

"You must trust and believe in people or life becomes impossible."

—Anton Chekhov

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No. 198 SHILLONG, SATURDAY, MARCH 1, 2025

Opposition on the beaten track

THE Budget session of the Meghalaya Assembly has begun and the Opposition comprising the VPP, TMC and Congress have sharpened their knives to put the MDA Government on the defensive. Unfortunately the Opposition uses the same old strategies of raising issues such as the illegal influx, unemployment, revenue leakage et al without having done adequate homework. This will result in a war of words where the ruling party will fight back and explain away all the points raised by their rivals. The problem with the Opposition is that they don't sit to discuss issues that matter to the people and agree to make common cause because the VPP, TMC, and Congress see each other as rivals and don't see eye to eye on issues.

What would have put the MDA Government on the backfoot is if the Opposition had done serious research on issues that hurt the people during all these months and years and come up with evidence-based studies. If there is unemployment and this is not a new thing that afflicts only the MDA Government, but has been a persistent issue in Meghalaya, the Opposition could have written to the Government and given it a list of recommendations on which sectors to create employment in. Concurrently the Government too could have used the State Planning Board and its plethora of verticals created under the Meghalaya Basin Management Authority (MBMA) to help provide a roadmap for employment generation even while verticals under the Agency such as PRIME have created some successful entrepreneurs. True that not all the youth are cut out to become entrepreneurs and there is need to create employment in other sectors but this requires intensive deliberations and in this the Opposition too should be involved. After all that would be in the larger interests of the youth of this State. Another issue that the Opposition would be raising is illegal influx. With Bangladesh currently on the boil this is a serious matter and illegal migration is taking place because large stretches of the Bangladesh-Meghalaya border is unfenced. Unless a thorough study is conducted to arrive at some figure about the number of people illegally settled in Meghalaya this will remain only an allegation that will be forgotten once the Assembly session is over.

The Opposition has also listed revenue leakage as an issue. This too requires in-depth study so that the Opposition can point out exactly where the revenue is leaking; why it is leaking and how that leak can be plugged. Since April 2014 after coal mining was banned by the NGT the State has lost revenue amounting to over 600-700 crores annually. The coal trade has gone underground thereby depriving the state of its legitimate revenue. However, revenue leakage seems to occur even with limestone and boulders exported to Bangladesh. These are areas of concern and the MDA Government needs to give clear answers to acquit itself on this issue. The Opposition has also pointed out to the sense of hopelessness among the youth. This sense of futility could be due to several reasons. Research on this too is imperative. The Opposition today can no longer take its role for granted. It has to demonstrate more professionalism.

Recently introduced Income Tax Bill 2025: Calls for a review

By Prof. D. Mukherjee

The Income Tax Bill 2025, introduced in the Lok Sabha by the Hon'ble Finance and Corporate Affairs Minister on 13th February 2025, marks a significant legislative reform, replacing the six-decade-old Income Tax Act of 1961. With 536 clauses and 16 schedules, the bill seeks to simplify and modernize direct tax administration, reducing compliance burdens and complexities. This forward-looking legislation strengthens investor confidence, fiscal governance, and economic administration amid a dynamic global market. Aligned with India's Ease of Doing Business vision, the bill enhances tax compliance efficiency, mirroring the success of the GST Act of 2017, which streamlined indirect taxation. By consolidating and simplifying tax laws, it aims to create a fairer and more transparent system. However, to fully achieve its objectives, certain provisions require refinement. Specifically, Clause 2(1) read with Clause 515(3)(b) should be reconsidered to foster a more inclusive tax compliance framework, enabling broader professional participation, including Cost and Management Accountants (CMAs) and Company Secretaries (CSs), in India's evolving tax administration.

The Hon'ble Finance Minister, in her 'Statement of Objects and Reasons', emphasized the need for this bill due to the complexity, frequent amendments, high compliance costs, and inefficiencies of the Income Tax Act, 1961. However, limiting the role of 'Accountant' solely to CAs contradicts the bill's goal of creating a simpler, inclusive, and efficient tax administration. Expanding this definition to include Cost Accountants and Company Secretaries would enhance competition and reduce compliance costs. Currently, CAs dominate tax audits and assessments, restricting taxpayer choices and increasing compliance expenses. Recognizing CMAs and CSs would introduce competition, ensuring better service quality at lower costs, particularly benefiting MSMEs and individuals. Increased professional diversity would improve efficiency, affordability, and access to tax management services. For MSMEs, compliance costs could drop significantly as CMAs and CSs bring expertise in cost efficiency and corporate compliance. A competitive tax compliance market would curb overpricing and promote a balanced professional landscape. Greater competition would also drive technological advancements, making taxation more accessible. MSMEs, startups, and individuals would gain affordable advisory services, aiding informed financial decisions.

Both Cost Accountants (CMAs) and Chartered Accountants (CAs) undergo rigorous training in taxation, accounting, auditing, and compliance. However, the Income Tax Bill 2025 does not recognize the role of CMAs and Company Secretaries (CSs) in tax administration, limiting their professional

scope. CMAs specialize in direct and indirect tax laws, financial analysis, and cost efficiency, making them well-equipped to handle tax-related matters. Their expertise in cost control benefits businesses by ensuring financial prudence alongside tax compliance. Including CMAs in tax administration would improve efficiency and promote a more structured, transparent tax system. Similarly, Company Secretaries (CSs) specialize in corporate governance, financial law, and regulatory compliance, positioning them well for tax planning and administration. Their deep understanding of corporate taxation ensures businesses maintain legal adherence while optimizing financial performance. Recognizing CSs in tax assessments and audits would create a more streamlined and comprehensive compliance system. By restricting the definition of 'Accountant' to only CAs, the bill limits taxpayer choices and increases compliance costs. Broadening this definition would foster fair competition, improve service quality, and enhance efficiency in tax audits, assessments, and dispute resolution. Given the complexity of financial transactions and evolving tax regulations, a multidisciplinary approach is essential. Including CMAs and CSs alongside CAs would strengthen tax administration, ensuring better financial management and compliance. India's diverse economic base requires an inclusive framework to enhance efficiency, reduce compliance costs, and improve taxpayer services, benefiting both businesses and the government.

Until 2009-2010, CMAs were the sole professionals recognized for indirect tax compliance, leveraging their expertise in cost control and financial efficiency to manage excise duties, service tax, and VAT regulations. However, recognizing the need for broader participation, the government later allowed Chartered Accountants (CAs) to engage in indirect tax audits and compliance, fostering competition, improving service quality, and reducing costs. A similar approach is now needed for direct taxation under the Income Tax Bill 2025. Restricting the definition of 'Accountant' to CAs excludes CMAs and CSs, limiting professional diversity and denying taxpayers access to specialized knowledge in tax compliance, corporate governance, and financial analysis. CMAs and CSs bring expertise crucial for efficient tax planning and assessments, just as indirect taxation benefited from a more inclusive professional environment. Expanding professional recognition in direct taxation would enhance taxpayer services, lower compliance costs, and improve transparency. A diverse pool of tax experts would strengthen financial management, ensuring businesses and individuals ben-

efit from a competitive and efficient tax administration system.

India, aspiring to be a global economic power, must adopt an inclusive, competitive approach to tax compliance by recognizing multiple professional accountability bodies. To align with international best practices in fiscal administration, India needs a diversified system similar to leading economies. For instance, the United Kingdom (UK) acknowledges various accounting bodies, including the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales (ICAEW), the Chartered Institute of Management Accountants (CIMA), the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA), the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA), the Association of International Accountants (AIA), and the Chartered Institute of Taxation (CIOT). This model fosters competition, efficiency, and cost-effectiveness in taxation, auditing, and compliance. Other nations also embrace pluralistic frameworks. Canada's Chartered Professional Accountants (CPAs) integrate competencies from legacy bodies like the Certified General Accountants (CGA) and Certified Management Accountants (CMA). Australia recognizes Chartered Accountants Australia & New Zealand (CA ANZ), CPA Australia, and the Institute of Public Accountants (IPA) for tax-related roles. In the United States, tax compliance is shared among Certified Public Accountants (CPAs), Enrolled Agents (EAs), and tax attorneys, ensuring taxpayers have multiple professional choices. India must adopt a similar system to enhance tax compliance, efficiency, and global competitiveness.

With India's 1.5 billion population and diverse economy, relying solely on ICAI for tax compliance is inadequate. Including ICMAI and ICSI in tax administration would align India with global best practices, offering taxpayers broader professional choices, improved service quality, and competitive pricing. The UK's Chartered Institute of Taxation (CIOT) sets a precedent by recognizing multiple institutions for taxation expertise, ensuring fairness, transparency, and efficiency. Expanding the definition of 'Accountant' in the Income Tax Bill 2025 to include CMAs and CSs would enhance tax administration, reduce compliance costs, and create a more inclusive financial ecosystem.

A strong tax administration system is crucial for a robust financial framework. Expanding the role of CMAs and CSs in tax assessments, appeals, and compliance would make the process more structured, responsive, and transparent. With tax laws becoming increasingly complex, a larger pool of qualified professionals would accelerate assessments, reduce backlogs, and enhance

dispute resolution, ensuring faster settlements that benefit both taxpayers and the government. CMAs, with expertise in cost accounting and financial management, offer valuable insights into tax-saving strategies and compliance planning. CSs, specializing in corporate law and governance, help businesses stay compliant with evolving tax regulations, reducing penalties and litigation risks. Their inclusion would lead to better tax planning and management, benefiting businesses and individuals alike. Additionally, recognizing CMAs and CSs would curb tax evasion and revenue leakages by ensuring expert guidance and greater adherence to tax laws. A diverse pool of professionals in tax compliance discourages unethical practices and maximizes revenue collection. A more inclusive tax administration system would also improve India's business environment. A well-structured, transparent tax framework aligns with the government's vision of 'Ease of Doing Business'. By reducing compliance bottlenecks and fostering professional competition, businesses—especially SMEs—would find tax obligations more manageable, leading to a stronger and more thriving economy.

To fully achieve the objectives of the Income Tax Bill 2025, the government should amend Clause 2(1) read with Clause 515(3)(b) to define 'Accountant' as: 'Accountant means a Chartered Accountant (CA) within the meaning of section 2(1)(b) of the Chartered Accountants Act, 1949, holding a certificate of practice, a Cost Accountant (CMA) within the meaning of section 2(1)(b) of the Cost Accountants Act, 1959 (as amended), holding a certificate of practice or a Company Secretary (CS) within the meaning of section 2(1)(b) of the Company Secretaries Act, 1980, holding a certificate of practice'. The Bill, currently under review by the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Finance, should expand the scope of professionals involved in tax compliance management. Additionally, establishing a new regulatory body, the Indian Institute of Accountants (IIA), as proposed in the CA/CMA/CS Amendment Bill 2022, would address the growing demand for tax professionals, aligning with global best practices. Restricting the definition of 'Accountant' solely to CAs contradicts the Bill's intent. Including CMAs and CSs would enhance competition, efficiency, and fairness in tax administration, benefiting taxpayers and the economy. A broader definition is essential for long due meaningful tax reforms. Moreover, inclusion of CMA and CS in draft bill 2024 was rightfully considered but exclusion of the same from the final bill placed in the parliament on 13th February 2025 seems to be a miscarriage of legislative intent and against openness and globalization.

(The Author is an Educationist, a Management Scientist and an Independent Researcher)

Unseen challenges of caregivers for persons with chronic physical disabilities

By Nancy Kharkongor

Caregiver burden is a critical social issue that often remains overlooked. While much attention is given to individuals with disabilities, the challenges faced by their caregivers—typically family members or friends—require greater recognition and support. These caregivers provide essential assistance but encounter significant emotional, physical, and financial difficulties in doing so.

Reality of care-giving in India
In India, approximately 10% of the population, or around 138 million individuals, serve as family care-givers. Due to limited healthcare coverage, family members and non-professionals play a crucial role in caregiving, making it essential to focus on their experiences. Many of these caregivers report high levels of stress and isolation, often sacrificing their own jobs and financial stability.

Care-giving can be a tough and stressful experience but can also bring a sense of fulfillment. It's essential to reduce the stress associated with caregiving and enhance the positive aspects to improve mental health and chronic illnesses. This involves understanding caregiving in different communities and developing programs that make it a rewarding experience. Studies have shown that around 90% of people with chronic diseases are cared for by family members who live with them, with caregivers of individuals with spinal cord injuries spending an average of 11.3 hours a day providing care while managing household chores and caring for other dependent family members.

Challenges and burdens encountered in caregiving
Caregivers face a range of challenges, also known as caregiver burden, including physical, mental, psychosocial and financial strains. They frequently deal with managing patient behaviours, addressing social and vocational issues, and coping with their own health problems.

These challenges vary across individuals and cases of disability, impacting the mental and physical health of caregivers. The lack of autonomy and financial burdens continue to impact the caregiver's adjustment with everyday complexities. Caring for children with disabilities places constant psychological and physical demands on the caregiver, resulting in high levels of stress. Psychological effects of caregiving include symptoms such as depression, anxiety, guilt, anger, insomnia, generalized muscle pain, and headaches. Caregivers in poor physical and psychological states are at a higher risk of providing poor-quality care to their patients.

Need for Support and Intervention
Despite advancements in healthcare, a significant portion of the global population continues to live with disabilities, presenting profound challenges for their caregivers. The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) emphasizes non-discrimination and inclusion, but the needs and experiences of caregivers remain unaddressed in policies and research.

To effectively support caregivers, it is crucial to implement targeted interventions that address their unique challenges. Programs designed to reduce stress and enhance the positive aspects of caregiving can considerably improve both caregiver and patient outcomes. Initiatives like group therapy sessions or community support programs can provide much-needed relief and a sense of connection.

Local problems and Intervention
According to the Indian Census 2011, there are 2.68 crore persons with disabilities in India, constituting 2.13 per cent of the total population. The Census also reports that one per cent (44317) of Meghalaya's population live with varying forms of disability. This alarming number foregrounds the challenges of disability. However, several institutions at the government and non-governmental levels have come up to mitigate the challenges of people with disabilities. A strong public

private partnership is a viable solution for furthering the cause. At the private level important stakeholders have emerged to cater to the needs of the disabled. The PMR Centre, Shillong is one example of community resilience in the wake of the challenges imposed by disability. Another focus of the centre is the issue and burden faced by caregivers who remain ignored in most of the policy discourses and research on disability issues. The past few months witnessed a series of case works and group sessions conducted at PMR Centre. Based on case studies conducted with caregivers it has been realized that caregivers continue to live with everyday issues ranging from physical and mental burden to financial and social constraints. Based on this premise PMR Centre has come up with a platform for an exchange of communication and group sessions for caregivers. These initiatives, have been found to be an effective intervention in its nascent stage.

The session provided caregivers a platform to exchange their ideas and develop a sense of solidarity as they share their burden. It remains an important objective of the PMR Centre to continue this work for the mitigation or alleviation of caregiver's burden by seeking partnership with different stakeholders.

Financial Burden of Caregivers

Caregivers often face challenges in affording the medicines and treatments that are necessary for the well-being of their loved ones. Some may also need to quit their jobs or reduce their working hours which also poses a threat to reducing their income, they may also need to quit their education in order to contribute financially to their households and support the medical expenses of their loved ones.

Mental, Physical, and Psychosocial well-being of caregivers

Caregivers of individuals with chronic physical disabilities, time and again feel stressed and may suffer from mental, psychosocial and physical health issues due to the lifelong responsibility of caregiving. This added duty can limit their social activities, leading to feelings of isolation. Over time, caregivers may experience emotional issues such as anxiety, depression, and stress from their caregiving role, which can negatively affect their overall quality of life.

The time and energy that caregiving demands, to manage caregiving and at the same time their other responsibilities, "juggling between work or being a mother or the unpredictable future" having to sacrifice their time, to give up on their studies, interests, eat, sleep, social interactions and their time. Impacting their careers, and opportunities, putting their goals on hold, for caregiving. They neglect their "me time," well-being and overall health.

Conclusion

The act of caregiving could be a very rewarding experience for caregivers and could also be an experience that results in unwanted consequences for the caregiver. Understanding and addressing caregiver burden is not just about supporting those who care for individuals with disabilities; it is about recognizing their integral role in the healthcare environment. By concentrating on their needs through comprehensive policies and community support initiatives, we can create a more compassionate society that values both caregivers and those they care for. Recognizing and valuing their contributions can improve the health outcomes of both caregivers and their patients. Focusing on the challenges that these caregivers face is essential, there is a need for policies and programs that support caregivers, to ease their financial, mental, physical and psychosocial burdens, enhancing their quality of life.

"Caregiving is a labor of love, but it is also a labor that requires support".
(The writer is a social worker, PMR Centre)

Letters to the Editor

State sponsored doctors ought to serve the state

Editor,
The Mandatory Medical Service Policy approved by the Cabinet is a wrong move. According to the Policy, medical students who study under state sponsorship will be exempted from serving the State Government if they work in non-profit organizations or central government hospitals located within the State. The rationale is that they are serving the people of the State by being in the State.

This rationale fails on two counts. First, the cost of healthcare in such non-profit organizations cannot be compared to the cost in state government hospitals. In fact, the cost of healthcare in non-profit organizations is almost as high as that of other private hospitals. So, in terms of cost, the service to the people cannot be compared to state government hospitals.

Secondly, can such non-

profit organizations or central government hospitals reach the nook and corners of our state? We have government CHCs and PHCs whose reach is vital for our rural areas. Can we afford to have the best doctors under state sponsorship serving in organizations that are concentrated in the city?

Thirdly, the question is, can such doctors, working in non-profit organization, also serve as visiting consultants in other private hospitals? If yes, then the end result is simply using the State's expenses for the benefit of private hospitals, with no added benefit to the people of the State.

Yours etc.,
Kitor H. Blah,
Via email

US citizenship via investment route

Editor,
It is astonishing that Indians are ready to invest Rs 44 crore to get US citizenship. By the end of 2024 there

were 58 million dollar-millionaires in the world. Of these the US alone accounts for nearly one-third (21 million) of the super-rich population. whereas the Western bloc, comprising the US, its European allies, Australia and Japan, has 44 of the super rich individuals or three-fourths of the global super-rich.

The US already had a similar programme, the EB-5 visa, since 1990, which granted Green Cards to foreigners who invested \$1 million in businesses that could create at least 10 jobs. The new Gold Card scheme merely increases the amount that foreigners are required to invest in the US from \$1 million to \$5 million. Trump expects to reduce the United States' \$36-trillion debt by selling Gold Cards. According to him, the US could generate \$5 trillion if one million foreigners buy Gold Cards. According to an estimate, 23,000 high-net-worth individuals (HNWIs) have forsaken Indian passports to obtain foreign citizenship over the past

10 years. This places India second among the countries that have witnessed wealthy individuals migrating abroad, after China.

The remaining 14 million dollar-millionaires reside in other countries. This makes Trump's plan to attract a significant number of the super-rich a distant proposition, especially after the required investment was increased fivefold. Trump's easy US citizenship for the world's super rich may prove beneficial for the US economy, and it will start in about two weeks, and the proposed gold card would be among the most expensive visa programmes in the world. The move comes at a time when the US President is devoting much of his time to deporting millions of undocumented immigrants. It also provides a twist on America's traditional reputation as a refuge for the hardworking poor "yearning to breathe free".

The "golden visas" are common around the world, including in European Union states like Spain and Greece.

In some countries, such as Malta, Egypt and Jordan, foreign applicants can even obtain citizenship directly through investment. These programmes are most competitive in the Caribbean, with countries like Dominica, Granada, St Kitts and Nevis setting their fees as low as \$200,000-\$300,000. While a US gold card would likely be in high demand, it may come with the unique drawback of exposing holders to the US taxes, no matter where they are in the world and no matter where their assets are. Generally, golden visa programmes are controversial because they can attract individuals seeking to use them for money laundering or fraud. These concerns have led several European countries, including the UK, the Netherlands and Greece to roll back their golden visa programmes in recent years.

Trump's golden visa plan could face even more controversy if he tries to push it through without Congressional approval, which he claims

is unnecessary. Congress is responsible for determining citizenship qualifications and, in the past, authorised the EB-5 programme that Trump says he intends to end. The proposed gold card visa is set to reshape the US immigration landscape, offering a faster but significantly costlier alternative to existing pathways like the H-1B and EB-5 investor visa. With a staggering \$5 million—far surpassing the EB-5's \$8 lakh requirement this visa will be accessible only to India's wealthiest individuals. This has raised concerns among Indian nationals awaiting the US green cards. Indian tech professionals currently on an H-1B visa often pursue the EB-2 or EB-3 employment-based green card route, which is time consuming. If Trump reinstates restrictive H-1B policies, this could further complicate the process for Indian applicants.

Only time will tell the impact of this step.

Yours etc.,
Yash Pal Ralhan,
Via email

Five tips to find what really brings joy outside of work

By Alison Bishop

Not long ago I attended a concert. It was a band that I had been waiting a while to see and so I was excited to be there in the crowd. Part way through, they played my favourite song and I noticed that I felt something different.

It felt like a pinnacle moment where the emotion of joy felt expansive and unstoppable. In that moment, I felt more alive with all my senses of my surroundings heightened and yet so much more connected to the core of who I know myself to be.

I first set out to write about finding joy, as if joy was out there in the world waiting for us to find it. However, the story of the concert shows us that this is not the case.

Not everyone likes the band that I saw and not everyone in the concert had the same experience as me. This tells us that joy is more personal, an inside job, rather than something to find outside ourselves.

The psychologist Chris Meadows suggests that joy is a feeling that comes from viewing an event in our lives as being meaningful to us or good for us.

Joy is not just a singular experience, there are different types of joy, according to Meadows.

In his study of joy he writes about the muted experience of "serene joy", which aims at restoring or maintaining equilibrium in the body. Then there is "excited joy", which is linked to pursuing goals.

"Individuated joy" is felt while alone while "affiliative joy" is shared with others. Meadow's study into the phenomenon of joy suggests that social experiences of joy occur more often than solo ones and result in what we know as bonding experiences.

"Anticipatory joy" occurs when the fulfilment of a goal is imminent and then "consummatory joy" happens when the goal has been achieved.

There is also an element of feeling blessed or that what has been achieved has exceeded expectations.

In addition to the thought processes that lead to joy, there are many other elements that

need to be in place. Safe, familiar surroundings are key in enabling us to be present in the moment to support relaxed equilibrium. When we feel safe and relaxed, we are more able to laugh and play and explore new ideas.

Playfulness that's aimless but results in fairly predictable outcomes, allows us to switch off our inner critic and focus on the good feelings of being in the moment with joy. This brings a sense of ease in that whatever happens, requires very little effort on our part.

Here are five tips on how to find what

bring us joy. To do this, it helps to create specificity around the goals that we aspire to in the future so that we are clear about what we want to achieve.

I love the theme tune for The Pirates of the Caribbean and want to be able to play it on the piano. To make this goal specific, I need to decide what my success criteria is. It might be, I want to play to the end without stopping, or I want to get to the end without stopping and to play all of the notes on the sheet music without mistakes. Only I can know whether I would feel more joyful by achieving the second goal over the first.

Being specific means we will clearly know when that goal fulfilment is either imminent or achieved. So, the more specific we are the better. The same goes for looking at the experiences that have brought us joy in the past. By reflecting on these experiences, we can learn things about ourselves that lead to us being able to create more joy.

3. Don't listen to your inner critic

It helps to switch off your inner critic, or at least turn the volume on this down.

It is not possible to be playful and feel safe and free, while we constantly are censoring ourselves. So, tell the inner critic that it is OK for you to be you.

4. Find your tribe

These are people who enjoy the same things as you. Being with other people who are like us enables us to feel freer to express ourselves in ways that are congruent with who we are.

5. Tune into the little things

Finally, pay attention to the little things, as they actually are the big things. Joy comes from the most unexpected places. By noticing when we feel joy we can create more of those experiences in our lives so that we can truly experience that joie de vivre. (*The Conversation*)

brings you joy in its many forms:

1. Be present

"Be in the moment" is easy to say but harder to do.

Joy exists in the present, therefore, we need to be there to experience it. This might mean that sometimes we need to ditch the phone and not video something to post or watch later as doing that prevents us becoming immersed in the here and now. This is about making our own experience more important than the "likes" of others.

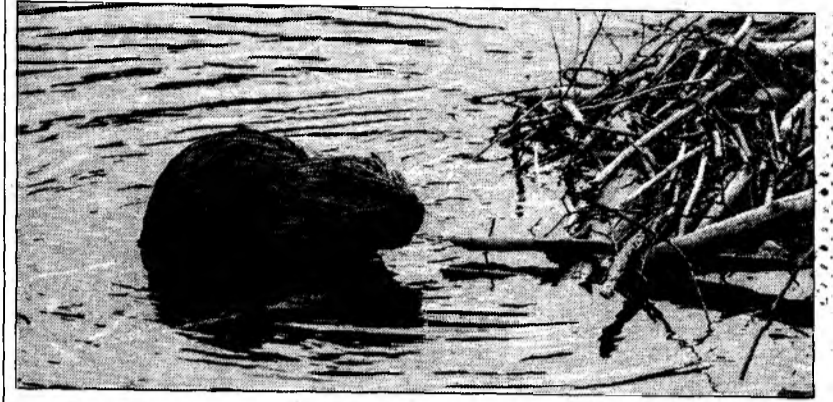
2. Listen to your inner voice

Next, turn up the volume on your inner voice.

As joy is unique to each of us, we need to hear our own voice to find out what will



Animals are the real architects of Earth



A new study led by Professor Gemma Harvey from Queen Mary University of London has revealed how hundreds of species shape the landscapes we depend on, from termite mounds visible from space to beavers creating wetlands and hippos carving drainage systems.

Published in Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS), this first-of-its-kind global synthesis identifies 603 species, genera, or families that influence Earth's surface processes. From tiny ants shifting soil to salmon reshaping riverbeds, the study highlights the diversity and scale of animals' impact across all freshwater and terrestrial ecosystems.

By estimating the collective energy of these "natural engineers," the research shows that their geomorphic contributions rival those of hundreds of thousands of major floods.

Key Insights from the Study

Unexpected Diversity: Beyond iconic examples like beavers and salmon, the study identifies hundreds of species -- including insects, mammals, fish, birds, and reptiles -- that shape landscapes in remarkable ways.

Freshwater Ecosystems in Focus: Despite covering just 2.4% of the planet's surface, freshwater habitats host over a third of these remarkable species.

Impressive Energy Output: Animals collectively contribute at least 76,000 gigajoules of energy annually to shaping the Earth's surface -- a figure comparable to hundreds of thousands of extreme floods. This estimate is likely conservative, as significant knowledge gaps exist, particularly in tropical and subtropical regions where biodiversity is highest but research is limited.

Fascinating Examples: Termites build vast networks of mounds in Brazil, some covering thousands of square kilometres, while salmon spawning can shift as much sediment as annual flooding. Even ants, through their tiny but countless actions, alter soil structure and drainage.

Professor Harvey explains: "This research shows that the role of animals in shaping Earth's landscapes is much more significant than previously recognised. From beavers creating wetlands to ants building mounds of soil, these diverse natural processes are crucial, yet we risk losing them as biodiversity declines."

Nearly 30% of the identified species are rare, endemic, or threatened, meaning vital geomorphic processes could cease before their full significance is understood. This loss could have profound consequences for ecosystems and the landscapes they support. (*ANI*)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, March 2, 2025

'Birthdate Forecast'

Moon semi-sextile Sun on your solar return chart and it will give very good results during the whole year ahead. You will be popular and will be willing to take challenges. You will get good business opportunities and can also enter into some partnership or joint venture. You would be looking for new avenues in your job. And will get success too. Your efforts will be appreciated by peers and seniors. Your magnetic personality will draw people towards you and you will be able to get the work done. You will also be inclined to try out lot of things at the same time. Yet you will show wisdom and foresight. Financially you will remain strong and stable. You will be able to attract the right person in your life. If still single you will meet your sweetheart. And will enjoy a good health. You enjoy travelling, and will get a lot of chances to travel, especially for leisure.

'This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) People and friends look to you with more respect, tolerance, and acceptance. You don't feel the need to prove yourself. You have the chance to shine because you project yourself with self-efforts and modesty. Some of your most natural talents and hobbies would meet with reward and acceptance. Work done behind the scenes may be revealed or incorporated into your career or public life. Past efforts pay off now. Some of you may find that your career is moving towards a more service-oriented direction. You have more faith in general regarding your career and the direction in which you are working. New friendships are likely to emerge as they are supportive and easygoing ones. You need a certain amount of self-confidence during this period.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) You would move towards a more positive and objective approach to your professional and personal life. You would have a great desire to expand your work and knowledge. Your ideas are higher as teaching may be part of the picture, and your cultural and spiritual awareness increases. You might further your education and it's a fabulous time to do so, or you could broaden your knowledge in a more informal manner. Close friends and family members notice you for your more tolerant and broadminded nature. Confidence is the key of success and faith in the universe and your ability to do the right thing will get you everywhere now. This is the best time for realizing the positive potential that you have. You could have a feeling of unrest or dissatisfaction with your environment.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) Your idealistic nature is stimulated, and you are likely to be more spiritual. You are sober and serious in professional and personal relationships. You are getting serious about loved ones, family relationships and children. You are likely to take your hobbies more seriously. In fact, this is an excellent time for monetizing any personal hobby and turning it into a profession. You would be more practical in romantic relations with a loved one. For many, a romantic relationship stabilizes and becomes more serious. Opportunities--both personal and professional--are likely to present themselves. You would combine your inner and outer strengths to achieve success and happiness in professional aspects. You achieve success as you are brilliant and there is good fortune attending to professional, personal and material aspects. It is easier than usual to be sensible about your diet, health, hygiene, and fitness needs.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) You may travel or make contact with people of different cultural backgrounds than your own. You are more determined to achieve your personal goals, and are more strategic in the manner that you go about doing so. Pouring your heart and soul into your efforts comes naturally now. Happiness and fulfillment through the expansion of your mind, widening your social circle, travel, and connections to people of a different cultural background than you is indicated. You connect with well-known personalities, fun loving people, artists and entertainers. You would be able to complete work assignments and personal business with good energy and support. Emotional attachments and relationships are rewarded with reciprocity. Some interesting people are drawn to you and invite you to work with them.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) You would be involved in lectures, debates, and discussions. You can convey your ideas powerfully to others, and you may be invited to speak in front of many people and this would enhance your image. You are quick to take the initiative and to put your thoughts into action. You would have a tendency to work on many projects. You are more determined and hard-working and this brings fulfillment of all desires. This is an excellent period in your life in which to get organized and to stick with projects through to the end. A new project or goal begun at this time has a good chance of being successful and long-lasting. It's an excellent time in which you make a lifestyle change, as your ability to concentrate on what really matters to you is enhanced.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22) There is perfection and beauty in emotional and personal relationships. You are frank, outspoken and can be outrageous or undiplomatic on occasions. This is altogether a happy and relaxed period for you. Remember to be thankful. Mental pursuits, new learning, and all forms of intellectual activity are favored. Your ability

to concentrate and focus helps you to achieve what you set out to do. You are more inclined to put your ideas into action than usual. Your position of power and authority is maintained despite many changes all around. You should maintain a positive attitude and face life in a positive way otherwise you will become frustrated and dull. Good luck in finances and opportunities is encouraging. Health problems are resolved and your energy is restored.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) A business partnership is lucrative and supportive. Good planning and management lead to be more progressive and productive professional ventures. Good luck in financial opportunities is encouraging. You are restless and move into varied activities and pay visits to friends. You are also likely to form relationships with people based on a deep level of mutual appreciation and understanding for each other. You are in touch with your more sensitive and spiritual qualities. You may be divided about business and professional matters and finally come to terms with compromise which might be the best thing to do at this time. You may take a short break before starting on a new project to renew your energy.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) You are able to express a greater level of sensitivity and sensibility. Your personal charm and attractiveness have a positive effect on your personal and professional relationships. People see you as a loving and lovable person and they would help and cooperate with your goals and ambitions. It's a very favorable time for developing your relationships with parents and other relatives. Responsibilities and commitments may take up more time than usual, so set a target and make a proper schedule to meet the desired goal. Personal relations are precious and need to be treated with tender, love and care. Personal relations are precious and need to be treated with tender, love and care. Children look up to you for love and affection. You will be considerably more productive, healthy, and focused.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) Family is supportive, children are loving and friends share hospitality and love at this time. It would be in your favor to make new beginnings and forget all old wounds and past patterns. It is best to let go negative feelings about relationships and situations gone by. You may be divided about business and professional matters and finally come to terms with compromise which might be the best thing to do at this time. You may disagree mentally with your partner but the love between you allows peace and acceptance. Your social life is expansive and a variety of people connect with you. You are stronger and wiser after having gone through trouble and difficulty. It is time to come back to your inner core to regain physical strength, mental balance, emotional harmony and spiritual awareness.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) Issues of sharing of power and authority with others in personal and professional relationships come to the fore. You are likely to experience events that highlight the necessity to share and trust. Events and circumstances are such that you learn about your own personal strength. You may have to deal with willfulness and issues of power and competition. You would have a tendency to control your life through some form of manipulation. You may discover a new direction in your career. You may also experience tangles in your close personal relationships. Watch for jealousies and manipulative behavior of people around. Things will not go in your favor if you resort to tactics to get what you want. You could have problems staying calm, cool, and collected at times.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) You are in touch with dynamic, forceful and assertive energy to make new beginnings. Professional power and authority are vested in you to organize and achieve important targets and goals. You bring stability and order in business and professional projects with a dynamic and assertive approach. You come up with original and creative ideas that surprise others in the professional arena. You most successfully perform tasks that involve cooperation and team harmony. Different people from different environments may attract you. Your warrior-like qualities of energy, action, swiftness, strength and pride come to the fore. You need to value and respect established relationships and business partnerships as they stand by you in times of stress and trouble.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) It is time to break through restrictions, additions and emotional patterns as you are ripe and ready for major professional changes. Do not forget about long term commitments while you are dealing with short term contracts. Opportunities and invitations from overseas take you on an unplanned journey. Visitors, friends and family make this a happy time as an event is celebrated. You are appreciative and caring as you give total support to loved ones through a difficult time. It is time to concentrate on your career prospects and professional skills as a promotion or lucrative business opportunity is likely to present itself. You are physically fit and it is important to keep a handle on and maintain balance in relationships, finances and new business ventures.

How Victorians started modern health obsession with collagen

Shimmering, wobbling and painstakingly prepared, jelly was a staple of elite Victorian dining tables. But beneath its elegant presentation lay a deeper significance - one that reveals much about the era's understanding of bone, health and scientific progress.

By examining what jelly meant to the Victorians, we gain a fascinating insight into how food, science, and social status were entwined, and why our modern fascination with bone broth and collagen supplements is nothing new.

To the Victorians, food was not merely sustenance but spectacle, and few dishes displayed culinary prowess as effectively as jelly.

The ability to produce a flawless, quivering mould showed not only a cook's technical skill but also a household's refinement and affluence. A beautifully set table featuring jewel-toned jellies and savoury aspics signified sophistication, wealth and control over one's domestic sphere.

Despite its seemingly effortless appearance, jelly was among the most labour-intensive dishes a Victorian cook could prepare. Before the advent of commercially available gelatin, creating the perfect jelly required hours of patient work, beginning with the extraction of gelatin from animal bones.

Beneath the quivering surface of a Victorian jelly lies a remarkable structural conversion that begins deep within bone.

The key to jelly is collagen, the most abundant protein in the body and a fundamental component of bone. Collagen provides bone with tensile strength and flexibility, working alongside hydroxyapatite, a crystalline form of calcium phosphate, which lends bone its rigidity.

In its natural state, collagen exists as a tightly wound triple-helix structure - a molecular arrangement that resists breakdown under normal conditions. However, through prolonged exposure to heat and water, this resilient protein undergoes hydrolysis, breaking apart into gelatin - a substance capable of setting liquids into the delicate, tremulous form so prized by the Victorians.

The process begins with the slow simmering of bones, a practice familiar to both culinary and medical traditions.

When bones are boiled in water over extended periods, heat disrupts the hydrogen bonds stabilising the collagen fibrils, causing them to unravel. This process, known as thermal denaturation, leads to the gradual breakdown of collagen's highly ordered triple helix, transforming it into smaller, soluble protein fragments.

The longer the bones are boiled, the more collagen dissolves, releasing a rich, proteinaceous broth - the precursor to both gelatin and the contemporary trend of bone broth, a healthy soup made by boiling animal bones.

As hydrolysis progresses, collagen loses its fibrous structure, forming a loose network of protein chains that remain suspended in the liquid. Unlike intact collagen, which is rigid and insoluble, these denatured

fragments possess the unique ability to trap water molecules within a gel matrix when cooled.

This transformation is the defining characteristic of gelatin: once heated, it dissolves readily into a liquid, but upon cooling, the reformation of weak intermolecular bonds allows it to set into a flexible, semi-solid state.

The final stages of gelatin extraction involve purification and clarification. Victorian kitchens employed traditional methods of refining the broth, often using egg whites to bind to impurities, which were then skimmed from the surface. Once sufficiently clarified, the liquid was left to cool, allowing the gelatin to set into its characteristic wobbly structure.

Unlike modern commercial gelatin, which undergoes industrial processing for uniformity and ease of use, Victorian gelatin varied in strength and purity depending on the bones used and the duration of boiling.

Some bones yielded a stronger gelatin than others, influencing both its setting properties and clarity. Calves' feet were among the most prized sources, rich in collagen and capable of producing a firm, well-setting jelly.

In contrast, ox bones, though commonly used for broths, contained less collagen and required prolonged boiling to extract enough gelatin, often resulting in a weaker set.

Boiling time was critical in determining gelatin strength. A long, slow simmer (12-24 hours) was optimal. Shorter boiling times, often used for poultry or lighter broths (and lighter bones), resulted in weaker gelatin. However, overboiling (beyond 24-36 hours) risked breaking down the protein structure too much, preventing the gelatin from setting properly.

Collagen and health
The link between gelatin and bone health was not lost on Victorian society.

Medical texts of the period frequently recommended gelatin-rich broths for invalids, children, and the elderly, reinforcing the belief that consuming gelatin could replenish and strengthen the body's own systems.

This intuitive logic mirrors contemporary claims that bone broth supports joint health, digestion and skin elasticity. However, while broth provides collagen and minerals, scientific evidence for its direct functional benefits remains limited.

Collagen from food is broken down during digestion and does not directly restore cartilage or connective tissue. Despite its nutrient content, bone broth is no more beneficial than other protein sources, with its resurgence driven more by slow food and wellness trends than firm scientific backing.

In many ways, the gelatinous dishes that graced Victorian dining tables were as much a product of scientific curiosity as they were of culinary tradition. The transformation of bone into jelly encapsulated an era fascinated by both anatomy and domestic mastery, offering a rare but not exclusive intersection between the dinner table and the laboratory. (*The Conversation*)

"A genuine leader is not a searcher for consensus but a molder of consensus."

—Martin Luther King, Jr.

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No. 200 SHILLONG, MONDAY, MARCH 3, 2025

Byrnihat- A Toxic Conundrum

BYRNIHAT today is in an unenviable position of being the most polluted area in the country. This despite the frequent checking by the under-staffed State Pollution Control Board. Recently some industrial units particularly steel producing ones were ostensibly sealed but the fact is that Byrnihat has a number of coke units too and some along the roadside. Not long ago students of a school in Byrnihat were taken ill after participating in sporting events probably because while running they gulped in toxic air. The principal of the school raised a hue and cry but surprisingly some groups from the area came in support of the industries and said the principal was making unsubstantiated allegations. That again is the sore point here. Polluting units pay these pressure groups to stand in their defence, when the same groups should have been the anti-pollution watchdogs. Engineers of the State Pollution Control Board have opined that the pollution is not entirely from the Meghalaya side of the border but that industrial units including brick kilns and other polluting industries from the Assam side of the border also add to the poor AQI in the area. For several years now a heavy smog hangs over the atmosphere. Unfortunately, no health research has been conducted to establish with evidence the consequences of such ongoing pollution over a long period of time. Since the Byrnihat pollution is an inter-state matter the need of the hour is for the Central Pollution Control Board to step in and seal the polluting industries in both states - Assam and Meghalaya. No economic activity can be allowed to carry on at the cost of the environment.

The Export Promotion Industrial Park (EPIP) at Byrnihat came up in 2011 under the central government scheme of giving tax holidays to industries investing in North East India. Since 2015 the State Pollution Board has been monitoring the area for three pollutants viz. Sulphur Dioxide (SO₂), Oxides of Nitrogen (NO_x), Particulate Matter (PM₁₀). Monitoring is carried out for 24 hours (4 hourly sampling for gaseous pollutants and 8 hourly sampling for particulate matter). The monitoring of meteorological parameters such as wind speed and direction, relative humidity and temperature was also integrated with the monitoring of the air quality. The air quality monitoring Data is submitted on a monthly basis for compilation and interpretation. Based on the Air monitoring data, the level of Particulate Matter (PM₁₀) was observed to be exceeding the National Ambient Air Quality Standards (NAAQS), 2009 consecutively during 2011-2015. The air quality generated over the years in the monitored station reveals that PM₁₀ (Particulate Matter) concentration exceeds the National Ambient Air Quality Standard (Annual Average). The State Pollution Board had recommended that in order to prevent further deterioration and improvement of the ambient air quality in the area there is an immediate need for taking necessary preventive and control measures but this was ignored by the State Government. Now that the central government too is apprised of the situation the CPCB should take immediate action.

Letters to the Editor

Rainwater harvesting an imperative

The special article "The World Today" by Toki Blah (ST 22nd February 2025) made interesting reading. Meghalaya receives an average annual rainfall of 4173 mm and for an area of 1 square Km the rainfall would be equivalent to 41,73,000 cubic meters. The rainwaters go freely to the Surma and the Brahmaputra valley. The Brahmaputra basin, which includes parts of Meghalaya, has a drainage area of approximately 11,667 square kilometres within the State. The major rivers in Meghalaya that contribute to the Brahmaputra and Surma valleys include Digaru River, Kopili River, Myntdu River, Someshwari River, Umngot River, Khri, Kynshi, Umngi and Rilang rivers. To get the precise estimate of the total volume of rainwater flowing into these valleys, detailed hydrological studies and data collection would be required. If I am not mistaken the North East Space Application Centre, Shillong has done a study on this.

To harvest rain water the cost of excavation per cubic meter ranges from Rs 90 to Rs 150 at today's prices and bricks and mortar work would cost Rs 1400 per cubic meter. Assuming that the average cost of excavation is Rs 120 per cubic meter, that gives a total cost to harvest rainwater Rs 1520 per cubic meter, other cost not accounted for. There-

fore, the cost of harvesting rain water from an area of one Sq Km works out to Rs 634.30 crore for these two items of work. The Gross Budgetary Support (GBS) of the Government of India in the Department of Water Resources, River Development and Ganga Rejuvenation is Rs 497.88 crore as per Budget Estimate 2025-26 and that of the Department of Drinking Water and Sanitation is Rs 6828.59 crore (Budget Estimate 2025-26 for the North Eastern Region). How much can Meghalaya plough from this amount is beyond comprehension given the kind of resources that the Government of India earmarked for the North Eastern Region.

It is fine to have a vision to harvest the rain water and make it an export item and an economic asset but the larger question is from where will the huge amount of money which is currency come from to implement the good idea? If Israel comes forward to help Meghalaya there is nothing like it because Israeli scientist Amir Yechiel developed a system called "Yuvai Mayim," which collects and recycles rainwater using small catchment bins that act as filters. This system is efficient and cost-effective, making it accessible for various applications. Israel also has integrated rainwater harvesting systems in schools, promoting water conservation awareness among students. These initiatives help instil a culture of sustainability and responsible water use from a young age. Israeli rainwa-

The verdict is out, and the mandate is clear: the new political party is here to stay. Leaders of the Voice of the People Party are certainly patting themselves on the back for a job well done. Of course, the party can do better and perform well in both districts, but they are obviously happy with the outcome. And as the saying goes: so far, so good.

Some call the victory of the VPP a reflection of the famous Greek saying, "Vox populi, vox Dei," but I would refrain from doing so for two reasons. First, because I believe that in a democracy, the voices of the minority and marginalized sections of the population are also important. Second, because I don't want to be caught in a trap where people with ulterior motives who use hate against minorities win elections and call their victory the voice of God.

If I were to agree with this notion, then I would also have to accept it when groups that propagate hate against other communities, religions, or races win elections and claim their victory as the voice of God. I'm sorry, but I don't believe God would support hate.

VPP's Magic Wand

Although the party would have loved to perform better, considering that it is only a few years old and competing against two well-established political parties that are also in power, they deserve a thumbs-up. This win is certainly by no means a small achievement.

The question their adversaries keep asking is: What is the magic? What helps the party connect with the public? Why are voters supporting the party? What does the Voice of the People Party have that attracts people to its fold?

Hope is the most important selling point that politicians, religious leaders, and businessmen use to attract people. In fact, hope is what leaders in any dispensation use to gain the support of the common people because hope sells in any situation, circumstance, or time. "Make America Great Again" or "India Shining" are examples of slogans that political parties use to instill hope in the people.

The VPP won the hearts of voters because of its three core agenda: clean politics, which vows to fight rampant

VPP: So Far, So Good

By H H Mohrmen

corruption in the state; eliminating nepotism in government job appointments and the allotment of government contracts and supply work; and eradicating poverty. These are changes that the common people hope to see. Therefore, to call the victory a mere populist appeal is to underestimate the wisdom of the voters.

Hope for a Cleaner and Better Political System

Clean politics is the main agenda of the new party, and this has been its leader's focus since 2010, when he first launched his clean politics campaign. Ardent Miller Basaiawmoit has at least been consistent in his call for clean politics. Obviously, the party's consistent demand to rid corruption from the government system has been accepted by voters.

The party also calls for fighting against nepotism, where only family members of those in power or party supporters get preference in government jobs or contract work. Appointments in government offices were made without interviews, as vacancies—particularly those at the district level—were not even informed to the respective District Selection Committees because the posts had already been filled by the supporters of MLAs.

People are not blind to these unfair practices, and the rise of the VPP, which has pledged to fight nepotism, resonates well with youths who have moved from pillar to post in search of jobs. The third important issue mentioned by the party president during the election campaign was fighting poverty and improving the state's economy. This call has strongly connected with people, especially the youth.

Pent-up Anger Against the VIP Culture

Dr. Ampareen Lyngdoh, the National People's Party candidate for the Shillong parliamentary constituency, uttered just five words after the VPP's landslide victory in the last Lok Sabha election, where she was defeated by Dr. Ricky J. Syngkon: "The voters were very angry." The voters have not forgiven or forgotten the "high-level" culture that prevails in the system today, where only those close to the government benefit from government jobs

and contract work.

Voters are against the Very Important Person culture promoted by this government, where chairmen, committee and commission members, and even party leaders indulge in VIP privileges. This government has even provided security cover to contractors from their own parties and to ministers' brothers, even when there is no perceived threat to their lives. Defying court orders, one would find ruling party leaders driving expensive cars with black-tinted windows and sirens. By contrast, prominent leaders of the VPP dress casually and do not seem interested in indulging in VIP culture.

The Party "Pdiang Borti"

The party's claim of not using money during elections was questioned when candidates organized rallies and were accompanied by supporters during the filing and scrutiny of nomination papers. Supporters of the VPP attended rallies just as the supporters of the other parties did. The question is: Who sponsored the cost of transportation and other expenses? The party may claim that the expenditure was a contribution from supporters, yet the question remains—what is the need for spending so much money if the goal is to be different? If the party wants to be truly different, it should raise the bar higher in its efforts to clean up the election system rather than imitating what others do.

Critics have called them "ka party pdiang borti." Fundraising from the public for new candidates is understandable, especially for first-timers, but what about candidates like the one who has already served two terms as an Member of the District Council? How can he allow poor porters and daily laborers to contribute to a campaign when the candidate is an incumbent MDC who benefited from pay and perks from the Autonomous District Council? Isn't this a case of exploiting the poor?

It is also rather ironic that despite the party leadership's fallout with the media, its popularity did not decline. Social media played a crucial role in helping the VPP gain much-needed popularity, and the credit goes to You-Tubers.

Guarding our legacy. Urgent need to preserve the old cenotaph

As we approach another solemn occasion - the Labour Corps Day on July 16 we are reminded of the bravery and sacrifice of our Garo brothers who travelled to France to assist the Allied Forces during World War I. This day is not just a date in the calendar; it is a tribute to the courage, sacrifice, and valour that is etched into the very fabric of our identity as proud Garos.

However, it is with deep sorrow and indignation that we learned of the demolition of the Old Cenotaph, a monument built to honour these brave warriors. We witnessed the demolition happening at an alarming pace under the cover of night, leaving us little time to comprehend or voice our opposition. The decision made by an officer—who, unfortunately, lacks a connection to our land—has erased a symbol of our history in favour of constructing a commercial complex filled with restaurants and shops. This is not merely a trivial matter; it is a blow to our hearts and our heritage. Does this officer not understand the emotional bond we, the citizens of Garo Hills, share with this site? The Cenotaph is sacred ground where our ancestors gathered in unity and service, deserving reverence, not commercialization. Where was the transparency in this decision-making process? Where was the consultation with the community

Analyzing the ADC Election

Of all the seven MLAs from Jaintia Hills, Commingone Ymbon is the only one who still holds his constituency. Sniawbhalang may be right in his analysis that the VPP's vote share declined from the last MP election to the ADC election, but what he failed to acknowledge is that his candidate from Nartiang-Wahiajer won against the VPP candidate by just seven votes.

One would expect that it would be a cakewalk for the NPP in Sniawbhalang's own village, but to everyone's surprise, his candidate almost lost. This should be a warning bell, especially since the constituency also includes Wahiajer, his birthplace. Indeed, the results of the ADC election serve as a warning for all MLAs of the MDA. The sign is clear: the public is fed up with their leaders' antics.

One Man, One Post

One of the points on which Ardent was attacked during the campaign was the claim that he succumbed to Mukul Sangma's pressure and resigned from his MDC post while retaining his MLA membership when the issue of "bam ar malo" (dual political posts) was at its peak. Some MLAs were holding both MLA and MDC positions at the same time. Ardent did the right thing when the matter was taken to court, whereas Pynshgain N. Syiem fought and won the case in court.

Pynshgain and others may have won the case legally, but the fact remains that the salaries and benefits of members of both houses come from the public exchequer. If ordinary citizens are not allowed to benefit from two posts, the same rule should apply to politicians too.

Where is the Party Heading?

The journey to the Assembly is challenging. The numbers are 34 and 26, and the question is: Will the VPP focus solely on the Khasi-Jaintia region in the next three years? It is difficult, if not impossible, for the party to expect to win all the 34 seats from the Khasi Jaintia Hills region. Garo Hills also offers an opportunity for the VPP. With the ADC election in the Garo Hills Autonomous District Council expected next year, is the VPP ready to take on the challenge and start organizing the party in the region?

that holds this place dear? The demolition, carried out without our consent and so swiftly, reveals a troubling disregard for our sentiments.

Transforming this sacred place into a mere facade of consumerism is deeply unsettling. The memory of our heroes—the songs and tributes that once resonated there—should be honoured, cherished, and preserved for generations to come.

Building a commercial complex where our valiant ancestors once gathered is akin to disrespecting their legacy with an enemy's sword. It diminishes their sacrifice and sends a message that our past is of no consequence. As citizens of Garo Hills, we cannot remain silent in the face of such an affront. We demand accountability, respect for our heritage, and a voice in decisions that affect our community. The upcoming MDC elections present an opportunity for us to express our outrage and stand together in solidarity.

I urge the authorities to reconsider this decision. Honour our brave Garo brothers not by erasing their memory, but by creating spaces that celebrate their sacrifice while fostering community pride. In unity and resolute determination, let us work together to uphold the values and memories that define us.

Yours etc.,
Mingran Sangma.
Via email

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

Let's not normalise abuse of deportees

By Lekha Rattanani

On Feb. 19, the United States White House posted a 41 second video showing deportees being put in shackles as they are herded into an airplane for deportation operations as part of the Donald Trump administration's efforts to remove illegal immigrants ("illegal aliens" as they are known there) from US territory. The video did not show the faces of the deportees or the US officials but the jackets the latter wore clearly shows them to be from ERO, which is short for Enforcement & Removal Operations of the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). The video was to achieve nothing but mock, embarrass, and humiliate not only the deportees, many of whom are from India, but also their nations and their people as a whole.

The video was shockingly titled: "ASMR: Illegal Alien Deportation Flight", and it has over a 100 million views on the social media platform owned by Elon Musk, called 'X'. ASMR in the video refers to the tingling sound of steel chains as they are laid out on the tarmac, as prisoners step forward and are shackled one by one. ASMR, which is short for Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response, is a sense of satisfaction and pleasant tingling ("tingles") felt down the spine, triggered by certain sounds in some people, like the crushing of tissue paper or popping of bubble wrap. The sound of steel shackles being laid out is the tingle they love. Musk retweeted

rarely unrestrained if needed in that regard. This is applicable to chartered civilian aircraft as well as military aircraft. There has been no change, I repeat, no change, from past procedure for the flight undertaken by the US on 5 February 2025."

Jaishankar seems to be saying that the present government is doing what earlier Indian governments have done - accepting what is standard US procedure for returning deportees. There is a difference this time though. Earlier operations were quiet, but now deportees are being returned in a widely publicised manner that mocks at and humiliates them and their countries. India's quiet acceptance of this dehumanisation and mistreatment stands out.

Smaller nations have done better. They hold up as an example of a good response. Colombia, Brazil and Mexico have brought into sharp focus the mistreatment of deportees returned to their countries. The angry responses of the two South American nations and Mexico stand out like a shining example of a good and measured response. There are images of President Gustavo Petro addressing Colombian deportees on a commercial flight. He was the first to raise a voice when he refused to allow in a US military cargo flight bearing deportees. "I deny the entry of American planes carrying Colombian migrants into our territory," Petro had said on the social media platform

As a nation that is the biggest, strongest and the largest economy among those being targeted for deportation, India must make this protest heard. In this, India has clearly, loudly, miserably failed. India even appears to justify the actions of the US.

the video with the words: "Haha Wow", with images of a medal and an emoji of a green-skinned, pointy-eared goblin.

The dehumanisation of deportees is not just in the way they are treated. There is a story of "aliens" being deep wired into the head of Americans, with multiple layers at play, like white supremacy, the criminalisation of poverty and/or the normalisation of abuse. There has to be something rotten in the head for an official account of the US President to issue such a video and for his most-trusted lieutenant to laugh as he retweets it. It is important for all nations to whom the deportees are being returned to not allow the United States to get away with normalising this conduct, and to let the US know that deportation is fine but mistreating human beings is not. Most of the deportees are from poorer sections of society looking for a livelihood, taking jobs that go abegging but for the availability of these willing workers. Treating them in this manner is behaviour that is closer to a fascist regime that sees other human beings as lesser than human.

As a nation that is the biggest, strongest and the largest economy among those being targeted for deportation, India must make this protest heard. In this, India has clearly, loudly, miserably failed. India even appears to justify the actions of the US. Was it not India's external affairs minister Dr. S Jaishankar who said in a statement on Feb. 06: "The Standard Operating Procedure for deportation by aircraft used by ICE, that is effective from 2012, I repeat, that is effective from 2012, provides for the use of restraints. However, we have been informed by ICE that women and children are not restrained. Further, the needs of deportees during transit related to food or other necessities, including possible medical emergencies, are attended to. During toilet breaks, deportees are tempo-

planes to get back deportees and Petro even offered the presidential plane to return his people with dignity. This is in sharp contrast to the Indian response.

Three batches of deportees have been returned to India, handcuffed and chained at the feet, aboard the stuffy confines of US military cargo aircraft. On February 23, the fourth and latest batch of Indian deportees arrived at Delhi's Indira Gandhi International airport. Unlike the earlier groups who returned handcuffed and chained on US military cargo flights, this batch of 12 came back on a commercial flight from Panama. They were unshackled and wearing electronic devices on their legs, but the deportees did recount torture and hardship at the Tijuana camp, on the US-Mexico border, where US officials made them sit on the floor for hours in extreme cold before leaving for Panama on a commercial flight. They noted that countries like Colombia, Brazil and Mexico had denounced this treatment of their people while India had remained silent adding to their problems. Brazil's Foreign Ministry has said in a statement that it was seeking answers from Washington regarding the "degrading treatment" of deported nationals. The Brazilian government said it would create a reception centre for deported migrants.

None of these countries are anywhere close to the might of the United States, yet they have made a point by saying: You cannot treat our people badly. We will not remain silent if you do so. India can learn some lessons here.

(The writer is the Managing Editor of The Billion Press) (Syndicate: The Billion Press) (email: editor@thebillionpress.org)

"You must remain focused on your journey to greatness."
— Les Brown

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No. 201 SHILLONG, TUESDAY, MARCH 4, 2025

Dissent and Congress

THE Congress party's present predicament is amply evident from the fresh brainwaves from senior parliamentarian Shashi Tharoor, which have embarrassed the grand old party. When Tharoor praised the LDF government in Kerala, which the Congress is opposing tooth and nail and he later dismissed criticism by claiming his views were based on facts, word spread that the former Union minister was only indirectly exposing the deep hurt he felt in being sidelined by the party. Perceptions were that he was not even given a decent seat in the AICC headquarters, possibly a rebuff based on his decision to contest the party president post against official nominee Mallikarjun Kharge. Alongside, it is common knowledge that the three-time MP from Thiruvananthapuram was being sidelined in the Kerala party as well. There too, the reason was obvious; namely his perceived attempt to be the next chief minister in the event the Congress party wins power in the state — where the Congress-led UDF has all along been strong. Tharoor had been airdropped into the parliament poll fray in 2009, shortly after he ended his long tenure in the United Nations. To his luck, he won the polls and never tasted defeat mainly due to his personal charisma, complemented by support he got from youth and women.

Tharoor is the odd man out in politics. In a sea of muscle flexing loudmouths on stage, he spoke sense by virtue of his high education, exposure to international bodies like the United Nations and his passion for reading and writing. Anybody else with his proclivities would have felt like a fish out of water in the political space here. With Manmohan Singh making him a Union Minister of state for External Affairs, his profile changed. The case surrounding the death of his wife Sunanda Pushkar was another turning point in his life. Tharoor survived odds and opened another front when he went and stood against Mallikarjun Kharge for the Congress president's post. From then on, Tharoor faced resistance from within the party on multiple fronts. His sudden praise of the LDF government was possibly done with the motive of telling the Congress leadership that he cannot be taken for granted for too long.

There may be merit in the argument of Congressmen that Tharoor was not being mindful of the party's liberal grant of positions to him for the past many years even as he came in as a greenhorn in politics. Chances however are that he may get away with his act. Unlike other parties, the Congress gives its leaders the leeway to criticise the party. Tharoor does not have the grit or mass support at the national level, or even in his native state, to split the party or take on the leadership directly from a high pedestal. At the same time, it is incumbent on the Congress party to make use of him and those like him to keep providing an intellectual aura to the party.

Real issues before the new EC of KHADC

By Toki Blah

The dust has settled; the war-cries over; the contest has been won and now the time has come for the victors to sit down and take stock of the spoils of war! Yes I'm talking about the recently contested MDC elections where we saw the VPP romp home in the KHADC with a clear majority of 17. On the Feb 26, 2025, VPP President, Bah Ardent, declared the office bearers for the KHADC comprising of the Chairman and Vice Chair for the Legislative Body together with the CEM and seven other EMs for the Executive Council. The justification for the small number of EMs (just 8 from the previous 12) is the call for curtailment in public expenditure! Is the VPP once again hitting the right chord of public sentiment? One has to say this for it has now become quite apparent that the VPP call for no corruption in politics; more transparency and accountability in public life; educated and enlightened party candidates together with the party's experiment with 'No to money power in elections' had found immense traction with the electorate of these Hills. How else can one explain the majority of 17 seats in KHADC and the attainment of EIGHT seats in the Jaintia Hills - a constituency notorious for the play of big money in elections and for the singular return for most politician crorepati!

One can safely say that the manner in which the VPP carried itself in the recently concluded MDC elections, is what the general public wants from politicians — the readiness for change in the demeanour and behaviour of its public servants. It however also revives bitter memories of the 1980s and of the rise of the Assam Gana Parishad then. Assam's hopes were raised only to be dashed to the ground once the AGP started tasting the fruits of Power. Today it is doubtful if people even remember the AGP and what it stood for. It is hoped that the VPP learns from the lessons of Assam. It would be a tragedy if the Hopes of the masses were to be betrayed by petty, irrelevant and shortsighted political self goals.

So what would be better than to girdle our loins; roll up the sleeves and try to come out with what are the publicly relevant issues before the present KHADC Executive Council. Where should its priorities lie in the next five years?

To be precise the KHADC already has its work cut out in the sense that their mandate;

scope of work and areas of interests are already chalked out in the 6th Schedule. The long and short of such a mandate is to promote the interests of the local tribals by safeguarding their rights over their lands, customs and traditions. Mould and shape tradition to the needs of today, so to say. Now wait a minute. Isn't the mandate of the State Government also to promote the well-being, development and welfare of the people? So are we missing something here? The Constitution does not play favorites and it expects both the ADCs and the State Government to both work for promoting the interests of the people. Here the Constitution looks at convergence of good governance from both institutions. It expects both the State Government and the ADC to supplement and complement each other in promoting the interests of the common man. Both the State Govt and the ADCs share a common goal. Unfortunately local political compulsions usually sets the State Government and the ADC at odds with one another; one trying to outshine the other before the public.

Of glaring example is the vexed question of MUDA. In an age of rapid urbanization where steel, cement, an expansion skywards is the norm, can one question the need for building regulations, both for Municipal and 6th Schedule areas, to ensure safety and security of the people? So why can't both the State Government and the KHADC make use of the common services of one MUDA? Why the need for duplicate MUDAs? Why the need for unnecessary expenditure of scarce public resources? I can come up with only one answer to the above questions — for corruption to take place in high places of public service, duplicity and obscurity are called for! That's what we are seeing.

The next mandate for the ADCs in Meghalaya is from Para 3 (b) which reads 'to make laws for the management of any forest not being a reserve forest' and proper management of water bodies within such lands and forests. The peculiarity of land ownership in Meghalaya is that 88% of the land and the forests on such land is owned by the public and only 12% is reserved forests managed by Govt. It is sad to admit that past ECs of the KHADC have preferred to

manage these community forests by exploiting their timber value only. The best part of traditional practices of preservation of our forests and natural resources, in the interests of the community have been neglected leading to vast deforestation of our hills.

Large scale charcoal burning all over the state has only added to deterioration of our community wealth. This is one of the major challenges for the new EC — how to rejuvenate our diminishing community forests! To give Bah Ardent Basaiawm his due one must admit that when he was CEM of the KHADC, the District Council had strongly intervened in declaring the Raid Mawtaraw and Raid Mawpat forests as 'law adong' or 'community reserve forests'. This welcoming intervention occurred because of a public outcry over attempts by the authorities of Hima Myllieh to sell off the area through allocation of plots to private individuals sometime during 2014. It is now learnt that greedy leaders of the community are once again surreptitiously attempting to repeat what they could not do in 2014. Let us take note that the evergreen pine forests of Mawtaraw and Mawpat form the Green lung area between Old Shillong and New Shillong. They will purify the air our children and grand children will breathe. Destruction of these forests, under the management and care of the KHADC must never be allowed to become the source for money making by greedy leaders. The public of Shillong must be whistle blowers over any visible attempt to alter the status of these forests. The new EC should take immediate steps to ensure that these community forests are protected and preserved. Funds to KHADC for such upkeep can be sourced from the Smart City project as maintaining and preserving green cover for the city falls under the purview of the scheme.

The next important issue before the new EC and one again mandated by the 6th Schedule is the management and upkeep of our traditional bodies. Of utmost importance is the relationship between the KHADC and the Dorbar Shnong. (note that emphasis is on the Dorbar Shnong and not the Rangbah Shnong who happens to be just the first among equals) Our Dorbars are under threat. The legal status of the Dorbar

was challenged by a single bench of the High Court in 2014 and the very existence and authority of this prime grassroot traditional institute will continue to be in question as long as the challenge remains unanswered. It is obvious that the answer to the challenge is through an Act of the KHADC that gives our Dorbar the legal shield that they require. We therefore need to review and reappraise the Village Administration Bill (VAB). Take it out of the cold storage it was assigned to and rework on it if so needed. Such a review should concentrate on the following aspects. First how to make the Dorbars transparent and accountable in their day to day functioning. Rules to the Act and training in finance management concepts for Dorbar officials should help. Second, to bring in uniformity and homogeneity in the election, formation and composition of all dorbars within KHADC. A standard manner in Dorbar elections together with the inclusion of both adult male and female electors can be a good start. Third, good management of Dorbar resources, and this includes financial resources, human as well as natural resources must be identified as good governance practices. Human resources are defined as all residents living within the Dorbar. Its youth need to be protected from harmful practices such as drug abuse etc. Dorbar should not be left to deal with the menace of drugs on their own. Relevant training on the subject is needed. So is the matter with women. They must be protected from abuse and exploitation and proper training can again be extended in this matter.

Natural resources for dorbars will primarily be the forests and streams that fall under the jurisdiction of a Dorbar. For a start, the Dorbars falling within Shillong and Greater Shillong areas can be facilitated to come up with sanitary concepts for both the Wah Umkhrah and the Umshyri. Dorbars falling outside urban areas can be encouraged to take better care of the forests and streams under their jurisdiction. Funds for such "Green Concept Projects of KHADC" will find ample scope from NEC, Ministry Doner, Ministry of Forests and Environment as well as the Ministry for Panchayats. What is really needed is the will and political vision to do something for the betterment of society and the environment. The rest will automatically follow.

25 Years of NESRC: Intersection of Research, Advocacy and Activism

By Timothy Khongsai

It was the dawn of the 21st century, when the world was buzzing with optimistic narratives of advancement and prosperity with increasing global interconnectedness. Yet, the Northeast of India was marked by a reality of political instability, extreme militarisation and turmoil. Activism, research and journalism were professions that could get you into trouble with the powers that be any day. Amidst this challenging climate, a seasoned Jesuit sociologist Dr. Walter Fernandes came to the Northeast with a mandate to start the North Eastern Social Research Centre (NESRC). He did it on March 1, 2000 with a prodigy of a scholar from the land of the Northeast, Dr. Sanjay Barbor, who now teaches at the University of California, Santa Cruz, USA. This research centre celebrated its Silver Jubilee on the 1st of March, 2025.

The founding of the North Eastern Social Research Centre (NESRC) came at a critical juncture for Northeast India. As mentioned above, the region was experiencing severe political and social unrest, with violence and suppression of autonomy movements across most states. The Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) granted security forces extensive powers while peace remained elusive despite ceasefire agreements in Nagaland and in a few other areas of the region. In what the people of this region call Mainland India, the Northeast was (and still is) suffering from a perception of being viewed primarily as a region of conflicts and of secessionists. The Central authorities viewed the region mainly through a national security lens, and treated it as a peripheral territory. To most people in mainland India the Northeast was that vague territory between Kolkata and Myanmar since their view of India stopped at Kolkata. This marginalisation manifested itself in what the people of the region perceive as economic neglect visible in its poor infrastructure and limited employment opportunities. That fuelled regional resentment. Complex tensions to indigenous identity arose also from concerns about real or perceived threats from "illegal migration", competition for scarce resources, and growing ethnic conflicts resulting from it. Civil society movements, student organisations, and human rights groups had emerged but often worked in isolation.

In this atmosphere the establishment of NESRC filled the need to provide a much-needed bridge during this fragmented period, a space for intellectual reflection combined with practical intervention on pressing regional issues. From its inception NESRC began to serve as a platform where conflicting groups could meet, where young researchers could develop their skills, and where the complex search for Northeast India's regional identity could be thoughtfully examined rather than contested violently. Today, after 25 years and after completing more than 70 studies across the region, NESRC has established itself as a vital institution in the Northeast addressing its varying social and political issues. It has become a crucial centre for scholars, activists, and individuals concerned with social change, particularly the youth, to come together and engage in intellectual conversations, hands-on engagement and activism. With its mandate to combine serious intellectual pursuits with involvement in social change, NESRC provides a space where thoughtful analysis meets practical political action. Its studies have primarily focused on critical areas such as land rights, ethnic identity, resource management, gender issues, development-induced displacement, and conflicts and peace.

In its pursuit for peace with justice, and encouraging the youth to get involved in the search for a Northeast with its own identity, the Centre, though based in Assam, has conducted numerous significant studies in the region as a whole. Meghalaya has not been left behind in this pursuit. Among its more than 80 publications, five are exclusively on Meghalaya. As part of its study of the gender implications of the tribal customary laws, NESRC did a detailed analysis of the role of women in the customary laws of the Jaintia and the Lyngam of Meghalaya and the impact of modernisation and neoliberalism on the women of these tribes. These studies have been published in 2020 under the titles "New Aspirations, New Approach: The Jaintias of Meghalaya" and "Reforming Norms, Reforming Practices: The Lyngngams of Meghalaya." Prior to it, NESRC did a pioneering study on all development-induced displacement in the state, 1951-2010. "The Development Dilemma: Displacement in Meghalaya 1947-2010" was published in 2016. Another study done in Meghalaya is on the impact of ICDS and published in 2017 as "An Impact Assessment of ICDS in Meghalaya: Strengths and Scope for Growth. A study on the role of the satellite in education done in 2013-14, and a second one on coal mining in Meghalaya done in 2013-14 has remained as unpublished reports.

The tribes of Meghalaya have also been included in other multi-state studies. Its first major research initiative in 2001-2002 immediately after its foundation, examined the changing status of women among six tribes in Northeast India, including the Garo of Meghalaya. This study was published in 2002 as "Modernisation and Women's Status in Northeast India." The Garo were included in its next major study in 2003-2004, published in 2005 as "Land Relations and Ethnic Conflicts: The Case of North east India," and the one after it on the gender implications of tribal customary laws (2005-06). The Khasi are among the tribes studied in two recent studies "Continuities of Migration: Women, Work and Belonging in Northeast India" (2023), and "Forests and Fields of Imagined Futures: Indigenous Women and Conservation Practices in Northeast India" (2024). The Garo are part of a four-state ongoing study on tribal land alienation.

Such studies are intrinsic to the prioritisation of land rights and Indigenous issues that has led NESRC to engage in extensive research on development-induced land loss and displacement, spanning from 1947 to 2010 across all eight North Eastern states. The findings of these studies have influenced policy frameworks, such as the Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation, and Resettlement Act of 2013. It demonstrates NESRC's role in advocating for marginalised communities. Its work on the "budget for children" has influenced policy decisions at the state level. Its engagement with gender issues has been significant, particularly in analysing the gender implications of tribal customary laws, done in collaboration with local communities to reflect on necessary reforms following its commitment to participatory research and advocacy. NESRC has also worked extensively in conflict resolution by facilitating dialogue between communities in conflict and providing analytical training to local peace activists. Through the network NESRC has created of its former staff, friends of the institute and the Jesuit connections across the Northeast, its work and influence extend beyond its physical location in Guwahati.

With a library that houses more than 13,000 books today in the middle of the hustling and bustling city of Guwahati, NESRC strives to continue to be a place where social issues are confronted, young minds are moulded, and intellectual engagement is fostered. Through seminars, workshops, and publications, the Centre actively promotes research and advocacy, aiming to address the pressing challenges faced by the communities in the Northeast. One hopes that this thrust will continue during the next 25 years and beyond.

Timothy Khongsai is currently a Research Associate at the North Eastern Social Research Centre.

Letters to the Editor

Meghalaya and non-tribals

Editor, The Government of Meghalaya has repeatedly failed to provide opportunities for non-tribals. With reference to the statement made by the New EC of KHADC (ST March 1, 2025) regarding the ban on fresh trading licenses for non-tribal businessmen, this move is seen as an effort to promote economic opportunities for the local tribal population. However, some argue that it could negatively impact non-tribal traders who have been running businesses in the region for decades. It is to be noted that local tribals are now at par with non-tribals in terms of business acumen. Many non-tribals are looking for opportunities to grow economically and secure their livelihoods in the limited areas where they have resided for decades. It is highly inappropriate to declare that fresh trading licenses will not be issued to non-tribal traders in areas where tribals can engage in business. This indirectly suggests that non-tribals can no longer engage in trade, which contradicts the Sixth Schedule, as local tribals are already capable of excelling in various fields—from selling land to establishing major businesses and factories.

This decision is a clear violation of Articles 16 and 21 of the Indian Constitution, which ensure the Right to Live with Dignity, Right to Livelihood, and Right to a Healthy Environment. No citizen should face discrimination based on race, religion, caste, or sex.

This is not the first time the non-tribal population of Meghalaya has been deprived of its rights. They have also been denied the right to vote in KHADC elections, where non-tribals were once nominated as MDCs during the late 1950s in the United Khasi & Jaintia Hills District Council.

Non-tribals have long struggled for their right to livelihood. Time and again, different political parties have voiced their opposition to granting non-tribals basic rights—ranging from business opportunities to employment. Non-tribals in Meghalaya face various hostilities, including threats and even killings. However, neither the government of Meghalaya nor the Opposition has taken a strong stand to condemn these injustices. In such a scenario, where more than 90% of Meghalaya falls under the Sixth Schedule and 85% of government employment is reserved for STs, the tribal population already enjoys significant security. This raises an important question about the well-being of genuine non-tribals who have been born and raised in Meghalaya for generations. These non-tribals have spent their entire lives in the State and consider Meghalaya their home. Yet, under these conditions, they are left with no choice but to leave the state in search of a dignified life elsewhere.

If such statements continue to be made by responsible public representatives, it will send a negative message not only to the people of the state but also to the entire country. Continued atrocities against non-tribals will eventually

force them to leave Meghalaya permanently, as they will no longer have the means to support themselves and their families.

Currently, non-tribals are deprived of:

1. The right to buy land in areas under the Sixth Schedule.
2. Employment opportunities in the government sector.
3. Trading rights in Sixth Schedule areas.
4. Land purchase and property ownership from non-tribals to non-tribals.

An Appeal for Justice

India is a country where tribals are not barred from engaging in business or securing government jobs. How would they feel if they were treated the same way? Now is the time for non-tribals to stand up and fight for their constitutional rights. We must demand accountability from our representatives, who have won elections using non-tribal votes, only to later ignore their issues.

Call to Action

During the 1972 formation of Meghalaya, the non-tribal population constituted 20%, but today, their numbers have drastically reduced to 9%. If this trend continues, it will further decline, and non-tribals will lose all their rights. The 2028 elections will determine whether Meghalaya will remain inclusive or whether non-tribals will continue to be marginalized.

At the time of elections, leaders from different political parties mislead our tribal brothers and sisters. It is crucial to visit government websites and verify facts about the influx instead of believing

false narratives.

This is an appeal to senior, respected individuals in society to intervene and speak up for the welfare of the non-tribal population, who have contributed significantly to Meghalaya's development.

Yours etc.,
Homnath Gautam,
Shillong-2

Environment a casualty

Editor, It is a crying shame that in spite of snowfall and avalanche alerts since February 24, labourers working on a stretch of the road to Badrinath Dham had not been evacuated in time. Four days later no action was taken to bring those labourers to a safer place. As a result, some labourers were killed and many went missing when avalanches hit the area on February 28. This indicates total apathy towards the safety of labourers. Now, who will be accountable for playing with so many lives? India needs stringent labour laws and their strict implementation. Otherwise, such a tragedy will become a routine affair. In fact the loss of lives of the labourers in the Uttarakhand avalanche came immediately after the Telangana tunnel collapse tragedy.

