

"If you stop to be kind, you must  
swerve often from your path."

--- Mary Webb

## The Shillong Times

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### Farmers suffer colossal loss

THERE are different categories of farmers in Meghalaya. Some cultivate food grains and vegetables; other grow fruits; still other rear livestock and nurture fish farms. In the past decade some enterprising farmers have taken to strawberry farming as a lucrative occupation, after this was introduced to them by the State Horticulture Department. Strawberry farmers do well if the weather is fine and there are no upward incidents that stop the supply chain. Meghalaya has in the past had strawberry festivals to popularize the fruit. Later there were festivals for 'biskot' (squash) where farmers were told that since the vegetables are relished in states like Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh et al they can grow them for export. The value chain was that Meghalaya House Kolkata would be a sort of clearing house. Not much is known about this business in recent times but farmers in areas like Mairang grow 'biskot' over acres and acres of farmland. What will happen to those farmers if the Government does not activate the value chain? Soon there will be a glut of 'biskot' in the market and the lockdown will only aggravate the problem.

So who purchases the bulk of farmers' produce? They are sold to retailers in the local retail markets, exported to neighbouring states and sold in bulk to restaurants and eateries. When restaurants are allowed to open only three days a week and that for home delivery, the vegetable and livestock have no takers. That leaves the farmers and vendors with no choice but to take back their produce which ultimately rots and is discarded as rotten waste. The effort put into growing fruits and vegetables go in vain. And only because there is no central procurement agency or a minimum support price. The purchasing power of most rural households is now declining after people have lost livelihoods. And vegetables are not exactly cheap. Their prices, like those of other essential commodities, have spiked up. Most families are surviving on rice with dry fish as a taste giving gruel. Pulses have also become unaffordable.

The absence of an agricultural policy in Meghalaya has resulted in this repeated loss for farmers. If there's any disruption of normal life such as bandhs, hartals and strikes the farmers are buffeted. If there's too much or too little rain they suffer. But the pandemic has dealt them the severest blow and will reduce many of them to penury if there is no bailout package. Economics works on the basis of supply and demand. Government needs to see which sectors have high demand for agricultural produce and keep those sectors out of the purview of the lockdown. More so, when those sectors are ready and willing to observe all Covid protocols. Quick ground surveys on a daily basis to find out what ails the agricultural producers will help government revise its lockdown policies.

# A season for kindness

By Rev. Lyndan Syiem

Over the past weekend, there has been a perceptible shift in the content of the local news cycle, both in print and electronic media. Earlier, the news was dominated by reports and statistics on COVID 19 infections and deaths, violations of SOPs, government-civil society efforts to control the spread and contain the infected. Now, the focus has increasingly shifted to the economic distress of people under a harsh month-long lockdown. Two headlines from The Shillong Times, 31 May, illustrate this: "Recoveries outnumber fresh cases yet again" is juxtaposed with "Wage earners' COVID woes on brink of desperation."

I concede that this lockdown was the last and only option left for a government desperate to reduce the unprecedented spike of infections in May. But we are all now increasingly concerned for daily wage earners, street vendors, taxi drivers, small business owners and the services industry, whose meagre savings have run out and they are reduced to handouts from their relatives, friends and neighbours. Unfortunately, handouts result in the loss of personal dignity, especially for working men, as I've personally witnessed in our church's food distribution program during last year's lockdown. That is why it is usually the mother who formally received and expressed thanks for our dry rations package.

People in the unorganized sector desperately need help. The government has announced packages, which we hope will be properly implemented. Many social, religious and community organizations are also distributing food and material relief. What else can we the general public do? There is a word that describes attitude, which motivates action: Kindness. Please note that this article is not entitled 'A Season of Kindness' but 'A Season for Kindness.' Some may say that the difference between 'of' and 'for' is just semantics. No, it is actually substantive. Because May 2021 has not been a season of kindness but of sorrow and loneliness for families that have lost their loved ones to COVID 19; it has been a season of worry on how to repay creditors the expensive medical bills for those who survived.

May 2021 has not been a season of kindness but of economic distress for everyone without a monthly salary or pension. May has not been a kind season for our frontliners against the pandemic: health workers, the police, magistrates, media persons, traders, deliv-

ery persons, bankers, and many more. I have family, friends and church members in all the above professions; they speak of the strain and the worry of infecting their families, of parents with comorbidities. It was so painful to hear that several nurses had contracted COVID 19 and some have passed away. Kindness means listening to our frontliners' concerns patiently, encouraging them and praying with them. Although May has not been a season of kindness, we can certainly strive towards making

assured of salaries at month's end from the government, despite their lockdown-induced absence from work, yet they refuse to extend the same kindness to their maids. What a shame!

Another is the blatant profiteering of essential items in rural areas. While prices in Shillong are relatively under control, I have first-hand reports of hoarders and grey marketeers exploiting rural folk in the villages. This is so unkind. Especially when farmers' produce cannot be sold at good prices in



June a season for kindness towards the sick and suffering, towards our frontliners, towards the underprivileged, towards strangers in need. Remember, kindness is described in Scripture as the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

In a famous Scripture passage, Matthew 25:35-40, the King of heaven identifies himself with the needy and the suffering: "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me." Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?" ... The King will reply, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."

One of the shocking things I've discovered is that some families that have temporarily stopped their daily-wage housemaids from coming to work have also stopped their monthly salaries. How are these maids and odd-job men who have served you and your children for years be expected to survive? While these families themselves are

Shillong, when vegetables tended during the spring season with fond hopes of good returns in summer are dumped for lack of urban customers. Admittedly the supply chain is disrupted, so that produce grown in the highlands no longer reaches the Southern Ri War regions and vice versa. But that is no reason to exploit.

My maternal grandmother grew up tending cows and growing vegetables to fund her own education. After my grandfather had made her life comfortable, she always taught us her grandchildren to help the poor and needy, and to always be kind to the less privileged. Kindness can either be institutional, organized or individual. Institutional kindness comes in the form of hospitals, charitable clinics, orphanages, and yes, the innovative Oxygen-langar of the Sikh community. To a COVID 19 patient with severe chest congestion, kindness means Oxygen. Institutional kindness also happens in a local church whose identity I need not reveal that has distributed financial aid to all its BPL families; and this will continue if the lockdown extends. The Women's Fellowship, with its own substantial resources, is now reaching out beyond denomination, religion and community.

Kindness is not just an emotional response to people in need. That kind of kindness often does not last.

Kindness needs to be properly organized. Beneficiaries have to be identified, resources collected and properly divided, with the neediest receiving a larger share. We've discovered that a small but dedicated team of planners and volunteers can quickly and efficiently begin with a pilot project. In our experience, once you start some good work, the resources will pour in. In a church context, there are many better-endowed families that have social concern, that also have the resources but want certitude that their hard-earned money reaches the truly needy. This is where transparency and accountability come in. Like in all matters concerning money, Organized kindness survives not on emotion but on proper accounting and audit.

But beyond Institutional and Organized kindness, this pandemic has also revealed many examples of Individual kindness. We have heard of an entrepreneur in Police Bazar feeding the destitute, and of some university faculty providing nutritious meals for health workers, and also for unemployed daily-wagers near their campus. My wife and I have experienced acts of individual kindness during the initial days of our COVID hospitalization when friends provided all our immediate needs. Most of our family members were under quarantine; my visits to their homes had rendered them high-risk contacts and they had to wait five days for the RT-PCR test. That was when friends stepped in and provided soup, nutritious food and other essentials. Our two young daughters also tested positive, although with mild symptoms. With family members in isolation, it was our dear landlady who provided them daily meals.

Having experienced so much kindness, I write to advocate this as one of the practical solutions to the present economic distress of the non-salaried class. The government, for all its shortcomings, is trying its best to address the problem. There is also kindness on a large scale institutionally and also organizationally in small groups. What is stopping us from individual acts of kindness when there is so much distress around us? Thankfully, kindness is infectious, kindness is fulfilling. It takes one man or one woman with vision to inspire others to action. Serving others in need is fulfilling because it answers a call deep within us that is ultimately divine. So let's all work together to make June 2021 a season for kindness.

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# Lakshadweep and the trouble in paradise

By Jagdish Rattanani

A little known member of the Bharatiya Janata Party has set off a political storm in Lakshadweep, the tranquil archipelago of coral islands and reefs that makes up India's smallest Union Territory (UT). He is the newly appointed administrator, Praful Khodabhai Patel, who in a telling picture on an official website can be seen bowing in what appears servile gratitude to his political master, Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Patel was the administrator of the UT of Dadra and Nagar Haveli and Daman and Diu, where his profile notes that he is a diploma holder in civil engineering and began his career in the construction sector. Patel took over on December 8, 2020 as the administrator of the UT of Lakshadweep, where he is talking shades of a language that the BJP tried, tested and perfected first in Gujarat—the so-called story of development, contracts, power to detain, beef ban, control on the number of children you can have and some tough administrative action against local fisherfolk.

Understandably, he has set off protests and demands that he be recalled, the strongest voices coming from Kerala, which is the closest in affinity and language and culture to the archipelago. There is enough already written on how the ecological balance of these frontier islands will be destroyed, of how the equivalent of a 'Goonda Act' is being enforced to stave off protests against the outpouring of "development" with the push for tourism and how this is a prescription-BJP agenda being forced on a population that is 96.58% Muslim (2011 census). For example, the draft 'Lakshadweep Animal Preservation Regulation, 2021', published on 25 Feb. 2021, sets out "prohibition against selling or buying beef or beef products" (Section 8), "power to enter and inspect premises" (Section 9), "prohibition against

he is a political lightweight. Something has pulled him to the top of a place he knows nothing about and he thinks not twice about pulling it apart. There will be a battle to get him out and there is no means of saying if this will succeed.

This is the harm the BJP delivers to the nation and its unity and strength—naked, in your face, care-a-damn and often openly and defiantly on an ugly agenda. Lakshadweep is one more example of how bad things can get under the BJP. We stand to lose freedom, integrity of political process, the safety of our land and people and an ethos that has helped the nation stand proudly democratic while others around us failed.

But there is another loss that the BJP delivers that is not so well discussed in the face of the nakedness of the obvious, in-your-face, harm. And this is that it pretends to bring change, like the argument that political leaders can head UTs, and why should it be that only a retired bureaucrat be given this portfolio, as has been the case in the past. This is a fair argument and the BJP could have set a new precedent by giving the UTs a clean, efficient, people-oriented leader who understands local sensitivities and protects and guards and empowers. That would be the best way to show that political functionaries can lead as administrators in a way that bureaucrats, often retired after long years of comfortable berths, cannot. But even in this change, the BJP has delivered a no-ball.

Patel is the administrator you can pick and say this is the kind you do not need, and that the practice of having bureaucrats here must therefore continue. In short, there is nothing on the agenda of change from past practices that can stand out as fundamental and constructive in the approach, outlook and direction of the BJP.

"The BJP tends to speak of the rich history of India but it has done nothing to support, build or nurture the depth of study that the Indian scriptures or wisdom traditions offer."

slaughter without certificate from Competent Authority" (Section 5). Here's a police State coming for the people of Lakshadweep, from not one but many angles as the administration prepares to welcome luxury tourism to the calm waters and the unspoiled beauty of the islands.

In fact, just one day after he took over, Patel visited "various construction sites" and evaluated the developmental activities of Lakshadweep and ongoing projects. A little over a month later (Jan. 16-18, 2021), on a visit to Moola beach, he said this was an "apt location for adventure and beach tourism". In Feb. 2021, official records show him again as visiting various construction sites. It is not that Lakshadweep does not need support and development; the kind of development being envisaged will wreck the islands, deliver an ecological disaster and render the local residents poorer, pushed to the margins of a model that will import advisers, strategists, hoteliers and the like. Patel himself is an import, with big questions on his qualifications to lead the islands. He was a Gujarat Assembly member who took over the State home portfolio when Amit Shah quit as Home Minister in Gujarat following his arrest in the Sohrabuddin case. Patel lost a subsequent election there, even when the BJP won the State. He is quite obviously close to the leadership to be handpicked to run first Daman & Diu and now Lakshadweep, even though

In the changes that the BJP seeks, short termism, narrow mindedness and a twisted Hindutva agenda overpowers. This cannot offer lasting approaches or bring fresh thinking to the idea of people-led growth and development. This is so in every sphere. The BJP tends to speak of the rich history of India but it has done nothing to support, build or nurture the depth of study that the Indian scriptures or wisdom traditions offer. In fact, its leaders stand out as unscholarly and understand none of the values that make India what it is. The BJP speaks of the depth of Indian thinking, but it has done everything to smother dialogue, debate and openness—the very stuff that is inherently Indian and has deep traditions in Indian society. The BJP speaks of 'Lutyens Delhi' that it wants to break but it is only creating its own version of Lutyens Delhi, with its pick of players. In short, look around and what we can see is a party in a hurry to capture, command and control, all in the name of the rich traditions that make India great but in actuality it is an attack on those traditions to make India smaller and smaller, day by day. Lakshadweep is only the latest hot spot in a national heat map that is burning India across many places and institutions.

(The writer is a journalist and faculty member at SPJIMR. Views are personal) (Syndicate: The Billion Press) (e-mail: editor@thebillionpress.org)

## Letters to the Editor

### Pathetic status of the poor

Editor,  
In Clint Borgen's words, "Poverty is relatively cheap to address but incredibly expensive to ignore." Gandhian principles suggest that the bloodline of the country lies in the rural population. I am dismayed to read the daily newspapers and watch TV news channels where the plight of the poor is portrayed day in and day out in these hard times, especially those in rural areas. Millions from the cities are going back to their village homes. Unemployment exacerbates their status even more. The plight of the rural underprivileged is not at a nascent stage; it was only mostly ignored by the working classes due to modernization and technological revolution in modern society. The current pandemic only accentuates this problem.

Various ways and means have been suggested to the government by experts in numerous articles, like Direct Benefits Transfer, expanding the scope and funds of MNRGA, basic amenities support, etc.

As concerned and responsible citizens, each one of us should lend our hands to the needy in whatever way we can during these hard times to ensure collective sustainability. These of course are my

personal views.

Yours etc.,  
Kevin M Shangpliang,  
Via email

### Covid impact on small businesses

Editor,  
The COVID-19 pandemic has thrown so many questions about government and citizen responsiveness to the greatest global health crisis in more than 100 years. The pandemic has led to a series of unprecedented policy measures ranging from lockdowns to requests for citizens to suspend their normal economic and social interactions to limit the spread of the disease.

Amidst all of this, small businesses in sectors which are most affected by COVID-19 and least financially resilient (such as hotels and guest houses, food and restaurant services, educational services; arts, entertainment and recreation) account for a disproportionate number of low-wage workers, people with less formal education, and minority business owners. Their fears are real.

We as citizens and residents can lend a hand in helping small business owners, supporting efforts to help them expand by trying to shop at small businesses first.

Buying from small busi-

nesses will help those owners stay open longer and possibly make it through the rest of the pandemic. Many small businesses operate only online and don't have a storefront to save on expenses. An effective response would also be to increase the access of small businesses to credit and stimulus funding.

The state requires the support of citizens of course and it is most likely to work well where citizens are bound together in a "community of fate", creating societal trust. It's a reminder that we don't control the tangibles. And the only legacy that holds any value is how we serve one another in crisis.

Yours etc.,  
Manisha M Pala,  
Shillong.

### Of frayed centre-state relations

Editor,  
It is unprecedented for the central government to recall the Chief Secretary of any state on central deputation when he is due for retirement. This unfortunate incident has happened with the West Bengal Chief Secretary who was to retire on May 31, 2021 but who on the request of the State Government has been given a 3-month extension. The Chief Secretary has been issued orders for central deputation without adhering

to Constitutional provisions. Granted that IAS officers do seek central deputation but not at the fag end of their careers. This incident is a show of strength by the BJP-led Modi Government to avenge the BJP defeat in the Bengal elections. As a result centre-state relations which is the essence of federalism is seriously impacted. To transfer a cadre officer on central deputation without the consent of the state violates the fine balance of centre-state relationship. Rule 6 (1) of the IAS Cadre Rules, 1954, clearly state that the concurrence of the state government concerned is necessary. The word "concurrence" here is critical. This decision and transfer of the Chief Secretary at a critical juncture when the state is fighting the Covid pandemic as well as facing the impact of the severe cyclone storm Yaas will affect the morale of the overall administrative framework.

Political harassment and vindictiveness unleashed on civil servants on account of political conflicts between the centre and state would damage the spirit of federalism in the long run and hinder and undermine the capability of the officers to stay non-partisan. It will also send a wrong message to many other officers who wish to work without any political affiliation. The "caged parrot" policy must be jettisoned; frequent interference in transfers and

postings of civil servants to fulfill a political agenda would destroy their ethical and moral integrity. The dire need in this country is to uphold the political impartiality of the civil services by not influencing them to act in a manner that jeopardizes their ability to remain outside all political influences. Decisions on postings and transfer of civil servants cannot be sacrificed at the altar of political expediency. Civil servants cannot be subjected to political vendetta.

Yours etc.,  
C Majaw,  
Political science Dept,  
NEHU,  
Via email

### Better strategies needed

Editor,  
The second wave of the pandemic has affected lives on a different trajectory. Whereas the health officials, the Government and various organisations are coming out with innovative strategies to control the spread of the pandemic, a fact that has overshadowed all these attempts at containing the virus is the plight of small and medium sized businesses and those working in these establishments. The closure of shops has left them high and dry. The situation has turned so acute that some people are

even indulging in illegal activities just to earn their daily bread.

No doubt, imposing complete lockdown has proved highly efficient in slowing the spread of the deadly virus, but not allowing shops to open at "specified timings" will affect the financial and mental condition of thousands of businesses and those working therein, making the scenario even worse. PT Sawkmie said it well, "The Government says they have enough stock of essential commodities but the ground reality is that people don't have money to buy them." It's a well established fact that only a prosperous economy can lead to a healthy state of mind. Hence opening of shops with strict adherence to the SOPs will put the State's economy on track and will also bring a smile to the thousands associated with this economic cycle.

Through your esteemed daily, I would request the Government to re-think the decision of restricting the opening of shops and hope that it formulates a strategy that provides a sigh of relief to the shopkeepers and their workers.

Yours etc.,  
Partha Pratim Duarah,  
Via email

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"They always say time changes things, but you actually have to change them yourself."

— Andy Warhol

## The Shillong Times

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### Meghalaya's socio-economic skid

THE NITI Aayog recently released its third Sustainable Development Report based on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) put together by the United Nations in 2015. The SDGs are a roadmap for achieve a better, more sustainable future for all. They address the global challenges we face, including poverty, inequality, climate change, environmental degradation, peace and justice amongst others. As per the NITI Aayog Report Kerala, Himachal Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Goa and Karnataka are listed as the top performing states while Bihar, Jharkhand, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Meghalaya are the worst performers. The three core elements of sustainable development are economic growth based on a sustainable model, social inclusion and environmental conservation. These three important goals are interlinked. One cannot happen without the other. Sustainable economic growth, achieving sustainable livelihoods, living in harmony with nature and appropriate technology are important for sustainable development. Does Meghalaya have these three elements that are key to socio-economic sustainability? The best example of unequal economic growth is visible today. A key indicator of social inequality in a supposedly cohesive tribal society, is landlessness. If 76% of Meghalaya's rural population today is landless then that's one area requiring urgent policy intervention. This is the prime reason for the growing poverty in Meghalaya and the crisis is deepening with the pandemic. What is government doing to address these inequalities? In the first place no government in Meghalaya has had an economic policy that takes into account all these factors.

When it comes to environmental sustainability, another SDG goal, Meghalaya's rat-hole coal mining, limestone mining and unregulated quarrying have changed the eco-system for the worse; poisoning the air and water. Forest cover has reduced as more and more forest land is alienated for mining or quarrying. The very meaning of environmental sustainability is to prevent nature from being used as an inexhaustible source of resources and to ensure its protection and rational use. Peoples' lives are intrinsically tied to the environment. A degraded environment cannot sustain life. Environmental conservation implies investment in renewable energy, saving water, supporting sustainable mobility, and innovation in sustainable construction and architecture and contributing to achieving environmental sustainability on several fronts. How does Meghalaya fare in this? Instead of opting for renewable energy the Government is looking at damming a vibrant River Umngot much to the chagrin of those dependent on the river for their sustenance. The SDGs also point to the need for integrating scientific and traditional knowledge which the indigenous peoples of the world are known for. But capitalistic exploitation of nature is not in consonance with traditional wisdom. Community knowledge has been pitted against capitalism and the mad pursuit of wealth. The result is fragmentation of the community which in turn erodes the idea of indigeneity.

# Modi's 'Federal' Mantra pits Centre vs States

By Rajdeep Sardesai

There is scarcely a week that passes without a potential centre-state conflict threatening to erupt in some corner. Then, whether it is opposition state finance ministers objecting to resource distribution under the Goods and Services Tax, the contentious farm laws being pushed through parliament without any oversight or consultation, the unseemly public spat over oxygen supplies, or the buck passing on vaccine policy implementation, there is a marked strain in relations be-

of a bruising election campaign being carried forward into daily administrative duties. The latest example is the unprecedented face-off between the Centre and the Mamata government over the sudden union home ministry order transferring the Bengal chief secretary to the national capital, an order which an enraged chief minister has refused to comply with.

This is no time for a political blame game. At a time when Delhi and Kolkata should be working together

minister. If Banerjee wanted a one on one meeting with the prime minister, it could have easily been arranged. Moreover, why should government officials be made hapless victims of the games played by their political bosses. Unfortunately, sharply opposing narcissisms leave little space for negotiation and consensus building in good faith.

Ironically, Mr Modi himself has been a three time chief minister before he became prime minister. One of his perennial grouses as Gujarat chief minister at the time was that the Centre was constantly targeting him. In fact, in 2013, he pointedly skipped a National Integration Council meeting called by then prime minister Dr Manmohan Singh to discuss the communal violence bill. Modi was by then the BJP's prime ministerial candidate and his supporters alleged that the meeting was called only to sabotage his political rise. Nor was this an isolated instance: on one occasion as chief minister, Modi openly tangled with the Planning Commission, accusing it of disregarding the country's federal structure in its dealings with states.

Now, of course, Modi has dispensed with even the Planning Commission, one of the few institutions meant to resolve Centre-state skirmishes in a rule based manner. Instead, the prime minister now directly summons and communicates with district magistrates from across the country on Covid management via video conference while meetings with the chief ministers, if the normally soft-spoken Jharkhand chief minister Hemant Soren is to be believed, are only meant for the prime minister's 'Man Ki baat' and not to listen to chief ministerial woes. Is this really the federal structure the prime minister once craved for or simply a reflection of a domineering presidential style 'Big Boss' national leadership that can't tolerate dissent or any alternate power structure?

Post-script: Since Lakshadweep's concerns were a trigger point for this column, let's conclude with the islands. The administrator, Mr Patel, says that he wants to lift the alcohol restrictions to unleash Lakshadweep's tourism potential. Good idea with one caveat. Would the former Gujarat minister propose a similar rule for his home state and its prohibition laws?

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The last time the tiny, scenic Lakshadweep islands made the national headlines, 24 x 7 private news television didn't even exist in the country. In 1989, then prime minister Rajiv Gandhi's new year visit to the islands had created a flutter over whether public monies were being spent on a 'private' family holiday. This time, Lakshadweep is a major national story for far more telling reasons: a spate of unilaterally declared new regulations by the Centre's administrator have sparked off fears amongst the local population of a 'saffron agenda' being imposed on a distant part of the country.

That the administrator, Praful Khoda Patel happens to be a former minister of state for home in Gujarat and a close confidante of prime minister Narendra Modi and home minister Amit Shah has added a distinct political twist. Mr Patel has already been in the news for the wrong reasons: his name has cropped up in the suicide investigations of Mohan Delkar, the long-serving MP of Dadra and Nagar Haveli, where again Mr Patel is the union territory administrator (the Delkar suicide case has got almost no media coverage in sharp contrast to the non-stop attention paid to the Sushant Singh Rajput case and nor have any central agencies air-dashed to Mumbai to investigate).

Moreover, located uniquely at the cusp of the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean, the Lakshadweep islands are of strategic importance. With a near hundred per cent Muslim population, anxieties of attempted cultural 'colonisation' are also being voiced. Then, whether it be new land rules, opening up the islands to alcohol consumption or restricting beef sale, there is a creeping 'nationalist' Hindutva versus a regional Muslim majority conflict that threatens the idyllic serenity of a land with a negligible crime rate and a population of just around 65,000. Why would anyone want to alienate and unsettle a tranquil petite edge of the country unless there is an obsessively centralising mindset that seeks to impose its political and ideological writ on every part of a diverse land?

This isn't then a battle just between Delhi and distant Kavaratti: at the heart of the controversy lies a deeper crisis between a dominant Centre and restive state governments across the country.



tween the Modi government at the Centre and state chief ministers that threatens to derail the 'co-operative federalism' goal that the prime minister claimed to embrace when he first came to power seven years ago. Such is the trust deficit and suspicion of central agencies that more than half a dozen states have already withdrawn the 'general consent' for CBI operations within their territory.

The most fraught and visible example of the underlying tension spilling over into a potential constitutional crisis has been witnessed in West Bengal. Ever since Mamata Banerjee's sweeping victory in the assembly elections last month, the battle-lines have been drawn between a defiant and ascendant state leadership and a wounded and embittered Centre. It is almost as if the ruling arrangement in Delhi has not forgiven Banerjee for giving them a bloody nose in the polls with the toxic edge

to resolve the twin Covid and cyclone challenges, competing egos and contrasting political objectives have resulted in a near-breakdown of the constitutional arrangement between Centre and state. The overnight transfer of Bengal's top bureaucrat to Delhi appears a prima facie vindictive act by the Modi government over allegations that the chief minister and her top officials kept the prime minister waiting for 30 minutes during his visit to the state to review the cyclone damage. Even if the chief minister could have shown greater grace in attending the review meeting, the primary responsibility for a genuine reach out lies with the prime minister's office. Mamata Banerjee deserves the respect due to a three time elected chief minister: she cannot be equated with a governor guilty of playing the worst form of partisan politics or an opposition leader in Bengal whose only role appears to be to harangue the chief

## How the PGI makes us question Meghalaya's Education System

By Cordelia Sawian

The Performance Grading Index (PGI) for the year 2019-20 was recently released and we can see as many as five States and Union Territories scoring 90% while reaching the Level 2 or Grade I++ for the first time with Punjab, Tamil Nadu and Kerala topping the index. Other than these three states, Union Territories of Chandigarh, Andaman and Nicobar Islands also occupied spots in this category with scores between 90 to 95 on a scale of 1000. It is interesting to note here that Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh also improved their overall PGI score by 20% moving up to Grade II and Grade IV respectively.

Let us briefly look at what the Performance Grading Index is. The PGI is a tool to provide insights on the status of school education in States and UTs including key levers that drive their performance and critical areas for improvement. The Department of School Education and Literacy (DoSEL) has designed the PGI to catalyse transformational change in the field

COVID-19 pandemic, we have seen the challenges that many are facing. In our State it is no different. Our state's education system has always been crippled by various challenges and the pandemic has only made things worse. The need for online education and classes has made matters worse, especially for those living in the rural areas who neither have access to android cell phones nor good internet connectivity. In 2020 when COVID-19 hit us, the Education Department came up with a solution of broadcasting online classes through channels like Doodarshan Kendra and also via the radio. The irony here is that neither the Department nor the Education Minister thought of equal opportunities. There are still many houses in rural areas that cannot afford a TV, nor a radio transistor (which I rarely see) or FM stations on their cell phones. How then do they gain access to the much-needed education? I have friends and family members alike who are



of school education. The PGI is expected to help States and UTs to pinpoint the gaps and accordingly prioritize areas for intervention to ensure that the school education system is robust at every level. It is prepared with a set of 70 parameters. The PGI evaluation provides grades to the States and UTs, as opposed to ranking. Grading, by allowing several States and UTs to be considered at the same level, eliminates the phenomenon of one improving only at the cost of others.

It is, however, ironic that Meghalaya has for the third

teachers and also students and I have heard them lamenting the problems they are facing because of the online education system.

An example of a state that actually gained success while bringing changes to its educational system when the pandemic kicked in is that of Gujarat. The authorities knew that 25-30% of its students had very little to no access to learning devices. Responding to this, the state education department prepared a detailed plan and guidelines to ensure that no student was deprived of

**A good and effective education system ensures that all of its citizens are built to nurture the society and become better individuals not only for themselves but the society and nation at large.**

### Letters to the Editor

#### Spare the MeECL pensioners

Editor,  
Your esteemed daily reported, 'Treat MeECL wounds, don't kill it': UDP (ST June 7, 2021), The MeECL wounds need the right medicine rather than cutting and throwing the wounded parts. The body of the MeECL is not just the MePDCL as conceived by our leaders; it has extended families - the pension holders who served the MeSEB and later MeCEL, after corporatization in implementing the Electricity Act, 2003 across the nation.

The reality is that the Corporations born out of State Electricity Boards (SEBs) are actually not doing better than the erstwhile Boards wherever they exist. Whereas the State Government had the responsibility of taking over all the 4(four) entities - the holding company, the MePDCL, the MePGCL and MePTCL, for initial 6(months) and allow them to start independent businesses with zero balance. After six months, the State Government did authorize the Holding Company (MeECL) to take over the other three entities which is continuing

till date with the exception of the MePTCL.

Meghalaya and the MeSEB in particular had survived with the tariff which was revised time and again in the last 35 years from 1975 till March, 2010 with logical increment of tariff with the sanction of the competent authorities.

It's only after Corporatization that power was vested with the MSERC which suddenly disallowed the MeECL from paying pension to pensioners and the family pension holders. This has wounded the hearts of over 3000 elderly citizens and their family members. On grounds of empathy alone the MeECL authorities cannot shirk off their responsibility of paying pension to retired staff and this is a basic human right and also a fundamental right enshrined in the Indian Constitution. All laws and rules are subservient to the Indian Constitution. It is because of this right to live that old-age pension is given to take care of senior citizens. Sudden stoppage of pension is like telling people to stop eating food.

The wound is right here in the hearts of thousand lives. Please treat our wounds.

Yours etc.,  
Thrumen Sangma,  
Via email

#### SC verdict on Dua case

Editor,  
Apropos of the news item 'SC quashes sedition case against Dua' (ST June 4, 2021). On the issue of protection of speech and expression of government activities in a democratic republic is a fundamental right of citizens for assessing whether the system of governance is moving on the right track, in the right direction or needs rectification/reinforcement for improvement. The criticism of government actions can be likened to periodical medical tests of human beings/people/citizens through diagnostic & pathological tests to assess the status of the biological system functioning (Metabolism & Catabolism) and needs medication for keeping operation of the health system running normal.

The crux of the legal tangle in Dua's case has remained unsolved. The apex Bench however rejected the prayer of Dua that no FIR should be registered against any media personnel with 10 years' experience unless cleared by a High Court Committee on the plea that it would amount to encroachment into the domain of the executive. The Indian Judiciary has a unique reputation/distinction of administering its ruling freely, fearlessly and without discrimination or apprehension of any kind. As per the

charges cannot be invoked against a citizen for criticism of government actions as it is in conformity with the freedom of speech and expression. In fact, criticism of government activities in a democratic republic is a fundamental right of citizens for assessing whether the system of governance is moving on the right track, in the right direction or needs rectification/reinforcement for improvement. The criticism of government actions can be likened to periodical medical tests of human beings/people/citizens through diagnostic & pathological tests to assess the status of the biological system functioning (Metabolism & Catabolism) and needs medication for keeping operation of the health system running normal.

The Indian Judiciary has a unique reputation/distinction of administering its ruling freely, fearlessly and without discrimination or apprehension of any kind. As per the

Constitution of India nobody is above law and the rule of law is applicable equally to all citizens of the country including "executives, legislators-MPs & MLAs and all politicians" who are elected by the people.

On the above perspective the demand of the EGI for repeal of the draconian and antiquated sedition laws [Section 124A] that find no place in any modern liberal democracy appears more than justified! After all media personnel are not criminals. Criticism of government actions or governance is neither a criminal intimidation nor a provocation or threat of violence resulting in public disorder to endanger the security of the State.

Right from weather forecasting, forewarning for floods, tracking terrorists' disruptive actions to typhoon devastation and disaster, media persons, risking their lives, lead round-the-clock and serve news for safety of people affected. The Army and disaster management groups take over for rescue, relief and rehabilitation!

It is unfortunate that even after more than seven decades of Independence draconian sedition laws designed by the British rulers to suppress the liberty of citizens including media personnel are still being applied by the

ruling dispensations at the union and state level indiscriminately. The excruciating manner in which such laws are implemented by the law enforcement authorities in different parts of the country leading to pre-trial incarceration, needs further intervention by the Apex Court. The Law Commission of India had also issued a directive in 2018 that for expression of a thought not in consonance with government's policy no individual should be charged with sedition. In effect the Law Commission had underscored that existing/prevalent sedition laws run counter to the protection of fundamental rights as enshrined in Articles 19 & 21 of the Constitution and need to be repealed!

Protest against an attempt to stifle the voices of the citizens and implicating them in criminal offences with even concocted and fabricated charges of treason by the state power in the largest democracy of the world is contemptible. It would be prudent for the government of the people, by the people and for the people to remember - Vox populi, vox dei! (the voice of the people is the voice of God)

Yours etc.,  
Samares Bandyopadhyay,  
Advocate, Kolkata High Court  
Via email

consecutive year been the only state to remain alone on Grade V. This clearly goes to show that our education system is not at all robust and neither is it showing any signs of improvement. Known for having many students coming from across the Northeast to pursue their education in our State, we should be proud of being a booming education hub. But sadly, the PGI results reveal the bitter truth that we can no longer be proud of our education system. The education sector is one of the most important determinants of human resource development and overall performance of a State. A good and effective education system ensures that all of its citizens are built to nurture the society and become better individuals not only for themselves but the society and nation at large.

In Meghalaya though, our education system is far from seeing better days. There are many issues and problems associated with the system in our State but the Education Department and the Education Minister do not take action on what needs to be done to bring a more effective system in place to check all the existing loopholes. Knowing that this sector is of utmost importance, his position needs to be critically examined.

With the onslaught of the

education. Learning was provided at the local levels with help from local authorities, the panchayats (in our case the dorbar shonghs), in promoting peer learning or group studies, home visits by teachers and field staff whenever possible, providing access to online classes at citizen centres, common halls or even offices as well as mobile learning vehicles that would reach the remotest village. Many students benefited from the exemplar and proactive contingency response of the education department in the State.

As the pandemic continues, very little is known of what the state of education will be especially for Meghalaya. It risks leaving a scarring impact on the education sector which is already reeling under a learning crisis. It is high time now for the Education Department and Education Minister to wake up and start devising strategies and means so no child is left behind. There is a need for the Department to craft policies into an integrated COVID-19 response strategy, guiding comprehensive action to ensure that learning continues. Whether or not the Minister has time to do this or the capacity for reimagining of education, is the million dollar question.

Email: csawian@yahoo.com

"Success breeds complacency. Complacency breeds failure. Only the paranoid survive."

— Andy Grove

## The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No. 294 SHILLONG, FRIDAY, JUNE 11, 2021

### Whither education excellence

QUALITY is a casualty when it comes to several aspects of India's progress. This coupled with the characteristic lethargy is a reason why our products as also the exports sector fail to measure up. This has impacted even India's higher education sector and research fields - the cutting-edge areas for the creation of an advanced society. Allocation for education as a percentage of the GDP is abysmal. The result is that India's ancient reputation in the field of knowledge -- exemplified in the Nalanda and Taxila age -- is simply a memory with no resonance to the present.

