

"Stupidity combined with arrogance and a huge ego will get you a long way."

--- Chris Lowe

The Shillong Times

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Time for political solidarity

THE country is facing a humanitarian crisis of epic proportions. At this time the least that citizens expect is for politicians to play the blame game whether at the Centre or in the states. Those in the government must understand that they need all hands on deck and that they cannot play politics with a virus that is killing thousands of helpless Indians every day. Prime Minister Modi's vaccine diplomacy to build his image has backfired very badly. In fact each of his actions since the beginning of this year is under scrutiny. The elections held in Assam, Bengal, Karnataka and Tamilnadu and the panchayat elections in Uttar Pradesh have turned super spreaders. If we survive this epochal devastation, let us hope that the Indian voter will place more faith in science and human development than in religion which politicians in this country have actually turned into an opium with the opiated having blind allegiance in a leader who is singularly obsessed with his image. The daily body counts have exceeded anything this country has experienced before. The health system has collapsed and doctors have never been so helpless. In this situation the BJP as the ruling party should set aside its political ego and reach out to all political parties and solicit their wisdom and synergy on how to reduce the human tragedy.

Prime Minister Modi must be prepared to be upbraided by his political opponents but even they might relent were Modi to say "mea culpa," instead of trying to wriggle out of culpability. A similar situation is developing in Meghalaya where every single day the Congress Party as the main opposition is firing missiles that are aimed at embarrassing the MDA Government. The problem with politicians is that they seek to score brownie points even from human tragedies. People are suffering and detest political jibes being thrown around. This is the time when the Congress should show its maturity by extending its assistance and help in synergizing the initiatives taken by government agencies, especially the health care workers who are stretched beyond limits and without any complaints.

Former Chief Minister and Congress leader, Mukul Sangma who is also a medical doctor, ought to offer his services to the people of Meghalaya at this critical juncture, instead of listing the faults of the MDA government day after day just to stay in the news. There will be time to tear the MDA government to shreds but for now the Congress should rise above political differences and be more humane. Chief Minister Conrad Sangma and his deputy who is quick to launch diatribes at critics should stop that game forthwith and convene an all-party meet to handle the looming medical crisis in the State.

Biden's 'mild shock' to Modi

By Ambassador T P Sreenivasan

'The trust some people in India had that the Biden-Harris administration would be friendly to India has been eroded already, observes Ambassador T P Sreenivasan.'

India's honeymoon with the Biden administration had not even begun when things began to go wrong, casting a shadow on a relationship which had held out many promises. Commentators jumped to the conclusion that Republican presidents, even President Donald Trump, were more sensitive to India's aspirations and needs. The two sides were quick to grab the low hanging fruit, the Quad, but India, becoming of a shy bride, did not go far enough to call a spade a spade. Instead, Quad became a dialogue, not an instrument of action.

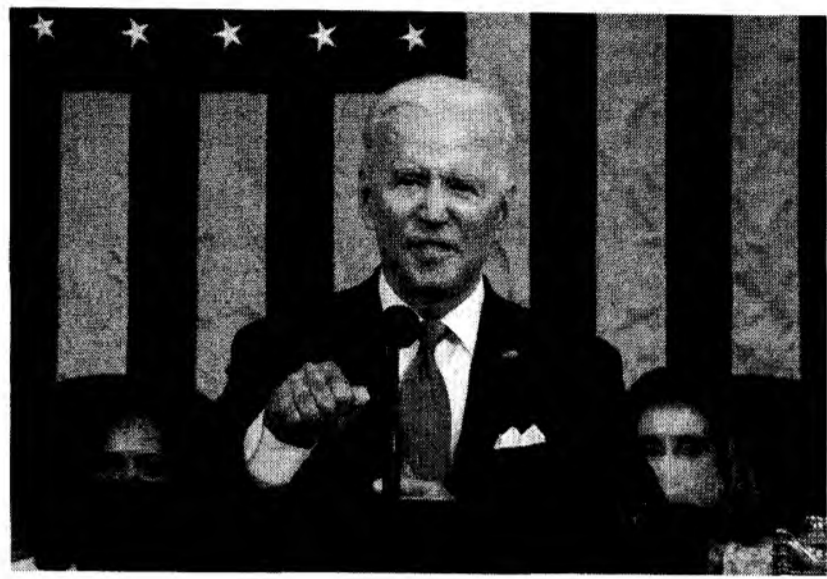
Perhaps, President Biden's disappointment came through when India expected help. Things appeared calm, but the first shock came from the very waters earmarked for intense cooperation. The commander of the US 7th Fleet made a shocking claim: 'On 7 April, 2021 USS John Paul Jones asserted navigational rights and freedoms... inside India's EEZ, without requesting India's prior consent.' To add insult to injury, he added, 'India requires prior consent for military exercises or manoeuvres in its EEZ... a claim inconsistent with international law... This freedom of navigation operation (FONOP) upheld international law by challenging India's excessive maritime claims.'

India and the US have fundamental differences in coastal States' rights to stop foreign military ships from conducting military activities within their EEZ. India had stated at the time of the ratification of the Law of the Sea that 'the provisions of the Convention do not authorise other States to carry out in the exclusive economic zone and on the continental shelf military exercises or manoeuvres, in particular those involving the use of weapons or explosives without the consent of the coastal State'. China too had made similar declarations.

Not wanting to attribute anti-India motives to the US, it was helpfully sug-

gested that the US action in India's EEZ was to convey a tough message to China that their claims of areas around the artificial islands in the South China Sea would be

by the US media as 'beyond crisis'. India, having estimated that it had sufficient stocks of vaccine for itself, had exported Indian vaccines to as many as 92 countries

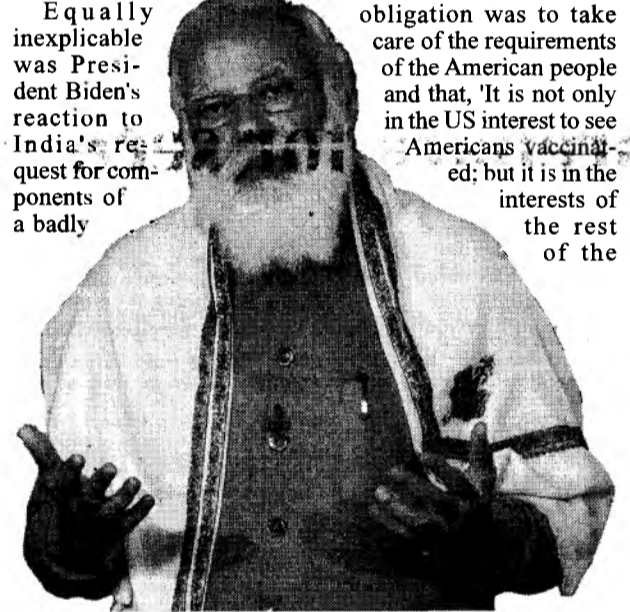


inadmissible. This does not appear logical as no one hurts a friend to give a harsh message to an adversary. Till

as part of its vaccine diplomacy. The US reaction was astounding as the expectation was that the US would imme-

diately announce all possible help, leaving the details to be worked out. But a US state department spokesperson said that the Biden administration's first obligation was to take care of the requirements of the American people and that, 'It is not only in the US interest to see Americans vaccinated; but it is in the interests of the rest of the world to see Americans vaccinated'. The reaction in India was not just one of disappoint-

ment, but of outrage that Biden acted against India's interests so soon after the formation of the Quad, which had pledged to work together against the pandemic. In the light of the Quad agenda, the US position was unacceptable. After a telephonic conversation between Modi and Biden, some amends were made, but not to the extent to satisfy the requirements of a strategic partner, if not an ally. Strangely, Biden explained that he had changed his mind because India had extended assistance to the US in times of need.



needed vaccine in an unprecedented emergency in India, which has been characterised even

world to see Americans vaccinated'. The reaction in India was not just one of disappoint-

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No wonder the anti-US lobby went to town to declare that Biden had deliberately tried to undermine the Modi government. The words of Biden echoed the 'America First' sentiment of his predecessor and not commitment to multilateralism. The rising anti-Indian sentiment in the West was also seen in a statement by German Chancellor Angela Merkel on the Indian request for vaccine components. 'We now have a situation with India where, in connection with the emergency situation of the pandemic, we are worried whether the pharmaceutical products will still come to us,' she said.

She went on to say: 'Of course, we have only allowed India to become such a large pharmaceutical producer in the first place, also from the European side, in the expectation that this should then also be complied with. If that is not the case now, we will have to rethink.' That was an unkind cut, not expected from a friend at a time of desperation. The trust some people in India had that the Biden-Harris administration would be friendly to India has been eroded already, even though a massive effort is being mounted by the administration, the business community and Indian Americans to make amends. Like Japan was rattled by 'Nixon shokku' when President Richard M Nixon made his historic visit to China in February 1972 India has had a mild 'Biden shock' from which recovery will depend on how things develop in larger issues like China, Russia and trade.

(Ambassador T P Sreenivasan (IFS 1967) is a former Ambassador of India and Governor for India of the IAEA).

Western media flay prime minister Modi's 'arrogance'

By Arun Srivastava

Dr Navjot Dahiya, vice-president of the Indian Medical Association, has described Prime Minister Narendra Modi a "super-spreader" of the Covid-19 pandemic. According to him, the blame for this devastating second wave lies squarely at the feet of Modi's government. "While the medical fraternity is trying hard to make people understand mandatory Covid norms, Modi did not hesitate to address big political rallies tossing all Covid norms in the air".

Modi has in fact come to know about the shortage of oxygen in the beginning of April. But his yearning to defeat Mamata Banerjee and install the BJP government was so deep that he preferred to ignore the red signals emanating from the states. Even the Le Monde, the French newspaper, on Wednesday blamed the "arrogance and demagoguery" of the Indian prime minister as much as the "unpredictability of the virus" for the deadly second wave of the pandemic in India. While the Indian media has been soft towards Modi and does not find any fault with him, the foreign newspapers are not impressed by the Indian foreign offices' clarification. What is really sad for Modi is they are not willing to believe India's claim and said "Modi leads India into a viral apocalypse".

Le Monde in its editorial pointed out, "The spectacle of lines of ambulances at the gates of overwhelmed hospitals, of sick people's relatives begging in vain to obtain oxygen and of mass cremations does not lie. From cities to rural areas, from the rich to the poor, the carnage does not spare anyone."

The editorial added; "Such a backfiring cannot be explained solely by the unpredictability of a virus and its variants. Narendra Modi's lack of prediction, arrogance and demagoguery are clearly among the causes of a situation that now seems out of control and requires international mobilisation. The Prime Minister, after paralysing and traumatising his country in 2020 by decreeing a brutal confinement, abandoning millions of migrant workers, completely lowered his guard at the beginning of 2021".

The editorial tore apart Modi's much publicised vaccine strategy, contending that the vaccine diplomacy was subservient to his ambitions, ignoring the reality of the country's production capacities. India looks like a war zone where people are losing their lives to the enemy. Things would have been different had the enemy's potential not been underestimated. The foreign media also takes a jibe at Modi neglecting the threat perception.

While some claimed Indians had great immunity, others mocked western countries for not being able to contain something as small as a virus. Interestingly, while the global fraternity after some easing out of the first phase attack, had started preparing to combat the possible attack of the second wave, Modi and his aides were busy chalking out the strategy to conquer India for transforming it into Hindu Rashtra. It was the time to get geared up for the second wave, but Modi used this as the time to start his election campaign.

This approach of Modi simply underlined that he is insensitive to the miseries of people and for him the people are mere termites. His claim of being

the Hindu Hriday Samrat (king of Hindu heart) also lies shattered on the streets of India. Corona has not targeted only Muslims, but the major victims have been the Hindus.

His aversion to the miseries of people has its resonance in the behaviour of others, especially the bureaucrats. On Wednesday a crying woman fell on the feet of a doctor in Noida to save her son, suffering with corona. But the doctor pushed her aside and even threatened to get her arrested if she does not stop crying. Strange!

While people across the country were suffering, Modi at a rally in North Bengal expressed gratitude by saying that he had "never before seen such huge crowds in a rally." He cheered the crowd. It is not that only the central government has been in denial mode, Yogi Adityanath, the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, resorted to white lies by saying that his state does not face shortage of oxygen and that action will be taken against hospitals spreading such rumours.

But the fact is almost all the crematoriums in the state are overflowed with bodies. People are using open spaces to build pyres. Crematorium workers complain that they are receiving at least 10 times more bodies than normal. According to official figures, the virus has claimed more than 200,000 lives so far in India. The situation has reached such a stage that the officials have been concealing the deaths and under-reporting the numbers.

Modi's attitude has been a shock for India's middle class, which perceives him as a messiah. They voted for him in huge numbers not once but twice. The slogan "Modi hai to mumkin hai" ("If Modi is there, anything is possible") still resonates with the Indian middle class. They responded with full vigour to his call to light diyas and beat thalis. They carried out his diktat of clapping for nine minutes and holding a lit candle. A democratic government is responsible to its people. But Modi does not bother about the people.

With Modi and his government not willing to come to the help of the people, this onerous task has been bestowed upon the judiciary. It is interesting to watch that High Courts have adopted a proactive stance in the fight against corona. The Delhi High Court rejected the Centre's submission that the current oxygen supply to the national capital was sufficient and asked it to respond on Delhi government's allegation that other states were getting more oxygen or almost equivalent to what they had demanded. The existing oxygen demand of Delhi is 704 metric tonnes as against the present allocation of 490 MTs.

The court said it is adopting a pan-India view and not suggesting that people in other states should suffer. "If as a matter of fact it is being put to you that the demand of a particular state was X and you have given them X + Y, then why have you not given that Y to Delhi when the demand of Delhi is more," said the court.

The court sought to know why the number of infections in Delhi are increasing and questioned the Centre over failing to revise the previous oxygen allocation. The court also took exception to Mehta's statement that oxygen can be taken from Madhya Pradesh and given to Delhi at the "cost of people's lives" if the court desires. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

Moral support to state govt

Editor,
The second wave of the Coronavirus continues to hit our country with a vengeance with lakhs of people being affected and thousands dying every day. Just a few days back I got a phone call from Germany asking me about the situation in India. Today the whole world knows that India is suffering at this time and so every Indian is responsible to fight this virus by being responsible citizens. Unfortunately even as the situation in the whole country worsens there are a few individuals who are not responsible for the safety of people in our own State. It is very sad to know that few people gave wrong numbers and addresses as they entered the state through Umting check point. Perhaps, this is not the time to play around and endanger the health of the people. In general, our State is safer compared to other states in India and it is the responsibility of every Meghalayan to fight against the virus and not only the State Government. Certainly, there have been failures from the State Health Department in handling this virus and I was also one of the victims last year. However, in my opinion let us not nurture our hatred and anger towards the Government but let us put up

a united fight to eradicate this virus. At present our State is still much safer than others and it needs our cooperation before it becomes worse as seen in many parts of our country.
Yours etc.,
Aiborlang Nongsiej,
Mawkyrwat - 14

Perplexing MCS result

Editor,
Through your esteemed daily, we would like to point out some inconsistencies in the recently declared MCS exams declared on April 29. MCS qualified at Rank 15 was working as an LDA in the office of the MPSC before the MCS recruitment advertisement, during and till date. She was selected for the post of Assistant Lecturer through MPSC but didn't join for reasons that are now crystal clear. We are sure that she was privy to all confidential affairs relating to MCS recruitment since she's an LDA in that office. Getting undue advantage of all information relating to MCS exam is a no brainer. We can only hope that besides being in the loop of things, no favouritism or influence has propelled her to clear her MCS exam although that is highly doubtful!
Then MPSC has forgotten that in this very year the

results for the LDA exams were declared on March 3, 2021, for which candidates at Rank no 66 and 68 clearly featured at the bottom half of the comparatively much easier LDA exams. But these two fellows magically appeared in the top 10 position for the MCS at Rank 3 and 8 respectively. Do we need to scratch our heads here? Are we missing something? Yesterday someone had written in these columns that this was the time for the MPSC to redeem its lost credibility but many of us doubt if that will ever happen unless the Commission becomes completely independent, in that no political appointees should be allowed. Will some public spirited citizens go to Court on this issue? If not the Meghalaya Government will continue to get the worst by weeding out the best to serve the state. Why do we wonder why there is so much corruption and poor governance in Meghalaya!

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request,
Via email

Culture: A victim or saviour

Editor,
Culture is undoubtedly very dear to us all. Even the ones who outrightly go against societal preferences

seem to be innately proud of their culture, for culture is a proof of civilization and who does not want to be termed 'civilized'? But unlike most civilisations that flourish and stand as examples, others shrink and fade with time. Very often calamities, both natural and human induced have been attributed to such shrinkage and the eventual collapse of civilizations. However, the loss of culture is not as sudden as a calamity. It is instead the aversion of individuals to accept the culture, love it, live it and most importantly, share it. Civilization which have shared their culture have bought themselves longevity. The primary reasons for a thriving culture are acceptance and sharing. The English and Japanese are outstanding examples of those who have accepted the changes to and shared the aspects of their culture.

The Constitution of India under the 5th, 6th and 10th Schedules provides various ways and means to safeguard the socio-economic interests of various communities in India. While the safeguards are very essential for the politico-economic upliftment and protection of 'unique cultures' in India, more proactive measures must be undertaken first at the regional and then at national level for the growth and spread of such unique cultures. At the

regional level, language and culture sharing between various communities of the state must be encouraged. What is also needed is an attitudinal change among the tribal and non-tribal households. The perception of "their ways" and "my ways" has to change to "our ways". Fact remains that despite having lived in the state for generations now, only a few non-tribal locals make an attempt to learn the tribal ways (language, for example), which is also, most often fuelled by economic needs. On the other hand, the "son of the soil" attitude displayed by some tribals contravenes the sharing and contributes to shrinking of the culture.

One who truly loves and wants their culture to flourish must embrace the changes that time brings with it while also encouraging others to embrace aspects of their culture. It must also be emphasised that learning another's culture does not imply abandoning one's own. Instead, it enriches the person with knowledge and empathy which is the need of the hour. The state has been a victim of misunderstandings in the past which have translated into gory affairs. These misunderstandings spur from lack of cultural integration among the residents and a sense of apathy towards other groups. If for once, everyone displayed

empathy and considered learning the language, values and ethos of the others (not for economic reasons) then culture, which has been presented as threatened and needing protection till now will actually protect the state from misadventures.
Yours etc.,
Ria Lamsal,
Via email

Unauthorised use of emergency horns

Editor,
Of late it is observed that many government vehicles (ML 01) and many other office/private vehicles use emergency horns viz., horns used in the escort vehicles, ambulances, etc, while they have to pass through crowded roads. This is highly illegal and should be cracked down by the Traffic Department, Meghalaya Police. Users of such horns should be arrested and penalized, otherwise, they are fooling the public on the roads in Shillong.
Yours etc.,
Dr Shantanu Dutta
Shillong - 3

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Up close and Personal

Munaf Kapadia: The Bohri Kitchen Story

By Vishnu Makhijani

This is a classic chicken and egg situation: a son seemingly sets out to cure his mother of her obsession with "saas-bahu" soaps on TV and focus on her culinary skills but instead finds his own feet as an entrepreneur!

"The greatest irony of all is that the world believes that TBK was born out of a son's desire to help his mother realise her dreams. While it may have started out that way, it really became about my mother helping me realise my own," Munaf Kapadia, founder of the hugely successful

The Bohri Kitchen that in five years, hosted close to 4,000 home diners on weekends and at its peak in 2019 was delivering 1,000 biryanis a day across Mumbai, writes in "How I Quit Google To Sell Samosas" (HarperCollins).

"Over the last five years of being CEO of TBK, personally and professionally.

I have grown by leaps and bounds. Mom, who has won awards and achieved semi-celebrity status with a growing list of fans in Bollywood (serenaded by Shaan on her birthday!) food and politics, hasn't changed one bit.

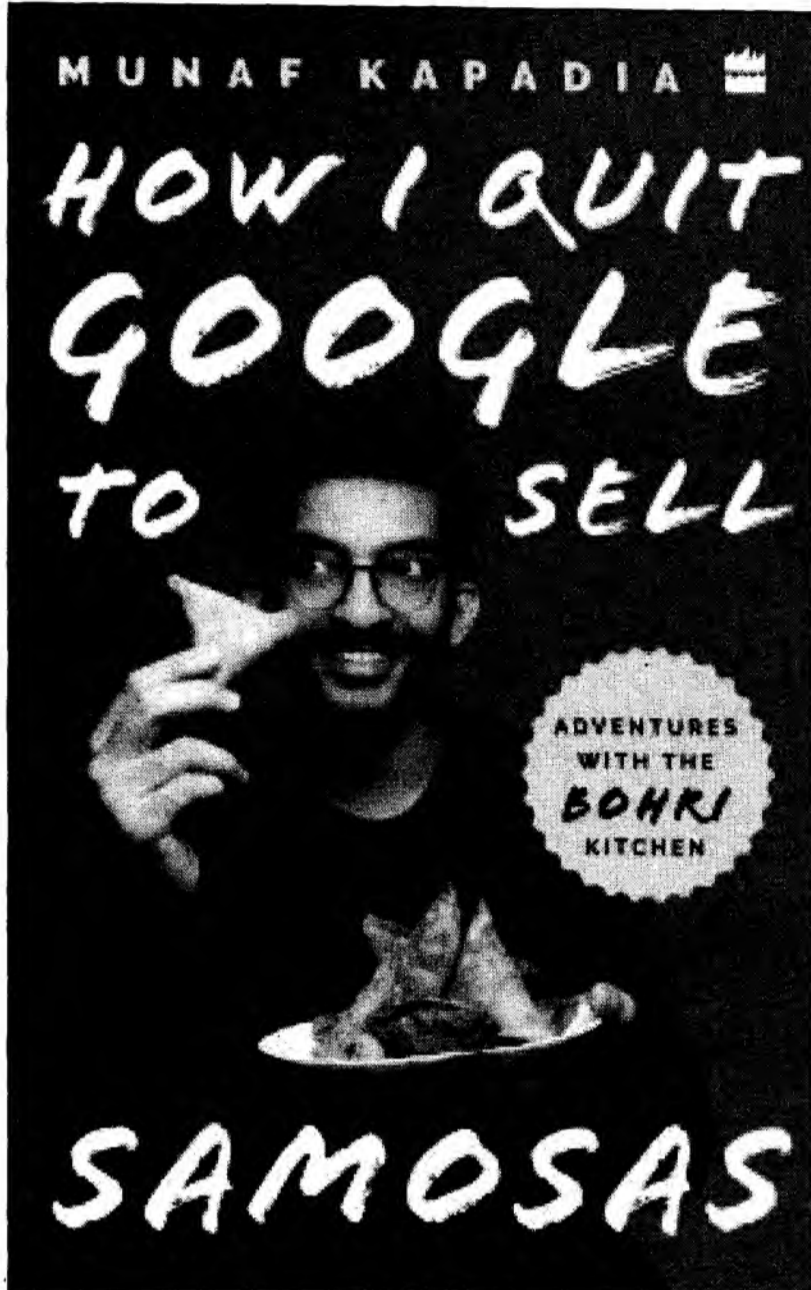
"Today, when I look at Mom, she seems as content and satisfied as she's always been.

I'd like to think that TBK has done something for her too.

I hope it gave her a sense of fulfilment and joy. I hope it made her look forward to her days in a way that only having a purpose or being brilliant at doing something makes you," Kapadia writes.

TBK had come to a grinding halt after a nationwide lockdown was declared on March 24, 2020 because of Covid-19 and "we're just about getting back on our feet" a year later, Kapadia writes, exuding confidence about the future.

"I do believe that the brand that we created because of a fight with Mom over a TV remote can survive a global pandemic. After



all, #BOHRIFOODCOMA (the state in which some guests found themselves in after a meal at the TBK Home Dining Experience) is considered a pretty dangerous affliction by itself.

"Through this book, I hope to inspire you. I hope to make you laugh a little and I hope that you take away this, if nothing else -- if I can do it, so can you," he maintains.

This confidence, in fact, grows

out of one of the 10 "Samosa Gyans" that Kapadia offers in the book: More than failure be afraid of not trying your best.

Central to the TBK Home Dining Experience is the Bohra Thaal that Kapadia (then still with Google but quit soon after) and his mother devised.

This is how it works: The average thaal is a large steel platter three feet in diameter placed slightly elevated on a square

cloth mat called a safra around which seven or eight guests are seated, either cross-legged or somewhere between cross-legged and a padmasana.

Once all the guests arrive, the pre-plated thaal is placed before them with condiments that include pudina chutney, pineapple and boondi raita, aam chunda (a sweet raw mango preserve with chilli powder, kokum aloo, Bhavnagri nirchis, aamba halad (two types of fresh turmeric and black pepper pickled in vinegar) and a bowl of lemon wedges.

The food is served on the thaal course-wise, starting with a kharaas or a savoury item such as TBK's now famous Smoked Mutton Kheema Samosas.

This may be followed by a Nariyal Kebab (tiny vegetarian kababs stuffed with mashed potato, spring onions and desiccated coconut).

Eating the samosa is an art in itself. You bite off the top and squeeze in some lime juice and green chutney to get the full flavour of the smoked mutton kheema -- an experience that invariably has guests asking for more!

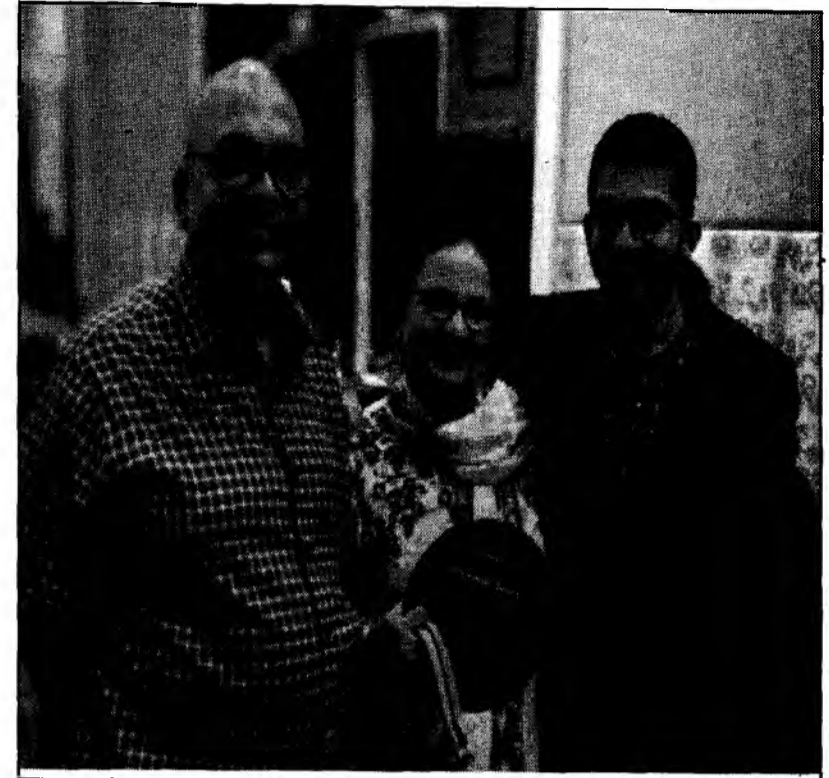
The kharaas is followed by a meethas or sweet dish (to help balance the gut), for instance, a Malai Khaja, a kind of Bohra Baklava.

Then comes the more serious food like the Raan in Red Masala -- a one kilo plus a leg of a goat marinated for over two days and cooked on a high pressure flame for a couple of hours.

The next up is the jaman aka main course -- it could be either Kaari Chawal or a Bohra Dam Biryani.

Next up is the hand churned Sancha Ice Cream made in a wooden barrel with a steel cylinder fitted inside, followed by a Gundi Paan.

The aim is to ensure that "when someone is done with the meal and leaves our home, they do so not only with full stomachs but



full hearts and minds as well.

"The world's best brands and businesses are built on authenticity, creativity and their ability to give customers something unique.

"Now, imagine if you knew nothing about our culture and eating practices, and you were taken through the whole experience of eating home-made Bohra fare in the home of a Bohra family as their guests. Wouldn't that be an experience worth hosting every weekend," Kapadia writes.

"Since the inception of TBK, we have gone from strength to strength where the brand's PR, outreach and visibility were concerned. I have made the cover of Forbes India, featured in Conde Nast Traveller and Entrepreneur magazines.

TBK is a two-time winner of the Times Food Award. Mom has been recognised as the Best Home Chef of the Year (2018) by the Indian Restaurant Congress. We won the rising star award at Mid-Day's The Guide Restaurant Awards 2018; Mom was thrilled

to receive the award from Shilpa Shetty Kundra, one of her favourite Bollywood actors," Kapadia writes.

And, with the Home Dining Experience on firm ground, it was time to expand TBK's reach with a second kitchen, at Worli for the delivery business and five cloud kitchens in the suburbs that were each clocking 200 biryani deliveries a day -- collectively doing business of Rs 35 lakh a month by August 2019.

On the comeback trail since January, TBK is currently servicing from its Worli kitchen five to 20 pre-orders a day depending on the day of the week. The extensive Ramzan special menu includes an Iftar Meal Box, Haleem with Khammi Roti, Mutton Paya with Sheermal Bread, Raan in Red Masala, and, of course, Smoked Mutton Kheema Samosas.

As Kapadia puts it in one of his "Samosa Gyans": I might not be a billionaire, but I know I've achieved enough to inspire you to get off your seat. (IANS)

Actress Jaya Seal Ghosh makes a comeback

For the love of Harry Potter

By Nitin Waghela

Jaya Seal Ghosh, who had shot into limelight some two decades ago with acclaimed filmmaker Buddhadeb Dasgupta's Uttara and then went on to act in a string of films in multiple languages, was missing from the silver screen for long since she settled down for a busy married life with percussionist husband Bickram Ghosh in Kolkata.

But it is lights, camera and action again for the actress and mother of two. As the shooting of The Green Window (in Hindi) brought to life the Bose Bungalow in Kolkata's upscale Alipore recently, the lady from Assam, playing an elderly Christian woman, was seen facing the camera again.

This time she also makes her debut as a co-producer of the film.

The Green Window is directed and written by Mumbai based Indira Dhar Mukherjee.

The actor who has won several awards with films like Uttara and Alifa is portraying a character named Georgy in The Green Window.

On the sets of the film at Bose Bungalow, TWF spotted Jaya as Georgy, an elderly Christian lady, wearing a well placed Christian cross around her neck, a patterned shirt, paired with a plain black skirt.

According to the makers, the story of The Green Window revolves around Georgy Fernandez, 64, who lives in Kolkata with her son Simon, daughter-in-law Patricia and grandson Sean.

Simon, the only earning member of the family, moves abroad



with his wife and son. His mother Georgy being a senior citizen stays back since her medical coverage and visa would take time.

Georgy shifts to an old age home as she is not willing to stay alone in the house where she lived for 35 years with her family.

After her husband's demise, Georgy spent most of the time in the upbringing of her grandson Sean. Georgy is a strong woman and is happy for her son's career growth.

She met "The Green Window" at the old age home which gave her a new dimension in life.

The film's director Indira Dhar Mukherjee is an up-and-coming filmmaker who has collaborated with some of the big names in the Tollywood industry to bring her

ises of St. Paul's Boarding & Day School," she says.

Alongside Jaya Seal Ghosh, the film also has Bengali actor Saheb Chatterjee who is playing a cameo role of Georgy's husband.

The film is based on Indira's understanding of Georgy, a real life character, who found herself within the boundaries of an old-age home as a result of her family's sudden shift to the United States.

During the shoot at the Bose Bungalow in Alipore, Indira says, "We shot the film at a place where the story of Georgy comes from, it's from St. Catherine's Home, and we shot most of the film there."

Indira also shared that she's keen to send 'The Green Window' to a lot of international festivals.

On playing the lead role, Jaya says, "The director and the writing were some of the things that helped me play the character well, and by being a mother, I was able to catch hold of some of the nuances required."

The actress adds, "Earlier experiences of theatre brought about the sensibility needed as an actor and it also brought discipline, while my background in Bharatnatyam gave me posture which I could loosen or change according to my situation."

The background music and music of the film is composed by Bickram Ghosh and Rinngo Arnab Banerjee is the DoP, while Arghyakamal Mukherjee shall edit the movie produced by Priti Agaral and co-Produced by Jaya Seal Ghosh. (TWF)

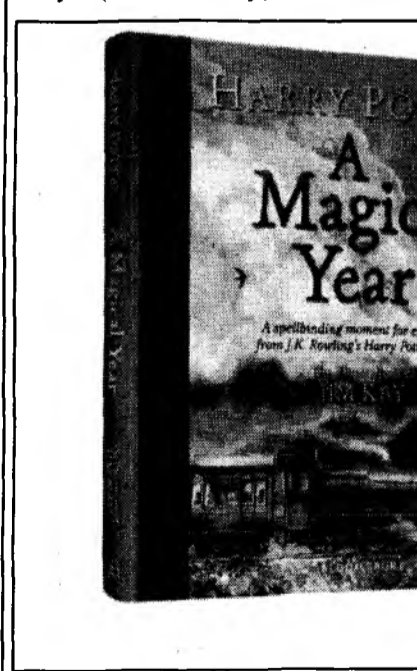
We are shooting the film in the original location from where the story originated "St. Catherine's Home Kolkata inside the prem-

Here's a unique and beautiful gift book for every day of the year, celebrating the astonishing art of Jim Kay paired with magical quotations from the original Harry Potter novels by J.K. Rowling.

"Harry Potter e A Magical Year: The Illustrations of Jim Kay" (Bloomsbury) combines

seven stories are represented in the book, from "Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone" through to "Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows".

All around, Kay's scenic artwork and decorative painter's marks bring that moment to life in breathtaking detail. His unique



interpretation is both captivating and transporting - picture frozen icicles glinting on the snowy towers of Hogwarts, the dancing eyes of Professor Albus Dumbledore, or the infectious hustle and bustle of Diagon Alley. Inside, a selection of the illustrator's most iconic images are complemented by previously unseen character studies, pencil

drawings and preparatory pieces from the Jim Kay archive. Jim Kay won the Kate Greenaway Medal in 2012 for his illustrations in "A Monster Calls" by Patrick Ness. He studied illustration at the University of Westminster, and worked in the Library & Archives of Tate Britain and then as an assistant curator of botanical illustrations at the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew before returning to producing art full-time. (IANS)

Ex-Union minister Meira Kumar on emerging Dalit Narratives

Former Lok Sabha Speaker and ex-Union Minister Meira Kumar was the guest at the event Kitaab organised by Prabha Khaitan Foundation (PKF) in association with Shree Cement in April. Kumar spoke about Dalit women as a book- Makers of Modern Dalit History- was launched virtually.

The event was attended by the two authors of the book, Guru Prakash Paswan and Sudarshan Ramabadrnan, as well as Devyani Khobragade, Makrand Paranjpe and Narendra Yadav. IBNS correspondent Souvik Ghosh brings highlights of the event moderated by journalist Maria Shakil

Guru, what is the new Dalit narrative?

As a member of the community and generation, I think the future course of Dalit imagination is something very important. It is no longer about reservation.

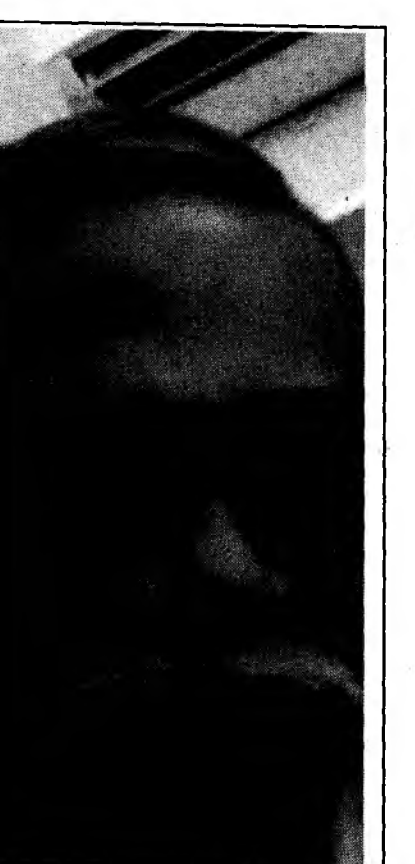
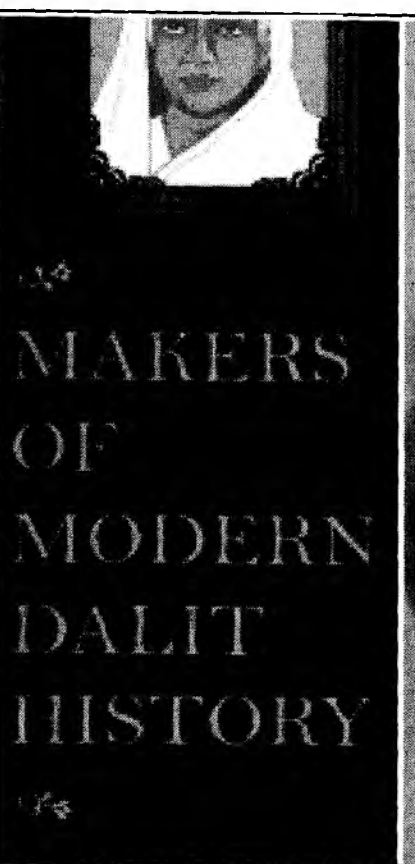
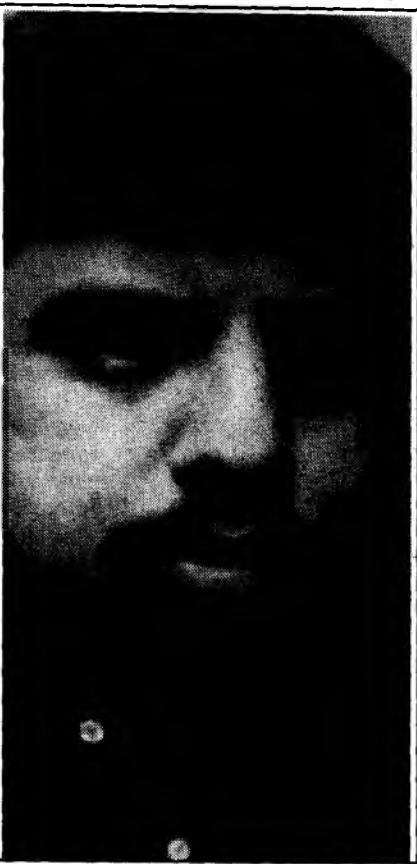
The young Dalits think of representation at the crucial decision-making positions.

It is no longer about a government job but beyond that. A Dalit wants to be in important positions now. These are the questions that are bothering us.

Over the course of last seven decades, we have seen there has been no Dalit as the cabinet secretary in the history of the country.

So the fact of the matter is, we are not having enough into conversation and not engaging with the truth. We need to have strong constructive conversation over caste issues and this is our effort through this book.

Sudarshan, could you have considered some more people who could have been featured in the book? In 2016, we two wrote an article on BR Ambedkar and



the organic positive response to the article prompted us to write a series of articles on such subaltern achievers. We knew they were redrafted from

history and there should be a concerted effort to represent them.

We are going to take the advice and make a part two of the book.

Professor Yadav, you have been mentioned in the book. Why do you think this book stands apart from all the Dalit literature you have read so far?

Dalit literature is of two kinds, one of which is autobiography.

The strength of Dalit litera-

ture is autobiographies and they have brought out the lives, times and sufferings of the Dalits.

Then there are collections of poems which are phenomenal. Then there are few books which are thought-provoking. But this book I think is very important because its idea is excellent.

I loved the idea of the book and also liked the selection of individuals. The introduction is very well researched. I have gone through Ambedkar's profile very closely because that's one of the most important one.

Anything you found which could have been better in the book, Mr. Yadav?

I felt two names which are conspicuously absent are Chan-

dra Bhan Prasad and Dr. Suraj Yengde. I would like to see them included in the book.

As admitted in the introduction itself, whatever written about Ambedkar would be inadequate to describe his contribution. This is absolutely correct. There are many errors of omission and commission.

Meera Kumar, both you and your Dalit leader father Jagjivan Ram found mentions in the book. You had defeated political heavyweights like late Ram Vilas Paswan and Mayawati. Your own journey inspired this book as well and the authors have been cautious and careful of the proper gender representation too.

How important do you think to talk about the contribution of women while we talk about Dalit literature?

Dalit women have not been celebrated and nobody knows about what they have gone through. Even in modern times, barring a few prominent names, no one knows what they are going through.

Yes we know about the men but what about the women? For instance, my late mother was not allowed to sit at a dining table to eat while she was in a hostel.

She had to sit outside on the floor. Yet, she continued with her studies. She faced the onslaught and humiliation, but

look at her determination. This is an Indian Dalit woman. She had to suffer so much and she had so much strength which Dalit men acquire from their mothers. So I am glad this book is written and a lot of writing has been done on Dalits.

On the other hand, I wonder, Dalit has become a tag when we talk of me, my father, people take the name of our caste. People don't take the name of castes of a Brahmin or a Baniya. Dalits are subjected to identification. We may do or achieve what we like but we are identified with our castes and our place in the society is referred to. With time, everything changes but the caste system never does. (TWF)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, May 2, 2021

Moon trine Venus on your solar return chart and it will give fantastic results. It is a beautiful combination. You will be a lot more imaginative and creative. Those who are working in media, dance, fashion, films, writing and electronic industry etc. will get good break through and they will further rise in their career. You can get a award or reward too for your contribution. You will be financially well off. Those who are in business will get success. You will also have good gains. You will be having excellent prospects in your job and will race ahead in your line of work. Your bosses will be happy with your efforts. You will also get involved in a new romantic tie leading to marriage. Love mates will also have a wonderful bonding. You will impress one and all with your amazing personality. Your work will get done.

Aries: (March 21 - April 20)

This week you will get success in adverse circumstances. You will have problems but solutions too. Your enemies may try to engage you but you will remain unaffected. You will also be able to establish your dominance over others. Your financial condition will be strong. You will also spend quality time with your family. And will enjoy life to the fullest. You will also improve your lifestyle and buy something new. You could spend on jewelry, household and clothes. You will be enjoying this whole process. The later part of the week will be particularly gainful days. You will be determined to achieve your plans. And this is the right time for earning money, having unexpected gains and getting money from somewhere.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21)

The whole week will yield positive results. Your troubles will get over. You will have control over the situation. You will finally breathe a sign of relief as your problems get resolved. Talking with your partner will give you a lot of energy. It is time to perfect your bond with closed ones. Just the right time for relaxation, fun, leisure and entertainment. Your work will start getting completed. You will be full of self confidence and courage. Your bosses will support you. A new hope will flow. Your financial condition is wonderful. You will feel fit and will be in high spirits. It is time to go closer to nature. You will get the love of your dear ones. Business journey will be successful.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21)

A dispute with a closed one may seem to run out of control. You may have some work pressure too. Things may start looking tough but you will manage the situation well. You will hold one to one talks with persons involved and with your gift of the gab be able to resolve your differences. Your domestic and professional responsibilities will increase but not affect you. Things will get better with time. You will feel a lot secure in your job. Your self confidence will also increase. You will impress one and all with your work and behavior. You will learn the skill to keep everyone happy. Your investments will yield good results. Lovebirds will have a wonderful time. You will learn something new.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22)

The entire week is splendid. These are days of victory. You will do your work in style and finish them on time too. Your bosses will encourage you and you will get full support of your colleagues. You will complete your financial matters at this time and get desired results too. You will be in spotlight and enjoy all the attention that you get. You will be surrounded by your well wishers. People will be attracted towards you because of your strong personality and behavior. You will make progress in business and work. Your prestige will get enhanced. Love birds will have wonderful time. You will spend happy time with family and friends. Your siblings will support you fully.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23)

Your efforts will be bringing lots of money. New business orders will be profitable. You will also get a salary hike. Those looking for new jobs for a long time will finally get one. At the domestic level, you will receive love from closed ones. Your partner/spouse will continue to inspire you. A change of plan according to needs of time will be good. The placement of planets is beneficial for you. You will feel peaceful and relaxed. Students will get results of their efforts. Some auspicious function may take place at your home. Your boss will be happy and will also promote you. Keep your important documents carefully. You will need them at some stage. You will remain involved in useful activities.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22)

It is time to take stock of your needs. You need to balance things quickly. Your tough professional life may be making difficult for you but you cannot escape them. You will have to take the responsibility and prove your worth and capabilities. You will make your plans, understand the situation and fulfill them. You

Libra: (September 23 - October 23)

This week you will be full of enthusiasm. You will be working hard and also fulfill your targets. Your communication skills will be second to none. You will be able to get your work done. Your desire to meet new people will also be strong. You will also be able to organize your house and office job efficiently. You will be able to fulfill all your responsibilities and also bring your family together. The company of your partner/ spouse will make you feel happy. You will also have no major financial worries. You will also not force your views on others. You will also understand the feeling of others and the difficulties that they are undergoing. It will make you a better person.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22)

The whole week is going to be wonderful. You will be having happy moments. You will be finishing your work in time and spend quality time with your loved ones. You will never be sort of company and not feel lonely. A lot will be achieved through your hard work. You will also get success in court related matters. Some financial deal will also be negotiated successfully. Your partner will remain a pillar of strength for you. You will value relations and relatives will also respect you. Works that had been envisioned will be completed. You will be able to adjust yourself in different situations. Family bond will get strengthened. There will be marriage, engagement and other functions and you will enjoy yourself fully.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21)

The whole week is an indicator of victory for you. You will remain dynamic in your approach and complete your task in style. You will get success in whatever you do. You will also meet new personalities from different fields. You will be socially very active and also earn good money. Philanthropic activities may attract you. You will also get interested in matters related to self realization. You will also do your work very sincerely. You will also remain alert during this period. Your natural leadership qualities will make you very positive in your actions. You will also enjoy more authority at this time than before. Love-birds will have a wonderful time.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20)

You will be busy in your work. And will feel happy in the company of your friends. You will complete your task with ease. Money will flow in. You will take full advantage of your contacts and work to the best of your abilities. There will be radiance in your work, family matters and personal matters. You will also expand the scope of your work. Your relations with family members will also get better. Love birds will make plans to get married with family support. You will also invest in new schemes. Business trips will be tiresome but fruitful. You will make maximum use of your knowledge and intelligence. There will be rest, peace and stability in your personal life. You will also support your friends in need.

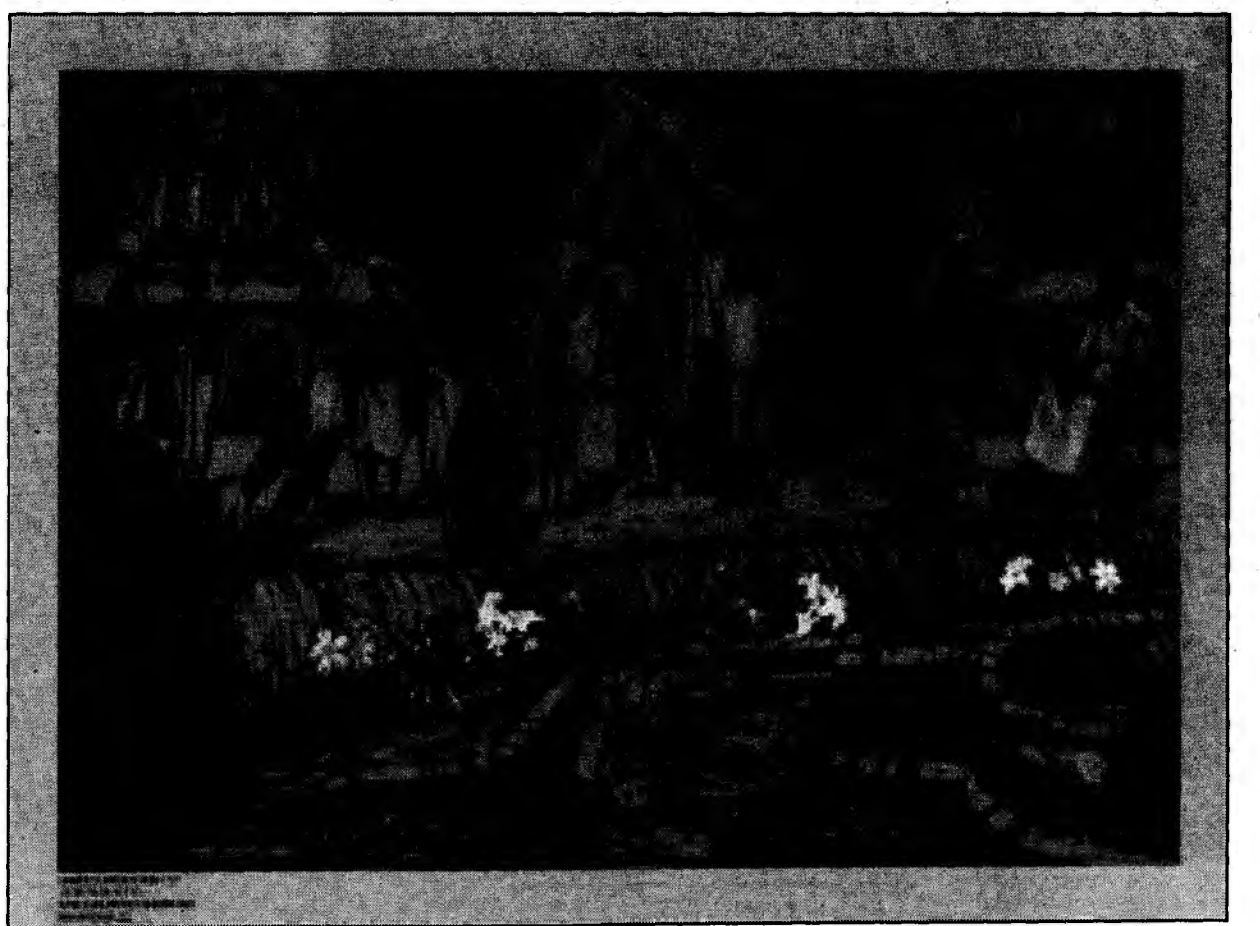
Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18)

It is a fantastic week. These are the days to do hard work and get the results. You will be happy to complete the work and feel happy to get the desired results. You will also establish good working relationship with influential persons. Some guests will arrive all of a sudden and keep you busy. You will also be able to do some important works you will not let your mind wander in the wrong direction and talk peacefully. You will be having few obstacles in government works. You will have a wonderful bonding with your spouse. You will face all your difficulties with determination and not get discouraged by difficult situation.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20)

There will be an increase in your dignity, name and prestige this week. All your works will get completed according to your wishes. Students will maintain their good record and their performance is going to be excellent. Youth will also be inspired to do their work. You will also acquire some new asset/ jewelry. However, spiritual thoughts will come in your mind. There will be an increase in your self-respect. You will also get success in matters of love and finance. Your relationship with your spouse is going to get better. You will also win over your enemies. Your better financial position will help you to fulfill your dreams. With this success you will be encouraged to renovate, beautify and decorate your house.

Punnapra-Vayalar revolt: Women in Art



A series of seven works by a participating artist in 'Lokame Tharavadu', a large scale contemporary art exhibition organised by the Kochi Biennale Foundation, revealed the role played by women in the historic Punnapra-Vayalar revolt, a movement predominantly of coir workers.

The art works are on display at Port Museum, Alappuzha, one of the venues of the art show curated by Bose Krishnamachari.

"When the martyred men were celebrated as immortal, the role of women who were widowed and had an equal stake in the process of the struggle was never properly acknowledged," said Bara Bhaskaran, an artist who loves to explore subaltern histories. Coir exports began from Travancore in the latter

half of the 19th century.

They surged after the first decade of the 20th century and as per a census of 1941, the coir industry had 1,33,000 cottage workers, apart from 32,000 'coir workers'.

A bulk of these workers were women, who worked on low wages, as the world looked for cheaper floor coverings, said Bhaskaran.

Bullet-ridden trunks of coconut trees in Punnapra and Vayalar stand as both victims and silent witnesses to the tumultuous events of October 1946. In the works of Bhaskaran, bright flowers sprout from bullet holes of uprooted coconut trees.

The Punnapra-Vayalar revolt, shaped by multiple factors including literacy and a labour

movement in the region was a struggle met with force.

Pitched battles were fought in many places but the arca nut staves and choppers of workers were no match for the guns of the military and many lost their lives.

Though the agitation was primarily against the Dewan of Travancore and the ruler of the princely state, who did not want to join the Indian Union, workers had a prominent role in it.

"The series is an attempt to document a historical event and pay tribute to the spirit of workers," Bhaskaran said.

Bhaskaran has participated in several national and international exhibitions including the Kochi Muziris Biennale. (IANS)

"Time is the longest distance between two places."
— Tennessee Williams
The Shillong Times

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SHILLONG, MONDAY, MAY 3, 2021

Results sans surprises

THERE is less of surprise in this round of assembly polls to four states and a Union Territory. The BJP and its allies retained power in Assam, the Trinamool Congress in West Bengal and the Left in Kerala while the DMK-led alliance wrested power from AIADMK in Tamil Nadu and the NDA won Puducherry. For those that expected a win for the BJP in West Bengal, this is time for a huge disappointment. The feisty chief minister Mamata Banerjee has managed to whip up sentiments in her favour also by way of a regionalistic approach and projecting "leaders from Delhi" as marauders – a strategy that worked well with the Bengali mind. The BJP however rose from the level of a non-entity five years ago to being the principal Opposition in the state. The pro-BJP trend was more visible in the last Lok Sabha polls in a sign that people preferred Narendra Modi as PM. A big question mark remains on the CM's status in Nandigram as conflicting reports came in – one saying that she won by 1,200 votes and other hints projecting her defeat. At the time of writing this editorial the last word from the Election Commission is yet to be heard. Meanwhile, Banerjee has said she would move court in ways that would enable her form the next government. She can be trusted not to leave such matters without a fight.

In Assam, Kerala and Tamil Nadu, opinion surveys and exit polls had made it amply clear as to what was in store. It was a foregone conclusion the BJP will retain power in Assam and DMK will drive out the AIADMK from supremacy in TN. In Puducherry, the NDA captured power as was also predicted in opinion polls. The Kerala poll results however have bucked the trend with Pinayari Vijayan's LDF retaining power in the state. This also shows that the Left still has some relevance at least in the nation's periphery down south but this has nothing to do with ideology. The credit goes to the policies and programmes of Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan. He led the campaign single-handedly. The victory for the LDF this time changed the usual trend in the state of the two rival political formations – the UDF and the LDF alternating in power every five years. The progressive erosion of the strength of the Congress party spelt doom for the Congress-led UDF in Kerala. In Assam too, even as it got a powerful regional party (king-maker) to its side, the Congress lost. The extensive campaign by Priyanka Gandhi there might have partly helped the Congress alliance win a decent number of seats in Assam.

The Bubble has Burst

By HH Mohrmen

The second wave of COVID-19 which hit the nation has changed people's (especially of those outside the country) perceptions about Prime Minister Narendra Modi and that of the country as a whole. The international media in nearly every corner of the world does not have kind words for the government's mishandling of the second wave of the pandemic. The PM and his party may find solace in the fact that some media outlets in the country are less critical about the way both the state and the central government handles the pandemic attack, yet it cannot be denied that the image that the PM has so painstakingly built for himself has gone for a toss.

The support of some local media may give the BJP-led NDA government a false sense of confidence that its base (local supporters) is still intact. They may make others believe that citizens of the country are aware of and appreciate the government's position vis-à-vis the current COVID-19 situation, which is also true in some ways. But the fact remains that the image of Prime Minister Modi in the international arena has crashed and this is something that cannot be denied.

Till a few months before the first wave of COVID-19 attack the ruling dispensation were boasting about the great Indian economy. They were projecting that the country's economy will hit the five trillion mark in no time. Till early 2020 'the five trillion economy' was on the lips of every leader of the BJP but after the pandemic attack last year, one does not hear about the projected economy anymore as the salvo fall silence. The pandemic brought the campaign of pushing the economy of the country to a five trillion mark to come to a grinding halt.

The Pharma and Vaccination Producer of the world
There were also claims that India is the Pharmacy of the world as it is the largest manufacturer and exporter of medicines in the world, but today that claim is also questionable as the COVID-

19 patients also lost their battle because of the lack of life-saving medicines. The pharmacy of the world finds itself having to bend on its knees when the second wave COVID-19 attack hit the country.

At one point of time all eyes of the world turned to India with hope because they see the country as the vaccine manufacture of the world. It is true that India is the only country which has the wherewithal in place to produce more vaccine than any country in the world. The capacity for mass production of vaccine in the country gives the world hope that India will be able to supply their countries enough vaccine to get its citizens vaccinated. But despite the country having two approved vaccines, namely Covaxin and Covishield, the task of providing its more than one billion population vaccination is not going to be an easy task. So if the country is to vaccinate the entire population in the stipulated time, will the local production be adequate?

The question is if India has the potential of producing the largest numbers of vaccines and the country already has two approved vaccines in a record time, why can't the government vaccinate all its citizens vaccination? The government has announced that it will start vaccinating citizens who are above 18 from the first of May, but many states complained that they do not have enough vaccines in stock. We were boasting about our health care facility as one of the best in the world and at one point of time there were talks of promoting health tourism in the country, for our neighbouring countries but the pandemic and particularly the second wave has proven to the world how fragile our healthcare system is. India is also believed to be the largest producer of liquid or medical oxygen but the second wave of COVID-19 attack has proven how ill-equipped we

are as most of the COVID-19 patients died due to lack of medical oxygen supply.

The second wave of the pandemic attack has illustrated that the strength that we believe the country has is false, (be it on vaccination production, our healthcare system or oxygen production) or perhaps there is something wrong with way the entire system is managed. The truth is that the country has failed its duty to its citizens as many have lost their lives to COVID-19. In the process their relatives and friends have unduly, untimely and unfortunately lost their near and dear ones because the system has failed them. The truth is the second attack of the pandemic has not only shown to the world the real image of the country but more importantly it has drawn the mask off the face of this country's leaders.

The man and his image

The tragic incident in the country has established that the image management was all that Modi indulged in. It was not his real image. Since he first projected himself as the prime ministerial candidate, Modi has invested hugely in image management. He sells himself to the country and the world as a person who started from a humble beginning. The narrative he constructs is that he rose from being a tea seller to PM. The common citizens of this country empathised with that. From a tea seller to the highest office of the Prime Minister is a very inspiring story. When this narrative was just doing the rounds, Congress leader Mani Shankar Aiyar said let him come selling tea at our conferences. Little did Aiyar know that this man was going to win the elections and become the prime minister of this country.

Some of the images that one will remember of the PM is that of a pious man who makes frequent visits to temples, who practices yoga regularly in his black gym suit. Another image that the

prime minister aggressively promoted is that of a very devout man. After the campaigning in the last general election concluded, he spent his time rejuvenating himself by meditating (albeit with camera man taking his photographs as he was meditating) inside a cave. A man who feeds bird and peacocks is another image which the PM had created for himself.

A PM in love with the camera

The Prime Minister's love for the camera is well known. This is established by the clips where Modi gestured to his security to move away from the frame as he was obstructing the camera person capturing his image. The PM gesturing to the security person for coming in between the man and the camera is a clip which speaks a thousand words. But what has happened in the last few weeks from campaigning in the election rally (in spite of the second wave attack and the catastrophe that followed), tells us so much about the man behind the garb.

Busting of the image

Unlike some media in the country, the media around the world does not have to toe the government line and the government cannot force them to write rejoinders for stories that they have published against the government no matter how damaging the report is. It is ironic that the world's largest manufacturer of vaccines has to now beg for vaccines and the Pharmacy of the world does not have enough medicines for its own people. It is also an unbelievable fall from grace that country which was once the largest producer of liquid or medical oxygen has to now depend on the neighbouring countries for the supply of oxygen for its patients. It is now obvious that the perception of the people particularly that of the outside world about the country and the prime minister which has been so carefully built has finally collapsed. It seems that it was just a bubble and the bubble has now burst.

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Thoughts of a COVID patient

By Rev. Lyndan Syiem

I have experienced many illnesses and injuries in my life. But I never imagined that one day I would become a COVID 19 patient, one of the millions of sufferers in this present pandemic. That I can sit up and write two days after the RT-PCR test declared me Positive, when thousands are gasping for oxygen, is only because of divine grace. It also helped that I had my first dose of Covishield vaccination, which reduces the severity of the symptoms; plus the timely medical help and spiritual support from family, friends and fellow congregants. You cannot visit a COVID patient, but you can pray from afar, send encouraging messages on social media and make short, very short, phone calls.

In Meghalaya, there is oftentimes a veil of secrecy when someone in the family tests COVID Positive. As a pastor one cannot, and should not, hide from the flock; so I chose the path of full disclosure. To the extent of calling up everyone whom I had met in the past ten days, with appeals for self-isolation. It helped that I keep a diary of my daily ministry. If we truly want to defeat this virus, everyone who tests positive must immediately inform his past contacts. Unfortunately, this is not always possible as there is a social stigma attached to the disease, as in the case of leprosy, tuberculosis and AIDS. Attitudes cannot be changed overnight, so the next best thing is to accurately inform the health worker who does your contact tracing. In my case, the doctor and the Asha staff did an excellent job.

What are the thoughts of a COVID patient? It depends whether you are asymptomatic or not. In my experience, the asymptomatics will initially be relieved, but then pride often sets in, plus the feeling of invulnerability to this dreadful disease. This is a dangerous attitude, because it leads to carelessness and lack of responsibility towards others. ... Those with severe symptoms can hardly think at all. Those of us with mild to moderate symptoms immediately think of our human frailty and mortality. Not death immediately, but it does enter the mind, especially with such graphic footage of COVID patients on television. Your thoughts lead to the hereafter: "Am I prepared to meet my Maker? What have I achieved in life? What is my legacy?"

Secondly, there is regret that one was not careful enough with mask, sanitizing and physical distancing. People will berate themselves for complacency and careless slips of the mask. They will review their activities over the past ten days and try to remember exactly whom they met, where they met. This thought then transitions to guilt and shame, because you may have unknowingly infected others with the virus. Guilt because you know very clearly your own culpability and shame because of what others might think of you. For most people, personal suffering can be endured, but the thought that one has inadvertently advanced the chain of transmission of disease is difficult to bear.

No decent, reasonable human being will deliberately cause death, but carelessness and negligence are enough for the virus to strike. That's why the COVID patient eagerly awaits to hear, as I am right now, the results of the tests of his primary contacts, the high-risk contacts. If they yield negative, there is relief and gratitude to God. A positive result is distressing, especially if symptoms develop. A recurrent thought is the firm resolve to live a new, responsible lifestyle amidst this ongoing situation of pandemic. And of advocating such a lifestyle to others, as I have done through social media and am doing through this article.

The COVID patient's thoughts then turn to the vaccine, its efficacy and the resistance of some people against it. Social media these

days is awash with conspiracy theories about the vaccine; that it contains a microchip, that governments and MNCs have nefarious designs to control the population. No matter how many clarifications that the government publishes on newspapers and billboards, there will always be videos where some 'scientist' disputes all the established data on vaccines. What makes it worse is when some religious preacher quotes Scripture, claiming that the vaccine is the mark of the beast or some other exegetical monstrosity. To such, I quote this warning from James 3:1: "Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly."

The thoughts of a COVID patient who has mild to moderate symptoms will often be interrupted by phone calls from well wishers and messages on social media. These are not a disturbance but a welcome relief from the routine of lying in bed, medicines, steam inhalation, breathing exercises and many other remedies. After their genuine good wishes, a few callers have mischievously asked me how I contracted COVID when I already had my first dose of Covishield! Rebuttal with facts and statistics is impossible to people who rely on anecdotal evidence. That's when I point out that none of the hundreds who have been fully vaccinated at the Mawroh PHC have subsequently contracted COVID 19.

To the best of my knowledge, and at the point of writing this article, mine is the only case, and I have only had the first dose. The first dose certainly reduced the severity of my symptoms and I pray it has also reduced the transmissibility of the virus to others. The argument of anti-vaxers who cite my case as a vaccine-fail is disproved by the literally hundreds of healthy senior and middle-aged citizens who were vaccinated with me at the Mawroh PHC.

Finally, what confuses the COVID patient's thoughts is religious people who reject COVID protocols in the name of faith. I am not qualified to comment on other religions, but in my own there are some who claim: "If you really have faith, you don't need masks in church." That's like Satan tempting Jesus to jump from the Temple roof, claiming that God's angels will save him. To which Jesus answered, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." Another claim is: "If you are a true believer, COVID will never enter your home." Such ideas are not evidence of faith but of gross biblical illiteracy.

The Old Testament laws on health, hygiene and diet were given by God through Moses to a people wandering in the wilderness. The whole purpose was that the people of God should diligently guard themselves against disease and epidemics. It was precisely because epidemics had the capacity to enter the tents of Israel, that the books of Leviticus and Numbers prohibit people with contagious diseases and dubious bodily discharges from entering the camp. Am I saying that we revert to the Old Testament laws? Of course not. While the exact stipulations no longer apply to New Testament believers, the principle of keeping others healthy by keeping yourselves separate still applies. As such, masks, sanitizers and physical distancing are the present-day application of "going out of the camp."

It can be somewhat embarrassing when your residence is officially declared a 'Containment Zone.' But one must sometimes accept "staying outside the camp" as the price for the overall health of society.
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Letters to the Editor

Gearing up for the 2nd wave and perhaps more

Editor,
The attention of readers is drawn to Patricia Mukhim's article "Traditional Institutions in a modern democracy" (ST 30th April 2021). The writup is a down to earth analysis of the relationship between our traditional grassroot institutions and the Government, wherein the common mandate of both is service to the people. The unfortunate part of this liaison between the two is that it simply sustains itself on a personal relationship of the individuals involved. If the PR equation of the officers involved on behalf of the Government with the head of the traditional institutions is good, the liaison works and thrives. Where the PR is weak, the synergy also suffers resulting in awkward and faltering coordination between the two.

The author made mention of the fact that the Dorbar works on a "trei mon sngewbha" or voluntary basis. Another factor of the Dorbar is that the election of its office bearers is on a non-political basis. These are the two redeeming features of our Dorbar system that are not found in the Panchayat system operating in the rest of the country. It is the reason for the respect and trust the Dorbar receives from the community. Others envy us of this fact but unfortunately our own, especially officialdom, does not and the traditional institutions are more often than not,

officially neglected. If our traditional institutions are to successfully coordinate with the Government especially in managing a crisis like the current Covid Pandemic, our Dorbars need to be supported by giving them the recognition they deserve. Besides official recognition our traditional institutions also need to be empowered so that they can function in a financially transparent and legally lucid manner.

In the absence of a state level legislation to bestow upon the grassroot institutions the recognition and empowerment they deserve, the Dorbars especially in the Khasi Hills, turn to the District Council and the Syiem for the acknowledgement they crave. The less said about the public service capabilities of the District Council and the Syiem and their ability to synergise the Dorbars, the better. Hence the need and urgent requirement for a state level legislation to give legal empowerment, together with the necessary rules and regulations to enable the grassroots institutions of the state to perform in a uniform coordinated manner! As we enter the 2nd and perhaps even a 3rd or 4th phase of the Covid pandemic, the urgency to have a smooth working relationship between the administration and an empowered grassroots governance system cannot be over emphasised. It is hoped that for the Government and our politicians give the matter the attention it deserves. It is better to be united, prepared and ready than to be caught squabbling and napping in a crisis.

As we speak about preparedness the tragic lessons

of mainland India as it grapples with the 2nd wave of Covid should be kept in mind. We need to start thinking and preparing for makeshift field hospitals; extra hospital beds; extra health workers and doctors to man such additional facilities. In the rest of the country the armed forces have stepped in to fill the gap. In Meghalaya too the Govt should start negotiating with the Army to prepare for such infrastructure if, and when the need arises. From news reports it does appear that the State has identified its own inhouse Oxygen manufacturing unit that can meet any requirement in the future. There is however urgent need to ensure assured supply and stockpiling of adequate vaccines. We are a small NE state and our needs might be overlooked. This is an area of extreme concern and adequate attention and priority must be dedicated to this aspect of the crisis. However, there is no harm in exploring all avenues and sources of assistance in preparing for the worst when it comes.

Yours etc.,
Toki Blah,
Via email

Covid vaccination-professionalism personified

Editor,
As the second wave of the pandemic hits us in what is a gruelling battle between the virus and the human race, vaccination seems to be our only hope. Despite the myths and conspiracy theories on social media about the after-effects of the vaccine, the

Government is determined to complete the process on a Mission Mode to ensure that our citizens are inoculated against the dreaded disease. Being lucky to be tagged a frontline warrior, I intended to get myself vaccinated along with a co-worker and we narrowed our search for a vaccination centre with the last resort being Civil Hospital, Shillong. Since many vaccination centres are non-functional till date, we finally decided to take our job at the said hospital. We were reluctant at first since it was a Government hospital but decided to take the risk. But the professionalism and the positive attitude of the Vaccination Team put us completely at ease. From the registration kiosk to the observation room the entire process was a breeze.

We were cordially greeted at the registration counter and after the process was completed and briefing done on the do's and don'ts post vaccination, including being told to take a picture of the instructions lest we forget them, we were administered the job by a very caring attendant. He engaged me in a conversation and before I knew it the vaccination was over. The attendant at the observation room informed us of the mandatory waiting time of 30 minutes and gave us a Paracetamol tablet just in case fever sets in. We never realised how the 30 minutes passed by as conversation in the room was vibrant. After the half hour wait we were handed a "vaccination completed" certificate.

As an endnote I would say, "Hats off" and "Kudos" to the entire COVID vaccination team at Civil Hospital for

executing the vaccination process in such a professional and friendly manner. Today my experience at Civil Hospital has instilled my faith in the Government Healthcare system of my state.