Tunnel disasters, one after another also point to a tunnel vision on safety protocols for labourers. Fifteen months after the Silkyara Bend-Barkot tunnel disaster in Uttarakhand in November 2023, a portion of the Srisailem Left Bank Canal tunnel in Telangana collapsed on February 22, trapping eight

workers. The trapped workers have not yet been traced. The Silkyara tunnel had collapsed trapping 41 workers for 17 days. After they were miraculously rescued by rat hole miners, the project restarted and an operator, Govind Kumar, was killed when a machine on which he was sitting fell into a 25-foot-deep trench near the mouth of the Silkyara tunnel. This indicates how the safety of labourers is of least concern.

Tunnel collapse also points to a lack of evaluation of environmental issues before undertaking such projects. Now, let us shift our focus to Jorhat. Jorhat has to suffer because of a cavalier attitude to its environment. According to official reports, Jorhat is slowly sinking. Cracks have developed in many buildings, temples, and even on the pavements and streets. Jorhat's sinking is primarily due to "development". Ignoring all warnings, water has been pumped out from beneath the ground for farming, making the sand and stone fragile and the soil dipping.

A government study in 1976 had cautioned that Jorhat was sinking. The study suggested that a ban should be imposed on heavy construction work in the area. But this warning is callously ignored. Authorities let hotels, lodging houses, and eateries mushroom in Jorhat. A number of hydroelectric power projects are also built around the town. Many roads have been laid and many tunnels have been made to improve connectivity. Geologists MPS Bisht and

Piyooosh Rautela said in their paper, "Disaster looms large over Jorhat" published in Current Science in 2010, that a major concern was the Tapovan Vishnugad hydro power project whose tunnel traverses through the geologically fragile area below Jorhat. Environmental issues are ignored in smart city projects also. The roads of the "smart city", Panaji, were flooded after the heavy morning showers in April last year. The flooded roads in a "smart city" highlight faulty urban planning. Without being sensitive to both ecology and equality, a city cannot achieve smartness. It is dangerous to evade environmental impact assessment before excavation for building a tunnel or a high-rise. Moreover, inequality does not let anything look smart. Would a model look smart by wearing a brand new costly coat along with a cheap, shabby pair of trousers which he tries to hide?

The way our cities bulldoze the environment annoyed Tagore. He wrote the poem, 'To Civilisation' (Sabyatar Proti), where he said, "On new civilisation! Bring back that forest and take this city full of irons, bricks, logs, and stones." Any effort to bulldoze the environment and workers' rights in the guise of development must be prevented at all costs.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

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

"Strive not to be a success, but rather to be of value."

— Albert Einstein

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No. 202 SHILLONG, WEDNESDAY, MARCH 5, 2025

Bull in a China shop

PRESIDENT Donald Trump may not necessarily be maniacal when it comes to his dealings with close neighbours Canada and Mexico and also super power China, but his actions have left a bitter taste in their mouths. The sharp and abrupt hike in tariffs on imports to the US that Trump imposed on these countries came into effect on Tuesday after a brief pause. But all the three are not grinning and bearing with what Uncle Sam has done to them. Rather, they have announced retaliatory steps in a similar manner. Outgoing Canadian prime minister Justin Trudeau, whom Trump mischievously called Governor Trudeau, is refusing to be cowed down. Trump insists that these nations should limit the flow of Fentanyl drugs to the US. An analgesic opioid, these are cited as "30 times more potent than heroin and nearly 100 times more harmful," than morphine.

The series of steps that Trump announced after his inauguration for a second term are obviously meant to strengthen the US after a period of "weak" governance by Democrats with Joe Biden as president. Trump, projecting an extra dose of nationalistic spirit, is also keen on generating more jobs for Americans as he had advocated the last time too. He is well within his limits to promote the manufacturing sector within the US. The higher tariffs on imports are bound to boost this attempt, though some questions arise. For one, manufacturing in the developed world involves higher costs. China manufactures products in bulk and sells them at low prices due to the availability of cheap labour there. With a sharp tariff hike, the prices of imported goods are bound to go up in the US— which would hit the consumer hard. Products manufactured in the US are bound to have higher prices. A matching tariff hike on imports from the US by these countries could mean the consumers there could turn their face away from such items, and opt for products from Europe, for instance. How things work out remains to be seen. Trump himself a business honcho naturally understands the market dynamics more than anyone else.

Curiously, Trump's opening of another front vis-à-vis Ukraine has shocked many. His harsh responses to visiting Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky in a face-to-face at the Oval office on Friday is indication that Ukraine can no longer trust the US. Having been there to sign a pact on metals exports, which however did not materialize, Zelensky faced open grilling from Trump after the former's call for a guarantee for US security support against future Russian invasions. Had the Joe Biden administration not given a firm backing to Zelensky at the start of the war in 2022, the Ukrainian leader would not have carried forward this misadventure against a crafty and ruthless Vladimir Putin. Thanks to Trump, Zelensky is now caught between the devil and the deep sea.

Is VPP the new AAP?

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

The Autonomous District Council (ADC) elections have just concluded and the results, to be honest, are a little surprising. Personally, I expected the VPP might do well in the Jaintia Hills Autonomous District Council (JHADC) where they would form the Executive Committee. In Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council (KHADC), I was expecting them to win some seats, but the clean sweep they performed by winning 17 seats surprised me. As the foremost Jaidbyniw party at the moment, their victory in JHADC would have reinforced the consolidation of a pan-Khasi identity, which was slightly fractured with the controversy around the state anthem. I think whether we are Pnar, War, Maram, Bhoi, Lyngngam, or Khyntiam, we are all Khasi and I prefer this over Hyniewtrep, which signifies the seven groups that came down from heaven to populate the earth. But regardless of our preferred terminology, we should not compromise our unity as a people. VPP's victory in JHADC could have been that unifying factor. But in terms of the other aspects of jaidbyniw politics, the false victimhood and the othering of non-Khasis blaming them for the problems our own people created, I stand in complete disagreement with it. And I will continue to do so.

Coming back to the ADC elections, this time around, it was a shattering of the status quo at least in the KHADC. Before the election results, consensus predicted a fractured house with no single party gaining a majority. In JHADC that came true with NPP falling short of 3 seats from securing outright majority. But in the KHADC, the VPP comfortably cleared that hurdle, paving the way for them to form the EC single-handedly. It also brings to light the myriad factors that played a role in this election, which ranged from frustration with the status quo in one corner but a near consolidation of the ruling party's influence on the other. Come 2028 general assembly elections, these factors will play a critical role in deciding who rules the state. It is important to remember that considering the ADCs depend financially on the State Government, winning the assembly election is the bigger prize.

The frustration against the status quo in KHADC

and the rise of the VPP reminds us of the rise of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) in Delhi as an outcome of the Anti-Corruption movement started by Anna Hazare. This movement signalled the rise of Arvind Kejriwal, a former bureaucrat and winner of Ramon Magsaysay Award for Emergent Leadership. His newly formed party swept the Delhi elections and ruled it from 2012 to 2024, and then losing the election to BJP recently. It was around the same time that my activism was taking shape and has influenced my choices since then.

Around the time that AAP was making waves in Delhi, I was doing my PhD at NEHU. I had defended my synopsis and was preparing for my fieldwork. It was around this time I met another research scholar who was staying in the same hostel as me. Our hostels were cheap but not well maintained and in need of urgent repair. He had tried to organise the students around the issue but had been unsuccessful. Convinced that the issue was of utmost concern for all, I offered my help in galvanising the students staying in the hostels around the campus. I roped in some more friends and went on a tour of all the hostels, undergraduate and post-graduate. During this tour, I saw scenes that left me shocked.

The boys' hostels were in disrepair, which was plain to see, but since girls' hostel was out of bounds for outsiders, we didn't know the condition of their infrastructure. The tour was the first opportunity any of us had got to enter the hostels. When we went to the bathroom, the scene was horrifying. There was green slimy growth all over the wall. We saw this in a few other hostels as well. Broken windows, condemned floors were some of the common issues across all the hostels. We made a report of all the observations, compiled them and made it into a letter addressed to the University demanding necessary action. We also called for a half-day strike, locking down all the hostels and preventing students from attending classes. The Vice Chancellor, prompted by the protest, called an emergency meeting for all students in the hostels. There was an intense discussion with the administration, after which we finally arrived at an agreement re-

garding the timeline for the proposed actions. With that, we ended the protest.

We not only had an altercation with the university administration, but with the official student body as well. Our group was non-official and included members from the non-Khasi community in important positions. In a meeting we had with them, some members from the official student body got upset when one of our non-Khasi members raised his voice. Later, when the meeting concluded and I was passing through the canteen on my way to the main road, one of the office bearers threw a plastic water bottle at me. The bottle didn't hit me and I looked back. He was standing with his girlfriend, staring at me with anger. I realised that he's acting brave not because he can take me in a one one one fight, but because of the people behind him. So, I decided not to confront him since I knew I would not be a fair fight.

A few days later, I had a meeting with the person who had initially asked me to organise the hostellers. He was our de-facto leader and also took the lead in all our discussions. In that meeting, he told us that there were some teachers who are acting against the interests of the students. He revealed that some were, in fact, targeting him personally. So, he suggested we should confront those teachers. Reluctantly, we agreed to accompany him since he was our leader.

A group of around half a dozen of us entered the room of a senior teacher. I thought we would sit down and talk it out peacefully. To my shock, our leader banged the table and started accusing the teacher of plotting against the interests of the students. In the commotion, something fell from the table on the ground. I bent down, picked it up, and put it back on the table. The teacher, scared, turned to me and asked me to intervene, claiming that he knows me. I had formed a research forum along with other PhD candidates in my department and we would often organise seminars calling scholars from all departments to share their work. Being the general secretary, I would take part in all such meetings. So, he knew me from then. Although uncomfortable, I told him he should not have acted against the

students. After threatening him, we all left the room and returned to our hostel.

The incident left me visibly disappointed. I realised we had been manipulated into unfairly threatening a senior teacher. Deeply concerned, I had a meeting with our leader and informed him I wanted to leave, citing the need for me to recommence my PhD field work. It was then I was in for another shock. He accused me of betraying him and told me I was also working against the interests of the students. Disgusted, I left his room. Later, when I informed another friend of the incident, he told me that our leader was always paranoid and megalomaniacal. In fact, long before the incident we would call him the Khasi Kejriwal on account of the AAP leader's highly dictatorial and paranoid style of leadership. After that, I never met him again.

AAP came to power by accusing everyone of being corrupt and painting themselves as the saviours of Delhi. It must be admitted that in the first couple of terms, there were positive changes. But from the third term onwards, there were reports of Arvind Kejriwal living lavishly and the revelation of the liquor scam which saw him being arrested. So, there was already pressure on him, which was made worse by his hostile attitude towards his own INDIA partners. Finally, the BJP defeated AAP in the recent Delhi Assembly elections, ending their reign. Kejriwal also tasted defeat. If the AAP government in Punjab falls or cannot win again, it could signal an end to a party which could have played a very important role in national politics.

We can term the VPP's victory in the KHADC as an AAP Delhi moment. However, the dynamics here are a little different because the NPP still has the edge since they control two district councils - JHADC and GHADC. If the VPP does not perform or fulfil the expectations of the people in the KHADC, the story could very well change. I dare to hope that this would create a healthy competition among the political parties to do good work so that they can then build their case for 2028. If not, things will change again. And that's the beauty of democracy.

(The views expressed in the article are those of the author and do not reflect in any way his affiliation to any organisation or institution)

Advantage Assam : Implications for Meghalaya and the Northeast

By Rudi Warjri

Last week Prime Minister Narendra Modi was in Guwahati to inaugurate the Advantage Assam Summit. The Summit was an event to project Assam as the destination for investment. A fortnight earlier, the Emir (Ruler) of Qatar visited India. Ignoring protocol, Modi went to the airport to receive the Emir. Among the outcomes of the Emir's visit was a commitment to invest \$ 10 billion dollars in India. While Meghalaya is thirstily aiming to achieve a \$ 10 billion economy, Qatar which is about half the size of Meghalaya and contains among the highest natural gas deposits in the world, 61 Ambassadors of foreign diplomatic missions based in Delhi also attended the Advantage Assam Summit illustrating the international importance of the summit.

The Prime Minister announced that the Government of India will invest Rs 1.22 lakh crore in renewable energy, infrastructure, agriculture and tourism. The aim is to convert Assam into a regional economic hub that will also connect with the neighbouring countries. The expectation is to produce 50,000 jobs directly. The spin-off will also lead to growth of SMEs. Before the Summit the Assam Chief Minister had travelled to several countries that included Japan and Singapore. There were also road shows in Mumbai and Delhi. A total of almost 5 lakh crore investment commitment has been achieved by the Advantage Assam Summit.

The slogan at the Summit was 3 T's - Tea, Tourism and Trade and the 3 "I's" Infrastructure, Investment and Industry. Investment announcements at the Summit by several private sector corporates and industrialists included Vedanta Rs 50,000 Cr, Ambani Rs 50,000 Cr, Adani Rs 50,000 Cr, JSW will invest in cement manufacturing, renewable and thermal energy. Tata Power is investing Rs 5,000 Cr and Tata Electronics Rs 30,000 Cr on a semiconductor plant at Jagi Road. It will produce 48 million chips daily and 27,000 jobs. These chips will be used in cars, mobiles, etc manufactured in India.

International MoUs were signed with Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation on Health and Agriculture; Ministry of Trade and Industry of Singapore for nursing talent; ASEAN One Co. Ltd Japan for Skills Training Institute; Spice Lemon for Japanese language.

The Ministry for the Development of Northeast (MDONER) will invest Rs 4,000 Cr in Telecom infrastructure and on a 5G Lab at Guwahati University. Besides, Guwahati railway station will become a multi-storied IT Hub. Rs 80,000 Cr in infrastructure will be invested that include key projects - a tunnel under the Brahmaputra river; elevated corridor at Kaziranga National Park and a Guwahati Ring Road besides Rs 4800 Cr to modernize Assam Inland Waterways.

At the district level, MoUs of Rs 586 Cr were signed to invest in the several sectors of MSMEs. MoUs amounting to Rs 3,150 Cr were signed in the Health sector. Development of 'Tiger towns' for economic and ecological well being. Across the State MoUs signed for Rs 5 to 50 Crs.

Discussions also took place in the field of Space and Geospatial industry which represent the "The skies of tomorrow." Apart from discussions on Aerospace and Defense manufacturing, climate smart development also figured because the rainfall in other Northeastern States has a direct impact on the Brahmaputra and its tributaries.

The challenge now for Assam is the implementation. Also how to make the growth as inclusive as possible and also there should be no marginalization of the local indigenous communities.

BJP ruled States in the Northeast like Tripura and Arunachal Pradesh are also expected to have an investment summit in the near future. It is now very clear that the BJP Government at the centre and in Assam are pulling all the stops to transform Assam into an exemplary economic model not only for the Northeast but for the whole of India. Regardless of the un-

derlying political agenda or message, the question now is what do non-BJP ruled states like Meghalaya and other states in the Northeast do?

Why does Meghalaya need external investment?

Sometime ago two women entrepreneurs from Meghalaya a mother-daughter appeared before Shark Tank India seeking Rs 20 lakh loan with 12% equity. Iatishah Rymbai and Lebani Rymbai wanted to expand their enterprise "Eri Weave" weaving traditional silk wear. Iatishah Rymbai was incubated by PRIME (Promotion and Incubation of Market Driven Enterprises) launched in 2019 by the Government of Meghalaya. These two enterprising ladies laudably traveled all the way to Mumbai and appeared on Television to look for investment. Why? Because Meghalaya couldn't provide them the capital.

Five lakh crore rupees is about US dollars 65 billion which is tantamount to building an economic volcano in Assam which can erupt and spew economic lava, gases and rocks impacting neighbouring States and countries in a variety of foreseen, unforeseen and unintended ways.

No external investment for Meghalaya means no job creation. Unemployment means unrest affecting social life and harmony that can impact on tourism and other sectors. Besides, Meghalaya is not a revenue generating state. 80% of its financial resources come from the central Government. The only resource is from external borrowings. Meghalaya does not have even the resources to adequately finance the existing public utilities like MeECL to ensure uninterrupted supply of power, leave alone providing uninterrupted power to investment establishments.

Hence the following suggestions for resource mobilisation:

i) The situation demands that political parties rise above just local issues alone and beyond Khanapara or what the central Government in Delhi ought to do or listen to. The volume and magnitude of the economic investment in Assam is like what Ayn Rand said, "you can ignore reality but you cannot ignore the consequences of reality." Lack of foresight may actually hurt the very fundamental premise of protecting the majority tribal generation in the future. Forget populist, myopic political mileage and ideological predilections for once. Be pragmatic like Deng Zhao Ping of China. Shakespeare wrote, "There is a tide in the affairs of men/ Which taken at the floods, leads on to fortune/ Omitted, all the voyages of their life/ Is bound in shallows and miseries".

ii) Specifically, there's a need for an all political party discussion on 'The Meghalaya State Investment Promotion and Facilitation Act 2024 (MSIPFA)' and the 'Land Bank' for investment proposal. The fears about the Land Bank has to be addressed. Some quarters have rightly opposed this because most of the so-called community land and private land in Meghalaya have been swallowed manipulatively by high level or well connected 'indigenous land sharks'.

iii) A declaration by the Meghalaya Government that no Ministers, politicians and bureaucrats and their relatives will benefit from the land bank transactions. This would allay some of the fears.

iv) The land can only be on lease, along the lines of land leased to the cement plants in Jaintia Hills. This is also an opportune time to bring in the cadastral survey and affirm the property rights further empowering the tribal population. Mizoram has already done it.

v) No politicians or their relatives can become shareholders, directors or part of the management of the companies set up. Those in Government from ministers to bureaucrats should give an undertaking in this regard.

vi) All safeguards should be underlined with regard to the environment and land degradation.

(The writer is a retired diplomat and has been involved in promoting investment into India and from India)

Letters to the Editor

Concerns over delays in MBoSE examination evaluation process

The MBoSE examination 2025 for SSLC conclude on February 25, 2025 and the HSSLC exams are ongoing. Every year the Board puts in all efforts to conduct the examination smoothly and complete the evaluation process as early as possible. However, the number of candidates appearing and the time taken to complete the process is unimaginable even though the Board starts the evaluation process for each subject immediately after the examination for a particular paper is completed. MBoSE has a customary practice to declare the results for its students in a phase-wise manner but never on the same day for both X and XII exams unlike CBSE. Here are some reasons why MBoSE is unable to complete the evaluation process within a definite timeline.

(1) One of the major issues plaguing the Board is the excessive time taken to evaluate examination papers. With only less than 1 lakh students appearing for the exams combining both X & XII, the evaluation process stretches over one to two months, causing undue burden on teacher examiners and disrupting the academic environment in schools. Comparatively, national boards like the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) handle a significantly larger number of students,

yet complete their evaluation process within two to three weeks. The delay in declaring results is due to several factors including the administrative process of compiling and releasing results across a large number of students and examination centres. This stark difference raises concerns about the Board's management efficiency and the overall system's effectiveness.

(2) Another pressing issue is the Board's failure to take action against schools that refuse to relieve their teachers for examination duties. In the case of CBSE, schools failing to comply with the requirement of sending teachers for evaluation face strict penalties, including fines and the risk of losing their affiliation. However, in the State Board, such non-compliance goes unpunished, leading to further delays in the evaluation process. Teachers who should be contributing to the timely evaluation of answer scripts remain occupied in their respective schools, leaving the burden to a few examiners who struggle to meet deadlines. This lack of enforcement weakens the Board's authority and negatively impacts the examination process.

(3) Another major issue is the lack of action against individuals who fail to report for examiner's duty. Instead of issuing penalties or seeking explanations, the board merely stops calling such individuals for duty in the future. This passive approach further weakens the system, allowing examiners to shirk responsibilities without consequences.

(4) The Board does not provide fixed working hours for evaluators. Many examiners report and leave at their own convenience, leading to

an inefficient and unstructured evaluation process. This lack of discipline further delays the completion of paper checking, prolonging the overall process unnecessarily.

(5) Adding to the problem is the misuse of influence by some teachers at different levels to be exempted from their evaluation duties. Some resort to fraudulent means, such as obtaining fake medical certificates through acquaintances in the Health Department, to avoid their responsibilities. Such unethical practices not only compromise the integrity of the evaluation system but also put an unfair workload on the honest teachers who diligently fulfil their duties. If left unchecked, these practices could erode trust in the Board's governance and the education system as a whole.

(6) A significant academic concern is that some teachers are assigned to evaluate subjects they have not specialized in during their undergraduate degrees. Despite the minimum qualification for secondary teachers being a UG degree in a relevant subject, many government-aided schools appoint teachers to subjects outside their area of expertise. Principals, for reasons best known to them, often allocate teachers to subjects without considering their specialization. This practice extends to the evaluation process, where teachers unfamiliar with certain subjects (familiar only after instructed to teach that particular subject by some principals/Head) are assessing students' answers, potentially leading to inaccurate grading.

(7) It appears that the Board does not actively seek out teachers with expertise in specific subjects for the evaluation process. Instead, the system relies on volunteers, which raises concerns about the credibility and fairness of the assessment process. A more structured and merit-based selection of examiners is necessary to ensure that subject specialists handle evaluation tasks, maintaining the quality of grading and fairness to students.

The inefficiencies in the Board of School Education's examination evaluation system demand urgent attention. By implementing stricter policies and transparent processes, the Board can ensure a fair, efficient, and accountable system. The future of thousands of students depends on the credibility of the examination process, and it is high time for the authorities to take corrective measures to uphold the integrity of our education system.

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request,
Via email

Involve local communities in checking influx

Editor,
Apropos of the news "Unsure about ILP, Government now to strengthen MRSSA" (ST March 3, 2025). I am in sync with the statement of Paul Lyngdoh, Minister and spokesperson of the government, "We can improve upon this Act. I see it as an immediate solution rather than waiting for the Centre to respond positively to ILP demand. We should strengthen what we already have in our hands - the MRSSA." In Meghalaya we have governance systems as below:

| Year | Governance Systems |
|--------------|---|
| 1/Immemorial | Chieftains (Syiems), Nokma, Dolo, Lyngdoh, Sordar and the Rangbah Shnong. |
| 2/1952 | Autonomous District Councils |
| 3/1972 | Government of Meghalaya |

If the grassroot system is lax, the ADCs and the government will always be in a state of flux and instability. This has been said by none other than late Tokin Rymbai, an expert on governance and land system in Meghalaya. He was also the Chairman of the Land Reforms Commission of Khasi Hills. I agree with Paul Lyngdoh that the Government has to strengthen the MRSSA evolve a mechanism to strengthen the oldest grassroot institutions so that they monitor how people enter the localities in Meghalaya. The Government could empower them and provide the necessary resources and the mechanism to check influx at the grassroots level.

In absence of the Inner Line Permit (ILP) in Meghalaya, there are several grassroots-level measures that can be implemented to check influx. The traditional village councils like the Dorbar Shnong can play a crucial role in monitoring and regulating the entry of outsiders. These institutions can maintain records of residents and visitors, ensuring that any new arrivals are documented. Local communities can be encouraged to report any suspicious activities or unfamiliar faces to the authorities. This can help in early detection and prevention of illegal influx.

As far as collaboration with local authorities is concerned there is a need for better coordination between traditional institutions and district administration to enhance the

effectiveness of monitoring efforts. Regular meetings and information sharing can help in addressing issues. Law enforcement agencies can work closely with local communities to ensure that illegal activities are promptly addressed. This can include regular patrols and checks at vulnerable points. Awareness campaigns should be conducted to educate the public about the importance of monitoring illegal influx and legal requirements for non-residents. This can help in garnering community support for the measures being implemented. Leveraging technology, such as mobile apps and online portals, can make it easier for residents to report any suspicious activities and for authorities to maintain records.

At the grassroots level initiatives like encouraging local solutions for local problems can be effective. For example, the Nongrim Hills Dorbar Shnong registers all residents and tenants, ensuring that they have a clear record of who is entering and leaving the shnong. Communities can be engaged in the implementation and monitoring process which helps build trust and ensure the success of the measures. This will effectively check illegal influx.

Yours etc;
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

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

“Action is the foundational key to all success.”
— Pablo Picasso
The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No. 203 SHILLONG, THURSDAY, MARCH 6, 2025

Railways & Public Opinion

DO pressure groups resisting the coming of railways to Byrnihat represent the entire population of the Khasi-Jaintia Hills? If not, how can one or two groups stymie the development of an entire state? Railways are the lifeline of a nation and carry goods and passengers at a price that the common citizens can afford. The coming of railways will facilitate travel between Meghalaya and the rest of the country. Besides, carrying goods by trains is much cheaper since trains can transport larger volumes of cargo at once, are more fuel efficient due to their lower rolling resistance, and require fewer personnel to operate, thereby resulting in lower operational costs, particularly for long distance shipment. Hence it is the economy of scale that operates here.

If the transportation costs of all goods come down essential commodities like rice, vegetables and other food products would automatically become more affordable. Trains will not be bogged down by traffic jams and will also not emit so much polluting fumes as trucks do. In fact, in a state that is inching towards major vehicular pollution, trains will cut down emission of greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide, nitrous oxide and methane. Again, for a state that is experiencing climate change it is important to change our mode of transport as much as possible. Have the pressure groups that stand adamant against railways taken all these positive features of railways into consideration? Have they done a cost-benefit analysis of the railways versus trucks maths? The question also is why should only railways result in influx and how? Any resistance to a project must come with detailed research which needs to be evidence-based and presented in a non-threatening public platform for all to debate the pros and cons without any intimidation. For too long Meghalaya has been held hostage to pressure groups and no government has had the political will to call their bluff.

It is public knowledge that all goods carrying trucks coming to Shillong are paying different groups at different points along the route. Trucks bringing fish from Andhra Pradesh and those carrying food grains such as potatoes, onions and vegetables are all paying these profiteers who have no love for anyone but themselves and are propagating a selfish agenda. A Government is elected to do what is best for the people and cannot be cowed down by any group with vested interests. There are various mechanisms to check influx and the local village councils can be empowered to keep a record and strictly check on the entry and exit of people from their respective localities. On the pretext of checking influx we cannot forgo railways for that is like cutting off our noses to spite our faces. The debate on whether or not to bring railways to Meghalaya has carried on for too long. It's time to end this debate by holding public consultations at every district and block of Khasi-Jaintia Hills and let people decide their future. No non-elected group should be allowed to hijack the railway agenda.

Meghalaya Facilitation for Land Alienation Bill

By Kitdor H. Blah

Whenever I think of the subject of tribe and land, I am reminded of what the sociologist Max Weber said – that when a tribe loses its territorial significance, it assumes the form of a caste. In the olden days, this may mean that the tribe becomes integrated into the hierarchical caste system, or that they become outcasts. In the modern sense, if a tribe loses its territorial significance, it is forced to be integrated into the economic caste system, or become an economic outcast. Once a tribe loses its land, or its land holding becomes insignificant, it is only left to be economically exploited.

One of the ways that the British protected the land rights of tribal people was to regulate money lending business in those tracts which were predominantly inhabited by tribal people. The Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation Act, 1873, addressed this threat for the North East region by prohibiting any person who is not a native of these districts to acquire any interest in land or the product of the land, beyond the Inner Line. This regulation of money lending for protection of tribal land made its way to both the Fifth and Sixth Schedules of the Constitution, under para 5(2) and para 10, respectively.

The Meghalaya State Investment Promotion & Facilitation Act, 2024 provides for the formation of the Investment Meghalaya Authority, and allows any person, persons or company, which has ownership, control or majority investment in any business enterprise to set up a business unit in Meghalaya, or to expand an existing unit, and all clearances for this purpose will be eased and simplified through a single online window called the United Investment Portal (UIP). Apart from this, the Meghalaya State Investment Promotion & Facilitation (Amendment) Bill, 2025 seeks to allow such business enterprises to acquire land in the state for the purpose of setting up a business unit in the state or expanding an existing one.

The Act provides for the constitution of a Governing Council headed by the Chief Minister, which shall guide the policy of the investment authority, and all orders and decisions of the Governing Council shall be binding upon all Government Departments, Authorities and Agencies, and they must issue the clearances and permissions required by the investment authority within the stipulated time limit. This Governing Council shall also facilitate borrowings and hypothecation of the investment authority's assets.

The Act provides for the

constitution of an Invest Meghalaya Fund, which shall be funded with receipts from fees and charges, as well as grants, loans or advances from the government, and sums received from other sources, as may be decided by the government. This fund shall be used for all purposes under the Act, including remuneration of employees, hiring of consultants, allowances, pension, third party vendors, etc.

The Meghalaya State Investment Promotion & Facilitation Act (read with the Amendment Bill) disregards the territorial significance of the indigenous tribes of Meghalaya. First, it disregards this territorial significance by facilitating land alienation. Second, it disregards the territorial significance of the tribal people by disregarding Tribal Land rights. Third, it disregards Court judgments relating to transfer of land in Tribal Areas. Fourth, it even overlooks the Land Acquisition Act, 2013. The only law that the Act pays homage to is the Meghalaya Transfer of Land (Regulation) Act, 1971. This is because the Land Transfer Act provides no legal impediment to the Act.

Facilitation of Land Alienation:

By directly purchasing land to create a land bank, the Investment Authority reduces land ownership by the tribal people and increases land ownership by the government. If the land bank is created by other means, such as by leasing out directly from the tribal people to investors, such leases will extend for decades, and it will be impossible for the next generation to reclaim the land as such leases will be renewed. This is a modern form of land alienation through the practice of money lending. Willful consent of the tribal owners in such direct purchase or lease is no excuse to facilitate this land alienation. The tribal people do not get any direct benefit from the investment, but their territorial significance is greatly compromised by land alienation.

Is there any safeguard to check the land alienation that this Act will facilitate? In the Samatha vs Andhra Pradesh, 1997, the Supreme Court ruled that the term 'persons' in the Andhra Pradesh Scheduled Area Land Transfer Regulation cannot mean the state government as the government cannot be a tribal or non-tribal person. Similarly, the Meghalaya land transfer act does not provide any safeguard to the land alienation caused by the creation of land bank by direct purchase and leasing out of such land to invest-

tors, as such land becomes government land once it is purchased.

Compromise of territorial significance of the Tribal people of Meghalaya:

This Act compromises the territorial significance of the indigenous tribes in many ways. First, the territorial significance is compromised by land alienation as pointed above. Second, it is compromised because the acquisition of land by the government is not for the general good, of which the tribal people are stakeholders, such as for development of public infrastructure or environmental conservation. Third, the Investment Authority may resort to borrowings in order to fund its operation, and part of its land bank may be given as collateral against such borrowings. This further isolates the land from any public good, of which the tribal people are stakeholders. Fourth, the Act does not provide for any upliftment of the tribal people. In the Samatha case, the Supreme Court ruled that in the absence of any prohibition against transfer of government land in Scheduled Areas, such transfer must nevertheless be done for the benefit of the tribal people, and moreover, the companies must spend a portion of the income arising out of the business for the upliftment of the tribal people, and this is apart from the royalties and cess that are already in place by law. The Meghalaya Investment Act does not even provide for such social responsibility towards the tribal people of the state as its aim is simply to attract investors, with no consideration for the land rights of the tribal people of the state. Fifth, the Investment Act seems to overlook the provisions of the Land Acquisition Act, 2013 which provides for compensation of 4 times the market rate in rural areas and 2 times the market rate in urban areas, as well as resettlement for acquisition of large areas. The Act only provides for direct purchase of land, with no consideration for the rates of compensation.

Sixth, one of the features in the Samatha case was the question of giving mining leases in Scheduled Area land to companies that are not owned by the tribal people. The Andhra Pradesh Mining Rules does not allow granting of mining lease of Scheduled Area land to non-tribal persons or companies. On the other hand, the Meghalaya Investment Act does not have any provision for investors or enterprises to be majority owned by the tribal people of the state of Meghalaya. Last, but not the

least, the Amendment Bill seeks to provide incentives under the new section 8(2) (a), to enterprises that create employment for local people. The investors are not mandated but only incentivized to create employment for local people. Local people are defined as domiciles of Meghalaya, thus providing no incentives even for employment of the indigenous tribal people.

In a nutshell, the Amendment Bill facilitates land alienation. The Act itself overlooks tribal land rights, Court judgment relating to transfer of land in tribal areas, and provisions of the Land Acquisition Act. What then is the point of paying homage to the State Land Transfer Act under the new section 34 in the Amendment Bill? It is irrelevant and immaterial to the threat of land alienation. It is just eyewash, to appease the NGO's, the District Councils and the public.

Impediments to the Act:

While there is no legal impediment if the government wants to bulldoze the Amendment Bill, there are impediments against its implementation. The Meghalaya Land Transfer Act may still provide an obstacle if the Investment Authority aims to create the land bank by leasing out land belonging to tribal persons. Secondly, the Dorbar Shnong may vehemently oppose any purchase of land by the Investment Authority. Third, the people and the NGO's might facilitate a protest against the Bill.

Autonomous District Councils are the last bulwark against the implementation of the Act:

Section 8(2)(c) of the Principal Act provides that all orders and decisions of the Governing Council shall be binding upon all Government departments, authorities and agencies, which shall issue requisite clearances. But the ADC's are not departments, authorities or agencies of the government. They are autonomous bodies which operate with the chief principle of protecting the rights of the tribal people. Para 10 of the Sixth Schedule also gives the ADC's legislative power to regulate trading by non-tribals apart from money-lending. The United Khasi-Jaintia Hills District (Trading by Non-Tribals) Regulation, 1954, and the United Khasi-Jaintia Hills District (Trading by Non-Tribals) Rules, 1959, are the last bulwark against the implementation of the Act. Section 3A of the Regulation gives enough rationale and justification to block all licenses for the implementation of the Act.

Solid Waste Management Why Meghalaya Budget Needs an Urgent Urban Mission

By Avner Pariat

Indian cities struggle with cleanliness due to a combination of systemic, cultural, and governance-related issues. One of the primary reasons is the lack of adequate waste management infrastructure, which I want to discuss in this article.

From many case studies and articles that I have been able to retrieve, it would appear that the following components constitute an adequate Waste Management Infrastructure (WMI):

1. Waste Collection and Segregation System
2. Waste Transportation System
3. Waste Processing and Recycling Facilities

While we have made some progress with the second component, waste collection and segregation need a lot more intervention. The last component is so far away from our reality it might as well be in another

towns and urban areas, not just one city (Shillong); which is what I am interested in discussing here. Meghalaya's urban population as per 2021 estimate is 7 lakh. For a 3.5 lakh city like Shillong, this would mean 11 crore per year just for itself. This figure does not segregate the recurring costs versus capital investments. I am unsure how that will be articulated in a budget but aligning with best practices, it seems by many online estimates that Shillong should have a dedicated allocation of Rs 20 crore per year (taking Indore as the model), which would mainly be used for us to procure the expensive machinery and equipment to deal with this menace.

I cannot write this article without mentioning the hardworking ragpickers and scrap gatherers, who work without formal recognition or support from

Ragpickers are often exposed to toxic waste, sharp objects, and hazardous chemicals without any protective equipment. The government should provide gloves, masks, uniforms, and tools to reduce health risks. It can also extend existing welfare schemes, such as the Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana (RSBY) for health insurance and Pradhan Mantri Shram Yogi Maandhan Yojana for pension benefits, to them.

realm altogether!

While door-to-door waste collection is doing fine, we have a desperate need for community bin collection, where large dumpsters are strategically placed in public spaces or residential areas, allowing people to dispose of their waste. For many people who live alone and do not have maids 24/7, this option is ideal. Having these bins made of sturdy material and with lids would keep out the dogs and cats as well. This is something we should bring back because I have seen people dumping garbage into drains precisely because they couldn't find a receptacle for their waste. This, of course leads to clogged drains, leading to waterlogging, increased disease outbreaks, and unhygienic conditions. To ensure better segregation, the usual colour-coded bins for wet, dry, etc waste can be implemented. There must surely be money in Swachh Bharat Mission (Urban) for this, I reckon. It is not just biotoilets in far-off villages that we need. Some cities have gone for underground community bins, where waste is stored below the surface. In a city like Shillong where space is always a concern, these might be a good option to explore. Anyway, the possibilities are endless if one is actually interested in the job.

As per the 2024-25 budget, Meghalaya allocated Rs 934 crore to the urban sector, with Rs 764 crore earmarked for state schemes. This includes various initiatives, like urban infrastructure development, the Smart City projects in Shillong and Tura, market redevelopment, urban mobility. But waste management, when compared to the other components, does not appear to be of critical importance.

The landfill site at Marten was allocated Rs 20 crore for something called "biomining". Additionally, new integrated waste management sites are being identified for the Shillong urban area (even though there are protests), and a new site has been finalized for Tura. But the actual machinery and recurring costs of dealing with the HUGE task of SWM is not explicitly spelled out in any budget document that I have read so far.

So based on past expenditure (Rs 110.3 crore over 5 years, between 2017-18 and 2021-22), Meghalaya has been allocating about Rs 22 crore per year to SWM across the state. However, this amount covers multiple

local authorities. While they play a crucial role in solid waste management, their efforts remain fragmented, inefficient, and very unsafe. I want the government to aid them in their efforts by ensuring their safety and dignity. Ragpickers are often exposed to toxic waste, sharp objects, and hazardous chemicals without any protective equipment. The government should provide gloves, masks, uniforms, and tools to reduce health risks. It can also extend existing welfare schemes, such as the Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana (RSBY) for health insurance and Pradhan Mantri Shram Yogi Maandhan Yojana for pension benefits, to them. We should not treat them like the garbage they are forced to retrieve and go through every day.

I had mentioned that an adequate Waste Management Infrastructure has three components but actually there is a need for a fourth as well namely

4. Cleaning & Sanitation: We cannot just collect, segregate, transport and process garbage as we produce it in the present time we are in. We need to deal with the tremendous legacy waste we have accumulated along our highways, gutters, rivers, hillsides, etc. We cannot wish them away, we need to employ people to clean them. This could push up the budget from 20 crore per year to perhaps 25 crore per year. The extra 5 crore mainly to be used for payments to the army of workers we would need to clean up our mess. These workers can be drawn from the aforementioned ragpickers and scrap gatherers.

Summing it up, in Meghalaya, cleanliness often takes a backseat to other urban priorities like road construction, water supply, and power infrastructure. The lack of coordination between the municipal board, state government, and the numerous private players results in a waste of effort and time, reducing the efficiency of the combined urban sanitation efforts. I think we need to spend money now on building up a complete and efficient system rather than just wasting money on mere awareness campaigns. The Public is well aware that polluting is bad for them. No one wants to live in filth. Let us stop the thrust on easy-to-do workshops, seminars, and other awareness programmes, and let us get down to the hard work of cleaning up our Shillong!

Letters to the Editor

Why subsume the Jaintia identity?

Editor,
The ethnic identity of the Jaintias has been under question since the 1950s. This time it has been debated in the ongoing Budget Session of the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly. The MLA of Mawlai initiated the debate during the Short Duration Discussion on the statements made by Cabinet Minister Kyrmen Shylla on the proposed construction of the Railways in Jaintia Hills. Surprisingly while participating in the debate, the Nongkrem Legislator misrepresents the Minister's statement to advance his agenda, the agenda of 'cultural assimilation'.

Today, the people of 'Ka Ri Khadar Dolloi' have accepted and are proud of the term Jaintia as the generic name for the Bhois, the Bites, the Hadems, the Pnars and the Wars who are the present inhabitants of Jaintia Hills. So don't start the process of assimilating ethnic

identities.
Yours etc.,
Dr. Omarlin Kyndiah,
Via email

Non-tribals at the receiving end?

Editor,
The letter to the editor captioned "Meghalaya and non-tribal" by Mr. Homnath Gautam (ST March 4, 2025) is a vivid depiction of the status of non-tribals in Meghalaya since attainment of statehood. In a democracy, people who are governed by a body or institution should have the right to elect its members and participate in its activities. However, in Meghalaya's Autonomous District Councils (ADCs), non-tribals have no voting rights and cannot contest elections, yet they are forced to obey laws, pay taxes, and follow regulations imposed by ADCs which is the antithesis to established democratic principles. The core objective behind formation of ADCs was for preserving and protecting the indig-

enous faith and culture. But since formation of ADCs in 1952, a huge number of tribal people have abandoned their traditional belief system and embraced an alien faith which is a living testimony of failure of ADCs in preserving the unique tradition and culture of Meghalaya. This has raised serious questions about the relevance of ADCs and utility for its existence.

Protection of customs, rituals, value systems and traditions of indigenous tribals is no doubt essential but turning such a mechanism into a tool to exclude non-tribals and deny them the basic democratic rights in the name of protecting tribal culture is undemocratic and against constitutional values.

Yours etc.,
N.K. Kehar
Shillong-3

Is there an LPG crisis in Shillong?

Editor,
It has been 67 days since the last time the residents of

Thana road received their cooking gas refill from our agency, Indane-Sunny Gas Agency. The last delivery was on December 27, 2024. The incompetence of the Sunny Gas Agency is staggeringly shocking. Even after repeated requests, I have been met with nothing but empty promises and complete lack of service. We are forced to buy commercial cooking gas cylinders due to the incompetence of this agency. They should shut down their agency since they can't run it. In other states of India people get their refills within 48 hours of request and here agencies like Sunny Gas Agency sit on it for months. This is unacceptable and the responsible Government Department should take note of this and take necessary action.

Yours etc.,
Akash Purkayastha,
Via email

Trump the vulgar capitalist

Editor,
The modern capitalist is vulgar enough to see re-

sources in the heavenly bodies -- instead of portents. But Donald Trump takes the cake when it comes to vulgarity. So far, I had thought of him as a foolish man, who, despite his advanced age, wears make-up, and pursues money, power, and women. But after his comments on Gaza and Ukraine, I see him as among the most callous of all human beings ever -- not yet a chilling killer like some past US presidents -- but chilling enough. I have in mind his views of Gaza and Ukraine. Instead of seeing them as the killing fields they have become, he sees business ventures in both.

Gaza is a graveyard, where little children have died needlessly. Trump sees Gaza as prime real estate. His blonde press secretary calls him "humanitarian" for saying so. He does not understand that people like the Palestinians treasure memories and ancestors more than material wealth. Nor does he understand that right now they are traumatized by tragic memories associated with the rubble that is Gaza. A grieving people, they are unlikely to care for push real estate. Besides, his disgusting suggestion

-- that the Palestinians leave Gaza -- amounts to ethnic cleansing.

Before Gaza it was Ukraine that became a graveyard. Does Trump care about the trauma, pain, and exhaustion of the courageous Ukrainian people? Besides insulting their heroic leader, Zelenskyy, he is crude enough to see a business venture in Ukraine as well -- this time, rare earth metals.

It is useless to try and reform an aging strongman who longs to be a dictator. What needs transformation is the American mindset. Despite the many excellent virtues of the American people -- especially their keen awareness of ethics, their love for truth, and their remarkable generosity - their materialism is killing - not just the planet - but the human soul, which degrades itself when it worships mam-

Yours etc.,
Deepa Majumdar,
Via email

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

"Solitary trees, if they grow at all,
grow strong."

— Winston Churchill

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No. 204 SHILLONG, FRIDAY, MARCH 7, 2025

Tip of the iceberg

INDIA'S corrupt systems, which flourished further under the Modi government despite his 2014 promise of rooting out such practices, are now threatening the national economy in more serious ways. Outside the façade of peace and tranquility, the nation is bedeviled by huge anti-national activities in the forms of smuggling, drug trafficking and deeply embedded corruption. All these are handled by the establishment with kid-gloves. The arrest of the daughter of a Karnataka Director General of Police this week by the Directorate of Revenue Intelligence is simply the tip of the iceberg. It demonstrates the rot within. Gold smuggling is taking place on a massive scale from Dubai, more aggressively in recent years with alleged support of top governmental entities and politicians. Cases relating to these are neither progressing nor are the guilty being punished.

The DGP's daughter, Kannada actress Ranya Rao, was caught with over 14 kg of gold wrapped around her waist, after the DRI got suspicious about her frequent Dubai visits — 10 in the last three months; and four in 15 days. The ease with which she got away with the security establishment at the airport, unhindered in all her past return trips, is proof of the able support she got from them. Her arrest and jailing mean little. She would get bail soon and her father will be having sufficient clout to "save her" — if not the "senior politician" who was also a part of the racket. His name is held back by the authorities while the state Congress has demanded his immediate arrest. Notably, the cases relating to another epic smuggling unfolded in 2020 in Kerala, leading to the arrest of the top-most bureaucrat in chief minister Pinarayi Vijayan's office and his girlfriend. These investigations are dragging on. Both the accused are out on bail and enjoying their lives. This case too involved seizure of Dubai gold worth over Rs 14 crore, sent through diplomatic channels. The entire system is steam-rolled by corrupt officials with wholesale involvement of senior politicians.

Add to this a report this week that the Railway Board has cancelled all pending departmental selections on Group C posts, following detection of irregularities and corruption in the process. Some 26 railway employees from Uttar Pradesh have been arrested in relation to the leaking of question papers of an inter-departmental test. Curiously, even in cases where arrests by central agencies took place, the investigations have been tardy and are ultimately sabotaged. Errant officials returning to work from years of suspension, with full back wages and court's clean chit, are making an ass out of the Indian judicial and administrative systems run by inept and corrupt hands. Narendra Modi as leader of the nation for the past 10 years "silently endured" all these and keeps playing the flute before his huge illiterate audiences. He has demonstrated his limitations. Rather, the corrupt systems has had the better of him.

Beyond the Railway Line: A Question of Jurisdiction and Mandate in Khasi-Pnar Dynamics

By Ialam D

The recent remarks by the members of the Voice of the People Party (VPP) regarding the Khasi and Pnar communities in the matter of the railway line in the Pnar region have sparked a critical debate, highlighting the cultural and political dynamics between the two communities. This issue has also brought to light their differing approaches to development and identity preservation. The behaviour of VPP members towards Cabinet Minister Mr. Kyrmen Shylla during discussions on the railway line issue has further exacerbated tensions, raising concerns about the erosion of respect and decorum in political discourse. It is imperative for political leaders to maintain civility and constructive dialogue, even in the face of disagreements, to uphold the integrity of the democratic process.

While the Khasi and Pnar are considered a single tribe, they possess distinct cultural, social, and historical identities. These differences are formally recognized in the administrative division of the United Khasi-Jaintia Autonomous District (UKJAD) into two autonomous councils: the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council (KHADC) and the Jaintia Hills Autonomous District Council (JHADC). The KHADC predominantly represents the Khasi community, while the JHADC primarily represents the Pnar community. This administrative separation underscores the unique identities and needs of each community, allowing for more tailored governance and development initiatives.

The recent MDC elections in Meghalaya also highlighted the distinct political preferences of the Khasi and Pnar communities. While the VPP secured a resounding victory in the Khasi Hills, winning 17 seats and demonstrating strong support among the Khasi people, their performance in the Jaintia Hills was less impressive, with only 8 seats won. This contrast underscores the differing political appeal of the VPP in the two communities, reflecting their unique cultural and historical contexts. The VPP's popularity among the Khasis does not necessarily translate to the Pnar community. The Khasi and Pnar communities also exhibit distinct economic characteristics that shape their perspectives on development projects like the proposed railway line.

The Pnar community is often associated with a strong tradition of entrepreneurship and business, with many individuals actively involved in trade, commerce, and small-scale industries. They are generally perceived as self-reliant, with a willingness to take calculated risks and a focus on economic independence. On the other hand, the Khasi community tends to

show a preference for salaried employment, with many individuals gravitating towards government jobs, education, and healthcare sectors. This inclination towards stable and secure employment often shapes their approach to economic development, emphasizing caution and long-term security over risk-taking and entrepreneurial ventures.

These economic differences are also reflected in the communities' responses to the proposed railway line. The Pnar community generally supports the project, viewing it as an opportunity to boost trade, commerce, and economic growth. They see the railway as a catalyst for development that aligns with their entrepreneurial spirit. On the other hand, the Khasi community has expressed concerns about the potential environmental and social impacts of the project, particularly the fear of an influx of immigrants that could threaten their tribal identity. This fear psychosis, rooted in historical experiences and cultural preservation concerns, has been amplified by certain politicians and NGOs, who have used emotive appeals to mobilize opposition to the railway line. However, the Pnar community's pragmatic approach to the railway project stands in stark contrast to the Khasi community's apprehensions.

The Pnar people, with their rich history as part of the Hindu Kingdom of Jaintiapur, have demonstrated a remarkable ability to preserve their cultural identity while engaging with external influences. Their confidence in their roots and traditions has enabled them to adapt to changing circumstances without compromising their heritage. This resilience is evident in their support for the railway project, which they see as a means to enhance economic opportunities while maintaining their cultural integrity. Also, the assertion that the railway line constitutes unsustainable development, as raised by the Mawla MLA, is misleading and warrants closer scrutiny.

In reality, railway lines are widely recognized as catalysts for sustainable development. They play a pivotal role in facilitating the transportation of agricultural goods, boosting trade and commerce, and reducing carbon emissions by offering a more environmentally friendly alternative to road transport. Additionally, railways create employment opportunities, enhance access to essential services, and contribute to overall economic growth. To alleviate the Khasi community's concerns, it is essential to clarify that the proposed railway line will operate exclusively as a goods train service, with no pas-

senger trains permitted. This approach ensures that the primary focus of the railway will be on economic development, particularly in facilitating the movement of goods and boosting local trade. By limiting the railway to goods transportation, the project can deliver significant economic benefits, such as increased trade, job creation, and improved market access, without compromising the cultural and social fabric of the region.

Furthermore, it is important to note that the railway line will not pass through lands under the jurisdiction of the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council (KHADC), addressing concerns about its impact on areas predominantly inhabited by the Khasi community. The rights of both the Khasi and Pnar people must be respected in a fair and just manner, keeping in mind the targeted approach as recognized by the administrative separation of the United Khasi-Jaintia Autonomous District (UKJAD). The Khasi community, under the KHADC, and the Pnar community, under the JHADC, have distinct governance structures that reflect their unique cultural, social, and historical contexts. The proposed railway line, which primarily affects the Pnar-inhabited areas under the JHADC, aligns with the development priorities of the Pnar community, who have historically emphasized trade, commerce, and economic independence. At the same time, the concerns of the Khasi community regarding cultural preservation and identity are acknowledged and addressed through the exclusion of passenger trains and the avoidance of KHADC-administered lands. This balanced approach ensures that the rights and aspirations of both communities are respected.

The Pnar community can benefit from the economic opportunities brought by the railway line, while the Khasi community's concerns about cultural and social impacts are mitigated. By adhering to this targeted and inclusive framework, the project can promote sustainable development while upholding the principles of fairness and justice for both the Khasi and Pnar people. Recognizing and addressing the unique cultural, social, and economic contexts of each community is crucial for ensuring that development initiatives are effective, sustainable, and equitable.

The Pnar community's pragmatic and confident approach to cultural preservation and economic growth offers valuable lessons for fostering cross-cultural understanding and cooperation. By engaging in respectful dialogue and tailoring development projects to meet the specific needs of each community, Meghalaya can achieve inclusive and sustainable progress that benefits all its people.

Meghalaya can achieve inclusive and sustainable progress that benefits all its people.

However, the resistance to the railway line in the Jaintia Hills region, spearheaded by certain factions within the Khasi community, raises serious questions—not only about fairness but also about jurisdiction and overreach. The proposed railway line falls under the jurisdiction of the JHADC, which predominantly represents the Pnar community. It is deeply concerning that voices from outside this jurisdiction are attempting to dictate terms and block a project that does not directly impact their region. This interference is not only unjust but also undermines the autonomy and decision-making rights of the Pnar people.

To add to this, the Garo Hills region, under the Garo Hills Autonomous District Council (GHADC), already enjoys the benefits of railway connectivity. If the Garo community, with its own distinct cultural and administrative identity, can embrace railway infrastructure without compromising its heritage, why should the Pnar community be denied the same opportunity? This glaring double standard exposes the hypocrisy of those opposing the railway line in Jaintia Hills. It begs the question: Is this resistance truly about preserving cultural identity, or is it a politically motivated attempt to control and stifle the progress of a neighbouring community?

It is unacceptable for one community to impose its will on another, especially when the project in question lies entirely outside its jurisdiction. The Pnar community has every right to pursue development initiatives that align with their economic aspirations and cultural values. Blocking the railway line under the guise of cultural preservation, while ignoring the successful example of Garo Hills, is not only unfair but also detrimental to the spirit of unity and cooperation that Meghalaya strives to uphold.

The time has come for all stakeholders—political leaders, community representatives, and civil society—to rise above narrow interests and work towards equitable development. The rights and aspirations of the Pnar community must be respected, and their autonomy in decision-making must be upheld. Meghalaya's future depends on its ability to embrace progress while honouring its rich cultural diversity. The railway line in Jaintia Hills is not just about infrastructure; it is a test of our commitment to fairness, justice, and inclusive growth. The people of Meghalaya must not fail this test.

Defunct APFRA - 1978: Revival after 47 years of slumber

By Wangbo Wangsu George

In the vibrant mosaic of India's diverse cultural and religious landscape, the tenets of freedom and secularism stand as our unyielding pillars. These fundamental rights, deeply enshrined in our Constitution (Art. 25-28), enable individuals to freely practice their faith and engage in religious discourse, enriching our social fabric. However, the resurfacing of the Freedom of Religion Bill in Arunachal Pradesh (APFRA, 1978), threatens to undermine these sacred values. After nearly half a century of lying dormant, the current government's inclination to enforce this draconian legislation must be met with vehement opposition and calls for repeal.

The original intent of the APFRA-1978, was to regulate religious conversions and curb the influence of Christian missionaries in Arunachal Pradesh (which has ample evidences in the Govt. Gazette, Religious Chronicles, personal diaries and records). While the stated goal may have been to protect indigenous cultures (Constitution, Art. 29), the reality has often been a grim manifestation of intolerance disguised as legal restriction. The Arunachalese Christians were/are not converted by anyone, instead they embraced willingly, knowingly and freely with a conscious choice as per the Fundamental Right guaranteed by the Constitution of India. This law, which aimed to sever the spiritual exploration of individuals and inhibit their right to choose their path, quickly earned the reputation of being repressive and discriminatory. It has left a legacy of resentment and distrust among communities forced into silence regarding their beliefs.

One of the most concerning aspects of this bill is how it perpetuates a narrative of communal division, contradictory to the principles of unity and fraternity enshrined in the Constitution of India. Arunachal Pradesh is home to a myriad of ethnic groups (12th Aug, 2021: Arunachal Times, '26 major tribes and 110 sub tribes') and religions, each possessing unique beliefs and practices. By targeting Christian missionaries specifically, this law fosters an environment of suspicion and hostility, alienating a significant section of the population that identifies with Christianity. It not only questions the faith of individuals but also devalues their existence and rightful choice to believe differently.

As the government considers reviving this outdated law, one must wonder: Is there anything else of significance for them to address? At a time when Arunachal Pradesh faces pressing issues, the focus should be on substantive legislation that uplifts lives and strengthens communal bonds rather than limiting personal freedoms. Several critical areas demand urgent attention, including anti-corruption measures that preserve our indigenous ethos of integrity, accountability, and honesty. Instead of enacting divisive laws, the government should prioritize measures that enhance the welfare of the poor, ensuring equitable access to resources and opportunities.

Additionally, as external threats loom large from potential Chinese incursion, the emphasis should be on legislation that secures our borders and protects the sovereignty of our state, for which the Government is required to empower local denizens through measures that will strengthen the allegiance of people to our nation; besides, the laws that aim at improving and ensuring quality education, for which our youngsters migrate to other states and abroad in pursuance of the same. In a nation where the Constitution guarantees freedom of religion, the revival of such a law sends a regressive message. It promotes the idea that there are acceptable beliefs and unacceptable ones, creating a hierarchy of faith that

simply has no place in a democratic society.

Our commitment to secularism must be unwavering; it requires us to respect all religions equally and dismantle laws that cool the spirit of religious pluralism. The repercussions of enforcing the Freedom of Religion Bill will extend beyond Arunachal Pradesh, echoing throughout the country and potentially setting a dangerous precedent for other regions with similar agendas.

In a nation where the Constitution guarantees freedom of religion, the revival of such a law sends a regressive message. It promotes the idea that there are acceptable beliefs and unacceptable ones, creating a hierarchy of faith that simply has no place in a democratic society. Our commitment to secularism must be unwavering; it requires us to respect all religions equally and dismantle laws that cool the spirit of religious pluralism. The repercussions of enforcing the Freedom of Religion Bill will extend beyond Arunachal Pradesh, echoing throughout the country and potentially setting a dangerous precedent for other regions with similar agendas. Moreover, one cannot ignore the implications this bill has on social cohesion. India thrives on its harmonious co-existence and the celebration of diversity. Policies such as the Freedom of Religion Bill directly contravene the spirit of cooperation and mutual respect among communities. Rather than bringing people together, they sow discord and mistrust, leading to the fragmentation of society along lines of faith.

The bill's coercive enforcement methods, reminiscent of an authoritarian regime, are also deeply troubling. I would like to remind Hon'ble CM Shri. Pema Khandu Ji, that if this "Act is not against any religion, denomination/personnel", then please go out or call and meet the people, there are hundreds and perhaps thousands of APFRA-1978 Holocaust survivors. There are ample reports of bloodshed, imprisonment, burning and demolition of the churches and harassment and intimidation for engaging with missionaries or exploring different faiths.

At a time when progressive dialogues around spirituality, faith, and self-identity are gaining momentum, it is particularly jarring to consider a return to repressive measures that attempt to mould individual beliefs according to an outdated paradigm. People today seek spiritual fulfilment through various channels, with many choosing to explore diverse religious traditions. The revival of the Freedom of Religion Bill would not only suppress this introspective journey but could also lead to increased skepticism and fear surrounding religious interactions, poisoning relationships across communities. Such coercive techniques violate not only personal freedoms but also human rights norms that India has pledged to uphold. Individuals have the right to seek, embrace, and change their beliefs without fear of retribution from the state.

As we stand at the crossroads of history, the potential reinstatement of the Freedom of Religion Bill in Arunachal Pradesh presents profound dangers to our cherished secular fabric. It threatens to inflame tensions, promote intolerance, and target individuals based on their spiritual choices. Now is the time to voice our dissent against such regressive measures and advocate for the protection of individual liberties in the face of encroachment. It is imperative that we call upon the government to repeal this archaic law, ensuring that Arunachal Pradesh remains a model of acceptance and understanding in our diverse nation.

The fight for freedom of belief is a battle for our shared humanity—one that we must win together.

Letters to the Editor

CM presents a progressive budget

Editor,
The Meghalaya Budget 2025-26 is a bold step forward, and credit must be given where it's due. Instead of just ticking boxes, this budget lays out a clear vision for economic growth, job creation, and sustainability. It's not just about numbers—it's about shaping a Meghalaya that thrives.

The 'Meghalaya Mission 10' stands out as a game-changer, aiming to push the state's economy to \$10 billion by 2028. Focusing on ten key sectors shows a structured, forward-thinking approach. The push for entrepreneurship and skilling is another major win, especially the creation of a dedicated Department of Entrepreneurship and Skilling. This move recognises that innovation and self-employment are just as crucial as traditional job sectors.

Education also gets a well-deserved boost, with the Chief Minister's Scholarship Scheme supporting 80,000 students. This initiative makes higher education more accessible, ensuring that financial struggles don't hold back bright young minds. Investing in students today means a stronger Meghalaya tomorrow.

Infrastructure is another major highlight—better roads, urban development, and improved connectivity will bridge long-standing gaps. Investments in tourism, agriculture, and industry promise new opportunities for growth. The Green Meghalaya plus programme is

also a smart move, rewarding communities for conservation while ensuring sustainable development.

Healthcare has seen a significant push, with expanded funding for hospitals, improved maternal and child health programmes, and streamlined drug procurement. The Megha Health Insurance Scheme now covers more people with higher benefits, ensuring better access to medical care.

The power sector is also making strides, with new substations, improved rural electrification, and investments in solar energy under the Chief Minister's Solar Mission. A stronger energy infrastructure will power industries, homes, and businesses more reliably.

Regional connectivity is getting a boost with new highways, bridges, and plans for airport expansion. Better transport links will improve trade, tourism, and mobility. The focus on border trade and economic corridors will also help Meghalaya tap into greater economic opportunities.

However, a strong plan is only as good as its execution. The real challenge will be ensuring timely implementation and making sure these investments benefit local communities first. Private sector investments must create real jobs for the people of Meghalaya, not just profits for large corporations.

Overall, this budget reflects a leadership that is thinking ahead. While no budget is perfect, this one lays down the right foundations. If implemented effectively, it has the potential to transform Meghalaya into a thriving, self-sustaining

economy. Eagerly looking forward to a strong and flourishing Meghalaya.

Yours etc.,
Bahunlang Pde,
Via email

Cabinet retreats: A hole in the State's pocket

Editor,
Concerns about the expenditure of the cabinet retreat in Sohra held at Polo Orchid on January 10-11 January 2025 are valid, especially given the financial constraints faced by the state. Holding such meetings in Shillong itself could significantly reduce costs, as it would eliminate the need for expensive lodging and catering at luxury resorts.

The use of public funds should always be justified by tangible benefits to the people. If such retreats are genuinely necessary for better governance, they should have clear objectives and measurable outcomes. Otherwise, spending crores on a two-day event, particularly if some MLAs do not even attend the discussions, raises serious questions about accountability and financial prudence.

If this becomes a recurring practice, it could indicate a pattern of using government PP mode retreats to benefit certain businesses rather than serving the public interest. Transparency in expenditure and justification for such events should be demanded to ensure that public funds are used responsibly.

Yours etc.,
DK Challam,
Via email

Trade wars and global impact

Editor,
Appropos of the editorial "Bull in a China shop" (ST March 5, 2025) Donald Trump's recent tariffs have indeed escalated trade tensions between the US and China. Trump has imposed a 20% tariff on Chinese goods, which has led to China retaliating with its own tariffs on American products. In the context of the current tariffs war between the U.S. and China the editorial can be applied to describe the aggressive and unrestrained actions of either side in imposing tariffs and retaliatory measures. Just like a bull rampaging through a China shop, the escalating trade war can have far-reaching and unintended consequences, disrupting global trade, affecting industries, and causing economic instability. The tariffs imposed by the US and counter-tariffs by China have created a volatile situation, with both sides engaging in a tit-for-tat strategy that risks further escalation and damage to their economies and the global market. This trade war is expected to have significant economic impacts, including consumer prices and disruptions to supply chains. China's retaliatory tariffs include up to 15% on key US farm exports, such as chicken, pork, soy and beef. This move is likely to af-

fect American businesses and consumers, leading to higher prices of various products. Both countries are trying to protect their economic interests. The long-term effects of these tariffs on the global economy remain to be seen. The counter-tariffs imposed by China in response to U.S. tariffs have indeed escalated tensions and could be seen as the beginning of a trade war. This back-and-forth of tariffs can lead to increased economic strain on both the countries and potentially disrupt global trade. Trade wars typically involve a series of retaliatory measures, and the current situation between the U.S. and China, both economic giants of the world fit this pattern. The economic impact of these tariffs can be substantial, affecting various industries and leading to higher prices for consumers.

A study by the World Economic Forum highlighted that tariffs and trade wars can dramatically change the tenor of global trade, leading to reduced trade volumes and slow-down of economic growth. Additionally, the economic consequences of trade wars can extend beyond the directly involved countries, affecting emerging economies and global markets. They can also create uncertainty in global markets. The economic consequences of trade wars can be long-lasting, potentially leading to shifts in global trade patterns and economic alliances.

The editorial has also raised a very interesting point: "Thanks to Trump, Zelenskyy is now caught between the devil and the deep sea". Ukrai-

nian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is indeed facing a challenging situation as the highly anticipated summit between him and the U.S. President Donald Trump ended in a diplomatic failure. The U.S. has paused military aid to Ukraine, putting Zelenskyy in a difficult position as he navigates the ongoing conflict with Russia. He has expressed his commitment to securing peace and is ready to work under President Trump's leadership to achieve a lasting resolution. However, the suspension of U.S. military aid has left Ukraine in a vulnerable position, and Zelenskyy may need to seek support from other European nations to continue defending against Russian aggression. In this complex geopolitical landscape, Zelenskyy is indeed caught between the devil and the deep blue sea, trying to balance diplomatic efforts and military needs to secure Ukraine's future.

Just how desperate Zelenskyy is can be gauged by his overtures towards President Trump and virtually apologising for the diplomatic fiasco last week at the Oval Office. Zelenskyy is now ready to part with his precious minerals to the Americans who are thirsting for it given the current dominance of China in the field.

Yours etc;
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

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

"Trusting our intuition often saves us from disaster."

— Wilson Schaefer

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No. 205 SHILLONG, SATURDAY, MARCH 8, 2025

International Women's Day, 2025

HOW different is today from last year when International Women's Day was observed across the globe and in our own country and state too? Unless there is a system to monitor women's ability to scale up their empowerment quotient by making use of their voices and to act decisively, these observances become mere formalities. Hence a monitoring system that measures women's ability to speak up and advocate for better pay; for equal rights and for a place at the high tables of decision-making is imperative. The theme for this year's International Women's Day is "Accelerate Action." This is a call to governments across the world to do better in their efforts to bring in gender equitable policies that recognize the special needs of women and where and how they need agency to arrive at an equal place in the decision-making platforms.

For centuries women have been conditioned not to speak up in public and especially not to speak loudly. Today such exhortations are passe. Women need to make their voices heard and if the system they live in is deaf to their pleas they need to make a noise and crank up the volume. Speaking softly used to be a trait by which women were accorded respectability. That managed to push them to the margins because society today is a noisy space and silent pleas tend to get subsumed in the cacophony that defines politics and all that it encompasses. Too often panel discussions on critical issues have only men at the high tables. Why are women not included? Why are their voices not considered important to bring the discussion to a realistic end? Without including women in discussions on health, education, the economy how can a country or a state expect to bring in a gender balance and gender equitable budgeting? Gender budgeting for all government programmes is critical and women should not allow a budget to be passed if it is not put through the gender lens. This requires intensive training for those sitting in the Finance Ministry/Department and also those heading different government departments.

Women are inflicted by stereotypical thinking that men know more about an issue than they do, so they fear to share their views in public. This fear needs to be overcome and can be overcome through regular training where women learn to present their views cogently, smartly and convincingly. Women need to learn to speak clearly, knowing that what they are about to say is important for policy making. Visibility is a sign of empowerment hence women have to be more visible at meetings and not take the backseats. Men will take centre-stage if women allow them to. There are enough studies to show that organisations that do not have women in senior positions do not reach their full potential. Above all, women should not allow themselves to be bullied or mansplained. Voice is the most powerful agency. Women ought to use this agency at every opportunity which includes writing for and speaking in multiple media channels.

Meghalaya's Budget 2025-26
A Bold Vision or a Financial Gamble?

By Bijoy A. Sangma

In an era where budgets often tread the tightrope between fiscal prudence and ambitious aspirations, Meghalaya's Budget 2025-26 stands out as a daring blueprint that seeks to redefine the state's economic trajectory. Presented by Chief Minister and Finance Minister Conrad K. Sangma, on March 5, 2025, the budget is not just a financial statement - it is a grand vision, a promise of transformation, and a test of Meghalaya's capacity to execute large-scale development. With a focus on economic expansion, infrastructure growth, social welfare, and environmental sustainability, the budget paints an inspiring picture of a future Meghalaya. But beneath the ambitious projections and soaring rhetoric lies the question: Is this a pragmatic strategy or an overreach driven by optimistic assumptions?

A Budget Shaped by the People, for the People
Meghalaya's Budget 2025-26 stands out not just for its ambition but also for its people-centric approach. Chief Minister Conrad K. Sangma emphasized that the budget was formulated through an inclusive consultation process, engaging citizens, leaders, academicians, and civil society members. By seeking input from diverse sections of society, the government aimed to ensure that the budget reflects the real needs, aspirations, and challenges of the people. Further, Meghalaya's long-term vision was developed through regional and sectoral consultations over the past six months, shaping the 'Meghalaya Mission 10' strategy. This participatory approach underscores the government's commitment to making policy decisions that truly align with the expectations of the people.

The Meghalaya Budget 2025-26 can be described as a 'People's Budget', given its emphasis on inclusive development, social welfare, and broad-based economic growth. The budget places significant focus on key sectors that directly impact the lives of citizens, such as education, healthcare, infrastructure, employment, and rural development. Additionally, its ambitious vision under "Meghalaya Mission 10" seeks to transform the state's economy and create more opportunities for its people.

A Historic Economic Leap: The Meghalaya Mission 10
At the heart of this budget lies the Meghalaya Mission 10, a bold initiative aimed at catapulting the state's economy to \$10 billion by 2028. This mission is structured around ten key opportunity sectors ranging from Tourism and Agriculture to IT and entrepreneurship. The government envisions a Meghalaya that is not just self-sustaining but also a front-runner in the Northeast in

terms of GDP growth and job creation. The budget projections indicate an impressive annual economic growth rate of 12.7%, which, if realized, will double Meghalaya's GDP from Rs 42,697 crore in 2018 to a projected Rs 85,000 crore by 2028. But while these numbers are impressive on paper, the challenge lies in execution. The ambitious private investment target of Rs 8,500 crore, a cornerstone of the state's economic expansion, is heavily dependent on attracting investors in industries where Meghalaya has yet to establish a competitive advantage. The question remains: Will the state be able to create an investment climate that draws in capital at this scale?

Infrastructure Boom: The Making of a Modern Meghalaya
One of the most striking aspects of the budget is its unprecedented emphasis on infrastructure, with a total capital expenditure of Rs 9,447 crore - a seven-fold increase from 2017-18 levels. The New Shillong City Project takes centre stage, promising a non-motorized, future-ready urban landscape with smart roads, a heliport, a business district, and improved urban governance. Additionally, road connectivity projects worth Rs 2,873 crore are set to transform the state's landscape, including key corridors to improve trade and access.

The push for connectivity extends beyond roads. The Dhubri-Phulbari bridge and the proposed Hili-Mahendraganj transnational corridor with Bangladesh signal Meghalaya's intent to emerge as a regional trade hub. These projects, if completed on schedule, could revolutionize cross-border commerce and integrate Meghalaya into the broader South Asian economic network. However, Meghalaya's history of delayed infrastructure projects raises a red flag. The successful execution of these plans will require not just funding but also administrative efficiency, transparent governance, and streamlined execution.

Tourism Boom: A Sustainable Growth Engine or an Over-reliance?
Tourism has been positioned as a game-changer for Meghalaya's economy, with the government earmarking Rs 600 crore for new tourism projects, including luxury resorts, cultural centres, and riverfront developments. With a 33% increase in tourist footfall since pre-COVID levels, the state is capitalizing on its natural beauty, cultural heritage, and adventure tourism potential to drive economic growth.

The Meghalaya Tourism Policy 2023 provides a structured framework to guide the sector's expansion, focusing on sustainable tourism, community participation, and

infrastructure development. However, challenges remain - seasonal fluctuations, gaps in last-mile connectivity, and the need for enhanced hospitality capacity could impact projected revenue growth. While the policy lays a strong foundation, its success will depend on effective implementation, private sector participation, and ensuring an equitable distribution of tourism benefits across the state.

Agriculture and Rural Economy: Sowing Seeds of Prosperity?
Agriculture remains a crucial pillar of Meghalaya's economy, and the budget reflects this with an allocation of Rs 618 crore - a 43% increase from last year. The CM FARM+ initiative aims to expand high-value crops like black pepper, floriculture, and mushrooms, offering farmers a chance to diversify beyond traditional crops. Additionally, the CM ASSURE program, with a Rs 50 crore allocation, promises to protect farmers from distress selling by ensuring a minimum support price for crops like broom and arecanut.

While these interventions are commendable, a fundamental question lingers: Are these programs adequately addressing the long-standing issues of low productivity, limited market linkages, and post-harvest losses? Without robust cold storage and transport infrastructure, many farmers may not fully reap the benefits of these initiatives.

Powering Meghalaya: A Sustainable Future or a Looming Challenge?
The energy sector, long plagued by inefficiencies, is seeing a massive push with a Rs 1,088 crore allocation. The CM Solar Mission, aimed at providing standalone solar systems at a 90% subsidy, is an ambitious move toward energy self-sufficiency. The state also claims a dramatic reduction in power losses, with Aggregate Technical and Commercial (AT&C) losses dropping from 32% to 17% over five years.

However, despite these strides, Meghalaya's power deficit remains a concern, and heavy reliance on central funding for electricity reforms puts future sustainability at risk. Will MELCL, the state's power corporation, truly become self-sustaining, or will it continue to drain state resources year after year?

A Budget for the People? Welfare, Healthcare, and Education
Meghalaya's budget makes strong commitments to social welfare, healthcare, and education, with Rs 2,176 crore allocated to health and Rs 3,654 crore to education. The expansion of Megha Health Insurance Scheme (MHIS), increased support for maternal and child health, and digital transformation of

schools through 750 digital libraries highlight the government's intent to enhance human capital.

Yet, the challenges of teacher shortages, uneven healthcare access, and poor learning outcomes remain unresolved. While financial commitments are essential, the efficacy of spending will determine whether these programs truly uplift Meghalaya's youth and vulnerable populations.

A Fiscal Tightrope: Is the Budget Sustainable?
The budget estimates total receipts at Rs. 30,415 crore, including Rs. 25,591 crore in revenue receipts and Rs. 14,324 crore in capital receipts. While the government projects a fiscal deficit of Rs 1,970 crore, it has managed to keep it within 2.96% of the GSDP, below the 3.5% permissible limit. This is commendable. However, with total borrowings of Rs 4,788 crore, Meghalaya remains heavily reliant on external funding sources such as Centrally Sponsored Schemes, Externally Aided Projects (EAPs), and Special Assistance to States for Capital Investment (SASCI). The increasing debt burden raises concerns about long-term financial sustainability.

If private sector investments and revenue generation do not keep pace with expenditure, the state may face serious fiscal constraints in the coming years. Can Meghalaya navigate this financial tightrope without slipping into a debt trap?

A Budget of Hope: A New Dawn for Meghalaya
Meghalaya's Budget 2025-26 is undeniably ambitious, bold, and visionary. It lays out a roadmap that, if executed effectively, could transform the state into an economic powerhouse. The focus on infrastructure, entrepreneurship, tourism, and digital governance is forward-looking. However, the budget also carries inherent risks - over-reliance on external funding, ambitious investment projections, and administrative execution challenges could derail its success.

Ultimately, the fate of this budget rests on how well the government implements its promises. If Meghalaya can overcome its historical bottlenecks and execute its vision with efficiency and accountability, this budget could mark a turning point in the state's history. But if these grand plans remain confined to paper, Meghalaya might find itself trapped in a cycle of unrealized potential and mounting financial burdens.

As the state moves forward, the people of Meghalaya must ask: Are we witnessing the dawn of a new economic era, or does uncertainty still loom on the horizon?
(email: bijoy.sangma@gmail.com)

Women need equal spaces in politics, society, economy

By Jennieffer Dkhar

The theme for this year's International Women's Day, "Accelerate Action" points to the fact that we need to speed up and move fast as something is not moving right and quick enough. What the two words hint at are the inadequacies and discrepancies that are in existence in societies across the world. Well, it had and still has never been easy for women to carve a space for themselves or to even have a voice and be heard. Assigned roles framed by society have a definite and clear-cut demarcation of the positions and responsibilities of men and women. This then makes it difficult for women to be somebody they are not expected to be. So, to conform to it to belong and to fit in. In fact, what is common is that both men and women have grown up with these male prescribed roles that appear as golden rules that must be challenged to the minimum. It is also true that things are beginning to change for the better for women but a lot of work is still left to be done. Perhaps the need to accelerate action is timely. To deliberate and discuss is much needed but to put words into action is the real test.