This thought arises in the context of the latest global ranking of universities that surfaced this week. This annual exercise has always been an embarrassment to India considering the overall low ranking our universities and technical universities of excellence get. This time, just over 20 higher educational institutions from here figure in the list of 'top 1000' institutions. The IIT Mumbai remained as the top best Indian institute and found its rank at 177. IIT, Guwahati, was among the few that found an impressive space while Indian Institute of Science in Bengaluru held its reputation. This apart, there is little for us to crow about. American and British Universities have retained their top slots but even tiny Singapore won better laurels than India in terms of ranking.

Two aspects need special mention here. There cannot be any complaints about the salary structure for university faculty. UGC scales have been impressive for the past few decades. Pension and other benefits too are high. Universities are well-organised entities where the faculty is impressively accommodated and cared for. The morale of the academicians must therefore be high. Yet, the quality of student output is not attaining world standards. There is less emphasis on research or on technological excellence via-a-vis IITs and the like. When Indians got Nobel Prize, other than for Rabindranath Tagore or Mother Teresa, they won it by virtue of their research and study in American or other foreign universities. Having a huge population bulge at 1.35 billion is in itself a burden; more so when quality is a casualty in most respects, and worse so in the education and research sectors. This, notably, has a direct correlation with the quality of India's overall (political) leadership. Shaping a nation towards the path of excellence is no easy job. Thrust areas need to be identified with a clear vision for the future and effective action taken. There must be life beyond vote-seeking via doles.

# Stop giving a political colour to education

By Patricia Mukhim

Politicians have this proclivity to turn every issue into a political omelette. It's not surprising therefore to hear the Shillong MP, Vincent Pala rubbing the latest Performance Grading Index (PGI) Report released recently by the Union Ministry of Education. The Report puts Meghalaya at the bottom of the heap. And Pala's contention based on his limited understanding of the issue is that BJP wants to give the missionary schools of Meghalaya a bad name as they have produced women and men of sterling qualities. But Pala misses the point because he has evidently not gone through the broad framework of the PGI school grading system. The PGI is structured in two main categories - (1) Outcomes (2) Governance & Management and both these categories comprise 70 indicators with a total weightage of 1000.

The PGI is built into the rationale that ensuring an efficient, inclusive and equitable school education system depends entirely on constant monitoring of interconnected parameters comprising inputs, outputs and outcomes to enable a quick response system for course correction. In our time we will recall that Inspectors of School would regularly visit and ask surprise questions or spellings. This kept educational institutions on their toes. Such inspections are a rarity today. So it's just as well that there is a central monitoring system on how schools are performing because many of them including the once famous missionary schools today provide education that leaves much to be desired.

The PGI assesses states' performance in school education based on data drawn from several sources, including the Unified District Information System for Education Plus, National Achievement Survey, and Mid-Day Meal. States are scored on a total of 1,000 points across 70 parameters, which are grouped under five broad categories: access (eg. enrolment ratio, transition rate and retention rate); governance and management; infrastructure; equity (difference in performance between scheduled caste students and general category students) and learning outcomes (average score in mathematics, science, languages and social science). These are mostly self-reported by the States but vetted by the Centre, with National Achievement Survey data also being in-

corporated. On some parameters, such as uneven learning outcomes between students from deprived communities and others, how the States/UTs try to bridge the gap also earns them better scores.

States are graded and not ranked to discourage one-upmanship, "thereby casting a stigma of under-performance on the latter." The Government says the objective is to help the states prioritise areas for intervention in school education. The Education Ministry released the first PGI in 2019 for the reference year 2017. The Centre's effort with the PGI scoring system is to nudge all

PGI REPORT CARD, 2019-20					
STATE	SCORE	STATE	SCORE	STATE	SCORE
Punjab	929	Himachal	839	Manipur	767
Chandigarh	912	Odisha	838	J&K(UT)	763
TamilNadu	906	W Bengal	834	Lakshadweep	754
Kerala	901	Daman&DiU	818	Uttarakhand	752
Andaman	901	Karnataka	813	MP	748
Delhi	898	Andhra	811	Bihar	747
Puducherry	889	UP	804	Assam	738
Gujarat	884	Tripura	801	Mizoram	723
Maharashtra	869	Jharkhand	790	Chhattisgarh	700
DN&H	867	Goa	783	Arunachal	698
Haryana	862	Telangana	772	Nagaland	667
Rajasthan	859	Sikkim	772	Meghalaya	649

States by using a hall of fame approach.

The PGI exercise envisages that the annual index would propel States and Union Territories to undertake multi-pronged interventions that will bring about the much-desired optimal education outcomes. The PGI also helps States/UTs to pinpoint the gaps and prioritise areas for intervention to bring about a robust school education system at every level.

The Congress MP was quick to blame the BJP Government and its attempts to downgrade the so-called missionary schools. Is the MP suggesting that all the children of school-going age in Meghalaya should be attending privately run missionary schools? If so what about Government schools? Should these be folded up because they are the ones that add to the negative reportage?

It's important to understand that the PGI is a tool to provide insights on the status of school education in States and UTs including the key drivers that enhance their performance and show up critical areas for improvement. The tools have been designed by Department of School Education and Literacy (DoSEL) with the sole intent of bringing about a transformational change in

learning outcomes. Sadly learning outcomes are normally measured by the annual exams but we all know that examinations hardly capture the holistic human development and the ethical and moral values of an individual. Hence the PGI focuses on comprehensive learning outcomes. However, measuring learning outcomes is the most challenging domain because it measures an individual's mind and attitudes. The other domains that PGI looks at to enhance learning outcomes is by providing infrastructural facilities and setting up mechanisms to check attendance all of which take much time and patience.

The PGI exercise that started in 2018 and came up with its first report in 2019. It provides a reliable, timely and participative information system coupled with a robust and efficient data analytics framework which is key to successful implementation of any Government programme. The School Education & Literacy framework when combined with the principles of the Right to Education, the National Education Policy 2020 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Government Schemes like Mid-Day Meal (MDM) and similar such schemes by the States would deliver

the desired result if they are monitored effectively. On some parameters, such as uneven learning outcomes between students from deprived communities and others, how the States/UTs try to bridge the gap also earns them better scores. A performance-based grant would provide the required incentive to the States and UTs to ensure their continuous and focused attention to this sector, which is crucial for overall growth and development of the country.

This is a completely transparent grading system for each parameter and sub-topic which are available on the public domain. States can also learn from each other since best practices are shared online. Educationists have called this a laudable initiative but it can work only if governments and Opposition parties don't pull apart and see value in strong and open school education, and work to strengthen access, equity and infrastructure by proper budgeting of fees and funds for universalisation of education.

The PGI model is adapted from Southeast Asia to carry out major reforms in school education in the later decades of the last century. India's school system is beset with poor access for many and equally poor infrastructure. The pandemic has also brought out the inequities between rural and urban students; between those with access to digital technology and those that don't thereby undermining the claim that online education is happening during the pandemic. Indeed, COVID-19 has cast a dark shadow over the education system and we must brace ourselves for a major drop-out of students, from the rural areas and from poor families. This is where the PGI scores can help states to access methods of intervention to stem this attrition.

The data that PGI has mined and the analysis of this data shows that school governance processes are the weakest link in some States. It will take a total transformation in the school governance system for the Right to Education to actually take shape. Some schools couldn't be bothered to offer remedial teaching to students that lag behind through no fault of theirs. Hopefully PGI will keep track of such remiss and compel institutions to be more conscious about affording access to those most likely to drop out of the system.

ing such office becomes a secondary priority for them. Now is the time for the government to analyze and review the administrative reforms from the lowest level to the highest. Implementation of 'One person one post policy' is the need of the hour. Schools in rural areas have to be subjected to intense assessment and monitoring on a regular basis. Frequent inspection by the concerned authority is much needed. Government has to make immediate investment in infrastructure and facilities in rural schools and flourishing towns. Teachers training and allied programmes should be held extensively. The school academic syllabus and curriculum needs revision and review to upgrade the standard of education.

Ironically, the post of Principals and Vice Principals in government schools are filled with political appointees and sometimes through the backdoor. Teachers teaching at the secondary school level with much lesser qualifications are promoted to the post of Principal/ Vice Principal in higher secondary schools bypassing those senior Assistant Lecturers with much higher qualifications and administrative experience. Why is government playing with education? Why does

not spare education from political interference?

Basic amenities in schools need attention as such facilities are left unattended by the government in most rural schools. Revision of the teachers' salaries under SSA, RMSA and other ad-hoc grants must be processed to lift the morale of deserving teachers so that they discharge their duties responsibly.

With the current worst achievement report of the PGI, the state government has now reached another milestone of failure. Is the Chief Minister and the Education Minister even aware and do they understand the shame and disgrace that the state is currently facing after such a report? Three years of governance failure from illegal coal trafficking, poor handling of the second pandemic wave, the MeECL imbroglio to poor education report all add up to a miserable report card for the MDA Government. What next?

Yours etc.,  
OR Shallam  
Panaliar, Jowai

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

## Trust deficit in Government & MeECL compounds public dilemma

By Rudi Warjri

Your editorial of June 5, 2021 regarding MeECL's painful reforms made for interesting reading. As a former member of the Board of Governors, MeECL I have myself written extensively on the several factors that plague the Corporation and its subsidiaries. Several Op-eds have also appeared in your esteemed daily.

The miasma of controversies surrounding MeECL is analogous to the famous poem, "The Blind Men and The Elephant." Six blind

it not be a mere eyewash or rhetoric. This Commission would need independent experts that will not comply with what Government desires but will give a straight and transparent report that is in the best interests of the MeECL. From the several Op-eds that have appeared, there are enough home grown personalities with larger experience who can contribute. Appointment of experts should not be dictated by whims and fancies.

"Everyone should wake up to the latest publication by NITI Aayog on ranking of States as per SDGs ( Sustainable Development Goals ). Meghalaya is in the second division category . Also the necessity of expert advice on any major decisions."

men feel the different parts of the elephant's anatomy and each of them defines the image of the elephant as he perceives it to be or as dictated by a distrust of what the other is saying. So the whole debate suffers from a trust deficit. Hence whatever measures the Government or the MeECL Management undertakes even with the best of intentions, compulsions and explanations are seen with grave suspicion.

The next question that arises now is, inevitably, what are the steps required for removing the trust deficit. My humble submission is as follows :-

A combination of actors, players, power centres etc are involved in this whole drama. Each one of them should accept that arrogance

The other power centres are the several unions and groups within MeECL itself. At the top are the Engineers; They are the principal repository of intellectual properties and leading functionaries in the organization. Invariably, they would have been students of Mathematics and Physics. They may recall what their icon Einstein had said "We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them." So they need to change their mindsets and be prepared to accept reforms.

The political parties, especially those in the opposition have also been part of the mess in MeECL etc. Who am I to tell them not play their politics? There is, how-



and intransigence will get them nowhere. Hence a willingness to meet the other half way is imperative.

Everyone should wake up to the latest publication by NITI Aayog on ranking of States as per SDGs ( Sustainable Development Goals ). Meghalaya is in the second division category . Also the necessity of expert

advice on any major decisions. Internationally recognized economist and former Governor of Reserve Bank of India , Raghuram Rajan, says that lack of expert advice on demonetization and vaccines policy has landed India where it is today . Among several charities is our much-disdained neighbour Bangladesh donating oxygen to India."

The pressure groups which are a parallel government of sorts generally

"Internationally recognized economist and former Governor of Reserve Bank of India , Raghuram Rajan, says that lack of expert advice on demonetization and vaccines policy has landed India where it is today . Among several charities is our much-disdained neighbour Bangladesh donating oxygen to India."

exercise authority without responsibility but without belittling their role on legitimate issues. I make the same appeal to them as to the political parties -- play by the rules and don't play football with the rule of cricket.

Power centres need to recognize one fact. States in India who have done better do so largely because they allow professionalism to be the critical factor if not the overriding factor in running of any organization. Power centres should adopt a moratorium from undue interference and influencing in the day to day running of the organization, especially with regards to appointments, tendering, contracts, procurements, penalization for dereliction of duty etc . The Management itself needs to be scrupulously transparent.

Inability to accept the above conditions means living with more and more, loading shedding and other sufferings forever.

(The writer is ex-Independent Director, MeECL etc., Email : rvwarjri@gmail.com)

### Letters to the Editor

#### Pala's remarks on PGI ranking preposterous

Editor,  
An extremely absurd and ridiculous statement was made by Mr Vincent Pala on the Union Ministry of Education Performance Grading Index (PGI) showing the lowest rank for Education in the state Meghalaya. Indeed Meghalaya was graded 5th in ranking with deficiencies in all categories of the Index from (a) Learning access outcomes and quality, (b) Accessibility and Infrastructure, (c) Equity and (d) Governance process. It's puzzling how a respected and learned individual like Vincent Pala could radically indulge in such outrageous propaganda, casting blame on the BJP central ruling party, without supporting any of his claims with evidence.

From the point of view of religion, yes, Meghalaya does have a majority Christian population and no doubt there are well established Christian schools in the state, however is it the intention of PGI to downgrade state education based on religion? States of Arunachal Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Kerala also

have significant Christian population and Christian institutions and they have been graded very well based on PGI. Now would Pala plead radicalism in such a case, I wonder. Once again where are the sources for his accusation. His expert opinions and claims that are based on his extensive tours across the country must inform him that our state lacks in various aspects in the education sector. I agree that Christian institutions are contributing towards the advancement of education. His statistics on the 30 - 40% government institutes and 60-70% Christian institutes only indicate that Meghalaya would be graded lower than the current status without the Christian educational institutes.

From the vast expanse of things that could be commented on regarding this issue, perhaps making a detailed assessment, analysis and review of the education system, adopting new and improved education policies, improving infrastructure, etc., would help. But Pala has indulged in propaganda sourced from immaturity and contempt. It is a great disappointment not just for the PGI ranking of the state, but also for the point of view that Pala holds. Shouldn't we not as a state move forward in providing quality education to the children, make

amends for the downtrodden situation of unsatisfactory performance and enhance the overall productivity in our region, rather than nibble on the derisive notion of, "Schools where they can brainwash students to demean the popularity of Christianity in Meghalaya?"

Yours etc.,  
Phrangngi Wahlang  
Shillong-8

#### What next MDA Govt?

Editor,  
The latest Performance Grading Index (PGI) of the Union Education Ministry, for school education, places Meghalaya as the state with the lowest scores in the infrastructure and facilities domain thus bagging the title 'Worst Performer in India.' Once upon a time, the state was known as the epicenter for school education in the north eastern region with the potential for being one of the superior education centers in the country. Sadly, we now have to witness the downfall of education in the state. The pride and esteem which everyone once had, has turned into shame and vexation.

What has the government of Meghalaya been doing all this while? Struggling hard

for such collapse? What policy and strategy has the Education Department implemented for such a poor report? The Chief Minister and Education Minister claimed that the report released by the Ministry for the past three years will serve as a tool for the government to analyze areas where improvements are needed. Seriously? Mr. Chief Minister and Mr. Education Minister, do you think we the people of Meghalaya are so naive as to believe in 'Failed and then Act policy' like you do?

In fact, the Department structural system itself is defective. The same bureaucrats are allowed to serve the Department for countless years, both at the Director and Secretariat level. The nepotistic nature of administrative appointment in the Department from the Block to the District level has greatly contributed to the failure of the education in the state. Well deserving and promising incumbents are deprived of their rights even with their higher qualifications, towering experiences and knowledge of the area.

District Mission Coordinators who are the backbone of school education at the district level are mostly appointed from amongst college faculties who are already engaged with their primary duties. Thus, hold-

"Perhaps crisis forces commonality of purpose on one another."

--- Michelle Dean

## The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No. 295 SHILLONG, SATURDAY, JUNE 12, 2021

### Lockdown induced human crisis

CHIEF Minister Conrad Sangma had stated that genome sequencing of the Covid-19 virus in Meghalaya in the second wave confirms the presence of Delta variant of SARS-CoV-2 in the state. Now termed as B.1.617, the double mutant variant refers to the merging of two mutations of a virus strain that go on to form a third, super infectious strain. In dealing with the Covid-19 every day is a new day. Medical professionals and scientists believe that the recent surge in the number of COVID-19 cases in the second wave could be attributed to this Delta variant. They also attribute the rise in cases to the laxity shown at the start of the second wave, which in turn has led to the rise in number of Covid patients requiring hospitalisation and also the number of deaths.

While Meghalaya did not go through an oxygen crisis of the kind faced by Covid patients in other states of India, the death toll here has been worrying especially because younger people with no comorbidities have succumbed to the virus. What is equally of concern about Meghalaya is the low vaccination rate. Despite, multiple messaging and publication of statistics showing that those who skipped the vaccination actually succumbed to the virus, the response has been muted. This vaccine hesitancy will mean more people being exposed to the virus and being unable to fight it. Cases will rise and so too the death toll. This will further delay the unlocking. And that is the crisis point.

The Government needs to understand that people have arrived at a critical juncture where the word "Lockdown" is now the enemy. Because of it they have lost their jobs and are unsure where their next meal is coming from. Many are relying on charity which they find demeaning. Thefts are on the rise. Daily labourers say the only choice they have now is between Covid and Starvation. Things are precarious at the ground. Lives are hanging by a thread. The Dorbar Shnong have done their best out of their own resources and with help from civil society groups, to help the poorest in their localities. The Government is yet to coordinate with them in reaching out to the destitute. In case Government distributes free ration it will do so only to those that have ration cards. The reality is quite a good number don't have ration cards. What happens to them? It's time Government forms a committee of concerned citizens to brainstorm over the future course of action for Meghalaya. Here the role of the MLAs is integral because they are the link between the Government, the people and institutions.

# Present global ranking of Universities problematic

By D. V. Kumar

This is that time of the year when different kinds of global ranking of universities such as THE (Times Higher Education) and QS (Quacquarelli Symonds) are announced. The QS World University rankings has just been announced. When these rankings are announced, there is elation in some Institutions/Universities and heartburn in many others (from India) which could not quite make the cut. Some of these Institutions/Universities will be keen on engaging in serious critical self-reflection and finding out ways and means of improving their rank next time.

What I wish to do here is to critique the present system of global ranking of universities. I know that this is not a popular perspective in the context of severe competition among different universities to do well both at the global and national levels. Apart from these systems of ranking being homogenising (one-size fits all) and hegemonising (to do well at the global level, one needs to necessarily publish in journals located within the West), what I find disquieting about these systems of ranking is that they are very closely related to the 'commodification of education'. Education is being seen less as inherently empowering and critical imagination-enhancing project and more as a technical and utilitarian one. It is increasingly being seen as a commodity, perhaps just like a tooth-paste or a soap. A commodity is a commodity because it has exchange value, that is, it can be exchanged for something else, most notably money. Rice produced by a farmer for his or her own use is not a commodity but when the same rice is taken to the market to be sold there, it becomes a commodity.

Advertisements help in increasing the exchange value to a considerable extent. Therefore we see a lot of money being pumped

into advertisements on soaps and tooth-paste. Universities too need to 'advertise' their degrees and brand image. These different systems of ranking provide a very good platform for them to do so. Students get attracted to the Universities doing well in these systems of ranking and are willing to pay hefty fees. To the best of my understanding no system of ranking which exists today talks about whether students who have come to universities are able to develop critical consciousness and an abil-

ity to engage meaningfully with ideas. Perhaps what Paulo Freire (a very powerful critical thinker) said long ago about the nature of education which was being imparted is relevant here. He argued that the basic aim of



education is to 'consentise the conscience' of those who are receiving education, not merely fill their minds with a lot of information which they are expected to receive uncritically (what he called 'banking concept of educa-

tion'). None of the systems of ranking, in my view, look at this aspect of education i.e. of its ability to deepen the critical consciousness of its receivers. I do understand evolving methodology for examining this is difficult but certainly worth trying for. The basic problem with the present system of ranking is that it treats education as a commodity and by doing so, it emphasises only its exchange value and ignores the use value i.e. education for engaging with exciting

ideas and its empowering potential.

The other important critical aspect which is missed by the global systems of ranking is that it does not address the issue of social inclusion, that is, how representative univer-

*"None of the systems of ranking, in my view, look at this aspect of education i.e. of its ability to deepen the critical consciousness of its receivers. I do understand evolving methodology for examining this is difficult but certainly worth trying for."*

sities are in terms of intake of students from marginalised and deprived socio-economic backgrounds and backward regions. In this respect, it needs to be recognised, that the NIRF (National Institutional Ranking Framework)

done by the MHRD does better than global systems of ranking as one of its five important parameters of ranking is Outreach and Inclusivity (OI). It seeks to rank universities in terms of how representative they are by looking at the socio-economic and regional background of the students. Due weightage is also given to the adequate intake of female students and provision of sufficient facilities to the physically challenged students. This is something that is completely missing from global systems of ranking which have shown least sensitivity to the socio-economic and cultural context. If such a thing were factored into the global systems of ranking, it would not be an exaggeration to say that many universities from India would figure prominently in any global system of ranking of universities. Though the NIRF is certainly an improvement over the international systems of ranking, it too needs some correction as it does not go the whole hog in terms of expanding the range of marginalised and deprived groups of people, especially those coming from the backward regions.

Another serious problem with the global systems (whether THE or QS) of ranking is that they place inordinate emphasis on perception which is totally subjective. If our higher educational institutions were to try to improve their perception at the global level, they would perhaps have to spend considerable resources and adopt mechanisms which have nothing to do with academic aspects. Perhaps it is time that the international agencies relooked at the whole system of ranking of universities by factoring in the role of universities in deepening of critical consciousness among the students and ensuring adequate social inclusion.

(D. V. Kumar is Professor of Sociology, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong)

## Assam Rifles: Foes or friends of the hill people?

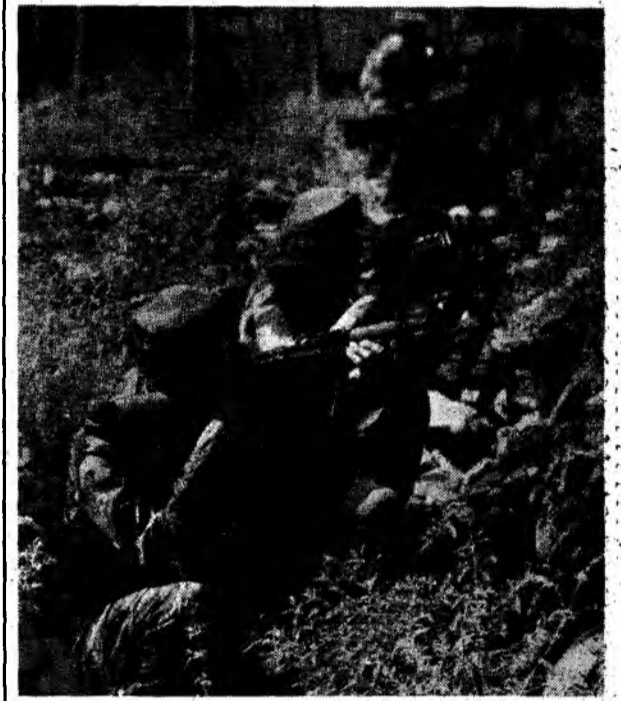
By T S Haokip

'The commander of 44 Assam Rifles, Banglabung shot me,' said Mr. Mangboil Lhouvum of Chalwa village, Kangpokpi District, Manipur in a feeble voice even as he endured the excruciating pains of bullet wounds in his abdomen. 'Tell us the name of the commander who shot you,' yelled a person, and he replied, 'Ashok. Major Ashok shot me.' These last words of the latest victim to an alleged fake encounter perpetrated by the so-called 'Friends of the hill people' were video-recorded while he was taken to Kangpokpi Hospital. The father of four and a daily wage earner, who was allegedly shot by the Major of 44 AR E Coy on the June 4, 2021, succumbed to his wounds before they could even reach the Hospital.

There have been numerous incidents of fake encounters in Manipur in-

sation clarified that all the names of the cadres are with the Government and there is no relationship whatsoever with the deceased? Why was the victim left on his own after being shot if it actually was an operation as claimed by PIB? These are some uncomfortable questions credible answers to which the PIB (Defence wing) and Assam Rifles would find hard to manufacture.

In the past instances, alleged fake encounters committed, involved or were assumed to involve mainly the non-officer ranked soldiers. That gives no justification for their detestable acts but rather a lamentable feeling of abhorrence for the lack of requisite behavioural training for the erring personnel. An Officer Training Academy (OTA) or an Indian Military Academy (IMA) passed out officer, however junior and inexperienced he



volving both state and central security forces. In fact, families of more than 1500 victims of fake encounters have formed an organisation- Extra-judicial Execution Victims Families Association (EEVFAM). For more than a decade now, EEVFAM has been fighting for justice by demanding fresh inquiries, punishment of the guilty security personnel, and compensation to the victims' families. Situations however improved in recent years, post the signing of Suspension of Operations (SoO) with various rebel groups. At a time when the Hill is slowly progressing towards normalcy, an incident such as this rekindles fear in the minds of the public and mistrust of the security forces.

Incidentally, a year ago another innocent man Mr. Thangboi Lhouvum from Kangpokpi District had lost his life soon after he was handed over to the police in 'black and blue' condition by the 38 Assam Rifles. He too was branded a member of the Kuki Revolutionary Army, an allegation the KRA had outrightly denied. A pertinent question that naturally arises now is- if the time has finally come to relook the draconian colonial law-AFSPA. The logic behind the removal of the law from the valleys and the application of it in the hills when most of the hill-based militants are under SoO throws an uncomfortable question; is the silence and timidity of the hill people their biggest mistake that rendered them, scapegoats?

The clarification made by PIB (Defence Wing) circulated widely in print and social media that Mr. Mangboil Lhouvum was killed in an encounter in self-defense is baffling beyond comprehension. Even if the innocent man is presumed to be a member of the Kuki Revolutionary Army as alleged, for argument's sake, why was an operation conducted when there is a suspension of operation? Is there any complaint or intelligence input of any threat to civilians or the security forces? How authentic is the allegation of the victim as member of a militant organisation when the said organi-

might be, is expected at least to possess a basic understanding of human rights, especially the right to life of an innocent person. Such an audacious act of shooting an innocent civilian at point-blank range by an officer in broad daylight reveals two things; either the officer is mentally unstable or he is inadequately trained that he has no respect for the lives of innocent people. In any case, the man with no gentlemanly trait of any kind is unfit to represent the Indian Army as an officer. He is a disgrace to the men in uniform; officers like these are responsible for the decline in public's trust in the security forces; the cowardly act such as this overshadowed all the initiatives taken by the security forces to bridge the gap of trust with the local people.

The Chalwa incident cannot be a chapter that is casually closed with the payment of financial compensation to the victim's family; the memorandum of understanding between AR, GoM and CSOs was effected mainly due to the laudable efforts of CSOs to smother public anger that could culminate into a serious law and order situation.

The incident should not be swept under the carpet as just another case of fake encounter devoid of disciplinary actions being awarded to the erring official; the concerned authority should initiate a high-level inquiry into the whole episode and introspect on their overall strategy and design of their activities in the region. Repetition of such incidents has the breakneck capability to create another Kashmir in Manipur.

If the Assam Rifles truly desires to establish friendship with the Hill people; the emergence of a man like Major Ashok should cease and desist from their rank and file; apart from serious introspection, it will take an effort more humane than planting trees, cleaning roads, and holding medical camps. What is required of them is to ensure the security of the civilians and not unleash fear amongst them; above all, not to shoot innocent civilians.

(The writer is a freelance writer and author.)

### Letters to the Editor

#### Good response from the Education Minister

Editor,  
It was good to see the open-minded reaction of the Education Minister of Meghalaya to the dismal ranking of school education in the state (Shillong Times, June 10, 2021). Hats off to Mr Lakhmen Rymbui for acknowledging that this report, "will help us analyse where we need improvement". Recognition of a problem is the first step towards solving it.

The quotes attributed to the minister and his knowledge of pertinent data demonstrates that he is gearing up to engage with the many deficiencies in Meghalaya's school system. He also provided several examples of specific measures that would be taken in the current year itself. Even the Chief Minister has added his promises of more investment for better infrastructure. This is a hopeful sign.

Unfortunately, the MP, Mr Vincent Pala has rejected the report of the Ministry of Education. He stands on shaky ground. The Ministry of Education report is well-corroborated by the NITI Aayog report of state rankings on the Sustainability Development Goals and the Annual Survey of Education (ASER) conducted by the respected NGO, Pratham Foundation. ASER collects data independently relying on local private partners to collect credible data. For several years, Martin Luther Christian University has been an ASER partner in Meghalaya.

To accuse the BJP of vendetta against Christian education is completely off target. The malaise in Meghalaya's school education has been a chronic problem, long before the BJP came to power. Successive Congress governments did little to adequately address the abysmal state of school education

in the state. No doubt the church schools are of good quality, but this report is not about that.

The Shillong Times of June 9, 2021 carried a report of 26 non-functional lower primary schools in one district alone. Such glaring examples stare us in the face. Mr Pala's mindset of defensive denial will only serve to feed conspiracy theories and contribute to sweeping the problem under the carpet.

Yours etc.,  
Glenn Kharkongor,  
Via email

#### A dilettante view of Education

Editor,  
The statements made recently by Shillong LS Member Vincent Pala in response to the Performance Grading Index (PGI) report on education are shocking. Mr Pala dismissed the last-placed ranking of Meghalaya as baseless, labelling it as a Central conspiracy to "demean the popularity of Christianity" in the state. He seemed to indicate that the ranking is the result of a vendetta against our state, rather than being based on facts and statistics. His claims are nonsensical and hard to believe, since he offers only personal anecdotes and blank rhetoric in his argument against the detailed report which was produced through actual research, but the arguments he goes on to present after these claims are even more appalling.

Mr Pala claims that 30-40% of the state's schools are govt-run, and goes on to say that the data for the report probably considered only these schools, hence the abysmal rank. This is nothing but an admission of the fact that Meghalaya's public schools have seen a cratering of their quality of education over time. However, Mr Pala seems to have no problems if, as he says, nearly half of our students are getting the

very worst education in the nation. The fact that a long term LS representative of our state is more concerned with floating absurd conspiracy theories than with remedying this reality is extremely depressing. In my opinion, Mr Pala should spend some time actually visiting the many rural and even urban schools in Meghalaya and observe for himself the abysmal conditions many of them are operating in. Then, hopefully, he will devote more time and effort to improve this grim state of affairs than he does to make such absurd claims and allegations.

According to the last Census, Meghalaya ranked 24th out of 35 states and UTs in our country in literacy rate. We were placed 6th among 8 NE states alone. Hence, our performance in 2011 was already poor and in severe need of a course-correction. A decade on, the state of education has worsened considerably, and unfortunately, us being the worst-performing state is not some unbelievable hoax, but fully feasible and realistic. It is high time we develop the sense and wisdom to admit these unflattering facts and start working in earnest to fix our schools and give our students the education they deserve. However, if our politicians and leaders continue to reside in a conspiracy-filled bubble instead of doing their duties, the future for education in Meghalaya seems dark.

Yours sincerely,  
N.K. Kehar  
Shillong-3

#### Plight of education in Meghalaya

Editor,  
The performance of Meghalaya as per Performance Grading Index (PGI report card) 2019-2020 released by Union Education Minister is dismal, with Meghalaya ranked at 36th and with just 649 scores out of 1000. Me-

ghalaya, once known as the educational hub especially for the students from North Eastern States and for which we Meghalayans take pride in, has now slid down to the bottom. We cannot turn a blind eye to the recently released PGI report card by assuming that it is a ploy of the Central Government to defame the education sector of our state. Instead, we should make the right moves for improving the scores in the following years. We cannot ignore the PGI report card because the score is derived by using database of 70 parameters such as equity, access, governance processes, infrastructure and facilities, learning outcomes etc that are mostly self-reported by the States and vetted by the Centre, with National Achievement Survey data also being incorporated.

Meghalaya's Education Minister says the PGI report is an eye-opener, and claims that for the last three consecutive years our scores have improved. How? The statement of our MP is even more bizarre. He says only 30-40 percent of educational institutions are run by the government and the remaining by Christian Missionaries which undoubtedly provide the best education in the State with proper infrastructure, facilities, access and best resource persons. So the question arises as to why the government institutions which account for to 30-40% of educational institutions in Meghalaya cannot meet the standards and parameters laid down by PGI.

Development in the education sector of our State will be achieved if and only if the children from all the villages and districts get equal opportunities and access to education. The recent Covid-19 pandemic which had forced us to opt for online teaching and learning clearly depicts a scenario where many children are left behind due to

unavailability of network, electricity problems, no access to smartphones and many other reasons. Though our government had taken up the initiative to broadcast the lessons for students through Doordarshan last year, the success of that initiative has not been measured so far.

The infrastructure of many government schools in our State has improved courtesy the Asian Development Bank (ADB) Funds but there are many schools which cannot meet the criteria laid down by the ADB and so are unable to function. This requires immediate attention. The government should identify such schools across the state provide them financial assistance to improve their school infrastructure. Teaching professionals are the most important resource in education hence their recruitment must be based purely on merit. Medicine and Education are the two fields where there should be no compromise in quality. Failure in these two sectors takes a huge toll. Hence our government must ponder on the PGI report card to improve the education sector of Meghalaya especially since the Chief Minister had claimed that Meghalaya is the first State to implement the National Education Policy -2020.

Yours etc.,  
Anil Singh Roka  
Shillong-2

#### Meghalaya's poor socio-economic grading

Editor,  
A FB friend of mine reposted a former IAS officer's post. I liked the post and ended up visiting his FB page. I found a post of his where he said that 20 African countries are ahead of India in per capita income. I have utmost respect for the said former IAS officer and I'm not trying to pick holes in his argument but I have to say it: What he said is

technically not economically correct. When comparing the economic well-being of different countries, the rule of thumb in economic thought is not to use nominal per capita income but rather to use per capita income in purchasing power parity (PPP) terms. If we use per capita income in PPP terms, then only 12 African countries are ahead of India. I'm not trying to advance a counter argument that everything is hunky-dory when it comes to the state of the Indian economy.

Yes, the Indian economy is in the doldrums but as a State we need to focus on the growth and performance of the economy of our own state. The fate of the people and youth of Meghalaya is in the hands of the State leaders, and this leads me to the second point I want to make. With regards to the report that came out in your paper (ST June 10, 2021) about Meghalaya being the worst performer in education primarily because of poor infrastructure and facilities, to be completely honest, it doesn't matter whether you're at the bottom or the top. What is more important is employment and employability. Right now the youth unemployment in the country is hovering around the 30 percent mark and the highest unemployment rates is among the highly educated. At the end of the day, it all comes down to gainful employment. So when it comes to creating gainful employment for our own youths, I still think the onus falls more on the State government rather than on the Central Government. Like I said earlier, our destiny is in our own hands.

Yours etc.,  
Gary Marbaniang,  
Via email

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

# On four wheels

Travellers are more mindful about following protocols of social distancing and ensuring proper sanitisation and hygiene at all times for a hassle-free travel experience in the current scenario. Caravans are considered a saviour in these times for those who want a comfortable road trip experience. Caravan trips may seem like an expansive mode of travel. Jigyasu Joshi, Co-Founder, Carvaa Travelers Private Limited speaks to *IANSlife* on why caravans are an economical and viable option for all budget groups.

**Q: Is caravan travelling as a trend is gaining ground and is the Indian traveller ready for the concept?**

**A:** We started working on launching Carvaa Travelers back in 2019. It has been 2 years and when we see the overall current tourism market, there is a significant increase amongst travellers looking for road trips options. The pandemic has further fuelled the trend to minimise human contact and ensure safety and hygiene conditions.

People have now started to experiment with their road trips and that is where caravanning comes in. We have come in contact with numerous people who either want to rent the Caravan for their next trip or buy one for themselves. We have received an overwhelming response for our Caravans. Not just in terms of renting but also manufacturing. So in a way, travelling in a caravan as a trend is surely and gradually picking up.