Yours etc.,
Mebanshan Wankhar
Via email

IPL: A farce in this crisis period

Editor,
Whenever India plays cricket against a country be it in India or abroad most of the players fail to give their best. They will first lose one or two matches and then with the sting of conscience begin to play seriously. But the notable thing is that the same lot of players in the IPL, give their best from the first match itself. Is it because of the huge money paid to them? They often score double the runs compared to the balls they face in the IPL? Where does this potentiality hide when they play for the nation in spite of high payments made to them by the BCCI? Secondly, in the present health emergencies where people are dying due to lack of oxygen and economic crisis that India is passing through why are the team owners of IPL wasting so much money on the IPL. Yes, they (IPL owners) are affluent people but should they not think about the crisis that the nation is facing?

India is a developing country and in these days of Covid crisis it is wise to waste so much of resources on sports which is not of national interest? All states have been told to stop all

sporting events then how is IPL being allowed free rein? Other developed nations that are capable of holding such games don't do it despite their resources. Thirdly, the cricketers across the world are the richest among the sporting lot and Indians are no exception. So how much more money do they want to accumulate? The other day Sachin Tendulkar donated a large amount towards the present health crisis and some foreign players have also donated handsomely but where are the other Indian cricketers? Also why are all cricket matches these days held in Ahmedabad stadium right from the test matches, one-dayers and now IPLs. Obviously all these events are attracting a good number of spectators so one is unsure whether physical distancing is practised especially at a time when the state is reeling under a huge surge of corona? Incidentally a few foreign players have already left for their homes in view of the corona surge. IPL matches should henceforth be stopped and if the IPL owners have accumulated huge amounts of money and do not know how to spend and where to spend it then they should ask the nation to show them the right way to spend. What they are doing now is just for the entertainment of the upper strata of society otherwise none will hesitate to call them an insensitive lot.

Yours etc
Bibhash Dhar
Shillong -3

Letters to the Editor must have the full name, address and contact number of the writer, even if they are sent by email. Only letters with the requisite details will be published.

"I have always found that mercy bears richer fruits than strict justice."

— Abraham Lincoln

The Shillong Times

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Vaccination crisis

INDIA is today passing through a phase where politics trumps governance. First, the country and the world waited for a vaccine to combat the coronavirus. After a long wait of several months, vaccines were developed and tested and found potent enough to counter the coronavirus or to lessen the impact of the disease. India was one of the vaccine producing countries and should not have faced any vaccine shortage had there been adequate planning. But because every decision was centralized and the Prime Minister's Office was the sole deciding authority as to whether Indians should be vaccinated first or whether India had the luxury to export the vaccines and India chose the latter, the country now finds itself begging for vaccines from the international community.

Of course, India needs to become self-reliant or Atma Nirbhar and to be respected for what it is capable of. After all, India exports the best minds to developed nations like the US and UK. Many Indians add value to the Information Technology and the Science and Technology sectors of the western world. Unfortunately these best brains do not find the ecosystem that promotes and nurtures research and scholarship in their own country and are forced to migrate to the west to upscale their knowledge and scholarship and to contribute to the cause of science which in turn benefits humanity at large. Without considering that its own population's vaccination needs are substantially higher than that of most nations, the Indian Government decided to go on an image building exercise and export the Covid vaccines to different countries in what is euphemistically termed "vaccination diplomacy." It was the most short-sighted thing to do because India now has to rely on the generosity of countries like the US for vaccines that it urgently requires. Vaccine diplomacy showed a lack of diplomatic brainwave. In fact, it was all about building Prime Minister Modi's image. It has cost the nation dearly because the recent announcement that those in the 18-44 age group are entitled to be vaccinated, has backfired badly. There aren't enough vaccines for this age group. Those that have registered and given an appointment met with disappointment when they turned up at the vaccination centres. Queries about when the vaccination would be available are met with blank stares as no one is sure when the vaccine would be available.

In Meghalaya, while the over 45 age group are hemming and hawing as to whether to take the shot or not, the 18-44 age group who are ready are told the vaccine is not available yet but is likely to arrive this month. It is rightly said, "Where there is no vision the people perish." India is now ruled by a government without a vision and people are dying by the thousands because of this lack of preparedness for the second Covid wave.

Hail to the Apex Court

By Albert Thyrniang

Last Friday the Supreme Court warned that states and the police would face contempt charges if they restrict citizens' SOS calls for medical help via the social media. SOS, originally standing for 'Save our Souls' or 'Save Our Ship' is a facility that can be activated in smart phones in case of distress and emergency. During this horrifying COVID-19 second wave outbreak, SOS alerts have become common for individuals, families, NGOs and even hospitals to call for help for oxygen, medicines and emergency medical attention. Even the Indian High Commission in London put out an SOS tweet pleading for help to tackle the devastating, epic crisis back home. But the trend has upset the centre and some state governments. Infamous for ruthless crackdown on protests and dissent, UP Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath directed officials to act against individuals who spread "rumours" by appealing for oxygen through social media. He even instructed the police to charge them under the National Security Act and seize their property. Subsequently, the Amethi Police booked a boy under the IPC for a SOS tweet for leads on availability of oxygen to save the life of his critical grandfather.

The pro-people stance at these trying times is commendable. Complementing the Punjab and Haryana High Courts which lauded social media for reaching out to people in urgent medical need, the stern caution from the Apex Court is a blow to Adityanath. The strong view should nip in the bud any misuse of the law against needy citizens. The situation in UP is disastrous. Media fact checks clearly prove that there is shortage of oxygen in the state. Doctors openly admit that people have died in hospitals for scarcity of medical oxygen. The claim of the Chief Minister of stock piling oxygen is wrong. The SOS pleas are not propaganda to malign his government. The timely intervention from the Highest Court is a relief as the gasping for breath, frantic search for beds, distressed calls for medical aid are not unique to UP and Delhi but to Karnataka, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and eventually the entire country. People need to use social media to let their grievances known. Why to clamp down against desperate appeals?

This 'national' restraint against coercive action came close on the heels of the Madras High Court singularly blaming the Election

Commission of India (ECI) for the second wave of the pandemic. The Delhi High Court too castigated the Delhi government's mismanagement of oxygen supply. The pro-active and pro-people role of the courts is the hope of this nation in their fight against the ravaging plague. Hope other courts take a cue from the shining examples and reverse the recent trend of courts tending to be politically influenced in return for post-retirement rewards.

In the meantime as the coronavirus contagion rages claiming recorded casualties, not necessarily from the virus but from the collapse of the health care system, free speech on social media too is under threat. Netizens flooded Twitter, Facebook and other social media platforms to criticise the government and demand for better handling of the public health crisis. Although denied but claims were made that the Indian government requested the social media companies to take down contents under the 'misinformation' pretext.

Obligingly, Twitter and others removed nearly 100 posts critical of the Centre. The trending hashtag #ResignModi was taken down and temporarily blocked on Facebook. It is very convenient for social media giants to clarify that the removal was an error. The country's political leadership under Narendra Modi appears to be to clamp down on criticism and silence critics to avoid public scrutiny of its complacency, callousness and incompetence in preventing and dealing with the COVID-19 'storm'. The central government's suppression of the fundamental rights is quite well known. It has shut down the internet in different parts of the country at different times to disable citizens from voicing against its policies and administration. Tolerance on freedom of speech has been on the wane under the present regime.

Initially this writer too wanted to let pass yet another rejoinder by one of the political stalwarts of the state. But when one realised that there is an underlying message of intolerance it could not be ignored. It is amusing that a veteran politician had to succumb to 'peer pressure' to read my article and then be compelled to respond to that ignominious piece. The Adviser to a party is quite liberal in his advice these days. But while on one occasion his counsel

was actually a threat, on the latest it was unsolicited. He even invited me to join politics and volunteered to screen my application into his party. He can send the form via electronic mailing.

The invite could be a joke or a ridicule, but the implications are serious. The assertion that to understand issues one has to be in politics is baffling. We may not comprehend the 'intrinsic values of practical politics and local administrative systems', but does it mean we have to join active politics? Is there a guarantee that if we become politicians we understand these and other issues better? Even if one does not have a comprehensive view on a matter should one be silent unless one is in politics?

One is quite aware of the matter regarding women's participation in traditional institutions like the 'Syiemship' and the 'Sirdarship'. That is why the statement was, 'perhaps another court verdict is needed to change things.' The local administrative laws of the traditional durbar, village administration law, etc which are 'accepted tenets' are not above legal scrutiny. Even if one has not sufficiently understood the above matters fully should one be barred from expressing oneself or should one be led to politics? Should politicians tell writers who opine on 'easier said than done' issues that they shouldn't say a word until and unless they are politicians first?

The Prime Minister and Home Minister and the central government have been facing heavy flak for being responsible for the present COVID-19 second wave catastrophe. Scathing criticisms are in for the euphoria in declaring victory over the virus far too early for the failed vaccine policy, for acute oxygen shortage and a host of sins of omission and commission. Should critics be ridiculed for their judgment on these 'easier said than done' concerns? Should they be condemned for not having access to the inner workings of politics thus prejudicing their views?

The international press has been stinging in its attacks of the Prime Minister accusing him of leading 'India out of lockdown and into a COVID apocalypse' and blaming his 'overconfidence', obsession with his 'strongman image', 'arrogance' and 'incompetency' for the catastrophe. Some called this 'tsunami' a

carnage and a crime against humanity because the people in power have fallen short of duties. Should foreign journalists be told 'you don't understand the Indian reality and hence your critical views have little credibility'? Should they be ordered to come to India first to understand the nitty gritty of Indian politics?

Implications can be endlessly cited. If the UDP criticises the BJP, should the saffron party say, 'you don't know enough about our inner functioning, therefore you better join us first' and vice versa? The same applies to the NPP, the Congress, HSPDP, PDF and NCP. Or should leaders of these parties shut up non-politicians who express their thoughts on their parties, on governance, on traditional institutions by condemning them as coming from non-qualified individuals? Should they be asked to enter active politics before writing a letter to the editor or a newspaper column on any subject? Should ministers resent criticism when the 'culprits' are not politicians, and hence assume they have insufficient knowledge of the working of a government? Why should politicians claim to have exclusive privilege to understand issues? Is not the freedom of the press a constitutional right of every citizen of this country irrespective of their level of knowledge and understanding? Which article states that only when a citizen has advanced in grasping an issue and only if he/she is a politician only then is he/she competent to speak?

Even atheists can write on religion, devotees on atheism, apolitical persons on politics, non-educationalists on education, non-economists on economics and so on. There is no restriction. Rejoinders and rebuttals are, of course, rights of all. But one inviting the other to associate with him or her before qualifying to express his views is absurd. It is actually intolerance and an exhibition of a closed mind set.

Politicians understand issues as politicians, others do so as observers. Everyone has a space and a role. The summon to join politics just because a person lacks the understanding of a subject or for whatever reason, is detestable. Knowledge is limitless. What someone lacks is supplemented by others and is welcome but not the unsolicited offer to alter one's identity.

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Staying alive

By TP Sreenivasan

A dictum that we do not remember in normal times is that success is meaningless without survival. But in the last one year, success has become synonymous with survival. Humanity has survived over centuries because of its instinct for self-preservation, but today, the overwhelming urge is to keep alive. This is the big difference that the pandemic has brought about in human behaviour. We have become less daring and adventurous because we know that nothing is more important than holding on tight to the tenuous lifeline. Even heaven is not tantalising if the prospect of the journey there is near. A recent cartoon showed a priest asking his congregation as to how many of them would like to go to heaven. All raised hands. Then he asked who would like to go first and no hand was raised. With all the challenges and sufferings of living, survival is an unrivalled measure of success.

When Hamlet faced the stark choice between 'to be' and 'not to be', he chose 'to be' as 'the dread of something after death.

The undiscovered country, from whose bourne/ No traveller returns, puzzles the will/

And makes us rather bear those ills we have/ Than fly to others that we know not of?/

Thus conscience does



make cowards of us all./

But Hamlet was sure that he would continue 'to be' and there was no threat of extinction.

Ambition is another trait of human beings, tempered only by the limitations of circumstances. But even sky is not the limit for dreams. When the wings of dreams are clipped, people scale down their ambitions to realistic levels. They still want to climb Mount Everest, swim the English Channel and land on the moon. But as age and diseases rule out certain activities, ambitions are abandoned, but survival is taken for granted and other dreams grow. But the pandemic, with its threat of unexpected attack, has made people consider survival bigger than success. The narrowing horizons of longevity have made humans limit ambitions other than survival. Elderly people wash hands more often, wear masks and confine themselves to their homes for sheer survival. They dread loneliness less and infections more.

The pandemic has also changed the priorities of states. Before the second wave struck with pervasive intensity, India's priority was the Chinese presence on our side of the Line of Actual Control (LAC) and the progress of disengagement was closely watched by the world. The Chinese challenge went beyond India and the whole world was preoccupied with the India-China standoff with the possibility of Pakistan opening another front. But the India-China confrontation and the sneaky dialogue with Pakistan with the help of UAE are off the radar, now that the threat is existential from an invisible enemy, with whom negotiations and diplomacy are not possible. Today, survival of citizens has become the priority. Decoupling from the Chinese supply chain and banning Chinese investment have become a faint memory. We are banking on China to supply life-saving drugs and vaccines even when they are occupying our land. The common threat of disease seems to unite the

world. Even while US President Joe Biden claims that he has done well in fighting the pandemic in the first one hundred days, the fear of the future haunts him. When he heard about the extent of the Covid-19 rampage in India, his instinct was not to express sympathy and support to India, but to look for escape routes for himself to preserve his national assets. A State Department spokesperson said that the Biden administration's first obligation was to take care of the requirements of the American people and that 'It is not only in the US interest to see Americans vaccinated; but it is in the interests of the rest of the world to see Americans vaccinated.' The reaction in India was not just one of disappointment, but of outrage that Biden was insensitive to India's interests so soon after the formation of the Quad, which had pledged to work together against the pandemic. In the light of the Quad agenda, the US position was unacceptable. Even though the US made amends subsequently, the self-preservation instinct was stunning.

The pandemic has played havoc with the most vulnerable of us all, the very young and the teenagers. Keeping them away from their friends is traumatic enough, but it is even more difficult for them to be with the parents all the time. The computer games

that they had loved till the pandemic arrived cannot replace kicking the real ball with their own feet. The children are the least worried about survival as they do not think of mortality. Moreover, the initial experience of the pandemic seemed to indicate that children were immune to the disease. But the more recent evidence does not rule out the possibility of children being infected. It is the parents who worry about the survival of the children.

India's vaccine diplomacy was an effort to overcome the self-preservation instinct by giving away our limited resources to others without making a careful plan of our future needs and capabilities. Much of Dante's 'Inferno' we witness in certain parts of the country is a consequence of not realising that even diplomatic success requires our own survival. Will the many lives lost without access to oxygen benefit from the sacrifice made? Even a former diplomat became a victim of our policy when he was virtually murdered in the parking lot of the Medanta hospital.

Someone said that nobody will help us if we did not help others. Humanitarian assistance at times of tragedy is not given on the basis of help given in the past. Many countries, who rushed support to India were not countries who received our gifts. In fact, there was criticism in our own country that Covaxin was not fully tested and should not be used. It is quite possible that some of our vaccines are lying unused in warehouses in some corners of the world, when we do not have enough for our own people.

Perhaps one outcome of the devastating pandemic times will be a change in our assumptions as to who our friends and adversaries are. Those who help us survive today may turn out to be the builders of our success in the long run. Survival is more important than geopolitics.

The author is a former diplomat and author of several books. Email: tpsreenivasan@gmail.com

Letters to the Editor

Unfolding Covid tragedy

From abroad, the Covid tragedy unfolding right now in India is heart-breaking. We feel helpless as we watch the agony of people losing loved ones, after begging in vain for oxygen. Our hearts ache as we sense the funeral atmosphere of Delhi, and the sepulchral gloom enshrouding the country.

The timorous self-confidence of Indians recovering from centuries of invasions by foreign forces, may appear like narcissistic nationalism to the west, especially this one too comes with a grain of truth. For, alongside the universal at the cost of the particular. But to the perspicacious, this neophyte confidence was long overdue. Now under the ravages of this deadly virus, this faltering confidence is giving way to the old despair and diffidence wrought by poverty, colonialism, etc.

Yet, like all appearances, this one too comes with a grain of truth. For, alongside this faltering confidence, we have a boastful anti-colonialism that tramples upon true cosmopolitanism. We have as well, a capitalistic braggadocio that is very Trumpian, and hence western in origin. One sees this unfeeling quest for Indian authenticity in Mr. Modi and his followers -- in their pre-second-surge one-upmanship with respect to the west and in their tri-

umphant crowing towards western sufferers of Covid.

If anything, this crisis has revealed the emptiness of narcissistic nationalism. Where are all the patriots now that India needs them? Why are they not emptying their coffers to help those in need? Where are the nationalistic Modi worshipping diasporic Indians in the west? Why are they not emptying their coffers to send aid to India? Typically such nationalists are schizoid in their attitudes. Incapable of true cosmopolitanism, they draw their LOVE for India from their HATRED for the west.

One sees in this crisis, both the light and shadow characteristic of the Indian civilization. On the one hand, man's love for fellow man, as strangers console one another in Delhi and elsewhere. On the other hand, the brutal callousness of the empowered towards the disempowered so typical of India. That Mr. Modi cannot feel the pain of his adoring masses, proves he is every bit as much a cult leader as was Mr. Trump.

An invisible virus has accomplished what diplomacy, trade, and goodwill have failed to do. It has united humanity. For those of us who are outside, it is heart-warming to know of all the nations (including western nations) that are leaping forward to help Indians. Unfortunately, it is part of the conscious-

ness of the oppressed, to act entitled with respect to the oppressor -- demanding help from the very people they fear and loathe. The tragedy of desperate migrants trying to flee former colonies to come to the west reveals this contradiction in neo-colonialism. But one cannot be truly free until one overcomes all sense of inferiority and entitlement. It is therefore my earnest hope that Indians will be grateful to the foreigners now rushing in to help India. This proves that in the end we are one humanity.

Yours, etc.,
Deepa Majumdar,
Via email

Vaccine Refusal- Shillong's Shame

Editor,
Shillong is known as the education hub of the North-east. Yet many of the residents of this highly educated city, known for its music, culture and sophistication, have refused to take the Covid vaccination. The lament by the DC, herself a progressive and enlightened leader, and the official appeal by the Chief Secretary, both of which appeared on the front page of the Shillong Times of May 3, 2021, should not have been necessary.

Like many others in this city, I have listened to theories of misinformation and dark conspiracy, circulating

among relatives, neighbours and even respected figures. A doctor friend of mine, himself vaccinated, could not persuade his parents or other family members to take the job. They belong to a conservative church, some of whose members openly idolise Trump on Facebook. Of course, now we know that Donald and Melania have quietly taken the vaccination. A neighbour has declared that Covaxin is not to be trusted as it is "Modi's medicine". Most worrisome of all is the refusal of many health workers in Shillong hospitals who refuse the vaccination.

Such attitudes hark back to the Dark Ages, when church leaders imprisoned Galileo for saying the earth revolved around the sun, and priests treated epilepsy by casting out the devil. Shakespeare makes many references to the plague in his plays, having lived his entire life in the shadow of successive outbreaks. During his time civic officials collected weekly data from parish death registers. When those deaths surpassed thirty, they banned assemblies, feasts, archery contests, and other mass gatherings. Since it was believed that it was impossible to become infected during the act of worship, church services were not included in the ban.

Pope Francis has been vaccinated, calling it a life-saving, ethical obligation. In a TV interview, he called on

everyone to get the vaccine, saying "It's an ethical choice, because you are also playing with the lives of others." The Church of England has called upon all its members to be vaccinated and has offered churches to be used as vaccination centres.

The piece by Rev Lyndan Syiem in yesterday's Shillong Times provides wonderful counsel for Christians, showing that spirituality can coexist with science, and that common sense and social responsibility must prevail. Unfortunately, there are influencers in the church who claim that divine interventions will protect the faithful. This is no different from pilgrims at the Kumbh Mela who believe that the holy Ganges will protect them from disease.

We need church leaders and other leading citizens to come forward and strongly appeal to the public through their churches, social media and their circles of influence to take the vaccine. It is only through vaccination that the pandemic will be eventually controlled.

Yours, etc.,
Glenn C. Kharkongor
Via email

Angels of mercy

Editor,
The news item "City Gurudwara offers oxygen langar" (ST. May 2, 2021) is not only comforting but inspirational as well and an

example for all to emulate. Last year too the members of the Sikh Community have demonstrated their humanitarian concerns and fellow feelings. The oxygen crisis the country is facing today creates fear and apprehension. As our state is also seeing a surge in positive cases, the support system from good Samaritans like the Sikhs is definitely reassuring.

The virus makes no distinction and hits anyone anywhere, irrespective of faith, community, age, class, caste, etc. It is a leveller that is mutating rapidly and frighteningly. As we fear physical contact lest we contract the deadly virus, our frontline workers, doctors, nurses, municipal staff, and many others are in the forefront. They deserve respect and prayers. Likewise, the Sikh Community who have once again led the way to support those in need deserve our gratitude. Let us pray for each other especially for those who are working relentlessly in the service of humankind and let us be more vigilant and extra careful to save ourselves, our loved ones and our frontline workers.

Yours, etc.,
Jennifer Dkhar,
Via email

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

"Aggression unopposed becomes a contagious disease."

--- Jimmy Carter

The Shillong Times

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Post-Poll violence in Bengal

THE aftershocks of the high-voltage West Bengal assembly elections are beginning to be felt—and in unimaginable ways. Twelve persons were killed in the violence from rival sides and worse could follow. It's a pity that the election frenzy has not subsided even after the results have been declared and that at a time when Covid19 is testing the resilience of the people both on the health and economic fronts. The BJP has gone to the extent of asking for central forces to be brought to Bengal and to even apply Article 356 (President's Rule) in order to restore law and order in the state. The ambition of the BJP to capture Bengal turned sour as it failed to grab power. However, the saffron party has emerged as the principal and only opposition in the state. Mamata Banerjee's defeat in Nandigram is a small matter considering the resounding win of the TMC in the state. She's beginning a third term with more confidence even while the Congress and the Left have been wiped out.

That said, the TMC chief cannot let law and order take a backseat at a point where her Party has been given another chance at governance. Maintaining law and order is integral to governance as it brings a sense of security for all, but especially for those engaged in economic activities. Bengal has a history of political violence particularly during elections. This reign of terror has got to end especially at a time when people are battling the worst form of the pandemic. Already, the failure of the Modi government to tackle the Covid19 situation is fuelling people's anger against his governance style. The actual number of deaths due to lack of oxygen or hospital beds are yet to be known but a safe guess is thousands have died. That a city like Delhi suffered directly under the nose of Modi is a worrisome commentary on the lack of preparedness on the part of the central government even as grim examples from the US and Europe were before us. A national lockdown might be warranted again. Sadly, the politicians who messed up with the election jamboree and discarding Covid protocols have not been held accountable for their deadly indulgences.

In the midst of all this the violence in Bengal is a slur on the country. The TMC has inherited the legacy of the Left parties in Bengal which have always indulged in strong arm tactics. The Left cadres have crossed over to the TMC and are continuing their reign of terror. Not that the BJP is an innocent bystander. Even before the polling there were incidents of violence and deaths. This is not what democracy is about. People cannot be coerced to vote a certain party under pain of death or intimidation. The Bengal violence must be contained.

Ha Ri Lajong; Katba Mon! (My country; My Wish)

By Benjamin Lyngdoh

The title of the column translates into a phrase 'In our own land; we do as we please.' Quite obviously, the phrase depicts a sense of pride and ownership of something and that it consequently entails a freedom to do or be as desired or pleased.

In literal terms, one might be excused for thinking about it as a light-hearted phrase that does not need much deliberation or delving into. In addition, some might take it in a positive note as being a mission/motivational statement that drives a person/people towards productive outcomes (say a sense of well-being or contentment). However, in the contemporary Khasi community the ramifications are far more serious. It is a reflection of something more sinister. One might be as candid in saying that it is a description of a sense of fear and insecurity. It is an expression of the feeling of being enslaved and controlled by others. It portrays that the 'sons of the soil' are being dominated by others. On the other hand, and increasingly, the phrase 'ha ri lajong; katba mon!' is being considered as a war cry and a call of defiance. It is about standing firm and steadfast. It is a call by the pressure groups to strike back and strike hard. The justification for such is that we are the 'sons of the soil' and as such we have the freedom to do and live as we please in our own land. Hence, while keeping in perspective the dichotomous nature of the phrase, it is important to dissect 'why' it has come about and 'what' it really means for the Khasi community at large. As such, can the phrase be used as an awakening cry in the true sense of the term? Or is it just a cry of frustration? What is the way out?

To start with, the people in the state know that the phrase has been there for quite some time but it has gained undue only in recent times. Today, it is largely seen as a result of large scale resentment over a number of violent incidents involving the Khasis and the non-Khasis. To name a few, the attack on Lurshai Hynniewta at Ichamati and his subsequent death, the

Lawsotun basketball court incident where a group of non-Khasi boys were attacked and the subsequent investigation resulted in a number of Khasi boys being picked up for interrogation, the attack on migrant labourers from Assam at a village near Mawkyrwat which resulted in the death of

Khan and Anushka Sharma. In the movie, all the prominent religions of India be it Hinduism or Islam or Christianity were harshly critiqued. However, one facet of the movie is important for all to realize. Since the majority in India are Hindus, Hinduism took the major bashing with moderate bashing for Islam

"What is even more disturbing is that the pressure groups have openly claimed that there was not enough condemnation by the wider sections of the Khasi community towards the murder and exploitation of their own and these very same people are quick to stand up for the non-Khasis."

Raju Mondal, the Golf Links attack where Phershan Roy Marthong succumbed to his grievous injuries and the very recent 58 Gorkha Training Centre versus the Mawshbit villagers rings fresh in the memories of all.

To call a spade a spade, all these violent incidents reek of a deep-rooted mistrust, resentment and animosity between the Khasis and the non-Khasis. What is even more disturbing is that the pressure groups have openly claimed that there was not enough condemnation by the wider sections of the Khasi community towards the murder and exploitation of their own and these very same people are quick to stand up for the non-Khasis. That fact is that these allegations of nepotism, favouritism and allegiance towards the non-Khasis are unfounded. The truth is that a crime is a crime and a murder is a murder and exploitation is exploitation. It knows no community or identity. It does not matter who commits crime/murder/exploitation on whom. They are all equally to be condemned! If anything at all, these anti-social elements are a blot on society who should be taken to task.

In order to drive the point home, the readers may try to relate to the religion-centric societal depiction of the Hindi movie PK starring Amir

and negligible bashing for Christianity. But what is the crux here? The crux is that since majority of the Indian population practices Hinduism, so goes the criticism and critique. By the same analogy, in Meghalaya if a non-Khasi is beaten up by a Khasi, it is widely seen as an act of intimidation and subjugation. Accordingly, there comes a lot of condemnation and abhorrence. If the case is vice versa, then it is seen as an exertion and power-positioning. How is that possible? How can the non-Khasis be so boastful? That cannot be! This is the position of the pressure groups and as a result comes the expectations for mass condemnation. In such a situation, any degree of condemnation will not seem enough and hence starts the abuse and malice towards the so called 'English media Khasi people'. However, this is not true! In reality, everyone condemns an act of violence no matter which side of the spectrum they fall in. As such, it is high time that this misconception is laid to rest by the pressure groups.

In relation to the above, the role played by the government and the media houses is critical. In a nutshell, they are supposed to be alleviators of a communal situation and not inflame it. Yes, law takes its course and law takes its

time. However, the government must try to ensure that the investigating agencies do not take too much time in solving a case. The delays only worsen the situation and rubs salt on the wounds of the near and dear ones. This only agitates the people thereby nurturing anarchy and lawlessness. In addition, even more important than the pressure groups that shout in the streets, it is the duty of the state legislature to get its act right. The demand for LLP is a good example. If the state government does not get its act right, we are heading towards another spell of turmoil and violence as seen in the past. This is a clarion call especially to the pressure group leaders who are now sitting MLAs/MDCs. Similarly, the media houses must stand up as an ardent 'fourth pillar of democracy'. It would be better if they report on communal incidents/violence with a moderate and unbiased tone. In general, the English dailies of Shillong do receive a lot of criticism on the reporting of such incidents. People say they are biased. However, what about the vernacular Khasi dailies? They have their own shortcomings. They also do their fair share of biased news reporting. However, the intention of this column is not to create animosity even of the slightest degree; rather, it is to revisit reporting standards of media houses and the exercise of duties and responsibilities judiciously and responsibly.

In the end, one hopes that the good intentions of all outweighs the bad. It is better to bury the hatchet and let us move on as humans. For the Khasi community, the phrase 'ha ri lajong; katba mon!' need not be discarded; rather, it may be taken as a motivational cry towards hard work, dedication, sincerity and progress. Well, in the true sense of the term we will be able to do/be 'katba mon!' only if we are capable and able enough to be self-reliant and self-sufficient. That way, it is time to convert the 'war' cry into a 'work' cry.

(The Author teaches at NEHU; Email: benjamin21-in@yahoo.co.in)

What's troubling Adar Poonawala - will the Modi govt come clean? PM received Covaxin shot in preference to covishield

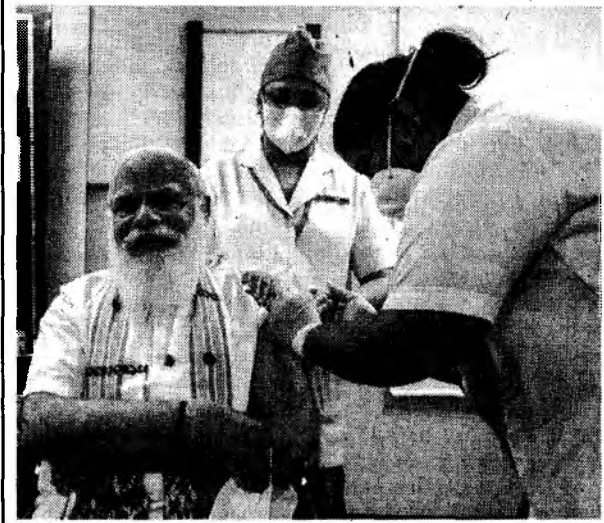
By Sushil Kutty

Adar Poonawala is the 'King of Vaccines'. And in today's Covid-19 world, he's bigger than Jeff Bezos and Mukesh Ambani. Poonawala runs the Serum Institute of India, the world's largest producer of vaccines with a production facility in Pune. Now, on the turn of a coin, he wants to set up production hubs in other countries, which ought to make India think. It appears like he is miffed with India. But why, what's eating into him?

Recent events in Adar's life point perhaps to a souring of ties with India and certain hi-fi Indians in particular. It looks like his 'standing' has taken a hit, and he blames certain powerful Indians for the jolt. It appears like Poonawala's status in the vaccine world has been brought down a notch or two; his 'King of Vaccines' crown is slipping.

First, Adar Poonawala, in the middle of March 2021, took on rent a mansion in the Mayfair locality of London for a whopping \$69,000 a week! Then, he said that SII was facing a funds-crunch. That it would require Rs. 3000 crore to fulfil commitments made to the people of India. To the hoi polloi, he came out as the genuine thing. After all it requires dough to produce vaccines. The same as it requires taxpayer's money to build the Central Vista in New Delhi.

Then, news broke that Adar Poonawala has been given the CRPF's Y+ security by a Kangana 'Manikarnika' Ranaut. Some influential people were threatening Poonawala. They wanted Covishield out of hand. Served to them on a platter. Poonawala did not name the rascals. Instead, the 'King of Vaccines' flew to the United



You see, Covid-19 is an opportunity to some, 'God-given or Devil-imposed?' only the Almighty will be able to say. As the world stands on the brink and we stare into the abyss with the abyss staring back at us, our sole solace and survival is the Covid-19 vaccine.

Luckily, we have more than one vaccine in use, and several in the pipeline. And Poonawala's Serum Institute of India is a top player. Last year, when Covid-19 hit the planet, India had an upper-hand of sorts: SII was within its geography! And Adar Poonawala had promised to fulfil India's needs of Covid-19 vaccines. Being top vaccine producer, SII easily got the nod to produce the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine. Poonawala named it 'Covishield' and Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited SII in January 2021, just days before India launched its Covid-19 vaccination drive, and everything seemed hunky-dory with SII and Adar Poonawala. So, why does it appear now like Poonawala has swallowed a cat?

By the way Poonawala is a recent addition to Forbes List of Billionaires. Some would say 'thanks to Covid-19', but then, again, why's Adar Poonawala acting strange, so to speak? Could it be because Modi chose to take a 'Covaxin' jab over Poonawala's 'Covishield'? You see ego is a massive thing. And could it be that it hurt when Bharat Biotech's 'Covaxin' got tagged as 'indigenously made' while SII's 'Covishield' was just another Covid-19 vaccine. Also, Covaxin "inventor" Krishna Ella was hailed as India's "self-made vaccine hero"? As if Adar Poonawala was running on gas from his father's pump piped from Exxon or Shell or what have you? The fact of the matter is: Covishield is a vaccine developed by sharper brains and not by Poonawala. But there's a way out of that handicap. Poonawala could correct the situation in his mind by setting up production hubs outside India. Besides, then, he would not keep on taking a loss in India; be compelled to sell at a discount. The situation called for hard decisions and, going by events/decisions, Poonawala took them, too, one by one.

Kingdom just in time to beat that country's no-more-flights-from-Covid-ravaged India deadline. He took his family with him. And, of course, he left without his Y+ CRPF security detail.

Nobody can call Adar Poonawala a man without vision. He knew exactly what to do, and when. Poonawala is one among the chosen few of the novel coronavirus to scale heights. Another one is Pfizer CEO Albert Bourla, whose Pfizer vaccine is the No.1 Covid-19 vaccine administered in the United States. It's said that in 2021 alone, Pfizer will generate profits of as much as \$4 billion from its Covid-19 vaccine. How much Serum Institute will generate is anybody's guess!

Of course, the Pfizer Covid-19 vaccine is not in India, but there's talk that it's in the Indian government's queue. The other day Pfizer announced it will send \$75 million worth of Covid-19 medications like anti-blood coagulants to India, a donation. But why anti-blood coagulants? Lots of Americans who took the Pfizer vaccine had complained of rare blood clots!

A similar complaint was lodged against AstraZeneca vaccine, but luckily Covishield was spared the ignominy. Poonawala's AstraZeneca vaccine has no rare blood clot worries dogging it. And now that India has launched into vaccinating Indians in the age-group 18-44, the largest chunk of Indians, there's the need for Serum Institute of India to jack up production. True, SII has to meet supply commitments it has made to other countries as well, but that does not mean Adar Poonawala can shirk his duty towards his motherland.

"There's going to be an announcement in the next few days," Poonawala told a newspaper the other week, but his statement that SII will be able to raise monthly output to 100 million doses only by July is not elevating news to millions of Indians in the 18-44 age group waiting to be inoculated, and to millions others who took their first shot of Covishield and are slotted for their second jab. That Serum Institute is poised to launch its 'nasal vaccine' in the UK doesn't make any difference. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

Onward Christian soldiers

Editor, Apropos the letter by Jennifer Dkhar, 'Angels of mercy' (ST May 4, 2021), it is wonderful that our brothers and sisters from the Sikh community have come forward to offer an 'Oxygen langar' in case of need. They have shown that religion is not only about praying and worshipping God but it is also about offering physical help to the sick and the suffering no matter what denomination they belong to. As a so called Christian state I thought by now we would have seen something solid being offered by many church organisations to fight this pandemic. Isn't it about time for the churches to come forward to contribute physically to the fight in whatever way they can? Churches are, of course, offering spiritual help but spiritual help compounded with physical help is uplifting and is a powerful medicine. This is an appropriate time to offer such solace where it is needed. Come on Church leaders, follow that line in the hymn, 'Onward Christian soldiers'.

Yours etc., D.M. Pariat, Shillong.

Nepotism - the executioner of deserving minds

Editor, American Novelist, Toni Morrison had once said,

"Everybody gets everything handed to them. The rich inherit it. I don't mean just inheritance of money. I mean what people take for granted among the middle and upper classes, which is nepotism, the old-boy's network." Nepotism can fairly be described as an act of using power or influence to get unfair advantages for members of one's family, or an acquaintance. This is prevalent across societies. It is prevalent especially in India. No matter how qualified and eligible a person is, if they do not have a link to anyone influential, they will lose out on an opportunity. It is a pity that someone talented and hard-working tries to fit in and be 'self-made' but lags behind only because he/she does not possess the clout of being connected to a high ranking or influential person.

This system leaves the youth demotivated and in turn to an increased risk of mental health issues such as depression, trauma and even unwanted thoughts. In Meghalaya, the subject of nepotism is not new. Favoritism and bias have been in existence for a long time in our State and especially in government departments where people are appointed through "backdoor entry."

Let us take the infamous case of the Meghalaya Energy Corporation Limited (MeECL). I came across a report about favoritism and nepotism in the MeECL where a junior engineer has been vested with special powers exceeding that of the Chief Engineer and has also been appointed as the nodal officer for implementation of Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP). This has irked the other employees of the Corporation who believe that

such duties and responsibilities have been the remit of the Chief Engineer and his team. The MeECL is not the only department with such malpractices. There are many other government departments in our State which practice this culture of nepotism.

The Meghalaya Public Service Commission (MPSC) too has been another institution that practices nepotism which people have time and again spoken out against. Thousands of candidates that have applied for various vacant positions against advertisements published by the MPSC, have not been able to qualify. They are given umpteen reasons for not being qualified enough. But to what extent are those reasons true? Meghalaya Government must not frustrate the youth especially those that are hard working and deserving. To cast them aside in favour of the less deserving is a crime and injustice.

Yours etc., Jordan Diengdoh, Shillong - 2

Our fight to tackle Covid spread

Editor, The night curfew recently imposed in the Shillong Urban Agglomeration is a good step taken by the State government to flatten the curve of COVID infection. In tough times, the Government's constant effort to tackle the crisis in infrastructure, staff and other resources related to treating the disease deserves praise. The private hospitals, the Sikh community and various

organizations gearing up in their tireless effort towards service to humanity is indeed praiseworthy.

However, apart from the selfless service rendered by various sections and the vaccination drives carried out by the Government, the awareness of the public and their adherence to SOP (Standard Operating Procedure) is the need of the hour to control the spread of the virus. Our society must constantly appreciate the frontline and the healthcare workers for their dedicated work as their tireless fight in these challenging times leads to a better tomorrow. It is a request to the Government of Meghalaya to consider Journalists as frontline workers and give them all the benefits under the category. We must maintain a proper diet and spend quality time with our near and dear ones so that no one goes into a state of social isolation. Educational institutions, and institutions adopting to work from home measures, must not lower the spirits of their students and employees because of digital divide. The state must seek active support from the Centre in combating the disease.

Yours etc., Partha Pratim Duarah, Nazira (Assam)

Open the gateway to knowledge

Editor, A week ago I was confronted by a paradox in the market. On one hand was a crowd jostling in front of a wine store and on the other a woman standing near a bookstall that was shut. On

enquiring she said she was looking for a Physics book for her daughter appearing for Class 12 exams. I noticed her distress on not finding the book. Seeing the rush at the wine store while a bookstore remained shut must have made the lady distraught. The thought that might have crossed her mind is - why are there no restrictions on wine stores while bookstalls are shut. Something is amiss as far as "setting priorities," is concerned.

All academic achievement, developmental activities and modern advancements happened because our ancestors and us read and learned about great inventors and discoverers. Today our children depend entirely on educational institutions and prescribed textbooks. But COVID-19 has forced all schools/colleges to shut their doors for over a year. Should we now "deprive" our kids of textbooks as well? Government needs to be more pragmatic. Nothing can be worse for our school-going children than to be idle at home for extended periods and without books. They will either while away their time playing addictive games or watch frivolous entertainment programs on TV which may affect their tender minds.

If the government can allow hardware shops to open during the containment period why can't they allow bookstalls as well to remain open to cater to the needs of students - of course, under strict enforcement of Covid norms. This will doubtless keep our children off many "harmful indulgences."

Moreover, why do we have to limit ourselves to construction of new concert halls, roads etc., to accelerate urbanization for develop-

ment? What is more important is for the government to work out policies that enable our children to "construct" creative ideas and improve their "mental ecology". For a better tomorrow, we need to educate children in every possible way. The Government and parents have to ensure that the lockdown isolation is not adversely affecting the mental health of our kids. Idleness could push them to wrong habits due to peer pressure. Why don't we think of these eventualities? Are the increasing cases of "drug addiction" and alcoholism among our youths not paramount challenges for the state?

The quote by American journalist Margaret Fuller, "Today a reader, tomorrow a leader," aptly explains how great readers emerge as great figures for the future. If our authorities at the helm, hark back to their past, they too would recall how some books have influenced them. They must have invested time to read books and gain knowledge because of which hold important positions today. To my mind, books are as essential as food to our body. They alone can effectively nourish the minds of our children. Interesting anecdotes of Einstein, Edison and Pascale forgoing their food but not their books should encourage us to open the doors of bookstores 24x7 for a better tomorrow. Only good books and sports can lure children away from bad habits.

Yours etc., Salil Gewali, Shillong

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

*"Don't spend time beating on a wall,
hoping to transform it into a door."*

— Coco Chanel

The Shillong Times

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All hands on deck

THE caption is a signal used on board a ship when there is an emergency and the Captain gives a call to indicate that all crew members are to go on deck to receive their briefing. Meghalaya is today in a similar situation. The second Covid wave which is more virulent than the first one, has entered Meghalaya with a vengeance. This requires that all those in leadership positions, social, political, religious, business and institutional roll up their sleeves and get down to helping those in need and there are many. The Sikh community of Shillong is always the first to extend help to those in need. Last year they gave food to the poor during Covid times. This time around they have organised an oxygen langar which is the need of the hour. This is a commendable gesture which needs to be replicated several times over by other good Samaritans. The Marwari Yuva Manch is also providing free food. This is how society converges to tide over a crisis. It is a matter of concern that political parties are not seen or heard doing social work at this critical juncture. The Congress as the main opposition party in Meghalaya should stop nitpicking about how the MDA Government is handling the pandemic. Would the Congress have handled things better if it was on the hot seat? Does it have a better strategy to beat the virus, more so since the former Chief Minister and Congress stalwart is a medical doctor? This is the time to rise above party politics and nudge the government to fill the gaps that they perceive exists in the manner in which things are being handled at this point.

At this point religious and educational institutions also need to come forward and offer their services to the sick and suffering at this time. There is need to consolidate efforts because the future looks grim and Meghalaya cannot go the Delhi or Maharashtra way or UP way where people die not so much of the disease as from the lack of oxygen. So let different groups take up different responsibilities. On the part of the Government, it is important at this time to clearly delineate the governance framework. Not every decision can flow from the political high table. The administration must be given the space to take certain decisions based on ground realities. After all, administrators are trained to manage disaster. The decision for a full lockdown could have been taken after weighing all pros and cons. Announcing a lockdown just five hours ahead results in panic buying and crowding, thereby defeating the purpose of a lockdown. At these times, strategize, strategize is the mantra and knee jerk decision must be avoided.

Letters to the Editor

MPSC's fiasco

Editor,
After all the allegations made against the Commission on the recently concluded MCS exams, kudos to the commission for being able to declare the final list of selected candidates within a span of 7 days! Most examinations require a minimum of one month or more to do the same! Through this letter, we would like to highlight an odd coincidence, wherein the names of three rank-holders in the said list were, in fact, reflected in the list of rejected candidates, dated 16.11.2017.

Elaborating on the oddity of the entire state of affairs, we will take you through a brief but succinct list of events that unfolded. MPSC had advertised for the MCS post on 24.07.2017 vide letter no. MPSC/ADVT-38/1/2017-2018/21. Subsequently, a list of rejected (proposed) candidates, dated 16.11.2017, was notified vide notice no. MPSC/EX-C/23/2017-2018/28. As per the usual recruitment process, these rejected candidates were to file their representations by 30.11.2017. An additional list of rejected candidates, dated 28.11.2017, was notified vide notice no. MPSC/EX-C/23/2017-2018/72, wherein this lot were to file their representations by 07.12.2017. Thereafter, after having considered and scrutinized the said representations, MPSC, on 29.12.2017, vide notice no. MPSC/D-108/2/2017-2018/16, put forth the eligibility list, stating and we quote, "The representations filed by 106 (one hundred and six) candidates have been placed before the Commission, 54

(fifty four) candidates have been found to be eligible and hence accepted".

Here's what's bizarre – The names of rank-holders 4, 19 and 37 of the list of selected MCS candidates, featured in the list of rejected candidates, dated 16.11.2017. However, these names did not reflect in the Eligibility List dated 29.12.2017, presuming they were amongst the 106 candidates who had filed their representations. Then, wouldn't it be correctly concluded, that their eligibility for the MCS exam ended there? But lo, a fresh rejection list was notified by MPSC, dated 13.06.2018, vide Notice no. MPSC/EX-C/23/2017-2018/82, wherein representations, if any, were to be filed by 27.06.2018. In this very notice, the names of these specific rank-holders do not feature anymore! But the strangeness doesn't end there. The subsequent Eligibility List, dated 02.07.2018, notified vide notice no. MPSC/D-103/2/2017-2018/162, does not reflect their names either!

Two primary questions remain - The Commission must have been ready and all set with the list of candidates who were to appear for the preliminary exam, on or before 19.01.2018, presumably. Why, then, did the Commission publish an additional list of rejected candidates, dated 13.06.2018, when the process of filtering the candidates had already been completed?

And for the substantial part, nowhere in the eligibility lists, dated 29.12.2017 and 02.07.2018 respectively, do the names of rank-holders 4, 19 and 37 appear. How, then, did the Commission include in the final list of selectees (MCS), dated 29.04.2021, the names of the said rank-

holders whose names have, not once, been reflected in the eligibility lists but, in fact, appeared in the list of rejected candidates, dated 16.11.2017? Is this, what one calls, breezing through the procedure of examinations, which, by the way, includes a written examination as well as an interview? Not to mention, one must be 'qualified' and 'selected' in order to take the examinations?

Oh, the ire the Commission receives till date, is everything but undeserving!

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request

UDP: A Khasi-Centric Party

Editor,
Recently while I was going through multiple videos on YouTube, the GHADC campaign videos dominated my feed as if the algorithm in the platform knew the interest that the Garo District Council (GDC) election had entailed and engrossed the people of Garo Hills.

From the high-profile campaign of the National People's Party (NPP) – the current ruling party in the State and the incumbent party seeking another term to run the Executive Committee (EC) in GHADC to the low profile campaign by the Congress party, Garo Hills caught the attention of many people in the Northeast for the first time for a council election. One would agree that even the more influential councils in Meghalaya like the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council (KHADC) and Jaintia Hills Autonomous District Council (JHADC) had never seen the kind of high energy and high intensity campaign

'Didi' could well be the agent of change

Mamata's determined venture into national politics

By Arun Srivastava

Just 48 hours ahead of her being formally sworn in as the Chief Minister, TMC chief Mamata Banerjee moved one step forward to stake her say in the national politics. For the experts and the political establishment, who till May 1 were sure of Mamata losing the election to the BJP triumvirate, Narendra Modi, Amit Shah and J P Nadda, a new hope of India and "agent of national political change" has been resurrected. This is undoubtedly the most coveted compliment for her, but at the same time underlines the desperation of the secular and liberal forces to take on the rightist power.

Some experts try to hide Modi-Shah's defeat behind the façade of underperformance in comparison to their hold on the Centre; they could not comprehend that the politics of hatred and insinuation has its own limits. During their sixty odd public rallies the duo simply used this as the electoral toolkit. They preferred to forget that the people, particularly the middle class and the women of the state, were getting butchered by corona. While they were flying across the country to campaign for their candidates, they ignored the basic task of organising and motivating the bureaucracy to take the epidemic head on.

In contrast, even while she was engaged in the tough battle of protecting her fort, Mamata cautioned the people against any negligence and advised them to take precautionary measures. Once the war was over and she won the battle, Mamata has made her first major foray into the national arena demanding free Covid vaccination for the 137 crore Indians across the country.

"We will give free vaccination to all people in the state and I demand free vaccination for 140 crore people in the country," she thundered. In case the central government fumbles or fails to vaccinate the entire population she will start a non-violent movement from the Gandhi statue on the Maidan (in

Calcutta) very soon. She also said, "They have the Reserve Bank (of India) with them... The cost of vaccinating everyone in the country will be Rs 30,000 crore. Why can't they do it?"

For her the top priority after taking charge of the government is battling the Covid pandemic. Her decision has also been inspired by two factors; while corona has been ravaging the country no political leader of national stature has come out with the demand for free vaccination to all the 137 crore Indians and secondly, Modi has been utterly mishandling the mechanism to fight the pandemic. What is shocking indeed is the government charging a huge amount from the people for vaccination. The poor and daily labourers, who have been forced to starve as they are denied livelihood, would find it a tough proposition to pay the charge. Besides, the rate is also not uniform. Unscrupulous people are taking advantage of the government policy.

That Mamata intends to make a proactive intervention in national politics was clear from her letter to the opposition leaders in the beginning of the month. At that time the BJP and close aides of Modi and Shah had decried it as a sign of her desperation to garner support as she was on the verge of losing the electoral battle. But her poise has made it explicit that she is raring to take on the Modi-Shah combine at national level when other opposition parties were wavering to do so.

Mamata's spectacular win notwithstanding, tremendous odds are stacked against her. She has been defeated in Nandigram, and it is the testament to her prowess as a politician. Though anti-incumbency brazenly stared her in the face, she managed to turn the odds in her favour. Ironically the opportunity was provided to her by Modi-Shah using their offices and skills to polarise the Bengali society. There is no denying

the fact that in the fight of political acumen she triumphed over Modi-Shah.

It is not that Modi-Shah combine faced their first electoral defeat in Bengal. Earlier they met with defeat in Rajasthan and MP. This time they were badly mauled in Kerala and Tamil Nadu, but Bengal had special significance. A win in Bengal would have accorded the BJP a pan Indian character and boosted Modi's political stature at the national level. Ever since Modi-Shah came to power in 2014, they have been scheming to throw Mamata out of power.

Obviously this year's poll result has wider implications; not only for Bengal, but also for the Lok Sabha elections in 2024. While Mamata has been catapulted to the national scene as a dominant agent of political change, she is being perceived as the opposition face who can take on Modi. Her first step into the national political arena also sends the message that the concept of one nation one party that was floated by Modi has crashed. The TMC win has reinforced the relevance of regional parties, the regional satraps and the necessity of strengthening federalism.

Though the BJP has lost the elections, it is ironic that the Central leaders of the party have been striving hard to create a political mess in the state. Their first move was to deny victory to Mamata from Nandigram. On Sunday, it was initially reported that she had won by a margin of 1,200 votes, but the returning officer subsequently announced BJP candidate's victory by 1,956 votes. The EC reversed the verdict. A miffed Mamata said; "How come the Election Commission reverse the Nandigram result after formally announcing it? We will move court".

Next day showing a text message on her mobile she told the media; "I received an SMS wherein the returning officer of Nandigram has

written to someone that if he allows recounting then his life would be under threat. For four hours the server was down, the Governor also congratulated me. Suddenly everything changed". This development cannot obstruct her from taking the oath of office, but it certainly creates some sort of political bitterness. To the utter surprise of the media and political circles, the news of EC declaring her loser was announced by the IT cell of the BJP. Then after it was picked up by others.

The fact remains that she is a more mature politician than the BJP leaders. With Subhendu Adhikary on its side, the BJP could well have won almost all the seats in Midnapore region. But Mamata's decision to contest from Nandigram helped the TMC win majority of the seats in East Midnapore and West Midnapore, considered to be the strongholds of Subhendu's family. TMC won 23 out of 31 Assembly segments in two districts. In fact, BJP had expected to win a majority of the 35 seats. Her presence saved the party apparatus from crumbling. TMC used the opportunity to expose the involvement of Subhendu in various wrong doings. This put the party on the backfoot. It is worth recalling that surge of the BJP in East and West Midnapores in the 2019 Lok Sabha polls was because of people's anger against Subhendu.

Notwithstanding the fact that the BJP used all its power and resources, the party could not retain its support base in the state. The BJP's vote share stood at 37.70 per cent, a decline of nearly 3 per cent from its 40.30 per cent votes in 2019. On the other hand, the TMC had increased its vote share to 48.20 per cent from 43.30 per cent in 2019. In other words, a 10 per cent vote gap stood between the two parties. The party could retain this percentage after Modi and Shah addressed nearly 70 rallies. Modi alone addressed 20 rallies. In 2019 Lok Sabha polls, the BJP led in 121 Assembly seats in the state, but this time it went down to 76. (IPA Service)

ers including the Garos. The party ideology and principles are about fighting for the greater Khasi land where Garo sentiments and feelings have no value let alone representing us. It is also important to note, that UDP has never been able to form a government on its own and its performance can best be described as a 'fly by night operator.' The famous expression from Texas is what UDP can be best described as - 'All Hat and No Cattle'.

Most Garos living in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, do feel like second-class citizens in their own State since the Khasis and Jaintias dominate every sphere whether business, administration, politics etc. As a Garo, I would not be wrong to say that we feel like second generation Indians in America where white supremacist Americans treat people of Indian origin as useless and of no value. With all of this, UDP is definitely a party for and by the Khasis and sadly, Garos have no place in it.

Yours etc,
Christina Marak
Shillong -19

Let's be grateful

Editor,
I live in Police Bazar and have seen the appreciable change in the behavior pattern of the public in and around the area. This has happened because of the commendable work by the DC's office staff, the office of NHM, the Covid Task force and the people of the area including the hawkers and daily bread earners from outside the locality. For instance Dr Lana E. Nongbri has been very regular with visits in

Murder at Medanta

By TP Sreenivasan

The frequency with which the IFS fraternity is losing its members to Covid is heart breaking. Although the Foreign Service is rather small, all of us do not meet each other because of the very nature of our peripatetic existence. We know some very intimately if we are posted together in a mission, some formally if we are posted in Delhi, some casually at conferences or social gatherings or in the corridors of South Block. Many are known only by reputation or the despatches they send. So no one is a stranger and there is a special bond among us.

Of late, I open the IFS group mail with trepidation because sad stories of illness and death appear in it all too frequently. We look at Covid casualty figures with cold acceptance, but when a name is attached to a number, a numbness sets in, memories come like sea waves and we express shock and sympathy, depending on the depth of the relationship we may have had with the dear departed. The pain is even more when the person concerned is younger, which happens these days as Covid does not choose its victims in any particular order.

When the news of the demise of former Ambassador to Brunei, Mozambique and Algeria, Ashok Amrohi came in the group, it was shocking as I knew he was many years younger to me, though our paths had never crossed. I had heard of him from common friends about his professional competence, his personal charm, his sense of humour, his humility and his zest for life. The death by Covid has a particular poignancy and I conveyed it

es, rich, poor, young and old. Though India managed to handle the first wave of the coronavirus reasonably well, we were caught unawares by the second wave, which brought untold suffering, death and devastation to the country. India became short of the most essential materials to save lives and no facilities even for cremating the dead with honour. It was only months earlier that India had won acclaim as the "pharmacy of the world", having provided Covid related relief supplies to 92 countries. Pictures of some of the cremation grounds remind us of Dante's inferno. In these circumstances, is it fair to expect a better treatment for Ashok?

It is here that we have to think of the retired life of Indian diplomats. They live in different countries for more than thirty years, with their roots in India becoming weaker. They build friendships abroad through professional contacts, but most of those links disappear over a period of time. When they come back to India, they may have basic comforts, but no safety net in their tough old age. They have no social status as retirement is a great leveller unless they have post-retirement employment or other sources of income. In Delhi only those in power and the very rich are respected. Others have to live in relative loneliness and depend on the health programme provided by the Government, with its tragic consequences.

Though it may sound an argument for discrimination among retired bureaucrats, it may be advisable to give some special benefits to

The Indian Foreign Service Association is trying to put a system in place, but it cannot be done without the involvement of the Ministry of External Affairs.

in a short message of prayers and moved on.

Then a horror story of the circumstances of his death came like a bolt from the blue the very next day. When Ashok developed serious Covid symptoms a few days earlier, the family managed to get a bed for him under the health scheme for retired officers at the reputed Medanta hospital and took him there. His wife stayed with him in the car in the parking lot of the hospital while his son went to register him at the reception. What followed was a series of heartless, reckless and criminal actions by the hospital staff. They sent Ashok's son from pillar to post with various formalities for five hours, insisting that the doctors would see the patient only after he is admitted to the hospital.

Ashok was, in the meantime, struggling for breath and fighting for survival and his wife was pleading with everyone for help. Someone brought in some oxygen, which was administered to him inside the car itself. But the delay in getting appropriate medical help literally murdered him in cold blood inside the car. By the time his son returned triumphantly to wheel him into the hospital, he had passed away and he had to be moved to the mortuary instead. It was a case of criminal negligence, callous behaviour, nothing short of murder. "Though the hospital had promised a bed initially, the admission process stretched on for hours due to long queues. They waited more than an hour for the Covid test. I went to the place at least thrice, begging them for someone to look at him. I was crying, I was shouting that his heartbeat is failing. But nobody helped. An oxygen cylinder was brought, but that did not help," his wife Yamini Amrohi said.

Certainly, what happened to Ashok is not an isolated event. Thousands of people have perished all around the world in diverse circumstances

our diplomats who live in different climates, develop alien food habits and expose themselves to culture shocks. It is believed that the casualty rate in the Foreign Service is only a little less than that in the armed forces. Many have sustained injuries in accidents and attacks, which require continued medical treatment. When a brilliant young officer, S.V.Purushottam, passed away suddenly in New York, it was believed that his system was weakened by excessive official travel and cumulative jet lag. I still carry metal plates in an arm and a leg, as the result of a politically motivated armed attack in Kenya.

As all these are part of the occupational hazards of the Foreign Service, don't they deserve some special care after retirement? Ashok's tragic death should open the eyes of the Government to the plight of our former diplomats and others in similar categories. The Indian Foreign Service Association is trying to put a system in place, but it cannot be done without the involvement of the Ministry of External Affairs. I believe retired military and police officers are more organised as the serving officers are solicitous about their seniors. A similar system should be put in place for our diplomats in the evening of their lives.

In the particular case of Ashok Amrohi, what happened was second degree murder by the Medanta hospital for which every guilty person should be brought to book. In addition, substantial compensation should be paid to the family. That should give some solace to the departed soul and comfort to others who live precariously back in India, after giving their best to the nation in different parts of the globe.

The author is former Ambassador of India and Governor for India of the IAEA.
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Letters to the Editor must have the full name, address and contact number of the writer, even if they are sent by email. Only letters with the requisite details will be published.

"Believe in your infinite potential. Your only limitations are those you set upon yourself."

— Roy T. Bennett

The Shillong Times

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Crisis of confidence

A crisis of confidence grips the nation. The second wave of Covid19 has exposed the lack of preparedness on the part of the central government in dealing with the pandemic. This, despite the long haul of a year, after the nation first faced the onslaught of the deadly virus. An unpredictable situation was at hand then. But warnings about the second wave and of the mutations of the Chinese-induced virus in more lethal forms were in the air. Both proved to be true and India's principal cities are faced with the grim realities of shortage of hospital beds, ventilators and worst of all the non-availability of oxygen. Those who ran the nation obviously threw caution to the winds and carried on uncaringly with election campaigns. Even otherwise, as in Delhi or Mumbai, the relaxation of Covid control norms resulted in a worsening of the scenarios. It is also likely that the large-scale arrivals from foreign countries to these cities on a daily basis could have spread new and stronger variations of the virus that spread faster. The realization by now is also that the virus can spread by air, which means a larger sweep.

The lack of preparedness to face a health crisis of the present kind and relaxations allowed in terms of social controls against the pandemic spread meant that the central government has failed to rise to the occasion. Big talks alone will not help when it comes to governance. The results have to be seen on the ground. Clearly, the BJP and the face of the party in the form of Prime Minister Narendra Modi has taken a huge hit. Link this with the political scenario as it exists now. The polls to the five assemblies are a pointer to the way things are shaping up. BJP that ruled Assam for five years has not improved its position in the state assembly. Over and above this, a big internal fight has erupted over two contending sides for the CM post. This apart, the party's goal of grabbing power in West Bengal did not materialize. Aside of Puducherry, the party failed to improve its position in both Tamil Nadu and Kerala. In states where the BJP is in power, as in Assam, the chief ministers failed to impress. This was proven in Maharashtra and Haryana. It is still a touch-and-go in Madhya Pradesh. Hence regional satraps including Mamata Banerjee will now begin a new push for power in Delhi with the 2024 LS polls in mind. The Congress has failed to learn any lessons from its repeated failure to win any state yet is unwilling to shift gears and rebuild its image. A major shift in the wheels of fortune is likely in 2024 as people realise they need hospitals more than temples.

Of Knee-jerk Decisions

By Patricia Mukhim

This country had witnessed how the fatal conceit of the Prime Minister in 2020 when a 21-day lockdown was announced on the evening of March 24, 2020 at about 8 pm, leaving the citizens with just four hours to decide their next course of action in an eco-system bedevilled by paranoia. Citizens were shell-shocked and scampering. Many did not have enough supplies in their kitchen to manage for the next 21 days. Others working in different parts of the country and with no assurance of how to meet their financial needs felt they could have left for their homes if they were given at least 48 hours notice. The pandemic was claiming lives even then. What followed was the catastrophic migrant exodus. Millions braved the lockdown and travelled back home; some of them literally walking and cycling and dying on the way. It was calamitous to say the least but it also demonstrated governance steeped in hubris where those sitting around the PM at the time of taking that fatal decision had no voice to warn him of the disastrous consequences or they didn't envision the tragic results of such a knee-jerk decision. Both reflect the signs of a failed governance module.

No one in their right minds imagined that such a reactive decision would be repeated ever. Indeed, the Prime Minister is now wary of calling a national lockdown despite the spiralling Covid cases; the complete collapse of the healthcare system in the country's capital and the monumental failure of the government to manage the oxygen needs of Covid patients. Then we have the images of funeral pyres burning round the clock leaving behind the ugly stench of the death of helpless humans which coincides with the death of conscience of the rulers mandated to govern this country.

And even as we were slowly but painfully assimilating the tragedy unfolding in different parts of the country, the Meghalaya Government repeated the very same blunder committed by the Prime Minister in 2020 by announcing a total lockdown in East Khasi Hills on May 5 with a deadline of 8 pm. The announcement, akin to a lightning struck at 3 pm. News travels fast in this age of social media revolution. The WhatsApp University

got into action and an hour later everyone ventured out to the streets to buy their stock of meat, vegetables, fish and dry rations. It was a mad scramble. Every small and big market was swarming with buyers who literally bought up everything they saw at prices higher than the normal and not daring to squeak. It was the seller's market all the way. If anyone was cantankerous and asked questions they would be shunted out and the next customer served. That's the rule of the market and it's not very different from the rule of the jungle — only here its survival of the richest!

But worse, this sort of suddenness is quite capable of shocking the daylight out of even the most sanguine person, paranoid as we are about the growing Covid numbers and deaths. This shock treatment is unparalleled in its ability to cause the very opposite of what the government was preaching, namely social distancing. Here it was a body to body jostling in shops and vegetable stalls. What could have gone wrong if the lockdown had been imposed on Friday, thereby giving citizens 48 hours of grace period? Panic buying could have been avoided and physical distancing would not have been blatantly violated. Some people likened the crowd in Shillong yesterday to the Kumbh mela in Haridwar. Of course the decision-makers who hardly move out to the streets to see how life is lived by the ordinary citizens are not expected to know the outcome of their hasty decision until the next day when the media brings it to their notice.

At this juncture it would be fair to know how the Government arrived at this tactless decision. Who pushed the panic button? Was it the medical professionals in the State-level Covid Expert Team; the hapless politicians who don't think beyond their noses or the bureaucracy which is out of sync with ground realities? Granted that the pandemic is a disaster that must be managed but managing a disaster cannot be worse than the disaster itself — in other words the medicine being worse than the ailment.

Someone has rightly observed, "If you can't recognize failure, you can't correct it." What happened on May

5 was a repeat of March 24, 2020 — a national misfortune which we all thought we had left behind until we had a repeat performance in our own state. The Government notification that came two hours after the announcement, laid out the details but WhatsApp does not wait for details. The notification says that designated shops in different localities would be kept open for essentials. But by the time this news arrived everyone had got what they thought they needed to stock their larders just in case a national lockdown too comes like a bolt from the blue. This incident only means that we in Meghalaya didn't think the national lockdown announced so suddenly was an epic failure. But who in the government is responsible for failure to take decisions based on hard ground realities?

The decision for the sudden total lockdown can be safely guessed, was because of the rising cases and therefore the fear of running out of hospital beds because, ostensibly 60% of available beds are occupied. Second, is the fear that government may find itself overwhelmed just as governments in other states have been. That's understandable. What's not understood is the timing and the suddenness of it all. These sudden reactions to a crisis tend to create a panicked citizenry when that's the last thing we want in this already highly strung environment.

One issue that plagues all governments is the propensity of bureaucracy to tread cautiously and err on the side of caution. As a result they prefer to take tried and tested steps and resist the idea of public feedback. But without feedback how does government (read bureaucracy) know if they're doing the right thing? In the book "Reinventing Government" by David Osborne and Ted Gaebler the authors speak of pulling ownership out of the bureaucracy, into the community. The authors observe that client-hood is a problem that emerged only after the industrial economy matured. Before 1900 what little controls existed over neighbourhoods, health, education etc., lay primarily with local communities because so many products and services, whether public or private were produced or sold locally. It was only with the emergence of an industrial economy that professionals and bureaucrats were hired to do what families, neighbourhoods, churches and voluntary associations had done.

The authors in their study found that (a) communities have more commitment to their members than service delivery systems to their clients (b) communities understand their problems better than service professionals (c) professionals and bureaucracies deliver services; communities solve problems. Also they found that while Institutions and professionals offer "service" communities offer "care." Care is different from service; care is the human warmth of a genuine companion; care is the support of loved ones as a family copes with tragedy, care is the gentle hand of a helper when one is bedridden.

The authors propose something we in Meghalaya can never imagine — A Community-Owned Government. Here it is the case of the government owning us and therefore taking far reaching decisions for all of us without as much as a "community consultation." Osborne and Gaebler also find that communities are more flexible and creative than bureaucracies and communities are cheaper than service professionals. Also the communities enforce standards of behaviour more effectively than bureaucracies and service professionals. And while communities focus on their existing capacities; service systems focus on deficiencies and what resources are needed to remove those deficiencies.

Osborne and Gaebler conclude therefore that while in a democracy it is said that people own the government, few citizens of any democracy feel they own or control their governments. That's because other than during the elections no one really cares to really consult them. And the bureaucracy is even less connected to the community. In fact some are so distant from the people's problems that it makes them unfit to take far-reaching decisions that affect the public adversely. This is why we need local governance institutions to take our voices on board before any decisions are taken on our behalf. Why should we the people not be consulted when decisions are taken? Why are we considered dimwits incapable of thinking of our own welfare? Why?

Shillong Municipal Board

By WL Lyngdoh

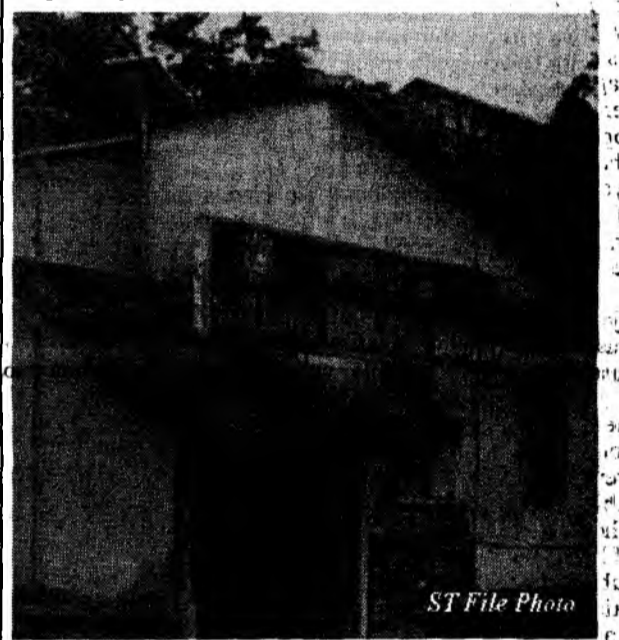
Shillong Municipal Board (SMB) has a long history dating back to 1878, when Shillong and its suburbs were constituted into a Station under the Bengal Act, 1876. The then Suburbs of Shillong comprised of (1) Mawkhar (which included South-east Mawkhar, Jaiaw, parts of Jhalupara and Mawprem) and (2) Laban (comprising of Lumparing, Madan Laban, Kenche's Trace and Ribong). The inclusion of Mawkhar and Laban with the Shillong Station was agreed upon by (L) Hain Manik Syiem of Hima Myliem, under Agreement dated November 15, 1878 on the condition that the administrative powers of the Syiem and Municipal areas are not affected. Further, the Shillong Station on March 10, 1909 was upgraded and converted into a Municipality, under the Bengal Act, 1884 with the inclusion of Haneng Umkrah.

Around this time, Shillong was the only hill station of the British Government and the Lieutenant Governor was bestowed with powers to step in for Sanitary Management. Shillong was well maintained in terms of cleanliness, cleaning of roads, garbage collection, etc. Water supply with clean drinking water was arranged through pipe system from Malki-Crinoline water source to the Shillong Municipal areas. Owing to its greenery and cleanliness,

was incorporated in 1974 Re-Organisation of the 10 wards of the SMB into 27 Wards, in an area covering about 25 sq Km. At present the Municipal Wards are Laitumkhrak Ward No. 1, 2, 3 and 4, Malki Ward 5 and 6, European Ward 7 and 8, Police Bazar -9, Jail Road -10 and 11, Mawkhar -12 and 13; Jaiaw 14-16, SE Mawkhar -17 and 18, Mawprem -19-21, Kenche's Trace -22 and 23, Laban - 24 and 25 and Lumparing 26-27.