Our state, though matrilineal in nature yet women have fewer decision-making responsibilities and are often pushed to the periphery. To start with, the presence of women in the local "dobar shong" is still prohibited as customary law says that a woman must not be allowed to participate in decision making since that is the right and prerogative of the men. What is interesting is the decision-making process. Yes, in the urban sector with most families becoming more nuclear in nature, the mother and father discuss and take decisions unanimously. But this may not be the case in the rural areas or for that matter even in the conventional families that are upholding traditions and customary laws stringently. At some point the roles of women have not changed, no matter how progressive one may be. We see a working woman, even if she is placed in a high paying job still responsible for household chores as a nurturer, a giver and a care-taker. Her responsibility does not end with being an equal contributor to the financial growth and stability of the family alongside her male counterpart. From conversations with women who are well placed in their jobs, one learns that almost every one of them agree that the roles and responsibilities of the daughter, wife and mother will always be one that a working woman will still adhere to and abide by. It is unlikely that such women will step aside and simply allow someone else to fulfil their share of duties and responsibilities. If one may try to conjecture, perhaps the reason behind this is in the way a woman is raised and nurtured since her childhood. These seeds of the nurturer in her do not allow her to look the other way. Therefore, we have working women working very hard at their work-

place and also giving their heart and soul in fulfilling the needs of their family at home. Women have been balancing the two roles beautifully.

One must also not sideline another truth especially prevalent in the cities that a strong support system of the family members especially, the husband is also noticed. Sharing of responsibilities at home is much needed and, in most cases, provided. Thus, many women, especially wives and mothers who have carved a niche for themselves in the annals of history must have these strong hands to support them.

Keeping the spirit of the week, the focus today is to cheer and celebrate those women who have withstood the test of time and are braving numerous challenges daily. These women have walked hand in hand with their male counterparts in almost every sphere in life. To celebrate few of these women achievers, some that come to mind are Sunita Williams, J. K. Rowling, Sudha Murthy, Nargis Mohammadi, Mary Kom Patricia Mukhim and many more. These women are living examples of the need for the society to realise the potential of women if they are given opportunities and a support system. Reaching paths that could be a distant dream for both men and women the stories of these women are inspiring and reassuring. Their are lives that tell the world that all that women need are opportunities. It is women like these who are representatives of womenfolk in the world as they are in a position to speak for the cause of other less fortunate women.

It is the less fortunate women and their unspoken stories that must not be left untold and unheard. They may not create records to be remembered in history but theirs are lives that are filled with challenges and tests every single day. Single mothers in particular are bereft of the support of the partner and are made to make ends meet as well as provide that emotional and mental strength for their children. There are daily wage labourers who rely on the earnings they receive at the end of the day. Gender disparity, unequal pay, limited career growth, harassment at the workplace, domestic violence, sexual assault, rape and murder and many more are daily realities.

We're in the 21st century, and yet there is a lot that must be done. To start with, the world must be a safe place for women to live in. Crimes and violence against women must be stringently dealt with by the legal system. Women must be provided equal opportunities as men in any field, women must be included in decision making, whether at home or in the society and community, etc. The bottom line is that it is important for both men and women to come together and work hand in hand to make this world a safe and happy place to be in. This Women's Day let us all come together and realise the strength of being one!

Letters to the Editor

Animals as sentient beings

Editor,
This is to thank the Shillong Times for a wonderful picture of the Prime Minister looking at a tiger through a glass partition during the inauguration of 'Vantara', in Jamnagar, Gujarat, on Tuesday (ST March 5, 2025). The picture takes me back to the year 1789, when the British philosopher Jeremy Bentham stated, "sentience should be the determining factor when considering a living being from a moral standpoint." According to Bentham, "criteria such as intelligence or the ability to speak are irrelevant for the moral status of a being. Not all humans are able to count, or to philosophise about morality, but all are capable of experiencing happiness and suffering." For this reason, we believe that people should be treated

equally and other creatures too deserve respect as they are also able to have a subjective experience of life.

Yours etc;
VK Lyngdoh
Shillong

Belief system and faith

Editor,
This is with regards to a letter by N K Kehar on "Meghalaya and non-tribals," (ST March 7, 2025). My objection is to this line, "But since formation of ADCs in 1952, a huge number of tribal people have abandoned their tribal belief system and embraced an alien faith which is a living testimony of failure of ADCs in preserving the unique tradition and culture of Meghalaya."

My comments :-
1) Firstly, this is nothing but a value judgment on the freedom of a person or

a group to choose their own belief system and faith. JIM Nichols Roy the architect of the ADCs said during the debate in the constituent Assembly in 1948, "No human can judge the relationship between me and my God."

2) ADCs come under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India. Nothing has been mentioned about belief system and faith. Unless the Constitution I read is wrong, then NK Kehar may please show me the correct version.

3) Kehar appears to have also interpreted that the tribal people had no freedom to choose their belief system and faith other than the one practiced by their ancestors, which can also mean that the practice of human sacrifice in some parts of Khasi and Jaintia Hills in the past should have continued even though it was barbaric and inhuman. Further the practice of Sati in some parts of India should have also continued in the name of

tradition and culture.

4) Kehar also tried to impose his own perception that belief system and faith are synonymous with tradition and culture, which the Sixth Schedule is silent about. And anything else other than that is alien. This theory is being propagated by the Sangh Parivar - RSS - Hindutva, especially in tribal areas of India and is an approach which can divide the tribals and may lead to fissiparous tendencies especially considering the fragility of the socio-political situation in the Northeast and neighbouring Bangladesh and Myanmar.

5) I nevertheless understand the sentiments of Kehar about the case of non-tribals vs the ADCs which is undemocratic and discriminatory but that cannot be addressed by clubbing it up with belief system and faith.

Yours etc.,
Rudi Warjri,
Via email

Booted out, but not beaten: Zelenskyy stands tall

Editor,
The tense meeting last Friday between Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and former U.S. President Donald Trump sent shockwaves across the world. Many began to question America's leadership and commitment to justice and democracy.

Just imagine how Ukraine has endured Putin's brutal aggression for three long years. Entire cities have been devastated. Countless civilians have lost their lives. But despite this unimaginable pain and suffering, Ukraine remains resolute. It stands firm, a true testament to Zelenskyy's unrelenting fortitude. Throughout the unprecedented devastation,

Zelenskyy has proven to be an icon of resilience. One woman from New York posted on Facebook, saying, "Zelenskyy is undoubtedly a leader determined to protect his people and uphold his nation's freedom at any cost. Lots of love from America."

What was most disappointing, though, was that instead of the dignity that was due to him, Zelenskyy was humiliated in the Oval Office. The whole world watched in shock. The leader carrying the pain of a "wounded nation" was neither shown empathy nor given sympathy but was talked down to and booted out of the White House. The world was not silent. People across the globe condemned the haughtiness of the American leadership. However, to Zelenskyy's relief, British Prime Minister Keir Starmer, French President Emmanuel Macron, Canadian Prime Minister Justin

Trudeau, and Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni boldly stood together with Ukraine. Amazingly, over 70,000 signatories launched an online petition requesting the cancellation of King Charles's invitation to Donald Trump for his visit to the UK.

What is especially alarming is that the fallout in the Oval Office exposed how Trump could undermine the values of democracy on a whim. Critics called his handling of the encounter not just a failure of diplomacy but a failure of humanity. How could so-called global leaders turn a blind eye to the suffering of millions for so long? One believes there is no greater injustice than ignoring the desperate cries of a nation fighting for its integrity and sovereignty. To put it bluntly, a country that silences these cries with bombs and bloodshed is never a "superpower". It is nothing more than a sheer

savage force.

Of course, history has no mercy for tyrants. Russia's aggression has brought Vladimir Putin unprecedented infamy, as he is now openly mocked and condemned by the majority of the global population. Arrogance and egotism may allow some leaders to wield power for some time, but they do not make them immortal. No throne is eternal. No empire of cruelty stands forever. Hands stained with the blood of humanity are bound to face divine retribution. In addition, acts of brutality never bring a man, inner peace. The guilt of his sins or bad karma haunts him, in this life and the next.

Yours etc.,
Sail Gembali,
Shillong

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

Gap between perception, reality may go far deeper for narcissistic people

Despite exuding confidence, narcissistic people relentlessly crave admiration. In other words, they are unable to convince themselves of their own brilliance.

Growing research shows the gap between perception and reality for narcissistic people goes far deeper than their inflated views about their appearance, accomplishments and abilities.

Narcissism is a personality trait that exists along a spectrum, where the lower end reflects a healthy balance of self-esteem and confidence.

At the extreme end of the spectrum, however, narcissism is considered a personality disorder which affects 1-2 per cent of the population.

Most of us manifest narcissistic traits to varying degrees, but the more elevated the features are, the wider the gap between perception and reality.

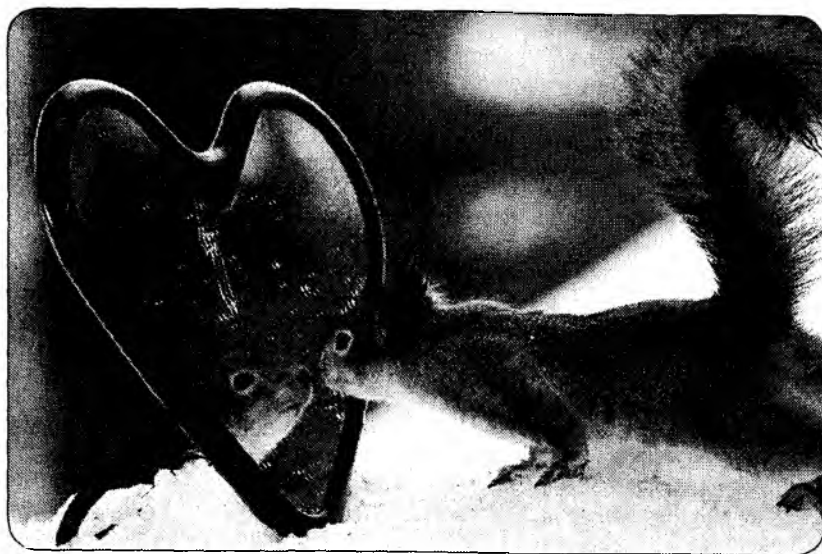
Narcissistic people with elevated features frequently belittle anyone who fails to provide them with the special treatment they feel entitled to. Ironically, they continuously undermine the false self they are trying to build and maintain.

They can also be quick to respond with anger and aggression to criticism, in an attempt to protect their grandiose yet fragile sense of self. A 2021 UK study found they experience more paranoia, even when there is no evidence of people meaning to harm them, compared with people with lower levels of narcissism.

Similarly, recent research by US psychologists found that narcissistic people experienced heightened fear of being left out, and accused others of deliberately ostracising them when there was no evidence to support their belief.

The study found that participants high in narcissistic traits were more likely to interpret ambiguous social cues as rejection (for instance, a delayed text message). This suggests their perceptions of social behaviour may be distorted.

Narcissism and ostracism fuel one another. Narcissism can be expressed in "vulnerable" features (socially-inhibited and neurotic) as well as "grandiose" features (dominant and



extroverted). People with more grandiose features are overtly assertive and self-promoting.

People with more vulnerable features tend to be outwardly distressed, hypersensitive and inhibited.

Although these are separate forms of narcissism, they share a core of entitlement and an antagonistic character style.

And just like we all exhibit varying degrees of narcissistic traits, we also fluctuate between these two expressions of narcissism.

The US researchers chose to focus on grandiose narcissism only. The study differentiated between two facets of grandiose narcissism: narcissistic admiration (the ability to charm and manipulate people) and narcissistic rivalry, which includes devaluing and acting aggressively towards others.

The research team analysed data for more than 77,000 participants from a series of seven studies by other scientists spanning 2009-2022. The first two studies investigated the relationship between narcissism and ostracism using surveys and experience sampling (a method used to investigate participants' cognition and behaviour outside the lab - for example, using participants' smartphones to track their behaviour).

The first study found people who reported higher narcissism levels said

they experienced significantly more ostracism, compared with other participants. This was backed up by the second study, in which participants completed the narcissism assessments then reported feelings of ostracism within a 14-day period, using a mobile app.

The remaining experiments examined how people with higher levels of narcissism perceive ambiguous social interactions, and how others respond to narcissistic traits.

After a group task, people with higher traits in narcissistic rivalry were more likely ostracised, even when other participants weren't told the target had elevated levels of narcissism.

This supports the findings of a 2017 meta-study showing that people high in narcissistic rivalry may provoke direct conflict through their behaviour, and perceive others more negatively.

The US researchers concluded that, while narcissistic features can fuel social exclusion, ostracism itself can, over time, contribute to pronounced narcissistic traits.

It appears that ostracism can make people already high in narcissism even higher in these traits.

Other research has similarly shown disparity between the narcissistic self and reality, and the role paranoia plays in this relationship. For instance, a

2015 study found that elevated levels of narcissism are associated with belief in conspiracy theories. This association was driven by paranoid thought.

These findings are concerning given the harmful consequences of conspiracy theories for society. They can fuel violence, climate denial and vaccine hesitancy.

Narcissistic personality features also tend to be higher among political leaders than the general population. Conspiracy theories may be appealing to politicians - particularly during times that challenge their entitled need for superiority and power.

The ideal self and the actual self

The US study's findings carry practical implications for interventions aimed at people with high levels of narcissism.

The researchers said interventions should not only try to improve relationships by identifying personality risk factors (in this instance, the rivalry component of narcissism), but also consider the perceptions of the person involved.

Narcissistic personality disorder comes with a higher risk of suicide and mental health difficulties, and treatment rarely makes much difference. This is partly because of patients' resistance to abandoning the "ideal self", leading to frustration, anger and conflict with their therapist.

But some interventions could target the cognitive distortions of narcissistic people that hamper their ability to function in society. For example, psychological therapies could aim to help them process the defensive mechanisms (overvaluing themselves) that mask underlying feelings of vulnerability.

Helping narcissistic people develop greater insights into their habitual reactions - such as responding aggressively to self-esteem threats and feelings of social exclusion - could help them foster skills that reshape their cognitive distortions.

This could ameliorate distress, anger and hostility for narcissistic people - and the people around them. (The Conversation)

Labradors, humans share the same obesity genes

Pippa flops by the Aga oven chewing on a stick. At just 12 weeks old, this Labrador retriever puppy looks cute but clueless. But when she hears the word "biscuit", her entire demeanour changes. Ears pricked, she's immediately at her owner's feet, gazing adoringly, sitting, even woofing on command.

We led a study to find out how genes have such a significant influence on why humans (and dogs) become overweight. It was their reputation for greediness that led us to focus on Labrador retrievers. Genes are responsible for 40%-70% of human obesity - the rest is related to life experience.

We extracted DNA from samples of saliva sent in by interested pet owners. More than ten years after the first dog slobber arrived in the post, the results of our study are striking: dogs don't just share a home with their human owners, they share obesity genes too.

Each of the top five genes that increased the risk of weight gain in Labradors were also implicated in human obesity.

Such crossover is not astonishing; both dogs and humans evolved to deal with cycles of food glut and famine. Both have brain mechanisms that drive hunger and satiety to ensure food intake meets our daily energy requirements.

And although we often think of fat as a problem, it does make sense to have some - it is an energy reserve to draw upon in times when food is scarce. Genes influence those mechanisms, but how? The answer lies in the highly selective nature of dog breeding. A side effect of dog breeding is that it is remarkably straightforward to identify the genes which cause traits - even those like obesity, which come from the net effect of lots of changes along our DNA.

As a vet, I know obesity is a real problem for many of my patients, so we study dogs both for their own sake and as a "model" of human disease.

The genes we found were most important in determining obesity in Labradors were not frontrunners in genetic studies of obesity in people.

Rather, they were also-rans, with a minor impact on human weight gain.

Normally they wouldn't interest us, but the dog results told us they can have a big effect on body weight and made them worth investigating. That was true of our top Labrador obesity gene, DENND1B. Dogs who carried the problem version of this gene had around 8% more body fat, but the effect in humans is only subtle.

It turns out that DENND1B has a previously unrecognised role in the brain's regulation of body weight, for dogs and humans. Leptin is a hormone produced from fat cells in the body. More fat, more leptin.

It acts in the brain by activating "melanocortin receptors" to reduce hunger and increase energy use. The system drives food intake in times of starvation and reduces it when the body has good energy reserves.

We showed DENND1B is produced alongside melanocortin receptors in the brain and alters signalling by them.

There is a lot we still need to learn about DENND1B, but this was a great start, especially since it is notoriously difficult to go from finding a genetic association to providing a molecular link to how the gene is acting in the body. Although not the target of the latest wave of anti-obesity drugs, there are obesity medicines which target melanocortin receptors, so there is real value in understanding the nuances of that brain pathway.

Genes make staying slim harder

Low-risk dogs in our study were all slim or only marginally overweight. But their owners don't get the credit - this group tended to stay at a healthy weight even if owners didn't pay much attention to how they regulated their dogs' diet and exercise.

High-risk dogs can be kept slim, but it is much harder work. These owners need to be vigilant at all times to ensure their chow-hounds don't get opportunities to snack and must steel themselves to resist the "big, brown eye treatment" that is such an effective way to beg for food. (The Conversation)



'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi Sunday, March 9, 2025

'Birthday Forecast'
Moon trine Sun on your solar return chart and it is going to be wonderful year for you. Your spirits will be high and you will be roaring to go. There will be methodical approach the way you take things. People will get influenced by you. And you will be able to get the things done to your liking. You will make notable progress in job/profession. Your colleagues and superiors will be your constant source of strength. Your financial position will get better. You will be able to improve your general standard of living. You will have very joyous and cheerful atmosphere at home. Your partner will remain by your side under all circumstances. Children will shine in studies bringing joy to you. Some long held dispute in family will also get solved. Health will be fine. You will go to some exotic location for a fun filled vacation with your family.

'This week for you'
Aries: (March 21 - April 20) This phase brings glory, gains and success in professional and personal relations. You would express yourself with charm and grace as you are exceptionally articulate and your writing takes on a poetic quality about it. You are emotional, loving and caring in personal relationships and family situations. You manage to communicate with moody and angry people with a sensitive approach and gentle manner. Looking within at your values and beliefs gives your insight and direction. You are physically energetic and enjoy the feeling of well-being and confidence. Beware of over-indulgence of any kind by maintaining a balance in all areas of life.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) Commercial transactions and business deals could be conducted successfully. You are unlikely to be display a whole lot of self-discipline. It's a great time to exert your personal influence, as you come across as especially cooperative. There is perfection and beauty in emotional relationships as you come from a deep and spiritual space within to relate in a new way with your loved one. You are frank, outspoken and can be outrageous or undiplomatic on occasions. Money matters take priority as some unexpected expenditures have to be met. Avoid being lazy and laid back as temporary gain or success in business needs to be followed up with hard work and dedication.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) You would improve your professional and personal relations, as you express yourself in a gracious and exalted manner. There could be alterations in ideas or plans, increase and decrease in finances and fluctuation in business. You can be led away by enthusiasm unless careful inner balance is maintained. Marriage, business partnership and collaboration are strengthened through understanding and commitment. You are just, fair and generous in family and professional situations. Your sense of humor helps you out of difficult situations. Beware of a covetous and suspicious person around you who could cause misunderstanding in your personal relationships.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) A cheerful and hopeful outlook increases your chances of gaining cooperation with overseas contacts. You are likely to get business and work opportunities from overseas and engage in a variety of activities and meet new people. Financial benefits also may come your way through investments and insurance. The ability to express and communicate your ideas is extremely important to you. At this time your heart is where the home is. You may be tempted to spend lavishly on things that make your life more comfortable and pleasant. You are physically energetic and enjoy the feeling of well-being and confidence. Beware of over-indulgence of any kind by maintaining balance in all areas.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) You are frank, outspoken and can be undiplomatic on occasions. Political correctness and diplomacy are the call of the hour. You are more willing to adapt to new circumstances, ideas, and unfamiliar situations this week. You put in a lot of efforts and then find that this has established a strong professional base and this brings in desired and even unexpected gains. It is good time to organize your workplace. This would help you to get a better perspective to achieve goals. It's time to expand your social circle and to make more contact with groups and friends. Romantic notions start to take on a realistic shape.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22) It's a great time to exert your personal influence where it can prove to be beneficial with the larger picture in view. You exhibit individualism and brilliance in handling business ventures and collaborations. This helps you build your self-confidence and

strengthen your financial position. You may take up assignments and projects and this would end on a winning note for you during the week. Your efforts to reach out to new people will be accepted and welcomed as you get success in foreign matters too. You extend your hospitality to family and expenses rise this week on purchase of luxurious household items. Health and energy need to be conserved through a busy time at work.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) This phase brings joy, understanding and harmony in personal and professional relations. You wield power and authority most effectively as you bring perspective and order in chaotic situations at work and home. You gain money and influence through business ventures. Success brings rank and respect as you dominate the professional scene. You win appreciation of people in senior position and this opens the doors of new opportunities. You carry yourself with confidence and style that attracts much attention and draw attention of interesting people around you. You would express yourself with charm and grace in professional life and this brings financial gains and new contracts. You feel full of energy and indulge in sports, physical activities and a structured exercise routine.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 24) This brings success, glory and cordial relations with family and loved ones. Cooperation and focus on harmony and understanding benefits you professionally and enhances your reputation and public relations. You are patient, laborious and clever with material aspects and manage finances and business ventures with ingenuity this week. You are more rational when it comes to financial matters. You need to drop comparisons and rivalry in personal relations and competition in professional aspects as they lead to a feeling of inadequacy and stress. You would regroup your energy and thoughts and focus on the basics.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) You extend hospitality to family and friends as you entertain and organize meetings and get-togethers. You would perform tasks that involve cooperation and team harmony. A cheerful and hopeful outlook increases your chances of gaining cooperation and favor from seniors. Financial benefits also may come your way through investments and insurance. You would have a positive feel towards spiritualism. You are passionate in what you do, although you display self-discipline with people around you. It's also a good time to break bad habits.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) Confidence, pleasure, and a deeper involvement in personal and professional relations comes to the fore. This enhances work opportunities for people in the creative line, marketing, arts, show business and related fields. A romantic affair would give a big boost of confidence and personal magnetism runs high to be appreciated and admired. This is a time where you bring more harmony and pleasant interactions to your relationships in family and loved ones. Socializing and making new contacts could help to boost your career. A healthy lifestyle and fitness remain on your agenda.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) You would face new circumstances, changes and unfamiliar situations. A positive approach and well-chosen words would benefit. You may take up new assignments and projects that would incorporate and utilize your ideas. Your inner hopes and desires come to the fore even as you tackle your job with a realistic and practical purpose of mind. You incorporate and utilize your ideas. You would be loving and appreciative of the love you receive especially from children. Romance heightens your personal magnetism.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) You feel the fragile bond of friendship, romance and love in personal relations. You curb your natural reaction to situation and focus and gather information and take care not to hurt any relationship. You will be needed to provide inputs and your presence may also be required at home and work and you will have to divide your attention according to priorities. It is time to heal friendships with tender, love and care. You may also display more responsibility towards your family and take them for outings. Your thoughts turn to philosophy and worship during this time. The fine arts are inviting and involving as you channel your creative energy into it. This is a good time to organize yourself and your thoughts and attend your health and well-being.

Parasitic worms could be hiding in you! Spot these unusual signs

Comedian Shappi Khorsandi once commented that she used the mythical concept of "sugar worms" to get her children to brush their teeth after sweets. It's a trick I poached to convince my daughter to do the same. She's since grown wise to this, but now luckily manages to navigate her way around a toothbrush twice a day without resistance.

Real worms have now replaced fictitious worms as a point of discussion in many other households with young children. Every few weeks, nurseries and schools inform parents of yet another occurrence of threadworm. It's not surprising that these wriggly beasties keep rearing their heads, considering how easily transmissible they are.

Threadworm

Threadworm infestation is a common minor ailment, particularly in kids. The worm species that causes it - Enterobius vermicularis - goes by many other names, including pinworm. This is because it really is as thin and pointy as a pin, and silvery-white in appearance. It's also sometimes known as seatworm, possibly because the body parts it most commonly affects are those which you sit on.

The circle of life for a threadworm is simple. Their larvae come from ingested eggs that then hatch in the small intestine. They typically form a colony within the first part of the large intestine (the caecum).

But their most noticeable effect appears to be on the back passage, since the female worms migrate there, usually at nighttime, to lay their eggs. This results in the common symptoms of a very itchy bottom, especially at night. The itching naturally makes the sufferer scratch, installing the newly laid eggs under their fingernails and allowing them to spread to other hosts through contact. It can affect anyone - both adults and children.

It's possible to spot threadworms in the stool after a bowel movement. They can make themselves known in several other ways, including nighttime irritability and bed wetting. Because the worms prefer living in the intestine, in rare conditions they may cause abdominal pain and mimic appendicitis. In fact, in some cases the appendix is removed and found to be chock-full of wriggling worms.

The condition is usually mild and can be treated at home. Mebendazole,



an oral anti-worm medication, can be bought over the counter at most pharmacies and is normally effective.

It's recommended to treat everyone in the household over the age of two, in case they have already spread - remembering that sometimes there are no symptoms to be noted at all. But it's important to speak to a doctor for children younger than two years old, and pregnant or breastfeeding women with threadworm, as medication may not be suitable.

Hygiene measures are important to help clear the infection and prevent the spread, especially in those who can't take medication. This involves scrupulous washing of hands, laundry and avoiding scratching the affected areas. It's a good idea to trim fingernails too, to prevent the eggs from getting caught under them.

Hookworm

Threadworms aren't the only worms (helminths) that invade humans. Hookworms, for example, affect about 470 million people worldwide. Infections in the UK are rarer, since hookworms favour a warmer climate.

Like threadworm, they also tend to take up residence in the small intestine - though they can also get there in a much more complicated way. The larvae of hookworms are able to pass through the skin and travel to the lungs in the bloodstream. Once there, they journey upwards into the throat where they can then be swallowed down.

Since the respiratory tract and gut are the favourite places for these worms to bunk down, the symptoms of a hookworm infection tend to be associated with them - such as coughing and

wheezing. Inflammation in the small intestine, triggered by the infestation can generate abdominal pain and diarrhoea. It can also hamper the absorption of proteins and iron from the gut, causing anaemia.

A characteristic rash might be noted in the stage where the larvae start to burrow through the skin - looking a bit like a snake writhing through it. In the medical profession, we call this cutaneous larva migrans.

Like threadworm, hookworm can also be treated with oral medications.

Filariae

Worms don't just invade the gut or lungs. Some of them work their way into other regions of the body. Take lymphatic filariasis, a condition that arises when certain worms of the Filariidae order, infiltrate the lymphatic system.

The lymph vessels act as drainage pipes, removing excess fluid from the tissues and returning it to the bloodstream. When the worms invade and inflame the lymphatic system, the result is lymphoedema - an accumulation of fluid in the extremities (like the legs), which causes swelling and discomfort.

In extreme cases, the swelling can be profound, resulting in a condition known as elephantiasis. This is because the worm infestation causes not just swelling, but also skin changes - making it thicker and tougher, and taking on the appearance of elephant skin.

These are just a few of the helminth conditions that can affect humans. Other examples include tapeworms and whipworms - which are also intestinal. Ringworm is a misnomer though, and not a worm at all - it's actually caused by a fungal infection. (The Conversation)

"Every calamity is to be overcome
by endurance."
—Virgil

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No. 207 SHILLONG, MONDAY, MARCH 10, 2025

The language row

INDIA'S three language formula has stood the test of time. By including a local language, national language Hindi and world language English into the curriculum, India sought to put a strong foundation for its new generations to effortlessly communicate with the outside world. A state that resisted this and staged violent protests leading to deaths and arson in the 1960s was Tamil Nadu. Under the leadership of the Dravidian parties, Tamils saw the imposition of Hindi on them as part of the north Indian Aryan attempts to subjugate them. They however welcomed English while opposing the three language formula. Naturally, they no longer saw a threat from the British Raj to their culture and civilization in independent India. Tamils are understandably and appreciably proud of their language, culture and history. The Chera Chola dynasties of the South had proven their supremacy in warfare, maritime prowess, wealth creation and much more in the periods long before the British Raj.

The challenge held out to Chief Minister MK Stalin by Union Home Minister Amit Shah, to teach Engineering in Tamil must be seen in this light. Shah and the BJP have demonstrated a heightened sense of nationalism, set against the accommodative nature of the Congress party that ruled India for much of the post-Independence era. Admittedly, the Congress inherited this spirit from India's first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru, who with his education and eminent exposure to the West had laid the foundations of a new India. The BJP, by virtue of its RSS ideology, is inward looking and has a different world view. At the same time, the Modi government is also restrained in matters of major policy changes and indulged in kite-flying without showing the determination to reform the nation's systems; much less the society. Hence, it is in no mood to rub Stalin or Tamil Nadu the wrong way.

Be that as it may, Stalin being generations past the 1960s would do well to review the Tamil Nadu government's policy to resist the three-language formula. Tamils face a serious communication problem in other states, mainly in north India as also cities like Mumbai and Kolkata, where job opportunities and economic activities are high. Youths from other southern states are familiar with Hindi and do not face a serious communication problem at the ground level in the North as they could speak and understand Hindi. Admittedly, successive governments in Tamil Nadu have developed the state in terms of both agriculture and industry. Stalin is taking this ably forward. Yet, times are changing. The three language formula itself must change to a four language formula by including another foreign language too as optional in the school curriculum. The world is turning into a global village. More Indians are working abroad now than in the past. Millions more are seeking opportunities abroad.

My Name, My Purpose in Life

By H.H. Mohrmen

This column was the first to bring to light cases of unusual names among the people of Meghalaya. Later, after reading the article, a young woman studying at a university in Delhi, with an interest in further researching the subject, contacted me. A few years later, she sent me the link to her paper on the issue, published in a reputed journal. Recently, when she went to cast her vote for the ADC election, Patricia Mukhim the Editor of The Shillong Times mentioned in a Facebook post the awkward experience she encountered because of her name.

"What's in a name?" Does a name really have meaning? Perhaps some names do, but a name is not just an individual's identity; in some strange way, it also has a connection to a person's life. A name is something that not only identifies a person and differentiates them from others, but it is also something they carry throughout their life until death. A person's name is unique not only because it is their identity, but in some cases, it also carries the charisma and aura of the individual and helps define them.

Names are not given at random; there is always some thought behind them. Parents often seek the help of close friends and relatives to suggest a name for their baby. Naming a person is also an important religious tradition. In Christianity, the rite of passage is Baptism or Christening. In the Niamtre tradition, the naming ceremony is known as "Chad Lane," "Sib Syin," or "Rim" in the War Jaintia tradition.

Names and the Stories Behind Them

In the "Sib Syin" tradition, family members—particularly ki kha (the child's paternal relatives)—select a few names and present them to the person performing the ritual. During the ceremony, these names are offered one by one, and through divine intervention, the chosen name is marked as the one to identify the baby.

I believe there is certainly something in a name that connects it to the character and persona of a person. Otherwise, what would be the point of having a name? If someone were to ask me, "What is your name all about?" My answer would be

that my name may not have a meaning, but it carries stories that are deeply connected to my life.

My name has a few stories associated with it, and strangely, these stories help define my identity and purpose. Yes, not every name has meaning, but mine has a story. My story began at birth when I was dedicated in the church. Since we do not practice infant baptism due to our belief that original sin does not exist, we perform a naming ceremony and child dedication instead.

When I was dedicated as a child, my name originally had just one "H," followed by my surname. But how did I end up with two "H's"? As a baby, I had only one "H" in my name, which I will reveal later. However, as I grew up, I made a conscious decision to add another "H" to honour my father. I of-

A name is something that not only identifies a person and differentiates them from others, but it is also something they carry throughout their life until death. A person's name is unique not only because it is their identity, but in some cases, it also carries the charisma and aura of the individual and helps define them.

icially added another "H" to my name when I filled out the Meghalaya Board of School Education form to appear for the High School Leaving Certificate Examination in 1984.

What's in a Name?

There are two reasons why I have a double "H" in my name. First, I have two brothers—one older and one younger—and all three of our names start with the letter "H." To avoid confusion, especially when only initials are used, each of us has an extra letter in our name. My eldest brother, Heiborni Treyoo Roi Mohrmen, uses "H.R."; my younger brother, Heimonni Treyoo Roi Mohrmen, uses "H.T."; and I ended up as "H.H." Mohrmen. Close friends even call me "Double H" or simply "HH."

What the Two H's in My Name Stand For

I mentioned earlier that the first "H" in my name comes from my father's name, "Hamkhein," which

means "one who is fearless, cares, or bothers less." I chose to include his name to honour him because, in our matrilineal society, I carry my mother's surname and had no direct way to acknowledge my father in my name.

However, to tell the truth, another reason I added my father's "H" was that I was embarrassed by my given name. That's why I initially chose to use only my initials and preferred people to call me H.H. Mohrmen. My given name is "Helpme"—yes, an English word. And please don't ask why my parents named me that, because, unfortunately, I don't know. What I do know is that my parents were literate—my father studied up to Class 9, and my mother appeared for her matriculation (Class 10)—so they certainly understood what "Helpme" meant.

When I Realized My Name Was Unusual

I was never bullied or ridiculed for my name, but I recall an experience during my time at the Unitarian College in Manchester, UK. People were curious about how I got my name, and for the first time, I had no answer.

When I was about to return to India, my fellow students organized a farewell party. They not only presented me with a newly translated Bible published by both Oxford and Cambridge University but also sang the Beatles' popular song Help! I knew it was a playful gesture meant to lighten the mood. I wasn't offended; in fact, I was pleased because the gift was handed to me by a girl my age who also gave me a peck on the cheek. She had shown interest in me before, so it was a double joy to be kissed by her. I even kept the lipstick mark on my cheek until someone pointed it out.

After the UK episode, I started to feel uncomfortable

with my name, especially since my job involves taking care of visitors from abroad, mostly Americans and British. Imagine introducing myself and being asked, "What does it mean?" or "Why did your parents give you such a name?" These were questions I had no answer for.

Proudly Wearing My Name

Later in life, I changed my perspective and started embracing my name with pride. Helping people comes naturally to me, so my name felt fitting. When people thanked me for my help, I would often reply, "You don't have to; it goes with the name." After all, when someone calls me and uses my name, "Helpme," they are literally calling for help!

I even joke that my name, Hamkhein Helpme, means "don't care, don't bother—just keep helping others." Over time, I also developed a new interpretation of my initials. Though "H.H." could stand for "His Holiness" or "His Highness," which are lofty titles beyond my reach, I prefer to think of it as standing for Honesty and Humility. While it is difficult to always be honest and humble, I strive to embody these qualities in my daily life. Though easier said than done, these are the principles I live by. I know I will fall short of achieving these ideals, but I also know there is no harm in trying. After all, life is a constant struggle for self-improvement, a race where you stumble, fall, and rise again.

Facebook's Opinion on My Name

Another interesting incident involving my name happened on social media. When Facebook became popular, I tried to create an account using my real name, but my registration was repeatedly rejected. Facebook deemed "Helpme" a fake name. To comply, I had to change my name. Now, my social media friends may understand why my Facebook name includes my father's name, Hamkhein, but not "Helpme."

Now, I am happy with my name. Everything that happened regarding my name has been for the good. As Steve Jobs once said, "You can only understand life by looking backward." My name is not just my identity—it defines me.

Mahakumbh : Purgatory and Salvation

By Chiranjib Haldar

When Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath shrugged off alarming bacterial contamination claims of the Mahakumbh waters at the confluence, he may have only reiterated a broad statement by the central BJP regime. Adopting a decolonisation agenda in governance, policy and global diplomacy is not enough. It is time to salvage our ancient civilisational ethos and design homespun cultural narratives that articulate India's contemporary vision. Though a paradigm shift, amalgamating modernity and tradition hides beneath its veneer, the stark reality. The Mahakumbh is no longer about faith, auspicious dates and religion. Going by the spectacle at Prayagraj, it may seem like a communitarian, majoritarian frenzy whipped up to facilitate fast bucks for the organized and unorganised sectors—sundries and services all garnering chunks of the celestial pie on offer. What entered the popular lexicon from a disparaging remark by an iconoclast in the mid-nineteenth century, religion is still the opium of the masses.

Beyond the gruesome stampedes and serpentine queues, miles of human chains awaiting their holy dip, lay an opiate truth. The confluence of water's di-

pilgrims in hordes do add up to the zest of planetary alignments. But beyond the oriental mela's euphoria, lies another truth. The neo-orientalism of the Mahakumbh camouflages the still prevalent caste hierarchy which the electronic and social media blitzkrieg fails to decipher. When political and social luminaries immerse in the sangam, it is only a reassertion of this exotic orientalism. So, Mahakumbh 2025 is not just about scriptural injunctions. It is a fetish for the manifold reincarnations of orientalism. Mark Tully while covering the 1989 congregation for the BBC noted the casteist genealogy. There are the ascetics and the pilgrims called Kalpvasis, the Brahmins or Prayagwals, the Kewat boatmen and the lower caste Khatiks at the end of the social ladder.

There is a mystical halo to the Mahakumbh too. Besides enabling cultural narratives, the confluence of India's most sacred rivers—the Ganga, Yamuna and the mythical Saraswati, the harmonious chants of millions of pilgrims, the resonance of temple bells all override the neo-oriental razzmatazz. Historically Brahmin supremacy, Mughal yogis and British propaganda all have shaped the Kumbh Mela

The Kumbh Mela in Allahabad opines 'The mela was emblematic of a timeless India which thrived under foreign rule. Its role in the imagination of pilgrims and as an information mechanism made it an appealing opportunity for both Nehru and Gandhi... There was some reservation in elite nationalist circles about utilising a Hindu institution to communicate ideas of an inclusive nation.'

vine ability to cleanse the pilgrims' squalid soul of all putrefaction is what matters. As in John Bunyan's The Pilgrim's Progress, centuries ago, the cost of redemption is enormous. A tumultuous journey for the commoner proven by the blatant photographs of train compartments bursting at seams, the road to deliverance is not easy. The cost is great and the true devotee must be willing to pay the price as sin does not keep humans from attaining glory. Drone shots of clobbering heads and ghats swaying with dots of various hues, what many of us are seeing on television and reading about is modern India in a microcosm. It is high time not just to rinse our souls but to reclaim a cultural narrative that would repudiate time-worn stereotypes.

It is the tremendous power of belief that, even now, brings millions to Prayagraj. And the contours of this belief, the sangam banks that contain a faith torrent, are shaped by historical forces. Forget the squalor, the rational warning of the Pollution Control Board that the waters are swarming with zillions of bacteria, a dermatological quagmire brushed under the carpet of auspicious lunar phenomena. The sheer pride and vanity of the returning pilgrim to kin, friends, neighbours after having accomplished a stupendous task braving the herculean obstacles, is visible everywhere. Beyond the fusillade of human emotions, reels on social media and braggadocio highlighting the Mahakumbh tales, lay the feeling of satiety. A dip undertaken at the confluence of the three holy rivers is what matters most and will stand the test of time. The entire tussle in rail coaches, strides of pilgrims' endless miles and the kaleidoscopic unfolding will all fade into oblivion after the last lap.

The ascetics, saints, ash-smearing Naga sadhus, skeleton-donning aghoris and

into the world's greatest religious gathering over three centuries. Historian Kama Maclean in Pilgrimage and Power: The Kumbh Mela in Allahabad opines 'The mela was emblematic of a timeless India which thrived under foreign rule. Its role in the imagination of pilgrims and as an information mechanism made it an appealing opportunity for both Nehru and Gandhi... There was some reservation in elite nationalist circles about utilising a Hindu institution to communicate ideas of an inclusive nation.'

As the Mahakumbh wound up, we must remember the mega congregation is not only about saffron leaning celebrities. Socialites, politicians cutting across hues and parties, impresarios, influencers, filmstars are all adding to their glamour quotients, posting their shorts and reels and depicting their bravado with pride. There are two connects at either end of the spectrum. Webchecked in fliers descending at Prayagraj airport, dashing to hotels at exorbitant prices and heading to relatively well-managed ghats under adequate security, getting the publicity optics right and boarding the flight back home after purging their souls. The other motley millions packed like sardines in trains and trucks, disembarking at peripheral stations and outskirts. Walking like disheveled mortals, jostling at bhandaras or makeshift kitchens, shell-ing out wads of notes to fleeing vendors all for the ultimate soul-wrenching goal. For a Mahakumbh swab in squalid water brimming with microbes at the confluents' ghats is more sacrosanct than the stain and germ. The purgatory is worth a conquest of the mind, the pious and holy.

(The writer is a commentator on politics and society.)

Letters to the Editor

Which tradition are ADCs protecting?

Editor,
This is in response to the letter "Belief System and Faith" (ST March 8, 2025), in which Rudi Warjri expressed his chagrin at my statement that the large-scale abandonment of indigenous faiths by the state's tribals is a glaring example of the toothlessness and lack of utility of the ADCs in protecting tradition and culture.

Perhaps Warjri missed the point of my letter, as evidenced by his defence of the "freedom of a person to choose his own faith." He is right that tribal people have the freedom to practise their indigenous faiths or abandon it in favour of another religion, foreign or otherwise. This only reinforces my argument: the ultimate decision and power to preserve or discard tradition lies with the people, thereby raising the question—if the ADCs lack the power or right to intervene here, then what exactly are they meant to do?

We cannot excuse the steep decline in the share of indigenous faith followers under their watch by arguing, as Warjri did, that "belief system is not synonymous with tradition/culture." Viewed that way, no single trait is synonymous with tradition and culture and thus none of them are worth conserving. The matrilineal system alone is also not synonymous with culture, neither are the languages. Can they also be discarded

without suffering any "loss of culture"? One could even argue that traditional faiths are among the primary defining characteristics of the people—unlike the matrilineal system (which exists in many communities worldwide). These faiths are truly "indigenous" and found nowhere else. If the ADCs are not expected to prevent the erosion of such a core trait, what purpose do they serve? For instance, many urban youths in the state today mainly use English for communication, and over time, more will likely adopt it as their primary language over their native tongues (as is also their right). When that happens, will it still be wrong to question the relevance of the ADCs?

It is also dishonest to argue that indigenous faiths specifically deserve to be abandoned due to certain terrible practices while ignoring the fact that Christianity, the adopted faith, has similar baggage, with heretic-burning and killing of non-believers being well-known examples. Yet, I doubt anyone would argue that converts should embrace these aspects as well. I also fail to see the point of bringing up the RSS here, as they have zero relevance and involvement in this issue (perhaps it was an ad-hominem retort, but I digress).

Furthermore, dismissing these concerns by saying, "This is how the Constitution says they have to function" is disingenuous. Even Warjri agrees that the current structure of these bodies—where the very people they regulate and tax (non-tribals) have no say in their elections—is

discriminatory and undemocratic. Thus, the system is far from perfect or sacrosanct. Sadly, in a state where accountability and fair treatment are alien concepts, any reform seems unlikely—especially when non-tribals bear the brunt.

As it stands, the ADCs appear to be little more than over-glorified commerce regulatory authorities—policing small businesses run by non-tribals while doing little to curb larger entities that exploit loopholes to operate. Masquerading as custodians of culture, they blatantly discriminate against non-tribals while doing little to protect tradition. Of course, these bodies also consume significant resources under the pretext of culture, further taxing the reserves of our already impoverished state (much of which is ironically provided through the taxes of the non-tribals themselves and the Centre). While it may be an unachievable fantasy given Meghalaya's history and governance, perhaps we could use Musk's DOGE here too—to audit and purge the deadweight from these bloated institutions, and eliminate their discriminatory, undemocratic functioning.

Yours etc.,
N K Kehar
Shillong-3

Reviving our Shillong Observatory Hill

Editor,
A few years ago, I visited Hong Kong and my Chinese

friend took me for a visit to the Hong Kong Observatory Hill which overlooks the city. I was so impressed by the beauty of the place and the spectacular sight it offers of the great city. The place is characterized by a motorable road but reserved for pedestrians. It is a road constructed all along the hill overlooking the city. I was told that the British made it when Hong Kong was under their governance. Recently I happened to visit Darjeeling city and there again I took a trip to another observatory hill constructed by the British during the colonial years. Here again, I realize that the road that runs around the hill is overlooking Darjeeling city. Both observatory hills seem to have been the creative undertakings of the British. It is evident that these places were made to serve as viewpoints of the cities. They are wonderful locations for the citizens and tourists to go perambulating in the evening hours, breathing the fresh air away from the hustle bustle of city life and from its pollution. They are wonderfully decorated with a variety of exotic plants and flowers as well as resting places. All along you have good restaurants and cafeterias etc. They are beautiful places to spend leisure time as well as have a healthy walk.

Incidentally, my attention turned to our own city of Shillong. I asked myself, why didn't the British do the same here as well, for we also have the Shillong Peak overlooking the city. Then I realized that they had actually made a similar observatory hill on the slope of our Shillong hill.

There is a motorable road above Malki Khliehshong just a little above Pastoral Centre (Red Gable) which runs across up to Lawjynriew if I am not mistaken. The road is still there but sad to say that it has been left abandoned for decades now. Elderly people have informed me that during British rule that road was very much functional and British families used to frequent the place.

I personally feel that we have wasted a great opportunity by abandoning this historical spot. Darjeeling Observatory Hill for example, attracts thousands of people and it is one of the important and most frequented tourist locations. It is an income generation for the Tourism Department as well as for the local people. Here in Shillong, we have instead ignored our own observatory hill; what a shame? I believe all Shillongites will agree with me that the Government should do something to revive this heritage road and turn it into a bustling tourist spot. One or two small bridges need to be repaired and the road needs to be redone. The place could be done up aesthetically so as to become the pride of our city. In fact, an approach footpath could be made from this road up to the Shillong Peak viewpoint and of course if a cable car (ropeway) were to be installed it would be even more wonderful. This Government is giving a lot of emphasis to the tourism sector, so I hope something concrete would come up in this place, sooner than later.

Yours etc.,
Barnes Mawrie sdb,
Via email

Addressing water shortage through rainwater harvesting

Editor
For the last couple of weeks, it has been reported that there will be potable water shortage in and around Shillong. The Government is requesting those building new structures residences, commercial and institutional structures to make provisions for rain water harvesting.

The MUDA should be specifically told to incorporate this in their permission for building construction. The construction site map should be properly checked to see if that provision is included in the site plan. The Government should construct reservoirs wherever the land is available to avoid this problem.

The urgency is because there is apprehension that in the near future there will be acute water shortage as water sources are drying up due to climate change. There should be "nullas" to feed the existing sources and reservoirs of rain water in Shillong which has more than 4000 mm of rains every year. We should not suffer from water shortage if proper steps of harvesting rain water are undertaken.

Yours etc.,
SL Singhania,
Shillong

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.

"Surprise is the greatest gift which life can grant us."

— Boris Pasternak

The Shillong Times

Vol No. LXVII No. 208 SHILLONG, TUESDAY, MARCH 11, 2025

Efficiency tracking imperative

THE report by the Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council showing Meghalaya to be among states with shortest working hours comes as no surprise. People in government offices even today don't turn up before 11 am especially in areas beyond the state capital where monitoring is almost absent. Add to that the absenteeism for various reasons such as attending funerals and other responsibilities particularly of women employees and productivity is at its lowest ebb. While senior officers particularly those from the IAS work beyond the scheduled hours to meet deadlines, their ability to keep track of employees working under them and to enforce discipline and punctuality has always been lax. It is to make up for this staff lethargy that the Government of Meghalaya has had to appoint several contractual employees from whom they extract work. Measuring how much work each government employee turns in at the end of the day is a fair practice and taking note of poor performance and needless delays in addressing public grievances is an imperative in Meghalaya.

For far too long the lackadaisical attitude of staff has been tolerated. Perhaps ministerial staff have to be on their toes because the ministers have to often work overtime. But others down the line especially at the Block level leave much to be desired. Block level staff are supposed to take government schemes to the last mile and to explain to farmers and other stakeholders how they can access the schemes and what documents are needed to benefit from those schemes. The fact that Meghalaya still has a large section of population who refuse to enrol for the Aadhar card and some even refuse to register themselves as voters on account of some beliefs preached by overzealous Christian denominations clearly indicates that the government system has not been able to penetrate deep enough and to break through that veil of disinformation.

Time has come for the Government of Meghalaya to put in place a system of measuring efficiency from their employees. After all, there is such a thing as value for money. Spending taxpayers' money on non-productive staff is what has impeded development in this state. People in distant villages face several barriers when they visit government offices. Most often they are treated like underdogs waiting for a favour instead of the public with the right to demand service from public servants. This is due to peoples' lack of awareness about their rights and government employees believe in the adage 'the less people know the better it is for them'. The reason why government jobs are so valued is because of the easy-going nature of the work and the lack of a monitoring system. While private institutions have a key-in system for the time of entry and exit of employees there is no such system in government service. Unless such strict measures are adopted the Chief Minister's promise of the 10 billion dollar economy will remain a pipe dream.

Constitutional Challenges and Economic Consequences of KHADC's Trading Ban

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

As anticipated, the first announcement made by the Executive Committee (EC) of the newly formed Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council (KHADC) was related to trading licenses. The new Executive Committee, led by the Voice of People Party (VPP), announced a ban on issuing new trading licenses to non-tribal traders for trades that Khasis can engage in. Unlike the demand by the Hynniewtrep Youth Council (HYC) asking KHADC to come up with provisions specifying that trading licences will be issued only to genuine non-tribals who are permanent residents of the state, the news report of the ban did not specify if it extended to only those who are not permanent residents of the state. So, it's reasonable to assume that the ban is applicable to both the permanent as well as non-permanent non-indigenous residents.

Trading license has always been a highly lucrative political issue for all parties. When the Titosstarwell Chyne led EC was about to be brought down, the CEM (Chief Executive Member) himself, i.e., Titos, went on a personal inspection of trading licenses in order to identify non-tribal traders (non indigenous non-ST people) who were operating without one. After Pyniaid Sing Syiem became the new CEM, he did the same thing. He also went on a personal inspection spree to identify non-indigenous traders trading without obtaining a proper license. Unless the raid led by Titos failed to identify any unlicensed traders that Pyniaid's team was aware of, the new raid conducted just a few weeks later made little sense. Instead, the tradition of harassing the non-indigenous population in the guise of trading license can be described as the initiation ceremony for proving to the local Khasi community their loyalty to the cause of the jaidyriew. This time, however, rather than focusing on identifying traders operating without a license, the new VPP-led EC has declared its objective of completely eliminating the issuance of new licenses to non-indigenous traders. Although the directive was phrased with conditional language, implying that only trades where the local Khasi population can compete will be impacted, it could effectively exclude all future business opportunities for the non-indigenous population.

The VPP-led EC is technically correct in stating that no new trading licenses will be issued for trades that local Khasis can undertake. According to section 3A of the 'The United Khasi - Jaintia Hills District (Trading By Non Tribals) Regulation,

1954' the EC can refuse to grant a license if "there is any tribal who carries on the same trade or is willing to carry on such trade for which the application of license is made." So, there are two parts to this statement: license can be denied if there are competing applicants for the same trade, and license can be denied if any indigenous tribal is willing to engage in the trade for which the non-indigenous trader is also applying. The first one is clear, though it has a lacuna, while the second is much more complex. However, both could result in the denial of all legitimate license requests.

I completely agree that when it comes to granting a trading license, preference should be given to an indigenous trader over a non-indigenous trader. The complication which arises, however, is that indigenous traders do not need to apply for trading licenses. They simply need to get the permission of the Rangbah Shngong for setting up their businesses. So, the competition never arises because they are never on the same platform applying for the same trading license. Also, even if there are already indigenous traders carrying on a similar trade, how does one decide if there is no space for an extra trader, whether indigenous or non-indigenous? Has the KHADC already mapped out the quantum of business that already exists and have concluded based on a rigorous calculation that any new business would lower the rate of profit of existing businesses? Maybe the market can accommodate more traders and therefore there is no danger to the rate of profit falling below a level which becomes unsustainable for existing businesses. If the market cannot accommodate more businesses, then we must exclude both indigenous and non-indigenous traders. Regardless of whether the business is operated by indigenous or non-indigenous traders, the market will naturally regulate itself if there is harmful competitive behavior. However, excluding non-indigenous traders without adequate data and analysis is comparable to racial profiling, which is unlawful.

One thing which one must not forget is that the legislation which regulates trade by non-indigenous non-tribals is about regulating the trading, not preventing them from carrying any business at all. This completely goes against Article 21 of the Indian Constitution which states that "No person shall be deprived of his life or personal liberty except according to procedure established

by law". As per the Olga Tellis v. Bombay Municipal Corporation (1985) judgment, right to livelihood is an integral part of the right to life under Article 21. Of course there are reasonable restrictions such as provided under, 'The United Khasi-Jaintia Hills District (Trading by Non Tribals) Regulation'. But can this Act completely strip non-indigenous traders of their right to earn a livelihood under a valid and just reason? That could amount to violating Article 21, which is one of the fundamental provisions in the Constitution. The chances of violating the Constitution are greater in the second scenario when requests for licenses can be rejected if there is an indigenous trader "willing to carry on such trade" as desired by the non-indigenous trader.

In the second scenario, there is an assumption that indigenous traders are willing to do the trade which they are not currently engaged in. Take any trade, and we will find that there is potential for an indigenous person to participate in it. This includes any small business like selling on the footpath to setting up large factories which can employ hundreds of people. For example, in the last election, the richest candidate was Metbah Lyngdoh, who had declared assets worth 146.31 crore. There will be many who did not contest elections, but whose net worth will be much higher than this. So, theoretically, there is no business in the state that an indigenous person, if they want to, cannot do. So, following the logic of "willing to carry on such trade," KHADC can reject every additional license request from non-indigenous traders. However, in reality, indigenous traders may not wish to pursue that business, either because they are already involved in other ventures or simply do not have an interest in it. The second category will include salaried people who have no acumen or desire to enter trades which requires a lot of effort and fortitude. Also, even if there are indigenous traders who want to enter the business, the market could accommodate new traders, both indigenous and non-indigenous. Therefore, rejecting requests for new licenses would be based not only on hypothetical reasoning without any data or analysis but also in opposition to market demands.

Does it mean that non-indigenous traders will stop doing business? As highlighted in the emotional letter sent to the newspapers by Homnath Gautam, which expresses concern over the current restrictions faced by the permanent non-indige-

nous non-tribals—who are already barred from purchasing land in areas under the Sixth Schedule, accessing government employment opportunities, and engaging in land transactions between non-tribals—this new directive would further prevent them from participating in trade as well. In order to survive they will be forced to leave the state in search of a dignified life elsewhere. Is that the goal? To drive the entire non-indigenous population out of the state, believing that doing so will solve all the problems?

Apart from the legal challenges that the ban might face, there are also unintended consequences which are not positive for the KHADC. One likely implication of such a directive is that it will lead to the proliferation of "Trading in Benami" which means the carrying on of any trade by a non tribal in the name or on behalf of a tribal. Non-indigenous traders who have the capital and the expertise will simply do business under the name of an indigenous person. There is anecdotal evidence suggesting that such illegal businesses are widespread. It not only results in a loss of revenue but also fosters an environment of corruption. Indigenous traders pay nominal professional fees, but license fees paid by non-indigenous traders generate a lot of revenue, ranging from a minimum of 3000-5000 rupees to a maximum of 40,000-50,000 rupees. The District Councils already lack sufficient funds. Disregarding the fact that right to livelihood for everyone is guaranteed by the Constitution, the ban is an economically disastrous move that will only lead to an increase in corrupt practices. This situation will be worsened by the fact that limited financial resources will make it challenging to pay staff salaries, cut spending on development projects, and shrink the state's overall tax base. The expansion of an illegal economy will primarily benefit the 'high level', while ordinary people will bear the consequences.

The decision to halt the issuance of new licenses to non-indigenous traders for trades that, theoretically, local Khasis can engage in is a reflection of jaidyriew politics. VPP, as the foremost jaidyriew party currently, had to take a stand on this. But it contradicts the Indian Constitution and their purported fight against corruption. It will be interesting to see what happens if someone challenges this directive in court. Will the ban be upheld, or will it be overturned?

(The views expressed in the article are those of the author and do not reflect in any way his affiliation to any organisation or institution)

Challenges and the way forward State of the Indian National Congress (INC) in Meghalaya

By Divesh Ranjan

The Indian National Congress (INC) in Meghalaya has endured a tumultuous political journey since 2021. In a significant blow, all 17 of its MLAs defected to other parties—including the Trinamool Congress (TMC), the National People's Party (NPP), and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)—ahead of the 2023 Assembly elections. However, INC made a surprising comeback, securing five MLA seats with a 13.71% vote share and later winning the Tura parliamentary seat with an impressive 56.96% vote share. This resurgence underscores two key aspects: the party's resilience in the state and the presence of a committed voter base that remains ideologically aligned with the Congress.

itize leadership change and promote young, dynamic leaders who can engage with the electorate. The party has competent figures who can help reestablish its relevance and drive growth.

Why INC Failed in the District Council Elections

The INC's poor performance in the KHADC elections signals a broader issue—Khasi Hills voters were unconvinced by the party's current leadership. A critical misstep occurred in June 2023 when Ronnie V. Lyngdoh, as Leader of the Opposition, led INC in supporting the NPP during the vote for the Chief of the Executive Committee in the KHADC. Instead of aligning with the United Democratic Party (UDP) or maintaining neutrality, INC's decision to

To regain lost ground, INC must critically assess the reasons behind its recurring setbacks and its failure in the District Council elections.

Strategic planning based on this evaluation is crucial for future electoral success. The party's instability—exacerbated by frequent defections, often engineered by rival parties—aligns with the BJP's broader "Congress Mukh Bharat" agenda. Moreover, INC has been vulnerable to what appears to be a coordinated pseudo-attack. Initially, TMC aggressively expanded into states like Meghalaya, Tripura, Goa, Assam, and Bihar, drawing away INC leaders and voters.

Despite this revival, INC suffered another setback in August 2024 when three of its MLAs defected to the NPP. This significantly weakened the party's presence, particularly in the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council (KHADC), where it now holds no representation. Currently, Ronnie V. Lyngdoh, representing Myllem, is the party's sole MLA in the state assembly.

To regain lost ground, INC must critically assess the reasons behind its recurring setbacks and its failure in the District Council elections. Strategic planning based on this evaluation is crucial for future electoral success. The party's instability—exacerbated by frequent defections, often engineered by rival parties—aligns with the BJP's broader "Congress Mukh Bharat" agenda. Moreover, INC has been vulnerable to what appears to be a coordinated pseudo-attack. Initially, TMC aggressively expanded into states like Meghalaya, Tripura, Goa, Assam, and Bihar, drawing away INC leaders and voters. However, TMC's sudden withdrawal from these regions suggests that its true objective was not genuine expansion but rather weakening the Congress.

back the NPP blurred party distinctions, pushing voters toward the Voice of the People Party (VPP).

This move sent a strong message to the electorate—that there was little difference between INC and NPP. As a result, voters began questioning why they should support INC when the party itself was aligning with its rival. This perception shift led to a significant voter migration to the VPP. INC failed to recognize the loyalty of its core supporters, many of whom strongly opposed the NPP. By playing a contradictory role—acting as the opposition in the Assembly while supporting the ruling party in the District Council—the Congress compromised its credibility and lost public trust.

This strategic blunder was compounded by other factors, including internal weaknesses, delayed candidate selection, lack of grassroots mobilization, and an inability to counter the leadership crisis. As a result, INC has lost its presence in the KHADC, further diminishing its influence in the region.

The Way Forward for INC

To rejuvenate itself in Meghalaya, the Indian National Congress (INC) must appoint a new state president who embodies fresh energy and a clear vision. The party requires dynamic and outspoken leaders capable of engaging the electorate while being guided by experienced figures like Pala. A strong grassroots movement is crucial to reconnect with voters, complemented by comprehensive structural reforms at every level of the organization.

Meghalaya's electorate has not entirely abandoned the INC; their shift to the VPP was driven more by necessity than allegiance. With the right leadership and strategic direction, the Congress can reclaim its position as a party of balance, development, and inclusivity. As the influence of money power in Meghalaya's politics diminishes and voter awareness grows, the INC has a prime opportunity to stage a comeback through a well-crafted and strategic approach.

Despite recent setbacks, the road to recovery remains open. However, the party's leadership must act decisively, confront past missteps, and take bold measures to restore public trust and reinforce its organizational strength.

The writer is Political Advisor and Election Strategist, Contact: Divesh.ranjan9@gmail.com

Letters to the Editor

Digging up a newly constructed PWD road

Editor,

I would like to highlight the painful sight of random digging of PHE water pipes on the black-topped roads. This is now a common yearly occurrence and much has been written about it over the years but nothing appears to be done.

What is most disturbing is the haphazard digging up of the PWD roads. A most recent and ongoing case to point is the digging up of the road from Nongrim Hills Petrol Pump towards MES. The digging up has been done along the centre of the road and not along the roadside as we were wont to see in earlier days.

Firstly, let me point out that this road is a Bituminous Macadam road and carpeting has been done using specialized machines, ensuring both uniform compaction and uniform spread of materials. What this central digging has achieved is compromising the structural strength of the road along the dug-up trenches. How can the dug-up trenches be compacted to obtain the required base strength? How can re-laid bituminous material retain the homogenous composition of the original material and structure? The re-laid material is normally

a Pre-mix carpeting which is incongruous with the original BM structure and does not blend at all. We have seen the deteriorated road condition in Rynjah Market where the pipes were also laid along the center of the road. It is visible to the naked eye even today.

Secondly, why and when was digging up the centre of the road to lay pipelines allowed? Do the PHE or JJM Guidelines stipulate this? What about the PWD- does it have no say in the matter or is it's brief simply to allow its roads to be dug up in whichever way others may desire? There has to be some spine and some say somewhere.

Thirdly, what is transpiring shows also a glaring lack of planning and coordination between the concerned departments. As pointed out, the Nongrim Hills Petrol Pump - MES road has been recently blacktopped, and now it has been dug up again. The same digging up is observed along the Nongrim Hills - Bethany Hospital road. A point that must be looked at also is the absolute lack of concern for the commuters. We must question why this work was not done a few months earlier ahead of the commencement of the school and college sessions. This action is not only inconveniencing the pedestrians but also likely to endanger lives and safety of school-going children.

Fourthly, we as citizens must be alarmed at the wasteful spending of tax-payer's

money. A road is first laid with tax-payers money. It is dug up within the month. Then it is again re-laid and repaired with tax-payer's money again. This is utterly crass wastage of public money, which could have been well-spent somewhere else.

Finally, it is not only the pipelines, but also the digging up and construction of drains being seen now that is an eyesore and an undue harassment all around. No Entry, One-way regulations and such like especially during school timings is nothing but sheer harassment. We the public, are made to suffer because of the incompetence and insensitivity of the implementing agencies and the deaf indifference of those with the ability to influence."

Yours etc., D Lyngdoh, Via email

A riposte to belief system, faith and ADCs

Editor,

Apropos the letter on belief system and faith and ADCs by NK Kehar (ST March 10, 2025), I found the riposte convoluted, when broaching about a non-sequitur oligarch like Elon Musk and his DOGE (Department of Government Efficiency) where even cabinet members in the US are themselves up in arms.

But I'll try to make sense, since the letter also states that, "I missed the point."

I don't know what Kehar's primary grouse with the ADCs is. I guess it is about his legitimate grievance against the ADCs narrowing down the scope of business for non-tribals. He's free to critique, lambast or be preachy to the ADCs about their functions and dysfunctions. I give him my best wishes.

I however continue to disagree about mixing ADC's mandates with belief system and faith. This discussion needs to go beyond a letter to the Editor in some other forum or fora where we can openly debate this subject.

Yours etc., Rudi Warjri, Via email

The Price of Pink: Why Women Pay More for Less

Editor,

We've just wrapped up Women's Day with all the right empowerment slogans, motivational memes and the "You go, girl!" speeches. But now that the high has settled, let's talk about the actual cost of being a woman. And I don't mean metaphorically, I mean the literal, wallet-draining cost of existing in a female body.

An article in Mint recently reminded me of something I've noticed but never fully

processed: women are paying extra for the exact same products and services men use. This isn't a wild feminist conspiracy, it's an actual, documented phenomenon called the Pink Tax. It's the reason a razor suddenly becomes more expensive when dipped in pastel colours. Men's razors are built for efficiency, sharp, sturdy and priced like a practical tool. Women's razors? They come in soft pastel shades, with ergonomic curves (we never asked for), and a price tag that suggests they possess magical hair-removing properties!

It's the same story with clothing, a women's plain white T-shirt somehow costs more than the men's version, despite having less fabric (what are they charging us for, the air between the threads?).

Then there's the haircut paradox. A man with long hair can stroll into a men's salon and get a trim for what we'd call pocket change. But if he steps into a women's salon, suddenly his hair is no longer just hair...it's a complex, high-maintenance entity demanding Bond-level precision and architectural layering. Same hair, same scissors, but suddenly, the price tag suggests a masterpiece is being sculpted.

Face wash? The men's version says "Removes Dirt", the women's version says "Infused with ancient Himalayan rose extracts for a celestial glow." Translation? It does the exact same thing, but at twice

the price. Because apparently, glowing costs extra!

And here is where it hurts the most: we're not just paying more, we're also earning less. The gender pay gap ensures that while a man pays Rs. 200 for a deodorant, we pay Rs. 280 for ours and we do it while earning 25% less than him.

So how do we fix this? First, get mad. Second, get smart. Start checking price tags like your life depends on it - because it does. Buy the men's razor - it actually works better, probably because it wasn't designed to look "cute." Grab the men's deodorant - if you can handle the lingering scent of "Arctic Thunder" or "Wolf Rage" and the occasional puzzled stare. And when it comes to T-shirts? Go for the men's section. Billie Eilish does, and let's be honest, they're more comfortable. Also, compare brands. Some don't play these ridiculous pricing games. Support them. Call out the ones that do. And maybe next Women's Day, instead of sentimental hashtags, perfume, chocolates, and floral tributes, we demand something actually worth celebrating, like fair pricing.

Yours etc., Ellerrine Diengdoh, Via email

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

"Today is the only day. Yesterday is gone."
— John Wooden

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No. 209 SHILLONG, WEDNESDAY, MARCH 12, 2025

Development, doles

THE seemingly rudderless state of this nation is amply reflected in the 'doles raj' that is ruining the economies of several states while the central government is simply looking the other way. Consider the scenario in Maharashtra, where the BJP seized power last year by promising the moon to the electorate in the form of doles to several vote banks in the society. Reports say the state's first budget subsequent to the Mahayuti government's win in the 2024 assembly polls records a record high debt of 9.3 lakh crore, the steepest-ever revenue deficit of 46,000 crore, and a paralysis on the developmental front. No major new scheme has been announced and huge additional taxes have been imposed on the people - including the poor - to fetch additional revenue to carry forward the governance system.

The government is taking more from the people than it is giving to them. Worse, with egg on its face, the Devendra Fadnavis-led BJP-NCP-Shiv Sena alliance government has gone back on its word on two major fronts - a stipend scheme for women and girls; and a farm waiver for farmers - two principal vote banks that have now been fooled. The allocation for the Ladki Bahin Yojana has been cut by 10,000 crore compared to last year's funding. The government also did away with the Shiv Bhojan, a free meals scheme for the poor. Admittedly, the BJP had not been indulging in the doles raj style of wooing the voters, while the regional parties run by unscrupulous leaders with no commitment to national causes carried it to critically high levels. In each state that indulged in doles raj, development suffered. The southern states - a hotbed of regional politics - played mayhem with this practice. Developmental projects suffered hugely in these states in recent years. The Congress seized Karnataka from the BJP by adopting such tactics, and Andhra Pradesh's wily Chandrababu Naidu played the same card and outwitted his rival.

Taking lessons from these poll victories, the ruling party at the Centre too chose to ignore national interests and made huge offers to the electorate, courting especially women and farmers. The BJP government at the Centre is not working wonders in most fronts and has not been able to bring change in any significant way in the last over 10 years of the Modi rule other than for an infrastructural push - and huge cuts from these for the saffron party's poll funds. The NDA government's main credit and reason for sustainability is that the economy has not been mismanaged, unlike the pitiable scenarios in India's immediate neighbourhood. But, by unwittingly experimenting with the doles raj system in state assembly polls, and having tasted success as in Maharashtra, the BJP and also the Congress would again be tempted to undercut national interests for their immediate electoral gains. Excesses of any kind must be arrested through effective intervention by the Supreme Court.

Letters to the Editor

Budget lacks roadmap to self-sufficiency & financial freedom

Editor,
First of all, I appreciate the Chief Minister bringing graphs to the Assembly as it helps us understand how he sees things.

The CM, in his speech on March 10, 2025, justified the loans of the state, by terming transfers from the Centre as "our rightful resources." What he is saying is that out of the total money that the state receives in this budget, only 12% is from loans, while the rest is money received from central schemes and from the state's own resources. And that therefore, in light of this, we should dispense with the idea that the growth of our expenditure is fuelled by loans. And that we should not have any ill feeling towards the state's debt.

Firstly, our state in itself operates on a huge revenue deficit. That is, our expenditure hugely exceeds the receipts from our own resources. In 2024-25, it is only because of transfers from the Centre that we had a revenue surplus. This transfer from the Centre is what the CM calls "our state's rightful resources." Yes, the Constitution does mandate sharing of taxes by the Centre with the states, and also for providing grants, but these are still transfers from the centre. Hence we can call it

the state's rightful resources, but the point is that we owe a huge part of our revenue receipts (more than 70%) to transfers from the Centre, and this means our State lacks self-sufficiency in its own resources.

What the people of the State long for economically is self-sufficiency and financial freedom. Hence, what we see when we look at the state's borrowings, is that we have neither self-sufficiency nor any roadmap to financial freedom. The CAG report last year revealed that the State is taking new loans to repay the existing debts. When the State has to resort to borrowing to repay old loans, isn't that the definition of debt trap?

So, by saying that we have a high percentage of non-loan receipts because transfers from Centre are state's rightful resources, and therefore justifying taking loans, I feel the CM is disregarding the aspirations of the people for the State to be self-sufficient and financially free. If we need transfers from the Centre to have a revenue surplus, or to close the deficit, then we are not self-sufficient. We are not growing or improving at all. What happens when the Union Government itself is burdened by its own debts and such transfers are squeezed? After all, more than 30% of the Centre's tax revenue goes to interest payments.

Over and above that, the CM justifies borrowings as it builds capital assets. But when the State has to take more loans to repay old loans, does it not mean that the revenue generated from such

This article is in continuation to my various other published articles dealing with the same issue. There is an unhealthy relationship between the State Government and the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council (KHADC) which I have observed at least since the time I was a member of the KHADC in 2009. There is a groundless cry of lamentation, even by some senior professors, that the legislative and administrative functions of the District Councils have been badly curtailed by the Government of Meghalaya through the provisions of Paragraph 12A. Hence, they opined that Paragraph 12A of the Sixth Schedule should be scrapped. Spurred by such a lamentation, a narrative arose in the recent past that led to an antagonistic relationship between the State Government and the District Councils. The emerging narrative seems to suggest that the Government of Meghalaya is some sort of a foreign authority that is antagonistic to the District Councils which on the other hand, they believe is a part and parcel of Khasi tradition! The also claim that the District Council should always take a stance in opposition to the State Government. That is a tear-inducing emotion indeed!

So who created this emotional narrative? In my analysis, this kind of narrative was created by leaders in the KHADC who had been members in the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly, but failed to make their mark at the State level, or were ousted from the Assembly by the people's mandate. Based on this false narrative and also the false hope that the Central Government shall bypass the State Government and provide Direct Funding to the District Councils for all development projects in the Sixth Schedule areas (practically, the whole territory of Meghalaya), these District Council members began to make laws after laws at frenetic speed to counteract the authority and functions of the State Government, in an attempt to show that the District Council is a constitutional authority at par with the State Government. Take for example, "The Khasi Hills Autonomous District (Village and Town Development Council) Act, 2021" which is full of flaws. I will point out some of these flaws. Section 4(8) says "After the formation of the Village Development Council or Town Development Council, the Dorbar Shnong shall seek the approval from the Executive Committee of the District Council through the Chief of the Hima." Section 5(6) says,

Equation between the State Government and ADCs in Meghalaya

By Fabian Lyngdoh

"The annual account of the Village Development Council or Town Development Council shall be audited by the Auditor appointed by the Chief and Dorbar of the Hima or by the Dorbar Raid as the case may be. The Executive Council of the Village Development Council shall report and place the audit annually in the Village General Council and to the Chief and Dorbar of the Hima." Section 24(1).

Further the Act says, the Executive Committee shall constitute a Local Area Planning Council in every constituency to be headed by the MDC representing the constituency to consolidate the plans prepared by the Village Development Council and Town Development Council and to prepare a draft development plan for the Constituency as a whole. Section 25(1), "...All grants, funds, and other financial assistance received from the Central Government, State Government and/or any other agency for the purpose of socio-economic development and poverty alleviation shall be spent only in accordance with and to achieve the purpose of this Act."

All the functions that the dorbars of the villages and towns have so far been doing directly with the departments of the State Government are enlisted in this Act of the District Council. The question is: are the village and town development councils meant only for implementing the schemes that come through the District Council, or also with all other schemes that the villages and towns receive directly from the State Government and Central Government? Does this Act cover the MNRGS scheme besides other schemes that the people usually receive directly from the departments of the State Government and which are implemented by the District Council Development Agency, and the Block Development Office? If that is the case, won't there be an overlapping or a clash of authority and functions with the State Government? Is the Chief of the Hima/Elaka equipped enough to deal with the projects and accounts of the many villages and towns within his jurisdiction? There are many other flaws in this Act and in other Acts of the KHADC; I leave that for others to study and analyse.

This unhealthy contest for authority between the State Government and the District Council would only create disputes and confusions among the people. Our farsighted leaders in the past have found that the authority

of the District Council within the State of Assam was miserably limited. Hence, they fought for a full-fledged Hill State, and through an arduous "No Hill State, No Rest" movement, they celebrated the achievement of their objective with great joy. It is said that the leaders discussed whether to retain the District Councils or not, and they arrived at the conclusion that they should be retained as training grounds for future MLAs. Paragraph 12A was inserted in the Sixth Schedule by the North-Eastern Areas (Re-organisation) Act, 1971 when the full-fledged State of Meghalaya was formed to regulate the proper functioning of the District Councils.

That was the perception and vision of our leaders in the past. But today, some self-styled leaders of the Jaidbynriew, are yearning for the golden age of autonomy that the District Council had within the State of Assam. The youth of today should realise that before the full-fledged State of Meghalaya was formed, the capital of Assam was in Shillong. If Meghalaya had not come into being, Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma, the present Chief Minister of Assam would be sitting in the Secretariat in Shillong. In the Assam Legislative Assembly in Shillong, there would have been hardly 8 (eight) MLAs representing the people of Khasi Hills, Jaintia Hills, and Garo Hills in the 134 member, Assam Legislative Assembly; and definitely, Assamese would be the official language, and the District Councils would have had no power or authority to do anything about it.

We hope that the present leadership in the KHADC would not make the District Council to function as an Opposition Party, or a pressure group against the State Government (whatever party is leading it), but would work in tandem with it, for the order and progress of the State as a whole. If there is a serious thing to be opposed, the opposition leaders in the Legislative Assembly, along with the people at large would do the needful because that would be a people's problem, and not only a District Council's problem. As ADC's in Meghalaya do not concern with the affairs of minority or micro minority populations, but with the majority tribal populations in the State, the ADCs should not compete with the authority of the State Government because the State Government too was constituted to see to the

affairs of the majority population in the State. Para 12A of the Sixth Schedule should in no way be a hindrance to the healthy coordination between the District Council and the State Government. This constitutional provision has a rationale to exist for facilitating public interests and as a safeguard against infringement of fundamental human rights of citizens. The currently popular narrative that the State Government has no jurisdiction in the Sixth Schedule areas, or that the State Legislature has no mandate to make laws on the subjects of the Sixth Schedule is a misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the constitutional provisions.