The best part about travelling in a caravan is that it gives you an immense sense of liberty and that is the very essence of travelling. The freedom of stopping or staying at a point that offers a picturesque view of a place, the freedom of sleeping under the starry night sky, freedom of cooking a fresh meal while on the move are some of the many things that make caravan travelling a wonderful preference.

**Q: As safety is still a major concern in India, how do you manage the upkeep and sanitisation of the Caravans?**

**A:** Safety does remain a point of concern when you are travelling. In order to deal with it, we make sure that whichever place the travellers are halting the van is first reviewed by our caretaker-cum-driver that goes along with the vans. Only after speaking with the locals nearby the halting area, we stop at the



place overnight. Apart from this, we have certain associations with homestays, camping areas, hostels and resorts in some parts of India where a traveller can go and park the van safely within their premises. We also have a very efficient GPS system in our Caravans and there is also an SOS button in times of emergency.

However, travelling in a caravan is a pretty safe experience as one is always in charge of their sanitisation plus you don't have to eat outside food as you can cook inside the van.

Moreover, we have hosted many couples, families and groups of friends in our Caravans and none of them has faced any major inconveniences or trouble. In fact, on Women's Day this year, we did a Caravan pool trip where 7 girls from various parts of India travelled across Himachal Pradesh for 10 days. It was totally a safe journey for them.

In order to keep our caravans hygienic, we take a one day's time

between each booking and the Caravans are sent for a wash and basic servicing. Also, before handing them over to a traveller, we sanitise all the spaces inside and outside the vans.

**Q: Is the popularity only restricted to metros, or do you get bookings from other cities as well?**

**A:** When we launched Carvaa we expected that our major clientele would be from metropolitan cities such as Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore, among others.

However, it was a surprise for all of us that the bookings and the queries started coming from all parts of India in the initial days itself. This boosted our morals and made us realise that travellers from across the country are willing to explore and travel in caravans. Our social media presence and reach, especially Instagram has also been instrumental in many ways to get bookings and queries from various parts of India.

**Q: How is a caravan designed to make it comfortable for travellers and challenges faced in setting it up?**

**A:** We're currently operating with two Caravans, called 'Fine' and 'Rare'. Both the caravans have been thoughtfully designed by us. We have engineered them keeping in mind the comfort of travellers within the limited space inside the vans.

With a capacity to accommodate 5 people, caravan 'Fine' is equipped with most of the essentials one might need during a trip. There is a well-stocked Kitchenette, Utensils, Drinking Water, 180 litres of water for other purposes, washroom, camping tents, a portable music speaker, pillows and quilts, among other things. While we choose to call it 'Fine', the travellers can call it by any name they feel sounds best for it. As for the sleeping space, the camper van has a master bed, 2 sofa-cum-beds and 2 berths. Beautiful LEDs on the ceiling make for a perfect ambience at night.



The van also has a washroom with a shower. The shower can be fitted outside the van as well for taking bath in the open. There is enough storage space inside the camper van that can fit all your stuff. The modular kitchen has a 5-kg LPG cylinder and all the utensils for cooking your meals.

With a capacity to accommodate 3 people, caravan 'Rare' is an apt choice for the adventure seekers. The van promises comfort and utility even on rugged routes. The caravan is equipped with almost all the essentials you might need during a trip. It comes with a well-stocked Kitchenette, Utensils, Drinking Water, 130 litres of water for other purposes, washroom, camping tents, a portable music speaker, pillows and quilts, among other things. The modular kitchen has a 5 kg LPG cylinder and all the utensils for cooking your meals. Apart from a sofa-cum-bed for sleeping, the roof of the van opens up revealing a cosy bunk bed covered from all sides. There is enough storage space inside the camper van to fit all your stuff. While we choose to call it 'Rare', the travellers can call the Caravan by any name they feel sounds best for it.

Since we have modified the Caravans all by ourselves, there were numerous challenges that we faced. The biggest of them all was the challenge to arrange for required resources for building the interiors. There was a dearth of dealers dealing in appropriate items that we needed for the modification when we started fabricating our vehicles. It was a Herculean task to find out the right equipment without compromising on its quality. Apart from the infrastructural hurdles, understanding the rules and regulations around Caravans was also a tedious job. We had to run from pillar to post in order to get the right paperwork done for the Caravans.

**Q: Are Caravans an expensive or economical option for travelling? What are the costs involved and how does it compare to other modes of travel?**

**A:** In my opinion, travelling in a van is the most sustainable way of travel. It is a way of travelling that allows you to manage your work in the most efficient ways. It allows you to keep that balance between working and exploring. You could be sitting by a river bank while working on your laptop at one point of time and you may be sitting in the middle of a green pasture while working the next moment.

Travelling in a caravan can be a luxurious or an economical option based on one's comfort. We, at Carvaa Travelers, are aiming to make caravan tourism an affordable mode of travel in India. So, we have two Caravans -- one in which 5 people (excluding driver) can comfortably sleep in and the other with a capacity to accommodate 3 people (excluding the driver). One doesn't need to book a separate accommodation as the vans can be their humble abode for the road trip. We charge on a per-day basis and the charges for a 5-person Caravan and 3-person Caravan is Rs 6,000 per-day and Rs 5,500 per-day respectively (inclusive of Driver and GST). The fuel, state and toll taxes are not included in this price and have to be borne by the travellers.

In terms of cost, the per-day per-person cost in our caravans is as low as Rs 2,400 that includes the stay, commute, fuel, state taxes, road taxes and also a caretaker-cum-driver. Travellers don't have to pay extra for the local commute they do for exploring the city. They do save a good amount of travelling in the caravans and apart from that, given the current pandemic-era we are living in, it is also a safe way of travelling to a place.

(By N. Lothungbeni Humtsoe)

# A selfie from Mars

China has revealed new images from its Zhurong rover on Mars, including a beautiful selfie of the rover next to its landing platform.

The first batch of scientific images of the rover, the panoramic view of the landing site, the topography of Mars were released by the China National Space Administration (CNSA) on Friday, calling it "tour group photos".

Zhurong joined NASA's Perseverance on Mars, making China the second country to land and operate a rover on the Red Planet.

The picture of the "touring group photo" shows the rover travelling about 10 metres south of the landing platform, releasing the separate camera installed at the bottom of the vehicle, and then retreating to the vicinity of the landing platform.

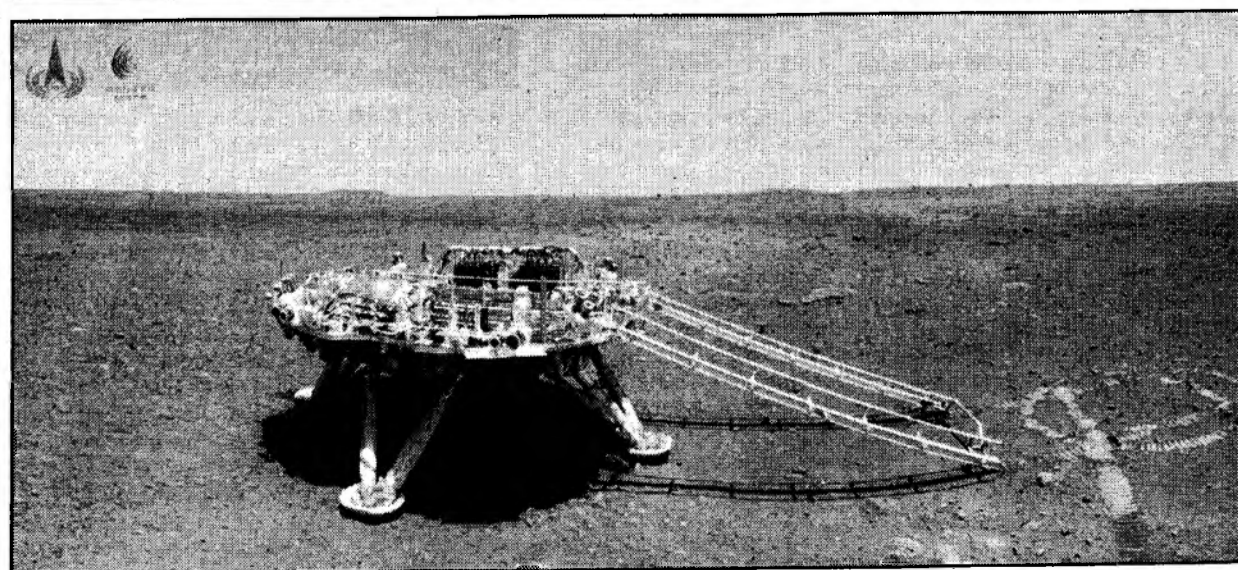
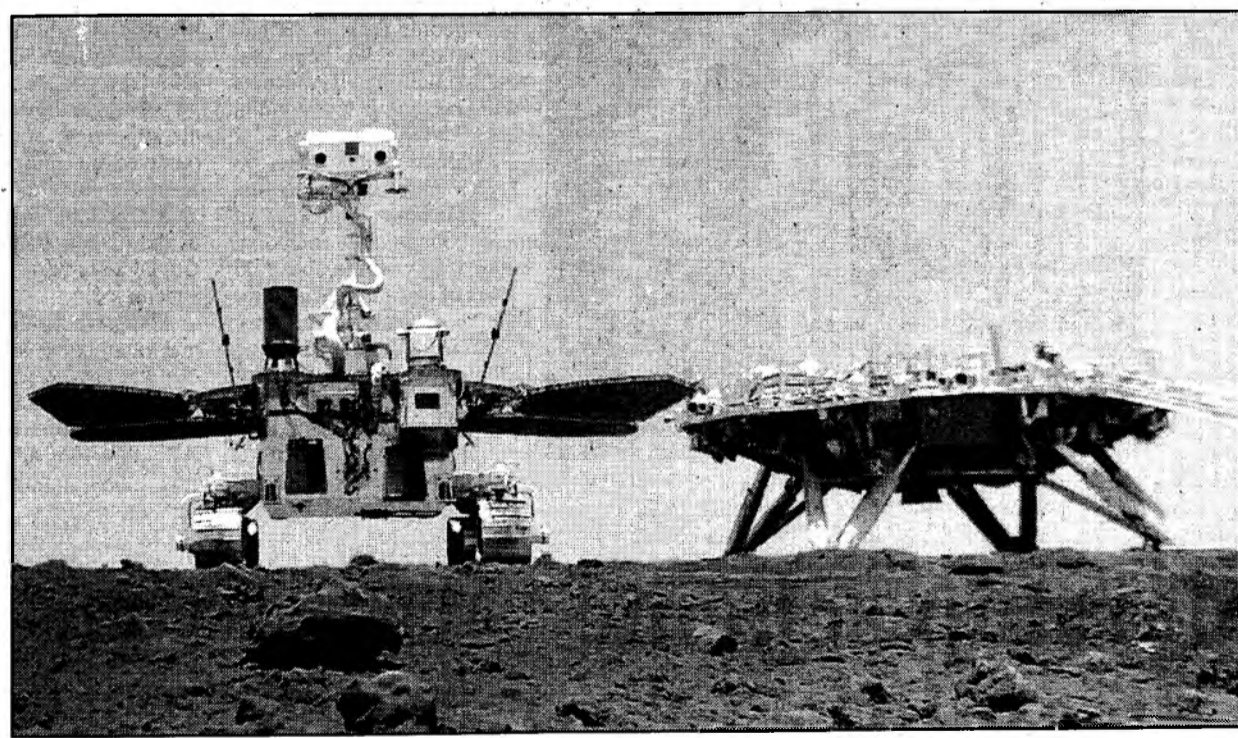
"The separate camera took pictures of the movement of the rover and the photo of the rover and the landing platform. The image is transmitted to the rover through wireless signals, and then relayed back to the ground by the rover through the orbiter," CNSA said in a statement.

China landed a probe on a planet other than Earth for the first time on May 15.

The Zhurong robot is due to study the planet's surface rocks and atmosphere. It will also look for signs of life, including any subsurface water or ice.

The six-wheeled solar-powered Zhurong rover resembles a blue butterfly and has a mass of 240 kg. It also has an expected lifespan of at least 90 Martian days (about three months on Earth).

Barely a week after its arrival, Zhurong also sent back first footage from Mars — two photos and two videos. (IANS)



# Think about 'thinking'

Here's a book that will get you thinking about thinking.

Canadian psychologist John Paul Minda's *How To Think: Understanding the Way We Decide, Remember and Make Sense of the World* (Hachette) is a comprehensive and accessible overview of how the brain works and how you think, learn, remember, make choices and experience the world.

In the current era of big data, algorithms and AI, knowing about how humans think — indeed, how you think — is more important than ever before.

We understand more about the brain than ever before and we also have more tools than ever before to help us think. This book will show you how your brain works, how your mind works, why we all make certain mistakes in thinking and why that's not always a bad thing.

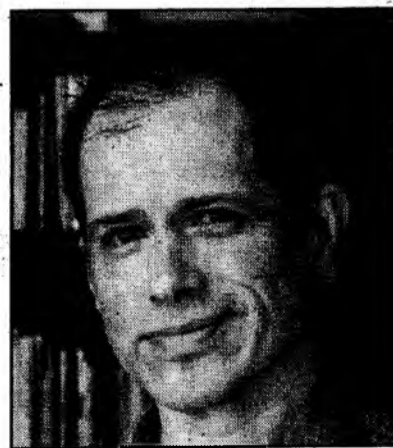
In order to understand how people behave, you need to understand how people think. And if you want to understand how people think, you need to have a basic understanding of cognitive psychology, cognitive science and cognitive neuroscience.

This book explains cognition and the links between the brain, the mind and behaviour in a clear and straightforward way.

Through interesting case studies and research examples, Minda shows how the brain is involved in mental activity, how memory works, how language affects thought, how good (and bad) decisions are made, and why we make predictable errors in our thinking. With practical applications for everyday life, this is a book that helps us become better

thinkers, better learners and better problem-solvers.

Minda is a professor of psychology at the University of Western Ontario, Canada. He has been studying the mind and brain for over 20 years and has written extensively on the topic of how people think. He is the author of the textbook *The Psychology of Thinking*. (IANS)



Understanding the Way We Decide, Remember and Make Sense of the World

# Gaming BOOM

The gaming market in India has seen tremendous boom in the last few years and will continue to grow as the development and advancement in technology continues to happen even as we speak. *IANS*Life spoke to Sapna Bhutani, co-founder of Mystery Rooms real-life escape games, on her views on how the pandemic gave a boost to the Indian gaming industry.

## What is the company offering?

Mystery Rooms as India's first live escape experience has opened a window to wide experiences that a person can have today besides just watching a movie or going on a dinner night. Limited number of available options in entertainment and lack of choices to organise a unique personalised event with just your people around had made the city life monotonous.

Suitable for all age groups, it's actually one of a kind experience where kids can play together with their parents or even grandparents. It is a means of safe adventure and adrenaline rush that you can experience without having to jump from the mountains or diving deep in the sea! Besides being an entertainment destination, Mystery Room is also a unique team building exercise that every corporate is engaging in. Solving a Mystery Room mission involves brushing up all mandatory skills which end up making the teams efficient and all the more bonded.

Today, Mystery Rooms aims not only at breaking the monotony of the city life but at offering experiences that are fun, adventurous, highly immersive, captivating and that encourages the 4 C's of 21st-century learning i.e. Communication, Collaboration, Creativity, and Critical Thinking.

## How do you see the gaming industry in India taking shape?

India is one of the global leaders in the gaming industry owing to its vast user base. The industry has seen tremendous boom in the last few years and will continue to grow as the development and advancement in technol-

ogy continues to happen even as we speak. The audience for the gaming industry is no longer limited to the gen x population but has opened its arms for all age groups which makes the industry a giant open market. In the current challenging times, the gaming platforms have become virtual social spaces serving consumers' desire to connect with their friends or family in a fun way.

## What changes have the lockdown brought to the industry?

The pandemic has affected every

means that you need not come in contact with anyone outside your team.

The lockdown helped us widen our horizon and create experiences that our customers can enjoy being at home. This was indeed never a plan but we had to find a way to reach our customer and stay connected with them amidst these crazy times.

Mystery Rooms launched its first ever online game in the initial days of the lockdown and was an instant hit. Since then we have broadened the choices of online experiences available at Mystery Rooms that

## With outdoor games getting limited during Covid times, how do you think mystery rooms can help?

Rooms is currently offering an array of on-line experience to its customers across the globe which is as engaging and stimulating as any of our physical rooms. They not only give you an opportunity to connect with your friends but also help you challenge your wits while you are still bound to the boundaries. The following are our appreciated products for virtual birthday parties and online team events

**Mystery Kits:** These are easy to set up Print And Play missions which one can enjoy with their family.

**Live Streaming-** An highly immersive experience hosted by our Gamemaster in our physical location through Live

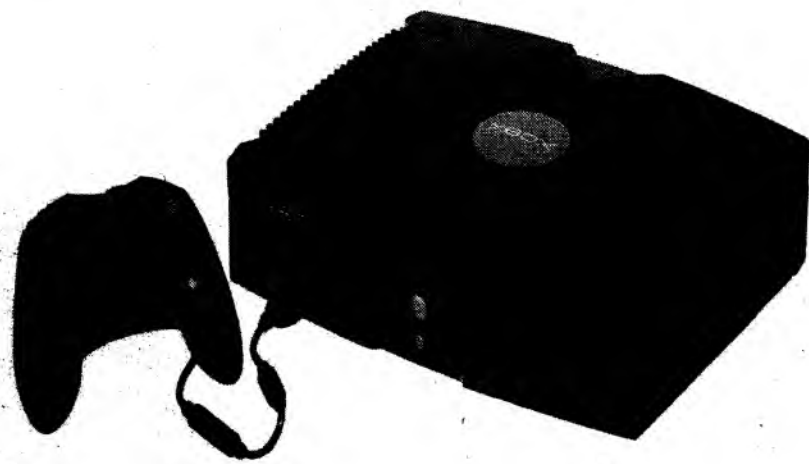
**Online Games-** These anytime anywhere mystery games are available on our portal and are a hit amongst corporate.

**Mystery Box:** Delivered to your door steps Mystery Box is a ready to play escape room experience packed in a box.

## What are your plans for future?

We have headed towards technology driven rooms which are highly immersive and more interactive in nature. Technologies like Augmented Reality are also being integrated in our future rooms. Presence of a character to make the mission all the more real is being introduced in our upcoming center in Gurgaon. The brand aims to reach all cities of India through the Franchise model in order to make the Mystery Rooms experience accessible in every corner of the country.

(By Pooja Gupta)



industry in its own way but has also created an opportunity for every business to grow online and make ways to reach its customers. Mystery Room has always been very cautious about the safety of its customers and employees and has adapted all possible measures to make the experience in our physical escape rooms safe and secure. Also, Mystery Rooms experiences are completely private which

once can enjoy from the comfort of their home being connected with their team members from anywhere in the world. Since these games are played online, they helped us penetrate the international market and today we have regular customers from countries like US, UK, Canada etc. Owing to the amazing response we have received for these at home experiences, we will continue to host them post Covid.

# Art, culture & the Mughals

Enter the splendid world of Mughal India and explore its rich aesthetic and cultural legacy through fresh insights in *Reflections on Mughal Art & Culture* (Niyogi Books).

Recent scholarship in this field has offered deeper analysis into established norms, explored pan-Indian connections and drawn comparisons with contemporaneous regions of the early modern world. Further studies along these lines were encouraged in a seminar at Mumbai's K.R. Cama Oriental Institute and the formidable scholarship presented by contributors forms the content of this volume, edited by Roda Ahluwalia, an independent scholar of South Asian Art, with an interest in painting and the book arts, religio-philosophical thought and the material culture of South Asia.

The 13 essays by internationally famous experts in the book explore varied subjects under the Mughal umbrella, challenge long-held ideas and draw comparisons between the artistic expressions and material culture of the powerful Islamicate triumvirate of the early modern period-the Safavids in Iran, the European-based Ottomans and the Mughals in the Indian subcontinent.

Themes as diverse as portraits of royal women, sub-imperial patronage of temples, word-image relationship, the lapidary arts and the Imperial Library of the Mughals (at London's British Library) are featured in the book. Murals painted on architectural surfaces, the textile culture of the city of Burhanpur, changes in visual language and content of painting, and Imperial objects d'art have been discussed, challenged and analyzed.

The final three articles are groundbreaking comparisons across the Ottoman, Safavid and Mughal spheres.

This beautifully illustrated book is sure to appeal to connoisseurs, collectors and scholars alike.

Here's a sampling from the book:

An essay by Mika Natif focuses on Mahim Anaga, foster mother of Akbar and his advisor, and Hamida Banu, Akbar's mother - and chief wife of Humayun.

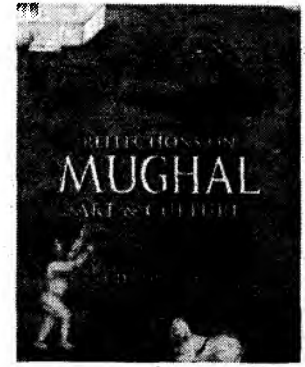
Many beautiful paintings, a chapter on the important documents of the Mughals - showing their imperial seals (Ursula Sims-Williams), a chapter on the jewellery and stone carving of the Mughals (Susan Stronge), Decorative art objects at the National Museum, Delhi (Anamika Pathak)

"Muslim Kings, Hindu Temples" by Catherine Asher. Many Hindu temples were built during the time of the Mughals - by Hindu courtiers. For example, there's the Adinath temple at Ranakpur, temples in Chittor, and temples built by Raja Man Singh (Govindā Deva Temple in Vrindavan) and Jagat Shiroman in Amber.

Gulru Necipoglu compares the Ottomans in Turkey, the Safavids in Iran and the Mughals in India - comparing large buildings such as mosques and palaces made to impress both the local people and foreign travellers.

Roda Ahluwalia is currently a visiting scholar of Jnanapravaha, Mumbai, where she lectures on Mughal, Deccani and Pahari painting for the 'Indian Aesthetics' programme, and a member of the Governing Board of the K.R. Cama Oriental Institute.

She has worked with the Rajput painting and manuscript collections of the British Museum and the British Library. Among her publications are a book titled *Rajput Painting, Romantic, Divine and Courty Ari from India* (2008) and various articles on Indian Painting. (*IANS*)



## 'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambl

Sunday, JUNE 13, 2021

Moon trine Neptune on your solar return chart and it will give favorable results for the whole year. You will get lot of opportunities to make progress in life. Money inflow will be continuous. You will like to explore some new business. And could enter into partnership or joint venture. You will use your communication skills to the best of your advantage. And will win big contract or work order for your concern. You can also get involved in some exciting love relations. They will go a distance. You will plan to get married and get settled in life. Students will study hard and get success in exams/interviews. Those looking for jobs abroad will get success. Those in creative line of work will also get acclaim. You can be facilitated publicly for your contribution to society. You will look after your family members well.

Aries: (March 21 - April 20)

It is going to be a peaceful week. You will be a lot more relaxed and look towards life with a positive attitude. You will look after your elders well and take care of their health. You will also complete your pending tasks. You will also earn profits in your profession. Your respect will also increase. New job opportunities will be available. Positive events will also take place. You will be spending some quality time with your family. Marriage proposals for singles will come. You will also be keen in making new friends. Your name and fame will spread far and wide. Financial position is going to be strong and stable. You will develop interest in Yoga, Meditation and prayer.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21)

You will earn profits in your profession. Your self respect will also increase. Your financial position will get better. New job opportunities will be available for you. You will also get connected politically with important personalities. You will also benefit from your relatives and friends. A big order or deal may also come your way. You will also meet high ranking officials who will help you in moving forward in your life. You will spend wonderful time with your family. You need to cut your expenses. Your situation will also improve. Your desired tasks will get completed. Your mind will also be kind and happy. You will turn religious and spiritual in nature.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21)

You will have great mental peace. You will also recover money from somewhere. The matters of your family will also get top priorities. You will also meet an old friend of yours. It will make you feel relaxed and happy. The condition of your business will also improve. You will have wonderful bonding with your mate. You will also make positive changes in your life style. You will also recover money that was stuck somewhere. All the judicious investments during this time will prove to be beneficial in the future. You will also have good working relations with your bosses and colleagues. Your time will keep getting better. You will also meet lot of influential people.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22)

It is going to be a week of mixed fortunes for you. You will have a misunderstanding for some person. Your enemies and opponents will be a cause of worry. You will also have a fight with your spouse. But matter will get resolved. You will also have monetary benefits. With your strong will power you will start moving towards success. You will also face every problem with the help of your intelligence and cleverness. You will complete your work peacefully. The time is extremely favorable for you. You will also make many plans to gain profits. Your health will be good. Take care of your diet and eat healthy food. You will also impress your boss with your attitude.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23)

There will be positive developments that will make you feel happy and better. The time is extremely favorable for you. You will complete your work peacefully. Husband and wife will understand each other's feelings and lend support to each other. You will also make many plans to gain profits. You will also have good working relation with your bosses. Do not lend money to someone otherwise it will get stuck. Some important decisions need to be taken in your personal life. To earn money will be your target. Your confidence will be high. You will also receive support from your brothers. An atmosphere of happiness will surround your family. You will feel very active and energetic. Peace and harmony will prevail at home. Long, quality time with your friends and feel rejuvenated. Your health

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22)

A tricky situation will arise all of a sudden. You will be tensed about the poor health of your elders or parents. But you will face this situation bravely and come out winner. Your friends will support you a lot. You will have a favorable time in your business. You will have financial gains. You will also spend quality time with your friends and feel rejuvenated. Your health

Libra: (September 23 - Libra 23)

Your efforts will bring in lot of money. Despite stiff competition you will perform well. New job/business opportunities will keep coming. You will have good financial gains and you will remain busy in your work. You will also spend your money wisely. Those in business should be alert in public dealings. You will also share good relationships with your spouse/partner. Your family will support you. You will also like meeting people. You will also get chances of investment. You will also carry out worldly activities very calmly. You will also use your capabilities in your career, profession, spirituality and religion. Students will focus entirely on their studies and will be able to concentrate much better.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22)

You will definitely achieve something big in your life. Fate will be on your side. Your status in society will grow. Your friends and family members will give you good support. You will enjoy their company. There is also possibility of buying some new item in the house. All efforts and tasks related with children's education will get completed. Students will study with concentration. You will also receive a favorable news. Your time will improve and new opportunities will come up. You will also get an important post. All your held up work will get completed. You will also focus on your targets and meet them too. Your popularity, name and fame too will also rise.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 23)

It is going to be a wonderful week. There is Yog of promotion in your job. Your bosses will be very supportive. You may also begin a new work. Days will bring joy and health. You will get success in every work. People associated with technical jobs will reap more benefits. You will benefit from your inheritance. You will also make contact with new people. Politics may attract you. You will spend your time having fun with your friends and close people. You will achieve success in your business. The whole week is full of happiness. You will have some positive changes in yourself. It will make you feel better and confident. And you will be more assertive and achieve your goals.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20)

Your importance along with your work will increase. Your work condition will be better and you will spend time enjoying yourself. You need to be careful about your health. You may mess up your work due to your carelessness. Avoid being over confident. At your workplace keep your documents safely so that your enemies could not harm you in any way. You need to limit your expenses. These are the days that you succeed in government related matters. Your subordinates will fully support you. Peace and harmony will prevail in family relations. You will have good equation with your mate. You will also receive the full support of your parents and in-laws.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18)

The start of the week will be pleasant. You will be happy. These are good days in terms of money. You will also hear some good or pleasant news. Due to your strong will power you will start moving towards the path of success. Your enemies and opponents will not be able to harm you. There will be peace and harmony with people around you. Prepare well for interview/exam. You will be mentally peaceful. These are enlightenment days. You will have the desire to do something new for yourself for which you will learn a lot of things. This will take you to the road of success and prosperity in life. And you will be getting lot of benefits from others.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20)

Your career related problems will get resolved. Keeping your mutual enmity aside, you will focus on your work. Obstacles will get removed under the guidance of experienced person. Your time will be spent on reading interesting and educational literature. Your work efficiency will be enhanced. You will meet old friends. Your presentation will also be terrific. Time will be in your favor. You will be able to complete all your tasks. You will also do meditation and prayer. Your efforts will be met with success. You will also plan to do something big in your life. Those who are single will get suitable marriage proposals. Your family will give consent and provide you full support.

# Child Rights as a Career Option

By Ranjan K Baruah

Most of us have seen children on roads which may differ from place to place but the fact is that we still see children out of schools in our country. It is not only in one or two nations but there are many countries where children are not able to get their rights like education apart from others. When kids are not in school means they are either working somewhere or engaged in activities which may not be positive for them.

The number of children in child labour has risen to 160 million worldwide - an increase of 8.4 million children in the last four years and the agriculture sector accounts for 70% of children in child labour, followed by 20% in services and 10% in industry. There are many issues affecting children like child abuse, trafficking, child marriages, child labour, child health, addiction, etc. We are aware that 12th June is observed around the world as World day against Child Labour.

All children have rights to get education and other rights like any other citizen. In spite of having children's rights many are deprived of those rights. One of the worst forms of violation of child rights is none other than child labour. The other issues related to children are equally crucial and it is important to address all these issues to bring solutions. Can we think of our career working with children or their rights? Yes, this is possible and we can make our careers in the field of child rights or children's welfare.

There are many courses which enable one to be in this field but one must be passionate when it comes to work with children from different backgrounds. Whenever we talk about rights, we must work with economically challenged people or people living in difficult situations. One may choose to study Social Work or similar course of humanities and



later do some specialization with children issues. Certificate Course in Child Protection, Certificate /Diploma Course in Child and Adolescent Counselling, Online Course in Child Protection, Post Graduate Diploma in Child Rights law, Certificate Course on Child Rights and Child Protection, Post Graduate Diploma in Child Rights and Governance, etc. Like rights issues there are other courses on health rights, nutrition, etc. There are many online courses available from different universities which can be completed digitally.

Organizations like the United Nations Children's Fund or popularly known as UNICEF are focused in areas of child rights. There are government departments related to child welfare or child development apart from social welfare. There are posts in government like Child Development Project Officer (CDPO) and government services like Integrated Child Development Services popularly known as ICDS. We have heard of 1098 or Child Line which

is working on issues related to child rights and welfare. There are different job opportunities in these organizations. If someone wants to work abroad then s/he may learn foreign languages like French or Spanish.

Many other skills and attributes are required to be successful in the field of child rights like effective communication, patience, hard work, capacity to work in different situations, cope up with situations, etc. One should love travelling and visiting remote areas and challenging areas when ever needed. There are challenges as well opportunities in this field as there are many children out of schools and engaged in other activities. Being in this field we can ensure the rights of all children and give them a bright future.

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

**"Always make a total effort, even when the odds are against you."**  
—Arnold Palmer

**The Shillong Times**

Vol No: LXIII No. 296 SHILLONG, MONDAY, JUNE 14, 2021

**Defections, Democracy**

WE have come a full circle to another round of defections. The Congress party has seen the exit of a prominent youth face, Jitin Prasada, to the rival BJP bandwagon in the run-up to the Uttar Pradesh Assembly polls. BJP, on the other hand, suffered a loss of face in West Bengal when its top functionary Mukul Roy ended his short-lived fascination for the saffron politics and returned to the Trinamool Congress. Both these defections show ideology is simply a matter of personal interests for politicians. This is a far cry from the days of Independence some 75 years ago and raises a question mark on the claims that Indian democracy is maturing. More defections are in the offing from the Congress as Sachin Pilot is getting restive in Rajasthan yet again and started dictating new terms. The exit of another youthful face from the Congress to the BJP, Jyotiraditya Scindia in Madhya Pradesh, some time ago should be a lesson to defectors. He has not been given any plum post and is caught between the devil and the deep sea. Possibilities of defection are strong in Karnataka too, where the BJP is a divided house.

A good thing about the defection scene, however, is that it is not easy for defectors to pull down governments as they could in the days of Aya Rams and Gaya Rams in Haryana and other states. The anti-defection law brought forward by Rajiv Gandhi while as Prime Minister in 1985 ended that era. It was stipulated that if less than one-third of the number of legislators of a party defected, they would cease to be MLAs or MPs. This brought about a much-needed stability to governments, many of these having had to remain in power with narrow margins be it in the assembly or even parliament. The ideology of the Congress and the BJP are diametrically opposite in real terms. For the Congress, the first priority is secularism; socialism having taken the back seat. For the BJP, secularism is anathema. Jitin Prasada is obviously sensing the steady loss of relevance of the Congress on the national stage and jumped ship when the nearest opportunity beckoned him. That is, the approaching UP assembly polls, where he could be of some help to the BJP. In the case of Mukul Roy, shamelessness is his first name when it comes to defections. He has been with the Congress, the Trinamool, the BJP and is now back in the Trinamool. Chances are that his end as a politician is nearing.

# NCERT faux pas: Our advantage

By H H Mohrmen

The North East is again not included in the prescribed textbook of the NCERT and it was not until Patricia Mukhim brought this to light in an article published in The Quint that we were made aware about the embarrassing mistake. But rather than engaging in a blame game, it would be interesting to look at how this could pan out to be to our advantage. Taking advantage of the faux pas, the question that needs to be asked is if Meghalaya is to be included in the text book how do we wish to describe the state? Or how will we present the area to the young learners of the country?

As such this is a reading into the important facets of the people who live in the Khasi Jaintia portion of the state only because they are ethnically of the same stock. Culturally they are unique because lineage is taken from the mother and clan plays a vital role not only in the family life but in the social life of the people too. For instance, traditional offices in the raid or the hima are based on the primordial clans of the area. Most clans trace their origin to the stories of their 'lawbei' primal mother and they are related according to the clan they belong to. People who live in these two regions are united by their culture. They have the same food habits and their way of life is identical in every respect.

**Mythologies and Stories**

Story telling is an integral part of the life of the people here. They weave stories about nature and everything around them. The story telling tradition is not limited to grandmother/father telling stories around the fire place. Story telling traditions which still prevail in the Niamtre, Niam Tynrai are ka Choh syiar, ka Choh fia and other traditions. They tell stories which connect them with nature and even the celestial bodies in the sky. The most prominent of all stories is the creation story which speaks about the origin of the tribe. Originally it is believed there were sixteen huts in heaven of which seven descended to earth and the nine huts remained with the creator. The people who live in these hills are the descendants of the seven huts who descended from heaven via an umbilical cord called the 'sopet bng'

In the past people did not record their stories and traditions because they believe that it should only pass from one mind to another and one tongue to another (nei jabié ha i jabié, n u

thylliej ha u thylliej). This is how the stories and traditions passed from one generation to another.

**Language**

Although they speak different dialects which are sometimes unintelligible to one another, yet they all belong to the same Austro Asiatic Monkhmer language group. They write the Sohra Khasi dialect because the British first landed in the region and the missionaries used the dialect to write the language using the Roman script. This has its advantages as it became the link language which people use to read and write. However, people use their dialects in their daily communication amongst themselves and especially while performing their rituals in the traditional religion.

**Migration to the area**

The tribes still narrate stories of their migration to the hills which took 12 long years, circling the Himalayas which

support each other in times of joys and sorrows in the principle they call 'ka chan kyliang ka nong kyliang.'

**Festivals**

The famous festivals of the people are the Shad Nongkrem, Shad Suk Mynsiem in the Khasi hills and ka Behdienkham, ka Chad Sukra in Jaintia hills, Ka Chad' pastieh, ka Nohsakyriat and ka Rong Khli, ka Rong Kusi are some prominent festivals in the War Jaintia areas. All festivals have one common feature - they connect with the agrarian lives and practices of the people in their respective areas.