The hillock in Jail Road belongs to SMB from the time of British rule in the Assam province covering the whole of North-Eastern states, East Bengal (Bangladesh today) and West Bengal and it comprises an area of about 2 acres. I would like to highlight that during my tenure in the year 2005 when I was the CEO of SMB, a plan with an estimate had been initiated with the help of Engineers of the Directorate of Urban Affairs, Meghalaya, to construct a 4-storied SMB building in Jail Road. The plan was prepared for ₹ + 3 Building within the government prescribed norms according to area coverage as per details below.

Basement and Ground floor — Parking Lot
First and Second Floor — Shopping Mall
Third Floor — SMB office complex.
In view of financial con-



ST File Photo

Shillong earned the status of being the cleanest hill station of India. With its picturesque landscape, Scotland was comparable to it and it was coined as the "Scotland of the East" and it was the first hill station in the country where senior British officials and their families settled.

Further, in order to uphold the status of being the cleanest hill station of India, 10 municipal boards, including Mawkhar and Laban were constituted on November 15, 1910 and they were Laitumkhrak, European Quarters, Jail Road, Haneng Umkrah, Police Bazar, Mawkhar, Jhalupara, Mawprem, Laban and Malki for proper management of solid and liquid waste.

It was in the year 1930 that the British government realised that they needed the help of the local prominent leaders in the SMB and appointed (L) Wilson Reade (1930-34) as Vice-Chairman of SMB who was also the first Khasi to be appointed to this post. The second Khasi to be appointed was (L) Henderson G Phillip Shabong (1935-37) followed by (L) Theodore Cajee (1942-44). After India's independence, in 1947, there was a strong advocacy by (L) JJM Nichols Roy, Member of the Constituent Assembly, Government of India, for special protection of Tribal lands in North-East.

The Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India became a landmark in Indian history with (L) Nichols Roy as the chief architect. But under the umbrella of the Sixth Schedule, expansion of Shillong Municipality was opposed by the Syiem of Myliem to protect the tribal lands which were under the care of the Heads of Traditional Institutions. Assam Municipal Act, 1956, which was adopted as Meghalaya Municipal Act, 1973 with minor changes

straints, the Plan and Estimate of the proposed SMB Building was processed with a PPP (Public Private Partnership) model. In the PPP model, it was proposed that SMB and the private party will contribute 50 % each besides government grants and loans. The time frame for the project was 2007-2010 and handing over of the building on completion will be during the last part of the year 2010 for operational processes by the SMB. Share of the net income revenue receipts will be 50 % to the Board and 50 % to the private party. The cost of investment of the private party including interests will be worked out for the required number of years subject to a maximum of 10 years from the date of handing over the building on completion. The period for liquidation of private party investment will be arrived at, in consultation with the private party concerned.

I was left astonished and shocked when I came across the letter to the Editor in this newspaper (ST April 6, 2021, under the caption "Subversive deals on Government land" by D. Surong stating that the newly under construction SMB Building and property does not belong to SMB anymore and that it is owned by a private party. If this turns out to be true then it is quite unfortunate and very sad to learn that the proposal supported by the then government to lease out the Municipal land to the private party has led to a complete sell-out of the SMB property. The MDA Government may intervene and contest if required, to revive the ownership of the property of the SMB in the hillock of Jail Road Shillong.

(The author is former CEO, SMB)

Letters to the Editor

National lockdown inevitable

Editor,
The new Covid strain is spreading at such a fast pace and the increased number of infections and deaths are increasing with every passing day. This has prompted many political and non-political groups to put forward the idea of a complete national lockdown to break the chain of transmission of the virus. This may be a good idea. However a total nationwide lockdown will again paralyze an already limping economy and the livelihoods of crores of marginalised and migrant workers will be in jeopardy.

If such a severe measure is needed then there should be assurances that the basic needs of people - food and shelter will be met by the government. Though vaccination has given a glimmer of hope the idea of massive vaccination drive is a hurdle as there is low stock of availability of the vaccine. The opening of the economy after the first lockdown followed by elections and religious gatherings has triggered the second wave. Also, the government's lack of planning in ensuring oxygen supplies, hospital beds and adequate ICU facilities has worsened the situation which has led to a huge rise in the death toll. 'Stay home and stay safe' is possible only if the

livelihood concerns of the working class are addressed. Hence, the idea of a complete national lockdown must be imposed only when the issues of daily labourers are addressed and looked after. Stay Strong India!

Yours etc.,
Chanmiki Ezra Laloo
Via email

Reading — A declining habit among students

Editor,
Apropos the letter by Salil Gweli under the heading "Open the gateway to knowledge" (ST May 5, 2021), I would like to thank the writer for highlighting the mental aspects of the student community during the Covid-19 lockdown. I personally feel it is a serious concern about which not only the state but the central government should pay attention to. The lockdown has resulted in students being isolated at home away from libraries and away from books. This situation compounds the already declining reading habit among students. In a situation of forced closure of schools, colleges and universities students now lack physical access to print resources. Hence, Government must ensure that the students are not "deprived" of academic textbooks by putting restrictions on book stalls. It would be natural to expect people to have read

more during the period of lockdown. Global Web Index Coronavirus Research of April 2020 revealed that 33 % of people worldwide read more books while at home during the crisis.

Reading is the gateway to success in education. It has personal values. It is a door to almost all knowledge and vocations. Failure to read paves the way for all kinds of catastrophes in the society. However, nowadays, reading is considered a pressure inducing activity rather than pleasurable one. This attitude towards reading has become a serious problem since lots of people do not realize the value of reading for scholarly reasons or form simple pleasure in their lives. Both young and old prefer to spend time with their smart phones, watching TV, gossiping and many other things instead of reading which can enhance their knowledge.

In Dallas, 'Earning by Learning Programme' is being implemented to encourage reading among school kids. Under this programme, the school pays two dollars for each book they read. To collect the cash incentive, students have to take a computerized quiz to prove they've read the book. This programme worked best with second graders in an under-achieving Dallas School.

Students who miss the chance to connect with books in their initial stages of life will find it difficult to obtain good reading habits in their

later years. Let's build the affection for books. Read books and stay intellectually active.

Yours etc.,
Dr. Omarlin Kyndiah
Associate Professor & HoD
Biochemistry, St. Edmund's College
Via email

UDP- a Khasi-centric Party?

Editor,
I am indeed grateful to Christine Marak for bringing out in the open the above communal subject, which has been the offending reason in our party's decline in Garo Hills region. I wonder, whether she (hopefully she is a lady) is a fake or real writer, since she did not mention her address, identity or any credentials to be able to reach out to her to articulate, or share more on the sensitive issue.

Her ignorance of everything she publicly expressed in public, could be the reason perhaps why she did not disclose her full identity. For her and all other ignoramuses, UDP is only a nomenclature, changed two times from the original APHLC to HPU, then to UDP, to accommodate the wishes of other parties who joined and amalgamated with us in course of time. The same goes with other parties too.

The APHLC was formed in 1960 during the Hill State Movement and our first President Capt WA Sangma dis-

solved it in 1976 at Mendipathar. After Capt Sangma left to join the Congress Party, Mr. Mody K Marak, became the second President of the APHLC which continued to remain till after the Supreme Court rejected in 1977, the said dissolution of the Party by a handful of leaders.

After the name of the APHLC was changed to HPU in 1986, Dr. Milton Sangma became the Party President, until he voluntarily retired. After Dr Milton's retirement, HPU merged with the HSPDP led by Mr EK Mawlong in 1994. The new nomenclature was United Democratic Party (UDP) and Mr. Mawlong became its first President, where leaders from Khasi-Jaintia and Garo Hills continue to remain up to the present.

For Christina's information, the Garos have a long history of being in Khasi Hills and Garo platoon fought under Tirof Singh, Raja of Nongkhlaw, to repel British soldiers. Garos are everywhere, particularly in West Khasi Hills, where they co-exist with the Khasis, having their own land, profession and even contesting in every election right from 1972, when Meghalaya was bifurcated from Assam.

In 2018, Martin Dango was elected MLA from Ranikor Constituency. In 2013, Dr. Jova Ch. Marak was UDP candidate from Rambrai-Jyngam Constituency. There will be so in future too. With the above recollection, I now request Christine Marak to see reason, avoid parroting

the malicious note of mischievous politicians who have their personal agenda. Instead help in fostering stronger relationship among us all.

Yours etc.,
B M Lanong,
Via email

Relief for differently-abled employees

Editor,
The step by the Tamil Nadu government to exempt its differently-abled employees from attending office following the surge in COVID 19 cases is really praiseworthy. The differently-abled employees need not come to the office till June 20. This is a big relief for them. The central government has already issued an order and directed state governments to exempt differently-abled people from attending the office. The pandemic and consequent lockdown have come with diverse challenges, from sourcing essential supplies to accessing medical treatment, exercising social distancing, public transportations, and much more. The need of the hour is that the state governments should facilitate their differently-abled staffers.

Yours etc.,
Amit Singh Kushwaha,
Satna (M.P.)

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

"Perfection of planned layout is achieved only by institutions on the point of collapse."

--- C. Northcote Parkinson

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No. 261 SHILLONG, SATURDAY, MAY 8, 2021

Tough call for Government

THE recent statements by some Dorbar Shnong that they cannot provide quarantine facilities to returnees and people testing positive within their jurisdiction is worrisome. What has changed between now and 2020 which has made the Dorbar Shnong adopt this belligerent stance at a time when they are most needed to help contain the virulent Covid wave? The Dorbar Shnong are best placed to maintain strict vigil over their residents that test Covid positive. Government does not have the human resource needed to exercise control over the residents of a shnong during these times. Besides the Dorbar Shnong are supposed to be the local governance mechanism that are closest to the people. If they shirk their responsibilities at this time, they may live to regret the decision.

Of course, the Dorbar Shnong may have some genuine reasons for expressing their inability to take on the responsibility of quarantining Covid positive individuals. Firstly, they don't have the space. As expressed by a Rangbah Shnong, in the past they were using educational institutions for quarantining Covid positive people. This time the Government has announced a lockdown that ends on May 10 and there are no announcements as to whether educational institutions will be under lockdown for an indefinite period. Hence educational institutions are wary of giving out their classrooms to be converted to Corona Care Centres. There is also the question of separate toilets for the inmates which need to be put up considering the infecting capacity of the virus. Also, the garbage generated by the inmates at the Corona Care Centres cannot be collected at random since it may contain infectious matter. Such garbage cannot be treated like ordinary garbage and needs to be handled with strict precautions.

However, what is bothering most of the Dorbar Shnong is the financial resource which has perhaps not been forthcoming since the last year when they had diligently assisted the Government. Without Government assistance it will be difficult for the Dorbars to pay for the upkeep and maintenance of the Quarantine centres. The Dorbar Shnong collect a minimum fee from residents for garbage collection and maintenance of water supply systems and street lights etc. As expressed by one of the headmen some people from the localities will have to be enlisted and paid for doing their duties at the quarantine centres. It will be difficult to find "volunteers" who will undertake what is a tedious task, pro-bono. Perhaps what has irked the Dorbar Shnong is also the short-term liaison between themselves and the Government. A more sustainable, formal relationship is the need of the hour and also a proper funding mechanism so that Dorbars are not left out on a limb.

Letters to the Editor

Rebuttal to letter 'MPSC's fiasco'

Editor, This letter is in response to the letter published in The Shillong Times titled, "MPSC's Fiasco" (ST May 6, 2021). The author of the letter in question has tried his best to lay out a strong case against the accused candidates as well as the MPSC, but in the process he has left an important loophole which allows for the real version of the truth to reign supreme. Through all the various notifications and notices of MPSC that he has laid out from 2017 up to 2018, the author has conveniently forgotten to mention or make known to the readers the Addendum to Notification No. MPSC/ADVT-38/1/2017-18/47, dated Shillong, the 4th January 2018, released by MPSC. In this said Addendum, which is available on public record on MPSC website, the MPSC had received a very important clarification from the Personnel Department, Government of Meghalaya vide letter No. PER.34/2016/87, dated 29th December 2017.

This clarification pertains to the eligibility of those applicants who are already in government service to apply for the MCS prelims examination, provided those applicants entered government service at the appropriate age. Prior to this clarification, it is true that Rank Holders No. 19 and 37 were placed in the ineligibility list as they were

deemed overaged. However, the aforementioned Personnel Department letter has clarified that it should not be so, as both candidates were already government employees. MPSC, by the same Addendum, therefore granted additional 15 days for government employees who wanted to apply for the MCS exam to do so. It was also explained in the Addendum that those who already applied before need not apply anymore. It was on the basis of this new development that a fresh ineligibility list was released on June 13, 2018. As Rank Holder No. 19 and Rank Holder No. 37 were already government employees, they are very much eligible and within their legal rights to apply for the MCS examination. Thus, their names no longer featured in the updated ineligibility list. It must be noted here that grant of age exception to government employees to apply for government jobs is a practise which is widely accepted and legal.

I request all to please dig a bit deeper and straighten their facts first before coming forward with such huge allegations which have finally turned out to be baseless.

Yours etc.,
Jeremiah S,
Via email

Second Covid Wave & our weird reactions

Editor, The 2nd Covid wave is upon us and its severity and devastation is greater than

Goebbelian thesis has come alive in Bengal. The RSS and the BJP have succeeded in their design to push a divisive narrative that the state has been in the midst of a communal war like situation.

Coinciding with the occasion of swearing in of Mamata Banerjee as chief minister, two more events took place. One that took place in Raj Bhawan was more politically noteworthy. Going beyond the constitutional practices and norms, just after the swearing ceremony Governor Jagdeep Dhankar used the occasion to tell Mamata that he was extremely concerned at unabated reports of unprecedented post poll retributive heart rendering violence.

Dhankar also sent out a sharp message to her on the post-poll violence. "In our constitution, the law has the highest position and we should maintain that. We should immediately take necessary action and send relief to the victims' families. I have every hope that the Chief Minister on an urgent basis will take all the steps to restore the rule of law". The oath was administered at a low-key ceremony at Raj Bhawan held amid the raging COVID pandemic. Left Front and BJP boycotted the ceremony.

He said such senseless violence shames democracy. Such collapse of law and order will neither be overlooked nor allowed. He also said that Prime Minister had called and expressed his serious anguish and concern at the alarmingly worrisome law & order situation. Narendra Modi also extended his wishes and congratulations to her. Taking to Twitter, PM Modi wrote "Congratulations to Mamata Didi on taking oath as West Bengal's Chief Minister".

Dhankar has the reputation of behaving like a BJP leader and adopting confrontationist attitude and approach towards Mamata and her government. But using this solemn occasion

Home ministry escalates blame game with Mamata

Didi refuses to take blame for EC's lapses

By Arun Srivastava

was deprecated not only by the political circles but even by the people of the state. It was perceived as a naked attempt by the BJP leadership to humiliate her. In fact on her part Mamata did not accept it lying low. She put the facts straight and said for three months the Election Commission was running the state administration obviously the responsibility to put a check on violence was its responsibility.

Mamata who was sworn in at 10.45 this morning, said, "My first priority is to control covid. I am now going to Nabanna (state administration headquarter). There I will hold a meeting with my officers. and will take necessary measures to control covid immediately. I will address media again this evening."

"There is some sporadic violence after the election. We have to control that with a strong hand. In the last two months, the administration system was run by the Election Commission. There was some inefficiency. We have to change the whole setup immediately," she further added.

Meanwhile, Mamata Banerjee putting the record straight said on Wednesday that violence and clashes were taking place in those areas where the BJP won the elections and most of the videos of violence being shared on social media were either fake or old. She said, "I have noticed that violence and clashes are taking place in those areas where the BJP have won the elections. These places can't be seen as black spots. Barring some sporadic incidents most were fake. BJP is showing old videos." She even called upon the BJP, "You have been torturing people since the elections and now, stop this. Or else, law will take its course."

Even after being aware that EC has been responsible for running the state administration, the home

ministry has written to the state government, accusing it of not taking steps to stem the violence and asked why a report sought by it has not been submitted yet. The home ministry has asked the state government to take all measures necessary to stop the violence. "The letter has also said that if the situation report is not received at once, it will be viewed seriously," the official said.

The state BJP, which has already launched a vitriolic campaign against her on alleged escalation of violence, organised an oath taking ceremony against 'Politics of Hate' in presence of its all India chief JP Nadda at its office in Calcutta. It was something like devil quoting the scripture.

Even while the polling process was on, its top leaders including UP Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath had threatened the TMC cadres to wait till May 2, the day of the counting. After that the TMC workers would be thrashed. The state chief of BJP Dilip Ghosh had warned them to get ready for treatment. Its national general secretary Rahul Sinha opined that in Shitalkuchi the CISF should have killed 8 TMC cadres instead of gunning only four. Other senior leaders have been going around threatening the TMC workers.

Most intriguing has been the act of its senior leader Swapan Dasgupta. A fairly senior journalist, who had held many senior positions in media tweeted that thousands of Hindus are taking shelter in open field in Birbhum district. In his enthusiasm to serve the divisive politics of his bosses, he even ignored the basic tenet of journalism, which he must have learnt during his formative years to check and cross check. The incident was denied by the police. These incidents simply underline the degeneration of the learned Hindu protagonists.

It indeed came as a pleas-

ant surprise that people who were engineering violence were taking oath against politics of hatred. All the newly elected BJP legislators took an oath against 'politics of hate'. Nadda in his address to the MLAs said that the oath-taking by BJP MLAs was a mark of respect to accept the people's mandate in the West Bengal Elections and also highlight post-poll violence allegedly by TMC goons. Nadda also stated that the opposition is boycotting Mamata Banerjee's oath-taking ceremony to protest against the violence. In addition, he has also assured that the saffron party will 'dismantle' political violence in West Bengal.

Once the situation has comparatively cooled down, it transpires that the BJP cadres were aggressive and in contrast the TMC workers were the real victims and suffered most. More TMC workers than the cadres of BJP were killed. While the media management of BJP successfully exploited the situation and tried to convince the Hindu people that minorities had resorted to violence, the TMC miserably failed to present its story. For the first time during the last three months of electioneering TMC appeared to be defensive.

The BJP alleged that TMC-backed goons have killed a number of its party workers, attacked its woman members, vandalised houses, looted shops of the party members and ransacked party offices, the charges rejected by the ruling party. Even the home ministry sought a report from the state government on the post-election violence "targeting opposition political workers in the state". In addition, following the allegations of BJP the human rights bodies National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) and the National Commission for Women (NCW) have also raised concerns over the violence and sought an inquiry. (IPA Service)

Bangladesh cheers Trinamool Congress win Cultural cross fertilisation pleases Dhaka

By Ashis Biswas

While the Trinamool Congress's (TMC) major election victory in Bengal has been welcomed in Bangladesh, there is also an undercurrent of dismay. Judging by social media messaging, Bangladeshis fear that the Teesta River Water sharing project may not be implemented. And criticism on this score about the TMC has not been muted either. The official praise coming from Dhaka about Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee may be as effusive as before. But public sentiment as a whole towards her and the TMC is more nuanced, even somewhat different.

For Bangladesh Foreign Minister A.K. Abdul Momen

'Bohiragoto'! quipped a pro-BJP wag. As a gesture, this could not have made secular Bangladeshis happy in 2021, the year of Mujib's birth centenary!

Bangladeshis settled in Kolkata often discuss such matters among themselves and with locals. A Bangladeshi student pointed out that even the TMC's trademark rallying cry, 'Ma, Mati Manush' (Mother, land and people in literal translation) was taken wholesale from a call given by Khaleida Zia, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party leader, years ago in Bangladesh.

However, this was contested by locals. They admitted that the 3Ms catchword

too has been misappropriated without attribution. But the man denied due credit by the TMC was the late playwright Bhairab Ganguly. He had written a play entitled 'Ma Mati Manush' that ran commercially in Kolkata for a long spell some years ago.

In short, the Bangladeshi cultural factor does significantly influence the political vocabulary/poll campaigning in West Bengal these days. There is nothing unusual in such cross fertilisation of new catch phrases or slogans. But prior to 2021, this was not the case. A major reason for revisiting/re-

viving Bangladeshi sayings and slogans could well be the TMC's current insistence on stressing the Bengali identity in its campaign. According to the new TMC narrative, this was its response to an existential threat it was facing from the predominantly north Indian cum Gujarati party, the BJP.

And given the impressive dimensions of the TMC's victory, this appeal to Bengali pride certainly did work among the electorate.

Some Bangladeshi papers carried comments from writers pointedly asking whether in her new tenure, Mamata Banerjee would treat the river water sharing issue with more sensitivity. They urged upon Bangladesh Government to renew its efforts to settle the long pending problem once and for all. A section of Bangladesh correspondents pointed out that in overlooking Mamata's refusal to let water flow from India to Bangladesh from the international river Teesta downstream, India was guilty of violating established law and regulations arbitrarily. Mamata Banerjee had not bothered to answer former Bangladeshi Minister Dipu Moni when she had pointed this out to her (Banerjee) during a visit to Kolkata. They also resented GOI's refusal/reluctance to 'discipline' a state Chief Minister who had been allowed to defy the Prime Minister of a sovereign Independent country like Bangladesh, which was unacceptable. Overall, Bangladesh press coverage suggested that post Bengal elections, people as well as political parties would adopt a wait-and-watch approach vis-s-vis bilateral relations/ties. Curiously enough, in one or two Bangladeshi papers, details of 'deals' worked out among BJP leaders and TMC leaders who joined them were also carried. Such reports showed the BJP in a negative light. Reports from Kolkata-based correspondents carried even financial and related details relating to leaders switching sides, which no Kolkata-based paper or TV channel had published. (IPA Service)



in the midst of our struggle in the 2nd Covid wave, some serious and course-changing decisions need to be taken. It is hoped we have the vision and moral courage to do it. Lives depend on it!

Yours etc.,
Toki Blah,
Via email

Importance of books

Editor, Apropos the letter by Salil Grewal, 'Open the gateway to knowledge' (ST May 5, 2021) I like to put forward my views. The writer rightly mentioned that something is amiss as far as "setting priorities," is concerned i.e. the wine shop was open and unfortunately the bookstall was closed. I strongly feel that the authorities concerned should rethink while setting the priorities i.e. the wine shop should be closed and the bookstalls should be kept open.

It also mentioned another important aspect that if the government can allow hardware shops to open during the containment period why can't they allow bookstalls to remain open to cater to the needs of students of course, under strict enforcement of Covid norms. Truly the bookstalls should be given top priority just like essential items and as such should remain open during any such containment period. At any point of time, we as a society cannot afford to put any obstacle in the process of education be it online or offline. At a time when the

online classes are the only mode for imparting education, by shutting down the bookstalls aren't we putting obstacles in the education process?

I have learnt through experience that the Book lane at Lewduh in Shillong is the main 'Book Hub' of Meghalaya where many are also publishers that cater to the needs of local students in particular. It is mostly from these book dealers that the books are supplied to different bookstalls in the interior parts of Meghalaya. Hence their functioning without hindrance is important. It may be worth mentioning that a large number of our students prepare for various national level entrance and competitive examinations, therefore they would require various reference books from time to time. Further, for the online classes to carry on effectively and produce the desired results, the keeping the bookstalls open is important as the students and teachers frequently need study-materials, teaching aids and other related items.

In short, as a concerned parent and a teacher I request the authorities concerned to please prioritize the opening of the bookstalls by duly including them under the essential items list for any containment period henceforth.

Yours etc.,
CS Singh
Shillong-2

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

Mysterious and Solitary Leopards captured in a Book

By Vishnu Makhijani

The leopard is the reigning rock star of the wildlife world. It's a species that is obscure and largely overshadowed by the tiger, especially in India, scientist, conservationist and author Sanjay Gubbi writes in "Leopard Diaries".

However, it is also a species that is loved by some and hated by many others. Nearly buried in this cacophony of conflict lies the "remarkable story" of this "lonely, mysterious creature" that he explores.

"Wildlife science hardly reaches anyone except those who are into serious academics.

Furthermore, the common man or decision-makers do not understand the language jargon and the complicated statistical procedures of scientific papers.

In addition, these papers are mostly behind the iron wall of paid subscriptions. In such a scenario we must reach and popularise wildlife conservation through popular media such as books and articles. "There is quite a bit of popular literature on tigers but very little on leopards despite the species losing its habitat on a fast track.

So, the best way to bring both science and applied conservation is possible through a book" that is sub-titled "The Rosette in India" and has been published by Westland, Gubbi told IANS in an interview. To this end, the book has in-depth information about understanding this spotted cats' population, its distribution and human-leopard conflict issues based on his research work in Karnataka - and also has information based on literature reviews about leopards from across its distributional range.

"But to give a bigger picture, to draw the attention and interest beyond leopard ecology I had to fish anecdotes from my experiences about the enchanting habitat it lives in, the interesting people within that landscape, the different species leopards co-exist with, and other curious aspects," Gubbi, who holds a doctorate in leopard ecology and conservation, explained.

He is the winner of the Whitley Award (popularly known as the Green Oscars) in 2017, and is also the recipient of the first Co-existence Award 2019 by the Prince of Wales and the Duchess of Cornwall, and the Carl Zeiss Conservation Award, among others. Vis-a-vis the



tiger, are the steps being taken for the conservation of leopards adequate?

"It certainly does not match anywhere close to what the tigers draw. Of course, the tiger numbers are much much lower than leopards (2,967/12,852), their habitat requirements are much larger, hence it is fair that it gets that attention. But we also need to focus on species like the leopard as they are key wildlife beyond forest habitats such as the rocky outcrops, scrub forests.

They also define the public opinion towards wildlife conservation as they are highly conflict-prone," Gubbi pointed out. What are the lacunae and

how can these be addressed?

"We need to focus a lot on protecting leopard habitats and their prey, especially outside the protected area network. Our research showed that prey poaching is seven times higher in non-protected areas and (where) the populations of large prey like chital, sambar, barking deer is 90 per cent lower.

"This calls for urgent attention if we are going to conserve leopards at the landscape level. Similarly, we are losing their habitats at unprecedented levels.

Both these factors have led to high levels of human-leopard conflict the cost of which is borne by poor rural

communities.

Very importantly we need to bring down conflict to tolerable limits. The future of wildlife conservation in India hinges on this," Gubbi maintained.

Thus, his research goal was to collect the best possible data on leopard ecology and to apply the data to leopard conservation and he decided to do so even amidst the political difficulties of working on large carnivores functioning in a landscape where hegemony was already established.

Leopards are territorial and so are those studying them."My interest was not to master leopards but to slowly interpret their life to help contribute to their conservation, especially through conflict mitigation strategies.

I have strongly felt that research should be more than a quest for facts.

I don't want to merely leave records of the animals going extinct for our children to read. I am more interested in our children actually being able to see these animals," Gubbi writes in the book.

As George Schaller, an American large mammal biologist says, "A researcher today also has a moral responsibility to help the species endure," we can "endlessly describe a species, but we need to help the species persist.

Information is key but so is emotion," Gubbi writes.

"The journey with the leopard was not intended to produce a guide to lead others and state how it is in the leopard world.

"This is not a manual on how to conserve leopards but a log of my journeys and observations. It records my experiences with the people I met, and the results of our study on this wonderful cat.

We also have to recognise that there are things we cannot understand about leopards, or for that matter about any wild species.

"Leopards possess qualities and abilities well beyond the means of science to decipher. We have interpreted a little about this species.

But nature knows a lot more. And we will never know many secrets of this spotted cat.

Science has only been nibbling at the furtive biological facts of many wildlife species, and most of it remains to be understood.

Our work added just another brick to this large world of ecology and conservation," Gubbi writes. He concludes the

book with the fervent hope that in the 22nd century "we find as many leopards roaming this country as we do today.

However, this needs involvement and fuelling conservation not merely through science but through on-ground efforts by, ecologists, wildlife enthusiasts, photographers, filmmakers, media personnel and everyone, keenly interested in saving nature.

Science is like the tangier delights of food, adding variety, and flavour to the diet, while conservation is like cod liver oil, essential for sustenance and building strength". "Much like poetry, in conservation what matters is saying what we see, and the need of the hour is that we speak up about the threats these graceful cats face.

Many questions related to leopards remain unanswered to this day. We know only a thing or two about these graceful cats. If our work and this book contribute even a nickel's worth to help conserve this felid species, my team and I would be, delighted." (IANS)



Zakat: Evolution of a Tenet

By Asad Mirza

Zakat is one of the five basic tenets of Islam. Zakat means purity. Thus, this implies that a man purifies his yearly earnings by giving away one part of it in the path of the God. This further implies that man should understand that his earnings or his possessions are not a result of his own making but they are a bounty given by Allah. Thus, Zakat is, in essence, a practical acknowledgement of God's bounties. And this admission is no doubt the greatest form of worship.

Payment of Zakat every year is obligatory, on every earning Muslim, at the minimum fixed rate of 2.5 per cent per annum, on all wealth that is subject to growth. This amount is given for worthy religious causes 'for the sake of God' and for meeting the needs of the poor and the helpless. The second point above is more important. It means that through your alms giving or sharing your wealth you are helping the needy, poor and helpless, who are unable to sustain themselves.

Thus, through this act of yours you are spreading your wealth and joy among the less privileged. And this is what is enshrined in the Islamic principle of equality of wealth, a concept that has been borrowed even by Karl Marx.

Zakat management in India

Every year a considerable sum of money is donated in the name of Zakat in India.

Have you ever wondered how much Zakat is being generated in India every year? Let's assume that out of 15 million Muslims, only One Million contribute the minimum amount of Zakat for a lakh of rupees, which is Rs 2500. Even at these conservative fig-

ures the amount comes out to Rs 25,000,000,000!!! And in reality the actual amount is much more than this.

It leads one to wonder where all this money is being spent and by whom? According to sources, conservatively we can say that 80 per cent of this amount is gobbled by the religious educational institutions. Fair enough, they have their expenses and needs to be taken care of. But does this figure reflect in the quality of education imparted by them or the overall personalities of their students? No not there, but in the style of living of their administrators!

Further according to sources this year most of the institutions that collect Zakat, are deducting 40 to 45 per cent of the Zakat collected as administrative expenses, and these administrative expenses are completely unaccounted for. This leads us to surmise that our Zakat money is not being used properly and productively for the benefit of the Indian Muslims, to ameliorate their lot. Instead it is being managed in an unsystematic, unprofessional and individualistic manner.

Secondly, most of us consider giving out Zakat as a burden, not as a duty or as a contribution enjoined by Allah to spread joy and wealth within the community. Thirdly, Zakat collection has become a business and many institutes who collect and survive Zakat are doing it in a professional and unIslamic manner.

How to manage Zakat more productively

In the current scenario it becomes incumbent on our religious scholars and leaders to ponder over this question. It would be prudent on their part to sit together and constitute a central



Zakat Fund for the whole of India, with branches in every state capital and sub-branches in every big city and town. Every Indian Muslim who has to pay Zakat, should be directed to deposit his contributions in specified bank accounts managed by the Zakat Fund, which in turn should be managed by a committee of religious, community and social leaders and professional accountants and financial experts. In addition, those who are not using the banking or digital financial tools, should deposit their Zakat in a box, which should be placed in every Masjid of the country, along with a box for contribution to the Masjid. These boxes should be opened quarterly and money deposited in the accounts of Zakat Fund. The Imam and Muezzins of the Masjids should be made responsible to manage these boxes and their contents.

The Zakat Fund should pay the salaries of the Imams and Muezzins of the mosques, in-

stead of them being disbursed by the respective state Waqf.

They should further be tasked to prepare a database of the needy and destitute in their locality and forward it to the state and central offices.

This will engage the local Imams in the collection and disbursement of Zakat to the needy in their area based on real inputs. It will also empower them to handhold the families who are being given financial help, on how to better their life and circumstances and get out of the poverty by pursuing education or a small business and other means to better their family situation instead of relying on community help for life time.

Once this starts happening in real terms, then we'll find that the number of poor in the community has come down drastically and instead once who were poor are now helping others.

The central committee of the

Zakat Fund should oversee the total collections and their disbursement.

First on the list should be the religious institutions, second destitute families and third would be community projects which would help the community in different fields like, education, medical facilities, scholarships, hostels, and educational expenses for the poor students and entrepreneurial seed funds for giving out loans to deserving individuals to start new ventures.

We can only imagine wishfully, if we have a Central Committee of committed elders who manages this money, then within a span of 2 to 5 years, we'll be able to build a well equipped hospital in every district of the country, a university in every state capital, a secondary school in every village, a degree college in every town and city and homes for destitute, widows, orphans and physically handicapped in every district of the country, to be used by every

citizen of the country.

Personal Zakat management
Lastly, we should also discuss as to why most of us consider giving out Zakat as a burden. This is due to our own foolish thinking and money management and desire to get maximum benefit even for doing a good deed.

A wrong perception prevails amongst most of us that Zakat should be given out in the month of Ramazan, as the reward for giving out alms in this month is 70 times more.

Both these concepts are erroneous and unIslamic and have no mention in the Holy Quran. So, to make our Zakat contribution easier on our pocket and also make it more fruitful, what we can do is to calculate our yearly Zakat and divide it by 12. This sum we should take out from our salary or business profits every month and keep aside and hand over to a needy as some one approaches us, instead of waiting for Ramazan. Remember, your Zakat for the next year becomes due as soon as the current year's Ramazan ends, which mean that you are continuously under obligation to the Almighty Allah to pay your Zakat.

These musings are just that of a common Muslim and are based on common sense and practical solutions.

Let's hope and pray that our community's religious elders take heed of these ideas and suggestions.

This will definitely make our community financially stronger and self-sustainable in a short time and also contribute to the welfare of our brethren in the country through institutions and programmes managed by our Zakat Fund. Ameen. (IANS)

Oxford-based distributor Ray McLennan harps on the importance of reading

By Vishnu Makhijani

In 1998, Ray McLennan, who till then had been importing into the UK "all sorts of things" from India like musical instruments, saris, tilak, Tulsi malas and agarbatti, purchased Motilal Books, a small Oxford-based distributor focusing on academic bookshops and university libraries.

In 2014, he set up his own company, Rays Books of India Pvt Ltd, to broaden his accessibility. Between them, the two companies recorded a turnover of 1.7 million pounds in 2020, in spite of the Coronavirus pandemic, riding largely on online sales.

"I needed a new challenge, and having found it hard to get books from India, and the constant issues with payment, quality, reliability, and general information on what is in print, decided to improve all the logistics, providing a much needed service for all Indian publishers, from the biggest to the No.1 authors," McLennan, who is originally from New Zealand, told IANS in an interview from his base in St. Albans in Hertfordshire, north of London.

"My gifts from India to the world are printed books across the full spectrum of subjects, many unique to India and others international, but produced more cheaply in India than elsewhere. Religious and spiritual development titles are the most popular category of Indian publishing worldwide.

But all academic subjects, fiction, wildlife and tourism, and of course cookery, are always selling," he added. And how - 16,000 books were sold per month in 2020 and made for 9,000-plus titles sold during the year.

"We have had an increase in turnover (in spite of the pandemic), but due to increased freight costs, a lower margin. Our greater sales

are because online selling is king. Bookshops have been closed much of 2020," McLennan said.

His Indian associate, KPR Nair of Konark Publishers, was quite astounded when he visited McLennan in St Albans in 2019.

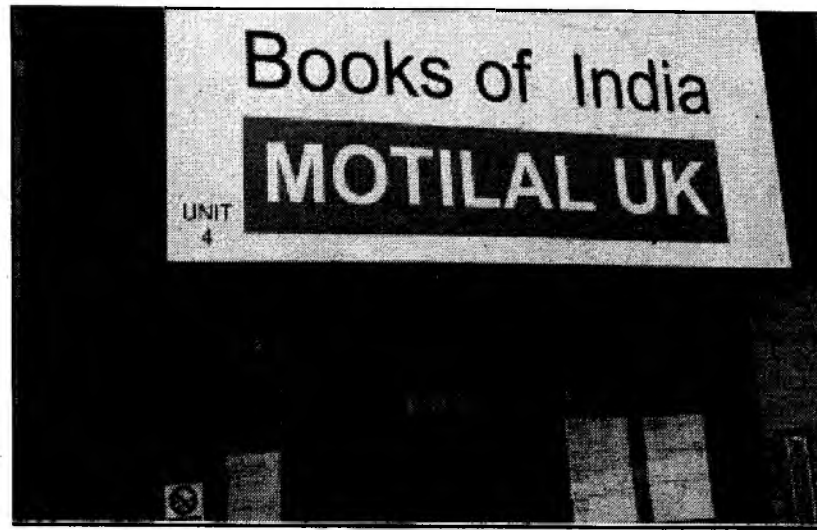
"I could not believe my eyes when I saw the kind of stock of books held by him of Indian authors, from Chetan Bhagat to Shobha De to Ramachandra Guha to Shashi Tharoor. I was floored by his in-depth knowledge of our products and equally by his passion about Indian culture and our way of life, etc.

What was to be a brief meeting thus ended up in a four-hour

long passionate talk about books, history and culture and untold stories about Indian authors and our publishing industry. "To sum it up, both of us did not get time even for the minimum civilities of a cup of coffee. We did not simply realize it; we were so caught up in our talk.

We smelled, sipped, drank, but it was all books and books," Nair told IANS. Only in India, McLennan said, "is the English publishing scene full of titles on an endless range of subjects, authors and publishers.

As the world's largest distributor of this material outside of India we work with the worldwide book



every year, and since 2004, multiple times a year.

The establishment of Rays Books of India Pvt Ltd improved the procurement percentage of all books he had a demand for and that dramatically improved sales. "We went from supplying only 55 per cent of titles ordered by me to 85-90 per cent, and that, in turn, told the UK market that greater availability was now possible, which again increased orders," McLennan said.

"We are pushing new developments all the time. Adding new titles to our selection is a priority. We are currently adding over 500 new titles to the world's book trade records, every month, every year," he pointed out.

"We want to sell as many of each title as possible, and as a specialised wholesale distributor of Indian publishing, we estimate that around 75-80 per cent of all Indian publishing sold in the UK is sold by Motilal (UK) Books of India," he added.

Over time he built up the inventory of titles held in stock in the UK, "and that again increased the speed of supply to all types of trade customers, such as book chains, independents, libraries, schools and specialist niche markets.

"From 2006 we have been the only major supplier of all Indian publishing worldwide, and although we have had financial collapses, terrorism, changes of governments, ebooks, Brexit, and now Covid, our sales have continued to increase as we create more awareness of what has been published, its price and where to get it.

"Yes, Covid is giving us problems, but we will continue to supply demand which is mainly coming from the USA and the UK as can only be expected as the two biggest centres of English language publishing and selling," McLennan concluded. (IANS)



trade to list between 700-1,000 new titles a month, adding to a range of over 100,000 such titles available today.

We have over 9,500 Indian published titles in stock with Amazon.co.uk, and 13,400 units in stock with Amazon.com in the USA."

"We have titles available from more than 750 Indian publishers we exclusively represent into the UK and the worldwide book trade, including Penguin Random House, HarperCollins India, Westland, Konark, Orient Blackswan, TERI, Juggernaut, Kitab Mahal and Jaico.

"We exhibit internationally every year at the London Book Fair (the 2020 edition was cancelled and the 2021 event will be held digitally) where we meet with publishers and customers.

We attend the Delhi World Book Fair every year in February (the 2021 edition was virtual), which presents us an opportunity to meet contracted publishers and new publishers, see new titles, and plan future business with them all to maximise sales outside of India," McLennan said.

He visited India originally in 1975, has since visited the country

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambhani

Sunday, May 9, 2021

Venus square Saturn on your solar return chart and it will give mixed results for the whole year. You will have some differences of opinion with your in-laws. Some issues may blow out of proportion. But you will manage to make them happy and give proper care to them. You will also get some monetary benefits from parents. But you will have property related disputes with your relatives. You will seek legal recourse. It will be wise to take proper advice before deciding to make any major investments. You will find job situation tough. It will be wise not to think about changing your present job. You will be not so lucky in love matters. Think twice before committing. Auspicious functions will keep taking place. Peace and harmony will prevail at home. You will be involved in social activities and community services.

Aries: (March 21 - April 20)

This week the road to success will be bright. You will gain in your business. New financial gains are indicated. You will also make new investments which will prove to be beneficial. Your work will also get completed. Your work will keep you so busy that you will not get time even for yourself. People will acknowledge your intelligence. Your bosses will appreciate your work. Those who are jealous of you will be envious of your popularity. Your family life will be good. There will be joy and cheer in family relations. You will also plan to go out with your family. Achievements will bring peace and happiness in your life and you will feel secure and content.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21)

It is going to be a wonderful week for you. Your dreams will get fulfilled and you will achieve everything. Your hard work, dedication and sincerity will pay off and you could be promoted in your job. Your peers and bosses will support you. Your path will become easier with the help of an influential person. But do not trust others in financial matters. You may get cheated. You need to be aware of the enemies and foes. You will have good bonding with your mate/spouse. Guests will arrive and you will be busy in welcoming them. You will also get the blessings of your elders. The understanding between husband and wife will be very good. Financial condition will be stable and strong.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21)

It is a favorable week for you. The situations at workplace will be in your favor. You will give a glimpse of your talent through your hard work and dedication. Your bosses will discuss and implement your ideas. You will also receive an important message for some person. Students will get success in exams/interviews. It is a very important time period for youth. Those in job could be promoted or given an additional responsibility. Your colleagues will be good to you and will be happy with your good work. You will also give full time to your family. You will also have wonderful bonding and understanding with your partner. It is time for spiritual and religious gains.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22)

It is going to be a testing week for you. Your bosses will be on your side and you will complete your pending works with alacrity. You will also have new ideas. Some people may try to corner you but you will have the situation under control. You will be busy in the office as well as home. Your family members will keep supporting you. Your hard work and efforts will prove fruitful. You will complete your work with dedication. Your financial position will also keep getting better. Those who are single will get marriage proposals. You will have good understanding with your brothers. You will also receive a pleasant news from somewhere. You will get back struck up money.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23)

Your efforts will get rewarded. Conditions at workplace will be in your favor. Beware of being cheated in financial matters. Don't trust other persons easily. In the dispute between brothers, conditions will be in your favor. Your capabilities will also get revealed to the people. You will be busy in daily activities. You will have pressure to complete your pending work but will be able to do so. You will meet an influential person and also get immediate benefits. You will also give entire time to your family. Your time will be spent in joy and laughter. You need to take control over unnecessary expenses. Students will get good results in exams/interviews. You will use your knowledge discretion and will increase your profits in business.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22)

There will be favorable events taking place for you this week. Money will come in from somewhere. You will have happiness and joy in family relations. You will get good results in your business. You will also fulfill the demands of your family members. You will complete your work with dedication and full honesty. You will increase your profits in business. You will

also receive valuable gifts from relatives. You will also bring some change on the personal and at your workplace. Your misunderstanding with brothers will get resolved. You will have high self-confidence and your responsibilities at the workplace will increase. Success will be at your feet. Your health will remain perfect.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23)

You will be absorbed in your work. And will be getting better opportunities in your job/business. There will be positive change in your behavior and habits. You will discuss matters of great importance with your bosses. You will also get a work order from abroad. You will also adopt a positive attitude towards people. In business you will be enthusiastic because of rising profits. You will enjoy the best of health. Your bonds will be strengthened between brothers and other relatives. You will be hopeful from one person but your expectation will be hampered. You will also establish relationship with influential persons. Travelling will help you in obtaining money. Money will keep coming.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 24)

Things are looking bright this week. The range of your contacts will be quite big and widespread. You will move forward with focus on your objective. The time is favorable for students. The results of competitive/departmental exams will come in your favor. Your financial condition will get stronger. The works you have thought about will be completed. You will be busy in some function. You will be busy with family and will receive some good news from relatives. Seeing your progress, people will be jealous of you. You will possess a rich personality and will meet a close friend. There will be improvement in your health. You will adopt a liberal attitude in your home and business.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21)

Your monetary gains will increase and your confidence will also rise. Your property disputes will get resolved. You will also have happy moments with your partner. Your colleagues will help you a lot. You will also get appreciation for your efforts. The people around you will be fascinated with your personality and work. It will open the doors of progress for you. There can be a promotion or increase in salary. You will get something new for the house. The passage of time is smooth. You need to be patient and balance at this time. Your friendship with the officials will come in your rescue. You will be able to accomplish the most difficult tasks very easily.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20)

You will have some tensions due to love affairs. It is time to take stock of the situation and take an appropriate decision. You might be handed additional responsibility at the workplace. You will get victory in financial matters. You will have some differences of opinion with your bosses but matter will get resolved quickly. You will have good time with your family members. You partner will continue to support you. You will also come in contact with new people who will later be of help to you. The money that was struck for a long time will be yours with little effort. You will get success in job/business. An unexpected meeting with an influential person will open the doors of progress for you.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18)

You will be spending a lot of time with your family. Your financial position will be stable and you will adopt a positive approach towards life. Your personality will bloom with the success that you achieve. You will be full of enthusiasm and will make maximum use of your contacts. Conversation and contacts will be of importance to you. This will help in completing your tasks. A new person will come in your life all of a sudden. Relationship, people and places will also hold an important place in your life. You will look at life with a totally different perspective.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20)

The beginning of the week is going to be good. You will have monetary gains. And will also get a chance to rise in your business. Matters connected to the government will be resolved. The work related to bankers will be done well in time. You will get loan for a project of yours. You will have good working relations with your colleagues. Lovemates will enjoy your company. You will make your house a heaven. Qualities of being the best father/mother are in you. You will get the results of your work. You will make all efforts to make money. People will praise you. You will take a pleasure in things. Your bosses will be happy with you and praise your work. A balanced attitude will bring success.

Online Courses during Lockdown

By Ranjan K Baruah

The tense is still continuing as schools are closed, colleges are closed and classes have once again moved to digital mode. Classes are conducted online and all the students are worried once again. What will happen to exams and other tests, etc? There is nothing in certain during these uncertain times. But we have no other option but to keep fighting the virus and protect self and others. We have passed 2020 and 2021 shall pass too with more challenges.

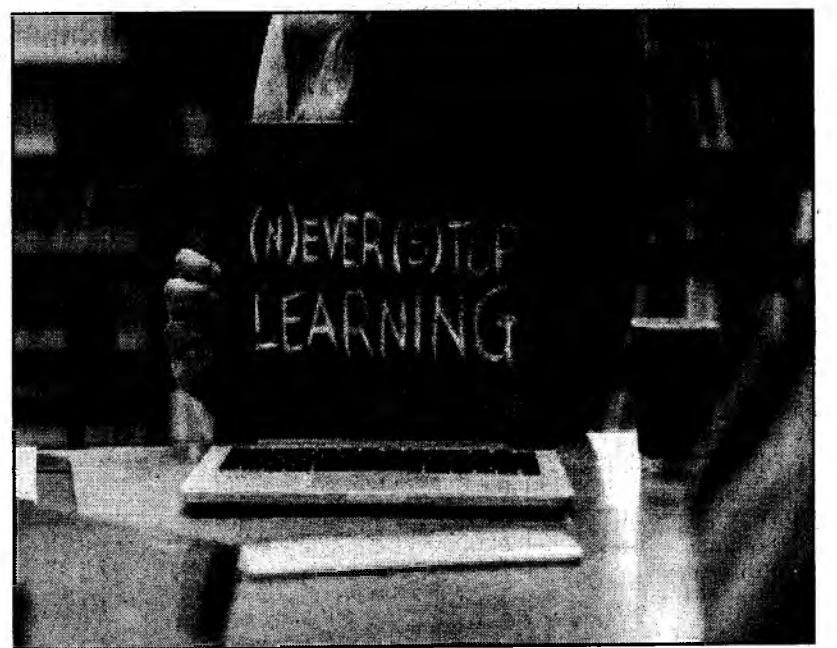
When we are at home, things are not normal all over the country. When we are using the online mode for learning then we can also explore some more courses or training which is being imparted online from different parts of the world.

There are many free online courses which can be opted by our students or recent graduates to enhance their employability in near future. In today's edition we are mentioning a course offered by Amazon which can be chosen by many students or even recent graduates who are striving to get jobs in the near future.

This course is related to cloud computing and it has been designed to help people launch careers in the cloud. AWS re/Start is a full-time, classroom-based skills development and training program that prepares individuals for careers in the cloud and connects them to potential employers.

A technology background is not required to apply.

The program is focused on unemployed or underemployed individuals, including military veterans, their families, and young people. Through scenario-based learning, hands-on labs, and coursework, learners can gain the technical and soft skills they need for an entry-level cloud role. AWS re/Start also provides learners with resume and interview coaching to prepare them



for employer meetings and interviews. AWS re/Start curriculum teaches AWS Cloud fundamentals to help learners succeed in entry-level cloud positions.

Through scenario-based exercises, hands-on labs, and coursework, learners build Linux, Python, networking, security, and relational database skills.

Learners receive job-specific training on building effective front-line support, troubleshooting, escalation, and task automation techniques. AWS re/Start also provides learners with professional skills including effective communication, collaboration, resume writing, and interview coaching to prepare them for employer meetings and interviews.

This is a full-time training programme from Monday-Friday and typically for 12 weeks.

The program is offered at no cost to learners. Amazon Web Services (AWS) is the world's most comprehensive and broadly adopted cloud platform, offering over 200 fully featured services from data centers globally. Millions of customers—including the

fastest-growing startups, largest enterprises, and leading government agencies—are using AWS to lower costs, become more agile, and innovate faster.

Apart from the above mentioned course AWS also conducts many other training programmes which can be enrolled by the students.

Similarly there are many other universities and agencies that conduct free online courses and some time trainees need to pay for the global certification.

Aspirants must make sure that once they enroll for any such courses then they must complete the programme and also take assessment to get a certificate else there is no use of enrolling in any online course.

We shall publish about other online courses provided by leading universities and institutions which can be availed by our students and job aspirants.

(Ranjan K Baruah is a career mentor and skill trainer and can be reached at 8473943734 or bkranjani@gmail.com for and career related queries)

"Time doesn't heal emotional pain, you need to learn how to let go."

— Roy T. Bennett

The Shillong Times

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Himanta's turn in Assam

IT was inevitable that Himanta Biswa Sarma, with his growing clout within the BJP, has outwitted Sarbananda Sonowal and taken the chief minister's chair. A sense of uncertainty was evident even at the start of the assembly poll campaign in Assam when the BJP made it clear it would decide on the name for the next CM after the polls. Yet, things were not as smooth as it should have been which is evident from the delay in the zeroing in on the name. With word coming from Delhi in support of Sarma in the given situation, his selection was smooth; the outgoing CM proposing Sarma's name making him the unanimous choice. The talks in Delhi also held out hope for Sonowal; that he would not be the loser and would return to the Union Council of Ministers. Assam's tenuous political and social situations are unique and need to be handled with care. Congress leader Tarun Gogoi has exited from the scene and the present party campaign perhaps felt his absence. Priyanka Gandhi has campaigned extensively and it is disappointing for her and the Congress Party that the fortunes of the grand old party could not be revived even with the heft provided by the induction of a regional party from the NDA side and support from other regional outfits.

With former Congressman Sarma taking charge, there could be more erosions from the Congress to the BJP. Otherwise, the BJP-led NDA alliance's fortunes remained tight at 60 this time too in a house of 126, with allies AGP winning nine seats and UPPL getting six seats. This formed a comfortable majority as of now and for future too as the rival side remains weak. The failure to improve the strength of the BJP also came as a disadvantage to Sonowal vis-à-vis pressing his claim for a second term as CM. It was time the party changed the leader. Assam past its student union uprising is increasingly encouraging the nationalist forces in recent years. So is the scene with the sister states too, helping in the cause of national integration that is still a long-drawn process considering the ground realities here. Sarma has helped the BJP spread its wings in the North-East, where the Congress party left its eminent space in state after state in a steady downslide. Sarma might further power such a push. The communal equations in Assam also require close watch in view of the sway of multiple interests there. The governance of Assam will not be an easy task for any chief minister.

The Heart of The Nation Is in Pain

By H H Mohrmen

The second wave of the corona virus attack laid bare the grim reality that the country is ill-prepared for the onslaught of the pandemic. The whole world watched in disbelief as citizens of this great country fought valiantly what they already know is a losing battle. The pain is not so much about the disease because everybody knows that sickness and death are part and parcel of being alive. But the fact that most of the deaths were and are avoidable because they were caused due to the failure of the system is a hard pill to swallow and also a very painful scene to watch. It is heart wrenching to note that in the last few weeks much of airtime and newsprint in the country was devoted to reports on what happened in the hospitals and crematoriums or burial grounds. The focus of the media cameras in the last few weeks centred on the pain and grief that people suffered across all over the country.

The scene is the same everywhere in almost all the hospitals particularly in the states which were hit hard by the pandemic. The most common image is of people who desperately trying to get a bed in the hospital for their loved ones. Patients lying inside ambulances or hospital corridors waiting to be admitted to the hospital is one image that shall be remembered for a very long time. People who tried to get at least one cylinder of medical oxygen for their sick relatives and having to carry the cylinder around is another image that will remain etched in public consciousness for a very long time. But the most heart-rending scene was to see relatives wailing and crying for their loved ones who had lost their fight against the disease. The image of many funeral pyres burning the dead bodies at the same time is an image that one wishes to never witness again in one's lifetime. Death of course is natural because there are only two ultimate truths in life — birth, the doorway and death the exit point of life, but to die for lack of hospital

beds, or lifesaving drugs or medical oxygen is something that one cannot accept in this modern day.

Truly, a person who is born will one day die some way or the other, but no two deaths are the same. One death cannot be compared with the other because every loss is different from the other. A family which loses one of its parents is losing the past of their lives and parents who lose their children are devastated to see the dreams they had for their son or daughter being shattered just like that. But one question that is in everybody's and particularly in the minds of those who lost their loved ones in the ordeal is why? Why is this happening to us?

Like a sprinter who celebrates his winning while he is still 50 metres away from the finishing line only to be overtaken by a runner behind him, the NDA government too has celebrated its supposed victory over the pandemic too soon. Perhaps 'end game' is one statement that Dr Harsh Vardhan the Health Minister of country would not like to repeat. This year the second wave of COVID pandemic has caught the government off-guard. In spite of the instantaneous announcement of last year's lockdown to prevent the spread of the virus, the soul of the nation was not as badly hurt as it happened this year. Even if many had criticised the government for the way it announced the lockdown which compelled the migrant labourers to literally walk home to avoid starvation and death, yet the general consciousness or the soul of the nation was not as heavy as it is today.

This time the leaders of the Government were caught unprepared. While they were still trying to comprehend the unscheduled and abrupt end of the election campaign in West Bengal and were waiting for the election results, COVID positive cases and numbers of death from the pandemic rose exponen-

tially in the nation's COVID infection graph. The BJP leaders who had just finished campaigning for the different state assemblies, suffered a double blow as they were overwhelmed by the problems that came with the second wave of the pandemic and their party's loss in the election.

This time around the Government no longer has time to call the citizens to join in clanging of utensils, no more burning of diyas, candles or shining mobile phone torches either. Neither is there showering of flower petals from the sky to honour the frontline warriors. Everything seems to happen so fast that it left most people in fear and the Government dumbfounded. Whoever is in the driving seat is obviously shellshocked and is in a dilemma as they don't seem to know what they are doing or what to do next. The general public lives in fear and desperation and the relatives of those affected and those who lost their near and dear ones to COVID-19 are angry. They are so frustrated that they even lost their respect for the doctors and the nurses who were there to help them. It is sad that the health workers were at the receiving end of the people's ire over the failure of the Government.

This time around there were no more praises and accolades for the health workers. It is not that they did not perform their duty as well this time around when the second wave hit, as they did last year. The reason is that much of the problems they encountered this year are beyond their control. The doctors and nurses too are frustrated because they feel helpless not because they are not equipped professionally to handle the situation but because part of the system has failed them. The HealthCare System in the country has not totally failed but it is the absence of basic infrastructure that is supposed to be in place which has failed them.

The doctors, the nurses and health care professionals are only one part of the system. It is the duty of the Government to provide the necessary infrastructure to complete the system. Unfortunately, the health workers have to bear the brunt for the lack of infrastructure, which is not their fault at all.

It is true that lack of hospital beds is one major problem in the country but we do not have enough doctors to man the hospitals either. The doctors have gone beyond their call of duty and have work beyond their shifts, but they cannot save life unless the required infrastructure is available. The question is why is a country of more than one billion people not having enough doctors?

The Government should have learned from what had happened last year that health care system of even developed countries like Italy and US crumble due to COVID-19 attack, but as the saying goes those who do not learn from history are bound to repeat it. The Government has not even learnt from China the place where the corona virus originated. China must have hit the right buttons somehow because till today mortality due to the pandemic in the whole country is only about 5000. Whereas in India people are desperate and angry as they see no light at the end of the tunnel. The reason is because the Government which had failed to prepare for the second wave is seeing no other alternative other than to impose a lockdown.

Now that we have seen how much damage the second wave has had on the country, the question in every citizen's mind is, "Are we prepared for the third wave?" On the other hand the deaths due to corona virus should not remain just statistics for future reference. Instead, their names should be inscribed on some national monument. In fact, if the Government goes ahead with the Central Vista project, the names of all those who died in the pandemic should find place in the monument.

Hhmohrmen67@gmail.com

A Message to the Covid Complacent

By Rev Lyndan Syiem

I write this article from a hospital bed, on my mobile phone, as I'm slowly recovering from a nasty attack of the COVID 19 virus. Physically, I'm weak and helpless because I'm dependent upon oxygen support, drips, injections, nebulizers, and the rest. But it is precisely this condition that grants me an audience before the general public, when I write as someone who has personally experienced the illness.

You may call it oversimplification, but I believe there are three groups of people: The COVID Sceptics who are also vaccine conspiracy theorists, the COVID Realists who have been or are going to be vaccinated, and the large majority who I will call the COVID Complacent, only some of whom have been vaccinated. They have no strong reasons against vaccination, but will wait for the rest of the herd. My primary audience is the latter, who I believe will help turn the tide against this pandemic by cooperating with the government and the doctor shonongs.

Friends, our state will soon be in deep trouble if we don't change our attitudes now: on masking, sanitizers/soap, physical distancing and vaccination; I will also add public feasting at weddings and funerals. When the lockdown ends, and if people return to their careless ways, the number of positive cases will shoot up and our limited health care system will be overstretched. I can already see the strain on our doctors, nurses, technicians and ward staff here at Bethany Hospital, as they rush from emergency case to emergency case.

These health workers are people with families and small children at home, and yet they sacrifice their valuable time to care for and serve COVID patients. It can become extremely hot inside a PPE suit, and yet they serve long hours with friendliness and professionalism. I offer my humble salute to all our health workers throughout the state, who are among the few groups that are not staying home during this lockdown. You have the prayers of the entire community, that is grateful for your dedicated services.

But if we really respect our health workers and we truly honour their sacrifices, we must show it in action. How? It's simple: Just follow the Protocols. Someone may ask, what about you Pastor? I must humbly admit that I slipped somewhere along the line; and now I'm paying a heavy price for my complacency.

If you're asymptomatic or have just mild symptoms, you'll never know this. But those with moderate to severe symptoms have all experienced that burning sensation in the lungs, that gasp for precious oxygen, that struggle to cling to life with every breath. At my most painful moments, I remembered Genesis 2:7, "Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being." I would pray through parched lips: "Give me the breath of life, O Creator God." And he graciously answered my humble prayer.

Friends I'm sharing my mistake because I want you to learn from my unforced errors and carelessness. Please don't repeat my mistake. I'm sharing my spiritual experience because I want to encourage the COVID patients and their anxious families. Keep praying, keep hoping, keep fighting. I'm sharing my suffering because I want you to know that COVID 19 causes excruciating pain in the lungs; many people are too weak to fight back, they give up breathing, and just die. The sight on television of people dying in the hospital parking lots of Delhi is tragic, it's heart-breaking. The sight of long lines of dead bodies awaiting their final rites has

shocked the entire world. I pray dear Heavenly Father, please spare Meghalaya such tragedy. Help our people O Merciful Father, to come to their senses!

This virus is treasonous, it lulls people to a false sense of security. It's insidious working can be observed in my case: Of the about 100 people that I met during the contact tracing period, the virus latched on to only about 26 people, including my wife and two children. Of these, 19 are asymptomatic, 5 had mild symptoms, including my two children: only two, my wife and I were hospitalized. What do these figures convey? Some people may react dismissively: "It strikes only 2% of the population." Isn't that way too much?

But imagine if the 19 asymptomatics roamed around freely and infected others with the virus. Meghalaya's population is over three million. Imagine if just 1% of 3 million, which is 30,000, experience severe respiratory distress and required hospitalization in oxygen-equipped beds! Some estimates say Meghalaya has just 12,000 hospital beds, with less than 1000 being equipped to handle COVID patients, with oxygen support and isolation. The other beds are required for other illnesses, injuries and obstetrics.

Friends, we are staring at a possible disaster. Unless we quickly embrace masks, sanitizers/soap, physical distancing, vaccination, and unless we immediately stop community feasting, we will be in deep trouble. But it is also at such times of distress that the people of God have spontaneously fallen on their knees in prayer, as is happening right now in Meghalaya. ... I have sworn to God that I will serve as a Pastor, a shepherd of the flock, and I remain a shepherd even from my hospital bed, a wounded shepherd, if you like. It is with this heavy responsibility that I write this article to the flock, as well as to society at large. Please follow the SOPs faithfully. Please pray and vaccinate prayerfully.

Through it all, I'm happy it was the Pastor and not the parishioners that was hospitalized. I accept that it's time for someone from the ministry to suffer with our people, so as to encourage them from within the pain. For too long have I been insulated from the pain and prayed for COVID patients from above the struggle. Now I'm fully in with you brothers and sisters, and I can understand exactly what you're going through.

Do not be afraid because the Lord has promised never to leave us or forsake us. If you recover, you will grow in your relationship with Him. What happens if you do not? ... Pastors must always be honest about the possibility of death in extreme cases, and I'll answer, with due respect to other faiths, as a Christian. ... If you are not able to recover, then just go on ahead in faith and you will find Jesus waiting for you on the other shore.

Friends, I'm in the midst of a long, painful struggle against COVID, and it's been a privilege to be able to chronicle the process. I hope it encourages people amidst these troubled times. I also hope it raises awareness on COVID prevention. I close by humbly reaching out to the COVID Sceptics, who have their own reasons and convictions. I request you with folded hands not to undermine public confidence on Health Department advisories by forwarding outlandish claims about microchips in the vaccines, about the number of the beast and Bill Gates getting rich off the vaccine. Keep your personal convictions, no one can force you, but please don't disrupt the Public Health Services of the Government.

Email: lyndansyiem@gmail.com

Letters to the Editor

UDP: A Male Chauvinist Khasi-Centric Party

Editor,

I was overwhelmed with the response that my letter captioned, 'UDP: A Khasi-Centric Party' (ST May 6, 2021) received last week. I consider myself fortunate that a political stalwart and former Deputy Chief Minister of Meghalaya, Bindo M Lanong, responded to the letter the very next day after I had pointed out the inconsistencies and ineptitude of the Party insofar as handling the last GHADC elections and their Garo candidates is concerned. This led them to face an embarrassing defeat. As much as I respect Bindo Lanong for his political and social experience, I can't help but point out his chauvinistic and patriarchal mindset in his letter that referred to me in a condescending tone where he says, 'Hopefully she is a lady.' Not that it bothers me, but as the senior most leader and advisor of his Party, Mr Lanong's statement carries much weight and his attitude clearly shows the prevailing mindset and culture in UDP which is against women in the State of Meghalaya. The idea that a woman can point out his Party's flaws seems unacceptable to him and his colleagues. More so, if the person concerned is a Garo woman. No wonder, crime against women in Meghalaya is growing like the Covid-19 numbers, daily, under the supervision of his Party colleague as Home Minister.

The chest-thumping of

the UDP leaders during the campaign trail in Garo Hills, where all their star campaigners were Khasis with not a single Garo as part of their central executive body today - are questions that Mr Lanong conveniently left unanswered. Why would he anyway, when his Party is a Khasi Party? Instead, he chooses to educate us that in the past the biggest example of co-existence between the Khasis and the Garos was when Garo soldiers fought under a Khasi chieftain against the British soldiers. I'm thankful to him for this analogy as this exposes the very philosophy and underlying ideology, about UDP, which believes that Garo people can't lead and will always have to work under a Khasi leader. This thinking is probably one of the many reasons for the Party suffering such a humiliating defeat.

To add to this, the narrative of many roadside discussions in Garo Hills during the GHADC election was that UDP does not value the Garo sentiments and rich history which I'm afraid Mr Lanong has proven to be true, especially with the response he came up with. This communal mindset within the top brass of the UDP and its cadres only exposes what I had pointed out - that a bunch of Khasi legislators want to rule and dictate terms to the GHADC without caring for our sentiments and feelings. It is ironic that when a Garo woman points out these anomalies, she is being labelled an ignoramus, which is reminiscent of the 'Lutyens Eminent Attitude' that is running within the Party which thinks that ruling Meghalaya

is the birth-right of the UDP. This reeks of an oligarchical mindset where one family and a few male individuals from one community believe they can rule and control the masses forever.

I would be happy to have these exchanges directly with Bindo Lanong as suggested by him, but only if he would first accord women the same status and respect he has for the male members in the Party and if he can let go of his communal mindset which is embedded and has become a true identity of the UDP against the Garos in Garo Hills. To conclude, UDP is not only a Party for and by the Khasis but unfortunately, it is also a male-centric sexist Party.

Yours etc.,
Christina Marak
Shillong - 19

Editor's note: For the benefit of readers, Ms Christina Marak has provided her contact number and it is therefore immature to allege that she is a ghost writer of some rival political party just because she critiques a political party. The Shillong Times believes in healthy debates without demeaning anyone and certainly without indulging in sexist remarks.

Strict containment in rural areas needed

Editor,

After overwhelming the health apparatus in Shillong and other district headquarters Covid-19 is now slowly spreading into the rural areas, which remained unaffected

in the first wave of the disease in 2020. Hence there is a scepticism in people residing in rural areas as to whether the virus is real. Some believe that the virus only affects other states of India and that the cases occurring in Meghalaya are not real cases of Covid-19 but are some other seasonal allergies and afflictions like fever and common cold. Added to this scepticism there is also a myth circulating among the rural folks that Covid-19 is a "political virus", a tool used by politicians for self-aggrandizement.

This lack of awareness among the rural folks and reluctance to submit to testing and to be vaccinated makes them more susceptible to Covid-19. The problem is compounded by the lack of proper medical infrastructure in rural areas since they are mainly concentrated in the towns. As is evident from the growing numbers of Covid patients in the state, hospitals are inadequate to admit the rush of patients. If the number of cases increase, the healthcare institutions will collapse, leaving the patients in the lurch. This will exacerbate the surge of Covid-19 in the State. It is therefore imperative to spread awareness about the real threat of the virus and to impose stringent, even aggressive measures not only in urban areas but also in rural areas so as to impede the escalation of the virus. The virus does not discriminate between rural and urban folks. It will sweep all those that stand on its path. People of Meghalaya must understand this and the State Government must take strict action.

Yours etc,
Lurshai Kharbari &

Philista Warjri,
Via email

My learning experience at MLCU

Editor,

Confronted by my child-like perspective, I've always felt that the journey of life ends at home. I had a low esteem and was unsure of finding my way in life. However, when I moved to Shillong and enrolled at Martin Luther Christian University (MLCU), my life changed significantly. I became a different person empowered with a positive lexicon. My childhood dream was to become a Veterinary doctor and cure sick animals as they are stoically incapable of acknowledging their pain. Daunting moments prevailed when I failed to crack the entrance exam even on my third attempt. I was on the verge of giving up, engulfed as I was with trauma and confusion. When I proceeded with my admission in MLCU, a new window of opportunity opened up for me to have a fresh start.

At first, I was amused with the equitable and impartial admission procedure. It was the sign of a first blessing from where all other blessings flowed. Continuous Formative Evaluation (CFE) was an effective learning system where young learners are groomed with intra-personal and interpersonal skills in a stress-free ambience. As the exam system is not followed, the theoretical and practical evaluations adequately paid off. From the feedbacks given by the faculty during classroom presentations and

interactions, I gained confidence and courage to confront my weaknesses and learn from my mistakes. The English Communication classes, not only improve my writing skills but my articulation became more fluent. The efforts of all the teachers with whom I have crossed paths was worthy of respect. Step by step, I soared higher with my grades and outgrew most of my weak qualities.

Being a student of Tourism and Travel Management enabled me to explore the roots of different cultures beyond my horizon. The experiential learning in visiting different destinations was an adventure of a lifetime. It helped me comprehend the beneficial essence of the tourism industry for the host communities. Apart from my own culture, I have learned to respect the traditions and customs of other cultures. Tourism can be a wonderful tool for building rapport in our North-eastern region, with cultural exchange programs within the aspect of tourism academics.

In conclusion, being a student of MLCU was a life changing moment. It moulded me to develop professional life skills and value systems. I have now graduated and moved on to pursue further studies. But wherever I wander, I will always be proud of being an alumnus of MLCU as it immensely enhanced professionalism in me.

Yours etc.,
C. Lalrinfela,
Via email

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

"Speak when you are angry - and you'll make the best speech you'll ever regret."

--- Laurence J. Peter

The Shillong Times

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Vaccination hesitancy in Meghalaya

THERE are no dearth of conspiracy theories circulating on social media particularly on WhatsApp about people dying or having severe reactions after receiving the anti-Covid vaccination. Some claim that those who are vaccinated still get Covid and die, so what's the point of subjecting the body to something that can alter the body's DNA? Such theories are not based on science but on other beliefs induced by religion. Prof Jeffrey Almond of Oxford University and others like him say that injecting RNA into a person doesn't do anything to the DNA of a human cell. It works by giving the body instructions to produce a protein which is present on the surface of the coronavirus. The immune system then learns to recognise and produce antibodies against the protein.