The ADCs in Meghalaya cannot dream to be Autonomous Territorial Councils like the Bodoland Territorial Council, and the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Territorial Councils because the autonomous districts in Meghalaya are not serving a minority population within a larger State, but they are with the State, making up the whole. The Assam Government has delegated a considerable number of the State's executive subjects to these Territorial Councils. But the same cannot be done in Meghalaya.

People who have a personal grudge with the State Government, or who have some personal political vengeance to carry out against some other political leaders; should not be given the opportunity to lead the District Council. The District Council is not the platform for some disgruntled politicians to avenge the wrongs they presume to have been put into at the State level. Mr Ardent Miller Basaiawmoit, President of the Voice of the People Party (VPP) has rightly said that the KHADC under the leadership of the VPP will, as far as possible, work in coordination with the State Government for the betterment of the people at large. He was criticised on social media for saying this by people who do not understand the ground realities of things beyond party-politics.

The Meghalaya State Government is supposed to work for the interests of the majority tribal populations in the State within the provisions of the Constitution, and the District Councils are not supposed to take a stance as a counterforce against the State Government. There should be a healthy relationship between the State Government and the District Councils, whichever parties are in the ruling in their respective domains. Let us hope for the best.

End Game in the Ukraine War: Still some way to go

By Ajay Patnaik

Within a month of Donald Trump assuming the Presidency of the US, there have been remarkable shifts in American policy towards Ukraine. What looked like a total US commitment to see the strategic defeat of Russia a few months ago, has now transformed into putting pressure on Ukraine to move towards a ceasefire and negotiate a peace deal. Suddenly, the new dispensation in America seems to be empathising with the Russian perspective and position on its conflict with Ukraine. The bulldozing of Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky in the Oval Office, pause in military aid to Ukraine and stopping intelligence sharing indicate that the US is strongly pushing for an early end to the war. Caught in this radical shift in the US position and meeting of American officials with their Russian counterparts in Riyadh and Istanbul, Ukraine has had to recognize this new reality and agree to the peace process without insisting on security guarantees. However, the story does not conclude here. There are many imponderables on the way to end the war.

The European powers have rallied together in support of Ukraine's war efforts and have promised to continue the supply of military and financial aid. This may not be enough for Ukraine to regain its lost territories, let alone inflict a defeat on Russia. Still, such support in military and financial terms could prolong the conflict for some time at least.

Secondly, the US policy is not in favour of empowering Russia to the extent that it becomes a hegemonic power in Eurasia. The US since the end of the Cold War, even during days of bohemie in the 1990s, never considered Russia as an equal and even treated it as a 'defeated' power. The fact that Moscow still had the largest nuclear arsenal and the capability to destroy the West has always bothered policy makers in Washington and the European capitals. As a result, the policy of containment continued even after the Cold War ended. In pursuit of this policy, the US/West expanded NATO eastward to Russia's borders, changed regimes that were friendly with Russia and installed more anti-Russian and pro-Western governments, for example in Georgia and Ukraine. As Russia pushed back against such Western policies, the proxy States were encouraged to stay away from any effort to normalise relations with Moscow. The Minsk II agreement of 2025 and Istanbul talks of 2022 are examples of this.

The thinking that Russia has to be contained still persists in the West. Trump's inclinations notwithstanding, he cannot probably go against the larger strategic goal of weakening Russia as a global power. He has even cautioned Russia with sanctions on banks and tariffs if the country does not agree to an immediate ceasefire.

However, Trumps pressure would be more effective with Ukraine than with Russia. Being a proxy State, Ukraine was totally dependent on Western military and financial aid, the bulk of which came from the US. Being a smaller country, it has experienced relatively more damage to its infrastructure, manpower and other resources. If the war lingers, further attrition is on the cards. So, America is actually doing Ukraine a favour by trying to stop this protracted war. Trump also pragmatically thinks that US financial resources could be put to better use domestically than in funding a war that Ukraine cannot win and Russia will not ultimately lose.

For Russia, the end of this conflict is desirable in many ways. It does not have an inexhaustible supply of men and materials to endlessly fight the war. At many levels sanctions are biting though not as much as the West desired. To escape the severity of sanctions, Russia has

depended more on China, which may look beneficial now but in the long run it could stymie Russia's power in Eurasia where China is already advancing rapidly with its economic heft. To escape from any potential Chinese economic grip, Russia needs to quickly end this possibility. This can be done by working to end the sanctions and resume trade and investment relations with Europe. Achieving that would depend on how soon a peace deal is signed with Ukraine. Now that the US is on board for a negotiated settlement the chances of peace are brighter.

Negotiations to end the war are not going to be easy. Both Ukraine and Russia would have their maximalist or extreme positions. Kyiv would demand the return of all areas under Russian control since 2014, including Crimea. Moscow would want complete control over Crimea and four other regions (Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia) it had declared as part Russia after a referendum there in September 2022. Moscow at the moment does not have complete control of these territories. It would expect Kyiv to cede the territories to Russian sovereignty.

The other sticky point could be security guarantees. Russia wants Ukraine out of NATO in future. Given the US statements on this issue, NATO may not include Ukraine as a member for now. But the situation may change in future with new political dispensations in the US.

Given past experiences on NATO expansion despite assurances, Russia may not accept such a 'commitment' at face value. It needs buffer zones to insulate itself from NATO reaching its frontiers, especially through its more than 1,900 km long border with Ukraine. Russia has tried this earlier, with two break-away regions of Georgia (Abkhazia and South Ossetia) declaring independence after the Russia-Georgia war of 2008.

Russia has military personnel and equipment stationed there. Similarly, the Transnistria region that broke away from Moldova in the early 1990s is a proxy state for Moscow. Russia also has heavily militarised its exclave of Kaliningrad on the borders of Poland and Lithuania which are NATO members. The Russian controlled areas in Ukraine would serve the same purpose. Thus, Russia would not depend on assurances from the West about NATO expansion and ring fence itself with buffer zones to prevent any future security shock.

But what about security guarantees for Ukraine? The European powers have suggested that they could undertake a peacekeeping role after the war ends. The length of the border and the amounts of personnel and equipment this required would be enormous and expensive. Many European countries may be reluctant to commit so much human, military and financial capital for this. Russia would be opposed to any European/NATO role in peace-keeping since those powers have been party to the war in different ways. Instead, the option of having a UN or international peace-keeping mission may be considered.

On the whole, it may not be easy to achieve a lasting peace, though Trump looks to be in a hurry. The pressure on Ukraine would work, since it has been totally dependent on the West to fight the war. Russia on the other hand has been fighting practically on its own. It has been under massive sanctions since 2014. It can live with a few more. If Russia cannot have the advantages it has won after three years of war it may not be prepared to conclude a peace deal.

(Dr. Ajay Patnaik is a retired Professor, Centre for Russian and Central Asian Studies at the Jawaharlal Nehru University). (Syndicate: The Billion Press) (e-mail: editorthebillionpress.org)

Hospital with a heart that cares

Editor,
My visit to the Apollo Trinity Medical Centre, a premier healthcare facility belonging to the renowned Apollo Hospitals group, in our own city, was an eye-opener, showcasing the marvels of modern medicine and the compassionate care that are the hallmarks of Apollo Hospitals.

On stepping into the premises, I was enveloped in an aura of excellence that the Apollo Trinity Medical Centre exudes. The state-of-the-art facilities are nothing short of impressive and are designed to ensure that patients receive the highest quality of medical care available. The cutting-edge diagnostic equipment and excellent patient care, reflect a commitment to providing world-class healthcare.

However, it's not just the technology and infrastructure that set Apollo Shillong apart. The true heart of this institution lies in its dedicated staff. The doctors, nurses, and support personnel work in seamless harmony, and their professionalism is matched only by their warmth. It's their smiles and comforting words that act as the first step towards healing, thereby setting the tone for a patient-centric experience that is both caring and efficient.

To witness the synergy of advanced medical technology and heartfelt compassion at

Apollo Shillong was truly inspiring. It reaffirms my belief that healthcare, besides being a science, is also an art—one that Apollo Trinity is mastering with each patient they attend to. The impact of their work is profound, not only enhancing health outcomes but also offering peace of mind to families in need.

This visit was enriching and left me wishing the team at Apollo Trinity Medical Centre in Shillong continued success in their noble mission. Their tireless pursuit of healthcare excellence is not only commendable but truly inspiring. Special commendation is due to the visionary Chairman and Founder Dr. Prathap C. Reddy and his team at Apollo Hospitals headquartered in Chennai, for pioneering such life-changing initiatives nationwide and beyond. Such institutions rekindle our faith in the future of healthcare.

In essence, Apollo Trinity Shillong is more than just a medical centre; it stands as a beacon of hope and an exemplar of what dedication and expertise can achieve. May the team continue to flourish, serving the community with unwavering commitment and passion, embodying the hospital's noble motto of "Touching Lives" every single day.

Yours etc.,
Chanmiki Laloo
Shillong-02

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

capital expenditure is clearly not enough to even service the debt.

In light of all this, all this talk of increased expenditure, high proportion of non-loan receipts, and 12% loan receipts, fail to grasp the one fact that the CAG has highlighted. And that is, that we are heading into a debt trap. We are not heading towards self-sufficiency or financial freedom. The budget has a Rs. 1970 crore fiscal deficit, but the state has to pay more than Rs. 6000 crores of the existing debt in the next five years, and even more after that. The borrowings and the capital expenditure do not generate enough revenue to service the existing debt and they do not come with a roadmap to financial freedom.

Yours etc.,
Kitdor H. Blah
Via email

Hindi not a national language

Editor,
This is with reference to the editorial, 'The language row,' (ST March 10, 2025) which I read and re-read several times. I again checked with article 343 of the Indian Constitution which speaks about the official languages of the Indian Union. I was wondering if there was any amendment to this article. Is Hindi the national language of India? If someone as erudite as you would be misled into assuming so, all the more the less educated ones of the country. With the continued promotion of Hindi at the expense

of other languages, many more languages, especially the smaller ones, would go extinct. Already the Gangetic belt is referred to as the Hindi belt as this language has subsumed the smaller languages of the region.

A person born in Tamil Nadu (or anywhere in India) should not have to travel anywhere else in search of work. If they move out for a white collar job, English, rather than Hindi would be of more help. Your claim that there are more job opportunities in Kolkata than in Tamil Nadu may not be backed by data. By focusing on English, the job market of almost the entire world is accessible and learning a third (or fourth) language may not be easy for everyone.

There are several students in Tamil Nadu who learn Hindi and even write exams through the Hindi Prachar Sabha but may not be able to communicate in Hindi as the language is not used commonly in the state.

However, of late, one feels a need to know Hindi as most of the waiters in restaurants, attendants in petrol pumps, labourers, etc. in Tamil Nadu are migrants who speak only Hindi and no other language. If English is spoken by all (like the Khasi vegetable and fish vendors) there may not be a need for a third language for the masses.

Yours etc.,
Caleb Harris,
Via email

(Editor replies: The word 'national language' was inadvertently used to define Hindi. The error is regretted.)

"In every walk with nature one receives far more than he seeks."

—John Muir

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No. 210 SHILLONG, THURSDAY, MARCH 13, 2025

Influx: Real, Imagined or Constructed

INFLUX is an issue that has propelled several politicians to power and affluence. Such politicians don the mantle of leaders making heroic speeches and painting themselves as saviours of a pathetic, dependent, scared, useless citizenry unable to fight their own battles, afraid of competition and looking up to politicians to save them from the looming, threatening prospect of becoming a minority in their homeland. Whether this is borne out by independent research based on evidence of facts and figures and carried out by a credible institution is no one's concern. It takes a war cry for things to start hotting up, more so during a run-up to the elections. At that time people look for saviours from their personal and economic predicaments, the solutions for which rest on effective governance. If the health and education systems are not delivering as they should, influx is not the reason. The reason is the breakdown of governance at the last mile. Lack of accountability of people entrusted with the task of making institutions work better is the problem. The weak link in the chain of governance is the absence of a tracking and monitoring process which drives non-government institutions to perform better with measurable outcomes.

Attempts by government past and present to bring the railways to the Khasi-Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya have been stymied by pressure groups of all hues and acronyms. The political system has proven to be without backbone and to acquiesce to the illogical and unreasonable demands of the sundry groups who believe that without their advocacy the people would be left helpless and hapless. In fact, such groups take root because people don't have the courage of conviction to speak their minds where it matters—in public platforms. Hence their voice is being usurped by these pressure groups who claim to speak on behalf of the citizenry.

Influx is a problem that no less a country like the USA has had to deal very sternly with. But that's because the USA has a robust system and well-documented evidence of illegal migrants. Those who violated the laws have been deported under very degraded circumstances. India needs to carry out the National Register of Citizens (NRC) for all states including Meghalaya to determine the number of illegal migrants living in this country and in Meghalaya and work on their deportation. Unless such steps are taken the bugbear of influx will continue to haunt this state and its people while politics will continue to be hijacked by pressure groups whose members inevitably join politics. In fact, being in a pressure group is a trajectory to politics. Very few have the courage to contest elections without the camouflage of a social worker to enter politics. The pressure group route to politics is tried and tested and has failed. People have enough wisdom to decide their own fates without surrendering their decision-making power to interest groups.

Shillong, with its breathtaking landscapes and vibrant culture, is increasingly burdened by traffic congestion, narrow roads, and inadequate public transport. For parents, the daily struggle to get children to school amid gridlocks and limited parking has become a daunting challenge. Amid this growing crisis, the Sustainable Transport and Efficient Mobility Society (STEMS) has emerged as a game-changer. Launched by the Government of Meghalaya in 2022, STEMS provides structured, sustainable, and affordable transport solutions, reducing congestion and emissions. At its core is a dedicated school bus service, offering parents a safe, reliable alternative to private vehicles and easing traffic pressure.

While STEMS is not a silver bullet for all of Shillong's transport challenges, its success so far indicates that structured, technology-driven transport solutions can make a significant impact on urban mobility. Its success has earned widespread appreciation, demonstrating that an efficiently managed transport system can revolutionize daily commutes.

From Concept to Change: Reinventing Urban Transport

What began as a pilot project has now become a key pillar of Shillong's urban transport system. Initially, 30 GPS-enabled, CCTV-monitored buses were introduced in Laitumkrah and Dhankehi, areas where a pre-launch survey estimated that 27,000 students commute daily. Designed for safety and convenience, these buses are equipped with trained caretakers, real-time tracking, and first-aid kits, providing parents with peace of mind.

STEMS was not developed in isolation but was shaped by insights from shared bus models across India. CEO Isawanda Laloo explained that the team studied services like Shutt (Delhi, Mumbai), City Flo (Mumbai), and Bangalore's school bus aggregation model, incorporating best practices while avoiding pitfalls to create a system suited to Shillong's urban landscape. Technology has been a key enabler of STEMS' success. The IT platform, initially based on NIC's Starbus, was customized with support from NIC Meghalaya and Uttarakhand, leading to the development of a dedicated app, caretaker app, online tracking, registration, and payment system - ensuring seamless access and monitoring for parents.

The initial response to STEMS was lukewarm, as acknowledged by Education Secretary Swapnil Tembe. However, he noted that demand has surged as parents and students recognized its unique benefits, rarely seen elsewhere in India. He emphasized that STEMS provides both convenience and security, ensuring students are safely escorted to school while parents receive real-time notifications on their mobile phones.

Despite initial scepticism, STEMS has gained strong public acceptance. Today, 900 students use the service, and demand continues to rise. With plans to double the fleet to 60 buses, the initiative is expected to further reduce congestion. However, urban mobility experts emphasize that long-term solutions must include better traffic law enforcement, road infrastructure improvements, and expanded public transport beyond school routes.

Shared Mobility: The Stats That Matter

The impact of STEMS is measurable. It is best understood through hard facts. Each bus accommodates 30 students, meaning that with the existing fleet of 30 buses, 900 students are transported daily. Considering that most private cars carry an average of two students per vehicle, STEMS has already eliminated approximately 450 private cars from Shillong's roads every day during peak school hours. Once the total fleet reaches 60 buses, the initiative is expected to remove 900 private cars daily during peak school hours.

The success of STEMS has inspired policymakers and stakeholders to think even bigger. Nongthymmai MLA Charles Pyngrope, recognizing the potential of the initiative, recently stated in the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly during the Budget Session, "If just 30 buses can bring noticeable relief to Shillong's traffic congestion, imagine what 300 buses could do." His idea aligns with that of STEMS, where an expanded fleet could potentially eliminate up to 4,500 private vehicles from Shillong's roads daily.

National Recognition: A Model for Other Cities

STEMS has earned both local approval and national recognition. In October 2023, Shillong was honoured at the 16th Urban Mobility India Conference and Expo in New Delhi as the "City with the Best Record of Public Involvement in Transport Planning." The award, presented to STEMS CEO Isawanda Laloo and her team, highlights the collaboration between community members, school authorities, parents, and key government departments, including the District Administration of East Khasi Hills, Shillong Traffic Police, and the Public Works Department. This achievement reflects Meghalaya's commitment to sustainable mobility and the hard work of the STEMS team.

This recognition has also sparked interest in replicating the model in other congested cities across India. As vehicle numbers and air pollution rise, Shillong's structured, technology-driven transport system offers valuable lessons. However, experts caution that awards alone do not ensure long-term success. For STEMS to remain effective, it must be continuously evaluated, financially sustainable, and expanded to serve the general public and government employees, ensuring a broader impact on urban mobility.

Monitoring to ensure that the contractor employs the necessary workforce and machinery. A clear, systematic approach must be adopted to complete the work in a timely and efficient manner. The safety and well-being of the people should be prioritized over profit and convenience.

The project, meant to be a symbol of progress, has instead become an example of poor planning and inefficiency. If immediate corrective measures are not taken, the struggles of the people will only worsen, and the project will remain stuck in an endless cycle of delays and inconvenience.

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request,
Via email

From Struggles to Solutions

Is This The Beginning Of The End Of Shillong's Traffic Jams?

By Bijoy A. Sangma

The Voices of Parents: A Community Perspective

I spoke with parents whose children use the STEMS bus service, and their experiences highlight its real impact. One mother, who previously struggled to get her child to school on time due to unending traffic snarls, shared her relief, saying, "My mornings are so much easier now. The bus arrives on time, and I can track my child's journey. No more worrying about being stuck in traffic or struggling to find parking."

Another parent emphasized the cost-effectiveness of the initiative, pointing out that STEMS is far more affordable than hiring private transport. However, some parents voiced concerns about limited route coverage, stressing the need for expansion to serve more schools and residential areas. Their feedback underscores the importance of continuous improvements to maximize STEMS' benefits.

Beyond Shillong: Expanding STEMS to Tura and Jowai

As STEMS grows in Shillong, other urban centres like Tura and Jowai face worsening traffic that demands similar solutions. In Tura, the district headquarters of West Garo Hills, congestion is rising due to increasing private vehicles. Even in 2022, at least 150 new vehicles were added to its roads each month - a number that has likely grown. Narrow roads and the lack of public transport have led to frequent gridlocks. Expanding STEMS to Tura could offer parents and students a safer, structured alternative, easing congestion and improving road safety.

Jowai, too, struggles with severe traffic in the town centre particularly during peak school hours, where narrow streets and heavy trucks compete for space, causing frequent bottlenecks. While infrastructure upgrades are essential, introducing STEMS buses could immediately reduce private vehicles on the road, providing much-needed relief.

Expanding the Vision: Public Transport & Govt Staff Services

With STEMS' success, discussions are underway to expand it beyond students. Shillong's limited public transport forces reliance on private vehicles, worsening congestion. Extending STEMS to the general public and government employees, including Secretariat staff, could remove hundreds of private cars from city roads during rush hours. Introducing eco-friendly electric and hybrid buses would further align Meghalaya's transport system with national and global sustainability goals.

Sustaining Impact: Scaling Solutions

While STEMS shows promise, its long-term success depends on careful planning, sustainable funding, route optimization, and public adoption. Financing future expansions - whether through government subsidies, public-private partnerships, or other revenue streams - is

crucial to keeping fares affordable while maintaining quality.

Beyond finances, expanding coverage, improving traffic management, and integrating multi-modal transport will maximize impact. Challenges like parking shortages, the need for smaller buses on narrow roads, and fleet expansion must be addressed. Encouraging more parents, commuters, and government staff to shift from private vehicles to shared transport will be key. Optimized routes, digital ticketing, and service expansion can further enhance STEMS' efficiency and reach.

Urban Mobility: Global Insights for Meghalaya

During my travels to London, Stavanger in Norway, and Singapore, I witnessed how efficient public transport transforms urban mobility. London's Tube and bus network, with real-time tracking and cashless payments, ensures seamless travel. Stavanger's Kolumbus system, with electric buses, app-based ticketing, and ferry integration, prioritizes sustainability and efficiency. Singapore's MRT and AI-driven traffic management set a global standard for congestion-free commuting. These cities prove that smart, well-planned transit systems, backed by technology and policy commitment, can revolutionize urban mobility - offering valuable lessons for STEMS' expansion in Shillong, Tura, Jowai and other places.

A Vision for the Future: Replicable Model for India

The Meghalaya government's STEMS Team led by CEO Isawanda Laloo deserves commendation for this transformative initiative. By integrating technology, urban planning, and community engagement, STEMS has created a structured school transport system that other Indian cities can replicate.

While no single solution can eliminate congestion, STEMS proves that well-managed, tech-driven public transport can make a measurable difference. As Shillong embraces smarter mobility, STEMS emerges as a model for sustainable urban transport - one that, if expanded wisely, could become a blueprint for cities across India.

Beyond the Horizon: The Next Leap in Urban Mobility

The success of STEMS highlights a key lesson: solving urban congestion requires smart transport, better infrastructure, and a shift towards shared mobility. Encouraging more residents to adopt public transport is vital for a sustainable future in Meghalaya's urban centres.

For STEMS to thrive, policymakers, urban planners, and citizens must ensure it remains adaptable, efficient, and financially viable. If managed well, it can transform Meghalaya's transport landscape and become a national model for sustainable commuting. For Shillong, Tura, Jowai, and beyond, shared mobility is the future - and STEMS is leading the way.

(email: bijoy.sangma@gmail.com)

Indigenous faith and the 6th Schedule

By Hammarsing L Kharhmar

The recent exchange between N.K Kehar and Rudy Warjri in the 'Letters to the Editor' section of the Shillong Times has been very interesting and provides valuable insight into the views and perspectives of a section of citizens of Meghalaya. A lot can be learned and understood from the dialogue. It is healthy and necessary. The discourse stemmed out of reactions to the statement made by the new EC of KHADC, which is proposing a ban on issuing trading licenses to non-tribals, for work that tribals can do. This spiralled into a debate between the above-mentioned writers on indigenous culture, beliefs and the Autonomous District Council's (ADC) role in their preservation. What particularly struck me is the statement by Rudy Warjri in his letter 'Belief System and Faith' (March 8th 2025) that "Nothing has been mentioned about belief and faith" in the ADC's and the 6th Schedule. This appears to be a fact, and this fact needs to be reflected upon and addressed, carefully and immediately.

It seems right from the start a decision was made on how the tribe should progress, by eminent leaders of the past. The architect of the 6th Schedule, the venerable Reverend JIM Nichols Roy, was a devout and proud Christian, having reinforced his new religious identity by adding a new Christian first name (James) and his wife's surname (Nichols) to his title (Roy), post conversion. He did not write his clan (Syiemlieh) in his surname. In a memorable speech in the constituent assembly debates, when arguing the case for Autonomous Councils for the hill tribes the Reverend expressed the following in one session, "I myself being a Hillman know what I feel. Being a Christian I want universal brotherhood everywhere." He was valiantly defending against being subsumed under a larger culture (Hinduism), but the irony here is that he himself had already chosen a culture (Western Christian culture) other than his own, to protect his people and his land. His defence or case did not make any reference to any sacred traditional belief and was mostly dedicated to the "egalitarianism" and food habits of the Khasi, which he pointed out were in contrast to the social structure of Hindus in the plains (aka caste system) and their eating habits.

This isn't a surprise though. As mentioned above, early on a decision had been made by several "tribals", who no longer follow the ancestral faith, that Belief and Culture are separate. This is a choice no one can or should interfere with or take away. However, for those who follow the Khasi faith, many facets of Khasi culture are deeply connected and even inseparable from the Khasi systems of belief. Therefore, it seems only-right and fair for new constitutional provisions to be introduced or significant amendments be made to the existing 6th Schedule to help and assist the Indigenous faith followers in keeping alive and advancing the indigenous culture. It is no secret that, if not for the Seng Khasi and Seif Raij, the indigenous culture of the Khasi - Jaintia Hills and the sacred beliefs upon which it has existed for millennia in these pristine hills, would be relegated to some academic articles and photos in museums.

I know it might seem unrealistic, but I firmly believe the Constitution has to be amended. Articles have been removed and Articles have been added in the past. The Constitution is not a static document. As I understand, the Constitution of India does not allow for reservation based on religion, but it allows for special benefits to be accorded to minority religious members and institutions. In all of this, the indigenous faith followers of the land, are left hanging, literally, neither here nor there, simply striving forth out of deep love and respect for what is theirs. But, this imbalance needs to change. I don't believe in taking away anyone's rights, but I do believe it is time for the members of the Indigenous faith community - "Khun Niam Khasi Niamtre" - to wake up and appeal for the scales to be balanced, in their favour, too.

Religion, is at the very heart, about the soul. The rites, rituals and ceremonies are born from and rest upon a belief in Divinity, understood from within. Beliefs born of the land and preserved and passed down through generations are deeply rooted to the land and environment. The indigenous culture preserves the indigenous religion and vice versa. And within the two, lives a unique identity. This undeniable fact, now universally acknowledged, can no longer be ignored. However, now that there is also open acknowledgement that the 6th Schedule or ADC's weren't meant to, or able to protect the indigenous faith, new legislation or laws are much needed. The current provisions are there mainly to protect the land and natural resources of the tribes, and I think they are more than sufficient as they are. What N.K Kehar stated is very true: "These faiths are 'truly' indigenous and found nowhere else."

The Centre and the State need to take notice and do what is right. The Indian state needs to accord special recognition to the Indigenous Faiths of the North East. A new department at the Centre which oversees this dire need, must be created for the long term security and stability of the region

plenty, we would go hiking into the forest and up the Laitkor hill. Along one of the streams there were three small waterfalls at a distance from each other, and at the bottom of one of them there was a pool where we enjoyed swimming. In summer we would collect mushrooms (Tit Syiar) from the forest and before Christmas we could get the "Tiew Christmas." The forest, although depleted now, is unspoiled environmentally, and is perhaps the only place in and around Shillong city that is still remaining so. Perhaps the Forest Department reclaiming the old road was a blessing in disguise. What the Government should do henceforth is to maintain the forest and rejuvenate the streams if the volume of water has decreased and to sustain them so that they can continue feeding water to the localities as mentioned. Let us keep this part of Shillong

Do not destroy the serenity still existing in this place by turning it to a bustling tourist spot for gain. Let it be one of the few legacies of Shillong that is worth leaving for the next generation.

Yours etc.,
L.M.F.Sohun
Shillong - 4.

Let us keep this part of Shillong

Let us keep this part of Shillong

Letters to the Editor

The Troubled Road

Editor,
The ongoing road construction of package 2 of JICA project from Myllem to Wahlyngkhat has become a nightmare for commuters, especially for those who rely on this route for essential travel. The project, which was expected to improve connectivity and ease transportation issues, is instead causing immense distress due to mismanagement and lack of proper execution.

One of the major setbacks in this project is the evident lack of manpower and necessary equipment. The company awarded the contract appears ill-equipped, with insufficient workers, tools and machinery to carry out the work efficiently. As a result, progress has been painfully slow and the quality of work remains questionable. Proper excavation and levelling require skilled labour

and adequate machines, but their absence has turned the construction process into a chaotic and unorganized effort.

Instead of following a systematic approach, excavation along the route is being carried out haphazardly. Work begins in one location, only to be abandoned midway as the focus shifts to another spot. This erratic method, resembling a "treasure hunt," leaves behind deep trenches, uneven surfaces and loose debris, making the road highly dangerous for motorists and pedestrians. Such an approach not only wastes time but also raises serious concerns about the competence of those handling the project.

The poor execution of the project has made daily travel a harrowing experience. For people who must use this route—students, workers, traders and especially the sick and pregnant—the condition of the road poses severe

risks. Ambulances struggle to navigate the uneven terrain, delaying urgent medical care. Pregnant women and elderly individuals face extreme discomfort due to the bumpy and unsafe road conditions. Even for regular commuters, the journey has become physically exhausting and mentally frustrating.

At this rate, the project is bound to face significant delays. The slow pace of work, combined with poor planning and lack of resources, suggests that completion will take much longer than expected. This not only increases the financial burden but also prolongs the suffering of those dependent on this route. Furthermore, if the work is not executed properly, the quality of the road may deteriorate faster, leading to further maintenance issues in the near future.

The authorities responsible for overseeing this project must intervene immediately. There needs to be stricter

monitoring to ensure that the contractor employs the necessary workforce and machinery. A clear, systematic approach must be adopted to complete the work in a timely and efficient manner. The safety and well-being of the people should be prioritized over profit and convenience.

The project, meant to be a symbol of progress, has instead become an example of poor planning and inefficiency. If immediate corrective measures are not taken, the struggles of the people will only worsen, and the project will remain stuck in an endless cycle of delays and inconvenience.

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request,
Via email

No to the Observatory Hill

Editor,
Apropos of Barnes Maw-

rie SDB's letter on "Reviving our Shillong Observatory Hill" (ST, March 10, 2025), there was a motorable road in the 70s and 80s connecting Motinagar and Upper Lumparing, Riat Laban, and further up to Sericulture Farm and Laban. It passes through thick forests on the upper reaches of Motinagar, Risa Colony, Cleve Colony and Malki up to Upper Lumparing. In the mid 70s, boys from Motinagar and Lumpyangd would meet in this jungle road and hold racing competitions for fun. There was no local sports club in those days. During the same time, (L) V. S. Jafa (IAS) was staying at his official residence in Motinagar. He and his family would go horse riding in the morning on this road.

Today, due to negligence, the Forest Department has reclaimed the motorable road, and the wooden bridges across the streams are no longer there. There was no

Observatory Hill on this road as described by Barnes Mawrie. Instead, there are several rough foot paths going up the hill from this road leading up to Laitkor. Only when you go further up in locations where trees are sparse can you see Shillong city. There is no evidence of any road or steps that were made to reach these locations to make them as observation points for the British.

The rough foot paths were formed by the feet of villagers from Smit and Nongkrem carrying their produce to lewduh over decades. I don't know if the villagers are still using these foot paths with the number of cars available now.

I disagree with Barnes Mawrie on turning this forest into a bustling tourist spot. It is a water catchment area which was feeding clean potable water to localities like Motinagar, Risa Colony, Malki etc. During my teens in the 70s, when rainfall was

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.

"To live is to think."

— Marcus Tullius Cicero

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No. 211

SHILLONG, FRIDAY, MARCH 14, 2025

Troubled neighbours

THE Islamic world in India's neighbourhood is unstable – with a series of incidents rocking terrorist-infested Pakistan; and the interim government of Bangladesh headed by Mohammad Yunus facing heavy odds against its survival. Pakistan, which nurtured terrorist outfits for decades, is now largely at the receiving end. The ambush of the Jaffar Express on its way from Quetta to Peshawar by Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) militants led to scores of deaths and a hostage crisis that lingered. That the ambush took place in a long tunnel made rescue operations difficult, though the army later claimed it killed the militants. The BLA, seeking Independence for Balochistan from Pakistan, has repeatedly been engaged in violent acts. The militants are posing a serious threat to not just the Pakistani establishment but also China. They are also seeking immediate withdrawal of the Chinese personnel and a stop to their investments in the region. A break-up of Pakistan is a stronger possibility today than at any time in the past. Allegations from the Islamic country that India's external intelligence agencies were fanning militancy in Balochistan are not supported by evidence. It is also possible that India's RAW might be alert and active against machinations of the ISI military intelligence of Pakistan, which played mayhem with life in Kashmir and beyond for many years. Afghanistan, free from US occupation and having attempted to ally with Pakistan some time ago, is now on a confrontational course with the Pakistani establishment that tried to fish in troubled waters there.

Without doubt, the ISI played a major role in the ouster of Bangladesh's popular prime minister Sheikh Hasina, who had to abdicate power and seek asylum in New Delhi in August last year. She and several Awami League leaders sought refuge in India in the immediate aftermath of the bloody takeover of the nation by students and youths. Muhammad Yunus, who took charge as chief adviser to the government, is now less confident of its survival. Several factors are undercutting the governance system there, with fears of a military takeover being too pronounced. A senior Awami leader's claim this week that Hasina would soon return as PM is perhaps aimed at giving a morale boost to the besieged party's rank and file. Large sections of the people in Bangladesh are set against chances of a domination of Bangladesh yet again by Pakistan and they are against the spread of militancy.

India is watching the scenario from close quarters. The attacks on Hindus in Bangladesh by the new dispensation's supporters have reduced, but their safety is still at stake. Any aggravation of the scenario against Hindus there would be invitation to trouble – a direct intervention by India. Pakistan, its hands full with the crisis situations on multiple fronts there, including a serious financial crisis, will not be in a position to play around to further muddy the waters in Bangladesh.

Is Meghalaya's progress derailed by misplaced resistance

By Patricia Mukhim

The continued resistance to railways on the plea of influx is a no-brainer since there is no clarity on whether influx has really taken place and if so where are those illegal settlers residing. The word influx makes one feel as if there is a wave of migration either from Bangladesh or from other parts of India. Whatever statistics are available show that the non-tribal population of Meghalaya is dwindling on account of many reasons, chief among which is the drying up of employment and business opportunities. Hence even non-tribals with a long history of having lived in this state since the time it was part of Assam have felt the need to move out in search of better opportunities. There is no state in this country where other Indians cannot work. There are hundreds of people from Assam, Manipur, Nagaland, Mizoram working in Goa, Hyderabad, Bangalore, Chennai, Kerala etc. Their services are needed there and even while the youth from Tamil Nadu, Kerala or Karnataka might be working in the north eastern states in banks and other institutions. This is the nature of life. It is futile to expect that Meghalaya alone can provide employment to every Khasi, Jaintia and Garo. The youth from here too must develop wings strong enough to fly and then land a job and work without being considered the other in his/her country.

These are the current realities and change is creating major disruptions. If our youth are not prepared for such disruptions and instead create "enemies" on whom they blame their inability to cope with competition then we are in for a long haul that would worsen the scene. Since 1979 the politicians in this state have created the "other" the external enemy who is out to take away their rightful space in the sun. This despite all the protective mechanisms. A student body then hijacked this agenda and the violence of 1979 happened. This was followed successively with violence against other minority groups until about 1992 when the embers of militancy were lighted up. After the militant outfits caved in and began talking peace, (although at what stage that peace talk is at is anyone's guess) now several pressure groups based in different districts have sprung up like mushrooms with fancy

acronyms.

All pressure groups thrive by creating a fear psychosis – fear of being marginalised – fear of losing jobs, losing land, losing women to the imagined "other." The fear creation drama is one that calls for a detailed analysis. To the average Khasi, fear is like a wall that cannot be scaled; its something that blocks progress. What they don't see is that a wall can be climbed if they put in the required effort. What makes us think that we are inferior to the "other" in terms of intelligence, ability to compete and ability to excel? Who has engrained that belief in our psyche. And why is it that our education system has not been able to erase that deep-seated assumption from our minds and that of the younger generation of Khasis? Its time for schools, colleges and universities to make the tribal students face their fears head-on instead of feeding their anxieties through populist ideologies that teach our youth to treat the 'other' as the enemy. There is a strong case for reframing and redefining fear and where it originates from.

Politics and political parties that exacerbate fear and push us to see everyone who is 'not like us' as enemies should be exposed. The current trend of politics that looks at the state of Meghalaya not as a part of the homeland of every Indian who was settled here much before 1972 but as an ethnic homeland of only the three tribes is a dangerous trajectory that defies the idea of India. We cannot for a moment forget that we are an integral part of India and its constitutional values. If we were to travel to Jharkhand – a tribal majority state and speak to non-tribals there, they don't feel the sense of alienation that non-tribals face in Meghalaya. They feel "Jharkhandi" and every bit a part of that state and contribute their mite to that state. But ask a permanent resident non-tribal here whether he/she feels part of Meghalaya and the answer is a studied silence which can be interpreted as the inability to even speak their minds.

How long can pressure groups who are not elected and who do not represent the mandate of the entire Khasi-Jaintia populace hi-

jack for instance the coming of railways? The only bogey of fear is "influx" and their answer to that is the Inner Line Permit (ILP). Have they done a comparative study of whether the ILP run states are more progressive than Meghalaya? Does Nagaland, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh or even disturbed Manipur get as many tourists as Meghalaya does? Do these ILP states have as many institutions of national importance like the IIM, NIFT, IIM, NEIGRIHMS amongst others? The reason that Shillong was chosen as the location for these institutions is because it has no ILP. Take the case of Mizoram which has a branch of the Indian Institute of Mass Communication (IIMC) there. The Institute is running with only 31 students. Is it viable in the long term? True the ILP mechanism has been largely eased with people arriving at the Aizawl airport filling up a form and paying Rs 350 for a permit. But that still is a deterrent to most Indians.

Instead of instilling a perpetual fear psychosis there have to be counter-forces to encourage our youth to act in spite of their fears. The youth need to identify the cause of the fear and take a step forward to face it. A small step like writing the first sentence for those that fear to write; speaking in public even if they tremble in the process; in fact anything that can shift the mindset from paralysis to momentum is a great step forward. Fear is created by those that seek to control our minds and our behaviour. It was a group of frightened individuals who attacked non-tribals with such violence in 1979 and 1982, 1987 etc. Those perpetrators were egged on by mind-control agents who did not appear in the forefront but gained from the anti-nontribal politics of that time.

As a society we need to ask a few questions. Why have so many pressure groups with unaccounted money that supports a lifestyle to be envied, sprung up? Their existence is proportionate to the number of youngsters who have been told they cannot get jobs because those are being taken away from them? By whom? No answer. The fear that they cannot do anything on their own and that they need pressure groups to ride on is what has given rise to so many of

these groups. None of these groups are registered which means they operate in a system of opacity. No one really knows how they sustain their activities and how they find the time to keep harping on what is failing in Meghalaya but have failed to tell us one thing that they have managed to get through their pressure tactics.

Its time to remind our youth that the most successful people in any field have one thing in common: they move toward fear, not away from it. They understand that discomfort is the price of progress. The entrepreneur who risks failure, the athlete who pushes through the pain, the artist who exposes their soul to the world – all of them feared if they could accomplish their mission. But they used fear to propel them against all odds.

The resistance to the railways is one of the most illogical things because a cost-benefit analysis will tell us that there are more advantages than disadvantages. At least the cost of living for many would be brought down due to a reduction in transportation costs. Let the public of Meghalaya decide for themselves and convey to the Government whether they are in favour of the railways. Give the public a platform to voice their feelings and concerns.

If we have elected a Government we ought to have some faith in it. True that sometimes governments could push through policies that are detrimental to us. In that case too let the public and not a few self-styled pressure groups make their voices heard. After all, we live in a democracy and have not surrendered our rights to third parties other than the government to run our lives.

Lincoln believed that you succeed in a democracy when you treat others as friends and not as enemies: "If you would win a man to your cause, first convince him that you are his sincere friend. Therein is a drop of honey that catches his heart, which, say what he will, is the great high road to his reason." Instead of perpetually treating the Meghalayan non-tribal as the 'other'; as the 'enemy'; as the 'exploiter' take him as an ally in propelling this state to its natural trajectory where everyone wins and there are no losers.

Modi Govt turns apologist for US. On Trump's coercive tariff hikes National interests of India at stake as a result of total surrender by centre

By P. Sudhir

The US President Donald Trump, in his first address to the US Congress following his election, has threatened to impose tariffs on countries that he considers are taking advantage of US trade policies. In his list is India, along with Canada, Mexico, China, Brazil and the European Union. Trump has repeatedly named India as a country that is levying exorbitant tariffs on US products. He even called India a 'tariff king'. Trump threatened that from April 2, he would levy 'reciprocal tariffs'.

The US has imposed an additional 25 percent tariff on steel and aluminum products from Canada, along with various goods exported to the US from Mexico and

pharmaceutical companies, and unrestricted data flows. It needs to be noted here that Lutnick's comments were made after his meeting with the Indian Commerce Minister in the US.

Opening up India's agricultural sector to the US through the BTA and reducing tariffs would have disastrous consequences for the country. Nearly 70 crore of our people depend on agriculture for their livelihood. Allowing US agricultural products into the Indian market through concessions would spell disaster for a large number of our people already grappling with a prolonged agrarian crisis.

Similarly, diluting India's patent laws would be a killer blow to the domestic industry,

A glimpse of this capitulation was evident in the Union Budget, which reduced tariffs on Harley-Davidson motorcycles, Bourbon whiskey, electric vehicles, wines, and other products. Prime Minister Modi was among the few foreign leaders who rushed to greet Trump after his re-election.

China. These actions have been met with strong opposition from the affected countries, as they violate multiple trade agreements previously concluded with the US, as well as World Trade Organisation (WTO) rules. In response, Mexico and China have imposed retaliatory tariffs on US products, and Canada has also announced its intention to do the same. Unlike these countries, the reaction of the Indian government has been rather tame.

The Indian government chose not to respond even after President Trump claimed that India had agreed to "significantly reduce tariffs on American products." When questioned, Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri stated that "tariff liberalisation has been a component of India's trade agreements." Stripped of its diplomatic language, this suggests that the government has effectively yielded to US pressure. A glimpse of this capitulation was evident in the Union Budget, which reduced tariffs on Harley-Davidson motorcycles, Bourbon whiskey, electric vehicles, wines, and other products.

Prime Minister Modi was among the few foreign leaders who rushed to greet Trump after his re-election. The BJP and its media allies portrayed this visit as a recognition of Modi's leadership. However, behind Trump's flattery lay the hand-wringing that Modi was subjected to. During their joint press conference, Trump continued his criticism of India's tariffs on US goods, while Modi conveniently opted to remain silent. The Indian government sought solace in the fact that the joint statement mentioned working toward a "comprehensive bilateral trade agreement." The BJP government thinks that India can escape from US tariffs by negotiating the bilateral trade agreement (BTA).

The true nature of the proposed Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA) was revealed during a recent media interaction with US Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick. He stated that India and the US should aim for "something big" in trade, emphasizing that the agreement should not be approached "product by product" but should instead encompass the "whole thing." To remove any ambiguity, he explicitly stated that the US wants India to "open up its agricultural market." Through the BTA, the US is not merely seeking tariff concessions; it is demanding broader changes, including reductions in agricultural subsidies, opening government procurement to US companies, amendments to patent laws to benefit US

particularly the pharmaceutical industry, which produces affordable medicines compared to the exorbitantly priced drugs in the US market. The reduction of tariffs on electric vehicles, is designed to facilitate the entry of Tesla automobiles, produced by Elon Musk, Trump's trusted lieutenant.

In what is becoming a recurring pattern, the Indian government is increasingly becoming an apologist for the US and its coercive tactics. When the US deported the first batch of Indian illegal migrants in a military plane, shackled and mistreated, the Minister of External Affairs falsely claimed that "women and children" were not subjected to such treatment. He shamefully justified the US actions by stating that handcuffing and shackling were "standard operating procedures."

Only after widespread public outrage did the government meekly issue a statement through its spokespersons, saying it would bring the matter to the attention of the US administration. There was no strong condemnation or protest registered, as one would expect.

In stark contrast to the BJP government's submissive stance, smaller countries like Mexico and Colombia have strongly protested when their citizens faced similar mistreatment. Colombia, for instance, sent its own military planes to bring back its citizens and refused entry to US military planes.

On the issue of tariffs, too, the BJP government is acting coy. During a visit to London, the External Affairs Minister inexplicably stated that the US administration's moves toward multi-polarity suits India's interests. When questioned about tariffs, he again deflected attention by referencing the proposed Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA).

The statements and actions of BJP ministers make it increasingly clear that they are bending over backward to placate the US. They seem willing to pay any price, even at the cost of sacrificing India's core interests in sectors like agriculture. The government is working hard to finalise a trade deal that would please Trump before he visits India for the QUAD summit, which India is hosting later this year. In its eagerness to be part of the "shared enterprise of QUAD," the BJP government is compromising India's self-reliance and national sovereignty. This should not be allowed under any circumstances.

It is imperative to expose the Modi government's surrender to US imperialism and mobilise people in large numbers. The future progress and sovereignty of our country are at stake. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor**Indigenous faith & Sixth Schedule**

Editor,
The recent debate on indigenous faith and the Sixth Schedule has raised important questions which the article 'Indigenous Faith and the Sixth Schedule' tried to answer. I agree with the article's conclusion which calls for special recognition of indigenous faiths, such as Niam Khasi/Tre, in order to provide them with proper protection. Religion is a choice and it should always remain so. But adherents of minority indigenous faiths in South Asia have suffered because of the onslaught of foreign non-indigenous faiths brought from outside the region like Hinduism from Central Asia and Christianity and Islam from South West Asia. This is pure majoritarianism which all faith practitioners engage in.

In the early days of Christian conversion among the Khasis, many were ostracised by their community, which is also an example of majoritarianism. But today, followers of Niam Khasi/Tre are being marginalised by the state controlled by adherents of Christianity, which is a fact. Therefore, the idea should be to stand for the weak, which is also provided in the Constitution. Therefore, indigenous faiths such as Niam Khasi/Tre, Songsarek, Sama, and others should receive legal recognition as minority faiths and become eligible for support and protection. Otherwise foreign non-indigenous religions like Christianity, Islam

and Hinduism will gobble them up, which has already happened. Then it will be an enormous loss for the community because both past and present are important for the society to move forward. And since the Indian Constitution has provisions for protection and support of minorities, minority faiths also deserve that protection.

Yours etc.,
Bhogtoram Mawroh,
Via email**Forest land not Forest Department**

Editor,
Thank you for printing my letter "No to observatory hill" in The Shillong Times dated March 13, 2025. In my letter I had written, "the forest has reclaimed the motorable road." By this I meant the road is now overgrown with vegetation and no longer looks like a road but has become part of the forest. The word 'forest' has inadvertently been interpreted as Forest Department. What I actually meant was forest land.

I apologise for the lack of clarity.

Yours etc.,
LMF Sohtun,
Shillong-4**Is NPP a Garo Party?**

Editor,
I am indeed allergic to the words, "NPP is a Garo Party" as appeared in certain local newspapers and the latest in your paper (ST March 2, 2025) captioned "VPP's rise sends alarm bell for rival par-

ties" in which Paul Lyngdoh stoutly dismissing claims that the UDP's alliance with the National People's Party (NPP) ridiculously derided as a Garo Party has led to the Party's electoral debacle.

In this context, how can it be perceived that NPP is a Garo Party when the party won considerable seats from Khasi and Jaintia Hills in the MLA and MDC elections? There are Cabinet Ministers and two Dy. Chief Ministers in the present dispensation from the NPP. Hence it proves beyond doubts that NPP is not a Garo Party.

Alternatively I have never come across any print or social media blaming and accusing that UDP, HSPDP and VPP etc. are Khasi-Jaintia Parties. This amply testifies to the wisdom of the Garo people who believe that deeds speak louder than words. If my memory is correct, I don't remember that the UDP, HSPDP, or VPP ever got even a single MLA or MDC from Garo Hills, which are the "Khasi-Jaintia based parties." Even if they dare to contest from Garo Hills, the result I think will be zero.

Comparatively, while Garos are behind the Khasi-Jaintia people in all respects, be it in education, population, and the size of the area, and most of all having more seats in the assembly (i.e. 36 while only 24 for Garo Hills), yet most of the time a hero from Garo Hills sits in the driver's seat, controlling the journey or sailing the boat wherever its convenient thereby pleasing the passengers and serving the public at large, even enticing the opponent to embrace him to achieve what is demanded be

it wealth or fame.

Yours etc,
Svetlana Wankhar
Shillong - 1**Stop the nepotism; bring in merit and equity**

Editor,

It has come to our attention that specific orders, issued periodically by the State's Finance Department concerning government servants already holding a particular position but allowed to officiate in a higher post, have not always been followed. It must be reminded that the Finance Department, in its Office Memorandum issued on December 1, 1998, outlined a uniform procedure for government employees who are permitted to hold a higher post.

The office memorandum underscored that a government employee would be permitted to hold dual charge only when he/she carries the identical scale of pay within the same cadre and offices, and for a period not exceeding six months. Moreover, the same order stated that the arrangement for dual charge for any post should be made based on the seniority, according to the gradation list, of all officers of the next lower rank stationed at the particular station, which is the headquarters for the vacant post.

At the same time, the Finance Department, in its subsequent order issued on July 31, 2018 (Office Memorandum No. FEG.2/2001/Pt-1/22), stated that those

holding dual charge would be entitled to a Charge Allowance of 10 percent of their basic pay.

These orders are clear and straightforward. However, it has come to our attention that certain government servants have been allowed to deliberately flout these orders by their superiors. For example, there is a case involving a grade four government employee who has been allowed to officiate in a higher post and is drawing the salary of that higher post, which exceeds the salary of their original position, instead of drawing only the Charge Allowance. The appointment of this grade four employee to officiate in the higher post is also surrounded by controversy, as it has come to our knowledge that the seniority, as per the gradation list, was not considered.

This is just one example; there could be many others involved in such illegalities. We have heard of government employees being forced to approach the court to seek justice due to favouritism, where they have been deliberately sidelined despite government rules and orders to the contrary. The aggrieved government employees have no other recourse when the government or its departments disregard the rules and orders they themselves issued. These incidents speak volumes about the government's partiality and its disregard for the rules.

The perception created by such glaring partiality is highly negative and creates an unhealthy atmosphere, besides setting the wrong standards. We hope that the concerned authorities will

take note of such incidents, inquire within each department, and eliminate those who are undeserving, while appointing deserving individuals according to the rules and procedures.

The proverbial "blue-eyed boy" syndrome seems to have infiltrated every department, even when merit is at stake. Recently, we heard Nongkrem legislator Ardent M. Basaiawmot speak in the Meghalaya Assembly, where he mentioned a certain "blue-eyed" official of Chief Minister Conrad K. Sangma. It is an open secret that politicians, bureaucrats, and senior government employees have their own personal preferences, even at the expense of merit. If we truly care about an egalitarian bureaucracy, we must eliminate such preferences and adhere to the laws and rules that were created by the bureaucrats themselves. Otherwise, the laws and rules will become obsolete and meaningless.

The departments must introspect and identify those individuals who have been allowed to violate the rules and orders. The undersigned would be happy to provide the names of such government employees for the departments' review. It is the duty of the Finance Department to check such irregularities, and to live up to the expectations of the people and of government employees as the government itself claims to be "pro-people".

Yours etc.,
Sanbor Wahlang,
Shillong - 3

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

The Assembly - A Stage

THE budget session is done and dusted and legislators from the Opposition have been able to act their parts with all the bluster at their command to corner the MDA Government. After that there will be a lull until the monsoon session arrives and the same old queries are raised. This is the age of information and Opposition MLAs are supposed to use part of their MLA funds to employ researchers to follow through on the different schemes of the Government and how they are being implemented on the ground and to what effect. Only then will legislators be able to make sense in the next Assembly session and only then will the Executive not be able to explain away things and avoid accountability.

Those who have followed Assembly proceedings for the past two decades will recall how Conrad Sangma as an Opposition MLA would corner Mukul Sangma the Chief Minister on exactly the same lines. Several MOUs were signed with private power companies but not a single one materialised to date. Since legislators are prone to forgetting their past, even the Shillong Medical College was a project initiated by the Congress-led MUA Government of Dr Mukul Sangma where a person with dubious credentials was brought in as a private partner in the public-private partnership mode. The Shillong Medical College never took off and even today not much is known of its status. Opposition MLAs are supposed to have done their homework and laid before the Assembly the present status of the Shillong Medical College; how much money has been invested and reasons for its delay, for public knowledge. But that did not happen. The public is still in the dark about what would have been the first state medical college. This has been the eternal predicament of Meghalaya. When people who used to be in the treasury benches find themselves in the Opposition, they ask the most searching questions that they prevaricate on while in the government.

The question about consultants was raised during the first tenure of the MDA Government and was repeated this time too. Instead of asking questions and waiting for answers from the Government would not an RTI have done a better job? Then the Opposition would have been better armed to take on the Government after it has done a cost-benefit analysis of hiring such consultants. Some of these consultants work on an NGO mode and are most connected to the people. One of the plagues affecting the Government is that its employees are divorced from the ground realities in the distant periphery. They are not concerned with the state of the environment and the massive deforestation happening in every part of Meghalaya due to timber logging, quarrying and charcoal burning. Opposition MLAs too are hesitant to bring these issues to the Assembly lest they step on the toes of their crucial supporters. Some institutions are at least working on these critical issues on soil, environment, better agricultural production etc. The Assembly therefore is meant to deceive. And people are suitably misled!

Beyond Women's Day - Working women, and following footsteps

By Raneer Kaur Banerjee

I thought about it, and in the 365-and-a-quarter days of every year, there are basically three types of days that we "observe." There are those days that are supposed to be unequivocally happy: for instance, birthdays, anniversaries, Diwali, Christmas, Id, or Gurpurab. There are those days that are supposed to be unequivocally sad: for example, 9/11, death anniversaries, or Muharram. And then there is a third category of what I call Reminder days: AIDS day, Alzheimer's Awareness Day, Day, Armed Forces Day, Friendship Day, Grandparents Day, Valentines Day, Earth Day, Holocaust Day, Women's Day, and such occasions.

Why do we need these special memorial days? Because these are issues, emotions, people that we neglect on the other 364 days? Because these are issues, emotions and people that don't really come first in our daily order of things or priority lists? Because these are issues, emotions and people we take for granted and need to remind ourselves to notice and celebrate one day of the year? Because these are issues, emotions and people we don't consider important enough to dedicate the whole year to? Because these are issues, emotions and people we think are dealt with and taken care of in that one day and for the rest of the year we can feel good that we gave them that one day and they are to be grateful that they have that one day?

Have you noticed that in all those reminder days about people, Mothers, Fathers, Grandparents, Friends, or Women, we never really commemorate something called a Man's Day? That, my more militant feminist friends would say, is because every day is Man's Day. Which reminds me of those SMS messages I get every women's day from all my friends. I'm sure all of you share them and will know what I'm talking about.

Some of these messages are very sweet and feminine and appreciative. Some are eager and sincere. Some want to put us on pedestals and perpetuate the "woman as martyr" myth and talk about the sacrifices women make and those special qualities we have—as if we are all Mother Teresas whose calling in life is to neglect our own needs and "nurture" the "world" to help it become "better."

Then there are the sarcastic ones that make men our worst enemies and laugh at the expense of the other biological sex. Let me mention two I got this year:

"God created women second because after he created man he stepped back and thought, 'I can do better than this.'"

"Despite the old saying 'don't take your troubles to

bed' many women still sleep with their husbands...be different tonight."

And my all time favourite punctuation trick:

Woman without her man is nothing (i.e., Woman, without her man, is nothing. However, we must read it as "Woman. Without her, man is nothing.")

I really think those are unfair. I like men. Men are nice people. Some of my most favourite humans are men. I don't think we need to disparage men to be appreciated as women. I don't think men need to be reminded of our value on any special day. I think by perpetuating myths and dividing genders we are perpetuating our own persecution as the "weaker" sex.

I really don't think we need a blanket Women's day per se. I do think we need several other reminder days to "notice" the injustice and torture being committed on certain sections of our society that happen to comprise primarily, but not exclusively, of women. So yes, we do need a Rape Victims Day or a Dowry Death Day or a Battered Wife Day or a Neglected Old Person Day—you get my idea.

I'll add another pet peeve to this polemic: the words "Working Woman." As far as I am concerned, I have never seen a woman who does not "work." All women are working women—only, some of us get paid and recognized for the work we do outside the home. My mother never earned a paisa, but oh, she worked! We were an extended or joint business family of fourteen members with one or more house guests almost all days of the year and my mother managed that household and its resources so wonderfully.

Individual tastes and special dietary needs were effortlessly catered to. A virtual army of drivers, vendors, part-timers and full timers were administered without a falter. Absentees, gaps in service, broken vehicles were all dealt with without effect on the routines of the other members of the family. Clothes were miraculously collected, washed, dried, folded, ironed and returned to the respective rooms and wardrobes without a hitch. Sickness, cuts and broken bones were taken into her stride without a drop in her smile. Homework was checked, diaries signed, schoolbooks covered, projects aided—no problems at all. Ripped jeans and missing buttons were mended in a jiffy and without a frown. Fights were arbitrated to everybody's satisfaction; tantrums and transgressions were punished; hurts and upsets were gently soothed... And after all this she had time and money left over for

charity—Now that's what I call optimum usage of her resources!

My mother ran several service industries rolled into one. She practiced several professions simultaneously and excelled in each one. She was the Receptionist, Housekeeper, Master Chef, Accountant, Manager, Tailor, Nurse and Doctor, Lawyer and Judge, Teacher and Mentor and Counselor... Oh, yes, she worked! And we didn't have to celebrate her on Mother's Day and Women's Day. We didn't think she was someone special to put on a pedestal. Most of all, she didn't feel she needed special treatment.

There is absolutely no denying or disputing the fact that our patriarchal society still wants women to follow their men (and so what if some of us are matrilineal?)

The wife, by her very definition in our culture, plays supporting role to her husband who is the hero: She is ardhangani, one half of her husband. She is sahadharmini, an associate in the fulfillment of his human and divine goals; She is sahakarmini, a co-worker in all his efforts: She is sahayogini, a helper in all his ventures.

This has been true from the time of the Vedas: "I will be the Saaman (the music) and may you be the Rk (the Vedic text being cast into music)."

Let me be the heavens (the upper world) and let you be the Bhumi or Mother Earth.

I will be the Sukla (life force) and may you be the bearer of that Sukla.

Let me be the mind and let you be the speech.

May you follow me to conceive children and gain worldly as well as spiritual wealth."

It has been true through Manu's description of the ideal female partner for a man—who, by the way, should be about one-third his age:

*karyeshu dasi, a slave/ servant in her work
karanesu mantri, with the administrative powers of a minister
bhoyeshu maatha, who can feed you like a mother
shayanesu ramha, and please you like Ramha in bed
kshamaya dharitri and who has the forbearance, the patience—the sahanashakti—of Earth*

It has been true through Kalidas, who said: "Women go the way of their husband as moonlight follows the moon or lightning the cloud"

And it is true as propagated by all our immensely popular television serials and film industries across the nation.

Much more, it is still

true as lived by millions of women all over India. Society desires women to walk one step behind their men.

But does higher social approval come to the women who follow in their men's footsteps? Who do not deviate? Who never challenge the norm? Who do the done thing, so to speak?

Therein lies the rub. Society may expect a woman to be one way, may prescribe a woman's ideal, but it reserves its approval—its esteem, its appreciation, its recognition, its awards, its admiration, its praise, respect and acclaim—for those women who flout all the expectations and defy its prescriptions.

Think of any Indian woman who has had any impact through myth and legend and history: Durga, Kali, Draupadi, Rani Lakshmi Bai, Indira Gandhi, Mother Teresa

Think of any contemporary Indian woman who has achieved social recognition or appreciation - Rekha, Sushmita Sen, Arundhati Roy, Mira Nair, Kiran Mazumdar Shaw, Sania Mirza,

You will find that they are all women who do not recognize any social limits on their beings. They are all women who stride way ahead, or go away, or create their own difficult road. They are all women who do not follow the beaten path.

On the other hand, think of the women who did the done thing: Sita did every single thing by the book. Did it get her her society's approval?

Madri was the perfect wife who even committed sati with Pandu. But who gets all the attention? Kunti, a woman with a curious past and her own mind.

Krishna's wives committed jauhar after him. Do we chant or even know their names? The names we associate with Krishna and celebrate and adore are of two of the most deviant women in their societies, Radha and Meera.

Litterateurs like Kalidasa and Tulsiadas became men of learning because of their wives. Do we know who they were?

It's very simple, really. When you follow behind, you remain unseen, unnoticed—taken for granted and therefore uncelebrated. When you walk ahead, or walk away, you are seen, followed, recognized, validated.

So ladies: By all means, walk a step behind your men.

Do it so you can support them. Don't expect social approval for doing it.

Feel free to follow in your men's footsteps. Don't expect society to validate your hard work and celebrate you for it. Take the backseat when your man drives. Do it so you can drive him where you want to go. Don't do it for any respect or rewards from society.

A Teacher in the Final Stages of Academic Fatigue

By Ellerine Diengdoh

Let me begin this article with a DISCLAIMER: Whereas it has come to the author's attention that modern discourse tends to confuse critique with personal attack, and whereas said author has no particular desire to be summoned before a disciplinary committee for causing "undue emotional distress" (hereinafter referred to as mild discomfort), the following clarification is hereby issued:

Clause 1: This commentary does not apply to young individuals suffering from chronic depression, anxiety disorders, or any other diagnosable mental health condition. Said individuals are hereby absolved of all implied criticism and shall instead be afforded every right, privilege, and support due to them as decent human beings navigating an indifferent world.

Clause 2: The subjects of this critique are instead those otherwise healthy, able-bodied, cognitively sound persons who, upon encountering routine academic tasks, respond as though they have been drafted into active military service without prior notice.

Clause 3: Any objections to the contents herein may be submitted in writing, provided they are:

- 1) grammatically sound,
- 2) free of unnecessary melodrama and
- 3) submitted on time, for once!

In witness whereof, the author affirms the following:

Education is not meant to be comfortable. It is meant to be transformative. And, in rare cases, slightly terrifying.

Signed, *Ellerine Diengdoh*

Once upon a time, I thought my biggest challenge as a literature teacher would be getting students to wrestle with difficult ideas... perhaps a discussion over whether Jane Austen was ahead of her time or just a Regency-era gossip columnist, a heated debate on whether Heathcliff deserves therapy or an exorcism, or the very least, I hoped to teach students how to form a coherent sentence without sounding like a malfunctioning chatbot attempting to summarise Hamlet: "Prince sad. Uncle bad. Ghost spooky. Much stab."

How naive I was.

It turns out, the real challenge is making it through a single lesson without someone hyper-ventilating under the sheer weight of existence. I have (in this case speaking for all my fellow teachers as well) quite against my will, become a part-time therapist, emergency breathing coach, a human tissue-dispenser and a crisis intervention unit, armed with nothing but a syllabus and dwindling patience!

There was a time when, if students were bored, they'd slump in their chairs, sigh real loud, stare intensely at the clock, doodle in their notebooks, or perfect the fine art of the theatrical eye-roll. Now, they tremble at group projects, turn pale at class tests, or suffer horrifying "panic attacks" at the mere mention of an oral presentation. I now fully expect the college to introduce roaming paramedics, ready to administer oxygen every time I say, "Right, who wants to go first?"

And then, of course, there are the emails and Whatsapp messages, explaining how due to, traffic jams, mental exhaustion, existential uncertainty, or mysterious ailments beyond the reach of medical science, they could not complete a 500-word essay. Yet, somehow, they had the strength to draft an excuse, often attached to a doctor's certificate whose legitimacy God alone can verify.

Once, students were expected to deal with stress. If a test was due, they either did it or took the hit. If they disagreed with a professor,

they argued their point, or at least complained bitterly in the canteen to anyone who would care to listen. If they felt uncomfortable in a class discussion, they either spoke up or silently seethed grinding their teeth in rage.

Now? Now, we tread carefully. We soften every blow. We provide trigger warnings. The merest hint of discomfort must be explained and neutralised.

Here's a revolutionary idea: perhaps life doesn't come with trigger warnings. Maybe, just maybe, the world will not stop to dim the lights and provide a safe space every time something is difficult. And perhaps, instead of bubble-wrapping students against reality, we should be teaching them how to navigate it.

Consider this bizarre contradiction:

We expect these young people to one day handle jobs, relationships, mortgages and God help us, parenthood! We trust them to vote, drive cars, and sign legal contracts. Yet we act as if they will shatter into a million pieces at the first sign of adversity. This is the generation that will inherit the world. And they are catastrophically unprepared for it. Instead of resilience, we have given them a highly sophisticated sense of personal injury. Instead of grit, we have trained them to identify oppression in literally everything. They now believe:

1. Discomfort is dangerous.
2. Challenge is an attack.
3. Failure is not a lesson, but a personal affront.

Congratulations, society! We've successfully removed their psychological immune system. Now, at the first sign of stress, they break out in full-body emotional meltdown.

What Needs to Change? Let's be clear: Colleges are not trauma centres. Teachers are not on-call counsellors.

So here's a radical proposal:

Let them struggle. Struggle is not abuse. It's called learning. If we keep swooping in like life coaches every time a student faces a challenge, we are not protecting them...we are crippling them. The world will not pause to hand out participation trophies just because someone tried really hard but felt overwhelmed.

Stop over-validating. Not every fleeting emotion requires a TED Talk and a candlelit vigil. Some emotions need to be managed, not indulged.

Teach endurance. The universe doesn't care that you're anxious! If you're terrified of public speaking, congratulations! That is your brain telling you what you need to work on. Nobody ever overcame the fear of water by standing near a pool talking to their therapist about their feelings.

Reintroduce consequences. If an assignment is late, it's late. If you fail a test, you learn from it. Some things in life are not negotiable.

If we don't fix this now, we won't just have fragile students—we'll have a generation of overgrown toddlers masquerading as adults, bursting into tears and hyper-ventilating over work emails, that horror of horrors, didn't come with a smiley. A single piece of constructive criticism will send them spiralling into a week-long hibernation, complete with scented candles, self-affirmations and a support group to help them recover from the ordeal.

As a teacher, I am here to educate, to challenge, to push my students to grow. But I refuse to be a professional hand-holder for a generation that must, at some point, learn what every generation before them knew instinctively: "Life is hard. Cope!"

Letters to the Editor

Youth of Meghalaya Need Not Fear

Editor

The article by Patricia Mukhim, "Is Meghalaya's progress derailed by misplaced resistance?" (ST March 14, 2025) has concluded that the main cause of resistance to the engines of development such as an open state border and railways is fear. She convincingly made the case that there are really no threats to the identity and culture of Meghalaya. In fact, it was pointed out that the percentage of non-tribals in the state is steadily decreasing.

She rightly mentioned that Meghalaya was given several central educational institutions like IIM, NIFT, IHM, NIT, and NEIGRI-HMS because the state has no ILP. In 2018, Mizoram got its first state medical college. Five years later, there are attempts to transfer the medical college to the Central Government. One of the major factors is the shortage of faculty. Meghalaya has plans for two medical colleges. ILP will be a hindrance to recruiting faculty. At least 90% of the faculty will have to come from outside the state. They may be

given permits, but constant border checks and the need to obtain permits for visiting relatives and friends will be a major deterrent.

We prevent skilled and semi-skilled workers from entering the state. Many local contractors and other employers are facing shortages of workers, such as carpenters, electricians and plumbers. Some of those that have joined work have been chased away. This is harming the construction and other industries, slowing down the economic development of the state, and thereby harming the future prospects of our own youth. We consider Shillong to be the hub of education of the Northeast. Are entry restrictions going to encourage students to come?

Fear leads to isolationism. When we prevent other Indian citizens from coming in, our own youth become reluctant to go out and work. While there are many youth from Nagaland and Manipur working in retail and hospitality in Bangalore, we hardly see any from Meghalaya. Does this mean that all local youth are getting jobs in Meghalaya? Not at all, unemployment is rampant in our state.

I have been teaching at a University in Shillong for two decades. Earlier I taught at a University in South India

for 10 years. I know that our students are no less than university students elsewhere in India. Many of our youth have additional talents in art and music. Many of our students are sent for internships in mainland India. Most of them are offered jobs, but these are rarely accepted. Our psychosis of fear is isolating our youth. Bangalore has become a destination of choice for the best and brightest from all over India. Our Khasi, Pnar and Garo youth must also take these opportunities with confidence and a sense of aspiration.

The health, education, and economic indices in Meghalaya are at the bottom of the nation. Evidently much is wrong with our leadership and with the rest of us. How do we get out of this rut? Our younger generation must shed fear, take courage, and lead the way.

Yours etc.,
Glenn C. Kharkongor,
Via email

Investments sans land bank

Editor,

When we look at the potential of Meghalaya, both in the manufacturing and service sector, there are huge limitations. The govern-

ment's set goal of achieving a 10 billion dollar economy or to have a GSDP of Rs. 86,000 crore is achievable. But focusing on the number can be dangerous, as that does not reflect the ground realities.

GSDP grows with public consumption, government spending, production of goods and services, and high exports over imports. This goal cannot be achieved by public debt as the debt to GSDP ratio of the state, at 37%, already exceeds the parameters of the Meghalaya Fiscal Responsibility & Budget Management Act, which is 28%. Moreover, the state is in a debt trap or heading towards it, as it is using new loans to repay old loans.

So, now with the land bank facilitation out of the way, we can talk about private investments. Of course, we need private investments. The Government does not have enough resources to keep on borrowing. You cannot oppose both public debt and investment, at the same time, if we want growth. Considering the state's low revenue at present, we need to increase investment, so that the government can focus more on lowering its liabilities, rather than on expenditure. But the goal should not be a set number of GSDP, but on self-sufficiency of the state, i.e. high

production and low imports, especially for essential commodities. The goal should also be on increasing the purchasing power of the common people. Focusing on numbers can lead to high inflation and increased inequality. The money that comes with the growth of GSDP should reach the pockets of the common people, FIRST & FOREMOST. And it should match the production of commodities too, so that prices do not rise.

And while inviting investments from outside, we have to make a very calculated move to also make room for development of local manufacturers and producers so that foreign and outside investments do not choke out local manufacturers. It must be done on the principles of the KHADC's Regulation of Trading actually.

Foreign investment must also come with employment of native people of the state so that the money stays in the state and increases consumption and cash flow within the state. Such investment must also come with sourcing raw materials from within the state, as much as possible, so that it uplifts local producers and the money again stays within the state. These two criteria are non-negotiable.

Such investments must also buy from local vendors or suppliers, so that it further

uplifts local businessmen/suppliers/traders. This can be done by carrot or stick.

Lastly, we can look at different kinds of investments. We can have private investors setting up industrial units. We can have public private partnerships so that the controlling interest remains with the people of the state. We can have investments in the form of equity in local businesses or state owned enterprises. We can facilitate low interest loans for local manufacturers or producers. These are all investments.

But we should not focus on the GSDP number. Rather the focus should be on increasing the purchasing power of common people, first and foremost to avoid poverty, and on high production to avoid inflation.

The main vision should be self-sufficiency and financial freedom. The single window United Investment Portal is great for all businesses. It is needed to remove hassles, but it should not be used to bypass other departments.

Yours etc.,
Kitdor H. Blah,
Via email

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

Growing Trump-Putin detente could spell trouble for the Arctic

During a wide-ranging 90-minute speech to the US congress of March 4, Donald Trump revisited his determination to "get" Greenland "one way or the other". Trump said his country needed Greenland "for national security". While he said he and his government "strongly support your right to determine your own future" he added that "if you choose, we welcome you into the United States of America".

Trump's ambitions regarding Greenland and its considerable mineral wealth are just one of a raft of issues in the first six weeks of his second term that have plunged European global politics into disarray.

As the White House ramps up the pressure on Ukraine's president, Volodymyr Zelensky, to allow the US access to Ukraine's mineral wealth, the US president is also talking about "cutting a deal" with Russian president Vladimir Putin. That deal would not only mean territorial losses for Kyiv, but would prepare the ground for a potentially far-reaching economic partnership between the White House and the Kremlin.

Currently, Trump and Putin are primarily focused on Ukrainian territory and mineral assets. But discussions have also begun on where else "deals" might be made, including in the Arctic.

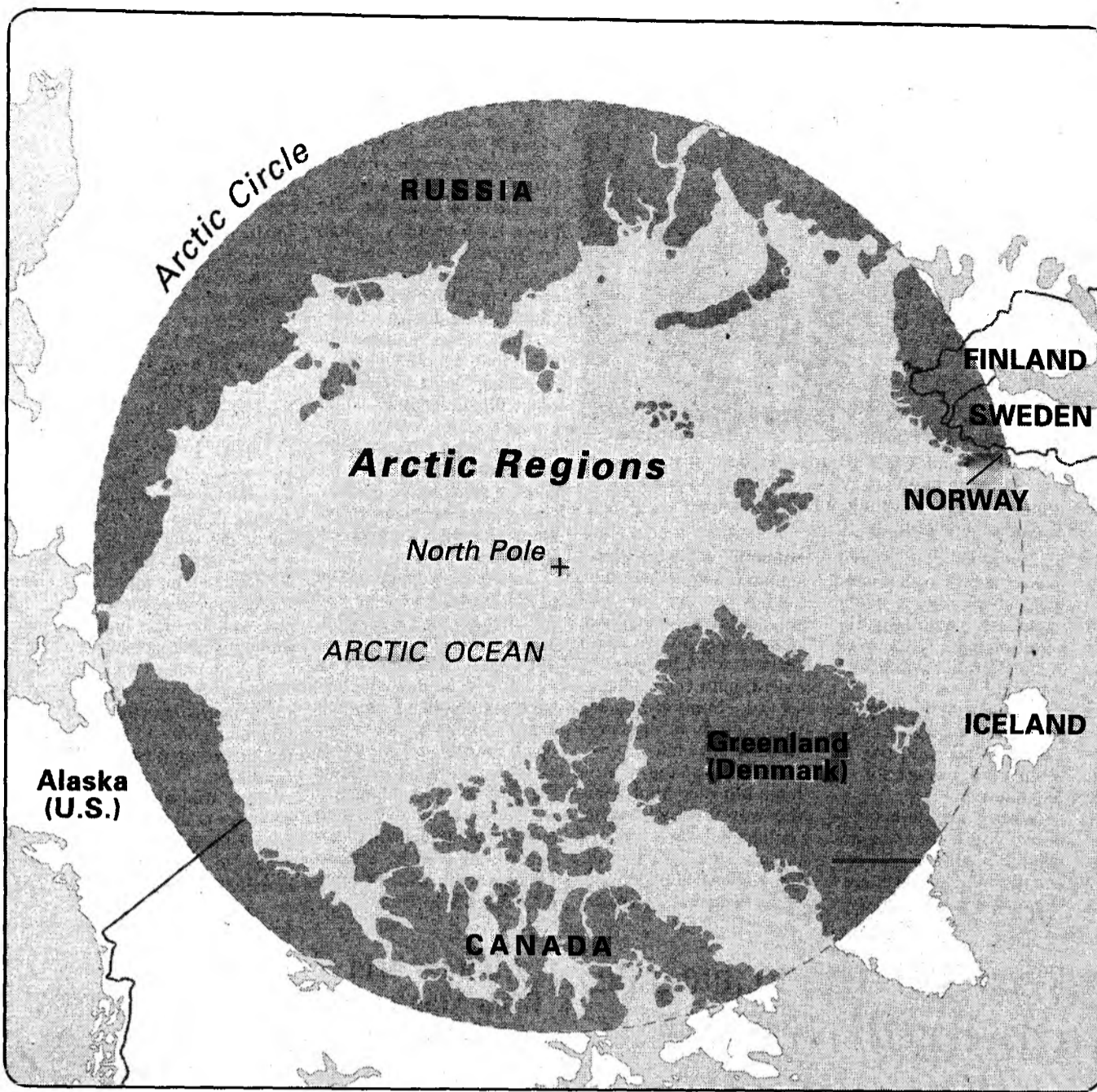
A carve up of the Arctic is an attractive proposition for the two countries given the importance both leaders attach to mineral resource wealth. As in the case of Ukraine, such an approach would reflect Trump's predisposition for transactional geopolitics at the expense of multilateral approaches.