**Monolith and the Megalith**

Monoliths or the three standing stones and megalith or one sitting stone have become an unofficial symbol of the tribe. One can find the stones dotting the landscape all over the Khasi and Jaintia hills region and even in Jaintiapur in Bangladesh. Mega-

ling with tradition. Had it not been for these institutions we would have lost all the stories and the traditions which are like roots that connect us to our ancestry. Our ancestors believed in one God but there are also deities and divinities that are being revered and worshipped. Rites of passage from naming ceremony, to marriage ceremonies, to a person's last rites which are unique to the people are at the same time the storehouse of stories and traditions. Stories are embedded in almost all religious rites and traditions from the naming ceremony 'ka Chat lane or ka Sib syiñ', to marriage ceremonies 'ka lam iutang' to the last rites 'ka choh syiar' traditions.

**The Kingdoms**

In both the Khasi and the Jaintia regions of the state there were many small kingdoms or chieftainships but the Jaintia kingdom was one of the powerful ones. Its dominion extended from the hills to the plains and it is one of the few tribal kingdoms which issued its own coins. The first encounter between the British and Jaintia people was in 1774. The British force under the leadership of Major Hennicker attacked in retaliation to the aggression of the Jaintia king. Another encounter between the Khasis and the British was the rebellion led by u Tirot Singh Syiem of Hima Nongkhlaw which started in April 1829. The last bit to save the Jaintia kingdom was a rebellion led by u Kiang Nangbah who was treacherously captured and hanged by the British on December 30, 1862.

**Natural splendour**

The region is blessed with natural beauty which includes hills, rivers and waterfalls which come cascading down the ridges during summer. Most of the hills, rivers and the waterfalls have stories to tell. There are also flora and fauna which are unique to the region like the pitcher plant. Meghalaya is also blessed with caves and these include the longest and the deepest caves in India. Apart from the unique formations found in these caves, rare fishes and animals are also found inside these caves.

**Khasi, Khasia, Khasiah like Jaintia or Jainteah are exonyms or names that outsiders use to refer to the tribe. Now people who live in Jaintia Hills prefer to be called Pnar and like the Lyngngam, the Bhoi and War, they are all grouped as Khasis.**

Hence all this information cannot be clubbed in a North East capsule.

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they call 'ki Makashang.' But recent studies based on ancient genome revealed that they originated from China. The Austro-asiatic-language speakers in India which includes the Mundas and the Khasis arrived as farming migrants to India from South East Asia sometime in 2000 BCE. Studies by the Indian Statistical Institute, and the Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology, suggest that the ancestors of the Mundas arrived in India 66,000 years ago. The Khasis which were the first genetic offshoot of Munda came about 57,000 years ago.

**Way of life of the people**

Their way of life is governed by three cardinal principles; 'tip brier tip blei, tip kur, tip kha and kamai 'aka hok', which literally means revere God/gods and respect fellow humans, respect relations from the mother and the father's clan line and earn righteousness. They also believe that the well-being of all 'ka bhalang u babun balang or ka bhalang ka imlang sahlang' is the most important community obligation. In their day to day lives they

lithic structures like the stone bridges, the bathing ghat carved on a rock and other sculptures and carvings are found in Jaintia hills.

**Sacred grove**

People who live in these two regions are also known for the sacred groves that they nurture. Most of the sacred forests are connected with the traditional belief systems of the people. It is believed that there are gods who dwell in the forests and in the nature around called ki 'ryngkaw ki basa'. Sacred forests are believed to be the altar from which religious rites to appease the deities are performed.

**Living root bridges**

Living root bridges which can be found only in the War area of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills are not really about the marvel of bio-engineering feat of the people, they are a living representation of the way of life which always strives for the well-being of all in the community.

**Niam Khasi and Niamtre**

Niam Khasi and Niamtre are the custodians of these stories and traditions and most of the sacred forests continue to be so in keep-

ing with tradition. Had it not been for these institutions we would have lost all the stories and the traditions which are like roots that connect us to our ancestry. Our ancestors believed in one God but there are also deities and divinities that are being revered and worshipped. Rites of passage from naming ceremony, to marriage ceremonies, to a person's last rites which are unique to the people are at the same time the storehouse of stories and traditions. Stories are embedded in almost all religious rites and traditions from the naming ceremony 'ka Chat lane or ka Sib syiñ', to marriage ceremonies 'ka lam iutang' to the last rites 'ka choh syiar' traditions.

**Govt must be prepared for 3rd Covid wave**

The news report that Government has set up special committee to manage paediatric Covid cases" (ST June 11, 2021) is imperative before we are hit by the 3rd wave of the pandemic that is expected to severely affect

anything untoward happens. We must ready ourselves to battle the entry of the 3rd wave and not allow it to catch us unawares. As it is, the concern of the State Government is the rapid spread of the Delta variant of Covid. It is essential that the Government leaves no stone unturned to protect its people. Having said that, we as citizens should not forget our own roles and responsibilities in battling Covid. We have to be vigilant and adhere to SOPs in letter and spirit for our own sake and that of our children, our loved ones the human race in general. It doesn't look as if the pandemic will recede anytime soon. Let us therefore be more careful and strive to live for one another, with one another.

Yours etc.,  
Jennifer Dkhar,  
Via email

**NEHU fails its students**

I am a retired employee and a parent of a student studying in NEHU and it is with utmost disgust that I state that the current officials of the Examination Department have been playing with the futures of the students. My daughter, who has bagged a prestigious fel-

lowship from a University in the United States, is unable to confirm her offer just because the results of a semester which was completed nearly four months ago has not yet been declared. Sources say the Professors have diligently finished evaluating the answer scripts, which was really easy this time around, owing to the online mode of examination. However, the highhandedness of the current Controller of Examination and his associates, especially the Deputy Registrar in-charge deputed from the Computer Center who is usually even more sluggish in his approach, has put the career of my daughter and thousands of others in turmoil.

I urge the Vice Chancellor to kindly expedite this matter of utmost importance so that erring and "pension-drawing" officers such as the ones mentioned are taken to task and hardworking and deserving students do not suffer because of their misdeeds and incapability.

Yours etc.,  
A concerned parent  
Name withheld on request

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.

**Is inclusive & equitable education possible?**

## A critique of Meghalaya's SDG grades

By Dr Rikil Chyrmang

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) by the National Institution for Transforming India (NITI Aayog) Index in collaboration with the ministry of statistics and programme implementation (MoSPI), United Nations in India, and Global Green Growth Institute aims to provide a holistic approach to the social, economic, and environmental status of the country and its States and UTs. It also measures India and its States' progress towards the SDGs for 2030 and to ensure that no one is left behind. A composite index for the set of parameters was constructed based on the 17 SDG goals. The composite index score ranges between 0 and 100. The Index Score categorisation: Achievers (100), Front Runner (65-99), Performers (50-64), and Aspirants (0-49).

The 17 SDG index include SDG1 (no poverty), SDG2 (zero hunger) SDG3 (good health and wellbeing), SDG4 (quality education), SDG5 (gender equality), SDG6 (clean water and sanitation), SDG7 (affordable and clean energy), SDG8 (decent work and economic growth), SDG9 (industry, innovation, and infrastructure), SDG10 (reduce inequalities), SDG11 (sustainable cities and communities), SDG12 (responsible consumption and production), SDG13 (climate action), SDG 14 (life below water), SDG15 (life on land) and SDG 16 (peace, justice, and strong institutions) and SDG17 (Partnerships for the Goals).

also been reflected in the recently released report 2019-20 of the Union Education Ministry on Progression Grading Index (PGI) of school ranking where Meghalaya performs at the bottom among all Indian states. Many other scholars pointed out the abysmal performance of Meghalaya in different parameters. Where are we heading to?

No doubt, there is improvement in some indicators in the SDG4 for Meghalaya in 2020-21. But it is a matter of great concern for the set of parameters for achieving quality education. This is in particular, adjusted percentage of net enrolment ratio at elementary (Class 1-10), the percentage on learning outcomes in Language, Mathematics and Environmental Studies, Science and Social Science for Class 5-8 students, the percentage of school teachers professionally qualified recorded a very low level of Index score (0-49). Meghalaya has only 43.63% of trained teachers at the secondary level (class 9-10) below the national average of 82.62% as per the NITI Aayog 2020-21 India Index. Meghalaya performance for these sets of indicators is worst and it is in the category of an "aspirant".

It is a sorry state of affairs, where the overall quality of education in the state is down from bad to worst. If this is the situation how can the state achieve the targeted SDGs set for 2030? Schools have ceased to at-

**The need of the hour is to prioritise the thrust areas for resource allocation such as the revenue and expenditure gap. Once this gap is narrowed down then the government can mobilize its resources efficiently.**

tract the best students, and post-schooling most of the best students from within the state choose to move outside for higher education or training programs due to deficiency of education infrastructure. An independent assessment of rural children's educational performance across Meghalaya shows the lowest proportion of children who can read at the highest (story) level, and that this is half the average of children across the country. Its performance in arithmetic is noteworthy, as it is the only state in the country with fewer than 20% (18.69%) of its rural children being able to perform division at the grade 5 level, thus making it the worst-performing state in this regard. The SDG4 Index shows 84.76% of schools in India had access to basic infrastructure (electricity and drinking water) whereas only 28.4% of schools in Meghalaya have access to basic infrastructure.

The need of the hour is to prioritise the thrust areas for resource allocation such as the revenue and expenditure gap. Once this gap is narrowed down then the government can mobilize its resources efficiently. Meghalaya can improve its SDG composite ranking and SDG4 on quality education in the coming years with the help of the people, and all stakeholders. Meghalaya can take advantage of their revenue balance and invest more in inclusive education which should be about 6 to 7% of the Gross State Domestic Product.

(The writer is Assistant Professor, Department of Economic Studies and Policies School of Social Sciences and Policy, Central University of South Bihar, Email E-mail: rikilena-tor@gmail.com, rikil@cusb.ac.in)

**Letters to the Editor**

**Pala's criticism of PGI report unwarranted**

Editor,  
What Mr Vincent Pala, a Lok Sabha member representing the state of Meghalaya from the Congress party, said about Performance Grade Index (PGI) 2019-2020 following the dismal performance of Meghalaya in school education is deplorable to say the least. It displayed poor statesmanship, bigotry, xenophobia and ignorance. How else can we interpret his assessment that it is a ploy of the BJP central leadership to downgrade the Christian institutions of the state? Let Mr Pala answer how Kerala, a Christian state with a number of schools run by missionaries is placed in the highest grade via his own logic. Literacy rates may be higher in Meghalaya but that does not take into account outcomes which the PGI intends to measure. It measures transformational changes which go beyond just text book learning. At a time when the Meghalaya State Government has accepted the gradings graciously and pledged to work on the shortcomings, why is Mr Pala making such statements? Probably because he is a Congressman, some would say. Others

can allege he lobbies for the missionary schools. To me he speaks like any other Congressman who has to speak something cynical against everything the central govt tries to do. By highlighting the role of missionary schools, he has indirectly revealed his leanings towards private institutions over government run schools.

PGI itself is non-partisan and transparent. Being a scientific tool, it adopts a grading protocol rather than ranking in order to avoid inter-state conflicts.

Mr Pala is concerned about the image of Meghalaya. Where is his concern when it comes to law and order which continuously shows a downward trend? Mr Pala's dislike for Eklavya schools tends to emanate from his lack of awareness and appreciation for the other world. Eklavya schools were started by the Tribal Affairs Ministry to provide free and quality education to Scheduled Tribe children in the farthest corners of the country. The Centre grants funds and the state governments implement this by recruiting teachers and students. There is no hidden agenda per se.

The need for centrally modelled schools is much more acute for states in the remote northeast. I would go far as to argue for more such institutions to bring in cohesiveness and promote

nationalism at an early stage among the tribals students, many of whom feel alienated from the mainland. How many Khasis know Sanskrit or can appreciate mainland Indian art or culture despite being part of a free country for over seventy years? Why this self-imposed isolation?

Missionary schools do a good job of what they do and everyone is proud of them. Education in itself, cannot brainwash or force anyone to change unless one's own consciousness feels the need to. We live by our own choices and aspirations.

Citizens and media must not give in to allegations made by politicians that are not backed by factual evidence. Such statements divide society and usher confusion and chaos.

Yours etc.,  
Bhaskar D  
Via email

**Govt must be prepared for 3rd Covid wave**

The news report that Government has set up special committee to manage paediatric Covid cases" (ST June 11, 2021) is imperative before we are hit by the 3rd wave of the pandemic that is expected to severely affect

anything untoward happens. We must ready ourselves to battle the entry of the 3rd wave and not allow it to catch us unawares. As it is, the concern of the State Government is the rapid spread of the Delta variant of Covid. It is essential that the Government leaves no stone unturned to protect its people. Having said that, we as citizens should not forget our own roles and responsibilities in battling Covid. We have to be vigilant and adhere to SOPs in letter and spirit for our own sake and that of our children, our loved ones the human race in general. It doesn't look as if the pandemic will recede anytime soon. Let us therefore be more careful and strive to live for one another, with one another.

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Yours etc.,  
Jennifer Dkhar,  
Via email

**NEHU fails its students**

I am a retired employee and a parent of a student studying in NEHU and it is with utmost disgust that I state that the current officials of the Examination Department have been playing with the futures of the students. My daughter, who has bagged a prestigious fel-

"As sure as the spring will follow the winter, prosperity and economic growth will follow recession."

--- Bo Bennett

## The Shillong Times

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### The Vaccination Challenge

THE USA which suffered the worst consequences of the first wave of Covid19 is now ready to discard the masks and return to normal. Reason? Most, or all of its citizens are vaccinated. While there is no guarantee that the virus will not mutate further, in a world where distances have reduced, science, will hopefully, discover a vaccine for that too. What's baffling is the vaccine hesitancy in Meghalaya especially among the elderly who are also most vulnerable. This is the time when MLAs/MDCs should be out campaigning in their constituencies to ensure all their constituents are vaccinated. But it appears that even among this group of political elites too, fear of the vaccination prevails. Quite a few have not had even their first dose.

Meanwhile those in the 18-44 age group seem more inclined to be vaccinated, some travelling several kilometers into another district to get their jabs. This is the active group that wants to break free of the virus because they miss their social life and want to get back to their normal educational schedules. This group is disinclined to be influenced by religion or superstition. They are, apparently better informed because they get their information from multiple sources. The elders on the contrary are fed conspiracy theories, made worse by religious misgivings. Unless the majority of Meghalaya's population gets vaccinated our chances of returning to normal will recede. People will continue to be infected and die even as the economy shrinks to breaking point. Even now there is a clamour that Government should relax the norms since people are facing a money crunch by remaining at home and not being allowed to work. But Government has to balance the rising infection with locking down the population as healthcare facilities reach breaking point.

India is running short on vaccines but in the recent G7 meet on June 11, last at Cornwall, UK the countries have unanimously agreed that top priority should be accorded to leading the global recovery from coronavirus while strengthening resilience against future pandemics. Leaders of the Group of Seven (G7) wealthy nations have pledged more than 1 billion Covid-19 vaccine doses to poorer nations which includes India. The International Monetary Fund calculates that \$50 billion investment now by the G7 to vaccinate people in poor countries would yield \$9 trillion in additional economic growth by 2025 by controlling the pandemic earlier. Vaccinating the globe will require dynamic leadership and international cooperation. If the United States provides that leadership and demands that cooperation, millions of lives will be saved, and the world will have a new template for solving the Covid 19 challenge.

# Lockdown: Alleviating the socio-economic impact

By Rev. Lyndan Syiem

There is no denying the severe socio-economic impact of this lockdown, now into its seventh straight week. There is also however no denying that this lockdown has reduced the spread of COVID 19 infections and thereby decreased the number of deaths. In a situation of two equally-undeniable but polar-opposite propositions, what is the solution for our ordinary citizens? Is it 'safety first' or 'give us bread'? In reality, we need both safety and bread. Thus far the government has been able to enforce its will and the Meghalaya citizenry has generally submitted to the harsh restrictions. But there are also voices of dissent from the streets and the marketplace, amplified by the local electronic media. These are voices of hunger and desperation, the voices of single-parent families that must pay the rent and feed young children, that we as a society cannot ignore. One of the marks of a good and compassionate society is how it treats the poor and the powerless.

Indeed, this is one of the marks of true religion, as we read in James 1:27: "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world." In quoting from one particular Scripture, I am not limiting practical religiosity to one particular faith. Rather, compassion and generosity are found in the ethical teachings of all religions. The first part of James 1:27 needs no interpretation and its practical application to our present crisis is eminently clear. The second part though has usually been interpreted exclusively in terms of avoiding moral and sexual pollution. The context of the passage however indicates that "keeping oneself from being polluted by the world" also includes eschewing materialism, selfishness and greed. The very next chapter sternly warns against partiality towards the rich and disregard for the poor.

The Graeco-Roman world of the early centuries CE was one of the great achievements of human civilization in law, administration, public works, literature and the arts. But at the same time, it also employed slaves, oppressed women, suppressed ethnic and religious minorities and neglected the poor and powerless non-citizens, the 'plebians.' This was part of the "moral pollution" that James, the brother of Jesus, warned his brother's followers against. This, among

other Scriptures, was what guided the early Church to the triad of temperance, moral purity and charity. Their sobriety and acts of charity distinguished the early Christians and attracted the neglected masses to what the Roman elites, the 'patricians,' mocked as a lower-class, Eastern sect. The lesson from history is that every society and religion must guard itself against selfishness and self-absorption; it is in their own long-term interest to reach out beyond the traditional boundaries to serve the poor and huddled masses.

In the Roman empire, the patrician elites lived either in villas outside the city or in 'domus,' spacious homes in exclusive zones, similar to gated communities in large cities across the world. One of the stipulations of this lockdown is isolation in

*"These are voices of hunger and desperation, the voices of single-parent families that must pay the rent and feed young children, that we as a society cannot ignore. One of the marks of a good and compassionate society is how it treats the poor and the powerless."*

family units and physical distancing from everyone else. The danger of six weeks of such seclusion, compounded by home delivery and 24x7 internet, is that even compassionate and normally generous people become isolated and insulated from the reality of hunger and deprivation outside their compound walls. Outside the walls, is the harsh reality that Veronica Pala has described in her article "Landlessness in Meghalaya..." (ST, 11 March, 2017) and Patricia Mukhim has documented in "The myth of 'Community' in Meghalaya" (ST, 3 March, 2017). Other writings and surveys reveal the following:

76% of rural households in Meghalaya are landless while, according to the 2011 census, 70% are dependent on agriculture. The result is sharecropping, in which wealthy landowners receive from a third to half of the produce. Rural distress leads to urban migration, where large families cram into small, badly-maintained tenements, similar to the crowded 'insulae' in ancient Rome. From my own experience of visiting and praying for migrant families in such tenements, the few economic opportunities for migrant men are as construction workers and daily wagers in the services sector; for migrant women, it is as hourly housemaids, street vendors and for the for-

lunate few, as shop assistants. The lockdown has suspended their usual earnings and exhausted their meagre savings. Most churches are aware of their plight and many have distributed food and cash relief to such households.

The first part of Mukhim's article-cum-book review focusses on land acquired by the government for institutional, resettlement and industrial use. She criticizes various agencies for flouting land laws and questions how some portions of land have devolved to industrial and private ownership. She asks about people displaced by land acquisition for mining and infrastructure development and inquires into their present condition. Mukhim also examines the concept of community land among the Khasi-Jaintia people, which she argues has not really

benefitted poorer members of community and clan. Other sources indicate that when land use in rural areas changes from agricultural/forest to mining/industry, the long-term beneficiaries are few and the people displaced are many. These beneficiaries usually come from the village itself; they are not perceived as exploiters but as smart entrepreneurs. Most of the displaced get some compensation initially but they eventually migrate to urban Meghalaya, seeking economic opportunities and social reintegration. Some of these have prospered, but the majority have suffered tremendously under the pandemic and lockdown. Besides these migrants, there are also many urban-born poor that have suffered loss of income and depletion of savings.

What is our response to such suffering? I am a social and religious conservative, as you may have discerned from my writings, who will not directly confront people and demand radical changes in the socio-economic system. Besides, our ministry habitat includes both rich and poor; we have to serve both the wealthy and the destitute. And one prefers persuasion and gradual change to confrontation and revolution. Hence the appeal, "A Season for Kindness" in my previous article. This does not mean

that we ignore the voices of street vendors, small business owners and daily wage earners that we hear almost daily on our local electronic media. We also cannot ignore the voices of social activists who speak, at great personal cost, on behalf of the deprived.

At the same time, we hear daily briefings from government figures about the positivity rate, the ratio of recoveries to infections, vaccination hesitancy, with appeals for COVID appropriate public behaviour. The ordinary citizens consent because we are afraid of a surge of infections that will overwhelm our health system's approximately 1000-bed capacity to treat patients with severe conditions. But it is difficult for average citizens to choose between 'safety first' or 'give us bread.' Some commentators on YouTube videos have insinuated that it depends on whether the citizens are salaried/pensioned or belong to the business/services/unorganized sector.

The former support the lockdown, 'safety first,' because their monthly income is protected. The latter want an end to restrictions on trade and services. However, this is not a simplistic case of 'purse determines perspective.' Because there are many salaried/pensioned people, as also many wealthy business people, that have genuine concern for the economically distressed. Some have contributed large sums to religious and social organizations for relief to the poor. Some have preferred their local dorbars to distribute money and materials. Others are quiet philanthropists in their neighbourhood. Whatever your preferred mode, the Master's command is to "love your neighbour as yourself."

Some on social media have tried to polarize between government employees and the non-salaried. However, one of our legislators recently gave a fine speech where he asked his audience of vendors and daily wage earners not to begrudge government employees their monthly salary. Because when they buy goods and services from you, they are helping you earn money; your spending will in turn benefit others. He said the state government's monthly salary bill is 480 crore rupees, most of which enters the local economy. He explained in simple terms what in Economics is called the multiplier effect. I fully agree. Polarization does not make economic sense. Cooperation is more sensible.

Email: lyndansyiem@gmail.com

## Life in the times of COVID-19

By Paleisha Kurbah & Graceful Darity Lyngdoh

The lull and the tide in unpredictable manner confuse us. The lull and tide of life. When COVID-19 was first announced in 2019, most people across the world panicked. World leaders try to convince people that we will survive this. World leaders also blamed each other. Insofar our region, (North East India) is concerned we were not so badly affected in 2020. However, beginning 2021, there is a frightening escalation in the number of people affected, the number of people needing critical care and many who succumbed to COVID-19 too. We also have people who recovered after the infection.

Ours is a small state where the health care facilities are a bare minimum. At the time of writing this article, the oxygen supported beds stand at 859, ICU beds at 135, a total of 994 beds that can accommodate COVID disease patient (meghalaya-covid.info). This will not suffice if the trend keeps on increasing. The state of mind of the people ranges

care providers and public alike. Sudden announcement of lockdown and news of known people who succumbed to the Covid disease is overwhelming and causes undue stress and anxiety. Add to that the flood of information from the media, not knowing anymore which one is true and which false only add to the anxiety.

Ignorance: - Lack of adequate information, unwillingness to accept the directives given builds on the burden on the Government and other authorities. False media information drives people to refuse what would have been otherwise. Our society like most others, has a mix of the well informed, educated and the uninformed, uneducated who are influenced by other factors like religious influences and superstitions of all kinds. Somehow the reluctance that was very much there last year has ebbed down now as the pandemic rages more vigorously this time.

Media frenzy: - The tsunami of information that floods our smart-phones now tends to be scary and



from fear to anxiety, to anger and helplessness. The whole dynamics of humanity is shifting to the negative (not that we are writing off the positive human traits that are still seen even during a time as this).

The following are some of the themes that loom large before us as we listen to the voices of the people and our own:

Social change: - humans are social animals, and this COVID-19 pandemic is shaking that fundamental foundation of a society. We have to maintain social distancing, wear masks, cannot hold big gatherings no matter what the occasion. Our movement is restricted and we cannot live freely. People spend most of their time within the confines of their own homes which brings other problems with it. They become an isolated lot and they are drowning in their frustrations and angst.

Division in our community: this pandemic saw people who are divided in their belief systems: there are people who follow protocols to the dot and others who are least bothered. There are the pro-vaxx and the anti-vaxx; those who feel that this virus is real against those who feel it's a conspiracy. This division appears to be alarming because it may cause a wide gap that might be difficult to bridge once this is all over. We belong to a community that is close knit but the current crisis may propel our society to become more individualistic.

Financial constraints: - Not all people are steadily employed nor work in a steady income facility. The lockdown and its repercussions are affecting them tremendously. Those families that are affected are struggling to make ends meet. This has a negative impact on individuals, families and businesses.

Fear, stress and anxiety: - fear is sensed in every breath without having to speak it out. The candour and the audacity it manifests is humongous. People look at each other with suspicion; families fear how long their reserves will last and so on. There is fear that there will be shortage of medical facilities in the minds of health

confuses the public, substantially.

Burn-out: - the second wave is putting the Health Care Personnel on their feet most times. Once they have donned the PPE, they cannot eat, drink nor relieve themselves till the end of the shift when they remove the PPE. This causes discomfort, stress and health issues like UTI, gastritis etc., to the workforce. Seeing 5-6 patients die in one go stresses them with the fear of contracting the virus always at the back of their minds. The exponential increase in cases requires them to put in more work hours and less off-duty periods. All of these and perhaps more, burns them out.

Guilt: - Health Care Personnel have families too. To be away from their loved ones for a prolonged period during times like these compounded with high unpredictability of the situation prompts them to want to stay home and not think about their duty. But on the other side there is the call of duty to serve humankind that is imbibed in them as part of their training. This dichotomy may spur a sense of guilt in them sometimes.

Stigma: - In our society, we still encounter a lot of misconceptions in remote and developed areas alike. Health Care Personnel are advised not to come home but stay at their work place during this time especially if they are on COVID-duty so that they do not bring the virus to the locality.

Lack of sufficient resources: - With the number of positive cases, deaths and patients needing critical care, and rising numbers of patients needing oxygen, there is a mounting fear that the state will not have adequate resources to handle the situation. There is fear that we may be like most other states in our country where the situation has spiraled out of control no matter how much effort the government and significant others put in. And if this trend goes on, we will indeed run out of not only material requirements and life-saving equipment but human resources as well.

(The writers are President and General Secretary respectively of TNAI Unit, Dr H Gordon Roberts Hospital, Shillong)

### Letters to the Editor

#### Of veiled threats and vaccinations

Editor, Recently, the Deputy Commissioners of various districts in Meghalaya have issued orders directing the Government officers and staff, specific categories of public servants and even those engaged in trade and services to get themselves vaccinated. The orders seem to infer a direct correlation between vaccination and public health. They also hold a threat of action against those who do not comply with this direction. The terms and conditions laid down in the orders seem almost draconian especially in light of the reality of dwindling incomes and uncertainty which hover menacingly along with the virus and pose a greater threat to the physical and mental health and welfare of the people of the state.

Those in power are convinced that vaccination is the key to beating the virus. If this is so, then those who have been vaccinated have no need to fear further infections. The insistence that those who have not been vaccinated can still infect those who are vaccinated and are therefore a threat to the

public health, can only stem from complete or partial knowledge that the vaccine is in fact not the ultimate remedy against the virus. If this is the case, forcing people to get the vaccination against their will is not only illegal but also immoral. Is it the mandate of any democratically elected Government to govern illegally and immorally?

The essence of a democracy is freedom and liberty, while also respecting others' rights and freedoms. As long as the choices of citizens of a democratic state do not imperil the other citizens, the right to exercise this freedom and liberty cannot be taken away from them. If it is taken away from them, it implies that the threat of endangering the others exists. If this threat exists, in this case the threat to those who have been vaccinated from those who have not, it means that the vaccinations cannot really protect those who have been vaccinated. In this context, people have every right to reject the vaccination.

There is no study or paper showing the possible effects of the vaccine on those who already have physical ailments such as diabetes, heart problems, rheumatism, pregnancy, etc. with suitable advisories for such cases. The vaccination is

indiscriminately given. It is highly unlikely that a vaccination will have zero negative effect on persons with pre-existing medical conditions. Who then will take responsibility for the negative effects that arise post vaccination? And the consequences that follow? Will the Government be ready to bear this risk? The factor of risk exists everywhere, in all activities. This is why financial investments carry a statutory warning of the risks involved, as do tobacco products and even medicines. In fact, even surgical procedures are not carried out by surgeons unless the consent of the immediate family members is obtained.

The pharmaceutical companies manufacturing the vaccines in the Western world seek the cover of indemnity for this same reason. If there are no attendant risks from the vaccines that they manufacture, they would not be seeking indemnity. These facts belie the phrase "in the interest of ensuring health and safety" which is the cloak used to lend legitimacy to the orders.

Another order issued by the Deputy Commissioner, East Khasi Hills District has directed a door-to-door survey to assess the number of people left out of the vaccination programme in order

that there is zero wastage of vaccine doses. The tenor of the order suggests that there is an imperative to the universal coverage of the vaccination drive. Yet, from various reports on the matter, it appears that the quantity of vaccines currently available is insufficient to cover all the citizens. If this is a fact, the limited doses can be administered to those who have already received previous doses of the vaccine in order that they may complete their dosage and rest assured that they have full protection. This will be a judicious way of addressing both the issues of informed consent which is a fundamental human right and the shortage of vaccines, to the satisfaction of all the citizens of the State. So what is the real purpose of the door-to-door survey? What will it achieve?

There are more than sufficient legal grounds for the exercise of choice by the citizens of the State in this matter. If the Government will not acknowledge this, the other question that will arise is - why? Why would the Government force this agenda using veiled threats? What are the considerations that would compel it to ruthlessly discard all these facts and disregard the fundamental rights of the citizens granted by the Constitution, the same Constitution that

gave the Government its power to govern? Can a Government pick and choose which provisions of the Constitution it is to uphold and which it is to ignore? Is it not bound by the whole of it? We would do well to keep in mind that it is a Government of the people, by the people and for the people.

Yours etc.,  
Banshai Marbaniang & Steve Khyriem,  
Via email

#### Of Covid skeptics & anti-vax candidates

Editor, It is notable to have come across a special article by Rev Lyndan Syiem captioned "Hope from the Hospital Bed", (ST, May 19, 2021). His three offers of empathy, love and practical advice are prominently highlighted and are very much the antidote to a vacuum that is otherwise overlooked at this juncture, keeping in mind that everyone is selfishly absorbed about caring for one's self. The fact that the writer himself is fighting this virus, his write-up offers us a whole new perspective of what it looks like from the

other side of the fence. As he rightly mentioned, a long hospital stay does change the perspective of life and death. The writer correctly pointed out to the readily available information in today's digital world and what is alarmingly dangerous as he pointed out is the error that comes along with such accessible data. When one is unable to discern right from wrong, then that erroneous data has the ability to affect those within our influence which may prove fatal in the long run and further increase the number of Covid-skeptics and anti-vax candidates.

Seeing the far reaching impact that this particular article has on most of my known colleagues, it does bring to mind Romans 8:28 amid my wonder if we would have ever got the opportunity to read one such poignant and fine article, if the writer was never a victim of this dreaded virus. I bet the Almighty does bring good out of evil and that does give us hope amidst the ruins around us. Godspeed Pastor and may God bless you.

Yours etc.,  
Lawrence Sumer,  
Via email

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

"Solitude, isolation, are painful things  
and beyond human endurance."

-- Jules Verne

## The Shillong Times

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### Life after second wave

AS the second wave of the pandemic recedes and the unlock process is on across states, activities are beginning to build up and are gaining steam. This optimism however is conditional to the successful handling of the pandemic situation hereafter including the likely strike of a third wave. To be fair, unlike the second wave which seems to have taken the country unawares, preparations for the third wave are on top gear to meet that eventuality. It is in the fitness of things that this emerging new phase will see hectic activities on the governance and political front too.

The talk about a likely cabinet expansion has been in the air in Delhi for the past few days, capped by a fresh round of meetings Prime Minister Narendra Modi held with senior ministers like Rajnath Singh and Nitin Gadkari as also BJP chief JP Nadda among others. Home Minister Amit Shah too was meeting parliamentarians in groups. A pandemic in itself should not have paralysed the governance process of a nation as huge as India. Yet, unlike China or other nations, the natural instinct here was for most people to swing into a holiday mood. When salaries were promptly being paid to government employees, safety was their next priority and governments allowed a relaxed phase for the bureaucracy. Offices could have functioned with proper maintenance of Covid protocols and most officials had their own vehicles but that did not happen.

Curiously however even the work at the ministry levels went into slow motion. Contrast this with the promptness with which the workforce in the health care sector, the police and security establishments, and other essential services functioned. They even stretched their limits and worked overtime to save lives and the nation itself. They did not run and hide behind a safety curtain. Some of them paid with their lives. Hope is that their families will be adequately compensated. Curiously, at the central government level, some 28 ministerial berths remained vacant over the past many months. This has had a telling and adverse effect on governance itself. Even a pandemic of this kind does not justify such a drift at the highest level. This couldn't-care-less attitude is what keeps India backward despite having the advantage of a huge population of youths. With lack of effective handling, the economy is down in the dumps; there are hardly any good tidings on any front in recent times. Covid is used by the powers-that-be as an excuse, caught as they were in a characteristic lethargy.

# PGI: How should Church & Govt respond

By Albert Thyrniang

The latest Performance Grading Index (PGI) report has ranked Meghalaya the worst performer in school education. The state, whose capital was dubbed as the 'educational hub' of the North East has performed worse than the other 'six sisters'. Social media users reposted and shared the report mocking ourselves. The Shillong MP, Vincent Pala smelled a rat and rubbished the report alleging conspiracy against Christian education in the state. Letters to the editor denounced the LS Member. The editor of this paper on June 11 appealed to individuals like Pala to 'stop giving a political colour to education.' Pala not only painted the report with political colours but also added a religious hue to it.

The centre does have an agenda to impose a certain ideology to overreach every sphere, including education and to downgrade Christian contribution to education but to brand the PGI report motivated is perhaps immature. Pala has played to the gallery to please his 'voters'. Christian bodies and organisations who were initially stunned were later comforted by Pala's statement. Pala's position is a reference point to believe that our schools are still the best. We will continue to live in the bliss that we provide the best education and therefore won't move to keep track with the fast changing concept of education. We will stay in our comfort zones though things are not that rosy.

It is a fact that missionary schools contribute significantly to education in the state. But should the credit be given more than its due? The MP, who claims education here is superior than in many states in the country, points to Meghalaya's higher literacy rate as compared to the national figure. The dissenter observes, "Government schools account for around 30-40 per cent of all schools in Meghalaya and the rest (60-70 per cent) are run by different Churches and organisations. This report may be for government schools only". This writer has no alternative information to question the data but if the figures are correct then the report is also a hard rap on the 'Christian' education in the state. It simply states that 'Christian' education has failed. We certify ourselves to be doing a great job but we may have failed in our duties.

My assessment is that the different Christian denominations focus mainly on secondary and to some extent on higher second-

ary and college education. The maximum emphasis is on secondary education. In this sector the 30-40/60-70 share could be spot on. The Churches' schools are present across the state in towns and villages as well. The Churches administer them well. Sufficient personnel are placed in these institutions to ensure good education.

But what about Lower Primary (LP) education? On paper 30-40/60-70 distribution may also hold water in this sector. But LP schools are completely neglected. Let me elaborate from familiar circles. In a particular Parish (a Catholic Church administrative territory) there are 34 villages. In every village there is a Roman Catholic Lower Primary (RCLP) school funded by the government. The school building, number of teachers and the mode of function are practically the same as government LP schools. The Parish priest (pastor) is the secretary of all these schools. He only signs the salary related papers. There is almost zero monitoring of classes, regularity and punctuality of teachers. The example in question could be a sample for the whole state, meaning there are hundreds of such poorly run RCLP schools particularly in Khasi-Jaintia Hills. At least four pastors, three in West/South West Khasi Hills and one in Ri Bhoi district admit to this writer that education in RCLP schools is no different than in government LP schools. They have privately proposed surrendering these schools. The reason for the neglect is that the Church gains nothing from these LP schools. But should the Church merely look for financial gain? Does the Church have no resource to improve their LP school in rural areas? Will the Church transform LP schools to contribute towards positively impacting the next PGI rating?

We can also be critical of Christian Secondary Schools. Are they still the best? Can we compare them with private schools, say the Delhi Public Schools in terms of infrastructure, personnel, subjects offered, information technology education, etc.? In these schools, there are teachers for arts, dance, music, theatricals and sports of different disciplines.

Are Christian missionaries basking in the past glory for being the pioneers of education? Have we moved with the times? Have the classrooms changed? Are we stuck with the blackboard and chalk method? Have we

progressed beyond memorising text books and notes? Do we embrace arts, dance, music, theatricals and sports as part of the curriculum? How many teachers are proficient and skilful in any of the above activities?

Meghalaya chief minister Conrad K Sangma has identified poor infrastructure as the main reason for the dismal show. Therefore, he pats his government's back for the investment to improve the infrastructure of 200 schools. The Chief Minister has the ambitious plan to build another 500 new schools. Given that Meghalaya (87) recorded just above Bihar (81) - the lowest scores in infrastructure - the emphasis is justified. A proper school building with adequate facilities is a must to improve the overall quality of school education. But emphasis on this area without doing much on other domains will count for nothing in bringing about quality education.

The PGI accords the highest importance to the domain termed as 'governance processes.' With 24 States/Union Territories (UTs) scoring less than 288 of 1000 the report states that the main focus of states and (UTs) is on improving the processes. This domain includes parameters like 'teacher availability, teachers training and regular inspection.'

On teachers' availability there is a severe shortage of Mathematics and Science teachers in the state right from the LP level. The problem is more pronounced in villages. It is a nightmare for private schools, especially for classes IX to XII levels, to get Mathematics and Science teachers. Even if candidates are available low pay deters them. They prefer to engage themselves in private tuitions. This has taken a toll on the health of education. The massive failure in Secondary School Leaving Certificate (SSLC) examination is attributed to the acute lack of mathematical skills among students. What can be done in this regard? Easy solutions are hard to come by.

Regarding teachers training, comments are limited to secondary and higher secondary level. The state has only five B. Ed colleges, of which three are functional. With the National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE)'s strict rule of 50 enrolments per year the demand for admission far exceeds availability of seats. How can the three colleges absorb all the teacher aspirants? Graduates who wish to do B. Ed col-

leges fail to get admission. From where will the youths of the state train themselves to be professional teachers?

It is learnt that two institutions, namely Teachers Training Institute, Jowai and Don Bosco College for Teacher Education (DBCTE), Tura have opted to launch the four-year integrated B. Ed Course and are awaiting permission from NCTE since 2019. As per information NCTE has cancelled its 2019 notification for the four-year integrated course. No one knows when the new notification will be issued and the fresh course commence, in keeping with the New Education Policy. Meanwhile the above institutions have been left in the lurch. Permission for the two-year course has been denied and the green signal for the four-year course is unduly delayed. The state government and responsible ministers have been knocking at the doors of NCTE but to no avail. Hence education suffers!

It baffles me as to why permission for opening of B. Ed colleges has to come from a national body. Education is a state subject. A state can set up state universities. States can establish state institutes. Why can't the state set up state B. Ed colleges? Why can't universities like NEHU approve the creation of B. Ed colleges? If NCTE exists it must perform its duties expeditiously otherwise it is a stumbling block for the progress of education.

Regular inspection is one of the parameters in the PGI. In our state, inspectors of schools and their subordinates (now District School Education Office or DSEOs) have stopped inspection of schools completely. If the government wants to improve the status of education, it should order the inspecting officers to pay regular surprise visits to schools. This is the easiest trick involving little cost.

The last point is, "compliance with the indicators (governance processes) will lead to critical structural reforms in areas ranging from monitoring the attendance of teachers to ensuring a transparent recruitment of teachers and principals." Will the government introduce a transparent mechanism like "on camera" interview to recruit teachers on merit? Unless this is done the 'white ink' saga will continue to be applied. Candidates are selected even before the interview. Clearly infrastructure is an important component but without drastic internal reforms, school buildings will turn out to be monuments.

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## Isolation: Glimpses of tragedy, hope and humanity

### From inside the COVID-19 ward

Dr Meban Aibor Kharkongor

It's over for now. Three lifeless bodies lay outstretched, adjacent to each other on ruffled up beds, still attached to machines whose sole purpose was to force in a breath, one at a time, into patients who were too weak to do so themselves. Their bodies finally look calm and rested, after days of pain and struggle, bearing the unimaginable discomfort of having a large tube pushed down their throat, only to have a gush of air forced into their lungs to quench their thirst for oxygen. Ventilation indeed appears peaceful when the soul no longer fights for dominance. A young staff nurse switches off all the three alarming monitors and powers down the ventilators - we had lost this fight. A new patient is being trolleyed in.

The wailings never really stop inside the isolation ward. The first few days were the most difficult. Death and pain are things that are encountered on a daily basis if one is in the health care profession. However, nothing could have possibly prepared us for the things that transpired inside the Covid19 ward. With time, caregivers had to condition themselves to ignore the suffering around them. Paying heed to it all will only worsen the situation. Yes, I had to condition myself to learn to ignore the emotions all around so that I can keep on fighting for the countless lives that depend on me during their hour of need. Yes, it will affect me in numerous adverse ways later, but that's a problem for another day.

"Hello sir, your wife is very sick right now and she is unable to breathe even on the non-invasive ventilator. We are shifting her to ICU right away, and it is a possibility that she might not make it through the night". Only sobs can be heard from the other end. "Please take care of my husband doctor, he is all I have left in this world" uttered an elderly lady as she was getting discharged. Her husband of 40 years stayed back as he still needed oxygen. They never saw each other again after that. How does one ever recover from that? Three days after he was admitted, his wife who was caring for him developed symptoms as well. Few days later she was sealed in a coffin and carried to a hole dug on a hill, by people in PPE suits who are complete strangers. Prayers by loved ones will be made only from afar. Where is the honour in any of this? Is it not this sense of helplessness, that makes us all crumble with anguish and disheartenment? Seeing that medical treatment doesn't seem to work; not being able to care for one's loved one in their death beds, not being able to send off a family member into the afterlife, indeed cripples all involved in the care and treatment of a Covid19 patient. And these men, yes, these noble men, men with probably the most difficult job in the world, carrying unmarked wooden boxes cradling lifeless corpses of someone else's loved one; they silently come and go, often many times every single day. When this is all over, I hope they are remembered too.

This new patient, she looked familiar. Dehydrated yet sweating at the same time, her skin radiating a dusky hue and she was moaning as she struggled to breathe. The fog from the face shield made it even more difficult to recognize her at first glance. But yes, I knew her well. "Be objective! Sever all attachments. Don't let emotions influence your medical decisions", I reminded myself. Does knowing the doctor on duty give one an added edge while being admitted in the hospital? Many would say yes but I beg to differ. Screams could be heard from the adjacent ward. Yet another life lost to this

Covid19 menace. The nurse next to me is checking a patient's vital signs and I can't help but be in awe of her courage and strength in this war against the virus. We have been blessed with an army of nurses, with timid voices, who endlessly toil in silence to take care of the ill and wretched. Truly, they leave grimy footprints and are the real heroes in this tragic situation. "Sir the patient admitted in the Dressing Room is not doing so well. Shall we start her on the C-PAP?" I just gave a nod. Would I be able to still take care of patients in such a composed manner if my own mother is on the ventilator and would unlikely make it through the night? This gem of a young doctor is doing just that! Mother will be so proud of the warrior she raised.

Shouting can be heard outside, from within the emergency room. Yet another who got offended with the staff for conducting a Covid test. Foul language is usually the first choice from among the limited arsenal of the ignoramus. "How can you suspect Covid when my mother is bedridden?" while all the while forgetting that he goes out into the community daily! Louder shouts are heard when the test showed a positive result. Now it somehow became our fault. Should we just tell him that the fault is likely his? Will he be able to live with himself if we too start to disregard the feelings of people during their most vulnerable moments? Another patient gets trolleyed in.

Today we lost one of our own. This brings an unpleasant realization that warriors are humans too. Indeed, life is so fragile. One minute ago, she was here awaiting her call to run to the laboratory to retrieve reports that would likely save a life and now she herself is on bed 5 in ICU, cold. We will remember your humour, your dedication, your selflessness. It has been an honour to have lived during your lifetime. Prayers were heard over the PA system, offering some conditioned consolation for all who knew her.

The last place one might expect to find anything short of tears and rants of hopelessness is the waiting area next to the ICU. But there they are, ten souls united by Humanity. Sharing stories, life experiences and sometimes even food, and all the while remembering that loved ones are desperately fighting to hold on to dear life in the adjacent room. They gave each other hope and comfort in the midst of suffering and pain. It made me realize that we are all not very different from each other during such difficult times. Petty differences of race, creed, religion, wealth and fame should henceforth bear no importance in terms of how we choose to look at life. We are all just as vulnerable and just as strong as the complete stranger in the next seat, in the next bed, so why be bothered by imaginary disunion.

When this tragedy is past; when this storm is over; let everything that has happened bear witness to remind us that we got through it all together. Let us remember the healthcare personnel who had left their loved ones so that your loved ones could be cared for. Let us appreciate the courage of all who stepped forward risking their lives to make sure that others don't have to. Let not this spirit of comradeship end with the pandemic, nor should the conviction that, "I am my brother's keeper," be forgotten once "normalcy" returns. Let us honour the legacy of our dearly departed by embracing life in all its fullness. Let the word Humanity bear new meaning henceforth; that during our darkest hour, we only had each other to lean on.

(Dr Meban Kharkongor is medical specialist, Dr Gordon Roberts' Hospital, Shillong)

### Letters to the Editor

#### Unfair accusations

Editor,  
Apropos letter to editor "NEHU fails its students" (ST June 14, 2021). I would like to clarify that there is no Deputy Registrar in-Charge from Computer Centre deputed to Examination Section at present. It is very unfortunate that the concerned parent chose to pull a personal allegation without knowing the current scenario of the examination department of NEHU. I was deputed as Deputy Registrar in-Charge from the Computer Centre for a brief period of 5 months last year ending in October 2020. All the results of exams conducted during that period have been declared. I request the concerned parent to clarify the facts before going to the media. It would be better if the concerned parent reaches out to the University for any clarification instead of falsely accusing someone and attempting to defame them.

Yours etc.,  
Partha Pratim Dey  
Computer Centre NEHU

#### Helpline for the mentally distressed

Editor  
The corona virus pandemic has had significant psychological impact worldwide. Any crisis is invariably

associated with states of panic and a sense of threat to individual safety. But the present havoc caused in the mental sphere is not short-term. It will have wider and longer effects on people compared to physical injuries. Previous outbreaks have shown that there were heavy psychological burdens upon health workers and the general public as well. As cases are still on the rise, psychological disturbances will continue to impact thousands of people. Conspiracy theories, false claims, misinformation and disinformation are only exacerbating the mental composure of the general public. The uncertainties regarding Covid-19 and its continuation, sub-clinical symptoms, re-occurrence have contributed to the confusion.

So far, the pandemic consistently shows that young people, rather than older people, are most vulnerable to increased psychological distress, because their need for social interactions is stronger. Young women are more vulnerable than young men, and people with young children, and those with previously diagnosed psychiatric disorders, are at particularly high risk from mental-health problems. Common psychiatric symptoms associated with a pandemic of such a scale would include sadness, inability to express joy, dissatisfaction, inability to express positive feelings, ideas of helplessness and hopelessness. This

may lead to increased risk of suicidal thoughts, self-destructive behaviour and suicides. Other symptoms can include feelings of fear, anger, worry, frustration, changes in appetite, energy, desires, and interests. In addition there would be difficulty in concentrating and making decisions, difficulty in sleeping. Physical symptoms, such as headaches, body pains, stomach problems are the most common presentations of these underlying issues. Not everyone confronted with the pandemic will reveal psychiatric symptoms but would still need psychological help and support from others. The importance of early intervention and vigilance for signs of psychiatric illness remain pertinent at this critical time. Psychological health effects could be minimized by avoiding excessive exposure to COVID-19 media coverage (a prevalent national pastime, especially binge-watching news channels), maintaining a healthy lifestyle while also engaging compassionately with other people.

A few strategies to cope with overwhelming emotions during such times includes maintaining a healthy daily routine, including physical exercise, mindfulness, healthy eating and staying connected with supportive family and friends through online portals. Most importantly we must stay physically safe from the virus by

following all the protocols and guidelines given by health experts. Be mindful that reacting from a place of fear and panic is unhelpful. One of the most effective ways to manage our emotional storm is to focus on the actions that are in our control.

On the other hand we can also expect post-traumatic growth wherein people learn how to deal with their mental health challenges, appreciate life and develop an internally audited resilience. This is the time when we must address the substantial and unmet mental health needs of our society, with a focus on the most vulnerable.

If anyone is experiencing mental health problems and needs support they can reach SANKER on our toll free helpline (1800-345-3655).

Yours etc,  
Dr Dida Khonglah,  
MD (Psych) SANKER,  
Via email

Education without ethics is disastrous

Editor,  
The recent PGI report released by the Union Ministry of Education has certainly taken away our peace of mind. It is unbelievable that we are at the bottom of the ladder in terms of overall academic performance. How could we put up with it when we have never hesitated to boast about our state being

the academic hub of the Northeast? Now the fact has literally left us deflated. Many reactions and feedbacks have flooded the edit pages of this newspaper. This is indeed a good exercise. Even the Education Minister has taken the report with a positive attitude. He called for sincere efforts at improving the grading. I feel our collective responsibility is now imperative.

When we talk of education it is wrong to ignore the importance of ethics and character. I personally feel that we should be equally concerned about the character and morality indices of our society and academia. Let's find out whether our younger children are on the right track. Through a recently published article -- "Stop giving a political colour to education" Patricia Mukhim points out -- "Parents send their children to school not just for academic credentials but with the hope that schools would build their character and the principles of good citizenship and life skills. Learning outcomes are normally measured by the annual exams but we all know that examinations hardly capture the holistic human development and the ethical and moral values of an individual."

Truly, of what value is education if our academically proficient students have a weak character and low moral values? This fact is noticeable now than ever before. Merely evaluating the

"kind of posts" and the number of "likes" on "Instagram, Facebook and Tiktok ..." reveal the picture of where we are and what we are up to. Frivolity and vulgarity are so predominant that the academic status has been just used as a "tool" to achieve self-centered "needs" and self-gratification.

Yes, our minds are littered with several outrageous ideas. Of course, the present global environmental crisis and existing social depravity are glaring proofs that the present education system has totally failed to make us "think correctly" and act ethically. We only talk of science but we fail to understand that science may end up in a disaster without the modulator of ethics and prudence. Here I am prompted to share a significant thought by Albert Einstein. He literary puts all our greed-driven aspirations and ambition to rest by asserting -- "Only morality in our actions can give beauty and dignity to life." This quote by the great thinker should inspire us to find out where exactly the problems lie and what our education system has failed to impart.

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

"Only by learning to live in harmony with your contradictions can you keep it all afloat."

— Audre Lorde

## The Shillong Times

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### Of rights and responsibilities

DEMOCRACY is a strange thing. Every citizen knows his/her right but has to be reminded of their responsibilities. Citizens are entitled to know what their rights are in law and also to appreciate the extent of their legal responsibilities to the state and to other citizens. The anti-COVID vaccination has suddenly reminded people of their right not to take the vaccine but those very same people forget that they might retard the unlocking process because cases will not go down unless people are fully vaccinated. Those who oppose the vaccination for whatever reason also have the responsibility to remain locked up inside their homes for they will remain vulnerable to COVID-19 and will also spread it. Besides, if they do contract COVID-19 they might be severely affected. It's a fact that India has vaccine shortage at the moment but the Central Government is trying its utmost to make up for lost time. Countries like the US are being plied upon to either do away with patenting rights for manufacturing vaccines across countries that have the necessary set-up or to assist with vaccines. While there are reservations on lifting patenting rights by Big Pharma, these are unprecedented times that require pragmatic decision-making. The higher income countries ought to display a moral responsibility to assist countries in Asia and Africa which do not have the capacity to meet the vaccine needs of their huge population

The Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), USA states categorically that COVID-19 vaccines were developed using science that has been around for decades and they are not experimental. They went through all the required stages of clinical trials. Extensive testing and monitoring have shown that these vaccines are safe and effective. It says COVID-19-vaccines are effective and can keep a person from getting and spreading the virus that causes COVID-19. Above all the vaccine also helps those who are vaccinated from getting seriously ill even if they are affected by the virus.

Persons who are vaccinated may also protect people around them, especially those at increased risk for severe illness from COVID-19. In fact, CDC says once a person is fully vaccinated he/she can resume many activities that they did before the pandemic. People are not considered fully vaccinated until 2 weeks after their second dose of the vaccination. The moral of the story is that the longer we delay vaccination the longer the unlocking and the more the economic tragedy. The right to resist vaccination entails a responsibility to think beyond self and for the greater good.

# MeECL has failed; MeECL must succeed

By Sumarbin Umdor

The above title, borrowed from the report of All India Rural Debt and Investment Survey of 1951 by replacing the word cooperatives with MeECL (Meghalaya Energy Corporation Limited), succinctly describes the state of the Corporation while at the same time underscoring the importance of its revival and success.

In this essay I (a) summarise how MeECL and the state have reached the present unenviable situation, (b) examine the proposal of the Corporation to introduce Input Based Distribution franchisee (IBDF) in the state which has now been withdrawn, and finally (c) propose for civil society led shadow monitoring of the functioning of the Corporation.

An orphaned child: Prior to the corporatisation of the Meghalaya State Electricity Board (MeSEB) in 2010, the then Board was operating as a vertical integrated utility handling generation, transmission and distribution of power in the state. Till the late 1990s, Meghalaya was in a power surplus position and MeSEB was the best place to be employed in the state with employees enjoying free electricity, regular bonuses and upgradation of their salaries every five years. The exponential increase in demand for electricity, particularly from the power intensive industries that came up after the implementation of the North East Industrial Policy of 1997, along with the failure of the state to set up new power generation units have led to a situation where about half of the power procured by state owned distribution corporation (MePDCL) is being met from central power utilities purchased at a considerably higher price.

The dismal failure to reduce aggregate transmission and distribution losses (AT&C at 35 per cent is among the highest in the country). Compounded by mismanagement and corruption the result is a combined loss of about Rs. 500 crore (2019-20) of the three state owned power corporations (generation, transmission and distribution) with 88 per cent of it being the losses of the distribution unit (MePDCL). As on March 2020, MePDCL is saddled with outstanding dues of Rs. 1346 crore which it has repeatedly reneged to pay compelling the central power and transmission companies (NEEPCO, NTPC, PGCIL, etc.) to regulate power supply as a last effort to recover their dues.

So, who is the culprit? It is true that the successive governments in the state have been slow to add capacity and revamp the functioning of the Corporation. The presence of well-entrenched vested interest groups indulging in power theft and other corrupt practices have only worsened the situation. The managerial and technical leadership steering the Corporation have in many instances been wanting particularly in timely execution of projects and overall employees' efficiency is also low. Certain sections of the community also view the Corporation mainly as employment avenues with no regard for its commercial concerns. Therefore, in a way, MeECL is like an orphaned child who has gone through many abusive foster homes and all those who she has come across have taken advantage of her.

An Attempt at Forced Adoption: Due to high losses in the distribution sector, the central government has been trying to introduce private players through multiple distribution licencing with limited success. This has led the central government to introduce an alternative way through the distribution franchisee (DF) to enable private companies to enter and invest in the sector. In this model, a state-owned distribution entity can allot a private company a certain area for distribution of electricity on its behalf for a fixed duration while maintaining public ownership of the distribution sector.

The success of IBDF in Bhiwandi circle of Maharashtra, where the entry of the private distributor (Torrent Power) in 2007 led to doubling of revenue collection in two years and reduction of T&D losses by 43 per cent in four years, is often touted as an example of success of this model. Of course, there are also other instances where DF have not worked and existing contracts terminated due to different factors. These challenges in implementation of the IBDF in India are discussed in detail in the paper 'A critical review of the franchisee model in the electricity distribution sector in India' by Thakur, et al. (2017).

IBDF is under implementation in many circles in as many as 6 states with the twin objectives to bring down spiralling losses and improve the services to consumers. In that sense, the IBDF proposal for the two circles in Meghalaya is not new and should otherwise be welcomed as

a much-needed intervention to revive MeECL. However, what has raised eyebrows is the manner in which it was brought forward with no details available on the terms under which the circles were to be handed over to RECPDCL (REC Power Distribution Company Limited). Questions like the absence of competitive bidding, long duration of the contract (many other existing IBDF contracts are for 10-12 years), lack of clarity on investment obligation of the franchisee, revenue sharing formula, sub franchising clause etc., have not been clarified. The whole proposal felt as if it was being forced on the state with the two circles being given away to an outside entity on terms known only to a small circle in the government.

Meghalaya has been very tardy in reforming its economy and governance structures to meet the demands of changing times. So, for the government to rush through the IBDF proposal without proper discussions with its coalition partners (and not just cabinet members), leave alone the opposition, is a hasty move. As expected there is strongly resistance given that there is existing demand to remove the people championing the DF proposal. Two important lessons learned from this episode are (i) It is not enough that vetting of such proposals should be limited to government departments. Rather, there should have been wider consultations and public disclosure before a formal acceptance decision is taken by the government (ii) The person heading the department proposing any reform measures such as in this instant case must enjoy the confidence of coalition partners and that of the general public. Sadly, this cannot be said with the present Minister of Power of the state government.

Group Parenting: The provision of 100 per cent state budgetary support for loans taken by MePDCL under the Atma Nirbar Loan scheme to clear existing liabilities is not the end of the power crisis unless it is accompanied with fundamental changes in the way the Corporation functions as well as realisation of performance targets. Otherwise, we are only stalling a much bigger crisis which will visit us in the near future. In fact, there is a real danger that full government support to loans taken by MePDCL may cre-

ate a morally hazardous situation where the Corporation loses all incentives to improve performance knowing that it will be bailed out by the state government. For a resource starved state like Meghalaya, rescuing the mounting losses of the Corporation can come only at the cost of investment in health, education and other sectors of the state.

This episode has hopefully opened the eyes of employees and there would be renewed vigour on their part to help revive the MeECL. But there is a limit on the role that they can play in resurrecting the fortunes of the Corporation. A much bigger responsibility lies squarely on the government of the day as being the owner, it has a say in the appointment of an independent board, a competent management team and more importantly in withdrawing political patronage from those engaging in rent extraction from the Corporation.

Finally, is there a way out of this mess? One of the steps that needs to be taken is for civil society organisations (CSOs) to be involved in monitoring the functioning and performance of the Corporation. CSOs are increasingly undertaking monitoring and auditing role (shadow monitoring) of government policies to evaluate their effectiveness. Involvement of CSOs in government projects is being promoted by international institutions as a good practice and essential strategy to combat corruption. In the present situation, it calls for setting up of a CSO led watchdog committee consisting of knowledgeable and independent members of the public and other stakeholders coming together to externally and independently monitor and report the functioning of the Corporation. The committee can use RTI and insider information to secure necessary information to analyse major policy decisions, expose and counter policies and actions detrimental to commercial interest of the Corporation, advocate and support good policy alternatives, and lastly to provide the public with regular reports on the functioning and performance of the MeECL.

Hopefully, in the coming together of all stakeholders and the civil society in the caring and nurturing of MeECL, we will finally be able to reverse the financial woes of the Corporation and set it on the road to recovery.

(Prof Sumarbin Umdor teaches Economics in NEHU, Shillong. Email:sumdor11@gmail.com)

## Harmony of faith, science and vaccine!

Naba Bhattacharjee

The COVID-19 trends clearly demonstrate that this deadly virus could be with us for some time more. The second phase of COVID-19, particularly in our country including Meghalaya, has been much more intense and severe, compared to the first phase. We need to be prepared for a potential third wave with a probability of affecting children. The only plausible COVID-19 preventive available to humanity is the vaccine, in addition to a mandatory mask mandate, hand washing and physical distancing. While the above are relatively easier to adopt, the vaccine hesitancy, like in other regions, is also widespread in our state of Meghalaya and is a matter of grave concern. "Science without religion is lame, and religion without science is blind," says Albert Einstein.

During Phase - I, medical science was primarily involved in studying the characteristics of the new virus and developing a plausible vaccine to counter the pandemic. This was the biggest challenge to scientists. And in the absence of a lasting and proven panacea in sight, faith in religion and spiritual beliefs together with hope in medical science, occupied center stage. Swami Vivekananda thus quoted on the subject - "Religion as a science, as a study is the greatest and healthiest exercise that the human mind can have". The inherent contradictions between religion and science have been going on since the dawn of mankind and continued to divide opinion. However, the last few centuries has witnessed harmonious co-existence. Today science and religion are complementing each other and are not in conflict. "Science can purify religion from error and superstition. Religion can purify science from idolatry and false absolutes" - Pope John Paul II.

Scientists took up the challenge in earnest and came up with a vaccine breakthrough at the earliest possible time. In the intervening period, self styled experts on COVID 19 virus started springing up like mushrooms. Social media platforms provided the tail wind for propagating thousands of unfounded and absurd hypotheses, which gained momentum, targeting even the efficacy and credibility of the vaccine, leading to the phenomenon of vaccine hesitancy and rejection. In order to fast track the process of vaccination, the prevailing hurdles need to be understood as the process shall be a long drawn exercise.

In order to achieve optimal success the usual top down standard procedure, has to be avoided. Only a human-centric approach can produce the desired results. Vaccine hesitancy is complex, context specific and includes factors such as complacency, convenience, and confidence. Discussion and maintaining a transparent line of communication between those implementing the process and the target community, is imperative. Vaccination campaigns, should give communities a greater voice in vaccine rollout, including the locations etc. In fact where hesitancy level is high, home vaccination could also be a viable option. In rural areas, there is fear of hospitals, tests, isolation/quarantine besides general misconception like infertility, emergence of side effects and related ailments etc., after administering vaccine. Health officials and vaccine providers need to listen to individuals and community organizations and have their concerns addressed, through scientific data and information. Message must emphasize that the

vaccine is the only "friendly shield", not only protecting oneself but also family members, near and dear ones and friends. It is a proven phenomenon that a child is the best teacher of parents on various issues. Here too children could be motivated to assume the role of frontline vaccine influencers, empowered by teachers in course of conducting classes, both off and on line. A successful approach to overcome vaccine hesitancy or rather outright rejection is to initiate a dialogue and awareness based intervention.

Awareness aimed at making communities responsive to what vaccination is and its purpose. Benefits of the vaccine as a life saver should be prioritized in simple local language through pamphlets, hoardings and newspapers considered as source of authentic information in villages. Social mobilization aims to facilitate change through a range of players engaged in interrelated and complementary efforts. Church elders at local/village level, heads of traditional/indigenous faith; medical officer of the local PHC, Matron/Nurse, health care workers with whom villagers are familiar and comfortable with including heads and members of traditional institutions, women's and mothers organization etc can play the defining role as vaccine influencers. In adopting a multi pronged template, empowering VDP at village level with authority for enforcing protocols beside members of local sports clubs, players and sportsperson, youth organizations, musicians and social bands, et al could also be roped in for the purpose. Local MLA/MDC can play a positive role in convincing people. Friends, family, neighbors and even acquaintances who have overcome vaccine hesitancy, can be among the strongest votaries. This mixed group shall be the front line "vaccine influencers".

The entire exercise shall have snowballing effect as more people get vaccinated; while others know who've gotten their jab; thereby motivating the hesitant individual. A familiar face can go a long way to reducing vaccine hesitancy. The "wait and watch syndrome", evident even in urban population, as to how a vaccine worked for other people, is an important factor of vaccine hesitancy.

Vaccination camps have to be held in a reassuring and friendly environment to boost confidence. Minimum travel time for people to come to vaccination/testing centres is imperative. Polling booth - like facilities can be created in the village level. The initial approach including the actual pain free comfortable jab shall be carried as a message by word of mouth to encourage others. Mobile units can cover interior of villages for household vaccination drive including spot and walk in vaccination system to bridge technology gap in rural areas.

It is important to educate people that adoption of Covid 19 Appropriate Behaviour and vaccination is the sure shot insulation from the virus and consequently towards restoring normal life and resumption of livelihood activities, school, travel etc.

Finally, a systematic review of strategies for addressing vaccine hesitancy and course correction, to identify line of action, shall ensure to convert resistant families into vaccination advocates. While each loss of life matters, the impact on communities with small population is burdened with larger implications.

(Email: naavstar@yahoo.co.in)

### Letters to the Editor

#### Take your vaccination seriously

Editor,  
My family and I have recently recovered from Covid-19; some of us asymptomatic but some - my mother, father and our house-help - developed symptoms. My father had to be hospitalized and I was his caregiver throughout his period in hospital. I write this letter because what I witnessed in hospital will continue to haunt my father and I for a long time and we can only be grateful to the medical staff and frontline workers who fought to keep him and all the patients alive at the risk of their own lives and of their loved ones. It is difficult for me to remain silent because I owe it to the medical team to speak out and address the issue as we have witnessed how devastating this virus is and will continue to be if we do not take action as responsible citizens.

I have seen my father fight for his life in hospital - the chills, a fever of 106 and a drop in his oxygen levels. He was put on mild oxygen support twice and both times his body responded well. When my parents contracted the virus, it had been nearly a month since they received their vaccination and I truly believe that they are alive and recovering without severe complications because

they had taken their vaccines on time. My father was in hospital for 14 days. He did not hesitate to go to hospital as soon as we discovered he had low oxygen levels. I cannot forget the nurses, doctors and staff who looked after him in their PPE suits all day. One night, a young nurse came in dragging a heavy X-ray machine. The machine was so heavy and at 3am she was pushing it alone, in her stuffy suit, in order to check Papa's lungs. My heart broke because I could see how exhausted she was, both mentally and physically.

The DC's orders for vaccination are not meant to cause harm to the public. We have already gone through and will continue to go through untold misery and loss: loss of lives, livelihoods, dignity, so much loss! Please, I urge all of us to take the vaccination process seriously and get vaccinated. I am writing with a lot of emotion and it is because I have seen my father come out alive and well after fighting this dreadful virus. There are doctors, nurses, health workers who can advise you about the vaccine and its effects. Study the statistics and you will see how beneficial it is. Let's make informed decisions and not be afraid. We owe it to our health workers for the sacrifice they are making to keep us alive.

Yours etc.,  
Lapdiang A Syiem,  
Shillong-2

#### The controversial rice scam of Meghalaya

Editor,  
We all are familiar with the story of Robin Hood who lived between the 12th to 14th century. An outlaw living in the Sherwood Forest with his "Merry Men", he was known to fight for the rights of the oppressed. He robbed from the rich to give to the poor; stood up for the common man in the face of tyranny. We don't know for sure if Robin Hood existed but as citizens we expect the government and its legislators to stand up for our rights and guard them. Unfortunately, this is not the case.

On June 13, 2021, the Assam police following a tip-off conducted a joint operation with the district administration and were able to seize one lakh bags of FCI rice from the godown of a private company in Boko. This rice, meant for the needy and our young children was being repackaged and sent to many other places including the Assam Rifles. This just shows that a chain must be in existence including officials who are likely involved in the scam. Following this, we saw various news articles related to the incident. What is intriguing are the contradicting statements between the Minister of Food and Civil Supplies, James Sangma,

Deputy Chief Minister Prestone Tynsong and the Social Welfare Minister, Kyrmen Shylla.

While the first says that the government does not have a clue as to how and why this happened and blames the Food Corporation of India, the second one blames the suppliers. Surprisingly, it seems the General Manager, Food Corporation of India has clearly denied their involvement stating that their Releasing Officers (Ros) on a quarterly basis release the rice from the FCI and hand it over to the Directorate of Social Welfare and after which FCI's responsibility is over. If so, the buck stops at the door of the Minister for Social Welfare, Kyrmen Shylla, including the officials of the Social Welfare Department.

How can one lakh kgs of rice just disappear into thin air with neither the Social Welfare Department nor the Social Welfare Minister having a clue about its disappearance or the fact that such illegalities and scams are taking place? Or are they somehow also involved in this? As many know, controversial scams cannot happen without the involvement of officials of various government departments. It is therefore incumbent upon the Social Welfare Minister to give us clarity into this alleged scam.

There is also news doing the rounds that the rice seized from Deepak Agarwal reveals the con-

stant corruption involved in the implementation of the Supplementary Nutrition Programme under the Department of Social Welfare. Agarwal is the owner of the godown where the rice was repacked into East Sunrise brand, a part of the Continental Milkose company, the same company that the Directorate of Social Welfare allocates rice to, which then gets supplied under the SNP. Continental Milkose is a company that also seems to have been involved or rather linked to quite a few scams like the Bal Vikas Seva Aur Pushtahar in Uttar Pradesh, selling of expired baby products in Kochi, substandard quality of ICDS food to Anganwadi Centres in Imphal among others.

This only makes me wonder why the Directorate of Social Welfare does not do its research? How can a controversial and tainted company involved in many a worrying scam be allocated rice and cereals meant to be supplied to the weaker sections of society, especially under a nutrition programme which feeds young children and mothers? As a concerned citizen, I would urge the Chief Minister to conduct a thorough enquiry into this matter and even put to question the Social Welfare Department that is responsible for this. It is also time for various civil society organizations to demand a proper investigation into this matter. The Social Welfare Minister cannot feign ignorance. I

would also appeal to the likes of Jemino Mawthoh who has been very vocal on many issues to seek clarity and also question his party colleague and Ms Angela Rangad to file an RTI into this matter which is of grave concern. Then only will the matter come to light.

Yours etc.,  
Andrea Syiemlieh  
Shillong -22

#### Power cut pandemic

Editor,  
Meghalaya's Power Minister had recently assured that there will be uninterrupted power supply. But the MEPDCL has been indulging in frequent power cuts, almost daily for lengthy periods running into a few hours. It is not understood as to why the tax payers are being harassed without assigning any reasons for power snapping. Will the Power Department along with higher-ups give reasons why this is happening and will they take steps to stop this harassment to the citizens? Proper action must be taken to ameliorate this "Pandemic" of power cuts.

Yours etc.,  
S.L. Singhania  
President, Police Bazar  
Welfare Society  
Via email

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

*"It is an unfortunate fact that we can secure peace only by preparing for war."*

— John F. Kennedy

**The Shillong Times**

Vol No: LXIII No.301 SHILLONG, FRIDAY, JUNE 18, 2021

**No escape from COVID**

IT is certain by now that Covid19 will have the better of us humans. Vaccines on the one side and lockdowns on the other have been the two principal lines of defence against the deadly pandemic, and the world is nowhere near a clear solution to outwit the virus and growing grip of the pandemic. Reports are that a third wave is in the making and could hit worst-affected Mumbai, or the whole of Maharashtra, in just a couple of weeks. Similar could be the case elsewhere. A third wave could lead to a fourth wave, of which there is no mention. Fear is that the third wave would see a more fiery spread which could mean for Maharashtra eight lakh active cases as against the present 1.4 lakh.

The second wave reached out to rural areas as well, while the first wave limited itself to urban sprawls. For the approaching third wave, the reason cited is the sudden crowding of public spaces immediately after the relaxation of the lockdown. The people suffocating inside homes have, at the first opportunity, chosen to let themselves go. There is a limit to extending the lockdowns as that would affect the poor segments of the population living a hand-to-mouth existence. On the positive side, health experts have come up with a firm conclusion that vaccinations are more effective than anticipated. A study showed some 95 per cent of the vaccinated health-care workforce has shown resistance to the virus.

This was more than what the nation bargained for. Projections so far were that vaccine efficiency could be 70 per cent. It is also clear by now that those who were vaccinated have acquired sufficient resistance to ensure that there will be no major health complications. Notably, also, hospitals across states have by now been equipped with sufficient oxygen-linked ICU beds and drugs to meet related eventualities.

About a year more could be lost in the fight against Covid19 even as the promise is that India could vaccinate the entire population by the end of this year. The disruption of the education and examination processes cannot be wished away. It's still a scary scene. There are no signs that an early restoration of normalcy is likely. The more the unlocking, the more the spread appears to be the norm. The UK, for one, has delayed its unlock plans by a month in June as there were fresh eruptions of the pandemic when a phased relaxation process began. This could happen in India too.

**Letters to the Editor**

**Vaccine resistance irresponsible**

Editor,  
Dr Meban's Kharkongor's description of the overwhelming emotional and physical distress that health workers have been going through during this pandemic is something that resonated with the entire medical community and the rational, empathic sections of society. I thank Dr Meban for putting the spotlight on humanity in such sordid times through his column in The Shillong Times, thereby reminding us that people are not just statistics or numbers that get released every evening. Each departed soul has left a void that will never be filled. I also thank the thoughtful doctor for talking about the resilience shown by our brave Covid-19 warriors, the accomplished professionals, nurses, frontline workers and the big-hearted volunteers who have taken up funeral duties.

Families across our state, our country and the world have experienced despair — and our Covid-19 warriors have been striving day in day out trying their best to make a difference. By putting their bodies on the line, by taking risks that armchair critics and commentators would not even dream of doing, they are our real heroes. Alas, in this battle we have also lost people from the medical community and frontline workers; while they tried

to save the lives of others they too succumbed to the disease. The virus is real and the lives that are lost are real. A pandemic that existed on TV screens is now at home. The tragedy is real and amidst this desperation, people have also risen as a united front — helping each other and preventing more tragedies.

Unfortunately, we still have irresponsible individuals undermining the hard work and the risks being taken by the Covid-19 frontliners. There are individuals who in their drive to showcase themselves as concerned citizens, albeit with a very myopic mindset, are spreading doubts and creating obstacles in the public mind regarding the vaccination. Does it not matter that independent studies and subject matter experts have vouched for the effectiveness of the vaccine? Results of a recent study by Apollo Hospitals over a period of four and half months from 43 units of Apollo, spanning 24 cities in the country on more than 31,621 healthcare workers who had received either both doses or the first dose of Covishield or Covaxin showed that the vaccines offer 95% protection from the virus. The finding also showed that only 90 cases or 0.28% of them required hospitalization with only three cases or 0.009% requiring ICU admission.

The protective effect of vaccination in preventing infection, hospitalization, need for oxygen and ICU ad-

There is no magical answer, but we must try. Scientists, economists, epidemiologists, bureaucrats and politicians all have their own particular orientation, but all must put their heads together so that a collective reasoning can emerge. No dominant viewpoint should skew the formula in a particular direction and those with powerful and influential voices must keep the interests of the voiceless at the head of the agenda.

The question is not when to unlock? The easing up of restrictions all over the world, the demand for personal rights in prosperous countries, and the abject suffering of poorer sections in developing countries from economic hardship, makes the easing of lockdown restrictions inevitable, sooner rather than later.

The science is incomplete and while we see daily reports of medical advancements, it often seems like two steps forward, then one step backward. Dealing with the current situation is difficult enough, predicting the future of Covid is fraught with uncertainty, not much better than peering into a crystal ball.

This article is divided into three parts. Firstly, the need for unlock. Secondly, a review of the current situation, and thirdly, a reasoned plan for unlock. The experiences of other countries and even other states in India is not fully helpful as each region has its own unique aspects and experiences. The available data from elsewhere needs to be melded with local data to find the best solution for the state or a district, and distinctions also made between urban and rural areas.

**The Urgent Need to Unlock**

The Covid pandemic is shadowed by the lurking spectres of many other pandemics, growing in severity. The looming collision of pandemics will soon overtake the casualties of Covid and the fallout will be more devastating than the virus.

Economic disaster for the poor in Meghalaya is inevitable with continued lockdown because it will affect the sectors of agriculture, construction, tourism, and transport. The shutdown of these sectors imperils farmers, daily wage workers, drivers, semi-skilled workers, and hospitality staff. The middle class salaried employee will survive over the short term till the formal sector starts

mission were 65 percent, 77 percent, 92 percent and 94 percent respectively according to a study done in CMC, Vellore. There are many other studies conducted by other countries that prove vaccination is protective. The statistics would be more or less similar if a survey is conducted in our state too with regards to vaccination and Covid.

There is an illogical inconsistency in the way the anti-vaccination brigade goes about its business. And we are going to lose lives because of such reckless and insensitive statements. I would also urge our community and individuals to join the united front against the virus rather than create unnecessary and self-destructive resistance.

Yours etc.,  
Dr. Debashish Das  
Medical Director,  
The Children's Hospital,  
Shillong - 6

**Legislators, keep your ears to the ground**

Editor,  
A good leader should learn to keep his ears to the ground. The real test of leadership does not show up when everything is smooth sailing. Rather, leadership is most often tested during a crisis. The way a leader behaves and acts in a crisis will establish his credentials. In times of a pandemic like the one we're experiencing at present, there is no time to dilly-dally or even weigh

flattering. The continued rise of the stock markets promises little for the poor, because it is speculated on growth and is a gambling game for those with deep pockets. Observe how the billionaires of the world became richer during the pandemic. Because of deepening poverty and mounting hunger, untold numbers will die of starvation if lockdown continues.

Children and youth have been grievously damaged by the yearlong lockdown, and tragic data is now emerging. The National Commission for Child Rights has informed the Supreme Court that more than thirty thousand children have already been orphaned, lost a parent or been abandoned because of the pandemic. A report from the US describes an epidemic of child mental illness, growing by more than 90% in the last year. Suicide has become the number one cause of death among children and adolescents, with some younger than ten years of age taking their own lives. In MLCU, 24% of students report daily feelings of stress and 80 high-risk students are receiving therapy.

There are many other threatening pandemics: the plight of women because of domestic violence, trafficking, and poor reproductive health services, the loss of learning for millions of children, the despair of jobless men. Space does not permit the elaboration of these tragedies. The continuation of lockdown will have a multiplier effect on these calamities.

Data is uncompiled, neglected or suppressed, with Covid news mainly favouring elite concerns, and the evident efforts by the government to save face. Just yesterday, the Ministry of Health asked states not to reveal data about vaccine stocks. Even the courts keep asking the government for data.

**Review of Covid Situation**

The unpreparedness for the second wave, super-spreader elections and religious melas, failure to educate the public, and lack of citizen responsibility compounded the rampaging onslaught of the highly infectious Delta variant.

In the interim, vaccination stayed on a slow track, only recently being stepped up. As of June 10, 2021, 238 million Indians have been vaccinated, which is about 17% of the

the pros and cons of the vaccine drive initiated by our Government. This is a case of quickly evaluating all the facts at hand and making a decision about what is best for the general public.

A true leader should act like a statesman, that is, one who has the vision to dream of a better and safer world and have the courage to turn that dream into a reality. He should have a prudent concern for the future and show wisdom and skill in dealing with public issues. He should strive to promote public good and be far-sighted enough to think for the future generation. This is the quality we should look for when we elect our representatives.

A representative cannot change his views just like a chameleon changes colour. A leader is not one who does what his electors tell him to do. If representatives only voice out their opinions based on the judgment of their voters then the administration of the state will be in turmoil. Leaders should not be instructed by their electorate about the stand they are to take on various issues. Their horizon of approach should not be narrowed down by a parochial outlook. Local prejudices should not guide the leader. Instead the general good of all should be the criterion for exercising independent judgement. Hope this will be a clarion call for all our budding representatives.

Yours etc.,  
C Lyngdoh,  
Shillong-3

**The big question:**

**How to unlock Meghalaya safely?**

By Glenn C. Kharkongor

population. In Meghalaya, 4.06 lakh persons have been vaccinated so far, which is about 12% of the population. To these protected persons we could add the nearly 40,000 confirmed cases, who might have antibody protection. Unconfirmed cases may be four to six times more than the confirmed cases. If we add two lakh unconfirmed cases, the protected population rises to about 20%.

So with these levels of cases and vaccinated persons does this mean that we are nearing herd immunity? Dr Srinath Reddy, President of the Public Health Foundation of India has dovetailed some data as follows: "A recent study from Serrana (in Brazil), revealed that deaths were reduced by 95% and infections by 86%, when 60% of the population was vaccinated. On June 1, 2021, Britain reported zero Covid-19 deaths, after 59% of the British adult population were vaccinated. If we conclude that we too must achieve 60% vaccination coverage to attain such safety, we have several months to go. We cannot remain in lockdown till then."

The snail pace of vaccinations in Meghalaya clearly indicates that vaccine protection is not the available solution to lifting the lockdown. The other important limiting factor is the availability of hospital beds for the moderately and seriously ill, which approached saturation level a few weeks ago. So vaccination and ramping up of hospital services are not solutions beyond a point.

What are our remaining options? And what would be the criteria to implement them.

**Safety Guidelines in Easing the Lockdown**

Maharashtra, Karnataka and Delhi have announced plans and guidelines for lifting the lockdown. Maharashtra seems to have a more structured plan of phases from June 7 which is district-wise, based on a positivity rate of less than 5% and occupancy of oxygen beds in hospitals of less than 25%. There are separate rules for municipal areas, rural areas and containment areas summarised in a detailed spreadsheet. Karnataka has announced a similar multi-phase unlock plan starting from June 14, also using a 5% positivity rate cutoff. These guidelines could be adapted

to Meghalaya. Release from lockdown could have the following phases: In Phase 1, daily outdoor physical exercise such as cycling, jogging will be permitted, essential shops will be open for four hours every day and plumbers, electricians, carpenters and mechanics can move around for work. Offices will be allowed to function with 25% staff.

In Phase 2, all open markets and market areas will be opened, but not closed area malls and market complexes. Limited public and private transportation with passenger management will be permitted in urban areas, but unrestricted in rural areas. In Phase 3 increase in office staff to 50%, and dine-in eateries can open with restricted number of customers. Each of the above phases could last from 7-10 days.

Depending on the success of the first three phases, in Phase 4, educational institutions, poorly neglected over the last year, could be allowed to open with limited hours, distance management, and batches alternating on a weekly basis in each student would have one week offline and then one week online.

In Phase 5, places of worship, theatres, gyms, swimming pools, entertainment halls, barber shops, beauty salons, and bars can open on a limited basis. Weddings and funerals will be permitted with small numbers. All large events will be prohibited. Through these phases, tight monitoring of state entry points should continue. Tourist spots will be open only to locals.

**Third Wave?**  
Is a third wave coming? Almost definitely there will be a spike with the phases of lockdown release. Widespread vaccination has not been achieved and it is impossible to eliminate human to human contact. Admissions to hospitals can be minimised by improved awareness of symptoms so that timely care can be instituted, and late stage deaths avoided. If the spike is large, the next lockdown will be unavoidable and so on till vaccination of all including children is accomplished.

During the unlock phases, of paramount importance is responsible citizen behaviour. This will necessitate step-up of community messaging, and monitoring by the authorities, communities and individual citizens. Freedom from lockdown comes with the price of self-discipline and community vigilance.

Human Rights  
Article 25 in The Constitution of India provides for "Freedom of conscience and free profession, practice and propagation of religion (but subject to public order, morality and health. Article 19 on the right to freedom also carries a rider, that "nothing in this article shall prevent the State from making any law in the interests of the general public".

The Epidemic Diseases Act, 1897 empowers the government to take special measures and prescribe regulations as to dangerous epidemic disease, when the ordinary provisions of the law are insufficient for the purpose, so as to prevent the outbreak of such disease or the spread. Though legislated more than a hundred years ago these provisions are not outdated, since the world has experienced many pandemics over the previous centuries and while medical science has advanced, administrative measures also have an important role to play.

On June 13, 2021, a US court dismissed a lawsuit brought by 117 workers terminated by Houston Methodist Hospital because they refused to comply with a hospital order that they be vaccinated against COVID-19. The lead plaintiff, a nurse had argued that the vaccines are experimental and dangerous. The judge did not find merit in either argument. It was also noted that 24,947 other employees of the same hospital had taken the vaccine. The judgment noted that the hospital had made the correct choice to keep staff, patients and their families safer.

So far more than 400 US colleges and universities have announced mandatory vaccinations for faculty and students so as to keep campuses safe. These include Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish institutions and theological seminaries. An overwhelming majority of students of students, 96% have gotten the vaccine or have said they will get it.

Who are the vaccine refusers? Survey data have shown that certain demographic sections of the public are more inclined to refuse the COVID-19 vaccine. An Indian study has shown that overall about 10% are vaccine hesitant. This rises to 24% in low-income groups, and 28% with low education and 24% among families who had refused other vaccines earlier. Hesitancy among scheduled caste and scheduled tribe persons were three times higher than the other sections.

In the US, refusal or hesitancy (about 25%), is higher among women, minorities, lower education groups and conservative persons. In France, vaccine refusal and hesitancy (about 30%) was associated with female gender, lower educational level, and poor compliance with recommended vaccinations in the past.

There is considerable vaccine hesitancy in Meghalaya especially in the East Khasi Hills. A survey conducted by the Indian Institute of Public Health Shillong, of Health Care Workers (HCW) not vaccinated by April 15, 2021, over half reported fear of adverse effects and a third attributed to confusing messages over Whatsapp among other reasons. Vaccine hesitancy was least among doctors (14%) while it was several times higher among nurses, allied health personnel, non-medical support staff and non-medical frontline workers (41-50%). Higher vaccine hesitancy was seen among HCW in private hospitals compared to government hospitals.

Vaccine refusal endangers the public  
One pertinent example can be cited. In the last couple of decades, the increasing refusal by parents to give their children vaccination has seen a resurgence of measles in the US and UK. Measles was eliminated from the US in 2000. Now hundreds of

children each year suffer from this vaccine preventable disease.  
Vaccine refusal has been an ongoing problem in Meghalaya, as shown by a study conducted in 2017 by the Indian Institute of Public Health Shillong in collaboration with the Directorate of Health Services (MCH & FW), Government of Meghalaya. Vaccine refusal will delay or prevent herd immunity. Dr Srinath Reddy, President of the Public Health Foundation of India has provided some data in a recent article in the Times of India. "A recent study from Serrana (in Brazil), revealed that deaths were reduced by 95% and infections by 86%, when 60% of the population was vaccinated. On June 1, 2021, Britain reported zero COVID-19 deaths, after 59% of the British adult population were vaccinated." Such data indicates that achieving herd immunity is possible if a large proportion of the population is vaccinated. Studies from the US indicate that herd immunity may be achieved only if 70-90% of the population is vaccinated. So not getting vaccinated puts others' lives at risk. It may prolong the pandemic, resulting in additional hospitalizations and deaths. According to the Shillong Times of June 2, 2021, already "vaccination hesitancy among the people here is proving to be immensely costly as a staggering 91.4% of those who lost their lives owing to COVID-19 infection were not vaccinated. ... Only 26 had taken the first dose while there were zero deaths among those who had both doses."

**Vaccine hesitancy a danger to public health**

By Dr Sandra Albert & Dr Rajiv Sarkar

The World Health Organization has declared "vaccine hesitancy as one of the 10 threats to global health in 2019. On an individual level, studies have shown the following factors are causes of vaccine hesitancy: the perception that vaccines are not effective or useful; concerns about safety and side effects; distrust of the health system; a preference for "natural health;" fear of pain and needles; lack of awareness; and prior negative experiences with vaccines. On a community level, vaccine hesitancy is seen across educational and socioeconomic backgrounds. Misinformation about vaccines spread on social media also has been a driver of vaccine hesitancy in recent years, as has negative media coverage of vaccines, including coverage of celebrities who promote vaccine refusal." (WHO)

**Vaccines are effective and safe**

A large body of emerging data from around the world now shows the efficacy and safety of COVID-19 vaccines. These are available in reputable medical journals and international health agency websites. We present some sets of data from India which pertain to the Covaxin and Covishield vaccines. The Covishield vaccine in particular has been subjected to extensive clinical trials in several countries and a recent study from the UK shows it offers protection against the newer delta variant of the virus as well.

**Study of CMC Vellore Hospital Staff**

Group	Vaccinated	Unvaccinated	Benefit
Number	7080	1605	
Got infected	9.6%	27.2%	x3
Hospitalized	0.9%	4%	x4
Needed oxygen	0.7%	0.06%	x11
Needed ICU	0.5%	0.03%	x17
Deaths	1	0	

\*Published Mayo Clinic Proceedings June 11, 2021

**Ministry of Health\* data on side effects Jan 16-Jun 7, 2021**

Side Effect	Number	Percentage	Comment
All side effects	26,200	0.01%	
Minor	24,901	0.01%	Fever, pain and swelling at injection site, including pain and swelling, which spread beyond the nearest joint, and high-grade fever
Hospitalization	2,318	0.001%	blood in vomit, unconsciousness, chest pain, difficulty in breathing, thrombocytopenia (low blood platelet count)
Deaths	488	0.0002%	

\*reported by CNN-News18

Ministry of Health\* data on side effects Jan 16-Jun 7, 2021  
The total of 26,200 side effects given 13.4% of the population vaccinated.

Correction: In the letter to the editor, "The controversial rice scam of Meghalaya," by Andrea Syiemlieh (ST June 16, 2021), the name of Mr James Sangma was inadvertently mentioned as the Minister Food & Civil Supplies instead of Mr Prestone Tynsong who is also the Dy CM. We regret the error.

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

Sandra Albert MD DrPH and Rajiv Sarkar PHD, faculty Indian Institute of Public Health Shillong

"Celebrity gives us delusion of self importance."

— Al Goldstein

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No.302 SHILLONG, SATURDAY, JUNE 19, 2021

**Kyrmen Shylla: Naively sardonic**  
STATE Social Welfare Minister, Kyrmen Shylla keeps his own counsel. Despite the alleged scam involving his Department where one lakh bags of rice each weighing 50 kgs supplied by the Food Corporation of India (FCI) and meant for the Supplementary Nutrition Programme (SNP) of the Social Welfare Department of Meghalaya, were seized from a private godown in Boko, Assam, Shylla denies any wrongdoing. It would be a surprise if he didn't. But because the media is doggedly pursuing this matter, Chief Minister Conrad Sangma had to come to the rescue of Shylla. He categorically stated that the seized rice had nothing to do with the Public Distribution System (PDS) nor was it meant for distribution under the National Food Security Act (NFSA). He later stated that as per a verbal report the rice was meant for the Social Welfare Department.

The seized rice in this case was lifted from the FCI by a company called Continental Milk-cose Ltd. The explanation later given by the Director, Social Welfare Department is that the manufacturer processes the rice and wheat into a variety of ready to eat fortified food products in the factory which is then supplied to the Anganwadi centres under the Supplementary Nutrition Programme. This still does not explain why the rice is repackaged to be supplied to the Assam Rifles. Director Social Welfare also claims that the processing Company has always complied with the Department's requirements. Without any checks and balances how does anyone know how much of the processed food is coming to Meghalaya for the SNP. Through the SNP, under the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) the Social Welfare Department is supposed to provide supplementary nutritious food to children from 0-6 years of age, pregnant women and adolescent girls to improve their nutritional status. Under this programme, hot-cooked food and home delivery rations are provided to the target beneficiaries through Anganwadi centres. Is this happening in Meghalaya? The National Family Health Survey has been hammering at the poor nutritional status of women and children in Meghalaya.

Interestingly, following this scam the Assam Government decided on June 16 that it would procure rice for the Social Welfare Department's SNP directly from the FCI and not through contractors in order to put an end to the writ of contractors that runs in the department. Assam Government says the contractors have been charging Rs 32 per kg of rice whereas if the Department procures the rice directly from the FCI, the price is Rs 22 per kg. This surplus money would enable the Department to provide more nutritious food to the target beneficiaries. Funnily, Meghalaya has not taken any such decision as yet.

# Covid-19 conundrums: Delusions and deceit

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

On June 15 last an order was passed by the East Khasi Hills Deputy Commissioner, Isawand Laloo stating that from June 24, 2021 only those shops will be eligible for opening whose staff have already been vaccinated. In an alternate reality, where vaccines are in surplus and the only reason people are not getting vaccinated is because they vehemently refuse to do so, such an order makes sense. However we are not living in a fantasy world. The world in which we are living is where vaccination rate in India and Meghalaya is below 20%. Even this took a couple of months with the Central Government claiming that they will be able to vaccinate the whole country only by the end of 2021. The main reason for this is vaccine shortage, not the reluctance of people to go for vaccination. What this essentially means is that for the more than 80% of the population, try as they might, they will be forced to go without vaccination at least for the next few months.

Initially I was unable to get any vaccination slots for myself and my family. Until I got them I was very worried. I'm sure a lot of people are in the position I was in a few weeks ago. In my own locality I saw dozens of people standing outside the vaccination centre being told the doses are over. Many are those who earn a living working as helpers in shops, driving taxis, etc. Because of the order they will be barred from earning their livelihood despite no fault of theirs.

The danger of Covid-19 mutation is very real and vaccination is one of the ways through which we can counter this threat. In the last few months I have been getting distressing news of people I had met in the last few years succumbing to the virus. My brother in Delhi contracted the virus. He was asymptomatic and has since recovered. So I fully understand the fear of those who are afraid. If there are no strict controls, the curve which is declining could peak again resulting in countless deaths. At the same time, I have neighbours who have been sitting idle without any income for the last one month. They have not been able to pay their bills and are worried that

their financial situation could worsen if this goes on. This is the real world. So are we caught in a situation where it is a choice between the devil and the deep blue sea? Actually not! Solutions exist but the Government has been very reluctant to administer them, most important being the income support to the community to tide over the loss of income.

Income support had been proposed by Thma U Rangli-Juki for helping those who have suffered financially because of the lockdown. This,



as has been suggested, could come from the MLA and MP funds, together with the contribution from the salaries of those whose income exceeds rupees one lakh a month. Of course the Government has decided not to implement such a scheme which is not surprising considering RTI findings that have revealed the income support from last year is still due for many till date. This led to the verbal altercation between the Deputy Chief Minister Prestone Tynsong and Angela Rangad from TUR where the former suggested that the latter should contest elections if she chooses to make such allegations. The message was loud and clear: "When you do have the money and the influence come talk to me then." Notwithstanding the subsequent silence of the Government in the matter, why has there been no income support for the public? I can hazard a few guesses.

One of the most obvious is that the respective MLAs don't want to part with the funds. In this case, I would like to share a personal experience. A few years ago when I had gone for an RTI awareness program in one shop. It is like a law applied against spitting in public because spitting spreads diseases. To the anti-vaxxers - stop being selfish for a while and talk to the health workers who expose themselves day in and day out to the risks and dangers of the virus; to the families of victims of the virus and the Covid warrior who has to come out on top of the virus. They all have a right to life and free speech as much as the anti - vaxxers. Hear what they have to say.

I deeply appreciate church leaders like Rev Lyndan Syiem. He has come out with verses from the scriptures in support of the vaccination. And he is a Covid warrior himself, having fought the disease. In fact, the churches as institutions with a platform to influence should come out much more openly in support of the vaccination.

To the proliferating pressure groups, whose slogan is to save and protect the community, some of whom to be students, please look at the data. Today's Shillong Times carried an article with data by Dr Sandra Albert and Dr Rajiv Sarkar about the effectiveness of vaccination. Instead it would protect the community if the pressure groups also join the campaign for vaccination. The community may have escaped the first and second wave, it may not be so in the third wave. And what is there left to protect after death?

Those who suffer most from the lockdown are the marginalized sections of society like the daily wage

rural community, the Chief Guest for the program was the incumbent MLA. After the program the MLA gave his opinion and informed the community that RTI is a good tool but does not tell the whole truth. He explained that many people from his Constituency come to him for financial help for various causes, viz., games, church, medical, etc. When he provides such financial assistance he does not ask for a receipt. In the event of an RTI although the MLA (presumably) did not keep the

funds for himself he would not be able to provide the paperwork. I leave it to the readers to decide how many are going to be convinced by this argument. To cut a long story short: the reason for non-release of funds is so that some can be kept aside for corruption.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that some legislators have come forward with financial help for some members of their constituency. This is indeed appreciable but what people forget is that the help provided is actually not charity (i.e., goodwill of the legislators) but an entitlement to which the public has the right to. In India less than 3% of the population pay direct taxes on their income. This is because more than 90% of the workforce is in the informal sector which is characterised by uncertain working conditions and low pay. Try as much as this large segment of the population do, they don't have enough to qualify for the income slab which will make them eligible for taxation. So how much exactly does this population contribute to the coffers of the Central and State Governments?

Let's take the example of Meghalaya. Assuming a population of 30 lakhs (2011 figures which must have increased in the last 10 years) and people spending around 100 rupees a day on different items out of which 1 rupee is the tax collected, 30 lakhs rupee is the single day contribution to the treasury. Multiply this by 7 days in a week, 30 days in a month and 365 days in a year. In the same way, imagine yourself collecting 1 rupee daily from 1 billion people, at the end of the year how much money will you have in your bank account? All the expenditures of the government which include salaries, subsidies etc., comes from the money collected from citizens. Even for those government servants who pay taxes on their salaries the remaining amount comes from the contribution of the public. That's why they are called public servants because the common people's money pays for their salaries. So while it is appreciated that some legislators do provide some help we should not be deluded to think that it was a charity done because of goodwill. We are only getting back what we paid for.

But it seems that the state and its officials have forgotten this truth. Or they are trying to hide this truth and are instead asking people to blame themselves if things go wrong. It goes this way--- "Yes, we are not going to give you any support, whether it's for running the community isolation centres (last year's bill is still due) or income support but if you don't take vaccination (which you will not get even if you want) you should be ashamed of yourself for putting others in danger. So go, sit in a corner and starve." Pretentiousness and fake self-righteousness is something I have come across a lot and I can say with absolute certainty that it's a quality shared by many in the Government. Maybe those in charge never had to go hungry because they had no money (I have actually experienced that) or maybe they have forgotten who they were. Either way the public has been left to fend for itself and made to feel bad about it. Class tactic! How long will this state of affairs last? I don't know. I hope not for long.

Email: bhogtoram.nes-fas@gmail.com

## Removal of sedition law from Indian statute imperative Modi govt misusing the law to curb democratic dissent

By Binoy Viswam

Ever since RSS led BJP has come to power, the democratic spirit of the Constitution has been constantly under attack. In fact democracy itself and its impeccable values are grossly threatened by the managers of state power. In the name of patriotism, attempts have been made to imbibe a totally different variant that has no concern for the masses and have, in return, no love from them. For them, dissent is depicted as a crime and the term anti-national has elaborately been used to unleash attack on each one who dared to come in the way of 'Hindutva'.

Students, teachers, workers, peasants, dalits, tribals, intellectuals, nobody is spared from sedition

of opinion and expression. In letter and spirit, it runs against Article 14 (equality before law, equal protection) and article 21 (right to life and personal liberty). One can only wonder how such a repressive law be allowed to do its rounds without any inhibitions.

The country witnessed on various occasions, the blatant misuse of 124A, as it happened in the Kedar Nath case (1962) to Kanhaiyya Kumar case (2015). Massive resistance to this was always there and the government was not ready to heed the people's voice. It was widely in application across the country during the anti CAB-NRC agitations. The campuses, when they rose to defend academic freedom had to pay heavy prices. Human rights activists, not in small

numbers. charges. Sedition was a strategic project and 124A of the IPC was its dangerous weapon. On every passing day this great country is humiliated by the arrogant misuse of that draconian law. It is a shame on the secular - democratic fabric of the country that was realized through immense struggle and sacrifices. That's why the recently held National Executive committee of the CPI demanded to scrap off the sedition related 124A from the statutes.

The ideologues of RSS-BJP are eager to glorify this primitive law and they go to the extent of painting it as the synonym for allegiance to the nation. They forget that this law was enacted by the British colonial masters in 1870 to brutally suppress the Indian freedom movement. It is an insult to any freedom loving people that such a colonial piece of law continues to remain untouched even after seven decades of independence. It is the most atrocious face of the colonial past, slavishly celebrated by the ruling classes of independent India.

A freedom loving people who cherished the glorious saga of the struggle for emancipation cannot tolerate this paradox anymore. For the RSS-BJP, who had no role in the Indian freedom struggle, 124A-sedition might be an attractive and lovable cause. Hence, they rush to it every now and then to stifle down the voice of protest: Mahatma Gandhi, the father of the nation held section 124A as a 'rape of the word law'. He further termed it as the "prince among the political sections of the Indian Penal Code designed to suppress the liberty of the citizen".

Under Modi rule it has been often used against the masses and the committed activists. Its sole intention is to suppress their genuine aspirations. This section of IPC is in direct contradiction with article 19 of the Constitution that guarantees freedom

**Corrigendum:**

In the article 'Vaccine Hesitancy is a Danger to Public Health' published in ST on 18.06.2021 the numbers in the last three rows of the table below got inadvertently reversed. The corrected table and the link to the original article is given below:

**Study of CMC Vellore Hospital Staff\***

Group	Vaccinated	Unvaccinated	Benefit
Number	7080	1609	
Got infected	9.6%	27.2%	x3
Hospitalized	0.9%	4%	x4
Needed oxygen	0.06%	0.7%	x11
Needed ICU	0.03%	0.5%	x17
Deaths	0	1	

\*Source: [https://rds-ibs-prod-cdn.elsevierhealth.com/pbl/assets/raw/Health%20Advance/journals/mcp/mcp\\_1656\\_6\\_2.pdf](https://rds-ibs-prod-cdn.elsevierhealth.com/pbl/assets/raw/Health%20Advance/journals/mcp/mcp_1656_6_2.pdf)

Letters to the Editor

### COVID-19 vaccination & public awareness

Editor,  
Concerning the ongoing COVID-19 vaccination in the country, it is appropriate to say that India is a strange country where people may go to any extent for the sake of politics and religion. On one side, some leaders/people raise their concerns on so many COVID-related deaths, shortage of COVID vaccine, mismanagement by the Government etc. On the other side, they oppose vaccination by giving misleading statements to misguide innocent public/followers for their political and religious gains. Because of the deliberate creation of this unfortunate dilemma in public, despite sincere efforts by the Government, the overall vaccination drive to fight against COVID is not that efficient.

COVID-19 is not like other diseases of the heart, brain, kidney, etc., which remain localized to the affected person only. A COVID-affected person has the vulnerability to spread this in hundreds and thousands of persons in society. After vaccination, the possibility of COVID-19 infection is drastically reduced, thus, not only does the person protect himself/herself against COVID-19, but also helps to stop its possible spread in society. Thus, it is the individual's primary responsibility to get vaccinated in public interest

and stop the possible spread. Often people/leaders quote a negative example which may be one in a millions where because of various reasons, some side effects or other complications might have developed after vaccination. It should be clear to everyone that although all of us are human beings, individual physiological and immunological ability differs. Thus, these negative examples could be due to multiple factors and may not be associated with vaccination only. We should be optimistic and refer to the 99.99 percent of positive examples, increase public awareness, work together to stop the spread of COVID-19, and save the precious lives of our dear friends and relatives by getting ourselves vaccinated.

Yours etc.,  
SB Prasad,  
NEHU, Shillong

### I support mandatory orders by DC

Editor,  
The Deputy Commissioner, East Khasi Hills had issued an order that reads, "Any shop which has not completed vaccination of its staff will not be permitted to open from the June 24, 2021 onwards." We need to ask ourselves why this order and what is the rationale.

It is over a year since the corona virus pandemic has afflicted humanity. We also learnt about mutation of the virus into new variants and strains. The virus is trans - borderless. It knows

no religion nor politics. It is a great leveller because it knows neither rich nor poor. It knows no race or caste. The lockdown has changed our lives. Like the virus, normal life has mutated into a new normal life. Online life has become the normal life, yet we still cannot exist without offline life. Among the primary offline activity is functioning of shops and markets. Transition between that space means possible exposure to the virus.

Meanwhile our mindsets cannot continue to be in the pre corona virus mode or pre lockdown mode. One has to abide by certain SoPs like wearing a mask when one goes out of the house. Yes, it is a right to stay put in one's own house. The same right gets regulated when one goes out of the house. So one should know when to draw a line between when one's rights begin and where those rights end

Shops and markets are also public spaces. They are places where customers go to buy their necessities. They are not the private homes of shop owners. In my view mandatory vaccination of the staff in the shops should be part of the revised SoPs. The same should apply to customers. Vaccination certificates of staff can be displayed at the entry point. Customers do the same when they enter.

I also find it bizarre when people talk only about rights and never about duties. One's right to refuse vaccination cannot be an infringement on somebody else's rights. Such a person should not enter a public space like a

shop. It is like a law applied against spitting in public because spitting spreads diseases. To the anti-vaxxers - stop being selfish for a while and talk to the health workers who expose themselves day in and day out to the risks and dangers of the virus; to the families of victims of the virus and the Covid warrior who has to come out on top of the virus. They all have a right to life and free speech as much as the anti - vaxxers. Hear what they have to say.

I deeply appreciate church leaders like Rev Lyndan Syiem. He has come out with verses from the scriptures in support of the vaccination. And he is a Covid warrior himself, having fought the disease. In fact, the churches as institutions with a platform to influence should come out much more openly in support of the vaccination.

To the proliferating pressure groups, whose slogan is to save and protect the community, some of whom to be students, please look at the data. Today's Shillong Times carried an article with data by Dr Sandra Albert and Dr Rajiv Sarkar about the effectiveness of vaccination. Instead it would protect the community if the pressure groups also join the campaign for vaccination. The community may have escaped the first and second wave, it may not be so in the third wave. And what is there left to protect after death?

Those who suffer most from the lockdown are the marginalized sections of society like the daily wage

Only one face that appears on the endless stream of news mediums, exhorting and leading us, that has got even the most sceptical observer listening and paying attention.

We know only too well how loud and sonorous our leaders (MLAs) can be. We need only go back to the recent assembly sessions, and how can we forget election time. Voices so loudly convincing, so passionately in love of public service and of public good! So it is a wonder that those same voices are not heard at a time like this. The public, I am sure, would like to hear from our elect. Where is their public service at this time? Is it only in delivering rations and impromptu photo sessions? How about them taking a stand and we hear from them instead? Or are they afraid that this might diminish their popularity if they stand against public opinion? The state is at an important cross-section. Is it right for our elected leaders to remain silent at this time and allow all of the public's anger, aggression, questions to be vented towards that lone voice? A true leader is one who will fight for the good of the people regardless of public opinion. It takes a courageous leader to make the hard decisions.

Yours etc.,  
Rudi Warjri,  
Via email

### Leaders gone AWOL

Editor,  
These are tough times we are living in. Yes, the silver lining is finally upon us as we begin unlocking with all precautions and safety measures in place. The lockdown period has indeed got a few of us wondering what life will be like upon unlocking. The Covid pandemic is now a threat that will loom in the background for quite some time. While one appreciates all government's efforts to curb and handle the crisis with the health and well being of the public in mind, it however seems that it is just one voice that is heard from the chorus of our leaders.