But anti-vaxxers mostly from the West are peddling misinformation and conspiracy theories aimed at eroding trust in the COVID-19 vaccine and the public health systems that are disseminating them. In the latest attempts to undermine the vaccination rollout, activists are amplifying the deaths of those who died of old age or underlying health conditions after receiving the shot. In other instances, vaccine-hesitant activists are manufacturing stories of deaths related to the vaccine that never happened. These groups are also latching onto reports of real deaths following the shot, blaming the vaccine and disregarding medical information that other causes are to blame. Medical experts say it's a case of emotion versus science. In certain cases, vaccine-hesitant groups are simply making up fake stories of deaths tied to the vaccine. While headlines and arguments make an emotional grab, Dr Panayiota Kendeou a professor in the department of Educational Psychology at the University of Minnesota cautions that individuals need to look deeper at the science and the data. Kendeou is a contributing author of 'The COVID-19 Vaccine Communication Handbook,' a practical guide created by an international group of scientists aimed at improving vaccine communication and countering misinformation. According to the handbook, if 10 million people are vaccinated and the vaccine had no side effects whatsoever, then over the following two months it can be expected that 4,025 of those vaccinated will have a heart attack, 3,975 will have a stroke, 9,500 will have a new diagnosis of cancer, and 14,000 will, unfortunately, die.

Across India, people are queuing up for the vaccine but there aren't enough to go around especially for the 18-44 age group. Hence, it's not India as a whole that's having vaccine hesitancy but the northeastern states in particular that are influenced by anti-vaxxers from the West. The message to vaccinate needs to go out from the pulpits and from society and community leaders. If this does not happen soon, Covid will overwhelm Meghalaya. Meanwhile, those in the 18-44 age group that are ready to be vaccinated should be prioritised lest we have vaccine wastage.

All can be pandemic good Samaritans

By Albert Thyrniang

'Langar' is a Persian word that came to be used in Punjab meaning a community kitchen or a community meal. The word has come to be associated with Sikhism. Many Gurdwaras serve vegetarian meals free of cost to absolutely anyone. The practice attracts particularly the homeless but also visitors avail of the service. People have been moved by witnessing people sitting on the floor being served a meal.

In the midst of the ravaging pandemic a Gurdwara in Indrapuram, Ghaziabad bordering Delhi extended the community service of providing oxygen to COVID patients who need to breathe to survive. The 'oxygen langar' came to the aid of hundreds of distressed people with their falling oxygen levels. The initiative has inspired other Gurdwaras across the country to do the same. Recently the Sikh community in Shillong announced that it has set up an "oxygen langar" for COVID-19 patients and are ready to let the needy breathe the priceless air if the situation arises. This gesture must be appreciated.

During this pandemic we heard, read and see heart-warming stories of good Samaritans who ignore the threat of the virus and choose to help the needy. Take for example the group of Muslim youths in Hyderabad who performed the last rites of more than 1,600 Covid-dead including Muslims, Hindus and Christians; Bhavana Pandita, a homemaker in Ghaziabad, who initially started providing home-cooked food to neighbours but ended up forming a group with volunteers to expand her voluntary service; the Cardiologist, Syed Amjad Bashir in Maharashtra who has built and inaugurated a 35-bed hospital for Covid patients out of his savings; the auto rickshaw owner-cum-driver Javed Khan in Bhopal who converted his auto rickshaw into a makeshift ambulance after seeing seriously-ill Covid patients being taken in bicycles or even pushcarts. Harsh Mandavia and his mother Heena Mandavia in Mumbai who fed over 22,000 meals, 55,000 rotis and 6,000 homemade sweets when the second wave hit the city; the 56-year old Delhi cop, ASI Rakesh Kumar, father of 3 who has been performing the last rites of unclaimed bodies of Covid-19 victims at a crematorium besides performing his duties; the Mumbai police of a station who contributed Rs 500 to an old lady flower seller who begged she had no other means of surviving during the COVID curfew days; the author and entrepreneur Rhea Mukherjee of

Bengaluru who has fed eight families in the last two weeks or so with the help of people who bring home made food to her 'kitchen'. From providing free meals, arranging for oxygen, coordinating on availability of beds in hospitals, giving dignified burials, these and many other examples of kindness and empathy prove that humanity does come of age during a disaster. The on-going unprecedented national health crisis has once again shown that the best in humans does emerge at the worst of times.

In Meghalaya the traditional institutions, particularly the Rangbah Shnong won accolades for their roles in tackling the 'first wave' last year. The village and local committees collaborated with the State Government in running community quarantine centres, facilitating accommodation of returnees in quarantine facilities, manning of entry points, supervising containment zones, enforcing shutting down of shops and even restrict vehicular movements. The grass-roots traditional bodies played a crucial part in the fight against the virus. Practically all villages set up their own quarantine centres with or without government support. Videos and images were shared on social media of the facilities that were established to prevent the outbreak in the state. From early on the State Government entrusted the designated responsibilities to the village headmen and their council. The success was visible.

Against this background it was a surprise to see the other day in media reports that some headmen in localities in Shillong have refused to set up community quarantine centres. Dearth of funds, lack of space, want of volunteers etc., were given as reasons for their inability to comply with the urge of the Government to once again partner with it to defeat the more devastating virus. If not contained the fragile health care system in the state could collapse. God forbid the distressing scenes of Mumbai, Bengaluru or Delhi could be here as well.

The experience of the 'first wave' might have influenced the decision of the 'Rangbah shnong' in Shillong. Talking to some headmen in villages they were disappointed with the Government last year. They were not given the promised financial support to set up quarantine centres and in managing them. Management of schools and other facilities also complained that the State Government

forgot everything once the virus subsided. Many asked, 'Who has benefited from the Rs 399 crore of Covid-related expenditure as many stakeholders were left high and dry?' A public representative was heard speaking for caterers and service providers that their remunerations were hard to come by. So where did the inflated amount go? The headmen in Shillong too might have been led down by the 'ungrateful' attitude of the Government after their commendable job. Laxity has made residents of some localities to defy the present lockdown order. Authorities have failed to enforce a strict lockdown. Suggestions have already been given to empower the local headmen to enforce lockdowns under their jurisdictions. The traditional heads might have felt, that the Government needs them only during crises.

A solution seems to have been arrived at. The reluctant Rangbah Shnongs have agreed to set up community quarantine centres with government aid. It is good news. But to make village heads feel important only during an emergency is a poor reflection of governance. It has been established by now that the second wave is/was due to complacency, callousness, arrogance and incompetence. We blame the governments at the state and centre for being complacent after the virus abated. We point fingers at politicians for organising huge election rallies that turned super spreaders. We take aim at the Kumbh Mela for being the 'biggest super-spreader in the pandemic's history'. But complacency, callousness and arrogance are also faults of the common citizens.

We all know we need not follow politicians. We all know the virus is not new and kicking. We need not be complacent and callous. We need not throw away our masks in public as politicians do in election assemblies. We need not forget social distancing though our leaders flout the rule to win elections. We too have our 'Kumbh Melas'.

Looking back we recall our complacency and callousness right from November/December last year up to March/April this year. Restrictions on social and religious gatherings were still in place but we ignored them. Christmas celebrations were normal especially in rural areas. Churches were packed. Marriage functions were as usual. Sports and entertainments too were back. Markets were reopened.

Travels resumed. Schools restarted. Everything went back to pre-pandemic era. People spotted with masks were rare. Social distancing was forgotten. How do we expect government officials to implement wearing masks and maintaining of social distancing everywhere? Of course the insistence on and especially implementing of protocols went into off mode from the authorities as well. The pandemic was supposed to change our lifestyles in certain ways. It has not.

Came early April and the Easter celebrations were in full swing. Visuals of religious gathering like church blessings and processions were seen in Facebook. A number church leaders in the country have succumbed to COVID-19. Many more have been infected. Religious gatherings might have been spreaders. Certainly Kumbh Mela is not the only culprit. Then came the GHADC elections. The effect has already been felt. Complacency and callousness crept in.

One of the reasons for complacency and callousness was the 'faulty' diagnoses. In December last year in my village six people were tested positive. They were kept in home 'isolation.' How do people isolate themselves in a rural home? After two/three days they were back with their normal duties. Villagers say none of their contacts were tested. People saw the cases as fake. After the incident the fear for COVID-19 disappeared. People who had planned for a sober Christmas and New Year celebration cancelled all earlier decisions.

In early April, 12 inmates of a hostel in Tura were found to be with the virus. However, all their contacts were negative. As this writer was in that very institution many messages me raising suspicion on the diagnostic kits. It is for this reason the people of a village in Jongksha refused to be tested as they could not believe that the index patient had COVID. When the testing tools are unreliable, complacency and callousness imperceptibly follows.

The tools may be defective but we are certain the virus is accelerating virulently. The outbreak is exploding. The daily death record is 3000-4000. Our state could also face the brunt. The state capital is already under full lockdown. We can be good Samaritans by not helping the spread. Wearing masks in public is one of the easiest practices to be a Samaritan. Coronavirus loves complacency and callousness.

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Vaccination has slowed down: Mobilise communities

By Glenn C. Kharkongor

What should have been a vaccination overdrive has shown a dismal downturn. The numbers tell the story. The state's efforts, sincere and well-meaning though they may be, shows apparent dis-coordination between the political leadership, health directorate, and the bureaucratic administrative machinery.

Political leaders look for political points, whether in the treasury or in the opposition. The health directorate, run by doctors, tend to be focused on medical issues such as preparedness of hospitals. The bureaucracy, which is the arm of the government that must run operations finds itself sandwiched between the politicians and the doctors.

It seems to me that decisions made by the political leadership are largely influenced by the doctors who often carry the day with their degrees and medical jargon. This sometimes intimidates, rather than merely influences. Having been in the fraternity for fifty years in mission hospitals, medical colleges and government committees, I have often seen the sometimes undue influence that doctors exert on decision-making processes. An example of this was the recent decision for lockdown. It was the right decision, but among the major reasons cited was the fact that hospital capacity would soon be under strain. This was a correct conclusion, but dictated by medical concerns. The decision to make two pre-fab hospitals is also correct, but it again shows a curative mindset, which has taken precedence over a preventive attitude. Such is the average doctor's outlook, conditioned by his/her training.

This brings in a subtle skewness in the decision-making strategy, in which strong influencers elevate medical priorities and thus relegate prevention to secondary importance. Decisions such as the recent lockdown was not accompanied by a clear preventive strategy, which is why public health specialists and epidemiologists must be in the forefront.

Vaccination slowdown: An example of this skewness is shown the vaccination data, obtained from the covid.gov.in dashboard for Meghalaya state and the Johns Hopkins University world Covid date centre.

As on May 8, 2021, only 2,75,458 (42%) of the eligible population of 6.5 lakhs have been vaccinated. In the past 2-3 weeks, the vaccination numbers have slowed from about 15 thousand a day in the week of Apr 26 - May 1 to the numbers shown below:

Date	No. vaccinations	New cases
May 3	8661	246
May 4	7006	339
May 5	6281	269
May 6	8382	347
May 7	8189	297
May 8	4004	375
May 9	No data (Sun)	418

The vaccination slowdown is perhaps caused by several factors, one of which is vaccine refusal. The efforts by government and community leaders to increase the vaccine rate has had limited success. It may be that the state does not have sufficient vaccine stocks. At a vaccination centre set up last Thursday near my house, only a few persons were vaccinated. The staff said that forms had run out so left to get some more, returning two hours later with only a few forms, and closed shop soon thereafter. Many who stood in line could not get vaccinated.

Vaccine shortage: The central government is tight-lipped on vaccine supplies, with no certain timetable for vaccination while the pandemic rages on. The Financial Express of May 8, asked the question, "If the Indian government has paid the two vaccine companies (Serum Institute and Bharat Biotech) for additional vaccine doses, then why is the overall stock of vaccines reduced and also the rate of vaccinations declining? The ambitious vaccination drive that India embarked... gathered steam in April touching around 4 million vaccina-

tions a day. But...the rate of vaccination has slipped to 2.3 million doses a day."

On May 6, the central government announced that it had provided over 171 million doses to all the states free of cost till date, and that 8.9 million doses are still available with the states. In addition, 2.8 million vaccine doses would be made available in addition to the states within the next three days. That is 11.7 million doses for the states. This, going at the current rate of vaccination, will get consumed in a matter of days. To vaccinate all adults with two doses the country will need an additional 1.2 billion doses. Who knows how long it will take for his astronomical figure to be reached? Bhutan showed the strategy that poor countries should adopt. It has vaccinated 93% of its adult population. A study by the Harvard University School of Public Health has noted "that while the U.S. has the world's best medical system, the nation has neglected a public-health focus on prevention—which Bhutan and some other socially cohesive low- and middle-income countries have adopted to avoid being overwhelmed by epidemics." Bhutan cannot afford expensive high-tech curative medicine and neither can Meghalaya, nor run many hospitals when health manpower is in short supply. In the approach to Covid, Meghalaya needs to adopt a small, poor country approach. We should not have missed the bus on preventive measures like vaccination. Now vaccine supplies have rapidly dwindled and the situation for the next few months looks grim.

Community Mobilisation: Community mobilization has also failed. The reluctance of the dorbars to collaborate with the government shows neglect of this important asset. The dorbars appear to have genuine reasons for their hesitancy: lack of resources, manpower, and increased community exposure and risk. However, one enlightened and resourceful dorbar has shown community concern and responsibility. This shnong has had a recent rise in positive cases, mainly from returnees coming through Umling.

Located within the Shillong Agglomeration, this dorbar has set up a unique self-help model by setting up its own Covid quarantine centre. It has obtained 20 beds, mattresses, pillows and linen from a sponsor. The dorbar is providing other amenities from the small surplus gained from the household fee for garbage collection. A small daily charge will be levied from the quarantined persons. The estimated a monthly deficit of Rs 1.2 lakhs will be borne by the dorbar. They can financially manage for 3-6 months, by which time it is hoped that the pandemic will be brought under control.

Suggestions: Daily briefing of administrative updates by operational heads such as the chief secretary, health secretary and DC rather than politicians or doctors. There should be public health updates and advisories by public health experts. DIPR and the Shillong Times should publish daily data on vaccinations and vaccine doses in stock. As the >45 year age group have had their chance, provide vaccinations to anyone who walks into a vaccination centre. Exhaust the vaccine doses available. When more are vaccinated, the safer the state will be. When vaccine supplies are exhausted, appeal to the central government, high court, or international foundations for help. If a state says it has no more vaccine and pleads its case, it will strike a chord somewhere.

Mobilise the dorbars by addressing their concerns and needs. Some of the poorer shnongs will need financial help, for which a monthly scheme can be worked out. Volunteers in the Covid community quarantine and care centres should get priority vaccination. Provide crash course healthcare training for community volunteers. Financial incentives can be given to shnongs based on vaccination acceptance. **A poor state must vaccinate.**

Letters to the Editor

In-situ construction works

Editor, In the latest government notification, I'm glad that In-situ construction works are allowed. This is a definite relief for those labourers who stand the risk of losing work. Now since construction work is allowed, the next concern is the maintenance of supply chains. Just by allowing construction is not enough; shops dealing with the supply of these raw materials and their transportation are part of the supply chain. Shops dealing with construction material can be opened in a regulated manner to maintain this supply chain.

In the last few days, many vehicles carrying these construction materials have been fined during their journey on the plea that they have violated rules. In fact, these vehicles, unlike passenger vehicles which stand the risk of disease transmission, generally have a maximum of two persons on board. Hence I find no reason to restrict the movement of vehicles transporting goods. Besides, the exemptions permitted will have no value if the supply and transport chain is cut off. Through this esteemed newspaper I wish to highlight these two concerns to the District Administra-

tion and all those shop and vehicle owners involved in helping the Government in provide economic relief to the daily wage earners involved in the construction sector.

Yours etc.,
Sonic Kharuit
Shillong-3

Books are essential

Editor, As a student, pursuing an academic career in these COVID times has become a herculean task due to non-availability of printed books and materials, as the book shops across the city have been shut down due to the lockdown. Like me the entire student fraternity is facing this difficulty and it seems there's no respite for us anytime soon as it is unsure when the book shops will open and we will be able to get our required books and other study materials. Further, we will have to submit our assignments on time through the on-line mode, else we will be delayed and subsequently penalised.

As a student, I understand that the steps the Government has undertaken in order to curb the COVID spread in the city and the state is commendable, however, the availability of books and other printed material is equally important for us, students, to pursue our studies. The material that we

need is not always available on the internet and therefore reference to printed books is imperative.

I also refer to the published articles on the topic of "Books" by Mr. Gewali and Professor Omarlin Kyn-diah and would sincerely request the Government to take cognisance of the academic needs of students of Meghalaya.

Yours etc.,
Samuel Marak
Shillong

UDP a party of Khasi, Jaintia, Garo people

Editor, The letter by Christina Marak alleging that UDP is a Khasi-centric party is completely misleading and based on assumptions. The UDP was once led by our own Garo leaders namely Capt. Williamson A Sangma, (L) Mody K. Marak, Dr Milton Sangma and many others since the start of the APhLC, later turned HPU and then the UDP. Earlier we also had Mr BG Momin as the General Secretary of the UDP. History is testimony to all this if only Marak has taken the trouble to find out the facts.

Earlier when (L) PA Sangma was in the Congress, whenever there was an election in Meghalaya, be it Lok Sabha, Assembly or the District Council, the fight

would be between the Congress and the regional party - UDP (erstwhile HPU). Way back in 1988 this same regional party then called HPU had won 15 out of 24 seats in Garo Hills in the Assembly elections. After the expulsion of PA Sangma from Congress, it is he who tagged UDP as Khasi party, primarily to weaken one of the two (i.e. Congress and UDP). Since the UDP fights elections on genuine issues of the State and its people and not with money power, sadly money power has got the better of Garo Hills. Hence the party is finding it difficult to resurge in this part of the state.

UDP stands for United Democratic Party and is inclusive of Garos, Khasis and Jaintias. It is a Party which did not field any non-tribal candidate during just concluded GHADC election in deference to the sentiments of the Garo people. For the information of Ms Marak this Party continues to have Garo Leaders in its CEC and Garo ex-MLAs as Co-Chairman in the present Government. At least now we are getting a positive response from the people of Garo Hills and one of these days we believe that people will accept and support our regional party. Let us therefore bridge the gap and live unitedly in peace and harmony.

Yours etc.
Anand M. Marak
Via email

Penalty for wearing unclean masks

Editor, I am quite apprehensive about the fact that many people are wearing unclean masks. Not only the illiterate but also the literate people are least bothered about this unhealthy habit. Some wear masks which have not been washed ever since they have been purchased. I think this is the most serious concern when COVID cases are increasing so rapidly. Moreover, how can we guarantee that the wearing of the unclean masks is not one of the reasons for what are going through right now? I firmly believe that unclean/unwashed masks are more dangerous than wearing no mask. Can we not ascertain this fact with the help of a microscope? I think our complacency is proving suicidal.

Hence, with all urgency, I would request the government to take serious note of this unhealthy practice. The police force should now aggressively check and penalize those defaulters wearing unclean masks. Unlike in the west, lack of cleanliness is one of the inherent traits of most of the people in our country. We can fight back the COVID virus only with the weapon of healthy habits and alertness.

Yours etc.,
Salil Gewali,
Shillong

What a team! True Samaritans

Editor I want to thank and let people of Shillong know about the Organisation MakeSomeoneSMILE which is serving relentlessly during this stressful period. On Sunday last we needed an oximeter and some medicines to be bought and dropped home. It was around 8 PM when my parents needed help. At that point, no one, not even our closest relatives and acquaintances offered to assist. I live in Nagpur and had no option left, so I called on the number provided by Team MakeSomeoneSmile. Mr Anky, who I think is the lead, not only agreed to help but within an hour ensured that all the mentioned items were dropped at my parents' place in Madanryting. Such a generous act at a much-needed time is commendable and an example of humanity at its best and deserves special mention. I wish Anky and his team all the very best!

Yours etc.,
R K Mawtoh,
Sitaburdi, Nagpur

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

"Inequality can have a bad downside, but equality, for its part, sure does get in the way of coordination."

-- Mary Douglas

The Shillong Times

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Congress skips internal polls

THE Congress Working Committee has skilfully skirted the Party's existential crisis by shifting focus to the Covid19 pandemic and also stressing that the first priority is to fight the pandemic and save lives. So, what could wait first and foremost are the organisational elections -- which were to be completed by June end with the selection of a new president -- the CWC has surmised. The meeting fired fresh salvos at the Modi government for its failure to check the Covid spread and taking it to deadly levels in the second wave of the pandemic. This is understandable and Prime Minister, Narendra Modi is himself on the defensive about the way things have spiralled out of control.

The BJP-led government and the PM himself have lost a good part of their credibility if social media offensives from the hoi polloi are any indication. Clearly, the CWC sees an opportunity in this, alongside the unimpressive showing the saffron party had in this round of assembly polls overall. Time now for the Congress to latch on to Covid19, turn the people's anger against the government to its advantage and prepare the ground for a big fight at the 2024 hustings as also for the polls to assemblies like Uttar Pradesh. But 2024 is still a long way ahead and Modi the master juggler can be trusted to come up with new tricks from inside his sleeves as he did via Balakot shortly before 2019.

The polls for five assemblies showed the Congress running for cover in four and making marginal gains in Tamil Nadu where the DMK avoided giving it a share in the new power edifice. The CWC set up committees to fix responsibilities for the defeat in all these provinces, including the unexpected drubbing in Kerala, the decimation despite a tie-up with the CPIM in Bengal, the loss of Puducherry and the continued oblivion in Assam. The campaigning by the Rahul-Priyanka duo did not help turn the tide to the party's advantage. As of now, if organisational polls are held, a question is with what face can either of the two heirs-apparent claim the right to head the Congress party as was possibly aimed at as a fitting finale. Organisational elections could have given the much-needed boost to the sinking morale of the Congress party pan India. If the seasoned grand old party further loses its foothold and if the present adverse trend is not arrested, the more corrupt and unscrupulous regional dynasts will rule the roost. India will then be up for grabs.

Jodi No 1 on the retreat?

By Rajdeep Sardesai

For the last seven years, they have been projected as India's jodi number one: prime minister Narendra Modi as the larger than life strongman leader and home minister Amit Shah as the BJP's chief election strategist have carried an aura of near invincibility. If Mr Modi and his governance model have been identified with catchy buzzwords like 'achche din' and 'new' India, Mr Shah has been branded as a modern day Chanakya. However, the last month has dented the well cultivated imagery: if the Covid 2.0 crisis has raised serious questions over the prime minister's governance style, the BJP's West Bengal debacle has punctured Amit Shah's boast of being a master at winning elections.

Take Covid 2.0. A pandemic offers no easy solutions and spares no one but can it be denied that the dominating political executive at the Centre has been behind the curve in the Covid fight? Then be it green signalling potentially super spreader events like the Kumbh Mela, the utterly confused vaccine policy or the botch up over oxygen supplies, the Modi government stands accused of fumbling and stumbling at every turn. An all-powerful government which claims to be adept at micro-management is struggling to coordinate, communicate and execute a concrete national plan of action.

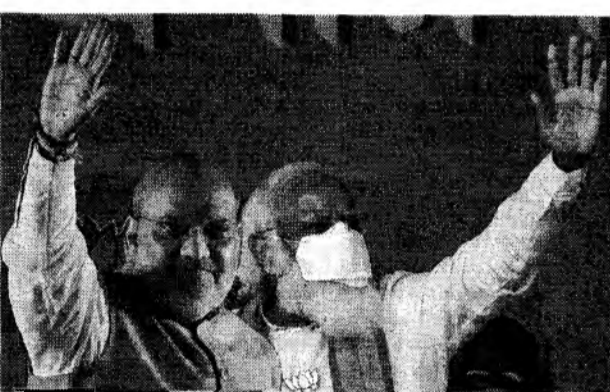
That it has taken repeated Court interventions to goad the Centre into acting swiftly reveals the failings of a highly bureaucratic style of functioning that appears trapped in its own echo chamber of complacency and hubris. That Rahul Gandhi, often lampooned as 'Pappu' by the BJP's hyper-active IT cells, has been pressing most of the right buttons on Covid should be a cause of further embarrassment. Even the much-vaunted Gujarat model stands exposed by the long queues of ambulances outside state hospitals, a grim reminder of the darker side of a development paradigm that didn't invest enough in public health.

Hype has been confused with reality in West Ben-

gal too. The BJP marched into the election like an all-conquering army, backed by massive resources, institutional support and a media blitzkrieg that suggested a landslide victory. Buoyed by their gains in the 2019 Bengal elections, the BJP seemed convinced that chief minister Mamata Banerjee would simply roll over and be vanquished. For Shah in

Poribortan' (real change) on the ground. As it turned out, a lone Mamata Banerjee on a wheelchair versus the BJP's muscular men on a chariot only mirrored a compelling narrative of Bengali sub-nationalism: a rooted popular Bengali speaking mass leader taking on the might of the Hindi speaking 'outsiders'.

So is the 'Jodi number one' on the retreat? Yes and



particular, the 'conquest' of Bengal was a personal mission, one where his crucial role as union home minister in a national crisis appeared to lose out to his persona as an aggressive party campaigner. When as home minister he should have been co-ordinating with all states on Covid protocols, there was an all-consuming ambition to first capture another opposition-ruled state. When he should have been bunkered down in the home ministry, he was addressing large roadshows in the dust-tracks of Bengal with no masks or social distancing.

Here again, there was an unmistakable arrogance in approach, a failure to recognize that a Vidhan Sabha election is fought on a very different terrain to a Lok Sabha battle. The sharply divisive 'Jai Shri Ram' war cry which proved so effective in 2019 appeared out of sync in a highly localized election that was calling out for a more ear to the ground grassroots style of politics. Without a strong, credible Bengal face, the BJP lured key lieutenants of the chief minister to switch sides exposing their own limitations of symbolizing an 'Asol

no. Despite the criticism of the failings of the Modi government in handling the pandemic, the prime minister remains a highly popular leader whose mass connect isn't going to evaporate overnight. Likewise as a consummate 24 x 7 politician, Shah will gear up to fight the next big electoral battle in Uttar Pradesh. Reports of their imminent political demise are exaggerated. Bengal 2021 is not quite yet India 2024. Every election plays out very differently and three years is a very long time in Indian politics.

And yet, under-playing mounting citizen anger at a collapse in basic health services would be politically foolhardy. When a health emergency has put lakhs of people on ventilator, a central government cannot, to quote the Delhi high court, 'be living in ivory towers'. When people are desperately struggling for oxygen and ICU beds, there needs to be a genuine reach out to address their grievances with empathy and common sense and not through typical bureaucratic apathy or crafty perception management. An authoritarian mindset that views any criticism as 'anti-

national' is dangerous when the country is gasping for oxygen: what stops the prime minister, for example, from bringing together the finest minds in the country across key sectors from medicine to science to business to politics in an inclusive endeavour to identify mistakes and course correct? Is this not an ideal moment to decentralize decision-making and build bridges with those who might have useful, even if contrarian views?

Unfortunately, the strongman model of political leadership is often unwilling to accept blunders and take responsibility. Rather than pass the buck, Messrs Modi-Shah need to do a mea-culpa, fix accountability and ring in the changes. Can, for example, the health minister, the affable but clearly clueless Dr Harshvardhan get away by claiming only last month that the country had sufficient stock of vaccines when alarm bells were already ringing across state capitals that vaccine supplies were running out? This is the same health minister who in early March cheerfully claimed that the world was witnessing an 'end-game' to the pandemic. A ministerial resignation and core team transfers isn't going to stop the virus spread but might just signal that the Modi government is acutely conscious of the enraged public sentiments. The 'achche din' bubble has been well and truly pricked by the smoke and ash that bursts out of funeral pyres across the country: the nation wants to know who will bear the cross for an unimaginable tragedy.

Post-script: Covid 2.0 also calls for an urgent redrawing of priorities. Earlier this week, the Indian Premier League, cricket's wealthiest extravaganza, was suspended after a few players tested Covid positive. A high-profile sports event in Covid times was always going to be a high-risk venture. So here is another suggestion: why not also halt the construction of the central vista in the national capital, a grandiose vanity project, when health risks facing the construction workers should be prioritised? (The writer is senior journalist and author. Mail: rajdeep.sardesai52@gmail.com)

The architecture of hubris

By Manish Tewari

Fascism has a strange fascination with architecture. The moment the Nazis rode to power in 1933 Herr Hitler started unveiling his plans for building a new capital for his thousand-year Reich.

To be named Germania it envisaged the grand redevelopment of Berlin.

From the mid-1920s itself much before power ever loomed over the horizon Hitler fantasised about his blueprint for Germania. It finds a prominent mention in his book called the Mein Kampf. Hitler had even prepared the drafts of the grandiose monuments that he proposed to erect. In his mind's eye Adolf Hitler in addition to being The Great Helmsman was also the immortal designer.

In the spring of 1936, Adolf Hitler commissioned his pet architect Albert Speer who later became his minister of armaments to execute his vision and construct "the" megapolis that would be the epicentre of his Reich. Hitler was resolute that the centrepiece of his Nazi dystopia christened Welthauptstadt-World Capital Germania should be completed by 1950. Speer had been the de-facto Nazi architectural director since 1934. He had created a distinct impression on Hitler with his exotic metamorphosis of classical architecture into mammoth but manifestly asexual Nazi architecture that was designed both to intimidate and overwhelm.

This transfiguration was personified in one of Speer's initial but key undertakings, the Nuremberg parade grounds laid out for the 1934 Nazi Party Congress. The impact of the classicist architecture of that stadia is intimately captured in an array of propaganda films curated by the Nazi information czar Joseph Goebbels.

It was designed to provide a backdrop to the stunning imagery of militarised discipline of Nazi cadres forming a geometrical aligned corporeal congregation united in their allegiance to the Fuhrer. The political ontology portrayed by the overpowering impact of this architectural setting is of Being-as-One.

One people, One nation and One Reich, which Hitler emphasized in his oration in that arena. He preached both "complete unity" and asked for blind the obedience of the German nation. Isn't it eerily similar to the one leader one nation one election rhetoric that we hear these days with elections of course being dispensable even in the medium term?

Hitler's visualisation was to transform Berlin into Welthauptstadt Germania—the greatest city of them all. However, stripped of sophistry it was at best plagiarism on a malevolent scale. The only originality being cloning and supersizing of the landmark monuments that Europe had on offer then.

These monoliths were to be erected along a seven-kilometre (4.3 miles) Boulevard of Splendours to create an overarching persona of Nazi pre-eminence on citizens and travellers alike. At the south end of this avenue was to be located the Triumphal Arch six times more humongous than the Arc de Triomphe in Paris. At its north end the concourse was supposed to pan out into a parade ground containing a gigantic Palace for the Fuhrer, the Reich Chancellery, and a gargantuan Grand Hall. Mark the Palace for the Fuhrer.

Hitler perceived monumental architecture as a means of creating a beguiling sense of shock and awe. He was fervent in his conviction that colossal constructions were powerful weapons of projecting political supremacy. For him architecture was not simply the means of giving form to space. It was the virtuosity of creating power through prodigious spatial imagery.

The budget for this vanity project was an estimated 4-6 billion Reich Marks about

50 billion US Dollars at today's cost. Hitler dismissed all concerns with regard to the both timing and cost notwithstanding an on going war. For in his megalomaniac existence it was about perpetuating his legacy. The only way of leaving your indelible footprint on the sands of time was by erecting grandiose edifices.

Moreover, the Nazi party was a pioneer in the use of propaganda both during its relentless quest and perpetuation of power. As the Reich minister of propaganda it was Joseph Goebbels' conviction that "propaganda becomes ineffective the moment we are aware of it". Inspired by this credo the Nazi Party consciously created a myth about opposing the status quo and presenting its Supreme leader as both, an outsider to the incestuous alchemy of the decadent elite and a radical messiah, ironically while being in bed with the very same set. Does it not contextualise the constant railing against Lutyns' Delhi and the fabled Khan Market Gang?

The Nazis were not alone in this endeavour. The Fascist Dictator of Italy Benito Mussolini also launched an ambitious building drive. However, it was the creation of the Casa del Fascio (House of the Fascist Party) that most caught Italian fancy. Primarily it was the headquarters of the Fascist Party.

Archetypes of this new building got constructed across the Italian peninsula. Stereotypically situated in the town centre these structures were built to typically dwarf the church's dominant role in Italian social life. They metaphysically underscored the eternal presence of Il Duce — as Mussolini was called. Antiquity was equally important weapon in the Fascist arsenal. Isolamento as it was known as, involved the valorisation and refurbishment of rhetorically momentous structures.

Monuments as statements, as manifestations of a civilisation and its values and accomplishments, is an impulse that began to fade with the invention of the printing press. The mass-market book, carrying the soul and complexity of a civilisation, became the representative artifact.

The ideas, concepts, aspirations of a people did not need large and expensive agglomerations of masonry to articulate and announce themselves. The written word, the book, cheap and universally available, could do it to perfection.

It is the reason the exemplary founding fathers of modern India did not first, in 1947, move to raze building and raise buildings to announce the dawn of a new freedom and a new covenant of equality and fraternity and justice for all Indians: they chose to sit down, almost three hundred of the very best of them, for almost three long years, to debate and dissect and carve the most important book of contemporary India, the Constitution.

Democrats create festivals of ideas, crusades of justice and equity, carnivals of creativity, in which all may participate, on some kind of equal footing. It is only autocrats and fascists, monarchs and megalomaniacs, who seek statues and monuments to awe their subjects, to bring them to their knees.

Modernity with all its commitment to freedoms and reason is sought to be subordinated by monumental architecture to the will of the fascist state.

This is precisely what we are witnessing with the relentless and profoundly vulgar redevelopment of the central vista in New Delhi (in the middle of a crippling pandemic at an enormous financial cost).

(Manish Tewari is a lawyer and a former Union minister. The views expressed are personal. Twitter handle @manishtewari)

Letters to the Editor

On UDP- A Khasi Centric Party

Editor, Apropos Christina Marak's rejoinder (ST May 10, 2021), I would like to express that all of a sudden, an elusive Christina Marak is in the limelight, but sad to see the malicious mindset ingrained in her, maligning me about evils no one has ever seen in me during my long political career, the so-called, 'chauvinistic and patriarchal mindset,' furthermore alleging that I can't accept a woman pointing out my flaws, etc. The hard-hitting part is about her calculated political move, that for her dubious allegation about me personally, she clubs my party along, that this is 'the prevailing mindset and culture in UDP, which is against women in the state of Meghalaya.'

I have been to every part of Garo Hills during my long political career but have never come across any Garo woman with a wicked mentality as Christina. Giving all the benefits of the doubt, she either could be from outside Garo Hills or could be a modern lady Christina, which does not matter to me.

Maintaining my opinion about her being elusive, it reminds me of a similar incident in 2013, when a similar kind of a letter was published relating to the same stuff about women, by a fairly Daisy Kharkongor, who never existed, nor known even to the Kharkongor elders when enquired about her. About her communal mindset, she conveniently sidetracked about the three leaders, Capt WA. Sangma,

Mr Mody K Marak and Dr Milton Sangma, who were the former Presidents of our party.

About the Garos who fought together with Raja Tirot Sing against the British in Jyrngam - Boko areas, many acclaimed with pride to hear about the said part of history, except the elusive Christina who wishes to twist and turn as goaded by her mindset. Can I suggest she read the history of this event?

As to Christina's emphasis on gender issues, I am not only an orthodox practitioner of women's emancipation and matrilineal system but an advocate of the issue. I am now the Chairman of the KHADC Committee on Khasi Social Custom of Clan Administration Bill 2020, which draft has been duly completed and is being studied by JHADC. Soon the law on Khasi - Pnars social and cultural system, will be streamlined more effectively.

Therefore, I need no certificate either from Christina or anybody else about my stand and my party

Yours etc.,
BM Lanong,
Via email

Airtel failing its customers

Editor, We the residents of Mawlnrei Khlieh Shnong request Airtel to please check your tower because the internet is not working here and our children who are having NEHU online exams now are suffering from network connectivity. We trusted Airtel for having provided a good network for a long time here in our area but now there is frequent internet breakdown.

We request the Airtel officials posted here to rectify the matter at the earliest so that our children's online studies and examinations are not disrupted.

Your etc.,
B.Diangdoh,
Mawlnrei Khlieh Shnong

Time to act responsibly

Editor,

The surge in Covid-19 infected in the state as a whole and East Khasi Hills in particular is of great concern for the administration and the citizens as well. The administrations is doing its best by issuing advisories and standard operating procedures (SOP) and protocols but it is the primary duty of citizens to adhere to these norms. In spite of the lockdown people take the liberty to come out and stroll on the road without even caring for themselves and others. It is observed that certain localities have free movement of people and roadside shops are open in complete violation of the lockdown and without caring that they may be responsible for the spread of the pandemic

As citizens we have a grave responsibility at this time. The least we should do is to abide by the advisories issued from time to time by the administration in order to break the chain of this dreaded pandemic.

Each village/ locality should take a vow that, "This is my village/locality and I should take responsibility for the welfare of the people of my locality." Recently few Dorbar Shnong have taken up the task of going from door to door to apprise people of the benefits of vaccination within the respective localities.

These Dorbars should be appreciated for their endeavours in educating people on the benefits of inoculation. At the same time the Dorbars should strongly be advised by the administration to report any Covid positive case in their localities and inform the authorities for proper action.

People who have taken both doses of the vaccine should not be complacent that they are now free from the pandemic and therefore need not observe Covid-appropriate protocols. It should be noted that even if they are vaccinated, they must follow the guidelines, like wearing a mask, not venturing outside their homes unnecessarily, frequent washing of hands with soap and also to maintain physical distancing. The administration should also take up sanitization and fogging of the areas from time to time as was done last year. Fellow citizens, it needs two hands to clap. Similarly the administration alone cannot overcome the spread of the pandemic unless we join hands and do our duties responsibly as advised by the administration. We have three full tasks ahead: 1) Create awareness about the Covid vaccine 2) Overcome pockets of public resistance caused by misinformation and 3) Provide logistical support whenever required.

We should trust the government and have faith in modern science and get vaccinated when our turn arrives. We should not fall prey to negative information spread by ill informed sources.

Yours etc.,
SL Singhania,
President Police Bazar Welfare Society

Election results and Covid-19

Editor,

The election results to four state assemblies and one Union Territory will have an impact on national politics in different ways. In Assam, West Bengal and Kerala the incumbents returned to power and in Tamil Nadu and Puducherry incumbents lost. Clear messages are emerging from the election results.

First, these results are not actually a verdict against the BJP due to its failure to deal with the Covid-19 crisis. This is because polling in most states except Bengal were over before the crisis worsened. The present Covid crisis may adversely affect the BJP in future. In fact, the elections were not a referendum on Covid-19 management. Second, in spite of a tough contest, the BJP retained power in Assam and it will form a coalition government in Puducherry.

In fact, the BJP was not certain about winning sufficient number of seats to form a government in West Bengal. Obviously, the debacle of the Left-Congress-Indian Secular Front coalition enabled the TMC to improve its record. The BJP's over-dependence on Modi to win votes did not help the party much in West Bengal. Mamata Banerjee's popularity in the state diminished the BJP's electoral prospects. Third, political parties, the BJP in particular, adopted communal campaigns in Assam and Bengal. The BJP put in a lot of effort in religious polarisation in West Bengal and Assam. Mamata Banerjee gave the BJP a taste of their

own medicine by adopting her own tactic of religious polarisation. Fourth, these results have worsened the existential crisis that the Congress faces. The party had already lost Puducherry before the elections. It failed miserably to return to power in Assam and Kerala and is only a partner in the alliance in Tamil Nadu in spite of winning 19 out of 20 seats in the Lok Sabha elections in Kerala, the UDF could win only 41 out of 140 assembly seats. Although the Left performed poorly in West Bengal, it changed the political history of Kerala when a ruling front was returned to power. Fifth, given that Bengal, Tamil Nadu and Kerala will be governed by parties that are politically and ideologically opposed to the BJP, there will be a greater assertion of federal rights. This may help in the restoration of balance in federalism. Sixth, the election results have come at a time when the BJP is faced with accusations of bad governance due to the Centre's mismanagement of Covid-19 crisis.

It is a fact that the present health emergency brought about by Covid-19 has far-reaching implications for the politics of the country. The political prospects of political parties depend on how they respond to the present crisis. It is the responsibility of the incoming governments to focus on Covid-19 and work towards combating the second wave.

Yours etc.,
Venu GS,
Kollam

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

"The future of food security will depend on a combination of the ecological prudence of the past and the technological advances of today."

--- M. S. Swaminathan

The Shillong Times

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Mental health distress

THE second wave of the Covid19 pandemic is causing tremendous distress this time around. Psychologists from NIMHANS Bengaluru have cautioned that too much exposure to television news with horrifying pictures of corpses by the hundreds floating on the Ganges; of Covid patients writhing in pain and breathlessness and finally dying for want of oxygen or of those who die on hospital floors with their family members yelling out in vain, all create a grim picture of the present situation in India. On one hand citizens have been told to stay indoors to break the cycle of infection. On the other hand the grim situation pushes every normal human being in isolation to want to find out how the situation is developing - whether the oxygen shortage is resolved; whether Covid numbers have come down or are still on the rise and the number of Covid infected and deaths across the country. Seeing the unending images of death and despair over television has its negative effects. People are getting into a cycle of depression with many ending their own lives out of desperation. News of a young doctor becoming a victim of suicide because the burden of seeing Covid patients die for want of oxygen or a hospital bed was too heavy on his mind, informs us that post Covid India will have to deal with mental illness over and above many other challenges.

Online classes and work from home are not the new normal. Humans are social beings that thrive in the presence of other humans. This is true of children as it is of adults. Last year Covid took a heavy toll on the mental health of students who were ill at ease with online education, especially those seeking to appear for entrance exams to professional courses. By November 2020, everyone believed the worst was over and normalcy was returning. But that was not to be. The second wave hit India with a vengeance since April this year. And things have just spiraled out of control. Many are staring at the spectre of job loss or loss of income from the trades they pursue. The tourism industry is shattered. Hoteliers and guest house owners are out on a limb. They are all hurting but have to take it on the chin. Meanwhile the central government's handling of the pandemic compounds the problem. Now even vaccines are running out even while the majority of Indians are yet to be vaccinated. Now even as the death toll mounts and news of death of friends, relatives and acquaintances numbs the soul, the mental health of Indians is at stake. This will be India's big challenge post Covid.

Save Umngot today, save a generation tomorrow

By Mayborn Lyngdoh R

Civilizations of humankind were moulded, shaped and breathed into life from dust through the ebb and flow of the mothers of civilizations - the Nile, the Indus, the Tigris and Euphrates. Empires and kingdoms have been erected from free-flowing water bodies, and the journey of man began, evolving with every passing age and generation from continent to continent. Man advanced quickly through the centuries, annexing and overpowering fellow men, the environment and living organisms who are rightful partakers of this beautiful Eden of a planet called Earth. Man's greed has compromised the breathing Mother Earth as an inanimate commodity to be used, misused and overused for the selfish enterprise of a handful of men and women craving for the luxury they do not deserve from the sacrifices made by others, and, on that note, let's turn our eyes to the Umngot River and the insensitive, draconian approach by the Meghalaya Government to go forward with the Umngot Hydro-Electric Project despite the protests from the fifteen villages surrounding the river. Six communities have been very vocal in the protest - Umsawar, Mynsang, Mawdulop, Mawsir, Ksanrangi and Pashang Village of Mawkyntew C&RD Block, East Khasi Hills District since 2012 while its wrath will also affect the villages downstream like - Shnongpdeng, Kudeng, Amko, Nongbareh, Dawki, Lymba, Kongwang and Rikynjai, Darrang.

There is a growing consensus around the world that dams are no longer sustainable. European countries are demolishing dams to restore the ecosystem. The Yecla de Yeltes Dam in western Spain, that once supplied drinking water to local communities for half a century, until the contemporary re-evaluation of its ecological impact rendered it obsolete and unsustainable. Its demolition was the biggest dam-removal project in the European Union so far - and is being hailed by ecologists as a milestone for river-restoration efforts in the continent. "Dams alter the natural characteristics of a river system," says Jeroen van Herk, a project manager with Dam Removal Europe, a group that promotes river restoration in the continent. "Long stretches of rivers, which once flowed freely from source to outlet, become a series of pools, hindering migrating fish from reaching spawning grounds in the upper reaches." The issue of sustainability is more important in the context of climate change. Dams clog free-flowing water, and as a result, droughts take shape and decrease in rainfall is predicted to be an important feature of climate change in tropical regions of the world like India which will only intensify. Tropical dams emit substantial amounts of greenhouse gases (GHG),

and these emissions have often been understated. Large dams like the one planned on Umngot will contribute to GHG and climate change.

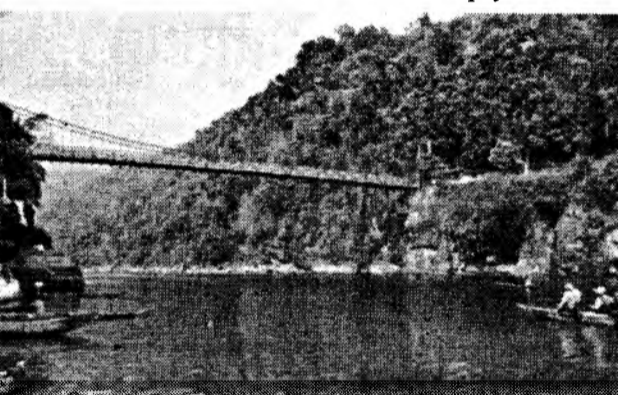
The proposed construction of the Umngot Hydro-power Project will also lead to a degradation of the local ecology. The Draft Environ-

sam and other states for rice, barley, wheat, oil, meat, fish and all kinds of edibles. We cannot survive on our own, and if we are to disregard the plea of the agriculturally inclined lot, we are not just signing a death-note to them but also to the future of the entire state.

"Man's greed has compromised the breathing Mother Earth as an inanimate commodity to be used, misused and overused for the selfish enterprise of a handful of men and women craving for the luxury they do not deserve from the sacrifices made by others."

mental Impact Assessment (EIA) report has admitted that Reservoirs contribute to greenhouse gas emission ... the rotting organic matter releases large amounts of carbon into the atmosphere ... (and) the decaying plant

NESFAS, an indigenous organization (non-governmental), works closely with Umsawar, which is one of the villages affected by this project. With the ever-growing population, Meghalaya will have to pay attention



matter ... (on) decomposition eventually releases dissolved methane" (P. 183). While referring to the Umngot Hydro Electric Project it mentions 28 mammals, 16 reptiles, 97 birds and dozens of butterfly and fish species in the project affected area. It also mentions in page 184 of the report that the threat of poaching will increase during the construc-

tion stage of the project. Exponential loss of biodiversity is therefore imminent. What is most worrying is that once the 'tipping points' have been breached, the damage to the ecosystems is irreversible. As mentioned above, the proposed project will directly affect the livelihoods of the fifteen villages, leaving them impoverished. If we go by the statistics of the draft, two-thirds of the population in Meghalaya is landless. Many farming households are already taking land on rent for cultivation which reveals that landlessness is a major problem in the entire state, let alone the area. As it is already made known, Meghalaya is dependent on As-

"If we go by the statistics of the draft, two-thirds of the population in Meghalaya is landless. Many farming households are already taking land on rent for cultivation which reveals that landlessness is a major problem in the entire state, let alone the area."

micro-organisms. Among all the food plants available in the village, the most exceptional is phankaro stem or orange-fleshed sweet potato, rich in Vitamin-A. Vitamin-A boosts the immune system, and helps prevent serious conditions like early onset of blindness not to mention medicinal plants and the two-hundred eighty other food plants found in the village (as per the study done in 2018 on documentation of agrobiodiversity).

The entire North-eastern states falls under zone V of the seismic scale, meaning Meghalaya is one of the most earthquake prone areas. Dams and earthquakes have a very intimate relationship

- In 2013, a magnitude 5.1 earthquake occurred near the Three Gorges Dam, the world's largest hydroelectric dam built in 2003 to block the Yangtze River. The earthquake caused some damage to structures near its epicenter. The results revealed that all the earthquakes occurred in a narrow band along a previously unidentified fault that is connected to the reservoir. Subsequent field survey in the region led by John Encarnacion, Ph.D., a geology professor at Saint Louis University, Missouri found evidence for the fault in terms of deformed and damaged rocks. They also found that the narrow band of earthquakes had been confined to a specific rock type that was exposed in the dam reservoir and dips into the earth beneath other rock types. "When the dam was built, a lake was created. The higher water levels created greater pressure in pore spaces in rocks at lower depths, a known trigger for earthquakes. This is the same effect that can lead to earthquakes when wastewater is pumped into the ground," Encarnacion said.

In 1857, Meghalaya (then under Assam) witnessed the biggest earthquake in the history of the state with 1542 casualties giving birth to the beautiful ridges and valleys we now have. Though beautiful, we cannot risk another catastrophe. We cannot take the tectonic plates for granted, while lives of people hang on a pendulum.

Conclusion with a Solution:

Since Meghalaya is geographically placed on a divided high and low altitude, the state government should capitalize on eco-system this by installing windmills on the one part, with solar panels along the plains of Ri-Bhoi to curb the growing need for electricity. Hybrid Solar panels, also known as all-weather solar panels generate electricity from both the rain and the sun; these would also be the perfect fit for the state. The Government of Meghalaya must understand and consider every single individual of the state as a stakeholder with a voice as loud as the clarion shouting in one accord, "WE DO NOT WANT THE DAM".

Constitutionally:

Under the Indian Constitution, Articles 244, 275, 330, 334, 371 and 164 (1) clearly highlight the rights and protection of the indigenous people of India that should not be overlooked.

Man is born greedy, but let us be logical with greed when sustainable alternatives are available. Rivers are the veins, and the stratum of life, without them life would cease to exist. Despite the mighty oceans overwhelming our existence, it's the rivers we turn to for survival. SAVE UMNGOT TODAY. SAVE A GENERATION TOMORROW.

Mayborn Lyngdoh R can be reached at maybornlyngdohr@gmail.com

Independent inquiry: MeECL & subsidiaries

By Rudi Warjri

My attention is drawn to the reported appointment of an Independent Inquiry by the Government of Meghalaya, into the affairs of MeECL and its subsidiaries. We should all welcome it albeit better late than never.

Briefly, the whole squabbling and debate about the affairs of MeECL etc., had started because of the perennial load shedding. The genesis, history, chronology, the several factors which caused the load shedding have been debated at length in the past few months. So, the fundamental approach to the framing of the Terms of Reference should be to as to (a) What should be done to prevent load shedding in future (b) How to do that. Addressing all factors comprehensively and exhaustively is therefore an imperative.

The report quoting the Power Minister states that the focus of the inquiry would be on power theft, industrial area tariff, different kinds of tenders of state and central government schemes, nepotism, promotion, recruitment etc. Fair enough. It is however important that while dealing with the specifics, one should not lose sight of the systemic. I would therefore suggest that the Terms of Reference be in a systematic manner as follows:

Losses: Power theft would come under financial loss. It happens because there is no sync between distribution and consumption of power. It takes place due to inadequate billing; non billing; large scale connections without meters especially in rural areas. Industrial area tariff would come under both commercial and financial loss because of the differential tariffs involved. Some reports mentioned about mechanisms used by some industries to manipulate meters to reduce the actual consumption in the meter. Technical losses leading to financial loss also takes place because of defective meters etc. Commercial and financial loss due to engagement of brokers and franchises in the past. Also the monumental losses like the failure of Unit I of Umiam - Umtru project Stage IV Power Station in crores, details of which have been submitted in an independent report which had reflected on the work culture etc., because SoPs like delay in attending to exigencies were not being complied with scrupulously. The viability of the whole Myntdu - Leshka project is also a case of technical and financial loss. And even the Ganol project in Garo Hills and others need to be examined to see up to what extent the Electricity Supply Code has been followed.

Assets: The land owned by MeECL; their proper survey and documentation to prevent further encroachment and squatting must be part of the TOR. Also optimizing the utilization of the school buildings, quarters, Inspection Bungalows (IBs) etc. IBs lying unused could be commercialized. Dams, power houses, power stations, substations for generation, transmission and distribution are all capital assets which need a proper inventory, upgradation and maintenance.

Liabilities: A combination of both quantitative and qualitative human resources means an ideal asset. The Inquiry can also examine whether current size of the employees and the output is an asset or a liability. If a liability how can it be converted into an asset? The professionalism or lack of it with regards to preparing of timely detailed project reports (DPR) - a reason for several central schemes lapsing need investigation, needs probing too. Then the extent to which the actual corporatization has taken place

between MeECL, MePTCL, MePGCL and MePDCL; their clear demarcation and delineation which among other things, is linked to the problem of timely preparation of audits and accounts needs a thorough probe. For instance, why is a full time Director of Accounts not been appointed? There is lack of routine inspection and supervision of subsidiaries all the way to the Line-man or Jugali. The interplay of vested and interested parties and groups of all kinds from political, semi political and non-political have had a bearing on the MeECL. Pressures used by delinquent employees and those penalized for dereliction of duty needs to be exposed. Interference in appointments, promotion, recruitment and lack of transparency in the running and management of the corporation itself must be scrupulously examined. How civil works contract given to family members led to financial losses is another critical factor for the MeECL falling down a slippery slope.

Power Purchase; debt financing: There is a dire need to go deeper into the whole system and modus operandi relating to power purchase from NEEPCO, Power Grid, NTPC etc. In the system of financing and debt from Power Finance Corporation; Rural Electrification Corporation, Government of India, World Bank, ADB etc., to what extent have commercial transaction standards been adopted and followed?

Role of MSERC (Meghalaya State Electricity Regulatory Commission). Is this Commission functioning according to the Electricity Act 2003, para 86, the spirit of which is to add value to the functioning of MeECL and its subsidiaries? And whether appointments etc., are in line with Government rules to prevent spawning of vested interests?

Training: Existing human resource can also be an incremental asset provided there is upgradation of skills, reskilling etc. In fact the necessity of imparting the concept of corporatization itself among the employees is important. Have employees imbibed this concept and practicing those concepts?

Technology: Keeping up with latest technology is a must. An auto pilot data feeding system where revenue collection matches with units of power distribution by a particular substation is integral to the system. Is there a proper maintenance of log book, registers etc? The need for an Intranet for sharing of data among all the wings Technical, Civil, Administrative, Accounts etc., and between MeECL and the subsidiaries is imperative. Is such a system in place? If not why not? Is there a system of inventoring of all procurements and their utilization? For mapping of households the assistance of NESAC (Northeast Space Application Centre) can be and should have been sought. Why was this missed?

Power sector: There is need to examine the whole power sector industry in Meghalaya, namely the hydro, thermal, solar, wind etc., and their potential, capacity and underutilization and the prospects for exporting power to Bangladesh and other neighbouring states.

The Independent Inquiry Committee may use social media to enable the public to give suggestions, ideas, feedback etc. It would act as a forum to give access to those among the public who have experience with the power sector and industry in general.

The writer is ex Independent Director MeECL & Subsidiaries & can be reached at rvwarjri@gmail.com

Letters to the Editor

Together we can overcome the pandemic

Editor,
The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a dramatic loss of human lives worldwide. At the same time the economic and social disruptions caused by the pandemic are devastatingly high. Without the means to earn an income during lockdown, many are unable to feed themselves and their families. Further, border closures, trade restrictions and confinement measures have been preventing people from accessing markets freely, including for buying inputs and selling their produce, as such, reducing access to healthy, safe and diverse diets. Furthermore, many experience income losses and some may resort to negative coping strategies, such as distress sale of assets, predatory loans or child labour.

Hence, responding swiftly to the pandemic, while ensuring that humanitarian and recovery assistance reaches those most in need, is critical. It is the time for solidarity and support, especially with the most vulnerable in our societies. Only by coming together can we overcome the intertwined health and social and economic impacts of the pandemic and prevent its escalation into a protracted humanitarian and food security catastrophe.

Last but not the least, through this letter I just want to remind everyone that together we can overcome the COVID-19 pandemic. As such my humble request to all my beloved citizens of Meghalaya is to cooperate with the health workers and district administration for a better tomorrow. At the same time let us extend our helping hands to those who need them the most without any discrimination. May the good Lord turn His face towards us and give us peace.

Yours etc.,
Iahmi Khyriem
Chutwakhu, Jowai

Vaccine Shortage

Editor
The Health and Family Welfare Minister of Meghalaya informed yesterday, based on an average daily utilisation that the State will not have COVID vaccines after 8 days (ST, May 11, 2020). While many critics will berate the State government for the scarcity, the State has no grounds to be blamed for the same. The Covid vaccine quota and the Oxygen quota for each state is decided by the Central Government which has turned a deaf ear to the concerns of various State Governments and of Delhi regarding allotment of vaccines. Instead the Centre indulged in appeasement politics by supplying nearly 60 million doses of vaccines

to foreign nations. This has caused a huge imbalance in the entire COVID management strategy resulting in huge increase in the number of infections. The situation prevalent in Meghalaya and in various other states would turn into a big catastrophe if time bound politically neutral steps are not taken by the Central Government. While maintaining a mutual relationship with foreign nations is imbibed in our nation's ideology, the prerogative of getting vaccinated should be given to the citizens of our nation in the present situation.

Through your esteemed daily, I request the Central Government to import and distribute COVID vaccines across the nation in a time bound manner and allow judicial interference regarding the management of the strategy to tackle COVID in the nation.

Yours etc.,
Partha Pratim Duarah,
Via email

Vaccinating the vulnerable and younger citizens

Editor,
In the past few weeks and days there has been a surge of the COVID-19 cases in the state, which has claimed the precious lives of many people who are infected with this virus. Majority of those who have lost their lives are people with co-morbidities and who have not got the vaccine to fight the virus. As medical reports suggest that persons with co-morbidities are more vulnerable to being severely infected by this virus, hence vaccinating them, must be the first priority of the District Administration to save the lives of many. At present there is a low turnout among the public to get the vaccine, despite the wide publicity and aggressive drive carried out by the

Health Department about the importance of vaccination, in fighting the virus. Another observation I have is that vaccination must start for everyone irrespective of age, since many young adults in the age group of 18 to 44 years are also being infected easily in this second wave of the COVID - 19.

I hope that the District Administration would take note of this and begin the vaccination process for all citizens of the state at the earliest so that we can fight this pandemic collectively, since vaccination is the only way to tackle the virus besides following the protocols issued by the Health Department from time to time.

Stay safe.

Yours etc.,
Terrence Thangkiew
Shillong-17

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*"The more you sweat in peace,
the less you bleed in war."
--- Norman Schwarzkopf*

The Shillong Times

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Jerusalem burning

THE world's holiest of holy sites, Jerusalem, sacred to Jews, Christians and Muslim alike, is also the world's longest-lasting powder keg -- a history of a hundred years. Israeli Jews and Palestinian Muslims are engaged in a fresh round of fights via rocket and missile attacks and other devastating weapons, unfortunately in the Holy Month of Ramzan. The fight began this time at Al-Aqsa Mosque in the Old City, it being the third-holiest site in Islam. Since the beginning of mid-April, Palestinians faced resistance from Israeli police in East Jerusalem to thwart evening gatherings there. Militant Sunni Muslims say Israel ignited fire in Jerusalem and Al-Aqsa and the "flames" extended to Gaza, the base of the Hamas militant outfit.

In a series of attacks since Monday, about a hundred people have been killed and over 300 injured as Gaza, the strip of land abutting the Mediterranean Sea and under part control of Hamas Islamists and external control by Israel since 2005, remains the hardest hit. A population of over 20 lakh growing at the fastest rate of over 2 per cent a year in Gaza is bearing the brunt. What gives militarily well-equipped Israel an added advantage is that it controls Gaza's air-space, maritime space and six of the seven land entry points. The Sunni Muslims populating Gaza, captured by Israelis in 1967 from Egypt, are treated as second class citizens in the occupied land while the Hamas in recent years enjoyed marginal governance freedom.

Israel's air-strikes over Gaza have flattened several high-rise buildings. In retaliation, the Hamas militants have fired over 130 rockets to Israeli areas, and the casualties there could be high as well. On the Hamas side, several militant commanders have been targeted and killed, meaning a full-scale war is unfolding. Israel has the American backing, as is reflected also in the statement by President Joe Biden on Thursday that Israel has a right to defend itself in the face of rocket attacks from the Hamas militants. His predecessor, Donald Trump's decision to shift the US embassy from capital Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, against international will, had complicated the West Asia scene a couple of years ago. An effort by Barack Obama while as president to broker peace in the Middle East had not helped. This was a follow-up to a push by Jimmy Carter when he was president, via the Camp David agreement. The present offensives must be stopped through mediation and Egypt is already making an effort with US backing. Palestinians virtually live a caged existence and they should be allowed to breathe easy.

Covid-induced catastrophe and community response

By Patricia Mukhim

The news is not good. Covid numbers are rising and so are the deaths. The news from NEIGRIHMS and from the State Health Department is worrying. Healthcare workers as can be expected are either too exhausted or have tested Covid-positive. Dr Bhattacharya of NEIGRIHMS has correctly stated that ICUs require an Intensivist who specializes in the care of critically ill patients. Then there's need for critical care technicians who are trained to respond rapidly and competently to medical emergencies. All this takes time and investment in human resources which this state and country have not done in the last 74 years. And now it's impossible to suddenly produce this category of skilled manpower to manage the ICUs. Needless to say if there aren't enough qualified technicians and Intensivists then our ICUs are worthless. We can only lament our fates at this point those we elected to govern the state and country had no vision. They failed us!

Yes the country and state are in a crisis. This is the time when all the elected must overcome their ennui, get out of their comfort zones and be with those who are suffering and mourning. People are dying and lives matter. The elected here includes all MLAs, MDCs, Syiems, Myntris, Rangbah Shnong etc. They are all elected for one reason only - to serve the people. To say at this juncture that they don't have resources to mobilise the community against Covid is a poor excuse. The Dorbar Shnong particularly have a duty to (a) help maintain vigil in the respective Shnong so that those testing positive don't gallivant around (b) that people in the respective localities maintain Covid protocols and strictly observe the District Administration's notifications about how many shops should remain open on a particular day (c) that quarantine centres are provided volunteers that are mobilised by the Shnong. A Rangbah Shnong and his Committee must be able to mobilise that kind of voluntarism in a crisis.

Localities like Nongmynsong, Mawbah and Polo had to suffer an enforced lockdown because people don't respect protocols even when they know this is a matter of life and death. This reflects on the poor functioning of the Dorbar Shnong of those areas. In fact such Dorbar Shnong have to bear the

onus for the Covid spread in the entire city. This is not the only time that the Nongmynsong market area has violated protocols. Last year too this place was perpetually crowded and people did not care a hoot about the Covid notifications. Other Shnongs however, were seen to be more disciplined and capable of managing their residents and even the passers-by. The Khasi Hills District Council has constructed some good buildings near Lum Sohpet Bneng for Indigenous tribal healers. The buildings are not occupied as yet. Can the Council not offer that facility as a temporary hospital instead of us having to wait for the pre-fabricated hospitals to come up? Of course there will be need for ICUs to be set up and other facilities like beds/blankets etc which the Councils should mobilise out of their resources. If the



Councils don't do something now, then when? And that place is a sanatorium with fresh air, peace and calm all around. The Councils also have some guest houses near the Umiam Lake which could also be temporary corona care centres. Why should the state government spend money on temporary constructions without having taken stock of all buildings available and lying unoccupied? The money (Rs 2 crore?) should be used to equip these buildings with life-saving equipments and drugs and for managing the centres. The least the District Councils should do now is to work in tandem with the State Government. This is the time for all the elected to 'give,' for they have taken enough from the system.

As a community we have our duties too and fault-finding at this juncture is not one of those duties. Yes we are angry at the callousness of the central leadership and their bungling on the vaccine and then the handling of the pandemic this time around. The agonising sight

of dead bodies floating on the Ganges; of people dying for want of oxygen and of the Prime Minister and his cronies at the PMO still micro-managing foreign aid that comes to assist Indians and channelizing financial aid through the dubious PM CARES Fund, are galling. And we have to be angry and protest but let's not end up there. Let's store these memories until 2024 and not accidentally delete them when Modi indulges in another set of histrionics. Those who have presided over a regime that has lost count of the number of deaths have to be resoundingly defeated. That goes for the states too. But that's not enough. We can't allow one set of failed politicians to be replaced by another set of similar calibre for then we are asking for more trouble and would have learnt nothing from this pandemic.

In fact, one hopes fervently that the pandemic throws up a clutch of selfless leaders before we are punished by another virus. One thing that confounds is why the bureaucracy goes along with the chicanery of their political masters even when doing so has cost so many lives. What makes the bureaucracy act like rubber stamps endorsing everything that the political class does? Why don't we have even one senior bureaucrat in the PMO or the Health Ministry or Home Ministry resigning on moral grounds as one IAS officer did during the anti-CAA days? How can an entire class of administrators keep following what is essentially a wrong trajectory of governance? And now when the judiciary steps in the Solicitor General tells the justices to keep their hands off administration! We are fortunate that the judiciary has stepped in to streamline the distribution of oxygen and for setting up a national task force to handle the pandemic. Left to the cen-

tral government everything would have been reduced to the worst political duplicity and cover-up.

In our own state the Congress Party has launched a broadside at Chief Minister Conrad Sangma for attending the oath taking ceremony of the Assam Chief Minister after postponing a cabinet meet which was to address the health emergencies in his state. NPP supporters will see his presence in Dispur as a noble gesture while detractors call it a dereliction of duty. But what does the citizenry without any political leanings have to say? What they say is important since they are under no compulsion to take sides. Indeed one may ask - Why is the swearing in of a Chief Minister of Assam so important at this juncture when the pandemic is raging there as well? One can understand the chief ministers of BJP ruled states like Tripura and Manipur having to toe the line since the BJP President JP Nadda was also present. But Pema Khandu of Arunachal Pradesh chose not to attend. The Mizoram CM too did not attend. Conrad Sangma and Neiphiu Rio are the only two non-BJP CMs present.

The pandemic is raging in Meghalaya and all groups especially those that are well organised like the KSU, FKJGP, HYC, HNYF, etc., now need to offer their services to the different Dorbar Shnong they reside in. They cannot just be having a laundry list of demands. At this juncture let them show their organisational skills and pan out to ensure that returnees and those that test positive remain under confinement. Many other groups that I know of are doing their best to provide food to health workers in some hospitals and to the poorest at their homes. Many are rising to the occasion by donating to different causes because their logic is, "If Not Now, Then When; If Not Us Then Who?"

Tailpiece: The Government of Meghalaya would do well to have an online functioning public grievances cell so that people having genuine problems can inform the administration and not nurse their grouse. Any anxiety or frustration at this time will render the body's immune system weaker and make people more vulnerable to Covid. One officer may be dedicated to handling that website and giving feedback to the Government so that the malfunction is addressed. Thank You in advance!

2020: A year to remember!

By Langhu Valentina

On International Nurses Day the world cheers the nursing personnel for their valour and heroism at saving lives and playing the role of second angels to sick people who need the most care in their darkest hours. I believe every one of us have had our share of experiences of navigating through the dreaded years of Covid-19 from the burden of piling enough ration stocks in our

bathroom. The next thing is to drink a bottle of water, take a shower, eat lunch and rest, only to be awakened for the next shift. This is the routine we followed during these phases of Covid duty. After the Covid duty rotating shifts are over we will be off for a week and then back to work. This is the job we embraced with pride and dignity in our hearts leaving behind our personal matters

"There is the agony of businesses shutting down which led to unemployment and displacement but leaving us with bills due for payment, besides protecting our family members from contacting the deadly coronavirus. But the most painful and tragic thing to bear is the death of a family or friend who succumbs to this deadly virus."

kitchen store to other essential household items that will last us a week at least. There is the agony of businesses shutting down which led to unemployment and displacement but leaving us with bills due for payment, besides protecting our family members from contacting the deadly coronavirus. But the most painful and tragic thing to bear is the death of a family or friend who succumbs to this deadly virus. It leaves us with a numbing

with our beloved families who support us constantly in their prayers.

Apart from the professional front, I also have to share some funny experiences I had during the lockdown. Since almost everything was shut down except for essentials and even the salons and parlours remained closed, to keep up with my self-care, beauty routine, I purchased an orange gel peel-off mask along with an orange face wash.



feeling and a vacuum in our hearts that will not be mended easily.

A nurse by profession, when I was called for Covid duty, I went through a range of emotions. I was overwhelmed with fear but at the same time a sense of responsibility for the job I had been doing my whole life. The fear was whether I would be given enough protective measures when I have to come in direct contact with people who are infected with Covid. The moment I put on the PPE (Personal Protective Equipment) suit, everything became blurred with all the

The next day, I started the session without reading the label properly and squeezed a hefty amount of gel from the tube on the tip of my finger and applied it all over my face then left it on to dry as per the instructions provided with the brochure. After a few minutes I patted my face to check if it's time to peel off the face mask. To my astonishment the gel was still wet just as I had put it on. Only then I realized that I had mistakenly put on face wash gel instead of the peel-off mask gel and so it was not drying. Immediately I had to splash a bucket of wa-

"A nurse by profession, when I was called for Covid duty I went through a range of emotions. I was overwhelmed with fear but at the same time a sense of responsibility for the job I had been doing my whole life. The fear was whether I would be given enough protective measures when I have to come in direct contact with people who are infected with Covid."

masks and goggles or face shields and my face fully covered from head to the toe. Then the sweat would start dripping down my face and body. I had to stay in the ward for 6 to 7 hours, which also means I could not relieve myself even if I urgently wanted to. Nor could I quench my thirst until my shift was over, for drinking water meant I would need to use the toilet which I can't in my PPE.

From what I heard from my other colleagues, some of our staff had to wear diapers because they suffer from urinary tract infections and have problems holding their bladder for long hours. One of the first things we did on being released from our duties is to rush to the

ter onto my face to cleanse off the face-wash foam from my face. That was such a wastage of the face wash gel. It would have lasted me a week or so, and, of course, a waste of water too.

But whatever happens in life and no matter what the experiences - good bad and ugly, there is always the humorous side to life and that story also needs telling. Every second and every minute counts! Let's not forget to laugh even in the face of tragedy because every rainbow appears only after the storm has passed and then we can see that silver lining in the midst of the clouds.

The writer is Nursing Officer, NEIGRIHMS

Letters to the Editor

Practical aspects of the mask-mandate

Editor,
With every passing day, the surge in the number of Covid-19 positive cases gives makes us take a reality check on the situation and the undeniable fact that the virus has taken over every aspect of our daily lives. The people of Meghalaya and India as a whole rely heavily on the media when it comes to being informed about the current issues that plague our society, the Covid-19 virus being at the forefront.

In an exposé carried by a local media outlet which was uploaded on their YouTube channel on May 4, 2021 it was shown that not just members of the public but even law enforcement personnel too were not adhering to the mask-mandate in public places as notified by the Government. There is an underlying issue that is prevalent in the society regarding the non-adherence to the standard operating procedures notified by the Government and that is because the reality of the virus has not hit every household and we all hope that it never does. But the faster the public understands that these

procedures are for our own good the better it is for us and only then shall we see a decline in the number of Covid-19 positive cases in our state.

The blatant disregard for the law has long-lasting repercussions especially in times such as these. The onus is on each and every one of us to take matters into our own hands and start protecting ourselves and our loved ones by adhering to the rules and regulations notified by the Government from time to time. If done right, we, the People, shall conquer this pandemic and strive towards rebuilding our society for the betterment of all.

Yours etc.,
EG Kharmalki,
Via email

Lockdown disrupts lives

Editor,
This pandemic has necessitated another lockdown and this time Covid19 is at its most virulent. While the Government sets out rules and protocols the common man keeps a check not on his health but his wallet to see if he would survive the lockdown in case it is further extended.

While it's important to save lives it is also impor-

tant to check that the common man is not driven to desperation for not having any money to provide the basic needs of the family. The Government has tried to distribute free rice but it's only for Covid affected people and not for everyone. In these hard times although the lockdown has been imposed because of the imperative to break the infection cycle but even while some die a physical death there are many who die of suicide across the country and the world because they have had to shut down their businesses and sit at home, with each day adding to the losses.

Nevertheless, I would urge everyone to wear masks and stay safe and not be a danger to others and to themselves. Let's remember that the longer the lockdown the more difficult it will be for those who survive this pandemic.

Yours etc.,
Aparna Deb,
Via email

Irresponsible behaviour of elderly citizens

Editor,
There is no cure for Parkinson's disease. So too for

careless behavior. Recently, when I headed out to buy groceries in Riblong, all I could see were elderly people in their 50s, 60s and 70s not following Covid-19 protocols. Their masks were hanging from their chin and the social distance turned into social gathering. They had a plethora of things to discuss from politics to cricket to relative's wedding and if you ever try to correct them on appropriate Covid behavior, all you hear is, that they have seen more life than you. Yes, agreed, people in their 50s, 60s and 70s have seen much more in life than a 25-year-old person but just because one is older doesn't that person wiser or correct about everything. Foolishness has no age. Our elders are at the highest risk of contacting the virus yet all they want is to step outside their homes. Family members cannot stay in denial and not question about the undesirable behavior of the elderly in this pandemic. Sure, staying inside the house for 24 hours can be frustrating for anyone but if we don't act more sensibly then the repercussions will be very serious.

Yours etc.,
Abhishek Sharma,
Shillong -4

Help ease cremations during lockdown

Editor,
Usually, dead bodies are cremated at the Electric Cremation at Jhalupara near R P Chest Hospital. This is the solitary electric crematorium available in Shillong. Due to frequent breakdown of the said crematorium, the District Administration has, since last year, earmarked/ designated Boothnath Crematorium at Mawbah (Barapather) for cremating dead bodies of Covid patients. This alternate arrangement is for when the Electric Crematorium goes kaput or is engaged in incinerating hospitals waste. This earmarking of the said cremation ghat was done after the DC's representative came and inspected the site. The Boothnath Crematorium is spacious, easily accessible to mortuary vans up to the pyre platform and is away from a residential area.

During lockdowns people face immense problems in cremating the dead. On reaching the Ghat in the mortuary van one will find that the chowkidar will not open his firewood shed unless one

produces the paid receipt for firewood which is issued at Goenka's Office located at Keating Road. So, one has to go all the way up to Keating Road to bring the receipt. Till then the mortuary van and the mourners accompanying the deceased have to wait idly. Also, during lockdown nearby shops selling pine wood for kindling the pyre, are closed. So, kindling the pyre also poses a problem at times.

In view of the above stated facts, people cremating their departed ones are, therefore, informed beforehand of the above hurdles so that they would take necessary steps before bringing the deceased for cremation, particularly during the lockdown. Also, through your esteemed daily, the District Administration is requested to treat vehicles carrying/supplying firewood to the Ghat for cremation purposes, as an Essential Service. This will ensure the availability of firewood at cremation ghats.

Yours etc.,
Krishna Chettri,
Via email

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"A reputation once broken may possibly be repaired, but the world will always keep their eyes on the spot where the crack was."

--- Joseph Hall

The Shillong Times

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PM's image dented

THE maladroit handling of the second wave of the coronavirus has dented the image of Prime Minister Modi. Barring die-hard BJP supporters and the RSS cadres, most independent thinkers, intellectuals and even those that had supported Modi wholeheartedly through their writings have now had to step back and confess that Modi and this Government have failed to tackle the second pandemic wave. Vamsee Juluri, professor of media studies, University of San Francisco a former supporter of Modi said he used to call out the global media for being unduly critical of Modi. But over the years he is witnessing what he calls Modi's appropriation of grassroots energy and turning it into a copycat American right wing propaganda model. Modi indeed has harnessed the raw energy of the deracinated urban middle class Indian and the large swathes of rural Indians that had fallen between the cracks. The fact that the ruling class in of India up until Modi came along represented a dynastic model with only short interludes of rule by grass-roots leaders like Lal Bahadur Shastri, Chandrashekhar, HD Deva Gowda and Vajpayee, was what made Modi- the chaiwala a popular urban legend.

But it is the current handling of the pandemic and the callousness of the Modi-Shah combine in abandoning all Covid protocols during the election campaign in March-April this year, which has frustrated even the most ardent Modi fans. The sight of dead bodies by the hundreds floating on the Ganga, the uncountable deaths and misery of not even managing a decent funeral for loved ones; people gasping for oxygen and not finding hospital beds is what angers people across the country today. All this was due to lack of preparedness. And the fact that the Modi Government relied on the Indian Council for Medical Research (ICMR) instead of the National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC), Nagpur which has epidemiologists that are hands-on as far as understanding the behaviour of viruses is concerned, as the lead agency in tackling this pandemic, would appear to be another blunder.

Suddenly, the entire health system has collapsed and the government is itself gasping for breath. The carefully cultivated image of India as a vaccine exporter has now come to haunt the nation - what with vaccine shortage afflicting the country. Vaccine export has turned out to be another flawed decision. And now, Home Minister, Amit Shah is missing in action. There are too many missteps by the present government and this at a time when the need for an efficient and effective governance is uppermost. Leaders rise and fall by how they handle crises and Modi has mishandled this pandemic big time.

Covid-19 pains: A collective failure

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

Much of the blame for the present Covid-19 crisis has been put on the government and rightly so. However, there are also personal behaviours of individuals which have led to this state of fear and uncertainty. These are individuals who for their selfish interest put others at risk. The best example is of those returnees who did not follow protocols but mingled freely in social gatherings before the quarantine period was over. This led to spread of the virus in the entire community. Then there was news of returnees who had done their testing at the Umiling entry point but had given wrong address and contact numbers. Many such people later turned out to be Covid positive and the government was unable to trace these individuals. For sure they must have spread the virus within their family, neighbourhood and with individuals they had come in contact with. And then there are also those who were engaged in similar behaviour but fortunately it did not result into any untoward incidents. I was told by a friend that some of his colleagues who had gone to the Assam-Meghalaya border purposely avoided getting their tests done at the Umiling Gate. After the visit these colleagues promptly returned to the office and mingled with the staff. Many of the staff had elderly members in their household some of whom had co-morbidities. It was sheer good fortune that there was no Covid incidence but such acts of selfishness could have been fatal for some. It can be said with absolute certainty that selfish behaviour such as the ones mentioned above must have been hugely responsible for the spike in the number of cases and deaths in the state.

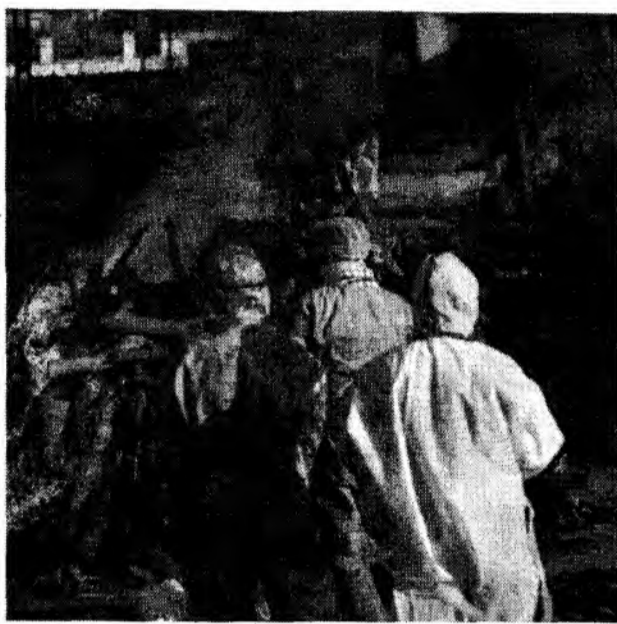
At the same time, such attitudes have been facilitated by the Government which is bent on blaming people rather than introspecting. I got a call from a friend whose sister was trying to return home from another state. Since his mother had co-morbidities he asked his sister to delay her return. But like the selfish people mentioned above she refused to listen to his pleas. My friend informed the Rangbah Shnong and asked him to convince his sister to postpone her return till June. The Shnong instead of heeding his request informed that because of lack of resources the present quarantine centres are not functioning and passed the responsibility to the Block Development Officer (BDO).

My friend called the BDO and explained that the tests are not 100% reliable and there is a chance that the protocols will be breached which could put his mother in danger. The BDO stated that they cannot stop the sister from coming as it is a family matter. Furthermore,

the officer chided my friend telling him that it's his family's responsibility and the administration cannot do anything about it. After some argument the officer told him that if the sister violates the protocols he can report her. My friend told me that he will definitely report the sister but what happens if his mother gets infected because of the breach. Will reporting then guarantee her safety in case she falls seriously ill? The Shnong passed the buck to the BDO and the BDO then

burn and tears could have been avoided.

The government will argue that there is shortage of funds. However, news reports revealed that revenue collection did not suffer because of Covid-19. In fact it saw a rise. So there should be some money that can be spent on measures to control the virus. What about the MLA funds and money from other heads? Since this is an emergency and if the spread of the virus is contained the economy is certain to suffer.



passed it back to my friend. The person who broke the protocol will be punished as an afterthought but what about those who will have to suffer by this abdication of responsibility?

To be fair to the Shnong, there are some practical difficulties they face regarding the management of the pandemic. Recently, the Nongthymmai Dorbar informed that

"Apparently from what transpired it seems that the warning was not heeded and the country is facing an unmitigated crisis because of it. And before this is over millions will be dead. There is no doubt that the deaths and sufferings in the country were avoidable if those in positions of power had taken note."

they cannot run the quarantine centres because of lack of funds. This was the same case for my friend's Shnong as well since they have not been paid for the expenses incurred last year. Without the centres the only option left is for home quarantine which may not be possible in some cases and for those that are able to do as well, there is a high chance of protocols being violated. This is not hypothetical, it has already happened as mentioned in the beginning. What happens if such breaches are not reported? How many families are going to report on their own? If the quarantine centres were functioning such dilemmas would have been addressed and a lot of heart-

This will increase the financial burden of the State in the future. Can these funds not be accessed so that such a situation can be avoided? Money spent now is money saved for later. Or is this another attempt by the Government to abdicate its responsibility and then blame the people? In such a case, why not then dismantle the whole institution and let people look after themselves. If the lessons of

the Police and local administration which includes the Dorbar Shnong. Right after the news of people giving wrong information broke out, another friend called me who was at the Umiling Gate with her baby. She had been stuck at the Gate for over 4 hours and was told that test she had done was not reliable and they had to repeat it. And then there was the revelation that false reports were being sold at centre. The Government has admitted the same. In fact the Deputy Chief Minister Prestone Tynsong proclaimed that the Government knew about this malpractice from the very first day itself. Granted a crisis is a good opportunity to make money. That is common knowledge. The important question, however, is how come there was no mechanism in place to make sure that this did not happen? After all, if those who are positive are given the negative certificate, they can spread the virus to others in their family and the community.

Recently I came across an interview where it was revealed that INSACOG (Indian SARS-Cov-2 Genomic Consortium) had warned the Indian Government as early as March 2021 that a second wave was imminent and the dangers the new variants posed. Apparently from what transpired it seems that the warning was not heeded and the country is facing an unmitigated crisis because of it. And before this is over millions will be dead. There is no doubt that the deaths and sufferings in the country were avoidable if those in positions of power had taken note. There are those who would say that it was arrogance which has created this situation. I differ. This was not arrogance but willful criminal negligence. This was the same case with our own State Government which was busy aping the national political behaviour, not strengthening the prevention measures and blaming the citizens instead. There is no doubt, as explained above, that selfish behaviour on the part of many private individuals is responsible for the crisis we are facing right now. But it is for this very reason that the Government has been given the mandate to check the worst impulses of individuals' especially in times of crisis. That is the purpose of the institution and it has to do its job.

In the end what is to happen? Who will my friend blame if something goes wrong and his mother contracts the virus? His sister? The Shnong? The BDO? The State Government? The Indian Government? And will it matter? Most probably he will end up blaming himself and live with the guilt.

Email: mawroh.bhogtoram99@gmail.com

Time for compulsory licensing of generic manufacturers

Covid-19 Pandemic calls for early relaxations on IPRs

By Rohan Wadhwa

The second wave, or rather a tsunami of Covid-19 as the Delhi High Court has observed, has knocked down India's medical system. There are appalling reports of casualties due to a lack of medical facilities from all over the country. The paucity of drugs that Covid-infected patients need is a recurrent theme in the news. According to medical professionals, the current situation can improve if medicines are made available for all patients in adequate quantities.

Relaxing the intellectual property rights (IPR) rules will increase the production of generic drugs which are interchangeable with the innovator's products. Invoking Compulsory Licenses can be the way forward to tackle the inadequacy of drugs as India reels under Covid-19 cases.

Compulsory licensing of drugs such as Remdesivir, Tocilizumab and Favipiravir, which are being used to treat Covid-19, would mean that generic pharmaceutical companies will manufacture them in greater quantities, thereby increasing their supply and availability to meet their growing demand.

Patent laws and rules give inventors exclusive rights to the benefits of their invention or the process used in the invention. This exclusivity denies everybody else the right to that process or invention. A Compulsory License, in this context, requires a patent holder to allow other manufacturers to use the patented product or process.

Article 31 of the agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (or TRIPS) agreement says a government can authorise the use of patented products of processes during a national emergency, and in extreme urgency, for non-commercial use.

Under the Indian Patent Act, 1970, section 84(1) allows for a compulsory license if the reasonable requirements of the public are not being satisfied at reasonably affordable prices. Section 92 of the Act is a special provision that permits compulsory licensing on notification by the central government.

The effect of this section is that during a national emergency, or in circumstances of extreme urgency, the central government can grant a compulsory license to the applicants seeking to use a patent. Section 92(3) provides immunity to applicants to use a patent without following the compulsory license procedure in section 87. Section 100 empowers the Centre to even take over the invention.

Recently, a three-judge bench of the Supreme Court comprising Justices DY Chandrachud, L Nageswara Rao, and S. Ravindra Bhat took suo moto cognizance of the issue and asked the central government to consider the compulsory license of drugs such as Remdesivir, Tocilizumab and Favipiravir. The court asked the Centre to invoke section 92 of the Patent Act to issue Compulsory Licenses of these patented drugs. Justice Bhat observed that countries such as Germany, France and Canada have resorted to the tool of compulsory licenses to ensure the supply of essential drugs that treat Covid-19. He cited Bangladesh—which produces generic Remdesivir and is now exporting it to many countries. (The government of Jharkhand has also requested permission to import Remdesivir from Bangladesh.)

India was a harbinger of compulsory licensing at the TRIPS negotiations. Now is the most suitable time to implement the laws that pertain to compulsory licenses. Nearly a decade ago, India laid down a precedent by granting compulsory

license to Indian generic drug producer Natco Pharma Limited, of the patented drug Nexavar by Bayer Corporation for Germany. The patented drug was used to treat kidney cancer.

Natco Pharma got a compulsory license because Bayer's patented drug was not fulfilling the reasonable requirements of the public at an affordable price. Following a decade-old precedent, Natco Pharma once again has applied for a compulsory license before the Controller of Patents to manufacture the drug Baricitinib used to treat Covid-19. Natco has applied based on section 92(1) read with section 92(3) so that the drug can be manufactured affordably and its availability improves.

The patent for Baricitinib is with Incyte Holdings Corporation and was granted to them in 2018. Natco Pharma argues that production of the patented drug is not enough in the country and that it has received emergency approval for its efficacy in treating Covid-19 patients. It is also argued by Natco that along with low production, it has exorbitantly high prices.

Only 8,870 tablets of the drug were produced in India in 2019 and 8,385 tablets in 2020. The average cost per tablet is Rs. 3,230, and 14-day treatment costs around Rs. 45,220 per patient. Natco Pharma aims to sell the drug at Rs. 15, 20 and 30 for 1 mg, 2 mg and 4 mg variants, respectively.

Though compulsory license seems to be a viable option, giant pharmaceutical companies strongly oppose it. They argue that active pharmaceutical ingredients (APIs) used to manufacture the drugs are not available in India. Therefore, even if generic drug-producing companies get the technical know-how, they would be unable to improve the supply and availability.

These companies suggest that the government invoke other options such as section 47 of the Patent Act, 1970, which allows the government to import patented drugs. Further, the government can invoke section 26(B) of the Drugs Act to order manufacturers to produce specific drugs.

India is one of the worst-hit countries by Covid-19. One important reason for this is the lack of medicines to treat patients. Relaxing IPR rules will ensure the production of enough generic versions of these drugs. In the interim, while compulsory licenses operate, pharmaceutical companies will earn royalties on the sales of such drugs.

Pharmaceutical companies are uncomfortable with the idea of compulsory licensing. The developed nations have also lodged their dissatisfaction with tools such as compulsory licensing. Even during the ongoing pandemic, which has caused over three million deaths, pharmaceutical companies are not ready to shed their profit-generating mindset. Developed countries are also shying away from their responsibility to relax the IP law regime in the current situation. That is why the debate between the Global North and Global South has got rekindled.

Pharmaceutical companies have a moral duty to give out voluntary licenses to companies that apply to manufacture the patented drug on reasonable terms. If the government is serious about the "Make in India" scheme and "Atmanirbhar Bharat" policy, it should compulsorily license essential drugs that are needed to treat Covid-19. The government should not shy away from its duty to prevent the loss of lives, even if it means temporarily relaxing the current IP law regime. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

Second Covid wave: Is Meghalaya ready?

Editor,

When the first wave of COVID-19 came to India and then subsided last year, the government and its supportive commentariat were triumphant. Yes, our drains aren't choked with bodies, hospitals aren't out of beds, nor crematoriums and graveyards out of wood or space. Too good to be true? Bring data if you disagree. Unless you think you're an omnipotent force. Leave aside the callous, disrespectful imagery - did we need God to tell us that most pandemics have a second wave?

This one was predicted, although its virulence has taken even scientists and virologists by surprise. So where is the COVID-19-specific infrastructure and the "people's movement" against the virus that Prime

Minister Modi boasted about in his speech?

At this point, hospital beds are unavailable. Doctors and medical staff are at breaking point. Friends call with stories about wards with no staff and more dead patients than live ones. People are dying in hospital corridors, on roads and in their homes. Crematoriums in Delhi have run out of firewood. The forest department has had to give special permission for the felling of city trees. Desperate people are using whatever kindling they can find. Parks and car parks are being turned into cremation grounds. It's as if there's an invisible UFO parked in our skies, sucking the air out of our lungs. An air raid of a kind we've never known.

Where shall we look for solace? For science? Shall we cling to numbers? How many dead? How many recovered? How many are infected? When will the peak come? Except - how do we know?

Tests are hard to come

by, even in a small city like Shillong. The number of COVID-19-infected people are six times the number we had last year and to inflict more pain on this situation, many are on the grim path of not following protocols mandated by the Government. Are we ready for the same scene just as Delhi, Bengaluru is witnessing and some Indian States too? Doctors who are working outside the metropolitan areas can tell you how it is. If Delhi is breaking down, then imagine if such a thing happens in our State? Are we prepared? Are we equipped with machinery to overcome such a drastic wave of the pandemic? Still, till today, many are resisting taking the vaccine - made impudent by their superstitious, religious beliefs where one person I encountered clearly mentioned, "If my body is vaccinated with Covishield or Covaxin and antibodies produced, then all the antibodies in my body would die." I mean, seriously? I was dumbstruck. Who on earth would pass around

such a stupid and imprudent message? Some WhatsApp videos circulating putting more heat for individuals not to take the vaccine?

How will we survive if we do not cooperate with the Government?

The situation that now arises is that Meghalaya is on the verge of an overburdened health care and hospitals. Are there hospitals? Is there oxygen? More than that, is there love? Forget love, is there even concern? There isn't. Because there is only a heart-shaped hole filled with cold indifference where India's public heart should be.

Yours etc.,
Dr Chamkiki Laloo
Via email

Sad demise of a legal giant

Editor,

I am deeply saddened by the passing away of Justice DK Basu. The country has lost a great legal mind who

was instrumental for the landmark judgment in DK Basu versus State of West Bengal. He was one of the petitioners in the landmark case. This case is a celebrated one where the Supreme Court laid down specific guidelines required to be followed by police while making arrests. It was the mid 1980's and Calcutta as it was known then was witnessing the final phase of the Naxal movement - an armed peasant revolt against the zamindars, which had begun in the summer of 1967 in Darjeeling districts Naxalbari area. To counter the movements violent turn, the State adopted equally violent measures to suppress it. Stories of these custodial deaths published in national dailies prompted Justice (Retired) Dilip. K. Basu then executive chairman of the Legal Aid services of West Bengal to send a letter along with newspaper clippings to then Chief Justice of India, who introduced the concept of Public Interest Litigation to the Indian Judicial Sys-

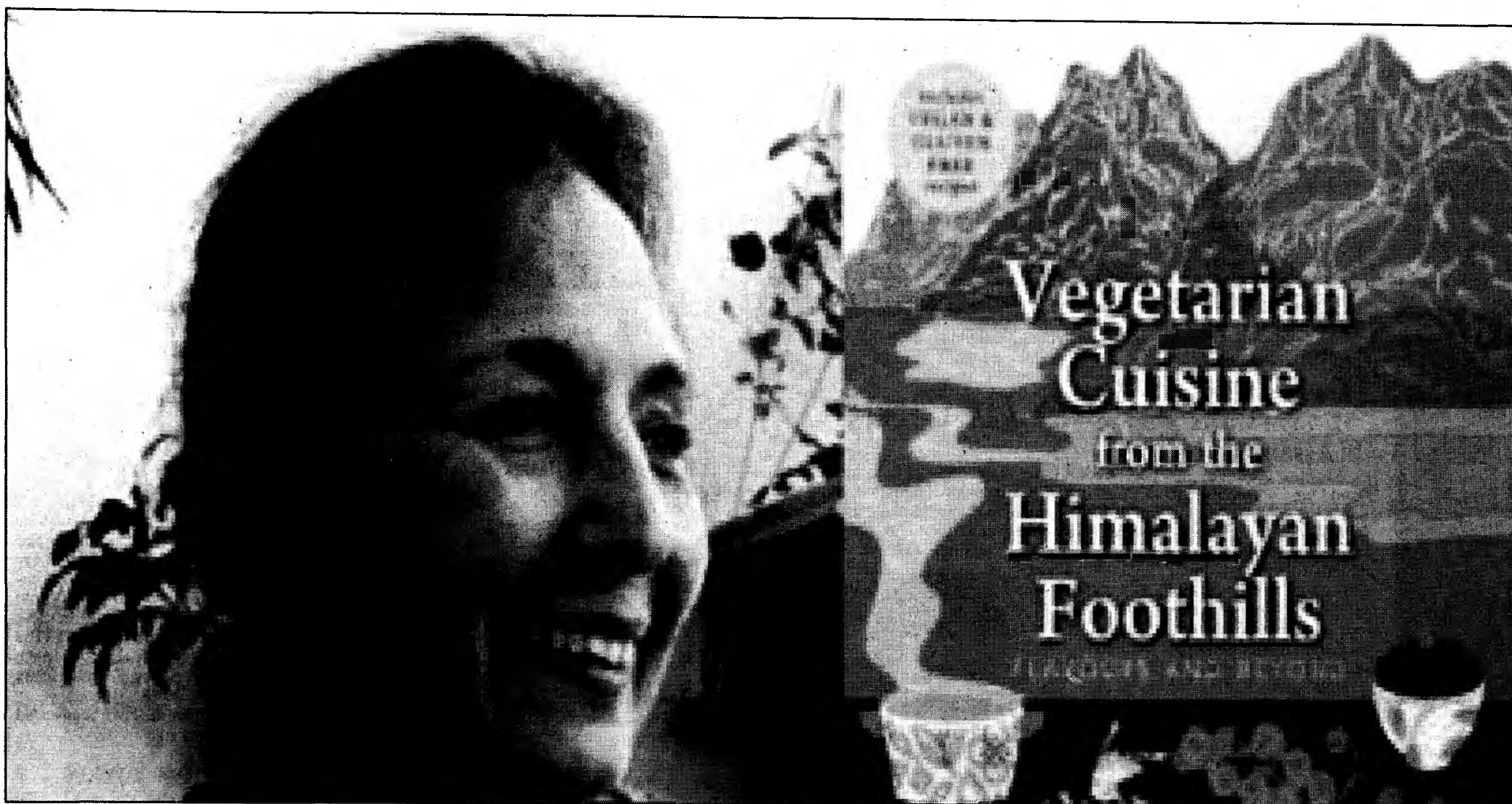
tem. The letter was treated as a Writ Petition and that case led to the landmark order known as the DK Basu Judgment.

The comprehensive guidelines originating from the case were considered a ray of hope for protecting people against custodial torture and violence by the police. The former Calcutta High Court Judge has carved a niche for himself in the history of human rights. The judgment is a heritage that will forever remain and his name will be written in gold in Indian Legal History. His spirit will remain with us for as long as we remain advocates of the rule of law and the culture of human rights. We mourn the departure of the great judge. May his soul rest in peace.

Yours etc.,
Advocate Mominul Haque
Shillong -6

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

Veena Sharma: A Journey of a Gastronomist



By Vishnu Makhijani

Author and gastronomist, Veena Sharma has always believed that one's kitchen is one's best pharmacy, providing us with the particular admixtures and combinations that help uplift both our physical and mental constitutions.

"If we knew what and when to ingest certain foods into our systems, we would be infused with sacred healing that would make our bodies light and mind sharp... The moment the body is supplied with the right balance of nutrients, vitamins, and minerals, the mind becomes light and ready to delve into its own stories," Sharma writes in "Vegetarian Cuisine from

the Himalayan Foothills" (Niyogi Books).

"Due to my never-throw-away-anything mentality, my food has the quality of a melange. From this tendency, arise creations that come as a surprise. I do not feel restrained due to not having this or that ingredient. Something else always serves the purpose and, at times, brings out more interesting and delectable results, leaving people guessing what it has that had been used. Rishikesh further lifted the sense of restraint, as I felt like experimenting with many of the unfamiliar-looking ingredients that I had not encountered before," and planted the germ of the book.

"When I settled in Rishikesh, I was exposed to a huge variety of

produce: be they lentils or legumes, herbs and spices or greens.

That made me palpably aware of what bio-diversity actually means, and what a storehouse of nutrition it provides. That encouraged me to explore and experiment with these amazing ingredients.

As I did, so I also noted down the recipes that came out of those explorations. "So, the book is a result of experimentation and is also an invitation to others to explore.

"It is meant to show that if I can do it, anyone can do it and enjoy the process," Sharma, a Fellow of the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla (2010-12), who also served as the Head of the Swahili Service of AIR's External Services Division, told IANS in an inter-

view. About the research that went into the book, she said: "Again, it was more a personal delving into ingredients, many of which I had not been familiar with before.

I also spoke with the locals about those ingredients and how they would use them. Then, I would give them my own preferred twist trying to best bring out their flavours, textures and colours. I also looked into other researches, many of which can be found on Google. Some I read in printed material - whatever and wherever I could find it."

The outcome is a delectable experience for gastronomes, as Sharma delves into mount-watering recipes that draw upon local bounties - some forgotten, or less used,

grains and greens, spices and fruits - from the Himalayan heights.

Exploring a variety of palates and creating a whole range of nutritious and tasty foods, there is an underlay of desire to retain and re-establish the biodiversity that is vital for your physical and mental health. Not for nothing is the Garhwal region of the Himalayas referred to as 'deva bhumi', the land of the gods.

The topography and climate of this sacred land has spawned a rich biodiversity of flora and fauna. Water currents carrying rocks and herbs, fed by high-altitude minerals and vegetation irrigate the soils. Steep hillsides, varied in their orientation and elevation, etched by terraced farms and fed by mountain

streams, produce crops suited to their particular terrains.

The book dresses and enhances this traditional produce to enrich the urban table, catering to your taste buds and nurturing your bodies and minds.

Think of nutritional lentil kababs, vegetables with a twist, zesty chutneys, nourishing coups, and even extraordinary deserts like phony gulab jamuns and luscious puddings. The inclusion of several vegan and gluten-free recipes makes the book of interest to those with special tastes.

Its compact 15 chapters guide you through legumes, vegetables, savouries, vegan delights, raitas, soups, chutneys and desserts. With striking photographs and useful snippets of information accompanying each recipe, this book is sure to feed your deepest cravings.

"A thing we often ignore is that food is central to our systems - mental and physical.

As we ingest nutrient-rich wholegrains and fresh produce, that is seasonal and local, we supply our bodies not only with the much-needed nutrition, we also strengthen its immune system, making it capable of fighting any foreign, unwanted intruders.

We Indians are very good at using various herbs and spices for preparing 'kadhas'.

Many people have been familiarising themselves with more and more ingredients for helping the system fight unwanted intruders. We should continue our search into whole grains, pulses, seeds and also consume good amounts of leafy greens - whatever is available at a given time in the year," Sharma explained.

What next? What's her next project?

"As a keen student of Vedanta, I have currently been engaging myself with a study of some Vedantic texts. I would be very happy to work on celebratory foods from this region. Every small area creates particular dishes to honour specific festivals and rituals. I would like to go into those and discover the reasons behind them," Sharma concluded. (IANS)

A Curated Birthday for Ruskin Bond

Ahead of his 87th birthday on May 19, Ruskin Bond, one of India's most-loved writers of children's stories, has carefully curated a mixed bag of 25 of his most cherished stories in a new book, "All Time Favourites for Children", (Puffin), interspersed with excellent and quirky artwork that will evoke a range of emotions, not only among the young, but also across a spectrum of readers.

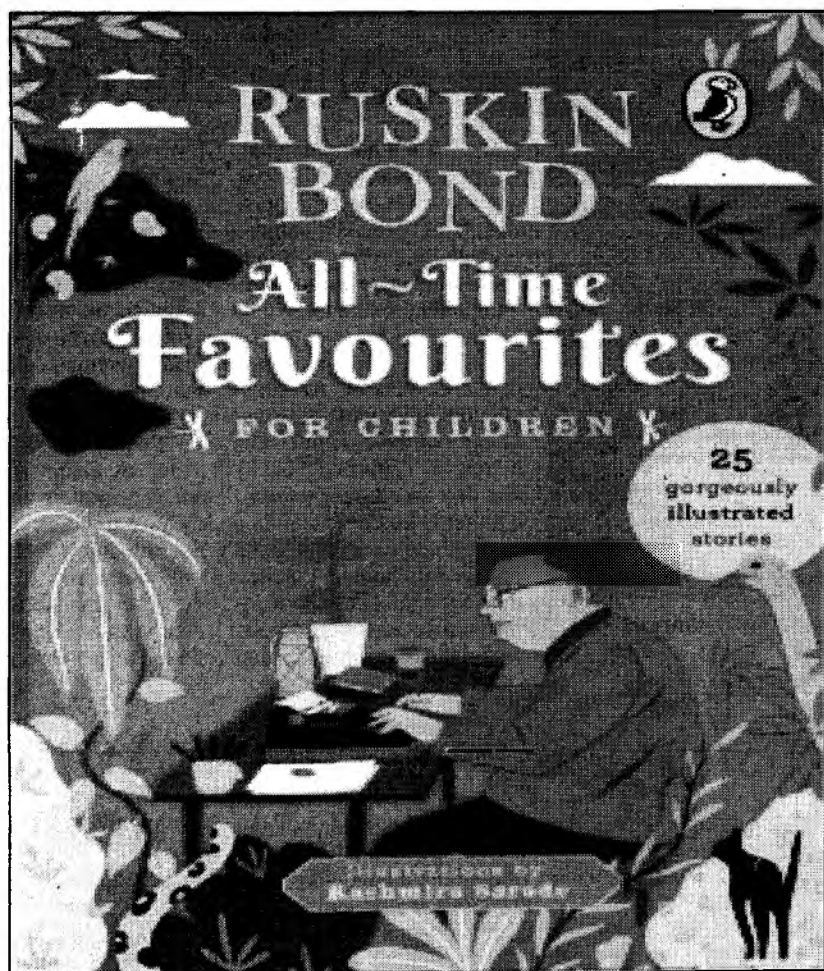
The collection brings together some of the evocative episodes from Bond's life - the iconic Rusty, eccentric Uncle Ken, the ubiquitous grandmother - and many other charming, endearing characters, while also introducing us to a smattering of new ones that are sure to become firm favourites with readers.

Heart-warming, funny and spirited, this is a must-have on every bookshelf!

The book, in fact, is the perfect complement to "A Song of India" released last July to mark the beginning of Bond's 70-year writing career, in which he takes the reader back to 1951, his last year in Dehradun before he set sail for England, and which later became the basis for his first novel, "The Room on the Roof".

"A Song of India marks 70 years of my long writing career which began when I was sixteen. In these seven decades, I have written hundreds of stories for children and just as many for adults too. And I am still continuing to do so. I am very fortunate to have lived in a beautiful part of the country, in the mountains.

I am blessed to have received inspiration from the natural world around me, from children and animals, and all of this is reflected in my works," Bond said. Evocative, full of anecdotes, inspiration, warmth and gentle wit, poignant yet brimming with hope and nos-



talgia, "A Song of India" is Part 4 of his magnificent memoirs and is bound to be one of his most enduring works for young readers, in the years to come. Beautifully illustrated by Mihir Joglekar, this book is a must-have for every Ruskin Bond fan.

Born in Kasauli (now in Himachal Pradesh) in 1934, Bond grew up in Jamnagar (Gujarat), Dehradun, New Delhi and Simla (now Shimla).

"The Room on the Roof", written when he was 17, received the

John Llewellyn Rhys Memorial Prize in 1957. Since then, he has written over 500 short stories, essays and novellas (including "Vagrants in the Valley" and "A Flight of Pigeons") and more than 40 books for children.

He received the Sahitya Akademi Award for English writing in India in 1993, the Padma Shri in 1999, and the Delhi government's Lifetime Achievement Award in 2012. He lives in Landour, Mussoorie, with his extended family. (IANS)

William Dalrymple: The Company Quartet

From multi-award-winning and bestselling historian William Dalrymple, comes a four-book collection, chronicling the thrilling rise and fall of the East India Company.

We still talk about the British conquering India, but that phrase disguises a much more sinister reality.

For it was not the British government that began seizing chunks of India in the mid-eighteenth century, but a dangerously unregulated private company headquartered in one small office, five windows wide, in the city of London.

Bringing together two decades of meticulous research and masterful narration, "The Company Quartet" (Bloomsbury) tells the remarkable story of how the magnificent Mughal empire, which then generated just under half the world's wealth, disintegrated and came to be replaced by the first global corporate power: The East India Company.

William Dalrymple's epic, bestselling and multi-award-winning histories are now available in this magnificent paperback box set, presented in a stylish slipcase. Comprised of four individual books - "The Anarchy", "White Mughals", "Return of a King" and "The Last Mughal" - this essential collection spans over two hundred years of tumultuous colonial history, covert political machinations and bloody resistance.

William Dalrymple is one of Britain's great historians and the bestselling author of the Wolfson Prize-winning "White Mughals", "The Last Mughal", which won the Duff Cooper Prize, and the Hemingway and Kapuscinski Prize-winning "Return of a King".

A frequent broadcaster, he has written and presented three television series, one of which won the Grierson Award for Best Document-

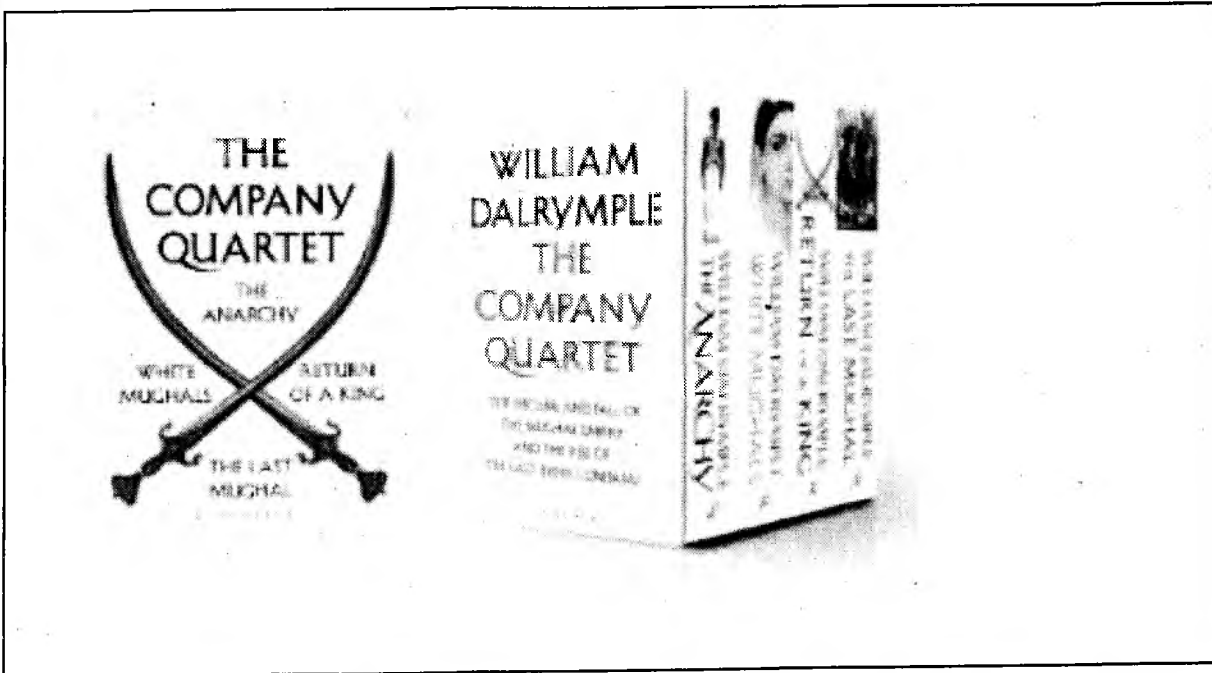
tary Series at BAFTA.

He has also won the Thomas Cook Travel Book Award, the Sunday Times Young British Writer of the Year Award, the Foreign Correspondent of the Year at the FPA Media Awards, and been awarded five honorary doctorates.

He is a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, the Royal Asiatic Society and the Royal Society of Edinburgh, and has held visiting fellowships at Princeton and Brown. He writes regularly for the New York Review of Books, the New Yorker and the Guardian.

In 2018 he was presented with the prestigious President's Medal by the British Academy for his outstanding literary achievement and for co-founding the Jaipur Literature Festival.

Dalrymple lives with his wife and three children on a farm outside Delhi. (IANS)



Ray's women in the rough trade

The representation of the sex worker in Indian celluloid seldom displays attempt at non-voyeurism. Satyajit Ray, on the other hand, took a more nuanced look at the sex worker, finds Shoma A. Chatterji on the birth centenary year of the maestro.

Satyajit Ray's films often see him as a social commentator. Without taking a moralistic stance, it is as if his characters reflect social realities that he observes around him. It was true of his portrayal of the sex worker in three of his films, as well.

In *Ashani Sanket* (*Distant Thunder*), Chutki, a poor girl from a lower caste is pulled into prostitution by hunger, which the brickfield agent takes advantage of, during the infamous Bengal Famine in 1943 during the World War II.

Historians now establish that it was totally man-made as the British administration hoarded rice to feed soldiers, about to arrive in the East. When the Brahmin's wife Ananga who Chutki is very fond of, guesses what is happening, she refuses Chutki's offer of rice from her 'earnings', though



her family is equally hungry. "What can I do? I always feel hungry," Chutki defends herself. She runs away to the city with the agent perhaps to disappear in the red-light district eventually.

Ashani Sanket (1973) based on Bibhuti Bhushan Bandyopadhyay's novel, offers an insight into a rural woman's desperate response to hunger.

When driven to starvation, Chutki, unlike Moti who dies of starvation, or Ananga, who adjusts to the grim reality, is prepared to exchange sexual favours for a fistful of rice from a hideous, scarred man she abhors. Conditioned morals of a patriarchal society mean little to Chutki when hunger stares her in the face.

Women like Chutki are not uncommon in contemporary India. Ray, perhaps, can be credited with the first non-voyeuristic but a sensitive look at prostitution in Indian context through cinema.

In *Pratidwandi* (*The Adversary*, 1971), Ray introduces his viewers to a different kind of sex worker. She holds a job as a qualified nurse but moonlights as a sex worker.

Much against his will, the hero Siddhartha Choudhury, a medical college drop-out due to his father's sudden death and depleting finances, is introduced to her by his friend Adinath.

It's obvious that he is uncomfortable in her presence and is surprised to find that she is actually a nurse.

Is Siddhartha scared to reveal in his friend's presence that he is a virgin? Or is his discomfort rooted in the fact that he is not easy in the company of females?

The woman speaks in a flirtatious, even mocking tone, and comes out in a bra and petticoat. When she finds that Siddhartha

is nervous, she asks him for a cigarette. She is quite open about her double life and it appears that she manages to keep the two occupations apart.

The role was portrayed by the late cabaret dancer Miss Shefali, who, in real life, had earned sobriquets like "Bengal's Helen" and the 'Queen of Cabaret'.

Her entry into the cabaret scenario happened at a time when the white-skinned dancers were disappearing from Kolkata. She did act in a few films, but her fame came as a cabaret dancer.

This woman is not into prostitution out of poverty but wants to earn some extra dough. Perhaps, she has a family to take care of? Ray leaves it unsaid.

Rather, he offers a glimpse of the rapidly changing scenario in Kolkata where an educated man like Siddhartha cannot land a job, despite a good academic record. He suspects his own sister of compromising with her boss in order to become a model, and where a qualified nurse takes to sex work as just one more source of earning.

The common thread that runs through Ray's treatment of prostitution is its organic evolution as an integral, indivisible act within the evolution of a society, now overrun with greed, consumerism and corruption, not necessarily in that order.

His *Jana Aranya* (*The Middleman*, 1975) is a scathing comment on erosion of values, arising partly out of a decadent education system, and partly out of unemployment and associated corrupt practices, encroaching into the lives of the urban middle-class.

As the hero Somnath, along with his PR friend Sukumar, goes from door to door in search of a woman for the 'reward' of a prized contract, Ray cracks the

facade of the bhadralok Bengali society to expose the underbelly of the city.

A tutorial class doubles up as a rendezvous for call-girls, the watchman functions as a pimp. A mother of two young girls is pushed into sex work; a drunkard husband lives off his wife's earnings and while pimping, pretends to be 'respectable'.

In *Jana Aranya*, Ray also offers a glimpse of the system of disguised prostitution in Calcutta. Kauna, a sister of Sukumar's friend, symbolises a world of crumbling morals among the lower middle class on the one hand, and the upper class on the other, in different ways.

Kauna accepts her vocation in a no-nonsense, matter-of-fact way, refusing to recognise the hero in the changed circumstances of their encounter. She denies that she is Kauna, and tells him that her name is Juthika.

She does not narrate a sob story to evoke his sympathy and insists that he should not leave the scene, because it would be a loss for both of them. After all, his fortune depended on gaining a big contract by offering her to the lustful businessman, the boss.

The climax of the film suggests that the hero has reduced himself to prostituting his conscience to eke out a livelihood through meagre contracts, gained at the cost of procuring a woman for the contractor.

He, therefore, is as much, if not more, a prostitute than the prostitute he procures for his prospective clients.

All three films denote, in subtle ways, different periods in the social history of Bengal in general and Kolkata, in particular; how even prostitution becomes almost a normal feature in the big churn. (TWF)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, May 16, 2021

Moon sextile Uranus on your solar return chart and it will give excellent results for the whole year. It is a victorious time for you. You will make good money by your efforts. A change in job/business look certain. You will have no major worries. Your health is also going to be perfect. Your problems will also get resolved gradually. You will come closer to your family and will value relations. You will also have an enjoyable time in the company of near and dear ones. You will get victory in court cases. All your financial decision may give you much gain. Your friends will help you when you need them most. You will enjoy a favorable phase and will get success in whatever you do with much thought and deliberation. You will also get involved in new romantic relations leading to marriage. Your family will give consent.

Aries: (March 21 - April 20)

It is going to be a special week for you. You will do something new at your workplace and also get lot of name and fame. Your whole personality will undergo a sea change. And you will impress one and all with your attitude and behavior. Your attitude towards life will be positive and you will accept new challenges. You can also fall in love with a person who will come in your life all of a sudden. You will get new opportunities in your profession/business. And you will easily complete your work. You will also have auspicious and wealth giving days. You will also have interest towards spiritualism. You will be artistic and imaginative. Your prestige will also increase. You will also be traditional and fulfill your dreams.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21)

There will be lot on offer for you this week. Your financial position is going to be good. You will receive some good payments and will also sign new contracts in your business. Those who are unemployed will get good job opportunities. There will be improvement in your business too. Your bosses will be happy with your performance. You will do every work carefully, with a lot of deliberation and on advice of your seniors. You will also spend quality time with your family. Your love life is going to be great and you will have amazing bonding with your partner. Newly-weds will also be able to understand each other properly and also take care of each other. You may become impatient in some situation.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21)

It is going to be a wonderful week for you. You will be very confident and positive. Works done by you will be fully successful. You will maintain your dominance at your workplace because of your liberal and flexible attitude. Your enemies will also get defeated. There will be meetings, travels and contracts with regard to work which will keep you engaged. You will be getting excellent results. You will also listen to problems of others and also try to solve them. You will be having little problems on the monetary front. Put a hold to your unimportant work, otherwise problems might increase. Listen to what your partner and well wishers are telling. They are your lifeline in these testing times.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22)

You will be having a lot of problems but solutions too. There are chances of getting lot of money. Do not interfere in other's affairs, otherwise you might have to feel embarrassed. You need to use your money at the right place. Your friends and relatives will help you a lot. Your enemies and opponents will try to put a hurdle on your path but you will be little affected by it. Pay attention to your work. You will get good results. Some dispute and misunderstandings between husband and wife may take place. But it will be resolved amiably. You will share amazing bonding with your mate. Atmosphere at home will be peaceful. The placement of planets is indicating a period of good progress in times to come.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23)

Things are looking up again for you this week. You will also get involved in the affairs of your children and might go to his/her school/institute to get information about them. You will be satisfied a lot seeing their work and performance. You will also start getting good job offers. Now is the right time to fix long term goals. You will have to work hard in order to get happiness and good results. Halted works will gather momentum. You will feel physically active and relaxed. The time is full of fun and frolic. You will do each work very carefully. These are good days. You will spend time with your parents and wife. Keep away from controversies. You will get good news from somewhere and take an important decision regarding your career and business.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22)

It is going to be a very busy week for you. You will remain involved in your work and also will have deadlines to finish. You will do the right thing and achieve your objectives. You will interact a lot with your bosses and subordinates. You will remain concerned about everyone. There will be lot of peace at home. You might

visit a beautiful and solitary place. You will also have new tenants or will think about buying a new house. Proposals will come for unmarried persons and they will be favorable. You will feel that there is something new in life. You will be successful in acquiring knowledge. Your thoughts will be beneficial for the members of your family.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23)

There are chances of your work getting done. So make best use of these opportunities. There will be various activities in different directions. You will also get united with your dear ones. You will come closer to your life partner. You will be getting lot of money, fame and will be bestowed with good health. You will also achieve the heights of success. You will get to meet new people. You will remember the time you spent in the happy company of your family. You will be guest somewhere and derive pleasure. This is the right time to get results of your hard work. Marriage talks may be finalized. Brother and sister will assist and cooperate each other. Spend only that much as you have in pocket.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22)

What an amazing week this is going to for you. You will get unexpected success in your professional deals. New job/business offers will come to you. Your prestige and respect at job too will rise. Your monetary position is also going to be great. Money and wealth will keep coming. You will fare very well in interview or tests you may appear at this juncture. You will also be getting a pleasant news. Health is going to improve gradually. You will become very emotional and will miss someone close. You will get the blessings of your senior family members to have your morale boosted. Some long lasting worry will also vanish. Property dispute will also be resolved by some family members mediation.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21)

Financially you will feel much relieved. Your problems will ease and new sources of income will be tapped. You will also resolve old differences and disputes with mutual understandings. You will also develop contacts with new people. It will prove to be beneficial for you. As it is, you may find financial crunch gradually getting eliminated. In your profession you may have to be very careful and act with much prudence. You will have good equation with your bosses. You will achieve your desired results and feel happiness and peace in your work field. You will be enjoying good understanding with your life partner. Things will be on the normal track. Property disputes will get resolved.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20)

Your tasks will start getting finished this week. You will work very hard and will multiply your sources of income. You will also get some lucrative opportunities in business as well. At times it looks to as that things are tough and not going in our favor. Maybe it is needed to bring out best in us. It is high time to start a new venture. Your projects will get completed. You need to remain careful from some persons. Be wary of the fights and confrontation or altercation stay away from them. You will receive blessings from your elders. With your prudence and wisdom you may take some good decisions. Fortune favors the brave. Your colleagues and friends will be cooperative.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18)

You will get a pleasant news with regard to your relative. You will get emotionally involved with a person known to you. It will lift your spirits. Government related matters will get done. Your family members will stand shoulder to shoulder with you in all situations. You will get gains from everywhere. Your financial position is going to be good. You will face life's problems fearlessly and impartially. You should not trust anyone in financial matters. Some people may criticize you but you need not pay any attention to them and keep a control over your speech and anger. There will be an improvement in your relations with people whom you interact with. You will be kept busy in daily work.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20)

You will be required to show lot of guts to stay in the competition. You will interact take some strong decisions which will have a powerful impact upon your competitors. Even they will praise your efforts. Financial position is going to be strong and stable. You will use your talent and abilities to the hilt. Your hopes and expectations may be squarely met. The differences with your partner will get resolved. You will be butt of some scathing criticism. But you will take it in your stride. Your enemies and rivals will be outclassed. Your government related work will also gather momentum. Your colleagues and friends will be quiet cooperative. You will introduce a new system in your work pattern.

Career in Peace Building

By Ranjan K Baruah

All of us want to live in peace and in a place where there is no conflict or violence. In spite of our will, there are many places which have disturbances due to many reasons. Armed conflicts and other forms of violence have been witnessed by people around the world. The last century has witnessed two of the most devastating wars which are known as World Wars.

Following the devastation of the Second World War, the United Nations was established to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war.

One of its purposes is to achieve international cooperation in solving international problems, including by promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion.

Living together in peace is all about accepting differences and having the ability to listen to, recognize, respect and appreciate others, as well as living in a peaceful and united way.

The UN General-Assembly, in its resolution - 72/130, declared 16th May as the 'International Day of Living Together in Peace', as a means of regularly mobilizing the efforts of the international community to promote peace, tolerance, inclusion, understanding and solidarity. The Day aims to uphold the desire to live and act together, united in differences and diversity, in order to build a sustainable world of peace, solidarity and harmony.

1st September is also observed as 'International Day of Peace' and 2nd October as a 'Day of Non-Violence'. Well, our readers may be wondering why we are mentioning days, instead of careers.

The aim is simple: it means there are scopes and opportunities for people who want to work for peace building or peace-making around the world. There are special courses after completing graduation related to peace and conflict



studies.

It is preferable for students completing subjects like Political Science or similar to take up courses related to peace and conflict studies. Graduates from other disciplines may also take up full time Master's degree courses or post graduate diploma, related to peace-making.

Few universities also offer PhD in Peace and Conflict Studies. Few other courses include MA in Conflict Analysis and Peace Building, PG diploma in Conflict Management and Development, PG diploma in Conflict Transformation and Peace building, MA in Peace and Conflict Studies, PG diploma in Gandhian Non-violent Conflict Resolution, Master in Humanitarian Action and Peace Building, Master in Prevention, Arbitration & Conflict Resolution, Diploma in Negotiation, Mediation and Conflict Resolution, Diploma in Mediation and Conflict Resolution, etc. There are few free online courses for the beginners to get ideas about the courses.

Aspirants may get jobs in different research institutes related to peace studies, teaching in colleges and universities, involvement with civil society organizations, work

with international organizations like the United Nations and its special agencies dealing with peace, human rights, etc. Those who want to work with international agencies may also start learning foreign languages from the initial period to excel in their careers.

Young people from the North East may take it up as the region is transforming currently. Though conflict has not ended completely, many positive changes have taken place in the last few years. With proper analysis many positive changes can be brought to the region.

Apart from having formal qualification and degrees, it is also important to have other required employability skills to be successful in this field. One should be passionate about travelling and meeting people if they want to work in the field of peace-making. During the lockdown period, aspirants may explore online courses related to peace-making and conflict studies and finish a few online courses for enhancing their careers.

(Ranjan K Baruah is a career mentor and skill trainer and can be reached at 8473943734 or bkranjan@gmail.com for any career related queries)

"A good plan violently executed now is better than a perfect plan executed next week."

-- George S. Patton

The Shillong Times

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Like flies to the fire

RUNNING at over three lakh daily infection cases and over 4,000 deaths a day, the national Covid-19 scenario remains grim. Yet, the positive signs are that both Delhi and Mumbai which are among the worst-hit have registered a curve in daily rates and deaths, and that the positivity rate in the capital has come down to around 10 per cent as on Sunday. We were on a roll prematurely soon after the 'first wave' and are paying a huge price for this.

Governments have woken up. Some eight brands of vaccines are to be made available for use in India, largely drawn from abroad, rather than us depending on the two or three home-made ones. The oxygen position is improving while ventilators and hospital beds are faced with shortages. There are no quick overnight fixes and only a steady improvement on these fronts need be expected. There were reports about ventilators supplied to hospitals under PM Care across the country which did not meet the required standards. The PMO is aware of these and corrective steps should follow. The fight against Covid would continue at three principal fronts - namely to vaccinate maximum number of people, force people to observe protocols and better equip hospitals with facilities. As the Delhi high court rightly stated weeks ago, this is the time for the official agencies to "beg, borrow, steal," or do whatever else to fill the gaps between requirements and supply positions.

RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat has called a spade a spade when he said there was both laxity and over-confidence among the governments and the officials after the first wave -- even when the nation was in anticipation of a second or even a third wave as is now feared. He rightly stressed that "we all" erred, including the people who threw caution to the winds and were game with festivals and election campaigns by wantonly ignoring the C-protocols. All these took the nation to the edge of a precipice in terms of the pandemic's bloody surge. Strict controls, rather, helped China to sit back and relax now. The permissiveness here proved to be deadly and people are dying like flies, so much so dead bodies are either discarded in rivers or buried in the sand - the stark indignity in death. The nation has lessons to learn from this. The governments as also entities like the election commission must conduct themselves with a better sense of responsibility. What has already happened cannot be undone and those who erred, and grossly at that, might be called up on to answer for their indulgences that brought the situation to such a scary level.

The beginning of the battle of perception

By H H Mohrmen

While the fight against the COVID pandemic is not over yet, the central government is embarking on another kind of fight which a battle for the minds of the people. To fight against what it calls 'bad press' that it received due to its mismanagement of the second wave of the pandemic attack, the Government is, embarking on the so-called positive campaign. The negative publicity that the government received due to the pandemic has dented the image of the BJP-led NDA government in general and the image of the prime minister in particular.

The Government is obviously at the receiving end of all the news that is being reported by almost all media outlets which of course are unfavourable to the BJP too. It is no surprise therefore for the Government and its supporters to allege that the way the media is disseminating news about the second wave of the pandemic attack is, at the same time spreading too much negativity in the country. How else would the independent news outlet report the news? Or is there another way of reporting other than telling the truth as it is.

Government alleges that the visuals in the electronic media about shortage of hospital beds, video clips of patients gasping for breath, never ending cremations and now dead bodies floating on the rivers are akin to spreading negativity. But the point is whether what has been reported is the truth. Even a lay person knows that in any kind of news dissemination only truth matters. There is no such thing as bad or good publicity but telling the truth as it happened and this is what is expected of every media worth its salt. But some find that the news that was broadcast is a bitter pill to swallow and as the saying goes, truth is always hard to accept. Of course, there is no harm in the central government's move to embark on a positive campaign but at what cost? Positive campaign at the cost of denying the truth that the Government has failed in a big way in handling the pandemic crisis? Positive campaign which tries to disregard the truth that hundreds and thousands of people had lost their lives in the disaster is not going to augur well for the ruling dispensation. This is like trying

to create, produce and share positive contents in the country when the only 'positive' that people are talking about are stories of people being COVID-19 positive.

The NDA Government's assumption that what is unfolding in the media is bad publicity for the central government is in another way of not accepting the truth as it happens. The Government instead considers the crisis as an opportunity for a public relations exercise while turning a Nelson's eye to the hard facts and truth that emerges from the predicament. The Government should instead

Government and the various BJP agencies, is to move the spotlight somewhere else. It will use all the power within its control to disseminate 'supposedly positive' information using various media platforms to attract only good and positive vibes towards the Government. This is not only abandoning one's responsibility but more tragically it is leaving the very people it promised to serve, to their own fates. Is this even morally correct on the part of the Government? Is what the Government doing even fair to those who suffer, lost their lives and to their

can even change the fortune of the Government in the near future. And this will in fact be a positive campaign which will also ensure that bad publicity does not always have to end badly. On the contrary the Government is found to be doing something else.

Clearly this Government exists only to gain attention, acceptance or approval of their supporters and they assume that publicity is the only way to get it. The positivity campaign will no doubt please the Government's cheer party, but not its opposition as they will surely remain adamant. But the question that should be seriously considered is - what about the fence sitters? Will the good publicity that the Government is trying to promote not turn bad and end up as bad publicity instead? What the NDA Government needs to realise is that this is not mis-information or a smear campaign against the ruling BJP, but it is the truth as it unfolds.

However, this is not the first time that the BJP is indulging in this kind of exercise. It has been playing this battle of perception to perfection in the last few years. In fact it has been engaging in this exercise since Narendra Modi arrived in the national scene when his 56 inch chest and the BJP's invisibility image was instilled in the people's perception. The only difference though is that this happened when the party was at an advantage point. This time around the party is getting a beating from almost every direction, so will the positive campaign be effective?

learn from the fact that there is no such thing as bad publicity as long as one is open to the truth and is willing to accept one's mistake and say sorry. Any publicity is good publicity if one is willing to learn new lessons from one's mistakes and try to mend one's ways.

The saying 'any publicity is good publicity' owes its origin to showman and circus owner of America Phineas T. Barnum and this phrase rings true even in the present context if only the Government is willing to accept its blunders. But the saying, any publicity is good publicity whether it is positive or negative is also true only, if one is open to opinions that are contrary to one's own understanding of the issue. The Government's handling of bad publicity by countering it with a supposedly positive campaign raises another question and that is whether this Government is really serious in its attempts to solve this one big misfortune.

The Government is in the wrong if it sees the disaster only as an opportunity for a public relations exercise. The simple meaning of 'publicity' is to attract public notice. Now the entire efforts of the



near and dear ones who are still alive? Instead of trying to do something to recover from the fall, the Modi Government is instead choosing to ignore the truth. The public expected the Government to take charge, come out, own its failure and boldly shoulder the responsibility that the people of the country have placed on it. But maybe an apology is too much to ask from the people who run this Government. Or whether this has to do with Gujarati pride, is difficult to know. But one would honestly expect that they will at least promise to mend their ways to prevent similar disasters from recurring. One assumes that owning one's mistakes and promising to mend one's ways will definitely create a good story and more importantly it would give the Government an opportunity to regain the trust of the people and help it recover its lost reputation.

If the Government would have handled the crisis much more humbly, then it would be like pressing a refresh button which will enable it to restart right away. The approach will help reverse the bad publicity that it had encountered and possibly, it

Oh, Jerusalem

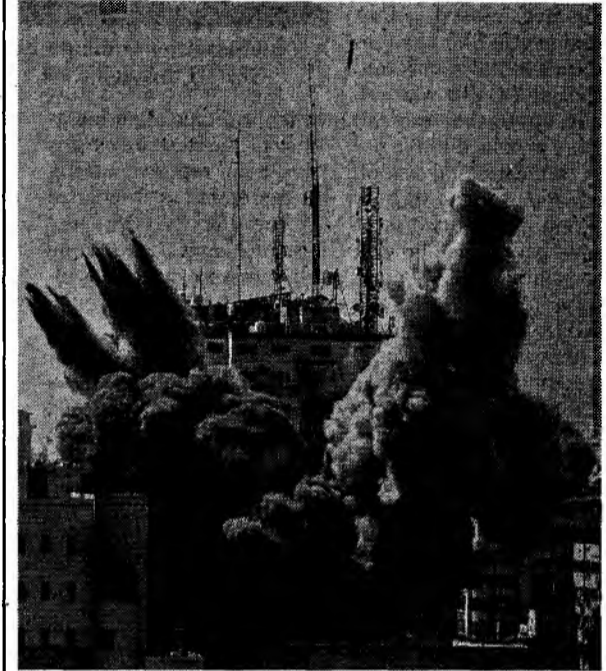
By T P Sreenivasan

Nothing seems to have changed in the Middle East even after the signing of the Abraham Accords, and the exit of President Donald Trump. The most recent Hamas rocket attacks and the disproportionate air strikes by Israel followed the familiar pattern. Efforts by the UN Security Council to call for restraint and a ceasefire have been blocked by the United States to give Israel time to wreak vengeance on Hamas and to deliver a stern message against another intifada. "If the Biden administration had a honeymoon at the UN, it is over now," said Richard Gowan, who represents the International Crisis Group at the UN.

The US is isolated, as before, in the Security Council on this issue and if the mat-

to his Israeli counterpart and released a statement proclaiming "ironclad support for Israel's legitimate right to defend itself and its people." The statement said Lloyd "strongly condemned the launching of rockets by Hamas and other terrorist groups that targeted Israeli civilians" and "reiterated the importance of all involved parties to take steps to restore calm." At the same time, for the record, the US stated that Palestinians must be afforded the right "to live in safety and security" while calling for de-escalation.

There appears to be a vaccine inequity issue between Israel and Palestinian Authority at the present time. According to the Times of Israel, Israel had purchased ten million vaccine units



ter is taken to the General Assembly, the US would be condemned even more and that may be the only reason for the US to agree to an open meeting of the Security Council next week, which may result in an inane call for peace. Russia and Turkey are likely to agitate the issue in the General Assembly. At the same time, blocking statements and debate by the US "is a gift to China and Russia, who will portray the

of Astra Zeneca, which are lying unutilised as Israel switched to Pfizer and Moderna versions and completed the vaccination of the whole population of Israel. On the other hand, only 1% of the Palestinians have been fully vaccinated. Israel is trying, to divert the vaccine to some other country or just throw them away. This would be seen by the Palestinians as cruel discrimination by

"The latest violence was sparked off by the growing unrest over control of Jerusalem and attempts by Jewish settlers to take over Arab-controlled communities. The tensions have spilled over into the West Bank, where hundreds of residents in Arab communities staged overnight protests against recent actions of Israeli security forces against Palestinians. Casualties have been mounting on both sides, as Hamas continues its bomb attacks on Israeli targets."

US as the villain blocking UN action over Gaza whenever the US raises Syria or Xinjiang," Gowan said.

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It is not unusual for fighting to break out between Israel and Hamas, given the way the Palestinians are treated in Gaza, but they do not last long as no war can resolve the issues between them. But Prime Minister Netanyahu, who is struggling to win a majority and to overcome corruption charges, warned in a statement that "This is just the beginning. We'll hit them like they've never dreamed possible."

The U.S. Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin spoke

Israel. It could have been a win-win situation if the vaccines were transferred to the Palestine Authority as a good will gesture.

India, as a member of the Security Council, is engaged in counselling restraint since we have good relations with Israel and Palestine. The unfortunate death of Soumya, a young Indian lady in the Hamas bombing impelled us to criticise Hamas for indiscriminate bombing of civilian areas. Israel has made a gesture by the speedy despatch of the body of Soumya in its national carrier to Kerala. Gone are the days when we stood solidly behind Palestine, but we still demand Israeli withdrawal from the territories occupied since 1967 and the establishment of a Palestinian state. Israel had shown understanding of our principled position on Palestine even in the old days and our continuing position on Palestine has not stood in the way of our good relations today. An all-out war is not likely because Hamas will have little support from the Arabs and a final solution is hardly possible when the global situation is in a state of flux. Peaceful co-existence is the only option for Israel and Palestine. We can expect a speedy end to the conflict and resumption of an uneasy peace in Gaza.

(The writer is a former diplomat- Email: tpsreenivasan@gmail.com)

Letters to the Editor

Lanong's memory lapses

Editor, Apropos of BM Lanong's letter "On UDP---a Khasi-centric party" (ST May 12, 2021), we are baffled by his mention of names like Captain WA Sangma, Dr Milton Sangma and Mody K Marak as UDP Presidents from the Garo community. It seems to us that he is dropping names as a valiant attempt to establish his contention that UDP is not a Khasi-centric party. Well, without entering into a debate with him on whether or not the Party has any support base in Garo Hills, we are compelled to wonder whether Lanong is suffering from dementia. He is the Working President of UDP and more than anybody else, he should know best who were his predecessors in the Party from Garo Hills. To the best of our knowledge and belief, none of them had ever held the office of UDP president.

To refresh Lanong's memory, Captain Sangma began his political career with Garo National Council (GNC). This grass-roots level organisation which had massive support in the Garo community, later joined the All-Party Hill Leaders' Conference (APHLC) as its constituent. APHLC got us the state in 1972 and came to power. It was in 1976 that Captain Sangma along with some others in APHLC decided to merge with Indian National Congress. Till his death in the 90's, Captain

did not leave Congress. It is a known history of Captain's political life that he never played politics of defection and instability.

Therefore, the question arises, did Captain secretly join the UDP that nobody seems to know? We invite Lanong to enlighten us in which year was Captain Sangma president of UDP? Like-wise, the claim that Dr Milton Sangma was UDP president, is absurd. For all we know, Dr Sangma had contested unsuccessfully from Kharkutta constituency in 1978 and lost to Late Freidina Marak by a big margin. He then virtually withdrew from active politics and concentrated on academics. He later went on to be the Pro-vice-chancellor of NEHU Garo Hills campus. Till date, at least we are unaware of Dr Sangma being President of UDP. We shall be obliged if Lanong can make us wiser on this issue.

Regarding Mody K. Marak, who was a big prop of GNC, he was a principled man. He had his differences with Captain Sangma, particularly his style of functioning, and never compromised on his stand. Yes, he was anti-Congress primarily because of Captain Sangma's hobnobbing with the INC. The only time Mody Marak had contested elections was in 1978 from Tura constituency only to lose to the Congress candidate. But was he ever the president of any regional party? We can't say authentically. It is

for Lanong to set the records straight.

Yours etc.,
Samson A. Sangma and others,
Via email

Spitting an ugly habit

Editor, Spitting has been a very casual habit in our State and in country. Even though we have all learnt in school and through awareness programmes that the human spit carries many germs and bacteria and transmits diseases especially in these times, when our country is facing the Covid 19 pandemic crisis and, new cases and death rates are on the rise even in our State. Sadly I still see people removing their masks and spitting on the road sub-consciously. I fail to understand why this is not a punishable offence. In fact it should be part of the Covid protocol not to spit on the road and just about anywhere. Even during this lockdown, we can see fresh spit marks on the road.

Last year there were announcements not to spit around, but it is difficult to instil any behavioural change in our people unless they are fined. Hence there should be strict law against spitting. People should either be heavily fined or kept in the lockup for a few hours. Then only will the habit be ingrained in repeated offenders.

Yours etc.,
Monica Thangkiew,
Via email

Police approach and behaviour

Editor, A video has gone viral wherein Anjani Kumar, the Commissioner of Police, Hyderabad, is seen addressing policemen urging them to show empathy and restrain the use of "lathi", especially against the poor. He also requested the police to help the people, and arrange for masks, food, etc.

Compared to this we hear the DGP of Assam threatening to act against people if they violate the law, and initiate punitive action by taking cognizance of such acts as "attempts to murder". This definitely is police-high-handedness. Whenever there is disturbance or crisis in policing, or policemen are found guilty (like the recent leakage of question papers in police recruitment in Assam), many senior police officers went hammer and tongs saying that police are part of the society, and if the society has bad elements, so do police. But when it comes to policing during enforcement of lockdown and curfews, police seem to forget that they are a part of the society, and that the society feeds them.

The pandemic has thrown our lives out of gear, and the least the police can do is not to humiliate people on the strength of their "lathis". Mostly, it is the poor (including women) and the young who are at the receiving end of police humiliation, and violation of basic human rights and dignity.

Enforce you should, but also have empathy towards the people you are policing, is the humble appeal to all policemen.

Yours etc.,
D Bhutia
Guwahati

Is this the "New India" we voted for?

Editor, The Covid-19 pandemic has thoroughly exposed the fragility of India which was already known to all well-meaning citizens for decades. This has now been exposed on an epic proportion. It has plundered the myth that all is well which was continuously and frivolously fed to us day in and day out in well-orchestrated ways on social media networks, biased news channels and all possible platforms by the current political dispensation. Our image as a responsible nation capable of taking care of its populace has further diminished globally under the pressure of handling/mishandling of the pandemic. Whether it is the Financial Times/The Washington Post/The New York Times/CNN/BBC/etc. all have highlighted our poor preparedness and handling of Covid-19 waves ravaging the nation. Things were somehow manageable as long as it did not penetrate the villages, which obviously are the most vulnerable places when miseries strike. The situation, of course, was grim but now with its tentacles spreading to the

villages, it's devastating to say the least.

Yours etc.,
Dr. Lakshon Kma,
Via email

Covid-19 pains: Of civic responsibility

Editor, In the article, 'Covid-19 pains: A Collective failure' (ST May 15, 2021) the writer Bhogtoram Mawroh has projected himself as a concerned citizen through that article. However, he also needs to understand that every citizen's role in this pandemic is vital. It starts with each one of us, from wearing a mask to maintaining social distance and staying home. I am sure all regulations are generalized as it is impossible to make exceptions. As a 'concerned citizen' and if it really were his intention to help his friend, then Mawroh's duty was to counsel his friend and not dump family issues on the Shnong and the Administration which must be already overwhelmed. What constructive role did he play in this particular case. Charity begins at home! As Mawroh himself has rightly put, his friend will have only himself to blame for his inability to solve his family issues.

Yours etc.,
B Lyngdoh,
Shillong-4

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"It's fine to celebrate success but it is more important to heed the lessons of failure."
 --- Bill Gates

The Shillong Times

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Needed a Covid War Room

GOVERNMENT is waging a war against Covid. The need for a war room for constant strategising is imperative. Things are spinning out of control in Meghalaya, particularly in the capital city of Shillong with cases rising every day while the number of deaths have risen exponentially. Shillong faces multiple problems ranging from shortage of ambulances to hospital beds with provision for oxygen and with ventilators for very critical patients. East Khasi Hills is a large district and while the Deputy Commissioner has been pro-active in responding to public grievances, when the health infrastructure itself leaves much to be desired then responding to a crisis such as this one becomes infructuous. The problem is that even patients from other districts rush to Shillong thereby aggravating matters.

Every other state in the county has set up a war room to monitor the Covid situation in real time. Data on current occupancy of hospital beds and directing patients to hospitals with vacant beds will be of much help. The war room will also have several helplines and sufficient people to attend to those helplines. It must be remembered that a suspected Covid case creates panic and stress for family members. They need to know the helpline numbers which are responsive. They need to know which hospital to go to depending on the availability of a bed. If family members have to request other people to help them find an ambulance or a hospital bed it means Covid management is not on track. A team of doctors should be posted in the war room to track things as they develop and to give feedback to the administration for necessary action. A call to the war room cannot be left unattended. It has to be addressed to the last mile and the caller's waiting time should not exceed 90 seconds. A war room helps to assess which patient needs an ICU bed with a ventilator immediately and who needs oxygen. Counselling the family members at these crucial times helps to calm their anxieties.

A war room essentially has a grievance redressal cell; a team to monitor social media; a team for deciding the order of treatment for COVID-19 positive patients. It monitors those in home isolation. There is a team for updating bed availability in hospitals; and a team to monitor the availability of oxygen support in hospitals. Checking the status of Covid positive patients in home isolation is imperative because in many cases such patients tend to leave home and roam in public places, thereby becoming super spreaders. Such persons are tracked and penalised in the interest of public health. Needless to say this important function has been neglected this time around. In Assam the Covid War Room is supervised by no less than the Chief Minister. Meghalaya needs to emulate that example.

There is a steady echo of voices asking for the Prime Minister to step aside, many demanding that he take responsibility for leading us straight into the mouth of the pandemic to be devoured, and others asking that he make way for someone less divisive in steering the nation through these difficult times. The demand has grown against the backdrop of a strong rebuff from the electorate in West Bengal and expectedly in Kerala, a poor showing in the panchayat polls in Uttar Pradesh and continued toll exerted by the second wave of the pandemic - seen in funeral pyres burning round the clock, bodies found floating in the Ganges and the complete mess on a vaccination programme for the people of India. Even the BJP's ideological parent the RSS can no longer ignore the havoc caused by SARS-Cov-2; it has launched a series styled as "positivity unlimited", which is actually an insensitivity that still had to make a token acknowledgement of the misery all around us. The RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat has come out accepting that we let our guard down, though it is all of us, not just the government, he said, and the road ahead should be evidence-based approaches. The BJP has stepped up, too; the negative equity the PM has earned is being met with a "positivity" propaganda brigade that is taking its role rather seriously. As a result, a new pandemic called "positivity" is being unleashed to fight the SARS-Cov-2 pandemic. This is why a whole new set of "positivity" videos, stories designed to evoke nationalistic sentiments, and videos of how a "hard-working" Prime Minister is being unfairly targeted have hit the market as 'Whatsapp' forwards in the last fortnight or thereabouts.

All this transpires amid a total collapse, an underlining of the nation's firm membership in the group of third world nations, left quite clueless and only receiving assorted help from across the world, and even that has not been transparently accounted for or deployed with any sense of efficiency.

Yet, the Prime Minister is unlikely to go with a graceful resignation. He will have to be pushed out of office, and this is unlikely to happen as long as his party and its

The new pandemic of 'positivity'

By Jagdish Rattanani

ideological parent the RSS think they can ride the storm. They are equally unlikely to ask a different set of questions, demand accountability and become uncomfortable with reducing of the party to a person.

The plain fact is that all reins are in the hands of the Prime Minister, a complete

crossing all boundaries as can be seen from the suit he wore that had his name woven in, the re-naming of a cricket stadium in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, as the Narendra Modi stadium, done at the hands of the President of India, and his pictures on all vaccination certificates. As the historian Ramchandra Guha



capture of the party and its machinery, which must bend to his whims, which of course the BJP has done with a readiness that makes it quite common to call this a one-man show. Some would add one lieutenant, the home minister, who is known equally for his divisive exertions, and that

has helpfully pointed out, by naming a stadium for himself while in power, Modi sits in the company of leaders like Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, Saddam Hussein and Kim Il-sung.

Not since Mrs. Indira Gandhi and her total domination and control over the Congress

"The plain fact is that all reins are in the hands of the Prime Minister, a complete capture of the party and its machinery, which must bend to his whims, which of course the BJP has done with a readiness that makes it quite common to call this a one-man show."

makes it at best a "two-man army", to borrow the words Shatrughan Sinha used when the actor-politician concluded that he could take it no more in the BJP and moved to the Congress.

The arrest of as many as 15 people and the registration of 17 FIRs in mid-May for posters put up in New Delhi critical of Modi by tying him to the export of vaccines when Indians don't have enough, and the questioning of the President of the Youth Congress B V Srinivas in another instance, are only the latest cases that make the point. Not only is criticism stamped out, Modi has the penchant to use his position for personal glorification,

in the 1970s has any single political leader held such power and authority at the national level and shown the willingness to use it to narrow ends. Mrs. Gandhi had a declared "Emergency"; India today lives through an undeclared "Emergency", which is in many ways worse because constitutional limits are stretched, twisted and tested routinely, not under the umbrella of any extraordinary national exigency, but under a new normal that takes hold to terrorise citizens into silence. All of this will have long term implications for the future of Indian democratic traditions. But following in the footsteps of Indira Gandhi, and making it one worse than that, also

Embracing the situation and fighting the good fight

By Maitphang Syiem

There is a time for everything (Ecclesiastes- 3), and the verse from Ecclesiastes 3:5 says "A time to embrace". Being complacent may be our human nature, but at this juncture there is no room for complacency. Sarcastically lamenting, perhaps the virus in its first version was testing our mettle and it saw our guard and our planning gradually dwindling down with time and by the time we realize that we are off the pitch, the virus has unleashed its new virulent form. Hence the question hovering over us is why and where did we miss the gap? Well this is for us to introspect, but the current scenario demands that we embrace the situation be it with the guidelines, the possible help especially with the vaccination drive with a clear conscience that we are going to take back our stronghold and not let our game off the pitch with a strong heart that yes, together we can get rid of this grim situation. And with that positivity in mind we need to put our hearts and souls together in letter and spirit.

There have been speculations that the virus may be a form of a bioweapon and considering the definition as laid down in the National Disaster Management Guidelines on Management of Biological Disaster which says "Biological weapons include any organism or toxin found in nature that can be used to incapacitate, kill, or cause physical or economic harm. Biological weapons are characterized by low visibility, high potency, substantial accessibility and relatively easy delivery methods". There is an old saying "Kham ma u nongshun u ba ngim iohi" which translates into "there is a greater danger from an unseen enemy." The virus is certainly an enemy with low visibility, incapacitating many essential systems such as health and education, causing economic stress and of course taking a toll on human lives. Another pertinent fact is that the virus is replicating at an unprecedented pace and this is something to question. We have seen global variants (VOIs) and (VOCs) like B.1.1.7, B.1.351, P.1, B.1.427 and B.1.429 and now we have our Indian variants such as B.1.617 classified as "Variant of Concern" by WHO. Somewhere we need to question as to why we keep having many variants? As laypersons it does not seem natural. Let us find out for ourselves.

Hypothetically saying, if the speculations are true then we really need to prepare from all aspects spiritually, physically and mentally to take the bull by the horns, to take a moment and think what we really need to do. If we see the guidelines on Management of Biological Disasters, immunization is one of the tools to protect ourselves to minimize the effects from biological threats and it is the only antidote. So the point here is are we embracing it with good faith? Before we ponder further, keep in mind that any vaccine with proven efficacy is better than no vaccine. Let us dump all the theories in the bin and do the most crucial duty of saving ourselves and saving others. As laypersons we cannot deny the fact that there is a cloud hanging over us when it comes to this but we need to put our faith in place also. Here I wish to put few quotes and phrases to ponder, "Don't be afraid; just believe." (Mark:5:36). The situation we are in demands that we all need to be vigilant, disciplined with our actions and to stay strong on the inside and outside as well. "Be on guard. Stand firm in the faith. Be courageous. Be strong" (1 Corinthians 16:13). Drawing inspiration from the phrases and the verses we really need to embrace all possible guidelines be it now or

even when we get through this outbreak. As mentioned earlier we have no room for complacency; we need to be on guard at all times.

Reiterating on "Complacency", Covid has undeniably exposed the gaps; the elements that we really need to consider and put our minds together to chart our preparedness plans and the plans cannot be short term in nature. It has to be for a longer term assuming that this pandemic may stay longer and the plans are to be reviewed from time to time. Existing plans are to be broadened and strengthened. The top to bottom approach works to maintain the course of action but practically in such demanding situations it does not work completely as it is perceived. People who are on the ground know the reality and taking them on board to help in action plans would be a great participatory initiative. Of course this has to be a concerted effort from all possible facets of the society alongside the controlling authorities. To put it simply, we need street-smart planners and not book-smart planners as some things do not work by the books. The best responders in such situations are the locals hence identifying, empowering and mobilizing them is a vital step.

As we can see the major incapacitating focal point of the virus are the health systems, so our long term planning for this has to be exceptional and incorporate all the possible tools; giving an open platform to shell out ideas, on-board street-smart brains as it is a vast subject affecting many aspects. Covid scenario is definitely telling us to strengthen our health systems, our epidemiological surveillance and intelligence network systems and to imbibe from the local or may be global best practices, and till date the state of Kerala and its network of health systems (coronasafe) has been exceptionally best in the country when it comes to managing this current disaster. Aren't we supposed to embrace such best practices? If not now when? Perhaps, the controlling authorities may think of an initiative involving local citizens to be part of epidemiological surveillance and monitoring. This will definitely bridge the gaps and augment the existing surveillance programme.

Assumedly till date we have not experienced the kind of caseload that other states are facing but when they really reach that stage and exceed our health capacity, it would be chaotic. This requires foresight. Something extra needs to be worked out and put in place. There is also an impending burden on the health workers and we need to realize this fact. As the cases are gradually sky-rocketing, a concerted plan has to be put in place. As we enter a demanding situation, prioritizing and counteracting the focal point of covid is important. We cannot let our existing stronghold fall. After all, it is a fight.

At this point let us remind ourselves of this statement by Nobel Laureate, Joshua Lederberg, "The single biggest threat to man's continued dominance on the planet is the virus." This is undeniable when seen in conjunction with the present situation but let us also be not dismayed by what we are facing. We have all the protocols, all the guidelines and all the possible help but above all the most important weapon we have is our faith and hope. We need to embrace both. To conclude, there is a famous salutation of the India Army's Assam Regiment, which says "Tagra Rahoh", which also means staying fit and strong. Let us embrace that spirit and fight this fight together with a strong heart and soul.

(The writer is a Geospatial Expert. Email: maitphangsyiem@gmail.com)

Letters to the Editor

Don't Hesitate, Vaccinate

Editor,
 On 16 Jan 2021, India started Vaccinating health workers and individuals older than 45 years with Covid 19 vaccine- Covishield. This Covishield vaccine is the Viral Vector-Based Vaccine where an adenovirus is used with SARS Cov 2 Spike(S) glycoprotein coating to produce Covid 19 vaccine.

Viral vector-based vaccines differ from most conventional vaccines in that they don't actually contain antigens, but rather use the body's own cells to produce them. They do this by using a modified virus (the vector) to deliver genetic code for antigen, in the case of COVID-19 spike proteins found on the surface of the virus, into human cells. By injecting cells and instructing them to make large amounts of antigen, which then trigger an immune response, the vaccine mimics what happens during natural infection with certain pathogens - especially viruses. This has the advantage of triggering a strong cellular immune response by T cells as well the production of antibodies by B cells.

The other types of vaccine are whole virus vaccines which use a weakened or deactivated form of the pathogen that causes a disease to trigger protective immunity to it. There are two types of whole virus vaccines. Live attenuated vaccines use a weakened form of the virus,

which can still grow and replicate, but does not cause illness. Inactivated vaccines contain viruses whose genetic material has been destroyed by heat, chemicals, or radiation so they cannot infect cells and replicate, but can still trigger an immune response.

The utility of vaccine campaigns to control the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV 2) pandemic is not merely dependent on vaccine efficacy and safety. Vaccine acceptance among the general public will have a decisive role in the successful control of the pandemic. However, vaccine hesitancy, which is a common phenomenon globally is becoming a major health concern. The most common reasons behind the refusal of vaccine acceptance and negative attitude towards Covid 19 vaccine includes perceived risks, social factors, certain religious beliefs, lack of knowledge and awareness, and the negative social media activity about vaccination.

While the global efforts to mitigate the effect of the pandemic, and to reduce its health and socio-economic impact rely to a large extent on preventive measures, now we have an emerging way out, in which science has given us a gift that will save our lives, the Covid 19 Vaccine. Trust Science, get the vaccine. Together we can overcome the Covid 19 pandemic.

Yours etc.,
 Dr Omarlin Kyndiah
 Associate Professor

& HoD Biochemistry,
 St. Edmund's College

Time to harness all resources

Editor,
 The subject matter of this letter is definitely a burning issue of the day. The problem is undoubtedly grave but at the same time, to find a solution to the problem is a crying need. I appeal to the concerned authorities and the government to take productive measures to stop our state from becoming a hotspot of the second wave of covid 19. May I point out that lockdown or containment is not the only solution to the problem. Vigilance at the check gate at Umfing was loosened and it resulted in people moving in and out of the state with ease. This was not the case during the first wave of the same disease.

Now with the second wave being more serious and resulting in innumerable fatalities in the state, why are the entrants not sent to Covid Care Centres, as was being done earlier until the RT-PCR report is declared? Why are they allowed to go home? Are they really quarantined at home? Who is keeping a check? The authorities did not seek the help of the Dorbar Shnong in this matter. What if these entrants do not have secluded rooms with washrooms? What if the report declared is positive? Are they not be-

coming spreaders? I appeal to the authorities to kindly wake up and not blame the general public for violating lockdown rules. Are there policemen on the roads? Who is keeping a check on people's movement? I see no one! We are free to move. Why are the curfew rules not made more stringent with police patrolling especially at night?

I also want to point out that if Tuberculosis could have had exclusive hospitals then why not for Covid? I believe the doctors and nurses can treat patients more efficiently in a Covid dedicated hospital.

Today, all hospitals have Covid patients and checking or testing is being done at entry points to the hospital. Is anyone sure that the patients or attendants being tested there are Covid negative? If so, how? They can become carriers and spread to many more over there, can't they?

Is the Government, ready to face the peak in our State? If so, how? I understand already most hospitals here are full of Covid patients. Is the Government actually waiting to come to the limelight like Maharashtra, Karnataka or Delhi? Wake up authorities! Make arrangements soon. It is the need of the hour. Please use community halls and other institutions lying vacant as Covid treatment centres and save lives.

The need of the hour is to come together as one and overcome the challenge of saving Meghalayans. Dear Government, I appeal to you

to kindly look into the matter and act urgently rather than taking decisions based on panic reactions at the last minute.

Yours etc.,
 Sangeeta Das,
 Via email

Frequent unscheduled load shedding

Editor,
 Frequent unscheduled load shedding has been experienced in the past few months. This abrupt action on the part of the concerned Department has badly affected students and teachers who are dependent on the internet Wi-Fi for online classes and exams and also individuals who are working from home because of the lockdown. We have been under tremendous stress and obligations to complete our syllabus on time amidst the pandemic and this sudden load shedding has, in fact, added extra burden and stress on us. Many students are missing classes while teachers are unable to proceed with the scheduled classes due to unexpected power cut in their localities. When the government is locking up everyone at home, certain basic necessities such as electricity should be provided uninterrupted at least during working hours. This is a humble request from netizens to the Government to come up with appropriate measures for the welfare of students, teachers

and everyone concerned.
 Yours etc.,
 Dr Thanggoulen Kipgen,
 Via email

Unfair editorial

Editor,
 Your editorial 'PM image dented' (ST May 15, 2021) appears to be slightly harsh and also mistimed. At present one will find social media full of such accusations. People can ignore and overlook them but your assessment in the editorial column can make an indelible impression in the minds of lakhs of your readers. Believe me, I have no political affiliation but once a person is chosen by the people democratically to be our PM, I feel, we are duty-bound to integrate with him, particularly at this hour of national crisis. We should not, by any means, give anti-social elements a chance to exploit the situation.

I am not here to negate your assessment about Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, which I believe time will tell. At this time moment, I strongly feel that he is doing all he can to ward off any likely catastrophe. Let's pray for his success in his endeavour and strengthen his hand.

Yours etc.,
 Krishna Chettri
 Shillong-2

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"Hope is the last thing a person does before they are defeated."

— Henry Rollins

The Shillong Times

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Complete lockdown imperative

A total lockdown is inevitable when containment measures don't work and the Covid infection rate refuses to flatten. While the second Covid wave is more devastating than the first, a section of the public does not seem to realize the gravity of the situation. With Covid positive cases rising every day and the number of deaths turning to mere statistics, a total lockdown is the only remedy. Granted that a lockdown is an unnatural phenomenon and a burden on daily wagers, apart from the psychological trauma of being cooped up inside small homes with hardly any breathing space, but harsh times call for harsh measures. For those in charge of meeting the exigencies — namely those in government and health care professionals these are indeed trying times. Critics on social media will never understand what those manning the system currently, actually go through. And they cannot take time off and say they are fatigued!

The system is at breaking point and we are well aware of it. They can only do the best they know in a scenario where they are handling an enigmatic virus. What they should not be burdened with is an uncooperative citizenry. This pandemic is a call to every person in and outside of Government to work together to contain the spread. It is not just the Government's responsibility to do so by imposing restrictions. The communities should be volunteering to assist Government efforts at their level. There is an innate wisdom that resides with the community and this was amply demonstrated in the first wave. Let this wisdom and voluntarism come to the fore now when it is most needed.

Despite the show of bravado, health workers are at breaking point attending to Covid patients round the clock. Hospitals are overburdened by patients needing critical care. The difference this time is that Covid has spread even to the hamlets of the State, thereby, making containment a challenge. The spread this time is essentially due to lack of institutionally managed quarantine centres for returnees. Home isolation is a farce and this has been borne out by ample evidence when the phone numbers and other details of returnees were found to be misleading. The problem is that every person believes he/she is healthy until Covid strikes and strikes the vulnerable members of their families. Then the inevitable happens and death is the price that society pays for the indiscriminate behaviour of a few. Last year satellite markets had opened up in Upper Shillong and other areas. They helped contain crowding. With the return to apparent "normalcy" these markets dwindled and the rush to Lewduh began. Government should reflect and learn lessons from such episodes. Marketplaces are essentially crowd pullers. This challenge needs a nuanced approach.

Hope from a hospital bed

By Rev Lyndan Syiem

Like everyone else these days, I spend my mornings reading the news and the numbers. Which as you all know, is often very sad and depressing. That's why I make it a point not to begin my day with the news but with Scripture and prayer. This is what gives me the strength and courage to face another day, to minister in prayer over the phone and WhatsApp to dozens who call and text me every day.

I've never been this busy as a Pastor before, counselling and praying for people. Everyone is alarmed, even panicked right now, over this sudden surge of infections and deaths. Even the COVID-Sceptics and Vaccine conspiracy theorists are no longer confident of their old, entrenched positions. They can no longer deny the reality of the graphic, televised funerals being conducted by pall-bearers in white PPE suits.

Amidst widespread anxiety and despair over what will happen with this Second Wave, what hope can a recovering COVID 19 patient offer from his hospital bed? There is so much that one can offer, if only one just reaches out to people with empathy, love and practical advice. Empathy is available when one has gone through great suffering and comes out refined by the desire to help others in need.

Love is frankly supernatural, it comes from above; one can only be a humble recipient and a willing channel. Practical advice is not available unless you have gone through the disease yourself or have been a caregiver. We have many such people in our midst, listen to them when they speak. They may not always be able to articulate clearly, but learn from their stories of fighting the illness and winning because of faith and hope.

If you really desire to offer hope to people who are suffering, please start by becoming properly informed with true science and not with the fake scientists out there on the internet. The sine qua non of true science is peer-review and being published in reputed journals. Even in this mad scramble amidst the COVID crisis, we must never

sacrifice quality research and empirical verification.

Unfortunately there is now a veritable industry of self-styled scientists, some of whom even dare speak in the name of Jesus Christ, who mix a percentage of truth with a fatal dose of error. The sad thing is that all this pseudo-science is being peddled on religious social media and people are so lacking in spiritual discernment that they will believe anything. But let's talk reality. If you, God-forbid! God-forbid! fall ill to COVID 19 and develop complications, who will you go to? The pseudo-scientists and anti-vaxxers or a real doctor in a real hospital?

That is why if you really desire to be of practical help to people, you must first learn to respect the doctors, the consultants, the experienced nurses. I know that you have a really fast internet connection, but it was the doctor who spent 5-6 years in medical school, plus six more years doing his MD and DM. I accept that there are gaps in knowledge in the medical profession, especially over this virus and the body's inflammatory response, that's causing all these pulmonary and other problems. And while our hard-pressed doctors and specialists are always learning, always researching, we must respectfully support them in prayer and in public regard.

Next is to respect our health care professionals. I deeply respect everyone who is a frontline worker, but there is just no comparison with the doctors, nurses, ward staff and technicians who physically touch and serve a COVID patient, who is rushed into the ICU with heaving chest, raging fever and agonizing gasps for breath. I personally know that many of these health professionals have families, small children, and aged parents with comorbidities, yet they willingly lay down their own bodies on the line for us patients.

Which is why as I lay semi-conscious, that verse kept coming to mind: "As I have loved you, so you must love one another." I have

never met Mother Teresa in her famous blue-bordered saree, but I have actually met her compatriots dressed in white PPE with blue piping at Bethany Hospital. All of you recovered COVID patients have also met these wonderful angels of God in the many hospitals all over our state of Meghalaya, and across the world.

Hope from a hospital bed does not mean glossing over the errors and blunders of our leaders and people. From all accounts, the major cause for the current spike in Meghalaya is due to irresponsible returnees who furnished false names and false telephone numbers, and who never quarantined themselves. There will be no charges, no arrests, no tracing of subsequent infections and deaths. But frankly, you will one day have to answer before a higher tribunal, unless you make your peace with the Almighty, and your personal restitution to our deeply-scarred society.

For those responsible returnees who followed the rules, you have absolutely nothing to be ashamed of. For those of us who tested positive, even though we immediately informed all our contacts, there is regret, sorrow and yes, a deep sense of guilt. I admit that it is a cross I will bear for a long, long time. Please don't patronize us and say "don't blame yourself." It is just too early to comment on the final resolution.

Hope from a hospital bed sees the leaders of the government, of the dorbar shnongs, of the various social and religious organizations, struggling against impossible odds in finance, organization and finding volunteers for Corona Care Centres. It sees the selfishness and the pettiness of human nature. Yet it also sees responsible, large-hearted men and women in government, in local dorbars and in various religious bodies.

Hope for better things on earth is by definition inclusive. It cannot be limited to one's own community, one's own culture, one's own religion, but must include oth-

ers, especially those not our own. Hope sees and publicly acknowledges so much good in the many communities and groups that make up this beautiful state of Meghalaya.

In the amazing Providence of God, a hospital patient whose humble writings sparked hope in the suffering and the depressed, suddenly becomes privy to information from all manner of sources. I cannot identify persons by name in this article, but God knows your selfless acts of service to society. The Scriptures clearly speak of rewards, not of heaven, but in heaven. While we sinners can never get to heaven except by the grace of God, Scripture also teaches that the Lord will never forget the humble services offered in his name.

A hospital bed changes your perspective of life and death. For someone who had experienced just a few OPD procedures before, a long hospital stay teaches that life is short and death is ultimately certain. But it also teaches that there is life beyond death, and there is so much meaning while we are still alive. Please allow this hospital patient a personal note that will edify and bless you dear friends. My wife lost her mother last year and our family is still in bereavement. My mother-in-law was among the kindest, gentlest, noblest women I have ever met; I loved her as I love my own mother.

In a deeply subjective experience that I can never fully explain, I reached very near to where my mother-in-law is, with Jesus. It was abundantly clear that she was very happy there. I also wanted to go with her but was sent back to earth, because there was another, stronger, desire within me to complete my life's mission. As a Pastor, it is my duty to counsel and pray for the bereaved. But I have not been able to really minister to my own wife. Until I had this strange experience and shared the story over and over with her. I now share this story publicly dear friends, in the hope that it will bless you and give you hope amidst a despairing world, and also hope beyond this despairing world.

Email: lyndansyiem@gmail.com

Patent-free vaccine not enough to fight coronavirus

Hospitalisation cost beyond common man's reach

By Nantoo Banerjee

If the primary purpose of the World Trade Organization is "to open trade for the benefit of all," it may be time for WTO to revisit its agreement on trade-related aspects of intellectual property rights (TRIPS) to do away with patents on Covid vaccines as well as drugs to hopefully save millions of lives across the world. The global vaccine market this year could be closer to \$28 billion. The market size of Covid medicines — mostly unproven and hospital-administered — is several times bigger. IPR contributes a substantial portion of Covid vaccine and drug prices. India is among several WTO members, especially those from the lower- and middle-income group, to demand patent waiver for vaccines. Human rights bodies and global advocacy groups have also raised a similar demand. However, they have been unsuccessful so far in the face of strong lobbying by powerful pharmaceutical firms. The TRIPS agreement was negotiated during the 1986-94 Uruguay Round before introducing intellectual property rules into the multilateral trading system for the first time. The question is: can WTO withstand the pressure of the global pharma biggies to achieve its Millennium Development Goals (MDG) to create an enabling international environment, especially for developing countries?

Thanks to TRIPS, Covid vaccine manufacturers and market leaders are in no mood to dilute the patent charges. They include AstraZeneca plc, Pfizer Inc., Sanofi S.A., Novavax, Inc., Moderna, Inc., Sinovac Biotech Ltd, Johnson & Johnson, Sanyu, Shanghai Fosun Pharmaceutical Group Co., CanSino Biologics Inc., CureVac AG and Arcturus Therapeutics Holdings Inc. Three Indian companies — Cadila Healthcare, Serum Institute and Bharat Biotech also feature among the global producer-marketers to Covid vaccine. According to WHO, several Covid vaccines are still undergoing clinical evaluations. Many healthcare organisations are getting funded globally due to their distribution rights of coronavirus vaccine. For instance, on October 13, last year, the World Bank approved a total of US\$ 12 billion to developing economies in order to finance the testing, purchase, distribution, and treatment of COVID-19 vaccine.

Amidst the TRIPS controversy, it may be heartening to note that several pharmaceutical companies from different countries have joined hands under the umbrella of a non-profit medicines patent pool (MPP). A coalition of 18 drug companies from India, China, Bangladesh and South Africa that manufacture generic drugs have pledged to work together to accelerate access to millions of doses of new interventions for low- and middle-income countries. The Indian drug firms include Sun Pharma, Lupin, Aurobindo, Zydus Cadila, Hetero, Natco and Strides Shasun. Such cooperation among competing drug firms to control and defeat the pandemic is rather unprecedented. Until early last week, the pandemic had affected over 160 million people globally and killed 3.3 million. Over 4.5 lakh died in Brazil and nearly 2.5 lakh died in India. The US topped in the count with 5.8 lakh victims. France recorded one lakh dead.

Incidentally, the huge global market for Covid-19 drugs is mostly for those which are yet to be accepted as fully "proven" remedies. Many are approved for "emergency use" or as an "off-label" drug. Among those drugs being used in India are: Hydroxychloro-

quine, Favipiravir, Remdesivir, Tocilizumab, Itolizumab, Dexamethasone, Methylprednisolone, low molecular weight Heparin and antibiotics such as Azithromycin and Ivermectin. In addition, convalescent plasma therapy is approved as an "off-label" therapy. Last week, the Lancet Commission said plasma therapy is ineffective on Covid patients. The Commission conducted a trial on 16,000 patients and there was no significant improvement in those patients. However, as mentioned earlier, these medicines provide no "proven" remedies. For instance, Hydroxychloroquine is approved as a treatment in mild cases and as prophylactic. Compelling data from multiple large clinical trials such as WHO's SOLIDARITY and the UK's RECOVERY find HCQS does not show benefits in treatment. The USFDA revoked 'Emergency Use Authorisation.' India moved the drug out of treatment protocol for severe cases. Its side-effects include severe heart arrhythmia.

Favipiravir is an oral antiviral drug, fast-tracked by India's Drug Controller General. It received 'Emergency Use Authorisation' for treatment of mild or moderate infections. The drug was not approved in the EU or US. Remdesivir is Gilead Sciences' patented anti-viral drug, earlier tried on Ebola. Tocilizumab was originally used on patients with rheumatoid arthritis. Dexamethasone is said to be the only drug so far to show striking impact on mortality. The UK's RECOVERY trials show Dexamethasone can reduce deaths by one-third in patients with severe Covid-19 infection who need oxygen therapy or are on ventilators. Remdesivir, Tocilizumab and Itolizumab — all injectables — are used in hospitals only. Some of them are very expensive. Covifor is priced at around Rs. 5,400/100 mg vial. Cipla's Cepremi is Rs. 4,000/vial. Itolizumab price is Rs. 32,000 for full treatment or Rs. 8,000/vial. The Covid treatment under hospitalisation makes it frightfully expensive.

Vaccines are generally meant to strengthen the immunity system while drugs are supposed to be curative. A lifting of the patent protection for vaccines will mean that once the formula is shared, any company having the required technology and infrastructure can produce vaccines. This will lead to cheaper and more generic versions of Covid vaccines. It will also help in overcoming vaccine shortages. Under the patent system, only drug companies which own patents are authorised to manufacture Covid vaccines. However, the removal of patent protection alone does not guarantee that vaccine prices will come down substantially. In the capitalist system, prices are determined by the demand-supply equation and quality. And, as WHO chief Tedros Adhanom himself explained, innovators will stand to get royalty. The patent holders argue that innovation as well as vaccine quality and safety will depend on maintaining exclusive IPRs. Incidentally, the present pricing of insulin, the world's single largest selling drug, demolishes the patent-price myth. When inventor Frederick Banting, a physician turned researcher, discovered insulin in 1923, he refused to put his name on the patent as he felt it was unethical for a doctor to profit from a discovery that would save lives. Banting's co-inventors, James Collip and Charles Best, sold the insulin patent to the University of Toronto for a mere \$1. They wanted everyone who needed their medication to be able to afford it. (Ipa Service)

Letters to the Editor

Move to shut markets a bad one

Editor,
In the span of a week, two major markets of Shillong — the Lewduh market and the Laitumkhrah market — have been shut down due to violation of COVID protocols. While the intention behind shutting down the markets is understandable, the move to shut it down isn't as nuanced as it should be.

In the pandemic, if one thing is fundamentally required, it is the constant flow of essential commodities. Shutting down the bigger markets essentially diverts customers towards the smaller markets because people most definitely will not stay without buying food for themselves. This causes two things — one, overcrowding at the smaller markets, thereby risking the violation of protocols yet again. Second, it causes a demand-supply imbalance in the smaller markets due to which an automatic hoarding behaviour is likely to be induced in these markets.

Therefore, if the Government strictly requires people not to move out except for essentials, they need to increase the number of markets as opposed to reducing them. Last year during the first wave, many parts of the city saw markets being set-up at a locality level. This is required even now. If one can procure what one needs within a close vicinity of their housing, there is absolutely no requirement for anyone to crowd any market.

Yours etc.,
Patrick Kurbah,
Via email

More on the Umngot River Project

Editor,
On 27 April 2021, a local TV channel telecast the enchanting Umngot River meandering through lush green valleys of the villages on its banks. The channel interviewed several people from the adjoining villages and all of them opposed the proposed hydel project of the Government. Some of them condemned the proposal and even threatened to lay down their lives for the cause. Indeed, it will be an irreversible loss not only to the area but the whole eco-biological system of the state. For projects such as these we should think carefully and do a cost-benefit analysis of the project in the long run. Do we need this project — is the question we must ask ourselves faithfully without any conflict of interests.

Firstly, let us analyse the power scenario in Meghalaya. According to the latest Meghalaya State Electricity Regulatory Commission (MSERC) Distribution Tariff Order 2021-22 - 2023-24, Meghalaya produces about 1200 MU annually including free share from NEEPCO. This production is not constant but varies according to season as much of it is hydel power depending on the monsoons. During lean periods the State has to buy power from outside.

According to the report, the annual power bought from outside is 1765 MU.

From the data above it can be seen that the annual power availability in the state is about 2965 MU. Let us look at the annual power consumption of the state. The consumption comprises two components, domestic and industrial. The report mentions about 900 MU for domestic, commercial, etc and about 600 MU for industrial consumption. Hence the total annual consumption is only 1500 MU. We therefore have an annual surplus power of 1465 MU. A layperson may ask, 'if you produce 1200 MU and you consume 1500 MU, when there is a shortage of only 300 MU why do you buy 1765 MU?'

As mentioned earlier, power shortage during lean periods compels the state to buy power and to fulfil unavoidable agreements with power suppliers. However, it sells or exchanges the surplus power. The surplus of 1465 MU may not be true considering what had appeared in the public domain, namely the power theft and transmission loss. If this is not enough Govt is subsidizing power tariff to these group of industries. Power politics in Meghalaya is of a very high voltage. Big shots from the national capital, a number of industrialists and local leaders blinded by the spoils of office had put the state to ransom. This is in a nutshell the power scenario in the state.

The burning issue here is with respect to the Umngot River Hydel Project which will produce 200 MW of power. Do we really need that power? The figures show that if there is no consumption by the industrial areas, the existing hydel power generated by the State

is sufficient for domestic use. The state is self-sufficient if there are no major power consuming industries. Research should be conducted as to how much the state gains from these industries in terms of local employment etc. We need pragmatic policy decisions to identify what types of industries we should allow. We should go for Green Development like Tourism, cottage/small scale industries, I-T etc., which will generate local employment and conserve the environment. We may not need the big Umngot Hydel Project. We should abandon it. Rather we should encourage small micro hydel projects, solar or wind projects. Why wait for public outcry when common sense does not warrant it?

Yours etc,
Torist Mark,
Via email

Seeking relaxations on Covid protocols

Editor
With reference to Govt Notification dated May 6, 2021 (ST May 9, 2021) amongst other things, it is stipulated that the burial/cremation of Covid infected dead bodies is to be completed the same day or latest by 2:00 PM of the following day. In this connection, we are aware that once a Covid patient dies in a hospital, the family members have no say at what time or how long will it take for the hospital authorities to release the dead for burial/cremation. In one instance, a Covid patient

died at 09.45 PM on May 14, 2021 at NEIGRIHMS. The family members of the deceased requested the undersigned at around 11:00 PM of the same day to permit for the burial, as it is mandated by their custom to bury the deceased. The burial permission was duly granted. The following day, the relatives/neighbour of the bereaved family completed digging of the grave as per protocol, by 12:30 PM and waited for the mortuary van to come with the dead body. After a prolonged wait the body arrived only around 08.00 PM. The mortuary van came and dropped the corpse in the pit and it left. It took another one hour or so to cover up the grave. This delay is perhaps due to shortage of mortuary vans due to rising number of casualties these days. Such situations may also happen elsewhere. Hence the authorities concerned are requested to suitably modify the above clause in the protocol

Yours etc,
Krishna Chettri
General Secretary
Gorkha Samshan Ghat,
Shillong-2

No memory lapse this!

Editor,
Sometimes, especially during the ongoing tense situation to get something to relax or laugh about is a treat to me, especially when it comes from people like Christine Marak and Samson Sangma. I have never met nor heard about him yet he questions my memory lapse in his letter (ST May 17, 2021).

Samson should read The Shillong Times of May 7,

2021. Nowhere is it written that Capt Sangma, Mr Mody Marak and Dr Milton Sangma were UDP Presidents. The former two were ex-Presidents of the APHLC and the latter the former President of HPU.

If Samson does not know and is interested to know then he should refer to the Supreme Court Ruling of 1977, to see that Capt. Sangma himself admitted that he was APHLC President until November 16, 1976 the day when he dissolved the APHLC at Mendipathar. I doubt whether Samson has memory at all if he does not even know his own leaders from Garo Hills, because when the former two passed away, UDP was not even born. Only Dr Milton is alive so the writer may inquire from him, whether or not he was the first President of HPU.

Both HPU and UDP are offshoots of the original APHLC in the course of dissolutions and amalgamations. About the two leaders' connection with UDP in any manner, he himself brought it up out of the blue. About Mr Mody Marak losing in 1978 from Tura, please visit Tura and find out from his relations and our leaders, whether or not he was APHLC President after the above 1976 dissolution. Let Samson know also that Mr Mody Marak was the first CEM of GHADC and he was APHLC candidate in the above 1978 election.

Yours etc.,
BM Lanong,
Via email

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*"Education is a progressive discovery
of our own ignorance."*

--- Will Durant

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No. 272

SHILLONG, THURSDAY, MAY 20, 2021

Mamata on the defensive

THE ugly events unfolding in Kolkata, West Bengal's capital, show that the BJP will not leave Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee alone even after she outwitted the saffron party and won a landslide victory in the recent assembly polls. The arrest of several senior leaders of the Trinamool Congress including two ministers by the CBI in the Narada tapes case must be seen as the beginning of a new season of offensives against Banerjee by the establishment in Delhi. A question is, why else did the CBI wait for five years to proceed in the matter even when there were sufficient grounds to suspect wrongdoing?

On the BJP's part, the party having suffered a major loss of face in the state, wants to keep the heat on Banerjee if only to keep her under control. The saffron party's strategy to take on the CM at the political turf has failed as it had no "local" leader to hold aloft to match the stature of Banerjee. Suvendu Adhikari has not built a clout that could remotely equal the CM's though the former minister floored her in his own turf in Nandigram. At the same time, it is a sad commentary on the part of the CBI that it vacillated over the matter for so long. In the meantime, some of the accused had crossed over to the BJP. Adhikari, for one. Video-tapes had clearly shown several top TMC functionaries taking bribes in a sting operation by the Narada News team operating in the guise of potential investors. Fact is, such bribe-taking is common today and spans across state governments.

Corruption is widespread because agencies like the CBI are taking things easy, its officials acting as "caged birds" of the powers-that-be at the Centre. Other investigation apparatuses like the Enforcement Directorate as also Vigilance agencies at the state and central levels are mostly serving no purpose other than dragging investigations which ultimately reach nowhere but become a mere tool for harassing opposition parties and governments. Punishing the guilty is an oddity in Indian situations today where powerful politicians and bureaucrats are involved. Investigations into another big scam involving the TMC in Bengal, the Sharada chit fund scam, also have not produced results. Those who lost money in the ponzy scam will only have to grin and bear with it. Narendra Modi came to power in 2014 with a promise to clean the Augean stables but the grim reality is that he did too little about this in the past seven years.

Letters to the Editor

Barik Point: PWD Complex/ Covid Centre

Editor,
Numerous write ups and letters have appeared in your esteemed daily in the not so recent past concerning the utilisation of the PWD Complex at Barik Point. There were initial proposals by the Government to have a park which personally, I have nothing against except that I feel the site is not ideally located. Eventually the Park proposal changed to a shopping mall which was not well received by a substantial section of the public and has been kept in abeyance since.

For over a year now our country and the rest of the world have been badly hit or mauled by the Covid 19 pandemic which has infected millions of people. The complaint from a majority of countries is the same - a shortage of hospital space and connected paraphernalia to effectively treat the infected. So hospitals is the need of the hour for Meghalaya or for that matter Shillong and East Khasi Hills in particular which have been recording the highest daily cases of infections and deaths in the State. Your daily of May 10 last, mentioned that two prefab hospitals at a cost of Rs 5 crores are coming up at Pasteur Institute and ISBT Mawiong, Mawlai. This is appreciated but they are temporary measures to deal with the immediate emergency. It is here that I would like to suggest to the Government that the Barik Point

PWD complex be utilised for building a permanent new modern hospital be it termed as an extension or an annexe to the present Civil Hospital which is already congested and lacks the latest equipment. A new 4 to 5 storied state of the art hospital with a well-planned underground parking area and earmarking at least 2 to 3 floors for Covid cases will go a long way in boosting our fight against this vicious virus which is here to stay.

The Government may give an urgent thought to this proposal and get expert opinion on it. Another state-of-the-art hospital is the crying need of the hour and not a shopping mall.

Yours etc.,
JM Pariat,
Shillong

Of Covid vaccination

Editor,
Ever since the two contemporary elixirs - Covishield & Covaxin were approved in India, the administration had the responsibility to roll out a successful vaccination drive for the entire population. With over 4 lakh people administered with at least the first dose so far in four months and over 500-600 daily new cases in recent times, the scenario appears to be a complex puzzle. The demand and supply of vaccines along with wastage percentages (5.67%; 4th Rank in the country), the scheme of priority, and availability become important factors. Does it mean we would take around 27 to 28 months to inoculate the entire state of Meghalaya?

The number of COVID cases and deaths due to it is a cause of grave concern. Presently India stands number two in the total number of COVID cases in the world after USA. True that we have a large population and so the number is high, but even a proportionate number comparison with other countries in South Asia is worrisome. We come from the same ethnic background, have similar culture, food habits, nutritional status and have the same level of inequities in income as well as disparities in the access to the healthcare system.

As on 17 May 2021, out of a population of 139 crore India has recorded 2.5 crore cases and 2.78 lakhs deaths. Pakistan with a population of 22.5 crore has recorded 8.80 lakh cases and deaths of 19,752. Bangladesh has a population of 16.6 crore and 7.8 lakh cases and the number of deaths due to COVID is 12,181. Likewise, Nepal with population is 2.9 crores has 4.6 lakh cases and deaths of 5,215. Sri Lankan population is 2.14 crore and has 1.45 lakh cases and 981 deaths.

As per the above figures, India recorded 1,812 cases and 20 deaths for each one lakh population. In comparison, the number of cases in Pakistan is 393 cases and 9 deaths, and Bangladesh 470 cases and 7 deaths. Nepal has 1,569 cases and 17 deaths per lakh of population. Sri Lanka has 675 cases and 5 deaths per lakh.

During the second surge there is unprecedented increase in the number of COVID cases in our country. As on 17 May, we recorded 2.60 lakh cases or 19 cases per lakh population, Pakistan 3,232 cases or 1.4 cases, Bangladesh recorded 698 cases or 0.42 cases, Nepal recorded 9,198 cases which is 31 cases per lakh, Sri Lanka recorded 2,456 cases, that is 11 cases per lakh of population.

This data from www.worldometers.info indicates a comparison in the proportion of population being taken ill of COVID. As on 17 May 2021, India had nearly 13 times more cases than Pakistan, 44 times more

Irrational govt policies to blame

India fares worst in Covid crisis in South Asia

By Dr Arun Mitra

than Bangladesh, 0.60 times of Nepal and 1.6 times of Sri Lanka.

If this data is to be believed then we have to very seriously introspect into the causes of such a catastrophic situation. Countries which we have been calling to be far behind us in economy have fared better in COVID management till date.

It is acknowledged globally that India has high level of expertise in medical science and has several hospitals with advanced care facilities compared to anywhere in the world. As a result people have been coming to our country for medical treat-

ment (medical tourism) from across the world including the developed countries for the last over 20 years.

"The government completely ignored the advice of the experts in December 2019 and then in January & February 2020 when they were busy in welcoming the US President and later allegedly in engineering communal violence in North East Delhi."

We also have good number of pharmaceutical companies, and have been supplying medicines and vaccines to other countries including Europe. We have already fought several national calamities successfully and even launched the biggest immunization programme of Pulse Polio in the world since 1994. We also successfully managed Plague in 1994 in Surat. With some ifs and buts, we also fulfilled health needs of our people during national disasters like earthquakes, tsunami, cyclones, floods, landslides and drought in the last few decades. This has been possible through the health planning in the post-independence period. Our health personnel took active part in developing national health missions like Revised T B Control Programme, National Leprosy Control Programme etc. This means we have sufficient scientific knowledge.

Then where did we fault? The above cited successes were met with through a coordinated effort between the polity, medical personnel, and concerned citizens groups. But the present day disaster is of catastrophic nature which occurred because of skewed priorities and lack of scientific temper. Science has never been the centre of focus during the on-going pandemic. Political interests took over science in managing the pandemic. Ironically, a public health issue was never discussed with public health experts or epidemiologists. All decision making was done in a totally centralized non transparent manner by the Prime Minister himself without any consultation with medical personnel, economists, civil society, elected representatives or even his colleagues in the cabinet.

The government completely ignored the advice of the experts in December 2019 and then in January & February 2020 when they were busy in welcoming the US President and later allegedly in engineering communal violence in North East Delhi. It was only in March 2020 that the Prime Minister suddenly woke up to impose a lockdown without consulting any expert. That caused immense damage to the economy of the country and livelihood of the people. Instead of talking with seriousness, he raised gimmicks like banging thalis and clapping etc. Unscientific ways such as use of cow urine and cow dung to control the disease or perform yagya to push corona virus away were propagated through his bandwagons; unfortunately some of the doctors and scientists too were part of it. The Health Minister, who is a trained person in modern scientific medicine and at a very prestigious position in the WHO, propagated non-

control the narrative. Israel has often leaned on Hamas' use of 'Human Shields' to justify strikes on targets where civilians live and work. What arguments like this do though is ignore that even if Hamas did have an office in that building, the people who lived there did not choose it as neighbour. But the Israeli Defence Forces provided no evidence to back up the claims. This time though, the voices of opposition to Israeli actions and US policies on the long running conflict has reached relatively higher sound decibels. The open display of the Palestinian flag by two members of English FA Cup-winning Leicester city football club at London's hallowed Wembley Stadium is part of a riding chorus. Israel's government had become too comfortable with the idea that it can mislead the foreign media without a corresponding change in the overwhelmingly credulous way it has traditionally been covered.

The result of the current "intifada" has pricked the balloon of Israel's constant attempt at presenting itself as a perpetual victim of some imaginary horde of Arabs and Muslims, which is no longer paying dividends. Yours etc.,
Advocate M Haque,
Shillong-6

proven drug like the Coronil of Baba Ramdev. He even advised people to eat chocolate, something reminiscent of the French princess advising people to eat cakes if they do not get bread.

As a consequence despite the briefings by the scientists about the upcoming 2nd wave, the government was totally unprepared for the second wave because of pre-occupation in elections and Kumbh Mela. In any health emergency, database is important to plan for the present and also the future. But the data of the number of people taken ill and deceased was purposefully fudged. This led to complacency in the society. The government's acts added to such complacency in the minds of people. The Prime Minister was full of self-praise in the months of January and February even at the international forums.

There was no definite strategy about immunisation programme. That is why the vaccination schedule is being changed every now and then. The public sector units in pharmaceuticals and vaccine production have been closed even though they have a praiseworthy track record of participation in national health programmes. We failed to procure sufficient number of vaccines for our people on time.

Not a word of empathy for those taken seriously ill or deceased from the mouth of Prime Minister, who is always vocal even on trivial matters. The government is not ready to divert funds allocated for Central Vista project to the pandemic. Any one questioning the approach of the government is being threatened with prosecution. This is against all norms of democratic values of our great nation.

Health services in the last few years have been corporatized. That is why even the middle classes have been feeling the pinch of corporatized healthcare. Only public health services with more emphasis on the preventive aspect and allocation of sufficient budget for primary, secondary and tertiary prevention is the way out for future. (IPA Service)

Economy tumbles. 1 Crore jobs lost since January Government institutions peddling a pipe dream

By Subodh Varma

The number of employed persons in India plummeted from about 40 crore in January to 39 crore in April 2021. That's a loss of one crore employed persons, one of the steepest falls ever in four months, barring the brutal devastation caused by last year's complete country-wide lockdown in April-May 2020. This emerges from latest estimates of employment from the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE).

January was actually a high in terms of employment, mainly because of demand in agriculture. As harvesting of wheat and other rabi crop got completed, jobs in agriculture disappeared, leading to a steep fall in employed people. The rest of the economy obviously is unable to absorb anybody. The job situation has not shown any significant recovery since the lockdown last year. In fact, the past two years have seen corroding unemployment that has damaged family budgets, pushed down living standards and - as a dire side-effect - pushed down wage levels.

This grim picture of losses in existing jobs goes hand in hand with increasing unemployment rate. Jobless numbers have zoomed up since April and touched a staggering 9 per cent recently, as per quick estimates put out by CMIE.

Remember that all those who lost jobs are not necessarily reflected in unemployed numbers - some simply stop looking for work for a few months, and are thus counted out of the labour force.

On the other side, the rise in unemployment rate does reflect the effect of the pandemic, subsequent devastation in terms of death and infection, and then the state-wise or regional lockdowns announced by the governments. At present, at least 26 states have lockdown-like restrictions of varying types. This has a direct impact on livelihoods, since the vast number of people is working in informal occupations, which get prohibited in such conditions.

The CMIE estimates suggest that the number of jobless persons actively looking for work was approaching 3.4 crore in April this year. Besides these, there are those discouraged jobless people who want to work but are not actively looking for it, knowing that jobs are difficult to find. Their numbers are estimated at 1.9 crore. So, the total number of jobless people willing to work adds up to a mind-numbing 5.3 crore in April 2021.

The number of people working in the rural job guarantee scheme stood at 2.1 crore in April 2021. Usually, there is a big jump in job seekers after April, as the summer kicks in and all agricultural work dries up. So, these numbers - already at very high level - are likely to increase in May and June. What is happening with the rest of the economy, besides agriculture? Why is it not able to absorb people? Actually, despite all the backslapping and applause, the Indian economy has never recovered from last year's lockdown. And, that is so because it had already gone into a slowdown in 2019 for reasons that had nothing to do with the pandemic.

In 2021, the second wave of COVID and the sub-national restrictions on activity, have given another jolt to the fumbling economy. While most professional rating agencies have downgraded their forecast about India's economic growth in the current year, there seems to be a view among government economists that the economy will not take that

big a hit as last year. This is based on the fact that most manufacturing activity in India is still permitted, and agricultural activity, too. Rabi harvest has been good, and as the pandemic spreads, harvesting has mostly been completed.

This is a pipe dream that is being peddled mostly by government and its institutions. Some features that define this second wave are: it is more deadly; it is affecting younger people more than before; and, it has spread to rural areas. These three factors alone are likely to cause a major hit to the economy. Here is how.

The severity of disease and its increased infectiousness has meant increased pressure on hospitals, which have been overwhelmed. The net result of this - and the shortage of oxygen, drugs, beds - has been far higher spending on treatment by families. This will have a very damaging effect on family budgets, which in turn means curtailed spending potential.

The younger population getting more affected means that more people in productive jobs will be sick, and given the jungle raj that prevails in terms of job security, this implies loss of earnings and likely loss of jobs too. This, in turn, again means less spending by families, as they sink under joblessness.

Increased infection in rural areas means a very large population is affected, and the virus is likely to go through its ebb and flow for a longer time.

All this put together means that people's buying power - their ability to spend - will get restricted, and whatever they have, will be focused on getting basic needs. Demand for goods, already low, will crash further. And, if there is no demand then industrial activity will also decline, as will various demand for services, including trade, restaurants etc., construction, tourism and so on. Just keeping manufacturing activity in the organised sector open is not going to help much. This decline, in turn, will cause more joblessness, and so the cycle will go into a tailspin. Just like it has been happening.

The only way out of this blind alley into which India is being led by the Modi government is to completely abandon last year's path of fiscal tight-fistedness and start spending money on the people. This applies to everything:
► Health and COVID management: Vaccines should be made free; treatment should be capped and made free as much as possible; money should immediately flow into building decentralised health infrastructure through central funding, etc.

► Universal and Expanded Public Distribution System (PDS): At least 10 kg additional foodgrain per family should be given out through a universalised PDS; the number of items in PDS should be increased, like Kerala's food kit.

► Financial Support: Cash should be given to all needy families. Trade Unions and farmers organisations, as well as Left parties have demanded at least Rs.7,500 per month to all non-income tax paying families.

Besides this, government should provide financial aid to state governments who are actually fighting the COVID battle. If need be, the government should raise resources by taxing the rich sections of Indian society, or raise loans. But unless these measures are taken boldly, India faces a grim and devastating future. (IPA Service)
Courtesy: The Leaflet

control the narrative.

Israel has often leaned on Hamas' use of 'Human Shields' to justify strikes on targets where civilians live and work. What arguments like this do though is ignore that even if Hamas did have an office in that building, the people who lived there did not choose it as neighbour. But the Israeli Defence Forces provided no evidence to back up the claims. This time though, the voices of opposition to Israeli actions and US policies on the long running conflict has reached relatively higher sound decibels. The open display of the Palestinian flag by two members of English FA Cup-winning Leicester city football club at London's hallowed Wembley Stadium is part of a riding chorus. Israel's government had become too comfortable with the idea that it can mislead the foreign media without a corresponding change in the overwhelmingly credulous way it has traditionally been covered.

The result of the current "intifada" has pricked the balloon of Israel's constant attempt at presenting itself as a perpetual victim of some imaginary horde of Arabs and Muslims, which is no longer paying dividends.

Yours etc.,
Priyanka Surana
Shillong -2

Israel targets media

Editor,
Israel by bombarding media houses in Gaza, wants to make sure that whatever link the Palestinian people have with the outside world is severed, and by doing so, Israel can continue its propaganda campaign. IDF has deliberately targeted media facilities in order to disrupt coverage of the human suffering in Gaza and while advanced warning of the bombing allowed the journalists who worked there to escape with their lives, that's all they could do. Their valuable equipment and records were lost. The international Federation of Journalists lauded the attack as the latest example of a pattern of "systematic targeting of media in Gaza in an attempt to try to

control the narrative.

Israel has often leaned on Hamas' use of 'Human Shields' to justify strikes on targets where civilians live and work. What arguments like this do though is ignore that even if Hamas did have an office in that building, the people who lived there did not choose it as neighbour. But the Israeli Defence Forces provided no evidence to back up the claims. This time though, the voices of opposition to Israeli actions and US policies on the long running conflict has reached relatively higher sound decibels. The open display of the Palestinian flag by two members of English FA Cup-winning Leicester city football club at London's hallowed Wembley Stadium is part of a riding chorus. Israel's government had become too comfortable with the idea that it can mislead the foreign media without a corresponding change in the overwhelmingly credulous way it has traditionally been covered.

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Yours etc.,
Advocate M Haque,
Shillong-6

Nurses most poorly paid professionals

Editor,
International Nurses Day was celebrated a few days ago. In the past, their work usually went unnoticed or

unappreciated but since the pandemic hit the world, people have started realising the selfless sacrifices nurses put into their work. Some weeks ago, I saw a discussion about this current pandemic on a mainstream news channel and all the panelists were either nurses or people from the nursing fraternity. It's heartening to see nurses getting the recognition which is long overdue. Be it the first or second world war, or this current pandemic, nurses have been in the forefront when it comes to saving precious lives in such helpless and precarious situations. But when it comes to remuneration, nurses are still highly underpaid. It's common knowledge that nurses are paid peanuts. Apart from the lucky few who are employed by the central or state government, the vast majority of nurses work in private hospitals. The high pay disparity between nurses and other medical professionals needs to be addressed. Last year the nurses in a reputed hospital in the country's capital came into the limelight when they went on a strike primarily because of anomalies in their pay fixation. I was surprised to know that even the pay of nurses working in such reputed hospital is not at par with other well paid professionals. So it is imperative upon the hospital authorities all over the country to pay nurses according to the strenuous effort they put into their work.

Yours etc.,
Gary Marbaniang,
Via email

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"The risk of a wrong decision is preferable to the terror of indecision."

— Maimonides

The Shillong Times

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More Covid deaths

THE national Covid scenario in relation to specific cities, states and regions remains grim though the daily infection rates are coming down in the face of lockdowns and such extreme steps. Yet, a more worrisome trend is of the steady increase in fatalities while new challenges in the form of black fungus and even the more-deadly white fungus infections are surfacing. All these are straining the health care sector that has stretched its resources to the maximum for over a year. Their patience is wearing thin. It is time to morally equip the staff and extend them additional care and support.

The Covid-linked death numbers, which ran at the rate of over 4,000 a day for the past several days, has slipped narrowly by over 100 on Thursday. This is small consolation and hints at the long road ahead before the nation can rest or relax. As of now, six states are bearing the brunt — Maharashtra, Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh and Delhi. The daily infection rate, as on Thursday, was of around 2,77,000, despite the lockdown in these states — set against the 4,14,000 daily infection cases on May 7, the largest daily tally for India so far.

Lockdown is easy. The hard part is to find the means and resources to inoculate the population at the earliest. The young lot is also drawn into the new phase of vaccination from May 1. On the ground, the rise in the fatality rate among the youths reinforces the need to expedite the process of vaccination. The Centre aims to procure 267 crore of C-vaccine doses by the end of this year, which should suffice to inoculate all of the adult population. This should reduce the present unbearable pressure on the health-care institutions. By the middle of 2022, the youths too could get vaccinated and chances are that we shall breathe easy in a year's time from now. The struggle on the oxygen front is easing. And the issues of ventilators and ICU beds will need to be addressed with a great sense of urgency even as mobilization of resources will be difficult for the government on its own. The way forward is to involve the private sector to higher levels. Perceptions about Covid spread continue to change among the scientific community as is evident from the guideline issued by the Union Health Ministry on Thursday. It stated that smaller aerosol particles can be carried in the air to a distance of 10 metres. This should further raise our alert levels and diligence in observing Covid protocols of mask wearing at all times.

Time to ask what we can do as citizens

By Patricia Mukhim

These are traumatic times. Social media — our only mode of connecting with friends and relatives near and far has become an obituary page with someone losing a family member or friend or colleague. As a media person I have spent years critiquing governments for their acts of omission and commission. In fact, for most of us, the Government is the only bashing board. We swear at politicians and bureaucrats because we look up to them as a cure to every ailment. We continue to do so even now and social media is rife with memes of politicians and government officials. But now is the time to stop bashing up people on social media for own failure to rise to the occasion. Too many spend too much time on social media, sometimes into the wee hours and wake up late thereby subjecting their biological and mental systems to abuse. Lockdowns are a drag but they are a necessity to break the chain of infection. We cannot punish ourselves merely because of the temporary (hopefully) suspension of socializing. This is a time to think beyond the self and to ask, "What can I do to help?"

Needless to say there are far too many that need our help and attention in these difficult times. While it is fine for the middle class to tell people, "Stay at Home; Stay Safe," for too many that interprets into a job loss and suspension of income. It's as tragic as that! And no, I am not against the lockdown because it is the only safety valve we have at the moment. We need to cut the infection rate and the death rates. We don't need to be told just how fragile our healthcare system in this country and our own state is. The greatest fear of those who run the government is that this fragile system might collapse due to the sheer weight which is far beyond its carrying capacity.

The daily number of infections, the rising number of deaths of fairly younger people sends us into panic mode. And while we may put up a brave face so that

younger members of our family don't panic, we'd be lying if we said we said we are stoical about death. The panic is real and after a while comes the panic fatigue. On a given day we are overcome by a variety of emotions and it is draining. So how much more difficult it is for those who are managing the Covid crises up close. Think of the Deputy Commissioners who have to be on their feet and do a damage control by the hour. Suddenly a whole cluster of hamlets test positive and the rush to address that calamity begins only to be told that a second and third cluster needs salvaging. The District Administrators and their team are truly the first respondents in terms of managing not just the health exigencies but the entire economic and commercial eco-system. I am sure they don't even get a sound sleep at night burdened as they are by the weight of their responsibilities.

The politicians we take for granted and go hammer and tongs at are also as frightened and worried as all of us are. They are as affected by the deaths and infection rates. The young Chief Minister who suddenly has to shoulder such a major responsibility is human too and is liable to slip up. It would be cruel to expect him and the Government to reach out to every corner where people need help. At this juncture citizens too have a responsibility to put their shoulders to the wheel.

Let us place on record our deep gratitude to the doctors and nurses that work tirelessly in Covid wards. This must be the most trying time for them and their families. They must be overwhelmed by panic fatigue. The fear of being carriers of the Covid virus to their families must make them feel vulnerable. What would we do without these angels of mercy and yet we seldom if ever express our gratitude to them. Without these selfless workers the hundreds of Covid patients would have been left unattended.

Yet amidst the encircled

gloom, there are heart-warming stories of groups that extend voluntary help to the needy. I know of a professor from NEHU and his wife who have been providing breakfast to the nurses of a private hospital and who aim to do this for a month until someone else takes turn to do so. There are groups that have offered to provide food to Covid patients and their families. There are those doing home delivery of groceries without a profit motive. The list is endless. Yes there is no dearth selfless; humanitarian philanthropists in this city. Some like the Sikh community have quickly converged to provide oxygen langars; others to provide food or medicines or just to arrange ambulances or hospital beds. When Shillong is tested it always rises to the fore.

Those in the Government working round the clock to come up with the best strategies to contain the Covid infection must be fatigued. Yet fatigue is a luxury they can't afford and I hope we understand that and are more forgiving of lapses for there are bound to be some in this jungle of confusion. The best way forward is to bring an issue to the notice of the district administrators. They will be grateful if a matter of urgency is brought to their notice. Indeed, we have to be the eyes and ears of the government.

In these times the book "Think Again" by Adam Grant affords the reader with the opportunity to gain some learning curves. Grant, an organizational psychologist at Wharton explores what goes wrong when smart people are too righteous and is in favour of intellectual humility. Those in the bureaucracy are there because of their intelligence and skills but often miss out on the chance to relearn and unlearn.

Grant says research finds that the best people at making predictions aren't those who are smartest but rather those who weigh evidence dispassionately and are willing to change their minds. Simi-

larly, there are maths wizards that excel in interpreting data but only so long as the topic is banal, like skin rashes. Studies found that when these wizards were asked to interpret data on a topic they were passionate about, they blundered. Passion swamped expertise. Grant also found that there are a number of biases at play, including the, "I'm not biased" bias. That's when we believe we're more objective than others. This particularly traps intelligent people. Grant says these biases not only prevent us from applying our intelligence but can become a weapon against truth.

In the bureaucracy there is a tendency for linear thinking and for relying on the tried and tested. But Grant says intelligence not only the ability to think and learn but to rethink and unlearn. And this requires another set of cognitive skills. It is of course normal to lean in favour of the comfort of conviction over the discomfort of doubt. Often, we listen to opinions that make us feel good, instead of ideas that make us think hard. We see disagreement as a threat to our egos, rather than an opportunity to learn. We tend to surround ourselves with people who agree with our conclusions, when we should be gravitating toward those who challenge our thought process. I say mea-culpa to this! Grant says this makes us too much like preachers defending our sacred beliefs, or legal eagles proving the other side wrong or our politicians campaigning for approval — and too little like scientists searching for truth. Intelligence is not a cure here. On the contrary it can even be a curse. Being good at thinking can make us worse at rethinking. The brighter we are, the blinder to our own limitations we can become. Grant conclusively says, 'humility is often a more effective persuasive tool.'

The moral if any here is: Every person is capable of thinking outside the box and perhaps providing answers to some of the complex problems staring at us today where what's tried and tested no longer works.

Imploding health infrastructure destroys credibility

Pandemic India's peculiar medical and political binary

By Revathi Siva Kumar

April was the cruellest month. But then again, was it? May seemed crueler for the junta.

In spring, the mad second COVID-19 wave tore into our lungs and lives and raged with about 4 lakh cases and 4,000 deaths a day. Some cheering voices say that there has been a slight dip recently. Yet India topped the world with a record number of fresh COVID cases and fatalities yet again in the past week.

April was especially cruel to the ruling party. It lost the assembly elections that it had strained so hard to wrest. Yet May got worse, as Prime Minister Narendra Modi's approval rating plummeted in popularity. So the main, looming fear of bad press shrouded the government, with a global loss of face and the Prime Minister's hubris and governance failures exposed.

The pandemic thus created a medical and political binary, with both domains sharing a common factor — calamity. But while the Centre is gasping under the twin body blow on the nation's health and on the party's image, the warriors against both have diverged. The medical crisis is being battled by brave corona warriors, volunteers and the fragile health systems, while the political fallout is being addressed by a frightened

secular virus, is not a serial killer. It cannot evade blame for not arming the country against it.

The National Executive Council, the apex decision-making body under the National Disaster Management Act, was constituted in 2020. Yet, the Council did not meet at all between November and March to strategize and take action. Nor did it analyse the predicament or come up with solutions even after March, when the second wave had begun to well and truly raise its menace throughout the country.

But the health crisis certainly kicked the ruling party to spring into action — just to prevent its own political death rattle. Hence, it has gone into propaganda mode, which it excels at. Legally, if not ethically, attacking and accusing anyone even remotely connected with the pandemic. It has called into action its lightning brahmastra of fake news, blaming the public for breaking rules, accusing opposition parties of non-cooperation, and the media for spreading negativity.

In 'unforgivable West Bengal, All India Trinamool Congress workers granted the BJP an almost unexpected boon of attacks on its workers and headquarters. Hence, through a legally sanctioned return gift, the BJP flooded us with a misin-



formation campaign against "violent" Team Mamma.

The BJP has slammed foreign media for calling out the government's inaction and parlayed with social media groups, such as Facebook and Twitter, to shut dissenters up. Officials from the Union Ministry of Information and Broadcasting have pounded video conferences to rope in senior government officials who could silence critics. It also began its barrage of Hindutva messaging, spinning its "positive" act of restoring its image as the slayer of the 'other' and the protector of Hinduism.

The government's worry thus goes beyond the health crisis triggered by the pandemic, the economic tragedy, or the deaths of people. It is frightened about its political interests jeopardized in the harvesting of human souls. Meanwhile, the victim of the appalling tragedy, the junta, is a clueless headless chicken. As it turns hopefully towards the government, it asks: Is the Centre planning some big-bang action in a deep, dark, secret board room? What are the steps it is plotting and planning to take? Will it lead citizens out of the bog?

Some people see that the thrust of the ruling party's present efforts is not related to helping the public as much as it is to make it appear like it is helping the public. They can see through the danse macabre and understand that tragedy might be relentless for people, but the panicky government is working only to pre-empt its own demise.

Yet, many, many more who were originally stupefied are falling all over again for the lawful lying and religious calls. The vision of a Hindu nation, with Modi as its brand ambassador, is the intoxicating poison that again pulls volunteers to cheerfully step in — and die. (IPA Service)

Courtesy: The Leaflet

Letters to the Editor

Home quarantine impractical

Editor, We all know that home quarantine or isolation means that a person should stay in a well-ventilated single-room preferably with an attached/separate toilet. Further, if another family member needs to stay in the same room, it's advisable to maintain a distance of at least one meter between the two without sharing personal items with others in the household.

This is good advice but hardly practicable for the large majority of citizens who live in small houses along with elders that have co-morbid conditions like hypertension, cardiovascular disease, renal disease etc. Most of those told to isolate themselves share same household items eat in the same kitchen, share the same toilet and other personal items with other family members as well. Those who have tested positive therefore infected others in the family. This is the reason for the widespread infection in the second wave.

Further, home quarantine demands that all surfaces that are likely to be touched are regularly disinfected and sanitized. They include tabletops, doorknobs, handles, etc. But is that even possible or affordable for most in our society? Hence, with a heavy heart I plead with the authorities to discourage home quarantine. We need Covid Care Centres now more than ever before to isolate returnees and those recuperating from Covid. There are school and col-

lege hostels, hotels, schools, stadiums etc., for Covid victims or those exposed to the infection. To contain the pandemic the District administration and the Community institutions have to work in close coordination.

Yours etc.,
Iahmi Khyriem
Chutwakhu Jowal

Spare a thought for healthcare workers

Editor, In these last few days, I've had the opportunity to interact with some healthcare workers in a private hospital in Shillong and got to know and see upfront the conditions in which they are working during the current surge of the pandemic. The unrelenting rise of Covid-19 positive cases in Shillong has necessitated hospitals to increase Covid wards and many of the admitted patients are requiring intensive care. Healthcare workers are experiencing an unprecedented level of physical and emotional stress and exhaustion every day. Yesterday, one of the nurses narrated how he was able to have dinner at 2 am due to the demand of attending to Covid patients. Many doctors and nurses in this hospital are now staying in makeshift arrangements at this hospital campus due to increased cases and for the safety of their families. In doing their duties, these health workers are risking their lives every day in this Covid war zone. Acknowledging this invaluable service by the healthcare

Yours etc.,
Sumarbin Umdor,
Via email

On closure of markets

Editor, The Government's decision to shut down two major markets in urban Shillong due to violations of Covid safety protocols by shoppers is partially acceptable. However, this action could also lead to negative consequences which the Government has not envisaged. During any crisis, be it war, a civil uprising or in the present case a pandemic, the most basic survival kit apart from a home is food. A person will go to any lengths to be able to buy food to feed the family and to survive the crisis. The decision to shut down the markets will result in people straying to other areas beyond Shillong where the pandemic has not touched and result in spreading the infection in areas presently declared as pandemic free zones or green zones. If smaller villages are overcrowded it will again violate Covid prevention protocols.

Another problem is that people from the city who stray to these small markets have the propensity to hoard and buy off everything they can lay their hands on. Shopkeepers in these communities will never stock more than what people in these communities demand, especially if the commodities are perishable ones. Hence while the city folks can buy up everything there will be nothing left for the people residing in these villages.

If the Government desires that people do not stray beyond their daily shopping areas, it should reconsider opening these two markets and also encourage spaced roadside sale of essential

commodities which will result in shoppers spreading to multiple roadside shops instead of accumulating in a few shops permitted by the government.

Yours etc.,
J. Paul & S. Rynjah,
Via email

Let's fight together

Editor, The citizens of Meghalaya have seen a beacon of light in the challenging times as MLAs of different political parties joined hands yesterday to fight the second wave of COVID and ramping up of the infrastructure to tackle any probable occurrence of the third wave of the deadly pandemic. The formation of the "Political alliance" gives a clear signal; a signal to the politicians at the Centre and some states that the priority in the present times must be to maintain "Political Unity" and not to create a Political turmoil. However, following COVID appropriate behaviour by citizens is the "self-administered vaccine" to flatten the COVID curve. Though it's an uphill task for the frontline workers and the doctors to control the spread of the disease, I would urge them to carry on their work with dedication and selflessness keeping in mind that history is always enriched by the legacy of those who rendered their tireless service for the welfare of humanity. Moreover, various organisations and the village chiefs can implement the observation made by John F. Kharshiing, Chairman of the Grand Council of Chiefs of Meghalaya i.e. doing door to door campaigning in their villages to control the spread of the virus. It

is expected that the Centre doesn't just beat the drums of "Parivartan" but distribute vaccines to the states in a time bound manner.

Yours etc.,
Partha Pratim Duarah
Via email

Harrowing time to get vaccine slot

Editor, Those of us who have taken the first dose of vaccine went to the health centre directly and were vaccinated the same day. We were asked to come after 28 days for the second dose. Now we are being informed that for the second dose we are to come after 12 to 16 weeks and book the slot online. I simply wonder at the wisdom of the government. How does it think that it's feasible for all citizens to apply online to get their respective covid jabs done, be it first or second? How many citizens are so tech-savvy as to work competently online and to book a slot? Is it not ironic that with most of the citizens being uneducated the Government should insist on citizens applying for the vaccine online? Only a fraction of the population know what CoWin is and much less the procedure to operate it.

Let the system be simplified by involving the Dorbars and volunteers locality-wise or for that matter a door to door visit would be easier to accomplish this gigantic task.

Yours etc.,
P P Choudhury
Shillong-11

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"Our dead are never dead to us,
until we have forgotten them."

--- George Eliot

The Shillong Times

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Bickering about meat

MEGHALAYA has a peculiar political culture where daily briefings on developments vis-a-vis the Covid infection and other public-related information such as lockdowns etc., are chaired by the Deputy Chief Minister instead of the Health Minister. In all other states, the Health Ministers assisted by a team from the Health Department that include medical specialists give their daily briefings to the media, in case health related questions need to be answered. It is only in Delhi that Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal fields all questions and he has done his job commendably other than the faux-pas about the Singapore variant of Covid entering India through air travel from Singapore, hence the need to stop air travel to and from that country. Naturally this created a diplomatic flutter with India's Minister for External Affairs and the Indian diplomatic corp having to pacify their Singapore counterpart saying Kejriwal does not speak for India.

Meghalaya seems to be on the same slippery slope as far as press briefings go. Last week the Deputy CM when asked about the difficulties that daily wagers face and whether the Government has a bail-out package for them, replied instead that people should cut meat out of their diets and stick to rice and vegetables. This is akin to what Marie Antoinette the French Queen during the French Revolution told starving peasants when they said they had no bread to eat. The Queen told them to eat cake instead. This biting sarcasm finally led to her execution. The Deputy CM has later apologized but by then all kinds of memes have circulated over social media. This demeans the stature of the Deputy CM who is no longer taken seriously.

On another note, perhaps the Deputy CM is also blissfully unaware that Meghalaya has a huge chunk of people earning their livelihoods from butchery. They have been groaning under the weight of livelihoods loss since the regular tranche of beef cattle coming from Assam is now largely diverted to Bangladesh. If beef, which used to be the poor person's protein has now slipped out of the palate, it is a cause of concern that the Government ought to address instead of giving people unsolicited advice to turn vegetarian. After the travel restrictions due to the pandemic, beef is now in short supply and prices have jumped up, thereby making it unaffordable for ordinary mortals. Granted that red meat may have dropped off the menu of most adults but children and young people need their quota of protein that beef and other meats provide. Needless to say chicken and pork are not a staple for many here. Government needs to address the issue on two counts (a) ensure regular supply of beef cattle because of its nutritional value for most households (b) exercise its minds on helping butchers sustain their livelihoods.

Death and suffering in the pandemic

By Albert Thyriang

Death is inevitable. It is the surest eventuality. John Donne might have chided death not to be proud. Saint Paul of the Bible may question, "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" but death is a reality we have to face. Only 'when', 'where' and 'how' are hidden. The last day will arrive. The last breath will come.

For this generation the worst has been the last one year or so. We have seen deaths during COVID-19 pandemic more than ever before. The coffins in mortuaries, the long lines of military trucks heading to the burial grounds in Italy, USA and elsewhere, the unprecedented funeral pyres and dead bodies floating in the Ganges river in India are visuals associated with the cruelty of the COVID-19 pandemic. Perhaps there is no one left who does not personally know someone who has passed away due to the present outbreak. Like all other pandemics in the past the exact number of deaths will never be known. History will only estimate the loss of lives in millions.

Personally, I sadly came to know that a classmate succumbed to the disease in Kolkata last week. The 51 year old had just lost one of his family members two/three days before the gentle and kind soul went to his eternal rest. Another person whom this writer knew personally died in Tezpur. He was buried at 2.30 am the next day with 12/15 attendees. He was just 34. Hard breaking indeed!

A list compiled by the editor of a Christian weekly who keeps track of the deaths of priests and nuns due to Covid-19 in India tells that the second wave of the coronavirus pandemic has so far claimed 181 priests and 166 nuns. This is viewed as a great loss for the minority-within-a-minority community. It is also a reminder that is best to treat the virus from a scientific view point rather than discounting its hazard via religious lenses.

Yes death is inescapable but what Coronavirus has inflicted is untimely deaths. The first wave affected mostly the elderly. The second wave respects no age groups. Al-Jazeera, in one of its reports branded the India COVID crisis a 'graveyard of the young.' Reports from Bangalore (Karnataka), Tamil Nadu and Delhi inform that more

young people have become victims to the fast spreading virus. The trend is global. It is not just Indian. Unfortunately hospitalizations and deaths of younger people in their 30s, 40s, 50s and 60s has been one of the tragedies of COVID-19. Even in the first wave nearly half the COVID-19 victims in India were younger than 60. In Brazil thousands of children have died.

Another unspeakable thing COVID-19 has done is the dishonour to the dead. Due to lack of firewood or man power or whatever, dead bodies were dumped into the holiest river, the Ganges. This is shocking. We also see bodies were pushed by JCBs into the graves, loaded into hand pushers and even transported on cycles.

What happens after death? Where do the dead go after they leave their bodies? Or is there life after death? Religion may provide an answer. Near death experiences may give a clue. But this is not the time to philosophise. According to a yogi the state to which the soul passes on to the next life depends on the last few moments of his or her life. If an individual is serene before death he/she will continue in the serene state in the next life. But if the person is agitated before death probably he/she could be in a restless state even after the passing over. This makes sense because all loved ones try to facilitate a peaceful ending for a dying person. Their wishes are honoured to satisfy the dead person. It is painful therefore to see that many died agonisingly during the pandemic. Heart attack, stroke, panic and the unavailability of oxygen are contributing factors to many deaths in addition to the virus. To die due to the above causes is excruciating. That the state, the hospitals and the family members are helpless in easing the process of death is hurting.

Burial is a social obligation. All are invited to a funeral. The dead are given dignified funerals. COVID-19 has abruptly altered this practice. We can't attend funeral functions even of our dear ones. Suddenly volunteers have to perform the last rites. Unclaimed bodies have to be buried by unknown people. Corpses have to be fished out from river bodies. The unthinkable has happened.

Forced upon by COVID-19, dignity in death is most unfortunately suspended in many an instance.

Could we see a similar situation in Meghalaya? No one wishes to see a Delhi like disaster but the signs are worrying. 75 per cent of COVID-19 beds have already been occupied. In East Khasi Hills bed occupancy has reached 87 per cent. The number of beds in all 11 districts look to be highly insufficient in case of a worsening situation. Could we see hospitals overwhelmed in the coming days? Could we see mortuary vans waiting outside? Will there be acute shortage of oxygen? Would patients die in distress for want of a bed and oxygen? Will doctors have to choose which patients to treat? Could families be unable to dispose the remains of their dear ones? The other day a Youtube video alleged that a family refused to bury a new born and so entrusted the job to the Shillong Municipal Board. We do not know the circumstances. We can conveniently blame COVID-19.

Another inevitable effect of COVID-19 is suffering. The diagnosed and symptomatic patients, particularly those who have to be hospitalised and are shifted to ICU must be undergoing untold anguish. The pain is both physical and psychological. The suffering extends to family members, relatives and friends. In serious cases, even if recovery takes place, the road could be long. If a father, a mother, a husband, a wife, a son, a daughter loses the battle against the virus the pain is never diminished. We know it is not easy to be a widow, a widower, an orphan or someone who loses a son or daughter. COVID-19 has increased human suffering.

Again, this is not the right time to be philosophers. What is the meaning of suffering? Why do we have to suffer? Do we deserve to be infected with this virus? Even if we want to delve into these questions no satisfactory answers can be given. We may ignore these questions. We may even say that this pandemic will not last for ever. This pandemic will come to an end. But to get over this plague we need to suffer. By the fact that we are under lockdown we are inconvenienced. Medicos have suggested a state-wide lockdown

to contain the surge. This may be necessary.

Historians say that 4000 years ago the ancient kingdom of Mari (Syria) was ravaged by a mysterious disease. King Zimri-Lim ordered infected people in his palace to be placed in isolation in separate buildings and rooms. He extended the edict throughout his kingdom. Ultimately the contagious disease was contained. Lockdown, isolation and quarantine and other protocols cause fatigue but they are indispensable if the pandemic is to be beaten. Suffering for a greater and common good is meaningful. Suffering for a better future is worth every bit.

Deputy Chief Minister, Prestone Tynsong courted controversy when he advised Meghalayans to exclude meat from their diet during the lockdown. Hope the suggestion has not come from Hindutva circles who want to take control of our mind spaces by entering our kitchens. Probably the minister wanted to convey to the citizens that during this 'abnormal' time they can't expect normal food. Hope the minister did not mean to absolve the government's responsibilities from extending aid to the needy during the lockdown. Hope the labourers, stranded persons, footpath sellers, BPL families, farmers, sex workers are supported during the zero earning days.

While the rest suffer there are unscrupulous individuals who take advantage of the situation for their personal benefit. In Delhi dealers hoard oxygen cylinders to make windfall profit. In our state probably not all the Rs. 399 crore was spent judiciously. The Rs. 51 crores meant for special assistance to labourers, daily wage earners, BPL Families looks a suspect. According to the civil society group, Thma U Rangli-Juki (TUR) from the amount 2.42, 857 persons would have received Rs. 2100 each in their bank accounts. But even those who got the government support, a mere Rs 700 was transferred into their bank account from a single instalment. Where has the rest of the money disappeared? Who has pocketed the money meant for the needy? Politicians or officials or both? It is unpardonable that people have no qualms in placing self-interests before the suffering of the less privileged.

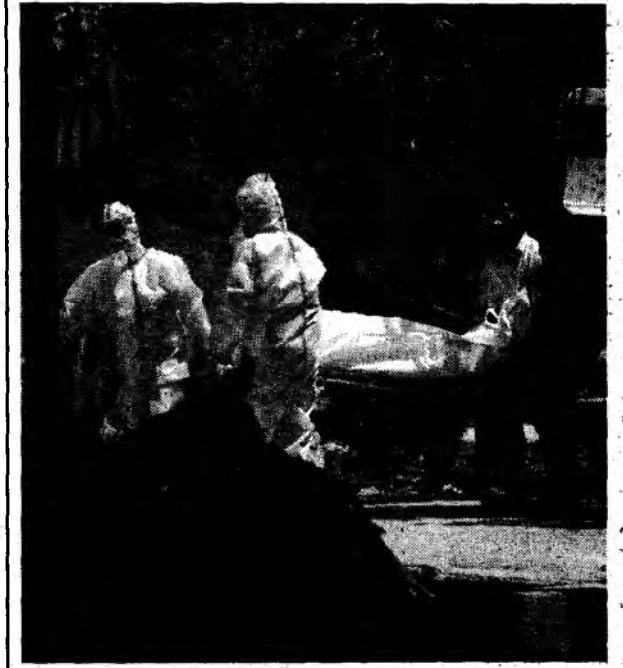
Covid deaths matter

By Hamehi & Niema Syiem

We write this article because we are extremely pained that so many of our relatives, friends and neighbours are losing their precious lives in this miserable time of Covid, only because they are said to have comorbidities. There is no rule that people with underlying medical conditions should not be able to enjoy a life free from health risks and external threat; it is their fundamental right to life, and safeguarded by the Constitution. But somehow this Government of the day did not find wisdom in reactivating the mandatory requirement of institutional quarantine that was hugely successful in controlling the spread of the pandemic last year; instead the administration let its guard down and has exposed

national quarantine centres in order to isolate all positive cases both asymptomatic and mild to moderate cases; and ensuring necessary compliance strictly without any special concessions in the larger interests of the health of the community.

Getting to know the exact strain of virus that is prevalent today is most important to study the nature of its spread; use of digital data sharing technology to map clusters of rapid spread and generate analysis; setting up of decentralised 24x7 call centres to support the Incident Commanders in each Zone; converting each and every idle premises of School, College, Training Centre into quarantine centres; drastically reducing the burden on private hospitals



our communities to this deadly mutant variant by letting the asymptomatic roam carelessly. History will not be kind to the powers that be (there is just a handful of them, plus another handful who do their bidding) for collectively failing to keep a check on the number of deaths that are rising by the score every passing day.

Frankly we're tired of watching unintelligent talking heads who make it their privilege to announce the daily statistics, yet do not care to delve further into how many RT-PCR tests have been duly conducted each day and in what clusters. Vaccination is today the

whose bed occupancy are flooded with Covid patients; widespread publicity that the virus does not spread merely by droplets and with physical contact but is dangerously airborne in closed spaces in the form of aerosols; stepping up RT-PCR testing on a war footing in both reported clusters and random sites; opening up dedicated channels of support to respond to distress calls in these desperate times; and taking everyone on board from Opposition parties to NGOs and faith based institutions is the need of the hour.

Perhaps the only key brick in the wall that has not been discussed here is

"Frankly we're tired of watching unintelligent talking heads who make it their privilege to announce the daily statistics, yet do not care to delve further into how many RT-PCR tests have been duly conducted each day and in what clusters. Vaccination is today the accepted way to reduce casualties of mortality in positive cases, but increased gold standard RT-PCR testing is the only proven method of finding a way to put a check on rising number of positive cases."

accepted way to reduce casualties of mortality in positive cases, but increased gold standard RT-PCR testing is the only proven method of finding a way to put a check on rising number of positive cases. About two months ago, the number of new positive cases was in non-threatening double digits; what then happened that caused the numbers to explode to about 450 at the start of last month's initial containment measure, and what are the Health authorities doing wrong that the numbers are fast nearing to beyond 1000 even after two weeks of total lockdown?

The time to act is now, and just because of feedback from a conglomerate of less than a dozen Shillong headmen who have rejected the idea of activating community quarantine centres, it doesn't stop a committed Government from enforcing the full spirit of Section 2(1) of the Epidemic Diseases Act to "prevent the outbreak" by setting up additional institu-

how the State will be able to finance such a concerted strategy of enormous scale. For that we are prepared to indulge in a rejoinder if and when the question crops up, because it is a serious matter of protecting our families and our loved ones; and this sentiment has been voiced by none other than the Chief Minister on the floor of the Assembly in response to Government spending Rs 399 crore last year on measures to contain Covid and provide relief.

As we conclude our thoughts go back to our loved ones whose lives were cut short by this nasty pandemic. Their untimely deaths will not just be a number for statistics; their passing away matters so much more, to every heartbroken family and to us. So in honour of all those who have fallen, let us not wait for the third wave to come, we face to fight this war, with an intelligent concerted strategy, aggressively starting now.

Letters to the Editor

Dystopian health status

Editor,
It is said that a healthy nation is a wealthy nation. WHO recommended that the doctor to population ratio should be 1:1000, but in India, this figure is abysmal at 1:1400 (approx.). This data is even more appalling in rural areas which is 1:10,000 (approx.). According to an economic survey, India is one of the countries with a high out-of-pocket expenditure on healthcare and services which means that the majority of the population have to spend more of their income on healthcare services. This is because the government spending on the health sector is merely 1% of the GDP- that is the government's assistance is very low when it comes to health. In this matter too the figure is worse in rural areas.

During the budget speech 2021-22, the Union Finance Minister informed that health spending had increased from approximately 1% to 2% of GDP. But if one dissects the budget, one finds that allocation to other ministries (like MoAYUSH, Dept. of Water and Sanitation, etc.) are being clubbed together to display the massive claimed figure of approx. 2 lakh crore.

It is time that the Union Government, in tandem with the state governments prioritizes the health sector so that we as a nation will be prepared for any future health crisis.

Yours etc.,
Kevin M Shangpliang,
Via email

Vacuous arguments

Editor,
BM Lanong's arguments in his letter, "No memory lapse, this!" (ST May 19, 2021) are unconvincing and bewildering. To us he once again revealed his loss of memory, as also blatant distortion of a forgotten part of Meghalaya's political history. To buttress his claim that three Garo personalities provided leadership to regional parties, he wanted us to refer to his earlier letter captioned "UDP--a Khasi-centric party?" (ST May 7, 2021) which some of us had missed. On going through the letter, we find a curious claim by him. Let us quote what he had stated in the letter: "After the name of the APHLC was changed to HPU in 1986...", and went on to proclaim that "nowhere is it written that Captain Sangma, Mr Mody K. Marak and Dr Milton Sangma were UDP Presidents". In trying to defend his stand, he further stated in the same letter and we quote, "UDP is only a nomenclature, changed two times from the original APHLC to HPU and then to UDP...". By saying so he is clearly trying to establish that in 1986 the APHLC had ceased to exist after the emergence of HPU. To us that's a clever and blatant distortion of facts (or is it a proof of his loss of memory?).

What Lanong conveniently suppressed is that in 1986 only a section of APHLC had broken away to form a

new regional party called Hill People Union (HPU). But to say that APHLC was "replaced by HPU" is totally wrong and a deliberate attempt to mislead the readers. His predicament is not difficult to comprehend. Having committed a blunder in the first place, Lanong is now desperate to defend the indefensible. For his benefit, let me put the record straight. Some die-hard APHLC leaders from Garo Hills---and Garo Hills alone---refused to fall in line with the move for creation of a new party, HPU. Despite strong opposition from Garo Hills, a big chunk of APHLC leaders deserted the party and formed HPU. Undaunted, APHLC supporters from Garo Hills kept the party alive and in the 1988 elections that followed HPU's emergence, the grand old party had won two Assembly seats---Dalangiri and Rangsakona---both from Garo Hills.

Therefore, Lanong's claim that APHLC "changed" itself to HPU is a sweeping statement and clever suppression of facts. His other argument that since Captain Sangma was once the President of APHLC therefore he also can be treated as having led the UDP is vacuous, to say the least. To stretch his logic further, will it be right to say that we Meghalayan tribes who were once upon a time under Assam where all residents are loosely regarded as Assamese, should call ourselves Assamese even today?

Yours etc.,
Samson A. Sangma

& others,
Via email
(No further debate on this issue will be entertained)

Impact of Covid-19

Editor,
The Covid pandemic has rudely affected our day to day lives, restricted our movement and our businesses. The global economy, barring China's has dipped once again. Daily wagers such as vendors, local taxi drivers, domestic workers, construction labourers are worst affected as the majority of them have lost their meagre incomes making it difficult for them to pay off their expenses. Kudos to the Arvind Kejriwal, Government in Delhi which has decided to provide Rs 2,500 monthly pension where the sole breadwinner of a family has passed away due to Covid; to provide free education to kids who lost their parents to Covid in addition to Rs 2,500 per month till the age of 25 and Rs 50,000 to the family that has lost someone to Covid.

It is a great step to combat the losses of the most depressed community. Taking the example of the Delhi government, I would urge our State Government to kindly provide relief to the daily wagers to combat their losses so that they would at least be able to feed their family and pay off expenses. Also to provide ex-gratia payment to the family whose earning member has succumbed to the virus. Lastly

as a youth, I would humbly urge the public to take their vaccination at the earliest to contain the virus. As advised by World Health Organization we should wear our masks, maintain social distancing, use hand sanitizer even after getting vaccinated in order to prevent others from getting infected. As citizens we should all be responsible since the only way we can get through this is if we think as "WE," not as "ME".

Yours etc.,
Alvinston P Syiem,
Via email

Arise, Awake

Editor,
Apropos the letter, "The ignorant are ignorant of their ignorance" (ST, May 24, 2021), in response to the news report about pressure groups refusing to address the hesitancy about Covid-19 vaccine, is timely. Pressure groups should check the names of the mortal souls appearing in this daily, "In Memoriam", every day. A glance at the daily mortality rates would inform the reader that more than 95% of them comprise of the local tribal population. They are succumbing to the Covid-19 virus across the state due to their unfounded hesitancy and doubt about the vaccine. The pressure groups, who often go hammer and tongs at silly issues in the name of upholding tribal rights, must garner enough courage to see the real picture because the matter is indeed very grim. In fact, they should encourage their people to

take the jab.

Also in the same vein may I ask where are our MLAs-- who instigate the pressure groups to achieve their subversive goals? I agree with Pynshngai Jyrwa's, letter, "Where are the MLAs?" (ST, May 22, 2021) which has raised an alarm over the hibernation of the elected MLAs, barring a few. It is high time for these MLAs to utilize the pressure groups, the way they instigate them to take up political issues and remove the fear and anxiety that looms large over the tribal people of the state. As C. Lyngdoh has rightly said in his/her above mentioned letter, the pressure groups should read the national dailies and watch global television channels since countries like USA & UK have vaccinated a certain percentage of their population -- who now can move freely and without a mask.

Let our pressure groups realize that vaccines are the only solution to this pandemic and they should not allow Meghalaya to remain unprotected when the entire nation is rapidly being vaccinated. Arise! Awake! If not for yourself, then for the innocent people who are being misled to not get vaccinated.

Yours etc.
BC Paul
Shillong - 4

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"Mistakes are the portals of discovery."
— James Joyce

The Shillong Times

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Central vista, funds

THE big question today is whether the Modi government should proceed with the Central Vista project. Top Congress leaders from Sonia Gandhi down to former law minister Kapil Sibal and other intellectuals have in recent weeks castigated the Modi Government for investing on this ambitious project despite the second Covid challenge. The project would require an astronomical sum of Rs 20,000 crore for its completion. The works on Parliament House are progressing and would cost around Rs 1,000 crore.

What would be unveiled in four years are a new Parliament House, residences for Prime Minister and Vice President and some 10 blocks for government departments, all converging into a prime landmass along the elegant Raj Path. There are no two views on the need to construct a new parliament house as the impending constituency delimitation process would eventually require more space to accommodate the larger number of MPs. The present building does not lean itself to expansion because of its shape. The growth in population will need to be reflected in the new number of constituencies. The only issue is about timing. India is battling the second wave of the coronavirus and the number of infected and deaths have reached mind-blowing figures. So much so that dead bodies are discarded in rivers and buried in sand banks. This is the time when maximum allocation should be made into the health care sector. Unfortunately, the judiciary has refrained from intervening in this issue from petitioners seeking to halt the project. The Opposition has every right to "correct" the "wrongs" of a government. However, in these times of lockdowns and restrictions on social gatherings, open protests are not possible. Curiously, a set of over 100 retired civil service bureaucrats have also thrown their hat into the ring. They have sought to corner the government on several issues and called for a halt to the Central Vista project. They too cite similar reasons - that such a vast sum of money must be diverted to the health care sector.

While it's important for governments to take full care of the health and medi-care sector in these daunting times, the iteration of lockdowns have seriously hampered the national and global economies. A whole generation is bound to bear the brunt of this pandemic in multiple ways. This is time for governments to spend; as the US did during the Great Depression. It made the economy recover and grow to new heights. John Maynard Keynes turned this into a much-celebrated economic theory. Rolling out more infrastructure projects will help reach more money to the markets and into the hands of the people. The Opposition is thus restrained in its criticism of the project. The Modi Government defends the project on the plea that most of the buildings require high maintenance and very high rentals. The Vista project they claim will accommodate all important government institutions above all.

Modi a victim of India's seven-year syndrome

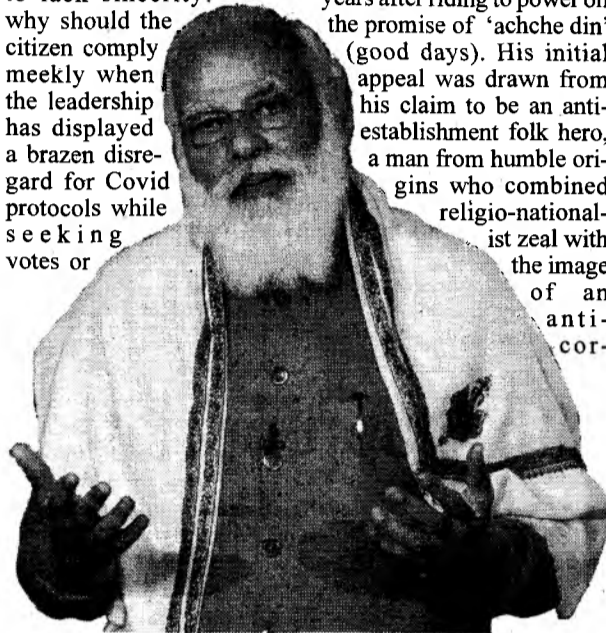
By Rajdeep Sardesai

Last August, when a Mood of the Nation poll showed prime minister Narendra Modi's popularity still rock-solid, a senior Congress leader angrily rang up: "Why are you running these farzi (false) polls! Lockdown, economic recession, migrants walking home, lives and livelihoods both destroyed and you Godi (pliant) media people are still trapped in Modi mania!" Over the years, I have learnt to never argue with politicians on opinion poll numbers: a subjective prelim test is, after all, never quite an objective final exam. A few months later, when the NDA won the Bihar elections, albeit with a reduced margin, the neta called back, this time in a more sheepish voice: "Guess the lockdown didn't make that much of a difference to voter behavior!"

In the run up to the 2019 general elections, the BJP social media team ran a campaign with the catchy slogan, "Aayega toh Modi hi!" (Modi only will come). The campaign was designed to create an aura of invincibility around the prime minister, a sense of inevitability over the election outcome. After all, in the last seven years, Mr Modi has been a colossal figure in Indian politics, a Supreme Leader whose personality cult dwarfs all around him. I once called it the "TIMO" factor in India politics: There is Modi Only. He was like the Pied Piper to whose tune millions would happily "taali-thali bajao", "light diyas", why even willingly lighten their pocket of Rs 500 and Rs 1000 notes. He was not just another political figure, but almost a religious cult leader, a quasi-Godman attracting a frenzied devotion among his supporters bordering on fanaticism.

The past tense has been advisedly used here. Because as Mr Modi is set to complete seven years in office next week, there are visible signs that the halo is losing its glow and the following its intensity. Call it the seven year itch, or rather the one year virus, the fact is that Mr Modi is not quite the indomitable presence of even nine months ago. He is still neta number one but also a leader who appears increasingly fallible and human. Where a year ago, his televised addresses to the nation were akin to an all-powerful commander in chief leading the citizenry

into a self-proclaimed 'ma-ha-bharat'-like war against Covid 19, his less visible public presence now betrays unease and uncertainty in the face of unimaginable grief and tragedy across the country. A year ago, the prime minister could demand obedience by asking the nation to 'sacrifice' and go into lockdown mode, today his words of caution seem to lack sincerity: why should the citizen comply meekly when the leadership has displayed a brazen disregard for Covid protocols while seeking votes or



shown gross incompetence in vaccine policy?

The seven year itch is an interesting prime ministerial syndrome to explore. Mr Modi will be the fourth Indian prime minister to complete seven years in office. The first, Jawaharlal Nehru, was a much adored leader whose

The resultant 1975 Emergency would scar her rule forever. Dr Manmohan Singh too was besieged by the anti-corruption Anna movement in 2011, seven years after becoming the 'accidental' prime minister. He would be left permanently hobbled, eventually bowing out ahead of the 2014 elections.

Mr Modi too now faces his moment of truth seven years after riding to power on the promise of 'acheche din' (good days). His initial appeal was drawn from his claim to be an anti-establishment folk hero, a man from humble origins who combined religio-nationalist zeal with the image of an anti-corruption crusader and a development icon. For seven years, this image has been artfully managed, a teflon-like coating ensuring that no blame ever stuck to it. The Covid 19 surge is the first time that the glossy protective veil around the prime minister's persona is being lifted.

unconstitutional shenanigans like in West Bengal appear even more like a sore loser's attempt to destabilize political rivals at a time when unity and consensus building is the need of the hour.

The prime minister still enjoys a considerable reservoir of goodwill. To believe that the Modi era is coming to an abrupt end would be foolhardy and akin to making the same mistake that the Congress leader made last August when questioning our poll numbers. After all, the durability of Mr Modi's appeal is also dependent to a great extent on the disjointed state of the opposition.

But like in the Covid fight, complacency is a dangerous attitude in public life. The next year, in a sense, is decisive because in every state that goes to the polls within a year from now, the Covid shadow will loom large. Nowhere is that shadow going to loom larger than in Uttar Pradesh, the pivot to Mr Modi and the BJP's dominance of Indian politics in recent times. In 2014, Mr Modi first carved a national stature for himself when he decided to contest from Varanasi and famously claimed that "Mujhe toh Ma ganga ne bulaya hai" (I have been called by Ma Ganga). Today, as dead bodies float and wash up on the Ganga river bank and pile up along the ghats of Varanasi and other UP towns, the stench of unclaimed bodies is a reminder of a putrefying political system where the citizenry was promised so much more than what was actually delivered. Which is why Mr Modi needs to snap out of denial mode and course correct before the seven year itch becomes a raging political epidemic that leaves the government on ventilator.

Post-script: In 2019, just ahead of the general elections, I met an astrologer on the campaign trail. "Mr Modi will be PM for sure, the BJP will get more than 300 seats and the NDA will score more than 350," he predicted. But there was a sting to his tale: "But Mr Modi will have rough time midway through his term, can't say how and why." As an avowed rationalist, I walked away with a dismissive grin. Now, the words are proving uncannily prophetic!

(The writer is senior journalist and author. Mail: rajdeepsardesai52@gmail.com)

Children are getting Covid Who will speak for these Innocents?

By Glenn C. Kharkongor

In the last one month, among my circle of friends and colleagues, four families have been affected with positive cases, hospitalizations and one tragic death. In all these families, each child tested positive, one as young as two years of age. The children have been isolated at home with one parent, also positive, with food being left at the door by relatives. These small children cannot understand why they can only wave to an aunt or a grandparent from the window. One exposed frontline worker had to be isolated at home in his own room, sequestered from the family. His young daughter was distraught, sobbing, "Is papa going to die?"

In the din of Covid, the voiceless are mute spectators, suffering their quiet fate amid the clangour of the pandemic. Their world has become even more harsh: domestic violence for women has increased, migrant workers have suffered a second economic devastation. Even the highly visible health workers, not belonging to powerful trade unions or influential lobbies, do not have health insurance cover from the government or any other meaningful support.

Children have been under the Covid radar. From the beginning of the pandemic we have been reassured by glib statements that children are at low risk. In the colourful graphics in the newspapers or TV, there is no breakdown to show statistics for children. One of the few stated worries is that if schools are opened, will the children contract Covid at school and bring the infection home to the adults? Such has been the sidestepping of children in conversations about Covid.

More cases in the second wave
The second wave has been vastly different for children. The new variants, being more infective, have been affecting children in much larger numbers and with greater severity. Yet still, demographic data for infected Indian children is hard to find. All we can rely on are anecdotal reports that are truly alarming. Just two districts in Rajasthan reported more than 600 Covid cases in children over a few days last week.

In the month of April 2021, more than sixty thousand cases in children were reported in Maharashtra. Entire families including infants have quickly turned positive if one member was affected. The Maharashtra government has directed health authorities and the public to be alert for symptoms in children. Addressing over 6,300 paediatricians virtually, the chief minister said vigilance and immediate diagnosis was the need of the hour for children.

The World Health Organisation (WHO), in an October 2020 document, reported that Covid-19 among children and adolescents, being 29% of the global population, represented about 8% of reported cases. In the USA, children account for 22% of the population and 14% of the cases. In India, if we extrapolate the lower figure of 8%, it would mean that so far there have been more than two million affected children.

India Today opened a recent feature article with the statement, "Covid-19 may have turned severe and even deadly for thousands of children in India". The real number is apparently unknown.

Unlike in the first wave, Covid has turned more severe for children. According to the Indian Academy of Pediatrics, more than two thousand cases of multi-system failure, affecting the hearts, lung and brain, have been reported in children so far, some with fatal results. Sir Ganga Ram Hospital in Delhi alone had 140 cases.

The National Commission for Protection of Child

Rights, the country's apex child rights body, has asked the Centre and states to ramp up their preparations and services to protect children and infants.

Children vulnerable in many ways

Poverty and malnutrition are factors that grind out a vicious circle for children. Malnourished children have weaker immune systems rendering them more susceptible to infectious diseases. A report from Azim Premji University released earlier this month has estimated that Covid has pushed an additional 230 million Indians below the poverty line. Imagine the huge number of malnourished children that will be added to the already high numbers in our country.

The fifth National Family Health Survey (2019-20) released a few months ago has shown that in Meghalaya, the infant mortality rate and the under-five mortality rate has actually increased since the last survey in 2015-16. How come these unforgivable statistics are never highlighted in the media or by the government?

In Meghalaya, the prevalence of underweight, wasting and stunting remains high. In preschool children, the prevalence of stunting is 46.5%, perhaps the highest in the country and has increased from 43.8% in the last survey. Stunting indicates chronic malnutrition over a period of years, and almost half our children have suffered in this way.

Children who have lost parents have been rendered orphans. Delhi has announced special schemes for these children, whose lives have been traumatised forever. A UNICEF India official has called for speedy help for children, saying that "children are being orphaned and we do see that there is a lot of trafficking of children".

According to the American Psychological Association, there has been a spike in child abuse in the USA during lockdowns. Child abuse has increased in India as well. The key risk factors include overstressed caregivers becoming violent or abusive due to economic stress, and children's restricted mobility as schools are closed. Childline India Foundation has reported a 50% increase in phone calls during the lockdown. Of the calls received during this period, 30% were related to protection from abuse.

When we know that 93% of perpetrators are relatives or known individuals, child sexual abuse can be devastating, as the isolation of lockdown has made it even more difficult for victims to seek help or escape. Children are subjected to unimaginable feelings of helplessness and mental health consequences. Another vulnerable population of children are the homeless, rag pickers, and those who beg on the streets. Thousands are being exploited in exchange for a meal or a daily wage just enough to sustain themselves. With lockdown, the usual crumbs obtained on the streets are no longer there.

According to Childline India Foundation, the most heart-wrenching calls to their helpline are the now regularly received "silent calls". The child behind the call does not know what to say or how to express it.

Those who are from my generation will remember this song by the Carpenters, the side B of a record released in 1971.

*Bless the beasts and the children
For in this world they have no voice
They have no choice.*

Half a century on, is the world a better place for children?

(The author is a former professor of pediatrics and can be reached at glenchrst@yahoo.com)

Letters to the Editor

Cheap political remarks unwarranted

Editor,
As a concerned citizen, I am compelled to express my deep disappointment with the appallingly careless and disgraceful statements from the Deputy Chief Minister, Prestone Tynsong, in recent weeks. We have spent more than a year living with the challenging circumstances that the global pandemic presents to us; from losing loved ones, to getting ill and having our livelihoods taken away, people in Meghalaya have tasted it all. Despite these calamities, the Deputy Chief Minister still finds the opportunity to engage in patronising games in which he condescends to and demeans the poor and indeed, any person who questions the state government's (failed) administrative efforts and decisions.

His response of "What more can be done?" when asked about the possibility of relief packages for citizens who have been badly affected by the pandemic and the subsequent lockdowns, is a strong indication of his inability to fully understand his duties and respect his position as an elected representative in government. This rhetoric of surrender and helplessness is gravely unhelpful, especially when citizens are looking to the state for assurance, assistance and means of survival. Further, his statement urging people to forgo meat and survive on vegetables does not even deserve reflection

or comment, but I will appeal to the respected gentleman to come down from his high horse and learn how people are actually living, with or without the added complications of the pandemic.

Lastly, as a woman, I was also very disturbed to read the Deputy Chief Minister's response to the rightful allegations put forth by Thma U Rangli-Juki regarding the government's financial assistance to daily wage earners in the 2020 lockdown. In his tirade, the Deputy CM only addresses Angela Rangad, and patronisingly tells her to contest in the 2023 state elections if she wants to serve people better. Apart from this being a poor retort from a very insecure politician, I also don't think that women like Angela would obligingly enter politics via a man's invitation; they will enter politics because of their own political convictions. Unfortunately, and to his embarrassment, the Deputy CM did not stop here but went on urging Angela to educate herself at MATI. Of course, such a statement from a man in a position of power is nothing new in this country, but as someone who still has some faith in principles of political democracy, I was not expecting a cheap jibe to be the choice of weapon in a public dialogue.

As Covid-19 continues to ravage the fragile social landscape of Meghalaya, I sincerely hope that government representatives speak and act more responsibly and in alignment with the dignity of the offices and positions they hold.

Yours etc.,
Gertrude Lamare,
Via email

Why this obtrude nature?

Editor,
"There is nothing more dangerous than the conscience of a bigot" said George Bernard Shaw. The world has once again come to a stand-still. I may not speak for the whole world but I can certainly speak for our State. In the months that had passed by, we have seen the sudden rise in the number of COVID-19 cases which is alarming to say the least. This rise in numbers is a trend we are seeing every day, coupled with the number of deaths which surpasses a score daily. This has unfortunately compelled the State Government to impose a total lockdown in Meghalaya as a last resort to stop or rather slow down the spread of the virus. The lockdown has its own pros and cons; with the cons weighing a tad heavier on the scale. The effect it has on the citizens is rather gloomy, especially for those who belong to the not so well-to-do categories which is a reality for India and Meghalaya.

In Shillong, we know that a good chunk of the population are not so privileged to afford the luxury of 'work from home' or even receive their wages and salaries by sitting comfortably within the four walls of their homes; for they have mouths to feed and depend on a meagre amount they receive from

the daily wages they earn. At a time like this, what has appalled me is the statement coming from the Deputy CM, who with no remorse went on to say that people should resort to having rice with vegetables and skip meat. This statement from a rather senior politician is unacceptable, inappropriate and outrageous. It just shows his obtrude nature, for without a second thought he went on to make such a bold statement and surprisingly, even defends it stoutly.

We in Meghalaya are known for including meat in our diets. We love to consume meat with our meals, even if it is just a few pieces. We have a large number of people who depend on butchery as a profession and who earn their daily wages through this profession. This would mean snatching away their livelihoods. It would be an insult and offense to those who cannot afford to include meat in their diets but can only afford to have 'rice with vegetables' as our Deputy CM mentioned. Why would he want to impose his opinions on others? Those who can afford to include meat in their diets are free to do so. Those who cannot, because of the many reasons they know better, are also free not to eat meat. But, for someone to impose his opinion on people because of the present crisis is totally unacceptable and uncalled for and should be condemned.

These are hard times for everybody, especially for those that live from hand to mouth. In times like these, it is important that all of us,

including our ministers and MLAs be more sensitive and not come out with such harsh statements that are both upsetting and offensive. Think twice, Act wise!

Yours etc.,
Natasha Pariat
Shillong - 3

Dy CM's outlandish dare

Editor,
It appears our Deputy Chief Minister doesn't know when to stop putting his foot in his mouth. After calling on Dr Mukul Sangma to come contest elections from his constituency, he now calls on Ms Angela Rangad to enter the political arena for better understanding and so that it might help change her mind about levelling allegations that he terms as unfounded. Based on decades of observation of how things unfold in the political arena in our state, it can safely be said that neither Angela Rangad nor any other right-thinking person needs to enter the political arena to understand and appreciate the old saying that 'politics is a dirty game.' It is no rocket science but just plain old common sense that tells us laymen that politicians in power, barring a few, generally tend to be financially corrupt. Otherwise, how else can it be explained when someone who promises to use all means to help his constituents develop, instead develops a sudden liking for real estate and the associated props. It doesn't need a mathematical genius

to figure things out and it doesn't need a training session at MATI to know that figures don't necessarily tell the whole truth. The name of the game is obfuscation and figures can be made to dance.

Tynsong further stated that 1.81 lakh applications were found eligible out of 2.33 lakh applications for financial assistance from the Government due to last year's lockdown. Even if we discount the so-called ineligible applications, we are still left to wonder as why it is still an on-going process. Is the government machinery that slow that it's taking this long to disburse such a measly amount to the beneficiaries? Beneficiaries deprived of relief, frontline health-workers without proper protective gear, etc. and the Government is still trying to defend spending 399 crore in last year's Covid-19 situation, with our Hon'ble Deputy Chief Minister mouthing off against anyone who dares to allege any wrongdoing by the powers that be. It is safe to say that it is only by God's merciful kindness and not the Government's preparedness and wisdom that our people were spared from the pandemic last year, regardless of what our Hon'ble Deputy Chief Minister may say.

Yours etc.,
Donboklang Dohling,
Via email

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"Negative thoughts stick around because we believe them, not because we want them or choose them."

— Andrew J. Bernstein

The Shillong Times

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More than a double whammy

A double whammy is a two-fold setback when two unpleasant things happen at once. For the people of Meghalaya and the country as a whole it has been a multiple whammy with disease, poverty, loss of income and loss of social and emotional pillars. On the livelihoods part only about 2.6 percent of Meghalaya's population is employed in the State Government. A minuscule number work in banks and central PSUs or in the private sector. This leaves a huge number in the informal sector. These are the farmers, daily wagers (labour, domestic help etc) and self-employed (street vendors etc). All three forms of livelihoods are precarious and subject to all kinds of vagaries, from arbitrary closure due to law and order problems to uncertainties caused by nature, particularly with climate change playing havoc.

The plight of the majority of Meghalayans therefore is unimaginable when a pandemic such as the present one strikes and all livelihood earning activities come to a sudden halt. Consider the agony of a head of the family who is also the only earning member but who is jobless due to the lockdown and that same person contracts Covid and needs hospitalisation. Who does the person approach for financial assistance to meet the subsistence needs of his/her family? And while the Meghalaya Health Insurance Scheme (MHIS) does give some cover for hospitalisation and other charges but there are several unforeseen expenses not covered by the Scheme. The insurance cover is up to Rs 5,00,000 per family on a floater basis meaning that total amount can be used by one person or jointly with other members of the family. While the MHIS provides some relief in terms of health needs, people need more than that at this point and that is the weekly payment which should take into account the family size and the inflation rate in Meghalaya.

It is this agonising financial pressure which has triggered a public outrage, questioning the Government's call for a total lockdown without considering the plight of the large section of people who are not in the "work from home," category. This group has called for a peaceful demonstration on June 1. Government should have anticipated such a reaction if it has its ears to the ground. Poverty in Meghalaya has been on the rise and the lockdown has only exacerbated this destitution. With the Deputy Chief Minister expressing helplessness to assist those who have lost their livelihoods, it is but natural that people would be agitated. The Government has to find ways and means to assist the poorest at this juncture. It cannot plead helplessness.

Supporting the community during Covid-19

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

Recently on being asked what support the Government of Meghalaya is planning for those whose livelihoods are being disrupted by the lockdown, Deputy Chief Minister Prestone Tynsong expressed the Government's helplessness and suggested that to tide over their difficulties people should eat rice and vegetables instead of meat. This bizarre statement reminded me of a passage from a book in which a former politician from Meghalaya stated that people in Shillong are happy with Bandhs as they can avoid going to office. The inference was that everyone in Shillong has a salaried job. Obviously this particular individual who lived a sheltered life surrounded by his cohorts was unaware that many in the city earn their livelihood by working as daily wage labourers or are self-employed. This is true of India as well where more than 90% of the workforce is found in the informal sector. So when this former politician was talking about Bandhs being beneficial he was talking about his kith and kin who are among the privileged members of the society.

In the same vein, the statement by the Deputy Chief Minister appears delusional and a callous attempt to abdicate his responsibility. According to him, because people in Meghalaya like eating meat, they need to make that sacrifice for the larger good. By this logic does it mean that in states where people are eating vegetables they should instead eat gravel? Maybe I am being too harsh. The stress of dealing with this extraordinary crisis must have unnerved him and he inadvertently made that foolish statement. Another statement that he made was regarding the Government's inability to provide income support for the citizens affected by the lockdowns and restrictions. I think this also is borne out of frustration and does not really reflect his government's real intention. After all, I don't think he and his fellow legislators are going to forgo their salaries and benefits as it would be hypocritical for them to enjoy the taxpayers' money while the public is suffering. Hence, assuming that the Government is indeed looking to help those whose livelihoods are badly affected there are some points which must be kept in mind while designing any such intervention.

Complete lockdown has been declared in many parts of the State. With vaccination going slowly and a third wave being predicted, restrictions are going to persist for a long time. Income support, therefore, becomes very vital. Last year the Government initiated a weekly income support of ₹ 1000 which was a very good idea. However the figure was on the lower side. Assuming ₹ 300 (a figure still lower than minimum wage of ₹ 324 as prescribed by the Government of Meghalaya for unskilled labour with skilled labour getting higher rates) as the daily wage and multiplying it into 5 days gives an amount of ₹ 1500. CPI (Communist Party of India) had demanded that the income support should be raised to ₹ 2000 which is also a good amount. The Government could look at these two figures and arrive at a figure which they feel is justified for providing income support.

This time around, the second wave is different from the first wave in that Covid-19 has been able to penetrate the rural parts of the country where cases are increasing at an alarming rate. This bodes badly not just for the health of the rural community but also for the economy as a whole as well. Last year, the lockdown and economic disruptions led to an overall negative growth in the country's GDP. India's GDP contracted by 23.9% in the first quarter of the FY 2020-2021 because of the lockdowns which exacerbated the already declining consumer demand and investment. But even at such a bleak time growth in agriculture was positive, the only sector to do so. The farm sector grew at 3.4% year-on-year in the quarter. It will not be an exaggeration to state that it is the farmers who saved the Indian economy and the country.

Understandably the Central Government made provisions to help the farming community. There was an increase in MGNREGA wages which was also quite welcome. However the increase of ₹ 20 considering ₹ 1000 per week as the income support (given last year), make up only for a loss of two weeks and is inadequate. Till date there has been no announcement of any hike in MGNREGA wages. To be fair to the Central Government, over ₹ 19,000 crore

was recently transferred to more than 9.5 crore farmers under the PM-KISAN scheme. Unfortunately less than 9000 farmers from Meghalaya benefited from the scheme. According to the 2011 Census, the total number of people engaged in agriculture is 5,25,912 or over 5 lakhs. The number of PM-KISAN beneficiaries is thus only 1.7%. What is important to remember is that we are in 2021 which means that the numbers must have increased from the 2011 level. The actual percentage could therefore be less than 1% which is really distressing.

The Government of Meghalaya therefore, apart from looking to ensure that more beneficiaries get the income support, can take the lead in petitioning the Central Government to increase the wages for MGNREGA considering that many more disruptions are guaranteed over the next few months. The second wave is predicted to end by July which is still two months away. After which the third wave has been confirmed to arrive in the next six months. Because of all this, disruptions to livelihoods are going to continue. Therefore the hike in MGNREGA wages is very crucial.

At the same time it is important to remember that people in rural areas do not work in a single activity for the entire year but are engaged in multiple activities to make ends meet. This is especially true of those who are registered under MGNREGA which is a seasonal employment scheme. They work in MGNREGA for a period of 100 days and then do daily wage labour in other projects for the remaining 256 days. This is the planting season where a lot of such workers would have been engaged in working in other people's farms. With the lockdown and other disruptions that source of income is not available anymore. So even if they were to get the MGNREGA wages they would still be losing wages. The loss of non-MGNREGA wages for those who will be getting only MGNREGA wages and for those who will not get any wage loss compensation at all will have the effect of increasing indebtedness especially among the rural populace. If the amount of compensation is inadequate

whatever amount the community gets will be used for paying past debts. But since there will be massive wage losses for this period, the current debt will increase exponentially. This will further weaken their situation and make the community more vulnerable to future shocks. And if this lockdown continues, even with intermittent relaxations, the hardship of the community will only intensify.

In the long term the community will become more marginalised. Therefore a comprehensive income support program is the need of the hour. Since the response from the Central Government might be delayed considering the situation in the country the State Government has to take this responsibility on their own. Already suggestions have come about how that can be achieved.

Thma U Rangli Juki (TUR) and Workers Power of Meghalaya have demanded that the State Government consolidate the MLA-LAD (MLA Local Area Development Scheme) and MPLAD (MP Local Area Development Scheme) schemes to help mitigate the Covid-19 crisis in the State. They demanded that ₹ 2 crore sanctioned to MLAs to implement various schemes each year should immediately be consolidated into a single fund of ₹ 120 crores and cash transfer/income support should be initiated for the families, daily wage workers, domestic workers, taxi drivers, shop assistants, street vendors and marginal farmers. They also demanded that 25% salary of Class One Officers including central services officers and tax refund for IAS and IPS officers should also be utilized to take care of the out of pocket expense of the citizens of the state. These are very practical suggestions and would do a great deal in easing the suffering of the people during such a difficult time. I am sure the MPS, MLAs and the IAS and IPS officers will be eager to lend their support for such a move. It will bring relief to countless people in the State especially those from the weaker socio-economic categories.

Finally, whatever the Government decides to do at this critical moment will not be forgotten by the people. I pray and hope that they feel the pain of the citizens and make the right decisions.
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Green forests: A rich tribute to a Satyagrahi

Dr Saji Verghese

The second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic that struck our nation has reduced much of our population to just tolls. However, there are at least a few who stand out in the tolls for their unforgettable contribution to environment protection, music, and for upholding cultural and moral values. Sunderlal Bahuguna, the man who gave a proper direction to the move to preserve trees in the Himalayas influenced innumerable movements across the globe. The Chipko movement as the world knows it, received its popularity at the hands of this Messiah of environmental enlightenment.

While there are biological reasons for stopping deforestation, there are undoubt-

edly aesthetic and cultural reasons too, for, some of the trees have withstood the test of time, being witnesses to the degeneration and regeneration of many civilisations. Among the living beings in the animal kingdom, which could be a means to explaining 'evolution' is Coelacanth, with a history going back 420 million years ago, it is referred to as the "four legged fossil fish" and is alive and thriving in the Indian Ocean too.

"Among the living beings in the animal kingdom, which could be a means to explaining 'evolution' is Coelacanth, with a history going back 420 million years ago, it is referred to as the "four legged fossil fish" and is alive and thriving in the Indian Ocean too."

India's second-highest civilian honour, the Padma Vibhushan, in 2009. Ekta Parishad is another social movement which is similar to the Chipko Andolan. It is inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's concept of Sarvodaya which is working for the upliftment of the Dalits and other marginalized groups and societies. The Garhwal Himalayas remained a major site of rising ecological awareness of how reckless deforestation had denuded much of the forest cover, resulting in the devastating Alaknanda River floods of July 1970. The incidents of landslides and landslides became common in an area which was experiencing a rapid increase in projects of such kind. The organised small groups in the villages began to ventilate their grievances taking them to the local authorities against commercial logging operations that threatened their livelihoods.

In 1971, the Sangha workers held a demonstration in Gopeshwar to protest against the policies of the Forest Department. Such protests continued in the following year. In March 1973, the small success that was attained by the villagers was after their protest in the form of beating drums and shouting slogans, which forced the contractors and their team to retreat. The contract was thus cancelled and was handed to the Sangha to carry out the project, not compromising with the integrity of the environment. This became a turning point in the history of eco-development struggles in the region and around the world.

The success stories followed in the 1980s where they undertook movements to stop limestone mining in the Doon Valley. The quarrying activity was causing large scale deforestation of its forest cover, leading to heavy loss of flora and fauna. The United Nations Environment Programme report mentioned that Chipko activists started "working a socio-economic revolution by winning control of their forest resources from the hands of a distant bureaucracy which is only concerned with the selling of forestland for making urban-oriented products".

The Chipko movement became a benchmark for socio-ecological movements in other forest areas of Himachal Pradesh, Rajasthan and Bihar and later throughout India and was influential in generating environmental protection awareness in different continents across the globe. Every living tree and thick forests of our country is a standing testimony to this Warrior who succumbed to the present Pandemic.

(The writer is Associate Professor, Lady Keane College, Shillong)

Letters to the Editor

Tynsong's apartheid mindset

Editor,
This is the second year that total lockdown is imposed in the State and hence it is as dark as it was in 2020 for the poor and daily wage earners, if not darker. It is well known that the income of an estimated 2 lakh labourers in the informal economy in the state of Meghalaya has fallen by leaps and bounds since 2019. Most poor families in Meghalaya have had to bear the brunt of the underprivileged treatment that was shown to them by the political class and influential civil society organisations much before the pandemic hit them last year. The violent protests that took place in 2019 with the Citizen Amendment Bill (CAB) led by various civil society NGOs to the Ichamati incident last year in February where curfew was imposed by the authorities for days, is evidence enough that there was little or no thought given on how the working class of the state will survive with no basic income.

The pandemic has so vividly and so woefully brought to light the complete absence of humanity and moral conscience by the present Deputy Chief Minister of Meghalaya, Prestone Tynsong. His abhorrent mindset towards the labour class of the society where he is the minister in-charge is sad and can be described as rumblings of a sick mind where he has complete disregard for anyone or any issue.

Worse is the statement of the Deputy Chief Minister where he said that 'people should resort to having rice with vegetables.' This is downright heartless and insensitive, especially for many families that are finding it extremely difficult to survive in these trying times. Prestone's remarks reminded me of the 'complete policy failure' of the then-British Prime Minister Winston Churchill who deliberately ordered the diversion of food supplies from starving Indian civilians to well-supplied British soldiers and to top up European stockpiles which led to the Bengal Famine in 1943 where an estimated 3 million people died of starvation.

It is unbecoming of a senior politician who is an aspiring Chief Minister to be spewing such unscrupulous and juvenile statements in a public press conference. His incessant sermon to the public on every issue is irritating and void of any logic. Sometimes I wonder why we elect brainless and loudmouth individuals like Tynsong whose only interest is to gobble up the resources of the state for his benefit even amid such a dangerous pandemic that is claiming the lives of 20 people daily.

The plight of lakhs of labourers and their families doesn't seem to affect him; instead, he openly chooses to indulge in corrupt practices through his Labour Department where lakhs of beneficiaries did not receive the amount of Rs 2100 per week promised by the State Government for three weeks in 2020. As a Labour Minister, he seems to hardly

care to inquire how these families are eating and surviving during these difficult times, but is only interested in his own efforts to build a robust empire (real estate) for himself through ill-gotten means. If you are reading this Mr Deputy Chief Minister, we've heard enough of you. Please gracefully tender your resignation.
Yours etc.,
Benjamin Lyngdoh
Shillong - 16

Thinking aloud!

Editor,
Aristotle once said, "State exists for the sake of the good life; it exists to promote moral objectives, justice and the COMMON GOOD." It's embarrassing to see Government representatives busy having arguments and making outrageous statements instead of thinking of the common welfare of the State. From the CAA agitation to the ILP issue and now the Covid 19 crisis, the people of Meghalaya have suffered much. There is substantial loss of jobs and incomes as the huge majority are working in the unorganized sector in urban and rural areas. Many are still dependent on their daily wages and live a hand to mouth existence. From the farmers to those involved in the tourism sector, the issue is grave. An illustrative point is that places like Sobra which are totally dependent on tourism are out on a limb because of this crisis. The impact has been shattering especially for those who had availed loans to start the business of home-stays

and guest houses. It is high time that Government comes up with a well-considered policy to assist this large chunk of people who have lost their livelihoods with minimum or basic income for a particular period. Except for government employees everyone in the private and non-formal sector is affected by this pandemic. From hotel owners to their workers - all are suffering income loss. The cost of living has risen exponentially so a mere cash delivery of Rs 1000-2000 per week is not enough. Power should not be misused. It should be used solely for the advantage of the people.
Yours etc.,
C. Majaw
NEHU MA Political Science Dept
Via email

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Yours etc.,
C. Majaw
NEHU MA Political Science Dept
Via email

Goodwill gesture from Assam CM

Editor,
It is indeed a great gesture on the part of the new Chief Minister of Assam to supply Oxygen to Meghalaya. Himanta Biswa Sarma has always set himself apart from other leaders. He had proved what one can do during the first phase of Covid lockdown last year. He himself had come forward to get things together to contain the Covid fatality. No matter what other political parties might have said about Meghalaya CM Conrad Sangma's presence during the recent swearing-in ceremony of the new Chief Minister in Guwahati, the people of Meghalaya can be optimistic now. It will

certainly go a long way as far as strengthening the friendly ties between Assam and Meghalaya is concerned. Don't we have vexed border issues left unresolved for several decades? The frequent skirmishes and bloodshed have brought untold sufferings to people living in the border areas. I believe such problems would not have happened if the neighboring Chief Ministers were having a friendly relationship. It is always advantageous if the neighboring heads of states have a close personal rapport. Hope now the cordial warmth of Sangma and Sharma will break down all the walls of belligerence.
Yours etc.,
Salil Gewali
Shillong

Allopathy a stupid science - Ramdev

Editor,
Yoga televangelist Baba Ramdev has now grown into a business tycoon but has never been a science student nor even a quack-doctor or a charlatan! He had better concentrate on his area of counselling on yoga and develop his Ayurvedic medicine enterprise.

It is not enough for the Union Health Minister Harsh Vardhan to term Ramdev's statement which rubbishes that allopathy is a "stupid science" as 'most unfortunate.' This is a mere eye-wash. Ramdev further claims that medicines such as remdesivir, favi-flu, and other drugs approved by the DCGI have failed to treat Covid-19. This is an insult to modern

medical science. A serious aspersion has been cast by Ramdev on medical science and medical professionals of India, thereby humiliating the scientists and Doctor-community who have been rendering their valuable services in this pandemic.

Hundreds of doctors and healthcare workers are braving the pandemic as frontline warriors. Many while in the process of treating Covid patients had to sacrifice their lives. Now they are robbed of that dignity and are tainted by the aspersions cast on them by Ramdev!

The Indian Medical Association and the entire medical fraternity have demanded that the Government should prosecute Ramdev after a video purportedly showed him dubbing allopathy a "stupid science" that had killed "lakhs of people" and was ineffective against Covid had gone viral. Ramdev has no business at all to meddle with medical science and comment irresponsibly in an idiosyncratic manner!

The Indian Medical Association may also consider filing a PIL in the Supreme Court of India for prosecution of Ramdev under Section 499 (Defamation) of the Indian Penal Code and other relevant Acts and rule of law of the country!

Yours etc.,
Samares Bandyopadhyay
Advocate, Kolkata
High Court
Via email

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"There's nothing more important than our good health - that's our principal capital asset."

-- Arlen Specter

The Shillong Times

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RBI's cautious optimism

THE annual report of the Reserve Bank of India, released on Thursday, raises optimism about the state of the national economy battered by the Covid-19 pandemic. As the new financial year commenced, "pervasive despair" of the past year's first wave, it claims, is replaced by "cautious optimism" built by the vaccination process. RBI stresses on its projection of a real GDP growth of 10.5 percent for this fiscal, the first part of which is already a washout in view of the Covid's second wave. A scaling down of the forecast is still a possibility, given the current conditions.

On the positive side, Goods and Services Tax (GST) collections crossed the Rs 1 lakh crore mark for the seventh consecutive month and climbed to the highest level on record. This could mean the manufacturing and services sectors remain in good shape despite the adversities. Yet, several sectors of the economy are down in the dumps as in the cases of aviation, public transport, hospitality, tourism and hotels industry segments that will not gain a new life at least until the end of this year. Even after the vaccination, the fear factor could linger. The fresh damage the pandemic can inflict by its own erratic behavior also must be taken into account. The economic recovery from the pandemic's adverse sway, RBI stresses, will critically depend on the revival of private demand by giving a "boost" to the market forces. Raising the consumption and acceleration of investment are a pre-requisite to the process of an economic recovery. The government will have its plans ready on these fronts.

The despair of the past year is clearly replaced with a sense of optimism even as the death rate from the pandemic is on the ascendant in the season of the second wave. All the same, the money circulation in the market has considerably reduced as the graph of joblessness increased and purchasing power decreased over the past one year. Only those in specific white collar sectors and government employees continue getting their full salaries. The impact on the stimulus packages announced by the Centre over the course of the past few months would need to be gauged. Overall, the sense of despondency continues. Large numbers of people across the spectrum are avoiding being in the public realm. The essential items production would not be hampered, but other sectors including even the textiles and garments sector are facing the brunt. While experts talk in technical terms, the ground realities too would need to be taken into account.

Nurses - Critical pillars of the healthcare system

By Patricia Mukhim

May 12, observed as International Nurses Day, passed by without much fanfare. On that day nurses worked just as hard to assist and serve Covid patients in all the hospitals of the state - government and private. It is ironic that while we see statistics of the number of doctors that have lost their lives to Covid, no one tells us how many nurses and their family members have become victims of this virus. It's unfair to treat nurses as less important than doctors. Covid patients I have spoken to have been appreciative of the nursing care they received at hospitals. Nurses are the first contacts with Covid patients. Doctors act on the information given to them by nurses. In a particular private hospital in Shillong, there is a very innovative practice of monitoring patients via a WhatsApp group comprising doctors and nurses. Nurses diligently give feedback to doctors on the condition of every Covid patient. This is important because Covid affects different patients in different ways. While some patients have stronger immunity and therefore fight the virus better, others with compromised immune systems are dealt a heavier blow and it becomes a battle for survival.

In all of this, nurses are the ones that assist the patient, administer injections and medicines prescribed by doctors-in-charge, check the IV fluid, check blood pressure and monitor the oxygen flow to ensure that a patient that shows signs of breathlessness is given oxygen without delay. Nurses communicate with family members of a patient and give them assurance that he/she is being looked after well.

A nurse therefore has to be a good communicator on two counts. First she is using 'she' here because the majority of nurses are women) has to give constant feedback to doctors about the patients' condition, hence has to be as conversant with medical vocabulary. Based on that feedback doctors prescribe drugs/injections and other diagnostic tests. Second, the nurse also has to give feedback to the family members and this requires a high degree of social communication skills. To be able to explain in layperson's language a difficult medical condition requires exceptional skill

and patience. It is a very demanding job because nurses are expected to be (a) professional (b) empathetic and caring (c) to show patience when a patient is difficult and throws tantrums. Most patients have confessed that it is nursing care that has been instrumental in their healing from medically challenging ailments. Nursing therefore is not just a career but a vocation and only the best can succeed in this profession dedicated to Florence Nightingale.

However, what many of us forget is that nursing is also very taxing for women. The nurse is also a mother, sister, daughter who has to go back to her family after nursing hours. During this pandemic nurses looking after Covid patients are apprehensive about returning home lest they carry the virus with them and infect their family members, especially the elders who might have co-morbidities. There isn't enough facility for nurses to quarantine themselves within the hospital premises. Last year nurses, doctors and ward girls/boys that came in contact with Covid patients were quarantined in hotels and Corona Care Centres. This year the facilities are withdrawn, thereby putting nurses and also doctors at high risk. I know of a nurse who is a single parent and had to keep her two children with friends, to protect them from herself. Some weeks ago she tested Covid positive and it was a God-send that her children are safe elsewhere. Of course the emotional wrench is difficult to address but at this time safety is uppermost.

This article by no means seeks to downplay the role of doctors as they too are critical to saving lives. In fact, a collaborative effort between nurses and doctors and a good understanding between the two is important to the healthcare system. A surgery of any kind requires

the involvement of doctors and nurses. Post operative care is essentially provided by nurses. While doctors visit their patients once a day while making rounds, nurses constantly check the patient's vitals. In one sense, nurses are like advocates for patients and a bridge between the patient and doctor and patients and their family members.

A nurse understands that a hospital stay is not exactly pleasant. Most patients resist hospitalization and vent their frustrations on nurses. But I have seen nurses calming patients down and even singing to them. The very fact that a nurse tries to understand the patient's predicament is itself a healing touch. We need to remember that sickness is both physiological and psychological as well. A compassionate nurse addresses

both. In India there is a huge gap in the nurse to patient ratio, hence a patient needs an attendant (family member) to attend to his/her needs. Nurses provide the training to such attendants and guide them on how exactly to minister to the patient - what to feed and what not to feed the patient. It is the nurse that trains the attendants on what kind of diet the patient requires, the timings for medication and in case of kidney patients to monitor the urine output as well.

During these Covid times, nurses have been in the forefront to administer vaccinations. In every centre, those who have gone to be vaccinated have reported a very congenial atmosphere that drove away any fear they had of receiving the vaccine. Before they knew it the jab had been given and the other nurses are at hand to direct the patient to the waiting room where they are told to wait for 30 minutes in case they have any reactions to the vaccine. The manner in which they explain the whole process is simple and clear. This in itself dissipates any fear people may have of taking the vaccine. It is a fact though that

nurses are not paid as well as they should despite their duty hours being very strenuous. Considering that medicine is an evolving science and that technology is being used to improve treatment outcomes, nurses also deserve training because the more they are trained the better they become at serving patients. I asked a patient who recovered from Covid what it is that he remembers most about his hospital stay. Without hesitation he said, "nursing care." His contention is that while doctors prescribe medicines based on feedback they receive from nurses, they are hardly in contact with the patients. It's the nurses that are really front-liners in every sense of the word.

The pandemic has also laid bare the importance of mental health of the patient and his/her relatives. Every Covid patient is fearful of what might happen. Those with more complications wonder if they will come out alive. If nurses are also trained to understand the nuances of mental health and what language and vocabulary to use with patients without being patronizing it would be a boon to healthcare as a whole. For a long time we have compartmentalized mental health and believed that only psychiatrists, psychologists and clinicians can help people with agonizing mental health problems. But most people with mental health issues, particularly those suffering from Covid just need a non-judgmental and soothing presence to listen and understand their plight. Perhaps they know the solution to their problems or the solutions will emerge even as they speak. We cannot undermine the power of empathetic listening and considering we have so few mental health professionals it is time to train nurses to play that critical role of listening with empathy.

A post-Covid patient also said that he realises there is a great need for male nurses as well to better manage male patients. But that's not the only point. A male nurse might not be overly burdened with domestic work and parenting as a lady nurse is. Also a healthy balance is always good in any profession. On that note let us salute our nurses for their phenomenal service to suffering humanity!

The Agnotology of Covid-19 Vaccination

By Benjamin Lyngdoh

The term 'agnotology' is relatively new. It is derived from the Greek word 'agnosis' and was initially used in the 1990s by Robert Proctor and Iain Boal and subsequently it first appeared in the book 'Cancer wars: How politics shapes what we know and don't know about cancer'. In simple words, agnotology concerns doubt and the 'manufacturing' of doubt. If persistent, then this doubt turns into manufactured ignorance. Ultimately, the ignorance leads to unknowledge which is the uncompromising non-acceptability or the non-conformity to an established fact/truth.

However, for the purpose of this column we will simply take agnotology as 'the study of ignorance'. Now, what makes agnotology (of something/anything) a dangerous percept is that it is based upon 'scientific data' and arguments. Here lies the crux of the matter. Once a subject-matter is argued on the basis of scientific data then the argument seems convincing and little do we know that we are in fact victims of ignorance. The same is happening with the hesitation towards acceptance of the Covid-19 vaccine. There is a lot of agnotology perpetuated. As a result, there is doubt and ignorance. Well, it is time to stop it before it turns into a full-blown unknowledge!

Before we move into the specificities relating to Covid-19 vaccination, let us just scan into the original and early practices of agnotology. This will help us in understanding better what we are talking about. In the first case, what is the relationship between smoking and cancer? Does smoking cause cancer? Is there scientific data to this end? Yes, there is! However, the advertising campaigns and propaganda of tobacco companies worldwide create doubt to this effect. In fact, there are studies which debunk the relationship between smoking and cancer. Plus, it is an open secret that the tobacco companies continue to fund scientific research to this effect. This is the agnotology of 'smoking and cancer'. In the second case, what is the relationship between fossil fuel and climate change? Does the burning of fossil fuel result in climate change and is there scientific data and argument to this end? Yes, there is! However, global oil companies are involved in open propaganda so as to undermine the effects of fossil fuel on climate change. Even today oil companies are known to fund their 'band of scientist' towards conducting studies so as to downplay the effects on climate change. This is the agnotology of 'fossil fuel and climate change'.

Now, the safety/efficacy of Covid-19 vaccines is the contemporary subject-matter of agnotology. Many are skeptical about their credentials. Efficacy comes later; in fact, many doubt its safety. Add to this, the claims of mind-control, impacts on fertility, nano-chip implantation, etc have created paranoia. The thing is all of these claims are harped upon on the basis of scientific data/material. In social media, there are many documents and video clips to this effect. It has to be said that on first reading/viewing some of them do seem very convincing. Plus, they have the 'time-period to make a vaccine' as their strongest card and do play it to the hilt. The underlying question is, 'how can you make a vaccine in a year when in fact it normally takes years just to establish its safety (let alone efficacy)'. This is the major source of all agnotology and the end result is the hesitancy to take the vaccine.

However, there is already an answer to this question (Read Global covid-19 vaccine roll-out: Time to randomize vaccine allocation? The Lancet, 15th May, 2021 and mRNA vaccines: A matter of delivery. EClinicalMedicine, 1st Febru-

ary, 2021 amongst others). These articles underline that the vaccine development technology of today is far advanced than before. Hence, we see the fast development of vaccines. But still, a lot of ignorance is being circulated across media platforms. The end result of it being hesitancy and unwillingness to take the vaccine.

In this cycle of agnotology, the role of people and social media is pre-eminent. Social media is a double-edged sword. If on one hand, it can result in good; on the other, it can be the cause of confusion and chaos. One can only urge people to analyze and think on the media content before sharing and forwarding it further. The fact checking on the content can be helpful. On doing so, one will see the agnotology that is being propagated on Covid-19 vaccines. There is a lot of doubt being manufactured and ignorance being spilled with the objective of derailing the fight against the pandemic. Again, on fact checking one may be surprised at the fake scientific data being used to confuse and spread ignorance. A case in point is the video of Carrie Madej being interviewed by a Sikh person which has been debunked as 'misinformation' by reliable medical sources. Moreover, we must learn from countries (like Europe) which have undertaken the Covid-19 vaccination drive seriously. In the last weekend, the sporting events across Europe from football to Formula one witnessed fans/supporters in the stands/stadiums. Well, this is nothing but the outcome of the Covid-19 vaccine. It has slowed down the spread of the virus. It is time for us to learn and replicate!

Another aspect which is related to agnotology is 'cognitive dissonance'. It is the state of having inconsistent and conflicting thought processes and attitudes when related to behavioral changes. It is a conflict between our belief systems and the behavioral change needed. It results in anxiety, stress and negative perceptions about things/issues (in this case the vaccine). As such, cognitive dissonance is an outcome of agnotology. Now, people normally deal with cognitive dissonance in two ways. First, they just brush the issue under the carpet and pretend that everything is well. Second, they tend to look for information to get a better understanding of the issue. In the case of Covid-19 vaccines, it is the latter at play.

People aggressively look for information on validation/non-validation of the vaccines. It is in such a situation that the machinery of spreading ignorance on the vaccines runs wild. In addition, there is a catch. People who are less convinced to take the vaccine because of their belief systems will always look for and agree to information undermining the vaccine. Similarly, they will easily and readily discount/ignore any scientific information validating the vaccine. This is the real and dangerous side of cognitive dissonance. As a result, the agnotology of Covid-19 vaccination has played havoc in the society.

In the end, there is a lot of work to be done. This is because the scientific spread of ignorance will continue. Yes, the state government can continue with its social marketing campaign on the benefits of the vaccine. However, it will be better if its efforts of convincing people are established with facts from reliable sources. One such source is a journal named 'The Lancet'. In all the State Government briefings so far, scientific research-based facts from reliable sources are seldom quoted. It is time to start doing so and hope that people will understand. After all, we can fight scientific ignorance only through scientific facts!

(The Author teaches at NEHU. Email: benjamin21in@yahoo.co.in)

Letters to the Editor

All round loss due to lockdown

Editor, Colossal loss of vegetables, fruits and other perishable items of everyday use in the hands of the producers on one hand, and the shortage and very high price being charged by the few traders on the other hand, during the lockdown, curfew etc, This could have been avoided by allowing unhindered movement of these from the field to the consuming centres and thence to mobile outlets. These carts should be allowed to move freely while observing Covid-related SOPs. The Health Department should maintain reasonable vigil to ensure that these vendors are non-carriers of the virus. Law keepers should be sensitized on this subject.

Yours etc., BC Biswas, Via email

Vaccination - a hassle-free experience

Editor, As per my scheduled booking slot, I had gone to get myself vaccinated at the U Soso Tham Auditorium on 25th May last. Through your esteemed daily, I would like to thank all the people rendering their services at the vaccination centre. From the ladies at the entry point, the

ones at the identity verification point, the nurse administering the vaccine (who was both warm and reassuring) to the lady and gentleman at the waiting area. Thank you for having made the experience as smooth and hassle-free as possible.

You are all doing a commendable job. Thank you for your service.

Yours etc., Name withheld on request Via Email

WhatsApp must comply with Indian laws

Editor, The legal outrage between WhatsApp and the Centre over the new IT rules over freedom of speech and expression and our right to privacy, needs to be balanced with reasonable restrictions. In the KS Puttaswamy vs Union of India case 2017, the Supreme Court ruled that Right to Privacy is our fundamental right under article 21 but it laid the proportionality test stating that it would not be an absolute right. WhatsApp has deliberately failed to comply with the new rules by citing invasion of privacy of citizens. But we have to look at specific cases and circumstances. In some situations social media has created havoc and confusion amongst citizens. It has tried to brainwash people into believing fake news content. Rampant videos of sexual

abuse and contents related to rape, pornography and child abuse are circulated through online platforms like WhatsApp. These videos threaten the life and dignity of women. Fake news and false messages have created disharmony among different communities and incited violence and communal appeasement. Unwanted crimes like drug peddling, sale of illegal weapons are also happening through this platform. No doubt the new rules also concern us all and our right to privacy but it is also the right of a sovereign government to ask for disclosure of the origin of a message that can affect the security of the country. This has to be in line with the laws of the country. Hence, it is the right time for the government to ensure that social media should not be abused by the use of defamatory language and also by creating messages that can cause panic in society. Social media must be used for good, not for spreading fake or misleading news.

Yours etc., C. Majaw, Political Science Dept. NEHU, Via email

Poor mobile & internet services in Tura

Editor, We live in the internet era, don't we but the ser-

VICES provided by mobile operators in Tura, especially BSNL, is far below average. The services provided by the Vodafone-Idea are no better. If the services are poor in Tura town, think about the services in semi-urban and rural areas! You can neither use WhatsApp nor you can send an e-mail. Yet the billing amount remains the same every month. Sometime back, the District Administration in Tura opened a WhatsApp page advising the public to send their complaints/grievances to be forwarded to the concerned mobile service operators for taking necessary action. Many have sent their complaints against these mobile service providers. What happened to those? If the mobile service operators do not listen to the District Administration, will they care to act upon the complaints lodged by individuals? It seems highly unlikely going by past records.

The problem of below average services provided by these mobile operators has been going on for several years now. Normal times, bad times; curfew or no curfew; lockdown or no lockdown, the poor mobile/internet services continue. We see no improvement in their services at all. The Government is encouraging cashless transactions. Moreover, during this lockdown period, only two branches of SBI in Tura are allowed to open and most of the ATMs run dry. At this juncture, the public need uninterrupted internet services to order goods

online and for accessing the COWIN portal for booking appointments for taking the jab as well and also for students who are attending online classes. How will all these be possible when the internet services are down? It is high time the District Administration takes them to task otherwise, our dream of living in the digital era is a distant reality.

Yours etc., Fergertson R Marak, Tura

On Samson's vacuous arguments

Editor, I thank Samson A. Sangma for one more joke during the ongoing pandemic stress. He is hell-bent on casting aspersions about my memory loss. I doubt if he is by any chance a doctor to certify that I have lost my memory. He does not seem to be a quack too, judging from the way he wrote, misquoting even what I have written and seriously misleading the public on many facts he cited which I am duty bound to correct him with official statistics.

Firstly the writer misquoted me by mentioning the year 1986 at least twice when I had actually mentioned the year 1976, November 16, when APHLC was dissolved by Capt. WA Sangma in Mendipathar. Readers may refer to ST dated May 19, 2021. I never mentioned the year 1986, as misquoted by

Samson.

I also never mentioned that APHLC had ceased to exist in 1986 after the emergence of HPU, though when the HPU was recognised in 1986 by the Election Commission (EC), we abolished the original APHLC and the 'Rose' symbol. As is the case with many parties in the country, in Meghalaya too some persons wanted to retain the APHLC, but they neither got the official recognition from EC, nor were entitled to use the 'Rose' Symbol.

Samson is guilty of misrepresenting facts and misleading the readers, when he claimed that the grand old party (APHLC) had won 2 seats from Dalamgiri and Rangsakona. For the benefit of readers and the general public, some persons did contest from the new party, the APHLC (A) and two of them won, but not with the Rose symbol from Rongram and Dalamgiri Constituencies, not Rangsakona Constituency as misquoted by Samson.

From where did Samson surmise that I claimed Capt Sangma led the UDP on the basis of his being the President of the erstwhile APHLC. This is absolutely unfounded and Samson is only trying to create controversy where none exists.

Yours etc., BM Lanong, Via email

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"Hypocrisy is the mother of all evil and racial prejudice is still her favourite child."

--- Don King

The Shillong Times

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Wanted public-monitored relief fund

LAST year the Chief Minister's Relief Fund started after the pandemic hit the State saw many people contributing generously towards it with the hope that the money would be utilised to help those who are impacted the most from the lockdown. In a similar manner the Prime Minister's Citizen Assistance and Relief in Emergency Situations Fund (PM CARES Fund) was created on 27 March 2020, following the outbreak of Covid 19 in India. The purpose of the Fund is for combating and containing the pandemic and future pandemics. Interestingly, the documentation for the constitution of the fund was not made public. Government of India announced that Prime Minister, Narendra Modi is chairman of the fund, and the trustees include Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, Home Minister Amit Shah and Finance Minister, Nirmala Sitharaman

The total amount of funds donated and the names of donors have not been made public and the Fund is privately audited. Government of India initially claimed that the Fund is private. It refuted allegations that the PM CARES Fund is a public fund subject to transparency laws such as the Right to Information Act 2005 even when government infrastructure and the national emblem are being used. The PM CARES Fund has faced strident criticism for its lack of transparency and accountability. It was only in December 2020, the Government of India reversed its stance and admitted that the PM CARES Fund was a public fund, but it continued to adopt a defensive stance as far as disclosing information under the Right to Information is concerned.

Meghalaya is now passing through very tough times and a substantial number of people working in the informal sector namely daily wagers, small vendors, taxi drivers, labourers, who are temporarily without jobs are struggling to survive. While individuals and groups are trying to reach out to the needy with rations etc., people may have other needs too that have to be met. And nothing can substitute for cash. Individuals, organizations and institutions that wish to contribute are unsure whether their money or materials will reach the most deserving. The CM's Relief Fund saw many donors coming forward to generously donate last year. But there is also no information on how that Fund is being managed; how much money it has at present; whether it is still receiving donations; what amount has gone to help those in distress and whether the CM's Relief Fund has been publicly audited. Perhaps the CM's Office could co-opt some civil society members as Fund Managers in the interest of transparency. Those who manage these Funds would have to put in place a system which captures a proper database of the needy and deserving in each constituency. Institutions like IIM Shillong and NEHU, Economics Department could be enlisted to help devise a system where the needy can access the Funds seamlessly.

Letters to the Editor

Defeat of the BJP in West Bengal

Editor,
The drubbing received by the BJP at the hands of All India Trinamool Congress (AITC) on May 2, last was in no uncertain terms a bolt from the blue as BJP had gone hammer and tongs in a campaign overdrive led by PM Modi himself and the Union Home Minister, besides a host of other Union Ministers and Chiefs Ministers of the BJP ruled states. In a word, it was carpet-bombing on a TMC ruled State marshalled by a heroic lady, Mamata Banerjee. BJP was seemingly at a vantage point with an unprecedented number of TMC leaders joining the BJP fold as Bengal was under the so-called Modi wave. The defectors were just like those subterranean creatures visualizing that a massive quake was imminent and thereby making them head for the hills where the BJP is positioned confidently. To add to the woes of the TMC, a good number of exit polls had predicted that

the BJP would win hands down. And wonder of wonders it that even India Today news channel which often gives precise polls predictions concluded that the BJP could secure a majority. But at the end of the day, it was Mamata Banerjee who has had the last laugh at the utter demoralization of the rank and file of the BJP.
It bears recall that a parallel historical instance vis-à-vis BJP's loss can be drawn from the epoch-making battle which occurred in 1863 when the massive Turkish army of nearly two lakhs with 40,000 Tartars attacked Vienna, the present-day capital of Austria, which was defended by a less than twenty thousand defenders. The Turks were led by Kara Mustafa who was hell-bent on capturing Vienna which he termed the Golden Apple and proposed to turn the magnificent Catholic Cathedral of Vienna into mosques as the Turks had done to the exquisite Cathedral of Santa Sophia at Constantinople (now Istanbul). But on September 12, 1863, the dogged defenders of Vienna with the timely arrival of John Sobiesky, King of Poland,

routed the Turks, decisively. Likewise, what the Golden Apple of Vienna was to Mustafa, West Bengal was Sonar Bangla for the BJP. I'm afraid that the defeat of the BJP in West Bengal portends the writing on the wall at the hustings of 2024 for the BJP.
Yours etc.
Jerome K. Diengdoh
Shillong-2

MLAs/MDCs - help your people now

Editor,
The second onslaught of COVID-19 has taken a toll on the healthcare system and has caused illness and death of numerous families in the State of Meghalaya, particularly in East Khasi Hills District. This chaotic situation had been persistent for almost two months now starting from April. The government seems to be in a dilemma as to what steps to take in order to control the sudden surge.
A close examination of last year's scenario reveals that this sudden and uncon-

The unbridled 'Chinese' virus

By T S Haokip

A YouTuber from Punjab recently remarked that, 'Arunachal Pradesh ain't India enough' and went on to call a Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA) from the state of Arunachal Pradesh, "Chinese". The story went viral and created a social media storm. There could be many such incidents unreported and silently withstood. Racial discrimination against North-Eastern people in mainland India is nothing new, though new incidents keep occurring. How could one forget Nido Tania, the boy from Arunachal Pradesh who was beaten to death by shopkeepers in a fight sparked by taunts on the hair colour of the Arunachali boy in Munirka Delhi? Memories of a few North Eastern people being denied entry in a supermarket in Bangalore allegedly for physically resembling the Chinese and therefore being alleged carriers of the though they wore masks and showed them their Identity cards are

"The discrimination case involving the YouTuber from Punjab reveals an uncomfortable trend among some miscreants hailing from mainland India to use discriminatory words to humiliate and subjugate their North Eastern counterparts. This discriminatory psyche and misconducts stems from the belief that such incidents do not attract any fearful consequences."

galand police and brought to Kohima to face trial. The accused did apologise and appear remorseful and seemed to have learned her lesson. She was later released and it is highly doubtful the person

of the second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, it is unthinkable as to how a feeling of hatred and enmity could be developed against one's own countrymen at this juncture.

We should all hang our heads in shame and introspect. The challenge now is to find a solution to end this humiliating culture for good. Not all victims have the blessing like the MLA of Arunachal

to install NE helplines in all states.

Being one personally affected by the unending wave of racial discrimination based on appearances and the type of food I chose to put on my plate, I remember the psychological trauma and anguish so much so I had at one point questioned if NE Indians are considered bonafide citizens of the country at all. Many victims of racial discrimination will harbour the same anguish. Also, racial discrimination spawns regional enmity as is evident from past incidents. Such episodes of racial discrimination against Northeasterners has in the past fuelled regional enmity and resulted in the attack on people from outside the region and vice versa. It is a dangerous trend and highly detrimental to the idea of unity in diversity.

While the Government is spending its time and energy to thwart off China's claim of a part of a state in North East India, calling names like 'Chinese' to our North Eastern brethren, in addition to it being a crime, is tantamount to promoting China's propaganda. Ironically, there are sizeable number of North-Easterners in the Indian Army who are valiantly manning our borders to avert external aggressions including that of

China's. It is a tragedy that Northeasterners, despite rendering their selfless service to the nation are rebuked and not treated as 'equals' by many people.

To rein in the menace of racial discrimination in all sincerity, it is time discussions on the matter are given a centrepiece in our social sphere to spread the awareness of it being a vicious social evil. Endowing paramount importance to the issue is a pressing necessity that merits the collective endeavour of concerned authorities and the general public. The initiative warrants policies and actions devised by taking into account the grave ramifications of racial discrimination, beyond the concerns of North-Eastern Indians. In all the cases involving discrimination of NE people, the victims are not just those directly affected; India as a country that celebrates diversity becomes the unwitting victim.

(The writer is an author and freelance writer based in Mumbai.)



will repeat the same mistake again. But the crux of the matter is whether the punishment awarded is exemplary enough to discourage others from committing the crime. It is in this aspect that the efforts of the Arunachal police

Pradesh whose case has the close supervision of Union Minister, Kiren Rijju. That timely intervention of the minister could be the main reason for the swift punitive actions. Should all incidents of crime against North-East-

"But the crux of the matter is whether the punishment awarded is exemplary enough to discourage others from committing the crime. It is in this aspect that the efforts of the Arunachal police to nab the YouTuber despite his apology, which deserves commendation. Racial discrimination is too serious a matter to be dismissed with a note of apology."

to nab the YouTuber despite his apology, which deserves commendation. Racial discrimination is too serious a matter to be dismissed with a note of apology. More stringent actions should be awarded to discourage potential discriminators.
At a time when the nation is reeling under severe impact

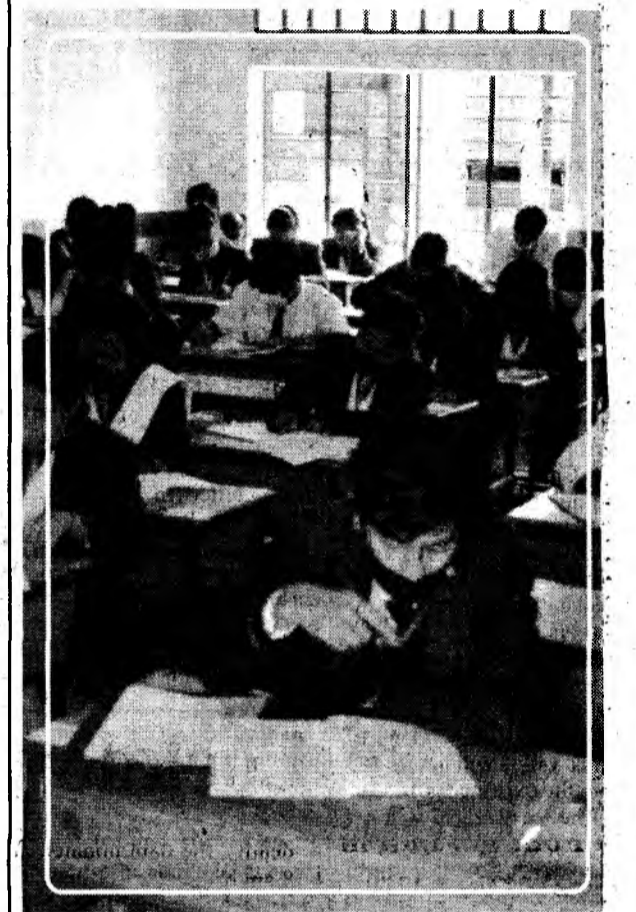
ern Indians be then allocated to ministers for timely action? The Government has taken a commendable step of forming North East helplines to specifically attend to the concerns of North Eastern people in a few metropolitan cities. Considering the rise in crime against NE people in various places, is it time

Education in the time of pandemic

By R Lyngdoh

It is really a time of crisis for all. Be it the virus affecting our immediately families, the loss of near and dear ones, the isolation we have to go through, the turmoil of front-liners, the struggles of many to look for their next meal, the worries of the daily wage labourers, the agonies of the business person - these are all gnawing pains. Then there's the frustration of labour loss, the growl of empty stomachs, the wails of hungry mouths, the exhaustion of the learners and the torture of the educators. I may have missed out on other points but this is how the pandemic has afflicted many. In spite

that many families are not financially well-off to be able to provide a good quality gadget to each of their off-springs. No doubt, our children are superb in picking up a book or a newspaper and reading through without any glitch in their grammar and pronunciation, fluent in their digital know-how, and dextrous with their snazzy response to every comment and updates in their media profiles, but when it comes to their basic needs, they are naive and need a lot of adult supervision. The skill of survival are unheard of, unthinkable to them. And not everything is not as simple as making the 2-minute



of the sinking ship (as the meme circulating on social media depicts), the teachers are still orchestrating the choir amidst the storm.

It is depressing to note that some of the elite schools in Shillong are insisting that the school environment be transferred to the homes of students. School students are required to follow the school routine at home, donning their school attire only to prove to the school authorities, their sincerity and punctuality, which digitally can be very misleading. Stuck to their electronic gadgets for the major part of the day, we are still expected to wear them off the gadgets and apply the tenets of 'go out and play', as if on cue and is if they can switch on and off like robots. One may take the school to the homes, but one cannot make the home a school.

The amount of work that teachers are expected to do from home, while multitasking with household chores, tending to their children and aged parents needs is a tough call. Add to that the problem of arranging for digital technology despite the lack of resources, and we have an insensitive system in place. The teacher by and large is an epitome of dedication, sincerity and punctuality. This is a time-bound profession that requires respect before order. The school authorities are so hell bent on finishing the curriculum that sometimes it makes me wonder whether education is imparted or forced upon students. Are the students learning or only gaining knowledge? Are kids becoming knowledgeable or wise?

Majority of us are trying to survive but we are expected to be punctual to the calls of the school authorities else our children forfeit their attendance for the day. And let us accept

Maggie noodles. For many parents, this is the golden opportunity to teach their kids the basic necessities and basic life skills that life itself beckons us to learn.

The government, on its part is instrumental in facilitating the imparting of knowledge which is evident in policy-making. It would be nice if the government could provide the infrastructure, prepare the battlefield and then call on the foot soldiers. A case in point is when rumours about a lockdown was heard on social media platforms, students from rural areas flocked to the urban areas for fear of lack of accessibility in case of online classes or exams. Education is kind only to the affluent. The pandemic has brought that up close and personal.

It is understood that Covid is an unprecedented crisis of our lifetime and it is rather difficult for the government to handle such a situation, let alone be prepared for it. Here I am referring to our respected Education Minister and the policies being implemented incrementally. I guess, taking into account the plight of the general public, would be the first step in policy-making and also decision-making. Introducing the coronavirus into the school curriculum is fine but couldn't it wait till a cure is found or till the vitals are clarified, so as to equip the teachers with the resources to handle this topic after all doubts and confusions are cleared?

'Humanity' should be given more importance and due attention, as it is what is called for at this point. Humanity cannot be taught; it cannot be learned but it can only be replicated and exemplified from those who practice this virtue.

Humanity should guide the future generation. Let's give it a wise thought.

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

The Pandemic zone

Impact on Spectator Sports

While sporting leagues and sports persons across the world are hit by Covid-19 fallout, spectator sports like USA's NBA or cricket-crazy India's IPL cope with new challenges. Jackson Stone, Ashley Wright and Tyler Hollins from USA and Harshal Shah from India report



It's been over 400 days since the NBA announced it would be suspending its season, the first of many postponements or cancellations echoed by sports leagues across the globe in the following days.

The United States had 1,267 confirmed cases by the end of that night on March 11, 2020.

This number has since inched towards 150 million cases worldwide despite national and state governments around the world declaring unprecedented lockdowns and public health and safety measures.

Yet, over a year later, India's highest regarded cricket league, the India Premier League, continued to play on despite over 350,000 people testing positive in India till early May.

However, amid the catastrophic second wave Covid-19 situation in India and consequent outrage, the league- which has an estimated brand value of \$6.8 billion- has been postponed. The decision was taken after several players tested positive for the virus.

Officials had been advocating for continued play because of the league's importance to the country's overall well-being. An anonymous IPL official told Reuters that the "IPL provides a much-needed distraction for all from the doom and gloom around us."

Another factor that may be holding the league back from cancelling or postponing the season is the unknown monetary impact of the \$2.55 billion dollar television deal that runs through 2022.

The league first started play in 2008 but is already the 6th-biggest in terms of revenue in the world and has surpassed the MLB in sponsorship revenue.

"Many IPL teams have made money this year," said Thomas Abraham, co-founder of SportzPower, an independently owned media company in India.

According to Abraham, Covid-19 had zero impact on the big leagues like the IPL.

"It would have been negatively impacted if VIVO [smartphone company] had not come back this year (2021). Last year VIVO was not there and there was a drop in revenue from INR 440 crore to INR 220 crore, which is basically half."

"Many IPL teams have made money this year. The big leagues have managed to maintain the num-

bers because they have a decent amount of media rights and higher levels of viewership. We do not really know what is going to happen to smaller leagues."

However, not all sporting events or leagues deliver like IPL cash cow.

Some premier domestic leagues of India, such as the Ranji Trophy (cricket), will not be held for the first time in 87 years.

As a second spike hits its peak in India, the future of the country's most popular sports- cricket- is uncertain.

"We have lost the year 2020-2021," said Snehasish Ganguly, Honorary Secretary of The Cricket Association of Bengal (CAB), a state unit of India's cricket board, BCCI.

"We are almost on the verge of losing 2021-2022 because nobody knows how long the pandemic is going to last."

The year that we have lost, without cricket, has impacted the careers of youngsters, their mentality and mindset towards the game," he said.

A number of players have already opted out of the IPL due to COVID-19 concerns, similar to the NFL's decision to allow players to opt-out of the 2020 season.

Even newspapers had started to boycott coverage of the league because of its willingness to play during this time.

A different world

However, life on the other side of the planet (read USA) is trying to slowly navigate through a pandemic that some state governments view as essentially over.

"The Texas Rangers tried 100% (capacity) on their Opening Day, the Indy 500 is going to have 135,000 people at their event and golf tournaments are bringing people back in, but it still remains to be seen whether there'll be another surge again," said Dr. Jim Riordan, director of the MBA Sport Management program at Florida Atlantic University.

"Outbreaks and positivity rates are going to dictate how quickly and how fast that each city can move."

The disparity between cities and allowed attendance at sporting events has been substantial in recent months.

The Kansas City Chiefs opened up to 22% capacity of Arrowhead Stadium every game, but the next

closest team in terms of distance, the Chicago Bears, didn't allow a single spectator into Soldier Field the entire season.

Even teams who accommodated fans couldn't uphold their commitment to everyone who had bought tickets in advance because of the reduced capacity regulations.

"It was disappointing for a lot of season ticket holders just because of the way they did the spacing in stadiums," said Chiefs season ticket member Jonathan Liddle.

While ticket sales are an important piece of revenue for professional sports teams and college athletic departments, it only makes up a portion of the revenue made on gameday.

Not having spectators in the seats has been costly on many levels.

"That takes away a lot of not only main revenue, but also ancillary revenue," said Dr. Riordan. "You have ticket sales, but people who buy tickets to come to games also pay for parking, souvenirs, concessions, hotdogs, beer, food. All that's gone by the wayside."

Major League Baseball, a \$10 billion industry, lives off fan revenue, similar to other major sports leagues.

When a family of four attends an MLB game, they spend approximately \$234.38 on tickets, parking, food, and merchandise.

During a typical 162-game season, gate receipts, the sum of money taken at a sporting venue for the sale of tickets, add up to \$2.84 billion for the league.

That number has negatively impacted all teams, whether they are large national markets such as the New York Yankees or locally supported teams such as the Kansas City Royals.

For example, the New York Yankees, the highest valued MLB franchise and second most valuable franchise in the world at \$5 billion, suffered a dramatic revenue drop in 2020.

For the shortened 60-game season, the Yankees brought in \$108 million dollars, a steep decline from their \$683 million dollar figure in 2019.

However, teams with lower payrolls and expected attendance such as the Kansas City Royals still managed to draw in \$109 million in 2020.

That could be in large part to the new television deal that was struck before the season that was

rumoured to have doubled their previous deal in terms of value.

"The eyeballs right now during COVID and the pandemic, or through last football season and in spring training, were not in the seats so to speak," said Dr. Riordan. "Most of the eyeballs are now watching on television."

Careers, mental health at jeopardy

Covid-19 has dealt a blow to the budding careers of many sports persons in both countries.

According to Subrata Dutta, Senior Vice President of the All India Football Federation (AIFF), "due to the pandemic, many football players may shy away from their game and might lose their game form which may put their life and career in jeopardy."

"If tournaments and leagues do not take place, football players, especially those who are professionals, they would not get their salaries," he said.

According to sports administrators, COVID-19 protocols and bio secure bubbles are also affecting the players mentally.

Said Dutta: "If the players are confined to a room or a place, if they cannot go out and mix with people or visit their friends and relatives, they are mentally affected."

"If the players are confined during a two-month long tournament, it definitely takes a toll on their mental health. They would be demoralised and demotivated."

"The players might need a psychiatrist or sports doctor to come out of the mental agony."

As Snehasish Ganguly of CAB put it: "In this situation, a lot of cricketers might have diverted themselves from sports to studies or are focusing on other parts of their careers."

What's next?

Despite the differences between the two countries, one thing remains constant.

"Everyone looks to sports and entertainment as an outlet," said Dr. Riordan.

"Working 9-5 or a lot longer, five days a week, they look to sports and entertainment as a way of getting away from all that and getting refreshed and just enjoying themselves."

Especially now since they've been cooped up in houses and not

been able to do that."

While Americans may be able to watch and support their favorite teams in the stands, many in India don't have the same option now. But they are hopeful.

"Despite the fact that our way of playing sports and life in general are being affected, I believe that sports have a bright chance of picking up post the lockdown," said Dr. Sankar UV, Director at the Sports School, which is one of India's first integrated schools for sports and academics.

"There will certainly be the aspect of heightened safety protocols for the foreseeable future, since the people of our country have become more conscious of their health."

According to Thomas Abraham, there is going to be a process in which the whole ecosystem figures out how to get back to play.

"The momentum has been disrupted in a big way."

Businesses have to come back on track, people need to have financial stability. There are many people who have lost their jobs.

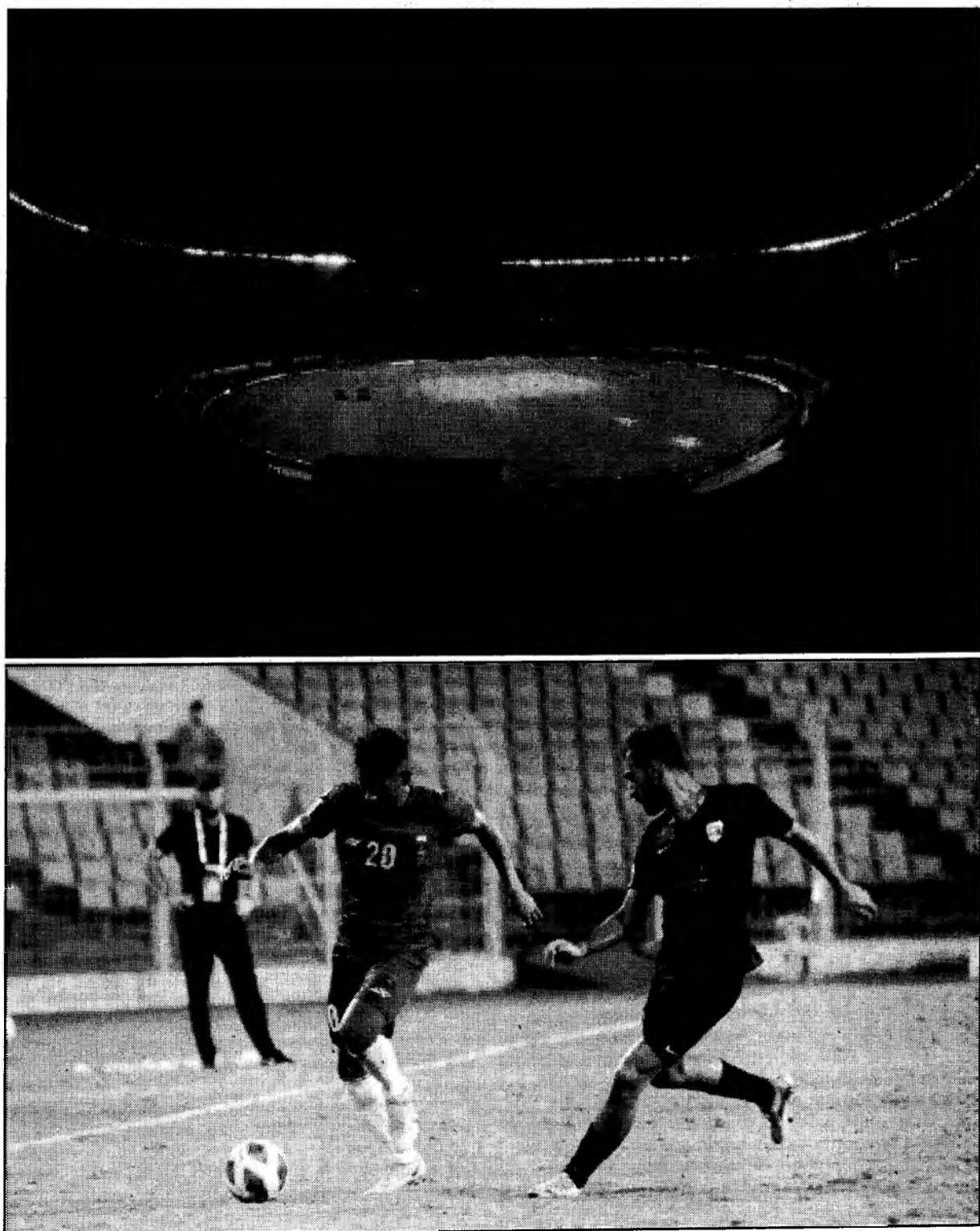
"Financially, the potential consumers of sports have been affected. It is a process that has to start again. There is no straight answer here. The economy has a huge role to play," he said.

Whether or not health and safety protocols allow fans around the world to celebrate their team in person by the end of the year, sports will be at the forefront of public events to bring the community back together.

"When we had the 9/11 tragedy, people looked to sports," Dr. Riordan said.

"People looked to the (2001) World Series and getting back to playing games a week later. We had President Bush throw out the first pitch. It was a national event. It was a national unification event."

"Sports are certainly a unifier. It's bringing people together. And it'll do that here (with COVID) too." (TWF)



Malayan giant squirrels on Northeast India Radar

The Malayan giant squirrel is predominantly arboreal and lives in the tropical and subtropical montane evergreen and dry deciduous forests of Sikkim, north Bengal and northeast India. Logging, habitat loss and forest fragmentation are common threats to the species while dearth in scientific research means that targeted conservation action for the Malayan giant squirrel is also lacking, Mongabay-India correspondent Athira Perinchery reports.

It was a hot summer morning and Samrat Sengupta, a masters' student of science at the Guwahati University, was watching birds through his binoculars in a reserve forest in north-eastern Assam. His eyes widened in surprise when he saw a predominantly black squirrel, the size of a small monkey, manoeuvre nimbly and with great speed through the topmost branches of the high canopy.

"I had never seen such a large squirrel before," he recollected. "It fascinated me."

Ten years later, in 2017, one of the study subjects that graced his doctoral thesis was this intriguing black mammal: the Malayan giant squirrel. While Sengupta's work examined how four arboreal squirrel species including the Malayan giant squirrel partition food, space and time to coexist in Assam's Hollongapar Gibbon Wildlife Sanctuary, he gleaned some worrying facts from his fieldwork. His observations mirror what published scientific studies on the species, though few, detail. That though the Malayan giant squirrel is common in many parts of north-east India, hunting and habitat loss pose a threat to it. A dearth in scientific research - including basic data such as population status - means that targeted conservation action for the Malayan giant squirrel is also lacking.

The Malayan giant squirrel
Weighing around three kilos, the black or Malayan giant squirrel *Ratufa bicolor* is the largest of India's four giant squirrels. Predominantly arboreal, they live in the tropical and subtropical montane evergreen and dry deciduous forests of Sikkim, north Bengal

and northeast India. Sengupta's research in 2016 shows that in Hollongapar, these squirrels spend more than 95 percent of their time on treetops but do occasionally descend to the forest floor for foraging.

While tree squirrels like these giant squirrels are often seed eaters, they do inadvertently aid in seed dispersal too when uneaten seeds drop down to the forest floor as they forage, write scientists Aparajita Datta (Nature Conservation Foundation) and Nandini Rajamani in their chapter on squirrel species or sciurids of India. There are other reasons why Malayan giant squirrels, like other sciurids, play an important role in the local ecosystems too. Tree-dwelling squirrels are important prey for large predatory birds and small carnivores, according to Datta and Rajamani. Moreover, the "presence or absence" of giant squirrels in general "could be useful in assessing habitat quality (as indicator species), because of their ecological requirements, dependence on canopy continuity, and on fruits and seeds for food," they add.

The Malayan giant squirrel's need for a continuous tree canopy is something that Sengupta, currently an assistant professor at the Debraj Roy College in Assam's Golaghat, noticed during his studies in eastern Assam too. In Hollongapar, the squirrels would barely venture outside the forest patch, while the three other species he studied - the hoary-bellied, Himalayan striped and red-bellied squirrels - would still use the nearby tea estates in varying degrees. In 2008, a study by Datta in Arunachal Pradesh also

found that Malayan giant squirrels were more abundant in areas that had higher tree densities and canopy cover, a feature of unlogged forests.

Logging and fragmentation are concerns around the Dehing Patkai National Park in northeastern Assam, noticed researcher P.S. Sumashini when she recently surveyed for Malayan giant and red-bellied squirrels in the area. She visited six forest patches (including two large patches each around 100 square kilometres large, two medium-sized ones of around 25 sq km and two small forest fragments less than 5 sq km).

"We did not record any Malayan giant squirrel in the small patches," said Sumashini, currently a research fellow at the Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment. "Only one medium-sized patch was home to these squirrels. Fragmentation could indeed be affecting the arboreal Malayan giant squirrel here."

Hunting the Kebung
A more direct threat that Malayan giant squirrels face is hunting. Locals often hunted these squirrels for meat in northeastern Assam, said Sumashini, who once even encountered a hunter during her fieldwork there. A survey by scientists in Arunachal Pradesh's Ziro Valley in 2011-2012 revealed that locals hunted Malayan giant squirrels here mostly for meat; the team also came across squirrel skins at homes. From being listed as 'Least Concern' in the IUCN Red List in 1996, Malayan giant squirrels were bumped up to 'Near Threatened' in 2008. It still

remains in this category as per the last IUCN assessment (2016) since its population is "declining" due to habitat loss and "over-harvesting" for food.

In 2014, scientists' interviews with the Adi tribal community in northern Arunachal Pradesh revealed that here too, hunting Malayan giant squirrels was common; locally called *kebung*, the squirrels are a part of the peoples' socio-cultural, economic and livelihood systems and are used as food, medicine and in traditional ceremonies. The squirrels are therefore hunted in even community forests (protected traditionally by local communities) and areas with successional vegetation, such as *jhum* lands (areas where *jhum*, or slash-and-burn agriculture, is practised by clearing a patch of forest and then letting it lie fallow for several years).

Jhum cultivation and the Malayan giant squirrel
Such areas of successional vegetation - vegetation that grows in *jhum* lands left fallow especially for longer periods of time - are one of the habitats that Malayan giant squirrels utilise.

In 1996, scientist T. R. Shankar Raman (currently with the Nature Conservation Foundation) spotted the Malayan giant squirrel only in areas that had higher numbers of tree species, and a higher density of trees.

Such higher species richness and densities of trees occurred in only two types of habitats: mature forest (this included primary forest that was not disturbed by *jhum* cultivation, and a 100-year-old disturbed forest that had regenerated in a village); and areas with late-successional vegetation (patches that had been left fallow for at least 25 years following *jhum* cultivation). Interestingly, the species was not spotted in areas left fallow for one, five, or even 10 years. Mature forests and late-successional vegetation were home to more trees that offered food resources (such as the elephant apple



tree, *Dillenia indica*); and Shankar Raman observed nests of the squirrels only on tall trees in mature forests. Maintaining mature forest and late-successional vegetation, therefore, could be important for the "continued persistence" of species including the Malayan giant squirrel, Shankar Raman had pointed out.

However, more recent studies on how these squirrels respond to *jhum* cultivation or fallow lands across other parts of its range in the northeast are lacking.

Lack of research
In 2008, a literature survey on tree and flying squirrels across the world by scientists including Rajamani, currently an assistant professor at the Indian Institute of Science Education and Research (IISER) Tirupati, found a "complete lack in scientific knowledge" for many species.

A lack of basic data on species is a huge problem for targeted conservation action, and with the case of the Malayan giant squirrel we are not even quite sure of distribution or population density, commented Rajamani in an email. "We have information on the species from few sites only, and these studies are typically snapshots in time, not long-term studies that have tracked populations or individuals. The lack of knowledge of basic behaviour, life history patterns, and social

structure preclude us from drafting species-specific conservation plans."

One reason why research has fallen behind is that these mammals are a "relatively small, less charismatic species, perceived as less important", write Rajamani and Datta in their book chapter. Another issue, they say, is logistical: these small mammals are difficult to study in the wild. Indeed, the squirrels move so quickly that it is easy to lose sight of them in the canopy, said Sengupta. Moreover, radio-tagging individuals is almost impossible for the number of permits that would involve, he added.

Currently, the reserve forest in Assam where Sengupta spotted his first Malayan giant squirrel is now the Dehing Patkai Wildlife Sanctuary and National Park. While the squirrels here may benefit from the added protection that this legal move brings, there is much ground to be covered for *kebung* conservation across the northeast. Increasing awareness among local communities and regular monitoring in community forests could be vital, said Sengupta.

Monitoring small forest patches to regulate logging and hunting could be important too, said Sumashini. "If not, Malayan giant squirrels in such fragments could be doomed." (TWF)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, May 30, 2021

Mercury square Mars on your solar return chart and it will give mixed results for you. You will be rewarded for your efforts. But be aware of being cheated in financial matters. There are chances of an untoward incident. But you will face it well. You will be busy in daily activities. Your pending work will also get completed. Take any decision related to your heart with care. Don't be in a hurry to fix any marriage related matter. You will give your entire time to your family. Your time will be spent in fun, relaxation and entertainment. Your financial position is okay. It is necessary to control unnecessary expenditure. Your enemies and foes will be active. You will get success in some competition/interview. Involving yourself in charitable deeds will give you a peace of mind. You need not waste your energies in disputes, quarrels etc.

Aries: (March 21 - April 20)

You will be having wonderful financial gains. You will also like to spend as much as you want to. But don't go overboard. Spend at right places at the right things. Save for rainy days too. An important work will get finalized. This will increase your popularity. You will also like to make a will or testimony of your assets and property. Property related dispute will be accomplished with the help of experts. Your siblings will be happier. You will also make plans to buy a new vehicle. Your partner will remain a pillar of strength. Family circumstances will be to your satisfaction. You will also make necessary changes to your house, office and shop. Those who are unmarried will get ready to tie the knot.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21)

The time is favorable for you. You will have financial gains. You will also make progress in your job. You will look after your children and friends well and will reach out to them. You will have lot of love and respect for your parents and elders. You will also feel proud of learning something new at your workplace. You will also get favorable results in competitive exams. You will also get loan to expand your business and you will also be able to return it on time. You will have good understanding with your bosses and subordinates. There will be an increase in your income. The doors to new possibilities will open. You will also try to move ahead by clearing all hurdles.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21)

A change of luck and fortunes seems imminent. But this is a cause of jealousy for some of your colleagues. But this is not your problem. You will be normal and perform your duties. You will accomplish daily tasks with great ease and get the help of family and other people. You will be full of energy. These are property gaining days. You will also prepare to undertake new responsibilities. You will have capacity and confidence to bring tasks to conclusion. But before doing any work, do the home work, only then you will be successful. You will be praised and get support in full steam and you will feel better. You will achieve your objectives. Ties in family will improve.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22)

This is the right time to develop contacts. You will have financial gains. People in the family will live with mutual love and respect. Visitors will come to your house and it will create a vibrant atmosphere. Some of your tensions will get removed. You will also look after your children like a good guardian. You will also plan for your child's future. The path to progress is also bright. You will accept a new responsibility. You will also get expected help from friends and colleagues. You will be very humble and soft with your relationship. You will have little tension in family matters. Think before taking a decision. A meeting with an inspirational person will open the doors of progress for you.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23)

There will be gains in your business/profession. Your prestige will also increase. You will be busy in amassing amenities. You will get the best of everything. Your responsibilities will increase. You will be successful in whatever you do. You will also meet old friends. On meeting whom your old memories will be revived and you will share your feelings. Your mind will be satisfied. You will develop a capacity to remain happy. But you need not speak such truths that should not be revealed. You will be victorious in everything. The happiness of the winning will reflect in your face. You will spend time with your family. Get your routine check ups done. Money will inflow.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22)

You will feel happy and prosperous. You will also be busy in social activities. The responsibility of work and family notwithstanding you will manage the situation well. Happiness will radiate from house. You will have good relationship with your partner. You will concentrate on better life style without stress. Property related dispute will be solved. Old memories will be refreshed with some old friends. You will be more ambitious and

will make a deep analysis of your own self and the world. Keep your character good and do not become dishonest. Efforts made for getting money will be fruitful. You will find new opportunities in your career. Your business will also flourish. Husband and wife will have good relations.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23)

It is a success granting week. And you will get victory and success in your pursuit. Your enemies may try to harm you but will not get success. You will complete business and trade related works with a serious approach. Money will flow in. You will avoid taking risk in your business. The atmosphere at home will be good. The misunderstanding between husband and wife will get resolved. You will also resolve everything at the workplace with your wisdom. You will also be praised at your work. You will also participate in some function or ceremony. You will spend more time with the family and also in reading some interesting or knowledge enhancing literature. The time is blissful.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22)

There could be some tiff with a senior official at your workplace. This will trouble you for no reasons but you need to overcome it quickly. You may get a big order or contract from abroad. In the government related dispute you will emerge victorious. Some religious activities or worship may keep you engrossed. In your work, you will get expected results with your humility. And with the gift of the gab you will make everyone favour you. Your family peace and prosperity may swell. You will also give much value to your emotions for the family members and relatives. Financially you will be satisfied with your assets and progeny's educational prospects may cause you a little bit of worry.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21)

You will be busy in your work. You will also be happy and in a positive frame of mind. You will also complete your daily chores with ease. Money will flow in. There will be radiance in your work, family matters and personal matters. You will have good time with your mate. You will also expand the scope of your work. Government related work will get completed. You will make maximum use of your knowledge and intelligence. There will be real peace and stability in your personal life. By helping your needy friends, you will be doing great work. Some person might neglect you but you will keep your behavior normal. You will achieve something new that will bring happiness and peace in your life.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20)

It is a favorable week for you. New opportunities are awaiting for you in your career and job. You will establish an understanding with your partner and then work. There will be a tendency towards some new work. You will also decide to do something new and take rest after finishing them. You will also come in close contact with your bosses and all your work will get completed with their help. You also need to take all decisions with a lot of deliberation and care. You will have a nice time with your family members. Your partner will be a source of strength. Children will listen to you. Your property disputes will also get resolved. Some new projects will get initiated. You will also get a good news from somewhere.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18)

Your bosses will praise your work. Your meeting with an influential person will bring lot of fortunes for you. You will not take any decision in a haste. A person may level a false allegation against you but it will have little impact of your reputation. Money and wealth will keep coming. You will get things of leisure. And will be having good time with your family members. You will have good understanding with your life partner. You will start meeting lot of people and life will be starting to get back on track. Take monetary decisions carefully. You will learn a lot from bitter experiences. The quarrel with your siblings will also get resolved. You will also receive good news.

Places: (February 19 - March 20)

You will be dedicated towards your work and will also be getting good results. People will praise your work and your contributions. Your financial position is going to be good. You will be exploring additional and new sources of income. You will hence forth be satisfied with your earning. You will also channel your energy and enthusiasm in a positive direction. You will share good bonding with your mate. You will pay attention to your health. You will share your responsibilities with your family. Your enemies and critics will become active and will try to demean you in society. But they will not get success. Time is very favorable for you. Your daily routine will be quite busy.

Career Opportunities in Tobacco Control



By Ranjan K Baruah

One of the health issues in India and around the world is health problems due to consumption of tobacco and its products. Tobacco kills up to half of its users around the world. It kills more than 8 million people each year and more than 7 million of those deaths are the result of direct tobacco use while around 1.2 million are the result of non-smokers being exposed to second-hand smoke. Over 80% of the world's 1.3 billion tobacco users live in low- and middle-income countries.

There is no doubt that the tobacco epidemic is one of the biggest public health threats the world has ever faced. All forms of tobacco are harmful, and there is no safe level of exposure to tobacco. Cigarette smoking is the most common form of tobacco use worldwide.

Other tobacco products include waterpipe tobacco, various smokeless tobacco products, cigars, cigarillos, roll-your-own tobacco, pipe tobacco, beedis, gutka, etc. Smokeless tobacco contains many cancer-causing toxins and its use increases the risk of cancers of the head, neck, throat, esophagus and oral cavity (including, cancer of the mouth, tongue, lip and gums) as well as various dental diseases.

Government of India launched the National Tobacco Control Programme (NTCP) in the year 2007-08 during the 11th Five-Year-Plan, with the aim to (i) create awareness about the harmful effects of to-

bacco consumption, (ii) reduce the production and supply of tobacco products, (iii) ensure effective implementation of the provisions under "The Cigarettes and Other Tobacco Products (Prohibition of Advertisement and Regulation of Trade and Commerce, Production, Supply and Distribution) Act, 2003" (COTPA) (iv) help the people quit tobacco use, and (v) facilitate implementation of strategies for prevention and control of tobacco advocated by WHO Framework Convention of Tobacco Control.

The National Tobacco Control Cell (NTCC) at the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW) is responsible for overall policy formulation, planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the different activities envisaged under the NTCP.

Let us talk about something from career perspectives. When we see tobacco use as a public health hazard means lots to be done to control it.

When we talk about career options with the areas then it would include government sector as well as private sectors and more importantly social organization and nongovernmental organization.

Aspirants may join government programmes like NTCP. Scopes are there for health professionals like doctors, nurses and health educators. 31st May is observed as World No Tobacco Day around the world. There are opportunities for

aspirants who are creative to be in information dissemination and awareness raising programmers of different organizations who are focused in tobacco control. There are options for legal experts too as there are many laws related with tobacco products which need to be educated amongst the masses through various media.

International organizations like the World Health Organization have different programmes related to tobacco control where aspirants may join and get engaged.

There are opportunities for people who are associated with drama or puppetry or traditional media to generate awareness amongst rural masses especially in countries like India.

Now readers may be wondering whether there are any special courses to work in the field of tobacco control. Well, there is no such direct course but there are short term programmes for people who want to work against tobacco.

A Master in Social Work or similar course helps one to get engaged in the development sector easily. For creative activities in tobacco control it is preferred that aspirants come from journalism or mass communication subjects.

To become a counselor it is preferred to study psychology or similar courses.

Apart from the qualification and degree one needs to be passionate and ready to work in different situations as working with tobacco users is always challenging.

There are different opportunities and fellowships available for young people and experienced people who want to work in this field. We can together end tobacco and if someone chose it as a career then they are not only working but also helping many families directly or indirectly.

(Ranjan K Baruah is a career mentor and skill trainer and can be reached at 8473943734 or bkranjara@gmail.com for any career queries)

"They say time heals all wounds, but that presumes the source of the grief is finite"

— Cassandra Clare

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Probe COVID'S origin

THE Covid genesis story is getting curiouse and curiouse even as optimism about a fair conclusion on this critically important matter fades. There was a lag in the way the international community tried to search for the origin of what was prima facie a lab-induced virus, the "genie" that was out of the bottle sometime in late 2019. Americans were stunned by its impact right in their mega cities while the UN and WHO were delayed in their responses. The global body sent a scientific team to Wuhan to probe its origin but failed to fix responsibility. A team of British scientists now say they have evidence to confirm that Chinese researchers created the deadly virus in a lab in Wuhan and that they tried to cover up their tracks by engaging in reverse engineering to create the impression that it evolved from bats. They stress that Covid19 virus has no credible natural ancestor and was a "creation" of the Chinese. These Chinese researchers, it is noted, have been "silenced" or made to "disappear" by the wily Chinese establishment. "The laws of physics mean you cannot have four positively charged amino acids in a row (as in this case). The only way you can get this is if you artificially manufacture it," these British scientists reason. This raises issues of moral codes binding the global scientific community.

The apprehension has been that the virus "escaped" from the Wuhan Institute of Virology where scientists were engaged in experiments bordering on biological warfare for the future. Donald Trump as US president was taken aback by the sweep of the virus in his urban sprawls that attention got deflected from the real issue of the virus's origin. Belatedly, his successor Joe Biden has set a three-month deadline this past week for the American scientific intelligence community to arrive at an opinion on how this virus came about. The UN can do its job even at this late hour. But China with its hold over the Security Council is bound to put hurdles in the way of any UN effort unless there's going to be more intense pressure from the US to take the investigations forward and fix guilt on where things have gone wrong. Punitive measures must follow. This is important not just to face the present critical global situation but also to act as a deterrent in future against attempts that put human existence at grave risk. A country that has caused unprecedented deaths and suffering and has virtually killed the economy should have been made a pariah by the international community.

Of Spokespersons And Their Messages

By HH Mohrmen

The evolving scenario in Meghalaya has proved one thing - the crisis management system of both the state and the central government has failed. It has missed the first phase of the crisis management strategy by not being able to foresee the coming of the second wave of the pandemic. The State Government is making a bigger blunder in its response to the crisis by not giving due importance to public relations in dealing with the crisis. The role of public relations in responding to a crisis is crucial because its task is to develop messages that explain the crisis and the response to it so that the messaging reaches the public in an unambiguous, empathetic capsule to enable them to respond to the crisis.

Anyone with even a little understanding of crisis management would know the public relations is critical to crisis management. Communication both within and outside the government is like a lamp post which provides light to those in need of some ray of hope during a crisis like the pandemic. The person in charge of the task shoulders a very heavy responsibility because he is the bridge between the public and the government.

Earlier the job of spokespersons was easy, because they talk to the media person through whom the message is disseminated to the public. But with the advent of the electronic media, people can see the gestures and even read the facial expressions of the government spokesperson. These are non-verbal and unintended signs which tend to send out the wrong messages. At a time of crisis, wrong messaging whether intentional or otherwise is the last thing the government should be sending to the public.

In the competition to reach to their audience faster, media outlets are even using social media platforms to livestream press conference which makes the task of the spokesperson even more challenging. In the circumstance, the spokesperson should not only be someone who is well verse with the subject at hand but should also have communication skills. The Director of Health Services can only share basic information about the pan-

dem. The responsibility to inform the public about the policies and actions taken by the government to tackle the pandemic is the responsibility of the government spokesperson. Unfortunately, many a times it looks as if the spokesperson comes to press briefings with little or no preparation.

To avoid sending wrong messages it is important to have a written script handy which is often neglected by the concern authorities. That is the first and the most important lesson in any public relations exercise, more so during a crisis. A fatal flaw of the Deputy Chief Minister of Meghalaya and the spokesperson of the MDA Government is that he is verbose and gets carried away. He goes beyond his brief. Perhaps that is because he has no training in Public Relations (PR) and is not mindful of his gestures and facial expressions. This was what let him down in the recent imbroglio. It is the main cause of the skirmish between him and TUR which has now escalated to a war words between the government and the farmers and hawkers. The impression gained is that the Dy CM is callous and uncaring and lacks seriousness. And that he even jokes about people's misfortune. The advice he offers to the poor to avoid eating meat and eat only vegetables, which in other words could have meant to reduce the expenditure on food was ill-timed and unnecessary. Who is the Dy CM to decide people's palate?

His gross mishandling of the job of government spokesperson is the prime reason for the mess that followed. The primary duty of the spokesperson is to help mitigate the crisis but he has instead aggravated the predicament. The recent fracas with the leader of TUR is a classic case of a failed public relations which in turn affects the government's crisis management strategy.

There are two counter arguments to the Dy CM's recent brawl with the leader of TUR. First of all, it is about the right to criticise the government which is a constitutional right of any citizen or group in a democracy. Pressure groups are part and parcel

of any democratic system of government. They say the four pillars of democracy are the legislature, the executive, the judiciary and the media. But pressure groups are like walls which help echo or sound public opinion back to the government. There is also a saying that walls have ears. The Dy CM's conflict with pressure groups and his questioning of their role is something that should have been avoided especially in times of a crisis like this one.

There are many ways of responding to the question that TUR raised. The last thing the Dy CM should have done is get into a confrontation. The seasoned politician that he is, the Dy CM should not have forgotten the one important rule in politics - which is to win people over and build his support base and to avoid creating needless controversies and enemies.

Perhaps it is worth reminding the Dy CM of the saying, "Politics is interested in you even if you are not interested in politics." It may sometimes seem as if people are not taking part in a democratic process, but different people take part in politics in different ways. Some take the role of a pressure group, some write letters to the editor, still some file RTI queries and some simply cast their votes once in every five years. This is how people involve themselves in the democratic process. It is not necessary that they should all contest elections.

Challenging them to contest the election an infantile reaction. It is like a child who is defeated in a game and then calls his opponent to come fight him at home where he knows he can easily beat them. Election is the safe space or a cocoon (if you like) for the politician. They know it needs a lot of money to contest elections which leaders of pressure groups do not have. In fact, politicians have purposely made contesting an election an expensive affair which only the rich can indulge in.

Hence one will every time hear politicians challenging leaders of the pressure group to join the fray because they know that it is beyond their

reach to contest any election. But this can change if the people of the state come to their senses and do not allow money to be the criterion for winning elections. It will change when people vote for a person not because of their bank balances and assets but for their educational qualifications, their experiences in public service and more importantly their character.

Coming back to the government and the management of its PR, it can be concluded that in the present government there is much left to be desired. The role of the government spokesperson is crucial because the public faith on the government largely depends on him. He is the one who gives the public confidence through correct messaging and assures them that government is handling the crisis well. The public trust on the government has unfortunately slipped from the Dy CM's hands.

That this happened at a time when the government desperately needs the support of the public in combating the second wave of the pandemic and also its post-crisis management, is unfortunate. The fight against the pandemic will not end with the fall in numbers of COVID-19 cases. When the number of cases fall, the government will have to move to the third phase of crisis-management step which is managing the post-crisis scenario.

The next challenge the government will have to face is to get the maximum number of people in the state vaccinated. This will be a challenging task because there is already a huge vaccine hesitancy among a big chunk of the population. There are those who do not rightly refuse to take vaccination. Getting the public vaccinated is not going to be a cake walk; the government will need to have clear policy to convince people to take the jabs.

In such a situation the government will not only need a public relations strategy that is effective but more importantly a spokesperson with good PR skills. The government cannot afford to fail in getting the entire population vaccinated by the end of this year, otherwise the consequences will be too high a price to pay.

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Musings, Questions and points to ponder

By Rev. Dr Leaderwell Pohngap

On Prayer
(This is not a theological treatise on prayer but just a personal reflection as a Christian)

Ever since the declaration of the Pandemic Covid-19 last year, where all of us denizens went through a troublesome lifestyle in which we are forced to follow different protocols and subjected to lockdown from time to time, different Christian churches and groups have called for prayer and in many cases along with fasting. I have myself been a part of some. We as Christians believe that prayer is part of our faith journey. Of course, we know, if we are honest, some Christians take prayer as a priority for everything in life, while many 'use' prayer as the last resort when everything else has failed. So there is no surprise for me with this call for prayer and fasting by different church groups from time to time.

But what surprised me is the news I read on May 27 last in The Shillong Times, our dependable Daily in our State for many years. It says:

Govt to organize special prayer program on May 30. The report goes, "The state government has decided to organize a special prayer session by citizens at 12 noon on May 30. Health Minister AL Hek on Wednesday informed that he had proposed the suggestion of organizing special prayers which was accepted by the chief minister. Hek urged citizens, irrespective of their religion, to take part in the special prayer from the confines of their homes. "We need to pray for the departed souls who died of COVID-19 and also for early recovery of those who are infected by the virus," the minister said. Hek

informed that the Directorate of Information and Public Relation has been asked to circulate the message for the information of all citizens." Unlike the calls by different church groups, this message is different, because it is a call not only to the Christians but to all citizens, irrespective of their religions. It is indeed a pleasant surprise and I am so glad that the Government is calling for prayer. I read and reread this news. I thought it was a cabinet decision but from the news it seems it was not. It was the suggestion of the Health Minister to the Chief Minister and the Chief agreed. I want to thank God and thank them for their courage to do this and for using the Government machinery (read DIPR) to publicize this. I encourage all of us to join and I hope many will. I will join because like many of you:

1. I believe Covid is a dreaded disease. Whatever name we give it and whatever may be its source, it is a plague. And it has killed many!

2. I believe God uses us humans through inventions of medicines, through different protocols and other efforts to defeat this plague.

3. But I believe ultimately it is God who will bring it to cessation.

4. Therefore, we need to pray for wisdom to fight it. We need to pray for those who have been affected by Covid-19 as expressed in this invitation and we need to pray for God's mercy to stop it.

I do not know what other faiths say about prayer. And what I say here may not make sense to those who are not of the Christian faith. But when I think about these prayer calls and especially that of the Government, it made me ask some questions and

seek for answers from the Christian perspective, taking the Bible as the context. This is not to lessen the importance and the needs of these calls for prayer. But rather to strengthen the need for prayer and plead with God to have mercy on us.

Questions and answers as I understand them:

Is prayer a must for us in our faith?
I believe it is. If you are a Christian it is a given. In prayer we express our relationship with God, our trust in Him and our need for Him. God calls His people always to assemble together and plead with Him for our needs. Paul, in his letter to the church at Philippians 4:6 said, "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything in prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God" Then he encouraged the believers in Thessalonica, saying, "Pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:7)

Does God hear us and answer our prayers?

Yes. Throughout the Bible we have promises and testimonies of God hearing and answering prayers. In 2 Chronicles 7:14, God said, "If my people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land." The Psalmist said about God, "In the day of my trouble I will call upon you, for you will answer me" (Psalm 86:7)

Is there a condition to receive answers to our prayers?

But wish as I may, there seems to be a condition

Health Minister AL Hek on Wednesday informed that he had proposed the suggestion of organizing special prayers which was accepted by the chief minister.

receive an answer to prayer. In the verse that we have referred to above, God said, "When people come and humble themselves and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear them and heal their land." To do this means that people acknowledge their wayward ways and repent. So, humbling oneself and repentance seem to be a condition.

We have a beautiful story in the Old Testament. God told Jonah, the prophet, to go to Nineveh, a great city steeped in wickedness. God said that in 40 days it will be destroyed. Jonah went and preached in Nineveh. Then the people, from the greatest to the least, including the king himself put on sackcloth and ashes, proclaimed a fast, turned from their wicked ways and begged for God's mercy. Then God relented and the city was not destroyed. This is a beautiful picture of humbling before God and repentance.

God looks at who we are in our hearts and lives, not just what we voice in prayers. Yes, we need to pray but our hearts must be in tune with Him. If our lives are not right, He calls us to be humble and repent.

Points to ponder:
1. Very often in prayer we beseech God for a change in our situations, conditions or for others to change. What do you think will happen if we first humble ourselves, repent and then petition God for our needs?

2. What do you think might happen, if churches or Christian groups or even the Government calls for a day of repentance instead of just prayer and fasting? After all, I think many of us, Christians and non-Christians alike have skeletons in our closets that need to tumble out. I am sure then, God's mercy will fall on us and heal us.

Letters to the Editor

Unnecessary bickering

Editor,
The response of the Deputy Chief Minister (Dy CM) to allegations by a woman activist on the financial irregularities in disbursement of the money allocated for distressed labourers in the State is amusing and uncalled for especially when the man on the street is bleeding financially. For Meghalaya's sake, the Dy CM should have avoided using the good name of MATI because nothing worthwhile has come out of the training institute. The Dy CM could have mentioned Tata Institute of Social Sciences or Delhi School of Economics if he wants the said activist to get a lesson in public or financial administration or he could have mentioned ICAI if he wants her to get a lesson in Accountancy. In fact, it is the people in government who need a lesson or two in good governance. Rather than beating around the bush the Dy CM should have given a straight answer and put the accusations to rest. Since the Covid crisis happened last year, many unsubstantiated accusations have been flying around regarding the mismanagement of the crisis. To be more specific, the unsubstantiated accusation was that some in the current dispensation have been milking the pandemic for personal gains. Like I said, these are unsubstantiated accusations, so the

government should come out with a solid answer to dispel these unsubstantiated accusations.

Beating around the bush and engaging in a public spat with someone won't do the government's image and reputation much good. The government must get its act together to reduce the suffering of the common man. By common man, I mean people who live from hand to mouth. In the past couple of days, I've seen distressing news regarding the plight of farmers in the state. Most farmers are finding it hard to sell their agricultural produce because of the lockdown restrictions. Most farmers travel from far and wide to reach the city only to return empty-handed at the end of the day because they could not sell their agricultural produce. The government could have implemented the Minimum Support Price policy. Since the lockdown measures are in place, people do their marketing in their respective localities only. So it is the government's duty to buy the farmer's agricultural produce and supply them to the various localities. The government can even export such agricultural produce to our neighbouring state. The government needs the full cooperation and support of the public at the moment but it must also do its bit to reduce the sufferings of the common man.

Yours etc.,
Gary Marbaniang,
Via email

Correction

Editor,
In my letter captioned: 'Defeat of the BJP in West Bengal (ST 29, 2021), due to typing oversight the Battle of Vienna was mistakenly dated as 1863 instead of the actual year 1683. The unintended error is regretted.

Yours etc.
Jerome K Diengdoh,
Via email

Keeping negativity at a distance

Editor,
Right communication is indispensable to make us alert and prepared to counter any catastrophic challenges. In the case of a global health pandemic, it has assumed still greater significance. An American researcher and the writer of "The Great Influenza" had asserted -- "In the next influenza pandemic, be it now or in the future, be the virus mild or virulent, the single most important weapon against the disease will be a vaccine. The second most important will be communication." Of course, in times of uncertainty, people naturally rely more on the media than any other sources. It is therefore unbecoming when the e-media prioritizes increasing TRP by creating a sort of fear psychosis leading to distress among the masses.

Today, when we switch on the TV channels for news, the same incidents of gloom

and doom are repeated. The style and manner in which incidents and cases are portrayed are heart-rending. Frankly speaking, in the upsurge of hysteria and the sense of fear spread by some electronic media, the nation is reaping the whirlwind. Such TRPs earned at the steep price of "mental health and immunity" are totally uncalled for. Needless to say, the continuous coverage of fearsome news obviously raises feelings of anxiety and depression. It adversely affects one's ability to "ward off infections" as it results in rapid drop in immunity dropping. Many people have died of suicide as they are overwhelmed by intense fear and depression. Senior journalist, Patricia Mukhim has aptly remarked in her recent Friday article -- "The pandemic has also laid bare the importance of mental health of the patient and his/her relatives. Every Covid patient is fearful of what might happen. Those with more complications wonder if they will come out alive."

Hence, let's all make a conscious effort to stay away from negativity in the larger interest of our health and well-being. In the light of the present crises Dr Anjali Chhabria, a Psychiatrist and Psychotherapist, has also strictly warned, "When you're going through Covid, it's better to stay away from negative news. Keep yourself relaxed because your immunity depends on your emotional health." Therefore, in our fight against the viru-

lent virus, we should be extra careful that our mindset is not overpowered by negative forces. Positivism and optimism in our thought process alone contribute to boosting the strength of our immunity and mind. So, nothing is better than keeping negativity at a distance as we have learned to keep physical distance. Let's firmly believe there is light at end of the tunnel.

Yours etc.,
Salil Gewali,
Shillong

Additional electric crematorium urgently needed

Editor,
The existing electric crematorium at Jhalupara is the only modern crematorium available for people of Shillong City and its suburbs. In this crematorium, corpses are brought from distant places for cremation. This electric crematorium is a decade old. Due to overuse and wear and tear, it breaks down very often. Sometimes it takes days together to repair it. During this period people face great problems in disposing of the mortal remains of their near and dear ones. The family members of the deceased are then forced to use the cremation ghat at Mawbah (Barapathar) where firewood is used. Even when the electric crematorium is functional, it is reserved up to 2 pm for incinerating hospital wastes, since last year, as per the Govt order. So, the

bereaved families who have to cremate the dead body of their deceased member by tradition/custom are made to wait very long. It usually takes a minimum of two and half hours for a body to be fully cremated in the electric crematorium. The waiting becomes longer when there are already two or more dead bodies waiting in the queue.

The scenario in the cremation ghat is not problem-free either. A lot of wood is required for setting up a single pyre for cremating a body. Firewood is not only scarce but expensive too. The cost of cremating a body is not less than Rs 5000. Poor families find it difficult to meet this huge expenditure.

From the above facts, it can be seen that the disposal of dead bodies by cremation is an arduous task in Shillong. The problem is exacerbated during this pandemic. The Greater Shillong Crematorium and Mortuary Society may, therefore approach the concerned authorities for providing an additional electric crematorium in the existing location. This is an inescapable necessity for the people of Shillong considering the increase in population and above all the scarcity of firewood.

I expect more rejoinders to this letter to alert the authorities to this critical public need. Besides the bereaved families, the disposal of dead bodies is also a state responsibility.

Yours etc.,
Krishna Chhetri,
Shillong-2