In the Arctic, any deal would effectively end the principle of "circumpolar cooperation". This has, since the end of the cold war, upheld the regional primacy of the eight Arctic states (A8) that have cooperated to solve common challenges.

Since the Arctic Council was established in 1996, the A8 has worked on issues of environmental protection, sustainable development, human security and scientific collaboration. That harmony has been crucial in an era in which climate change is causing the rapid melting of Arctic ice.

Notably, the Arctic Council played an instrumental role in negotiating several legally binding treaties. These include agreements on search and rescue (2011), marine oil pollution preparedness (2013) and scientific cooperation (2017). It also supported the Central Arctic Ocean fisheries agreement (CAO) signed in 2018 by the Arctic Ocean states with Iceland, the EU, China, Japan and South Korea.

The Arctic Council - and more broadly, circumpolar cooperation - withstood the geopolitical aftershocks of Russia's seizure of Crimea and parts



of eastern Ukraine between 2014 and 2015. But Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine left trust teetering on the precipice.

Within a month, European and North American members had pressed pause on regular meetings of the Arctic Council and its scientific working groups, isolating Moscow. Some activity eventually resumed at the working group level in virtual formats, but full engagement with Russia has remained conditional on a military withdrawal from Ukraine. Meanwhile, hefty sanctions were imposed by the US and Europe, including targeting Russian

Arctic energy projects.

Russia's response was to enhance its relationships with others. Countries such as Brazil, India, Turkey and Saudi Arabia now work with Russia in the Arctic on commercial and scientific projects. This pivot raised concerns among Nato allies about a stronger and challenging Russia-China presence across the Arctic. But the second Trump administration has changed the calculus. There's now the threat of a new Arctic order based on the primacy - not of the A8 - but on a reset of US-Russia relations.

CHANGE OF FOCUS

Trump's signing of an executive order on February 4 to determine whether to withdraw support from international institutions may lead the White House to conclude there is no place for the Arctic Council. Its longstanding focus on climate change and environmental protection is anathema to the Trump administration, which has already withdrawn from the Paris agreement and is destroying domestic climate-related science programmes.

The longstanding commitment of the A8 to circumpolar cooperation, or even a narrow A5 (Canada, Denmark, Norway, Russia and the US) view of the primacy of the Arctic Ocean coastal states, is likely to be dismissed by the White House, which favours the embrace of great power politics. While many have warned that the Arctic Council can't survive without Russia, losing US interest and support would surely be its death knell.

In this landscape of "America first", the prospect of Washington and Moscow dividing the Arctic and its resources seems increasingly realistic. In such a situation, the international treaties signed by the A8, and the CAO may also be at risk. Denmark may find itself excluded altogether from Arctic affairs if Trump gets his way over Greenland. At any rate, all the Nordic Arctic states are likely to struggle to make their voices in the region heard.

A key question for European Nato and EU members is whether Trump would worry about Russian dominance in the European Arctic if it brought US-Russia economic cooperation to extract the region's wealth? Might Trump even be supportive of Russian attempts to revisit the terms of the 1920 Spitsbergen Treaty, which ultimately gave Norway sovereignty over the Arctic archipelago (albeit with some limitations), if that too meant jointly unlocking Svalbard's mineral resources let alone the wealth of the Arctic seabed?

What room, if any, would a deal leave for Indigenous people to be heard, or for international scientific collaboration on critical challenges related to climate and biodiversity?

If we have learned anything in the tumult of recent weeks, it is that European countries, individually and collectively, struggle to exercise strategic influence over contemporary geopolitical events. If Trump and Putin do begin negotiations over the Arctic, Europe may simply have to accept the end of the Arctic Council and circumpolar cooperation.

Climate science, environmental protection, sustainable development and the ability of Indigenous people to decide their future would all suffer. The UK and Europe meanwhile will be left to consider what, if anything, can be done to defend Arctic interests. *(The Conversation)*

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, March 16, 2025

'Birthday Forecast'

Moon square Mars on your solar return chart and it will bring mixed results for you. You have the urge to do a lot of things but circumstances pull you back. Your plans may not materialize. You may have skirmishes with subordinates at place of work. Your seniors could also appear to be dissatisfied with you. You will have mental tensions and stress due to them. But it would be wise for you to show some patience. You would appear to be overtaken by problems but if you show will power and courage you will emerge winner. Hurdles may try to overtake you but you will refuse to bow down. Financial position will be moderate. Health will be generally fine. You will take to spiritualism in a big way and could also visit some holy places with family.

'This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) This week highlights friendship, romance and love in your life. You would be successful in any field that requires a lot of imagination and vision. You would express your unique individuality, and if this involves changing careers or jobs, a new relationship, or a new hobby. Your domestic life takes on top priority. Making yourself feel comfortable and secure is paramount, and you have every chance to boost your feeling of stability and support with family. You attempt difficult tasks, resolve complicated issues and connect with unapproachable people in higher position. Your hobbies, moments spent with family, all come into focus.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) You meet difficult tasks and resolve work related issues confidently. Business expansion and new professional opportunities are worth considering. You would admire and adapt new circumstances, ideas, and unfamiliar situations. You are able to find novel solutions to problems now. Your efforts have been establishing strong professional base which brings in desired and even unexpected gains. It is good time to organize your workplace. This would help you to get better perspectives to achieve desired goals. It's time to expand your social and professional circle. Avoid being laid back as any gain or success in business needs to be followed up with hard work and dedication.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) Your ideas and goals are higher than usual, teaching may be part of the picture, and your cultural and spiritual awareness increases. Happiness and fulfillment through the expansion of your mind, widening your social circle, travel, and overseas connections is indicated during this phase. Those connected with the media, journalism and arts get an opportunity to showcase their talent. Students in fine arts and related fields attain success and good results. This is the right time to share your loving and personal relationships and share thoughts and ideas and spend good time in the association of your loved one. You are ready to make new beginnings and invest in new business and relationships. Spending time in solitude among natural surroundings is therapeutic.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) Travel, contact and communication are the keywords of this period. Opportunities and invitations from overseas take you on an unplanned journey. Visitors, friends and family make this a happy time as an event in family is celebrated. You are full of hope and enthusiasm as you make new beginnings at work and home. Business expansion and new professional opportunities are worth considering. You are appreciative and caring as you give total support to loved ones through a difficult time. Activities related to communication such as journalism, literature and fine arts are prominent. Short trips and other forms of communication appeal strongly. The desire for some form of recognition and financial success is stronger than any other time enhanced now.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) A cheerful and hopeful outlook increases your chances of gaining cooperation with outcaste and foreign people and this brings financial growth. You move on the path of success and betterment in terms of better financial stability, emotional and mental satisfaction and intellectual growth. It's time to expand your social circle and to make more contact with groups and friends. Students of Computer Hardware and Engineering achieve better results during this week. You handle conversations, seminars, meetings and express yourself more specifically about the subject. This is an excellent time to make some financial investments and adopt new strategies in financial matters. This is a time when you renew your energy and consider what things are important to you.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22) You would be successful in the fields of creativity, writing and entertainment industry or in any field that requires a lot of imagination and vision. You would be able to make an impact on important people. Your creativity will assist in your output at work and

help you undertake redecorating your office. Your ideas are higher than usual, teaching may be part of the picture, as your cultural and spiritual awareness increases. Happiness and fulfillment through the expansion of your mind, widening your social circle, travel, and connections with new associates indicated during this phase. Students in journalism, law, management and related fields attain success and good results.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) A cheerful and hopeful outlook increases your chances of gaining cooperation of business associates and this brings financial growth. You expand your circle of influence and these new associates would prove to be beneficial in the long run. You handle conversations, seminars, meetings and express yourself more specifically about the subject. Financial investments yield good gains. This is a time when you renew your energy and consider what things are important to you.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) This period highlights friendship, romance, love and children. You give a new approach to love, children and creative projects. A new set-up in existing love affair or a new love affair altogether may be formed. Your professional life brings rewards and recognition. An opportunity to expand business arrives now. Increased connections and experiences come into picture. Your career, reputation and public life are influenced. This is a very fortunate time to arrange get-to-gathers, parties and fun. Increased public recognition and professional success characterizes this phase. You would become more particular about your health and diet.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) You may begin to take on more responsibilities on the job or in another service-oriented capacity. Your job could become rather tedious or boring, or working conditions may be poor, tiring and frustrating. You would be sensible about your diet, health, hygiene, and fitness needs. You find yourself more accountable than ever when it comes to your work and output. You may have to draw some boundaries with friends and the demands of others. This is a good time to belong with a friend or a group who shares your own ideas and thoughts. You would attach yourself to unusual, more spiritual, friends. This is an excellent period for starting new regimens to improve your health and well-being, such as regular exercise, more structured and productive use of your time, and so forth.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) It would be wiser to face difficult people and situations rather than avoid them as there would be victory and success in professional ventures. Don't take the one you love granted but show your love and appreciation. Communications from overseas are hopeful and exciting as business opportunities are extended to you. Your professional skills, wisdom and craft is appreciated and fresh opportunities for expansion are made available to you. Personal relationships gain a romantic and exciting quality. Tackle sensitive subjects and difficult people and get your point across. Business projects and associations are opening up and widening your horizons so you need to think expansively from now onwards.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) You would achieve a lot in business and professional aspects by combining creativity and practicality. You play the role of the elderly in the family and personal situations by taking on extra responsibility and giving direction. You can expect superiors to support you and stand up for you in tough situations at work. You can trust your intuition about people and situations when called upon to mediate in conflicts and collaborations. You are bold and adventurous and you cannot tolerate delay that prevents you from behaving exactly you want. How willing you're prepared to experiment and explore new approaches will determine your success this time. You will be considerably more productive, healthy, and focused.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) This is a favorable period for people in sports, media and other related fields. It's a great time to exert your personal influence, as you are coming across as especially cooperative and graceful. You are more willing to adapt to new circumstances, ideas, and unfamiliar situations. You would work more creatively and express yourself with more sensitivity, compassion, and warmth. You have been more determined and hard-working and this brings fulfillment of desires particularly in your personal and domestic life. You are physically energetic and enjoy the feeling of well-being and confidence.

Why are suicide rates so high in people with bipolar disorder?

Heston Blumenthal, the celebrity chef known for his experimental cuisine, recently shared his experience of being sectioned under the UK's Mental Health Act, saying it was "the best thing" that could have happened to him.

His openness about living with bipolar disorder highlights the little-discussed fact that people with this condition face one of the highest suicide risks of any mental illness.

Bipolar disorder is a severe mental illness characterised by episodes of mania (high energy, impulsivity) and depression (hopelessness, fatigue). Suicidal thoughts and behaviour are a core feature of the disorder, with fluctuating risk that can persist over long periods.

Although bipolar disorder affects around 2 per cent of the population, studies suggest that up to 50 per cent of people with the condition attempt suicide at least once, and 15-20 per cent die by suicide - a rate much higher than in the general population. Unlike global suicide rates, suicide deaths in bipolar disorder have not declined.

Understanding why suicide is so common in people with this disorder is difficult.

But one major factor is mood instability. Rapid shifts between emotional highs and lows, as well as mixed states where symptoms of mania (impulsivity) and depression (despair) occur together, can be particularly dangerous.

Social and economic factors also play a role. Research we conducted at Swansea University shows that the population suffering from bipolar disorder has become poorer over the last two decades.

Financial strain, social isolation and poorer access to healthcare all lead to worse outcomes. Beyond suicide, people with the condition die up to 20 years earlier than the general population, often from preventable health problems such as heart disease.

While bipolar disorder cannot be cured, it can be managed. The most commonly used drug, lithium, has been found to reduce suicide risk significantly in some patients. However, people with the condition struggle to take it regularly.

The drug's side-effects can affect the kidneys, thyroid, metabolism, cognition and cardiovascular health. Managing these side-effects requires regular blood tests and continuous monitoring, making long-term treatment difficult.

Many people stop taking their medication during manic phases, believing they are cured.

Other treatments, such as antipsychotics, mood stabilisers and electroconvulsive therapy (where electric currents are passed through the brain while the patient is under anaesthesia), can also be effective in some types and phases of bipolar - for example, in states of mixed mania and depression where there is a high risk of suicide - but they come with their own harms and limitations.

Some psychiatrists now question whether continuous lifelong treatment is necessary for all

patients. Even when people seek help, healthcare systems often fail to intervene effectively.

Suicide risk is highest in the days following discharge from a psychiatric hospital.

Many people who later die by suicide have recently visited emergency rooms after hurting themselves, but the help they received was either delayed or not enough to prevent further harm.

Existing tools to identify and measure suicide risk, such as checklists, questionnaires and structured interviews, are ineffective. Many people with bipolar disorder who die by suicide are assessed as "low risk" shortly beforehand, exposing a crucial gap between doctor and patient perceptions.

This is in great part because these tools rely too heavily on past factors such as suicide attempts (which may not be disclosed), rather than dynamic, real-time distress or mood instability.

Despite the significant effect that bipolar disorder has on individuals, families and society, the development of new drugs has been frustratingly slow. Lithium, first used in the 1940s, remains the go-to treatment, while most other drugs were originally designed to treat schizophrenia. No truly new treatments have emerged in decades.

One difficulty is that bipolar is not a single disorder but a spectrum of conditions, rendering the one-size-fits-all approach inadequate - lithium is effective in only about one in three patients.

Drug development for bipolar disorder is particularly challenging. The complexity of bipolar disorder calls for equally complex trials that need to consider patient variability, ethical concerns and strict safety requirements.

New treatments also face strict approval hurdles because lithium - despite its limitations - is highly effective for some patients. This results in slow treatment development, leaving patients with limited options.

Research is also slowed by concerns about whether it's ethical to involve patients in trials. But it's important to include people with the disorder who have experienced suicidal thoughts and behaviour, to better understand their mindset and decision-making.

However, new approaches offer hope. Several research projects, such as Datamind, are developing artificial intelligence platforms to help find new drugs quicker and to personalise treatments based on patients' genetic and clinical profiles. AI could lead to faster, more effective therapies tailored to individual needs.

To prevent suicide, we need to rethink how risk is assessed, improve follow-up care, and reduce barriers to treatment.

While the statistics on bipolar are alarming, the message should be one of hope. The condition is treatable and suicide is preventable, but only if we commit to improving access to care, reducing stigma and advancing research. *(The Conversation)*

Plan or perish

THE less said the better about the nation's transportation policy. With a steady and phenomenal increase in the vehicle population in the past 30 years, city streets are bursting at the seams. The more governments engage in fire-fighting operations, the worse the scenario becomes. The present move by the Delhi government to introduce regulations in car purchases etc, like insisting that a third car a family buys must be an electric vehicle, would marginally help solve the larger problem of pollution. But such soft steps alone will not help in tackling similar issues in other cities too. With India witnessing a vehicle sales revolution in recent years, the sales last year was around 2.5 crore; an 11.4 per cent surge compared to the previous year. This made India the world's third largest vehicle market. Passenger vehicle sales totalled 10 lakh units in one quarter last year. Most of these are obviously urban-centric; a reason why city streets bear the brunt. The railway sector's failure to handle freights efficiently led to an explosion of trucks on the roads. All these pose the problems of road congestion, traffic snarls and pollution.

Fact of the matter is, regulatory mechanisms were absent or were not at work at all. It is for governments to plan the transportation system long-term; and for the people to derive the advantages. A city state like Singapore effectively tackles these problems through a good mass transport system; so does the developed world as a whole. The chaos that marks Indian roads could be evident in relatively smaller levels in the rest of the developing countries as well, many of which are governed by democratic governments that change periodically. Long-term visualization, planning and execution are there, of course; but these lack seriousness at the apex itself. A nation with a population bulge of 1.4 billion should have adopted policies that are mindful of the ground-realities.

The failure on the part of successive governments to plan and implement effective rapid mass transportation systems is the principal reason for the problems of vehicular pollution and road congestion. Building national highways in modern ways was a good initiative, which changed the face of India. Yet, the wrong, unbridled encouragement to the passenger vehicles segment caused all the problems. Cities that grew on their own without proper planning have narrow roads, buffeted by shops and business establishments on both sides. Road widening is a difficult task and it costs massive sums. Hence, the marginal improvements, which however fail to solve the congestion problem. The unpardonable delay in the introduction of Metro Rail systems across cities — after its high-profile start in Calcutta in 1984 — showed how the nation's leadership lacked the determination to change things for the better. Till now, only around 15 cities have this system, covering a total distance of no more than 500km.

Evolution of the Tiger Festival of Nongtalang

By HH Mohrmen

Nongtalang village is set to celebrate the Rongkhli Festival once again, but with a significant difference this time. Unlike previous celebrations, this year no actual tiger is involved, only the symbolic image and spiritual presence of the tiger will be honoured. The name of the festival is derived from two words: 'Rong' and 'Khli.' 'Rong' could very well be a borrowed word from the neighbors in the plains, meaning 'color,' while 'Khli' is a generic War Jaintia term for the tiger species.

Rongkhla, or Rongkhli, is a traditional tiger festival historically observed only when a tiger is accidentally killed. However, this year, the festival is being held to honour a tiger that passed away long ago. Traditionally, the festival serves not only as a way to pay tribute to a deceased tiger but also as an act of atonement for the clan associated with the individual responsible for the tiger's accidental death. As part of this tradition, the clan is required to host the festival as a means of reconciliation, reinforcing the community's deep spiritual connection with nature.

This year's celebration holds immense cultural and environmental significance, as it is centered on the idea of reverence rather than hunting. No dead or living tiger is involved—only their symbolic image and aura will be present in the ceremony. This shift highlights the festival's evolving role in modern times, where it serves as a catalyst for wildlife conservation rather than a justification for hunting. By commemorating past encounters rather than repeating them, the festival educates the community about the need to protect endangered species such as the Clouded Leopard, which is legally protected under the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972. The event fosters a deep respect for the tiger as a divine figure and instills a strong ethical code within the community to prevent hunting and harming of wildlife.

Historical Background of Nongtalang

Nongtalang is a border village on the southern slopes of Meghalaya, bordering Bangladesh. The village is located approximately two kilometers from the international border and is among the oldest villages in the War Jaintia region of West Jaintia Hills District. It is about 33

km from Jowai, the district headquarters and less the 100 km from the state capital.

The War Jaintia people, a sub-tribe of the Khasi-Pnar people of Meghalaya, have their own distinct dialect (also called War), which is barely understandable by the Pnar of Jaintia or the Khasi. Scholars of the Khasi language believe that the War Jaintia dialect of the Amwri area is the mother or origin of the Khasi language which is a branch of the Austro-Asiatic Monkhmer group of languages.

Nongtalang village has a population of approximately 10,000 (as per the 2001 census), with the majority following the Niamtyrai, the traditional religion of the indigenous people. The headman of the village also serves as the religious head or high priest (Lyndoh) of the Niamtyrai. To hold this position, the headman must belong to the Lyndoh rad clan. His tenure lasts as long as he retains the confidence of the Dorbar Kor, or the grand council of the village. Nongtalang eleka also has a Doloi who is from the Jawchibi/Jawchibijai clan.

Origins and Rituals of the Rongkhli Festival

The origin of the Rongkhli Festival is uncertain, but some believe it began as part of inter-tribal conflicts in which victors would carry home the heads of their enemies as trophies. Over time, this evolved into the symbolic use of a tiger's head instead. Some speculate that the festival is linked to the Rymbui clan, who trace their ancestry to Ka Rymbai Bahkhla (Meaning "She who was carried by the tiger" or "The woman who was saved by the tiger who carried her on its back.") However, this possible connection requires further study.

Legends suggest that the first settlers of Nongtalang village were U Shitang Rymbai and his wife, a woman from the Talang clan. In the village's matrilineal system, the Talang clan became the religious and spiritual leader. Priesthood in Nongtalang can only be passed from mother to daughter and maternal uncle to nephew.

Traditionally, if a member of one of the six major clans (Pohnsem, Lamin, Myrchiang, Barih, Pohti, and Rymbui) caught a tiger, they were required to perform specific rituals to appease

Kpong, the hunting deity. If a tiger was killed, it was kept in the village outskirts until the required ceremonies were completed. The village drummers would beat their drums every evening for a month before the festival began.

On the festival's first day, a ritual called "ushering the tiger" took place, in which the deceased tiger was ceremonially brought into the village. The entire village would march in a procession, dancing to the sounds of drums and tangmuri flutes. The tiger's body was displayed at Rymmusan, where men danced throughout the night to keep the tiger company.

On the festival's final day, young men dressed in warrior attire gathered at Rymmusan playground to perform mock duels and warrior dances. The ceremonial tiger was carried through the village by a shaman and presented at the residences of religious leaders. The final ritual took place at Phlong Shep Shngai, where the tiger's severed head was placed on a stick to ward off evil spirits. The remaining body was discarded, and the dried tiger meat was distributed to those who wished to partake.

Festival Schedule & Events

This year the festival commenced with a ceremony known as "Tdeh Bom," which translates to "bringing out the drums." These drums, which will be used throughout the festival, were sanctified by the elders of Raid Nongtalang in the presence of the Pohnsem Clan, who are hosting the event this year. Sources from Raid Nongtalang and the Pohnsem Clan confirm that the festival is scheduled for March 21, 22 and 23. On the first day, a ceremony at the ossuary will take place in remembrance of the deceased tiger, which also demonstrates that the animal is given the same honour as the deceased human being.

The celebrations will continue the next morning at the Pohnsem Clan's house, featuring a performance of "Pastieh," a traditional warrior dance. Young men from various clans, dressed in ceremonial warrior attire, will engage in mock duels. After the performance, the dancers and attendees will proceed to the residence of the Lyndoh of Raid Nongtalang, where the warriors will once again perform their warrior dance. From there, the warriors,

accompanied by the public, will move towards "Phlong Shep Shngai," the western fort of the village. Throughout the procession, the warriors will carry an image of the tiger, which will ultimately be discarded at the western fort of the village—symbolizing the removal of all evil and reinforcing the festival's spiritual and cultural significance.

In the evening, young women from the village will participate in "Kaelang," a traditional dance where they will be dressed in full ceremonial attire and regalia, dancing to the rhythmic tunes of flutes, drums, and the Chakudiah.

Rongkhli Festival as a Conservation Tool

Although rooted in age-old traditions, the modern adaptation of the Rongkhli Festival plays a crucial role in shaping wildlife conservation awareness. The festival has shifted from a historical act of penance for the accidental killing of a tiger to a celebration of life, reverence, and protection. By emphasizing symbolism over actual sacrifice, the event teaches younger generations about the importance of preserving biodiversity and co-existing with wildlife.

Furthermore, the Rongkhli Festival promotes sustainable traditions that align with conservation efforts, demonstrating how indigenous cultural practices can harmonize with modern wildlife protection laws. By embracing this new approach, the Pohnsem Clan and Raid Nongtalang set a vital precedent for cultural events to function as vehicles for conservation awareness, ultimately fostering a deeper connection between heritage, spirituality, and ecological responsibility.

Conclusion

The new embodiment of Rongkhli Festival of Nongtalang is a powerful blend of cultural heritage, spiritual reverence, and environmental consciousness. By transforming an ancient ritual into a conservation tool, the community has found a way to honour tradition while promoting ethical wildlife protection. The festival serves as an exemplary model of how indigenous traditions can evolve to meet contemporary conservation challenges, ensuring that the majestic tiger is revered rather than hunted. This transformation highlights the deep connection between culture and ecology, reinforcing the need to protect and respect the natural world for future generations.

KHADC's Trade Ban: A Constitutional Travesty and Case for Abolishing ADCs

By Dushyant Wadhwan

The Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council's (KHADC) recent decision to prohibit issuing new trade licenses to non-tribal traders in Meghalaya has sparked intense controversy. Ostensibly designed to enhance economic opportunities for the indigenous population, this edict flagrantly violates the Indian Constitution's principles of equality and fairness. It also lays bare the Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) as outdated, discriminatory bodies that undermine national unity and warrant abolition in Meghalaya. This article explains how the ban breaches constitutional norms and argues for dismantling the ADCs.

India's Constitution holds equality as inviolable. Article 14 ensures parity before the law, prohibiting arbitrary discrimination. Article 15 forbids bias based on religion, race, caste, sex, or birthplace, while Article 19 guarantees every citizen's

right to pursue any trade or vocation. The KHADC's decree defies these principles by targeting non-tribals, denying them livelihoods solely due to their ethnic identity. This exclusionary measure contradicts the Constitution's commitment to an equitable society.

Additionally, Article 21, which secures the right to life and liberty, includes the right to earn a living with dignity. By curbing non-tribals' ability to trade, the KHADC jeopardizes their sustenance, stripping them of economic independence. This policy does not merely limit commerce; it assaults the dignity of non-tribal residents, rendering their constitutional rights meaningless.

The Sixth Schedule, under which ADCs function, grants them authority to regulate land, forests, and local customs in tribal areas. Yet, this power is not unbounded. Paragraph 12A asserts that state laws prevail over ADC regulations in conflicts. The Meghalaya government's failure to challenge this ban, instead of upholding constitutional supremacy, betrays its obligation to ensure justice. The KHADC's overreach thus lacks legitimacy, setting a dangerous precedent where parochial interests override national law.



Beyond legal violations, the ban threatens severe economic and social fallout. Nontribal traders, long vital to Meghalaya's markets, bolster its fiscal health. Restricting their role risks fuelling benami transactions—covert arrangements where non-tribals operate through tribal proxies—undermining transparency and revenue. Anecdotal evidence suggests such practices are already widespread, fostering corruption and weakening the ADCs' fiscal credibility.

Socially, the policy widens the tribal-non-tribal divide. Meghalaya's diverse fabric, once a testament to coexistence, unravels as non-tribals face exclusion. Historically, non-tribals accounted for 20% of the state's population in 1972; today, they constitute just 9%. Such measures accelerate their departure, eroding inclusivity and contradicting India's unity-in-diversity ethos, turning Meghalaya into a fortress of insularity.

The ADCs, created under the Sixth Schedule to protect tribal autonomy, have devolved into tools of oppression. Intended as pillars of self-governance, they now wield unbridled power, often clashing with constitutional norms. The KHADC's trade ban epitomizes this tyranny, favouring ethnic chauvinism over equitable progress. First, ADCs lack accountability. Their legislative and

judicial authority, exercised without robust oversight, breeds arbitrariness. The trade ban, imposed without wide consultation, exemplifies this autocracy. Second, their relevance diminishes in a modernizing India. Tribal communities, increasingly skilled across diverse sectors, no longer need such insular protections. The ADCs' protectionism stifles innovation, tethering Meghalaya to outdated frameworks. Third, ADCs entrench inequality. By prioritizing tribals exclusively, they marginalize non-tribals, flouting the Constitution's egalitarian spirit. This disparity fuels resentment, threatening social harmony. Abolishing the ADCs would align Meghalaya with national governance standards, ensuring equal rights and duties for all citizens.

Meghalaya must reject this regressive policy and the ADCs that enable it. The state government should invoke Paragraph 12A to nullify the ban, reaffirming constitutional integrity. Simultaneously, a legislative effort to dismantle ADCs and replace them with inclusive local bodies would modernize governance. Such institutions could preserve tribal heritage while upholding universal rights, fostering a united, thriving Meghalaya.

In conclusion, the KHADC's trade license ban affronts India's constitutional foundation, subverting equality, liberty, and livelihood. Far from protecting tribal interests, the ADCs have become relics of division and inequity. Abolishing them would free Meghalaya from parochial constraints, ushering in an era of unity and justice for all its residents.

Letters to the Editor

A generation lacking real world skills

Editor,

I am writing to say I really enjoyed reading Prof. Ellierine Diengdoh's article in TST (Mar 15, 2025) — "A Teacher in the Final Stages of Academic Fatigue." From her words it would seem that the problems we are facing are the same, whether in America or in Shillong. This is a generational issue. We are seeing a generation of over-coddled youngsters, very frail, always in need of therapy, and stumped by cognitive lethargy caused by too much time spent on social media, too little reading, and inadequate brain stimulation.

An American Mom once complained to me about her son's over-frail girlfriend, saying (rough paraphrase), "At her age I held two jobs to make ends meet." Nothing in our current education system in America challenges student memory. I once had a young student say, "Give me this test soon. Otherwise, I will forget."

No doubt, my students have hard lives. They work, go to school, plus some of them have families. Some have mental ailments. Others have addictions. Yet none of this justifies the excessive hand-holding that does them

a disservice. It makes frail students even frailer. I cannot imagine asking them to write closed-book, closed-notes papers. All papers are open-book, and open-handout. Yes, I write detailed handouts so the texts are accessible to them. I do not pull these out from the Internet. They are expected to read in detail, read with accuracy, and read between the lines.

I once described to my students the gruelling examination system I underwent in India at a time when calculators and computers were unheard of. Everything had to be written in cursive. And pulled from memory. The question of open-book, open-notes did not exist. I asked them, "What would you do if you had to go through such a system?" They chorused, "We would take the first flight back to the USA."

Add to this the total dearth of love for knowledge. My generation had a thirst for knowledge — not information or data — but knowledge. Finally, after their lack of respect for teachers, lack of civility, plagiarism, sloppy work habits, inordinate materialism, and hunger for money — indeed, the end result would be Teacher Fatigue!

Prof. Diengdoh is right. How will such frail students face the challenges of the work-world, family life, and of life itself? Here in Amer-

ica, we see quick workplace turnover. Young people quit their jobs easily. Many are distracted. They give misinformation, with disarming smiles. They struggle to transfer data from paper to the computer — without making mistakes. This includes medical data. For all their love for information and data, they cannot transcribe with accuracy. As for work ethic, the less we say, the better. And of course, their outsized egos. The slightest correction is abuse.

Again, my thanks to Prof. Diengdoh for her article.

Yours etc.,
Deepa Majumdar
Purdue University, USA
Via email

Commendable effort by SMB to keep Shillong clean

Editor,

It is indeed commendable that the Shillong Municipal Board (SMB) has recently issued a directive requiring all commercial establishments, including street vendors, to install and maintain litter bins outside their premises. The initiative aims to make Shillong a "litter-free city" by April 2025.

Of course, directing businesses and vendors to maintain litter bins is a good

start, but without proper monitoring and timely waste collection, these bins could end up overflowing or being neglected, as has often happened in the past. To truly make an impact, SMB must enforce strict waste management rules, ensure proper segregation of waste at source, and implement a well-structured system that ensures garbage is collected not just from market areas but also from every household across the town.

Residents across the town must also take responsibility by handing over their waste to municipal collection vehicles instead of dumping it into drains, rivers, open spaces, or at the corner of the footpath, which is all too common. Unfortunately, many people, including the educated, still dispose of garbage irresponsibly, "polluting the environment" and undermining cleanliness efforts. SMB must not only send out strict warnings but also impose "heavy penalties" on those who violate waste disposal norms.

As a concerned citizen, I have repeatedly brought to SMB's attention the reckless dumping of garbage into drains and rivers. One glaring example is the large drain behind Kanya Pathsala School, near Garikhana, which has been treated as a free-for-all dumping ground by perhaps over thirty households in the

area. It is important to note that this legendary drain passes through the District Council office. It also constantly emits a terrible smell. After raising the issue in this daily many times, the local assistant headman, Deepak Wahlang, took action by writing to the Hon'ble Deputy Commissioner (DC) and attaching photos, requesting the installation of CCTV cameras to identify and hold the culprits accountable. Acknowledging the seriousness of the problem, the DC's office immediately approved the request and directed SMB, through a letter dated May 23, 2023, to take immediate action. It was also suggested that open drains in the town be completely covered with slabs. However, to everyone's disappointment, SMB has done nothing—absolutely nothing to date. I would like to know if SMB has become so lackadaisical that it turns a deaf ear even to the directives and suggestions of the Deputy Commissioner. I am utterly confused.

If SMB truly considers the dumping of garbage into drains and rivers, along with environmental pollution, a serious issue, then it is time to do more than just issue directives. Perhaps it should seek guidance from NGOs and engage with conscious citizens—people who genuinely care and can suggest measures to make our city

clean and beautiful. It would do well to take a page from Operation Clean-Up (OCU), whose members have been continuously clearing mountains of waste from the town's riversides for the past five years. I believe no other NGO has taken environmental concerns as seriously as OCU. While others talk, they take action. Of course, SMB is in dire need of the full support of environmentally conscious citizens — those who do not hesitate to wade into the river with hoes and shovels.

Incidentally, special appreciation goes to the area water inspector and plumbers of SMB who, following the publication of my letter in The Shillong Times titled "SMB Ignores a Leaking Pipe for Four Months!" (March 3, 2025), promptly took up the major pipe repair near the Rilbong Bridge and successfully completed it within five days. Let us hope that in the future, SMB does not wait for citizens to voice their frustrations in local dailies regarding its shortcomings, inaction, and indifferent attitude. Well, the public is now eagerly waiting for the town's much-needed cleanliness makeover!

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

"Be true to your work, your word,
and your friend."

— John Boyle O'Reilly

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No. 215 SHILLONG, TUESDAY, MARCH 18, 2025

Getting the basics right

THE MDA Government's proclamation about turning the state into a 10 billion dollar economy by 2028 is an aspiration—may a bold ambition for Meghalaya. But every vision or aspiration requires a clear roadmap so that the public can buy into that roadmap and be co-creators of the 10 billion dollar economy. After all, people should be prepared for that economic boost and they should know which are the areas for potential growth where they can participate. In the case of Meghalaya will it be agriculture, horticulture or just the extractive industries like mining which the Government is working hard to revive by adhering to the Supreme Court directive of scientific mining which is yet to be tried out and which is an unknown entity. No one is sure if the investment in scientific coal mining will yield the same returns as rat-hole mining which has turned hundreds of mine owners into millionaires. Also, if coal is to be scientifically mined, how about limestone mining and quarrying? Why should they be allowed the reckless model of mining without any environmental plough-back?

These are red flags that ought to be considered as critical for a state that is not environmentally sustainable. Considering Meghalaya's location as a hilly terrain and its loss of forest cover the rain water run-off is phenomenal but other than a few water conservation projects not much is happening to address deforestation. Some NGOs have been employed to regreen Meghalaya and to reclaim its lost soil but these projects will take a long time before they produce results. Meanwhile, scientific studies by the Centre for Science and Environment have shown that Meghalaya is heading towards a drought situation. The reasons are not far to seek. If over 747 water sources are in a critical condition then it requires drastic measures to revive those sources and that will only happen through reforestation. But that will take its own time.

Most forested areas in Meghalaya are now under broomstick cultivation. This is seen especially in West Khasi Hills and parts of East Khasi Hills. Broomstick is easy to grow and requires no effort at all but its impact on the soil and its capacity to suck underground water is legendary. It is unfortunate that the farmers of this state are not told to put a stop to broomstick cultivation. So large is the production today that there is a glut in the market. Naturally the price of broomsticks has slumped. That's the law of the market. Another important aspect that is needed to boost Meghalaya's economy is to get investors from outside the state to set up state of the art processing units for pineapple, oranges and other local fruit. These industrial units however need a constant power supply, not the present mode of power supply where power cuts are perennial. If industries have to rely on generators, their production costs will go up. Also, can Meghalaya have water guzzling industries when the state is facing a precarious situation as far as water is concerned? These are emergent issues that need to be red-flagged.

Letters to the Editor

Broom cultivation a bane or boon?

Editor,
In the latest Meghalaya Assembly sessions many of our representatives have bemoaned the plight of the broomstick cultivators for the unprecedented falling of market price of broom and consequent upon which they have had to endure inexorable losses in terms of cost of cultivations! I, for one, wish to share their grievances at this critical juncture because they are victims of the fluctuating market dynamics in such field enterprises.

On this issue, I wish to bring home the point that originally broomstick cultivation was not recognized as an agro-crop but rather categorized as jungle product. Of late however, I have been told that now broomstick farming is bracketed under one of the premier agricultural crops. In contention against this recognition, several years ago, I do believe even now, agro-experts have decidedly averred that broomstick as a farm venture is diametrically alien to sustainable agro-horticultural farming; these agricultural scientists have warned that rampant broom plantation will drastically transform the fertile agricultural landscape into veritable barren tracts, a precursor to total deserti-

fication!
Incidentally, several years ago in my official tour programme I was directed to collect important data on horticulture crops in a village Wakhken, which fortuitously is the village of our incumbent Deputy Chief Minister P. Tynsong. While surveying the village I had been apprised by the farmers that prior to the cultivation of broomstick, the river Umru that has been flowing through this village was more often than not overflowing its banks, specifically during summers, but after some years of introducing broomstick plantation there has been a dramatic change in the dynamics of the said river. The volume of water has reduced sharply thereby precipitating a decrease in river depth. I was literally taken aback by such narratives and out of curiosity, I asked the agricultural officer concerned who was then in charge of that specific village as to the phenomenon leading to the transformation of the said river's eco-system as echoed by the villagers. The response I got was rather intriguing. He recounted the fact that the pre-eminent factor leading this river to the extant moribund state was owing to the abundant planting of broomsticks by farmers to yield economic prosperity. He further reiterated that the networks of roots, unlike other crops, can penetrate deep into the

A Khasi Legacy: Independence, Resilience, and the Power of Matriliney

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

A few days ago, I recalled a story my late mother told me about our late great grandmother, a story that has stayed with me. Our ancestral village was Nongjri, saddled along the international border with one of our properties lying not very far from the river which divides India from Bangladesh. After a plague devastated the village, our family migrated from Nongjri to settle in the newly established village of Rana. My great-grandmother raised my mother after my grandmother died when my mother was young. A highly resilient woman, my great-grandmother was quite resourceful and had married multiple times in the past. During one marriage, she got very annoyed with her husband and tried to kill him with a wait (Khasi machete). This incident reminded of the iconic folktale of Noh Ka Likai.

According to legend, there was a woman called Ka Likai who lived in the village of Rangjyrteh. The settlement is now abandoned and falls under the jurisdiction of Laitduh village under the Sohra Syiemship. In the past, however, Rangjyrteh was part of the erstwhile Hima Khathnyrieh Shnong and was an important iron smelting site until the 17th century. It was from around the same area that in 2013 Pawel Prakov (I met him while I was doing my PhD in NEHU) and Ireneusz Suliga from the Department of Geo-environmental Research, Polish Academy of Science found evidence of iron smelting that goes back over 1000 years along with sites in Nongkrem that had dated to over 2000 years (oldest iron smelting site in North East India). Rangjyrteh was, therefore, a very important settlement in the past.

Ka Likai had a daughter who she loved very much. Her husband had died when her daughter was born. After her daughter grew up to play with other children, she married again. However, the new husband resented Ka Likai's inability to attend to him more because of the child. Therefore, one day when the mother went about her work at the iron smelting plant, her husband killed the child, dismembered her and prepared curry with the body parts. After Ka Likai returned, he gave the dish to the tired mother who ate without suspecting that she was consuming her own child. However, he forgot to throw away the fingers he'd put in the betel nut basket. After the husband had left,

Ka Likai took the betel nut basket and found the fingers of her child. Horrified at the realisation of what had actually transpired, she shrieked and ran out of the house with the wait to kill the murderer of her child. However, she could no longer find him and in distraught, she threw herself from the precipice from which a waterfall emerged known as 'Noh Ka Likai' (the place from where Ka Likai jumped to her death).

My mother never told me what made my great grandmother so annoyed with her husband, but I presume it was over a similar incident. I imagine, though, the spirit of Ka Likai was very with her when she tried to kill him. However, she failed, and the police took her into custody and imprisoned her alongside her husband. Another man, also arrested by the police, was in the same lockup. She found out that this individual had intellectual disability. Quick-witted that she was, she convinced the man to lie alongside her in order to give the impression that he was her husband. When the police came to inspect the lockup and asked her if she and her husband had made peace, the man (influenced by my great grandmother) nodded in agreement with her. The police then let them both go and my great-grandmother came back home without her husband or the man from the lockup. The only picture that we had of her was only of her standing together with my mother and her siblings. So, while she married multiple times, she never settled with any man. I guess she found them too tedious.

The ease with which my great grandmother could change partners was very much in keeping with the Khasi tradition of ease of getting divorce. According to PRT Gurdon's 1914 monograph 'The Khasis,' divorce was very common and can take place for a variety of reasons, such as adultery, barrenness, incompatibility of temperament, etc. During the divorce, the 'Ksiang' (go-between) and the maternal uncles 'Kni' must witness the event. On other occasions, friends and other acquaintances can replace the 'Ksiang'. The husband and wife bring five cowries each. The wife gives her five cowries to her husband, who then places them with his and returns the five cowries to his wife, together with his own. He then receives back the ten cowries from his wife and

throws them on the ground, signalling the acceptance of divorce. A crier (u nong pyra shnong) then goes round the village to proclaim the divorce, and inform the men and women of the village that they are free to court the two parties as they are no longer together. This can be compared to the case of a North Indian friend of mine, whose husband had abandoned her nearly ten years ago. But according to her customs, she cannot remarry because he had not officially divorced her. No Khasi woman would put up with this nonsense. Ease of divorce is the mark of a civilised society where women are not forced to suffer in a toxic relationship for the pleasure of those who do not come to her aid. What the Khasis had, the world is clamouring for and hopefully more societies would adopt the Khasi principle of divorce where every person, man and woman are free to separate and find someone else if they are unhappy. And even if they never want to settle, that's also alright.

Despite being quite old when my mother became an orphan, my great-grandmother made sure that she raised all her grandchildren in the best way she could. Although now I am the eldest, I had two elder siblings who had died soon after their birth. So, when I was born, she told my mother that she was buying me and I was her son. My mother, of course, agreed, but when my parents shifted to Shillong, she had to let me go. I visited the village a couple of times, but when she passed away, I could not go and my mother told me she wanted to see me one last time. Among my many regrets, that is one I always carry.

When I think about my great grandmother, I picture her as a strong and independent woman who was highly resourceful and quite entrepreneurial. We have some land under an areca nut plantation which still provides some money for my family. But I'm sure my great-grandmother also engaged in cross-border trade, especially in the Nongjri-Ha, established for that purpose. A few years ago I had gone there with my late uncle and the Haat resembled the weekly markets we see elsewhere. The only exception being that this one had many Bangladeshi traders. Even then, I saw many Khasi women selling areca nut in locally made bamboo baskets.

The Khasis share a relationship with the Austroasiatic speaking groups of South China and Southeast Asia. Despite converting to foreign faiths from India, women in these societies maintained their respectable positions. In his 2024 book 'The Golden Road: How Ancient India Transformed the World', William Dalrymple writes that "There was one other aspect of South-east Asian life that remained untouched by Indian influence: the high status of women. In Cambodia, women remained owners and disposers of property, something from which the Laws of Manu and wider Indian Brahmanical tradition excluded them." The Khasis have carried that tradition well into the modern period, and my great-grandmother was an excellent example of that.

There's another passage from the book 'Garo and Khasi: A Comparative Study in Matrilineal System' by Chie Nakane which talks about the immense strength of Khasi women as derived from the culture: Even after divorce or husband's death, the Khasi woman (non-heiress) stays on in her household. Indeed, many divorced or widowed poor wives, whose children are still small, try their best to live and bring up their children by themselves without asking their brothers' help. Of course, a mother and her small children may go back to live in her natal home... However, during my fieldwork, I found no sense of psychological inferiority in Khasi women, widows or divorcees, such as we usually find in other societies. The personality of the individual seems to reflect the social structure.

Things have changed a lot and the impact of a patriarchal Christianity which preaches monogamy and obedience to the husband has had some impact. The rise of cases of sexual assault against women is an example of how modernity has not been beneficial for the Khasi women. But I hope that the example of my great-grandmother and many like her (I am sure every Khasi household must have had or still have someone like her) can be a template to never forget the roots of our culture and what gives us our identity. We lose this, we lose who we are.

(The views expressed in the article are those of the author and do not reflect in any way his affiliation to any organisation or institution)

Heartless governance system

Editor,

Four migrant workers from Bengal died reportedly of suffocation after they went down to clean a septic tank at an under-construction building on Mint Road in Nagpada, Mumbai, a few days ago. Another worker is in a critical condition. There should be enough artificial ventilation at the manhole at the time of manual work inside a septic tank. The workers need to be provided with adequate safety equipment. How long should we keep our eyes closed when more often than not workers keep on giving their lives to clean our excrement without adequate safety measures inside a septic tank? The media must publish follow-up reports about what actions are being taken against those who violated the safety protocols for the workers.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

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

Meghalaya's Food Sovereignty: The Need for Urgent Action

By George B. Lyngdoh

Meghalaya's Growing Food Crisis

Meghalaya's dependence on food imports is reaching crisis levels, impacting both economic stability and household nutrition. Over the past five years, food inflation in the state has risen by over 20%, outpacing income growth for most households. In comparison, India's national food inflation peaked at approximately 11% in October 2024 before easing to around 6% by January 2025. Meanwhile, neighbouring Assam recorded a food price index decrease to 5.4% in July 2024, down from 9.4% in June.

Malnutrition rates have also been on the rise, with 40% of children under 5 years reported to be stunted or underweight, according to NFHS-5 data. These figures underscore the urgency of addressing food insecurity, malnutrition, and reducing reliance on imports.

Dependence on Food Imports

Meghalaya currently imports approximately 70% of its rice, 85% of its pulses, and nearly 90% of its fruits and vegetables, leading to an annual food import bill exceeding Rs 2,500 crore. Comparatively, cash crops like broomstick and arecanut contribute to less than 20% of total agricultural income, whereas food crops sustain over 65% of small and marginal farmers.

Food price inflation is worsened by infrastructural gaps in the rail, road, and supply chain network. Restrictions on heavy vehicles across the Umiam Dam force trucks carrying essential commodities to take a longer route—from Lad Umroi to Shillong via Mawryngkneng—effectively doubling the travel distance and increasing costs.

Farmers as Entrepreneurs, Not Beneficiaries

A fundamental shift is needed in how we perceive farmers. I have always articulated the need to recognise farmers as entrepreneurs, rather than beneficiaries because they never wait for doles to cultivate their land.

A rice farmer from Ribhoi once stated, "We have always been independent. We grow food because it is in our blood, not because we wait for someone to pay us to do it. What we need is support in better seeds, fair prices, and storage solutions, not handouts." Recognizing farmers as entrepreneurs, not beneficiaries, is key to reshaping Meghalaya's agricultural approach.

A Critical Look at MDA's 8th Budget

The Hon'ble Chief Minister Conrad Sangma's 8th Budget speech allocated a record Rs 618 crore to agriculture. However, the focus remains on agribusiness and high-value cash crops, ignoring food crop production. While commercial agriculture contributes towards economic growth, food security and nutrition must be prioritized to reduce inflation in food costs & dependence on imports.

The Pitfalls of Cash Crop Incentives

The CM-ASSURE programme, which provides an assured pricing mechanism for broomstick and arecanut (Rs 50 crore budget), will push farmers further into monocropping. While seemingly beneficial, assured pricing mechanisms can distort markets, encourage price manipulation, and create opportunities for corruption.

Neglecting Organic and Regenerative Agriculture

The budget is again silent on incentives for organic and regenerative farming, continuing to promote hybrid seeds and inorganic agriculture. These imported seeds are often disease-prone, they produce yields with reduced shelf life, degrade soil fertility, and threaten local biodiversity.

Sikkim, India's first fully organic state, successfully implemented agroecological policies, ensuring food security, market linkages for traditional crops, and subsidies for sustainable

farming; Meghalaya must adopt similar policies to strengthen its indigenous farming systems.

Promising Interventions in Food Crop Cultivation

In 2022, the Central Potato Research Institute (CPRI), Upper Shillong, helped Umroi farmers cultivate potatoes in the otherwise fallow winter period, increasing farmer incomes and promoting value addition through processed products like chips. Additionally, recent initiatives in millets and rice varieties have shown promise, but biofertilizers and biopesticides remain inaccessible even within government agencies.

Challenges in Food Crop Production

Farmers in Meghalaya face geographic and climatic constraints, lack of irrigation and water management, market price volatility, seed and input challenges, and labour shortages. Declining youth participation further threatens the sustainability of agriculture.

Given these challenges, Meghalaya requires a proactive and transformative policy framework to reclaim food sovereignty while aligning with existing government programs.

The Need for a Meghalaya Food Sovereignty Policy

A Food Sovereignty Policy must be introduced to ensure long-term sustainability and food security. The policy should:

- Reduce dependency on food imports by strengthening local food production.

- Protect and promote indigenous farming systems, native seeds, farmer-led research, and food traditions.

- Ensure nutritional security and climate resilience through agroecology.

- Strengthen community-led food governance for equitable distribution.

- Roadmap for Meghalaya's Food Sovereignty Short-Term (0-2 years)

- Expand CM FARM to support key food crops and establish community-led seed banks.

- Recognize Community Land Rights for continued access to traditional farmlands.

- Strengthen local procurement for PDS, school meals, and ICDS.

- Launch pilot village food sovereignty councils to test decentralized food governance and integrate MGN-REGA in farm labour.

- Promote agroecology and mixed cropping to balance food and cash crops, with bio-inputs

- Reduce food imports by 10% by 2026.

- Mid-Term (2-5 years)

- Increase irrigation coverage from 1.54 lakh ha to 2.5 lakh ha, focusing on small and marginal farms.

- Develop an Indigenous Food Market, promoting traditional foods and experiential tourism.

- Provide incentives for farmers practicing agroecology and regenerative agriculture.

- Integrate indigenous foods into midday meals and ICDS.

- Reduce rice imports by 30% by 2028.

- Long-Term (5-10 years)

- Reduce food imports by 50% and achieve self-sufficiency in key staples.

- Introduce a Meghalaya Food Sovereignty Act to safeguard indigenous farming rights.

- Strengthen agricultural financing, directing 50% of state agricultural funds towards food crops.

- Establish Emergency Food Reserves to counter climate shocks and food shortages.

Conclusion
Food sovereignty is not just an aspiration but a necessity for Meghalaya's survival. Farmers, policymakers, and citizens must work together to reclaim control over indigenous food systems, ensuring sustainability, nutrition, and economic resilience.

(The writer is a former legislator in Meghalaya Legislative Assembly and can be reached at georgeblyngdoh@outlook.com.)

surface soil to voraciously suck its moisture contents, thus sapping the reachable water bodies irreversibly. The forbidding instance he inferred being the river in question that meanders beside the village Wakhken!

Taking everything into consideration, would it not be wise for the Government to discreetly discourage the plantation of broomstick progressively against the apprehensions that in course of time Meghalaya may become a Sahara desert in the making? The perceptible apprehension is that such type of farm culture may turn our future generations to end up becoming environmental refugees as what we are witnessing how in some pockets in the continent of Africa, and for that matter elsewhere have suffered starvations for having wantonly abused the rich environmental biodiversity.

A point to note is that I had flagged the same issue in these very columns several years ago, but regrettably the same had fallen on deaf ears and there were no takers for my cautionary words.

Yours etc.,
Jerome K Diengdoh,
Shillong-2

Dealing with fear

Editor,
The special article "Is

Meghalaya's progress derailed by misplaced resistance," by Patricia Mukhim (ST March 14, 2025) made interesting reading. The point that struck me in this article was the author asking "There is a strong case for reframing and redefining fear and where it originates from." Fear, at its core, is a primal emotional response to a perceived threat or danger. It plays a crucial role in survival, triggering physiological changes (like the "fight-or-flight" response) that prepares an individual to react quickly to a challenge or danger. However, fear is not limited to physical threats – it can also arise from psychological or social challenges, such as fear of failure or rejection. Rather than seeing fear solely as something negative, it can be reframed and redefined as a signal of importance. Fear often highlights what matters to us, such as our safety, relationships or personal goals. As a motivator fear can push us to prepare, grow, and overcome obstacles, helping us build resilience. As a teacher, fear invites self-reflection, revealing insecurities or unresolved issues that we can address to grow.

As to the origins of fear it can be traced to both evolutionary biology and cultural conditioning.

Biological origins: Fear is deeply rooted in our evolutionary history. For early

humans, fear was vital for survival – it kept them alert to predators and environmental dangers. The brain's amygdala plays a key role in processing fear, triggering the release of adrenaline and cortisol to prepare the body for action.

Cultural and Learned origins: Fear is also shaped by upbringing, societal norms, and personal experiences. For example, a fear of public speaking may arise not from physical danger, but from cultural or social expectations and learned behaviours. When approached mindfully, fear can transition from being a barrier to a stepping stone. In fact, fear originates from deeply ingrained survival mechanisms but, with practice, it can be transformed into a catalyst for growth.

An insightful way to look at FEAR- False Expectation Appearing Real can reframe it as something less daunting. Often, fears that hold us back are rooted in imagined outcomes or exaggerated scenarios rather than actual threats. By recognising these false expectations and take steps to overcome them. This perspective is particularly powerful in personal growth, as it encourages us to question our assumptions and push past self-imposed limitations.

Yours etc;
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

"Worry never robs tomorrow of its sorrow,
it only saps today of its joy."

— Leo Buscaglia

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No. 216 SHILLONG, WEDNESDAY, MARCH 19, 2025

Horrifying fate of children

THE shocking news of the death of two teenagers from Meghalaya due to food poisoning in a school in Karnataka should shake the collective conscience. These students were sent to Karnataka for free education by the Lei Synshar Cultural Society (LSCS), a society allegedly affiliated to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), although the LSCS has denied having direct links with the Sangh. This has been happening since 2001 and the elder brothers of the deceased boy are also studying there. The question that arises is why do parents send their children to such distant spaces at such a young age when they still need parental care and affection. The answer is not far to seek. Poverty is the driving force that pushes parents to take desperate steps just so their children have a better chance at making a life for themselves away from the abject poverty that has been their own fates. The fact that the hostel is run by a private agency without authorisation is in itself questionable. The school is located in a distant village in the Mandya district of Karnataka. Normally such students are enlisted by the LSCS and are taken by train by a leader of the Society. Parents repose their faith in the Society because there have been precedents of others from their villages returning after being educated there. That all the students belong to the Niam Khasi, Niamtre tells its own story.

An investigative story done by Tehelka some years ago, found that the idea of sending young students from Meghalaya to RSS-friendly schools in Karnataka is an ambitious social-engineering project meant to counter the attempts of Christian missionaries to evangelise those adhering to the indigenous faith. The RSS has been working silently in Meghalaya for over three decades and has seen the downsides of a society where poverty has rendered families to become easy prey to anyone offering their children free education, complete with hostel facilities. Parents actually don't see the state in which their children live or are treated in such institutions. That the students were fed stale food that must have turned rancid is just the tip of the iceberg. In such institutions students are brainwashed never to complain about anything because the fact that they are given free education is in itself a huge favour.

According to the LSCS about 1100 students from Jaintia Hills, East Khasi Hills, West Khasi Hills, and Ri-Bhoi district are now pursuing studies outside Meghalaya with its assistance and some of them have been able to successfully obtain degrees in medicine, engineering, and other disciplines through the assistance of the Society. That is all fine but is it not a criminal offence for the institution to be feeding food that should have been thrown away? A charitable organisation does not ill-treat its wards. It is good that officials from Meghalaya have travelled to Karnataka to get first-hand information on the incident. Hopefully this incident will make parents more responsible about who they entrust their children's futures to.

Making sense of the Sexual Revolution ...

By Deepa Majumdar

If by "revolution," is meant seismic change, born out of revolt against an unjust order, or as a historical novelty — then "revolution" extends beyond the political. Thus, the scientific revolution is an amoral, apolitical utilitarian phenomenon. Of all normative revolutions, perhaps the most disturbing is the "sexual revolution," described by Pitrin Sorokin as something "odd." Revolutions bring sudden changes. What abrupt change has come with the sexual revolution? Modern man's uncritical descent into the body — a moral decline that has isolated the sexual act from love and friendship, treating it as an end in itself, rather than as a means to an end.

According to European wisdom, the scala natura, or Great Chain of Being is a petrified existential hierarchy — with God at the summit, human persons in the middle, and subhuman life forms below. This implies that although we have animal aspects, we are distinct from and superior to animals. Today, we are so confused about fundamental human nature that we blur the lines between human intelligence and AI, on the one hand — and between human and animal nature, on the other. Given our sentimental love for animals, we conflate ourselves to their level. But just as human intelligence is wholly distinct from AI, so also, human capacities are wholly distinct from those of animals. Unlike animals we are morally culpable, which is why, courts of law apply to us — not to animals. Especially when it comes to sexual conduct, we are entirely distinct from animals. Like animals, we are creatures of passion. But unlike animals, we are capable of self-control — through sublimation of the passions.

At this point in history, we are in a position to assess the sexual revolution — better than intellectuals like Octavio Paz, who, back in 1950, wrote, with touching naïveté — "In a society in which everyone could choose [to engage in bodily romantic love], divorce would become an anachronism or a rarity, like prostitution and promiscuity and adultery." Compared to mercenary acts of marriage that involve money and merchandise — marriage, through romantic love, is morally higher. Although not as effective as religion in its power of sublimating, falling in love sublimates the raw sexual impulse, at least slightly. Nevertheless, romantic love is unreliable as a basis for a stable union like marriage — because it is based on effervescent emotion. Like a drug, romantic love bestows an artificial high that falls with a thud, when love swings to its opposite, which is hatred.

Perhaps the greatest tragedy of modern western civilization is its unthinking descent into the body. One sign of this descent is its binary approach to the human sexual urge — giving us just two options — either expression or repression. Thanks

to Mr. Freud and his ilk, western "liberal" youth can be terrified of being sexually incorrect, repressed, or both. Many cannot even imagine the voluntary act of chastity — and nobody is teaching them otherwise. If the Talibanic creed of lustful puritanism is one horrifying extreme — then western lustful hedonism is another.

There is, however, a third option, besides expression and repression. This is self-control, through conscious acts of sublimation that overcome the sexual impulse and other passions. Sublimation is the opposite of repression. Unlike repression, which does not purify the mind, sublimation purifies by turning us upward towards dispassion. What are the means of sublimation? This is where religion becomes indispensable. For, no force on earth is more powerful in its ability to sublimate lust than sincere practice of a worthy religion.

Unlike animals, we humans are capable of the supernatural virtue of chastity. Hardly the exclusive prerogative of nuns and monks, this virtue matters also in marriage. For, without a semblance of marital chastity, marriages fall apart due to infidelity and sexual violence. In the immortal words of St. Francis of Assisi — one can get drunk on home-grown wine (I paraphrase) — meaning, one can be carnally immoderate within marriage. Such excess concupiscence can lead, not just to carnal volatility, which belies the very purpose of marriage — which is to hoist us above the crude physical level — but also to marital rape.

Given this background, what is the historical purpose of the sexual revolution? Whence did it arise, where has it led us, and is it coming to an end? First, the Pendulum of History always swings from extreme to extreme. This world has perhaps always swung between the extremes of sexual puritanism and hedonism. Within my lifetime I have witnessed it swing from a most destructive puritanism to a more destructive hedonism. But never before has this Pendulum swung to so great a descent into the body, as we see today. The purpose of this descent, therefore, must exceed mere fulfillment of the requirements of the Pendulum of History.

Has the sexual revolution brought about any good? I can think of at least three related morally worthy purposes to this descent. First, it has leveled the playing ground, degrading all of us to the level of the sexually non-respectable — perhaps as a cosmic punishment for our collective abuse of the latter — especially of the so-called "sex worker" (a euphemism). The west has not invented sexual minorities. They have always existed in non-western societies — but hidden from the puritanical eye. Second (as a result of the first), the sexual revolution has helped us embrace and

accept people we once treated as "pariahs" — members of the LGBTQI community and the "sex worker." Their sufferings are unimaginable. ISIL has punished homosexuality by throwing gay men off building tops, with mobs stoning them to death. I cannot imagine a greater human rights tragedy than that of the "sex worker" in a puritanical religious society. Third, the sexual revolution has given us a mixed message, telling us that sexual conduct within the limits of "consent" is OK — but not sexual misconduct. Infusing at least a modicum of sexual ethics, this message rescues the sexual act from its clandestine nonconsensual character under puritanism. But there is a fourth, highest purpose to the sexual revolution, which I elaborate at the end of this essay.

Clearly, these good aspects do not outweigh the damage done by this revolution. From a wasteland in human relationships, to broken marriages, fatherless children, and predatory conduct that has destroyed civil society — the sexual revolution has wreaked more havoc than good. One sign of the depravity of our times lies in our use of the legal term, "consent." To demand "consent" for the sexual act, is, at best, legally (not morally) correct — its legal status being no guarantee at all of its moral rectitude. For, "consent" is morally minimal. Two people may consent to mutually destructive sexual acts. Even if legal, can this ever be morally right? Of course not. Thus "consent" alone can never guarantee sexual ethics. Moreover, "consent" is a cold clinical term — very remote from love, affection, responsibility, and duty — all of which cocoon the sexual act in its proper context. For, the only proper place for the sexual act, and for the intense physical intimacy this entails, is deep, abiding friendship, accompanied by mutual responsibilities and duties. Time has not yet vindicated Paz's words. In the promiscuous world bequeathed by the sexual revolution, adultery has become meaningless, prostitution thrives (despite this revolution), and divorce has become the norm, rather than a rarity.

Hopefully this revolution is winding down — not because we have become more virtuous — but for two practical reasons. First, given the horrific escalation in sexist violence, western women are seeking to emulate the B4 or "Four Nos" radical feminist movement from South Korea — saying "no" to men, marriage, sex, and children. Here we must distinguish true chastity — not just from carnal-chastity in puritanical societies — but also from mere external celibacy, often practiced for morally inferior reasons by incel men, B4 feminists, and others. For, true chastity is not merely refraining from the sexual act, but redirecting the libido to something higher — through

sublimation. Radical feminists and incel men do not aim at a higher consciousness. Their goal being primarily circumstantial, and at best, political, they do not practice self-control through sublimation. They, therefore, cannot reach true chastity. But a second reason for the fading of the sexual revolution may be the reversal of Roe v Wade in America, which means federal protection of abortion rights has ended, and twelve out of fifty states have banned abortion. This new illegality of abortion may deter unprotected sex, leading perhaps to other forms of involuntary celibacy.

But the greatest impact of the sexual revolution reaches well beyond correcting puritanism, or restoring the status of former sexual "pariahs." This is the en masse voluntary chastity we can expect as a direct result of the sexual revolution. Having seen a holocaust in human relations and the personal devastation caused by unchecked lust, modern western man has discovered a newfound aspiration and wisdom. There is, in the west, a new yearning for true chastity. We can therefore expect the phoenix of true chastity to rise from the ashes of the sexual revolution. After experiencing what prior puritanical generations could only imagine — a break down in civil society, abandonment of marriage as an anachronism, violence against women and children at historically unprecedented levels, and a decline in ethical standards, intelligence, and mental health, as a direct result of ungoverned lust — western man longs to rise en masse to true chastity.

Let us not forget that this virtue is not restricted just to the sexually respectable. Any human being can attain chastity — whether someone from the LGBTQI community, or the "sex worker," or anyone else. We may vary greatly at lower levels. But our thirst for self-knowledge leads all of us to yearn for the same universal highest self — whether the image of God in man (per Christianity), or Divinity itself (per Vedanta). Sublimation of the sexual impulse is the means to fulfill this natural urge for self-realization. Any individual or civilization that achieves chastity progresses by leaps and bounds towards a higher, more sublime consciousness. Thus, alongside scientific sex education, all adolescents should also be taught self-control of lust (through sublimation). The Indian tradition has a rich repository of tools to overcome the passions through sublimation — from prayer to the practice of fasting, austerities, etc. In prior generations, Indian women prepared themselves for marriage and motherhood through assiduous discipline — by performing purificatory austerities.

Marriage and parenting have a sexual aspect. But they are never sexual in essence. So, the real choice before us, today, is not that of sexual orientation, but that between love and lust.

We need a better work culture How Meghalaya can become a US\$ 10 billion economy one year early

By Glenn C. Kharkongor

This article will meander through several topics, but eventually we'll get to the conclusion that if we all work harder and better, Meghalaya's economy can develop faster for the benefit of us all. The main beneficiaries will be our youth, whose job and financial prospects will be enhanced.

The Shillong Times of Mar 10, 2025 carried a front-page article titled, "Meghalaya among states with shortest working hours for government and private employees." The data was compiled and published by the Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister (EAC-PM). The study highlighted significant differences in working hours across the country, with Meghalaya standing out for its notably shorter workdays.

The study sample included more than four lakh individuals, aged 15-59 years, across the country. The national average time spent on paid economic activities is 422 minutes per day, about seven hours. In Meghalaya, individuals work an average of 375 minutes per day, approximately 6.25 hours, placing our state among the bottom states, with the lowest time spent on economic activities.

Government employees in urban areas of Telangana and Rajasthan work two more hours each day on an average than their counterparts in Meghalaya. In rural Meghalaya, the report indicates similarly low working hours, suggesting this trend may be influenced by social, economic, or lifestyle factors unique to the region.

US\$ 10 billion one year early
According to the EAC-PM report, 1% more time spent on employment work is positively associated with a 1.7% per capita increase in the Net State Domestic Product (NSDP). So, if individuals in Meghalaya worked as much as the national average, that is 11% more, the increase to the NSDP would be about 19%.

In Meghalaya, the NSDP reached Rs. 37,925 crore (US\$ 4.76 billion) in 2022-23. With national level working hours, it could have been US\$ 5.67 billion, a big step closer to the state target of US\$ 10 billion by 2028. This goal can be reached one year earlier just by increasing work hours to the national level.

Shillong Culture: slow motion
In a recent conversation with a young Gen Z colleague, I remarked about our slow motion pace of life, our tendency to take personal and work priorities lightly, and the lack of high aspirations. She chuckled and said, "Well, that's Shillong culture!"

The participants in a recent survey among working professionals in a higher education institute in the state called for better work-life balance. This is of course an important priority. But several of the respondents suggested even lower working hours.

Less working hours and a slow pace seem to be in-built into the psyche of the general work force, especially in organizations with fixed hours like government and education. But even in Meghalaya there are certain sectors like health, hospitality and journalism in which long hours are inherent in those workplaces.

Shillong Culture has become a Shillong Syndrome. According to the Oxford Dictionary, a syndrome in medical parlance is "a group of signs or changes in the body that are typical of an illness," or in sociology, "a set of opinions or a way of behaving that is typical of a particular type of person, attitude or social problem." A social attitude that seems to be prevalent among Shillong youth is the low aspiration of just to get a job and a life partner. Such a mindset will affect attitudes to work.

Ability of the future workforce
The Annual Status of Education Report 2024 (ASER), covered youth aged 14-18 years, across the country. Among students of Class 8

in Meghalaya, 57% cannot do subtraction of a two-digit number with borrowing, and 81% cannot do division of a three-digit number by a one-digit number. Of children in Class 8, one-fourth could not read a Class 2 book. These indices are among the lowest in the country. The performance in government schools were by far the poorest in the country, less than half of the next lowest state, Rajasthan.

Only 3.3% of schools in Meghalaya had computers, the lowest in the country, compared with 84% in Punjab. Almost all, 95%, of rural households in our state, has a smart phone; but only 38% of teenagers use it for educational activity, though 74% had used it for social media.

When these teenagers enter the workforce, there may be a question of work ability and efficiency. The quality, or lack of it, of the state education system will determine the standards of the future workforce in Meghalaya.

Why so few hours?
One obvious factor is the large number of holidays, more than other states in the country. Apart from the national holidays, we pay obeisance to a host of religious and cultural events and historic personalities, by commemorating them with holidays. For the most part these are local holidays, pandering to vote banks and enforced by pressure groups.

The actual number of hours actually spent working in an eight-hour day has been studied extensively. For those sitting at a desk in front of a computer, a UK survey showed an average of 2 hours 53 minutes per day in an observation study of office workers. The rest of the eight hours was spent on lunch and coffee breaks, socialising, social media and sites like TikTok.

The most productive professionals may perform 5-6 hours of work tasks, including meetings, emails, writing reports, or other job-related duties. Breaks may take 1-2 hours and the remaining non-work time is spent in stretching, walking around, and talking to colleagues. Of course, psychologists tell us that for humans, concentrating on work for every minute of an eight-hour day is impossible.

Time zone or change work timings
Wrong work timings are the bugbear of the north-east states. We go to work when the sun is high up in the sky and in winters, we reach home after dark. These hours are misaligned with the diurnal fluctuations of certain body hormones, such as cortisol.

Cortisol follows a pattern of daily fluctuations, called the circadian rhythm. Sunlight plays a key role in regulating this rhythm. Natural morning light causes higher cortisol secretion, peaking shortly after waking, promoting alertness, concentration, memory, problem-solving, and decision-making. As the day progresses and light fades, cortisol levels decrease, reaching a low in the evening.

There are morning people who tend to have peak performance during the morning hours. For them, about two-thirds of the population, starting the day earlier, say at 8:00 am, will result in better focus and productivity, as their cortisol and alertness levels are high in the morning. Evening persons may struggle with early work hours because their peak physical and mental performance occurs later in the day. Children and adults tend to be more morning-oriented, while teenagers and youth tend towards later sleep patterns, leading to better evening performance.

In the Northeast, morning peak performance hours are lost, because we go to work several hours after dawn. Then we struggle to work optimally in twilight because our cortisol levels are at a low ebb. So, either we continue to push for a different time zone, or begin work earlier in the day, say at 8:00 am. Our bodies and minds can then capture these hormonal benefits.

Letters to the Editor

Urgent action needed to confront Tura's growing drug crisis

Editor,
It's disheartening to witness the escalating drug menace that has engulfed Tura, once a serene and peaceful town in West Garo Hills. The stark reality is that drug users have skyrocketed from about 2 lakhs users to a staggering 3 lakhs in Meghalaya in just one year, as noted by Social Welfare Minister Paul Lyngdoh. This alarming increase isn't just a statistic; it's a growing crisis that threatens the very fabric of our society.

Union Home Minister Amit Shah recently declared that the Narendra Modi government's crackdown on drugs is relentless, emphasizing a "bottom-to-top and top-to-bottom approach" in combating drug trafficking. Yet, in the plain-belt

region of West Garo Hills, the numbers tell a different story. According to Minister Lyngdoh, while drug trafficking cases are reportedly on the rise, a shocking single detection of a drug-related case has been recorded from January 2025 to date in the entire area. This discrepancy raises profound questions about our law enforcement's priorities, effectiveness, and ability to tackle this urgent problem.

The relentless efforts of the police in Garo Hills seem focused on apprehending small-time users while high-profile peddlers operate with impunity. Where is the accountability? Why are we not targeting the real culprits behind this crisis? Tura's streets are now rife with addicts, and they pose a grave threat to the community. The essence of our once tranquil town is being eroded, and the government's response to this urgent issue seems appallingly inadequate.

While the formation of an Anti-Narcotics Task Force is a step in the right direction, we need action that goes

beyond mere discussions. What are the tangible results of these interventions? Although rehabilitation centers like the Addiction Treatment Facility at Tura Civil Hospital exist, questions remain about their accessibility and resources. Who is monitoring these centers to ensure they provide the comprehensive support that individuals struggling with addiction so desperately need?

The lack of transparency surrounding treatment facilities is a slap in the face of those grappling with addiction. The so-called Asha Bhawan, located in Bokmagre on the outskirts of Tura, supposedly run by former addicts, leaves the community in the dark. How many people in Tura are even aware of this center? It's a sad reflection of our reality that only a handful seem to know it's there or what it genuinely provides.

Moreover, the impotence of our so-called "intellectuals," developmental committees, and village chiefs (A'king Nokmas) is bewildering. Is it not their respon-

sibility to address this crisis? Are we waiting for a tragedy to strike before our leaders take meaningful action? The lack of sympathy and urgency from those in power is shocking. They seem content to sit back and watch as Tura is slowly transformed into a drug hub.

Conversations with faith leaders highlight the pressing need for a comprehensive and coordinated strategy to combat this epidemic. Yet, what tangible steps are being taken? The government's meager financial assistance for drug demand reduction is nothing short of an insult when considering the millions needed to effectively tackle this problem.

We demand more than just promises; we need action. We deserve proactive measures, not excuses or delays. The youth of Tura are at risk of falling into a cycle of addiction, and it is the collective responsibility of our government, police, and community leaders to provide the necessary support and resources. It is time to rise and reclaim our town

from the grips of this devastating drug crisis.

Yours etc.,
Chanella Sangma,
Tura

Looming water crisis

Editor,
Time and again reports and videos have surfaced over the gradual dwindling of water sources around the areas of Shillong and most importantly the impact on many catchment areas due to sand mining, excavation of boulders and subsequent deforestation. To only single out Shillong as an area where water scarcity and contaminated water often gets into water pipes is not acceptable. Why not take into consideration a similar crisis that has affected villages around Pynursla, Sohra, Amlarem, Sutnga etc. each of which has its own story to tell. However, what is imperative for the state authorities along with the village communities, dorbar shonong and the District Councils

is to have a joint working group mechanism such as a joint water and forest committee that would look into and study the problems in a holistic manner and come out with relatively workable plans learning from the past efforts and improving them with low-cost technology. This model has often been successful if we look at small sector interventions by various line departments as they are the experts in fine tuning things on the ground and not consultants who parachute into the state. The water crisis is seemingly getting out of hand and the state government should look into it's Water Policy as well as the KHADC which had brought out a similar document during the tenure of Ardent Basaiawmait as CEM.

Yours etc.,
Dominic S. Wankhar
Via email

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

"Who has a harder fight than he who is striving to overcome himself."

— Thomas a Kempis

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No. 217 SHILLONG, THURSDAY, MARCH 20, 2025

Alert in Nagpur

AN extraordinary situation has developed in the central-Indian city of Nagpur, following a violent demonstration seeking the razing of the tomb of Aurangzeb, one of the last among the Mughal emperors, in Khuldabad in Maharashtra's erstwhile Aurangabad district. Curfew has been clamped after several persons from rival communities and police personnel were injured in the sudden eruption of violence on Monday. In all fairness, the BJP-led NDA government with Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the helm had ensured peace in the communally volatile Hindi belt so far, with some exceptions like the Delhi riots over National Citizenship Registry etc. Nagpur, the winter capital of Maharashtra, too is part of the Hindi belt and the headquarters of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). Tempers have remained under control there even when states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar witnessed communal conflagrations in the past. Nagpur generally did not have a history of violence. What caused the disruption to peace there now has to do with a movie, Chaava, which was released a month ago. It re-created history, with focus on Sambhaji, son of Maratha warrior king Shivaji Maharaj, who had been involved in a war with Aurangzeb and was caught and tortured to death. Apparently, the movie raised tempers among sections of the Hindu nationalists, as claimed by Chief Minister Devinder Fadnavis.

The immediate requirement is restoration of peace in Nagpur and strong steps by the law and order machinery in Maharashtra and elsewhere to keep things under control. Fadnavis, on his part, should have acted in a more responsible manner, as the intelligence establishment had an inkling of the tension building up in Maharashtra over the release of the controversial movie. What should not be overlooked is also the direct link that the CM has with the RSS in Nagpur, which should have helped him gauge the rising communal temperature there. Notably, the Ram Temple movement gained traction from a Doordarshan serial, Ramayana, and this led to the mass frenzy and demolition of the Babri Masjid in the early 1990s, resulting in communal riots and large-scale deaths across the northern and western regions. There were lessons to learn from this.

The present scenario should not be allowed to get out of hand. Attempts at disturbing communal harmony must be nipped in the bud. It is important that the police and the intelligence establishment remain fully alert. While the Modi-led NDA government has a rightful claim to have ensured peace and stability essential for national well-being and progress, Manipur remains a blemish on the establishment's image. Home Minister Amit Shah too has a reputation overall for maintenance of law and order in other parts of the country, including the once-volatile Kashmir Valley in recent years. But constant alert on the law and order front is imperative in a country as ethnically and religiously diverse as India is.