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

*"The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents."*

— H. P. Lovecraft,

## The Shillong Times

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### Step forward in Kashmir

WHILE the Modi government at the Centre is shaking off its lethargy, matters of urgency are coming to the fore. Kashmir, for one. Prime Minister Narendra Modi is holding a meeting of political leaders from the state on Thursday to take the gains of the past two years there forward. Speculations are rife that the meeting would discuss the restoration of statehood for Jammu and Kashmir. This demand is strong after J&K had been downgraded to Union Territory status since August 5, 2019 following revocation of Article 370 and cancellation of the Special Status for the region. However, there are many ifs and buts before anything concrete happens. At best what is most likely is the start of the political process that remained fully suspended there since August 2019. Integral to this is also the constituency delimitation exercise for J&K that's currently under way. The PDP of Mehbooba Mufti and National Conference of the Abdullas have not cooperated with it so far, but both parties have realized that the process must progress. This will be a pre-condition for the coming into being of a legislature and formation of an elected government. The development council polls held a while ago progressed well even under the current limitations.

Clearly, belying fears by national opposition of an explosive situation developing there after the abrogation of Article 370, the region is breathing easy. Militancy backed by Pakistan has sharply come down. Pakistan is cautious about fresh encouragement to terrorists after the Balakot hit, and political leaders in Jammu and Kashmir have proven that they lack clout. Even after release from house arrest, neither Mehbooba nor the Abdullas could create a stir. The people of Kashmir are more resigned to their fates and protests have died down also because of the pandemic. This is time for the Centre to take positive steps to build on the gains there. People are indignant that the promises of jobs, industrialization and development held out by the Centre have not materialized. Here too the Covid pandemic came in the way and the Modi government itself was gripped by a paralysis of sorts. The Centre might however drag the constituency delimitation process for some more time until a favourable scenario arises for the BJP to dig in there and craft an alliance with PDP as it did in the past or by other ways. Drawn to a corner, even the NC might now have a rethink. This is time to look forward and rebuild Jammu and Kashmir along the path of progress so as to benefit the people there.

# Meghalaya Democratic Alliance's Green Legacy

By H H Mohrmen

Three and half years ago when he was chosen to lead the MDA, people had great expectations of him. They saw him as a modern leader, a politically suave politician and one who was going to really help the state develop. Now after three years and more the achievements of the Government under his leadership, especially with regards to the issue of environment protection and sustainable development of the state have fallen far short of those expectations. Yes, we are talking of Chief Minister Conrad Sangma.

Unlike some ministers in his cabinet, Conrad would be aware of the 17 Sustainable development goals (SDGs) which the countries of the world are set to achieve by 2030. The goals of global partnership are - to end poverty, improve health, education and reduce inequalities. The other important common global goals are to provide economic growth keeping climate change and preservation of oceans and forests at the heart of all that the governments do. Well, the report card about education is already out and there is nothing to cheer about. And now the Government is not going to fare any better in conservation and controlling climate change either.

The Chief Minister projected himself as a leader who is very concerned for the environment, but in reality in the three years that the MDA government has been in power, it has only encouraged unsustainable activities. It has promoted countless coke factories in different parts of the state and it has not taken to task those who are engaged in illegal mining and illegal transportation of coal. The MDA Government has always taken the job of tackling illegal mine owners and transporters of coal with velvet gloves.

The Government is good only at branding its programmes. Last year during the celebration of World Environment Day a clarion call was given to plant a million trees. But a year later no audit was done to find out how many of the one million trees have survived, or whether one million saplings were even planted in the first place? This year the call is to plant trees on a big plot of land but if this is going to be just another empty rhetoric,

the people of Meghalaya will have to wait and see.

The point is that nature conservation is not a one-off affair; it should be consistent and from the heart. The case of providing environment clearance for limestone mining at Brichymot is the real test with regards to the MDA Government's policy towards conservation. The ultimate outcome has only established the truth that the heart of the Government vis-à-vis the environment is in the wrong place. Sadly, in spite of the fact that all the pressure groups in Jaitia hills were against the proposed mining, the Government chose to ignore the public and sided with the Company. In the view of the Government, the interest of the Company is more important than that of the public.

In spite of the three adverse public hearings conducted by the Meghalaya State Pollution Control Board at Brichymot on 19.10.2019,

**The MDA Government has always taken the job of tackling illegal mine owners and transporters of coal with velvet gloves.**

31.01.2020 and the last one on 21.11.2020, the Government ignored public sentiments. Brichymot limestone deposit-I with the capacity to produce 2.507 million tons per annum and shale production capacity of 0.217 million TPA in a mine area of 42.051Ha was given mining clearance by the Union Ministry for Environment and Forests (MoEF). The Company proposed to take out 2.507 MTPA which it will achieve in 50 years. The question then is what will happen to the area after the 50 year period?

It was the MSPCB in its letter no. MPCB/TB-360-SCML-2020-2021 dated December 4, 2020 which has requested the Ministry to consider the said proposal from the outcome of the public hearing and public consultation as provided in para 7(i) (3) - Public consultation clause (v) of the EIA Notification, 2006. The letter also requested the authority to take into account the written submissions which were received during the period of

one month after the publication of the public notice and to make them an integral part of public consultation under prescribed provisions of the notification.

The devil lies in the details they say and this was obvious from the letter which recorded the proceedings of the public hearing as a law and order problem and not a public protest by those against the mining, as the reason for the Government not being able to conduct the public hearings. The other question whether the MSPCB had submitted all the letters of objections it received to the MoEF?

When the Chief Minister told the press that the State has nothing to do with the issuing of environment clearance, he was either not being correctly briefed or he deliberately feigned ignorance to misinform the public on the matter.

The fact is MSPCB had

literarily recommended the waiving the public hearing to allow mining as was clearly stated in the letter. It may be not be out of place to mention that earlier the MSPCB was under the purview of the Department of Public Health Engineering and now it is under the Department of Forests & Environment. What the people of Meghalaya need to ask is how the Forest Department which is mandated to protect forests has instead used the Board to encourage mining. Does this not put the future of conservation in the State in jeopardy?

It is also not out of place to mention that the Government has only 1145.19 sq km of forest areas in the state (5.10% of Geographical area) under its jurisdiction, yet instead of protecting the little forest cover that we have, the Department is indirectly responsible for issuing license to destroy forests. One of the major outcomes of the Company getting the clearance is the erosion of public trust on the MSPCB. The

Board has already suffered an embarrassing trust deficit and it will slide further down after this.

The prolonged Brichymot mining issue has not only made this small hamlet famous but it has brought to the fore the attitude that Companies have towards the citizens of the state. The outcome of the imbroglia has exemplified the Company's unabashed disrespect for the sentiments of the people. The Company has chosen confrontation as its method and is indirectly dared an open challenge to the pressure groups which opposed the mining proposal. The very fact that the information was made public not by the Board but the Company's advertisement in the newspaper illustrates that the Company is not only ecstatic about the news, but it is also indirectly reminding the public that it is in control.

It has been two decades since the first cement plant was established in the Narpuh eleka. In fact Star Cement incorporated on Nov 02, 2001 was the first company in the area, but what have these companies done for the region? It has been two decades of exploiting the region's resources, but is there a health care unit established in the area by any of the companies? Have any of the companies even started a college to benefit the people of the area? But how can one expect the cement companies to start welfare initiatives in the region when none of them even have their Corporate offices in the State?

Failing on health, education or any development parameter is not surprising but failing to protect the environment which will lead to climate change is unpardonable. That would not only be failing the future generation, but it is like the members of the MDA betraying their own children. The MDA can still correct its course and protect Narpuh. Brichymot was a very recent settlement and isn't it true that before the settlement, it was part of the JHADC unclassified forest? The NPP which is in control of the JHADC can look into the matter and ensure that the party is on the right side of history. This will not only ensure that the Party's image improves but it will also help keep Conrad's green legacy intact.

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## Need To Concentrate on Biomedical Waste

By Koustav Kashyap

The second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic has posed numerous challenges before India on multiple fronts such as health, economy and environment. One such impact of the Covid-19 outbreak on our environment which is exponentially increasing is biomedical waste.

Data suggests that average generation of Covid-19 related biomedical waste during May 2021 is 203 tonnes per day. The 'peak' generation was 250 tonnes per day which was reported on May 10. The earlier 'peak' generation in 2020 during the 1st week was in the range of 180-220 tonnes per day. While there are guidelines to handle medical waste with utmost care and dispose them safely, the exponential rise in the quantity of biomedical waste due to pandemic and lack of awareness on how to dispose them safely has made the task very challenging and difficult.

Biomedical waste is a hazardous waste which has both microbiological and biological contamination, which means that it has potential to spread various kinds of diseases. Plus, we have various medicines which are also toxic in nature. So, both from chemical and biological perspective, biomedical waste is hazardous to humans. Therefore, we have a separate law 'Biomedical Waste Management Rules'

respiratory droplets, aerosols and by touching surfaces but am very confident that as we are not managing the biomedical waste very well there may be large number of people getting infected because they are coming in contact with biomedical waste.

The 'Biomedical Waste Management Rules' came into existence in 1998 and after that there were so many amendments. The rules say that waste should be properly collected, disposed with treatment by incineration, torch technology where the treatment is given first and then finally disposed of.

All the legal provisions that we have right now is to deal with biomedical waste in hospitals whereas the majority of patients are getting treated at home; are quarantined at home and therefore whatever biomedical waste they are generating is at their own place. Unfortunately, we have not created a system to collect bio-medical waste separately from homes and to dispose of that waste into biomedical waste treatment facilities.

The second issue is that we have about 200 biomedical waste treatment facilities across the country but they are in certain districts like Delhi, Mumbai but in far off corners of the country there is no biomedical waste treatment facility even in the



to manage biomedical waste and we have a separate facility which is called a common biomedical waste treatment facility. The point is that it is a special kind of waste and it has to be managed very carefully because of its potential to cause harm to everyone.

Covid has added another challenge right now, because the Covid-19 waste is not only generated in hospitals but from homes too. In fact, 80% of Covid-19 patients are recuperating or have recuperated at home. They were quarantined and recovered at home whereas only about 20 percent had to go to hospital. These 80% patients have generated some amount of biomedical waste at their homes and we do not have any kind of facility to manage that waste. Essentially that biomedical waste has been dumped in the normal municipal waste, whereas in hospitals you have some kind of system. In fact, good hospitals have very good systems to manage biomedical waste, whereas some local hospitals don't have those facilities. Healthcare facilities must provide a storage area for medical waste until it is collected for treatment and disposal. Storage area should be selected carefully which is unapproachable to the general public and must exhibit warning symbols & signs. It should be stored in a dry and secured area before being transported. The area must be protected from water, wind, rodents, insects and animals. Hazardous biomedical waste should not be stored for more than 3 months.

Basically, this waste is infectious so we must take care; we should treat it properly and keep it in a proper colour coded container. The larger concern is that of managing Covid-19 waste at homes because we do not have systems to manage biomedical waste at home.

The news reports suggest that front-line workers, municipal workers have been impacted extensively during this pandemic; many have died. The waste generated at home is hazardous to the frontline workers who we have seen in the 1st wave and now in 2nd wave have been the most vulnerable. Our general assumption is that people are getting infected through

hospitals. The waste generated should be collected properly because if it infects water bodies then it will be a very big challenge. It should not mix with the municipal solid waste and it should be directly incinerated or gasified.

Another issue is that we have seen people throwing dead bodies of Covid affected people in the rivers. That too is a major source of pollution. If water from the river Ganga or any other river is tested, chances are that pollution through dead bodies would be very high. This is also something that we need to take care of and the administration should ensure that such a practice is immediately stopped.

The need of the hour is to make people aware that SOPs do exist and people should follow these rules very strictly. We should encourage people to keep the waste at home at an isolated place and when the waste collector comes, he should be informed very clearly that this is infected waste. The District Administrations will have to come out with very clear guidelines on what to do with that waste. The exercise is futile if the waste collectors do not know where to dispose of it and ultimately it reaches the municipal waste.

The ultimate goal obviously for all of us should be to drastically reduce environmental damage to fight the Covid-19 pandemic by treating biomedical waste with its exponential rise that we have seen over the past few months in the proper manner. Waste generation should be minimized for the protection of the environment and general public health. People must be sensitized to the issues related to biomedical waste and should participate in the programs organized for waste minimization. The medical employees must be trained to create awareness and foster responsibilities for prevention of exposure and unsafe disposal of such waste. The 2nd wave has led to a lot of hazards. We all have to understand that a healthy environment at the end of the day is essential for a healthy life and that is what should matter to us.

### Letters to the Editor

#### Suggestions to control Covid-19 surge

Editor,  
There are many reasons why there is a surge in Covid-19 positivity rates in Meghalaya since April this year. Many lives have been lost and more lives will be lost in the near future. The main reason for the increase in positive cases is the inept handling by the State Government in the second wave of Covid-19. It is noticed that thousands of trucks, buses and other vehicles are allowed to ply every day to and from Guwahati/ Shillong/ Silchar/Mizoram as they are supposed to be transit vehicles, despite the complete lockdown and curfew imposed by the Government of Meghalaya in districts of Ri-Bhoi, East Khasi, West Jaintia and East Jaintia Hills. With the exception of the Umling check post there is no semblance of checking on the whole route from Guwahati to Ratacherra (East Jaintia Hills, the last exit point from Meghalaya). No other check gates are visible anywhere on the highways. In fact, buses from Guwahati are loaded with passengers from their starting point but by the time they reach Ratacherra gate the bus is almost empty, since 95% of passengers have disembarked en-route from Ri Bhoi, East Khasi Hills,

West and East Jaintia Hills Districts.

It appears that there is no proper mechanisms to check and escort the bus passengers when they exit through Ratacherra gate. This is one reason why the towns, villages situated on the main road of those aforementioned districts have recorded high numbers of fresh Covid-19 cases. Some NGOs have done a remarkable job by detecting and deporting migrant labourers, some of whom are not even Indian nationals, but are roaming on the national highways. Credit should be given to them and the Government should consider rewarding these NGOs in monetary form and pay at least Rs 5000 for each labourer caught by them without proper documents and vaccination proof.

One can easily come to Meghalaya, as there is no checking done by any Government agencies. The route from Garo Hills to West Khasi Hills, Rani to Patharkmah via Mairang, Jagi Road to Umsning, Garompani to Jowai, Hamren to Khanduli and Ratacherra to Shillong via Jowai are free roads for them to commute to and fro as they wish. It is also evident from the trucks, buses and other vehicles that are plying along the National Highways with no supervision from the Government about these stoppages when taking beverages, snack and other food items from these

highway dhabas/shops that are supposed to be closed during lockdown period.

Recently, it was also noted that there are several new faces of a particular community who have been spotted in places like Jowai, Phramer, Lad-Rymbai, Khliehriat and so on. Consequently, the people of Meghalaya have suffered a lot due to sheer negligence and apathy of the State Government and have also lost their loved ones. They have been compelled to stay at home for nearly two months for no fault of theirs. The Government should stop the vehicles passing through Meghalaya for the time being since there are other routes passing through Haflong - Silchar - Agartala etc., so as to control the increase of positive cases in our State. It is high time that the Government wakes up from its slumber and acts responsibly otherwise Meghalaya will always be a hot spot for the Covid-19 surge.

Yours etc.,  
L. Dkhar,  
Ladthalaboh, Jowai

#### How to educate the educated

Editor,  
Never in a million years did I imagine I would contract the deadly Corona Virus but I did. My family had followed the protocols imposed by the Government to the T,

which included having only one person in the house doing all the grocery shopping to reduce the chances of getting COVID. Last week, I was summoned to the Office for some urgent work and that was the only day I stepped out of the house. Five days later, I was diagnosed with COVID-19. The only persons I came in contact with at the office were my Deputy Secretary and the Superintendent. As soon as I got the news, I contacted my family including the two people I had met at the office. All the people living in my area including my Deputy Secretary took the RT-PCR test and all turned out to be negative which left us with only the Superintendent who refused to take the test saying that she had been doing fine and defended herself by saying that she had been taking VITAMINS all these days! Sure, all of us are terrified of COVID and death. My Superintendent is probably in a state of denial but such nonchalant attitude of the people can lead to dire consequences. Being an officer holding a high rank, she should be the one to 'lead by example' is what we learnt at the various trainings at MATI. It's people with such attitude that put others at risk. I don't know what else the Government can do to educate the 'educated'

Yours etc.,  
Name withheld on request,  
Via email

#### Media & Covid-19 vaccine awareness

Editor,  
The media is the backbone of any democracy. It plays an important role in keeping the public informed about current events. In difficult times, such as now, when the pandemic is sweeping the world, democracy is increasingly reliant on the media. With the emergence of Covid-19, medical science has developed vaccines to help us fight the virus. Citizens who had never read, watched, or listened to the news before the pandemic are now doing so on a regular basis. Due to the information and directions being disseminated through the media, frontline workers are working tirelessly, and government agencies are more active. People in our state are really puzzled about the vaccine and they have little awareness about it. This makes the media a vital source of information regarding the vaccine, but it appears that the local news media in our state is focused more on news that discusses the vaccine's disadvantages than its benefits.

We, the people of the state, want the media to be responsible and inform us about the vaccine, including whether or not we should take it. The Government is doing everything it can to boost vaccine knowledge, but if the media only portrays residents speaking negatively about the vaccine, many people will conclude that the vaccine is not good for them. The media on YouTube channels are aware that the state's citizens are being misled by phoney vaccine news and still continue to depict the vaccine in a negative light. This increases people's fear about taking the vaccine.

When the media displays news about people disrespecting frontline workers and healthcare professionals while also showing news that is unfavourable about the vaccine, it is hypocritical. We respectfully request that the media boost vaccine awareness and educate the people of the state about vaccines so that we can all work together to avert this pandemic. We also urge religious leaders to collaborate with the Government and the media to raise vaccine awareness.

Yours etc.,  
Paul Melvyn Pathaw  
(Student)  
Via email

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*"Humans are startlingly bad at detecting fraud. Even when we're on the lookout for signs of deception, studies show, our accuracy is hardly better than chance."*

— Frederick William Robertson

**The Shillong Times**

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**Reforms, more reforms**

PRIME Minister Modi, ever keen on highlighting the achievements of his tenure, says the Centre has rolled out "public-friendly" reforms even in the midst of the devastating pandemic experience. The claims are that the Centre has introduced, "new model of reforms" by "stealth and compulsion" and that states cooperated well in these initiatives. Curiously, the PM's statement via a LinkedIn post comes at a time when perceptions are growing that the Modi government has lost its plot while it came to propelling India's growth. The downfall of the economy started long before arrivals of Covid-19. The nation is sustaining itself by virtue of the generous rollout of doles, which is a stop-gap arrangement and not a long-term solution. There is a sense that India is in the grip of administrative paralysis for a full 15 months.

Apart from GST, a reform that has been brought about was in the agricultural sector. The government did not budge before threats from farmers in Punjab and Haryana. A wholesale withdrawal of the reform steps is unlikely as state after state has stood by the reforms. What this goes to show is also that the eco-system for reforms are conducive in the Modi regime. The Opposition is lying low or is in a cooperative mood. The question is how far have the two Modi terms achieved in bringing transformational changes by changing the antiquated systems that remained in place for seven long decades.

Every sector cries for reforms. The judiciary, one of the four pillars of democracy, for instance. There is a huge pile-up of cases, unsettling the system and delaying the justice-dispensation process through decades. Top retired judges stated openly that vested interests are at work. The setting up of a National Judicial Service on the lines of the Civil Services to fashion a brilliant set of young minds to man the judiciary was decided on by the UPA-II, but the seven years of the NDA term left it in cold storage. Bureaucracy is riddled with corruption and so is politics. This is hampering investment opportunities, so important for job generation and economic growth. Agriculture sector, which is run with the sweat of farmers, did well in economic terms, while the industry sector is ailing. Investment means a cut for politicians and bureaucrats. India, alternatively, is depending on China to meet even daily household requirements. Sleepy, old-fashioned governance style at the apex is India's curse. Every sector must reform and refurbish its image. Talks apart, very little push in that direction is evident.

**Mysterious and non-mysterious silence**

By Albert Thyriang

The food grain 'scam' has ruffled the state. The seizure of one lakh bags of rice weighing 50 kg each by the Assam Police from a private godown in Chhaygoan, Boko meant for Meghalaya Social Welfare under the Wheat Based Nutrition Programme (WBNP) has made local and national headlines. The potential multi-crore foodgrain scam has become the talk of the town. The Congress, the BJP in Tura and some local NGOs have demanded a probe into the alleged corruption in diversion of foodgrain meant for nutrition of the poor.

While the whole state is miffed by the sensational 'catch', the regional parties in the MDA government kept a staunch silence until the Opposition Congress forced an economical reaction from the BJP and the PDF. While the BJP said all partners in the coalition have discussed the issue, the PDF informed it took up the matter with Chief Minister, Conrad K Sangma. The clarification, however, does not absolve the belated response. In the social media world of today why can't political parties have official Twitter handles and Facebook accounts? What prevents the PDF from putting up a post, "Raises the seizure of rice in Assam with the CM"? Political parties in Meghalaya are at least ten years behind as far as social media is concerned. Any way the PDF response is rare and muted. Along with the HSPDP it hardly has an opinion on any issue in the state. They seem satisfied just to be in the chair.

The UDP going 'missing' is however startling. The major partner in the MDA coalition has been at the forefront in criticising its own government particularly on illegal coal mining and transportation and the MeECL affairs. The party led the way in ensuring the removal of James Sangma of the NPP as Home Minister. The leadership managed to convince the Chief Minister to nominate their man, Lakhmen Rymbui to replace his elder brother. But when even their own minister failed to curb the rampant illegal coal mining they continued to take on the government. The party leadership even tried to persuade the Chief Minister to strip James Sangma off the Power Ministry too. The failed attempt might have hurt their ego.

The alleged rice scam is related to the Social Welfare department. The Social Welfare minister is Kyrmen Shylla of the UDP. Is this the reason why the party is on prolonged silent mode? If the minister was from another party would the UDP be quiet? Would not the party ask for change of guard? Or has the party learned from past experiences? The party has been critical of the Government in spite of being part of it. It is a case of escaping responsibility for failures. It is an example of enjoying

power while portraying to the public that the Party has no role in the government's fiasco.

The Party might have realised that it cannot have it both ways. It might have recognized that it has to accept failures while being part of the Government. It might have understood that being part of a coalition explicitly implies collective responsibility. It might have sensed that people have detected its double standards. It might have made up its mind that

efficient? Should our agencies not also get involved? The Government has so far shied away from any inquiry. But if investigation in Assam points to our state, the Government will have no choice but to order a full investigation. Even if the police probe in Assam finds Meghalaya 'innocent' should we rejoice? After all the foodgrains belong to Meghalaya!

Even if investigation is too early at this stage, should the Government avoid the media? On Friday last after



it can't choose successes and reject failures. But if this wisdom has sunk in the party, it has to acknowledge that in concrete terms. It can't be saying nothing. It has to either deny the involvement of the Social Welfare Department like the Chief Minister did or express its openness for a credible investigation like their own minister did. The silence of the UDP is mysterious.

The Chief Minister has claimed that the seized rice is not linked to the public distribution system (PDS) in Meghalaya. Deputy Chief Minister, Prestone Tynsong denies any knowledge of the re-packaging process of the 'Meghalaya' rice. The Food Corporation of India (FCI) has washed its hand of the irregularity claiming that the Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India, had allocated 3098 MT Rice and 1094 MT wheat under the WBNP Scheme for Meghalaya State for the 1st quarter of the year during 2021-22 and orders were issued to lift the food grains on four instances in May and June 2021 from FSD Khanapara. Once the stock was transported FCI's responsibility is over.

Meanwhile the Social Welfare Director insists that there has been no instance of non-supply of food items so far. Then how did the whole episode come about? Hopefully, the Assam Police will solve the case and unravel the whole saga. Time will tell whether the chain of events also lead to the neighbouring state.

But is the investigation by the Assam Police suf-

icient? Should our agencies not also get involved? The Government has so far shied away from any inquiry. But if investigation in Assam points to our state, the Government will have no choice but to order a full investigation. Even if the police probe in Assam finds Meghalaya 'innocent' should we rejoice? After all the foodgrains belong to Meghalaya!

its meeting, the entire Cabinet avoided facing the media. Even if repeatedly grilled by the 'fourth estate' on the issue should the government deviate from its practice of briefing the media after every Cabinet meeting? Should not the Chief Minister or the delegated Deputy Chief Minister answer questions? Was the 'rice scam' not in the agenda? But why was it not on the table? Is the issue unimportant not to be discussed? If all political parties have raised the issue was it not during the Cabinet meeting? Then why did Government not explain to the many waiting journalists who will in turn disseminate the Government's statement to the public? Why should the Government maintain an unexplained silence?

It is too soon to jump the gun. But it does not mean the irregularities cannot occur in our state. We have no record to show that unethical happenings do not take place here. Ethical niceties are spoken of regularly. We often eulogise ourselves of being a righteous society (Kajait/Ri Tip Brieu Tip Blei). We often proudly remind ourselves that that we earn our living through fair means (kamai da kahok). Christians have added values from the Holy Scriptures to supplement the 'innate' principles. But are we true to ourselves? The illegal coal business has been going on for at least six years. Since 2014 how many crores have been transacted illegally? Do we see righteousness in the lucrative trade? Do we even sympathise with the victims of mining tragedies? Have the ministers, the top govern-

ment officials, the police been earning/amassing wealth the right way? The other beneficiaries are the next powerful people, the pressure groups. Except for a couple, no NGO has spoken against illegal mining. There is no mystery. We can be blunt. The NGOs have their own 'check gates'. The leaders get a share of the clandestine cash.

The Meghalaya Energy Corporation Limited (MeECL) is dogged with allegations of corruption, scandals, favouritism and nepotism. Things have come to such a pass that no clean person can survive in this government enterprise. The 'impeccable' independent director, Lumlanglin Kharkongor had to quit in protest against questionable deals in the Power Corporation. The loss of ethics led to overpricing of computer related materials, furniture, installing and maintenance charges resulting in huge kickbacks.

The corruption charges in the ADCs will soon be out of public memory. The party that 'oversaw' corruption in the ailing council and has allegedly made the most of the 'central aid' returned to power. Political parties and winning candidates who vigorously campaigned against the malpractices are now supporting the current dispensation. Individuals have benefited fraudulently. They may never face the law. Few will press for action.

The recent distasteful and derogatory remark against the East Khasi Hills DC, Isawanda Laloo on Facebook by a 38-year-old man is an indication of the loss of human values. We may vehemently oppose the order for mandatory vaccination against Covid-19 as a precondition for permission to reopen shops and plying of commercial vehicles. We may put our points of view strongly in social media but the vulgar and sexist comment is out of sync in a civilized world. We were all outraged. The police promptly arrested the offender. There are also secretive Facebook groups and posts which degrade, demean, shame and humiliate women, particularly those who date and marry non-Khasi men. One only wishes the police take equally speedy actions against those behind such posts as well.

The Government might think that the latest scam too will be swept under the carpet. Or else why it is refusing to answer questions? The government knows that the media will soon focus on other 'upcoming' issues. The Government is also aware that the public is largely indifferent to corruption, irregularities and illegalities. Signs are there that illegal coal mining, corruption in ADCs and MeECL will eventually pass by. The food grain 'scam' will be no different. Life will return to normal.

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**Covid and the mess we are in**

By Toki Blah

The other day a batch-mate from Delhi called. His first question to me was, "How are things in Meghalaya and Shillong?" which probably meant the Covid situation in our state. I replied that it was the same as in the rest of India but with a slightly cock-eyed perception on how some people view the pandemic, its implications and how to deal with it. He was intrigued so I hastily sought to enlighten him on the issue. The fact is, there is total confusion, chaos, fear and panic here as in other parts of the country. People are clueless; the best one can try is by trial and error. Everyone, irrespective of which faith they believe in are praying for a cure and an end to the dreaded disease. Funnily, in Meghalaya, when God actually answers our prayers and vaccines are available and offered for free, many do a sudden about-turn and flee from the needle! The initial cry of, "Dear God, save us from Covid", rapidly changes to, "Please deliver us from the job"! A new word was coined—The anti-vaxxers.

Having tried banging pots and pans, lightning diyas, drinking cow urine et al, science has universally arrived at the conclusion that the only way to deal with the virus and to curb its spread is by achieving herd immunity through vaccination. Lockdowns are a temporary method of containment; the surest method known so far is through mass vaccination. That there are not enough vaccines to go by is a different story, but mass vaccination of everyone is the only known cure. In enlightened societies people queue up to be vaccinated and the educated and conscious 18 to 45 age group of our state have done us proud. Thanks to them and their scientific temperament Meghalaya has been spared the ridicule of being a No 1 vaccine hesitant state. May their tribe increase and so too the demand for inoculation. However, hesitancy persists among those with questionable degrees from Whatsapp University. Conspiracy theories of Covid promotion by Government and its agencies abound. It reminds one of the Taliban response to polio immunization in Afghanistan. There are those who feel it is against their faith to get immunised. Perhaps God didn't respond as per their demands and expectations. Others feel invincible; still others object simply for objections sake. Unfortunately this conflict of perception in Meghalaya makes it that much harder to manage the pandemic. Clearly something has to be done about it.

The second wave that hit Meghalaya with such unexpected devastation is now seemingly on the wane. Daily death tolls have waned though the infection rate is still alarming. It needs to reduce. Now if health experts are to be believed, and there is no reason not to, a third wave is inevitable and is likely to hit us sooner than later. Perhaps, if we are not careful a 4th wave will also follow with unforeseen consequences. As on June 20, 2021, Meghalaya had over 45,000 confirmed Covid cases and over 300 fresh cases each day. The death toll has crossed 780 while those still under treatment number 4500. These are human losses that a small, underdeveloped state like Meghalaya can ill afford. The impact of the pandemic on our fragile economy is yet unknown but a rough guess is that the economy is in tatters. The assessment is that thousands of jobs have been lost; thousands have slipped further into poverty; thousands of students will end up as drop-outs and we can foresee only more hardships. Unfortunately, our people are not prepared to accept these inescapable projections. Instead of converging on an action plan to save ourselves from

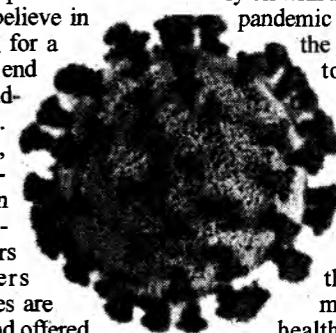
future mishaps we indulge in petty, political squabbles; on insignificant trivialities and displays of personal egos and sense of self-importance. Allow me to illustrate.

In an attempt to boost the percentage of vaccinations so as to reach the a critical mass effect, to bend the Covid curve, the Deputy Commissioner, East Khasi Hills District made it mandatory for those who are most likely to interact with others, such as shopkeepers, their staff and drivers of commercial vehicles should get themselves vaccinated before permission is granted them to carry on with their trade. In a pandemic it is the job of the administrator to ensure that public health is secured. It is her job to protect and save lives and if vaccination is the answer to maintain public health and prevent further spread of the disease; if that is the answer to lockdowns that have so devastated the economy, then so be it. Any DC worth her salt is expected to enforce it! The step should have been publicly applauded. One is therefore aghast at the howls of protest from some quarters. The allegation is that administrative force and coercion is being used to stifle the freedom of choice of the anti-vaxxers and is therefore ultra-vires to the Constitution. How accurate is this charge? It needs to be examined.

The allegation is that Art 19 (1.g) of the Constitution provides liberty to citizens to practice any profession, or carry on any occupation, trade or business within the territory of India. As such the DC's order has violated this fundamental right of the citizen. Meanwhile the Government of India too has left it to the will of individual citizens whether or not to get vaccinated. Force and coercion cannot be used. But the stark reality is that people are dying and EKH for its size has one of the highest deaths and Covid infection rates in the country. There is urgent need to arrest this; it cannot simply be wished away. Interestingly clause (6) of the same Art 19 of the Constitution provides that, "Nothing in sub clause (g) of the said clause shall affect the operation of any existing law insofar as it imposes or prevents the state from making any law imposing, in the interest of the general public, reasonable restrictions of the exercise of the rights conferred by the said sub-clause." The interest of the general public, in this instance is reliable protection against Covid 19. Vaccination is the only weapon of choice we have. So why oppose?

Some claim that the DC's order impinges on their Fundamental Right to Freedom of Religion, as they do not believe in vaccination as a cure for ailments. Art 25 of the Constitution grants them such freedom but, subject to public order, morality and health. Covid-19 is a threat to public health and as such, restrictions to a certain degree, on individual liberties is in order; in fact, sorely needed! A closer scrutiny of the DC's order also shows that the aggrieved parties have a choice whether or not to get vaccinated. Those who are vaccinated can get on with their businesses. Those who don't, in the interest of the general public, should stay at home. I see no restrictions on personal liberty in such a case. People are given a choice. Where's the coercion? Where's the force being used?

In conclusion, our choices must be unequivocal - freedom from the plague or freedom to do what we want irrespective of the harm it can inflict on others. Freedom from the pandemic enjoys that we act unilaterally to eliminate Covid-19 from our society. Freedom to act as we please, and assert our rights without social responsibility, is what the virus wants. The choice is entirely ours.



Letters to the Editor

**Vaccine hesitancy**

Editor, The hue and cry, the protest, the obstinate and adamant attitude of a section of people towards Covid Vaccination emphatically shows that a vast majority of our population are still either ignorant, or educated but lacking in knowledge, superstitious or illiterate. They boldly claim their freedom and rights yet they forget their duties and responsibilities as citizens of the society. Amongst these are the educated lot but how do you educate the educated? Their selfish acts put their own lives and other people's lives at risk.

This justifies the backwardness and the myopic thoughts that are still prevalent amongst people in our society. Our mindsets are

narrow and limited and we do not want to move ahead. Pity, that we look up to the Western countries for a modern lifestyle, yet, with the present scenario we can never even dream of matching the developed countries that are now progressing towards normalcy because they did not hesitate to take the vaccine.

The consequences of the choices made by these selfish, pseudo intellectuals can be devastating to one and all. Until and unless we achieve a certain percentage of people vaccinated we can never be safe and hence the lockdown continues. The ill effects of the lockdown need not be spelt out. Scepticisms can always be addressed through proper and authentic platforms but never through unverified social media channels. A sceptic needs to rationalise his/her thinking, satisfy his/her quest before

he/she runs out of time.

Change is always for the better, so why the hesitance and resistance to adapt to change? The mentality and mindset of a person has to change with time. Being in the 21st century we cannot afford to have mindsets of the 19th century where taboos, unjustified fears and superstitions dominated. We need to get past that, broaden our horizons and walk towards the future with renewed faith and hope.

I totally endorse the direction where only those vaccinated can resume their businesses; rightly so, for the safety of the larger population. Nobody has the right to keep another at any form of risk. Hence before massive infections and deaths befall us let us be wise in our decisions and not get carried away by false propaganda of the anti-vaccine crusaders. It's now or never!

Yours etc., Badarie Warjri, Via email

**Of true Covid warriors**

Editor,

The news report "Grave job...", in Shillong Times dated June 18, 2021, is a saga of dedicated service of SMB and CD&HG members in ensuring appropriate completion of the burial process of those who lost their lives in the fight against COVID-19. Similarly, the management and staff of Shillong Electric Crematorium have also been providing committed service to make sure that the last rites of COVID 19 victims are conducted following all rituals with dignity and honour. The entire crematorium, particularly operation of the furnace,

is controlled by a single furnace operator, Prakash Sunar at present. The Covid phase cremation till date has been a story of personal risk and sacrifice. On some days during the peak period of the pandemic, 4-5 bodies were incinerated, which entails more than twelve hours on an average of constant monitoring. The entire exercise was completed single-handedly by the operator with one additional helper at best. Thereafter, daily incineration of normal dead bodies also had to be carried out by the same team. In addition, during 1st phase of Covid-19 entire hospital and other Covid-19 bio-medical waste, generated daily, under Shillong Urban Agglomeration was incinerated in the same electric furnace, after completing incineration of dead bodies. Further, regular maintenance and repairing

works due to breakdown of the machinery also had to be attended to by the same team, with support and guidance of the technical team of GSC&MS; all of whom are rendering voluntary services. The crematorium is managed by a non profit registered society, since inception, but the operator and helpers are real front line Covid warriors of the pandemic. They render over 20 hours of service at times, with full dedication and satisfaction of all concerned.

We need to honour this selfless service.

Yours etc Naba Bhattacharjee Working President, GSC&MS Via email

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*"Destroying rainforest for economic gain is like burning a Renaissance painting to cook a meal."*

— E. O. Wilson

## The Shillong Times

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### Development versus Conservation

THE 71.5 km Shillong-Dawki-Tamabil National Highway being constructed by the National Highway Infrastructure Development Corporation Limited (NHIDCL) has run into a major controversy after protests were raised by concerned citizens over the felling of scores of stately English pines along the Eastern Air Command area in Upper Shillong. On Wednesday the High Court of Meghalaya stepped in to stay the further cutting of trees along that stretch after a private citizen moved a public interest petition. The Rs 1251 crore project which includes land acquisition is being funded by the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA). This mega venture includes a 4-lane highway for about 15 Kms from the Umshyri Bridge in Shillong to Baniun at 7th Mile Upper Shillong. If this highway comes up it will reduce the daily traffic jams from 7th Mile Upper Shillong to Umshyri Bridge in Shillong.

The work was started after all environmental clearances were received from the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF). It would be prudent to believe that the MoEF relied on clearances given by the State Expert Appraisal Committee Level (SEAC). Hence the State Government should be in the know of this. It is surprising therefore that Chief Minister, Conrad Sangma was caught by surprise at this tree felling exercise in what is Shillong's own idea of a boulevard. His tweet further exposed his ignorance when he said that NHIDCL would be told to stop the tree cutting process when this was clearly the brief of the State Forest Department which relied on the clearance given by the MoEF.

The NHIDCL has naturally washed its hands off this fracas saying they are not responsible for the tree cutting part of the project since they are only engaged in road construction. It is learnt that JICA itself being an environmentally conscious organisation had made several realignments to avoid treading on cultural icons like monoliths etc., along the route. This road when completed would become an integral lifeline for people of the southern slopes of Meghalaya who can export their products to Bangladesh, their natural destination. They would also be more conveniently linked to the state capital. So the importance of this national highway cannot be overemphasized. The only concern is that the project would claim over 4000 trees. While compensatory afforestation is being taken care of and the Government of Meghalaya plans to offset the damage by planting some 40,000 trees in West Khasi Hills, that can never compensate for those stately pines that are part of the history and eco-system of Shillong.

# Rahul Gandhi: The fall guy

By Rajdeep Sardesai

Dumping on Rahul Gandhi has become a fashion: while his BJP opponents have 'Pappu-fied' him as an incompetent leader, many of his Congress colleagues in private hold him responsible for the deepening crisis of the grand old party. It's almost as if every time any Congress person quits the party or indeed, the party suffers any election defeat, Rahul Gandhi is the chief culprit. So let's cut to the chase and ask the central question: would a Congress minus Rahul be in a better position to challenge a Narendra Modi led BJP?

After two massive electoral debacles in the 2014 and 2019 general elections, the obvious answer would be to suggest that a Rahul-led Congress is incapable of besting a Modi-led BJP. There is little doubt that the Gandhi scion is the tailor-made foil for the prime minister. His presence as a fifth generation dynast allows Modi to play the 'naamdar versus kaamdar' narrative to the hilt. Modi craftily deploys a populist war cry: would you choose a privileged, untested inheritor of a family legacy or would you opt for the up by his bootstraps 'chaiwallah' (tea boy) who has gone on to become prime minister after years of toil? For a 'new' India built on a meritocratic ideal, the well-marketed Modi journey is far too compelling when compared with the pampered existence of a Lutyens elite offspring.

Moreover, the sustained toxic campaign of the BJP in damning Rahul Gandhi as a 'Pappu' — through a mix of lies, half-truths and self-goals — has clearly influenced millions of voters. Even when he raises valid and searching questions, as he has done during the entire Covid period in the last year, the image of Rahul Gandhi as somehow an unsuitable leader has stuck. And in politics it isn't easy to repair the damage, especially when a complicit media is happy to play along with the ruling party.

And yet, it isn't as if the Congress was doing spectacularly well before Rahul Gandhi first entered the political scene seventeen years ago. This is, after all, a political party which hasn't won a majority at the Centre since 1984, an election triumph which was literally bequeathed to Rajiv Gandhi after the assassination of his mother. The decline in UP and across the Hindi heartland is a late 1980s phenomenon, a reflection of the changing paradigm of Indian politics where the Congress's

*"If Rahul Gandhi truly wants to wage an ideological war against the BJP-RSS; then he is leading the wrong army.*

*If he is committed to value-based politics, then he must show the courage of his convictions, take the risk of breaking the present 'Indira-Rajiv-Sonia' Congress and forge his own path by forming his own party with all comrades who share his dream."*

to the point of no return in large parts of the country. For the organizational decline that has pushed the Congress to the brink, Rahul Gandhi cannot be solely blamed since it pre-dates his arrival in politics (he perhaps can trace it back to his Dadi). What he can be held responsible for is his failure to recognize that the Congress in its present shape is not an

ideological adversary to the sangh parivar nor a robust election machine capable of taking on a Modi-led BJP. The Congress is a large and loose 'big tent' party of power, whose power-hungry leaders are habituated to VIP privilege, be it a Lal Batti car or a Rajya Sabha seat and a Lutyens bungalow.

It cannot be transformed overnight into a revolutionary party of hardened secular activists or a party of like-minded left leaning fellow-travellers. Those who have left the Congress in recent times, including those once seen as close aides of Rahul Gandhi, mirror the inescapable reality of a political culture that is discomfited with the prospect of being out of power for an extended period. If Rahul Gandhi is not seen as a vote catcher or an astute election strategist, then a large section of the Congress will never fully embrace him.

Which is why if Rahul Gandhi wants to genuinely 'democratise' or reform the

soul-stirring wannabe Mahatmas. For example, you cannot claim to be a secular fundamentalist and then compromise for power by tying up with the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra or with an Islamic cleric in Bengal. The Congress frankly is weighed down by too much baggage to be seen as a resolute defender of progressive values.

If Rahul Gandhi truly wants to wage an ideological war against the BJP-RSS, then he is leading the wrong army. If he is committed to value-based politics, then he must show the courage of his convictions, take the risk of breaking the present 'Indira-Rajiv-Sonia' Congress and forge his own path by forming his own party with all comrades who share his dream. If he has a vision for a better politics, then he needs to agitate for it, not just by attacking the Modi government on twitter or by holding online chats with American academics but by hitting the streets of the country and connecting with people, replacing the culture of entitlement with that of egalitarianism. That is the only way he can hope to emerge from the dynastic trap and be seen as a formidable challenger to the existing ruling arrangement.

Maybe he can even draw a leaf out of his Dadi's playbook. Like Rahul as 'Pappu', Indira Gandhi too was lampooned as a 'Gungi Gudiya'. Yet, by 1969 she was determined enough to break with the old guard in the Congress and forge her own identity with stunning success. Mrs Gandhi though clearly saw herself as an artful 24 x 7 practitioner of realpolitik. Rahul Gandhi too needs to decide: is he willing to play a lead role in the ruthless pursuit of power or else opt out and operate in a more academic universe of ideas? Staying in a status quoist comfort zone is no longer an option for him or the Congress.

Post-script: Recently, when Mukul Roy rejoined the Trinamool Congress, Mamata Banerjee was asked about taking back someone who had betrayed her. She was emphatic that there are no 'closed doors' in politics. It's a lesson in no holds barred powerplay that the Congress once excelled in and perhaps needs to re-learn. Else the original pan-India 'umbrella' party will be reduced to a localized rump grouping.

(The writer is senior journalist and author. Email: rajdeepsardesai52@gmail.com)

## The half-cooked students of 2020-21

By Benjamin Lyngdoh

The other day a group of concerned parents stated that "the future of their children is destroyed because of Covid-19". They are parents whose children are in classes eight, nine and ten. It is understandable that such parents will be the most worried lot as matriculation results are considered the hallmark and the first stepping stone into career building. High school education is the foundation for choosing amongst the streams of arts, commerce and science from class eleven onwards. If the foundation and counselling is not inadequate then the choice of a stream might be a difficult task. After all, it involves going into a higher and specialised study that ultimately builds a person's career graph. It is a precarious situation that has impacted the high school students enormously. Amidst this consideration, the fact is that all students across schools, colleges and universities have been affected in varying degrees. The degree of impact depends upon the seriousness of the student and the involvement of the parents. This primarily defines how bad the pandemic has been for students. In terms of learning and knowledge, we generally see a lot of half-cooked students with a few exceptions. Of course, the pandemic is the reason for it; but sadly much of it is our own doing.

In April, 2020 there was a clip on social media where a kid was asked as to why she has not gone to school? She answered because it is Corona holiday. The people around her can be heard laughing and clapping and everyone took it as hilarious. Well, today it is not funny anymore! Just look at the kind of havoc the pandemic has caused on the learning of students. Even today many of them still behave as if they are on a holiday. Since last year the desire and willingness to learn has deteriorated. The motiva-

*"The worrying thing is that they have become half-cooked not because of the Covid-19 situation alone, but because of taking advantage of the situation. For many, learning has become secondary, studying has become a rarity and scoring marks has become a piece of cake."*

tion is lost. In fact, some of them outlandishly hope that they will not need to go to their educational institutions anymore and that marks and divisions will be handed to them on a platter.

The worrying thing is that they have become half-cooked not because of the Covid-19 situation alone, but because of taking advantage of the situation. For many, learning has become secondary, studying has become a rarity and scoring marks has become a piece of cake. One student of a school proudly claimed that he scored 92% in his year-end examination but on discussing the basics of the subject-matter his knowledge was scanty and left a lot to be desired.

However, the intention of this column is not to demean; rather, it is to lay down the facts as they are. We must accept that we have a problem of half-cooked students and take steps to reverse the trend. Yes, we may not be able to do much about the pandemic induced restrictions; however, a lot can and must be done at the household level. As one teacher quipped, "When you are at school (lower classes), the real learning happens at home!"

The online classes are going on. The good thing now is that teachers have got the hang of it and students are in the bandwagon. However, the important point to be factored here is that we do not have a culture of teaching-learning through online mode. It is alien to us. Unlike in western countries where the practice of online classes dates back to the 1990s, for us it is something new and forced upon both teachers and students. Online classes are not built in our psyche and hence it will take time for the students to adapt to learning through it. This is precisely one of the reasons why students learn

less these days. It will take time for them to acclimatise to it just as it took time for the teachers to learn to teach online.

In this structural transition, the year 2020-21 has turned into a nightmare for the students. The condition worsens if the students already lack the desire for learning. Then all hell breaks loose. Here, let us take NEHU and the colleges affiliated to it as a case in point. In July, 2020 when we were all grappling with the issue of conducting examinations, all stakeholders from teachers to students to parents to society were involved in it. Till that time, it was unsure as to when and how examinations would be conducted. Till that time, the attendance of students in online classes was as good as 100%. When it was decided that the examination would be an 'open-book online mode', gradually the attendance started dwindling and the frequency of class-attendance became erratic. Combine this with cases where teachers do not take classes. Then everything goes for a toss. The outcome is half-cooked students in higher education. The year 2020-21 has brought out students with impressive marks and percentages but without adequate learning.

On the other side of the coin, 2020-21 has become the year of 'excellence of the serious'. There are cases of students who have done well during the pandemic. However, these are few and are predominantly those who have the backing of two critical factors — a good internet connection with supporting gadgets and parents who are able and willing to guide/teach their children. In truth, this will become an increasing trend in the near future. As nice as it appears this cannot be a yardstick for the many. This is because in Meghalaya not everyone has the economic means for online

learning. This is true even of those within Shillong itself.

The 2020 Oxfam report points out that the richest 10% in India own 74% of its wealth. In the case of Meghalaya, it would be fair to propose that the richest 10% owns 90% of its wealth! This disparity only indicates the depth of the problem. In addition, the majority of parents do not possess the ability to teach their children. There are many who cannot handle their children once they reach class five and above. This is a practical problem. All of this is a melting pot that leads to half-baked students impacted by the pandemic. In the short-term, the only way out of this problem is for teachers to consistently be on the look-out for students and motivate them to study; for students to reciprocate and be responsible towards their education and future careers and the parents to guide and teach their children to the extent possible. In addition, teaching by neighbours and friends can be of great help for parents who lack the skills. Failure to act on this will only aggravate the problem of half-baked students!

In the end, it goes without saying that classroom interaction is irreplaceable and that online teaching-learning is only a supplement. However, this very concept of blended learning is here to stay. Hence, there is need for the teachers, students and parents to rise to the challenge. Parents that are able to should invest in gadgets and teach their children at home; for those who are not able to, the government must assist in acquiring gadgets and parents are to build social networks for teaching-learning of their children.

(Email: benjamin21in@yahoo.co.in: The Author teaches at NEHU)



### Letters to the Editor

#### Teachers deserve a better deal!

Editor,  
It is unfortunate that Meghalaya, and the capital city Shillong which was once the educational hub of the North Eastern states has been ranked lowest in the Performance Grade Index (PGI). And the allegations advanced by our Lok Sabha MP, Vincent Pala, that this is an attempt by the Centre to downgrade the efforts of missionary-run schools is totally baseless. If the yardstick for judging the educational outcomes are to be tainted by political and religious undertones then education in Meghalaya will slide some more. Punjab which is ranked the highest is a Congress-ruled state which proves that such ranking is not influenced by political and religious sub-texts.

Regarding the low ranking of our state has the MP ever focused on any of the academic structures, which not only includes the performance of the students but also includes the welfare of the teaching community? Even the State Government has neglected this aspect. The Government focuses primarily on Deficit Schools

where the teachers are paid very high (although teachers normally get their salaries after 3 months) but can government admit that only those Deficit or Government-aided Schools contribute to the academic excellence of the state? Did the government ever pay attention to those teachers in private schools. They are left with no options but to teach in private schools since the appointment to Deficit Schools is always through the backdoor. Candidates that have the backing of the Managing Committee, whose members are the retired Government officers, including senior members of the locality.

There have been instances where one person serves as a Managing Committee member in several schools and enjoys monopoly in all spheres. In other states there is a centralized system of recruitment of teachers into government schools which is based only on merit. The successful candidates can be posted in any part of the state including the rural areas. Hence many teachers prefer to work in private schools located within their city. But private schools pay their teachers poorly.

In Meghalaya, there is no centralized recruitment system into Deficit schools. Many aspirants despite hav-

ing all the required qualifications are forced to work in private schools with comparatively less pay but with more work pressure. In private schools teachers work harder due to strict supervision. This improves the teaching learning process and also creates a conducive environment where children are disciplined and learn better. Hence even members of Managing Committees of Deficit Schools and teachers prefer to send their children to private schools. Here I am not blaming teachers of Deficit Schools as some are diligent and care about the overall academic excellence of the students. But the question still remains as to why many parents prefer sending their children to private schools. There must be some valid reasons for that.

The irony however, is that teachers of private schools are poorly paid and there is no regulatory body to ensure that teachers are paid decent salaries. Teaching is a dignified profession and teachers deserve respect. That respect will come when they are paid what they deserve. Many capable young people who could have made good teachers prefer to work in other sectors. If in academic competitions like the board exams, the students of Deficit Schools and Private Schools

face equal competition why is the Education Department not concerned about the welfare of private school teachers who are appointed totally on merit without any reservations and backing but are paid a pittance.

During this pandemic work pressure in the form of online classes has added to the burden of teachers but salaries of private school teachers are either stopped or reduced even while the Government turns a blind eye to their plight. It's high time Government focuses on such core issues and invests more on education. Government should also consider the plight of private school teachers and adopt a centralized and systematic way of recruiting teachers henceforth so that only the best make it to the teaching profession. Please remember that it is teachers who are responsible for creating the human resources for the future of the nation.

Yours etc.,  
Premankur Dam,  
Shillong-4

#### The poor need empathy

Editor,  
I am not against vaccination! What I am against is

the way it is being enforced on a certain section of the society and not by creating awareness among the mass. Don't shift the blame to someone else when people fear vaccination especially the uneducated and the marginalized sections of the society. They are the ones who need to be educated about the virus; the cause and its effects on their well being and to clear all the misconceptions which are cemented in their minds either through gossip or wrong information on the internet. Ask yourself all my beloved dear leaders what have you done to clear the misconceptions about the virus? Have you done enough? What I have seen is only administrative orders to get the job and warning to the anti-vax gossippers. Force and warning are not the essence of democracy. There's partiality too in that vaccination is forced only on a section of society. Even the shopkeepers and cab drivers have the right to be protected from the chance of contracting the virus from customers and passengers. So why not the customers and passengers get vaccinated too, my point here is to make vaccination compulsory to all.

What makes me write this letter is when I read in your paper that a lady selling

kwai dong was disallowed to open her shop for not being vaccinated. Instead of asking why, the authority tore her paper. That hurts. They should have asked the reason why and cleared all doubts if any from that particular Kong. They should make her understand and persuade her to take the job which in turn can motivate others. Tearing papers and treating the poor in that way is not our tradition. This goes to the one who tore the paper and to all those who gave out the order. What if that Kong and her entire family went hungry on that particular day or days to come? The administration should use its powers wisely since they don't understand the hardship that people go through during this period. At the end of every month government employees get paid whether there's a lockdown or not. Please have some sympathy while making decisions and remember we are living in the world's largest democracy.

Yours etc,  
A M Rynjah  
Shillong - 14

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"A destruction, an annihilation that only man can provoke, only man can prevent."

— Elie Wiesel

## The Shillong Times

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### Sad state of opposition

THE sad state of India's Opposition was evident at a Delhi conclave attended by eight political parties opposed to the BJP. The meeting was held in a cautious first step forward with an eye on the 2024 parliamentary polls, which could give the non-BJP parties the first opportunity to oust the NDA and Prime Minister Modi from power. However the fulcrum around which the meeting revolved, Sharad Pawar, was at pains to explain it was only meant to be a discussion on the state of the nation. As National Conference leader Omar Abdullah stressed, no such discussion is complete without a look at the political scenario.

As it turned out, no leader with notable clout attended the meeting, held as desired by former Union minister and Rashtra Manch leader Yashwant Sinha. Sinha lacks a base even in his native Bihar. Had he called the meeting without Pawar -- whose NCP shares power with the Shiv Sena and the Congress in Maharashtra -- it would have proven to be more of a damp squib. Word is that Sharad Pawar was testing the waters and caught on a request from Sinha for holding the meet at his Delhi residence. Pawar's series of meetings with election strategist Prashant Kishor in recent days indicates that something is cooking behind the curtains. The principal reason why there is no enthusiasm about an Opposition build-up even after the flooring of the BJP in West Bengal is the strategy being tied on the sly by the Opposition parties to keep the Congress out of a joint offensive against the BJP and PM Modi. Pawar rightly understands that if an offensive has to be launched then this is the time to start it, also because it would require time to take the movement to a crescendo by 2024. The ambitions of regional leaders to grab the PM's post could be a reason why they are wary of inclusion of the Congress in the proposed grouping, as had been the case before the 2019 polls too.

A problem with the regional parties and leaders is that they cannot pull along together. From the 1977 Janata Party period, this was proven time and again. Their egos clash at first sight. These parties and leaders are principally promoting dynasties and Mamata Banerjee is only the latest addition. They are all in the forefront of corruption if one goes by the series of exposes of the past. The Congress too is plagued by these flaws, but it still has a pan India appeal.

# Tree cutting saga, social media and selective outrage

By Patricia Mukhim

What delights the eye and appeals to our aesthetic sense is not necessarily worth conserving. The cryptomeria japonica lining both sides of the roads bordering the Eastern Air Command, (Indian Air Force) may not be ecologically sustainable. They were planted during the British era in the late 19th or early 20th century. This is information provided by former Chief Secretary, Barkos Warji. He says that the whole of Upper Shillong, including the present EAC, Agriculture Farm down to the Umshyri bridge was a reserved forest. The army was given 101 acres by the Forest Department and that is how the word 101 Area was derived from. Cryptomeria do not support any undergrowth because the ground hardly gets any sunlight. Hence they are a monoculture species and the antithesis of biodiversity which is the essence of environmental sustainability. But they are stately and beautiful to look at especially when going for a luxury drive with loved ones. It is the most romantic part of the drive. Hence the cumulative urban ire at the tree cutting misadventure!

But let me ask those same people whose hearts wept for the cryptomeria at Upper Shillong if they have driven to Khatar-Shmong and beyond. On the way there are beautiful cryptomeria which have probably grown from seeds. But whenever a road project needs to come up the trees are felled, since, practically speaking, not every space where trees grow can be defined as a forest and the villagers living beyond the 'civilization' called Shillong also need roads and communication. These are not the preserve of an urban elite. Some idealists who commute daily only within the 10 sq km radius of the city have asked why there is a need for a four-laned highway in Upper Shillong. The reason is that vehicles converge at 7th Mile Upper Shillong from the Dawki-Pynursla-Sohra-Myllem side of the divide and the Mawngap-Mawksynram - Mairang - Mawkyrwat - Nongstoin-Tura side. Because of this convergence at Upper Shillong there are daily traffic jams from morning till late evening all the way from 7th Mile Upper Shillong to the Umshyri Bridge in Shillong. Ask the residents of Upper Shillong

how long it takes them to commute daily because of the traffic jam. There is a time loss of several hours daily for people from West and East Khasi Hills who need to sell their produce in the Shillong markets. There are white and blue collared employees too who have to spend hours on the road. And mind you the above road is also linked to the major tourist spots of Meghalaya. So yes, the four-lane road is essentially to address this daily agony of ordinary people. So apologies



to the weekend, luxury drive takers. I hope this answers my question to the simplistic query of - why a four-laned road from Shillong to Upper Shillong.

The tragedy of a social-media led democracy is that people living in these areas through which the 4-lane highway will be traversing are not considered important enough to be consulted. It is the Shillongite whose agony and tears over the felled cryptomeria whose feelings must be assuaged or else the CEO of Meghalaya will lose face on Twitter. After all, Shillong is the nerve-centre of Meghalaya and it houses the intelligentsia of the state whose social media skills surpass that of the rest of the citizens of Meghalaya.

Social media is where people spend the bulk of their lock-in time. Virtual existence has replaced the real. It is easy to get the attention of the CEO of Meghalaya who has a strong Twitter presence and to get him to act. Virtual world creatures influence one another but not always in larger public interest or the common good. Like they say - if you're not on social media you're not a citizen. For Meghalaya it would be true to say if you are not on Twitter you don't exist, for, the CEO responds to Twitter through the day. No politician

wants to look bad on Twitter especially if he/she is tagged to a post. Remember, even Prime Minister Narendra Modi was a Twitter freak until the NDA Government got into a scrap with what was once the favourite news factory of the BJP managed by the suave Amit Malviya. It was when Twitter started to question the tweets of BJP spokesperson Sambit Patra on the fake Congress toolkit that Twitter has now become the enemy. However, Twitter is not poorer because of the

divorce with BJP. Millions of users including BJP members themselves continue to favour this medium to catch the eyeballs of the Twitterati. The point I am trying to make here is that selective heart-breaks for those "beautiful" trees that line our only boulevard in Upper Shillong and the complete apathy to the daily felling of trees from real forests across Meghalaya and their open transportation along the Shillong-Guwahati highway is pathetic. Let us forget, Shillong is not Meghalaya. We didn't see a Twitter storm when repeated mining accidents in East Jaintia Hills result in the deaths of poor, voiceless miners from Assam: We don't squeak at the encroachment into forest land for mining coal and limestone because those are "private" forests. But in a modern democracy can a private act that infringes on the common good (climate and the environment) be allowed to carry on unquestioned? Just drive towards Laitlyngkot and Pynursla to see the reckless stone and sand quarrying. Or drive towards Nongtalang in West Jaintia Hills or towards Shella in East Khasi Hills, to see the environmental degradation due to limestone mining. But no, the Shillongite can't be expected to drive to these peripheries. It's asking too

much from the urban yuppie. The drive will take them out of their virtual reverie. The reality today is that citizens of Meghalaya are a deeply polarized lot and this polarisation is due to a variety of reasons but essentially the isolating effects of social media, the corrupting influence of easy money for those associated to politics and the emergence of special interest groups which as the name suggests only pick issues that suit their interests and are not necessarily aimed at the common good. The rest of the citizens are an exhausted majority that don't fit in anywhere but who also are not mobilized enough to get their voices out where it matters.

There is so much distrust in Government today that conspiracy theories not only spread like wildfire but they are also the most effective community bonding mechanism. This is the paradox. Felling trees for making a road is not a conspiracy. We didn't think it was a conspiracy or murder of the environment when thousands of trees were cut to make way for the Shillong-Jorabat highway. Why? Because we all need to use that highway. Isn't that a selfish interest? The pandemic has created anxiety and alienation and it is normal to feel that things are spinning out of control with news coming in by the hour that a new variant of Covid-19 is upon us. It is in such times that conspiracy theories become effective emotional tools. Like someone had pointed out, for those in low status groups who feel powerless, conspiracy theories provide a sense of superiority and agency. But conspiracy theories are defeated and should be defeated by the light of reason.

To conclude, the national Shillong-Dawki highway must be built with a new alignment perhaps. However, all those who shed tears for the cryptomeria must also reserve their tears for the hundreds of pine trees that are mercilessly slaughtered daily for making charcoal and for export outside Meghalaya. If you are an environmentalist you can't be selective and pick only sexy issues. Be out there and campaign on the ground. There are many silent conservationists that are not on social media.

and daily wage labourers. But when it comes to the question of survival; rules, regulations and protocols go for a toss as was noticed in the past. Today the lower income group is facing unprecedented challenges in their lives which was never experienced earlier. Being a resident of W-10, I would like to draw the kind attention of Deputy Commissioner, East Khasi Hills towards the order no. C&S.2/CVD/2021/ORD/121 dated 05/06/2021 and C&S.2/CVD/2021/ORD/152 dated 19/06/2021 which are not implemented properly in their true spirit in zone III. The residents and business community felt discriminated. Essential commodities like groceries, fruits and vegetable shops are allowed once in a week to an individual (proprietor) which is contrary to the orders dated 05/06/2021 and 19/06/2021.

6-7 grocery shops, 3-4 fruit shops and few vegetable shops are not enough to cater to the needs of about 1000 (approx) families of ward 10 on a given day. Moreover most residents in adjoining localities such as Oakland, Police Bazar and other areas also purchase essential commodities from Jail Road. Perhaps Incident Commanders have failed to assess the ground realities in Zone III. In such a situation there are bound to be long queues for essential commodities due to lesser

# Decoding the performance grading index

By Aristotle Lyngdoh

"The purpose of education has changed from that of producing a literate society to that of producing a learning society" Margaret Ammons (1964). Education as a continuing learning process transforms societies to a better one when people become educated and learned.

Just like any other development index, PGI gives us the idea on the status and quality of the education system operating in the state and also where we have gone wrong over the years. These parameters comprise five domains such as (1) Learning outcomes & quality, (2) Access, (3) Infrastructure & Facilities, (4) Equity and (5) Governance Processes. Each domain contains a set of indicators relevant with the assessment of the learning process. And each indicator carries a uniform weight or score point to indicate the level of performance of each educational institution.

Before going further, it is important to have some ideas on the background of schools' establishment system in the State. Considering how religious endeavour and missions have pioneered school establishments in this State despite their limited resources and where the purpose of education then was driven by the mission and spirit of commitment and dedication to enlighten individuals, this is a great contribution. But with the passage of time, the perception of people towards education seems to have changed radically.

Today, education is more business-oriented and a venture that can generate income quickly. Most institutions in the State too started initially and wholly as private sponsorships by employing manpower available within the vicinity so as to minimize expenditure cost, thereby compromising with the quality and teaching competency. And when these institutions came under government sponsored programs either under SSA or through Grants-in-Aid or as ad-hoc entities the teaching faculty too came under the government payroll but not under any administrative supervision and control. So when they resort to agitations and strikes, no authority in question can reprimand or discipline them. Their performance, discipline and professionalism are outside the coverage of any rule of modern human resource mechanism. Thus, in 2017 a huge exercise was carried out to phase out unqualified teachers unless they complete some basic teacher's training at least before 2019. Still the situation has not improved much and school children still continue to remain deprived of modern techniques and creativity.

The National Achievement Survey (NAS) was conducted in 2017 across all schools in the country. It also forms the basis of the assessment on learning outcomes and quality for the grading purpose in PGI. The assessment was conducted for students of standard 3, 5 & 8 to assess and evaluate the learning outcomes and quality in core subjects such as Language, Mathematics, Science & Social Science. Unfortunately, the State scored only 126 points out of 180 much below the national average of 140. The percentage of schools that have displayed learning outcomes and quality were also very few. This means that most of the school children are unable to express their understanding in core subjects. Is this not an embarrassing situation? That is why in most cases children are forced to memorize texts even without understanding, just for the sake of writing exams. So, where is teaching competency and managerial efficiency?

With regards to the second domain or access relating to the net enrollment ratio, retention rate, transition rate at primary, upper-primary and secondary level including mainstreaming of dropouts, the State scored the lowest at 53 points out of 80 total points of which the national average is 70. The assessment as per the indicators show that the interests of students

is on the decline and fades away as they proceed to the higher classes. Why is it so and how shall we explain this phenomenon? How do we expect the society and state to develop and progress if the younger generation does not participate robustly in the learning process?

The claim that the State is an educational hub in the region and has the best institutions, is absolutely wrong and deceptive. How could we boast about this when in fact the State does not even have a single engineering college or medical college amongst others? On the contrary, this will blind the eyes of everyone from seeing the true picture and will likely affect budget allocation in this sector. Every year between 15,000-20,000 students appear in the secondary board exams, of which 3000-4000 students from privileged categories successfully opt for the science stream at Higher Secondary level. What about the rest and what prevents them from scoring good marks? Is it because of their weakness or the lack of opportunity and understanding on core subjects?

The third domain tells us about the facilities available for students in school such as functional toilets, clean drinking water, science and computer labs, library, etc. and provision of vocational education. Out of 150, Meghalaya scored 87, much below the national average of 122. Perhaps this is also another factor contributing to learning outcomes of students because of lack of exposure on basic scientific facts and phenomena. The picture was different and contrasting from twenty and thirty years ago. We can still recall how the learning experiences in those days were fantastic despite the poor quality of Assam-type building in those days. There were mini science labs, basic science and sports equipment and even if there was none the teachers would always make an effort to get one. Today, we hardly hear and see such kind of effort being made by the school or teachers concerned.

The fourth domain relates to the performance of various categories of students including children with special needs. Here too Meghalaya scored only 128 out of 230 and the national average is 228. This is also another great disappointment and another embarrassment in the context of equality and justice to everyone.

The fifth domain speaks about the overall administration and management of school education. The domain constitutes the maximum score due to the highest numbers of indicators being assigned here. Out of the total 360 points and 268 national average score, Meghalaya could manage only 197 points. As depicted in the report, the recruitment and relocation of teachers lacks transparency and professionalism. Managing Committees are left with no option but to make different kinds of adjustments. There is no doubt a huge shortage of desired qualified personnel in the State for all subjects which is a serious and worrisome situation so what shall we do about this?

While the cost of education has been steeply rising over these years and from an illiterate society at the beginning of the 19th century to a society where educated unemployed persons are also increasing, yet the behaviour and attitude of people in general has not shown any significant improvement. Looking at the behaviour of people especially during election times and how money is the sole criteria in electing a legislator, the habit of opposing essential projects and programmes, and many others, all reveal the nature and quality of education in the State. Improving the quality of education and making education attractive is a collective effort of all stakeholders in the society and also requires a huge investment. Therefore, it makes sense if the entire 120 crore rupee MLA scheme annually be invested in the education sector.

### Letters to the Editor

## Leaders where are you?

Editor,

Meghalaya and Shillong in particular has witnessed one of the fiercest debates in the past two weeks. This has brought a noticeable rift or division among the people. The vaccine dilemma has caught everyone unawares. One would imagine that a vaccine would finally bring the much needed relief to the common man but now the arrival of the vaccine is threatening to cause mass rallies, insubordination, non-compliance with Covid-19 protocols etc. This kind of behavior would completely reverse whatever progress we have made in the past year in combating this dreaded disease. There is a strong apprehension in many stemming from multiple sources. At present the voices of the masses is divided with regards to the vaccine.

As a state we are indeed fortunate to have many social organizations, unions and groups that exist to fight for the people's rights and to raise questions on the way the government works. In the past these groups have publicly decried and rightly so, the injustices meted out to the common man. They have on various occasions worked for the safety and preservation of the people. They are the voice of the masses and

of the oppressed. However, in the face of this pandemic, even these voices have been silenced it seems. The burning issue at the moment is that of the vaccine. Yes, it is encouraging to see members of different social organisations coming forward to get their 'jabs' but the question is, have they given their followers the much needed 'awareness' regarding the same. If they have taken the jab, it clearly means that they recognize its effectiveness in protecting them against this virus. Shouldn't they convey the same message and assurance to the masses? Without this vaccine, the health of the general public is at risk and this is not an exaggerated argument. Without the vaccine, the inevitable third wave will come crashing and leave behind a trail of destruction in its path. Such is the nature of this formidable virus and the present strain is an even more virulent one. Have we learnt nothing from the past months? We are in the throes of a pandemic, the likes of which has not been seen since the Spanish Flu. The very nature of a pandemic if not checked and curbed in time is that it can prolong for years together. If the main onus and drive of our social organisations is to ensure that our 'Jaitbyrniew' thrives and survives, then why is it that they fail to recognize the most dangerous enemy yet?

Is it too much to ask these

sons of the soil to utilize their platform to spread awareness, to alleviate fears and to remove unfounded theories and arguments? Is it too much to ask that just for once they should work in tandem with the government for the safety and health of the populace? The only other alternative to combat this virus is lockdown and we are all but sick of being 'locked-up'. A village in Ri Bhoi District (UmdohByrthih) has reached 95% vaccination, Bhaibari PHC, West Garo Hills has reached 100% vaccination. These achievements are to be lauded and applauded. The people of UmdohByrthih and Bhaibari are an example in wisdom and co-operation, in ridding this scourge from their villages. The NGOs, student organisations and other groups must show their concern and support at this time because the health of the people depends on it.

A parting note on our MLAs and MDCs. Isn't it their constitutional duty to ensure the health of their constituents? Can't they spread awareness to their constituents especially in the rural areas, on the importance of taking the vaccination? Can't they do so with the same vigour and fervour they do when asking for our votes? It is very encouraging to see so many charitable drives going on in and around the city but charity will only last for so long. If the electorate is not

healthy, their jobs will suffer, their education will suffer, their livelihoods will suffer, our medical institutions will collapse. The need of the hour is timely action and prevention or there might not be a healthy electorate to vote for them come next election.

Yours etc.,  
B M Lyngdoh  
Via email

## Why different sets of rules?

Editor,

The District Administration has been overburdened with work ever since the Covid-19 pandemic hit the State. It became additional routine work for the District Administration to assess the ground situation on a daily basis and depending on the situation, orders are issued for lockdown, extension of lockdown and opening of shops etc. in different zones under the Shillong Urban Agglomeration. In the past one year citizens are sensitised everyday about appropriate Covid-19 behaviour on TV, radio, newspapers and through other modes of communications. By now the majority of citizens in Shillong City are well versed with Covid 19 protocols.

Covid-19 has affected cross sections of the business community but the worst affected are the petty business persons, roadside vendors

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