When the land bleeds coal, the rivers weep poison

By Bijoy A Sangma

regulatory compliance.

The ruling redefined coal mining in Meghalaya, allowing illegal extraction under strict safeguards. It mandated environmental impact assessments, waste management, and land reclamation to curb ecological damage while ensuring worker safety and eliminating exploitative labour practices. However, transitioning from illegal rat-hole mining to regulated methods required structural reforms, administrative approvals, and infrastructural investments - challenges that have delayed progress for years.

Despite the judicial directive, illegal coal mining persists in parts of Meghalaya, highlighting enforcement gaps. With thousands relying on mining for livelihoods and strong political-business interests at play, eradication remains challenging.

Shift to Scientific Mining
After nearly a decade of legal battles, policy debates, and environmental concerns, now, Meghalaya is cautiously stepping into a new era of regulated coal mining, transitioning from the dangerous and unregulated rat-hole mining practices that once defined the state's coal economy. This shift is being guided by the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Act, 1957, ensuring that coal extraction aligns with scientific mining principles, prioritizing worker safety, environmental sustainability, and regulatory oversight. By August 2024, the state received 36 mining applications, with 13 securing prospecting licenses and four obtaining prior approval for full-scale mining leases, signalling a formal industry revival.

By January 2025, the Central government signed agreements with three local mining operators, granting them the necessary clearances to commence scientific coal mining operations in the West Khasi Hills and East Jaintia Hills districts, regions historically known for extensive coal extraction. This marks a shift from unregulated rat-hole mining to a structured, sustainable industry. The new framework mandates modern extraction methods, strict environmental assessments, mine closure plans, and improved labour conditions, prioritizing safety and fair wages, moving away from the exploitative, unsafe conditions that previously claimed numerous lives.

However, the transition to scientific mining is not without obstacles. The enforcement of new mining regulations, the monitoring of compliance, and the political and economic complexities surrounding coal interests in Meghalaya pose ongoing challenges. With many relying on coal and illegal mining persisting, success depends on strict oversight, transparent governance, and balancing economic and environmental interests. If executed effectively, this move could set a precedent for responsible mining in India, demonstrating that economic development and environmental conservation can coexist without compromising future generations.

Scientific Mining Delayed, Finally Begins

Despite progress toward scientific mining, implementation remained slow due to administrative hurdles. As of January

16, 2025, Meghalaya awaited final approval from the Union Coal Ministry, despite securing all state-level clearances. Chief Minister Conrad Sangma assured that formalities were complete, but the decision remained stalled in New Delhi. The delay frustrated local miners and raised concerns about illegal mining's resurgence. While the government advocates scientific mining, the lack of clear timelines risks pushing miners back to unregulated extraction. Without swift, transparent action from the Union government, Meghalaya may once again fall into the trap of weak enforcement and economic pressures sustaining illicit mining.

Finally, after over a decade, Chief Minister Conrad K. Sangma inaugurated Meghalaya's first scientific coal mine at Saryngkhama-A, Byndihati, East Jaintia Hills, on March 17, 2025. Reflecting on the journey, he acknowledged the uncertainties and challenges but emphasized the government's commitment to restoring normalcy for the people.

Learning from the Past
Unlike unregulated rat-hole mining, scientific mining follows strict regulations to minimize ecological and human risks. Mandatory Environmental Impact Assessments ensure biodiversity conservation and community welfare. Controlled blasting reduces underground disturbances, while proper waste disposal curbs acid mine drainage. Crucially, land reclamation and afforestation are required to restore mined areas rather than leaving them barren and toxic.

While these measures can help undo decades of damage, their success depends on strict enforcement, robust monitoring, and political will. Meghalaya's history shows that weak oversight and vested interests can undermine reforms, allowing illegal mining to persist. True change requires not just modern techniques but integrity, accountability, and a commitment to sustainability. Only then can Meghalaya hope to strike a balance between economic prosperity and environmental preservation, turning its coal-rich legacy from a liability into a responsibly managed resource.

Economic and Social Implications

The resumption of scientific mining in Meghalaya offers immense economic potential through job creation, revenue generation, and community integration. Legalizing mining under strict regulatory oversight is expected to provide stable employment for thousands previously engaged in hazardous rat-hole mining. Proper regulation could also strengthen Meghalaya's financial position. However, success depends on industrial efficiency and the meaningful inclusion of local communities. Former rat-hole miners must be equipped with skills and training to integrate into the scientific mining framework.

Yet, Economic progress must not come at the cost of environmental or social harm. To realize the promise of scientific mining, policies must balance growth with sustainability, ensuring mining benefits all stakeholders while preserving Meghalaya's natural heritage. The challenge ahead is to strike a delicate bal-

ance between economic growth, environmental sustainability, and social justice - where mining is not just a revenue-generating enterprise but a responsibly managed sector that benefits all stakeholders while safeguarding the state's natural heritage for future generations.

Environmental Restoration Mandate

The Supreme Court's Rs 100 crore directive for environmental restoration highlights the severe ecological damage caused by unregulated coal mining in Meghalaya. Decades of extraction have left deforested hills, acidified rivers, and unstable soil, threatening biodiversity and communities. Rehabilitation success depends on meticulous planning and execution to ensure funds are effectively used for afforestation, soil stabilization, and pollution control. The challenge lies in reclaiming abandoned mining sites and restoring fragile ecosystems affected by reckless mining.

Meghalaya's recovery depends on genuine ecological restoration, not superficial efforts. Afforestation must restore native species, while polluted rivers need scientific treatment to revive aquatic life. Success requires transparency, community involvement, and strict monitoring to prevent resource misapplication. If executed well, this landmark ecological rehabilitation effort could set a precedent for sustainable mining practices across India, transforming Meghalaya from a cautionary tale into a model of responsible resource management.

Future of Responsible Mining

The global mining industry offers compelling examples of how sustainability and profitability can coexist. Andrew Forrest's Fortescue Metals Group in Australia is pioneering a transition to green hydrogen and electrification, proving that large-scale resource extraction can be aligned with environmental responsibility. In Indonesia, advancements in High-Pressure Acid Leach (HPAL) technology have allowed for the efficient processing of low-grade ores without the excessive ecological damage once associated with such operations. These cases demonstrate that Meghalaya, too, can redefine its coal industry by integrating innovation, sustainability, and scientific precision into its mining practices.

The road ahead is challenging but offers a chance to redefine Meghalaya's mining legacy. Successful implementation can boost the economy, restore the environment, and set a national standard. The true test is whether Meghalaya upholds responsible mining or falls into regulatory loopholes, shaping its future and that of generations to come. Meghalaya's wealth is slipping through toxic streams and collapsing tunnels. With new policies on the horizon, can it reclaim what's lost before it's too late?

(Bijoy A. Sangma is a development professional, policy analyst, commentator on governance, economic policies, social justice and religious freedom. Currently a PhD scholar, he has previously worked with national and international organizations in leadership roles, contributing to thought leadership in public policy and social transformation. e-mail: bijoy.sangma@gmail.com)

How Broomstick Economics Threatens Meghalaya's Agricultural Future?

By K D Kharkongor

As a regular reader of The Shillong Times, I wish to write in support of Jerome K. Diengdoh's letter, "Broomstick cultivation a bane or boon?" (ST March 18, 2025). I happen to be a recently retired officer of the Agriculture Department, Government of Meghalaya and had written this article in Khasi in 2008. It is being translated to English by Napoleon S Mawphiang because of the urgency of the situation.

As pointed out in an April 23, 2008, article in The Times of India, the difficult and worrying topic is whether the earth can sustainably feed a projected 9 billion people by 2050. Experts and researchers face significant hurdles as the world's population continues to rise at a rate of about 78 million people per year, as stated in the article. Social discontent, food shortages, rioting, political instability, starvation, and a rise in failing states are some of the dire consequences that the globe can face if food security is not prioritised, according to these experts.

For instance, there has been a notable increase in the population of Meghalaya. The population more than doubled from 23,19 lakh in 2001 to 29,64 lakh in 2011. A rise of 11.5 lakh over 16 years brought it to 34 lakh (3.47 million) by 2017. There is an immediate need to address food security in light of the fast population expansion in Meghalaya, as the state's population could surpass 40 lakh by 2021 if current trends continue.

Growing broomsticks may be a lucrative business for farmers, particularly during peak demand when the grass sells at a premium. When demand for broom-grass decreases, though, farmers encounter challenges. More so than crops such as corn, ginger, bananas, vegetables, fruit trees, bananas, and colocasia, nutrient-intensive crops like broom-grass significantly deplete soil nutrients. Comparing soil quality before and after broomstick cultivation reveals the impact on soil fertility; cultivation highlights the importance of proper soil management to maintain long-term productivity.

When broom-grass takes over an area, the once fertile soil turns stony, hard, and dry, making it unfit for growing other crops. The poor condition and dryness of the soil makes it difficult to restore it to its original fertile state; it's a lengthy process. Soil cracking is prevalent in many broom grass cultivation regions, particularly on slopes or steep terrain. Erosion and landslides are the results of rainfall seeping into these fissures over the monsoon. Rats, according to farmers, will dig tunnels into broom-grass patches, consume the roots, and then burrow out again. These tunnels reduce soil strength and, in the long run, make erosion and landslides more likely.

Unfortunately, instead of percolating into the earth's subsurface, much of the heavy monsoon rains that fall on Meghalaya flow as runoff to Bangladesh's lower valleys and plains. The reason behind this is that the soil in regions where broom-grass is grown is hardened, much like the soil found on pine tree farms. The soil in broom-grass areas becomes dry again as soon as the rain stops, regardless of the amount of rainfall. Even during the height of the monsoon, nearby paddy fields still face water scarcity, which reduces rice harvests and causes many of the fields to be abandoned.

The effect on nearby crops is another negative aspect of growing broom grass. The soil becomes too dry to support fruit trees, areca nuts, betel leaves, and black pepper during the dry months beginning in September. Specialists in agricultural research in the Purnursla Block, as well as farmers in places like Nongtyngur, Wahkdait, and Ri-Bhoi, have noticed these shifts and know all too well the problems they cause.

An analysis of Meghalaya's agricultural output shows that the state is still

far from being food self-sufficient. This is due to a number of issues, including

1. Cultivable land has been in short supply due to the increasing population, which has led to higher demands for food, water for drinking, and irrigation. Enhanced water requirements for household purposes are also a part of this.

2. Currently forests are cleared for broomstick production, despite the fact that these forests are important water catchments, natural reservoirs, and habitats for numerous birds and animals. Paddy fields in the Ri-Bhoi, East Khasi Hills, West Khasi Hills, and Jaintia Hills Districts, which are located at an elevation of around 800 meters above sea level, used to be extremely productive all year round due to the practice of multi-cropping. This land could be used for fall rice or other crops such as potatoes, tomatoes, cabbage, lettuce, chilli peppers and other veggies after summer rice. Unfortunately, the water supplies to these paddy fields have dried up due to the rise in broomstick farming, which has reduced their production. If food production in Meghalaya stays poor, more money will leave the state to buy food from other states, which will further hurt the economy here. Experts have warned that future generations of a state that imports its food will live in abject poverty.

3. Insect populations that cause crop damage often increase when forests are taken down, which further complicates matters for farmers. Farmers frequently use a variety of hazardous, powerful, and expensive pesticides to control these pests. All forms of life are in danger, and this has an impact on farmers' revenues as well. The loss of forest ecosystems is leading to a decline or migration of birds, which play a crucial role in controlling bug populations through their feeding habits. Warming temperatures, caused in part by deforestation, pose a threat to all kinds of life on earth. This effect is most obvious in healthcare facilities, which often have lower patient volumes in the winter and much higher volumes in the summer.

Farmers in the Ri-Bhoi District and the East Khasi Hills (Khat-ar Shnong) have been using rep shyrti (jhum cultivation), a method of cultivation for crops like colocasia, maize, potatoes, and paddy, for some time now, and they have not allowed the soil to regain its fertility. Broom grass, on the other hand, is becoming more popular as a crop since it acts as a permanent plant by staying put in the soil for a long time. Prolonged broom grass cultivation dries out the soil nearby, which is a problem for farmers in the area.

Getting Meghalaya to a point where it can produce enough food on its own is a challenge, and the issues mentioned above are only a few of many. The following problems arise as a result of broomstick cultivation, to sum up:

1. The dryness and hardness of the soil have become major obstacles to water conservation and rainwater harvesting. This means that precipitation can't seep into the ground but instead runs off into the lower plains.

2. Drought conditions will make it next to impossible to grow other crops in the soil if broom grass output drops throughout the following decade. For generations to come, this will pose enormous difficulties.

The good news is that a number of broomstick growers in the Sonidan, lamkhon, Mawkani, Marrang, and Umtrai villages of Ri-Bhoi District (Mawhati and Nongphoh constituencies) have voiced their intention to end the practice. The last fifteen to twenty years have yielded nothing but trouble for them. During our conversations, these farmers shared their desire to go back to growing fruit crops, areca nuts, and other crops and trees that are good for the soil.

(Translation from Khasi by Napoleon S Mawphiang)

Letters to the Editor

Govt must get to the root of the Karnataka incident

Editor,
In the last few days, the people of the State received the horrifying news that two students from Meghalaya, both teenagers, died under controversial circumstances in Karnataka. Apparently, the students with 29 other inmates were staying in an unauthorised hostel run by a private school in T Kagepura village, Mandya district, Karnataka. It appears to be a case of food poisoning after the boys consumed leftover foods prepared for Holi celebrations elsewhere. What is outrageous is the fact that they were made to consume leftover food? I realise the boys must have come from a poor family but making them eat leftover food is like treating them like

untouchables, which itself is highly despicable. It's notable that the organisation, Lei Synshar Cultural Society (LSCS), which facilitated the travel of students from Meghalaya to Karnataka for their studies, is the same organisation featured in a TEHELKA magazine article about young children from indigenous faiths being sent away to study. Sanjana Chappalli wrote this report, titled, 'A Strange and Bitter Crop,' and I urge others to find and read it online. There are some unsavoury things mentioned about this whole initiative, which I feel people should know about. It could very well be that the Lei Synshar Cultural Society (LSCS) is actually trying to help poor children coming from disadvantaged backgrounds who have no other choice to get education. But we cannot condone the death of our children away from their homes, regardless of the supposed good intentions. I have come to know

that the village, Lyndem, from where one of the children hails is on the way to my village, Nonjri-Rana.

Recently, an individual named Akash Sagar, chanted "Jai Shri Ram" inside the church at Mawlynnong and Angela Rangad had filed an FIR against him. However, authorities have taken no action yet. There are non-indigenous people from outside the state coming to our indigenous territory and claiming one of our lands, Mawjymbuin Caves, as their own. And now, two of our children have passed away far from their homeland. I am completely against false Khasi victimhood, which blames non-Khasis for all our problems. But I am also upset that our government has not shown enough inclination to ensure that some of the legitimate issues are being addressed. Why haven't authorities arrested Akash Sagar to date? In the present food poisoning case,

the news is that there have been some arrests which are welcome. However, the expose in TEHELKA is highly disconcerting.

There is a need for thorough investigation into the matter. The report could be malicious and there's no truth in it. But after this incident, we need to know if our children are safe. I hope the Government will take this seriously and will not assume that our people have short-term memory and that we don't care about what happens to our brethren, so we'll forget and move on with our lives. The government is gravely mistaken if they think this will be forgotten. They have already got a political shock and if they are not careful, they might get a bigger shock in the future. It will not be forgotten and it will not be allowed to be forgotten.

Yours etc.,
Bhogtoram Mawroh,
Via email

Need to probe role of LSCS

Editor,
The death of two teenagers from Meghalaya in a Karnataka illegally school-run hostel and the 29 other Meghalaya students being hospitalized, and the allegations of food poisoning from their being fed leftover food from other festive celebrations, is SHOCKING!
My deepest, and heartfelt, condolences to the family members of the two students Khrehlang Khongtani and Nambantei Marwatin and a prayer for God's comfort on the bereaved family, as well as wishing God's care on the other 29 ill young people.

We thank the Government of Meghalaya, and the Chief Secretary, for the quick response and sending officials to Karnataka. But more important now, after these unfortunate kids are all brought back (and I hope they will be, y willingly),

is the culpability, if any, of the Lei Synshar Cultural Society (LSCS) and a probe into any link it may have with the RSS (which seems glaring now, especially in the absence of other information from the state government). A social organisation cannot say it does not know the antecedents of the organisation/school it is sending young rural teenagers to! I don't buy that!

We need to stop this now, or such tragic incidents will keep on occurring in the future, with our young boys and girls from the rural areas being "recruited" for studies by so-called social/welfare organisations whose character is suspect!

Yours etc.,
Eugene Thomas,
Shillong - 6

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

"Most people have the will to win,
few have the will to prepare to win."

— Bobby Knight

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No. 218 SHILLONG, FRIDAY, MARCH 21, 2025

Row over delimitation

A major row is unfolding with a question mark being raised on the long-awaited Delimitation process under which parliamentary constituencies would be re-drafted based on their new population strengths. As per a Constitutional requirement, the nation is required to undertake this process after every national census. The last census was conducted in 2011, which however was not fully completed or publicised due to various reasons; and there was no subsequent delimitation. The next census is expected in 2026, but chances are that this too would be dragged, or not completed. In fact, the delimitation exercise took place only three times – in 1951, 1961 and 1971 – after which the subversion of the nation's established systems was spectacular, thanks mainly to the overall degradation of the leadership quality at the nation's apex.

The present row has to do with a scenario wherein the five southern states would likely see a reduction in the numbers of their parliamentary seats, while states like Uttar Pradesh in the north would get larger numbers of seats, based on the massive increase in population in the north and a reduction in the southern states. The South, led prominently by Tamil Nadu's chief minister MK Stalin, has warned against "injustice" being done to them. He argues that the region's zealous adherence to and promotion of the Family Planning norm led to the present scenario. Andhra Pradesh's chief minister Chandrababu Naidu has exhorted Telugus to produce more children – even as the nation is struggling with the problem of population explosion. Stalin warns his people that a Damocles' Sword is hanging over their heads in the form of the Delimitation exercise.

Notably, the number of MPs in the lower house of Parliament had risen from 494 to 543 decades ago. While the Constitution originally stipulated that each MP in Lok Sabha should represent around 7.5 lakh people, the present scenario itself is a huge overstretching of this norm. Now, on average, an MP represents 25 lakh people. Worse, an MP from Uttar Pradesh represents about 30 lakh persons on average, while an MP from low-birth Kerala represents only 17 lakh people. In a scenario wherein the northern states get a larger number of seats, the political significance is higher. These are the states where the BJP is well-entrenched. If the next parliament polls are fought after a delimitation exercise, chances are that the principal opposition – the Congress that still has better hopes from the South -- would stand to lose in a big way. Prime Minister Narendra Modi keeps avoiding a confrontation on several contentious issues, as he does not want to face situations head on. He can be trusted to vacillate on this issue too, but for the fact that his party would be the main gainer from the delimitation exercise. Stalin might know as much and hence is likely to raise the pitch on this count.

The inglorious Karnataka events and the way forward

By Patricia Mukhim

It took the death of two teenagers to bring us face to face with what has been happening surreptitiously for decades. If any philanthropic institution desires to provide education to our youth here they are welcome to do so, without any strings attached. Children should be able to study in a liberal environment where they can think what they want without being coerced to recite prayers, sing bhajans or hymns with the ulterior purpose of proselytization. There are enough divisions in this state between the Khasi and Jaintia, between the Khasi-Jaintia and Garo and between the three tribes and the "others." The there is this unbridgeable chasm between the Niam Khasi, Niamtre and the Christians. Here too the twain can never meet because both groups are suspicious of one another and also mock and ridicule each other. Forces adversarial to our progress as a state fish in such troubled waters.

There are sections in the Niam Khasi/Niamtre who are not averse to aligning with Hindu belief systems and practices and seem to be cosy up with the current political dispensation running the country. Individuals are free to hold any political ideology but should they use their faith as a propeller to political power? If so they are as complicit as those they scorn for being Christians and believing in a foreign God. At the very least the Christian missionaries set up some of the finest educational institutions and with funds coming in from distant lands. Perhaps where the Christian missionaries might have erred is in making entry into those institutions conditional. That is that they would admit children of Christian faiths first before allocating seats to others. But those millions of non-Christian students that have studied in Christian institutions have never complained of being coerced into becoming Christians. Many of us studied alongside students of different faiths and never once felt the pressure to conform to Christian tenets. In fact we were fortunate to have studied in such enlightened institutions.

Now coming back to the point of destitute students being sent to study in distant Karnataka and reduced to living in decrepit, sub-human conditions and the fact that nearly all those students from Meghalaya are from

the Niam Khasi/Niamtre, the point being made by the leaders of the indigenous faith is that they have also started educational institutions for their children in the manner that Christian missionaries have done but that those schools do not get government patronage as schools of other faiths do. If that is borne out by evidence then it shows up Meghalaya as a state that leans towards a particular faith only and that is unconstitutional. But Meghalaya has also supported institutions like the Ramkrishna Mission and to their credit the Swamis have set up institutions, not in urban hubs but in the far-flung villages. You have flourishing RKM schools in Mawkynrew, Sohbar, Laitlyngkot, Myliem among many others. These schools have admitted the poorest and provided students a set of uniforms, school books free of charge. Like the Christian missionaries the RKM monks too get help from philanthropists across the country to be able to afford their charitable works. In fact, the RKM schools are doing more for rural Meghalaya than most other schools, apart from providing quality education. And those who have passed out of RKM schools have never been felt the pressure to adhere to the Hindu faith. The schools offer a liberal space for ideas to grow.

If the parents of Niam Khasi/Niamtre children don't feel comfortable sending their kids to Christian institutions or to government run schools – the first because they don't want their kids to convert and the second because of the sub-standard education provided, then aren't the RKM schools a better choice. I know of Swami who tour the villages urging villagers to send their kids to their school and with no cost. If the Niam Khasi/Niamtre are not getting government help to run their educational institutions why has that issue never been discussed in the Assembly? Why have petitions never been given to the Government? And if given why is the media not privy to such petitions?

In recent times the Aga Khan Foundation – a philanthropic institution with schools across India, had sent their representatives to Meghalaya to scout for aspirational children but

who are inhibited by poverty from attaining their goals. These representatives met with State Government officials and took them into confidence about the purpose of their visit and also sought government assistance to facilitate their engagement with various schools. Finally they were able to select their set of students who are now studying in an educational ambience they would never have experienced here. And all free of cost. They have a comfortable stay with large playgrounds and are not indoctrinated into any religion.

The question to ask the Lei Synshar Cultural Society (LSCS) is why are they sending only children from the Niam Khasi/ Niamtre to study in these ashram schools if the purpose is not to indoctrinate those children in an equally alien faith – Hinduism because, Niam Khasi/Niamtre are avowedly indigenous faiths. If today two teenagers have died due to the inhuman treatment they received in that ashram is the LSCS not culpable too for allowing that to happen? Where else other than Karnataka have they sent students from Meghalaya? This Society needs to be held accountable for surreptitiously sending kids across the country for the purpose of ideological brainwashing.

Any philanthropic organisation with a heart that cares for tribal students from Meghalaya, particularly for those that come from deprived backgrounds should enrol such students in a transparent manner and with the knowledge of the government because if anything should happen as in this present case, it is government that must rush in to do a clean-up job even while the LSCS looks on in abject apathy, except to defend its case.

We have had enough of a divide and rule model of governance in Meghalaya for the last 50 years. If the adherents of the Niam Khasi/Niamtre have genuine concerns they should get the Government to listen to their pleas and those concerns should be addressed. The fact that people of the indigenous faiths have been classed as 'Hindus' in official documents and have lost out on benefits due to them as members of the Scheduled Tribe. There has to be a discussion on this is-

sue in a public platform and this ought to be taken up in parliament. Tribals adhering to the indigenous faiths cannot be classed as "Hindus" because as tribes we don't practise the caste system and the other paraphernalia of Hindu rituals and nor do tribals believe in idol worship since they inherently believe in a Creator (U Blei Nongbuh Nongthaw) as opposed to the legion of Hindu gods and goddesses. So, to appropriate the tribals of Meghalaya into the Hindu fold is sheer political opportunism and luring innocent kids into this project is a crime.

The problem is the absence of a united platform where people can come together and discuss some existential crises afflicting our state. Politics thrives in divisions. Politicians cannot handle a unified voice of the people. They need us to fear someone or something so they can be our saviours. I had delved into this issue of a perpetual fear psychosis in my article last week. This fear of the unknown enemy has to be dissected and reduced to an entity we can identify and deal with. Unless we do so the agents that thrive on spreading fear will keep us in a perpetual victimhood mode.

As tribes we have the propensity to romanticise our past. But the past is potent and nearly always involves memory trafficked into an inflammatory myth. In fact, psychologists aver that when the past overwhelms it can turn victims into oppressors. Not to remember the past or to be overwhelmed by memories of the past are equally dangerous. Only a balanced view of the past in a non-obsessive way can help us shun victimhood and accept divergent narratives about ourselves for after all we are an oral history people and we cannot take legends and myths as absolute truths. To interpret our faith from the past into a constructed definitive present is potent apart from being divisive. We are people like all others. There is nothing unique about anyone of us.

Now that the children from Karnataka will be brought back from that infamous school, let us all contribute towards making their lives more pleasant so that the memories of that fateful event that snatched away the lives of their two companions are not allowed to mar their future.

ment. The area of Kiling, 9th Mile, which was earlier under-developed has now seen a lot of change and development. The University has been a big blessing for people of different walks of life.

Now with regards to the allegations made against the University and Chancellor for allowing students to cheat in the examination, only time will tell whether or not the allegations are true. However, the University still deserves to be protected from the hatred that is being thrown towards it, and the State Government must ensure that the students and the University are kept safe and protected.

As a former student of USTM it is disheartening to see the University being defamed to such ridiculous extents. USTM has achieved a lot in such a short time and in all its years of existence there has not been any such heinous attacks until recently. The Government of Meghalaya must ensure that the students of the University are protected at all costs, as the USTM not only a pride of the students but of the whole State of Meghalaya as well.

Yours etc.,
Reakor Shisha Kharkrang,
Upper Shillong

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

Rising Challenges for NPP: Can Conrad Sangma Secure His Political Legacy?

By Divesh Ranjan

Conrad Sangma was recently re-elected as the National President of the National People's Party (NPP). Under his leadership, the party emerged as the single largest party in the 2023 Meghalaya assembly elections, securing 26 MLAs with approximately 5.84 lakh votes and a 31.5% vote share. Through alliances with the UDP, HSPDP, BJP, and independent candidates, NPP successfully formed the government. Further consolidating its power, the party absorbed two MLAs from the PDF, three defectors from the INC, and secured the Gambegre by-election, bringing its total tally to 32 MLAs—crossing the majority mark and strengthening its political stronghold.

Despite this strong presence in the Assembly, the party faces significant challenges that could threaten its stability and long-term prospects.

NPP's Lok Sabha Setback: The Fall of a Stronghold

The 2024 Lok Sabha elections marked a major political setback for NPP as it lost its representation. The Tura Lok Sabha seat—long considered a stronghold of the Sangma family since 1977 (except for a brief period from 1989 to 1991)—was lost to the opposition. Former MP and NPP candidate Agatha K. Sangma faced an electoral upset, losing by approximately 1.55 lakh votes with a 23% vote margin. This loss serves as a wake-up call for NPP and underscores the need for serious introspection and course correction.

Poor performance in Khasi Hills and Jaintia Hills Autonomous district council

The NPP's weakening hold in the recent KHADC and JHADC elections is an alarming indicator of public dissent and eroding grassroots support. The party secured only four seats in KHADC and thirteen in JHADC, while the newly emerged VPP secured a decisive victory, and led KHADC. Notably, VPP's rise can be attributed to the misgovernance of the NPP, reflecting growing dissatisfaction among voters.

Fragile Stability: The Hidden Risks of Political Assimilation in NPP

By assimilating leaders from the PDF, independents, and the INC, the NPP in Meghalaya has secured its majority, creating an appearance of stability. However, this stability is superficial and may lead to unforeseen repercussions if it is not managed effectively. The excessive absorption of defectors risks undermining internal cohesion. While it may project an image of growth and create the illusion of expansion, this expanding bubble could burst at any moment. Since these defectors are not nurtured within the party's ideology and come from diverse political backgrounds, their presence could create internal friction. Over time, this accumulation of differing influences may accelerate polarization within the party, ultimately proving detrimental to the NPP.

Opportunities Amid Political Vacuum

The declining influence of the Indian National Congress (INC) across the Northeast has created a political vacuum provides an opportunity for the NPP to expand beyond Meghalaya and unify leaders from other northeastern states. As the only national party originating from the Northeast, NPP has the potential to become a major voice for the region at the national level. However, this would require a well-coordinated effort to consolidate leadership across states and address regional concerns more effectively, which is only possible under a visionary leader with greater unifying power.

Conrad Sangma's Leadership: Ambitions vs. Ground Realities

Chief Minister Conrad Sangma aspires to be a pan-Northeast leader, but true leadership is built on governance, policies, and public trust. The Northeast has historically been dominated by alliances led by either the INC (UPA) or BJP (NDA), leaving regional parties in a secondary role. If regional parties had united under a single front, their collective influence could have garnered more national atten-

tion. However, this has yet to materialize.

For Sangma to establish himself as a transformative leader, he must first build Meghalaya into a model state by addressing fundamental challenges, including weak education and healthcare systems, poor road infrastructure, alleged corruption, severe city traffic congestion.

Despite his political success, Conrad Sangma has struggled to match the legacy of his father, P.A. Sangma, the 11th Speaker of the Lok Sabha. While P.A. Sangma was a revered national figure, Conrad faces increasing criticism within his own state. His failure to secure electoral victories for his siblings further underscores the limitations of his political reach. Without demonstrable progress in governance, his broader ambitions may remain unfulfilled.

Governance Shortcomings and Opposition Challenges

Governance issues have further eroded public confidence in NPP's leadership. Continuous allegations of corruption, lack of transparency, policy delays, and ministerial unaccountability, failure to control pressure groups, weakening economic growth and increasing discontent among citizens have dented the government's image.

Although the NPP-led government holds a majority, it struggles to counter opposition narratives that highlight governance failures. Since the start of the NPP-led government, it has been mired in more controversies than recognized for its developmental achievements and good governance. Several lapses in governance and administration have given the opposition forces ammunition, fueling public dissatisfaction. The emergence of new political players signals deeper challenges that require urgent attention.

NPP's Growth and National Limitations

Under Conrad Sangma's leadership, NPP has expanded its influence across four northeastern states and currently holds government positions in three. The party's current political standing includes: 53% of seats in Meghalaya, 12% in Manipur, 8% each in Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh. However, despite these gains, as the lone national party from the Northeast, the NPP has only one Rajya Sabha representative and no presence in the Lok Sabha. This underscores its limited reach at the national level. To achieve long-term political relevance, NPP must focus on building a sustainable governance model in Meghalaya before seeking broader national influence.

Meghalaya's electorate once had high expectations from Conrad Sangma, but increasing criticism and governance failures suggest a diminishing faith in his leadership. If NPP does not take decisive steps to address public grievances and implement meaningful reforms, it risks further decline. The party's current majority may offer a false sense of security, while opposition forces remain strategically silent, preparing for future challenges. Without proactive course correction, NPP's dominance may prove temporary.

Conclusion: The Road Ahead for NPP

The National People's Party stands at a crossroads. While its rise has been impressive, its sustainability is uncertain. To secure its future, the NPP must address governance failures with transparency and accountability, strengthen internal cohesion and expand its influence across the Northeast. Additionally, it should rebuild its national presence by regaining ground in the Lok Sabha and increasing Rajya Sabha representation.

For Conrad Sangma, the challenge is not just about expanding NPP's footprint but proving that he can lead a model state in Meghalaya. Only by delivering good governance can he uphold his legacy and emerge as a true leader of the Northeast. The coming years will determine whether the NPP can transform itself into a lasting political force or whether it will fade into the background like many regional parties before it.

Letters to the Editor

Where the System Works and the Taps Don't

Editor,
After years of reading about Shillong's looming water crisis, I have finally decided to speak up about what I have personally endured for 14 years.

Let me start with the good news, Nongrah is a remarkably well-organised locality. The Rangbah Shnong, the Rangbah Dong, the Secretary Shnong, these aren't just names on a letterhead. They actually work and they turn up. Previously in the morning, now in the evening, they are at their office for a good three to four hours, sorting things out, making decisions, signing papers, and generally keeping the gears turning. No small feat in a state where "official work" often moves at the speed of an elderly cow crossing the road.

Nothing happens under the table (this is both from personal experience and what I've heard from friends). Buying and selling land is conducted efficiently and transparently. No extra greasing of palms required. You pay the stipulated fee, no more, no less. If you've ever lived in Shillong, you'll know that this level of efficiency and accountability is not a given. I've moved around enough to say with

confidence that, in most places, the local office is more of a rumour than an institution. But here, the system works.

Except for one tiny, insignificant detail.

There. Is. No. Water.
Yes, in a place that runs like clockwork, the taps remain as dry as my optimism during load-shedding season.

But not everyone here shares this parched existence. The original settlers have water because, when they arrived, divine wisdom instructed them to dig and dig they did. Then, as the locality expanded, a new rule appeared, "no more boring of water, as it would deplete the groundwater table". An admirable, noble environmentally conscious decision.

Now, I may not be an expert in hydrogeology (I had to Google that...literature, for all its wisdom, never quite prepared me for water politics), but here's a head-scratcher: if some residents have unlimited access to water and sell it to the rest of us and even to other localities, how, in the name of basic logic, does that constitute groundwater conservation? Either their wells are blessed with divine regeneration or someone ought to clarify the science or the spin behind this curious arrangement.

Now, I don't want to sound ungrateful. Two years ago, the grand pipe-laying began. Test runs were even

conducted. Water actually flowed. Into tanks. Into people's homes. It was beautiful. It was biblical. I filmed it because it felt like a moment of historical significance! Then, as if realising it had made a terrible mistake, the water stopped.

Since then, the pipes have been left to the mercy of time and plain bad luck. Some have been dislodged by passing cars, some repurposed by local kids in their ongoing war against boredom. The only logical conclusion is that the pipes were never meant for water. Maybe they're an art installation. At this point, we should just hold a funeral service for them and be done with it.

But wait, more pipe-laying is still happening! "Hope springs eternal" (Pope says) even if water does not. Fresh trenches are being dug, new pipes are being installed and the faithful among us still believe that one day, these sacred conduits may actually carry water. Maybe. Hopefully.

Perhaps, in some distant future, archaeologists will stumble upon them and conclude that we were an ancient civilization that worshipped dry pipelines, offering prayers in the form of empty buckets. Until then, we remain devout followers of this great tradition...thirsty, exasperated and still waiting for a miracle!

Yours etc.,
Ellerine Diengdoh,
Via email

Why target USTM unfairly?

Editor,
The University of Science and Technology Meghalaya popularly known as USTM is a relatively new but well-known private university located at 9th Mile, Khanapara, Meghalaya. The University in its establishment since 2008 has achieved many milestones, such as the First Private University from North East India to achieve an "A" grade from the NAAC; it was also ranked among the best 200 universities of India in the 9th edition of the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) 2023 and it has also been honored with the prestigious title of "University of the Year 2024" at the Academic Insights Education Excellence Awards & Summit 2024. The University is also on its way to establish the first ever private medical college, which will not only be beneficial for the state but it will also allow the residents of the state to pursue their degrees without going too far from their homes.

The University has also hosted and participated in several international events, including conferences, workshops, and outreach programs, focusing on various fields like management, science, technology, and healthcare. Indeed USTM has been able to achieve a lot more than the other private

universities in North East India. It is however saddening to see the University being targeted with unwarranted allegations, especially by the Chief Minister of Assam, Himanta Biswa Sarma who has come up with ridiculous allegations such as the flood jihad, fake degrees, financial irregularities etc. The CM has also claimed that the University was involved in facilitating cheating in exams, which has eventually led to the arrest of the Chancellor of the University, Mahbul Hoque.

The Chancellor has refuted all the allegations made against him; his bail has also been denied by a court of Assam. It is saddening to see such a prestigious University getting unjustified hate. The allegations that have been made by the CM of Assam are not only defamatory towards the University but they are also an indirect attack on the Meghalaya Government.

The University was established by the USTM Act of 2018 and is recognised by the UGC, BCI, AICTE, NCTE, NAAC, AIU, therefore, the allegations of the University degrees being false degrees are untrue and do not have any grounds to stand on. Although the state has come up with a clarification, it is saddening to see that it hasn't done much in this regard. The University has not only been a blessing to the students but it has also helped the people living in the area in getting employ-

"Today is the only day. Yesterday is gone."

— John Wooden

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No. 219 SHILLONG, SATURDAY, MARCH 22, 2025

Public Consultation Imperative

EVENTS leading to a civil society-government confrontation at Tura on the demolition work at the cenotaph housing the historic monument in memory of the 69th Garo Labour Corps who lost their lives labouring for the British soldiers during the First World War, were avoidable, had the district administration informed the public of the government's plans. The cenotaph houses the memory of the 69th Garo Labour Corps, numbering 456 men who undertook an arduous journey by ship to France. These tribesmen who found themselves in unfamiliar terrain, struggled to adapt to the harsh weather conditions where they were put to strenuous labour. Their work included making roads over difficult terrain for vehicles to carry reinforcements. In the main the labour corps had to facilitate the movement of soldiers of allied forces, apart from moving vital machinery. But they laboured hard and quite a number succumbed to the extreme weather conditions. Only 120 of those recruited returned home to Garo Hills on July 16, 1918. It is in memory of the fallen labourers that the cenotaph was built. A similar cenotaph stands in memory of the Khasi labour corps at the Mot Phran (Memorial of France) in Shillong where names of the fallen heroes are written.

In May 2024, there were media reports on the unsavoury activities at the cenotaph which was overgrown with weeds and had also become a den for dipsomaniacs. This report prompted the Chief Minister who represents the constituency to take quick decisions to renovate and maintain the place. But as usual, instead of taking the civil society into confidence and sharing his renovation plans with them, the Tura Municipal Board began demolishing the structure, allegedly with the intent of securing it. By then public tempers had risen since it was felt that the cenotaph would lose its significance if a new construction came up at the place.

A belated clarification by the Deputy Commissioner, West Garo Hills could not assuage the hurt feelings of the public. This exposes a major lacuna in the government — the laxity of never consulting the public on any issue before undertaking any project in their areas. This is also why land acquisition becomes a landmine since the public only gets to know of a project when the land acquisition process is underway and most often land sharks get into the business. In the present case of the cenotaph there are emotions and sentiments involved which a sensitive government should have shown due respect to. The cenotaph houses sacred memories and is not just any public structure. Consultation is the key to democratic decision-making. It ensures that decisions aren't made without considering the people they affect. By involving the public, consultations give everyone a chance to have their say on important issues. But will governments ever learn?

Jaintia Political Insignificance & Birth of Jaintia Hills Autonomous District Council

By Dr Omarlin Kyndiah

In the past the Jaintias were grouped under a single Kingdom. They were the first among the hill people of North East India to have evolved a centralized State system or Hima under the Syiem, the Elakas under the Dollois as the provinces, the Patorships as the division, the Raids and the Villages or Chnong under the village Headman or Waheh Chnong. It took the Jaintias approximately about a thousand years from the 3rd century B.C to the 8th century A.D to complete the process of state formation. This period may be regarded as the "Golden Era" in the political history of the Jaintias. However, when the British took over the administration of the Jaintia Hills on March 15, 1835, they destroyed the grand political edifice which had been laboriously built brick by brick by the Jaintias. The top structure, the office of the Syiem was abolished, though at the same time they retained the other traditional institutions viz. the office of Dolloi, Pator and Waheh Chnong. The Last Jaintia King was granted a pension of Rupees five hundred a month by the British till his death in 1861. This marks the beginning of the political insignificance of the Jaintia Hills.

Furthermore, the whole of Jaintia Hills along with a few villages in Khasi Hills were administratively grouped together under one system of administration by treating them as 'British Areas'. While the Khasi States were given semi-independence and had internal autonomy, this difference in treatment and imposition of administration under two distinct types by the British created discontent among the Jaintias. As a result, the Jaintias were further pushed into political insignificance. The Solidarity movement thus started in Jaintia Hills with the establishment of the Jaintia Durbar in 1900, twenty-three years before the establishment of Khasi National Durbar. The Jaintia Durbar led by Rev. L. Gathphoh in a memorandum on May 14, 1928 demanded before the Indian Statutory Commission their inclusion in the statutory reforms and protested against their conversion into a 'frontier tribe', which would retard their progress and deprive the Jaintias of their rights.

The political insignificance of Jaintia Hills was further reinforced after independence when the Khasi and Jaintia Hills were constituted under one common administrative unit, the United Khasi-Jaintia Hills District and also under one 'united' Autonomous District Council. The United District Council was never welcomed by the smaller

ethnic group - the Jaintias, who are the closest cousins of the Khasis. The movement led by Late S. Bareh for the creation of a separate autonomous District Council for the then Jowai Sub-division can be traced back to the time when the Bordoloi Sub-Committee, a Committee of the Constituent Assembly of India was considering the formation of district councils in all autonomous districts of Assam. Rev. J.J.M. Nichols Roy, a member of the Committee, managed to persuade the leader of the movement to agree to a United District Council for the entire Khasi and Jaintia Hills with an assurance that there would be a uniform administration. Subsequently, the United Khasi-Jaintia Autonomous District Council was created in 1952. The working of the Council came under fire quite early. No efforts were being made towards uniform administration.

In 1953, the United Khasi-Jaintia Hills District Council enforced the Assam Land and Revenue Regulations, 1886 to collect house-tax and revenue from the Jaintia areas, whereas, from Khasi areas proper no collection could be made. In the same year the Council brought all the four kinds of markets — under private ownership, syership, dolloiship and sirdarship under its control. The Jaintia market is privately owned and the income from the Jaintia market is over Rs 2 lakhs and that from the Khasi markets was about Rs ten thousand a year only. While the revenue from the grazing lands in Jaintia Hills was paid to the District Council, that from the Khasi Hills goes to the Syiems.

The Jaintia see no reason why they should be taxed when the Khasi States are untaxed. There is no equal distribution of Government grant, although much of the income of the United Khasi Jaintia District Council comes from Jowai Sub-division. In order to appease the disenfranchised Jaintias the District Council tried to introduce house-tax in Khasi Hills, but it failed due to opposition of the Khasi States. The only alternative left was to withdraw the house-tax in Jaintia Hills. This, among other things, has convinced the Jaintias that the Khasis are not capable of taxing themselves. All this created a fear psychosis in the minds of the Jaintia people that they were being ill-treated, deprived of their legitimate rights in matters of employment and development activities.

The Jaintia people felt the creation of a separate District Council for the Jowai Sub-division will bring a sense

of new hope, among others in the political fortunes of Jaintia Hills. The reaction was immediate. Series of representations and memoranda were submitted since 1957. In a memorandum submitted on November 1, 1957 to the then Union Home Minister, Pt. Gobin Ballabh Pant by the representative of the District Council, the issue of inequitable treatment was raised. Further, the memorandum made it very clear that nothing short of a separate District Council would be the solution for the less advanced Jaintias. The memorandum further reiterated that in case the authority does not find it proper to grant a separate District Council to the Jowai Sub-division, the Jaintias would prefer to be severed from the District and be centrally administered as otherwise there is a genuine fear that the Jaintias as a distinct people with rich history, age-old culture and custom would gradually be pushed to political oblivion as a result of domination by the majority of the United Khasi Jaintia autonomous District Council. The terms 'majority group' and 'minority group' may mean religious stratification in the Indian context, and generally racial and ethnic stratification. According to one opinion, it seems more accurate to use the term dominant group for majority group and subordinate group for minority group.

In another memorandum submitted to Prime Minister, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru on 30.12.1957, the leaders once again repeated the demand for a separate District Council for the Jowai Sub-division. The key argument for a separate District Council is that, firstly, it will dispel the sense of slavery and inferiority complex that is still lingering in the hearts of the people of the Jaintia Sub-division but which does not afflict those under the United Khasi- Jaintia Hills District Council. Secondly, in a separate District Council of their own, the people of the Jaintia Sub-division will have the right to govern themselves as people of a democratic Government which will infuse the spirit of freedom as enjoyed by our brethren in India.

There isn't enough room for all the information provided in all the memoranda that have been submitted over a period of six to seven years to be included in this write up. Altogether forty-three memoranda were submitted by various organisations, groups and individuals. In the fitness of things, it is worthy to mention the point at issue that has been raised and urged by the leaders

of the movement. Among others, the demand for a separate District Council for Jaintia Hills is in order to help them maintain their separate ethnic identity as well as safeguard their political significance. Moreover, there is a conscious feeling among the Jaintias that their identity might eventually be threatened if they were to continue under the same administrative roof along with the dominant Khasis.

In response to the persistent demand for a separate District Council for Jowai Sub-division, the Government of Assam on August 26, 1963 constituted a Commission to consider bifurcation of the United Khasi Jaintia District Council under the Chairmanship of GP Jarman. The Commission after a careful study of the forty-three memoranda recommended thus, "We feel that if the inhabitants of Jaintia Hills work together and maintain the existing system of administration, there is no reason why a separate District Council would, we think, resolve the prevailing tension and bitterness, due to lack of uniformity in administration between them and the Khasis and we hope lead to a better understanding between them. We accordingly recommend the creation of a new Autonomous District Council... from the United Khasi Jaintia Hills Autonomous District Council".

Following the Jarman Commission recommendation the Jowai Autonomous District Council was created with effect from 1st December 1964 by the Assam Government by notification No. TAD/R/50/64 dated 23.11.1964. The Council was rechristened as Jaintia Hills Autonomous District Council after Jowai Sub-division was upgraded as Civil District known as Jaintia Hills District.

The Jaintia aspiration of having the right to govern themselves had been fulfilled. Unfortunately, the working of the Council is so far unsatisfactory. In any case the working of the Sixth Schedule was subjected to scrutiny early in its journey. In 1960, the Committee appointed by the Governor of Assam to examine the financial conditions and working of each District/Regional Council reported that "the financial condition of most of the District/ Regional Council is not satisfactory". In 1966, the Pataskar Commission also found the performance of the Councils generally unsatisfactory.

The Commission further observed that "there were serious complaints against the accounts of the Councils". The questions that linger in the back of our minds is 'What is wrong with the Sixth Schedule?'

Urban Mission Meghalaya: ESL as Opportunity

By Avner Pariat

Sitting on a comode at Don Mueang Airport in Bangkok, lost in a haze of thoughts and recollections from the past few days, I suddenly heard a voice. It was a familiar sound, a distinct sound to those of us attuned to its peculiarities: it was unmistakably a Khasi voice. The accent, the tonality broke through the cacophony of other languages, hand driers and the more horrific sounds one encounters in a public male lavatory at 8 AM in the morning. What caught my ear though was how clearly this lone voice stuck out. This person was speaking English, instructing his son to wait for his turn. A seemingly small incident, yet it set my mind racing.

I realized then something remarkable: after spending almost 2 weeks in Thailand, this was one of the few occasions when I heard English being spoken openly and purposefully by a non-native speaker. This includes Europeans who did use a fair amount of English to navigate Thailand but when it came to communicating within members of their own group (whether German, Danish, Swedish etc) they would not use English but would naturally recourse to their mother tongue. Reflecting further, I recalled that I encountered only two other groups who spoke English to their own group members exhibiting a similar trend to the Khasi I encountered—Singaporeans and Malaysians (in particular those from Kuala Lumpur). Singapore, of course, has deliberately embraced English as its working language, using it as an important tool for much of their success. Kuala Lumpur—as a cosmopolitan hub—home to so many different groups naturally fostered English as a glue for social cohesion.

This ease with using English might be very well documented in Shillong, but even in remote villages, there are always some Khasi people who possess a decent comprehension of English. Our vocabulary might not be as expansive as that of native speakers, but our affinity for the language is undeniable. This, I contend, is not a weakness but a strength—one that we have failed, thus far, to fully recognize and capitalize on. Some critics, particularly from the right-wing ethnonationalist sphere, might argue that embracing English dilutes our identity. They insist that we must focus solely on preserving the Khasi language and culture. But why should it be an either-or situation? Language is not a zero-sum game. One can master English while still cherishing and nurturing one's mother tongue. Multilingualism is an asset, not a betrayal.

Traveling across Thailand, I noticed one undeniable fact—their English proficiency lags far behind ours. And therein lies an economic opportunity. If the government or private enterprises were to invest in this sector, Khasis could spearhead an industry of teaching English as a second language (ESL). The demand is real, the market (nationally and internationally) exists, and we already possess a hundred-year advantage in this domain. We should be serious about this as a skill set in itself.

We don't need to spend much time and money re-skilling our people in things they are not familiar with. We have many well-trained English teachers who are unemployed so the trainer talent pool exists. Most of the state's children opt for Arts stream already so the HR talent pool also exists. Let us put up EOLs for firms who are serious into going into this industry. Incentivize, subsidize, whatever it takes. Why not establish ourselves as a leading hub for ESL training, catering to the rest of South-east and East Asia? If we don't seize this moment, others will. The Nagas, the Mizos—many are catching up. If we hesitate, we risk squandering a unique and powerful asset. Moreover, a robust ESL sector in Meghalaya could provide thousands of jobs, ranging from teaching to administrative roles in language-institutions. It could also encourage young entrepreneurs to establish their own English training centres, creating a ripple effect of employment opportunities. Digital platforms and online courses could be developed, allowing Khasi teachers to instruct students across Asia remotely, further expanding the reach and impact of our linguistic advantage.

More than that, beyond Meghalaya, beyond the Northeast, and instead, look outward—towards Asia and aligning ourselves with the global economy. This is not just about language; it's about economic growth, about carving a space for ourselves in an increasingly interconnected world. A space which we can be proud of, which can make us wealthy. The same nay-sayers who say we must only use Khasi are quite clueless when it comes to how to improve our people's lives and alleviate their poverty. Let them grumble in the corner as usual. I repeat: English has given us an edge—it's time we use it to our advantage!

If we fail to act now, we will regret it in the future when other regions overtake us. We must push for policy changes that integrate ESL training. The government, NGOs, and private investors must come together to create an ecosystem where our English proficiency is harnessed effectively. With the right policies, funding, and initiative, Meghalaya can become a beacon of ESL excellence, driving economic growth and empowering our people.

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

Letters to the Editor

Some critical issues that need solution

Editor,
I am writing to draw attention to two important issues affecting the daily lives of students and residents in Shillong, which require immediate attention.

Firstly, there has been a growing concern regarding congestion caused by the increasing number of vehicles, especially around school hours. As the number of students relying on personal transport and private vehicles increases, the roads become heavily congested, which impacts not only the environment but also the overall traffic flow in the city. To mitigate this issue, I propose the idea of displaying clear and visible stick notices across schools and public spaces, urging students to follow the rules of using bus services. By encouraging the use of organized public transport systems, such as buses, and ensuring that students adhere to guidelines, we can reduce traffic congestion, lower pollution, and create a smoother flow of transportation.

Secondly, I would like to highlight the shortage of manpower in providing IT services for safety and assurance as promised by reading the Impact Assessment Report on IT services in Meghalaya which is becoming increasingly evident. The lack of qualified personnel in this sector has led to delays in various services, especially for students and working professionals who rely on IT facilities for their education and work-related needs. It is important that we invest in training and hiring more skilled individuals in this area to ensure efficient and timely IT services are available for all.

I believe that with proper awareness and action, both of these issues can be addressed effectively. A collaborative effort between students, educational institutions, and local authorities is key to a better and more sustainable Shillong.

Thank you for considering these concerns. I hope we can work towards solutions for the benefit of all.

Yours etc.,
Joshwa Mukhim,
Via email

(ST March 17, 2025) by Salil Gewali, I fully support the points raised by the writer. I have personally witnessed how garbage, carelessly thrown by irresponsible individuals, is carried away by water down the drain near my residence every day. Doesn't this waste ultimately pollute our rivers and harm the environment?

It is a big shame that the Shillong Municipal Board (SMB) has done nothing to act against those who dump garbage into drains. I think this problem happens almost in every locality. SMB must take the blame for this. There is no greater offense than harming the environment.

If the Shillong Municipal Board is serious about making the city a cleaner place, it must impose heavy fines on all irresponsible people who throw waste into drains or on river banks. More importantly, wherever possible, iron mesh retainers should be fitted to filter waste. Installation of CCTV to zero in on polluters and concrete slabs should be laid over drains to prevent direct dumping. I think such steps will go a long way toward preserving our environment and making Shillong a cleaner city.

Yours etc.,
Rupesh Nath,
Via email

Penalty for dumping garbage

Editor,
Apropos of the letter, "Commendable effort by SMB to keep Shillong clean"

(ST March 17, 2025) by Salil Gewali, I fully support the points raised by the writer. I have personally witnessed how garbage, carelessly thrown by irresponsible individuals, is carried away by water down the drain near my residence every day. Doesn't this waste ultimately pollute our rivers and harm the environment?

It is a big shame that the Shillong Municipal Board (SMB) has done nothing to act against those who dump garbage into drains. I think this problem happens almost in every locality. SMB must take the blame for this. There is no greater offense than harming the environment.

If the Shillong Municipal Board is serious about making the city a cleaner place, it must impose heavy fines on all irresponsible people who throw waste into drains or on river banks. More importantly, wherever possible, iron mesh retainers should be fitted to filter waste. Installation of CCTV to zero in on polluters and concrete slabs should be laid over drains to prevent direct dumping. I think such steps will go a long way toward preserving our environment and making Shillong a cleaner city.

Yours etc.,
Rupesh Nath,
Via email

STEMS expansion

The one of a kind achievement of this current government is the introduction of a school bus service named STEMS which has been in operation for quite some time and the efficiency as well as discipline of the buses along with time-keeping has been quite well received. Unfortunately, in spite of the traffic jams and unseen circumstances that happen these buses still try to put their best foot forward. What is important for the management is to now cater to townships where students still have to walk to their respective schools by perhaps launching mini-buses at subsidised rates. As in Shillong many families still find it difficult to manage sending their young children when they have more than one or two. What can be done is for the management to come-up with a subsidized rate which will require a bit more of data crunching so that those left out because they cannot pay, are also accommodated. I urge those who can afford to send their kids to school by cars should utilize this school bus service introduced by the state government if we really care

about decongest traffic.
Yours etc
Dominic S. Wankhar
Via email

Appreciation for Meghalaya Tourism's Digital Initiative

Editor,
I am writing to express my heartfelt appreciation to the Meghalaya Tourism Department for introducing the Meghalaya Tourism mobile Application that leverages Artificial Intelligence (AI) services. This innovative initiative has significantly simplified the process of reporting guest arrivals, which was earlier plagued by cumbersome paperwork. As a stakeholder in the tourism industry, I can attest to the fact that this digital solution has saved us a considerable amount of time and effort. The application's user-friendly interface and automated features have made it effortless to submit daily reports, ensuring accuracy and efficiency. This forward-thinking initiative demonstrates the Department's commitment to embracing technology and enhancing the overall experience for stakeholders like us. By streamlining

procedures and reducing paperwork, the Department has not only eased our burden but also contributed to a more sustainable and environmentally-friendly practice. I commend the Meghalaya Tourism Department for their vision and efforts in harnessing technology to improve the tourism ecosystem and I look forward to seeing more innovative solutions in the future.
Yours etc.,
Chanmiki Lamin
Dawki, West Jaintia Hills

Stop the ethnic cleansing

Editor,
Ethnic cleansing is an unpardonable offence and that is exactly what is going on in Gaza. Israel launched airstrikes across Gaza Strip on Tuesday killing 400 Palestinians mostly women and children disregarding the existing cease fire. One of the directors of the documentary film, based on the Israel-Palestine conflict, which recently clinched the Oscar, Basel Adra, appealed, "We call on the world to take serious actions to stop the injustice and to stop the ethnic cleansing of Palestinian people." This must be regarded as a cry not just to save Palestinian people

and children but to save humanity; to save ourselves from further disgrace. The people of Palestine should get their legitimate right to national independence and sovereignty without further delay.
Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

On being culturally rooted

Editor,
The special article "A Khasi Legacy: Independence, Resilience, and the Power of Matriliney" by Bhogtoram Mawroh (ST March 18, 2025) made reading interesting. I am in sync with the author as he concludes his well-researched article with, "never forget the roots of our culture and what gives us our identity. We lose this, we lose who we are." Our cultural roots and identity are the essence of who we are, shaping our values, traditions, and sense of belonging. Forgetting these roots is like losing the foundation of a tree - it leaves us disconnected, vulnerable, and adrift. Why they matter is because cultural heritage connects us to our ancestors, preserving their wisdom, beliefs and practices for future generations. It ensures that

the lessons of the past enrich the present and guide the future. It gives individuals and communities a sense of pride, purpose, and unity. It is the story we tell, the festivals we celebrate, and the values we uphold that make us unique. Cultural roots foster respect for diversity, enabling people to appreciate other cultures while staying anchored in their own. This exchange of ideas promotes global harmony. Amid globalization and modernization, a strong cultural identity helps navigate change without losing who we are. Language, art, music and rituals, born of cultural roots, add vibrancy to life, offering not just a sense of history, but also inspiration for innovation and creativity. In Meghalaya, for instance, the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo communities celebrate their traditions through festival, oral storytelling and distinct governance systems at the grassroots which are immemorial. These elements of identity ensure that, even as the region develops, its unique spirit thrives.
Yours etc,
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

Morning blue light therapy could improve sleep and daily activity

What if a simple change in your morning light exposure could help you sleep better? Our sleep patterns change across our lifespan, and, as we get older, we tend to have difficulty getting a good night's sleep and feeling well rested the next day.

Older adults - 60 years old and over - generally have less deep sleep and wake up more

bright - of blue.

As we age, our eyes change: the lens becomes thicker and yellow, and our pupil size and number of photoreceptors reduce. Less light, then, reaches the biological clock in our brain, making it more difficult to time and regulate our sleep-wake cycles.

To make matters worse, modern society's electric light and bright screens at night trick

or watching TV.

Study participants wore trackers on their wrists to measure their activity levels and sleep patterns. We found that people exposed to more hours of blue light in the morning had better sleep and more stable daily activity - likely due to improved synchronisation of their internal body clock with the external environment.

Our findings are especially exciting because despite the messiness of real-world conditions - morning people naturally started light therapy earlier, while night owls delayed it - they align with the findings of controlled laboratory studies, highlighting the real-life potential of home-based light interventions for better sleep. We also found that those who spent more time outdoors in natural daylight were more active during the day and went to bed earlier. This might be because bright light helps keep us alert during the day, making us naturally more tired by bedtime.

LIGHT AND DARK

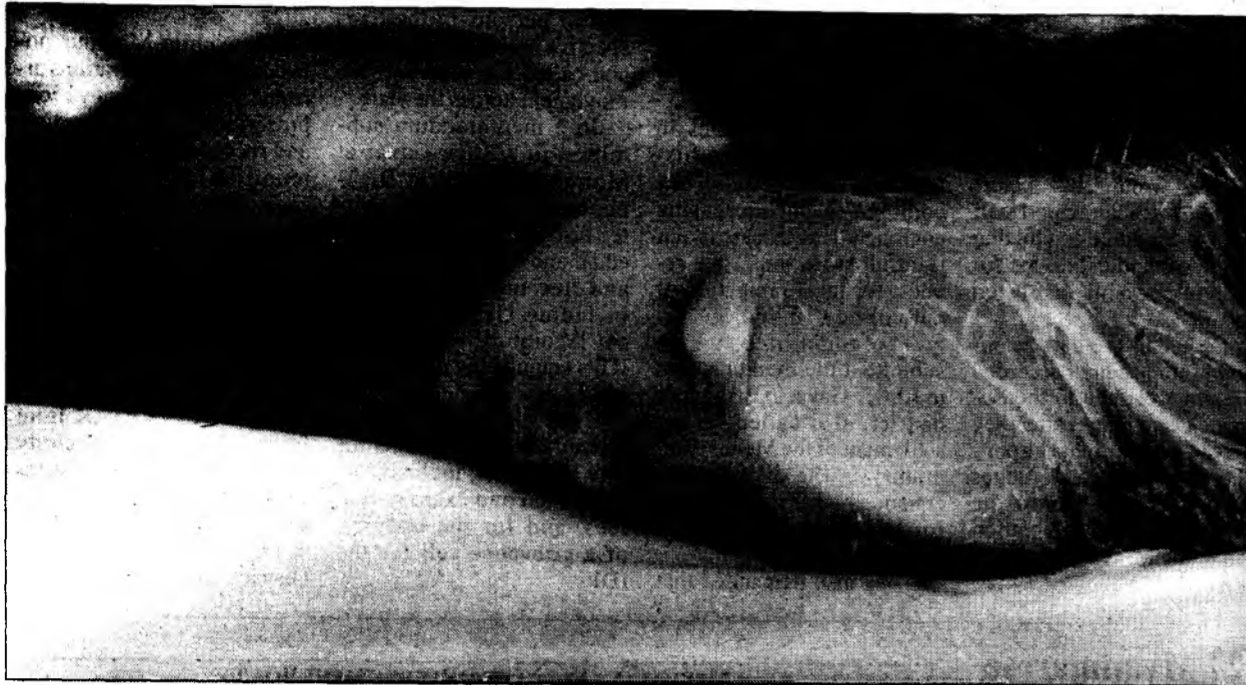
Good light exposure isn't just about bright light in the morning, it is equally about having enough darkness at night. Our study showed that those who spent more time exposed to light in the evening - either blue or white - actually experienced worsened sleep, taking more time to fall asleep and having more restless nights.

This could be explained by the alerting effects of light and suppression of the night hormone, melatonin, which can delay the body's natural wind-down process.

Sleep problems aren't just frustrating, they can also lead to health issues such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, depression and anxiety, cognitive decline and reduced productivity.

While we cannot solve the many sleep problems affecting people, we can offer a possible solution for some: exposure to more morning light - by opening the curtains, stepping outside for a walk, or indeed using a bright, blue-enriched light source indoors.

So, why not try it yourself for a few days - and let us know how you get on. (*The Conversation*)



often at night. They also sleep for shorter periods, wake up earlier in the morning and feel sleepy during the day.

Light, especially blue-enriched light (which has a higher amount of blue colours in it, like the light at midday), plays an important role in how well we sleep. This is because our sleep timing and quality is influenced by our internal body clock in the brain - the circadian clock - which relies on light and dark to stay in sync with the external environment.

To achieve this, humans have specialised photoreceptors - light-detecting cells on the retinas at the back of the eyes - that are highly sensitive to blue light. This is likely because we evolved to see the natural bright blue sky during the day, rather than indoor electric lights at night which are much less

our body clock into thinking it is still seeing daylight. Bright light at night contributes further to disruptions in our circadian system - and sleep quality and timing.

So, can improving indoor lighting offer an easier, affordable - and medication-free - solution to these problems? Our latest study, published in *GeroScience*, suggests it can.

STAYING BRIGHT

We recruited older adults (over 60 years old) with sleep problems to take part in the study. We asked them to follow a light therapy routine in which they administered blue light to themselves, at home, by sitting in front of light boxes. Each morning and evening, they spent two hours exposed to either blue-enriched or regular white light while going about their usual activities, such as reading

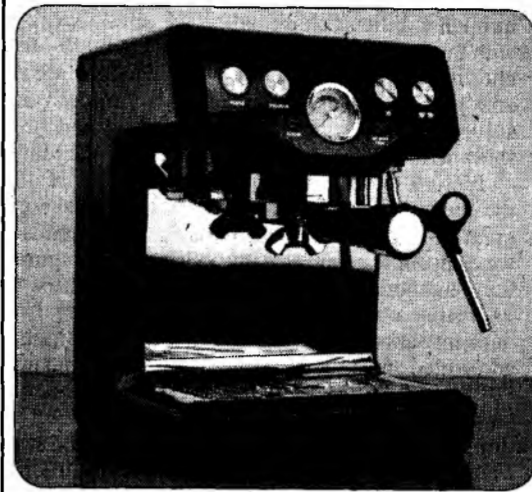
Blame your office coffee brewing machine for high cholesterol levels

Love to sip that freshly brewed coffee at work? Beware, your coffee brewing machine at the office may raise your cholesterol levels, claims a study.

The study led by researchers from the Uppsala University and Chalmers University of Technology in Sweden found that automated coffee brewing machines in the workplace contain natural chemicals, known as diterpenes -- known to increase cholesterol.

Elevated cholesterol levels are an established risk factor for cardiovascular diseases.

In the paper, published in the journal *Nutrition, Metabolism and Cardiovascular Diseases*, the team found significantly higher levels of



cafestol and kahweol in coffee examined from 14 machines in Swedish healthcare facilities.

Cafestol and kahweol are coffee-specific diterpenes -- known for their potential to increase cholesterol levels.

The diterpene concentrations in coffee from brewing machines considerably exceeded paper-filtered coffee. It is because paper filters, typically trap these compounds, but metal filters found in many coffee machines allow

them to pass into your cup.

The researchers examined brewing machines -- which produce coffee in 10-30 seconds by passing hot water through ground beans and a metal filter; liquid-model machines -- which mix liquid coffee concentrate with hot water; and instant machines.

While the brewing machines showed the highest diterpene levels, the liquid-model machines generally contained much lower levels comparable to paper-filtered coffee.

For espresso, there was a considerable and unexplained variation in diterpene concentration between the four samples tested. This needs further study but may be of importance for regular espresso consumers, said the team.

"Based on the concentrations of cafestol and kahweol in investigated machine coffees, thoroughly filtered coffee seems like the preferable choice for cardiovascular health. Accordingly, filtered coffee should be preferred, also in workplace settings," said the researchers.

"Intake of insufficiently filtered coffee during working hours could be an overlooked factor for cardiovascular health due to its effect on plasma cholesterol concentrations," they added.

The researchers also acknowledged major limitations such as its small sample size and lack of details regarding the designs of each coffee machine. The team also called for establishing the link with more studies. (*IANS*)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambli

Sunday, March 23, 2025

'Birthday Forecast'

Moon square Mercury on your solar return chart and it will give mixed results during the whole year. You will be put under tremendous work load. Office deadlines will keep your pressure up. Constant work load will give you jitters. You will appear to be a bit shaken. Your colleagues and peers will also add your pressure. Superiors will also keep reminding you about tasks to be completed. But you will not lose patience and emerge victorious in the end. There may be some tensions in the family and it will be difficult for you to convince your life partner. But in totality they will support you when you need it most. You will be drawn to social service, charity and religious activities. Health will be okay. You will develop lot of connection during business trips that you will undertake.

'This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) A more intense approach to relationships can be expected in this period. It is time to cut the fat by eliminating activities that aren't fulfilling your needs. Halfway measures will not be enough, so dig in and decide where you are going to invest your energy and where you need to pull back. When you concentrate your forces on one task or with one person, you can reach levels of fulfillment you haven't previously known. You would reach out and make new connections. You may visit and spend time in the company of your family and relatives. This is a favorable time to go for higher learning and join new courses to improve your professional skills and efficiency.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) You would realize that unsolved issues and puzzling situations are now becoming clear. All that is really needed is action, and you have plenty of energy to utilize. Your social life is likely to increase and bring you in contact with more influential, powerful and helpful people. This phase highlights friendship, love, romance and children in your life. This is a good time to build your skills, to get organized, and to attend to your health and your well being. There are strong chances of a pilgrimage; you may visit places of worship and holy places. A sense of humor allows free expression without anger or wounded egos.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) Realistic levels of optimism and confidence are with you, and you are able to attract fortunate circumstances into your life. Making progress can be difficult but not impossible. You could even feel trapped by your daily routine with the emphasis on getting every task done right. You would rather be doing more exciting things. Someone enters your life on a whirlwind of emotional intensity. Take advantage of the stabilizing results you can obtain just by being extra helpful and caring. The pleasure is in the journey ahead of you, rather than merely in the conquest of the summit. You may feel as if you are running out of time in your quest to free yourself from a challenging situation, but you have more time than you think.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) New responsibilities are likely to present themselves and you would take them more seriously now. You would learn about your own personal strength. You may have to deal with willfulness and issues of power and competition - in others and in yourself. There are likely to be times when you feel on edge, volatile, or even threatened. You may be able to get in touch with your internal motivations. A tendency to want to control your life through some form of manipulation would be strong at this time. Meeting with obstacles in your path, however, can force you into the position of using all of your resources to fight back, and you can discover resources you never knew you had in the process.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) Matters related to higher education, religion, and publishing proceed smoothly. This is an excellent time to seek advanced training and further your education. You would work in association with well-experienced people and would use your best talents and efficiency. Business expansion and new professional opportunities are worth considering. Financial benefits are stronger than any other time now. Duty and work commitment could come before pleasure, and a tendency to work more or harder is likely. As long as this doesn't reach workaholic levels, you will be just fine. You find yourself more accountable than ever when it comes to your work and output. Brisk walks and timely eating would be helpful.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22) This phase sees your energy and confidence increase dramatically. Things will not go in your favor if you resort to tactics to get what you want. At times, you could have problems staying calm, cool, and collected. Banned resentments come to

the fore and demand to be dealt with. It would be favorable to have good team spirit and be more tactful and obliging with your co-workers as this brings harmony and team spirit at the work place. You spend time with your beloved and go on trips, shopping, fun or even a journey. Intimacy and warmth are powerful stimulants for you during this phase. This is a favorable time to invest in shares, fixed deposits and insurance.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) You would be able to see the world in practical terms and structure your life and ambitions accordingly. Opportunities to travel arise and adventure tends to seek you out. Some restlessness is likely, mainly because of a deep feeling of wanderlust. You are more able than ever to see the "big picture" and less inclined to sweat the small stuff. You may be asked to state your intentions or urged to get serious. A new period for romance and fun is indicated. There would be strong associations and beginnings as new opportunities and changes are on the cards. Your family would be more supportive and harmony and pleasant interactions in your relationships would make you feel comfortable.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) The planetary configuration brings more physical and laborious work. You could be stressed while meeting people's expectations and approval. Outdoor activities appeal more than ever, and an opportunity to travel somewhere exotic could drop into your lap. You have a greater desire to get away, expand your horizons, and broaden your life experiences. This influence often correlates with a time when you are more able to get away from the daily routine--more options open up, or you have more free time to do so. Do not isolate yourself when you're feeling down. People will support you, or at least listen, when you share your feelings.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) You are artistic, stylish and your judgment is sound and you would participate in glamorous events. You are more receptive and gentle on a romantic level, and tend to be sentimental and caring. Your domestic life is comfortable as you make the family relaxed and secure and devote time with them. You are full of energy and indulge in arts and crafts. Try to compromise and adjust and take a soft approach when meeting people. You would be recognized and your work would be praised and rewarded. Take advantage of the smooth and magnetic energy. Give yourself a new fitness routine and healthy diet program to build on your energy.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) You would maintain a balance between emotional feelings and practicality. You might have a more materialistic view of life and are more attracted to objects and possessions that give you a sense of comfort and status. You probably should be on the lookout for a tendency to create your own financial stress due to extravagant spending habits. You would insert your creativity in an artistic way into your work. A sense of humor allows free expression. Your cultural and spiritual awareness increases. Confidence is the key-faith in the universe and in your ability to do the right thing instinctively will take you places now.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) You may need to re-adjust your plan of action. Errors in judgment made now are likely due to impulsiveness and in overlooking crucial details. You could have so many new ideas that you do not have time to implement all of them. Cooperation and a focus on harmony and understanding benefit you professionally and enhance your reputation and public standing. Good returns from overseas business are on cards. Your style of communication and efforts bring favorable results on your romantic life. You may feel restless at times; eat health food, yoga and meditation are recommended.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) You could seek distinction and strive towards perfection in your work. Efficiency should be your goal now. Relationships are dynamic and when a difference arises, you are quick to settle it, and have little patience for sweeping matters under the rug. Your close personal relationships are lively and full of conflicts and resolutions or reconciliation. The seeds you plant now, you will reap later. Surprises surrounding intimate matters, shared finances and resources and financial support may be in store. You could pay attention to various ways to increase personal funds, resulting in more than one avenue of monetary gain.

Too much of vitamin, mineral supplements can be toxic

Around half of UK adults currently take a food supplement - but vitamins and minerals are usually only needed in small amounts and too much of a good thing can be bad for you.

Here's what you need to know about the benefits and risks of some of the most common vitamins and minerals.

Vitamin A: Vitamin A aids the immune system in fighting off infections, helps you see better in the dark and is needed for healthy skin. Most people can get enough vitamin A from eating dairy, oily fish and liver. Yellow and red vegetables such as carrots and peppers, contain beta-carotene, which breaks down into vitamin A in the body.

The recommended daily allowance (RDA) is 700 micrograms and 600 micrograms for men and women respectively.

Although your body will store excess vitamin A, some research shows having more than 1.5mg a day over many years may weaken bones. In older people, this can lead to fractures as they are more likely to get osteoporosis. In severe cases, people may experience irreversible liver damage.

If you are pregnant, you should avoid vitamin A supplements completely - excess vitamin A can cause birth defects and miscarriage.

Vitamin B6: Also called pyridoxine, this vitamin is needed to make healthy red blood cells and help the body store energy from food. The RDA is 1.4mg and 1.2mg a day for men and women respectively. This can be obtained by eating, for example, fortified cereal, chicken and soya beans. More than 10mg a day is not recommended as the effects are unclear.

But taking 200mg or more a day has been linked to peripheral neuropathy - when the nerves in the body's extremities are damaged. This can start with tingling in the arms and legs and lead to loss of feeling. In some patients the effect will stop once the vitamin B6 is stopped. In other patients, nerve damage can be permanent.

Folic acid: Folic acid or folate is needed to make healthy red blood cells. Good sources of folic acid include green leafy vegetables, chickpeas and fortified cereals. The RDA is 200 micrograms daily.

In patients who are pregnant, folic acid is recommended to prevent neural tube defects like spina bifida. Doctors may prescribe higher than recommended doses (5mg) in high risk patients.

Consuming more than 1000 micrograms (1mg) of folic acid can mask symptoms of vitamin B12 deficiency, such as tiredness, tingling hands and feet, sore tongue and muscle weakness. These can indicate a vitamin B12 anaemia. By correcting the anaemia symptoms caused by a B12 deficiency, high folate levels can prevent the detection of an underlying B12 problem, which could lead to brain damage if left untreated.

Vitamin D and calcium: The amount of calcium in the body is controlled by vitamin D. Both nutrients help with healthy bones and teeth. Vitamin D is also needed for the immune system, muscles and nerves. Some foods like fortified cereal contain vitamin D but it is mostly made in the body when the skin is exposed to sunlight. The RDA for vitamin D is 10 micrograms. Those with a vitamin D deficiency may be prescribed higher doses.

People with darker skin or who do not have much exposure to sunlight may benefit from taking a daily supplement. But too much vitamin D over many years can cause kidney failure and irregular heartbeats. It may even be bad for the bones.

A Canadian study found that high doses could be linked to weakened bones. This is because high vitamin D intake causes too much calcium to build up in the body. The body starts to break down bones to lower the calcium.

Iron: Iron is an important nutrient needed to make red blood cells. Sources include red meat and beans. Iron deficiency is the world's most common cause of anaemia; however, taking too much can be toxic. The RDA for iron varies depending on your sex and age but you shouldn't take more than 17mg a day. Higher doses can be bought from a pharmacy or prescribed if there is a diagnosed deficiency.

Taking more than 20mg of iron everyday can cause stomach problems such as vomiting, diarrhoea and pain. Prolonged use or higher doses can cause organ damage such as liver failure. This is because it builds up in the organs and interferes with normal cell function.

Fish oil: These supplements contain omega-3 fatty acids. Different fats are needed to support the cells in the body and also to keep the heart, lungs, blood vessels and immune system working properly. Some are essential for brain and eye development in babies. Fish oil has been linked to a lower chance of heart disease. However, studies have mixed results about how effective these really are.

A recent study showed that healthy people taking fish oil supplements may have an increased risk of heart issues like stroke or atrial fibrillation. The benefits are mainly seen in people who already have heart disease. However, there are still benefits from eating food rich in omega-3s such as oily fish.

The British Dietetic Association says it's better to improve diet before considering supplements. Some groups, like infants, pregnant women and those with a diagnosed deficiency, need supplements. Different supplements have different amounts of vitamins and minerals so always read the label to make sure you're taking the recommended dose - and avoid taking multiple supplements that could increase your intake of a particular vitamin or mineral beyond safe levels. Ask your doctor, pharmacist or dietitian to check if you need a supplement before taking anything. (*The Conversation*)

"The man who is swimming against the stream knows the strength of it."

— Woodrow Wilson

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No. 221 SHILLONG, MONDAY, MARCH 24, 2025

Corrupt judiciary

QUITE understandably, Delhi High Court judge Yashwant Varma has opted to confidently fight back. He is engaged in chest-beating and would have the world believe he's innocence personified. The fire incident at his 'outhouse' on March 14 shamed the judiciary. Police went on record to say huge stocks of currency, apparently in crores, went up in flames. A video of the "recovery of the burnt cash" was also released by the police. Varma, traveling at the time, returned home not only to allege that this was part of a "conspiracy" against him — without suggesting who conspired against him. He's unruffled. Despite the fact that the Supreme Court has taken a "serious" view of the police findings, ordered an inquiry and stopped Varma from hearing cases, chances are that this tainted judge would stand his ground, pull strings and laugh his way back to his court chamber. It's hardly ever that cases against the high and mighty are investigated with any seriousness or taken to the logical conclusion. After a period of suspension, the sinners, bluff-masters, laugh their way back to their jobs and seats even with full back wages.

Note the fact that Varma functioned as a high court judge even as he was involved in complaints of fraud in the past. Keeping loads of unaccounted cash in one's possession is a crime in itself. With police having provided proof, the judge should have been arrested in the normal course. Giving Varma a kid-glove treatment and ample space to hold forth on his questionable "innocence" is a worrisome trend. In dealing with situations of crime, double standards are unacceptable.

The Varma episode came as a fresh shock and a blemish on the image of the judiciary. There have been repeated exposes of judges accepting bribes, including the case of a Karnataka mining baron being released on bail by a judge after infamously accepting a bribe of rupees one crore. Public discourse today is tainted by allegations that corruption is massive in the judiciary. The sanity of the system is seen to be a thing of the past. Ten years of Modi governance saw the overall corruption scenario worsening, even as the PM and his ministers have not been accused yet of such indulgences. The establishment as a whole is turning deeply corrupt under the PM's direct watch. Consider the scenario some time ago when none other than the CBI chief and the ED chief accused each other of bribe-taking in crores. The judicial system requires urgent reforms, but the government lacks the nerve to act. Part of such a reform was the law enacted by Manmohan Singh during the fag end of UPA-II to set up a national judicial appointments commission on the lines of the UPSC. The Supreme Court struck it down. This exposes the rot within. Modi failed to take the matter forward.

The way forward: Indigenous affairs department of Meghalaya

By Hammarsing L Kharhmar

At the outset, I must admit that it feels insensitive to discuss issues related to the deaths of the two teenage students, on any public platform, this soon. The cremation and burial of the two students have only just been completed. So, before sharing my observations and views on the issues related to and surrounding the tragic deaths, I'd like to express my deepest condolences to the grieving families and state that I sincerely hope no families should ever have to endure such tragedies, ever again.

I write this article, not for any other reason, other than the need to ask questions and present a view that I feel hasn't been shared yet. From the moment the news broke of the death of a Khasi student in Karnataka, due to food poisoning (the investigation is still ongoing), social media was flooded with expressions of sadness, shock and anger. Then followed the assumptions and accusations, both in local print and digital media. The focus was not so much on the cause of the death, but rather why rural Khasi children were being so far away from home to study.

One article in particular was shared widely: An old Tehelka report titled "A Strange and Bitter Crop" by Sanjana Chapalli, originally published in 2009, was resurrected and spread like wildfire. It is a damning investigative piece on the activities of the Lei Synshar Cultural Society (LSCS), and their role in facilitating the education of poor rural children in faraway states, in what are described by the writer as "RSS friendly schools". It is a long and detailed report; key sections of which were published in The Shillong Times, following the tragic deaths under the titles: "Focus back on 2009 'trafficking' report after twin deaths" (March 18th 2025) and "Horrorizing fate of Children" (March 19th 2025). Both the pieces relied heavily on the Tehelka reports findings, which must surely have led many readers to conclude that the activities of the Lei Synshar Cultural Society were illegal. However, with and in everything, there is always another side to the story.

A significant amount of time has passed since the Tehelka report was first published. A lot has transpired. Tehelka is no longer as sensational as it once was. Sanjana Chapalli appears to have switched careers and is now an "Award Winning Brand Marketer" (according to her Bio) but strangely the email listed in her website, which hosts the article is broken. (I tried to contact her to clarify some discrepancies and blunders such as her incorrect reference to the Seng Khasi as a religion). On the other hand, over 3000 students

have since graduated from LSCC affiliated schools, and what might come as a surprise to everyone is that a large percentage belong to the Christian faith. This is what I learned from one of the organisation's senior workers. I was also told that many ex-students have gone on to have successful professional careers on their return home, and are contributing positively to the society. A number of ex-students have gone on to set up their own establishments, including secular schools in their villages. Not a single student has changed their faith. On the contrary they are more certain and confident of who they really are. However, I still urge that all of the above be confirmed by an independent fact-finding team. I think it would be productive to hear directly from past and present students about their time at these schools. That said, I'd like to share my own experiences, based on interactions with the products of the LSCS. Firstly, other than the fact that they are all polite and hard-working individuals, I noticed three main characteristics:

(a) They are firmly rooted and proud of their indigenous roots and identity. (b) They speak and write their native language fluently and are also proficient in English and Hindi. (c) They are patriotic and connect well with fellow Indians from all communities and walks of life.

Secondly, I haven't found any dilution or loss of identity and very importantly, they don't harbour any animosity towards any community. The only thing they can be accused of is being fiercely proud and passionate about their ancestral faith — Niam Khasi Niamtre. I also noticed that they have imbibed some essential qualities, which many who have never left home, tend to lack which is self-discipline and a strong work ethic. But, this side of the story is either ignored or not known.

A one-sided narrative spilled over into the public discourse, relying on the seemingly biased report by Sanjana Chapalli, as indisputable fact. Predictably, the word "Indoctrination" popped up. There was dismay and disgust shown at the thought of young Khasi children having to chant shlokas, follow a meatless diet, forcefully adapt to an alien culture to the point where they allegedly forget their own native tongue. These are some very serious allegations. But are they all true? Before presenting an answer, I think we need to do some introspection.

Let's start by acknowledging that a lot of what is alleged above, happens for certain here. Shockingly, many tribals who have never

lived outside Meghalaya, display huge indications of loss of identity and have alienated themselves from their indigenous culture. Many have very rudimentary command and knowledge over their native language and history. Morals imported have largely replaced traditional teachings and wisdom. There are schools, mostly in rural areas, where singing hymns and reciting Bible verses is compulsory for all students and those that fail to memorise and recite the religious texts as desired by the authorities suffer severe reprimanding.

To sing in a choir is a common aspiration, as is the ability to speak English fluently, preferably with a foreign accent. I dare say a false sense of superiority exists amongst the tribals who no longer possess the indigenous faith. Modernity is still heavily equated with western ideas and faiths, to the point that Khasi first names continue to be relegated to middle names or scrapped entirely. Now we are even hearing of more and more Khasis who consider the matrilineal system as completely outdated and some even openly call it the bane of the community. Even food habits and tastes are beginning to change rapidly. But, is any of the above wrong or a problem? Does it all come down to personal choice? Yes and No. This is where perspective matters. Indoctrination, one could therefore say, lies in the eye or rather the soul of the beholder.

It is most unfortunate, but sometimes it takes a tragedy to draw out a much-needed discussion. As always, it is the fearless Shillong Times Editor, Kong Patricia Mukhim, who dares to ask the hardest questions. In the editorial piece titled "The Inglorious Karnataka events and the way forward" (March 21 2025), she makes very pertinent observations. Her piece made me reflect deeply and ask my must-families have to send their children to distant lands to study. If we are to leave aside the allegations of social experimentation and other theories. It appears that the root cause is a failing education system at home.

No one can dispute the fact that Christian missionaries and organisations have set up several of the best educational establishments across the country. I am a product of three: St Edmunds, Bishop Cotton, Bangalore and St Stephens, Delhi. But these institutions are almost all located in urban centres. The rural areas are where the problem really lies. Let us take our state as an example. A headline in this very paper dated January 18th 2025 read: "Study finds number of schools in M'laya

disproportionate to population size." A large number of schools are in the rural areas but something seems off. If the statistics are accurate, it would lead one to believe that several schools exist, only on paper. I hope that is not the case. An independent study is once again needed.

I cannot speak on behalf of the Christian Missions or Sangh Parivar organisations. I can, however, speak with some confidence on the Ramakrishna Mission Sohra Ashrama and the Seng Khasi. I must clarify though, that I speak not on their behalf, but rather about them. As a Managing Committee Member of the RKM Sohra, I am privy to all the excellent work that the organization has done in the state, particularly in rural and remote areas. The schools are growing and RKM is now about to open a college in the Sohra region. Children of all faiths attend the RKM, simply for the high quality of all round education they receive, at very affordable fees. Sadly, despite their impeccable service, RKM is still fiercely rejected in many parts of the Khasi-Jaintia Hills, on totally unfounded grounds. The recent violence in Mawkynew and a similar ongoing case in Jakrem (South West Khasi Hills) are examples.

To many misled locals, any saffron clad person or Sanskrit/Hindi named institution, is to be seen as a threat and therefore, automatically denied opportunities to establish anything in their region. Another example are the Eklavya schools that are set up specifically by the Central Government, to benefit poor tribal children. 38 Eklavya schools have been proposed for Meghalaya by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, yet sadly only two have been approved mainly due to resistance from locals. We should all realise that we are all stakeholders in the process of building a healthy society.

India is a country like no other. Our antiquity and uniqueness within the infinite spectrum of culture and traditions is unmatched in the world. We are all connected by geography, history and vast heritage. Each root must support the other in the preservation of the priceless intangible ancestral inheritances. So, finally coming to the role of indigenous faith organisations in this whole complex scenario, I see more and more reasons for the State and the Centre to introduce an "Indigenous Affairs Department" in the state of Meghalaya, to facilitate the establishment of Seng Khasi/Seifh Raj schools and other necessities required to help keep the indigenous essence of the people alive. We are not only preserving what is born of the land. We are also determined to grow from it. Indigenous cultures are vital pillars of the nation.

India's TB crisis : Are we doing enough to end it?

By Dr Bandi K Sangma

For centuries, tuberculosis (TB) has silently claimed millions of lives, lurking in the shadows of history as one of humanity's deadliest infectious diseases. Despite remarkable advancements in medical science, TB remains a persistent global threat, disproportionately affecting vulnerable populations. In 2023 alone, the World Health Organization (WHO) estimated that 10.8 million people fell ill with TB, and 1.25 million succumbed to it. But what if the real battle isn't just against the bacteria itself, but against the misinformation, stigma, and systemic neglect that allow it to thrive?

As we mark World Tuberculosis Day on March 24, 2025, it is time to confront the harsh realities of this ancient disease and commit to a future where TB is no longer a leading cause of death. From its traces in Egyptian mummies dating back 9,000 years to its modern-day devastation, TB's story is one of missed opportunities and urgent calls for action. By understanding its history, challenges, and the steps needed for eradication, we can turn the tide against this enduring epidemic.

TB is one of the oldest recorded diseases, with references in ancient Greek and Roman texts. Hippocrates described it as "phthisis," and it was long considered a death sentence due to the lack of effective treatments. It was only in 1882 that German scientist Robert Koch identified *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* as the causative agent, revolutionizing TB diagnosis and treatment. The term "tuberculosis" was later coined by Johann Lukas Schönlein, marking a turning point in the disease's scientific understanding.

India bears the highest burden of tuberculosis worldwide, with approximately 2.64 million new cases annually, accounting for nearly 26% of the global TB burden. On average, one TB patient dies every two minutes in India. Despite government efforts such as the National Tuberculosis Elimination Program (NTEP), significant gaps remain.

The profound tragedy of TB extends beyond its biological consequences, encompassing the pervasive social stigma associated with it. Misconceptions and myths, particularly prevalent in India, perpetuate this stigma. Common beliefs include the notion that TB is a hereditary curse, a sign of weakness, or even divine punishment. These misconceptions lead to delayed diagnosis, reluctance to seek treatment, and social ostracisation—especially among women, who often conceal their symptoms for fear of abandonment by their families.

A key factor exacerbating TB's impact is the presence of co-morbidities. The high prevalence of malnutrition, alcohol and tobacco use, diabetes and HIV infection in India significantly increases susceptibility to TB. Studies show that individuals with HIV are 16-27 times more likely to develop active TB than those without the virus. Additionally, air pollution, particularly exposure to fine particulate matter (PM_{2.5}), weakens lung function and raises TB susceptibility. The deteriorating air quality in Indian cities underscores the urgent need for robust environmental regulations and public health interventions.

Tuberculosis exists on a spectrum. Latent TB occurs when an individual is infected with *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* but does not manifest symptoms or transmit the disease. In contrast, active TB presents with symptoms such as chronic cough, fever, and weight loss and is highly contagious. The WHO is considering a third category, asymptomatic TB (aTB), current thinking positions aTB as a state on a continuum of M tuberculosis infection to clinically apparent symptomatic disease, with considerable variation in disease trajectories among individuals. Another critical question is the extent to which aTB contributes to transmission and its duration of infectiousness. Although transmission has been shown there is little and conflicting evidence about the relative infectiousness of people with aTB compared with those who cough. Some experts argue that many asymptomatic people releasing fewer infectious respiratory particles each time they exhale can be of greater importance than a smaller number of individuals who cough. Although molecular methods like Nucleic Acid Amplification Tests (NAAT) and Artificial Intelligence have enhanced the confirmation of TB diagnosis to a certain extent, there exists a significant population of patients who exhibit symptoms

and X-ray findings indicative of active TB but are sputum negative. These patients necessitate specialized investigations such as computed tomography (CT) scans and bronchoscopy, which are typically performed by pulmonologists or respiratory specialists to definitively confirm the diagnosis.

Treating TB is a protracted and arduous process, significantly more intricate than managing other diseases like malaria or typhoid, which can be effectively treated with brief courses of one or two medications. In contrast, TB necessitates a minimum of six months of intensive, three to four drug therapy with some cases requiring more than a year of treatment. This prolonged treatment often leads to adverse drug reactions, non-adherence, contributing to the rise of drug-resistant TB. According to WHO data, approximately 410,000 cases of multidrug-resistant TB (MDR-TB) were reported globally in 2023. India alone accounted for nearly 27% of these cases, underscoring the urgent need for better adherence strategies and stronger healthcare infrastructure. MDR-TB is primarily a man-made crisis, stemming from improper use of antibiotics, incomplete treatment courses, and poor healthcare practices. MDR-TB is significantly harder to treat, requiring longer durations of therapy with more toxic drugs. Newer treatment regimens such as bedaquiline-containing regimens have shown promise, but their accessibility remains limited due to high costs and regulatory barriers.

Despite India's ambitious goal of eliminating TB by 2025, the department of respiratory medicine, commonly referred to as pulmonary medicine or TB and Chest, has been designated as a non-essential department by the National Medical Commission (NMC). Consequently, it has been removed from the MBBS curriculum and not included in the newly established medical colleges. As a result, aspiring doctors would receive minimal exposure to TB management, leading to gaps in care and expertise. This oversight must be rectified to equip future physicians with the necessary skills to combat TB effectively. Medications alone won't suffice; we also need specialists.

Pulmonologists or respiratory medicine specialists, play an instrumental role in diagnosing, treating and managing TB, as well as difficult to treat TB and MDR/XDR TB. Their expertise extends beyond TB, encompassing a wide range of pulmonary diseases such as lung cancer, asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), critical care, interstitial lung diseases, interventional procedures and sleep medicine, among others. To effectively address these challenges, it is imperative to strengthen the pulmonology specialty and mandate the inclusion of pulmonary/respiratory medicine departments in upcoming medical colleges. This initiative will significantly enhance TB care and improve overall respiratory health outcomes in India.

TB and lung cancer often present with overlapping symptoms, leading to delayed diagnosis and mismanagement. Chronic TB infections have also been linked to an increased risk of lung cancer due to prolonged lung inflammation and scarring. Unfortunately, India lacks a nationwide lung cancer screening program, making early detection difficult. Given the high burden of respiratory diseases and tobacco use, implementing systematic lung cancer screening could significantly improve survival rates. To effectively combat TB, a comprehensive strategy is necessary—one that encompasses government policies, medical advancements, and public awareness initiatives. Key components of this strategy include expanding diagnostic facilities, ensuring adherence to treatment regimens, reducing stigma, integrating TB education into medical curricula, addressing air pollution, and implementing lung cancer screening programs. Additionally, India must prioritize investment in newer TB vaccines and innovative treatment regimens to accelerate progress toward eradication.

Lets reaffirm our commitment to raising awareness, dispelling misconceptions, and collaborating to eliminate TB and other respiratory diseases on World Tuberculosis Day. The fight against TB is a social, economic and ethical imperative. Together, we can defeat this age-old adversary and build a tuberculosis-free future.

(The author is MBBS, MD Respiratory Medicine, Assistant Professor, PA Sangma Medical College, USTM, Meghalaya.)

Letters to the Editor

Salute to Sunita Williams: She redefines female power

Editor, Space is not just a vast expanse of wonder. It is also a vast void where one could find oneself floating through a weight of uncertainty. What was supposed to be a 90-day mission in zero gravity unexpectedly stretched into more than nine long months. During that time, Sunita Williams and Butch Wilmore went through challenges they probably never imagined.

In the weightlessness of space, where even the simplest tasks become monumental, Sunita faced unforeseen predicaments. However, by breaking the glass ceiling, Sunita bravely endured what came her way. The long solitude never broke her spirit. Her resilience, in fact, ignites awe and sparks genuine inspiration.

And now, with her safe return to Earth, it's nothing short of a collective victory for all of us. For millions of people watching, especially

young audiences, Sunita is an intellectual idol. To be honest, at a time when so many young minds are increasingly drawn like moths to a flame by entertainers chasing the hollow fame of digital likes and views or misleading influencers, Sunita is undoubtedly a powerful reminder of what a real role model should look like. Needless to say, when our youth look up to the right role models, society undeniably grows healthier and stronger; but when the same admiration is "misplaced", it can be deeply damaging.

Well, as she steps back onto Earth, Sunita brings with her the wisdom of space, including lessons in patience, discipline, fearlessness, and the sheer brilliance of human ingenuity. By all accounts, Sunita's journey is not one of space but one just of possibilities that arise when one dares to dream and fly higher and higher. Simply put, let us have as our youth icons those who move in the orbit of patience, courage, honesty, and human values --- not those chasing fleeting fame or peddling empty ideals.

Yours etc.,
Satil Gewali,
Shillong

Self-sufficiency in food non-negotiable

Editor, I was very happy to read George B. Lyngdoh's article, "Meghalaya's Food Sovereignty: The Need for Urgent Action," because it is the most apt subject following the Budget Session. Without self-sufficiency in agricultural food production, there is no bright future for the people of the state.

The Budget, like all budgets these days, presents a fiscal deficit. What most people don't understand is that the current system of money creation itself makes it necessary for countries to run a deficit budget. When we see that over 30% of India's tax revenues go towards paying interest on public debts, we understand that the system is unsustainable. Central transfers to states will be squeezed sooner than later. When we further understand that the US exports inflation to the whole world by unrestricted creation of dollars, which in turn forces the countries that hold US dollars to create more of their own currency, thus causing inflation as well as increas-

ing these countries' internal debts, we can see just how unsustainable this whole system is.

And in the lowest rung of this untenable system stand states like Meghalaya, with high food imports, and high indebtedness. It is the most pressing need of the state to focus on self-sufficiency in food to survive the turbulent financial system. This includes not just food crops but all agricultural food produce. The fishery and piggy schemes have not made us self sufficient in fish and meat either. Apart from the points given by George B. Lyngdoh like organic farming, native seeds, and market linkages, there is also the issue of small land holdings, which makes it unfeasible for the farmers to invest in modern technology for large scale farming and irrigation. Thus, what we need is not land banks for outside investors but land banks for our own farmers, to facilitate a collective large scale farming unit and what we need is facilitation of investments in agricultural technology for such collective large scale farming units.

Needless to say, we need private investments in this sector too, and the government can indeed give much

attention to facilitating this through creative ways, including as equity or royalty.

Yours etc.,
Kitor H. Blah,
Via email

TB concerns in RPC Hospital Shillong

Editor, India is going ahead aggressively to eradicate tuberculosis with the 100-day TB Elimination Campaign. Some national and private media persons visited Shillong a few days ago to witness first-hand the measures adopted by health centers in tackling the infectious disease. They have also visited the heritage Reid Provincial Chest Hospital, Shillong which is one of the few health institutions to cater specifically to Tuberculosis. This hospital has been severely neglected in terms of infrastructure and manpower and specifically, very minimal medical doctors. Although it is located in the heart of the city, the hospital structures are wholly of the British-era Assam type and in dilapidated condition. Many patients are being treated here including those

suffering from multi-drug resistant TB, extensively drug resistant- TB etc. The World Health Organization says, "TB is spread through the air when people with lung TB cough, sneeze or spit. A person needs to inhale only a few germs to become infected." However, this hospital becomes a thoroughfare and amusement park for the public during the day and also at night due to the absence of proper watchmen/security guards. This is a serious health concern as the people can become infected without safety measures in place. There is no proper fencing or boundary walls hence land encroachment is taking place thereby, reducing the total area of the hospital. The solar light panels installed are not functioning as well. The State Health Minister should take note of these issues and take steps to improve the infrastructure of the hospital for the benefit of the public.

Yours etc.,
Shambhar Byrswaw,
Shillong-2

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

*"There is nothing like a dream
to create the future."*

— Victor Hugo

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No. 222 SHILLONG, TUESDAY, MARCH 25, 2025

Scientific Coal Mining

NO mining activity is free from adverse environmental consequences no matter the tall claims of governments here and elsewhere. Those living in the vicinity of the mining areas are well aware of the repercussions of coal mining including the acid mine drainage which has already polluted two rivers in Jaintia Hills and which have yet to be certified as 'pollution free,' till date. Naturally the reopening up of coal mining activities via the legal route and ostensibly with the adoption of scientific mining methods has created a sense of fear that not just the rivers would be polluted but forests would be cut down mercilessly to expand the areas under open cast coal mining, which is the only method other than rat hole mining.

There have been warnings from different quarters including the Central Mine Planning and Design Institute Limited (CMPDIL) that the impact on vegetation and forest cover using open case mining would be much greater than the improvised rat-hole mining would have caused. The CMPDIL officials aver that rat hole mining would not result in subsidence of huge tracts of land. Geologists from the state as well as those from the Indian School of Mines have said that the coal seams in Meghalaya are shallow and scientific or open cast mining would not be economically viable nor environmentally sustainable. But because the National Green Tribunal (NGT) insists on scientific mining which it believes will ensure that water and other forms of pollution would be controlled and accounted for instead of the archaic rat-hole mining method which has claimed several lines of miners, due to sudden flooding of mines, going scientific is the way forward.

Now that people are more informed about the consequences of coal mining such as extensive land degradation and habitat destruction they have started to voice their concerns and rightly so. Surface mining, or strip mining, involves removing large areas of earth to access coal deposits. This process leads to significant land degradation, destroying habitats and displacing wildlife. It has already been seen that wherever coal has been mined and when the mines are subsequently abandoned, the landscape is often barren and infertile, with lasting negative impacts on biodiversity. Additionally, the runoff from mining sites has polluted water sources and rivers through acid mine drainage and the toxins released by heavy metals and sulfuric acid. This contamination is highly toxic to aquatic life and poses significant risks to human health. And now with so-called scientific coal mining the use of heavy machinery would involve dumping of wastewater from mining operations into the rivers. Coal mining contributes heavily to air pollution through the release of methane, a potent greenhouse gas, during the mining process. Dust from mining activities also pollutes the air, further exacerbating respiratory problems. Already the coke units in East Jaintia Hills have been releasing greenhouse gasses and heavy metals in the air which have damaged the environment. There has to be a more environmentally sustainable way for Meghalaya to earn its revenue than through extractive industries.

Between Faith and Loss: The Struggle of Indigenous Khasi Identity

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

The death of two Khasi boys from food poisoning in Karnataka, after being forced to eat Holi leftovers, raise serious questions about the safety of out-of-state students and the underlying communal politics. While the death of both the boys is highly upsetting, I felt hurt by the demise of Khrehlang Khongtani from Lyndem village. Initially, I thought the village was the one I had once passed through on my way to Wakhken, a very famous tourist spot known for having a hospital dedicated to traditional Khasi medicine and a death-defying bamboo stairway which leads to a viewpoint. However, one of my relatives informed me that the village was actually the one which was on the way to my village, Nongjirana. The knowledge that the boy hailed near to my village threw me into a rage. The anger was not just about the loss of a precious life, but the realisation that it could very well have been one of my own that could have fallen to the same fate.

My family, especially my late uncle, were followers of Niam Tynrai, the indigenous faith of the Khasi. He was a very devout man and his faith was a significant source of strength for him. Although many family members converted to Christianity, he remained steadfast in his indigenous faith. Being the Kni or maternal uncle, he was close to my late mother, and he took care of our property since we had settled in Shillong. Before his death, I had become quite close to him and would discuss with him about various business ventures that we could undertake together. As for his loyalty to his indigenous faith, there was a particular incident which had made a lasting impression on me.

When I was doing my PhD, I was in great mental and emotional turmoil. It was during this time that I visited him in the village. We talked about many things and he told me that whatever the challenges, we have to be strong. He used the Khasi term "hap pyneh," loosely translating to "you have to be strong." Those words have become an indelible part of my life. He then offered to perform some rituals for me to help with my healing. Willing to try anything, I agreed to his offer.

He called another of our relatives who brought a chicken, a wooden board with a handle and an egg.

We took all the three items to the nearby stream near the village. There our relative, Masaw, gutted the chicken and took out the entrails. He examined the entrails and interpreted the meaning of the augury. Then he took the egg and threw it against the board. The force shattered the egg, scattering the shell fragments everywhere. Masaw again examined the shells. He offered a prayer and then threw the entrails into the stream. Thereafter, we returned home. Did the ritual work? I don't know. I was always a skeptic, and I remembered questioning the existence of God while I was in class VI or VII. It was much later that I declared myself as an atheist. In fact, this proved to be a big problem. When I first joined the PhD program, I went for a job interview. Although I didn't get the position, I was the runner-up. My senior got the job, but the pressure groups hounded her out because she was a non-Khasi. She was a gold medalist, and I had looked up to her as an inspiration. Her termination was an enormous loss for the students and the college. I should have received the job offer according to the merit list. But after I informed the management (Catholic college) that I was an atheist, they decided not to select me. So, I am not really sure if the ritual helped me recover because it still took me a few more years before I made peace with my challenges. But the kindness shown to me by my uncle has always remained with me.

My uncle fell from a tree while he was working in one of our areca nut plantations. I was told that the first person to find him and get help was his Bangladeshi friend from across the border. This person would help my uncle with the harvest and had requested him to find a job in the Khasi villages since he did not want to stay in his country any more. I found the prospect of a Bengali Muslim man caring for and potentially slaughtering the pigs intriguing. But then people preoccupied with daily survival cannot afford to be pretentious about their religious affiliations. His friendship with the Bangladeshi man was intriguing, especially since he had also fired his rifle at several Bangladeshis who were attempting to steal our harvest. I never got to ask

him how he became friends with the man. They took him to NEIGHRIMS, and I went with him. However, the rude behaviour of some of the junior doctors annoyed him and he decided to put his trust in traditional medicine. That was when we took him to Wakhken. I visited the place a few times when he was being treated there. Not long after, he passed away, and I was back in the village again for the last rites. I expected that there would be a Niam Tynrai funeral service, but to my surprise, it was a Christian one. When did he convert to Christianity? Or was his family forced to become Christians after his death in order for the last rites to be performed? I never asked, knowing full well that it would have undoubtedly been a difficult decision, and I had no right to interfere in it. Therefore, they buried him in a coffin with his wait (Khasi machete) and star (harness for carrying the basket). After we got back home, the whole family gathered around and started counting the money that we had received from guests who attended the funeral. The money was short by a few thousands with the expenditure exceeding the donations. They interpreted this as a sign of my uncle's insufficient virtue in life. One elder called out his name and lamented at the shortcomings by gently scolding him. The next day, I returned home.

Even though my aunt had built a house out of wood and cement, my uncle was still living in a bamboo hut. The house stood on a platform, requiring one to climb a bamboo staircase to enter. His children were still very young when he passed away. If the family had remained Niam Tynrai, it was very much possible that the Lei Synshar Cultural Society would have taken them for studies outside the state. While the initiative is commendable, there have been concerns raised about it in the past as well.

Sanjana Chappali's report, 'A Strange and Bitter Crop,' originally published by TEHELKA, revealed many disturbing facts about the impact on children taken to Karnataka for study. The report shared many disturbing details, which can be summarized in this sentence from the report: Living in environments so

different from their own culture, language, religion, and food has a devastating physical and mental impact on the children. Those children who survived the food poisoning reported that the school made them do hard physical labour. The report also talks about attempts at religious indoctrination into Hinduism. The report states that instructors taught the children Brahminical chants, Hindu religious festivals, and a shift away from a primarily non-vegetarian Meghalayan diet to vegetarianism. For a religion and culture which is older than Hinduism in South Asia, this attempt at weaning indigenous children away from their indigenous culture in the name of protecting them from conversion to Christianity is highly disturbing. But what is most disturbing is that two organisations, Seng Khasi and Sein Raji, who claim to be protectors of the indigenous faith, have not made public statements expressing condolence or condemnation of the deaths that have taken place. It is difficult to understand the silence unless the lives of the poor don't matter no matter which faith they belong to.

There is angst among the adherents of indigenous faith against Christian missionaries who they accuse of having destroyed the indigenous culture. Now that Khasis are predominantly Christian, there is a complaint of bias against those from indigenous faith. But sometimes people forget that, when Khasis first converted to Christianity, the community ostracised and expelled many. Nabon Sawian, believed to be the first Khasi woman to convert to Christianity, is one example. In 2018, filmmakers released a film titled 'Nabon, A Journey of Faith' detailing her experience. So, it is very much possible that if followers of indigenous faith were still in the majority, those who adopted Christianity would have been the ones persecuted. But it also doesn't mean that the marginalisation should continue. It is this animosity that is responsible for the death of Khrehlang Khongtani and Tobarin Nongsej from Sohparu, West Khasi Hills. It is, therefore, very important that we ensure such tragedies are not repeated. Never again!

(The views expressed in the article are those of the authors and do not reflect in any way his affiliation to any organization or institution)

of God's creation and artistic work of man. A couple of weeks back I and a few friends headed to Sohra to visit some of the most beautiful falls in our country. On the way we diverted towards a village called Mawkma (due to the construction of the old approach road through Sa-I-Mika Park) towards Daintlen Falls and Weisawdong Falls. Admiring the lush green rolling hills and water bodies, our excitement was also coupled with our expectations of a buzzing crowd and lively scene at the mentioned tourist spots. But on arrival, we were greeted by a desolate, barren and lifeless place with law enforcement driving us away from both these once thriving, lively and beautiful tourist spots without a justifiable or rational explanation.

Disappointed and baffled, we headed towards the closest village, Laitduh, which is nestled on a hilltop overlooking the canyons towards Weilo on one side and the Bangladesh plains towards the south. We had our refreshments and proceeded to other spots in Sohra before reaching our stop for the night in one of the many welcoming guest-houses. As we sat for dinner and did a recap of the day, we were accompanied by the owner of the guesthouse sharing experiences and accounts of our day to day lives. But still brothered about the first stop, I asked, "Why are these tourist spots given to us by our Creator to enjoy and witness, closed off and inaccessible to anyone?" The house owner then proceeded to shed light upon the sad situation of

claims and counter-claims by villagers or Kurs/ Raids over those tourist spots. Hence a number of scenic spots have stopped operating. Coming to the mentioned spots however, the administrative and jurisdictional claims of these neighbouring villages (probably 5 hours trekking to and from the Weisawdong Falls and Daintlen) seem outlandish, considering the topography and distance between the areas. Due to these wild allegations by these far-flung villages, the inaccessible tourist spots there and the village which these spots sit on are deprived of development and growth in all aspects. Such situations and those instigating such conundrum should be dealt with appropriately as these affect the livelihoods of the people of these and other villages in a similar predicament. This recent trip has shed light on things that speak of the reality of the tourism scene in Meghalaya.

Hopefully the concerned authorities would take swift and progressive action to ensure better growth of the tourism sector because if these issues aren't taken seriously and resolved then economic opportunities will be lost apart from creating disharmony.

Yours etc.,
Wallam Kupar Budon,
Shillong

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

The Waste Land: March Edition

By Ellerrine Diengdoh

I would like to inform everyone who has so kindly (and repeatedly) asked why I've suddenly been writing so much. The truth is, I seem to be going through a bout of midlife clarity, and since traffic jams now last long enough for one to complete a thesis on the road, that's exactly what I've been doing, except instead of research, I document the daily absurdities of life, one excruciating delay at a time.

The end of the financial year is upon us once again, that sacred time when the government suddenly realises it still has money left and must urgently spend it before someone asks awkward questions. And how does one spend money in a hurry? By launching an

will have fully regenerated... stronger and angrier than before, some of them deep enough to qualify as water bodies!

Let's also not forget the last-minute pavement reconstruction projects. One day, you're walking along your usual footpath, and the next morning, it has been stripped down to its foundation, with a lone shovel standing in the debris, looking as if the workers unearthed something horrifying and fled in terror. Pedestrians, now refugees, must dodge between speeding cars, homicidal buses, and deranged bikes and Scootys driven by "pronouns" who evidently believe in reincarnation!

Oh, and let's talk about the speed breakers. Not

Of course, back then, we had fewer cars, so the digging was mostly just an inconvenience. Now, many decades later, it has evolved into a dystopian nightmare. The roads are packed tighter than Shillong cabs, and traffic jams are so insane that you leave home in your prime and arrive at your destination with three grey hairs and a mild case of spondylitis. And yet, the authorities look at this chaos and think, "Yes! Now is the perfect time to start digging!"

all-out assault on roads, pavements, and drains, as if they've personally offended someone in high places!

When I was younger, I used to think this time of year was something apocalyptic. It was always around this time that my father (who was otherwise quite sane) would start hyperventilating and sermonising about the "important work" he had to complete, using the same tone, frequency and decibels our Presbyterian pastors adopted when preaching about the Second Coming. Naturally, my

the gentle, well-marked kind, that would be far too civilised. These are cunningly placed landmines, unmarked, unpainted, lurking in the shadows, waiting to ambush unsuspecting drivers. One moment, you're driving along in blissful ignorance; the next, you've been violently catapulted into the stratosphere. By the time you land, seatbelt strangling you, suspension in tatters, soul temporarily leaving your body, you have a revelation: India doesn't need expensive space programmes. Just strap a satel-

To add to this mayhem, the traffic diversions are pure sadistic genius. No Entry Here! Go There! No, Not There! Take a U-Turn! No, No, Not Here! I once followed a "Diversion" sign that led me straight back to where I started, which I assume was a deep, mystical, profound statement about the futility of life.

muddled brain assumed both events involved chaos, suffering, and a whole lot of dust. And I wasn't wrong. Because every March, like clockwork, the roads and everything else, would get torn up in a desperate, last-minute frenzy, as if the entire city had suddenly decided to turn itself into one giant archaeological dig site.

Of course, back then, we had fewer cars, so the digging was mostly just an inconvenience. Now, many decades later, it has evolved into a dystopian nightmare. The roads are packed tighter than Shillong cabs, and traffic jams are so insane that you leave home in your prime and arrive at your destination with three grey hairs and a mild case of spondylitis. And yet, the authorities look at this chaos and think, "Yes! Now is the perfect time to start digging!"

And then, of course, there's the Pothole Repair Department, which waits all year before suddenly realising, just before the 31st of March, that every pothole in the city must be filled immediately! But not with actual road material. No, that would be too conventional. Instead, they employ the 'whatever-I-can-lay-my-hands-on' formula, consisting of bits of gravel, a few sentimental pebbles, last week's leftover cement and a generous helping of moonshine-induced confidence, ensuring that by the first monsoon, the potholes

lite to a car and let these death traps do the rest!

To add to this mayhem, the traffic diversions are pure sadistic genius. No Entry Here! Go There! No, Not There! Take a U-Turn! No, No, Not Here! I once followed a "Diversion" sign that led me straight back to where I started, which I assume was a deep, mystical, profound statement about the futility of life.

And finally, there's the grand digging of drains. Not during the dry season when it makes sense. Instead, drains are dutifully excavated just before the rains, so that half-dug trenches transform into glorious, gushing rivers of urban filth, spilling onto the streets with rotting leftovers, sewage and that ever-present black sludge; composition unknown and, frankly, best left uninvestigated.

But here's a thought... What if (and hear me out) the financial year didn't end in March? What if we moved it to mid-December? That way, they could dig up the entire city when nobody is in a hurry. When schools and colleges are shut, half the city is on vacation and the rest are too full of Christmas spirits to care. It could be beautiful and perfect!

Of course, that would require planning. And foresight. And common sense. So, obviously, it's never going to happen. So, here's to dust, despair, and eternal road rage. Now and forevermore. Amen!

Letters to the Editor

Hinduism rooted in India

Editor,
Apropos of the letter to the editor by Dr Bhogtoram Mawroh (ST March 14, 2025) on Hinduism any student of Social Science knows that every culture, religion and language is unique and it's a taboo to compare one with another. Therefore, as a Spiritual But Not Religious (SBNR) Hindu I thought of seeking a couple of clarifications regarding his claim that (1) Hinduism like the two other major Abrahamic religions such as Christianity and Islam, originated outside India - Central Asia to be more specific and that (2) Hinduism too, like the other two major Abrahamic religions, Christianity and Islam, will "gobble up" Indigenous Faiths such as Niam Khasi/Tre, Songsarek, Sarna and others.

Roots of Hinduism: Contrary to the claim made by Dr. Mawroh, it is an accepted historical fact that the roots of Hinduism are traced to the Indus River Valley civilization and the peoples who lived there, with some traditions dating back to the Bronze Age (3000 BCE to 1900 BCE). Hinduism, contrary to the claim of Dr Bhogtoram Mawroh, did not travel from Central Asia, but rather, its traditions and practices spread from the Indian subcontinent to other regions.

Hinduism's presence in Central Asia, at a time when India alone contributed more

than 30% of the global GDP, predates the arrival of Babur by 800 years, with evidence suggesting Hinduism was prevalent in places like Samarkand, Uzbekistan during the 7th Century CE. Hinduism spread to Central Asia and Afghanistan through the Silk Route and from the 4th century CE onwards, Hinduism had a dominant presence in Southeast Asia, lasting for over 1,000 years.

Hinduism historically had a presence in several Central Asian countries, including Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan and today, vibrant and diverse Hindu communities are spread across Southeast Asian countries such as Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Medan (Indonesia) and the Philippines, mainly due to the presence of Indians, such as Tamil people, who migrated from the Indian subcontinent to Southeast Asia in past centuries.

The Proto-Indo-European language, from which Sanskrit and Avesta (the language of Zoroastrianism) developed, suggests a shared linguistic origin and potential for cultural exchange between the regions, but not necessarily a direct path of religious influence from Central Asia to India.

No Evidence of Central Asian Origin: Though some suggest that Indo-Aryan speaking people migrated to the Indian subcontinent from West Asia, bringing with them rituals and practices, including fire worship, sacrifices, and the Vedas, but there's no credible evidence to suggest that Hinduism originated in Central Asia

or that it was transmitted from there to the Indian subcontinent.

Therefore, if Dr Bhogtoram Mawroh has any specific, authentic information or material to support his claim that Hinduism originated in Central Asia, the same may kindly be shared for all our knowledge.

Hinduism & Conversion: Unlike the two main Abrahamic religions Christianity and Islam, Hinduism is generally considered a non-missionary and non-proselytizing religion, meaning it doesn't seek to convert followers of other religions to Hinduism. Hinduism is often seen as a "way of life" rather than as a religion that actively proselytizes.

Hinduism emphasizes on individual spiritual exploration and finding one's own path to Truth, rather than converting others. Unlike some religions with a central authority and a single holy book, Hinduism is diverse and lacks a single, universally accepted doctrine. As the scope of Hinduism is rather vast, it encapsulates different tenets, schools of thought and philosophies. As a Hindu I am free to worship or not to worship anything - be it the deities, animate or inanimate objects, nature, the celestial bodies - in fact the entire creation. Even one can be an Atheist and still be a Hindu. There are threads of Hinduism which are very much akin to the religious practices of the indigenous people and therefore, a sense of oneness in relation to the religious practises between Hinduism and the Indigenous/tribal religions and beliefs can be discerned - such

as worshipping trees, stones, fire, planets, star, etc.

(One may point out a few instances of Conversion such as Ghar Wapsi: which literally means "returning to the fold", and is mostly limited to those who had converted to other religions from Hinduism.)

I know Dr Mawroh to be a logical, analytical and data driven intellectual and I am sure when he talks about the "gobbling up" of indigenous faiths by non-indigenous religions such as Christianity, Islam and Hinduism, his concern is supported by data and I hope he won't mind sharing the relevant religion-wise data of all the conversions from Indigenous faiths to Christianity, Islam and Hinduism that has taken place since the early 19th century, i.e., from 1830s till date.

Moreover, it is of immense interest for me, personally, to know how many students of indigenous faiths have been converted to Hinduism by the Ramakrishna Mission Schools in Meghalaya, especially by the one at Sohra till date since its inception.

Yours etc.,
Hiranmoy Dutta
Via email

Inhibiting Tourism Root Growth

Editor,
As an avid traveller and naturalist, I have travelled to a number of places across the country and in Meghalaya to witness firsthand, the beauty

of God's creation and artistic work of man. A couple of weeks back I and a few friends headed to Sohra to visit some of the most beautiful falls in our country. On the way we diverted towards a village called Mawkma (due to the construction of the old approach road through Sa-I-Mika Park) towards Daintlen Falls and Weisawdong Falls. Admiring the lush green rolling hills and water bodies, our excitement was also coupled with our expectations of a buzzing crowd and lively scene at the mentioned tourist spots. But on arrival, we were greeted by a desolate, barren and lifeless place with law enforcement driving us away from both these once thriving, lively and beautiful tourist spots without a justifiable or rational explanation.

Disappointed and baffled, we headed towards the closest village, Laitduh, which is nestled on a hilltop overlooking the canyons towards Weilo on one side and the Bangladesh plains towards the south. We had our refreshments and proceeded to other spots in Sohra before reaching our stop for the night in one of the many welcoming guest-houses. As we sat for dinner and did a recap of the day, we were accompanied by the owner of the guesthouse sharing experiences and accounts of our day to day lives. But still brothered about the first stop, I asked, "Why are these tourist spots given to us by our Creator to enjoy and witness, closed off and inaccessible to anyone?" The house owner then proceeded to shed light upon the sad situation of

"Idealism increases in direct proportion to one's distance from the problem."

— John Galsworthy

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No. 223 SHILLONG, WEDNESDAY, MARCH 26, 2025

Shaping the economy

WHILE the tall claims of successive governments about the economic growth of India are taken with a pinch of salt, international agencies like the International Monetary Fund can perhaps be trusted to come up with a more realistic analysis. On this premise, the latest observation from the monetary fund that the nation has achieved a historic economic milestone by doubling its GDP from \$2.1 trillion in 2015 to 4.3 trillion by now should add a feather to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's cap. These were, principally his years, and it must be acknowledged that the national economy has not faced any major shocks during this period, except for the Covid-19 impact. Projections are that India can overtake Japan this year and Germany next year if it carried on with the present pace of growth. There, however, is no way India can aspire to outwit the two other major economies — those of the US and China — in the foreseeable future.

It is well-acknowledged that the Indian economy remained more or less stable in the past 20 years, and did reasonably well since the early 1990s, when Narasimha Rao as PM and Manmohan Singh as Finance Minister, squarely faced a major economic mess. They shipped India's gold abroad as security for huge loans, to conduct day-to-day business of the government. Their Liberalization push, which rooted out the outdated Socialistic controls, released the national economy from suffocation. The 30 years of push by successive governments took India to this level. Singh as PM knew how to refashion the national economy. Yet, in his last years, the economy showed signs of some strain and GDP growth slumped. Under Modi, it went down further, and Covid years came as another hit. Yet, overall, it must be stated that the NDA government too acted positively on the economic front.

However, a grim aspect about India's economic growth is that the "growth" per se is mostly limited to the top 10, or even 20 per cent of the population, who are well-entrenched in government, businesses and in fields like IT. The rest of Indians, forming about 80 per cent, of the population continue having a hand-to-mouth existence. Their life has not changed in any meaningful way. Poverty as such has been tackled with the subsidized ration system and the rural employment guarantee programme, both introduced during the Congress-led UPA terms. This is keeping the poor in a complacent mood. Their emancipation is a far cry. Modi carried on with his governance in the traditional Congress style. The PM is being guided by the RSS, which is neither progressive nor open-minded in its approach, hence there's a limit to what he can do in terms of reforming the systems. Systems are hugely being manipulated by vested interests including the corrupt bureaucrats. With a population mass of 1.4 billion, their collective energies should take India to the world's top super power status. What the nation lacks is strong leadership.

Letters to the Editor

Increasing age limit at entry of college/university teachers

Editor,
The request by the advisor of the Association of Niamtre Students of Shillong, Dr Omarlin Kyndiah to scrap the age limit while recruiting college teachers in his letter to the Chief Minister, Conrad K Sangma is highly justified. Unlike some professions requiring early start, teaching is accessible at various life stages, since it is more about qualifications and experience. Considering that there is no prescribed age limit for applying to become Assistant Professor in India as laid down by the University Grants Commission (UGC), there is also no restriction on the upper age limit to apply for UGC NET Lectureship, a mandatory criterion for entry to Assistant Professor position in colleges and universities. Further, the age limit for the UGC NET Junior Research Fellowship (JRF) is 30 years with 5 years relaxation for candidates from reserved categories like OBC, ST, SC, and PwDs. The objective of the JRF scheme is to provide opportunities to

NET-qualified candidates to undertake advanced studies and research leading to M. Phil/Ph. D, which is a mandatory qualification for promotion to Associate Professor.

The right to work goes beyond mere employment; it's about earning a dignified livelihood. As parents we request the Chief Minister to relook at the criteria with respect to age of eligibility to give an opportunity to our youth so that their years spent on academic training and research are not wasted.

Yours etc.,
Marbiang Rymbai
Via email

There should be no age bar for recruiting college teachers

Editor
Apropos of the news item, "Call to scrap age limit to recruit college teachers (ST March 22, 2025) as rightly pointed out by the University Grants Commission (UGC) has not set an upper age limit on the recruitment of Assistant Professors in colleges and universities. On the eligibility criteria UGC is focusing more on quali-

The unredeemable burden of being poor

By Toki Blah

Television and social media has exposed us so much to the killing and massacre of innocent children and babies in the Gaza and Ukrainian conflict that most of us have become immune to the horrific pictures of smashed and mutilated bodies of blameless and guiltless children. Then suddenly last week, the horrors of senseless deaths of such innocent souls blew up on our faces; the destroyed bodies of two guiltless children from these hills killed in far away Karnataka made shocking headlines. We are yet to recover from this shock so much so that the apparent social indifference over these tragic events are eerie because of their very silence. Some brave and concerned souls have ventured to express their views; Government has reacted by sending a fact finding team to Karnataka; but questions hang heavy in the air — unanswered; pregnant with ambiguity and uncertainty. The most pertinent questions are (1) How did this tragedy happen or how was it allowed to happen (2) Why did it ever happen and who is responsible? This author believes that enough time has elapsed for an unemotional and rational attempt at answering these questions and the focus of this write-up will be mainly towards the same.

First lets try and chronologically review as to what's the origins of this tragedy. It appears that a certain organization going by the name Lei Synshar Cultural Society (LSCS), an organization with apparent close links with the RSS, went about scouting and identifying children of poor families practicing the indigenous faith. The parents of such destitute children were then persuaded that the best interest of their wards would be in the care of foster homes identified by the LSCS, far from Meghalaya. The LSCS apparently also gave the assurance that the children will be safely brought up within the indigenous environment and faith that the children were accustomed to. So far so good. From here onwards however things begin to blur. It becomes unclear as to who took these children, far from their homes and hearths to such foster homes such as the "unauthorized hostel run by a private school in T Kagepura village, Mandya District, Karnataka," where 24 Meghalaya children fell ill due to food poisoning while two ultimately lost their lives. One is unsure how such institutions were identified as safe and who considered them suitable as hostels for poor children. It also is unclear as to whether the LSCS did any survey,

appraisal or inspection as to the suitability and security of these unauthorized (or can one call them illegal) residential hostels. The institutions were simply identified as establishments willing to take in the children free of cost. What deal was reached between the supplier of these children and the institution that received them is not known. The only agreement apparently reached with the authorities of these schools is "Look here are a bunch of 24 Schedule Tribe children from Meghalaya. They belong to poverty ridden homesteads. Educate them, feed them, bring them up in the Hindu way of life. We don't care how you do it. It is your problem. No one is going to ask how you do it. We leave them to your tender care. Bye Bye"

Identifying the children as scheduled tribes was perhaps the first mistake made by LSCS. It immediately conveyed to the caste conscious Hindu institution into which they were admitted that these were Dalit children from poverty ridden families from Meghalaya. For those unfamiliar with the term Dalit, Google describes Dalits as "members of a social group that has been historically marginalized in the caste system in India. The term is also used to describe people who are considered 'untouchables.'" Almost everyday we read in the papers the social abuses and crimes committed on Dalits in mainland India. Dalits live in a sort of social hell and it is into such a hell that the LSCS condemned our innocent village children to. Press reports simply state that the 24 children fell ill after consuming left-over food. There is no need to describe leftover food from restaurants, feasts or festivals. When eating in public we have all seen the dirty plastic buckets into which the unappetizing leftover slop from our plates is deposited. This discarded unpalatable stuff is then ultimately fed to dogs or pigs. In T Kagepura village, Mandya District, Karnataka, 24 Hynniewtrep children from Meghalaya came down with food poisoning because they were fed putrid and decomposed leftovers! Two innocents eventually died. In a caste ridden society untouchables are fair game for such leftovers. A disturbing question — was such free leftover food the daily fare for the poor children from Meghalaya? We don't know but were the 2 children from Meghalaya killed (I call it murder if it was done intentionally) because of caste differences?

This is a situation fraught with unforeseen danger and risk for a small minuscule Tribal community such as ours. It will sow the seeds of mistrust, suspicion and social disintegration among the rank and file of the Hynniewtrep people as a whole. There are people who would love this to happen but it is a clear and present danger that the Khasi Pnar community will have to address with urgency and haste. In India very often the poor, the homeless, orphans and the disabled are admitted into homes or social welfare centers where their well-being is supposed to be looked after. The sad fact is that very often such destitute homes are left under the supervision and care of cruel, heartless and cold-blooded individuals who are not above exploiting and mistreating their charg-

I ask these uncomfortable questions because I have seen such abuses on Dalits during my postings in the Indian heartland.

Press reports also claim that the LSCS has apparently transferred more than 1600 poor children to other parts of the country. So we ask the 2nd question, Why? The answer apparently is to save them from being converted to Christianity and to preserve their indigenous faith. We respect the Niam Tre and the Seng Khasi because we consider them the safe-keepers and guardians of our Hynniewtrep culture and traditions. Indigenous faith needs to be preserved. That's logical and understandable. What is not logical is why then admit them to unauthorized Hindu institutions where, as Kong Patricia Mukhim in her article has claimed "they are coerced to recite prayers, sing bhajans" and forced to learn Sanskrit Shlokas! Secondly they are made to shun meat and encouraged to be vegetarians. How do such Hindu practices help preserve Indigenous beliefs? These are kids belonging to an animistic faith very closely associated with the land and the environment and what they are being taught in these Hindu institutions are totally alien to their cultural belief systems. So why this perverted attempt at Social Engineering? Brought up, educated and reared up in an environment totally foreign to their indigenous tribal roots what happens to these kids when they return home? Will these children eventually return with a distorted view of their own egalitarian society that they will view from a prejudiced upbringing of social discrimination based on caste untouchability?

This is a situation fraught with unforeseen danger and risk for a small minuscule Tribal community such as ours. It will sow the seeds of mistrust, suspicion and social disintegration among the rank and file of the Hynniewtrep people as a whole. There are people who would love this to happen but it is a clear and present danger that the Khasi Pnar community will have to address with urgency and haste. In India very often the poor, the homeless, orphans and the disabled are admitted into homes or social welfare centers where their well-being is supposed to be looked after. The sad fact is that very often such destitute homes are left under the supervision and care of cruel, heartless and cold-blooded individuals who are not above exploiting and mistreating their charg-

es. Heartbreaking stories of abuse especially sexual abuse and exploitation by the management of such institutions is too common a narrative to be repeated. Did the LSCS that took our children to the unauthorized homes in Karnataka first carry out a survey of the suitability, security and safety of the unauthorized hostel run by the private school they were admitted to? Remember these are village children often too young to look after themselves. Locked up in a stuffy one room accommodation; unfamiliar with their surroundings and language; away from friendly faces of relatives and parents, to whom do these poor helpless abandoned children turn to if, heaven forbid, they are subjected to any form of torture or abuse? Have they unwittingly been forced into a form of bondage from where escape is impossible? Oftentimes helpless silence is the burden of poverty that only the poor understand! Here we turn again to Google where it describes the act of human trafficking as "the criminal exploitation of vulnerable people." Human trafficking is a modern form of slavery, often transnational in character and its victims are of both genders and all ages". The author is unaware if any transaction has taken place but has human trafficking taken place in this instance?

Dominance in the skies: Is Indian Air Force ready?

Editor,
The new world order ushered in by the Trump and Elon Musk duo has also brought in a lot of uncertainty. Authoritarian regimes are rising, profound changes are noticeable in economies slowly becoming cashless and technology reliant on machine learning. The United States under President Trump recently unveiled the 6th generation fighter plane dubbed the F-47, estimated at 20 billion dollars. The program was grabbed by Boeing which could surpass any fighter aircraft in its fleet raising eyebrows at Beijing. Fast forward to the Indian subcontinent, the French relationship has always been cozy with the Mirage and Rafale warplanes leading but what about the indigenous Tejas when just last month, Air Chief Marshal AP Singh went on to say that he was not confident with HAL on the delay. The geopolitical ground in Northeast India is rapidly shifting. Bangladesh is in a state of flux and in Myanmar the military is having a vice like grip. It is time for the big bosses at South Block to

revisit the drawing board and analyse the tectonic balancing needed along sensitive border areas. There is no shadow of doubt about the prowess within the men and women of the IAF as they dominate every military exercise with their foreign counterparts using their wise and quick decision-making prowess. Apart from the elemental psychology which is at play, the need to operationalise certain strategic areas and reinventing the force is the need of the hour. Finding the IAF squadron strength depleting, even the Defence Secretary, Rajesh Kumar Singh, urged immediate modernisation. I am reminded of a book 'Indian Army Vision 2020' by Late Brigadier Gurmeet Kanwal, a once towering figure in the Centre for Land Warfare Studies, New Delhi and Observer Research Foundation, outlining the different facets from air power, management along border areas, internal security and command-and-control systems giving a vantage point towards a 21st century changing environment.

Yours etc.,
Christopher Gatphoh,
Via email

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

Need for help desks and quality health care in hospitals

By Pynshaibha Latam

Every year, thousands of people from villages travel to cities in search of better medical treatment. Meghalaya, with its serene landscapes and close-knit rural communities, often sees patients from villages traveling to major hospitals in Shillong, such as NEIGRIHMS (North Eastern Indira Gandhi Regional Institute of Health and Medical Sciences), Nazareth Hospital, Civil Hospital, and Bethany Hospital and many others, in search of quality medical care. These hospitals, known for their advanced facilities and skilled medical staff, serve as crucial centers for treatment. However, many patients from rural areas face challenges in finding out the complex hospital systems due to language barriers and unfamiliar surroundings.

Challenges faced by rural patients?
When villagers arrive at

and others provide crucial medical services to thousands of people daily. However, many patients and their families face apathy and lack of compassion, rude behaviour, and inattentive medical staff, making an already stressful experience even more difficult. It's time for the government to take action on such kind of behaviour whenever detected or when complaints are made. They should remember one thing - that hospitals exist because of patients and in turn their livelihoods also depend on the patients.

Healthcare is not just about treatment—it is also about ensuring that patients feel safe, understood, and cared for. Hospitals in Meghalaya and beyond can improve rural patient experiences by making map-reading simpler, offering language assistance, and training staff to be patient

"Healthcare is not just about treatment, it is also about ensuring that patients feel safe, understood, and cared for. Hospitals in Meghalaya and beyond can improve rural patient experiences by making map-reading simpler, offering language assistance, and training staff to be patient and kind. A little guidance can go a long way in ensuring that no one feels lost in their journey to healing."

These large hospitals, they often find themselves lost in long corridors, unable to read signs, understand medical jargon, or even locate the right department. The absence of translators or hospital guides makes it difficult for them to register, consult doctors, or follow treatment instructions. Many of these patients and their families feel anxious and helpless, adding emotional stress to their already fragile health conditions.

Most big hospitals are designed with different departments spread across multiple floors and sections. While urban patients may be accustomed to navigating these spaces, villagers many of whom are visiting such large institutions for the first time—face numerous challenges:

and kind. A little guidance can go a long way in ensuring that no one feels lost in their journey to healing.

When villagers or rural patients or for that matter any patient visits a hospital, they typically have several expectations which include - affordable treatment, availability of doctors and staff, proper diagnosis and treatment—clean and hygienic facilities, availability of medicines, emergency care, polite and respectful treatment, clear communication, less waiting time and basic amenities.

A hospital should not just provide medical care but also treat patients with love, compassion, and dignity. When patients—especially those from villages—come seeking help, they need more than just medicine; they need

"When villagers arrive at these large hospitals, they often find themselves lost in long corridors, unable to read signs, understand medical jargon, or even locate the right department. The absence of translators or hospital guides makes it difficult for them to register, consult doctors, or follow treatment instructions. Many of these patients and their families feel anxious and helpless, adding emotional stress to their already fragile health conditions."

● **Language Barrier:** Hospital signs and instructions are often in English or the dominant regional language, which some villagers may not understand.

● **Complex Layouts:** With separate wings for surgery, maternity, cardiology, and emergency care, patients often struggle to find the right department.

● **Lack of Assistance:** Many hospitals do not have enough staff to guide patients, leaving them to wander around in confusion.

● **Time Wasted:** Patients spend hours asking strangers for directions, leading to delays in treatment and missed appointments. Government hospitals serve as the backbone of healthcare, especially for rural patients who cannot afford private treatment. In Meghalaya, institutions like NEIGRIHMS, Civil Hospital, Ganesh Das Hospital,

kindness, understanding, and reassurance.

A hospital that treats with love should have:

Caring doctors and nurses — healthcare professionals who listen, comfort, and genuinely care for patients.

Respect for every patient — regardless of background, every person deserves to be treated with dignity.

A warm and welcoming environment — a place where patients feel safe and valued, not just like numbers in a system.

Holistic healing — combining medicine with emotional support, encouraging words, and even spiritual care if needed.

Smiles and kind words — sometimes, a simple smile or a kind word can be as healing as medicine.

A hospital that heals with love not only cures diseases but also gives hope and peace.

"Silence is the mother of truth."

— Benjamin Disraeli

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVH No. 224 SHILLONG, THURSDAY, MARCH 27, 2025

Free speech under assault

THE arrest of journalist Dilwar Hussain Mozumder in Assam simply for questioning the Managing Director (MD) of the Assam Co-operative Apex Bank about allegations of a multi-crore scam is yet another assault on press freedom. It is a journalists' right to question financial irregularities in a bank where people deposit money and where they could lose their savings if the irregularities are not checked. Assam Chief Minister, Himanta Biswa Sarma is one of the directors of the bank and a BJP MLA is the Chairman. Mozumder is chief reporter of Cross Currents a digital media platform. He was at the bank premises during a protest by the youth wing of an opposition political party demanding answers from the Bank MD. Mozumder was arrested on an FIR filed by an unnamed person. He was detained for several hours and neither his lawyer nor his wife could meet him. This is a clear violation of the law where the right to consult a legal counsel has been denied. Mozumdar had been writing reports on alleged financial irregularities in the Bank and he possibly stepped on some toes.

That Mozumdar is a Muslim only makes it worse for him in the state of Assam where Muslims are hounded as they in the rest of the country. The hurry with which the FIR was filed alleging that Mozumdar abused the security personnel who belongs to a minority community and the fact that the FIR was unnamed makes it rather strange. Why did the security guard who alleged that he was bad-mouthed not put down his name as the complainant? Was he really the complainant or was it a case of harassing a journalist on duty lest he finds something unsavoury in the manner in which the bank was managed? The Press Club of India, the Guwahati Press Club and several other media organisations have condemned Mozumdar's arrest calling it an overreach. Their contention is that allegations of Mozumdar making caste-based remarks against the security guard should have been evidenced by others who heard the slur and have recorded it. As of now it is the complainant's words against Mozumdar's which makes the case inactionable. However, the message to media persons has gone out loud and clear that they cannot investigate anything even remotely connected with the powerful.

This is just one of hundreds of such incidents where journalists are put through the wringer for daring to question those in authority today. Journalists are killed in action and whereas many have taken the path of least resistance and compromised their loyalty to the profession by being lenient on the government and putting the opposition through a trial, there are a few who continue to plod on fearlessly. What is needed at this juncture is for journalists to stand in solidarity and fight out rather than yield to authoritarianism, for, a journalist's creed is to question the powerful, more so those who hold the reins of governance and are custodians of the public purse.

Letters to the Editor

Selective law enforcement & failure to tackle serious crimes

Editor, I wish to bring to light the troubling inconsistency in law enforcement priorities. While minor infractions like vehicle modifications, unstrapped seat-belts while driving or failure to wear helmets while riding are swiftly penalized, serious crimes such as narcotics distribution continue unabated.

Recently, I witnessed a group of drug and weed suppliers at the rear recesses of a local market, openly offering pedestrians to buy illegal substances and discreetly recorded their activities on camera. I promptly reported this to the police, providing clear video evidence. While I appreciate the team from one nearby Police Station for taking immediate action and conducting an initial check, they ultimately stated that apprehending the culprits was difficult as they needed to get hold of the illegal substances, and no arrests can be made without evidence of them possessing and supplying the illegal substances. But what's even more disheartening was the response from another high-

ranking Sub-Inspector (not from the nearby branch but from a different branch) who remarked, "If you want to reduce crime in the city, please become an IAS, IPS, Minister, or Chief Minister. You cannot solve other people's problems, let alone your own problems" when I sent him the footage.

Such indifference raises serious concerns. Drug abuse is a growing menace that destroys families and futures. Yet, when those tasked with upholding the law turn a blind eye, crime thrives. Justice must not be selective. Law enforcement must prioritize tackling organized crime with the same zeal as petty offenses. Citizens expect accountability, not apathy.

Yours etc.,
Meba Rymshon,
Via email

Reviving NES of Akashvani back on shortwave radio

Editor, I write to you as a concerned citizen and an ardent advocate of preserving and enhancing our region's rich cultural and informational heritage. I wish to draw at-

On Amendment of the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution of India

By Fabian Lyngdoh

It was quite interesting to listen to the debate held at Sankardev College between two lawyers, Erwin K Syiem Sutnga and Robertjune Kharjahn against one political leader, Ardent Miller Basaiawmoit. What came out prominently in the debate from the lawyers' side is the hopeful expectation for the amendment of the Sixth Schedule that is to come soon for the greater protection of the Jaidbyrniew (Tribe) in lieu of Article 371. Actually, the move to amend the Sixth Schedule had been initiated several years before. A review of the provisions of the Sixth Schedule by the Ministry of Home Affairs brought out certain deficiencies which make the 73rd and 74th amendments not applicable to the Sixth Schedule areas. Establishment of Village Councils is not mandatory in the Sixth Schedule areas, and where they exist (like the Dorbar Shnong), do not have constitutional protection for election on the basis of universal adult suffrage and tenure. There is no provision for separate fund for the ADCs in the Sixth Schedule areas on the pattern of Panchayati Raj Institutions because of the absence of a State Finance Commission, and there is no constitutional provision for reservation for women in the District Council, Regional Councils, Dorbar Shnong, Dorbar Raid, Dorbar Hima etc., in the Sixth Schedule areas.

The National Commission to Review the Working of the Constitution (NCRWC) had suggested the introduction of positive democratic elements like gender justice and adult franchise into these traditional institutions to make them broader based and capable of dealing with a changing world, to provide safeguards for minority and micro minority, and protection of their traditions, to evolve a process of central funding for plan expenditure to the councils directly. The Second Administrative Reforms Commission (ARC) Report, 2008, recommended for the setting up of a State Finance Commission and a State Election Commission as provided in the Panchayati Raj System for conducting election to the councils, and to provide discretionary powers to Governors without having to act on advice of the Council of Ministers on all issues relating to Councils.

It was since 2011, that a comprehensive bill to amend the Sixth Schedule was drafted and circulated to different institutions by the Ministry of

Home Affairs, Government of India for views and comments. The purpose of these amendments is to strengthen the autonomous councils set up in the States of Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Tripura, so that the benefits from the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments be made applicable to the Sixth Schedule areas. The Ministry of Home Affairs drafted the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution (Amendment) Bill 2012 which remains under process till date. Expert committees recommended that directly elected village level representative bodies need to be constituted and adequately empowered, provided their traditional practices carried out in a modern world do not deny legitimate democratic rights to any section in their contemporary society. There are many points of contention that the leaders of the ADCs of Meghalaya did not agree with the various suggestions given by the Central Government's agencies, and there are also many undemocratic elements which these ADC leaders would like to retain and incorporate in the Sixth Schedule amendment that are not acceptable to the spirit of the amendment itself. This tussle would make the intended amendment of the Sixth Schedule not applicable to the ADCs of Meghalaya.

Let us go into some constitutional backgrounds of the issue. Article 243 in Part IX of the Indian Constitution deals with the establishment of the Panchayats as local self-governance institutions in India; whereas, Article 244 in Part X of the Constitution deals with the administration of Scheduled and Tribal Areas. Article 244(1) gave birth to the Fifth Schedule which concerns the administration of Scheduled Areas and Tribal Areas in India. Article 244(2) on the other hand, gave birth to the Sixth Schedule, which concerns specifically with the administration of the Tribal Areas in the then, State of Assam.

Originally, Nagaland and Mizoram were placed under Article 244(2) within the State of Assam. But since Article 244(2) is the basis of the Sixth Schedule, which in turn provided only for the establishment of the Autonomous District Council within the State of Assam, the Nagas rejected the scheme. When Nagaland was given full-fledged statehood in 1962, it was based

on Article 371A which is a state-specific constitutional provision. When Mizoram attained full statehood in 1986, Article 244(2) and the Sixth Schedule were made applicable only to the Lai, Mara, and Chakma areas, while the State of Mizoram as a whole is based on Article 371G, similar to Article 371A of Nagaland.

When the Autonomous State of Meghalaya was founded in 1969 within the larger State of Assam, it was not based on Article 244(2) which is linked only to the Sixth Schedule and the District Councils, but a new version of Article 244 that concerns with the administration of Tribal areas, in the form of Article 244A was inserted. When Meghalaya attained full-fledged statehood in 1971, it was based on the previous Autonomous State. Hence, the full-fledged State of Meghalaya is also based on Article 244 A, which implies that Meghalaya can be indirectly inferred to as a Tribal State by virtue of Article 244 A because the basic Article 244 concerns with the administration of scheduled areas and tribal areas in India; whether to be administered by the District Council or by the State Government, is a different matter.

But Article 244 A does not contain protective constitutional provisions for the State of Meghalaya as provided in Articles 371A and Article 371G. That is the constitutional anomaly! If Nagaland and Mizoram which were formerly placed under Article 244(2), were given special constitutional provisions as Tribal States under Articles 371A & 371G respectively, why should not the State of Meghalaya, the areas of which are also based on Article 244(2), be also placed under some version of Article 371 when it has become a full-fledged state? Or why should not constitutional protective provisions similar to Articles 371A and 371G be provided in the Article 244 A itself? These special protective provisions for the Tribal States cannot be obtained merely by amending the Sixth Schedule, because the whole Sixth Schedule itself is a mini-constitution meant only for the establishment of ADCs within a larger non-tribal population of a State at a time when the Khasi and Jaintia Hills were part of Assam.

Any amendment of the Sixth Schedule is not concerned with the strengthen-

ing of the constitutional protection for the Jaidbyrniew (Tribe) via a vis the Government of India, but it is meant only for giving more legislative and administrative powers to the District Councils vis a vis the State Government. We are tempted to think that the District Councils of Meghalaya are the core concern of the move for amending the Sixth Schedule! That is not the fact! The move to amend the Sixth Schedule for giving more legislative and administrative powers to the ADCs is based on the persistent demands of the Bodoland Territorial Council, the Karbi Anglong Territorial Council, and the Dima Hasao Autonomous District Council for more autonomy from the State Government of Assam; the demand of the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council for more autonomy from the State Government of Tripura, and the demand of the Lai, Mara, and Chakma ADCs for more autonomy with respect from the State Government of Mizoram. The ADCs of Meghalaya are not at all the core of attention!

So what additional legislative and administrative autonomy do the ADCs of Meghalaya need from the State Government for a better means to protect the Jaidbyrniew? So far, the greatest achievement for protecting the Jaidbyrniew is the attainment of the full-fledged Hill State of Meghalaya. Amending the Sixth Schedule would not bring more autonomy to the Jaidbyrniew vis a vis the Government of India, but it would only mean enhancing the powers of the District Councils in relation to the State Government of Meghalaya. What special constitutional protection would the Jaidbyrniew achieve by enhancing the powers of the District Councils and reducing the powers of the State Government? That is only a wild dream! What is actually needed for enhancing tribal autonomy in Meghalaya is the constitutional protective provisions for the State as a whole and its government, either through a special version of Article 371 or by additional provisions in Article 244 A through amendment of the Constitution. That is constitutionally and legally perfectly sound. Whether that can be achieved or not, is not based on the constitutionality or legality of the issue, but it shall be based on the regional and national politics of the country. International geo-political circumstances may also be the ingredients in the soup!

Repairing the Famished Road to Manipur

By Jaideep Saikia

The imposition of President's Rule in Manipur was hailed as the beginning of the end of a dark chapter. But the manner in which the call to surrender illegal arms and restore free movement in the state has been stymied is being viewed as a dampener. But surgeries need a recuperation period. Bloodletting happens at times. It is only natural. However, wounds will heal after a passage of time. Time and history are testimony to both catharsis and correction.

But a reality check re-

was to break out. It is also important to secure the highways and prevent looting and destruction of public property by lumpy elements that might have the backing of the ethnic groups who are attempting to resist the call for free movement. Even as a concerted effort is being made to usher in normalcy, the lament that funds meant for the Hill areas of Manipur are not reaching the target areas must be addressed. Complete transparency that would allow allegation of misappropriation

"The ethnic cauldron that characterises Manipur, as indeed it is true for the entire North East, is schism ridden. There are no easy answers to the deep-seated malaise. Indeed, dialogue is the only way forward. Out-of-the-box calibration is needed to ensure that representatives of the various warring groups and well-meaning civil society organisations meet sooner than later."

veals that Manipur is in for a long haul. Peace might not return as quickly as it was expected. Wheels within wheels, new ethnic strife, this time between the Hmars and the Kukis, are being reported. The ethnic cauldron that characterises Manipur, as indeed it is true for the entire North East, is schism ridden. There are no easy answers to the deep-seated malaise. Indeed, dialogue is the only way forward. Out-of-the-box calibration is needed to ensure that representatives of the various warring groups and well-meaning civil society organisations meet sooner than later.

A Track-II Dialogue between the Kukis/other affiliates and Meiteis must start immediately. It is understood that it may not take place in Manipur because of the

should accompany the manner in which the resources and allocation of funds are being made and utilised. Facts and statistics about the Hill-Valley apportioning must be made public. This will help in future planning for correct and equitable distribution.

The seriousness with which the Centre (and even the RSS!) is finally according to Manipur must be met with a synchronised course correction in the compass. The security coordinate must change direction in order to decisively focus on the border with an eye to dousing the flames that are being fanned from across Myanmar. It is a possibility that onlooking anti-India groups may play spoiler and derail attempts to restore normalcy in the state. Such groups must be prohibited from entering

The foremost aspect that needs to be ushered in is a "sense of calm" in the state. The state must resort to all possible ways and forms, including psychological initiatives, to ascertain that at least some "breathing space" whereby violence does not erupt again prevails.

deep-seated animosity that continues to reign in the state as also because of apprehension that a physical meeting might spark off newer distress. If that is the case, then the dialogue could take place in Guwahati, Shillong or Delhi.

The foremost aspect that needs to be ushered in is a "sense of calm" in the state. The state must resort to all possible ways and forms, including psychological initiatives, to ascertain that at least some "breathing space" whereby violence does not erupt again prevails.

However, the most important aspect would have to pertain to the disarming of the ethnic armed groups of all hues. Unfortunately, the Governor's call to voluntarily deposit all illegal arms has not yet amounted to much. Stern kinetic action might have to be resorted to in order to recover all the armaments that have been causing mayhem in the state.

If there is resistance to the call and breaks are being applied to the appeal for deposition of arms and free movement then a rethink at the highest level may be necessary. Calculated discretion should become the middle name of national security management and diplomacy. But the crying need of the hour is that the sufferings of the internally displaced peoples are quickly addressed and alleviated. The relief camps must be provided proper amenities with hygiene ensured. The state would have yet another problem on its hands if epidemic, especially with monsoon soon setting in,

Manipur. Illegal Drones that have played havoc in the past must be banned in the airspace over Manipur, Nagaland and South Arunachal Pradesh.

China and other extra-regional powers that are seeking to fish in troubled waters have to be forcefully kept out of any loop that they are seeking to bandwagon themselves on to.

The Centre must be cognizant of the "thunders" that are raging in neighbouring Bangladesh and Myanmar. Spillover effects onto the North East can be expected soon. The visit by Supreme Court judges to Manipur would have a salutary effect. The visit and pronouncements by the judiciary were encouraging. However, Justice B.R. Gavai's statement that the Manipur crisis can be solved by taking recourse to "constitutional means" needs to be spelt out. What exactly are these "constitutional mechanisms"?

A Task Force on the "misfortunes" of the region should be set up immediately. A North East Security Council as was recommended by me over 15 years ago to then BJP prime ministerial candidate, Lal Krishna Advani, should be summarily instituted.

Manipur is India's "Land of Emeralds". All stakeholders should come together and put on their thinking hats and chalk out a durable plan for the restoration of peace in the state.

The nation cannot afford a continuance of the macabre drama. Enough is enough. (Jaideep Saikia is India's foremost strategist and best-selling author)

compromised. Given these advantages, I urge the authorities and stakeholders to consider reinstating and upgrading this service, ensuring it meets contemporary standards while remaining accessible to all segments of the population. A revitalized North Eastern Service of Akashvani will not only enrich our region's media landscape but also empower communities with a dependable source of information and cultural expression. Thank you for considering this appeal. Also, I have made a petition to revive its shortwave radio service and I am currently spreading it. I hope that The Shillong Times will join in voicing support for the revival of a service that holds the promise of bridging the communication gap in our North Eastern communities.

Yours etc.,
Hamemanbha Lyngdoh Lawai
Shillong - 14

A thoughtful perspective on railway connectivity in Meghalaya

Editor, The discussion around introducing railway lines in Meghalaya, particularly in

the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, has always been a sensitive issue. There are valid concerns regarding illegal immigration, and it is undeniable that our state faces challenges in this regard. The need for stringent laws to protect our indigenous communities must be a priority. However, at the same time, we must also consider the potential benefits of limited railway connectivity, especially for goods transport and local travel.

A goods train is crucial for Meghalaya. Transporting essential commodities solely by road increases costs due to fuel expenses, toll charges, and additional handling fees. With a dedicated railway network for goods transport, the cost of groceries and essential items could decrease significantly, ultimately benefiting every household. Numerous regions have experienced the economic benefits of efficient railway freight services, ensuring smoother supply chains and reducing market fluctuations. For Meghalaya, which is heavily dependent on imports from other states, such a development would be a welcome economic relief.

In addition to goods transport, a local railway line—strictly for travel within Meghalaya—could transform local commuting. Shillong, for example, often faces se-

vere traffic congestion, leading to lost productivity and wasted fuel. A well-planned local railway service could serve as an alternative mode of transport, reducing travel time and easing road traffic while ensuring strict regulatory measures to prevent any misuse.

I fully recognize and respect the deep concerns surrounding this issue. My intention is not to undermine the need for strong policies to safeguard our tribal identity and land rights, but rather to highlight a balanced perspective that also addresses the economic and logistical challenges we face. Any move toward railway connectivity must be accompanied by robust regulations to protect our indigenous communities.

This is simply a viewpoint I am putting forward, fully aware of the complexities and sensitivities involved. I believe our state deserves both enhanced security and thoughtful development. It is my hope that through continued open dialogue, we can arrive at solutions that serve the best interests of our people and our land.

Yours etc.,
A Thangkhiw,
Shillong- 8

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

"If you fell down yesterday, stand up today."

— H. G. Wells

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No. 225 SHILLONG, FRIDAY, MARCH 28, 2025

A shaky Bangladesh

THE Bangladesh government's chief adviser Muhammad Yunus enjoys a high reputation for the yeomen services he rendered to the poor in his country over the past five decades. The problem, however, is that the Nobel Peace Prize winner has little experience in international diplomacy. That is also largely evident in the way Bangladesh now under his guidance is getting caught in tricky situations. He himself faces the prospect of an ouster by the army. While the army is backing the present government, the military brass stand divided, with some among them establishing a line with Pakistan. In this backdrop, India is maintaining a studied silence to Yunus' request for a bilateral meeting between him and Prime Minister Narendra Modi while the two would meet at the BIMSTEC summit in Thailand next week.

In fact, India with its superior fire power and capacity to manoeuvre matters in the subcontinent is watching the evolving scenario. Consider the way the Taliban rulers in Afghanistan sought to do muscle-flexing against India in the immediate aftermath of the US exit from the landlocked nation. A warning from the Indian side, through the voice of Yogi Adityanath, that, "Indian military jets are ready for a take-off," drilled sense into the new rulers there. The Bangladesh establishment post the Hasina era would do well to note how the Taliban recoiled after initially antagonising India and seemingly sided with the Pakistani establishment. If the anti-Hasina forces in Bangladesh hope to steer clear of the present hurdles and uncertainties there with help from Islamist Pakistan or the extra-judicial forces there, they are mistaken.

Rumours of an internal military takeover of Bangladesh are in floating around while the nation celebrates the National Day. There is no indicator that the present establishment there has the wherewithal to move forward as a confident nation. Rather, with the military brass on one side and Hasina's Awami League rank and file on the other, a stable government for Bangladesh is wishful thinking. The United States has its own agenda in the geo-politics of the region but it has its limitations and so does China. Large numbers of Bangladeshis are still antagonistic towards Pakistan, considering the mayhem the Pakistani military unleashed on the hapless population during the Mukti Bahini days or the years in the run-up to the Liberation War and formation of Bangladesh as an independent nation. India's role in facilitating this makeover is part of history and needs no elaboration. Logically, Bangladesh is expected to build on this mutual trust. The demand from the present administration there to repatriate Hasina from India to face trial in Bangladesh has been ignored. Her safety is India's priority. The good friend that Hasina has been for India, and her family legacy being what it is, she's no bargaining chip. It is also important that the safety of Indians and Bangladeshi Hindus in Bangladesh must be ensured by the present government as a matter of top priority.

Food Safety and Health: We Are What We Eat

By Patricia Mukhim

For the first time ever the fairly new Commissionerate of Food Safety under the Health Department held a marathon seven-hour long meeting which brought together several departmental heads under one roof since food is a cross-cutting subject. If one is to talk about food production then the Agriculture and Horticulture Departments are first respondents. But so are the Soil Conservation and Water Resources Department and the Forest Department too since as tribals we still forage for food like mushrooms, edible herbs and a host of berries and fruits from our forests.

In fact, the reason why governance suffers is because departments work in silos — a fact that was recognised when the Meghalaya Basin Development Authority (MBDA) was created in 2012. The idea then was that at the village level people look for a package deal under one head — water, soil, agriculture, horticulture, irrigation etc. When a Department enters a village alone it becomes difficult to organise the communities around just that single department because their lives are intertwined in a host of activities which require a holistic approach. If governance in Meghalaya or elsewhere has failed it is because of the individualism in each department. Officers of several departments are not used to planning together and working not for departmental goals but always in the larger interests of the communities they work with. This mindset change is critical and if the transition is delayed and the disruption does not happen, Meghalaya will continue to face a governance crisis.

When I was invited to the day-long Conclave on Food Safety I decided not just to be at the inaugural session but to also listen to experts on food safety making their presentations. I was there not as a media person but a concerned individual considering we are today unsure about the safety of the food we consume from the fruits to vegetables, meat and fish and of course the range of other packaged foods we get off the shelves of supermarkets and grocery stores. Many of us don't read the labels and therefore don't know what we are really consuming and

if we are ingesting additives that will harm our health over a long period of time. This was brought to our attention by Dr Sandra Albert, head of the Indian Institute of Public Health (IIPH) here. From Dr Sandra's brief interjection one could learn that much of the processed food we buy without reading labels to find out what harmful additives and preservatives are added could over the long term accumulate in our bodies and over the long term could cause cancers.

It is interesting to note that Dr Joram Bede, Commissioner and Secretary, Health Department and also Commissioner of Food Safety and himself a medical doctor while speaking at the meeting made an appeal to the invitees present at the meeting that food safety is a shared responsibility and the media has a role in disseminating the right information to the public about how safe is the food they are consuming, very often mindlessly. Also important is for the media to create awareness about the harmful effects of pesticides applied mindlessly and of chemical fertilisers dumped on the soil with the hope of a rich harvest. Today, informed individuals don't mind paying more for organic food and vegetables if they can be assured of the authenticity of the claim made. In our effort to feed a huge population and produce more, India has gone on the fast track to use both chemical fertilisers and pesticides. To put back the clock now will take time and patience. The soil has to recover from its dependency on fertilisers. And while there are bio-pesticides made of natural ingredients perhaps these are yet to reach the last mile. But with extra effort from scientists and experts from the Agriculture and Horticulture Department and the Indian Council for Agricultural Research (ICAR), so much can be done to revolutionise farming.

In my travels to rural Meghalaya I have witnessed farmers who grow tomatoes spraying pesticide liberally to prevent blight and other diseases. Reading up I learnt that there are at least 22 diseases that affect tomatoes

of which I knew only of blight and mildew. Imagine the plight of consumers who don't wash the tomato properly before putting it in a salad. And we don't really know if the pesticides used can be removed merely by washing the tomatoes. Cabbage and cauliflower require both fertilisers and pesticides to be able to make it to the market. Those of us who grow these vegetables in the kitchen garden can watch out for insects and remove them physically but not in large farms. This is the existential crisis of our times.

A society is as healthy as the food it consumes. But just how sure can we be that we are consuming food that is free from harmful chemicals? Our broiler chickens are fed food that pushes them to grow unnaturally. So are pigs injected with hormones for rapid growth. Just how much can the government control these market forces if the public has no issue with them. A few years ago the Commissionerate of Food Safety, Meghalaya tested the fish that was imported from Andhra Pradesh and found that they contained formalin which was used to prevent them from rotting on the long journey over high temperatures. We are thankful for the Commissionerate's energetic workers including the Deputy Commissioners and Assistant Commissioner for Food Safety for bringing that to our notice so we could take appropriate steps and make informed decisions whether to continue to buy fish from Andhra Pradesh or look for locally grown ones.

It was heartening to listen to the Health Minister, Ampareen Lyngdoh expressing her concern on how to take state of the art testing facilities closer to the people especially food producers so that there is constant surveillance, testing and certifying of food sold and consumed. You can sense when a person is speaking from a position of authority. The minister correctly stated that food safety certification cannot come after people have suffered from food poisoning. Food testing is meant to prevent any such mishap.

With 25 Food Safety In-

spectors and 8 food safety labs on wheels plus a state of the art food testing laboratory what the Commissionerate needs now is constant hands-on training so that the outcomes are more visible. As was mentioned by some of the expert paper presenters there is a need to have in place a strong traceability system so that harmful chemicals are detected early on.

As Dr Joram Beda said, Good health is good food and the enemy of good food is poor hygiene, freshness and care. Most people don't check the labels to read what they are buying and if the food product has expired. Perhaps some responsibility on this front and a more aware consumer would reduce the health problems associated with food.

Meghalaya is fortunate to have a young and enthusiastic food connoisseur in Nambie Jessica Marak who was the first runner-up at the Masterchef India 2023. Nambie's presence as someone who knows food, how and where to source food and how it is to be treated before it is cooked, Nambie's short but meaningful speech at the Conclave was a masterclass in understanding that good food is not boring food. Her quotation, "The best meal is one that loves you back," drew huge applause. She added further, "By enforcing hygiene standards, promoting safe handling and educating vendors and households we don't just prevent disease, we elevate our food culture." Nambie stressed that though Meghalaya is rich in greens and herbs it is how these are washed and handled that matters. Washing anything that's eaten raw in contaminated water is how we often become victims of diarrhoea or dysentery or other forms of food poisoning. Nambie has so much to teach us about how to eat healthy and is rightly called an icon of not just good and healthy cooking but also careful and hygienic preparation.

With the Commissionerate of Food Safety having taken this illustrious step let's hope we have a more healthy and conscious Meghalaya. Perhaps a one-day interaction between media persons and the Commissionerate staff and officers would be a good way forward.

experience the fastest real GDP growth in the coming decade with better policies and development.

Yours etc;
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

Why disrespect other cultures?

Editor,
A few days ago, during a discussion in one of the Youtube news channels on environmental issues that affects life sustainability, one of the panelists who is the advisor of the Sutnga Elaka for Environment, Reading War completely veered off the topic and questioned the relevance of Ka Niam Behdeinkhlam and Chad Sukra while Rev Kyrsoibor Pyrthuh interrupted and was heard to have termed the religious festival of the indigenous faith as "Chad Cement." One can't help but wonder — is this part of a calculated effort to paint our religious festivals in a negative light? One cannot tolerate this sort of intentional disrespectful behaviour. It is very painful for many of us, the believers in the indigenous faith when our values are openly undermined. We respect all religions, but we will not allow anyone to demean our faith.

Yours etc.,
Dr. Omarlin Kyndiah,
Via email

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

Meghalaya's education system: Free, compulsory and completely unusable

By Ellerrine Diengdoh

In a statement that deserves to be carved into the walls of an abandoned government school, the Education Minister, recently assured us that Meghalaya is providing free and compulsory education under the Right to Education Act. He also questioned why parents are sending their children outside the state when, according to him, everything they need is right here at home.

That's a great question. Really. Why would anyone abandon this utopia of learning, where government schools have no teachers, no books, no walls and in some cases, no students? It is a complete mystery.

Oh, wait. Let's take a moment to appreciate the wonders of our state's education system. I didn't cough this up, please refer to "Schools in M'laya struggle to check falling grades", Shillong Times, September 11, 2024 - 9.8% of children drop out at the lower primary level; 9.4% disappear in upper primary. By the time they reach secondary school, 21.7% have vanished.

They are not taken by

written in hieroglyphs. Toilets that exist only in government reports, while students relieve themselves in fields, blessed by generations of suspiciously well-fed pigs.

And finally Mid-day meals which promises dal, rice, and vegetables. What students actually eat? Rice and a 'dal-flavoured' liquid that could also double as paint thinner. Occasionally, the vegetables arrive in spirit. When someone mentioned them in a meeting.

Occasionally, a government inspector drifts in, clipboard in hand—not to bring change, mind you, but to solemnly verify that, yes, everything is still missing!

But wait—how does the Honourable Minister see none of this?

One has to wonder about his office chair. It must be enchanted, or on opioids, because every time he sits on it, he seems to be transported to a parallel universe where Meghalaya's education system is thriving. Where government schools have world-class infrastructure. Where Teachers are sipping tea in fully funded staff rooms, discussing their

Infrastructure? A blackboard steadily disintegrating, a single bulb that works if the village has electricity and the stars align, desks and chairs so unstable they demand careful negotiation before sitting. No chalk. No materials. No pretence of improvement. Libraries so well-equipped they boast a jaw-dropping collection of exactly three books, so ancient they might as well be written in hieroglyphs.

floods or, famines. They do not disappear into thin air. No, they run from the education system like you would run from a burning house. Because that is exactly what it is! And for those who make it to the grand finale, exams, let's talk about results:

124 schools scored a 0% pass rate in the SSLC exams. That's right, not a single student passed. ZERO. A level of consistency that puts NASA to shame. 36 of these schools have done it for three consecutive years. You have to admire their commitment to tradition. It's like an annual festival celebrating collective failure.

But wait, what about the teachers? The real backbone of the system?

1,615 government lower primary schools have only ONE teacher. Teaching multiple subjects. To multiple classes. At the same time. Who needs Hogwarts when we have real-life wizards performing educational sorcery every day?

157 government lower primary schools have ZERO teachers. Education via osmosis! Students simply absorb knowledge from the air, like WiFi, but even less reliable. And now, let's talk about literacy levels: Only 14% of Class 3 students can read a simple Class 2-level text. Only 23% of Class 5 students can do the same. 60% of Class 8 students are still struggling with Class 2-level reading. At this rate, by Class 10, we'll have high schoolers struggling with bedtime stories. And what about those lucky few who actually stay in school? Well, they get to enjoy:

Classrooms that breathe freely, for they have neither walls nor roofs! Teachers who appear and disappear like ghosts.

Infrastructure? A blackboard steadily disintegrating, a single bulb that works if the village has electricity and the stars align, desks and chairs so unstable they demand careful negotiation before sitting. No chalk. No materials. No pretence of improvement. Libraries so well-equipped they boast a jaw-dropping collection of exactly three books, so ancient they might as well be

latest pay raises. Where students are graduating in flying colours.

But if I may ask, where can I get one of these chairs? I could really use it while correcting scripts. Imagine sitting down and suddenly finding that every essay is brilliant, every argument airtight, every student a genius. Perhaps a new government scheme is in order, 'The Magic Chair Initiative.' Every citizen gets one. Sit, and suddenly your salary triples and Meghalaya's schools become world-class institutions. Who needs real reform when we can all just hallucinate together?

And yet, while the Honourable Minister enjoys his fantasy, let me tell you what happens in the real world.

Children from Meghalaya left home in search of an education. Two returned in coffins. "Food poisoning" they say, as though a bad meal is the villain here. But let's not pretend. These children were not just poisoned by what they ate. They were poisoned by a system that made their exile necessary.

And now, instead of confronting this horror, instead of admitting that Meghalaya's education system is so neglected that parents are forced to send their children across state lines, the Honourable Minister of Education has a question:

"Why don't they stay?"

They don't stay because to stay is to fail. And if the government continues to pretend that all is well, if it keeps preaching about the 'Right to Education' while denying the 'Right to Quality Education', soon, the only students left will be the ones who have nowhere else to run.

"Why don't they stay again?"

Because Meghalaya has nothing to offer them. Because our schools are skeletal remains of what they should be. Because our colleges are chronically starved of funds. Because our university is a bureaucratic warzone.

And now, Honourable Minister, you—and those before you—must answer. Not just for those who left, but for those who never made it back!

Letters to the Editor

A tragedy: long in the making

Editor,
The article by Toki Blah, titled, "The unredeemable burden of being poor," ST March 26, 2025), made sober reading. The sad story of two students who died far away from home, has been long repeated. In Meghalaya we have just woken up to a tale that has unfolded before our very eyes, yet paradoxically managed to stay under the radar.

The ashram shalas were set up in 1953, ostensibly as a scheme to provide an education to children of poor ST, SC and OBC families, though ST children seem to be the dominant group. As of last year, there were 1103 such schools in Maharashtra, 705 in Odisha, 933 in Gujarat, 123 in Karnataka, and hundreds more in other states.

While writers to The Shillong Times keep quoting the Tehelka article, numerous other reports have appeared in the last decade. These investigative reports have appeared in the Economic and Political Weekly (EPW), The Times of India, The Hindu, and India Today. A study was published by the Tata Institute of Social Sciences Mumbai. A well-researched account was published by the International Institute of Social Studies, Netherlands by Sneha Dicholkar as a master's thesis. All of these reports dwell on the bad infrastructure, poor staffing, inadequate diet and malnutrition, but worst

of all, physical and sexual abuse, rapes, suicides and other deaths. Siblings are separated, and children are not allowed to speak their mother tongue.

The Courts entered the picture. In 2013 when a PIL was filed in the Bombay High Court, highlighting the deaths of 793 children in ashram shalas wrongly ascribed to snake and scorpion bites, and minor illnesses; when these deaths were mainly due to the negligence of staff. The PIL led to the formation of the Salunke Committee. Their report in 2016 exposed widespread malpractices. The Bombay High Court again took up the matter in 2024, since 80 deaths in ashram schools were further reported. The Gujarat High Court in 2024 took up the problems of poor staffing and teaching in ashram shalas, comparing them to orphanages.

The Kalinga Institute of Social Sciences (KISS) in Bhubaneswar has forty thousand tribal students on its campus, studying for free. Their website indicates a future goal of two lakhs students. Virginus Xaxa, perhaps the foremost tribal academician in India, was professor of sociology at the Delhi School of Economics and the Tata Institute of Social Sciences. Writing in the Caravan he decried the practice of KISS to describe tribals as primitive and backward, among other descriptions and practices, in its magazines and annual reports. He has been sued for defamation by KISS.

The harbingers of this tragedy were long evident. It is not only the fault of

the ashram shalas. Social and economic factors in our own tribal communities are the real drivers of this sad situation. Unless we take care of our own tribal children, many more deaths will follow.

Yours etc.,
Glenn C. Kharkongor,
Via email

India's slow GDP growth

Editor,
According to the editorial "Shaping the economy" (ST March 26, 2025), the economy is shaped by a combination of factors such as production, consumption, investment, trade, government policies, and societal trends. Two key indicators, GDP and per capita GDP, provide distinct perspectives on economic health. In 10 years time (2015-2025) China added \$8.3 trillion to its GDP while India added \$1.9 trillion during the same period. For the same period India added \$ 1320 to its per capita GDP while China added \$5839. It will be of interest to note that in 1960 China's per capita GDP was \$89.52 and India's was \$ 84.93. Today (2025) the per capita GDP of China is \$13,873 and that of India is \$ 2937. Both the indicators are influenced by factors like labour productivity, innovation, policies (taxation, trade agreements), and external events (global markets, climate changes). Together, they help assess not just the scale of the economy but also its impact on citizens' quality of life.

China rapidly transitioned into a manufacturing

powerhouse starting in the late 1980s, implementing reforms that attracted foreign investment, developed infrastructure and boosted export driven industries. India's industrial sector has grown at a slower pace, with strong reliance on services rather than manufacturing. China's economic reforms under Deng Xiaoping in the late 20th century prioritized state-led industrial growth, foreign direct investment (FDI) and export policies while India liberalized its economy in 1991, reforms have been slower and more incremental, which has limited its global economic competitiveness compared to China. Massive investment in infrastructure, such as roads, railways and ports, enabled China more efficient trade and industrial development. India's infrastructure development has been slower, often hindered by bureaucratic inefficiencies and funding challenges.

Despite having a larger population, China's aggressive education policies and vocational training programme have created a more skilled workforce. While India has a youthful and growing workforce, skill development initiatives and employment opportunities are still catching up. When it comes to political and policy stability, centralized political control allows for consistent and long-term policy implementation in China. India's democratic governance, while more inclusive, often results in policy debates and slower implementation. As for exports China leveraged its low labour costs and manufactur-

ing base to dominate exports across industries. India's exports are more focused on services (e.g., IT) rather than goods, limiting its global economic scale.

When it comes to urbanisation, technological advancement and per capita resource allocation, China's aggressive urbanisation strategies created economic hubs that drove growth while India has been slower and less organised, impacting economic efficiency. China invested significantly in Research and Development which is 2.44 percent of the Gross Domestic Product, leading to innovation and higher productivity while India's focus on technology has primarily been in IT services, which, while profitable, does not impact per capita GDP as broadly. Moreover India's R&D expenditure is stuck at 0.65 percent of its GDP and is stagnant. China's higher GDP translates into more resources available per capita for healthcare, education and infrastructure whereas India's lower GDP results in less spending per capita on these essentials.

Doubling India's GDP from \$2.1 trillion in 2015 to \$4.3 trillion is an achievement but given the sheer size of the American and Chinese economies which are \$30 trillion (estimated) and \$19.5 trillion respectively aspiring to be like them does not make any economic sense at all. However, according to Ray Dalio's Great Powers Index 2024 India has moved up on the list of global power rankings and has surpassed leading powers like UK, France and Russia. It is also expected to

"Of all possessions a friend is
the most precious."

— Herodotus

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No. 226 SHILLONG, SATURDAY, MARCH 29, 2025

Draconian DPDPA 2023

THE Digital Personal Data Protection Act 2023 is proving to be a draconian legislation insofar as the practice of journalism is concerned. The Act mandates across-the-board requirement for journalists to obtain consent before publishing data relating to any person in their reports. This is unnecessarily restrictive and impractical since journalism is about investigation especially when it comes to those holding public office. Asking such persons for their consent before publishing a damaging piece of report goes against the very idea of journalism. The Srikrishna Committee, which drafted the Personal Data Protection Bill 2018 had noted that mandating consent for processing such personal data defies the idea of investigative journalism as the person concerned (data principal) could simply refuse to consent and therefore forestall the publication of news which is in public interest. The primary function of the media is to report facts so that the public are informed of how those in positions of authority - the Legislature, Executive and Judiciary discharge their duties so that they are held accountable. In the course of investigative journalism the media comes upon solid evidence of wrongdoing why should it have to get permission from the wrongdoer to publish that information? This Act in its present form undermines the role of the media and erodes the very idea of press freedom.

While media persons get much of their information through the Right to Information route and various sources, that will now be curtailed by the DPDPA, which in turn violates free speech which underlies the practice of journalism. By the time the journalist gets the consent of the wrongdoer, the data holder could have tampered with data and manipulated it, thereby making journalistic pursuits futile. Several media organisations across the country and primarily the Editors' Guild of India have written to the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology to exclude journalists from the purview of the DPDPA stating that "the requirements under the DPDPA when applied to journalists are unduly onerous, impractical, and infeasible... in light of the distinct practices involved in journalism when compared to other professions."

The Guild observed that the protection of personal data in the course of journalistic activities is inbuilt into journalistic conduct, such as those issued by the Press Council of India (PCI), under the Press Council Act 1978, Code of Ethics and Broadcasting Standards released by the News Broadcasters and Digital Association. The PCI clearly bars journalists from intruding into the privacy of individuals unless it is in overriding public interest. Even recording a conversation demands that the person who speaks gives his consent except when recording is necessary to protect the journalist in a legal action. The Editor's Guild has asked for "a class exemption to data fiduciaries undertaking processing for journalistic purposes under section 17(5) of the DPDPA. If this exemption is not forthcoming, journalism in this country will be stifled since the penalties for violating the Act runs into crores of rupees. Time for journalists to stand in solidarity against a draconian act aimed at curtailing media freedom.

When media loses its moral compass

By Rajdeep Sardesai

of rogue news anchors whose singular intent was to create a Television Rating Point (TRP) drama that would garner eyeballs and act as a Weapon of Mass Distraction (WMD).

Recall this was an enormously fraught period as the rapidly spreading Covid virus had pushed the country into an unprecedented national lockdown. Cooped up in their homes because of social distancing rules,

even roping in Bollywood A-listers like Deepika Padukone and Karan Johar for police questioning, every attempt was made by hyper-ventilating anchors to create a prime time reality show to divert attention and push in alternate agendas when the country was going through the trauma of Covid-related deaths.

In a sense, the Rhea case marks a particularly low point in the moral abyss

many news networks have lost their moral compass in a maddeningly competitive universe. The private news tv revolution that began so promisingly in the mid-1990s has been almost devoured by those who have chosen to tread an amoral path where sense is replaced by sensation and news by noise. Rhea was trapped in a web of malice and misogyny, a fiercely independent woman almost became a victim of her own image. She was the 'perfect' vamp-like figure for a media ecosystem that neatly divides the world into heroes and villains. Sushant was the rising star, an innocent boyfriend who was being manipulated by an 'evil' woman: it's the kind of familiar storyline that was ideal fodder for a TV soap opera masquerading as news. Which brings me to the original question: will those who damned and villainized Rhea actually ever be held accountable? This isn't just a simple case of individual defamation. Journalists - myself included - may get a story wrong and periodically have to apologise for incorrect information. But the Rhea case wasn't just about wrongful journalism; it was a willfully malevolent attempt to destroy the life and reputation of a defenseless woman who wasn't even given a chance to tell her side of the story. I recall interviewing a tearful but stoic Rhea in August 2020: it was the first time anyone had spoken and actually listened to her. But instead of seeing the interview as a purely legitimate journalistic exercise, I was repeatedly attacked on social media for allegedly providing Rhea with cover-fire. It was only the support of the India Today tv management that offered some respite.

Today, five years on, my stand has been vindicated. Well, sort of. More importantly, Rhea's courage in the face of a terrible personal trauma has finally seen a glimmer of hope. But closure will only come when those who venomously targeted her are made to pay a price. It cannot simply be a case of public amnesia that allows the news wheel to quickly move onto the next big story. The incessant hounding of Rhea must become an example of what must never be repeated if credibility and public faith in the news media is to be restored. Rhea won't ever get back the last five years of her life but she deserves her dignity to be returned. An unqualified apology would be a good starting point.

(The writer is senior journalist and author. His latest book is 2024: The Election That Surprised India)



people were desperately looking for comfort. When the media should have been guiding them in a health emergency, a section of the news media chose to titillate them with the worst kind of voyeurism in the name

confronting news tv. There is much to admire about the live news tv wheel: the zeal and passion with which stories are reported from different corners of the country can be addictive and even at times ensure a measure

Initially the prime time tv narrative suggested that Rhea and family were guilty of abetment to suicide, then it was claimed that it was a case of a murder conspiracy in which Rhea was under the scanner. From being accused of being a gold-digger who had an eye on Sushant's money to being targeted as a drug-dealer and part of a global drug cartel, the campaign against Rhea was malicious and unrelenting. She was accused of black magic, referred to as a 'chudail' and in other abusive terms.

of 'investigative' journalism. WhatsApp messages of Rhea in conversation with film-maker Mahesh Bhatt were put out in the public domain in brazen violation of privacy rules only to create a prurient discourse that had no tangible connection with the Sushant case. From dragging in Shiv Sena (UBT) leader Aaditya Thackeray (then a minister in the Maharashtra government) to

of accountability. Unlike a previous era, there is no place to hide from the camera any longer. At the same time, the intrusive camera is a double-edged sword: it sheds light but can also hurtle into a snake-pit of darkness and toxicity where the lines between right and wrong are wholly and deliberately blurred.

The plight of Rhea Chakraborty highlights how

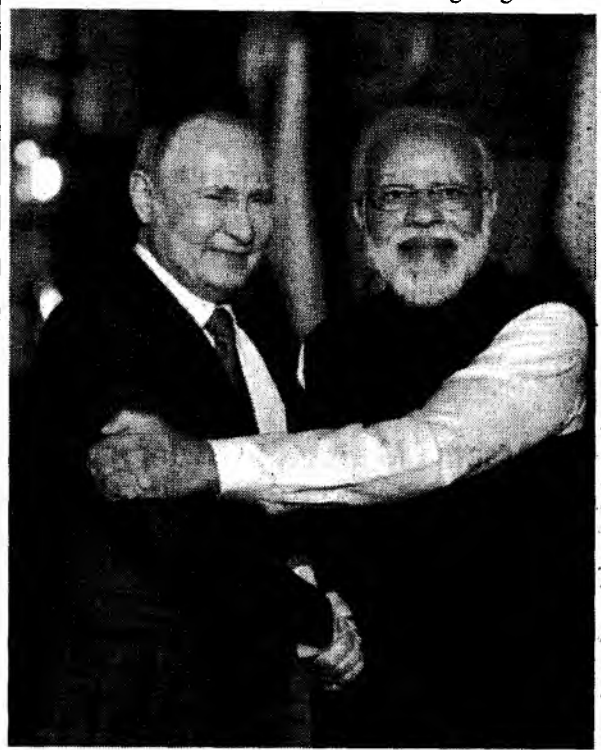
Russian President Putin's visit to India has turned into a big diplomatic mystery In the last five months since Kazan meeting, South Block has not given any dates

By Nitya Chakraborty

Russian President's pending visit to India has turned into a big diplomatic mystery as in the last five months since the Kazan summit on October 22 last year when Putin officially confirmed his visit to India in the presence of the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi amidst full media and TV glare, the Russian side is only talking of the coming visit and the preparations made for it, but the Indian policy makers including external affairs minister Dr.

for U.S. visits on February 12 and 13. Expectations were there that Putin's visit would take place soon after Modi's U.S. visit. More than six weeks have passed since the Indian PM's February 12-13 visit to Washington, but no firm dates have been indicated to the Russian side. That is why the Russian foreign minister had to remind again on March 27 in that video address about the pending visit.

Why is Narendra Modi still hesitating to give firm



S. Jaishankar have been talking in general terms about India-Russian relationship avoiding any direct mention of the timing of the visit.

Look at it. On Thursday, the Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov said in a

dates to the Russian side for the visit of their President even more than five months have passed after the final announcement in Kazan? Russia is not Bangladesh that the Prime Minister can avoid meeting the interim

President Putin's visit to India is due since his last visit in December 2021. After that in February 2022, the Ukraine war started. The Hague based International Criminal Court (ICC) declared President Putin a war criminal and ordered his arrest in a member country of ICC if he visited.

video address at a conference that President Putin will visit India and preparations are on. The conference was on 'Russia and India: Together Towards a New Bilateral Agenda' Our EAM also spoke saying that India and Russia are navigating a complex geopolitical landscape and underlined that the era of multipolarity necessitated greater cooperation between the two countries. All high sounding words but there was no mention on the nature of preparations and when exactly President Putin will be visiting.

If I am correct and generally I am, Thursday's declaration was the fifth such announcement about the Putin visit and preparations for that by a high ranking Russian official since October 22 last year. President Putin's visit to India is due since his last visit in December 2021. After that in February 2022, the Ukraine war started. The Hague based International Criminal Court (ICC) declared President Putin a war criminal and ordered his arrest in a member country of ICC if he visited. For Putin, it was a critical period, he did not visit countries except his friendly country China and two others close to his government. Though India is not a member of ICC, Putin's due visit to India was not given priority in the next two years. Only the issue of visit was seriously taken up at the Kazan summit when the Russian side announced in a big way that the President had accepted the Indian PM's invitation.

Originally, the visit was meant for December 2024, the usual month, Putin visited India earlier. It did not happen. Then Trump took over on January 20 this year and Narendra Modi's visit was talked of. Just in the first week of February this year, the dates were fixed

head of the government Dr. Muhammad Yunus for the last seven and half months and still refusing to give his neighbouring country head time at the coming BIM-STEAC meeting in Bangkok which he will be visiting on April 2-4. Russia has been standing by India steadfastly, during its trying years. India's balance of payments crisis could have deteriorated if India did not get oil at cheap prices from Russia during covid years.

In the coming month, Prime Minister Narendra Modi will be visiting Sri Lanka from April 4 to 6 after finishing his schedule in Bangkok. He has time after that. If the Indian side has any sense of gratitude to a long time friend and any geo-political sense, the South Bloc must not lose any time, PMO must tell the dates of President Putin's visit to the external affairs ministry so that they can officially announce.

Indian foreign policy is in a mess with the PMO in the driver's seat and Dr. S Jaishankar following them. India is isolated in South Asia. SAARC defunct due to India's blatant opposition to its functioning. India has lost its standing in BRICS due to the government's identification too much with the US global policy in Asia Pacific. Brazil and South Africa see Prime Minister Modi with some doubts. Russia still stands by India for historical reasons. The Prime Minister should honour that and remove all misgivings by cordially welcoming Russian President Putin to India as early as possible. The Prime Minister should take proper lessons from the present geo-political developments after Trump's beginning of second term on January 20 this year. He has to see that all Indian eggs are not put in one basket. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

No intention to offend anyone

Editor,
This is in response to Dr. Omarin Kyndiah's letter entitled, "Why disrespect other cultures?" which was published in your esteemed daily Dated March 28, 2025.

1. Let me begin by clarifying that I am no longer a Reverend as I had resigned and left the Church Ministry for good more than two years ago.

2. It is appalling to read that the writer is accusing me of terming the festival of indigenous faith as "chad cement". It is far-fetched to accuse me that I am part of a "calculated effort" to paint the indigenous faith practices in poor light. It is suggestive that I may perhaps represent a group that wishes to undermine the "adherents of indigenous faith". Therefore, I want to state here clearly that I represent myself in the above cited discussion and not any religious or civil society group. Whatever I deliberated on the subject, which is placed before the participants is my personal opinion which is based on available facts

and my understanding of the issue. I participated in the discussion on my own accord as a citizen and the copy of the written draft on the points of discussion is available with me. Should there be any consequence I will only have to answer.

3. Perhaps I would also like to raise a point here on the writer's ability to read or rather listen to the entire episode of discussion on the ecological perils in the State of Meghalaya which is the result of wanton greed. Is he or she trying to twist or deliberately misinterpret my entire deliberations by cherry picking the recorded lines so as to create confusion among the citizens which may perhaps lead to division?

4. In fact, the scale of environmental degradation in the State should have fumed every citizen with pain and anger irrespective of religion or beliefs he or she subscribed to.

5. This is Spring time, the queen of all seasons is rejuvenating lives here on earth and every culture across the universe, especially indigenous cultures, are celebrating life and offering thanks giving to its Maker (Who ever they believe) who has bestowed

upon mother earth with such abundance for every being to sustain a living. Most of the indigenous dances in the Land of Hynniewtrep are the manifestations of the divine and through these dances and other practices we all pay our obeisance (in whichever form we deem fit) to the Creator.

6. Cultural/Religious dances like the Shad Sukra, Behdeinkhlam, Shad Suk Mynsiem et al are intrinsically linked to the primordial activity of our ancestors, i.e agriculture or farming and these dances, apart from religious elements which they entail, reflect the essence of socio-cultural, economic and political life of the community. However, I concur with Kong Sweetymon Rynjah where she opined that unlike the Shad Nongkrem, the Shad Suk Mynsiem which is primarily a thanksgiving dance, is not a religious dance as it does not entail any religious rituals, but we only beseech through prayers and exhort before the Almighty (Ka Shad Suk Mynsiem March 2000). We must earnestly and continually beseech before our Creator to save our land from the neo-liberals who are hell

bent on destroying our ecology via a vis faith, culture and freedom.

8. The Jaintia Hills region is rich in culture and religious practices because of the fact that there are about 176 landraces of rice which are indigenous to the region or in other words they are not found anywhere else. We all must take serious note about the decadal loss of 3.99% of rice area in Jaintia Hills due to extractive and unregulated mining. Such a loss in the rice area will not only impact the economy, but the socio-religious and cultural practices of the indigenous people.

9. For growth and development, along with other regions in the State, Jaintia Hills is also making headway to accelerate the so-called progress which benefits only a few. Since the liberalization the State is also pushing hard for investment and inviting investors from outside to mine the available raw materials, like lime stone etc and to set up industries. There are a number of investors who have set up cement industries and also several coke factories in the State. Meanwhile, there are also voices of concern on

the impact that such an economic model has and which is believed to be at the cost of the environment. Therefore, the above cited discussion is in the context of environmental degradation and the survival of the indigenous people of the State in the face of economic progress.

10. As a writer and also an active participant in public discourse, I am extremely sensitive towards history, culture, traditions and especially to the sensibilities of people of other faiths. In no circumstances would I make fun at the cost of others. It is worth mentioning here that in the above mentioned public discourse, I subtly quoted a few lines from the Khasi Methodist Christian Hymn, "Haba nga iaid lymba ki 'law bah 'law san, nga iohngew ki jingpah ki sim ha u dieng. Na klar ki lum nga iohi ki thie ki madan..." (These lines are translated from the English Hymn, "How Great Thou Art") This act is also a critique to my own faith tradition. Does my religious song, which I prayfully sing every morning, about the greatness of the creation match with the current environmental realities?

11. The "chad cement" comment which was made by me during the course of discussion is intended metaphorically and should be understood in the proper context of our discussion. The comment does not equate "chad cement" with any revered indigenous festival, nor does it intend to suggest replacing it. I have no intention of disrespecting or demeaning the beliefs of any particular religious group, let alone the adherents of indigenous faith of Hynniewtrep community. However, if the general members of society and my own "kur and kha" (kith and kin) who are perhaps not able to grasp the nuances or that my "chad cement" comment has offended their sensibilities, to them I owe an unconditional apology. At the same time I honestly appeal to them not to be misled nor give in to the divisive elements whose endeavour is to create discord and confusion.

Yours etc.,
Kyrsoibor Pyrtuh,
Via email
Articles and letters appearing on this page are the views of the writers/authors and not that of The Shillong Times

How can you improve your critical thinking skills?



There is a Fox News headline that goes like this: *Transgender female runner who beat 14,000 women at London Marathon offers to give medal back.*

Read about the event elsewhere and it turns out the athlete was also beaten by thousands of people and it was a participation medal. While the Fox News headline is true, it is framed to potentially elicit a negative reaction.

Misinformation is on the rise. We're told we need to think critically when we read things online, but how can we recognise such situations? And what does it mean to think critically anyway?

What is critical thinking?

Critical thinking is based on the idea that if all ideas are equal, then all ideas are worthless. Without this assumption, there can be nothing to be critical of.

When we think critically, we focus on the quality of our reasoning and the factors that can influence it. In other words, thinking critically primarily means being critical of your own thinking.

Importantly, critical thinking is not strongly correlated with intelligence. While some believe intelligence is basically fixed (though there is debate around this), we can learn to think critically.

Other factors being equal, there's also no evidence thinking critically is an innate ability. In fact, we have evidence critical thinking can be improved as a skill in itself, and it is transferrable to other contexts.

The tools of argumentation

Many factors can affect the quality of your thinking. They include things like cognitive biases (systemic thinking errors), prior beliefs, prejudices and world-views, framing effects, and how much you know about the subject.

To understand the quality of our reasoning, we can use the concepts and language of argumentation.

People often think "arguments" are about conflicting views. A better way to understand argumentation is to view it as a way of making our thinking visible and accessible to each other.

Arguments contain premises, those things we think are true about the world, and conclusions, which is where we end up in our thinking. Moving from premises to conclusions is called inferring, and it is the quality of these inferences that is the concern of critical thinking.

For example, if one offer the premises

P1: All Gronks are green

P2: Fred is a Gronk

Then you have already inferred the conclusion C: Fred is green

You don't even need to know what a Gronk is to make that inference.

All our rational judgements and decisions are made up of chains of inferences. Constructing, evaluating and identifying types of arguments is the core business of critical thinking.

How can we improve our critical thinking skills?

To help us get better at it, we can understand critical thinking in three main ways.

First, we can see critical thinking as a subject we can learn. In this subject, we study how arguments work and how our reasoning can be influenced or improved. We also learn what makes for good thinking by using ideas like accuracy, clarity, relevance, depth and more. These are what we value in good thinking. By learning this, we start to think about how we think, not just what we think about.

Second, we improve our critical thinking by using what we've learned in real situations. This helps us build important thinking skills like analysing, justifying, evaluating and explaining.

Third, we can also think of critical thinking as a habit or attitude - something we choose to practice in our everyday lives. This means being curious, open-minded and willing to question things instead of just accepting them. It also means being aware of our own biases and trying to be fair and honest in how we think.

When we put all three of these together, we become better thinkers - not just in educational contexts, but in life.

Practical steps to improving critical thinking

Since critical thinking centres on the giving and taking of reasons, practising this is a step towards improvement. There are some useful ways to do this.

1. Make reasoning - rather than conclusions - the basis of your discussions with others.

When asking for someone's opinion, inquire as to why they think that. And offer your thinking to others. Making our thinking visible leads to deep and meaningful conversations in which we can test each other's thinking and develop the virtues of open-mindedness and curiosity.

2. Always assess the credibility of information based on its source and with a reflection on your own biases.

The processes of our thinking can shape information as we receive it, just as much as the source can in providing it. This develops the virtues of carefulness and humility.

3. Keep the fundamental question of critical inquiry in mind.

The most important question in critical thinking is: "how do we know?". Continually testing the quality of

your inquiry - and therefore thinking - is key. Focusing on this question gives us practice in applying the values of inquiry and develops virtues such as persistence and resilience.

You are not alone!

Reasoning is best understood as a social competence: we reason with and towards each other. Indeed, to be called reasonable is a social compliment.

It's only when we have to think with others that we really test the quality of our thinking. It's easy to convince yourself about something, but when you play in the arena of public reasoning, the bar is much higher.

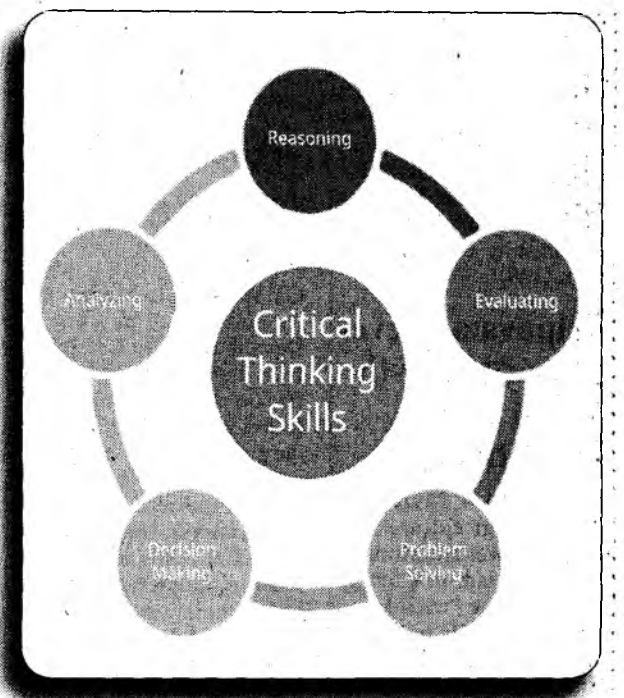
So, be the reasonable person in the room. That doesn't mean everyone has to come around to your way of thinking. But it does mean everyone will get closer to the truth because of you.

Use online resources

There are many accessible tools for developing critical thinking. Kialo (Esperanto for "reason"), brings together people from around the world on a user-friendly (and free) platform to help test our reasoning in a well-moderated and respectful environment. It is an excellent place to practice the giving and taking of reasons and to understand alternative positions.

The School of Thought, developed to curate free critical thinking resources, includes many that are often used in educational contexts.

There's also a plethora of online courses that can guide development in critical thinking, from Australian and international universities. (*The Conversation*)



'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, FEBRUARY 16, 2025

'Birthdate Forecast'

Moon is opposite Venus on your solar return chart. It will bring exceptional results for you during the whole year. Your communications skills will be strong and you will be able to express yourself more with those people with whom you interact. You will be able to use your talent and strength in the best possible manner. You will make good progress at your work place. And will also get appreciation and recognition from colleagues and superiors for your efforts. You will outshine everyone at your workplace. Your financial position will be extremely strong. A female friend will support you and could also help you professionally. You will fall in love with someone special. Your family will support you in all matters. Business related trips will keep you busy. These will help you develop contacts which will prove to very beneficial for you later on.

'This week for you'

management too. You work towards happiness and solidarity in friendship and love and this helps you get your health and relationships back on track. You reconnect with friends and focus your attention on your relationships with your family including children. The unattached are likely to meet someone who stimulates them mentally and a great period of togetherness could ensue.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) This is a positive period that brings sincerity, cooperation and harmony in relationships. This is an excellent time under which to work on resolving differences in values or problems with joint finances in a close relationship. Old friends and close family communicate good news and remain in touch when you need to share views and feelings. This is a great time to present your ideas and to make your mark at your place of work. Your innovative ideas elicit a favourable response from peers and seniors alike. Be objective as prejudices and notions could color your view on how you tackle a given situation. Health needs the attention it deserves.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) You are likely to swing to extremes this week, sometimes being happy, celebratory and at other times low, serious and depressed. Professional situations and personal relations are sensitive and tend to go through ups and downs. Finances and material effects need to be evaluated, do not make investments or speculate heavily. You are involved in multiple activities and need to avoid mental stress. It is the right time to concentrate on your career prospects and professional skills as your workload too increases. You have to develop more energy for work and your daily routine tends to speed up now. It's a fabulous time for joining a gym or stepping up exercise and health routines.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) Financial gains and profits from business are on the cards. This can be a time of achievement, career advancement, and success in business. Work-related travel or reaching out to more people is possible now. It is more about how you express yourself than the specifics of what you are saying that helps sway others to your position. Recognition is likely to come your way whether you ask for it or not, and the responsibility that comes right along with it. Do what you feel is right, keeping in mind that you are at your most visible during this week.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) This phase brings excellent opportunities for love and fun. A love affair may become a little more serious. Spending time with someone special is a focus. You pour more energy into self-promotion activities. It is a good time to work out money problems or other issues of sharing with a partner. You tend to be expansive and generous when it comes to love. More freedom is likely to be experienced in your career. You need to keep your eyes open for opportunities in these areas of life. This is an especially spiritual time for you - a time when you renew your energy and consider what things are important to you. You enjoy doing things with others at work and home, as synergy and cooperation are available to you now.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) This is a time of profitable productivity. Your mind is clear, decisive and organized in professional matters. You keep things in perspective and handle many issues and facets with ease and speed. You may feel professional unstable and emotionally insecure for a short while. You tend to apply too much force suddenly it's better to take one steady step at a time to climb the ladder of success. Your heart is with your home and family, if you happen to be traveling during this week, a romantic adventure may be on the cards. A focused effort in any direction brings success.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) Work issues are emphasized as well as mental and physical health. You are called upon to deal with the details and practicalities of everyday life, to become more organized, and to take charge of your routines. Circumstances are such that you need to develop some healthy habits, routines, and schedules. Believing in a grand plan is fine, but practical concerns need to be dealt with as well. An event may occur that expands your career or professional interests, and you derive more pleasure from these activities. A business venture could be gainful if you are willing to lend it some energy. A relaxed and light attitude would help you overcome negative thoughts.

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) You would enjoy doing things with others at work and at home, as synergy and cooperation are available to you. You would most successfully perform tasks that involve cooperation and team harmony. After dealing with tough people and complicated issues you feel much stronger and clearer about priorities. Study business offers and professional opportunities in detail. Instead of feeling hurt and suffering mentally, be patient and positive, as things are likely to turn around in a positive direction in a few days.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) There will be fabulous results for domestic and work related matters. You are strong and masterful while turning things around in a positive direction at work. Think about long term gain as opposed to quick fix solutions. Media and the arts involve you in creative pastimes. You enjoy love and admiration of the family. Artistic self-expression is important, possibly through writing or some forms of art. A strong desire for companionship and sociability dominates during this period. Health and energy need to be conserved through a busy time at work. Sports people also benefit from the planetary alignment as they are infused with positive energy and gain recognition.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) This phase brings responsibilities, seriousness and sensitivity in relations. You are bold and adventurous right now and you cannot tolerate delays, restrictions, or any form of authority that prevents you from behaving exactly the way you want to. Your drive for personal freedom and insistence on your rights is pressing, and a confrontation in which you have to stand up for yourself is likely. You will be needed to provide inputs and your presence may also be required at home and work and you will have to divide your attention according to priorities. This is good time to achieve balance between the head and the heart, and that too in all relationships.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) There will be mixed results as success and good fortune at work opens new horizons for expansion and travel. Some changes in the business set up are on the cards. You bring stability and order in business and professional projects with a dynamic and assertive approach. You come up with original and creative ideas that surprise other in the professional area. You support people with loyalty and zeal. A person makes an impact on you and it is hard to stop thinking of this strange connection. Your relationship with your partner is rather tenacious at the moment and requires extra attention and care. Emotive issues arise with family members. Your career, reputation, and public life are influenced.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) An increase in funds brings monetary gains and you may earn from investments made earlier. There will be times when you feel stressed over details. You may want to plan every move but serendipity has some happy surprises in store. You have more faith in general regarding your career and the direction in which you are headed. You will have the ability to build up financial reserves and resources, for the current planetary placement can bring a good deal of success in all monetary pursuits. Your romantic relationship takes on an added intensity and you receive more than you anticipated from your partner. This draws you closer on other levels too.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22) An excellent time awaits you especially regarding money and career. Feeling secure and comfortable on the job is important to you now. Money matters move smoothly even as expenses rise. It is time to get serious about other aspects of life

Everything you say to Alexa speaker will be sent to Amazon

Amazon has disabled two key privacy features in its Alexa smart speakers, in a push to introduce artificial intelligence-powered "agentic capabilities" and turn a profit from the popular devices.

Starting March 28, Alexa devices will send all audio recordings to the cloud for processing, and choosing not to save these recordings will disable personalisation features.

How do voice assistants work?

A voice assistant works by constantly listening for a "wake word", such as "Alexa". Once woken, it records the command that is spoken and matches it to an action, such as playing a music track. Matching a spoken command to an action requires what computer scientists call natural language understanding, which can take a lot of computer power.

Matching commands to actions can be done locally (on the device itself), or sound recordings can be uploaded to the cloud for processing. On-device processing has improved substantially in recent years, but is still less accurate than using the cloud, where more computer power is available.

Amazon is making two changes

Alexa devices send recordings to the cloud by default. However, some high-end Echo models previously supported a setting called "Do not send voice recordings".

If this setting was enabled, all recordings were processed locally. In practice, only a tiny fraction of Echo users (around 0.03% had this turned on).

In the first change, this setting is being disabled, and all recordings will be sent to the cloud.

Once in the cloud, recordings can be deleted or saved.

Saved recordings are used for Amazon's Voice ID feature, which distinguishes between speakers in the same household and aims to provide a personalised experience.

Alexa users also have a setting called "Don't save recordings", which, if enabled, deletes cloud recordings once they're processed. In the second change, if the "Don't save recordings" setting is enabled, Voice ID will stop working, and with it, access to personalised features such as user-specific calendar events.

This two-step change means Alexa users need to make a trade-off between privacy and functionality.

Alexa loses a lot of money

Put simply, Amazon needs Echo devices to start making money.

As US voice assistant expert Joseph Turow has detailed, Amazon began selling Echo devices very cheaply as a "loss leader". Amazon says it has sold more than 500 million Alexa devices, but between 2017 and 2021 alone the company lost more than US\$25 billion on the project.

Amazon is looking to generative AI to turn the business around, with a US\$8 billion investment in OpenAI competitor Anthropic.

In February, Amazon launched a new AI-powered Alexa+ system. It promises more natural interaction and the ability to carry out tasks such as booking flights. Alexa+ is currently only available in the United States.

"Agentic capabilities" such as booking flights require detailed profile information about the user on whose behalf they are acting. This would include details such as preferred products or services.

Voice ID and data from spoken commands assist Amazon in tying preferences to a particular person.

An AI-powered intermediary

How will Alexa+ help Amazon make money? The first way is via direct subscription fees: the service will eventually only be available to Amazon Prime members or people who pay US\$19.99 per month.

But what may prove more important is that it will help Amazon to position itself as an intermediary between buyers and sellers. This is what Amazon already does with its existing e-commerce platform.

It's easy to see the system in action when you search for a product on Amazon's website. Alongside items sold directly by Amazon, you are presented with products from multiple sellers, each of whom pays Amazon to be listed.

How to protect your privacy

After receiving a US\$25 million fine from the US Federal Trade Commission for retaining children's voice recordings in contravention of US laws, Amazon has overhauled Alexa's privacy settings.

The settings can be viewed and changed from the Alexa app on your smartphone, under "More > Alexa Privacy". Alexa users may wish to review the settings in "Manage your Alexa Data" to choose how long recordings are saved for and which voice recordings to delete. Recordings may also be deleted using a voice command.

As Alexa+ becomes available more widely, users will need to decide whether they are comfortable sharing data about their preferences with Amazon to enable agentic capabilities.

What are the alternatives?

For users who are uncomfortable with the privacy settings now available with Alexa, a private voice assistant may prove a better choice.

The Home Assistant Voice Preview is one example. It gives people the option to have voice recordings processed on-device, but offers less functionality than Alexa and can't work with as many other services. It's also not very user-friendly, being aimed more at technical tinkerers. Users may face a trade-off between privacy and functionality, both within Alexa itself and when considering alternatives. (*The Conversation*)

"Originality is the art of concealing your source."

— Franklin P. Jones

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No. 228 SHILLONG, MONDAY, MARCH 31, 2025

The rich on a roll

THE rich in India are on a roll. The number of billionaires in this nation skyrocketed in the last 10 years – a season of economic and political stability – from just 70 to nearly 300. Leading the pack, of course, are the likes of Mukesh Ambani and Gautam Adani, who have all kept the ruling elite in good humour. Curiously, as a global tracking agency reported, much of the developed world except for the US has lesser billionaires than the hefty pack India boasts of today. While the US has 873 billionaires, Communist China comes closer with 823 billionaires, while capitalist nations like the UK reported having just 150 and Germany 141 billionaires. Clearly, the global economic might is now getting concentrated in the Asian nations of China and India, while the US ably stood its ground through a century of mega growth there.

Note the other side. Consumer spending in India is driven by just 10 per cent of the 1.4 billion population. They form the elite, the rich, the business communities, government officials and corrupt politicians. Together, they comprise the top 10 percent affluent class, who have money to splurge, influence to peddle and make a heaven out of their surroundings. By contrast, the poor and the lower middle-class, forming around a billion whose sweat and energy drive the nation, lead a hand-to-mouth existence, barely limiting their purchases to daily essentials with their low income, and end up in untimely deaths. The nearly 80 years of 'desi' rule of Independent India through the system of democracy or people's power let this one-billion strong population down badly. What they get, as in old Cuba of Fidel Castro, are free or subsidized rations, which keep tempers under control. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 'blah-blahs' from the podium, extolling the virtues of modern India's trillions-strong economy, hide this reality. He's satisfied with what he's doing, and keeping India poor for all practical purposes. The chatter at the apex – forming 10 per cent of the population – boosts his ego; the rest 90 per cent are at the beck and call of politicians, and lining up before polling booths every five years in what's hailed as the periodic celebrations and festivals of democracy.

Recent studies testified to a K-shaped economic recovery after the Covid pandemic, noting that the rich here continued to prosper while the poor faced a serious decline in their purchasing power. With prices steadily going up, most private sectors saw no significant or matching salary increase, while the government sector staff are well taken care of. The top 10 per cent Indians now hold 58 per cent of the national wealth – a sharp increase from their 34 per cent in 1990. The bottom half of the population saw their share declining from 22 per cent of the national wealth to just 15 per cent. Can this be called equitable growth? Certainly not!

Letters to the Editor

Misrepresentation of Behdienkhlam and Chad Sukra: A call for respect and constitutional adherence

Editor,
The recent panel discussion on environmental issues hosted on the 4Front YouTube channel took an unfortunate and unexpected turn when two panelists – Mr. Reading War and Rev. Kyrsoibor Pyrtuh – diverted from the core topic and engaged in an unwarranted critique of the sacred Behdienkhlam Religious Festival and the culturally significant Chad Sukra Festival. Their remarks not only misrepresented the deep religious and cultural essence of these festivals but also blatantly disregarded the constitutional rights of the Niamtre people in the Jaintia Hills region.

Mr. Reading War, an advocate by profession, should be well aware that Articles 25-28 of the Indian Constitution guarantee the fundamental right to freedom of religion, ensuring that every citizen has the right to profess, practice, and propagate their faith without interference or misrepresentation. However, his statements during the discussion displayed a lack of understanding and a misinterpretation of the very constitutional provisions he is sworn to uphold. Behdienkhlam and Chad Sukra are not mere celebrations; they embody the spiritual, cultural, and communal harmony of the Niamtre faith, passed down through generations. It is indeed disheartening to witness a professional advocate like Mr. War exhibiting a concerning lack of understand-

ing of these constitutional principles. His statements not only reflected ignorance but also insensitivity toward the spiritual and cultural heritage of the Jaintia people.

More disturbingly, Rev. Kyrsoibor Pyrtuh, a former pastor who should ideally be promoting harmony and mutual respect, was heard referring to these sacred festivals as 'Chad Cement'. This derogatory remark was not only uncalled for but also an outright insult to the indigenous community that has for generations observed these festivals as sacred and divine. One would expect a religious leader to foster unity, compassion, and respect for all faiths. Instead, Rev. Pyrtuh's words have only sown seeds of discord and religious intolerance. Dear Pastor, it is not your duty to spread love among humanity rather than breed hatred and discrimination?

Equally disappointing was the reaction of the show's host, who was seen laughing and seemingly endorsing these disrespectful remarks rather than steering the discussion back to the environmental issues at hand. A responsible moderator should ensure that a platform meant for public discourse does not become a stage for religious insensitivity and misrepresentation.

The Behdienkhlam Festival is a sacred ritual observed by the followers of Niamtre, signifying purification, warding off evil, and seeking divine blessings for prosperity and well-being involving rites and rituals as per religious teachings and practices. Chad Sukra, on the other hand, is a cultural festival and holds equal religious importance to Niamtre faith that celebrates agricultural prosperity, rein-

forcing the deep connection and bonds between the people and mother earth. To distort the essence of these traditions with misleading rhetoric is a direct affront to the indigenous faith and cultural identity of the Jaintia community. The Jaintia people have upheld these traditions for centuries, and they continue to be an integral part of the region's spiritual and social fabric. These festivals are not just rituals; they are embodiments of faith, history, and heritage. They have stood the test of time and will continue to do so, despite attempts by a few to misinterpret their significance. It is imperative that individuals engaging in public discussions – especially those holding influential positions – exercise responsibility, sensitivity, and a commitment to factual discourse. Environmental issues are indeed critical, but they should be addressed with constructive solutions rather than unwarranted attacks on religious and cultural traditions. Respect for diversity and the peaceful coexistence of beliefs must remain at the heart of any meaningful debate.

The indigenous faith of Niamtre deserves the same level of respect and recognition as any other religious or cultural tradition. We urge Mr. Reading War, Rev. Kyrsoibor Pyrtuh, and the other panelist along with the host to reflect on their statements and actions and recognize the importance of fostering dialogue that unites rather than divides. It is only through mutual respect and understanding that we can truly work toward a sustainable and harmonious future.

Yours etc.,
O.R. Shallam
Panaliar, Jowai

Rice: The Crop That Feeds

By H.H. Mohrmen

Rice is not only a staple food for the people who live on the plateau of the Jaintia Hills but is also the most important food item connected to various aspects of the culture of the Pnar. In the past, in Jaintia Hills, the Wars who lived on the southern slopes of the hills primarily practiced jhum or slash-and-burn cultivation. However, the Pnar, who lived on the plateau, not only practiced but mastered wetland rice cultivation. This is evident from the beautiful rice terrace that they have skillfully made on the slopes of the hills and even in the valleys of different river basins.

Although farming practices in War Jaintia under Amlarem sub-division have changed and jhum cultivation has been replaced by mono cropping of arecanut or betel nut, the little rice cultivation that exists in the Amlarem area of War Jaintia also owes its origin to the Pnar who migrated there. The Pnar have a history of growing different types of rice, and rice plays a very important part in their lives, from being a staple food to being an essential component in religious ceremonies and rituals performed by the people, which we will discuss in subsequent articles. In this article we will only discuss the rich connection that it has with food. In fact, rice is used for many other purposes besides food and it is connected with many different aspects of the lives of people in the area.

U Syiem Sakho: The King of Crops

Food crops are not mere plants that feed people's hunger; in the context of indigenous communities, there is always one crop central to their lives. Although all crops and plants are equally important, there is one crop considered the king of all crops. This special connection between people and crops indicates that food holds a spiritual essence in the lives of indigenous communities. Almost every indigenous group has certain crops that are unique or fundamental to their way of life.

Among the Pnar, rice fits into that category of a crop with which the community has a special connection. Apart from feeding people, it is used for different pur-

poses. In fact, the lives of the Pnar community revolve around rice. The first lesson children are taught when they are young is not to waste rice. If bits of rice fall from a plate, children are instructed to collect the precious food. Unavoidable food waste is used as feed for domestic animals and sometimes as compost.

Among the Pnar, rice is considered the king of food and is also called u Syiem Sakho. Perhaps this is the only community that gives a crop the status of the king of crops. At one time, they grew more than a hundred varieties of rice in different parts of the twin districts. Khoo Soo or Khoo Wasoo used to be the most popular rice of the Pnar, and Khoo-Pnah or sticky rice is also one of the important rice varieties. The mere presence of such a large variety of rice indicates that the community has lived with this crop for thousands of years. Throughout the ages, they have collected the largest variety available and interestingly, Khoo Wasoo is only found in this area and that is also why sometimes it is also called Khoo Pnar or the rice of the Pnar. In England my host in their effort to make me feel at home, went to look for my favourite red rice at all the supermarkets but ended up with brown rice only. Whether Khoo Wasoo is endemic to the Pnar people only is an important case to study?

Another pertinent question arises: how did such a vast variety of rice come into the custody of the Pnar people? Where did this large variety originate? The hundred varieties of rice serve as historical records, proving that people have lived with the crop for thousands of years and have experimented with different varieties. The fact that the community has a rich agrarian culture also indicates that they have been practicing farming for a long time. Unfortunately, many of these rice varieties are dwindling, and several have been lost forever.

The importance of rice is seen in the fact that it is the only crop with three different names depending on its stage of use. U Kba in Pnar and Rhia in War refer to raw rice.

When the husk is removed, it is called U Khoo or Rhia, and when cooked, it is called Ja in Pnar and Ji in War. Ja or Ji is the most important food for the people – it is eaten three times a day, and no meal is incomplete without it.

Types of Rice-Based Dishes

In Jaintia Hills, there are many types of Ja, such as Jalieh, Jakhoo, Jasoo, Jadoh/Jidoh/Ji-ah, Jachulia, Jakhonboo, Janam, Jasiang, Jasaktung, Jatungtap, and Jakre. Jasiang and Jasaktung have religious significance. Jasiang is cooked rice used as an offering to ancestors during the Ka Siang Ka Pha ceremony. Jasaktung is rice cooked with beans, specially prepared during the naming ceremony of a baby in the Mukhap area. Jadoh is rice boiled in chicken or pork broth and is the most popular dish served at feasts, whether a wedding or a picnic. Jakhonboo and Janam have cultural significance as well; the former is given to mothers after childbirth, while the latter is offered as a mark of respect and sympathy to families that have lost a loved one. Ja tungtap is rice mixed with fermented fish, Jachulia is sticky rice and Jakre is rice cooked with millet.

Rice-Based Snacks

The Jaintia people have also created different food items from rice. Most of their snacks are rice-based, indicating that they have been eating and experimenting with rice for a long time.

Some of the most popular rice-based snacks are Pumaloi/Tpu-langdong and Putharo/Tpu-wasein. The difference between them lies in how they are prepared. Tpu-langdong is made from coarsely ground rice powder and steamed, whereas Tpu-wasein is finely ground and baked on earthen pots called Ki Weñ. Other snacks include Tpuynche, made from rice powder mixed with jaggery and water, baked until almost burnt. Tpuynche is associated with a tradition where a man and a woman declare their marriage.

Other rice-based snacks include Tpu-nawhali and Tpu-nai, both made from fine rice powder mixed with water, salt, and Nalieh (Pe-

rilla seeds). The difference is that Tpu-nawhali is deep-fried and crunchy, whereas Tpu-nai is baked and soft. Tpusuw or Tpusuwa, also called Tpu-Sutnga, is made from finely ground rice powder with sugar and steamed in leaves. Tpu-myngkruid in Pnar and Twewpuri in War is made by deep-frying rice powder mixed with jaggery. Tpurusi or Twew Rusi is a unique rice snack made by rolling rice powder and jaggery into balls, similar to a ladoo.

Other varieties include Tpujngiar, made from rice powder without any seasoning, and Tpu-pnah, made from sticky rice. Tpu Tadong is similar to Tpu Suwe but is cooked in a bamboo hollow and burned directly in the fire. Flattened rice, known as Shira/Khooner/Rhia Snair, and Handoo, which is pounded and dried cooked rice, is popular in Jaintia only. Khooner and Handoo were once popular snacks for travelers and even fed Jaintia warriors during their battle against the British under the leadership of U Kiang Nangbah.

The Khasi also have learnt the art of making Putharo from the Jaintia because the pots that putharo is baked are called Weñ and the two piece clay pots are made at Larnai only.

Rice-Based Beverages

Rice is also used in making traditional drinks. One of the common beverages among the Khasi Pnar is (rice beer), Yndem or Sadhiar the former is a crude rice beer and the latter is a much refined product. Another common drink amongst the Pnar and the War is Harak or kiad (distilled liquor), which are made from rice and even millet. Rice beer remained popular until the British introduced distillation techniques. In some cases, rice beer is still used today, especially in religious ceremonies or rituals. Making Harak is popular in the Tuber area, and it is made from rice. In certain villages under the Lasken Development Block, Cha-khoo or rice tea made from fried rice is an important beverage.

This article explores the deep connection between rice and the food consumed by the people. In the next article, we will examine how deeply rice is interwoven with the culture and traditions of the community.

Let bygones be bygones!

Editor,
This has a reference to the letter by Kyrsoibor Pyrtuh captioned, "No intention to offend anyone" (ST, 29th March 2025). While the writer had tendered unconditional apology he still justified his comment. A sincere apology involves expressing remorse. Hence a person who apologizes but still argues and justifies his or her statement(s) is essentially offering a "non-apology" or a "fauxpology." Further, his comment "Chad Cement" is to be understood as a metaphor cannot be accepted, because metaphor as it has been employed historically to denigrate various social subgroups present a pejorative image of the group in question. Anyway, let bygones be bygones!

Yours etc.,
Dr. Omarlin Kyndiah
Via email

Clarification regarding statements during panel discussion

Editor,
I am writing to clarify certain statements I made during the panel discussion titled "Rynsan lathir: Sa Katmo ngin pynjot ia ka Mei Mariang," held on 25th March, 2025, organized by 4Front Media. I understand that my statements have inadvertently caused offense to some viewers, particularly members of the Niamtre community.

I would like to assure everyone that it was never my intention to disrespect

or hurt the sentiments of any particular community. My comments were made within the broader context of discussing environmental degradation and its impacts on our cultural practices, without any intent to delve into or comment negatively on religious beliefs.

I sincerely apologize for any distress or offense my words may have unintentionally caused. I hold the deepest respect for all religious traditions, beliefs, and sentiments. It is my firm belief that meaningful dialogue must always be rooted in mutual respect, understanding, and tolerance.

I appreciate the opportunity to provide this clarification and hope that it will help to clear up any misconceptions and reassure those who may have been affected by my words. Moving forward, I remain fully committed to nurturing positive and respectful exchanges of ideas in our community.

Thank you for your understanding.

Yours etc.,
Reading War,
Via email

Calling out the abysmally poor Jio mobile service

Editor,
A growing number of Jio mobile users have reached breaking point trying to figure out reasons for the unreliable service provided by the company. What makes the situation particularly frustrating is the mismatch between what users are promised and what they actually receive.

For instance, Jio's Rs 899 plan offers 2 GB of data per day, yet in most areas, users

are unable to even access, "20 KB of data" consistently; even in the city centre – the heart of town, such as Mawkhar Market in Shillong.

Jio earlier used to offer a more affordable plan such as the Rs 479 recharge – which was mainly meant for people who mostly needed voice calls. It included just 6 GB of data for 84 days, making it a good fit for users who didn't depend much on mobile data and just wanted to stay connected with calls.

However, without any explanation, Jio has quietly phased out the Rs 479 plan over the past few months. As a result, users who once had a cost-effective alternative are now compelled to go for the Rs 899 plan – even if their data usage is minimal or the data service is completely non-functional.

This shift has left many users feeling exploited. Let's imagine a tailor charging you for stitching a coat, shirt, and trousers – but only delivers the trousers, claiming that the sewing machine broke down. If you filed a complaint at the police station, the tailor would likely be arrested, because it is a clear case of a serious criminal offence. Here my question is why is there no accountability when a big telecom company charges for services it doesn't deliver at all? Why isn't the government taking action against such blatant exploitation? Is there one law for ordinary citizens and another for the rich and powerful?

Yours etc.,
Salil Gwali,
Shillong

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

The Sangh @100

By Dattatreya Hosabale

When Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh is completing its hundredth year of service there is an evident curiosity about the way the Sangh perceives this landmark. It has been crystal clear for the Sangh since its inception that such occasions are not meant for celebrations but to provide us with an opportunity to introspect and rededicate ourselves to the cause. It is also a chance to acknowledge the contributions of the stalwart saintly figures who guided the movement and the series of Swayamsevaks and their families who selflessly joined this journey. There cannot be a better occasion than the birth anniversary of the Sangh founder Dr Keshav Baliram Hedgewar, which happens to be the Varsh Pratipada – the first day of the Hindu calendar to revisit the journey of a hundred years to resolve for the future of harmonious and united Bharat for world peace and prosperity.

Dr Hedgewar was a born patriot, and this trait of unconditional love and undiluted dedication for Bharat was visible in his actions from childhood. By the time he completed his medical education in Kolkata, he had already been exposed to all the efforts – from the armed revolution to Satyagraha – undertaken to free Bharat from British colonisation. As we fondly call him in Sangh circles, Doctor ji respected all those ways and never tried to belittle any of them. Social reforms or political independence was one of the central points of discussion at that time. At the same time, as a doctor of Indian society, he diagnosed the fundamental problems that caused us to lose our independence and decided to find a lasting solution. He realised that the absence of patriotism in day-to-day life, the deterioration of collective national character resulting in parochial identities and the lack of discipline in social life are the root causes of external invaders finding their foothold in Bharat. He understood that people had lost the collective memory of our glorious history due to incessant aggression. Hence, there was a sense of pessimism and inferiority complex about our culture and knowledge tradition. It was his conviction that mere political activism under a few leaders would not solve the fundamental problems of our ancient Rashtira. Hence, he decided to devise a method of consistent efforts to train people to live for the nation.

The innovative and unique functioning of the Sangh based on the Shiksha method is the outcome of this visionary thinking beyond political struggle. While participating in the political freedom struggle and encouraging others to do the same, Dr Hedgewar developed this training method for organising the entire society and not creating an organisation within the society. Today, after a hundred years, thousands of youth continue to join the path shown by Dr Hedgewar and are ready to dedicate themselves to the national cause. There is a growing acceptance and expectations of the society from the Sangh. These are not things but signs of approval for Doctor ji's vision and method. The progressive unfolding of this movement and philosophy is nothing short of a miracle. It was not easy to explain the idea of Hindutva and the idea of Rashtira when most of the English-educated elites were influenced by the European idea of nationalism, which was narrow, parochial and exclusivist. Dr Hedgewar did not theorise the ideology, but he gave an action programme in seed form that has been the guiding force in this journey. During his lifetime, Sangh's work reached all the regions of Bharat. When we attained independence and at the same time Bharat Mata was unfortunately partitioned on religious lines, it was Sangh Swayamsevaks who dedicated themselves to the cause of rescuing the Hindu population from Pakistan and resettling them with honour and dignity. The organisation for the organisation's sake mantra unfolded into transmitting organisational energy into various walks of national life. The concept of Swayamsevak, which is more

of a sense of responsibility and duty for society, started showing its presence in fields ranging from education to labour to politics. Everything has to be reorganised in light of the national ethos, for which Sri Guruji (Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar), the second Sarsanghachalak, was the guiding force during this phase. Bharat is an ancient civilisation with a destined role to play in the interest of humanity based on its spiritual traditions. If Bharat has to perform the role based on the ideas of universal harmony and oneness, then the common populace of Bharat has to prepare itself for that goal. Sri Guruji provided a strong ideational foundation for the same. The reformist agenda of the Hindu society gained new momentum when all sects of Bharat declared that any form of discrimination has no Dharmic sanction. Sangh Swayamsevaks played a pivotal role in the fight for restoring democracy through peaceful means when the Constitution was brutally assaulted during the emergency. Sangh has expanded from the concept of Shiksha to engaging in service activity by invoking the righteous power of society and has made significant strides in these ninety-nine years. Movements like Ram Janmabhoomi liberation connected all sections and regions of Bharat for cultural liberation. From national security to border management, participatory governance to rural development, no aspect of national life is untouched by the Sangh Swayamsevaks. The biggest satisfaction is that society is coming forward to be part of this systemic transformation.

While there is a tendency to look at everything from the political prism, Sangh is still focusing on the cultural awakening of society and creating a strong network of right-minded people and organisations. Participation of women in social transformation and restoring the sanctity of family institution has been the focus of Sangh for the last few years. Around ten thousand programmes were organised throughout Bharat with the participation of more than twenty-seven lakh people after the Sangh called for a tri-centenary celebration of Lokmata Ahilyabai Holkar – a testimony of how we are collectively celebrating our national icons. When the Sangh work entered its hundredth year, Sangh decided to take the core man-making for nation-building work up to the block and village level. Adding up to ten thousand Shakhas in the last one-year with systematic planning and execution is a symbol of determination and acceptance. The goal of reaching each village and basti is still an unfulfilled task and is a matter of introspection. The call for Pach-Parivartan – the five-fold programme for transformation – will continue to be the main focus in the coming years. While expanding the Shiksha network, Sangh has focused on inculcating civic duties, an environment-friendly lifestyle, socially harmonious conduct, familial values and systemic transformation based on the sense of self-hood, so that everyone contributes to the larger cause of Param Vaibhavam Netum Etat Svarashtam – taking our Rashtira to the pinnacle of glory.

In the last hundred years, Sangh, as a movement of national reconstruction, has travelled from neglect and ridicule to curiosity and acceptance. Sangh does not believe in opposing anyone and is confident that someday, anyone opposing the Sangh work will join the Sangh fold. When the world is grappling with multiple challenges ranging from climate change to violent conflicts, Bharat's ancient and experiential wisdom is eminently capable of providing solutions. This gigantic but inevitable task is possible when every child of Bharat Mata understands this role and contributes to building a domestic model that inspires others to emulate. Let us join this resolve to present a role model before the world of a harmonious and organised Bharat, taking the entire society together under the leadership of righteous people (Sajjan Shakti).

(The writer is Sarkaryavah, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh)