

"You can discover what your enemy fears most by observing the means he uses to frighten you."

— Eric Hoffer

The Shillong Times

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Survey past COVID

THE Economic Survey 2020-21 released in Parliament expresses optimism about a V-shaped recovery for the national economy. This is well-understood, given the positives that should emerge in the context of the fast-paced vaccination drive across the world and in India. Covid-19 itself does not seem to be in a mood to linger for long. The pent-up energy of the past one year will get released sooner than later, and a rebound in global economy too will have positive, encouraging impact on Indian economy. Question however is, given India's laid-back approach to matters, how much of this new energy can this nation make proper use of. Hurdles from the government side themselves are far too many, as was the case in the pre-Covid times too. The hope as expressed in the economic survey is that India could achieve a GDP growth of 11 per cent in fiscal year 2021-22 that is about to start from April, taking advantage of the expected jump-start after the season of lockdowns and extensive restrictions on public life.

The next fiscal, it could get down to normal with a 6.8 per cent growth. If this happens, well and good. It is time that government also makes the right moves to free up the economy from too much of controls and the bane of the licence raj as also corruption at bureaucratic and political levels that have brought down the spirit of enterprise. This is also adversely affecting job creation, with only the services sector showing substantial growth. The manufacturing sector is down in the dumps and understandably so. The commission raj and not just China, ensured as much. If very little of investments are coming into this sector, it is worth pondering why. The Survey stresses that "more than lack of compliance or regulatory standards, our administrative process is ailing from over-regulation". The index of eight core sector industries kept contracting in the past few months, raising question marks over an early recovery for the national economy. The survey notes that the Bangladesh economy is growing fast on the back of a major uptick in exports, based on the competitive advantage it has; something which Indian enterprise failed to achieve. It is high time our complacency is replaced with a new energy to perform. Significantly, a mention is made of the ills plaguing the banking sector, with a proposal to clean up bank books to ensure the mistakes of the past are not repeated. Question is does this government have the will to perform and produce results.

After reading my article, "This lie has to stop" (ST Jan 25, 2021) a gentleman called to tell me that it reminded him of the story of a big citrus fruit, a pig, a bat and an elephant. The story goes like this. The fruit fell on the back of the pig and hit it like a bolt from the blue; the pig ran helter-skelter and hit the tree where the bat was sleeping upside down. The bat too got the shock of its life and flew without any sense of direction, finally landing inside the ear of the elephant. The elephant was shocked and angry. It raised its trunk and took the bat from inside its ear.

The elephant asked the bat asked why it got into its ear. The bat narrated the story that it was peacefully sleeping on the branch of the tree when the pig hit the tree and it fell from down and thankfully it instinctively unfolded its wings and accidentally flew right inside the elephant's ear.

The elephant and the bat then went to the pig and asked why it hit the tree which has shocked the bat and made it fly aimlessly to finally get inside the elephant's ear. The pig also told its own story and blamed the big citrus fruit which fell on its back and shocked it to the point where it went and hit the tree. The fruit could not speak but even if it did how could it explain why it fell on the back of the pig.

Meghalaya today is in such a situation that almost everything is in disarray, yet, nobody wants to talk about it. The question that arises is whether everybody is blind to what is happening around or is there an all-pervasive fear to speak up. From health care to education, from agriculture to road construction and everything in between there is so much left to be desired.

As far as the health sector is concerned, very few doctors stay in the CHCs or the PHCs. The excuses are that even basic needs like water supply and electricity are not available in the government quarters and most of the buildings are in a dilapidated condition because of the sub-standard work of the contractors. Unfortunately some PHCs and CHCs do not even have water connection to the building. Hence patients cannot be admitted without these

Meghalaya at 49

By H H Mohrmen

basic necessities in place. The Sub-Centres in many instances are manned by nurses and even Civil Hospitals particularly those in the district headquarters are not equipped. The recent COVID-19 situation brought to light the inadequacies in the health care sector in the State, so much so that even Civil Hospitals do not have PPEs and testing kits not to mention respirators and other life-saving machines. Perhaps it would not be wrong to say that the private health care services are prospering because the state has failed in its duty to provide healthcare service to its citizens.

But healthcare service is not the only thing that's pathetic, education too is in a shambles and had it not been for the faith-based organisations and NGOs, there would not be any education at all in the state. From the lower primary to the higher secondary level, the best schools are run either by faith-based organisation or NGOs. The lesser we talk about the government schools the better. Except for the schools under SSA, the buildings of the schools run by the government are in a dilapidated condition. In fact it is the decrepit condition of the school infrastructure which becomes a major cause of revulsion of young people towards these government schools. Even at the higher education level, many of the colleges and universities are run by faith organisations and NGOs. The government has done precious little even in monitoring and controlling these institutes of higher education Meghalaya may have a high literacy rate but the claim that Shillong is the education hub of north east is becoming an empty rhetoric. It used to be, but the fame has gradually slipped from the state and it is being taken over by Guwahati. Meghalaya and Shillong in particular have to work really hard to regain the lost glory of those heydays when merit alone got people a teaching job.

The economy of the state is frail because it largely depends on activities like mining in which only a small percentage of the population are engaged. More importantly, mining is an environmentally unsustainable venture. Agriculture and its allied sectors which provide income to the largest section of the population in the State are not given due consideration. It is only recently with the launching of the Basin Programme that the effort of creating entrepreneurs in the sector was started. The Government does not even know where the strength of the state lies. It continues to give more attention than needed to mining. And this is the reason why mining especially coal and limestone still attracts many people to engage in the business and create controversies because it is illegal in the first place.

In spite of the activity being illegal, coal mining and transportation continues because Government chooses to ignore and continues to deny the truth. We have read so much about the illegal transportation and even mining of coal in the State. This is happening because the powers that be turn a Nelson's eye to what is going on.

The image of the State is going south. There is nothing much to be proud of about Meghalaya today. The incidents that are most shocking are the stories that two retired government officials shared with this scribe. Though they retired as high ranking government officials and had served the State in different departments, the stories they narrated are similar and do not augur well for future of the people and the state. Both of them were not happy with the way their department operates now. The department is not the same as it was when they joined service more than thirty years ago and they are not proud of what has become today they lamented.

The primary reason is that there is too much political interference in the system and officials are not free to perform their duties with due diligence. The entire system is corrupt they said and the reason is because politicians poke their nose in every Government activity. Political leaders are no longer policy

makers as they have become politicians and businessmen all rolled up in one. Political interference abounds and is visible in the manner in which the standards of government construction be it roads or buildings are being manipulated. Very few officers have the spine to be honest and stand up for what is right. Many fear that they may not gain favours or that they might be transferred to insignificant postings. There are many officers who are willing to toe the politician's line than what they believe is right. Those who are courageous enough to stand for what they believe in are punished by the powers that be. They are not happy with the system they leave behind because even honest officials are compelled to toe the politicians' line and bow before their political masters.

Unfortunately, the other metaphor which best describes the state of affairs in Meghalaya is that of the three monkeys who, see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil. The public has become blind even when they see, deaf even when they are able to hear and wish to remain silent even when there is so much wrong that is happening in the state. The public themselves are to be blamed for the mess that is happening in the state because the only time that they are engaged in the democratic process is during elections where they become part of the tamasha and where money power plays a very large role in the festivity. In fact this where it all begins because only those who can afford to splurge can buy their way to the assembly. If that is not the case then how come only rich people enter politics in the State? When was the last time we read of a candidate without a big fat bank balance winning the election? It looks like in Meghalaya the fatter the bank balance, the better are the chances of winning the election.

This is what has brought the state to the status that many of us are not proud of. If even after forty nine years there is nothing that the people can feel proud of then the blame is on the people themselves. Period

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Matrilineal system: Pnar perspective

By Helen Dkhar

This article aims at supporting my strong belief about the Pnar matrilineal lineage. The Pnar are one of the major tribes in Meghalaya besides the Garo and Khasi tribes.

According to Pnar traditional religious beliefs, changing ones title to that of the father/husband is extremely frightening because according to our belief, disposal of the dead through cremation and the collection of ashes is done, after which the remains are kept in sacred places specifically meant for individual clan (kur) known as Ka Thaw Buh Chien located in Jowai or Shillong as desired by the clan or Kur members. For example Kur Dkhar will only use the place meant for the Kur Dkhar and not anywhere else. Now the biggest obstacle is that the Pnar people who take the title of the father/husband will no longer be permitted to keep their ashes in the ossuary of their ancestral Kur Dkhar as now they no

do with individuality of men on how they conduct themselves. If a man has a strong personality to be a responsible uncle in his ing kur and likewise a dependable and trustworthy father/husband in his in-laws house, nothing in the world can label him as one having no identity of his own. His presence would appeal all and one with care, love and respect. It also depends on the family background, living habits and mentality he comes from.

Another hiccup that men tout is that they don't inherit family property, I for one would say that a majority of us Khasi/Pnar do not belong to a wealthy section of the society and a few that have, usually divide their property amongst their children, both male and female. But in the case of those who have say just one house then naturally the house would go to the youngest daughter or the khathuh who usually takes care of the aged



ST File Photo

longer belong to the Kur Dkhar. The question is will the members of the new clan the title of which they have taken allow them to inter the bones in their ossuary since they do not originally belong to that clan? According to my understanding the answer is a big NO. Merely taking the title of the father/husband does not make them their Kur.

This practice may not be a concern or even applicable to those who have converted to other faiths be it Christianity, Hinduism or even Islam. At the time of the last rites for the dead, a number of religious ceremonies have to be performed by the Kur. It is not a mere act of placing the remains at the designated place. Here in Shillong, we are deeply grateful to the Forest Department of Meghalaya, who had given us Ki Khon Ka Niamtre, a piece of land at Mawlai to be used as the clan ossuary for the benefit of those who find it difficult and challenging to go all the way to Jowai in order to complete this last rite of their loved ones. I wonder if this challenge could be one of the reasons for some of our own to change their faith.

If a marriage takes place between a Dkhar and a Shullai clan from one particular lawbei, the other Dkhar or Shullai members from the other lawbei can very well enter into wedlock. The taboo occurs only if marriage takes place from the same lawbei, which may result in ka chong sang that amounts to incest.

Regarding the observations made by the Syngkhong Rympei Thymmai (SRT) that some feel insecure being in the matrilineal system on grounds that they are losing their identity, equal share of property, have no say at either their in-laws or own clan (ing kur), etc., I feel the above claims have more to

parents. In fact, most families today do not even have a house of their own and have to live in rented houses.

As Mr Thyriang observed in his article (Is Matrilineal Lineage under question?, TST, January 19, 2021) that we are a matrilineal tribe not matriarchal where uncle/father are influential decision makers in the family, the head of the Dorbar Shnong are also male, the Dalloi are also male and so on and so forth, as such the land (clan property) belongs to the woman in name only while the actual executor is the man. Yes, there is no denying the fact that even in the modern political sphere female representation is still negligible. Then why the need for a change from the matrilineal system to patrilineal?

True lineage comes from a woman who is looked upon as a custodian of the well being of every member of the family. A woman is one which every family member should love and respect. Why should such a system that is so unique and has been here since time immemorial not be allowed to continue?

As a Pnar following the indigenous religion (Niamtre), to just take up the father's or husband's title for the heck of it will result in a lot of hassle and chaos as our lineage goes hand in hand with "ka khein kiur khein kha" involving a lot of religious ceremonies and practices.

I would like to end with the saying that religion and culture go hand in hand and cannot be separated at least for us ki khon ka Niamtre. In Pnar there is an adage that goes like this, "kylli ka dstur jubab ka niam" which means that every question on culture and tradition will end up at the doorstep of religion. This means that the indigenous faith is intrinsically linked to our culture and tradition.

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TO THE EDITOR

Will the GPO fix the ATMs?

Editor, The Shillong GPO ATM has been out of order for a long time. Perhaps the system engineer alone will only be able to tell if there is one. Looking at the "temporarily out of order" message at the said ATM screen, day after day, indicates that the management is not aware about its condition. There is no security personnel stationed at this ATM, who could have apprised the GPO officials doing sarkari naukri and caring two hoots about the plight of customers. In fact, India Post has only four ATMs in the town (GPO, Nongmynsong PO, Oakland PO and Rynjah PO) and there should be more around in order to cater the needs of its customers. Out of these four, only one is working.

The Laitumkhrah PO - which experiences major footfall everyday - should have one besides Laban PO, too. But, we don't have a post office in Laban for several years, now. The Shillong GPO is finding it extremely difficult to actually source a rented accommodation in Laban with its primitive era rent. Who is going to part with their landed property for a paltry sum that has no

comparison with the commercial rents for office spaces? Now, we cannot expect India Post to have ATMs stationed everywhere like commercial banks. Hence expecting an ATM in Laban - where we don't have a post office, after the last one at Howell Road exited following a court battle, is like asking for fruit before the tree has sprouted. Well, India Post is not bothered much since its ATM cards are now acceptable in other bank ATMs. But can it have such an attitude when the postal department is increasingly turning into a bank?

Yours etc.
BC Paul
Shillong - 4

Pot-pourri of issues

Editor, Distinguish farmer, Nanandro B Marak from Garo hills, the hardworking 60 year old gentleman took one sapling and planted it around the roots of an area nut tree. Marak not only planted the sapling in his soil, but fortunately now planted it in our minds to allow inspirational thoughts to germinate. Lack of resources, single-handedly clearing the jungle, nurturing the plants is what self-help is all about. The turning point came when a school

teacher Ringnang K. Sangma, introduced the laborious and fruitful work of Nanandro B Marak, to the Spice Board of India and the rest is history.

Marak's message to entrepreneurs and farmers is to persevere and work hard. Farming is a fulfilling and honest occupation and Nanandro B Marak raised his family of three children, ran his household, built a house, bought vehicles and remains contented. Surely one cannot ask for more. The message here is of determination, dedication, brilliance, humanity, inspiration etc.

On Meghalaya's rural challenge, an article by Patricia Mukhim, the question raised as to how doctors in rural Meghalaya can attend to an emergency in a distant place when he/she is not even allocated a vehicle, I wish to add a point here. Recently, army personnel at Karalpura in Kupwara helped a pregnant woman to reach a hospital on time for the delivery, even as Kashmir remained cut off from the country due to heavy snowfall. Along with a battlefield nursing assistant, the Army personnel carried the woman for almost two Kms in knee-deep snow on a cot before she could be driven to a hospital. PRO

Udhampur, Ministry of

Defence, shared a video on Twitter with the caption, "Heavy snow in Kashmir brings unprecedented challenges for citizens, especially in higher reaches. Watch the soldier and awam fighting it out together by evacuating a patient to the nearest PHC for medical treatment."

I earnestly request our Government and the Chief Minister to take the initiative of making it a regulation that vehicles placed at the disposal of Police, Forest, Soil, PHE, PWD, Agriculture etc., to help the doctors reach out to patients during vulnerable and all-time emergency situations in the absence of any vehicles being allotted to doctors in remote and rural areas.

The Friday edition of The Shillong Times comes with a free copy of the 2021 Calendar. Through this column I would like to thank 'The Shillong times' and entire team for the beautiful gift of picturesque seasons Calendar of 2021, along with a detailed (Act, General and Restricted) holiday list.

Yours etc.,
Joydeep Sharma
Shillong-2

Let down by Flipkart

Editor, I had ordered some items

from Flipkart with a gift card, which were shown to have been delivered but were not. On being contacted Flipkart officials were very polite, rang me up at all hours to inquire about my problems and finally it was resolved that they would refund the money. Everybody was however, more concerned at how I would rate their services. This process has been going on for over 45 days now but till date no refund has been forthcoming. The value of the items ordered is not much and I have had no issues with earlier orders of much larger denominations. Through this letter I express regret that online shopping may not always be what they are advertised to be. Buyers beware!

Yours etc.,
Dr. Tridib Kakoty
Shillong-14

Assam-Meghalaya border issue

Editor, Apropos the important news item published in your esteemed Daily (ST Jan 29) under the caption "Need to Know what Residents Want While Finding Solution" purported to have been said by the Revenue Minister, Meghalaya, we the ordinary citizens of the state,

sympathize with the Minister who had also reportedly stated that he could not say anything about the matter. The matter relates to the Assam-Meghalaya border problem being prioritized by the State government and even by the various NGOs as well and is supposed to be one of the few most urgent subject matters of the Revenue Department. It is a pity that the Minister had expressed his lack of awareness on this issue. If he is really ignorant about it, we would like to humbly inform him now that the previous government had already sent the relevant documents to the Assam government and being from Jaintia Hills, he might be interested to know whether the documents in respect of Block-I and Block-II are adequate or not. If not, then he could ask for further documents/information from the JHADC and the Deputy Commissioner, West Jaintia Hills Jowai in respect of these Blocks in order to be able to successfully fight their case. We would request the Minister not to raise new issues which may likely reflect ignorance and inefficiency.

Yours etc.,
Ju D. Lamin
Via-email

"We don't have to sacrifice a strong economy for a healthy environment."

— Dennis Weaver

The Shillong Times

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Budget 2021 & India's Northeast

COMING after a pandemic that struck a fatal blow to the country's economy, budget-making for this year must have been a tall order for Finance Minister, Nirmala Sitharaman and her team of economists. The Modi government is tasked with steering the \$2.7-trillion Indian economy out of a recession caused by the pandemic even while having to ensure that more resources are committed towards health care to deal with the disease and the vaccination regime. Accordingly health spending is being increased by 137% this year, totaling to over 2.23 lakh crore which is a huge jump from the meager amount allocated over the years which is less than 2% of the GDP.

The Government's decision to set up a Development Financial Institution (DFI) with a projected lending portfolio of Rs 5 lakh crore with the provision for debt financing by foreign portfolio investors will boost the infrastructure sector. In this respect it appears that poll-bound states like Tamil Nadu, Kerala, West Bengal and Assam are likely to gain from the current budget since there will be major commitments towards these states. Assam could benefit immensely from inland water transport while rail and air connectivity in the other seven states need a fillip. The announcement of an additional 11,000-km of highways and metros, along with rapid rail transport projects for 27 cities and a much awaited vehicle scrappage policy will send the stocks of some of the steel and aluminium companies soaring.

Real estate and construction are set to take a leap and real estate developers will benefit the most from the DFI. But this is also the sector that has the potential to create maximum jobs which is imperative at this juncture as the pandemic has seen unprecedented job losses.

The Modi Government's announcement of setting up a National Asset Reconstruction and Management Company to take over the stressed assets of banks will help clean up the huge burden of bad loans. The decision to recapitalize Public Sector Banks to the tune of Rs 20,000 crore will enable them to meet the credit requirements of a growing economy. A bold decision to privatize two public sector banks and one public sector insurance company underlines the Government's commitment to withdraw even from strategic sectors and allow private players a bigger role in the economy.

The financial year ended with a 9.5% deficit yet no new taxes have been announced. This shows that the Government is treading cautiously so as not to hurt the taxpayers.

Amidst the ongoing farmers' protest the Finance Minister announced the enhancement of agriculture credit target to Rs 16.5 lakh crore. So far the farmers have not reacted to the budget and are sticking to their demand for repeal of the three farm laws and a legal guarantee of the Minimum Support Price (MSP).

MDA Government evading responsibility

By Albert Thyrniang

Recently someone in the US recommended I read an article on the internet. Way back in November 1999, a year ahead of the 2000 US presidential election David Horowitz wrote, "In Washington, of course, evading responsibility is an art form, so it is not always easy to tell who's responsible for which mess." David Joel Horowitz, a writer and founder of the think-tank, the David Horowitz Freedom Centre, was referring to the poor state in health care, social security and education that neither the Democrats nor the Republicans owned responsibility for their failure while in power in Washington D.C.

A similar mess is on in Meghalaya - the illegal mining and transportation of coal. In spite of the rampant illegal business the MDA government has evaded responsibility. The latest in a series of instances that have come to light in the illegal coal business is the Rymbai tragedy where six labourers fell to their deaths into the coal mine in East Jaintia Hills ten days ago. The Deputy Chief Minister Prestone Tynsong refused to accept that the Government has failed to curb the underworld trade termed the Rymbai tragedy a stray incident. He even acknowledged his Government's helplessness in stopping the unlawful business completely. As reported he bizarrely explained, "This incident occurred far from the roadside and it is not even near the village. It takes one and a half hours to reach the place by vehicle, so it is not right to say the incident happened because of the failure of the Government." Shockingly the BJP MLA and Health Minister AL Hek has come out in support of the Government claiming, "If anything happens in the Health department you cannot just blame the Health Minister," asking further, "if something happens in the Civil Hospital will you blame the Health Minister?"

Such escapist defence should not be unchallenged. Such unjustified statements should be condemned. It's a pity the State is graced by such arrogant ministers. They should not get away with such callous attitude. If we cannot blame the Government then whom do we hold accountable? Is there a rule stating that if illegality occurs in a distant location away from the roadside the Government is not responsible? Are far flung villages outside the purview of the law? Is it not the Government's responsibility to maintain law and order beyond the highways? Moreover, we are not

speaking of other crimes here. We are explicitly talking about illegal mining which is banned by the Supreme Court. The Apex Court's embargo includes all coal bearing areas. Hence, the state government is duty bound to ensure that no illegal mining takes place anywhere where coal deposits are found. Even for stray incidents the State Government is accountable. For instance, BSF is certainly responsible for international smuggling. If smuggling takes place it is the failure of the Force. We are not suggesting the men must be withdrawn from the border. Similarly, we are not proposing the Government be dismissed. We only want the Government to accept its failures.

Coming to the Health Minister he is gently reminded that ministers are responsible for their ministry. That is precisely why they are there. If there is no responsibility involved ministers are not needed. Government departments can be run by directors. It is awful that a senior minister does not understand this basic concept. If tragedies, especially arising out of illegality, happen in the Health Ministry, in civil hospitals or government health facilities surely the government and specifically the Health Minister is responsible. And if they take place on a regular basis, the responsibility is graver necessitating a marching order for the minister.

On the larger picture too the Government is to be blamed. In July 2019 the National Green Tribunal (under the Supreme Court) conditionally lifted the ban on coal mining imposed in 2014 directing the state government to prepare a comprehensive mining blueprint that includes environmental restoration and labour safety norms as per the country's laws. Sleeping over the issue, the State Government has not complied till date. Therefore, implicitly the Government is facilitating illegal coal mining, its sale and transportation. The government has failed. Simple!

The instances of alleged illegalities are not stray as the Deputy CM may think. We chronicle the following incidents. First the widely publicised Ksan tragedy of 13 December 2018 where 15 miners perished after being trapped in an illegal mine. One month prior to it two activists were brutally attacked at Tuber Shohshrieh village while they were taking photographs of the alleged deposit of fresh

coal. In March 2020 four persons were arrested in East Jaintia Hills allegedly for transporting coal to Assam while Revenue Minister Kyrmen Shylla's brother Bisson Shylla, who is also under a cloud in the Rymbai incident, secured anticipatory bail. In October the same year the clandestine ferrying of coal was exposed when Assam police arrested five persons after detaining two coal-laden trucks. The name of the Power Minister, James Sangma cropped up but things moved on.

In January 2020 the State Lokayukta, based on a specific complaint, ordered a CBI inquiry into the alleged international racket involving transportation of coal besides boulders and betel nut. The Government challenged the orders for a CBI probe in the Meghalaya High Court frustrating the Chairperson of Lokayukta. The allegations of illegal coal mining and transportation did cause a political stir forcing the CM Conrad Sangma to remove his brother, James Sangma as State Home Minister apparently on the demand by the UDP and other allies in the MDA government.

By no yardstick are these stray incidents. The Government has acquired the art of evading responsibility despite recurring occurrences of illegality. When questions are raised ministers demand proof. When proof is evident they turn around with weird excuses to escape accountability and responsibility.

Initially the latest incident got the BJP on the one hand and the NPP and the UDP on the other into a verbal duel. The BJP, the two member partner in the 41 member MDA coalition which has been at loggerheads with the Government over corruption in ADCs, ILP and of course illegal coal commerce, demanded the resignation of Home Minister, Lakhmen Rymbui besides seeking an independent inquiry into the deaths of six labourers. Predictably Rymbui (UDP) has refused to quit citing that Karnataka Chief Minister BS Yediyurappa has not resigned over the death of six people in a dynamite blast in his home constituency. The Chief Minister (NPP) has also ruled out expelling his minister. And the Deputy Chief Minister, also NPP, has fired the 'stray incident' salvo. With Hek standing behind Rymbui the BJP is subdued.

The UDP leadership which probably played a major role in the removal of the former Home Minister

are now witnessing the flak against their colleague. Formerly the party had backed the State Lokayukta's move for a CBI investigation into illegal coal business but later changed tone pronouncing that charges sans evidence hold no water. The Rymbai tragedy is not unreal nor is it presumed! Or allegations must be illusory as their own minister's brother could be involved.

Ever since the inception of Conrad K Sangma's Government in March 2018 illegal mining and shipping of the banned mineral have made headline reports regularly but each time there was a denial. Even the Rymbai tragedy that has put the Government on the back foot may prompt no decisive action. No CBI inquiry! No independent investigation. We wonder, why?

Ministers are intelligent to assess that illegal coal mining and transportation is not a huge issue in the minds of the general public. The political class knows that it does not have a negative impact on electoral prospects. It does not swing the fortune of the Government even if the illegality continues. Issues like the one at hand and corruption have no bearing on electoral outcomes. The election to GHADC in April could prove the point. The ruling party which is accused of large scale corruption might still return to power. If the opposite happens politicians worry. If all illegal coal business stops, those in the government may stand to lose, electorally. If all illegal mining shuts shop and all trucks are off the roads, the coal mafia won't fund 'guilty' political parties and candidates in the next election. The coal barons could support the present ministers and politicians who take no strong measure to end the illicit trade. The status quo may benefit top politicians, some in the police and the bureaucrats, financially as alleged by an outlawed outfit. The best thing is not to clear the mess.

The present mess is persisting also because pressure groups are mere spectators. There has never been a protest, an agitation, not even a statement against illegal coal mining and transportation. We can only infer they too get a share of the lucrative industry. If the matter is treated like the railway line, uranium, CAA and ILP be assured of zero unlawfulness. Unfortunately the order of the highest court continues to be contemptuously violated for which the Government has so far evaded responsibility.

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A vicious cycle of deficit and debt cannot deliver economic growth

By RK Pattnaik

The Union Budget for 2021-22 was presented against the backdrop of a complete collapse of realisation of revenue receipts, particularly tax revenues and disinvestment proceeds, coupled with higher revenue expenditure due to larger provisioning of food subsidies for 2020-21. In addition, there has been an unprecedented contraction of economic growth. The revival of growth was designed by the government through financing the expenditure (both revenue and capital) by an all-time record level of fiscal deficit (9.5 percent of the GDP) accompanied by a revenue deficit (7.5 percent). It is important to mention that the financing of such a level of deficit was met by market borrowings facilitated by massive liquidity support (injection of cash by printing money) by the Reserve Bank of India to the financial system. It may be a consolation that this development is not unique to India but a worldwide phenomenon. The government is hopeful of a V shaped recovery for the Indian economy with a real growth rate (nominal growth rate minus inflation) of 11 per cent for 2021-22 as against a contraction of 7.7 per cent in 2020-21.

The Union Budget proposals for 2021-22 are based on 6 pillars viz: (i) Health and Wellbeing, (ii) Physical & Financial Capital, and Infrastructure (iii) Inclusive Development for Aspirational India (iv) Reinventing Human Capital, (v) Innovation and R&D and (vi) Minimum Government and Maximum Governance. Out of these six pillars health, human capital and infrastructure requires higher provisioning of capital expenditure. Recognising this, the Budget has made provision for capital expenditure to the tune of 2.48 per cent of the GDP. Revenue expenditure is budgeted at 13.14 per cent of GDP. Thus the total expenditure is 15.62 per cent of GDP. The borrowed resources measured in terms of fiscal deficit finances 43.53 per cent and the balance (56.47 per cent) is financed by revenue receipts and non-debt capital receipts. Furthermore, borrowed resources are budgeted to finance the revenue deficit to the extent of 75 per cent and the remaining 25 per cent is budgeted for capital expenditure even though the government claims that the capital expenditure is 26.2 per cent higher than that of 2020-21.

If the government had followed the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management (FRBM) Act stipulation of 3 percent of GDP as borrowed resources, it would have financed only 19.20 percent of total expenditure. This translates to a case for higher share of revenue receipts and non-debt capital receipt to the tune of around 71 per cent as against the budgeted share of around 56 per cent.

Another important aspect is related to human capital expenditure as mentioned earlier. Human capital is essentially health and education expenditure and as per our constitution, basically in the State list. To the extent that State governments will be involved in these areas the Union Budget has increased the borrowing limits of State governments to 4 per cent of the GDP as compared to the present limit of 3 per cent. Thus, the fiscal deficit of the government (Centre plus States) is 10.8 per cent of the GDP.

The lion share of such a level of fiscal deficit will be financed by market borrowings. Larger market borrowings will generate higher demand in the market. But the savings of the economy

which is the supply side of financing the borrowings is severely limited as the income level in the economy is low and revenue deficit representing the dis-savings of the government is high. This development will put pressure on the interest rate as well as the quantum of interest payments due to the demand and supply mismatch. Higher interest payments have already been reflected in the budget as it has shown an increase of 16.9 per cent over the previous year thus accounting for around 45 per cent of revenue receipts of the government of India.

The Union Budget has estimated a nominal GDP growth rate of 14.4 per cent for 2021-22 while the gross tax revenues have been budgeted to increase by 16.7 per cent with increases in corporation tax (22.64 per cent), personal income tax (22.22 per cent), customs duty (21.42 per cent) and GST (22.30 per cent). It is important to note that such increases in tax rates and GDP growth are mainly guided by the base effect. Therefore, it gives a spurious tax buoyancy picture.

Now let us turn to the medium-term fiscal road map. The Union Budget is silent on the medium-term fiscal road map. The moot question is how soon the government will return to the FRBM target of fiscal deficit and debt? The fiscal road map critically depends how soon the Indian economy will be on a sustainable growth trajectory path.

The return to sustainable growth as mentioned earlier depends on savings, particularly financial savings and channelisation of savings to investment. The important factor in this regard is the elimination of the revenue deficit which the government has been taking recourse to, by borrowing to finance the current consumption. Thus, revenue deficit is a dis-savings of the government. As long as there is a revenue deficit of a higher magnitude, dis-savings will be higher and the savings of the government will be adversely affected as also investment and economic growth.

The Union Budget has over reliance on borrowing to finance government expenditure. Apart from the interest payments implication as discussed above there are challenges of crowding out private investment. Government financing of investment expenditure on infrastructure needs to be supplemented by private investment. Infrastructure financing has not been categorical about private sector involvement.

The over reliance on borrowing in terms of a high fiscal deficit will put pressure on the RBI to manage the market borrowing as the debt manager. Already the market borrowing for 2020-21 has been at a record high level and another dose of higher level of borrowing from the market will adversely impact the financial market and prudent functioning of financial institutions particularly banks. This is so as more loanable funds will be directed towards funding the government's market borrowings resulting in less loanable funds available to provide credit to the private sector.

To conclude, the over-reliance of the Union Budget on borrowing will in many ways reap adverse consequences of a vicious cycle of debt and deficit rather than moving the economy to a sustainable growth path.

(Dr. R K Pattnaik is a former Central banker and a faculty member at Bhavan's SPJIMR. Views are personal) (Syndicate: The Billion Press) (e-mail: editor@thebillionpress.org)

TO THE EDITOR

In defence of matriliney

Editor,
Apropos the letter by Joyce Lyngdoh captioned "Why Glamorize Matriliney" (ST Jan, 29, 2021), I would like to ask as to why one should not be proud of or glamourise one's culture and identity. What is so wrong with it? Every society has certain loopholes but that does not mean that we should forgo our uniqueness and the feeling of being special from the rest of the people of our country. Thank you for the invitation but I certainly do not need to visit my home town. Not being physically present in Shillong does not mean I have forgone my roots nor am I oblivious of the ground realities in Meghalaya. On the other hand being away from home makes me more conscious of not only matters that affect my State but also issues that concern other states of India.

Maternal, child mortality

rate, single motherhood, rape cases and several other challenges that women go through all across the globe does concern each one of us but, that should not deter us from being proud of our culture. By simply not talking or highlighting about our culture is not the solution to improving the living standards, health and condition of women.

The true sense of being unique in itself means that we are different. In my understanding anything that is unique needs to be highlighted for the benefit of those who care to know about our society. I, for one take pride in the fact that I belong to this unique society that has given me the opportunity to share about my society, culture and tradition. What I fail to understand is why the educated lot as mentioned in the letter, namely the wives and children of IAS/IPS/IFS should find it so difficult to explain our matrilineal system to those who follow the patriarchal/patrilineal system?

Our ancestors had laid down strict rules and regulations with regards to marriage (Ka Shong-Kha Shong-Man) so as to steer clear from inter-clan marriage which is considered a sin/ taboo (Shong-Sang). If the choice is given to individuals to choose between a father's or mothers' clan name, I'm afraid, four generations down the line there will come a time when there will be inter-clan marriages, because the original mother's surname will be forgotten. For example, a woman has three children and if two of the children choose to take their father's surname and their children too follow the same lineage then the family would have a mixture of numerous surnames under one roof. In that way it will no longer be a home but a place where different clans/surnames dine and lodge under one roof.

To conclude, I would like to ask Joyce Lyngdoh to clearly specify the "glaring ills" in our tradition as mentioned in her letter. I also wish to affirm that our soci-

ety is not "finicky" as mentioned by Lyngdoh; rather ours, is a society that still follows the footsteps of our ancestors that stand tall in "Ka Tip-Kur Tip Kha, Tip Brieu Tip-Blei". This subject is a very vast one and it needs a better platform to be debated upon so as to have a clearer understanding of the same.

Yours etc.,
Leezandra Dkhar,
New Delhi -11

Journalism for a healthy democracy

Editor,
One's character is usually measured by one's integrity. We essentially put our all efforts to keep our integrity unshaken. But, the recent episode of one of the most senior journalists - Rajdeep Sardesai, has put the integrity of journalism at stake. India Today's journalist Rajdeep Sardesai had harped on Twitter that the President of India unveiled

the portrait of a movie artist Prosenjit Chatterjee instead of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose. Having been offended by the comments of the journalist, Rashtrapati Bhavan has promptly written a letter of displeasure addressed to the Editor in Chief of India Today Group.

The Chairman of the media house Aroon Purie has already expressed his regret and taken the anchor off the air for two weeks. Rajdeep's misdemeanour also did not go down well with large sections of twitterati resulting in huge outpouring of anger on social media.

It is worth mentioning here that Rajdeep Sardesai was also once given a dressing down by none other than the former President of India, Pranab Mukherjee when the journalist used the language of disrespect while interviewing the Head of the Constitution. Irresponsible behaviour by any person of high stature, particularly in a public forum, is not desirable. This only goes to damage one's credibility in the long run. Meanwhile, Rajdeep

Sardesai has also been pulled up by the UP police for allegedly spreading fake news with regards to the Delhi tractor march on Republic Day which ended up in unprecedented fury and violence leaving many police personnel injured. Irrespective of whether the spread of the news relating to the death of a farmer due to police firing and the riot incitement amounting to sedition can be established or not, it is never good if one's credibility is seen with suspicion in the public domain. Public opinion really matters in a democracy. The people are no less smart these days. One feels the fourth pillar of democracy should not be shaken by some self-righteous ambition and hurtful acts of a few media people. Democracy can only breathe in healthy air with the support of "healthy" journalism. Let the TRUTH be upheld that is in the interest of the public. Please note, even the "sweet lies" leave a bitter taste in the mouth.

Yours etc.,
Sali Gewali,
Shillong

"Caution, not exuberance, should be our fiscal motto."

— John Chafee

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No. 168 SHILLONG, WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 3, 2021

Military rule in Myanmar

DEMOCRACY has again taken a hit in Myanmar, and it came predictably from the military that had ruled the nation for many years. Having tasted blood, the military was unable to digest the people's power and was waiting for an opportunity. The November 2020 parliamentary elections reinforced the popular support for the National League for Democracy (NLD) and its Independence leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

In fact, the past 10 years of a functional democracy in Myanmar have only reinforced people's support for the NLD, while the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) propped up by the military as a counter to the NLD, bit the dust in the November polls too. That failure, however, turned out to be fodder for the military to interfere in the affairs of the nation afresh and take matters to a head. This resulted in the seizure of power and declaration of Emergency at the hands of the military top brass in the form of a vice president. It led to the arrest of Suu Kyi who was with the government in the form of state counselor and several others.

Notably, issues had affected the parliamentary polls, with the Rohingya exodus following a massive military crackdown resulting in their disenfranchisement. On the other side, there were problems posed by the Arakan army composed of Buddhist Rakhine ethnic minority recruits seeking regional autonomy for some parts of Myanmar. All these have come in handy for army chief Min Aung Hlaing to allege serious irregularities in the November polls; the script coming from USDP that sought a poll rerun. By February 1, Suu Kyi, President Win Myint and other top NLD leaders have been detained with a diktat from the military that it would rule the nation for a year.

India has reasons to be wary. The military has always maintained close relations with China, much to the concern of nations like India as also the US. At the same time, China was engaging the NLD and its government too by supporting infrastructure projects and helping them with funds etc. The Chinese leadership has called for restraint by all sides.

How the scenario develops there requires a close watch. Curiously, the coup has come shortly after the installation of a new administration in the US. The US had done some muscle-flexing with the military in Myanmar in the past in support of the people's urge for democracy to take hold there. Indications are that the military will remain in power not just for a year but longer.

Aung San Suu Kyi is perhaps the only political leader in history to have won a Nobel Prize for Peace for her defiance of military despotism, then joined her tormentors to gain political power, made a deal with the devil and gave it a human face and defended it in the International Court of Justice, won the elections again and was ousted in another coup. We probably have not heard the last of her, but she has fallen from her high pedestal as a defender of human rights to a disgraced agent of a military regime. No wonder, there was a demand for her to be stripped of her Nobel Prize. The daughter of an assassinated iconic prime minister of Myanmar today has the double infamy of giving up the struggle for democracy and legitimising the genocide of a section of her own people, the Rohingyas, by her government.

When I first saw Suu Kyi in Bhutan as the young bride of the British scholar, Michael Aris in 1971, she looked like one of the Bhutanese princesses. Having been a student in India when her mother was the Burmese ambassador to India, she was full of memories of India. When I was in Myanmar from 1983 to 1986, during the despotic rule of Ne Win, she was in London and she was hardly heard of in the country. In 1988 she came to Yangon alone to nurse her dying mother, but in response to the brutal killing of protestors against the military government, she spoke out against Ne Win and began a non-violent struggle for democracy and human rights and eventually became the leader of the opposition forces. Unaccustomed even to whispers against him, Ne Win placed her under house arrest in Yangon, incommunicado. She rejected an offer to be released if she returned to the UK.

The National League of Democracy (NLD) she co-founded in 1988 won more than 80 per cent of the parliamentary seats in 1990, but the results were nullified by the army. After she won the Nobel, some restrictions on her were lifted, but she did not travel to receive the Nobel for fear that she would not be allowed to re-

The Tragedy of Aung San Suu Kyi

By T P Sreenivasan

turn. She did not travel to London to attend her husband's funeral in 1998. She continued in various forms of detention and she grew in stature nationally and internationally as the potential saviour of the Myanmar nation, which was under military rule since 1962. After she won a parliamentary seat under a new constitution, which prohibited her from holding high office, she was allowed to travel to Oslo, London and Beijing. Her party won again in 2015.

Her reincarnation as the de facto prime minister (state councillor) marked her disgraceful coalition with the army and indirectly with China. The control of the country was still in the hands of the army, but her international image gave respectability to the regime. India, which had already chosen to deal with the government in power, felt comfortable in doing business with Myanmar. The idea was to wean Myanmar away from China, or at least to balance China. Though she focused on finding peace with the many insurgencies in Myanmar, the action taken by her government, following some attacks by the Rohingyas in the Rakhine state, invited international criticism. Thousands of Rohingyas became refugees in Bangladesh and elsewhere and many perished in the exodus. Her defence of the actions against Rohingyas in the International Court of Justice was condemned by many countries and major human rights organisations as an opportunist and enemy of democracy.

Suu Kyi won the elections again in November 2020, but the army struck on February 1st, 2021, the day the parliament was to meet and arrested her and other leaders of her party on charges of election fraud. She faces an unknown future, particularly since she had become a puppet of the army and lost her aura as a defender of human rights. The condemnation of the coup by the international community was mild and some countries like Thailand characterised it as an internal matter of Myanmar.

India expressed deep concern and said: "We believe that the rule of law and the democratic process must be upheld." There was no call for Suu Kyi's release in spite of her special connections with India. India had sent 15 lakh doses of the Covishield vaccine to Myanmar in January. India had also announced a gift of a submarine to Myanmar. India will strive to continue its cooperation with the government in accordance with India's policy to deal with the regime in control.

The tragedy of Suu Kyi is also the tragedy of Myanmar as a nation. A country, which was self-sufficient in food and fuel at one time, was a democracy under U Nu, and was poised to become the most developed country in Southeast Asia, when General Ne Win staged a coup in 1962 and followed a policy which anticipated the future advent of Donald Trump in the US. He declared that Myanmar would follow its own policy of socialism with no links either with the super powers or neighbours. His isolationist policy made Myanmar poor after a million well-to-do Indians, the backbone of the economy, were expelled with nothing but the clothes they wore. No compensation was paid to any of them and the gold they deposited in the embassy remained unclaimed for many years.

As the head of mission in Myanmar for two years, I was busy organising cultural programmes for the impoverished Indians left behind in the paddy fields and playing golf to cultivate the military oligarchy which occupied all the civilian posts including those in the Foreign Office. They would not meet diplomats in their offices as that would involve work in reporting on the conversations. The only time I met Ne Win was when I accompanied him to Delhi a week after the assassination of Indira Gandhi to express condolences to Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. In an emotional meeting during which he claimed to be an affectionate "uncle", Ne Win said he wanted to improve relations with India and asked for a grand plan to increase trade and cultural

relations. When I returned to Myanmar and announced the new plans, there was no response from the government and even a meeting was not possible in the Foreign Office. On some informal advice that we received that Myanmar will be happy if we purchased some rice, we did so, and that was the only commercial deal that took place. The experience was the same with other countries except Japan and South Korea which lavished gifts on Myanmar. The only time Ne Win met the ambassadors was when he held a golf tournament for heads of missions together with the senior military officers. He did crazy things like abolishing English in the country and ordering cars to drive on the left without any alterations to the cars or the roads, causing the highest number of accidents in one single day. He personally went to a night club and beat up the musicians and destroyed their musical instruments.

North Korean terrorists bombed a mausoleum in Yangon where the South Korean president was to reach in the next few minutes, killing several members of his entourage, including the South Korean foreign minister and ambassador to Myanmar. North Korea chose Myanmar because anyone in a military uniform could do anything there. But the culprits were caught and executed with military precision.

Even after Ne Win died, the military remained in absolute power till 1990 when the first general elections were held. Suu Kyi had the splendid opportunity to push for democratic reforms with the support of the US and ASEAN countries, if only she had continued the struggle. The Western sanctions were hurting the economy and sooner or later the people would have won. But she calculated that she was getting old and that her only way to come to power was through an unholy alliance with the enemy. Myanmar is now doomed to be a chaotic military dictatorship again.

The writer is a former diplomat. Email: tpsreenivasan@gmail.com

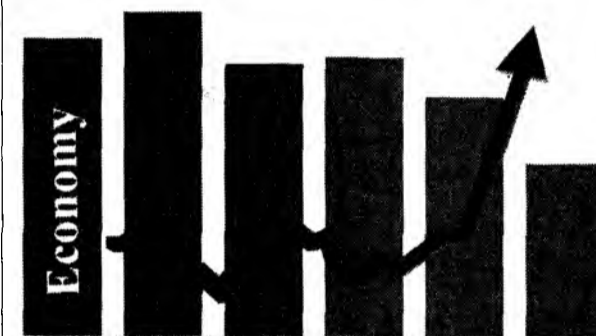
A growth-oriented fiscal stimulus

By Ajit Ranade

The government cannot spend even a rupee without the consent of parliament. Hence its annual spending plan, called the Union Budget proposal is tabled in the Lok Sabha, as required by the Constitution. The budget proposals are examined for how they impact the common man, how resources are to be raised, how is the gap to be filled, how will it affect economic growth, and whether the proposals make sense and are credible.

On the eve of the budget the Prime Minister had said that the budget would carry

home loan is repaid over the next fifteen or twenty years. The individual repays the housing loan before he or she dies. But a government lives on, so even in the future the government can borrow, and pay off old loans with new loans. That is not to say that this can be done recklessly. Even Mumbai's Municipal Corporation wants to borrow by selling bonds, but its Corporators are opposing it. In this case however, the finance minister has presented a credible and realistic picture of the government's finances and that will



on the work of the previous year, when five mini-budgets were presented in the pandemic year, under the "Atmanirbhar" package. By contrast the finance minister had said this would be a "never before", once in a century kind of budget.

What we have got is certainly very bold and ambitious. It is clearly focused on reviving growth. It makes up for the lack of fiscal stimulus that was mostly absent during the pandemic year. It now makes sense, that the government chose to backload the fiscal stimulus, at a time when most of the lockdowns around the country are being disman-

go a long way in building trust with the taxpayers.

Apart from the big spending thrust on infrastructure we also have a decisive move toward privatizing, the finance minister announced that two public sector banks, and one general insurance company will be privatised. Also, some of the government-owned assets, such as toll roads, or land owned by government companies, will be monetised. This is possibly the first such budget which is showing conviction about government vacating space for the private sector. Indeed, the stated philosophy is that the government will get out of all

"What we have got is certainly very bold and ambitious. It is clearly focused on reviving growth. It makes up for the lack of fiscal stimulus that was mostly absent during the pandemic year."

ted. For if people are stuck in their homes, then fiscal spending would not bring a bigger bang for the buck.

The big relief is that there are no new taxes, and the fiscal taps have been fully opened. Next year's annual budget size is nearly 35 lakh crore rupees, which is about 16 percent higher than last year's budget. But since we are just coming out of a recession, the tax revenues may not be very buoyant. Hence the gap between spending and revenue i.e. the fiscal deficit will widen. It was 9.5 percent of the GDP this year, since the GDP itself has shrunk by 8 percent, and the economy was in lockdown for several months. But next year too, the fiscal deficit will be 6.8 percent, which is more than twice as high as what is allowed by the fiscal responsibility law passed by parliament. The finance minister said in her speech that the fiscal deficit will come down to 4.5 percent only after four years, and even then it will be nowhere closer to the 3 percent limit specified by the fiscal responsibility law.

If the deficit is so high, how does the government intend to finance the gap? By borrowing of course! Today's borrowing has to be paid back in the future, by taxing future citizens, who are basically unborn taxpayers. But today's borrowing is going to be used to build roads, highways, metro rail systems, ports and airports. Those assets will last long, and will probably be in use for decades or longer. It's just like when an individual buys a house (an asset) the

non-strategic sectors like airlines, hotels etc. and leave it for the private sector. This will certainly improve the efficiency of the usage of capital and lead to higher growth.

India's ranking in the world hunger index, or child malnutrition is quite low. Hence, we need to substantially increase public spending on health, which is below our peer country average. This budget aims to double the spending on health and nutrition. But to do more, we need higher economic growth which can generate tax revenues to fund the social sector. On health and education, surely the finance minister could have allocated more, but given that the size of the deficit is already high, the policy focus is clearly on growth rather than redistribution. If indeed the economy manages to generate 15.5 percent nominal growth next year, as predicted by the IMF, then the current budget projections will turn out to be quite conservative and easily achievable. So, we must commend the budget for a growth-oriented fiscal stimulus, accompanied by some spending on social sectors, and deficit numbers which seem credible and achievable. On that count, kudos to the finance minister!

(Dr. Ajit Ranade is an economist and Senior Fellow, Takshashila Institution) (Syndicate: The Billion Press) (email: editor@thebillionpress.org)

TO THE EDITOR

Whither MCS results?

Editor,

The learned American counsel Stuart Bowen Jr. once said, "One day's delay is another day's lack of progress." In the field of public administration and governance, it is said that every unit in the public system has a vital and important role to play to ensure grassroots deliverance of amenities and facilities to the general public at large. In the scheme of governmental hierarchy, a break in the chain or line of command would create havoc in the entire administrative setup and ultimately it is the general public that end up suffering and losing the most.

The Meghalaya Public Service Commission, established under Article 315 of the Constitution, was set up with the mandate of, among other things, to conduct examinations for appointment to the Services of the State of Meghalaya. In essence, it is the constitutional duty of the MPSC to provide able, competent individuals of integrity to serve the Government of Meghalaya under various postings and positions. Among these services of the State of Meghalaya, we have the prestigious Meghalaya Civil Service (MCS) in layman's term. The MCS can be considered as the miniature

version of the IAS, for it deals with direct public administration at the state level under the supervision of the IAS officials. In Meghalaya, MCS officers handle extremely important positions that include postings as Block Development Officers, Extra Assistant Commissioners, Under Secretaries, Addl. Deputy Commissioners, Deputy Secretaries, Directors, Joint Secretaries, Secretaries etc. Needless to say, these are important statutory positions that are integral to keeping the state of Meghalaya running on a day to day basis.

In 2017, the Meghalaya Public Service Commission in consultation with the Government of Meghalaya, released the official advertisement calling for applications to fill up 38 sanctioned posts of the MCS - Junior Grade. Subsequently, in July 2018 the Preliminary Examination (Phase I) was conducted and the results were released the following month, i.e. August 2018. Then in October 2018 the MPSC called for applications of the successful candidates to the MCS Mains Examination (Phase II) to be held at a later date. In the midst of this, six unsuccessful candidates filed a writ petition before the High Court of Meghalaya challenging the Preliminary Examination results on various grounds. The court case went on for months. Towards the end of 2019, the MPSC released a notice that

the MCS Mains Examination would be held in January, 2020 and that the Schedule or Routine for the same would be released later. The aggrieved unsuccessful candidates in turn, filed a Miscellaneous Writ Petition seeking stay on the MCS Mains Examination notice, to which the High Court complied. However, the stay order was challenged by MPSC before a Division Bench of the High Court which overturned the earlier stay order. This decision of the Division Bench was also upheld by the Supreme Court of India.

The MCS Mains Examination were finally held in January 2020, where 576 candidates appeared for the same. The result of this Mains Examination however, was subject to the outcome of the original Writ Petition filed by the six aggrieved unsuccessful candidates, as decided by the Division Bench and upheld by the Supreme Court. Months and days passed since the conclusion of the Mains examination. Finally, on 27th January 2021, after exactly one year from the date of MCS Mains Examination, the High Court of Meghalaya disposed of the original Writ Petition and did not grant any relief to the unsuccessful candidates. The Court therefore granted liberty to MPSC to declare the results of the pending MCS Mains Examination.

The above is a short

synopsis on the history of the MCS recruitment matter in the state of Meghalaya. As one of the successful candidates, a few questions however trouble my mind. The final judgment of the High Court of Meghalaya was delivered on January 27, 2021, yet a week has passed since the date of the judgment but the MCS Mains results are nowhere in sight. As per the Shillong Times report, "MPSC to declare results soon" (Jan 30, 2021), no clear timeline has been intimated by the MPSC authorities. According to some sources, it is said that the declaration of results would take another month or so because MPSC has not even started evaluating the MCS Mains answer scripts, despite exams being conducted 12 months ago! If this is true, can we imagine a more pathetic situation than this? It is acceptable that delay in results was due to the matter being sub-judice in the High Court all this while, but could not the MPSC have at least completed the evaluation process? The Court never stopped MPSC from doing so.

Time and again, I have reiterated this point that premier examinations such as the Meghalaya Civil Service require months of preparation as it is not an examination one can prepare in just a matter of days. Many of us have sacrificed many opportunities to prepare and dedicate ourselves to

this examination. MPSC, now with untied hands, should understand the plight of the successful candidates and ensure that results are released in a timely manner. Already we have suffered for over 4 years (yes 4 long years) for no apparent fault of ours. Since its inception, MPSC has had a chequered history. Allegations of nepotism, manipulation and "making" plagues the Commission. The newly appointed Chairman and Members of MPSC should not allow these sort of allegations to stick. They should prove these allegations wrong through transparent conduct and timely declaration of results. In other states like Maharashtra and Karnataka, on the day when a judgment comes out which grants liberty to the State Public Commission to declare results, that day itself the State Public Commissions would release the results. By condoning this delay in MCS Mains results despite no pending litigation to the contrary MPSC is waiting for another form of litigation which would drag this process for another hundred years.

We the successful candidates are tired, weary and would desperately like to see the end of this entire fiasco. Frankly speaking it would be better to know that one has failed the examination than to be kept in the dark for years. At least one can move on to some-

thing else, without any baggage. If any of the MPSC officials are reading this, I hope it strikes their conscience to do the right thing. Innocent lives are counting on it.

Yours etc.,
Jeremiah S
Via email

Big boost to environment-friendly vehicles

Editor,

The Union Government has announced a voluntary vehicle scrapping policy in the Budget 2020-21. Under the policy, personal vehicles older than 20 years and commercial vehicles older than 15 years will have to undergo fitness tests in automated vehicle fitness testing centers. Anyone scrapping an old vehicle will get a certificate of scrapping and using that he might get a discount of up to 5 per cent while purchasing a new vehicle. As per the government's data, around 51 lakh light motor vehicles in India are older than 20 years; 34 lakh are older than 15 years, while 17 lakh medium and heavy commercial vehicles are older than 15 years and without a valid fitness certificate. Hope that the policy will help in encouraging fuel-efficient, environment-friendly vehicles and reduce vehicular pollution.

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

"There is no cure for birth and death
save to enjoy the interval."

— George Santayana

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No. 169 SHILLONG, THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 4, 2021

Health budget for local bodies

TO strengthen the primary healthcare system and to address the gaps that have been unearthed during the Covid pandemic the latest budget has allocated Rs 13,192 cr for Health. Again, in a clear departure from earlier practices this amount will be allocated to panchayati raj and urban local bodies for them to spend in accordance with recommendations of the 15th Finance Commission. Meanwhile the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare is in the process of drawing up the guidelines about where this money will be spent. This is the first tranche of a total grant of Rs 70,051 crore earmarked for the health sector at the rural and urban local body levels over the award period of five years.

A Committee headed by the Health Secretary, comprising principal secretaries of health of all states will draw a timeline of deliverables and outcomes for each of the five years along with a definite mechanism for flow and utilisation of these grants. This mechanism has to be in place by April 2021 for the first instalment of funds to start flowing by July 2021, according to the report.

In states, a committee under the chief secretary and comprising officials of the state departments of health, panchayati raj and urban affairs, and select representatives from all three tiers of rural and urban local bodies will decide on further devolution. Usually, money meant for health schemes is given to states. This is the first time PRIs and ULBs will be directly involved in the spending of central funds.

The total grants-in-aid support to the health sector over the award period works out to Rs 1,06,606 crore which is 10.3 per cent of the total grants-in-aid recommended by The Finance Commission. This works out to about 0.1 per cent of the GDP. The Commission also says that grants for the health sector will be unconditional. The panel has recommended that primary healthcare should be the number one commitment of every state. Moreover, primary health expenditure should be increased to two-thirds of the total health expenditure by 2022. The total public expenditure on health by states and the Centre should touch 2.5 per cent of GDP by 2025.

The idea that health funds should be routed through PRIs at the district, village and block levels is based on the Kerala government model from 1996 to transfer 35-40 per cent of the state's development budget to local governments. Under this model, sub-centres and primary health centres (PHCs) in rural areas were brought under the overall supervision and control of gram panchayats, putting in place mechanisms for greater community involvement.

This is a very sound model but the problem is with states like Meghalaya where there are no elected urban local bodies or panchayats. In such a situation how will the funds devolve to these bodies that have no accountability mechanisms in place? Meghalaya should start exercising its mind over this issue.

I am and I will (Prevent Cancer)

In a world without cure

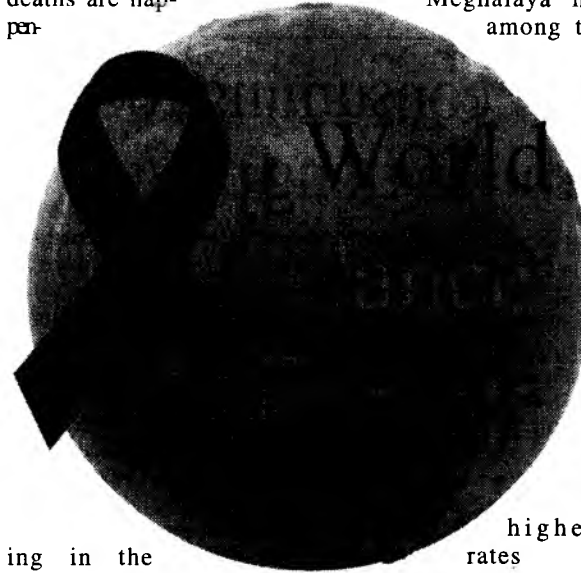
By Dr Caleb Harris & Dr Shreya Paul

World Cancer Day, February 4th, 2021

ways of treating cancer involves butchery (surgery) or burning (radiotherapy) or poisoning (chemotherapy). 10 million people die each year from cancer, and by 2030 experts project cancer deaths to rise to 13 million. Today, 65% of cancer deaths are hap-

pen- 2003 provides the legal basis for curbing the use of tobacco.

Tobacco, in any form, is the most important cause of cancer. The use of kwai (betel nut) can also independently (without the use of tobacco) cause cancers. Meghalaya has among the



highest rates of esophageal (food pipe) cancer in the world. Tobacco, betel nut and alcohol are group 1 carcinogens, yet are abused by a majority of the population, including minors.

"A considerable number of cancers and their overall risk can be held at bay by mere lifestyle changes alone. Changes which we as a society are unwilling to make, perhaps because we know there are treatment protocols in place. While stringent laws on curbing the sale and banning the use of said products might be in place, but at the end of the day it is the society which dictates the demand and use. In a world without cure, we would be left with no other option but to adapt to the times."

India has laws to curb the use of tobacco, unfortunately, the implementation is rather poor. Cigarettes and Other Tobacco Products (Prohibition of Advertisement and Regulation of Trade and Commerce, Production, Supply and Distribution) Act, 2003 or COTPA,

Let us entertain a scenario wherein cancer wasn't this dreaded chronic illness, which was manageable at worst and cured at best. Let us imagine a world where there was no cure to look forward to, no survival rates to debate upon. Would we overlook the abuse of car-

cinogens? Would we tolerate smoking in public places even though it is banned? The answer is a resounding NO. So, why cannot we "deny services" to someone who smokes in a public place, while putting others at risk too, just like we refuse services to someone without a mask?

A considerable number of cancers and their overall risk can be held at bay by mere lifestyle changes alone. Changes which we as a society are unwilling to make, perhaps because we know there are treatment protocols in place. While stringent laws on curbing the sale and banning the use of said products might be in place, but at the end of the day it is the society which dictates the demand and use. In a world without cure, we would be left with no other option but to adapt to the times. Instead of depending upon drugs, radiation or surgeries, we can incorporate certain changes into the fabric of the society wherein carcinogens like alcohol and tobacco are no longer perceived as benign habits but of catastrophic consequence. Why spend millions of dollars and mourn over precious time lost with loved ones when all we could do is act now?

World cancer day, observed on February 4 annually, is an initiative of the Union for International Cancer Control (UICC). 2019 marked the launch of the 3-year 'I Am and I Will' campaign, an empowering call-to-action for personal commitment emphasising the power of individual action taken now to impact the future.

While Meghalaya (and India) has done its best to keep Covid-19 at bay, through strict vigilance at the border and use of masks, hand-washing and social distancing, we have failed in our efforts to curb the use of tobacco, betel nut and alcohol which cause most of the cancers here. If we could curb the use of these carcinogens and prevent the young and naive from getting into this habit, we would be able to save several lives.

Views expressed are personal. Email: surgonco@outlook.com

A transformational budget

By G N Bajpai

Designing, drafting and delivering an appreciable national budget is a challenging task in a noisy democracy with competing claims, populism and an inter-dependent world where the flow of external resources significantly depends on perceptions often built around presumptive standards. This year the formidability of the Union Finance Minister's challenges was compounded by the impact of Covid-19, never before (expected) GDP deflation of over -7% and limited fiscal space. The first set of opinions on the quality and content of the budget have been splashed all over the media. The verdict of the capital market right up to the time of writing this column was positive and reverberating.

Referring to the budget and broader national priorities, first and foremost, there is the restoration of the growth trajectory. Secondly, employment generation. Third enhancing total factor productivity. Fourth, equity. Fifth cleaner environment, ecology and sustainability. And finally, fiscal prudence.

Every spectacular economic growth story around the world in modern history from the US, post-world war Europe to very recently China has been scripted on the plinth of infrastructure. Budget 21-22 accords unprecedented focus on building an entire gamut of physical and social infrastructure—roads, railways, ports, airports, power and health, housing, education, water supply and sanitation etc. The allocation of a higher amount of resources has been accompanied by a better policy response, improving institutional framework and concessions. The approach seems to be to facilitate execution, minimise political risk and ease the raising of financial resources from the market. Lack of financial closure has been the graveyard of many good projects.

Building vibrancy in the debt market, setting up of a distressed assets institution, consolidation of security market laws and sharpening of the exit policy are all going to address the lending capacity inadequacy, enhancing of investor confidence and infrastructure building challenges. Further, infrastructure building revives and enhances the growth of a host of other sectors and businesses. It is understood that the building of roads influences more than 150 industries, so is the case with other infrastructure projects.

The manufacturing sector in India has been a laggard. Even 'Make in India' launched by Modi government did not contribute significantly to revival. The policy framework including the Productivity Linked Incentive (PLI) scheme announced a few months earlier has been complemented in this budget with the setting up of seven new textile parks and a few other measures like the scrapping policy etc. In addition, there is a coordinated approach to bring down logistics costs. This should revive manufacturing.

The housing and construction sector has been in limbo for some time. There is some improvement after the settling down of the impact of RERA, economic recovery, a sharp decline in borrowing rates and added focus on public housing. Several steps including the one-person company will give a boost to the ecosystem in small towns leading to a large number of small units and start-ups sprouting.

Infrastructure building, invigoration of manufacturing, boost to start-ups and a pick-up in housing and construction all put together are likely to weave the story of a long-term higher growth trajectory.

The biggest employers in

India after agriculture are construction, health, housing, textiles and infrastructure building. Once these sectors shapeup, employment opportunities will unfold and absorb a number of job seekers entering the job market every year. Looking forward, research and development will be supported with the setting up of the Research and Development Fund that has a corpus of fifty thousand crores to be funded in the next five years.

The focus on horticulture, animal husbandry, dairies and fisheries are going to supplement incomes in rural areas. These along with better employment opportunities for the rural and urban unemployed will address albeit marginally the growing inequality. But much more needs to be done and urgently.

Improved quality of education, skill developments, health, housing and sanitation will not only enhance the quality of life but also productivity of labour. All these along with attention to clean energy will also enhance wellbeing and sustainability.

The envisaged policy frame of improving the ease of doing business aims at promoting entrepreneurship, competitiveness and trust. This will strengthen the enthusiasm of not only Indian but global entrepreneurs and enhance the eligibility to join the global value chain. And with large consumption market India could become a preferred destination for diversification. The government proposes to raise a significant size of resources through monetisation of assets—PSU, gas pipelines, power transmission lines, land etc., including through new approaches like Infra-invest REITS and strategic disinvestments. The government is proposing to contract its role in business and focus on governance by stepping out of areas other than few specified strategic sectors like defence, aerospace, energy, banking and insurance. The idea is to replace existing assets with new assets creation without straining the fiscal space. Eventually, it will enhance the productivity of capital.

The budget envisages a fiscal deficit of 6.8% with a path for restoring the FRBM compliance by 2026. The heartening features are improved quality of spending, greater transparency and reduction, if not elimination of off-budget funding. Government has refrained from raising either direct or indirect taxes so as to ensure that neither the sentiment nor available resources with private sector entities or individuals are impacted adversely. On the face of it, fiscal prudence has been sacrificed, but the option of either not spending or raising taxes was going to be more damaging. Globally, the modern monetary theory is being flaunted to rationalise a high fiscal deficit. With a declared glide path India should hopefully receive forbearance including from global rating agencies. However, the proposed bridging of the gap via market borrowing does ingrain the risks of a rise in interest rates and inflation.

The Finance Minister has ticked all the boxes except splurging direct cash and tax reductions. The direct cash transfers do have the potential of boosting consumption in the immediate future. But with limited fiscal space, she had to make a choice between now or making an environment of high job creation and growth. In fact, the proposed allocation is also going to boost consumption but with a lag. There are some expectations, which have not been met. (The writer is a former Chairman of SEBI & LIC) (Syndicate: The Billion Press) (email: editor@thebillionpress.org)

TO THE EDITOR

Mourning Mr Mohanan

Editor,
In the hurried pace of modern life we sometimes seek comfort by cleaving to someone who represents continuity. Like an anchor in the restless sea, this person gives us the stability that comes from a feeling of continuity and security. It has been decades since I last visited Shillong, where I spent my formative years. Given the rapid changes that have overtaken this beautiful city, I have long sought some anchor to connect the present with the past. For me, one such esteemed anchor was Mr M. K. Mohanan, who passed away recently at age 72. Described by one newspaper as "noted city-based businessman and socio-cultural figure," he was an active member of the Shillong community who labored to share the generous ecumenical vision of his mentor, Sree Narayana Guru (1856-1928). Larger than life, and president of SNGCC, Shillong, Mohanan represented (for me) not only a continuum from the Shillong of the past, but also the quintessence of our national character, which, according to Swami

Vivekananda, is yearning for the Divine. His spiritual radar ever alive, Mr Mohanan always responded to spiritually-oriented writings. A humble contemplative disciple of Sree Narayana Guru, he represented (for me) not only the best of Shillong, but also the best of India. Never did I imagine he would be snatched away from us so suddenly.

I first "met" Mr Mohanan via email, when he contacted me to write for a magazine he founded and financed. In an age when the written word is so profaned for the sake of lucre and body consciousness, when magazines and newspapers are untouchable in their inauspiciousness, Mr Mohanan founded a magazine with the wonderful numinous title of "Oneness." Created for the benefit of non-Malayalee readers, this magazine serves to unify us regardless of our individual identities and stations in life. Indeed, Oneness represented the India I have always loved – the higher universal India that transcends all boundaries and reaches for eternity from the depths of time. Mr Mohanan envisioned Oneness as a magazine that "gives more importance to spiritual, mystical, human rights, tradition, culture, ethos... primarily."

I remain grateful to Mr.

Mohanan for honouring me by asking me to write for this magazine, and for his constant appreciation of my small efforts. He always reported to me the feedback he got from my readers. I am grateful for his dedication to the youth of India. In 2020 he wrote to me: "Yes, indeed, youths are the pillars of every civilization. They need to be nurtured. India is very rich when it comes to youths as their population surpasses any other in the world... In fact, Oneness, as a magazine should echo the voice of the youths, at large..." At a time when many in my generation despair at the recklessness of the youth, Mr. Mohanan said, "Youths are the future of every nation since it is in their hands a country can either prosper or otherwise."

Once when I said that I found Nitya Chaitanya Yati's commentary on Verse No. 44 (in his book, "Neither This Nor That But Aum") to be inspiring, he arranged immediately to send me a copy of this book, through a friend in America. Always appreciative of universal truths, he said of this book, "In fact, all commentaries in this book are storehouse of universal truthfulness."

Every life is like a meteor, with a metaphoric tail that

represents the karmic trajectory of the person who lived this life. Every virtuous life illumines the universe. Every virtuous deed inspires others. In Mr. Mohanan's case, his life culminated in ceaseless service to mankind, spreading the universality and goodwill of his mentor, Sree Narayana Guru. Never ever did I dream we would lose him so soon.

In the back of my mind I had always hoped that one day when I visited Shillong, I would meet Mr. Mohanan in person. Alas, it is too late now. His sudden passing away has taught me to treasure every communication with persons who matter to us – to never postpone showing appreciation for those we treasure. May his soul rest in peace.

Yours etc.,
Deepa Majumdar,
Via email

Rooted to their constituencies

Editor,
The article Meghalaya's rural challenge (ST Jan 29, 2021) by the editor, Patricia Mukhim is an eye-opener and depicts a clear picture about functioning outcomes of Meghalaya and the role played by our elected representatives. I have visited almost the entire state with

special emphasis on border areas. I have observed that frequent visits and interactions of our elected representatives with their people and constituencies pay rich dividends and expedites developmental work especially construction of roads, bridges and gives a boost to the functioning of the Government machinery in that area. Moreover local level issues are addressed very promptly which makes the satisfaction level of local population very high. I am quoting the example of Pynursla and Amlarem where the Hon'ble MLAs originally belong to border areas. They frequently visit their constituencies and never miss the opportunity to attend local level functions i.e. games, cultural events and other programmes.

A lot of developmental work, especially construction of roads and bridges, opening of dispensaries, conduct of public outreach programmes by Border Security Force and State Government are taking place. Due to their personal attention to Dawki, Mawlynnong, Nongriat Amlarem, and conduct of various programmes at the border by BSF and effective coverage by media, there is a great boost in tourism and other economic activities. As a result, life of

common people in border areas is improving. Due to the personal intervention of ministers L Rymbui and P Tynsong almost all the roads are being constructed or repaired and a lot of bridges have also been constructed. Pyrdiwah, Lyngkhat, Lyngkhat in East Khasi Hills District are now connected with roads. Roads from Pynursla to Nayabazar, Tissan basti via Nongjri, Pongtung to Lyngkhat to Umsyiem and Dawki to Muktapur which were earlier non-existent or in bad shape, have now been repaired. This has made the life of people much easier.

All this has been possible as these elected representatives are fully committed to their constituencies and easily available; accessible and approachable to their people. What the writer-editor has mentioned to their constituencies and easily available; accessible and approachable to their people. What the writer-editor has mentioned to their constituencies and easily available; accessible and approachable to their people. What the writer-editor has mentioned to their constituencies and easily available; accessible and approachable to their people.

Yours etc.,
Saifur Rehman Khan
Shillong

"There's just some magic in truth and honesty and openness."

— Frank Ocean

The Shillong Times

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India's defence sales

INDIA'S offer at the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) defence ministers' conclave in Bengaluru, held as part of the Aero-India 2021 show, is to act as a supplier of missiles and sophisticated electronic warfare systems to member nations – some 27 in all. The offer made by Defence Minister Rajnath Singh is impressive if only for the new strides that India aspires to take in such fields. However, there is nothing as yet to show that India has achieved a reputation about the quality of its defence production sector. Herein lies the rub.

Admittedly, India has made commendable strides in space and missile technology and there is lure for the developing nations to look up to India for purchases. India has its own Akash and BrahMos missiles and nations like Indonesia and Vietnam in the Asian region were being sounded for such deals last year. At the same time, India is still dependent on the US and the West for sophisticated missile systems. A \$155 million deal was signed with the US last year for such purchases, and a 5.5 billion deal for S-400 air defence missile system -- with Russia which is also vying with the US for military sales to India as has been the case for decades.

In matters of defence weaponry quality is of prime importance. With quality comes the price factor too. The West makes its money from manufacture and supply of defence wares, including military aircraft as in the case of the Rafale fighter jets. This is a field that India, despite its huge size, neglected all along and instead depended on the developed world for all kinds of military supplies. At one time, the erstwhile USSR dumped all its military ware on India, as the Communist nation had an edge in producing quality military hardware. Yet, over the years, the quality of its heavily priced submarines etc., was in serious doubt.

After the collapse of the USSR and the NAM arrangement, India turned to the West for more of its arms purchases. Huge commissions changed hands and the beneficiaries were reportedly top politicians in power and top military generals. Admittedly, our satisfaction is that the scenario of such loot here might not be as worse as in countries like Pakistan. There is hardly any war for India to test the quality of its military acquisitions.

The Modi government in its first term talked big about a fillip to production of defence items within the country under the Make In India banner. But, no significant strides have been made in this direction as yet. It all remains in the realm of slogans.

Existential dilemma of the 'honest' politician

By Patricia Mukhim

The prefix 'honest' before the word politician is oxymoronic in today's context. Yet it would be wrong to write off all politicians as being dishonest and corrupt. I am referring to two politicians in the present MDA Government who appear honest (going by their antecedents) but are caught in the predicament of being part of a government that is bereft of all ethical and moral force. Mr Lakhmen Rymbui in his avatar as Home Minister actually has a lot to answer for, for all the illegal mining and transportation that is carrying on in broad daylight. His name, literally translated means "being happy."

I am not so sure that he is happy being Home Minister because he does appear to have snippets of ethics tucked inside his conscience. But other than stepping down from the Home Portfolio he has no other moral shield to cover up the large scale illegality that is being facilitated by his Department – the Home Department – as far as mining and transportation of coal is concerned.

The other gentleman who seems rather simple and a man of few words is Kyrmen Shylla. Its hard to fathom what goes on in his mind but there must be a lot of churning going on. His name means "Hope," and his parents must have nurtured hopes of him being the pillar of society – a man whose moral compass can never go wrong. Alas! He has a brother who owns a mine and he cannot but defend wrongdoing (illegal mining) because doing anything else would mean going against the family. We have yet to produce men and women that can stand their ground and not succumb to the pressures of clan, family and politics. Politics is a drug which once taken cannot be given up. The craving for power pushes people to violate every rule in the game so they can get to the finishing line by hook or crook.

Incidentally, both Kyrmen and Lakhmen are from the United Democratic Party (UDP) – a party that like the onion is needed by every dispensation to make up the magic figure to cook up a dish called 'government' in the state. Kyrmen Shylla as Minister for Social Welfare appears to be

making the right moves, albeit he also created a stir by intruding into the hornet's nest called lineage. It is his portfolio – Printing and Stationery and the transfer of a director who is a technical person and professionally qualified to hold the director's post, and then posting a non-technical person in his place despite the High Court directive, which is problematic. So is Kyrmen Shylla honest? I leave it to readers to judge this young legislator.

So why do Lakhmen Rymbui and Kyrmen Shylla shut their hearts and minds to the still, small voice that tells them not to compromise on their principles because that would erode their credibility. But the question that follows is whether honest politics is possible? And what about the UDP? Does it have any moral guidelines for its legislators?

Jean Jacques Rousseau once said, "Those who desire to treat politics and morals separately will never understand anything of either." The practice of politics not only can but must be reconciled with the imperatives of honesty. How do we define honesty or dishonesty in a politician? Is it possible for a politician to be honest at all?

This is a question that no politician would like to dwell upon. But what about the voters? Would they be ready to punish a corrupt politician? As is the case today, the voters in Meghalaya, barring a few in the city, all vote for money. A corrupt citizenry therefore cannot expect an honest politician. They have already sold their souls to the devil. But that's a generalization. There is a substantial chunk of voters who vote on principles and also continue to hope that a capable, honest and efficient person will win and bring the desired changes in the constituency and the state. However, since the large chunk of voters have lost their moral scruples they also have no moral force to speak up against corruption. Hence we in Meghalaya continue to reap the harvest we do today.

Normally change comes when voters vote out politicians who are dishonest

and publicize a problem, unmatched by the willingness to propose feasible solutions – is perhaps the most common form of dishonesty in politics. This is why actual governance is the best test of political honesty. It is how politicians while in government, actually govern and run the state; handle dissent and protests and implement the rule of law which proves their competence and honesty.

The toughest test of an honest politician comes when he or she must defend ideas that are unpopular but right. Joining the popular bandwagon just so the government survives is the worst form of dishonesty. Sadly, the actions of politicians today are fuelled purely by self interest. It is the dishonest politician who equates politics exclusively with popularity. But to be a politician with morals requires a supportive ecosystem. The public has to support tough decisions taken in their interests. That sort of politician also requires to build a cohort that supports his initiative and ensures the common good. When one politician displays decency, his colleagues should support him. Not doing so is a signal that decency doesn't pay. Political honesty is not the sole responsibility of politicians. We get the elected representative we deserve. The public must learn that fleeing a politician will turn him into a ruffian. After all, political honesty is more likely to take root in a society marked by a culture of tolerance, solidarity, and the equal enjoyment of individual rights. Such an ecosystem will root out political mischief-makers. And we know who they are!

Bottomline: For now, anyone with political aspirations must have a business or several businesses that will yield a few crores in 2023. Anyone without the crores need not even try. This will go on until the electorate realises the diminishing returns of taking 5000 or 10,000 rupees on the eve of election and compromising development and selling out the future of their children and grandchildren. So much for 'honesty' and politics! The twain can't meet!

An honest politician, in short, pursues a pragmatism built on principles, on the courage to say unpleasant things, but always with a constructive attitude. Indeed, irresponsible criticism – the eagerness to expose

will never dare to stand their ground. This is a very bitter message sent out to the youth of the state. The message is – you may be hard working and meritorious but if you have no godfather/godmother you are doomed. No wonder administration at the Block and district levels is so decadent. Cry my Meghalaya cry. Wow lah shet ka tieh pong deng bad la kijit u nam sarang (this is for my Khasi friends)

Yours etc.,
Mangkara Phanbuh,
Shillong,
Via email

what reality truly is. But it's not. The problem is that the lens through which we perceive is often warped in the first place by our genetic predispositions, past experiences, prior knowledge, emotions, preconceived notions, self-interest, and cognitive distortions. Once you assume that your definition of how a situation should be handled is the correct one and people around you should respond and react in accordance to your perception of the situation, problems arise. Initially it could be considered just bugging, but over time it can become a barrier to effective communication between two individuals eventually straining relationships.

Therefore, it is best to assume that every individual is different and has his or her own perceptions of life. Assuming your perception proper and imposing it on others is like creating a ticking time bomb waiting to explode. Let's remember we are unique and wonderful in our own ways. If we respect that in our relationships the world will seem a better place.

Yours etc.,
Vicky Vadera,
Shillong.

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

EAM's eight principles

Sermons to satan

By Dr DK Giri

External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, while delivering the keynote address at the 13th All India Conference of China Studies, outlined a set of eight principles to deal with China. While they reflect innovative thinking, they also sound like a moral commentary on Indian foreign policy. I have worded the title metaphorically, not as diplomatic lingo, to drive home the point.

Arguably, the principles adumbrated by EAM are a set of platitudes falling far short of international political realism. His stress on 'mutual' and reciprocity amount to wishful thinking in competitive and confrontational politics for power and domination. He said the relationship should be based on mutual respect, mutual sensitivity and mutual interest. These are idealistic and desirable in any bilateral relation but not practicable in dealing with China.

Interestingly, China has reacted positively to Jaishankar's template of eight principles meant to repair India-China ties. Beijing apparently liked Jaishankar's approach and has said only that the border issues need not affect other relations like perhaps trade and investment etc. Beijing's tactic of salami slicing territory while being open to negotiations and business-as-usual should not be lost on mandarins in the South Block or on China observers. Also to note that China's appreciation is like a bear hug.

Decoding the principles, first, "Agreements already reached must be adhered to in their entirety, both in letter and spirit". The EAM was perhaps reminding or reprimanding the Chinese that they are a serial killer of agreements. With their predatory actions in Galwan and Ladakh, they have violated the agreements of 1993, 1996 and 2013. It was agreed in 1993 that if any of the parties – India and China – is found to overstep the LAC that party should pull back. But Chinese PLA clearly overstepped in Galwan and Pangong Tso area and are yet to withdraw.

In 1996, the same agreement was beefed up as exercise in self-restraint should any of the parties transgress. The PLA violated this. They attacked Indian soldiers with iron batons and rods, killed in cold-blood Colonel Santosh Babu and his men when they were returning unarmed from a formal consultation. Furthermore, the 1996 agreement enjoins on both parties the responsibility for any military exercise not aimed at the other side. Amassing troops beyond the agreed number by PLA along the LAC is decidedly aimed at intimidating India.

In 2013, there was a bilateral agreement not to follow or trail a patrol by either side, along LAC where there was no common understanding of the border. The PLA not only trailed Indian military patrol, they tried to obstruct it. In such situations, the agreement is to quickly enter into negotiations and diplomatic parleys not military confrontation. PLA has done just the reverse. It has challenged, confronted and harmed Indian soldiers, then offered to negotiate. The moot question is, how does New Delhi ensure that Beijing adheres to the agreements? The EAM does not elaborate on it.

Second, "Where handling of border areas is concerned, the LAC must be strictly observed and respected. Changing the status quo unilaterally is completely unacceptable." This is arcane. Both Indians and Chinese or any other country in similar situations will understand this principle. The question is what to do if either of the country violates

this!

Third, "peace and tranquillity in border areas is the basis for the development of ties in other domains. If they are disturbed so will the rest of the relationship". This is a bold statement, a departure from the past strategy in our foreign policy. New Delhi was open to conducting relations in other areas, while freezing the area of conflict. This was our approach to Pakistan. Keeping aside the Kashmir question, we were carrying out business in other areas.

The BJP government set a pre-condition of terminating support to terrorism before normal business with Pakistan is restored. That is how even SAARC proceedings are stalled until Pakistan publicly and visibly stops supporting cross-border terrorism. It is praiseworthy of the current government to adopt a similar strategy with China as reflected in this principle. But is it really being implemented by New Delhi?

While 59 Chinese apps were suspended immediately after Chinese incursion into Eastern Ladakh and recently permanently banned, other apps are still in operation in India. The Indian cricket team was partly sponsored by Oppo, a Chinese company. Last month, when India had secured a historic win in the test series in Australia a full front page advertisement in an Indian newspaper congratulating the team was sponsored by BYJU, a learning app from China. In Uttar Pradesh, it was reported that the Chinese company had secured a big infrastructure contract. This after GoI put a rider on FDI from countries sharing a border with India. Such FDI would have to receive prior approval from GoI. This provision was meant to restrict opportunistic takeover by Chinese companies in the wake of the pandemic.

Fourth, "While both nations are committed to a multipolar world, there should be recognition that multi-polar Asia is one of its essential constituents". I have argued in this column ("EAM Gets It Wrong", 22 January INFA) about EAM misreading the emerging bipolarity as multipolar world. Since the Second World War it has been bipolar politics except for a short interregnum when under globalisation economy had replaced security as the driver of power politics. Again, does Beijing share EAM's perception of a multi-polar world? Certainly not as, under ambitious Xi Jinping, China expects to replace United States as number one power or compete with it as an equal power. Obviously, neither China nor USA see the world as multi-polar. How then will EAM's expectations be fulfilled?

Fifth, "Obviously, each state will have its own interests, concerns and priorities; but sensitivity to them cannot be one sided. At the end of the day, relationships between major states are reciprocal in nature". Here again, the assertion is idealistic not practical. All relationships cannot be reciprocal. A big power should not expect reciprocity from a small country with fewer resources. An aggressive and expansionist regime like the present one in China will not observe reciprocity. New Delhi should rather talk of interdependence between countries. It is a credible and viable approach propounded by political scientists of International theory Joseph Nye and Robert Keohane. This principle necessitates countries to be sensitive to each other because any action by one of them can cause upset in another country in relation to the former. The authors have further developed this principle into what is called complex interdependence which bind countries in such multiple relationships that either party cannot act unilaterally.

TO THE EDITOR

Quo Vadis - Indian Media

Editor,
Media is regarded as the fourth pillar on which the soul of a democratic state rests. Therefore it is of utmost importance to assure its independence, but with independence should come a sense of responsibility as the content that is broadcast is viewed by several millions and shapes opinions, views and actions of many. In these times when nearly everyone is using social media platforms and is connected to the media in several ways, the news travels at lightning speed as compared to the earlier times and reaches the masses very easily. Therefore media plays a massive role in shaping the way we think, hence for media houses, including social media influencers, it becomes a moral obligation to serve the nation with correct information that must be shorn of any hidden motives of shaping views in a particular direction.

In these times of tough competition, media houses are competing with each other regarding the narratives they push out get in order to establish their name or in some cases supremacy over the other which leads to the proliferation of tabloid news rather than factual and realistic news. In the

21st century, fake and fabricated news travels faster than real news leading to misunderstandings and half-baked conclusions based on facts which are irrelevant and irrational. These fabrications are peddled by several groups and individuals in order to support their ideologies and reinforce false beliefs to achieve monetary and political benefits. Media platforms ought to remain out of the control of the ruling governments so that they are not transformed into caged parrots and a government mouthpieces that deliver to the people only content in favour of the ruling party. Therefore to remove this political influence and the other motives by which media houses are driven to propagate unethical content, views and opinions which in the long term may even cause riots and conflicts between parties of differing faiths, a regulatory mechanism is need. This will ensure that media remains independent of any influence by the political hierarchy so that a system of checks and balances can be created.

However, all the blamed cannot be apportioned to these big media houses which have morally hit their nadir. People, meaning the audience and readers are equally to blame because of their turning a blind eye towards the real motives of the governments in power. The ignorant crowd has obliterated

the fate of those who slog and beaver away in their drab and somber working conditions hoping for some kind of illuminosity to lift them from their plight, but unaware are these people that this hope is merely an illusion further receding in the mirage of promises and assurance which will never be sculpted into reality.

"We are what we watch," is a phrase that says a lot about what we are experiencing these days, people crave glamourised and sensational reporting rather than a pragmatic report on daily happenings. Slowly and gradually people are losing their capacity to think rationally by developing a habit of not questioning and being led by anchors whose qualification to draw opinions might surprise a few. Whatever we see and hear has an impact on our thinking and the ways we start to perceive things. Therefore we must question and get to the very point where we are served with the truth and nothing else. Only then must we stop. Because if we start to put our faith in half-baked truth or fabricated and fake news then we might perceive things upside down and ultimately make a mockery out of our own selves. Perception is like getting a piece of information; wisdom is perceiving things correctly so as to be able to differentiate between right

and wrong; truth and untruth. We will have to learn to change our realities by changing our perceptions or else these forces will continue to build their fortunes at the opportunity cost of millions of people.

Yours etc.,
Divye Dutt
BA(Hons), Philosophy
Hindu College(DU),
Via email

What's with the MPSC!

Editor,
The main function of the MPSC is to conduct examinations and interviews and to publish results at the earliest, leaving no room for manipulation. If the Commission chooses to it can and should resist all forms of political pressure to illegally make someone pass at the cost of meritorious candidates. This has been the modus operandi for several years, thereby creating doubts as to the merit of all those who have been appointed in the past especially in the MCS and MPS. It is such a shame that Meghalaya – a state created to serve the people better has turned out to be a monster that serves only those with political clout. There has been no transparency in the functioning of the MPSC in the past and there isn't any today. Political appointees to the Commission

will never dare to stand their ground. This is a very bitter message sent out to the youth of the state. The message is – you may be hard working and meritorious but if you have no godfather/godmother you are doomed. No wonder administration at the Block and district levels is so decadent. Cry my Meghalaya cry. Wow lah shet ka tieh pong deng bad la kijit u nam sarang (this is for my Khasi friends)

Yours etc.,
Mangkara Phanbuh,
Shillong,
Via email

Perceptions and Relationships

Editor,
Perception is not reality, but, admittedly, perception can become a person's reality (there is a difference) because perception has a potent influence on how we look at reality. We assume ours is the right perception and others too should agree.

Think of it this way. Perception acts as a lens through which we view reality. Our perceptions influence how we focus on, process, remember, interpret, understand, synthesize, decide about, and act on reality. In doing so, our tendency is to assume that how we perceive reality is an accurate representation of

"The court can, and must, only maintain its legitimacy through the dispensation of justice, not by coercion and censorship."

— Bilawal Bhutto Zardari

The Shillong Times

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Plagued by hubris

REACTIONS to the BJP's corruption charges against the MDA government range from outright denial to taunts and mocks that the Party should pull itself out of the coalition. It is indeed a peculiar situation that the BJP finds itself in. On the one hand the two MLAs of the BJP are hell bent on sipping from the MDA cup because it suits their interests. On the other hand the BJP chief is going hammer and tongs at the MDA government and accusing it of corruption. The State BJP chief feels he needs build the image of the Party in Meghalaya for the next election and also for the Garo Hills District Council polls scheduled for April this year.

While the Chief Minister who also heads the National Peoples' Party (NPP) and the coalition government has been choosing his words with care, knowing that he cannot step on the toes of a coalition partner, his Deputy has been lashing out at the BJP relentlessly. The latest salvo was fired when he said that differences within the coalition will end if BJP leaves the Government. This is unprecedented and certainly not something that one coalition partner would say to another. It smacks of a hubris borne out of a sense of invincibility. Prestone Tynsong has been elected for four consecutive terms and feels that it is natural to talk down to a coalition partner that refuses to play ball.

Interestingly Chief Minister Conrad Sangma has left it to his deputy to deal with all the flak thrown at his government. Tynsong is virtually the de-facto chief minister. He has been fielding questions on health and other subjects even during the height of the pandemic. It is true that despite his seniority Tynsong was never allowed to come into his own during the Congress regime and remained in the shadows of the then CM, Mukul Sangma. That's something Tynsong has never forgiven or forgotten. Now that he is given a free hand in the present government he seems to have lost his bearings. His dare to former CM Mukul Sangma to contest from Pynursla, merely because Sangma pointed out that cattle smuggling and other illegalities are carried out through the Deputy CM's constituency has brought down the level of political discourse to an absurd level.

Ironically, Prestone Tynsong forgets that the BJP-led government is controlling the purse strings in Delhi and that the Modi government is well briefed about the goings-on in Meghalaya. The BJP is biding its time to hit out at the perpetrators of corruption when the time is ripe and closer to the elections. The two BJP MLAs are not ruffled by the insults to the Party since they both believe they won because of their persona. Come elections and they could very well jump to another party.

For now, each time the CM visits Delhi he is begging for some package or the other and what Tynsong has been doing is likely to hurt the NPP-BJP ties even at the national level.

Place of protest and battle for legitimacy

By Manraj Singh

Delhi is once again caught up in a political and social storm similar to 2019-2020 protests against Citizenship Amendment Act - National Register of Citizens (CAA-NRC) process. The reckoning to negotiate rights, power and legitimacy have once again taken centre stage. This time the agitation is being led by farmers against the three agriculture laws. An important aspect of agitation is about the place of protest as the farmers have occupied some of the highways and roads coming to Delhi from the neighbouring States. Along with the substance of the protest, the place also assumes significance because it determines the visibility and the interface of the protest with other sections of society and pressure it can exert on the Government.

This has brought back into focus the Supreme Court (SC) judgment on Shaheen Bagh protests viz Ajay Sahni vs Union of India, on the subject of where a protest can take place. In December 2019, residents of Shaheen Bagh, a colony in South Delhi had blocked a road in the area to lodge protest against CAA, 2019 which sought to guarantee Indian citizenship to non-Muslims residing in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh. The exclusion of Muslims in CAA played on the minds of the community at the discrimination and forebodings of the NRC in which proof of citizenship is demanded from the people. The protestors blocked one of the roads which connected Delhi to Noida.

In early 2020 a Special Leave Petition (SLP) was filed in the SC to get Shaheen Bagh protest site vacated as according to the petitioner it was causing inconvenience to other citizens. It was submitted that the public roads could not be permitted to be encroached upon in this manner hence a direction be issued to clear the same. In the judgment, the Court acknowledged the role and legitimacy of protests in the freedom struggle. It acknowledged the existence of post-independence constitutional machinery in the country to redress the grievances of its citizens. It recognised the right to protest against a law while a constitutional challenge was pending in the courts. However it ended up stating that "manner of dissent against colonial rule cannot be equated with dissent in a self ruled democracy". It claimed that the right of protest and the right to move freely must be balanced without going into details or providing sufficient reasoning on how to go about it. This sows the seeds of vagueness and opens the judgment to different interpretations.

Professor Apoorvanand in an article highlighted, "The term 'self rule' is a trap. Mahatma Gandhi had famously said that 'we want English rule without the Englishman.' The State in itself is coercive, and people have to be eternally alert so that they are not robbed

of their sovereignty. One is compelled to ask: Who is this 'self' in 'self rule'? The answer again comes from Gandhi. He says: 'Real Swaraj will come not by the acquisition of authority by a few, but by the acquisition of the capacity by all to resist authority when it is abused. In other words, Swaraj is to be attained by educating the masses to a sense of their capacity to regulate and control authority'.

People are bound to perceive the State as coercive due to inaction in many incidents e.g. during Nirbhaya rape incident, or mistreatment during the Hathras rape case or overlooking the demands of farmers, teachers, doctors and workers asking for fair wages and better working conditions. Issue is should we question the outrage and protests in all these cases through the lenses of inconvenience and legitimacy?

Meaning and metaphor of protest

A public protest is an act of speech and expression, organised and collectivised. It cannot be ordered just like our speech cannot be ordered. What to speak and how to say something is decided by me and you. It is wrong for Government to tell me to do so. SC has done something similar to this. Peaceful protests as devised and perfected during freedom struggle gave us an agency to get voices of the aggrieved groups heard. This discourse is enshrined in our Constitution as Fundamental Rights under Article 19 (1) with reasonable restrictions of public order justified by law. So if civil authorities have a reasonable apprehension of public disorder they may curtail or limit that specific right but the time limit for such restriction is not mentioned anywhere. This begs the question that if the grievance is not addressed should the aggrieved party return home.

In Apoorvanand's words "if the injustice is indefinite can the protest be old?" A 104 year old freedom fighter H S Doraiswamy who is still in public life in Karnataka has rightly pointed out that this judgment has opened a book of ambiguity. SC in its own judgment in Himmat Lal K Shah vs Police Commissioner Ahmedabad, said that the right to assemble on a public street could be subject to a reasonable restriction in the interest of public order. In the Ajay Sahni judgment it extended this logic and included disruption of traffic as public disorder. Public disorder is a threat to the very rule of law. It may be a riot or a large scale assault on the State. There is no evidence whatsoever that there was violation of public order at that scale at Shaheen Bagh. On reading the judgment, it is not even recorded as being alleged of such a threat. Therefore the vagueness in the judgment muddies the waters and creates confusion among the enforcement agencies and

gives them a legal tool to block any form of public protest. A UN Special Rapporteurs' report on the right to freedom of peaceful assembly notes that while restrictions to the right of peaceful assembly can be made in the interest of national security or public order, these restrictions have to be lawful, necessary and proportionate to the objective. These restrictions are to be the exception, not the norm, and, very importantly, that they "must not impair the essence of the right (to protest)." The report further explains that a blanket ban on a protest or banning of a specific site is disproportionate because it excludes the circumstances under which such an assembly takes place. The report notes that a certain level of disruption to ordinary life caused by assemblies, including disruption of traffic, annoyance and even harm to commercial activities, must be tolerated if the right is not to be deprived of substance.

Coming to the issue of reasonable time period of protest assembly, we and the court fail to ask whether similar inconvenience caused during construction of roads by diverting routes is not violation of right to movement. Delays are routine as they may extend to months or even years depending upon the project and circumstances.

In the Shaheen Bagh case SC constituted a committee of two senior advocates to act as interlocutors between Court and protestors of Shaheen Bagh. They presented the report to the Court but it was neither made public nor did the Court allude to its details in its judgment. So we cannot be sure of the premises on which the Court has made these observations about balancing of right to protest and the right of commuters.

Past protests
In a recent interview HS Doraiswamy recalls a protest of which he was a part of in 1935. He and fellow protesters had laid down on the roads to stop trucks, loaded with imported goods, from entering the markets. "It was a road roko. And it worked. Protests are about voicing our opinion in a way that the Government notices it," he adds.

Violent protests erupted after the horrific Nirbhaya rape incident in Delhi in 2012. Raj Path and India Gate was occupied by young and old. Stone pelting and lathi charge which were anything but signs of peaceful protests happened right near the power corridors of India in the heart of its capital. However, this caused a shift in conversation among the people and the atmosphere around. People talked about consent, women rights, patriarchal society, setting up a committee to look into laws related to rape and eventually an amendment to the law. Sections like stalking and voyeurism were added to the Indian Penal Code. This was a sign of a breathing republic in which the citizen

was vocal and the executive was willing to listen.

Protests and Purpose

The current farmers protest is definitely high risk due to blocking of highway, risk of covid-19 and other illnesses and the awaited State response which can be oppressive if negotiations do not succeed. At least 100 people have died due to the cold.

In the long term, protests work because they can undermine the most important pillar of power i.e. its legitimacy. State can be defined by its monopoly on violence, as put forth by Thomas Hobbes and codified by Max Weber, but the complete Weber quote is often overlooked. Weber defined the State by its "monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force." The word legitimate is as important as the words physical force. In the present case the agitation has been peaceful. Therefore one can argue if violence erupts it will be enacted and enabled by the State. Another pertinent question is if the State enables violence what effect will it have on its legitimacy. The spectre of legitimacy haunts the present Indian State and will haunt more forcefully if it exercises the option of violence and repression. It may repress the movement but it will result in huge loss of legitimacy to the State and make it brittle. The ruling elite will also lose credibility and legitimacy. Deep cracks will develop in the present hegemonic structure. Constant demonizing of farmers as terrorists, free loaders, spoil people, naxalites, Khalistanis etc, in the media and social media and also by leaders of ruling party are attempts to delegitimise the protests.

There is also a battle of competing narratives being fought. Professor Zeynep Tufekci explains that by themselves, streets don't magically hold any particular power beyond their ability to start that conversation which concern the society and frame questions. Successful protests are the ones that successfully negotiate the issues framed during negotiations.

Is there a way Forward
Looking back at the history of protests in India and how protests in general create awareness within society, it is important to resolve this impasse. Farmers cannot be expected to stay put on Delhi's borders indefinitely and Government also has to move on with other governance issues. Passions have to cool down for breakthrough and the responsibility lies on the Central Government. The Government is a servant of citizens and not master of subjects. As Nirbhaya protests led to reforms in law and a conversation on gender violence in society, let this moment in history be defined as dialogue and accommodation of "annadaata" in our discourse of the society. Let the voice of the aggrieved find space in the minds of our leaders and manifest itself through their course of action.

(The writer is an advocate) Email 4manraj@gmail.com

Modi fiddles as farmers are served a bed of nails

Concertina wires at Delhi borders now symbolise centre

By Sushil Kutty

The lethally sharpened wooden stakes jutting out of the horrendously nail-studded blacktops are a throwback to Medieval Delhi. The rolls of concertina laid across the breadth of the highways are meant to keep the Jat farmer out of Delhi. They say if anybody can beat the stubborn out of determination, it is the Jat. And the Jat farmers of Western Uttar Pradesh are as bull-headed as are the Jat farmers of Haryana.

Then again, is the Modi Government buckling under pressure? Afraid of the farmers "who are not farmers" massed at Delhi's borders? The government's response so far has been to remain basically absolutely unresponsive. The Modi Government's inability to cash in on the BJP's brute majority in Parliament betrays an innate weakness in the Modi Government. It puts a question mark on Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 56" chest, and Home Minister Amit Shah's writ at home.

ers do not want the new farm laws to muck up their pasteurized existence why thrust it down their unwilling throats? Modi may not yet be aware, but legions of his supporters and definitely most of his hardcore vote-bank see the slow but steady encircling of Delhi and Modi, and they are asking themselves the question, almost in panic, is Modi herding his exit? Does Modi yearn to retire to Vadnagar in Mehsana district of Gujarat and live the rest of his life wondering how the BJP's brute majority was washed away in the tears of a rough-and-tough farmer? The legitimate question to ask now is should January 26 be repeated on February 6, the day the farmers plan to enforce a 'chakka jam' across India? More to the point, does the Centre want an encore? Cannot Modi just up and give in, give up, scrap the three farm laws and be done with them? For the umpteenth time, the farmers do not want these "black" laws. C'mon man, scrap the

"The Government appears to have totally capitulated in the face of the determined push of the bunch of farmers who are not loathe to digging trenches to dig their heels in."

Nobody dare say it aloud, but there appears to be a yellow streak in the Modi Government, something of the coward. The Government appears to have totally capitulated in the face of the determined push of the bunch of farmers who are not loathe to digging trenches to dig their heels in. Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU) leader Rakesh Tikait says farmers will stake out at up to 100 roadblocks across India for as long as it takes this year if it comes to that.

From all indications Tikait's brag is not mere boast. He may have wept tears of frustration post-Republic Day events, but the tears pricked at Jat pride and now even if most of the farmers have retreated and politicians have taken over, Rakesh Tikait and the BKU have challenged the Modi Government and Modi cannot do anything else other than erect barricades and embed nails. Political power has shifted from the political neta to the political kisan. Shiv Sena leader Sanjay Raut acknowledged this when he met Rakesh Tikait at Delhi's nail-studded Ghazipur border crossing and promised him that the Shiv Sena, the Congress and Sharad Pawar's NCP stood with the farmers. Without doubt far tougher days are ahead for the BJP in Maharashtra where farmers make a substantial chunk of the electorate. Most of all, Maharashtra's farmers are an organized bunch, maybe far more orderly arrayed than their Western Uttar Pradesh counterparts. And the Maharashtra Government is not going to encircle Mumbai with concertina! Imagine farmers laying siege to every state capital in the Union. Maybe that's in the pipeline, too. Maybe somebody will whisper that into Rakesh Tikait's ear!

So, considering all that, now, why is Prime Minister Narendra Modi standing on prestige? Cannot he succumb to pressure, and, come to think of it, why did he have to bring in the new farm laws at all, aren't they piffle compared to see peace prevail in the country? Calm and peace should be first and foremost thought in a Prime Minister's mind, his duty. If farm-

black laws, think of India, as

Prime Minister your first allegiance is to India, not to the crony capitalists who line their pockets and line up to be counted in the Forbes list of billionaires!

So, why the barricading of Delhi, why the separation of Delhi from the rest of India? It's as if "We the People" do not count anymore. India without Delhi is headless, and imprisoning Delhi's denizens in Delhi is no solution to New Delhi's problems - Modi's problems. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has shut himself and his government up in Delhi. This when Covid-19 is rampant world-over. Does encircling Delhi in barbed wire solve anything? All that the farmers have to do is stick to where they are stuck now and very soon the Guinness Book will have a new world record. Narendra Modi is up against tunnel vision and at the end of this tunnel there aren't any of the three farm laws. The worst is, the wear and tear is showing on the Modi Government. The spark is missing. The Government cannot think up a solution to the self-inflicted crisis. Not even the coronavirus and Covid-19 have done anything to dampen farmer spirits. The Centre has thrown everything it could at the farmers, but nothing hurt the farmers - not even the tricolor coming unstuck from atop the Red Fort. And when the Red Fort itself is leased to a ("adopted by") private party, where's the sanctity left?

To reiterate, Prime Minister Narendra Modi is losing his grip on the nation. His loyal voters of 2014 and 2019 are so frustrated, so despondent they can barely keep their tears suppressed. Many of them are cursing Modi and Shah for their lack of guts. Modi is under tremendous domestic pressure. And international figures are gunning for him. Twitter is hell bent on doing a Trump on Modi. American crooner Rihanna, who recently launched her own lingerie brand, is asking "Why are we not talking of this..." and Speaker Nancy Pelosi found that music to her ears. Modi and his bed of nails are suddenly the talk of the globe. Will it be his epitaph, too: Modi and his bed of nails? (IPA Service)

TO THE EDITOR

On commercial vehicle strike

Editor,
I refer to a news item which appeared in your esteemed paper (ST Feb 5, 2021) under the caption, "Lift Strike:Tynsong to Cabbies." Among other things, the report implies that the government is trying to portray the withdrawal of the odd-even rule for commercial vehicles and permission to load passengers to full capacity as concessions to transporters. On the contrary, these are not concessions but mere easing of Standard Operating Procedures in line with Central Government Directives to the State Government which are issued from time

to time during the ongoing pandemic.

In all fairness, the Government should at least reduce the rates of various taxes on commercial vehicles and also reduce the exorbitant duties on petrol and diesel. After all, government had recently helped the industrial units across the State by waiving a large part of their electricity bills and other taxes amounting to tens of crores as a relief measure against the adverse economic impact the pandemic has had on the said industries.

In the present situation, our Government seems to be rigid perhaps because it does not expect the strike to endure for too long due to the fact that the transport

workers like drivers, conductors, etc being economically poor will not be able to go without income for a prolonged period.

Yours etc.,
Samuel Swett,
Shillong-2

Abuse of school bus facilities

Editor,
2020 was dedicated to Chinese sponsored Covid-19 whereas 2021 opened up with the much needed vaccine manufactured by the American multinational pharmaceutical corporation, Pfizer. Last year, education was one of the worst hit sectors and it seems that it was not enough that we have the ongoing strike by

the Joint Action Committee of Commercial Vehicles (JACCV) which has hit the student community even harder. When several schools reopened after a long lull in February, school-going students could hardly attend their classes for a single day and then came in the cabbie strike. Since most schools in the town don't run school buses, students had to rely on taxis to reach their respective schools.

The students of BSF Senior Secondary School are one of the worst hit by the striking cabbies. The school bus of this school caters to the BSF officials first and if it is available or spared, thereafter, then it is used as a school bus. The BSF Senior Secondary School, how-

ever, collects bus fares every month without fail from its students. Students had to avail bus services in a prescribed format with court fee stamps for a certain denomination. However, throughout the year this one and only school bus is used for the BSF officials more often, whereas students who availed the bus service had to depend on taxis.

The school which reopened on February 1, 2021 is unable to provide the school bus for ferrying students since its priority is to ferry BSF officials. Now, if these officials want a bus for themselves then they should procure another. Why on earth are they pushing the students of BSF Senior Secondary

School to hardship by snatching away their school bus? And if the said school cannot provide uninterrupted bus service then it should return the bus fare collected to the students. In the current scenario, many students of the school are unable to attend their classes since they cannot walk the long distances in the absence of the school bus and because commercial vehicles are on strike. The BSF babus should show some concern for the students of this school and understand that they cannot take away the school bus which is meant to ferry student.

Yours etc.
BC Paul
Shillong - 4

What strong heroine should look like

By Vishnu Makhijani

BREAKING STEREOTYPES

I was 10 years in the writing and breaks stereotypes of what a strong heroine should look like, with a heroine who is introverted, feels inadequate and powerless, and is conditioned to believe she is weak.

"It took me ten years and multiple drafts to write the story because I knew nothing about fiction writing. I don't have an MFA degree. I have never attended a writing workshop in my life. I am a journalist, but writing news reports isn't really writing, it is just conveying the news in simple, direct language. So, I had to teach myself to write fiction," Veena Rao, the editor of Atlanta-based community newspaper "NRI Pulse" told IANS in an interview of her debut novel, *Purple Lotus* (SWP-She Writes Press).

"I read books in the immigrant fiction genre (Jhumpa Lahiri, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Chimamanda Adichie, Akhil Mishra etc) over and over again, paying attention to character development, plot progression, style etc. until I evolved as a fiction writer," Rao, who grew up in Mangalore and moved to the US in 2001, explained.

Thus motivated to write a book of her own and realize her childhood dream, she sat with a blank page and the first thing she typed was the title, *Purple Lotus*.

"The lotus is such a beautiful symbol of rising above one's circumstances. It grows in muddy waters but rises unblemished and beautiful toward the sun. The purple-colored lotus is considered rare and symbolizes self-awakening. I suppose I knew what direction the story would take, but I had no story. Writing *Purple Lotus* was a very long, messy journey where I taught myself to write creatively as the story developed," Rao said.

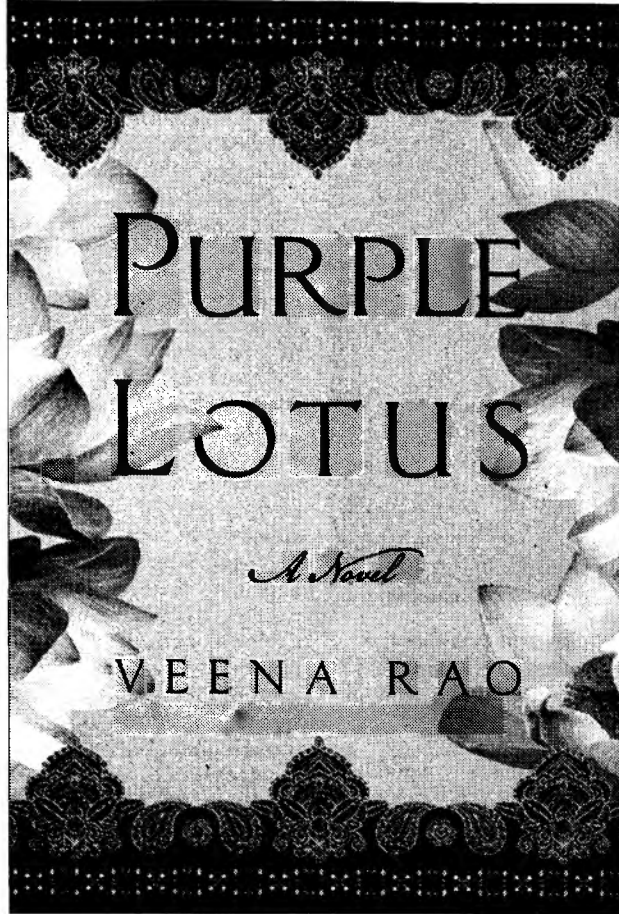
Then came the even harder part. "My manuscript was rejected multiple times over the years. Each time I saw a rejection email, it felt like a personal blow. But even through the bucket loads of rejections, I always held the belief that my book would eventually get published.

"Finally, last year, I entered the She Writes Press STEP manuscript contest that is open annually to women of color. I forgot about it because I had seen enough rejections to hope for a positive outcome. So, imagine my shock and joy when my publisher informed me that I had won the contest and a book deal.

"And fortunately for me, my novel has resonated with readers after it released this past fall," Rao said.

Resonated it has since it breaks stereotypes of what a strong heroine should look like, how a feminist narrative should be told.

"Female protagonists these days are feisty. My heroine is introverted, she feels inadequate and powerless, she is conditioned to believe she is weak. I was this woman. My life's journey has been all about overcoming my own insecurities and confronting my fears. So, it was very important for me to write about a woman who appears weak, fearful, and insecure, but her life's jour-



ney teaches her not only to overcome external obstacles, but also to find her self-worth and believe in her own strength," Rao elaborated.

Tara, the protagonist, moves to the American South three years after her arranged marriage to tech executive Sanjay. Feeling invisible and lonely, Tara finds herself lost in childhood memories that have scarred her for life. When she was eight, her parents had left her behind with her aging grandparents and a schizophrenic uncle in Mangalore, while taking her baby brother with them to create a new life in Dubai.

Tara's memories of abandonment mirror her present life of loneliness and escalating abuse at the hands of her husband. She accepts the help of kind-hearted American strangers to stand up to Sanjay, only to be pressured by her patriarchal family to make peace with her circumstances. Then, in a moment of truth, she dis-

covers the importance of self-worth — a revelation that gives her the courage to break free, gently rebuild her life, and even risk being shunned by her community when she marries her childhood love, Cyrus.

Life with Cyrus is beautiful, until old fears come knocking. Ultimately, Tara must face these fears to save her relationship with Cyrus — and to confront the victim-shaming society she was raised within.

Are Tara's experiences in the novel based on her own? "When I started to write *Purple Lotus*, I only had the title to work with. So, I put my six-year-old self on a train to Mangalore. That was a trip my family actually made in 1975. But, by the second chapter, Tara had evolved into a separate individual, with a story of her own.

"So, Tara's story is not autobiographical, but there are certain incidents from my own life that I decided

were interesting enough to include in Tara's story.

"For instance, when I moved to the US, I was terrified of driving. The first five years in this country, I relied on others to take me around. I failed the driving test six times. When I finally got my driver's license on my seventh attempt, a friend helped me find a beat-up car at a pawn shop. I took it home for \$650," Rao said.

Her two-door Mitsubishi Lancer helped her hone her driving skills in the backroads of Atlanta. She got on the busy Interstate for the first time to get to the printing press 30 miles away to load up the car with crisp copies of the first issue of "NRI Pulse". It was like driving to the top of Mount Everest!

"I included my driving story in *Purple Lotus* because it's a good metaphor for a new immigrant's life of starting afresh, failing, struggling and overcoming odds to survive," Rao said.

Speaking about the challenges of running a community newspaper, Rao said NRI Pulse came about on an impulse.

"A friend had suggested that the community needs a newspaper. I woke up one morning and decided that I would be the one to fill this need. I didn't have a business plan or capital — just a deep belief that I could do it. I had the necessary skills and prior experience as a journalist (*Indian Express*, Pune edition in the 1990s and a couple of publications in Atlanta).

"Sitting in my living room, it seemed like an easy thing to do. And I did have beginner's luck. Everything went beautifully. The newspaper had tremendous support from advertisers and the community. But it lasted about a year. A free newspaper depends 100 per cent on advertising revenue.

After the recession hit in 2008, getting advertisers was a major task. Very few businesses were doing well. Most businesses did not have a budget for advertising. Bringing each issue out was a major challenge. I ran the newspaper on a shoestring budget. I did most of the work myself — news gathering, editing, design, layout, newspaper delivery etc. I made personal sacrifices," Rao said.

Life wasn't easy, but at the back of her head, she had this "simple childlike belief in the success of the newspaper, and it stayed".

"The first payoff for all my hard work and persistence came in 2010 when I was featured in the Limca Book of Records as the first Indian woman to edit and publish a newspaper outside India. The Limca recognition immediately raised the newspaper's profile in the community and helped establish its brand name. Today, we are the No. 1 news source for the community in the region. And I have a wonderful core team of women who believe in our publication and its goals as much as I do," Rao said.

Swami Vivekanand once said: "Arise, awake, and stop not till the goal is reached." One thing is for sure: In Rao's case, she isn't stopping anytime soon! (IANS)

Books & Literature

An tale of friendship, resilience

By Siddhi Jain

The Last Strand, a new book by author V.R. Bhardwaj, is an intriguing tale of friendship, love, and leadership through challenging times. The author says that he has always been intrigued by the words of Khalil Gibran. "His magnificent words have always been the subtle catalyst that stimulate a long chain of thoughts."

Bhardwaj quotes one of Gibran's statements, "Out of suffering have emerged the strongest souls; the most massive characters are seared with scars", which he says have shown him the path of the story behind *The Last Strand*.

"The main characters of the plot have scarred pasts but have a willingness to create a better future. The story, comprising those scarred, complex but positively motivated characters, moves from a small village in the mountains to the fast-paced life of metropolitan Delhi. As the story moves, the connections develop, ambitions soar, mysteries unfold and one day the unthinkable happens leading to a series of tragic events. Overall, it is a mixed bag of emotions and thrill with life's philosophies at its core," he tells IANS.

Asked about the story behind the book, the debut author shares:

"There is a notable chronicle behind this book which I have never shared earlier. Although the book was published in the year 2020, the first draft of it was penned way back in 2014. That was the year when I had migrated to Australia with my family from India. As anyone would

acknowledge that moving the countries for good can't be easy; more so for me as I had the plans for a new start-up and wasn't motivated enough to get into a regularly paying job. Since, a start-up journey is often full of its own share of hardships and delays, the year of 2014 was especially a tough one. Simply speaking, I had almost no source of revenue for almost one year while there was a whole family to be fed. My wife did some jobs that kept us going and the life savings drained at a rapid pace. At that time, I had two options, either to succumb to the huge pressure to survive or to stay calm to recognize an opportunity even in those testing times."

"With the support of the family, I thankfully chose the latter. The story idea was in my mind for a few months already. After spending a few hours on my business every day, I made sure that I spent most of my free time reading and writing. This not only gave me much needed clarity but also kept me miles away from any sort of negativity. 3-4 months of persistent effort eventually culminated into a whole 100,000 words book," he shares.

"I sometimes say to my kids that for me, one of the toughest times of my life actually resulted into a big achievement in the form of a whole book. So, never jump to a conclusion without looking around for opportunities. If one door closes, there is definitely another one, somewhere, that is open for you. All we need is some self-belief and all we need to do is just hang in there and keep looking. The right opportunity shall certainly be spotted." (IANS)



Rediscovering love and yourself

What if you ran away from your life today? Twenty years later, three people are looking for you. One is dying to meet you again. The other wishes you had never met them. The third wishes they could have met you at least once. You are one person. Arent you? But you are not the same person to each of them.

Struti Changle's *You Only Live Once* (Penguin) is a marvelous blend of fiction and self-help, and follows three characters: YouTube star Alara, beach shack owner Ricky, and Aarav, who works in a corporate firm but pursues his passion of being a stand-up comedian on the side. Together, take the journey to seek the truth behind the famous singer Elisha's disappearance somewhere by the deep sea in Goa.

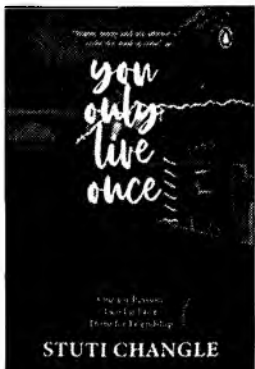
Readers are set for a journey of self-discovery through the questions and challenges each of these characters face. From the truth about love to learning to love oneself, this book, set on the picturesque beaches of Goa, explores the big questions and travels through time, presenting a story of

transformation. Will you be able to find Elisha? Or will you end up finding yourself?

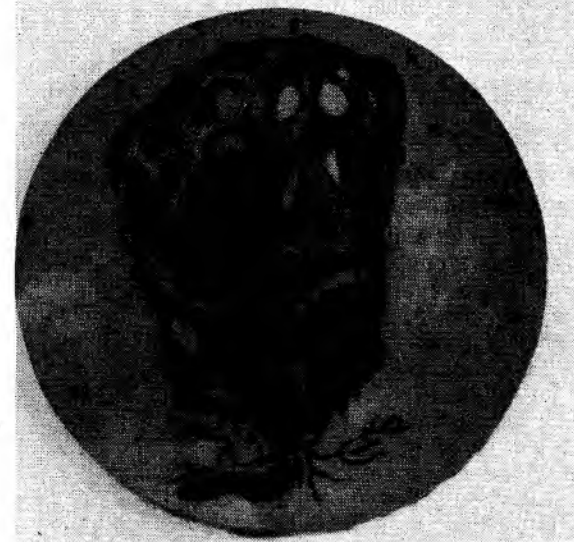
"My book is about searching for love and discovering yourself. It draws inspiration from my real-life experiences," says Changle about her second book. She won notable mentions in Amazon Kindle's Pen to Publish 2017 competition.

Changle is a postgraduate in management from IMI, Delhi. She quit her corporate career to inspire people by sharing life-changing stories. She made her TV debut in 2019 as a host of the TV series *Kar Ke Dikhaenge*. She is currently based in New Delhi, where she lives with her husband, Kushal Nahata, co-founder and CEO of FarEye.

Editor of the book, Roshini Dadlani, says: "I'm excited to publish Stuti and take her book to more readers. She has a wonderful way with words, and I'm sure *You Only Live Once* will not only delight readers but also help them introspect and learn more about themselves." (IANS)



The narratives around spices



By Siddhi Jain

Peppery Soliloquies, an upcoming art show curated by Georgina Maddox, will highlight the magical, aphrodisiacal powers of spices that evoke a melange of historical narratives, emotions, tastes, rituals, associations and aromas.

The intention behind Peppery Soliloquies is to uncover and investigate the notions and texture of spice through the artworks, while enjoying the serendipitous coming together of these multiple perspectives in a visual medium that usually gives rise to new readings and intuitive interpretations.

Presented by art connoisseur and Director of Art Centrix space Monica Jain, the exhibition will feature works of nine artists including sculpturist Arunkumar HG, Karol Antao, Vasundhara Tewari Broota, Lavanya Mani, Kishore Chakraborty, Chetan Mevada, Khanjan Dalal, Meghna Patpatia and Vishwanath Kuttum.

Arunkumar HG has worked on with papier-mache sculptures of the Star Anise spice that is native to southern China and Vietnam and then came to India with Mughal cuisine, where it is called the chakri phool looks, not just at the history of the colonial around spices but also the contemporary issues around its production, says the gal-

lery. "We encouraged our artists to explore in contemporary times and trace out the voice of the following aspects our peppery soliloquies employing art, references literature,



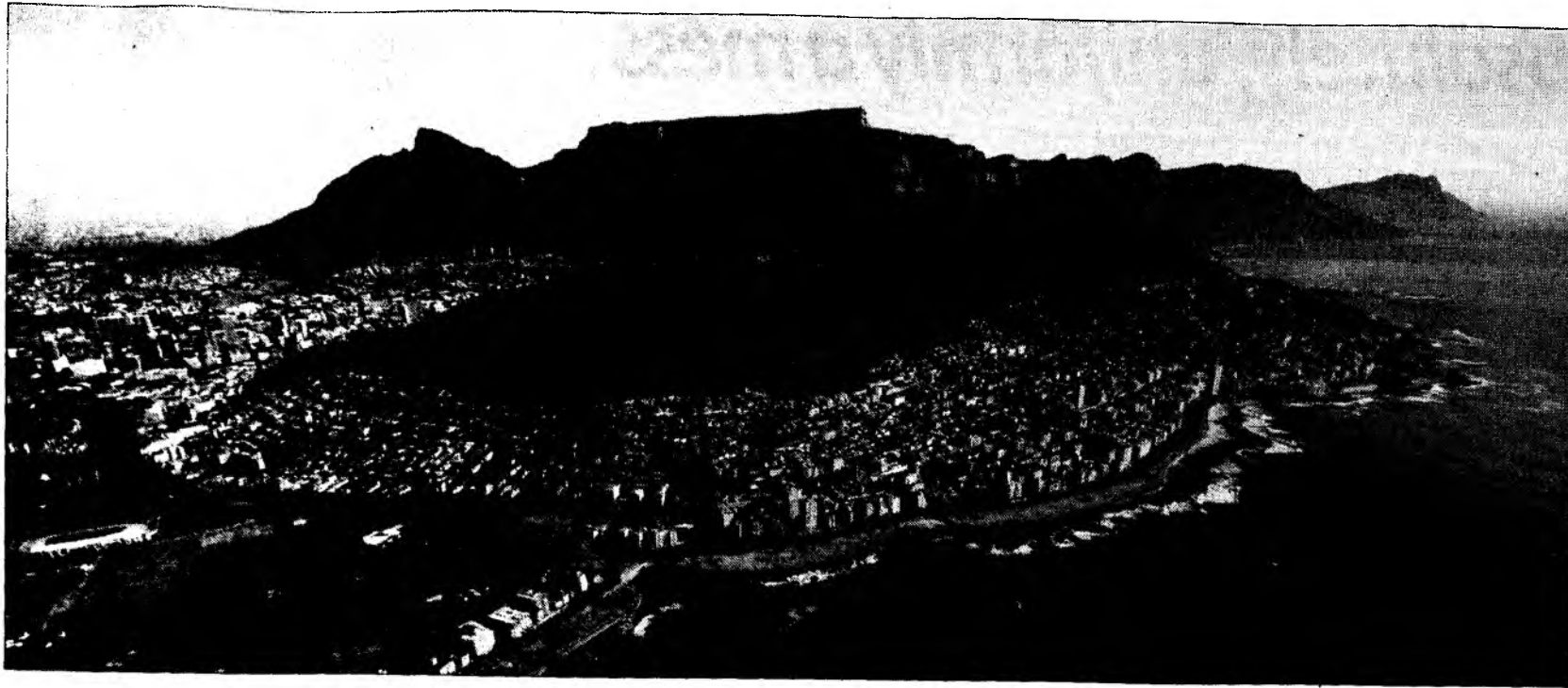
various aspects of life, from the everyday to the historical, from its aroma and flavour in food to its ayurvedic usage, from the aphrodisiacal to the mythological, from religious aspects, its medicinal usage. During the pandemic, our artists have turned inwards and created works especially for the show that look at this aspect of the spice trail along the spice trail of India and East Asia," says Georgina Maddox.

"Peppery stories, grandmas' recipes, aromas, whiffs of spices. The all too familiar took on a new importance during the pandemic. While eating out was always flavourful, it's the fragrance of home that became more fulfilling and enticing even as the aromas of distant lands became a distant memory. Art is always connected to life, what we see, observe and feel."

"Artists remain very connected to the earth, to feelings, thoughts, influences, life, situations, and society and their work reflects their sensitivity to these. This exhibition while incorporating diverse thoughts of the same concept also reflects how works can be more individualistic due to the pandemic. I think the aroma emanating from each work is even more powerful through memory and experience, through missing and savouring. Thus this show relives home and travels equally," says Monica Jain. (IANS)

ancient scripts, history and documents and of course contemporary times, where we examine the influence of species upon the following

Sensory South Africa



By Puja Gupta

With its adventurous atmosphere, stunning wildlife, vibrant culture, rich heritage and a varied bouquet of scenic surroundings spanning all geographical landforms, South Africa is easily one of the most multi-sensory countries on the planet.

You will feel the heartbeat of nature, hear the call of the wild, experience the touch of warm hospitality and connect with the pulse of the motherland.

The country provides a perfect symphony of sights, sounds, flavours, textures and scents to engage you in a transformational experience.

To help you navigate the Rainbow Nation in the most fulfilling way, we've compiled the perfect guide that will delight your five senses — read on:

Scenic Surroundings

Bursting with colours, South Africa is one good looking country — a treat for the eyes! From the endless golden beaches in the east to the desert coasts of the west, from the beautiful winelands around Cape Town to the spectacular jagged peaks of the Drakensberg, South Africa has some amazing scenic

sights.

Two of the most scenic courses in the Rainbow Nation would have to be Chapman's Peak and The Panorama Route.

Chapman's Peak on Hout Bay makes for a scenic drive or hike and is famous for a road hacked out of the sheer side of the mountain.

As you climb over the Atlantic Ocean, you will see that the cold waters from the west coast meet the warm waters from the east, producing an ever-changing assortment of the prettiest colours you can imagine.

The landscape is truly special with deep valleys whose sides are covered with rows of rare plants species — many of them unique to the Cape region, including fynbos, South Africa's national flower — the King Protea, as well as heathers, reeds and orchids of all shapes, colours and sizes.

Your visit to the Rainbow Nation would be incomplete without a drive along the Panorama route.

With some of the most unique and breathtaking scenery, the highlight of the route is the Blyde River Canyon: one of the longest chasms in the world, consisting of spectacular geological shapes and the most stunning scenic views of the country.

Sounds of Serenity

Alive with carnivals, local markets, indigenous performances, enchanting music and global events all through the year, South Africa is filled with a plethora of distinctive sounds. You can hear and feel the thump of African drums reverberating through the air, as you participate in one of South Africa's famous drum circles.

Generally, drumming workshops take place outdoors and are especially enjoyable on warm summer evenings. Creating and sharing music with the locals is what will stay with you for a long time, making the trip truly memorable.

You will also appreciate the sounds of the nation even more when you wake up to the tune of the African Fish Eagle, often known as 'the voice of Africa'.

Scents of the South African Bush

The musky wildlife scent of the South African bush will stay etched in your memory forever as it holds the promise of an adventurous day in the wild. Did you know that if you smell buttered popcorn, a leopard is probably close by? The scent, that is reminiscent of a movie theatre, signifies a warning sign to other intruders in their territory.

On the other hand, swift African antelopes called Impalas, are said to smell like cheese.

Additionally, with scent of braais, curries and native fruits wafting through the streets, no two parts of South Africa smell exactly the same.

Flavours Abound

Experiencing and sharing in the food of a different land is a very personal experience. Interestingly, South Africa's delicious signature dish — the Bunny Chow, has Indian origins. Other delicacies include, traditional African food cooked over an open fire or in a three-legged pot (or potjie), morogo (type of wild spinach), chakalaka (a spicy relish served alongside a main course), and the ubiquitous boerewors roll (a variety of spicy sausage).

Vegetarians will find a wide range of appetizing food options such as veg bobotie (a national dish of South Africa, which is a delicious mixture of curried vegetables, spices, fruits and nuts with a creamy golden topping, that add to its complex flavour), pampoenkoekie (light, fluffy and literally melt in your mouth pumpkin fritters) and pap tart (Pap, also known as mieliepap, is the Afrikaans word for porridge, typically prepared with corn-maize).



South African food trails are hugely popular among visitors. In South Africa, a typical food trail would include a few must-have experiences like wine tasting, Bunny Chow sampling, coffee tasting at a local roaster, walking tours of food gardens, visits to ethical butcheries, spice shops and quaint chocolate factories.

Soak in Luxury and Wellness

South Africa is one of the top relaxation destinations. There are numerous spas and wellness centres in every Province that offer the ultimate unwinding experience for those looking to immerse themselves in luxury. Every wellness centre has a variety

of unique spa treatments that include the incredible medicinal powers of indigenous plants, flowers and herbs in their restorative therapies. You will also have access to soothing massages, brightening facials, aromatherapy, mud baths and flotation tanks with healing salts.

Luxury safari lodges in the Rainbow Nation are especially known for their impeccably opulent spas and peaceful wellness centres.

Thanda Safari in Kwa-Zulu Natal is popular for its signature Marula balm massage. This treatment uses a mix of shea butter and African marula oil, that can be combined with a scrub for the full Thanda signature indulgence treatment. (IANS)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajal Bhambi

Sunday, February 7, 2021

Moon is opposite Rahu on your solar return chart and it will put you in a tricky situation. But you will be able to overcome it if you do not go overboard. Just keep your impulses under control. You may not see the things clearly it can harm your interests. Don't act in a haste. Avoid confrontation with your bosses/colleagues. Also don't trust people blindly in financial matters. Take all investment related decisions wisely. Your competitors will make life for you tough in your business. But will not be able to overpower you. You will be able to execute your plans well. You can also get involved in an exciting romantic relationship with a person known to you. Don't be in a haste to make commitments. You may be required to take tough decisions. You will show maturity in dealings with different problems of life. And come out winner.

Aries: (March 21 - April 20)

Positive new relationships are formed and you can look forward to good results. It is a friendly time, when it is easy to enjoy life and other people as you instinctively start a new phase in your life. It's time to give your life a makeover, a time of new beginnings and fresh energy. Focus is on personal freedom, reaching out to others, making new plans, and exploration. You are more enthusiastic and ready for adventure. A sudden job opportunity or money and property matters could be part of the financial gains. Your physical activities tend to be more intense, passionate, and focused.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21)

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

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21)

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

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22)

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

Leo: (July 23 - August 23)

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

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22)

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

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

Libra: (September 23 - October 23)

There will be a wave good-luck in love and romance. You spend great time in long conversations, phone calls, short trips and enjoy the feeling of togetherness. You are more receptive and gentle on a romantic level, and tend to be sentimental about work commitments. Business expansion and new professional opportunities are worth considering. Financial success is stronger than earlier. You may explore new technology and improve office infrastructure as this brings more efficiency and creativity on your work in an unconventional way. Positive new relationships are formed.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22)

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

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21)

You may feel the need to be appreciated by family members, and the need for togetherness with others this week. Events are such that you move towards a more objective approach to your life and you cultivate true friendships. It is a time when we need to let go of things that no longer serve their purpose, and hold on to things that have a future. You would express your sympathetic and compassionate side. Others might find you less sociable, as you are busier than ever and you focus on your activities and your needs. You would stand alone, take action and start afresh during this period.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20)

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

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18)

At this time you feel on top in domestic issues and spend quality time with people you care about and in activities that are rejuvenating. You tend to be traditional and restrictive in family matters and may have to face opposition of younger ones. It's time to expand your social circle and to make more contact with groups and friends. Your professional skills wisdom and craft is appreciated and fresh opportunities for expansion are made available to you. Overseas visitors gain a romantic and exciting quality. You need to tackle sensitive subjects and difficult people and get your point across.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20)

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

Career preference in Marketing

By Ranjan K Baruah

The pandemic situation has brought many questions for us but it is also bringing opportunities. We are not talking about COVID-19 or pandemic but an option which is demanded in present time. Wherever we see newspapers we could see one popular word when it comes to jobs and placement.

'Wanted marketing persons' or 'urgently needed people for marketing' are common in the advertisement of various newspapers. Now we might be wondering what it is all about. Well, the management process through which goods and services move from concept to the customer can be called as marketing management. It includes the coordination of different elements.

With the growth of the market and various companies business is booming everywhere. Marketing is a business discipline which is focused on the application of marketing techniques and administering organizations marketing resources.

Marketing is not just selling but it is also focused on many other things. Sometimes there might be goods which we can see and sometimes it might be related to services and other things.

Marketing does not mean only big companies or corporations. Even small businesses or entrepreneurs also need to know about marketing if they want to enhance their business and become successful in future.

According to American Marketing Association (AMA) marketing is "the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large."

The term marketing applies not only to private business firms but also to almost all other organizations such as government, social service institutions, NGO's etc.

From a societal point of view, marketing is the link between a society's material requirements and its economic patterns of response. Marketing satisfies these needs and wants



through exchange processes and building long term relationships.

Anyone can choose to be in the field of marketing.

Though no formal educational qualification is required, most organisations prefer graduates specially with MBA degrees as their marketing executives. Most Business schools teach sales and marketing management as a part of the MBA curriculum. Graduates can join MBA courses or other specialized marketing courses.

There are also Post Graduate Diploma Courses related to marketing. Sales and marketing are more or less the same but there are some differences. Besides MBA programmes, BBA (Bachelor in Business Administration) or BBM (Bachelor in Business Management) degree holders can also have openings in the field of marketing.

Apart from qualification the most important essentials to become successful in the field of marketing is to have some of the skills. Good communication skills, leadership quality, ability to motivate and work as part of a team, ability to understand and solve problems are the needed attributes. Marketing professionals need to travel around places. Apart from direct marketing there are many other indirect marketing. Marketing can be through phones, online, etc. Tech savvy people can be easily successful when it comes to online marketing.

Marketing and Sales Management is one of the most sought after careers, and ample job opportunities are available in this field with the emerging number of multinational

and national companies. Small companies, big corporate, government and non government organizations, consultancies, public relation agencies all offer a wide range of opportunities for marketing professionals. Advertising, sales, management, creative writing for product promotion etc are the areas of work involved.

Some of the courses in this field are like MBA in Marketing, MBA Sales and Marketing, M.Com in Marketing, Post Graduate Diploma in Marketing Management, Diploma in Marketing Management, etc. Entrepreneurs can learn the necessities of marketing to spread their business around the globe.

Aspirants who are willing to take up marketing as their career need to keep them informed for a better future. As mentioned earlier, as there is growth in the business in the north eastern region hence there would be more demand for marketing and young people with knowledge and experience will flourish in this field.

Due to the pandemic situation there were changes in the way we do marketing and more have moved to digital marketing but the situation will not change much and the demand for marketing would continue. There would be change in the marketing process or reach out but marketing shall remain as one of the most demanded career options for the young people.

(The author is a career mentor and skill trainer and can be reach at bkranjan@gmail.com or 8473943734)

"Most of us must learn to love people and use things rather than loving things and using people."

— Roy T. Bennett

The Shillong Times

Vol No: L.XIII No. 173 SHILLONG, MONDAY, FEBRUARY 8, 2021

Public transport strike

THE 4-day transport strike has crippled life in the state. Thousands of people who rely on public transport for daily commute and for transporting their goods to the market have been rendered immobile thereby adding to the economic pain caused by the pandemic. The Covid protocol required that commercial vehicles limit passenger intake to maintain social distancing. Over and above that, the odd-even arrangement has reduced the number of days that commercial vehicles can ply to only three days a week. Government decided to relax the odd-even arrangement only after the commercial vehicles decided to go on strike post the hike in fuel (petrol and diesel) prices. Since taxi fares are regulated by Government it leaves the commercial vehicle owners and drivers at a grave disadvantage. They had no other option but to go on strike. That was their last option. On February 5, Deputy Chief Minister Prestone Tynsong had asked the Joint Action Committee of Commercial Vehicles (JACCV) to withdraw their indefinite strike.

The demand of the JACCV is that the State Government reduce the petrol and diesel tariff. Tynsong had said that the revision of tariffs is not simple or so easily reversed because prices fluctuate every day depending on the dollar versus rupee exchange rate. Of late the rupee value has gone down vis a vis the dollar hence the steep hike in petrol and diesel rates. The JACCV has been asking Government to reduce excise duties so that the price of fuel comes down a notch or two. As of Sunday petrol was selling at Rs.90.85 a litre. Responding to the crisis caused by the strike of commercial vehicles and the public inconvenience caused by the ongoing strike which is not restricted to Shillong but has spread to other districts as well, the MDA Government has responded by offering a rebate of Rs 2 per litre from the tax component of the retail price of petrol and diesel which will be effective from Monday February 8, to maintain a price differential with Assam. Taxi fares were last hiked in January 2020. A second hike within a year would result in public uproar and also have a cascading effect on the price of essential commodities since the state relies heavily on road transport for ferrying people and goods to and from different corners of the state to the district headquarters and to the state capital. Hopefully the strike will be called off after this Government climb-down.

Agro-biodiversity walks: Connecting the young to nature

By H H Mohrmen & Pasqualina Lamare

Nowadays young people, especially those living in urban areas are deprived of the opportunity to live in the bosom of Mother Nature. This has disconnected the youth from nature. In fact urban youth with the exception of those who enjoy trekking, do not have any outdoor experiences. Young people in towns and cities have very little or no connection whatsoever with nature. The other exceptions could also be those interested in outdoor sports and who engage in their respective games in the playgrounds. Otherwise the lives of most young ones revolve around their rooms as they remain indoors most of the time. Unfortunately, it looks as if this trend will grow in the post-covid-19 pandemic era when people will prefer to be indoors and work from home.

The blame also is on the school system which requires that teachers burden the young with too much homework/assignments with timelines within which to complete them. This compels them to stay indoors most of the time. In the competitive world that we are living in where young ones are initiated into the world of cut-throat competition, they are expected to be the best in whatever they do. The youths are expected to work hard to be the leaders of the pack or to be number one. As such young ones are expected to excel in their studies. In the system where one is expected to be second to none, children and youths are even deprived of the joy of being a youth in this world of rat-race. They are denied the joy of being a kid or a youth as they are pushed to work hard and to be the best. In the process the youth have little time for recreation and they have also lost touch with nature which would otherwise be a refuge and another teacher for them.

One attempt to bridge this gap is to find out ways and means to reconnect the youth to nature that is around them. Hence under the project 'No one shall be left behind initiative' funded by REC, New Delhi, the Society for Urban and Rural Empowerment

Society (SURE) in collaboration with the Northeast Slow Food and Agrobiodiversity Society (NESFAS) embarked on this new venture to bring the youth close to nature. The project was designed to come up with the idea called Agro-biodiversity (ABD) walk. It is one of the components of the project, which was started in September 2018 which is implemented by SURE in 28 villages in West Jaintia Hills and East Jaintia Hills District, Meghalaya.

The ABD walk is not just ordinary trekking for the youth of the area, but it is a trek with a difference. Here young people learn while trekking in the local forests, led by an elder in the community. The objective of biodiversity walk is to spread awareness among children and youths on the importance of nature conservation and encourage them to preserve mother nature. SURE has conducted many biodiversity walks for students in different schools and in many cases even youths in the project area took part in these walks.

While conducting these activities elderly persons from the local community were identified as knowledge holders to help the youth identify different plants and animals. The service of these elders were sought to take the children to the forest so they can explain to the children about the different wild edibles, herbs and even wild mushrooms that are available in the nearby forests. The thought of engaging indigenous knowledge holders in the walk is a brilliant idea as it continues with the tradition of knowledge sharing from the older to the younger generation. In the process the knowledge holders pass on their knowledge of wild edibles, herbs, different plants and their uses to the young generations. In all these walks hundreds of wild edibles, plants and herbs have also been identified and documented for future use.

It is heartening to learn that the activity allows the

students to keep their minds open even as it makes them understand and appreciate the richness of biodiversity in mother nature. In a way this learning in the forest as opposed to classroom learning which sometimes can be dull is a welcome change for the learners. During the walks, learners are able to not only see but to practically touch, smell and even taste some of the wild edible plants which they would not have even dared to try in the absence of an expert. The activity also helps the kids build and enhance local knowledge and understand its benefit from the knowledge holders.

Till date a total of 23 ABD walks were conducted in the villages which include looksi, Thangbuli, Mulum, Mukhap, Musiaw, Shkenpsit, Niriang, Mustem, Kshryngchang, Samanong, Tyrchang, Chamcham, Ammutong, Pynthorlangte, Nongrimb-anthong, Myngo A, Myngo B, Amkhloo, Amsoh-meheleng, Khonglah, Nongkroh, Ammutong and Muphlang. Kids have expressed happiness to be part of the walk. In all, around 800 young people participated in the 23 ABD walks conducted in these different villages.

In each of these ABD walks not only did the knowledge holders of respective communities help young people to identify many wild edibles including plants and herbs used but in some cases local traditional herbal practitioners also helped identify plants which are used as medicines. But what is trekking without a happy ending? It is mandatory that at the end of the walk a cooking demonstration is also organised. Many of these walks are part of the Nutritional Campaign which involves cooking demonstration as this is also part of the activity. The wild edibles that have been collected from the forest during the entire trek are then cooked to be partaken by all those who participated in the walk.

The knowledge that young people gain is not only that they are able to

identify the plants particularly the wild edibles available in the vicinity, but they also know how to cook these plants and more importantly know how it tastes. The learning from organizing this activity is the fact that it is one class which everybody enjoys as it not only ends on a happy note, but a walk in the forest is an experience of a lifetime for most of the kids. After organising more than 20 of such walks, it gives us confidence to suggest that this kind of activity should be incorporated in the school system in Meghalaya.

Incorporating this model in the school curriculum of the state will definitely be a great learning experience for the youth. It will not only help them learn about biodiversity which occurs in their neighbourhoods, but more importantly it helps the young people gain indigenous knowledge which is gradually vanishing from the culture of the people. Young people also get the opportunity to gain indigenous knowledge which they would otherwise not have the opportunity to learn in the ordinary school system.

The only disadvantage that this activity faces is because the walks are arranged only once thereby denying the learners of comprehensive knowledge of all the different varieties of plants which occur in the neighbourhood. The reason is because different varieties of plants grow at the different seasons of the year, hence the young are not able to capture all the different plants available in the area just in one ABD walk. No doubt the youth who had the opportunity to participate in these walks have gained immense knowledge about the rich bio-diversity and the indigenous knowledge in the area that has been collected throughout the ages. The knowledge gain would have otherwise vanished away but for these walks.

(Pasqualina Lamare works as a Program Associate with SURE under the 'No one shall be left behind initiative project') Email hhmohrmen67@gmail.com

Response to Economic woes, Strike Justified!

By Subash Deb

Like most other states, Meghalaya has begun to witness fewer Covid19 positive cases. With vaccination programme currently underway and increased number of recoveries being reported daily, there is a sense of relief and hope that life will slowly but surely spring back to normalcy in the state. Thanks to the efforts put in by the doctors, health workers, frontline warriors and the Government functionaries that those alive now can resume their lives and if needed start afresh.

With over 25 lakh population in the state, life hasn't been hunky-dory for all and sundry, or else migration of indigenous population to other states for better education and opportunities would have been lesser. On top of that, the Covid pandemic has left many broke and without gainful employment. Adding to the woes are the pandemic-battered returnees to the state who are now jobless and uncertain about their future. I acknowledge that I should mind my words. But the fact remains that the returnees, their family members and

fuel are totaled by subsuming central and state taxes and dealer commission. As much as 70 per cent of the end cost of petrol and diesel are taxes and dealer commissions; only 30 per cent is linked to the benchmark cost of production. The transporters are also well-justified in seeking relief from the state component of fuel taxes during these harsh times.

India is a welfare state. The Meghalaya Government at the moment should be concerned with directing the resources to the people most in need. By being indifferent to their demands, the Government is attempting at creating an anti-poor, or rather anti-people image that it will never be able to live down during its remaining tenure.

It won't be inappropriate to state here that Meghalaya is yet to have a strategy in place to bring about macro-economic stability. Its fiscal deficit continues to remain beyond the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management target of 3 per cent. The pandemic-driven gloom and doom year can at best provide a face-saving



neighbours have voted the MDA-led coalition Government to power with some expectations and hopes of change in terms of job creation, peace and development. So if the citizens of the state are looking to the Government for help and support in such uncertain times, it is incumbent on the Government to answer to their cries.

To be fair, challenges before the Meghalaya Government are humongous as far as jump-starting the economy is concerned. The immediate one is to get the economy back on track. As a matter of fact, much of the economic crisis isn't pandemic-induced only. Rather, the state has been reeling under economic downturn since pre-pandemic times. The pandemic, no doubt, is the last straw to break the people's back, mostly those living from hand to mouth including daily wage labourers, taxi drivers, street vendors, and others. No wonder some of them could be looking for alternative avenues of income to eke out a living.

Despite the Conrad Sangma-led MDA Government presenting a deficit budget for FY 2020-21, the Government has pulled out all stops to extend financial assistance to the needy during the lockdown. Hats off! However, the paradox of the proverbial living in interesting times is that the appreciation goes as long as the dole lasts. Fair enough!

The recent state-wide strike called by the Meghalaya Joint Action Committee of Commercial Vehicles demanding revision of taxi fares and reduction of taxes on fuel is a testimony to the economic pain caused by the pandemic-induced lockdown. The spiraling prices of petrol and diesel over the last few days have taken a huge toll on the transport operators across the country. By not allowing revision of taxi fares to offset the high fuel prices, the Government is in a sense bringing their crises to a head. To wit, retail prices of

alibi for failure to create avenues for generating decent revenues other than coal mining, the ban on which since 2014 was lifted by the Supreme Court in 2019.

The once-booming and revenue-earning tourism industry of Meghalaya is biting the dust engendered by uncertain times. Tourism entrepreneurs who have been upbeat about their business prospects on the back of the entrepreneur-friendly Chief Minister's vision to foster a culture of entrepreneurship in the state are perhaps embattled by now to take further risks of investment. The CM has a task cut out to retain them by holding out an olive branch in whatever way possible.

In fact, with better roads and air connectivity, all that Meghalaya now needs is increased inflow of tourists for rebooting its economy. Alas! It is now anybody's guess if tourists would prefer Meghalaya over other states with the entry-exit check-point in operation which is a self-defeating exercise in itself. The objective of detecting illegal outsiders by the members of KSU post its installation is a deterrent to any self-respecting tourist to enter Meghalaya. In the current scenario, the travel and hotel industry can revive themselves by offering lucrative packages to tourists like never before, like no one else.

The economic task force launched by Chief Minister Conrad Sangma last year to revive the economy of the state post-Covid19 shouldn't end up being a lame-duck initiative. With such well-meaning task force in place reflecting the paternalistic will of the state Government to sort out economic woes of the people, protests and strikes for unfulfilled legitimate demands don't provide complimentary optics. At worst, they end up bursting arrogance when the opposition isn't bereft of able and efficient leaders.

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TO THE EDITOR

Allahabad High Court Judgment!

Editor,
How one wishes that the recent judgment passed by the Allahabad High Court is reverberated in our Hon'ble Meghalaya High Court regarding employment on compassionate grounds to a married daughter. What is intended to highlight here is the case of one Ms. Vimla Srivastava Vrs State of UP and others, where the former had taken to legal recourse for being rejected by the UP government considering her to be ineligible for compassionate appointment following the untimely demise of her father while in active government service. The government placed before the Court all the extant governing rules and binding guidelines that deny a married daughter from claiming any compassionate appointment in case of death in harness of parents/guardians etc. However, the High Court would not buy such contentions but steadfastly maintained that denying such appointments is markedly violative of Articles 14 and 15 of our Constitution. The Court held the view that irrespective of life's status, a married daughter is to be regarded as a family member of a deceased government

employee just like a son, married or unmarried. Hence, the Court's final verdict was that the said married daughter was to be issued appointment letter within two months.

To give credence to this context of argument, several Hon'ble High Courts of India like Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh besides others have likewise taken their State governments to task for having refused to accord compassionate appointments to married daughters. The Karnataka High Court had ruled, "Excluding married daughters from seeking benefit of compassionate appointment is unconstitutional"; And the Uttarakhand High Court's verdict was: "Married daughter always a family member like married son". Then to top it all, Himachal Pradesh High Court has sarcastically commented: "State cannot act in a misogynistic way".

I, for one, do visualize that before long our Hon'ble Meghalaya High Court would also ditto juristic action like the High Courts afore-said, when there are many, if not thousands, of such victimized daughters in our State who have been outrightly denied appointments. Coincidentally, while referring to an instance at hand, in one of the establishments of

Government of Meghalaya, i.e., the Agriculture department, an office driver had expired in 2007 and thereafter the deceased's married daughter had applied for compassionate appointment when the same was prevalent before being abrogated in 2010. However, her application was flatly rejected by the Government on the premise that she has since married. Having no other option, and additionally being destitute as she was, she had approached the Meghalaya State Legal Services Authority when the current Hon'ble Mr. Justice W. Diengdoh was its Member Secretary. This office had gracefully accepted the petition and duly appointed an Advocate to contest the case but for reasons best known to the latter it was thought that a case pertaining to such a compassionate appointment was not worth challenging in Meghalaya vis-à-vis the existing rigid official rules and regulations. Nonetheless, the said daughter didn't lose hope as she had conveyed a letter to the then Hon'ble Chief Justice of Meghalaya High Court on December 8, 2016. However, it was given to understand that no reciprocation was made to date; hence the petition to explore justice for that married daughter has since been left in limbo.

I, therefore, hope that

with the latest Allahabad High Court ruling on married daughters and appointment on compassionate grounds the same would similarly resonate in our Hon'ble Meghalaya High Court in as much as the issue in question violates Articles 14 and 15 of the Constitution.

Yours etc.,
Jerome K. Diengdoh,
Via email

Thanking MeECL, DC and others

Editor,
While gratitude is one step towards divinity, ingratitude is just the opposite. So, I do sincerely express my gratitude to MeECL, more particularly the Chief Managing Director, who had promptly resolved the frequent power-cut issues at Upper Mawprem and its adjoining areas. Soon after the publication of the letter "Frequent power-cuts and recharging MeECL" (ST Jan 26, 2021), the CMD himself had called a number of meetings for four hours, as informed to this writer, to take full stock of the situation. He directed the concerned departments to resolve the electricity disruptions with utmost urgency. This is highly admirable.

Incidentally, I also take this opportunity to thank other authorities like the

Deputy Commissioner, authorities of PWD, Shillong Municipality, Health Departments et al who have taken prompt initiatives to address the various issues of public concerns when my letters have appeared in The Shillong Times.

However, all credit goes to the Editorial team of the Shillong Times. Without media support, my objective of drawing the attention of the concerned authorities would not have been possible. I have understood now that without whistleblowers, and the watchdog role of the media, the public will "continue to suffer" and democracy will be just a farce. It is regrettable that the majority of people/consumers still choose to remain "silent" and suffer endlessly. This is nothing but an encouragement to the unscrupulous and the perpetuation of many other social ills.

Yours etc.,
Salil Gwali,
Shillong

Will the MPSC respond?

Editor,
It is heartening to read The Shillong Times report, "MPSC exam: Court refuses to interfere", (ST Jan 29, 2021), where it was reported that the Hon'ble High Court of Meghalaya refused to grant any relief to the peti-

tioners who tried to stall and overturn the entire MCS recruitment process. The litigation has finally come to an end after 2 years or so. On behalf of the 576 successful and deserving candidates who cleared the Preliminary Examination as per MPSC's criteria, I extend my heartfelt gratitude to the learned Court for finally bringing this long, pending issue to an end. After having perused through the judgment of the learned Court, it can be safely concluded that MPSC now has no legal inhibition to declare the results of the pending MCS Mains Examination. It's already been a few days since the much awaited judgment was delivered, so what is MPSC waiting for? Is it because 12 months after the Mains exam, MPSC has still not completed the evaluation of the answer scripts of successful candidates? This prolonged delay is getting ridiculous and makes a laughing stock of all Meghalayans before the entire country. If the MPSC has an iota of self respect left as a constitutional body, it would release the pending Mains results forthwith and get on with the pending interview stage and finally, the declaration of the successful candidates appointed to the MCS Junior Grade.

Yours etc.,
Jeremiah S.
Via email

"Dreams don't work unless you take action. The surest way to make your dreams come true is to live them."

— Roy T. Bennett

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No. 174 SHILLONG, TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 9, 2021

Religion and reforms

CHANGE is in the order of things; yet, it is religious heads that are seldom in the forefront of initiating change. Not so Pope Francis, the head of the 1.3 billion strong Catholic community spread across the world. The reform-minded Pope, who began his papacy since 2013, has come up with a new decision to break with tradition when he named a woman as under secretary of the synod of bishops. She would be the first woman to have voting rights in a panel that reviews questions of religious doctrine. Christianity and Islam are, at their apex, male-centric though the former has a large army of nuns forming part of the institutionalized set-up. Hinduism, by contrast, accords higher importance to goddesses, though at the ground level the domination of males is evident in all spheres of life across the spectrum. The 84-year-old Argentine-born Pope Francis had drawn special attention when he began softening the Church's attitude towards homosexuals and lesbians. Three years after he was ordained as Pope, he made it clear that homosexuals too are god's children and by 2019, he said "lesbian tendencies are not a sin." By the present appointment, the Pope has stressed the need for greater participation for women — who form half of the humanity — in church affairs.

Religions are guided by sacred texts. At the same time, much of the religious practices are based on interpretations of texts and it is here that an open-minded approach is advocated. Pope Francis, on his part, had made it clear a "conversion of the heart" is important for the reform process. Christianity's strengths are that it has an organised and highly disciplined institutional framework. Thus the head of the Catholic church is well-endowed to lead reforms, also by adherence to the basic tenets of the religion. It is not often that a reform-minded priest comes as the head of a church order. But here is someone who has shown the boldness to support even what was most-unacceptable to his predecessors; same-sex civil marriages; something that was scoffed at by past generations. There are lessons for the rest of the world to learn from the way the Roman Catholic Church is seeking to change itself, in terms of attitudes, even in the face of resistance from within the church. Reform is the key word; and reform is what politicians in India and elsewhere are mostly scared of, due to three reasons -- lack of vision, lack of initiative and lack of courage.

Calling the Church out

By Albert Thyriani

The cover story of the latest issue of a national 'Christian' Weekly is entitled, "The Church is NOT Apolitical." The story elaborately quotes Church's documents from the Synod of Bishops, to papal Encyclicals, to Apostolic Exhortations, to the famous Second Vatican Council to documents of Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI) to drive home the 'political' role of the Church. The edition's editorial is, "Church's Mission: Be Vocal for People." The story is against the background of the on-going farmers' agitation over the farm laws passed by the central government last year and the Church's deafening silence over the issue.

The country's farmers have been on strike for over two months against the legislations that might banish the Minimum Support Price (MSP) and the eminent takeover of the farm sector by corporates and multinational companies. The Church in India has remained a mute spectator offering no support to the agitating farmers who are demanding immediate repeal of the three anti-farm laws. They are facing a raw deal from the government in terms of talks and post January 26 have been branded as anti-nationals while enduring internet ban, disruption of water supply and electricity connection. Iron barricades have been set up, nails have been laid on the roads leading to the protest venues, journalists and MPs have been stopped from proceeding to the venues. FIRs have been lodged and arrests made almost arbitrarily. Even in such a crackdown on democratic protests the Church has maintained a stoic silence. The protests are against an impending exploitation of the poor by the rich. Yet the Church which claims to be a prophet has not spoken up. The excuse seems to be the plea that the Church is 'apolitical'. But is it a valid reason?

One highlight is from Pope Francis' most acclaimed third Encyclical Fratelli Tutti (All are Brothers) where he writes, "The Church cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the building of a better world, and she cannot fail to contribute to the betterment of society." The Pope does not advocate electoral and party politics by the Church but says that it cannot and must not shy away from politics. Politics is not limited to election. It means

governance. It includes the policy-making and law-making. If policies and legislations are beneficial the Church must applaud the government of the day. But if they are anti-poor and anti-people the Church must oppose the same. It is disappointing that while the farmers' cry for justice and when freedom and liberty are at risk the Church is in hibernation.

The lead story bluntly states that Jesus was never apolitical. He was 'deeply concerned about the deep-rooted injustices of his time and took a visible and vocal stand against them'. The Church too is not apolitical. Prophets intervened in the socio-political reality of their time standing for the weak and the marginalized. They were critical of the systems and policies that increased the gulf between the rich and the poor. The Church can't escape its prophetic roles by hiding behind the 'apolitical' veil.

The voice of the Church has been found wanting. When a large section of the country was up in arms against the 'communal' and 'exclusive' CAB/CAA the Church was practically silent. When Article 371 was abrogated and the people of Jammu and Kashmir were denied their rights and liberty the Church said little. The Church seems to be indifferent even at this critical time when country is fast moving towards fascism and majoritarianism.

In Meghalaya we have been reeling under the shadow of the demand for Inner Line Permit (ILP). That the Church has no opinion on this British created law to safeguard their monopolistic trade and commercial interests is not surprising because there is an element of xenophobia and chauvinism in the 'bodies of Christ' that preach love and brotherhood without boundary. To the appreciation of a few folks and a dislike of many others this scribe has more than once pointed out the existence of leaders who still preserve 100% of their 'tribal' mentality even while priding themselves of being in a 'universal' entity.

As expressed umpteen times, ILP is to hit tourism hard and affect the livelihoods of ordinary citizens adversely. It is here that the views of all citizens, including the Church are solicited. Does the Church have no pulse for the tea shop keepers, the sellers of handicrafts, drivers and others who subsist on tourism? Will or will not ILP

be counter-productive? Should we pursue ILP or the Meghalaya Registration Safety and Security Act (MRSSA), 2016/19 or both or none? Should we leave it to sentimental and emotional pressure groups to decide the fate of the state?

The only national and international news Meghalaya has made is the illegal mining and transportation of coal. Two disasters have afflicted the state, the 2018 Ksan mining tragedy and the recent 2021 Rymbai incident where 13 and 6 miners respectively died in illegal mines while attempting to undertake rat-hole mining. Unlawful activities mean illegitimate acquisition of wealth. Mine owners, businessmen, politicians, cops, bureaucrats, even NGT watchdogs are suspected of pocketing astronomical sums out of black money. While rampant illegality is on show the 'conscience keeper and ethics and morality teachers' are silent. Perhaps, besides flowing into electioneering, part of it comes to the Church. Should not relevance and credibility be questioned?

There has been a sort of debate on matriliney on this page in recent days. We may glamorise or romanticise it's 'uniqueness' but the system has myths and contradictions. Can we imagine that in a matrilineal society 76% of rural Meghalaya is landless? That means only 24 people out of 100 possess land. It is taken for granted that in this matrilineal society land is owned by women and hence it is women who have become landless. If they have no land what ancestral property do they pass on to their girl children? This landlessness and land alienation is because of land grabbing by the rich. Is the Church aware of this? Or is it a concern at all? Can the Church push for land reforms for a more equitable society?

The presumption that in a matrilineal set up women enjoy a privileged position is a myth. That in a matrilineal order women are not better off and are more empowered is a fallacy. Even in the 21st century women are still barred from the village council (Dorbar Shnong), clan council (Dorbar Kur), chieftain council (Dorbar Syiem) and other traditional decision making bodies. Even before the golden celebration of statehood we have no woman Chief Minister. The present Cabinet is boy's club. There are only four women

legislators in the current Legislative Assembly. There are hardly any women MDCs in all ADCs. This male domination will not be questioned by the Church because the Church itself is male dominated.

The editor of this paper has written two soul searching pieces recently, one on the challenges in rural Meghalaya and the other the dearth of honest politicians in the state. Rural Meghalaya is despondent. Roads are perpetually pathetic, LP school buildings are in shambles, health centres are sans doctors, nurses and medicines. Rural poverty stood at 49% in 2002. Never has one heard the Church complaining of these grim realities. Not once has the Church expressed dismay at the under-development in rural areas. It is true the Church has made good contribution in education but should not it be doing more, particularly in the Lower Primary sector? The Church runs many LP school in villages but they are no different from the government LP schools. There is only one president/secretary for all the schools in a 'cluster'. It is physically impossible to monitor and supervise them. Hence, education takes place only at the centre.

The editor laments that she can hardly think of any honest representative in the state. This is because the citizenry themselves are corrupt. The electorate votes for a candidate who hands over the biggest notes. The whole election process is painted with cash. In a state with nearly 80% Christians not to have one honest MLA/MDC is a big slap on the face of the Church. Church education has failed. The pulpit has failed. Where are the values? Where is spirituality? Are Sunday services of any meaning? Are annual Church gatherings attended by thousands a mere show? Or are they also occasions when large sums are collected from politicians and hopeful candidates just for food, putting up large makeshift structures, decorations and the like without tangible effect? Should they be reviewed? Is worship divorced from life? Do values emanate from worship?

No one is independent of politics. Separation of the Church and the state does not mean a lukewarm attitude to affairs of the state particularly on people-related issues. The Church, if it is faithful to its mission has to be vocal, especially in today's environs it is the need of the hour.

Email: thalbert@rediffmail.com

ILP regime and Tourism Development in Meghalaya

By Baiartis Lyngdoh Peinlang

Some people live with the illusion that people in Meghalaya had survived without tourism in the past and they will still be able to survive without tourism in the future. For them what's important is the Inner Line Permit (ILP). Such people don't even realize that tourists come here simply to pay a visit; not to stay here forever. Others perceive that tourism had helped many rural communes to earn an alternative income from the growing tourism industry in the state and that the implementation of ILP will be the sudden termination of its growth. Therefore, it is quite obvious that the issues of ILP implementation and tourism promotion would continue to be at the centre of the debate. The paradox is that neither the state nor the protagonists of the ILP or indeed the stakeholders of tourism have sat across the

and hence they need to be provided with sustainable livelihoods that do not go against environmental policies. Community-based rural tourism, which falls under the domain of ecotourism, is one such approach towards sustainable development that can help achieve the objectives of sustainability on account of the fact that it is both nature-based and agro-based and its growth is dependent on the ability to maintain pristine natural landscapes and to preserve local cultures. Also the readiness of the host communities to cooperate in the process of sustainable development becomes spontaneous as they begin to learn that they can earn cash income through their effort of preserving and promoting local cultures, local environment and agriculture. Thirdly, tourism develop-



(ST File Photo)

table to thrash out these issues.

There are three basic facts that we have to know about the tourism potential in Meghalaya and whether or not ILP will affect their growth.

Firstly, across the world people are striving towards achieving sustainable development and tourism is one such promising

mainly dependent on nature as the ultimate provider of tourism resources and tourism products, and hence we need to understand that mass tourism will have a devastating impact on the carrying capacity of the landscapes in many areas. Hence, it is important to see that all efforts are geared towards attracting only eco-

High end tourists will always pay a visit to a place they love irrespective of the price and whether or not ILP is in place. Investors in tourism or in other sectors as well will invest irrespective of whether ILP is implemented because they will always want to promote their businesses.

sustainable industry. It's the only non-polluting industry. However, we also need to know that there are two major forms of tourism viz. mass tourism which is low priced and hence can attract huge number of visitors during the peak seasons and high-end tourism which brings tourists through the year. Mass tourism is seasonal and therefore short-lived and can have devastating impacts on the environment and hence it cannot be considered sustainable. High end tourism includes adventure tourism, eco-tourism, health tourism, religious tourism etc which attracts national and international tourists with disposable income. This category of tourists have the money to spend and also understand and respect the local cultures. They practice responsible tourism.

Secondly, many rural communities in Meghalaya had been experiencing sudden termination of their sources of earning cash income due to the ban on tree felling and coal mining

tourists or high end tourists who really want to learn and appreciate the uniqueness of our culture and the beauty of our natural and quasi natural landscapes. High end tourists will always pay a visit to a place they love irrespective of the price and whether or not ILP is in place. Investors in tourism or in other sectors as well will invest irrespective of whether ILP is implemented because they will always want to promote their businesses. In fact, ILP will help to attract only high end or responsible tourists and keep the irresponsible ones at bay. Based on the above facts, it is recommended that policy makers spend more time on making efforts towards promoting and facilitating the community-based rural tourism approach for the benefit of the host communities by ensuring delegated power or citizen control on the tourism industry instead of wasting time in debating and merging the issue of ILP with the issue of tourism promotion. The writer is a research scholar and can be reached at pbaiar@yahoo.com

TO THE EDITOR

Commuters at the receiving end

Editor, It has been days since commercial vehicles have been off the road because of the strike against fuel prices and non-remunerative fares, yet no solution seems to be in sight. The general public have been the most affected with students, villagers with market produce, office goers and others who need public transport to commute to their respective destinations left stranded. At the receiving end of this tug

of war between the government and the aggrieved parties, it is the commuter who bears the brunt of it. In the meantime those in authority choose to have a sparring match with other members of the Opposition instead of working towards finding a solution to the ongoing problem. While empathizing with the organizations that have called for the strike because of the exorbitant price of fuels and the rollback of fares, as a citizen I urge upon the concerned parties to come up with a solution which would benefit all, so that the public would not be made a scapegoat as always, through no fault of theirs.

Yours etc.,
Angela Lyngdoh,
Shillong-14

When will the strike end?

Editor, The strike by commercial vehicles has caused immense problems to ordinary people who don't own private vehicles and have to commute to their workplaces daily in taxis. Not many of the Government owned red buses and maxi taxis are seen on the roads these days. Most of them are so badly maintained that they are abandoned all over the place. The agreement made by Government with

some groups to run the vehicles in a way that there is enough revenue generation for maintenance is perhaps not respected or the clauses laid down might have been made in such a way as to benefit the private party as is wont to happen in Meghalaya.

On Sunday the Government said that the price of petrol and diesel would be brought down by Rs 2. That hardly makes any sense. Private vehicles should get paid for the mileage they cover and for that reason it is high time that the Shillong taxi use meters to decide the fares. In this day and age when there is so much development the taxis cannot say that the meters fixed on them will not work because this is a hilly place. I believe this is a lame excuse because the taxis want to fleece the customers.

I appeal to the Government to consider fixing meters on all taxis plying in Shillong. This is also the only place that

does not have Uber and Ola cabs which make it very convenient for commuters in other cities. Why are the taxi owners not allowing this fair competition? Why is it that competition in this state is killed all the time and entrepreneurship is not encouraged? It is time that people who can afford to pay travel safely alone and in clean vehicles unlike in the local taxis which are not maintained and dirty inside but which only want to charge passengers a heavy fare. No, you cannot have it both ways. Taxis have to improve their services and not demand to have their cake and eat it too.

Yours etc.,
Veronica Khongjoh,
Via email

Bias in DSC published results

Editor, The District Selection Committee, Office of the Deputy Commissioner East Khasi Hill District has

released the result of the Typing Test to the Post of LDA cum Typist vide letter no. DSC.11/DSC-Exam/WTR/2016/113 Dated February 5, 2021 in which 238 Candidates have been selected to appear for the interview out of approximately 1400 Candidates who were instructed to appear for the typing test vide letter No. Letter no. DSC.10/DSC-Exam/LDA/2018/228 Dated 14th November, 2019.

As per the advertisement issued by the District Selection Committee, Office of the Deputy Commissioner East Khasi Hill vide Letter Memo No. DSC.7/ADVT/2013/60 Dated 14th August, 2018 the Qualification for 118 Vacancies against the Post LDA-cum-Typist is SSLC/HSSLC with knowledge of computer and typing speed of 30 wpm.

During the Typing Speed test scheduled on December 7, 2019 and February 7, 2020, the candidates appearing for the Typing Speed Test were not allowed to view the score of their own typing

speed.

The Question here is "Why are we the candidates not allowed to view the scores of our own typing speed test?" "Are the 238 Candidates who have been selected the only candidates who crossed the 30 words per minutes as mentioned in the advertisement?" It seems the 238 candidates selected to appear for the interview are in the ratio of 2 candidates to 1 post. If so why did the authority mention the need of 30 words per minute in the Advertisement. We demand that the District Selection Committee, East Khasi Hills publish the scores of the Typing Speed Test against the roll no. of each candidate who appeared for the Typing Speed Test.

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request,
Via email

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"Dreams are only dreams until you wake up and make them real."

— Ned Vizzini

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No. 175 SHILLONG, WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 10, 2021

Meghalaya BJP caught in a bind

ON Monday, BJP Rajya Sabha MP, Rakesh Sinha raised some very pertinent questions vis-a-vis the illegal coal mining activities in Meghalaya. He enquired about the action taken to curb the menace and the cumulative loss of revenue to the State exchequer. The Union Minister for Parliamentary Affairs, Coal and Mines, of NDA Government, Prahlad Joshi read out a standard reply evidently supplied to him by Government of Meghalaya. The replies refuted the allegation about coal being illegally mined and transported which every sensible person in Meghalaya knows is a blatant lie since hundreds of trucks carrying freshly mined coal ply on the Shillong-Guwahati road on a daily basis. They are more visible now because they traverse through Shillong city. Unfortunately Prof Rakesh Sinha's questions were unstarred. Hence written replies were provided to all the questions raised. Also, unstarred questions leave no space for supplementary questions which are akin to prodding.

Parliamentary rules dictate that ministers have to be precise and accurate while answering questions because the information given through the answers is taken as authentic. Answers such as those given by Mr Joshi to Prof Rakesh Sinha's questions are inaccurate and therefore misleading. It is not known if the learned professor has drawn the attention of the minister to these inaccuracies because if a Minister later finds that the information supplied is inaccurate or incorrect, he may make a statement in the House correcting the previous answer, in case it is a starred question or lay a statement on the Table of the House, in case of an unstarred question. When a Minister feels that he cannot supply authentic information to a question he should seek for more time and provide the answers after duly studying the matter. In the present case, the Union Minister represents the viewpoint of the BJP-led NDA Government. Hence going by his answer it would appear as if the BJP in Meghalaya which is part of the ruling coalition is barking up the wrong tree as there is no apparent wrongdoing by the MDA government here.

Since Rajya Sabha MP, Rakesh Sinha has just visited Meghalaya in January this year and travelled to distant villages and also met with a cross section of people, including BJP workers, it is presumed that he would be better briefed about the situation here than the Union Minister. The MP would also have been informed that the NPP which leads the coalition government here has been daring the BJP MLAs to leave the alliance because the Party has been attacking the Government on the GHADC scam among others. After the Union Minister has virtually given a clean chit to the Meghalaya Government on the issue of coal mining, the NPP-led coalition is now on a safe wicket even while the Meghalaya BJP is left to eat humble pie. Such are the perils of the coalition 'adharma.'

Dorbars and the need to be relevant

By Toki Blah

The Shillong Times of Feb 4, 2021 carried an interesting editorial titled 'Health Budget for Local Bodies'. The write-up carried a noteworthy story of a recent decision of the Ministry of Health, Govt of India, to outsource Primary Health care initiatives to Panchayats. The news appeared to have come out of the blue but as a matter of fact it was simply the Govt keeping up with the provisions of the 73rd Amendment of the Constitution dated 1992 and which resulted in the birth of the Panchayati Raj Bill and the 11th Schedule to the Constitution. The 11th Schedule encompasses the list of subjects or activities to be undertaken by panchayats or local bodies and item No 25 of the Schedule includes 'Health and sanitation, including hospitals, primary health centres and dispensaries' as one of the subjects earmarked for local self government intervention. This announcement by the Health Ministry is of major significance as it indicated a paradigm shift in Govt thinking on the delivery of public services through empowered peoples' grassroots institutions. We are seeing the germination of 'governance from below; approach to development; the dismantling of the conventional top-down approach, so beloved by I-know-it-all bureaucrats and technocrats and replacing it with a community participation approach; a gradual empowering process to enable communities through their locally elected institutions to participate, take charge and acquire ownership over their own planned destination. To put money where its mouth is, the Govt also came up with a hefty matching budget allocation of 13,192 crore for first phase implementation of this new 'Basic Health Care by the people' policy. All in all, an attention grabbing decision with all its implications on the future of India's elected local bodies!

The reaction that the above editorial and news produced among Shillong's reading public was disappointing. It hardly caused a ripple that is until the realisation slowly began to sink in of its far-reaching consequences on the welfare; wellbeing; health and very relevance of our traditional local body, namely the Dorbar Shnong. The Dorbar as it is viewed by many contemporary citizens of Meghalaya is seen as a revered part of our custom and tradition but at the same time maligned and neglected by those mandated to nurture. Meghalaya was exempted from

the Panchayati Raj as its local traditional bodies were expected to be at par with Panchayats, but this sadly was not to be. Empowerment of our Dorbars failed to materialise and they continue to remain as fossilised as the British found them 200 years ago. Today they still have no legal status. The electoral process by which the Rangbah Shnong and other office bearers are elected to office lacks the procedural uniformity, gender equity and the official franchise that modern 21st Century democratic practices demand. Worse, neglected and left to their own devices, the Dorbars need empowerment in financial management skills; concepts of transparency and accountability in local self governance and last but not least the ability to address a growing variety of welfare services schemes required for the well-being of the community. Viewed from this perspective, will Meghalaya once again miss the bus; miss the initiative to bestow ownership of basic and primary health care to our local communities; miss the chance once again to legalise and empower our traditional grassroots institutions? Time to examine the possibilities!

The Dorbar, our traditional body for grassroots governance, is the community pride and strength of Meghalaya that our modern day politicians, both at the State and District Council level have deliberately chosen to suppress; weaken and make redundant. They see the Village Dorbar with its impartial value systems and practices it represents, as a threat to the amoral party based political entity they belong to. It has resulted in the neglect of our traditional institutions; the independence and authority of the Dorbar eroded by the money power of the corrosive MLA scheme and I say this with all the authority at my command! Today as administration and especially development-oriented governance in the rest of India rapidly moves towards the process of decentralisation to grassroots functionaries, Meghalaya because of the inward thinking of its political elite, sticks out like a sore thumb. So how will Meghalaya deal with this new initiative in providing basic health care? In the absence of a legalised empowered Dorbar system, Meghalaya will have to turn to the time tested dependence on Govt Departments to do the job. No other way out. The bureaucrats on their part will simply take this as another central scheme with a financial target that

has to be met. They will carry on with that. The need to strengthen, empower and make relevant the traditional institutions of the people will be lost sight of. Why should bureaucrats be blamed if our own elected politicians are unwilling or reluctant to do so? Why expect it from a Govt servant? The point I'm driving at is, if we continue to leave the destiny of our traditional Dorbars to the whims and fancies of our politicians; as our traditional bodies continue to be irrelevant to the governance requirements of the day, it will not be far off when they will ultimately be replaced with Panchayats. Are we ready for this?

As we speak of trends in decentralisation of administration and governance to grassroots functionaries, let us turn to the Constitution of India and find out what it has to say on the subject. Article 243G (Powers, authority and responsibilities of Panchayats) is very clear and precise. It states - "Subject to the provisions of this Constitution the Legislature of a State may, by law, endow the Panchayats with such powers and authority that may be necessary to enable them to function as institutions of self Government..." It is therefore very clear, and precise that it is the duty and responsibility of the State Legislature alone to empower the Panchayats. In Meghalaya's case its Dorbars with the wherewithal towards local self governance. The onus is on the State Legislature to provide a uniform legal system for all the traditional grassroots bodies of the state to enable them to enjoy the benefits of Article 243G and its accompanying 11th Schedule. We have lost precious time by allowing a blinkered, narrow-minded and inward-looking District Council to tinker with the basic structure and foundation of our traditional bodies. It has led us nowhere. It was emotional faith totally misplaced. The half hearted VAB which primarily aimed only on how to route direct funding through the ADCs has proved to be a non-starter. It's time to change the narrative. If Meghalaya wishes to enjoy and benefit from the move towards decentralisation; direct funding and meaningful interpretation of the 73rd Amendment, it needs to come up with a uniform legal platform for the traditional institutions of all three tribes. We need a law to provide a standardized application of administration; a common approach to development;

a common system of electioneering; a homogenized regime of financial accountability for all the traditional grassroots institutions of the state. Any other consideration will simply mean going back to the political bickering of the past between the State Govt and the ADCs. There's no gain from such useless political exercises. We only stand to lose and we cannot afford to lose any longer.

While dwelling on the need to legalise and empower our traditional dorbars one cannot run away from the sense of grievance and aversion that these bodies have towards the Govt and its administration. The complaint is that Dorbars are often utilized or employed by the Govt which discourteously takes them for granted. They feel that they are called upon only in times of emergencies (citing law and order situations and the recent Covid crisis) and then unceremoniously jettisoned when such emergencies disappear or dissipate. On the other hand there is this unexplained feeling of loyalty to the District Councils even when the latter has done absolutely nothing for the welfare of the Dorbars for the last 70 odd years of its existence. The truth of the matter is there is very little commonality between the mandate of the District Council and its Dorbars. The truth of the matter is the State Govt and the Dorbars have more in common between themselves than they care to admit since both are mandated to provide service to their respective constituencies. Maintaining law and order; ensuring peace and tranquillity; ensuring security and safety for the citizen; providing essential services; offering assistance and help in times of need are what both Govt and Dorbars do best. The mandate of both is service to the community. It therefore makes complete sense for them to work in tandem for the good of humanity than to work at cross purposes. A state law that will ensure decentralisation of administration to provide for better coordination between the State and its traditional bodies is the need of the hour. In the rest of India people are enjoying the fruits of the 73rd Amendment. Time for us to also make hay of the liberties it has bestowed on our traditional bodies. Time to make our Dorbars relevant to the governance and administrative needs of the 21st century.

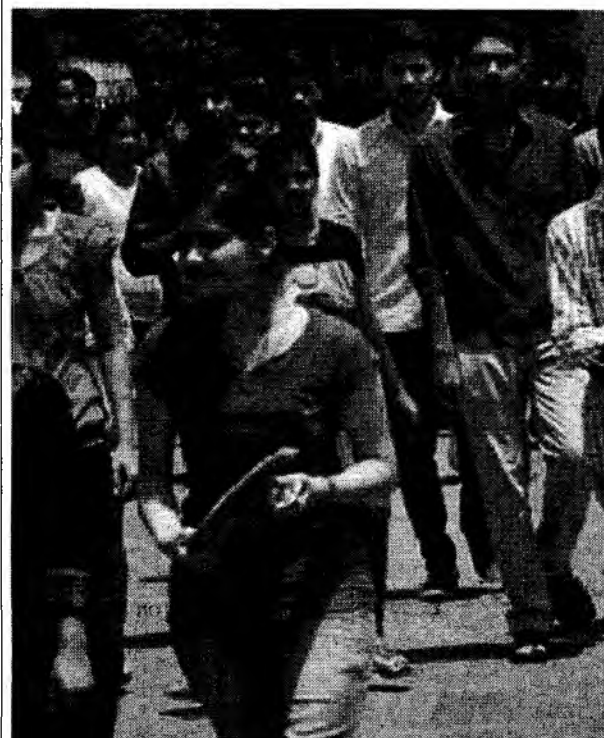
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'Gender Minority'- Unequal discourse

By Dr Samhita Barooah

It's been a harrowing time deliberating on the construction, re-construction of gender identities. As an educator in the social sector, some of us have been struggling with the myth-breaking, earth-shattering and demystifying experiences of co-creating transitions of adolescent, adulting and elderly minds on how gender identities are understood. In today's pandemic world, gender identities have taken a prominent virtual space capturing everyone's interest and attention. Thus academic, social organizations, state authorities and corporate agencies are all focused on interpreting and emphasizing on gender related concerns across sectors through the webinar and online seminar modes. Recently when one of the premier universities of North East India shared their flyer on a webinar on Gender Minorities within the North East context, I got a little startled. I wondered if

categorization in a single biological or transitional gender only way of practicing social inclusion of the gender diverse identities? In that sense the academic structure sharing their inclusive stance through the gender minority lens becomes thoroughly problematic. Why couldn't gender and sexual diversity be discussed in the academia without the over tone of looking down or focusing on a peripheral gaze, making it a thoroughly 'Othering process'. It is these academic spaces which theorizes and patents innovations that emerge with the inclusion or exclusion of gender diversity. But the patronizing positioning of an emerging and vibrant community of hope into a 'gender minority' further marginalizes the community. The moment the dichotomy of difference is raised from a sense of perfection, the presumptive lack gets reflected. Why are these discussions based on



this is a distorted beginning to a huge academic discourse which can lead to some very grounded shifts. In a recent academic online forum people were arguing about misuse of gender based violence laws which favour women more than men in some instances. Also that there is a need to change the nomenclature of laws enforcing institutions meant for women to gender commissions so that they can cater to the issues of all genders primarily men. Under such circumstances one wonders, what is the missing link in the approach? Is it the usual binary hegemony in a gender discourse or is it an aversion towards gender diversity within oneself?

Gender and sexual identities are always synonymous with the umbrella context of being 'women' which has its own problems. Only during the post 377 era are people trying to look up the dictionary meaning of the word, 'queer' within an otherwise hostile home space. Gender diversity is being celebrated through people's acceptance of their self-identity and their association with others through their celebrated identity. In some pockets even the homo-normative identities are celebrated and socially recognized through marriages, cultural acceptance and community support. But the understanding of inclusion cannot be rested on positioning the gender diversity as a reflection of gender minority.

When it comes to gender and sexuality the restricted limitations of being a minority or majority gets fluid. It depends on the life cycle shifts in a human being which may be biological, circumstantial or choice based that determines their preferences in expressing or closeting one's gender identity or sexual orientation. Are vulnerabilities of social class, ethnicity, caste, geographical and collective

'us and them'? The seeds of inequality are sown in the very conceptualization of the topic of discussion. Do our universities find it restricted to address conceptualizing and deconstruction of existing concepts related to gender diversity without adding the gender minority tag? Adding this tag is presumptive.

There is a sense of pity in positioning anyone as a minority for that matter. Is it only this sense of pity and lack which will determine whether gender diversity can be fit to be discussed in the academia? In this context gender queer awareness building seems to be the need of the hour through diverse platforms which includes people, processes, policies and practice with dignity and equity especially within the academia as per the new Education Policy, 2020. Academic spaces are empowering spaces for all genders irrespective of the normative or non-normative status. But if one begins the process of academic discourse from an unequal position, then how can inclusive strategies be devised to build greater solidarity across genders? Gender as such is elusive, dynamic and evolving so how can an academic discourse bind it in layers of vulnerabilities, targeted category and exclusion? Inclusive approach cannot be rooted in the ideas being at a majority position in any context. There is a need to address the issues of diversity within and outside the accepted gender identity in any society for that matter. Does gender get counted only through the population counts? Is that the only criteria to position gender in an air tight box of being a minority or a majority?

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TO THE EDITOR

Deafening Silence of the Church

Editor, There are two entrenched centres of power in Meghalaya, the government and the church. Of course, there are other power centres also, such as the pressure groups and mining mafias, but the government and the church are the overarching centres of authority. The government speaks daily. The church is a visible force, seen in the countless churches dotting the countryside and the lines of church goers each Sunday, but its voice is silent, outside of the Sabbath pulpit.

It takes courage to challenge centres of authority, so I admire Albert Thyrniang for his powerful article "Calling the Church Out" (Shillong Times, Feb

9, 2020). He has pointed out the failure of the church to fulfill its moral role in society. This moral role has three dimensions: religious, social and political and the three are inextricably intertwined. The church cannot choose the first role and neglect the other two.

In Matthew 5:13, Jesus said "You are the salt of the earth: but if the salt has lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? it is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men." In Meghalaya, the church has lost its savour, firstly by abandoning the poor, hungry, single mothers and destitute children, and secondly by its social apathy.

To pursue Albert Thyrniang's theme, unless the political voice of the church is raised, it cannot be "the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid". It must be among us.

Why is the church oblivious to the poor among us? What's more, these poor people are our fellow tribals, our fellow Christians.

The National Family Health and Family Survey, just released a month ago shows Meghalaya to be dead last in many health indices, most glaringly in the malnutrition of our children, even worse than in Bihar. Why is the church not holding the government to account for such tragic failures?

How does the church let its light shine? The Bible says it very clearly. Isaiah 58:10: Feed the hungry, and help those in trouble. Then your light will shine out from the darkness, and the darkness around you will be as bright as noon.

We celebrate Meghalaya Day, Cherry Blossom Festival, church fetes and installations and a myriad other feel-good events. But it's a thin camouflage for the

failure of the government and church to provide even basic succour for the poorest among us.

Yours etc., Glenn C. Kharkongor, Via email

Facing up to the truth

Editor, Reading Albert Thyrniang's piece, "Calling the Church out" (ST Feb 8, 2021) was a delight. The Church in Meghalaya is in comfort zone marked by occasional celebrations of this or that occasion. Some weeks ago there was a story in your newspaper about church money amounting to 4.67 crore having been defalcated from the church accounts. We were told then in January this year that the charge-sheet would be filed by the end of the month. We are yet to hear of this matter. It seems that church elders

don't want the culprits to be arrested since that would open up a can of worms. My suspicion is that the powerful voices in the Mawkhar church and there are many (some of them seasoned politicians) have tried to pull political strings so that the police drops the case for want of evidence. Knowing our compliant police anything is possible.

Has anyone heard of Meghalaya Police doing anything extraordinary? If they did would there be thousands of trucks carrying coal ply on our roads when the Government denies that there is any coal mining activity? Ask us the public and we will provide all the evidence of illegal coal mining and transportation. We see them every night and day; only the police are blind to this crime. If I were a police official I would be ashamed of my department. Most or all of these tribal police

officials are church going Christians. Does the Church ever raise its voice on illegal coal mining and how it is being facilitated? Forget it! In this State there is an abominable collusion between church, state, police and everyone else down the line.

Those who wish to speak up have no one to stand with them. All are ready to stand with the powerful. Meghalaya is doomed and all these collaborators in crime will one day have to pay a heavy price. It is sad that they all have children who will one day inherit this hellish foulness and that would be the end of Christianity, of politics, of coal mining barons and of the police. They will be buried in the debris of their sins. I salute Albert Thyrniang for his Daniel like courage!

Yours etc., Lambok Diengdoh, Via email

"Don't waste your time in anger, regrets, worries, and grudges. Life is too short to be unhappy."

— Roy T. Bennett

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China on Singh's radar

WHEN it comes to matters of national security and activities along the northern border, India's former army chief General VK Singh should know better. After retirement too, he has a ringside view of the security situation in his capacity as a minister in the Modi government. When he spoke about the Chinese intrusions the other day, the nation, however, was not in a mood to listen to him. He has stated that the intrusions along the northern border are not a one-way traffic and that India has intruded into what was thought to be Chinese territory more frequently. "If China has intruded into our side 10 times, India must have done it 50 times. We are not announcing this and the Chinese government and media are not giving any publicity to these acts," he said and also stressed that both nations have their own perceptions about the Line of Actual Control (LaC); meaning these intrusions cannot be seen as provocations. What the minister has stated is also that while the Chinese were liberally engaged in the act of Salami Slicing, wherein it would occupy a patch of land, and then give up a part and retain the other, this was no longer allowed to happen under the present government. Also, Singh's stress is that India's retaliatory steps on the economic front, like banning of Chinese apps in India, too hurt China.

If things were as simple as this, what was this fuss all about, is a pertinent question. It is quite possible this is not the whole story. Had it been so, India would have quietly left matters at that. Rather, the perception is that matters reached closer to the level of a war and a stand-off along the border in Ladakh still continues. What could be surmised at best is that there is a window of opportunity to talk matters out and avert a war. This should offer some relief to Indians; that, with our limited military and economic might, the path to peace is still worth pursuing. At the same time, the military might of this country must be scaled up gradually so that a sleeping giant in our neighbourhood would not fancy an easy cakewalk over us in future too. The present Union Budget showed an increase in capital outlay for defence to the extent of Rs 20,000 crore, despite the constraints of the Covid-linked hit that the national economy took. There was over-spending the past fiscal when the Chinese threat had edged closer to us. The vigil must continue.

TO THE EDITOR

Shillongites, stop the honking habit!

Editor,
Shillong roads are indeed chaotic and cramped but that doesn't justify the extent at which Shillongites honk every day. Or has our excessive honking become part of our driving experience, simply a habit? In Shillong everyone seems to be in a rush and the honking never seems to stop. One of the worst things about being stuck in traffic is the blaring horn that never seems to stop as if honking is a magic tool to clear traffic. There is probably not a single day when I don't get irritated with the terrible and unnecessary honking on the road. And the sound of the horn is disproportionately higher than the size of the vehicle. Horns today are an indication of our inflated egos and an expression of anger and impatience. Apart from the inconvenience and unpleasant emotion that incessant honking evokes,

it can also have hazardous health consequences.

Scientific communities across the globe see pollution as the commonest enemy of human health but a World Health Organization document terms noise pollution as the deadliest because of its health and social implications. Noise pollution leads to behavioral changes, stress, hypertension, anxiety, heart attacks, hearing loss and lots more. 70% of the noise pollution in Indian roads emanates from honking. Honking in the UK and other European countries is illegal and they treat it as another form of verbal abuse. Horns are installed in a car for specific purposes such as alerting a fellow driver who is about to hit you or a pedestrian who is in danger. It is meant for emergencies only and not a toy to play with. In Shillong we use the horn to say hi to friends and announce our presence or vent our anger and impatience and blast away when stuck in a jam. It puzzles me why we have to do this - it's madness.

Shillongites honk like nobody's business. The

Contract Farming in Meghalaya: The Hidden Dangers to Indigenous Farmers

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

The farmer's protest against the three Farm Laws has gone through many twist and turns. While it seemed like it might suffer a severe setback because of the January 26 incident it bounced back spectacularly after Rakesh Tikait's, (a prominent farmer union leader), impassioned appeal. In Meghalaya, solidarity protests did take place in support of the farmers by Workers Power of Meghalaya (WPM) and Meghalaya and Greater Shillong Progressive Hawkers and Street Vendors Association (MGSPHSVA). The public debate on the issue though, is not as passionate as in other parts of the country, presumably because of the impression that the Laws will not affect the farming community of the State. That is not accurate and one law in particular, viz., The Farmer's Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Bill, will bring a great deal of transformation to the agricultural landscape of the State with deleterious consequences on the local indigenous farming communities.

Indigenous farmers in Meghalaya practise a variety of farming systems to produce food for self-consumption and surplus for the market. Jhum or shifting cultivation (which is also termed as rotational farming) is one of such systems which is still being practised by many in the State. A participatory mapping exercise done in 28 villages of Meghalaya by the North East Slow Food and Agrobiodiversity Society (NESFAS) as part of the project "No One Shall be Left Behind Initiative: Biodiversity for Food, Nutrition and Energy Security, Meghalaya and Nagaland" supported by the Rural Electrification Corporation revealed that more than 80% of the villages and 70% of the households still practise jhum. The public perception of jhum however, has not been positive with Sixth Schedule itself calling for "... regulation of the practise of jhum and other forms of shifting cultivation". It has been particularly blamed for forest degradation and soil erosion. However, in recent times the debate has transformed with jhum being seen as an ally to biodiversity and landscape conservation rather than the other way round. An indication in the change of national policy perception is the 2018 NITI Ayog, 'Report of Working Group III Shifting Cultivation: Towards a Transfor-

mational Approach'.

Some of the main policy level suggestions made in the aforementioned report are: garnering authentic data on jhum, improved land use planning, amend credit guidelines to allow jhum cultivators access financial resources and most importantly categorise jhum "...as distinct land use, recognising that it is both an agricultural and forest management practice conducted on the same plot of land but at sequentially separated times." The last point is very important because it shifts the debate from jhum destroying forests to actually being very valuable to ecosystem services because of its landscape management approach. In fact the report mentions that drying of water sources, decline in soil fertility, reduced availability of fuel wood, fodder and wild edibles are the outcome of replacement of jhum by agricultural intensification. The falls under jhum in fact should be categorized, the report states, as 'regenerating fallows' which in time will become secondary forests and add to the forest cover of an area. Another negative outcome of decline of jhum is increased food insecurity. The report mentions that in order to manage jhum, government schemes have mostly prioritized cereal and plantation crops causing a reduction in diversity of crops. This has severely limited availability of food crops and compromised food availability during the gestation periods leading to food insecurity.

Research conducted by NESFAS in Khapmaw and Rasong (villages located in Mawkynrew Block, East Khasi Hills District) revealed that both villages cultivated and harvested more than 200 food plants from the landscape, majority of which came from their jhum fields. In fact the farmers cultivated 28 varieties in Khapmaw and 23 varieties in Rasong of starchy staples, viz., potato (phan), taro (shriew), millet (krai), maize (riewhadem), sweet potatoes (phankaro), cassava (phandieng) and Job's tears (sohriew) in their jhum fields. Food security is not just about the quantity but also the quality which can be assessed by the consumption of at least 5 of the 10 food groups, viz., as defined by starchy staples; pulses; nuts and seeds; dairy; meat, poultry and fish; egg; dark green leafy vegetables; vitamin A rich fruits and vegetables; other vegetables and other

fruits, as defined by FAO. All the 7 food groups based on plants were available from the jhum fields. There were other sources of food from the landscape, viz., homestead garden (kper), terraces (bun) and forest (khlaw). However these sources neither had the diversity or quantity to match the produce from jhum.

Covid-19 has demonstrated the importance of a resilient immunity to thwart the virus. In their 2004 paper 'Biocultural Diversity in the Sustainability of Developing Country Food Systems' T John and BR Sthapit have stated that biodiversity loss and nutrition transition has resulted in an outbreak of type 2 diabetes mellitus, cardiovascular disease, obesity, cancer and other chronic diseases. People who had pre-existing conditions were particularly vulnerable to Covid-19 and had high fatality rates. The reduction in jhum will bring about tremendous loss of agrobiodiversity present in the system and with it the pandemic of hidden hunger the 'lack of essential micronutrients, i.e., vitamins and minerals'. This leads to a decline in immunity and makes individuals vulnerable to various forms of ailments, something which Covid-19 has demonstrated to be very fatal.

There is another impact that contract farming will have which will be devastating to the local indigenous community, i.e., erosion of traditional land tenure system and promotion of privatisation. According to the NITI Ayog report government programs and schemes designed to replace jhum have led to the erosion of traditional institutions and customary norms resulting in increasing elite capture and a rapid erosion of traditional access and benefit sharing frameworks. This has led to rise in private property regime and shrinking of land available to jhum leading to 'distorted jhum', i.e., reduced fallow period. Contract farming envisaged under 'The Farmer's Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Bill' will lead to increase privatisation of land, especially on which jhum is being practised. This will further accentuate the already acute landless problem among the indigenous community in the State. Also instead of food crop the hallmark of jhum, cash crops, i.e., plantation crops will be promoted. The NITI Ayog

report has specifically mentioned plantation crops as leading to food insecurity. In conjunction with already existing high landlessness this will increase households' vulnerability to various threats.

Change in property regime has another component. The Sixth Schedule and The Meghalaya Transfer of Regulation (Act) 1971 were brought specifically to prevent land alienation of the local indigenous community to outsiders. Contract farming on a large scale will lead to consolidation of land holdings under the tribal elites which will then be transferred to the big corporations for whose benefit the three Farm Laws were legislated. Land will remain with the local community only in name. With traditional access rights gone this will be a death blow to the territorial rights of the indigenous people of the State.

A prelude to what could await Meghalaya can be gauged from the 2018 article 'No country for women: The dark side of palm oil production in Mizoram' by Purabi Bose. In this article the role and importance of female farmers got reduced drastically with the introduction of palm oil plantation as a substitute for jhum. Decline in food security and biodiversity has already become apparent to the local community. And with the attendant land titling i.e., introduction of private property regime, women have been left out of ownership rights and land use decision making. Even in Meghalaya (from personal discussions) it has been reported that cash cropping has actually led to diminished decision making role of women in spite of it being a matrilineal society.

The three Farm Laws, especially, 'The Farmer's Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Bill', will bring about a great change in the agricultural landscape of the State. This change, however, will not be a positive one with the greatest impact falling on jhum and families depending on it. The outcome, though, will not be limited to this group but will put into motion events which will prove a threat to the rights of the indigenous communities of the State itself.

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Emasculation of the fourth estate

By Arup Kumar Dutta

In the immediate post-independence period, there were two modes of accessing news --- print media and radio. The latter, designated as All India Radio, was controlled by the Government, so quite a few unseen hands with strainers sieved the news before the public. Such was the low credibility of our radio that Indians mostly went to BBC whenever they wanted the 'real' version on important events such as the Chinese aggression of 1962.

The AIR's nadir was reached during the "Emergency," when censorship was clamped down on all modes of media, especially the print media. Yet that period saw the Indian Fourth Estate's finest hour, with a majority of its constituents fighting censorship tooth and nail and often suffering for their effrontery. One also recalls the "Press," which kept the ordinary Indian up to date about goings-on in the country.

In those days the print media was the only source for credible news and views. Mind you, not that everything was hunky dory, for a few of the newspapers and journals had their own axes to grind. Also, the establishment sought to put across its point of view through publications of its own. But, even then, there was a broad-based solidity and credibility about the print media which, unfortunately, has evaporated with the passage of time.

Moreover, the print media of that era, both at the national and regional level, wielded real importance, and its 'voice' was heard. Politicians and bureaucrats inundating the corridors of power listened to what the media had to say and reacted accordingly. Editorials and news items were religiously placed before the big-wigs everyday so that they could sniff which way the wind was blowing. "Letters to the Editor" too were scrutinised and grievances rectified. Journalists were a tough and brazen lot, aware of the power they commanded, but sensibly purveying credible information rather than using the medium for self-aggrandisement.

What a different scenario it is today! The Fourth Estate can wear out its throat denouncing the prevalent chicanery and corruption without as much as moving a hair on the heads of politicians, bureaucrats or the public. Committed journalists can lambast the local administration against its apathy and inefficiency without effecting meaningful changes. Previously, if someone's name came out for the "wrong" reasons in a newspaper he or she would become incommunicado for months altogether! Nowadays, arrested culprits do not even bother to try and conceal their faces as they are led away in manacles, while the exposed "corrupt" prance about openly, having developed skins thicker than the proverbial rhino.

The process of emasculation of the Fourth Estate began with the intrusion of television in Indian drawing rooms towards the middle of the 1980s. Right from its commencement the idiot box, started in India as a tightly controlled arm of the establishment, and prosaically named "Doordarshan," unabashedly played its role as a purveyor of news without an iota of credibility. However, if one imagined that the entry of private channels brought credibility in the medium, that was a mistake. This was because private players who later entered the arena had their own games to play, the greatest casualty being the "objective" presentation of news and views.

The problem with the audio-visual media was that it had to attract viewership in order to survive, for without viewers there were no advertisements, and without advertisements there could be no channel! Even for 24x7 news channels a change in the style of news content and presentation was necessary --- the style of the Doordarshan-type newscasters with deadpan expressions and monotonous voices would not attract viewers. Moreover, it was the way a piece of news was presented, rather than the basic significance, which

served to increase viewership. Thus, the process of sensationalising the most ordinary news item and making it sound earth-shaking began with the intrusion of the electronic media.

At the same time editorial discrimination as to newsworthiness of an item began to play a less dominant role. Being a visual presentation, availability of "footage" was an important consideration, with the result that trivial bits of news got more importance over crucial items merely because the channel had more visuals to air. To make news-presentation 'livelier', the live "debate" format was introduced, which often descended into farcical verbal fisticuffs, inviting laughter from the viewer rather than a cerebral response. The reality was that the audio-visual media, unlike established print media, had to pander to an amorphous viewership belonging to different social and educational backgrounds, thus presentation and content could not be too high-brow or even directed at a presumed average audience.

The electronic media, therefore, had to aim at the lowest common denominator in order to attract the widest spectrum of viewership. Thus, petty news with which viewers could empathise more readily, rather than those of wider potential impact, took precedence. As is well known, visuals make a more direct impact on sensibilities; thus through intrusion into households, and providing presumably 'instant' news, the electronic media made a direct challenge to the print media, coercing the latter to adapt in order to compete.

The problems of the print media were made more acute with the phenomenal increase in the number of publications, as well as the invasion of the "wannabe" media moguls. From corporate houses which could boost their business prospects by controlling a media group to politicians who had made their piles through dubious means --- there has been a mad rush to grab a slice of the media pie, both print and electronic, thereby eroding its credibility even further. Established media organisations, which had painstakingly built up their reputation through decades of conscientious journalism, suddenly found themselves being challenged by fly-by-night operators, whose concept of newsworthiness was based on the size of the font of the printed headline.

Unfortunately, the print-media succumbed and took the easy way out. The few that tried to resist found it to be untenable as circulation decreased leading to their final exit. Today, whether at the national or regional level, overt sensationalism is the order of the day, with trite, badly written "human interest" pieces hogging the front pages, which, in the past were put to better use. Equally unfortunate is the total lack of scruples of a major chunk of the Fourth Estate to objectively present news and views. Many of them don't even blink about openly flaunting their partisan perspectives, unconcerned about how readers would categorise them.

The negative traits displayed by the electronic media have rubbed off on a section of the print media. For instance, the so called "national" newspapers published from India's capital unabashedly pander to "mass" culture. With such trivialization has come the inevitable emasculation, for the powers that be have recognised that in the realm of today's Fourth Estate the intelligentsia has been marginalised.

The current information technology explosion has ensured access to news and information from sources outside the traditional media. For the millennials a newspaper or even a news channel is dated. They have their own world literally in the palm of their hands!

(Arup Kumar Dutta, a prominent social historian and writer based in Guwahati, has authored some 35 books, among them *The Kaziranga Trail and The Ahoms* (Syndicate: The Billion Press) (e-mail: editor@thebillionpress.org)

Impact of petrol price hike

Editor,
The unprecedented hike in the prices of petroleum products is now a burning concern. Of course, there are many reasons leading to the hike in fuel prices. The country is beset with various problems which must have aggravated the market situation. No one can rule out the protracted mass agitations leading to considerable loss to the government exchequer, besides frequent standoffs with China affecting the government fiscal policy. More importantly, COVID-19 has dealt a heavy blow to the economy. Again, the main exporter of petroleum products Saudi Arabia has already decided to cut crude oil output by one million barrels per day starting from February. This has definitely caused panic in the crude oil market and price determination in the country. So, what one feels is that mere armchair criticism is not pragmatic. However, what cannot be ignored is that the frequent

petrol price hike gives enough excuses for the traders and industrial companies to raise the prices of their products disproportionately. Finally, their adverse impact falls on essential commodities thereby leaving the weaker section of society to bear the brunt. Moreover, due to the year-long pandemic health crises, poor people have already experienced extreme level of hardships. The loss of employment and sources of income have further worsened their conditions. So, obviously, any price hike in essential food items and vehicle fares this time will only add to their misery.

A fruit/vegetable vendor commuting from Sohiong village to Shillong and paying a minimum of Rs 200 as to and fro vehicle fare prior to Covid protocol feels it is too heavy on the wallet. Just imagine how a poor person with poor knowledge of the business and a "small amount" of produce he/she brings to the market can manage to earn and feed his/her family members in this situation. In view of the poverty that haunts the majority, the villagers/vendors who commute daily have to pay hefty vehicle fare

are actually parting with their entire daily income. It's sad that we are not moved by their plight. If we objectively study their day-to-day activities, life is very difficult for them. They ceaselessly slog and live a life that's pulverized by the weight of various "uncertainties and misfortunes." The present transport strike is another spell of bad luck!

In all honesty, I feel that the government should draw up plans and programs keeping in mind the citizens living in abject poverty. This includes the vehicle drivers too. They make up the "major" portion of the population in the country/state. This rapid petrol price escalation only burns away what little they earn. The two rupees cut in petrol and diesel prices by the state government is a welcome step, but will it bring any relief?

Price control of essential commodities and rolling back the petroleum price should be the main priority of the central government now. We must show mercy to those who cannot bargain for anything.

Yours etc.,
Salil Gwali,
Shillong

Yours etc
Manuel Carey Lymba
Shillong-08

"Learning to distance yourself from all the negativity is one of the greatest lessons to achieve inner peace."

— Roy T. Bennett

The Shillong Times

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Giving peace a chance

THIS is not the time to cheer yet the writing is on the wall. Far from the Great Wall of China, the ice is thawing. India and China have begun a disengagement process on the north and south sides of Pangong Lake in East Ladakh, the scene of a stand-off between the militaries of the two powerful nations in Asia since May last. If the situation had come close to a war, that fact is also that the sagacity of the leaderships on both sides averted such an eventuality. Through sustained talks lasting several rounds, contentious issues were brought to the table and matters discussed threadbare. Talks took place both at the military and diplomatic level. Significantly, both sides have agreed to quit for good and dismantle the constructions, if any in the disputed areas and detailed discussions will follow to set things in order. Discussions, though, will be a long haul. Yet, the leaderships of both countries have decided to give peace a chance. It is well-understood that much of the problems between the two nations along the Line of Actual Control and thereabouts arose from the differences in perceptions as to which area belonged to whom—these being mostly uninhabited, snowy regions. As Union Minister, General VK Singh stated some days ago, incursions took place from both sides. The Chinese military might, in terms of sophisticated and lethal weapons it acquired with great frenzy in the past two decades, is more potent than that of India. Yet, the strong will of India's ground force, the soldiers, and the heavy military preparedness here too, are sure to act as a deterrent against China's alleged usurpation designs.

Both China and India are at a time in history when they cannot afford to waste time, energy or economic resources to fight a war. This realization is evident on both sides, and especially to President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Narendra Modi - leaders of two large nations that form much of Asia. They pursued their causes with careful steps, never giving a chance for emotions to overrun their mental perceptions. External Affairs minister S Jaishankar, one of the finest brains in the present government, did a good job in getting matters across to China and enabled it to see reason. The strong steps by the Centre in effecting a minor yet significant economic blockade on the red nation via banning of apps etc also helped send the right signals to China. Without doubt, both sides are convinced that cooperation, not confrontation, is the way forward in these grim times. And just as well!

Busting the myths in Khasi society: A case of inventing tradition

By Patricia Mukhim

It is amusing how myths harden into beliefs because they are internalised by every generation. A society that rests on these repeated myths faces the danger of living in denial of the emerging realities that challenge us on a daily basis. For instance one of the most peddled myths is that the Khasi society is egalitarian. I am not sure if it was the British who called the Khasis egalitarian since I have not come across that term being used by the colonist. But this term has been banded around for a while. An egalitarian society is one that actively promotes equality. This implies a shared community ethos of community ownership of resources. If that were so, how does one person own an entire catchment that can feed water to hundreds of people in a locality? If we are egalitarian then how do some people own hundreds of acres of land while others are landless? No apologies for raking up the research findings on landlessness in Meghalaya which is a stark 76% of the rural population. Unfortunately the research does not take the urban population in its ambit. This would have showed up the austere poverty that marks Khasi society today.

Every which way we look at it, Khasi society defies the notion of egalitarianism because it is hierarchical with the Syiem at the top of the pyramid and the Lyngdohs/myntris occupying a lower structure followed by the Sordar at the Raid level and the Rangbah Shnong at the Dorbar level. But even the Dorbar Raid and Dorbar Shnong don't seem to have been part of tradition if one does a critical reading of history.

Each hierarchy extracts compliance to a set of edicts flowing from it. These edicts have evolved with time but the hierarchy persists. Hence Khasi society is an oligarchy where power rests with a small tribal elite. Unlike Greek oligarchies where control of the society vests in those that are distinguished by nobility, wealth, education etc., Khasi society does not stress on quality for those they are compelled to call their leaders. Even today the qualification of a legislator does not decide his electoral prospects.

The second myth that needs busting is what the British said about the Khasis - that they follow a democratic mode of decision-making. The British cited just a solitary instance when a decision relating to whether the British could be allowed to build a road in a particular direction took two days of consultation. But that singular instance is hardly adequate to demonstrate

the existence of the elements of democracy. If Khasis were democratic can far reaching decisions be taken by a few pressure groups without consulting the "people" (the Khasis are roughly about a million people). Yet Khasis believe they are a democracy even when the decision-making whether at the Dorbar Syiem, Dorbar Raid or Dorbar Shnong is by a select few who have been elected by voice vote - an election that is hardly democratic. And why do people continue to adhere to this practice? Because tradition says so. Really? Isn't tradition also invented?

Noted historian Romila Thapar in her book 'Sakuntala: Texts, Readings, Histories...' writes that the present selects items from the past that are used to invent or refashion what comes to be called 'tradition'. These are generally items which the present finds attractive and which legitimise its various codes of behaviour and belief. The making of tradition becomes another dialogue with the past. It is often a perceived past which contributes to the construction of history, although in effect it may well derive from the perspectives of the present." Historian Eric Hobsbawm also argues that traditions can actually be invented and constructed, and that what sometimes have been passed off as very ancient traditions are in fact of quite recent origin. Hobsbawm rues that historians across centuries have not studied very seriously the process of the creation of rituals, customs and traditions. Hobsbawm is of the view that in many instances societies appear to have invented or created traditions at different points of time. This can happen more frequently when a rapid transformation of society weakens or destroys the social patterns for which the 'old' traditions had been designed producing new ones to which they were not applicable. Hence old practices were adapted to new conditions by using old models for new purposes.

British ethnographer Hunter says of the Khasi states, "The Khasi dependent states consist of petty democracies, presided over by chiefs called Siems, who, though taken from one family, are appointed by election; or by head-men, such as Wahadadars, Sardars, and Lyngdohs, whose office are absolutely elective. The appointment of all these chiefs and head-men is subject to the confirmation of the British Government, which also

reserves to itself the right to remove them in case of misconduct.

Hunter however glosses over important aspects of the structure of the Khasi states. He uses the British prism to define the Khasi system of governance. In her paper, 'Critically Assessing Traditions: The Case of Meghalaya,' historian Manorama Sharma raises some critical questions. She asks, "If the Khasis were indeed democratic, what kind of democracy was it? Were they democracies in the participatory sense only, or were they egalitarian and liberal also? If there was an election, who was elected, and how?"

In 1833 British ethnographer, Robertson had called the Khasi chieftainships - oligarchies, and had also mentioned that the Chiefs were quite despotic. AJM Mills in his 1853 report did not refer to Khasi states as democracies. So how did British perceptions change so radically in thirty years or so when David Scott mentioned Khasi democracy? One argument could be that as the British consolidated their rule they also began to have better understanding of the ground realities. However, the larger possibility is that British themselves influenced the local system and judged them by their yardstick perhaps because they wanted to sow the seeds of representative government in India. It would not be surprising if the educated Khasis were also influenced by those ideas and sought to invent a tradition that would have some similarity to these new ideas.

Hunter in his intensive survey of the Khasi states makes no mention of the Dorbar or its composition. His only observations were that in the independent Khasi states the chiefs had full jurisdiction in all matters that concerned their own subjects.

Manorama Sharma draws a lot of her reasoning from the interface between the missionaries and the Khasi people. Thomas Jones the missionary who gave the Khasi people their script opened the first missionary school at Mawmsai. There is no mention of him having to obtain permission from any Chief, Raja or Rangbah Shnong whereas in Manipur a Catholic Missionary confessed that friendship with the Rajah of Manipur was important for the opening of the Catholic Mission there. This may have been an aberration since the first mission buildings in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills were set up in the military stations of the British. Later however, missionary accounts say, "for convenience of the

work, permission was sought from the Rajah to build new premises on the Nongsawlia Hill lying midway between the military station and the Cherra village." Sharma correctly raises the point that it is necessary to examine why words like Syiem or Sordar were not used by the missionaries at this time. Being conversant with local language and customs, the missionaries would have known such terms if they were locally used. Even while there were detailed accounts of resistance to missionary activities by those who wanted to protect their indigenous beliefs and customs there is no mention of a village dorbar or other such influential organisations, taking an organised stand against them. If indeed the Khasis had an official hierarchy as later mentioned towards the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth century which were organised traditional bodies why were their presence never felt by the missionaries in their close associations with the people?

Sharma avers that the missionaries would have tried to influence these institutions for easy outreach to the general population. But the missionaries made no mention of any such organised hierarchical system, or popular resistance exercised through such a system. The family of Ka Nabon a Christian convert resisted her conversion but they did so as a family. No evidence exists to show that the villagers went to any organised authority to try and stop missionary activities.

In the British chronicles mention is made of the Rajah of Cherra, who intervened when a missionary and his wife were threatened by Ka Nabon's relatives. The Rajah pacified the crowd and promised to bring a rapprochement between the family and the missionaries but he failed to pacify the relatives of Ka Nabon. A proper reading of history would inform that the Rajah was not approached by the people to lead their resistance. He instead interceded on behalf of the missionaries, but the villagers refused to accept his decision.

The question therefore arises as to what was the 'tradition' in 1848? If there were Dorbars, why were these not mentioned by the missionaries who were otherwise closely associated to the people they evangelised?

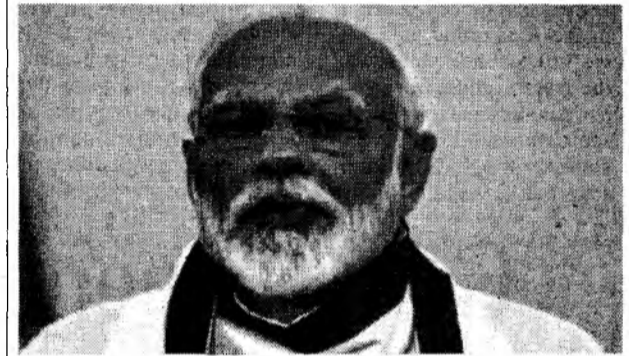
Clearly, we need more historians to go into our hoary past with its claims to exclusivity and an invented tradition.

Saffrons are leaving the US microblogging site in national interest Narendra Modi govt's war against twitter turning bizarre

By Sushil Kutty

Donald Trump's friend Narendra Modi is punishing Twitter. Punishing it in a manner befitting the action taken by Twitter against POTUS Trump after Capitol Hill. You cannot be one thing with regard to the United States' House of Congress and another thing when it comes to the Red Fort, Union Minister for Information Technology Ravi Shankar Prasad told Twitter. If police action at Capitol Hill was right and proper, then police action at Red Fort should also get the same right certificate.

Twitter hasn't reacted so far. It's playing hard to catch, but a little bird says Twitter is kind of mad that the Government of India isn't as compliant as was the Department of Justice in the Trump Administration. Twitter openly, brazenly, unequivocally, disciplined POTUS Donald Trump after Capitol Hill and one wondered then who was commander-in-chief - Jack Dorsey or Donald Trump?



In fact, if 'Manu' of the Manusmriti fame was around, Twitter would have promptly and permanently suspended him in the same manner it had Donald Trump. Then again, Twitter and Dorsey are not ideologically bent to give a friendly hug to Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Dorsey and Modi are not on the same page. They don't think alike. It's also difficult to pinpoint as to who of the two profited more from the unlikely association, Modi or Dorsey?

Guess what, maybe both of them got their pound of flesh each though Modi is a confirmed vegetarian and Jack Dorsey must in all probability like to dig his canine into chicken tikka masala. Like IT Minister Shankar Prasad said in the Rajya Sabha, Twitter and Facebook and Whatsapp, LinkedIn are all free to make their money in the Republic of India but not at the expense of India's laws. And India's ruling party of the present.

Seems like this did not go down well with Twitter, which - it seems - is a bigger champion of free speech than the Government of India and wouldn't and doesn't like the free speech of communist party leaders and journalists and media organisations curtailed by the Government of India, not if Twitter can help it. So, it is "we refuse to obey your diktat" because that diktat is not in line with the "law in/ of India" and Twitter knows the Indian law better than any Indian in India does.

In short, the microblogging site doesn't like being ordered around. It's made of sterner stuff. It has refused to be cowed down by the 'cow-party'. And the Modi Government has taken this Twitter attitude as grave provocation - a crime akin to grand larceny, even worse. India's Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (Meity) has warned Twitter of tough action ahead if it thought/ believed Twitter can dictate to India the Indian law!

There are reports that Twitter's India staff could be picked up and taken into custody. This after the micro-blogging platform blogged once too often. Minister Ravi Shankar Prasad cautioned Twitter and said there could be arrests if Twitter continued to "spread fake news and

fuel violence." And if Trump is following Twitter without being on Twitter and because he has been thrown out of Twitter he would have been thrilled to hear Prasad say that "Twitter's double-standards" would not be allowed in India.

Prasad is convinced Twitter is plotting his government's downfall; and that the farmers' agitation is being planned from overseas, and Big Tech has a dubious role. "Be it Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn or WhatsApp, action will be taken if these platforms are misused," he said. "Work in India. You have crores of followers here. We respect that. Make money but you will have to abide by Indian laws and the Constitution."

Chances are the battle between Twitter and the Modi dispensation will get uglier in the days to come, and there could be drastic action from the government's side. That's why all the "Koo" experience is

being cited time and time again by the Government of India, from inside Parliament and from outside Parliament, with television channels weighing in with their bits of wisdom. 'Koo' is being actively sold by Modi's ministers and the so-called government-friendly "godi media."

In fact, Republic TV editor-in-chief and sole owner Arnab Goswami is in the thick of 'Koo' and if there's the stench of 'conflict of interest' enveloping his whole Koo experience it's because he never forgets to allude in his nightly shows that Republic TV is part of the "Koo enterprise" and that he and the two entrepreneurs who launched Koo will make Koo a global brand to rival with and maybe even beat Twitter to second place.

To the discerning and the worldly-wise and the street-smart and from the behaviour of the Government of India and that of the 'godi media' as also that of Twitter, it looks like the Modi Government has woken up to the "threat" and "danger" from Twitter and it does not want to go the Trump way. Hence the belligerence and tough exchanges between the two sides, Twitter and the Modi Government. The government patronage to Koo is too glaring to be taken lightly. Twitter probably knows what's coming and, therefore, doesn't care.

Also, it's rather telling that Prasad took a question on social media being used to interfere with the election process. Now why would he do that unless the BJP and the Government fears that Big Tech must not be good for the BJP! "We respect the election process of India. If social media platforms are misused to tamper with the election process, our election commission and the government will take stern action," Prasad warned. "The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting has a cell to bust fake news. I would urge social media platforms to measure their unbridled exposure on your internal guidelines and take action. You are showing revenge sex videos, porn videos in an unbridled manner." Is the Modi Government afraid of going the Trump way and hence preparing the grounds to show Twitter the door? (IPA Service)

TO THE EDITOR

How long will the Govt lie?

Editor, Mahatma Gandhi once spoke of the three monkeys that see, listen or hear of the evil around them. This is exactly what is happening in Meghalaya as far as the denial about illegal coal mining is concerned. On a daily basis right from the Chief Minister to the Deputy Chief Minister and the ministers holding other portfolios all continue to deny in that there is illegal transportation and mining of coal in various parts of the state. Such is their audacity to deny even in the face of facts that we sometimes wonder how anyone can lie through their teeth. And that goes for all the officers who are involved in this illegality in spite of the rot spilling into the open. The coalition of regional parties who are the Three Monkeys are party to this illegality even though they try to portray themselves as 'innocent' bystanders while Rome is being looted. But all the

political [parties that are part of the MDA Government are collaborators in this illegality and they must take the blame because illegal mining and transportation is depriving the state of valuable income. Meghalaya is in dire financial straits but the taxes that could have come to the exchequer is looted by a few individuals. It's time to call a spade a spade.

Yours etc...
Dominic Stadlin
Wankhar
Shillong-3

Constitution guarantees free speech

Editor, Every individual enjoys full rights to support Narendra Modi or vote in favour of BJP. He/She also holds the right to dislike Congress/TMC or criticise Rahul Gandhi/Mamata Banerjee. But the saffron eco-system and its followers should also get enlightened about the simple truth that another individual or set of

individuals in this democratic country also enjoy the same rights of supporting RJD/TDP and opposing BJP!

And it is high time BJP is told in very clear terms that nationalism or truth does not depend upon the yardstick set by them. BJP is the last word of neither Hinduism nor nationalism and so the Hindu/Indian credential of any individual would not depend upon his/her stand on Ram temple Kashmir NRC "Gomata" beef-consumption or chanting "Jai Shri Ram"! Similarly neither the BJP nor its acolytes hold any democratic, moral and legal right to evaluate the "patriotism" of citizens through the yardstick of supporting/opposing Narendra Modi and his government's policies. As citizens of a democratic country with none other than the Constitution guaranteeing freedom of speech, each and every individual or political party holds every right to criticise Narendra Modi and the NDA Government or BJP in a civilized voice and non-

violent mode - be it on the Ram Mandir, revocation of Article 370 in Jammu & Kashmir, demonetisation, NRC-CAA, instant-lockdown, farm-laws or on the grounds of the economy, joblessness, national security, "Love jihad" and cow-vigilante. Instead of offering unsolicited advice on "patriotism", the BJP leaders and their followers should learn to respect diverse thoughts and opinions, tolerate criticism and engage in debate with logic, without calling names and character assassinating the ideological/political adversaries as "parasites" hatching "conspiracies" against the country by pursuing "Foreign Destructive Ideology"!

Yours etc.,
Kajal Chatterjee,
Kolkata

Overcharging by Rapido

Editor, I have heard several complaints from friends and relatives that some Rapido

captains (perhaps not all) are charging customers more than the amount reflected in the Rapido app. In my assessment, the said app calculates the fare based on the distance between the pickup and drop-off locations. With the ongoing cab agitation in many parts of the state, some of these Rapido bikers are taking the residents of Shillong for a ride (pun intended). Some of these extortionist Rapido captains are asking customers double or triple the amount even for a 10 minute ride. Usually, they would first call the customer and ask him/her the fare which is reflected on the app. They would then ask a higher fare and if the customer refuses, they would refuse to provide the service and demand that the customer cancel the ride. Upon cancellation, the helpless customer has to pay a cancellation fee which is added to his/her next ride. Many customers, especially during the evenings or those in a hurry or in an emergency, are forced to comply with the demands of some of these Rapido

drivers. From what I hear, the DTO office East Khasi Hills has clarified that Rapido has not been granted any commercial license yet to operate in the district. Rapido bikers are not deemed commercial vehicles for the purposes of paying any applicable commercial tax. As far as we are concerned, Rapido bikers are simply private two wheelers that are operating illegally without paying one paisa of commercial tax to the state exchequer. I appeal to the District Magistrate, EKH District, the Police Department and the Transport Department to initiate a thorough investigation into this Rapido business and to ensure that customers are not cheated, harassed and extorted in such an atrocious manner.

Yours etc.,
Jeremiah S.
Via email

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

"A bruise is a lesson... and each lesson makes us better."
— George R.R. Martin

The Shillong Times

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Contradictory policies

CHIEF Minister Conrad Sangma in his meeting with Prime Minister Modi waxed eloquent on climate change concerns. He proposed to hold the International Conference on Climate Change in Meghalaya. He says the Conference will showcase the various climate-related good practices in the region and bring out an action plan for climate change reversal and mitigation. All this sounds good on paper and the people of Meghalaya should be proud to have a chief minister that agonises on the adverse and often irreversible effects of climate change. But the events unfolding day in and day out in Meghalaya where coal is dug unscientifically and illegally to the point of poisoning rivers and cement plants that don't have adequate effluent treatment plants because their eye is on profit, not the environment, belie the CM's claims of environmental concerns. Just the other day a 12-tyred coal truck overturned and killed one person. The mining tragedy that killed six people is hopefully still fresh in the memories of the people of Meghalaya even though the poor labourers belong to a neighbouring state. What happens if a similar tragedy happens even while the Climate Conference is in progress? Would Meghalaya have the grace then to admit to its double standards?

Those who govern this state are leading a Jekyll and Hyde existence and allowing for massive destruction of the environment through unregulated mining of coal and limestone and also large scale quarrying of sand and stones to the point that rivers have run dry, changed courses or have become unfit for human consumption. All this is happening in the foul claim that "land belongs to the people," and government has no control over how landowners make use of their land. This is a hollow claim because as has been argued successively, no land owner can destroy the lives of the present and future generation on account of their wealth-acquisition projects. There is such a thing as corporate responsibility and payment for environmental depredation. Such a cost has not been extracted from these land owning cabals for the Meghalaya Environment Protection & Restoration Fund (MEPRF). Interestingly, the term of reference of the Fund is to look only at restoration of environment damaged due to coal mining. This is because the NGT has not taken cognisance of the damage caused by limestone mining especially in Shella-Bholaganj and Nongtalang areas. Imagine over 300 truckloads of limestone daily crossing the Bangladesh border and the extensive loss of forest cover and change in the landscape of those mining areas! And if Lafarge the international cement company is made to pay a heavy environmental cost why is this same edict not applied to other private miners? The Meghalaya CM needs to do some soul searching before waxing eloquent on the environment and ask himself if his heart and head are on the same page.

Covid-19 and beating your child

By Glenn C. Kharkongor

Violence against children during the Covid-19 pandemic has increased according to many authentic reports from around the world. But we are not talking about increased physical, emotional and sexual abuse of children by criminal perpetrators or dysfunctional step-parents, or the problems of institutionalised or street children. We are talking about the increased beating of children by their own loving parents. UNICEF, WHO and scientific journals have collated initial data and the incipient factors.

These show that during Covid, parents have used increased physical punishment with children: defined as spanking, hitting or slapping. In one survey, parents also reported an increase in conflicts with their children and an increase in yelling or screaming, using harsh words, and spanking their children more often since the start of the pandemic. Young children and adolescents are more exposed than ever to physical or psychological violence as a parenting practice.

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, children and adolescents are mostly at home with their parents and caregivers, who themselves are spending more time at home, because of restrictions on work and travel. Children are out of school, struggling to keep up with online classes, with no access to friends or playgroups. Parents have to keep them busy and safe while at the same time attempting to work at home. Added to this is the prolonged threat to family income and financial stability. These strains have affected the mental well-being of all family members, caused increased friction in family relationships, setting up a scenario for aggression and violence.

As it is, physical punishment is very common, even during the first five years of a child's life. According to UNICEF, more than half of children experience parental violence and psychological aggression. The report says that social, cultural and religious norms are used to condone such parenting norms.

Effects of physical and emotional violence

Exposure to violence, particularly in the first years of life, affect brain structure and result in lifelong impairments in cognitive and emotional capacities, in addition to contributing to high-risk and antisocial behaviour. This means that children and adolescents who are victims of violence

may show poor school performance, reduced social ability to, more irresponsible sexual behaviour or drug abuse, and a predisposition to chronic mental health disorders. These conclusions are based on scientific data.

For example, a collation of data by the American Academy of Pediatrics clearly showed that pushing, grabbing, shoving, slapping, hitting and hitting a child is associated with mood disorders, anxiety disorders, substance abuse, and personality disorders in a general population. A review of research by the Department of Family Social Sciences, University of Manitoba, and Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario in Canada has concluded that "Over the past 20 years, a growing body of research clearly indicates that children who have experienced physical punishment tend to be more aggressive toward parents, siblings, peers and, later, spouses, and are more likely to develop antisocial behaviour. Physical punishment may change areas in the brain linked to performance on IQ tests and increase vulnerability to drug or alcohol dependence."

Even a small slap conveys the message that violence is an appropriate response to conflict or unwanted behaviour. Aggression breeds aggression. Children subjected to physical punishment have been shown to be more aggressive to siblings, to bully other children at school, to show anti-social behaviour in adolescence, to be violent to their spouses and their own children, and to commit violent crimes.

Legal aspects

The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child defines physical and humiliating punishment as "any punishment in which physical force is used and intended to cause some degree of pain or discomfort, however light. In addition, there are other non-physical forms of punishment that are also cruel and degrading and thus incompatible with the Convention on the Rights of the Child. These include, for example, punishment which belittles, humiliates, denigrates, scapegoats, threatens, scares or ridicules the child."

According to the National Commission for the Protection of Child Rights, "corporal punishment is the infliction of pain intended to change a person's behaviour or to punish them. Though it

mainly refers to physical pain either through hitting or forcing the child to sit/stand in uncomfortable positions; an evolving definition also includes within its ambit wrongful confinement, verbal insults, threats and humiliation." The Commission is of the considered view that there is no room for corporal punishment in any deliberation with the child.

The Commission says, "Even animals are protected against cruelty. Cruelty to animals is punishable under section 11 of the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, 1960. Beating, kicking, overloading, torturing or otherwise mistreating any animal so as to subject it to unnecessary pain or suffering is a criminal offence. Our children surely cannot be worse off than animals."

Government of India statistics show that 65 per cent of school going children are subjected to corporal punishment. This is in spite of Section 17 of the Right to Education Act 2014 which states that "No child shall be subjected to physical punishment or mental harassment." Teachers in several Shillong schools still beat children. One school principal himself told me that he believed in the oft quoted biblical injunction.

Spare the rod, spoil the child?

According to Dr Cindy Miller-Perrin, professor of psychology, at the well-known conservative Christian Pepperdine University, liberal Christian denominations in the USA such as the Methodist and Presbyterian churches have passed resolutions encouraging parents to avoid the use of physical punishment, as have Jewish, Catholic, and Mormon faiths. However, among conservative Protestants, physical punishment of children is sometimes recommended and encouraged. Conservative Protestants report more frequent use of physical punishment than parents of other faiths.

She asks the question, "Are Christian parents biblically mandated to spank their children? Several verses in the Bible seem to indicate so. The important question, of course, is whether these passages should be interpreted as a mandate to spank, and whether the growing empirical research that spanking does more harm than good should contribute to the conversation that a symbolic interpretation would be indicated. Many progressive Christians and biblical scholars,

say the Bible should be read with an understanding of the cultural context and that it is also important to note that Jesus never advocated for physical discipline of children.

Being defensive about child beating

There are some commonly repeated reasons for beating children such as the following. "Corporal punishment is a necessary part of upbringing. Children learn from abating to respect their elders, to distinguish right from wrong, to obey rules and work hard. Without corporal punishment children will be spoiled and undisciplined." "I was hit as a child and it didn't do me any harm. On the contrary I wouldn't be where I am today if it were not for my parents and teachers physically punishing me." "There is a big difference between a vicious beating and the little smacks. These are not dangerous, do not cause real pain and cannot be called abuse. Why should these be outlawed?" and "Corporal punishment is a part of my culture and child-rearing tradition." The above questions are provided by The National Commission for the Protection of Child Rights and they have provided well-articulated answers.

In 1979 Sweden became the first country to prohibit all corporal punishment of children in schools and home. The preamble of the law says, "Children are entitled to care, security and a good upbringing. Children are to be treated with respect for their person and individuality and may not be subjected to corporal punishment or any other humiliating treatment. If we can't convince our children with words, we shall never convince them with violence." Many other Christian majority countries have enacted such laws.

The noted sociologist Malinowski provides a detailed description of the Trobriand tribals' attitude to Children, saying that "they enjoy considerable freedom and independence. The idea of a child being beaten or otherwise punished by a parent is viewed as unnatural and immoral. Things are asked as from one equal to another. A command, implying the expectation of natural obedience, is never heard from parent to child in the Trobriands".

Those tribals have got it right. The message is scientifically and morally clear: Do not beat or scold your children.

The author is a former professor of pediatrics

BJP's no holds barred electoral battle to capture West Bengal

By Dr Satish Misra

Battle for Bengal has begun. The BJP is leaving nothing to chance and is deploying every possible means to win West Bengal in the coming assembly elections as the significance of the victory is evident from the fact that Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been twice in the state in this month of February alone.

On 2 February, Modi kicked off the party's electoral campaign at Thakurnagar raising the issue of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). The choice of Thakurnagar for PM Modi's first rally reveals the significance of the place as the place is the hub of the sizeable Matua community, which originally is from erstwhile East Pakistan and began migrating to West Bengal in the beginning of the 1950s mostly due to religious persecution. The rally venue was near the house of Matua matriarch Binapani Debi, also called Boroma.

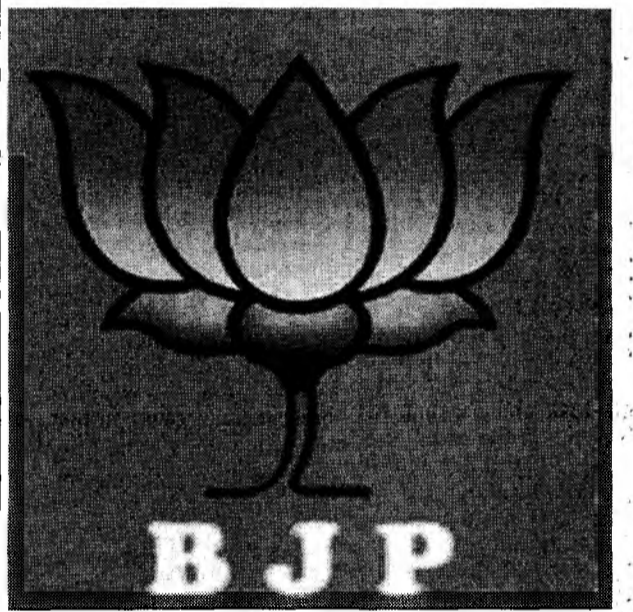
Matuas with an estimated population of 30 lakh in West Bengal -- the Matua Mahasangh claims 3 crore -- have influence in at least five Lok Sabha seats

Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee of appeasing Muslims and dispensing favours to them.

The second weapon that the BJP frequently uses is of raising the issue of corruption. It began to accuse the TMC government of corruption but at the same time it did not hesitate in inducting many TMC leaders who were involved in cases of corruption into the party.

Three of the TMC leaders, namely Mukul Roy, Suwendu Adhikari and Sovan Chatterjee - who are accused of the Narada sting case and Saradha chit fund scam and have been questioned by central and state investigating agencies, are now BJP's main faces.

While Roy was given the post of the BJP's national vice-president a few months ago, Chatterjee, a former minister and ex-mayor of Kolkata, was appointed as the party's observer of Kolkata zone Sunday. Adhikari, who joined the BJP this month, is being promoted as one of the star campaigners of the party ahead of the crucial West Bengal assembly elections.



in North and South 24 Parganas districts. Not only are they refugees, they are also a scheduled caste community with impact beyond Bengal.

From Thakurnagar, Modi went to address another rally at Durgapur, where the BJP has been undertaking a massive "Gantantra Bachao" (Save democracy) campaign. The Prime Minister attacked Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee slamming her for lack of development in the state.

Within five days on 7 February, Modi was back in the state addressing a rally at Haldia where BJP chief J P Nadda had amped up earlier by flagging off the first "Parivartan Rath Yatra".

In his address, Modi was at his aggressive best in attacking Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee accusing her of "cruelty" against the people of the state. He said ruling TMC people have criminalised politics, institutionalised corruption and politicised Police.

Modi's two visits in the first week of February were termed as political though he was in Kolkata on 23 January to celebrate the 125th birth anniversary of Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose where he did not either object or reprimand the BJP followers to raise "Jai Sri Ram" slogans. Mamata Banerjee, who was present at the event, had refused to speak.

The BJP has been actively preparing the ground for months rather for a couple of years now with party leaders and functionaries preparing the grounds by playing the communal card. It began with the saffron party's old tried and rested trick of communalizing the situation on the ground. It accused the TMC government of

From 2014 to 2019 Lok Sabha elections, Saradha and Narada issues remained the BJP's primary political weapons against Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool Congress. The Narada sting operation had come just ahead of the 2016 assembly elections. Last but not the least important card that the BJP is playing in the state is that of the dynasty as it is accusing Mamata Banerjee of promoting her nephew Abhishek Banerjee.

A victory in West Bengal for the BJP is important is also a test of Modi's popularity but apart from it, West Bengal is a doorway to the North East. The BJP knows well that without a firm foothold in Kolkata, it would not be able to hold to power in Assam and other north eastern states.

The ongoing farmers' protests and anti-CAA agitation in 2019-20 have dented the image of the BJP and that of the Prime Minister Modi in the public mind. Unemployment and deteriorating economic situation in the country has raised serious doubts over the promises that the BJP makes. Coming weeks are going to be crucial for the BJP to win but the task is difficult if not impossible because of Mamata Banerjee's indomitable spirit and her fighting skills. Moreover, West Bengal is unlike other states. It remains to be seen whether Bengali electorate of the state is going to be converted to Lord Rama in whose name BJP is banking upon. Bengal has worshipped Lord Krishna for centuries.

Despite the BJP enjoying a massive advantage over its political enemies in West Bengal and north-eastern states, yet the outcome of the electoral battle in Assam and West Bengal continues to be uncertain. [IFS]

TO THE EDITOR

Vehicle strike: 10 days and counting

Editor,
Through your esteemed daily I would like to express my concerns regarding the ongoing scenario in our State - the local commercial vehicles strike. This has been going on for 10 days now (and counting). It has created much discomfort for the public. It's understood that the reason for their call for the protest is due to the sudden hike in the price of fuel (both petrol and diesel) which has witnessed a record high of about ₹90 per litre. Yes, it is understood that the State Government must levy taxes on gasoline but the illogical and absurd amount which it is taxing on this product is really beyond anyone's comprehension. We all know that the Covid-19 pandemic has hit our

national economy hard thereby affecting all States without exception. But do our authorities not know or care to remember that the ones who are hit worst are in fact the poorest section which comprises the majority in our society? So how will this means of extracting high revenue from a commodity which all sections of our society are dependent upon, bring relief to the common people at a time when things are supposed to be gradually heading back to normalcy? In fact, this action will exacerbate the sufferings of the general public because commercial vehicle drivers are hiking their fares to more than double from what it used to be. Also this will lead to inflation of prices of all essential commodities mainly the groceries and other agricultural produce which are things that we consume on a daily basis. Let's also ponder upon

this extremely important aspect as we are heading towards gradual reopening of schools and educational institutions which are now coming up with schedules for different examinations. Internal promotion exams as well as Board Exams and University Semester End Exams etc., are scheduled to be held soon. Most students rely on commercial vehicles to commute to their schools, colleges, etc., so this hike in petrol prices which I have mentioned earlier will lead to increase in fares. This will hugely impact the wallets of the parents of these students. Not to forget that a majority of these kids have already been missing on important classes since the strike as they may not have been born with the luxury of private vehicle owning parents.

The funny side of all this is that the State Authority is turning a deaf ear to the

strike which according to me, (and also I hope I speak for most if not all the common people), is a matter of grave urgency which needs to be resolved as soon as possible. The moves that the Government has made of permitting all even/odd vehicle numbers to resume plying on a daily basis and also allowing the seating capacity to be back to what it was during pre-Covid times are unhealthy. Then the rolling back of fuel price a few days back by ₹2 which less than a week later (Friday Feb 12, 2021) has now again risen to ₹90 per litre is a nonsensical joke and a stupid ploy to try to appease the ongoing protesters by fooling the public. So through this letter I would like to tell the Government to stop the pranks and deal with the issue in a manner which will really satisfy all and not bring further discomfort and affect the livelihoods of our people.

Go ahead and increase your taxes on liquor and beverages once again (over the previous revision of 25%) and also on cigarettes or any other tobacco products as well as many other countless non-essential luxury products too - We don't mind! But lower the cost of fuel and do not justify the absurd hikes by simply employing the tactics of revising the rates of fares which will hurt us the public even more. Last but not least, I would like to urge the different Associations of Commercial Vehicle Drivers in our State and to each and every individual taxi driver too to please make sure that your protest and demands are for the betterment of all the people and not make bad calls that will benefit only yourselves at the cost of the common people. In the context of the plea for rebate on the amount of various taxes levied by the

Government in view of the pandemic situation, I would like to express my full agreement and hope that it is heard and acted upon in your favour.

Let's remember that we all need and depend on each other, for just as you all would rue to us when you're having a bad day in your line of work (as we used to hear in our local dialect, "Ym biang kamai bad khlem lait wat tang bai umphiang ne bai malik ruh namar ba duna passenger palat mynta ka sngi") so also when there's shortage of commercial transport the public's lives are affected.

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request,
Via email

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

Want a Bill Gates to emerge from community: Transgender activist

Kalki Subramaniam is a transgender activist, artist and poet. She was one of the moving forces behind the Supreme Court judgment that gave rights to transgenders in the country.

Subramaniam was in Kozhikode to participate in the 2nd edition of International Conference on Gender Equality (ICGE).

She spoke to IANS on a number of issues. Excerpts from the interview:

You recently wished on a public platform for a Bill Gates coming from the transgender community. How realistic are you on this issue?

I said this at the 2nd International Conference on Gender Equality with 100 per cent conviction. After the Supreme court recognised our community in 2014, there are more and more children from the community taking up technical and software education. Many are employed well in the software sector. Hence, I want that in the future you see people from the transgender community scaling great heights to become software entrepreneurs and world leaders in the field. So I am being totally realistic.

Generally you find people from the transgender community reclusive and not forthcoming, but you are very confident on public forums and even very pro-active and articulate. Where do you derive this confidence from?

Everything starts with the family. In case of most transgender people, the family support is missing, and they are even thrown out on the streets. Even if they are allowed to stay put, they are never recognised and kept away from family celebrations and auspicious occasions. However, in my case, it was in the reverse. Even though my parents were not educated, they supported me fully and gave me good education. This gave me the confidence and led to increase in my articulation skills. And so, I am where I am. Both my sisters and mother are highly supportive of me, even after my father passed away 15 years ago.

What do you feel is the biggest steps to be taken by authorities to ensure equality for the transgenders in society?

Sensitising teachers and police on transgender populace is an important step for the government to take so as to bring respect to our community in the country. If you sensitise teachers, it will lead them to teach a large number of children on the subject. It will in turn lead to major transformation among students. Police also has to be sensitised so that they act quickly whenever any transgender is the target of any crime. These are two steps the government should immediately take to reduce atrocities on the transgenders.

You are heading an organisation 'Sahodari' for the welfare of the transgender community. What are your

Subramaniam hopes for a future where people from the transgender community will scale great heights to become software entrepreneurs and world leaders in the field



activities?

We conduct awareness programmes among community members on government support available to them as also build up confidence in them. We are also into production and sale of artefacts. However, since we don't have any support from the governments or corporates, our programmes are very limited.

During the lockdown, the government of India announced some schemes for you. Can you explain?

The government of India announced Rs 1,500 for each transgender through direct bank transfers. According to the 2011 census, we have around 5 lakh transgenders but only around 2,000 may have actually got the money. The reason is the lack of awareness in the community. It has to be seriously worked on. Interestingly, there could be more than 30 lakh transgender people in India. It is thus difficult for us to spread awareness across the community with the meagre resources we have.



What are your major activities among transgenders as you are a sort of an icon for the community?

I am mainly into sensitising schoolchildren. I have single-handedly spoken to more than a million students across the country on transgender issues. I get calls from these students, who have since grown up and themselves become entrepreneurs. They are employing transgender people in their organisations. I consider it a major achievement for all my work within the community -- converted a young generation from 'transphobic' to 'transfriendly'.

What are your future goals?

I haven't set any goals as such, but of course I will see to it that transgender community is educated, and they are not looked down upon by society. We also want entrepreneurs to come from it. Another major point that I would like to say to powers that be is to sensitive the bureaucracy during training so that they get a basic idea of what we are and what our problems are. (IANS)

Women career scientists still face gender bias: UNESCO

Women still account for only 28 per cent of engineering graduates and 40 per cent of graduates in computer science and informatics, said a forthcoming UNESCO Science Report.

A chapter on gender in science from the report, called 'To be Smart the Digital Revolution will Need to be Inclusive', was published on International Day of Women and Girls in Science, and highlights that women are not benefiting fully from employment opportunities open to highly educated and skilled experts in cutting edge fields such as artificial intelligence where only one in five professionals (22 per cent) is a woman, according to a 2018 study by the World Economic Forum on the Global Gender Gap.

A statement from UNESCO said: "Likewise, women founders of start-ups still struggle to access finance, and, in large tech companies, they remain under-represented in both leadership and technical positions. They are also more likely than men to leave the tech field, often citing poor career prospects as a key motivation for their decision. Corporate attitudes towards women are evolving, however, as studies link investor confidence and greater profit margins to having a diverse workforce."

"Women need to be part of the digital economy to prevent Industry 4.0 from perpetuating traditional gender biases. As the impact of artificial intelligence on societal priorities continues to grow, the underrepresentation of women's contribution to research and development means that their needs and perspectives are likely to be overlooked in the design of products that impact our daily lives, such as smartphone applications."

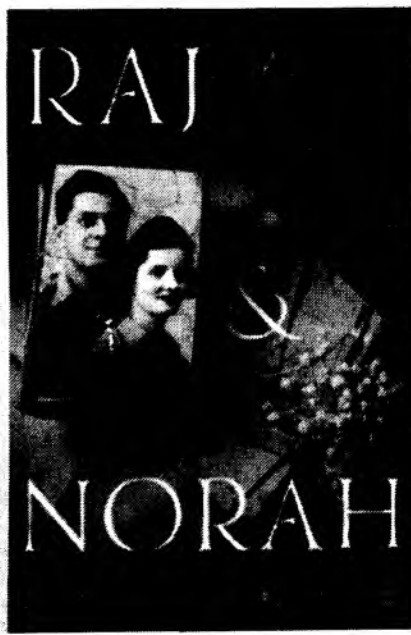
"Even today, in the 21st century, women and girls are being sidelined in science-related fields due to their gender. Women need to know that they have a place in science, technology, engineering and mathematics, and that they have a right to share in scientific progress," said UNESCO Director-General Audrey Azoulay in a statement.

The glass ceiling also remains an obstacle to women's careers in academia, despite some progress, says the statement. Globally, women have achieved numerical parity (45:55 per cent) at the bachelor's and master's levels of study and are on the cusp at PhD level (44 per cent), according to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics. The gender gap widens as women progress in their academic careers, with lower participation at each successive rung of the ladder from doctoral student to assistant professor to director of research or full professor.

Overall, female researchers tend to have shorter, less well-paid careers. Their work is underrepresented in high-profile journals and they are often passed over for promotion. Women are typically given smaller research grants than their male colleagues and, while they represent 33.3 per cent of all researchers, only 12 per cent of members of national science academies are women. (IANS)

Books & Literature

Raj & Norah: A true story of love lost & found in WWII



Raj & Norah is not only a thrilling account of love found, lost and reclaimed in the midst of World War II, it is also a story of two extraordinary individuals battling against their circumstances and what fate has in store for them.

When World War II broke out in 1939, twenty-year-old Rajendra Kohli was studying chemistry at college in England. Soon, however, he decided to volunteer for the war effort against Germany and joined the army.

After his heroic actions on the front left him severely injured, he found himself in Naples for treatment. There, he met Norah Elizabeth Eggleton, a nurse with Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service.

It was love at first sight, and in each other's company, the young couple forgot the devastation that surrounded them. But as quickly as their story began, it was over - Raj was sent to London, Norah was posted to a hospital in Rome, and they wondered if they would ever see each other again.

"My dad and I always knew this was a story for the books for many reasons," said Shaina Kohli Russo, co-author of the book, published by HarperCollins.

"My grandparents led extraordinary lives and their love story is truly inspiring, but on top of that, not many

I found it difficult and challenging to write the story of two people who I knew so intimately, but I knew it was a story that needed to be told. It wasn't until my daughter, Shaina, took an interest in the project that it was finally completed. She was the one who brought the project to life, says co-author Peter R Kohli

know that India fought as an ally in WWII and more so that many Indian soldiers were Muslim. It's a part of history that has not been talked about and it's so important that we finally recognize all the countries (and individuals) who helped us in the greatest war in history to defeat the greatest evil. Nowadays a lot of fear of 'others' is fuelled by differences, but if we could note that we have common ground, it truly could change the world," Russo added.

"I began writing the story of my parents about 20 years ago," said co-author Peter R. Kohli. "I found it difficult and challenging to write the story of two people who I knew so intimately, but I knew it was a story

that needed to be told. It wasn't until my daughter, Shaina, took an interest in the project that it was finally completed. She was the one who brought the project to life."

Peter R. Kohli worked in corporate America since emigrating to the US in 1977 from England, where he went to university and worked for many years. Since leaving the business world in 2016, he has spent his time writing.

Shaina Kohli Russo graduated from Pepperdine University in 2013 and worked in the entertainment industry for eight years.

She currently lives with her husband in Nashville, Tennessee, and is working on a novel. (IANS)

Messages of love, hope from global litterateurs

By Siddhi Jain

Indian author, Ruskin Bond, and British spoken-word artist George the Poet are widely known for kicking off the Royal Wedding of Meghan Markle and Prince Harry with his poem are among the six prominent authors and poets to have created fifteen original positive short stories of love, friendship, community, work, hope and family, as a signal of love and optimism in these trying times.

The stories were commissioned on behalf of Nokia phones and have been created and designed to be shared with loved ones as Short Moving Stories (SMS) e short, textable messages of hope.

According to Nokia, this collaboration comes after a year in which people worldwide have learnt to slow down and find new ways to stay in touch with their lives and loved ones by using their phones, with the

artists designing messages of hope to give people a way to connect and inspire each other.

According to Stephen Taylor, Chief Marketing Officer at Nokia phones, "if the last year has shown us anything it's the importance of positivity. Following nearly a year of isolation and vulnerability one thing that stood out to us is the power of people's collective voices to spread positivity in a time of need, which is also at the core of our business and ties back to our Finnish roots e Finland has consecutively won the title of being the happiest country in the world. So we are championing positive voices from around the world to spread uplifting messages, and help support each other as we come through the other side of global lockdowns."

Veteran author Ruskin Bond said: "In a world of constant ups and downs, what helps us survive is the

comfort we find in words spoken by our loved ones. These words have the power to create magic and help us through the toughest of times. I hope that my short stories help people in expressing their feelings to their loved and special ones. Share along."

As per critically acclaimed poet, podcaster and spoken word artist George the Poet, sometimes a few words can make all the difference. "We've all experienced how some days can feel flat and endless, especially as we can't see our friends and family. Like the new Nokia 5.4, I hope that my poems help you stay connected and in touch with your loved ones, until we can all be together again."

The Panel of Positivity also includes James McInerney (UK), George Kagwe (Kenya), Alina Balashova, and Juan Pablo Gaviria (Bogote, Colombia). (IANS)

JATIN DAS INK-PAINTS 2020'S MIGRANT WORKER CRISIS

By Siddhi Jain

Highlighting the plight of daily wage workers during the nationwide lockdown last year, senior Indian artist and Padma Bhushan recipient Jatin Das will soon exhibit a series of ink paintings he did on the subject of mass migration the pandemic caused.

Captured in ink on paper, in his signature style, the show of paintings titled 'Exodus 2020' will be on view at the Art Alive Gallery in New Delhi. The show is scheduled to run from February 20-March 15.

"Like everyone else, I was stuck at home for more than six months. I barely stepped out. What I missed the most was going to my studio, where I work from morning to late evening. Instead, I spent most of my time cooking and cleaning. But I was restless at home. I had two hundred odd acid free paper, some ink pots and lots of brushes. So I began painting. What appeared in the newspapers and television, and what I had observed over the years, all spontaneously came pouring out. And that is how the series was born, which I have named 'Exodus 2020'," says Das who was born in 1941 in Odisha, and has spent over 6 decades creating art.

Saying that the inspiration for his work has always come from the working class -- those who make roads, lay bricks, paint high rise buildings, the beldars, thehelawallahs, kudawallahs, manhole cleaners, rag pickers, house-help, construction workers, all those who toil non-stop -- Das adds: "During the lockdown the migrant workers, who build our homes and cities, had to go back to their villages. There was no work in the city, so no earnings. Hundreds and thousands of them had to walk bare feet, some on cycles, and others atop buses, without fearing the scorching sun, without food and water. They went with their little belongings, tucked under their arms, or on their heads. Men and women carried their children on their shoulders, in baskets, in their tired arms, quietly walking, through days



and nights, non-stop." "Normally, I paint figures, who are bare bodied, beyond any specific context of time and place. I don't have any other elements of clothing, architecture, foliage or animals, or anything that would localise it. But this is a special series, a response to our troubled times," says the artist, teacher and cultural expert.

Das is also the Founder and Chairman of the JD Centre of Art. (IANS)

'Museum sector in India needs to understand what the audience want'

Vinod Daniel, who spearheads the not-for-profit India Vision Institute (IVI), which promotes excellence in vision care delivery, is also a Member, International Council of Museums (ICOM), Paris.

During his recent Kolkata visit IBNS-TWF correspondent Supriyo Hazra caught up with him to discuss his project and the challenges museums are facing amid the pandemic. Excerpts:

What made you come to Kolkata this time?

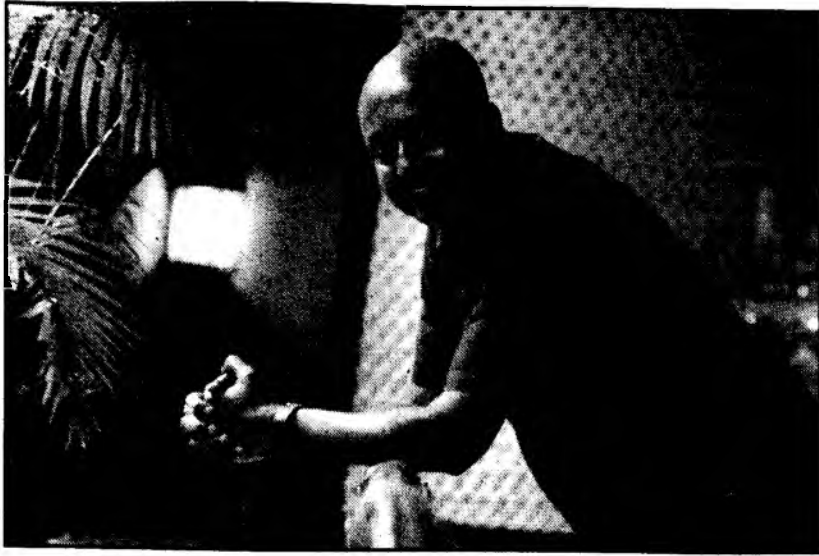
I have been to Kolkata about 25 times before. Prior to this visit, I have been here on numerous projects related to museums as well as vision. In this particular trip, I am concerned with both these aspects- museum and vision care. I was really delighted to give a lecture at Victoria Memorial this time. The setting of the grand location indeed made the entire event special. Meanwhile, my team is performing a vision screening project for underprivileged people in Bengal. In future, I will love to work in several such projects related to the concerned area.

How has the pandemic impacted museums across the world?

I feel that the biggest challenge which the museums face is in terms of the number of people who would visit the museums and experience everything which the institutions provide them. Typically, a museum which would attract a hundred people in a day might be able to accommodate less than half that number these days due to the pandemic. That shows the fear the public have with regard to public places, especially to close spaces. Until the world adjusts to the new normal, I feel the number of visitors will remain down by 40 to 50 percent.

Do you think that the governments across the world, including India, are promoting museums to students and other upcoming generations?

I would like to qualify your question. Overall, museums have a strong support of the government. In a place like India, most museums are either 100 percent undertaken or a substantial percent undertaken by the government. However, that is not the case in



many other nations. During the pandemic, I am not sure whether museums in India had additional support. However the good part is that a substantial part of the support goes towards paying the staff salary. And I feel that part has been performed by the government in India as most of

more way for museums to reach the public as physical visits have their own limits. I feel in the years to come, people will once again visit museums like they used to do in the normal period. The online tools will remain as an additional factor for museums. So, museums have this area of growth

We need govt support in terms of their programming, exhibitions, outreach and education

the employees are public servants. However, the museums really need government support in terms of their programming, exhibitions, outreach and education. I think only time will tell what will happen. I must add that it will be indeed a good step if the government provides some kind of assistance to non-governmental museums at this time of pandemic.

Do you feel that students in this age of technology are missing the enthusiasm to visit museums?

Over the last period of nine to twelve months, most museums have remained shut. However, now they are opening up once more. Meanwhile, there has been a trend of engaging in developing online programmes and tools. I feel that it is good as it is one

and capacity to expand its scope with these additional visitors. However, museums will now need to have enough resources to keep serving the online audience.

I don't think the current staff are well equipped to do it. New employees are needed to be employed and new initiatives are needed to be added to understand the audience better. Moreover, the authority will also need to learn the way of monetising the entire new aspect which is growing in recent times. My last point is that, one audience group which the museum misses out on are those aged between 15 to 35. So, the museum authority now has the opportunity to attract these people who are active online and on the social media platforms.

How can the conditions of Indian museums be improved in future?

The museum sector in India at this stage has a fantastic opportunity to grow. India can really rediscover itself in this arena. I think it is important that museums are given independence. I know there is a trust and there is a CEO and others who run it. It is important that this independence is respected. You can't really implement programmes and get the fund raising done without independence. The museums cannot be run as a public service arm by the government of the day. A good leader is needed who serves for at least 8 years. A good structure is also needed to move the sector forward. Apart from this issue, museums will also require skilled human resources. The pandemic has also changed the scenario a lot with this regard. Previously, you needed to hire a person and he needed to travel to a place to work there. However, with the availability of online technologies, experts, with proper needed skills, who are sitting far away can be hired on a part-time basis to help you. Now, that can be an answer until you develop your own skilled workers. So, there is a chance to capitalize the current situation with the help of technology.

What changes are required?

Museums in India also need to start changing their views. The museums need to understand how they can provide their content to the audience. They need to understand what the audience wants. All these are part of the process. Apart from them, keeping in mind the online aspect, one needs to understand that museums in India have good contents. India also has expertise and IT to translate the contents. Moreover, India has also got some of the best people in the movie sector. They can tell the story well. So, I believe it is time to put this combination in place to attract the audience. It will also make it easier to monetise as you cannot just do it by saying that I am putting all my collections online. The authority can also incorporate the Indian heritage of dance and music to it and all these steps will really redefine the museology sector. (Trans World Features)

A CULINARY GUIDE FROM INDIA'S EASTERN HILLS



By Siddhi Jain

The new book, "Spiced, Smoked, Pickled, Preserved: Recipes and Reminiscences from Indias Eastern Hills" by Indraneel Ghosh, is a delectable collection of stories with over 75 recipes from India's eastern hills including North Bengal, Gangtok and Shillong for food enthusiasts to savour.

Published by Hachette India, the 248-page book brings together charming vignettes from her youth in the densely forested Khasi Hills and then in Bengal's plains with a delectable selection of family recipes passed down over three generations to weave an utterly engaging narrative.

Ghosh was born in Shillong, the capital of Meghalaya and the erstwhile capital of Assam.

A taste for local cuisine in the Northeastern hills of India combined with an early interest in cooking, nurtured by her mother and uncle, led to various experiments in the kitchen. The recipes in the book contain some instances of this, says the publisher.

Tales of eccentric kith and kin, family folklore from the time of the Second World War and memories of Partition jostle with stories of kitchen ad-

ventures, reminiscences of cherished gatherings where food always took centre stage and fascinating nuggets on hard-learned culinary techniques.

Featuring over 75 recipes that represent a mix of Bengali, Khasi and Nepali cuisine, this collection will introduce readers to host of exciting fare from essential spice mixes to forgotten dishes reinvented over time; from fermented delicacies like shidol in pumpkin leaves to the sizzling nuggets of a pan-roasted telapiya; from flavoury fish stew to mouth-watering pork in plum sauce; and from the sweet-and-sour magic of fish roe ambal to a delicious tangerine payesh.

Whether one is an intrepid food-lover willing to take their kitchen adventure just that bit further, or a comfort-food enthusiast looking for a bowl of goodness, or simply want to tickle their tastebuds with a fresh flavour this treasure trove of treats is a must-have culinary guide.

The author's translations of selected poems by the Bengali poet Joy Goswami have been published by Worldview Books in India, and Whale and Star in the US.

She has also translated the memoirs of Kanan Devi, one of the earliest Bengali film actresses, published as My Homage to All. (IANS)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambhani

Sunday, February 14, 2021

'Birthday Forecast'

Moon conjunct Neptune on your solar return chart and it is going to be a very good year for you. It will turn out to be an amazing year. You will appear far more assured and wiser. You will enjoy your work. The projects that you have been thinking getting completed would see the light of the day. You would be man with the midas touch. You will be able to win a big order for your concern. Your name and fame will spread far and wide. People will start taking notice of you. And you will be able to convince them too. You would be invited at social gatherings and new contracts would be developed. You will have numerous business opportunities too. A female person might prove lucky for you and may be a source of comfort. Your brothers/sisters would support you and will be a source of inspiration. Financial position would be good.

This week for you!

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) You are able to integrate forces, resources and professional aspects to achieve success in important business ventures. With the expertise that you possess in your field, you achieve goals and targets on time. This is an exceptionally exciting time as challenging professional and business opportunities are offered to you. Deep personal relations and business partnerships are likely to get closer. Personal relationships gain a romantic and exciting quality. Tackle sensitive subjects and difficult people and get your point across. You are individualistic brilliant and daring in professional aspects as new projects get under way.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) You would be more accommodative and compassionate in professional and personal relationships. Friendship, cooperation and synergy are available and you enjoy the association of your loved ones. An opportunity for career advancement, a promotion or gainful business opportunity may be offered. You win debates, competitions and sports with your dynamic energy and power. Your personal charm and charisma take you through complicated situations. Even though possibilities and horizons open up, you tend to think negatively and imagine the worst. You may feel oppressed by too much work. It is the best time to share and delegate work and not to carry the entire burden yourself.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) You would be most successfully doing tasks that involve cooperation and team harmony. Emotional attachments and relationships are rewarded with reciprocation. Some interesting people are drawn to you and invite you to work with them. Your position of power and authority is maintained despite many changes all around. You can draw correct conclusions from previous knowledge of people you meet again personally when making important decisions. Business projects and associations are opening up and widening your horizons so you need to think expansively from now onwards. A new cycle begins with the old order finishing as inner and outer changes are on the cards. Health problems are resolved and your energy is restored.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) There is good luck attending to material matters, as there is increase of wealth and monetary gains. This is the right time to share your loving and personal relationships and share thoughts and ideas and spend good time in the association of your loved one. Practical details are to be dealt with clarity and efficiency. You may be involved in meetings with business associates as financial and business dealings would bring good results and gains. You can count on your professional and personal partners, as they stand by you through thick and thin. You will work in free and unrestricted space. Physical energy and good health allow you to tackle busy schedules.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) Your actions and emotions are balanced as you bring more accuracy in your work area. Economy at home and management of business and work are important issues of the week. You connect with new people and discuss important business matters. Financial transactions and professional projects go ahead smoothly with goodwill and profit. Your professional skills, wisdom and craft are appreciated and fresh opportunities for expansion are made available to you. Personal relations are satisfying and you have plenty of affection and friendship around you. You could be attracted to new people and ideas as you are open and receptive.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 23) The unpredictable is likely to happen that too when you least expect it. Surprises are in store for you in professional and personal matters. It would be best to be open and receptive in personal relations and family situations. A flexible approach in the work area is recommended. New people may come into your life and influence your decisions and

direction. Creative opportunities should not be ignored as it is likely to bring substantial professional material gain. While you work on one project another suddenly gains more importance and demands more attention. A financial windfall is possible as some dues come to you after a period of time. Don't be thrown by new developments. Meditation and spiritual pursuits can be rewarded and worth pursuing.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) This phase opens up a world of romance and love in personal relations. You are gracious with family and children. You would express yourself in a gracious and exalted manner and influence people in authority. There could be alteration in ideas or plans, increase and decrease in finances and fluctuation in business. You can be lead away by enthusiasm unless careful inner balance is maintained. Marriage, business partnership and collaboration is strengthened through understanding and commitment. You may handle more than one project at the same time with expertise and success. Commercial transactions and business deals could be conducted effectively.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) Good luck in finances and opportunities is encouraging. You are likely to spend time in different places and work closely in new associations as you combine good luck and good management. You share some memorable moments with a loved one. You are in touch with an innocence that comes from life lived fully, which also has a quality of wisdom and the acceptance of the ever-changing wonders of life. You would express your views and comments without fear of losing a contract and manipulate well to turn things in your favor. Luxury shopping may make a hole into your pocket but makes your family happy and cheerful. It would be good to say what you feel as you would be appreciated for your honesty.

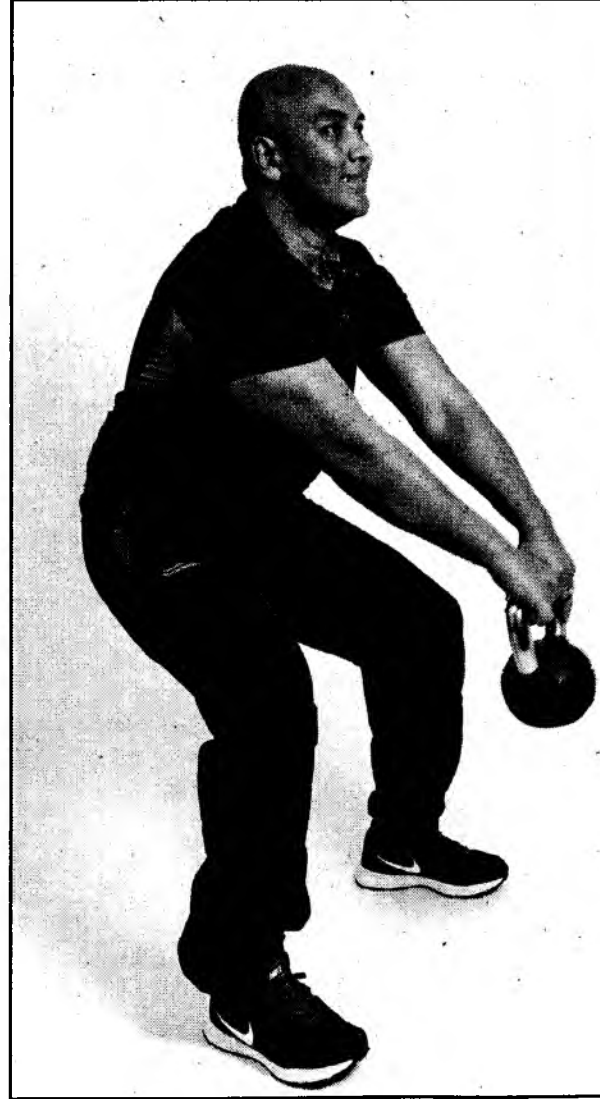
Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) You are bold, courageous and frank while dealing with controversial and professional matters. You are likely to meet high profile people and share ideas and spend some time in their association. A stimulating project should be taken as a challenge which would further your business prospects. Your associates and co-workers form a cohesive team with you. A wonderful professional opportunity takes you towards success. Good planning and management lead to progressive and productive ventures. A chance meeting will lead to romance, love and even a long lasting relationship. You may take a short break before starting on a new project to renew your energy. You are able to achieve a lot at home and at work with your youthful energy.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) The planetary configuration indicates that there is conflict within and discord outside. You may be divided about business and professional matters and finally come to terms on a compromise which might be the best thing to do at this time. You may disagree on a point of view with your partner but the love between you allows peace and acceptance. Emotions and mood can swing to extremes and it is important to achieve equilibrium. Your social life is expansive and a variety of people connect with you. You are stronger and wiser after having gone through trouble and difficulty. It would be wiser to face difficult people and situations rather than escape as there would be victory and success in professional ventures.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) You have the ability to stand alone. You are independent, creative, original, ambitious, determined and self-assured. Adopting a realistic, practical and disciplined approach towards life would bring harmony at home. This period proves to be good for the people in show business and in a creative line. Your ability to express yourself and to solve problems is enhanced. Students in music, singing, fashion design and beauty culture will get success and good results. Professionally huge expenses as well as financial gains from foreign business associates are foretold. You feel touchy and sensitive with your romantic partner.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) You are generous with friends, and loving in family situations. Your suave ways go down well with many. You stand at crossroads while making an important decision whether it is professional or personal. It would be better to listen to our own good judgment and do what is good for you especially as people around you could be judgmental or manipulative. Do not forget to share your feelings with the one who loves and cares for you. You can get stressed and a health problem could manifest as you worry about everything. You are fortunate as things turn out well in difficult situations at work and home. Your financial situation looks promising if you manage it well personally rather than trust upon others. A relaxed and light attitude would help to overcome negative thoughts.

Career as a Fitness Trainer



Ranjan K Baruah

One can start without a formal degree but as there is demand, it is always good to have formal degree or diploma and exposure to become successful in this field

of the options for them who can be fitness instructor or trainer for others.

Fitness Trainers are known by different names: aerobics instructor, gym instructor, personal trainers and so on. A fitness instructor's main job is to train people in the various aspects of physical fitness and maintain health by staying fit. Additionally they can give advice on nutrition.

Fitness trainer works one-on-one in case of personal training, works for a group of people in fitness centers, health clubs or gyms. These days' people are in quest of personal trainers to help them learn how to exercise, lose weight, sustain all round fitness and adopt an improved lifestyle.

One can start without a formal degree but as there is demand, it is always good to have formal degree or diploma and exposure to become successful in this field. The options for pursuing professional courses are many.

One can opt for a certificate/diploma course in sports science/yoga/fitness to become a fitness instructor. Some of the prominent ones are institutions under Sports Authority of India (SAI), Indira Gandhi Institute of Physical Education & Sports Sciences, Lakshmi Bai National College of Physical Education, Netaji Subhash National Institute of Sports, among others.

A number of institutes and university offer undergraduate and postgraduate level i.e. Bachelors in Physical Education (B P Ed.) and Masters in Physical Education (M P Ed.).

There are various options of employment after getting formal degrees or other training.

Most of the people join some established organisation. But there are always scopes for new people if they have some of the other skills like communication skills, management skills and writing skills.

Fitness trainers are generally employed by hotels, health clubs, gyms, fitness centres, spas, tourist resorts, housing societies and large organisations.

Trainers with good writing skills or speaking may join various media houses both in print or electronic or even start their own channel which can be broadcasted through various media.

Some may join corporate as corporate trainers as most are focusing for good health and fitness.

There are scopes for the young people of the state as most are physically fit and strong.

Mushrooming of gyms and fitness centres bring more scopes for the people who are trained fitness instructors or experienced instructors.

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

All of us dream of good health. Be it a man or woman, every one prefers to be fit. But in the busy schedule and rapid urbanization many do not get scope for doing exercise to keep them fit, as most are busy in their daily work.

The pandemic has also bought many new questions in front of us. As fitness is important and we need to get good health, fitness trainers or instructors play an important role.

There is growing demand for the fitness instructors and hence there has been growth and demand in the field of fitness. Fitness training is one of the fastest growing careers in the health and fitness industry today.

Today, fitness has become a flourishing business, with more and more health centres coming up. Careers in the fitness industry include that of athletic trainer, physical therapist, fitness instructor/trainer, etc.

Young people who are passionate for fitness or games and sports can take it up as a career option. Many of the sports persons in the north east do not get enough support financially after a certain period and this can be one

"It takes sunshine and rain to make a rainbow. There would be no rainbows without sunshine and rain."

— Roy T. Bennett

The Shillong Times

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Pulwama and after

TWO years ago Pulwama was a grim reminder of how this nation of 1.3 billion was held to ransom by terrorists trained by the Pakistani military. Balakot that followed 12 days later signified India's resolve to checkmate such agencies. To a large extent, the counter-offensive has helped even though the extent of damage caused to Pakistan or to the terror modules remains unclear. The positive side of the Balakot hit was that Pakistani generals, having taken an unexpected hit, stopped their attempts at browbeating India. The cautious approach of Prime Minister Imran Khan has helped too in restoring a modicum of peace in the subcontinent.

The 26/11 Mumbai terror attacks in 2008 was a watershed in the 30-year-old history of insurgency by Pakistani terrorists in Kashmir Valley and beyond. This having happened under the UPA term of Manmohan Singh, Mumbai went unanswered. India rather blinked. But, the resolve to retaliate began emerging here from then on, in case such eventualities arose in the future. Pulwama happened on February 14, 2019, and the retaliation was swift and well-organised. While there was no huge damage to Pakistan, and this by deliberate intent on the part of the Indian leadership, fact is also that this was for the first time that Indian military jets forced their way into areas deep inside, the military headquarters in Rawalpindi, and returned safely after accomplishing the task of pounding terrorist hideouts run with military protection there. True, India lost a fighter plane or two in a counter-offensive from Pakistan, but fact was also that the enemy jets failed to cross the border into India.

The Pakistani military generals who were engaged in bombasts for the past many years that they would teach a lesson to India with nuclear bombs if any attack was attempted at from this side, were tongue-tied and ran for cover. With Imran Khan too having taken a hit from the Indian offensive, the Pakistani establishment as a whole chose to lie low thereafter. India does not seek a war with Pakistan or China. The threat that existed for a while about a united offensive by these two militaries against India, the two acting in unison, too is dissipating. China seems to be in a mood to discuss and sort out matters along the LAC and Ladakh or the Galwan Valley in particular. Overall, therefore the security scenario in the entire geopolitical region seems set for improvement. This is a good sign for the post-Covid days when attention could be focused more on economic revival.

Hoping for better political system in the state

By HH Mohrmen

It started with a soul searching weekly column by the Editor of *The Shillong Times*, Patricia Mukhim which asked if there is any honest politician in the state now? Then another columnist Albert Thyrniang taking leave from the editor's article, raised the bar higher and asked if the church has failed in its sacred duty to produce an honest and upright member of the society? The other question raised is of what use is the church if what we have is a society which is corrupt? Has the church failed in its moral duty to bring change to society? What followed the two articles were series of letters to the editors which echoed the same concerns.

Corruption in the system started from the very beginning of the democratic process and that is during the elections. For the party to allot a ticket to a candidate, the main factor that is considered is his or her 'winnability' or chance of winning the elections. What does winnability mean? What are the parameters used to consider if the candidate has the chance to win the election or not? The primary factor that the party would consider is, if the candidate can muster enough money power to contest the election. In other words a big bank balance! Other factors like the candidate's leadership skills, educational qualifications, experiences in public service, his/her vision and dedication is of no importance as money is considered to be the main criteria for winning the election.

So why is money considered important? During elections, apart from having to spend money on organising campaigns and hiring buses to ferry supporters from one meeting to another, it is also used for feeding the supporters. Money is used to organise rallies but, sadly, much of the money exchanges hands just two or three days before the elections, in exchange for votes. In Meghalas elsewhere different organisations also expect favours from the candidates during elections; not personal favours of course but it is always on behalf of

educational institutions, sports or cultural clubs, the dorbar shnong, the sengkur, or the project or activities that the society, or even church runs.

The question that begs the answer is how can one expect politicians to be honest when the churches too are expecting them to consider them favourably? In the world where not only humans but even organisations and institutions have their own axes to grind, it is almost impossible to expect politicians to be honest. There are many instances when even faith groups are reaching out to the politicians during or prior to the elections. For example, they seek financial support for the school, hospitals, orphanages etc., that the organisations run. There is no harm in seeking support from any political entity but the problem is the timing in which the favour was sought. It is of course a major concern if it happens before or during the elections and it is even more serious if it is projected as if the politician is doing a favour for the faith group because he had donated or supported their causes.

How else would one expect the politicians to be honest when churches which plan to build multi crore church buildings are expecting the politicians to contribute to the project? The question is - Can public money be used in building churches, temples and mosques in a secular country like India?

The church is one very influential institution in the society but the pertinent question is whether we can blame the church only? What about other faith organisations because society comprises of members from other faith groups too. In the context of the Khasi Pnar society, the question of honesty in both public and personal life is enshrined in the traditions on which the society is built. The Khasi Pnar's way of life is expected to be governed by the three important cardinal principles 'ka kamai ia ka hok, ka tip-briew tip-blei bad ka tip-kur tip-kha,' but what use are these principles if there is no truth, no righteousness and no

honourable living in the society? What use are these principles if they are not put into practice and the society becomes a sham?

It is not just the state but the country too is passing through troubled times. The farmers' protest which has been going on for months together is another sign of a country which is in trouble. Though the protest has even gained the support of people from outside the country, yet there does not seem to be a solution to the problem. A ray of hope from the last budget session came from a speech by Mahua Moitra which went viral and has been debated far and wide across the country.

Mahua Moitra's scintillating speech in the august house which most probably is the second most popular speech she made has not only sent shivers down the spine of the ruling dispensation, but has caught the attention of many. Many believe that the Trinamul Congress MP echoed the general feelings of the nation. It is not only Mahua speaking in the House but she resonates the feelings of a common man when she rightly questions the functions of the two main pillars of democracy in the present dispensation. Democracy is in peril if the integrity of the judiciary is questioned. Democracy is in danger if those who question the function of the government are condemned as anti-nationals and are put behind bars without proper trial. Democracy dies the day the press which is supposed to be a watchdog and questions the government becomes a lapdog and hobbnob with those in power. Democracy will not survive if instead of being independent and standing on the side of truth, media chooses sides. It is a sad state of affairs that media now have sides and are alleged to be left or right leaning institutions.

There are also those who raised the flak against Mohua's fiery speech in parliament. But isn't parliament the place to speak the truth and during every session isn't it the duty of parliamentarians to raise important issues that

the elected member considers important? If not in parliament then where and when is the right time and the right place to raise these critical issues? Truth has to be told and like Mohua Moitra says it cannot be expunged.

It is now obvious that in the ensuing election to the West Bengal legislative Assembly, the sloganeering competition will be between the Hindu slogan of Jai Shri Ram and Joy Maa Durga or Joy Maa Kali. It is now obvious that Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Amit Shah met their match in Mohua Moitra and Mamata Banerjee the two Royal Bengal tigresses.

Like the storm which promises sunshine, the year that was and the beginning of the current year also hold a promise of a better future for the state. In spite of all the gloom and doom there is hope amidst this dark despair. The recent personal interview for selection of teachers for government Lower and Upper Primary schools in the state under the supervision of the Hon'ble court has brought fairness to the selection process for future teachers in the state. The personal interview under CCTV surveillance which has made a huge difference in the selection process is a welcome change. The selected candidates said that this time it is different because they have passed without any political intervention.

Another ray of hope of having a fair and clean election also lies with the Dorbar Shnong. Since the last election some dorbar shnong have prohibited candidates from bringing big crowds to their campaigns. Instead one or two vehicles were allowed and only the candidate and few of his supporters were allowed to be present in the meeting. This small step has no doubt minimised the expenditure which involves hiring of vehicles and serving food for the supporters. The dorbar shnong has a big and important role to play if the state is to have a clean election. The lockdown from COVID-19 pandemic has taught us one lesson and that is the power of the dorbar shnong to bring change to the society.

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Civilization and education

By Kalparaj Chakraborty

21st Century - The revolution in technology, the explorations of space, the miracles of medical science, the spectacular opulence of some nations, the dazzling high-rises in the metropolises and the apotheosis of state politics has definitely compelled us to proudly proclaim that we are, indeed, civilized. Shall the connotation of the term, then, remain confined only to its technological, infrastructural and political advancement? I wonder many a time! We need to first comprehend the meaning of the term 'Civilization' and later scrutinize its demands.

The word itself comes from the Latin root 'civilis', meaning 'civil'. The word 'civilization' first began appearing during the Enlightenment. If you're familiar with the Enlightenment, this is not surprising. The Enlightenment was all about civilizing humankind, using reason, education, and science to bring people up to a higher state of human functioning. A civilization is generally defined as an advanced state of human society containing highly developed forms of government, culture, industry, and common social norms. Of course, not all scholars agree with this definition. In fact, there is much debate over what constitutes a civilization and what does not. Furthermore, who determines what is 'advanced' and what is not? Historians, anthropologists, and other scholars have identified several core characteristics of civilization. Some of the most commonly suggested characteristics include urban centers, agricultural manipulation and storage, irrigation, written language, standards of measurements, craftsmanship technology, social stratification, state government, a common religion and/or ideological outlook, and a shared culture.

As far as my understanding is concerned, we have fulfilled all these demands of civilization. Science and technology, culture, religion, politics, infrastructure etc. have reached their pinnacle today. Then what is that which is undermining our ethical progress? What is it that we are constantly craving for? Why is there a murder of probity? Why such malevolence? Why must we be contented with the proud declaration - WE ARE 'CIVILIZED'. Are we?

After the primeval period, it became necessary for a civilized construction. Since Homo sapiens were devoid of rationale, they were no less than animals that lived on hunting. Let me not go deeper into history and present a totally unnecessary and convoluted account of how civilization launched or came to be launched. However, what is obvious is that a paradigm shift was indispensable into the very essence of human beings in particular and humanity in general. Man needed a more focused and a directed pattern of life that only a civilized milieu could offer. Man needed more than mere livelihood. Man needed 'ambition'.

Civilization, as I observed earlier, can be connected to 'enlightenment' and its prime aim was to bring people up to a high state of human functioning. Let me illustrate this highest state with the following exemplar. When we speak of civilization, one cannot exempt Greece from the frame. Around 2500 years ago there existed Lyceum, a gymnasium in Athens. Today's gymnasium stands in sharp contrast to the one that existed in Athens in 334 BC and talks only of body building. In Lyceum, the greatest philosophers of that period like Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Protagoras, Prodicus and others congregated and discussed and debated for hours on

end on myriad topics such as philosophy, literature, religion, astrology, astronomy, economics, politics, medicine, etc. Thus, it was not only for sheer body building that a gymnasium existed but it included the all-round building and development of body, mind, soul and spirit. This is civilization in the true sense of its term.

Where have we lost that spirit and why? Why has human probity fallen into its lowest ebb? What such malevolence? We are definitely educated. At least the statistics provided by the governments of different nations draw a parallel to the fact. The number of scholars globally should be strong evidence of the fact that we must be a hundred times better and more prosperous than our forefathers; than our ancient civilizations because we have the experiences of the past to rely on. We are laden with technology and most importantly we have books to provide us knowledge of not only the globe but also of the cosmos. And then suddenly I remember Ralph Waldo Emerson's words, "...instead of Man Thinking, we have the bookwork. Hence, the book-learned class, who value books, as such; not as related to nature and the human constitution, but as making a sort of Third Estate with the world and the soul".

Today's man doesn't introspect. They don't delve into their inner selves. Analyzing Emerson's view on books, I come to an understanding that books can educate man but not 'civilize' him. A civilized man can be educated but an educated man may not necessarily be civilized. We have created a society for ourselves where the highest order of thinking is not possible; where upliftment of human beings is possible, but not humanity. Let me be allowed to copy and paste Emerson again from *The American Scholar*, "The state of society is one in which the members have suffered amputation from the trunk, and strut about so many walking monsters, a good finger, a neck, a stomach, an elbow, but never a man".

We have become Auden's "Unknown Citizen" - surviving and perishing by total conformity. If readers feel this acceptable then I would go on to say that our identity is reduced to mere papers and numbers. If this is education let us deracinate such an education which has been eating into the vitals of our society and civilization for ages. Let us throw away all the books, empty the minds of the population and instill into them values, ethics and conscience. Education and civilization must complement one another. Congratulations to modern science for having conquered the once unexplored part of the cosmos, for having rescued man from being devoured by the monster of diseases, for bringing the world closer into a global village, for facilitating man with modern gadgets and thereby simplifying his task and for providing almost all that is required for a standard living.

Having fulfilled these, the need of the hour now is to ponder upon the question of creating a civilized society, like those which once existed in Greece, Rome, Egypt, and Mesopotamia, and are mere anthologies now. Restore, and restructure the ancient Indian 'Gurukul' system to meet modern standards but retaining the originality in spirit. Civilization never took birth out of nowhere; it evolved after a lot of collective human effort. The seed of civilization was sown, fostered and endured by man himself to perfection and education is the "manifestation of the perfection existing already in man". (Swami Vivekananda)

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TO THE EDITOR

Internet speed a bummer

Editor,
No, this is not a Valentine's Day post talking of the beautiful things of life. This is just another post about my life in Shillong. And if you have been in Shillong anytime in the recent past, you know that this is going to be a story of frustration. I have been working from home from Shillong for the past 11 months. And any of you who has ever done anything similar knows the pain. The internet speed is horribly slow. With BSNL broadband you see speed of 1 & 2 mbps even after spending Rs 700+ every month. Not one work week goes without you seeing, "Your internet connection is unstable" at least 10 times.

The speed that we get here with BSNL fibre, is the one that people get in mobile data in other places. When I say other places, I mean Guwahati, Kolkata and Bangalore, because these are the places I have tried and tested the speed of my Vodafone SIM myself. Here, my phone gets to edge mode, the moment the power goes off.

And dogle? My office gave me a Jio dongle with a

pack of 5 GB per day. That is more than enough to meet my work needs. But guess what? There is no Jio connectivity in my locality! And I live in one of the most popular areas of the town.

And if this was not enough, MeECL takes up the responsibility of making my life a little worse. Load shedding from 12am to 3am, 9am to 12 pm and again 7pm to 8 pm!! That's 7 hours a day!! And the load shedding happens in every part of the city at the same time. Is this some kind of a joke? I know many cities across the country adopt load shedding as a way of tackling power crisis. But 7 hours! That's something unheard of.

Do I need to remind the authorities that a good number of students are doing online classes in institutions outside the state? How do they justify to their teachers their absence for 3 crucial hours of the day? What happens to the attendance? I do work-from-home for an IT giant and my client is US-based. How do I explain to my boss and my client my absence from work from 7pm to 8pm? Had the load shedding been locality-wise, I would have made some alternative arrangements.

A year ago, I was talking to my aunt (who was born and brought up in Shillong

and is now based out of Delhi) about how, unlike her, I do not have the emotional attachment to the city. She says that is because my generation has not seen the city at its peak. All we saw was violence, tension, technological backwardness and lack of career opportunities. I guess she is right. I don't know.

But one thing that I do know is the fact that every time I visit the city, my attachment to it decreases. This time it was the lack of modern-day basic amenities aka electricity and internet. And if you think that this 'beautiful hill station' is an inconvenient place only for IT engineers like me who are doing their work from home, then you are sadly mistaken. The transport strike has brought life to a standstill in the city. Cabs, which are the lifeline of the city have been non-operational for over a week now. Moving from one area of the town to another is a nightmare unless you own a private vehicle.

Indeed, there is no end if I start jotting down the problems of the city. A good fraction of Shillong households have not had a drop of water in their taps since the past few days. The sheer inefficiency of the various State Government departments makes

surviving everyday life in Shillong a Herculean task in itself.

Since all of this is futile, let me just get to action and look up an inverter and other alternative arrangements. Just letting you know, Shillong, you disappoint me yet again.

Yours etc,
Shatavisha Chakravorty,
Via email

Whither Meghalaya!

Editor,
The beauty of democracy is that it gives everyone the right to dissent when the law becomes an ass or the government isn't legitimate enough to carry out its Constitutional mandate. This is reflected in the ongoing strike by commercial transport services mainly by a group of associations that involved in public service. The rise and then slight reduction of diesel and petrol prices by the present MDA dispensation is just an eyewash. It shows they haven't had enough of the Rs 399 crore of Covid funds. These present MLAs of the ruling government are answerable to the people who put them in that Assembly to be their

legislators and not opportunists. If this is the kind of governance that is happening then Meghalaya is going down the drain.

Yours etc,
Dominic Stadlin Wankhar
Shillong:3

Why this grudge against protesters

Editor,
Were the leaders and participants of the Ramjanmabhoomi Andolan, who accomplished a "divine job" on December 6, 1992 to pave the way for the construction of the "much-cherished" Ram Mandir of "dreams", also "Andolan jeevis" and "parasites" in a mission of hatching "conspiracy" against the country by pursuing "Foreign Destructive Ideology" (FDI)?

Or are "Andolan jeevis" only those who dare to lodge non-violent protests against the BJP, Narendra Modi and the NDA Government policies in this democratic country which guarantee the right to freedom of speech? But if "Andolan" gets registered in the most violent fashion by the saffron brigade, by exercising brute muscular

power and taking law in their own hands; it is nothing but practice of "pure cultural nationalism"!

What is the exact answer --- Surely the nation wants to know!

MPSC finally declares results!

Editor,
Apropos the news report, "MCS Junior Grade exam results likely this week" (ST February 8, 2021), I must sincerely thank the Meghalaya Public Service Commission for keeping its word and for ultimately declaring the MCS Mains results on February 11, 2021, whereby 76 candidates finally qualified for the Personal Interview Round, out of the 10,000 plus candidates who sat for the examination in 2018. Through this letter, I extend my heartfelt congratulations to all the successful candidates and I appeal to MPSC to stick to its declared schedule for the Interview Round, and to ensure that recruitment is done in a fair, transparent and professional manner, without undue delay, bias or favouritism towards any person.

Yours etc.,
Jeremiah S
Via email

"Whenever there is authority, there is a natural inclination to disobedience."

— Thomas Chandler Haliburton

The Shillong Times

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Meghalaya CM abdicating his duty

THE State of Meghalaya is facing several crises. The ongoing strike by commercial transport owners has reached the 13th day with no solution in sight. The strike called by the Meghalaya Joint Action Committee of Commercial Vehicles (MJACCV) since February 3 last was to protest the hike in fuel prices which has added to the burden of commercial vehicles owners since the Government was not giving the transport operators a free hand to decide the fares. The MJACCV on Sunday called on all private vehicles also to stay off the road. Large parts of Meghalaya are severely crippled by this strike, particularly the city of Shillong which saw near empty roads and students trudging to their respective schools with great difficulty as some also have to write their exams. The Meghalaya Government brought down the petrol cess by Rs 2 which the vehicle owners found preposterous. To add to this woe is the seven hour load shedding at different timings of the day. What has angered the public is the 9 am -12 noon shutdown because that is a critical time for students and teachers doing online classes or webinars; professionals who are working from home and home makers for whom that is a time for cooking and preparing meals for the family.

The Chief Minister had spent nearly a week in Delhi hobnobbing with the central ministers to solicit funds for a cash-strapped Meghalaya. From Delhi the Chief Minister took off for Arunachal Pradesh – all this while the people of Meghalaya are facing multiple problems. Several other ministers also accompanied the Chief Minister to Delhi. Chief Minister Conrad Sangma has virtually divided Meghalaya into Khasi-Jaintia and Garo Hills and has clearly marked out the responsibilities to be handled by him and his deputy Prestone Tynsong. Is this why the Constitution has earmarked the post of Chief Minister? The post of Deputy Chief Minister is not mentioned in the Constitution and is as such unconstitutional and does not bestow on the person the powers of the Chief Minister. The buck for everything that happens in Meghalaya on a daily basis has to stop at the Chief Minister's doorstep. The Chief Minister is accountable to the people of Meghalaya for how he runs the Government; not his deputy.

The stalemate with the MJACCV continues because the Deputy Chief Minister's attitude is uncompromising when dialogue is what is necessary to resolve all and every issue in a democracy. The fact that private vehicles too are wary of taking to the roads for fear of untoward incidents as has happened in the past whenever a strike is called by any group/s, has compounded the woes of the citizens here in Meghalaya, including tourists and visitors to the State. Will the Chief Minister stay put in Meghalaya and resolve the power and transport crises?

GHADC: another election, the same old story?

By Albert Thyrniang

The five month administrator's rule of the Garo Hills Autonomous District Council (GHADC) will come to an end in mid-April when the election to the Council will be held on April 9 and results declared four days later. Post elections a new executive committee will man the council, a new Chairperson, a new Chief Executive Member (CEM) and fresh faces in the Executive Committee will be in charge of the Autonomous Council. But will it be any different? Will the ills that have long dogged the council be ever treated?

The financial rot in the Council is in deep gorges. How on earth are the salaries of the employees pending for three years? The two month 'pre-Christmas' promise last year has turned out to be a lie as scores of employees still find their bank accounts empty. Not only have Christmas and New Year festivals gone past; the current financial year too will slip by. Even without the burden of paying the 30 MDCs for five months the Council couldn't clear two month's remunerations. No wonder the Non-Gazetted Employees Association (NGEA) has decided to boycott the upcoming elections. GHADC seems unredeemable.

Late last month the state president of Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), Saleng Sangma on called on 'educated people' to purge the mess in GHADC saying that there is something really wrong in the institution. Reportedly he made a loaded statement that it is unbelievable how employees have been surviving without salary for the past three years. Does it imply that employees themselves are involved in corruption in the Council? Does it mean that they are surviving out of a leakage in the Council's revenue? Someone pointed out that some employees are constructing houses. How do we explain that? Perhaps through loans? But do banks not come hard on customers who default monthly repayments for three years? Anyway the flip side is that the man who wants to cure the gravely ill GHADC is from a Party that is contesting only in two-three constituencies. The intention is commendable but three councillors (presuming all of them win) won't be able to clear the GHADC's massive mess.

The NCP chief also prophesied that his would-be MDCs might abandon him and switch to other par-

ties once the elections are over to become EMs in a stitched coalition. The absence of the anti-defection law has facilitated changing of political colours that has been on display in all three ADCs in the state. The party/alliance that rules the state rules ADCs as well through defection.

Prior to 2018 Assembly elections Congress was in power in GHADC. But soon after the NPP-led-MDA government was installed in March the Congress EC collapsed as Congress MDCs crossed over to the NPP fold. In the 2015 elections NPP, with 10 seats, formed the Executive Committee only for the Congress who was in power in the state, after effecting defection in the NPP camp, to return to power two years later in 2017. These are only two instances. No one can keep track of the drama of toppling games in ADCs, GHADC included. Instability is the hallmark of these institutions. Ideology, loyalty and respect for the electorate are alien in the institutions that are supposed to be the cradle for tribal values.

Now the Congress, it looks like, is the spokesman of the masses summing up peoples' sentiments against the NPP for the 'rampant corruption' and hence currently 'ruling leaders' deserve to be thrown out of GHADC. The grand old party may well succeed in dethroning the NPP because memory is very short. In 2015 the Congress lost the election because of the alleged blatant and massive corruption in their administration. The whole Executive Committee, including the Chairman, the Chief Executive member and practically all sitting Congress MDCs bit the dust. During its reign there were multi-crore scams in toll-gate bidding and illegal trade. RTI findings revealed siphoning off from Council's schemes. A one-man Judicial Inquiry Commission was instituted by the state government only to gather dust in District Council Affairs department till today.

Now life has reached a full circle. After five years, the Congress which lost power due to allegations of corruption might regain power by accusing the NPP of corruption. Sounds surreal! Looks like rotation of corruption! People remember only the latest malpractices! The alleged malpractices during the Congress regime are forgotten. Only

the malpractices during the NPP administration are noted. The NPP leadership, after taking over GHADC reign in 2015 promised a clean administration while assuring a probe into corruption charges in the previous Congress rule but has ended up in the soup for the very same kind of scams. On April 9, the national party will have to answer for the 'ghost bridges and footpaths', 'duplication of several projects', the 'Rs 5 crore for a two episode documentary', the 'exorbitant rates for radio jingles' and the 'high quotation for official building repairs.' Unfortunately, no one will demand a probe into the post 2015 corruption allegations.

The BJP which is responsible for RTI revelations in the GHADC scam will also fight the elections on the anti-corruption plank. Kudos for the red flag but is the saffron party serious about bringing out the truth? It has talked a lot. It has strained its relationship with NPP in the process. It has threatened to quit the MDA. It approached its top leadership. But nothing has come out of it. So the motive may not be to unearth corruption in GHADC but to have a base to launch the elections portraying itself before the voters as an alternative party that mean business. Will the Party gain mileage from the issue it has gone hammer and tongs at for the last few months? Wait till April 14.

Do we wish a change in GHADC? Do voters desire a transparent administration? Does the electorate want the mess to be cleaned up? Yes, but is there a choice? Will the Congress do it? Will the NPP do it? They have non-envious records to back them up. Will the NCP do it? Numerically impossible even with lofty ideals! Will the BJP do it? Arithmetically unsure! They may play the anti-corruption card and fight the elections on the transparency bandwagon but the perceived anti-minority tag with CAA and the current negative view on the central government in this regard as the background, the Party might not fare well enough to transform the sick GHADC.

As democracy is imperfect we have to be content with what we have. With no option the Congress and the NPP will battle it out for the number one spot with all things being more or less equal. Neither is a saint. The parties branching out from

the same tree line have turned bitter political rivals. Each has accused the other of imposing administrator's rule in GHADC. Each has charged the other of delaying elections to the ADC. Garo Hills will have to make the choice on the D-day and wait to see who will be in power for the next five unsure years.

The NCP and the BJP may come out with one or two councillors each. GNC could do a little better in comparison to the duo. Do we need to speak of other players, namely the Khasi-Jaintia Hills centric regional parties? Not worth giving any space here for these minor entities who compete only in their own dens. HSPDP has already informed its non-participation. There is no need for PDF and KHNAM to venture out.

This leaves only the UDP for consideration. Formed in 1997 (as a web portal describes) 'with the aim to restore the prestige and glory of the state when it was in its formative years, and to fulfil the aspirations of the residents of the state for an effective and corruption-free government' the Party has managed to occupy the chief minister's chair for short terms in 1998, 2000 and 2008. In spite of the 'achievement' the party which amalgamated the Hill Peoples' Union and The Public Demand Implementation Convention has remained rooted in Khasi Hills. Earlier it did win a couple of seats in GHADC but it did not bother to expand its presence and now it is practically non-existent in the western half of the state that will go to the polls. No one will bet for Meghalaya's largest regional party to taste any victory in any of the 29 constituencies. It does not see Garo Hills as fertile soil and hence continues to remain in the well of 36 Assembly segments and 29 seats each of KHADC and JHADC.

Will we see the same old story in GHADC? Will any one write a different script? Who will determine a new destiny for GHADC? Other than fulfilling a constitution requirement will the elections bring any positive change? GHADC needs a thorough surgery? Will we have a surgeon or a team of surgeons to do the incision?

PS: I notice the names of a couple of friends in the published list of a particular party. Wish them all success.
Email: thalbert@rediffmail.com

Wasted natural assets

By Barnes Mawrie

Everyone knows that Meghalaya is one of the poorest states in the country in terms of state GDP. There are not many big companies, no industries and no foreign investors who could generate employment for the people here. With regards to agriculture, horticulture, animal husbandry, food processing and other allied economic activities, Meghalaya is way behind other states. For food grains we are entirely dependent on other states. For poultry products or even for fish we are dependent on Andhra Pradesh and other states. In short, Meghalaya is not yet self-reliant as far as food supply is concerned. Even fifty years after statehood, our state is still living like a beggar. It is not surprising that youth still look for government jobs which are no longer available, because other sources of employment are absent altogether. Brain drain is a phenomenon of our State because of lack of job opportunities.

Yet we also know that our State is blessed with an incredible potential for tourism. God has blessed us with exceptional natural beauty – beautiful mountain ranges, captivating crystal clear rivers, mesmerizing natural caves, awe inspiring sacred groves, attractive lakes and of course an ever green natural cover. Unfortunately, all these potentials lie wasted and underutilized. Eco-tourism

a gem of West Khasi Hills. All those who have been there would not help but fall in love with this second biggest river island in Asia. This place however has remained unpopular for the sole reason that the approach road to it is in a miserable condition. The few kilometres towards this island has remained a bumpy road, slushy during summer and dusty during winter. This condition of the road has deterred nature lovers from undertaking such a journey.

Coming close to our own city of Shillong, we see a natural setting of exquisite beauty like the Golf Links losing its lustre day after day. The war trenches dug around its boundary with heaps of mud left over it betrays the callousness and the aesthetic insensitivity of those responsible for this. Today such a place of erstwhile beauty has turned into an eyesore of the city. Sohra which is world famous as a tourist destination, has not seen much development for the last few decades. Tourists who come from abroad are particularly disappointed to discover that their high expectations are not met.

Evidently, what Meghalaya lacks is not natural beauty but infrastructure. Anywhere we turn to in this State we are awed by its scenic beauty. Nature has so much to offer us in this particular part of our country. What we lack is precisely the political will to exploit this



can generate diverse forms of employment and thereby bring in a lot of income for the State. But evidently the State has not fully exploited this God-given opportunity. I will name a few of such wasted assets to support my arguments.

We all agree that Umiam Lake is one of the rarest natural beauties of our State. In fact, this lake could be compared to any picturesque lakes of Switzerland. This lake is the principal source of energy for the State. However, the touristic potentials of this lake have not been fully exploited. A lake of this sort in the west

God-given gift to our advantage. Meghalaya reminds me of the sad story of a beggar who lived a miserable life begging for daily food, while all the while he was not aware that he was in fact a wealthy man for he was holding a golden bowl in his hand. Our State is endowed with so much of touristic potentials which lie untapped all these years. Tourism could be the biggest industry of our State just like it is in Italy, Switzerland, Thailand or Singapore. Eco Tourism and Cultural Tourism are state resources that are still lying underutilized as of now.

Meghalaya is going to celebrate fifty years of statehood and the question we need to ask ourselves is: how far has our State progressed in terms of economic self sufficiency?

TO THE EDITOR

Clarification

Editor,
Apropos, the article, "Existential dilemma of the 'honest' politician" (ST Feb 5, 2021) by Patricia Mukhim, we the aggrieved employees of the Directorate of Printing & Stationery are shocked by the remarks of the writer in the said column wherein it was stated that a non-technical person was posted to hold the Director's post. We categorically refute the said statement and clarify that the present incumbent holding the post of Director –in-charge is very much a qualified technical man just as his predecessor was and he was posted in the said post as an in-charge Director to ensure smooth functioning of the Office in the interest of public service. Taking cognizance of the ongoing court case on the matter the said statement which is incorrect will mislead the public at large.

In view of the above, we the aggrieved employees of the Printing & Stationery Department request you to clarify matters as stated above so that the public is correctly informed of the facts.

Yours etc.,
Anisha Blah, Waraplang Syiem & others,
Shillong

Where are we living?

Editor,
The state of Meghalaya reflects a sordid and sad situation from all the angles. The Government is finding so difficult to manage the state and meet the minimum requirements of the people. We all know that "online classes" are going on for the students and amidst the severe power cuts the students are facing extreme difficulties. Next the "work from home," routine has also become an impossible task. Many of our boys and girls came back to their families from other parts of the country and work from home during this pandemic and now due to power cuts every day they are contemplating to leave.

And now the whole Shillong is at "pause" for two days due to the transport strike which is imposed on private car owners as well! Unimaginable, where is the willingness of the Government to solve the issues? Sufferings of common people are beyond words. First the pandemic and now these

additional chapters have added miseries in our life and only the common and poor masses are the victims. Elite classes anywhere in the world never suffer!

Yours etc.,
Anjan Kumar Das,
Via email

'Unhappy' Valentine's Day

Editor,
The 14th of February every year is eagerly anticipated by the young and old as it's Valentine's Day, a day for young love, for families and friends and all who believe in this expression of love. However, we were all literally jolted out of our love-struck stupor by the sudden electricity cut, which upon inquiry from the sub-station office was revealed to be a 7-hour load shedding schedule wrought by the Government.

As a citizen who pays my bills on time for fear of disconnection, I would like to ask the powers that be, as to why prior notice was not given to consumers so that we could schedule our plans accordingly. Or is it that our Government has become a dictatorship and decisions are taken by only those in power without any

discussion with the public as is the instance in a Democracy?

Many of our students have started classes, and exams are knocking at their doors even while the economy is slowly opening up after the lockdown of last year. So how will the students cope with this situation? Moreover small businesses depend on electricity for their activities like xerox and cyber cafes and grocery stores that require cold storage for their food products. How will they function?

I'm sure that all individual households pay their bills on time. It's mostly government departments who are slack in this regard. So my query is, why does the general public have to bear the brunt of the problems and be made the scapegoat once again? I hope those in power will have the decency to answer.

Yours etc.,
Angela Lyngdoh,
Shillong - 14

How many foundation stones a day?

Editor,
These days we see one

foundation stone after another being laid by MLAs/ministers. Does every construction have to be preceded by a foundation stone laying ceremony? The money for the construction of roads, bridges or other infrastructure does not come from the MLA/minister's private funds. This is Government of India money and acknowledgement should be given where it is due. All the photo-ops make our MLAs/ministers look foolish. It's a claim to fame that is not deserved. That the elected representatives don't even have shame as to claim credit that is not due to them, shows how vacuous their intents are and that they ride to fame on these shaky foundation stones. Incidentally there are many unfinished projects for which foundations stones were laid decades ago. Why are these projects not completed first?

There was a time when directions were given by the court that chairs and tables or ambulances given by MLAs should not be spattered with their names because all this money comes from the public exchequer. It seems that the MLAs need to be reminded of these lessons yet again because

thei vanity knows no bounds.

Yours etc.,
AR Nongrum,
Via email

Whither MeECL

Editor,
In spite of Government sanctioning nearly Rs 1400 Crores to the MEECL to pay the pending dues to the energy suppliers like NEEPCo, NPTC etc., with an understanding that there will not be any power cuts or load shedding henceforth, the MeECL has started to implement seven hours of power cut daily. This is unprecedented as nowhere in the country will one experience such power cuts. It is not understood why the State Govt. is silent on the issue and not taking up steps for clarification from the MeECL why it has to resort to such long durations of power cuts which is hampering the general public as well as the students who are studying online for higher studies. An early solution must be sought to mitigate the sufferings of the public due to such long power cuts.

Yours etc.,
S. L. Singhania,
Via email

or even in other parts of India would have become a major tourist attraction, but sadly this is not the case with Umiam Lake. The Chao Phraya River Cruise in Bangkok, just to name an example, generates a large amount of employment and adds hugely to the GDP of Thailand. It attracts large crowds of tourists from various parts of the world on a daily basis. Chartered Diner Cruises are being organized by wedding parties etc. Even sea parachuting and other water adventure games could be done in our lake as is being done in different countries. Why is Umiam lake so deadly silent and not thriving with tourist activities? The lake looks even more gloomy at night as there is no lighting around it. Even the little lighting along the embankment are already damaged and not maintained. This beautiful lake is truly a wasted asset of the State. All round the clock touristic activities could easily be organized and the State would have minted money from it.

Another location of great touristic potential, is Nongkhnum River Island in West Khasi Hills. This place of beauty par excellence is

However, to exploit these potentials fully, the State needs to improve infrastructure on a war footing. Road connectivity and communication need to be extended and upgraded. Tourist service facilities like hotels, restaurants, shops, tour agents, tour guides etc need to be enhanced both in quantity and quality. Next year 2022 when the State will host the National Games, it would be a golden opportunity for the tourism sector to boost its image and performance. Meghalaya is going to celebrate fifty years of statehood and the question we need to ask ourselves is: how far has our State progressed in terms of economic self sufficiency? We all know that Meghalaya till date is completely dependent on central dole. We are unfortunately still at the mercy of the central government. Perhaps it is time that the government should give greater attention to tourism as a primary source of income generation. A more effective formula of collaboration between the government and private sectors could be invented so as to reinvigorate tourism in our State.

Long live Meghalaya our beloved State!

"A bruise is a lesson... and each lesson makes us better."

— George R.R. Martin

The Shillong Times

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Hamstrung judiciary

FORMER Chief Justice of India, Ranjan Gogoi might have created a mild flutter in the public mind by saying, with facts and figures, that the Indian Judiciary is ramshacked and such a system ill suits a nation aiming to lord over a five-trillion economy. Justice Gogoi is right. Question is, who cares if the nation goes to the dogs. Indian judiciary has, over the years, piled up cases in a way that the judicial system is suffocating. Justice delayed is justice denied. Judges are getting their salaries and lawyers their fees without hassles. This is fine with them. With the judiciary sitting pretty over a backlog of four crore cases, fact is also that no one seems concerned about bringing in judicial reforms – a much needed exercise for a judiciary that needs to deliver. When Indian systems are crumbling, the bureaucrats are getting their salaries. When the banking system is going for a toss due to the pile up of bad loans, banking executives are not affected. They also have the liberty to go on a nation-wide strike and paralyse the banking system for days, at the drop of a hat, and to even demand more benefits.

Leaders of the democratic system have the luxury of coming to power for five years and then sit back and enjoy the spoils of power for another five years even if they are not re-elected. They evince little interest in having a long-term vision for the nation. They do not think of reforms or effecting corrective steps until the system reaches a breaking point. An attempt at reforms in the farming sector is facing stiff resistance from segments of the farming community but that is because the stakeholders – the farmers were never consulted to get their opinion. Despite being in power for nearly seven years, the Modi government has not touched up on various sectors like the judiciary for meaningful and timely changes to rid them of the flab, corruption and vested interests. Democracy's problem, unlike the era of the royals, is that those who lead from the front fail to adopt a forward-looking approach. Vote-fetching for the next polls so as to remain in power is their sole objective. Curiously, a top politician like Sharad Pawar was quick to express "shock" at the state of the judiciary only when Justice Gogoi made a public statement. Men like Pawar should know these big issues are killing a nation, without being drawn out of slumber and putting sense into their heads. What India waits for is a new kind of leadership to cure the nation of its ills. Old hats have outlived their expiry dates.

On being Indian and Khasi – Part I

By Dominick "DauniRoising" Rymbai

India, a Union of States and Union Territories, is going to celebrate its 75th Independence Day in a few months' time. In the days and months preceding and following 15th August 1947, most intelligentsia never gave our country a chance to survive, even for a few decades. A country of millions of people with a million gods, thousands of cultures in varied topography and climate zones, beset then with acute poverty, illiteracy, superstition and disease, the balkanisation of India was a hot topic among political scientists.

What defines a nation-state? What binds and binds people of a nation? Geography, language, politico-administrative divisions, culture, ideology, etc! Scholarly works can go on and on. In the old world of Europe where nationalism erupted, the amazing idea of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR) was caught out 30 years short of a century. Czechoslovakia became one by two. Today, there are simmering tensions in Spain and even Belgium and Italy. The home countries of the United Kingdom may not stay united beyond our children's lifetime.

But this 72 year old Republic of India, with the idea of India envisaged in the Preamble to our Constitution, is moving on to the future. How? Guess only Heaven knows.

Oral narratives and traditional accounts of the *Kalika Puranas* (10th century) had it that, the Khasis performed rituals and sacrifices in today's *Maa Kamakhya* temple; they named the goddess, *Ka Mei Kha* (paternal grandmother). There is still an office of the Doloi at the temple. Hinduism studies mention the origins of the Shakti Peeth, a goddess-focussed Hindu tradition, in present-day East and North-East India. The Nartiang Durga (or *Maa Jayanti*) temple is considered one of the holiest centres of Shakti Peeth. And the Durga Puja celebrations in Nartiang and Shella pre-dates the advent of the British Raj. On similar but varying lines, the Rajputs and the Marathas of Western India have their *Maa Bhawani* or *Maa Ambika*.

Today, there are many twins in the Jaintia Hills that are named *Ram* and *Lakshon*; *Kongka* and *Durka*. The architect of the Meghalaya Transfer of Land Regulation Act 1971 was Dr. (Late) Martin Narayan Majaw. One is certain that in each and every part of India, his

middle name may have different spellings or pronunciations but the same meaning.

Oral traditions have it that in the Ahom-Mughal conflicts in the 1600s, fighting men and women from the hills of present-day North East India were invited by the Ahom Raja to fight under the Ahom banner and defend their lands against the invasions of the mighty Mughal army. The conflicts culminated in the Battle of Saraighat (1671) where the Ahom composite army under the leadership of Lachit Borphukan defeated the colossal Mughal army led by the Kachhwaha Rajput Raja Ram Singh I from present-day Rajasthan. Old timers from our ancient hills can confirm, orally, that the Khasis (Khyntiam, Pnar, Bhoi, War, Maram and Lyngngam) and Achiks were part of that Ahom composite army. Some of the sick and the wounded of the retreating defeated Mughal army, mesmerised by the beauty and hospitality of our lands, stayed back and became permanent settlers. On 15th August 1947, all of the above became Indians, officially.

Rev. James Joy Mohan Nichols Roy, the father of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India, and Lokapriya Gopinath Bordoloi, the first and one of only two Bharat Ratna awardees from North East India, were good friends. Both had the ears of Gandhi, Nehru, Patel, Dr Rajendra Prasad, Maulana Abdul Kalam Azad, Dr John Mathai, Ambedkar, Rajkumar Amrit Kaur and Dr Shyama Prasad Mukherji and were members of the Constituent Assembly of India. During Partition, they were instrumental in making our Khasi-Jaintia-Garo Hills and the Brahmaputra & Barak Valleys included in India, not East Pakistan. In 1946-47, the "Advisory Committee on Fundamental Rights, Minorities and Tribal and Excluded Areas" chaired by Sardar Patel was a Major Committee of the Constituent Assembly. One of its Sub-Committees, the "North East Frontier Tribal Areas and Assam Excluded & Partially Excluded Areas" was chaired by Bordoloi. Bordoloi was ably assisted by Rev. J.J.M. Nichols Roy (called with fond respect Bah Joy), efforts that resulted in Tribal Rights & Empowerment and the Sixth Schedule. One may never know but it would be a proud moment for Khasis all over the world

when someday the people of the Union Territory of Ladakh in India's northernmost tip, put up a photo frame of Bah Joy in their Autonomous Council offices.

In January 2021, the images of storming of the US Capitol Hill of the world's most powerful democracy and highly-developed economy appeared intimidating and nerve-racking. In 2004, the cynics from 1947 couldn't believe the happenings in the world's largest and evolving democracy and developing & emerging economy. There was a smooth transition of government from a supposedly Right wing led coalition to a Centre-Left led coalition. In a country dominated by Hinduism, the Head of Government (the Prime Minister), a Sikh and a minority took his oath from the Head of State (the President), a Muslim and another minority. The Prime Minister was a member of the principal party of the coalition, a party led by an Indian Italian woman of Roman Catholic Christian origin, another minority. In 2002, the Muslim President was elected by members of Parliament and States' & UTs' Assemblies, with strong support from the then majority Hindu-dominated ruling party. There was a smooth transition too, vice versa, in 2014. The Late YS Rajashekar Reddy was a popular Chief Minister of the erstwhile united Andhra Pradesh. In a state dominated by the Hindus, he happened to be a devout Christian and a regular visitor to the Sri Venkateswara Temple at Tirumala-Tirupati.

Under a sweltering sun in July 1999, thousands poured in for the State Funeral of Captain (Late) Keishing Clifford Nongrum MVC at Madanlewrynghep (Fire Brigade ground). Of Khasi & Tangkhul Naga parentage, the brave soldier was martyred at the Kargil heights, defending our Motherland (that include these ancient hills we call home). A personal friend Late Chemsillylafrom Mihmyntdu village and son of a dried-fish seller at lawmsiang market, was a MARCOS commando of the Indian Navy. He died drowning in southern Tamil Nadu, only after he saved a fellow comrade-in-arms from drowning. Another personal friend, Major (Late) David Manlun KC, an army son of an army father brought up in Shillong (with the essential *shasaw/shadud* and *kwai* habits), was martyred in 2017 in

Nagaland, protecting the integrity and unity of our nation. A good friend whose formative years were in Shillong, Lieutenant Colonel Borlongki Bey of the Gorkha Rifles is still serving our Vatan.

Meghalaya has a sizable permanent non-tribal population; and not just Bengalis, Assamese, Marwaris and Sindhis. Studying in Khliehriat High School (a Salesians of Don Bosco institution run then by the legendary Fr. (Late) Henry Fantin), the writer has fond memories of teachers addressed as sir Matthew, sir George, sir Shakti and sir Balthazar. The books were in English but all teachers taught majorly in Pnar, to ensure better understanding of the concepts by the rural students. English can be one difficult language. The non-tribal teachers, mostly from South Indian states, speak fluent Pnar and unleash the imagination of many rural students. Matthew sir, in his History classes, would often stress that it would take more than a week just to see the historical places of importance in Delhi. Decades later and residing in Delhi NCR, the writer recalled the lesson.

Science lessons by the enigmatic Shakti sir were always well-attended. Dr. Star Pala, presently an Associate Professor of Community Medicine in NEIGRIHMS, was then an exemplar student of the school. Completing High School in KC Secondary School, the writer can never forget the lessons of Ms. Mala Dutta, Ms. Sunita Sharma, Mrs. Urmila Basu, and the educationist Principal & Indian Khasi Irish lady Ms Shiela Wallang and her Headmaster son, Mr. Brian Wallang. The English teacher, Ms. Mala Dutta, with her *kwai* and *paan* always at her side, spoke chaste English and taught us not only the use of Dictionary but Thesaurus too. She just looked and dressed as a Bengali but is every inch a Khasinised Shillongite. One can say she is a female teacher version of the former MLA of Mawprem, the Late Ardhendu Chaudhari. Shillong has a sizable Malayali community too; such that there used to be a shop in Laitumkhrak Beat House selling mainly the ingredients of Kerala's cuisine.

Disclaimer: Views expressed are personal; they do not reflect those of the Government of Meghalaya. An MBA (International Business) graduate of IIFT-Delhi, the writer opted for public service in his home state.

Increase in PILs Judiciary must act

By Dr S. Saraswathi

Replying to the debate on the Arbitration and Conciliation (Amendment) Act, 2021 passed by the Lok Sabha, Union Law Minister Ravi Shankar Prasad urged the judiciary to exercise its discretion in accepting public interest litigation (PIL). He said that there was a rush to file PILs on almost every issue these days and appealed to the judiciary to accept only "genuine" issues. Obviously, the courts are to decide what is a genuine issue.

Hardly a day before, the Supreme Court agreed to hear a PIL seeking to decriminalise begging which is an offence in many States under the Prevention of Begging Act. Already, the Delhi High Court had annulled the law that criminalised begging in 2008 and had stated that the government was bound to provide a decent life to its citizens and imprisoning beggars begging for bare survival amounted to adding insult to injury. Indeed, a proper use of PIL in public interest and a sympathetic response from the court on a genuine issue. And so, PILs have a bright and a dark side depending on its use.

Rapid growth in the number of PILs filed and heard in courts is a noteworthy development in the Indian judicial history. It is just 45 years old system born in the judiciary and not any legislative body. It quickly earned reputation as a friend of the poor and the weak to get justice, but has recently come under severe criticism for rampant use for anything and everything. The judiciary, once fascinated to deal with PILs as a new area of jurisprudence, different from normal civil and criminal disputes, and requiring abilities to handle with human and social welfare ideals in mind is now almost forced to look into the use and misuse of this legal instrument. Already, the judiciary is heavily burdened with the problem of clearing enormous number of pending cases and under-trial prisoners. It cannot be expected to be happy with reckless use of PILs like street-level protests for anything, though some very eminent judges were behind the creation of PIL for good reasons.

More than a decade ago, in 2008, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh expressed concern over growing tendency to misuse PIL with reference to a dispute between two private parties over business interests.

There are both big achievements and some drawbacks arising from PILs. Among achievements in terms of public good, social welfare, and removal of serious social problems and disabilities, mention must be made of Vishaka versus State of Rajasthan relating to sexual harassment at workplace which led to the famous Vishaka judgement. This litigation established gender equality as a fundamental right, respect and safety of women at workplace as the verdict firmly places right to life and right to live a dignified life for women as core principles in gender relations. This case helped to identify and define sexual harassment in detail.

However, the credit for one of the earliest and significant cases under PIL was about extremely bad prison conditions in Bihar jails which resulted in the release of 40,000 inmates. A PIL against tanneries in Kanpur for polluting the River Ganga with untreated sewage water was considered very important for its environmental concerns resulting in a number of orders to many industries in the area against pollution in the late 1980s. Environmental interests often clash with industrial and commercial interests

and need the help of voluntary organisations, activists, and common citizens to protect genuine public interests against encroachment by financially powerful groups.

Another case considered to be among the topmost in important PILs really catered to the care of helpless accident victims by giving a ruling in a PIL that doctors have a professional obligation to extend their services to protect life. Duty to act in times of crisis to save a life is put as top priority for doctors and also to policemen and other citizens.

Such examples are many which prove that India has an advanced system of jurisprudence by giving up the principle of *locus standi* which is followed in many western countries including the USA that only persons with personal stake in the concerned issue can file a petition.

The greatest benefit from PILs is in enhancing the accountability of the Executive to the people. Former Prime Minister Vajpayee vehemently opposed the move by United Front government in 1997 to do away with PILs or restrict its scope. He described it as an innovation necessary to make the Executive perform its duties and the Legislature discharge its responsibilities.

The term Public Interest Litigation is taken from American jurisprudence where it was used to provide legal representation to previously unrepresented groups like the poor, racial minorities, unorganised consumers, activists in environmental issues, etc. In the modern sense, its use expanded during Civil Rights Movement and Vietnam War in 1960s.

PIL refers to litigation undertaken to protect and secure public interest. It was introduced by Justice Bhagwati in 1976 to counter "state repression, governmental lawlessness, administrative deviance, and exploitation of disadvantaged groups and denial of their rights and entitlements to them". It brought in new judicial procedures such as obtaining views of experts and investigating facts by a court appointed committee.

Matters entertained under PIL include bonded labour, neglected children, non-payment of wages, atrocities on women, pollution, food adulteration, maintenance of heritage and culture, harassment in jails, and such issues that affect groups of people who cannot seek justice by themselves and issues of interest to the entire nation or population. Courts can also take cognizance of issues suo moto.

PIL's role in improving the lives of disadvantaged groups is experienced in many countries of Latin America, Asia, Africa, Middle East, and Eastern Europe. It can provoke legislative and executive action in public interest and encourage civil society to spread awareness about human rights, and participate in decision-making. It can contribute to good governance provided the issues raised are "genuine".

Apart from these, concerns relating to separation of powers and judicial capacity to cope with growing number of cases, misuse of the instrument to divert attention from real issues by political and other forces have complicated proper assessment of the system and its efficacy.

The judiciary, which sponsored PIL, must guard against its misuse. It should exercise utmost care in allowing PILs so as to safeguard this instrument for public welfare. It must act and act now. --INFA

(The writer is former Director, ICSSR, New Delhi)

TO THE EDITOR

Be impartial, Mr Speaker, sir!

Editor,
I read with much amusement the remarks of the incumbent Speaker of the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly as reported in your paper on February 16, 2021. He was quoted saying that the 'state government will try to end the agitation of the commercial vehicle associations.' He was further quoted saying, "I was trying to reach the Chief Minister but he is in Tawang. I have discussed the issue with the Deputy Chief Minister Prestone Tynsong and we will try to end this agitation."

The Honourable Speaker should be reminded that as mandated in the Indian Constitution, his duties are limited to conducting the proceedings of the legislative assembly in a smooth and impartial manner, and the dignified chair that he currently occupies is a symbolic representation of fairness and impartiality. He represents the House and all its members, and not only a section of it. Therefore, he is not expected to function as the

mouthpiece of the Government. Resolving the present impasse is the prerogative of the Chief Minister and his cabinet and not that of the Honourable Speaker, and one can hardly recall any former functionary of such a high and dignified office articulating on behalf of the state government.

The incumbent Speaker should read some of the erstwhile newspaper records and proceedings and take cognizance of his demeanour of his predecessors.

For instance, the hallmark of impartiality and democracy in the history of the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly happened between 1983-1988. Captain Williamson A. Sangma of the Congress had wrested power from Mr Brington Buhai Lyngdoh after the fall of the MUPP government which was in power for barely a few weeks after the 1983 election. Prior to that occurrence, Evansius Kek Mawlong of the HSPDP, a partner in the MUPP, was elected Speaker. Manifesting perhaps the best example of parliamentary 'democracy', the Chief Minister Captain Sangma and his party did not dislodge EK Mawlong

from the Speaker's chair till the end of the term in 1988, and he remains the only Speaker in the history of the state to have occupied the dignified chair throughout the five-year term despite his party being in the opposition. Can we fathom such a scenario now? Perhaps not!

The incumbent Speaker should focus on matters such as legislative conduct and one expects him to act more stringently against erring legislators, particularly those who use vulgar language in the presence of school children. He can take corrective measures beginning with a workshop to improve the communication skills of our legislators. It is most needed to evade the reoccurrence of such revolting behaviour.

Yours etc.,
Banshan Lyngdoh
Shillong - 2

On load shedding & transport strike

Editor,
I am writing (on behalf of the local people) to

express my disappointment on the current situation that is afflicting the State of Meghalaya. I am by profession a software engineer and recently moved to the town with the thought of staying close to my parents and cherishing the good old days of staying here thanks to the work from home (WFH) normal. But, unexpectedly the stay here is getting difficult with each passing day. Water problems, drain leakage, safety and development issues have plagued the State for decades. Adding a new agenda into discussion are the recent taxi strike and load shedding hours. When people from different sectors are indoors and acquainted with the online mode of learning and working, how can you deprive them of electricity? Are we not paying our bills on time?

The idea of power cuts from 9 AM to 12 noon is illogical. Due to the load shedding timings I am compelled to miss my daily scrum meetings and important software delivery. Our organisation has approved the WFH module with a trust that we will bring the same productivity as we do in offices. The network

connectivity of mobile operators is even more pathetic. I feel much sorry for my juniors and young students of the state who are preparing for their upcoming exams. "Burning the Midnight Oil" now seems a joke to me because Government has cut the source itself and it does not seem to care. Hence, I request the concerned authorities to either adjust the timings of load shedding or delay it by a few months. Additionally, I request the Government to please bring justice to the people and solve common issues that affect the people of the state.

"If you want to change the world, pick up your pen and write." - Martin Luther

Yours etc.,
Manish Thakur,
IT professional

FASTag harassment

Editor,
It is extremely unfortunate that compulsory applicability of FASTag at Toll Plazas on National Highways is rolled out by the Central Government, thereby inconveniencing a large number of travelers. While e-payment facilities

should be encouraged, the way it has been enforced is almost draconian. There is a price to be paid for a FASTag kit too. The Central Government would levy 100% penalty on vehicles without FASTag. Further, many of the Toll Plazas are almost within the vicinity of the cities, towns and even villages. Applicability of FASTag was introduced in 2016, but the Government forgot the issuance of FASTag at the time of vehicle registration or renewal thereof. The Government seems to have forgotten the weak, the elderly, the needy, and the poor in the process, as also the minimum convenience of citizens.

It is demanded that the Central Government immediately withdraw the compulsory enforcement of this draconian act, and allow payments at toll plazas by cash, etc at normal rates, without any additional charges.

Yours etc.,
D Bhutia
Guwahati - 24

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"We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them."

— Albert Einstein

The Shillong Times

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Twin problems temporarily resolved
FEBRUARY 16 would be remembered as a day when the twin problems of load shedding and transporters strike were resolved. The first problem was resolved after the Government of Meghalaya came to the rescue of the MeECL by availing a loan of Rs 1345 crore under the Aatma Nirbhar Bharat scheme. For Meghalaya this amount would all go into debt servicing and delayed payment for power purchase. MeECL is beset with many problems but some stand out and need to be addressed immediately. The per unit cost of power in Meghalaya is perhaps the lowest in the country and the state has been subsidising consumers for decades. This is no longer tenable. Electricity tariff has to be revised if consumers want uninterrupted power. The problem with Meghalaya is that every issue is linked to politics; even a business decision that is needed to put the MeECL back on the rails. Some years ago a tariff revision was vehemently opposed by the Rangbah Shnong. The MeECL did not have the muscle and clout to push through the decision. The political leadership has always been pliable to extraneous and unreasonable demands from sundry actors. No state can corporate business can run like this. During the 7-hour power shutdown since Sunday February 14, people were up in arms and questioning how there can be power cuts when students are still being taught via online classes and professionals who were working from home found themselves short-circuited. No one offered any solution. There were only questions and allegations levelled at government; some calling this a failed state.

Those elected to govern the state cannot keep looking at safeguarding their vote banks and postponing hard decisions. Inability to decide even the viable market rate of electricity supplied to consumers is what has brought Meghalaya to the present state. A corporation cannot be run like a government institution. It has to make profit to pay its staff with adequate funds for repairs and maintenance. Right now restructuring the MeECL; cutting down flab; tariff revision and doing away with power subsidies to large companies that make huge profits but plough back nothing to the state, are priorities. The Corporation must be better managed and the workforce cut down and employed elsewhere by the Government. Unnecessary staff piled on the Corporation by politicians down the years cannot be the onus of the MeECL.

On the revision of petrol and diesel rates not much can be said since the prices fluctuate everyday but here too the prices must be rationalised since government relies heavily on revenues accruing from different taxable products in order to run the state.

Finally a question needs to be asked to the Power Department. What is the status of the MoUs signed with different power producing companies since December 2007? If all that Meghalaya is doing today is to buy power from NTPC, NEEPCo, PGCIL etc., then isn't MeECL a white elephant that has to be jettisoned like the other losing concerns?

On being Indian and Khasi – Part II

By Dominick "DauniRoising" Rymbai

Our Christian hymns, with tunes derived from Welsh and Latin hymns and the Khasi rhythm, can lift anyone onto a higher spiritual plane. Also, a good rendition of the lamentation of Sier Lapalang's mother can give any music lover of the world, goose bumps. The Beatles are great; besides meditation, they did come to our country to learn the sitar (and possibly the daitara too, if only). The music of the film Rock On (2008) is good; a musical hit of its sequel Rock On 2 (2016) is Hoi-Kiw/Chale Chalo by our own Summersalt band and the inimitable Usha Uthup. Working with Javed Akhtar, Usha Uthup, and the Amar-Akbar-Anthony of music directors Shankar-Ehsaan-Loy is a dream come true for many Indian musicians. Interestingly, Ehsaan Noorani has been a big support of the annual International Blues Music Day celebrations in Shillong. One of the highlights of the musical journey of our own Soulmate band is the opening act for the pioneer of world music and fusion rock Santana and the legend himself jamming with them Live! on stage!

Who helps and supports all this? Blues Music fans from mainland India, the biggest of them all being a certain Anand Mahindra of the Mahindra Blues Festival. Our own Shillong Chamber Choir have performed for the American President at Rashtrapati Bhavan and also with the legendary Amitabh Bachchan. Their breakout performance and national attention? India's Got Talent Season 2 (2010) and the support from all Indian music fans.

George Harrison had jammed with Pandit Ravi Shankar and Ustad Zakir Hussain with the percussionist Sivamani. No less in effort and technicalities, the jugabandi between the lead guitar of Rangdip, the bass of Gideon and the tabla by Rinku for PCN's A Christmas Special 2020 did hit the right notes and feel. With 4.3 million views (greater than Meghalaya's population), the latest YouTube sensation Kynmo by Jessie Lyngdoh has fans from all over India. Shekhar Ravijani of Vishal-Shekhar fame remarked he got his first musical break in a movie made by our very own Pradip Kurbah. A musical genius and a national treasure of Tamil descent, AR Rahman composed the music and sang in Bengali and Hindi to the Bengali lyrics by an-

other great Indian Rabindranath Tagore and Hindi lyrics based on Tagore's originals - Jagoo Mere Desh Ko. And Tagore has a strong Shillong connection. Only in India can such a synergy happen.

There was a time in the late 1990s and 2000s in Jowai and Shillong when it would be almost blasphemous to disturb the older females and their male partners-in-audience at evening primetime. Ekta Kapoor's K serials were running. Ektaji would scarcely believe that when she designed her serials for a certain target audience, she would make die-hard fans in Meghalaya. Those fans know Smriti Irani (Tulsi before she joined politics with her real name) or Ronit Roy as Mr Bajaj before he made his name as a good character actor. The swag and hairstyle of Nagarjuna, Chiranjeevi and of course Mithun or Govinda is copied by many male fans in our hills. Some, grey with age and/or wisdom, still proudly sport their mane. The 2-Film series of Baahubali (2015 & 2017) has fans in some village called Tuber or Mannad in Meghalaya. With easy availability of Satellite TV and their Hindi-dubbed movies, Mohanlal, Mammootty, Diljit Dosanjh and also Ravi Kishen or Manoj Tewari do have fans among Khasis. M Karunanidhi was a playwright; students of Literature would admire the English translations of his short stories. And, reams and reams of paper can be written on the influence of Hindi cinema on our lives.

In football, when Eugenese Lyngdoh or Redend Tlang perform well for the National Team, a fan in Goa, Kerala, Bengal or Punjab or one of the metros would feel the same level of pride as any Khasi would. In cricket, the win of the 2020-21 Test Series in Australia is celebrated by every Indian cricket fan, resonating from the Kutch to East Jaintia Hills. The win is made all the more celebratory, when practically a B-team of India conquered Fortress Gabba at the deciding Test match. It may sound exaggerated, that feeling of the win at the Gabba is probably better than the win of debutante Senegal (practically a French B-team) over the defending champions France at the opening match of the 2002 FIFA World Cup. While in Delhi, the writer will never ever for-

get the memories of the night of 2nd April 2011 when India won the 2011 ICC World Cup. That night, citizens from every state and UT of India residing in Delhi NCR, converged upon India Gate to celebrate the win of the National Team. A Khasi, brought up in the matrilineal traditions, would swell with pride for Pomu Das, Sania Nehwal, Mary Kom, PV Sidhu, Dipa Karmakar and PT Usha.

The pristine environ setting of Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration at Mussoorie, where the elite All India Services Officer Trainees have their foundation courses, helps build lifelong beautiful friendships (including marriages) among the trainees. Former Home Secretary of the Government of India and a friend of North East, GK Pillai from Kerala and our own Toki Blah were roommates and are good friends. However, life in a good Business School of India, like the Indian Institute of Foreign Trade - Delhi, is not exactly conducive for long-term relationships with its almost cut-throat competition for grades and job placements (preferably in US Dollars). Of course, Indians being jugaad Indians and stemming over the tide, friendships, romances and marriages did blossom among the writer's batch mates. A decade down and communication lines are still running, the writer can safely claim that friendships were struck with a Bania from Punjab, a Sardeshmukh from Maharashtra, a Bodo from Assam, a Tiwari from Uttar Pradesh, a Rongmei from Nagaland and a Zomi/Zou from Manipur. A batchmate from IIFT-Delhi and an IAS officer, a Chiluka from Telengana, was helpful and supportive when the writer made some attempts to crack the Imtahaan-e-Hind, UPSC's Civil Services Examination.

The economy.

A popular Scooty model on Shillong roads, TVS NTorq, is manufactured by a company headquartered in Chennai. Lakadong, turmeric is very popular in mainland India. Online shopping for goods from the mainland is common; even big businesses in Shillong used online platforms for their supplies from as far as Kerala and Kanyakumari. Every morning, trucks with number plates of Andhra Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir drop their goods at Khliehlew, Shillong. Andhra Pradesh, the rice bowl of In-

dia, is an important supplier of our traditional & essential food item in Meghalaya, Ja Step, Ja Sngi and Ja Miet-Rice. Some of the ingredients to make Dosa, Jalebi, Rasgolla and Chole Bhatore (or Puri) come from the mainland; these dishes do sell well with the Khasis. Tourists from the mainland add up to the income levels of the Khasi entrepreneurs. With employable skills of good command over English and decent Hindi too, a number of Khasi men and women are employed by the services sector of the Indian economy. Their remittances back home, push up consumer spending and quality of life in the home state. In a globalised economy made smaller by technology, the list can go on and on.

If one goes through the history of our country since 1947, there were/are major challenges in its every decade of existence. Some or the other issue, appears(ed) to be threatening its unity, integrity and sovereignty. If the United States is a melting pot, India is a fresh salad bowl. With such diversity, even within the majority, there are bound to be a lot of centrifugal and centripetal forces at play. Non-state actors tend to take advantage of the goodness and power of assimilation of our soil. Balkanisation is a scary thought.

In Greek mythology, Hope was the last to come out of Pandora's Box. Where there is hope, there is possibility.

The Idea of India has never claimed to be a Thousand Year Reich. The bonds and connections between our ancient hills and the ancient mainland, strengthened by the Indian nation-state, must have, crossed three millennium. As we enter the third decade of the new millennium, on a wing of prayer and a spring of hope, are a few lines from a patriotic song of the Hindi film Hum Hindustani (1960) starring Sunil Dutt and Asha

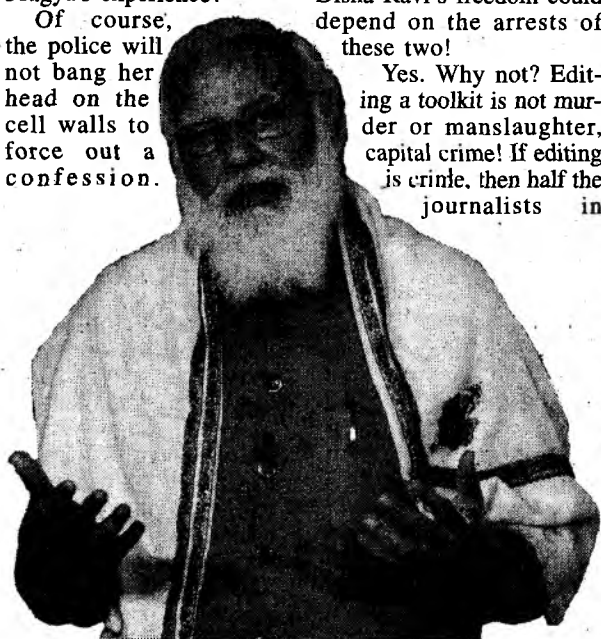
Chhodo Kal Ki Baatein
Kal Ki Baat Purani
Naye Daur (Journey/Run)
Mein Likhenge
Milkar Naye Kahani
Hum Hindustani, Hum Hindustani.
Disclaimer: Views expressed are personal; they do not reflect those of the Government of Meghalaya. An MBA (International Business) graduate of IIFT-Delhi, the writer opted for public service in his home state. Email - dominick.rymbai@gmail.com

Youthful opposition takes on tried and tested nationalism Modi government now clueless on how to stifle dissent

By Sushil Kutty

Young climate activist Disha Ravi is in a barred cell somewhere in the labyrinth of the Delhi Police. What do the police want her to confess to? The charges levelled against her speak of sedition, conspiracy and spreading hatred. The question is, what exactly does 'remand to police custody' amount to? What interrogation methods are used by the police? Are accused denied food, water; are they deprived of sleep? Movies tell harrowing tales of people in police custody. Member of Parliament Sadhvi Pragya, who was in police custody, has given graphic details of 'custodial interrogation.' Is Disha Ravi getting a taste of Sadhvi Pragya's experience?

Of course, the police will not bang her head on the cell walls to force out a confession.



That's medieval stuff. These days there are refined ways to keep an accused on the brink. Psychological stuff that play on the mind - keep the mind on the edge. Are the police playing psychological games with Disha Ravi? But when confessions made under duress cannot be considered evidence, why do courts give police custody?

The Delhi Police is emphatic that Disha Ravi was at the core of the anti-farm laws agitation with foreign lawyers, alleged Khalistani terrorists. The question is why did Disha leave the Whatsapp chat with Greta Thunberg intact, but chose to delete the 'Whatsapp Group'? Somehow doesn't seem to add up.

The police have to get the names of people in the 'deleted' Whatsapp Group if they hope to make progress in the investigation and prove their charges right. This means they need Facebook, which owns Whatsapp, to cooperate. Reports are the police have sought Facebook's help to unravel and lay bare the deleted 'Whatsapp Group,' get the names out to speak to them.

Meanwhile, media reports on Disha's arrest and her police custody posted on Facebook have drawn considerable support for the 21-year-old in the 'comments' sections. It was only late in the night that so-called bots in the BJP IT Cell noticed this to execute a counterattack. Winning the digital battle is crucial to win the war.

Disha Ravi probably wouldn't know that while in police custody, but the Delhi Police sure are giving the impression that they have the case tied up - that Facebook and Google are cooperating with them and are with the Government in quashing this attempt to unseat an elected government.

Yes, for the Modi Government, the farmers' agitation is no longer limited to the farm laws, it's an international conspiracy to unseat another right-leaning government. Period. Maybe. Maybe not. The fact is every time sense gains ground that the farmers' agitation is losing

ground something unravels to put it back on the front-pur.

It happened when the Red Fort was invaded. And it happened when Rihamna & Mia tweeted and the 'toolkit' was accidentally 'leaked' by Greta. Now, it's the Disha Ravi phase and likely would soon open to the Nikita Jacob-Shantanu Muluk chapter.

The duo are on the run and the police are apparently in hot chase! Are they? Why is it that no heads have rolled in the Delhi Police for letting go of Jacob and Muluk despite having Jacob in plain sight for a while? It's criminal that the Delhi Police allowed a suspect, two actually, to abscond. Meanwhile, Disha Ravi's freedom could depend on the arrests of these two!

Yes. Why not? Editing a toolkit is not murder or manslaughter, capital crime! If editing is crime, then half the journalists in

town would be behind bars and the other half would submit stuff not fit to publish. Fact is, so far, the Delhi police haven't produced anything to link Disha Ravi to the shenanigans surrounding the farmers' agitation and the Red Fort violence.

Also, now, politics has tainted the farmers' agitation. The Narendra Modi Government triggered the farmers' agitation by enacting the three farm laws. The opposition parties saw the overwhelming pick-up to the stir and leaped into the fray. Then, as sentiments veered in favour of the farmers, the ruling dispensation injected 'nationalism' into the mix with Red Fort happening and the 'insult to the tricolour' on Republic Day.

Both government and opposition playbooks have been in full power-play, and turning the tables on each other has become the routine, the order of the day. Right now it's 'nationalism/patriotism' versus the 'innocence of youth. Ever since Disha Ravi's arrest the opposition and 'independent media' haven't stopped talking of and highlighting the plight of 'young Disha'.

Yes, how can any Government put behind bars a young and vulnerable 21-year-old? Disha's pictures add to the pathos. Yes, the BJP and the Modi Government are being cornered for trampling on the rights of youth, jailing them for opposing the rampant exploitation of the country's resources by rapacious crony capitalists.

Yes, over 70% of India's population is youth - the young who are at the forefront of change. Narendra Modi and the BJP have been using 'nationalism' to tap the youthful vote-bank to win elections and remain in power. The opposition parties see an opportunity to use the same young vote-bank against the ruling dispensation. Disha Ravi's arrest has spontaneously brought together both opposition parties and 'independent' media on the same youthful platform! And young Disha Ravi is showing them the direction - the 'disha.' (IPA Service)

TO THE EDITOR

Pathetic service from AirTel

Editor,
I wish to draw the attention of the Information Technology Department, Government of Meghalaya and the office of the Deputy Commissioner, East Khasi Hills to the serious deterioration of the internet services provided by Airtel in many parts of Shillong city, particularly in the Mawlai area. Over the past few weeks, we the customers of this telecom company have seen that Airtel's internet connectivity is working at snail's pace and greatly hampers day to day work for many of us, especially for employees who must work from home or students who have online classes to compulsorily attend. In some areas, speed is hardly 20 to 30 kbps, while earlier it would go to 120 kbps or more during busy hours. It is amusing to note that these telecom companies do not delay by even a second to end a night customer's services when the monthly payment amount for an ensuing month is not paid. But it is sad to note that the services they are offering currently to the resi-

dents of Shillong city are not commensurate the amount charged. We appeal to the concerned authorities to look into this issue immediately.

Yours etc.,
K. Nongsteng,
Via email

Welcome move by the Govt

Editor,
Happiness is felt more intensely when we have already experienced a series of hardships. Now the announcement by Chief Minister, Conrad Sangma that the load-shedding regime has been lifted has come as a big relief to the citizens of the state who have been haunted by the "darkness". Everyone has thanked the Chief Minister and his team for this decisive move. Hope it will renew the enthusiasm of the student community who were feeling very pessimistic and low. This is also going to save the face of all those employees who have come all the way from Delhi, Bengaluru, Chennai, Mumbai to work from home. They were really having a tough time during the load shedding, apart from the frequent power outages.

Moreover, it is disgrace-

ful that we have to regularly suffer due to insufficient electricity in this twenty-first century. The image of an i-Phone in one hand and a candle in another is a paradox. We sincerely hope that the government will now seek a permanent solution instead of giving us citizens momentary relief. Our developmental activities cannot materialize unless we have sufficient electricity to fuel them.

Yours etc.,
Sail Gewali
Shillong

MCCL joint venture

Editor,
It is indeed a welcome step being mooted out by the State Govt. to have a joint venture for MCCL to tide over the present crisis of administration and mismanagement as the plant is suffering for more than a year resulting in huge loss to the state exchequer as well as adding to the suffering of the employees. The MOU if signed by the Govt. with a renowned cement company should not compromise the interest of the state as well as the employees. The MCCL had the regulation of bringing out

the best cement which was produced from the plant and there was heavy demand for it all over the state as well as the neighboring states. The plant should be upgraded with modern technology and the capacity should also be enhanced thereby bringing in more profit to the plant.

Yours etc.,
S L Singhania,
Via email

Why promote dynastic politics?

Editor,
After the untimely demise of Mawryngkneng MLA, David Nongrum it is deemed necessary to fill the space vacated by him so that the constituency which is already very poorly served, replete with bad roads and incomplete projects like the bridge connecting Umpling to Rynjah gets some traction and the constituency itself sees better development for the remaining period up to February 2023. Charles Pyngrope, the Nongthymmai MLA and father of late David Nongrum has made it clear that no one from the family would contest the by-election but it seems the Congress Party is hell bent on

promoting dynastic politics, which it is quite used to. The Congress is asking Pyngrope to reconsider his decision. Does this Party not have another candidate to contest from Mawryngkneng? What does that say about the leadership vacuum in the Congress? Where is the second and third rung leadership?

Of course in politics, a sitting MLA never promotes another leader for fear of being overshadowed. No MLA wants competition. Like the banyan tree that never allows anything else to grow under it, sitting MLAs too never want to see any other leader coming up. The Congress does not have a culture of grooming young leaders. And when sitting MLAs can no longer contest for various reasons or they die then their sons/daughters/wives contest so that power remains within the family. This has become the trend in Meghalaya. But the Congress is not the only party that promotes dynastic politics. The NPP is one up on this game. The UDP too is not far behind. When the late Dr Donkupur Roy passed away his son contested and won. So dynastic politics has become a

tradition in Meghalaya and a despicable one at that!

The voters in Meghalaya also don't reject this dynastic politics; on the contrary they encourage it. The reason is because these days MONEY is the one and only factor. If a candidate has no money, then he/she might as well not waste time. And then when the Government fails on all fronts we all shout and blame and castigate the ministers. We the voters have no right to do so. We have already been paid to vote. If the amount is Rs 2000 or 5000 or 10,000 we have already been paid to keep quiet like sheep for the next five years. So we get the government we deserve. We have all been bought and should stay bought.

But Mawryngkneng presents an opportunity to the people to vote an MLA who will concentrate on developing this hugely underdeveloped constituency and not just his/her personal interests. For that to happen people have to vote a candidate who will not buy votes but can be held accountable for the next 2 years.

Yours etc.,
Marcellus Kharsati,
Tynning

"The flood of money that gushes into politics today is a pollution of democracy."

— Theodore White

The Shillong Times

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Changing Kashmir

WITHOUT doubt, Kashmir is a work in progress for the Indian establishment. What came as a lightning strike in August 2019 by the BJP-led Modi government at the Centre, within three months of its reinstallation for a five-year term, was the abrogation of the Special Status for the province and bifurcation of it into two principal parts, namely Jammu and Kashmir on one side and Ladakh on the other. Many, including the Opposition parties, had looked at the central action with serious skepticism. Yet, some 18 months after the bold move, there is palpable optimism that things are changing for the better there. This view has been reinforced by the visit of a team of envoys from Europe, Asia and Africa this week.

After interactions with elected representatives of the Srinagar Municipal Corporation and all-party leaders, the envoys have expressed satisfaction over the restoration of democratic rights in the Valley after a period of uncertainties, curfew, snapping of internet communications etc. They were also convinced that the civic and District Development Council elections held there last year were free and fair. Notably, this is the third time that teams of envoys from foreign countries were ushered into Jammu and Kashmir after August 2019.

At the ground level, a significant change in recent months is the spectacular weakening of the terrorist/militant activism there. This may also have to do with the Balakot offensive against terror cells. Yet, the argument is not that the situation has been neutralized. Time alone can say how far things have improved, given the fact that Pakistani pro-Kashmiri outfits with ISI support are still active on the other side of the border.

A fair assessment could be that the people of the valley have had enough of disruptions to their normal life since the early 1990s when terrorist outfits got active. Politicians who fished in troubled waters are now finding the going tough. Union Home Minister Amit Shah has made it clear that if the situation improved, the Centre would be willing to restore the state status for Jammu and Kashmir, but not the special status.

Economic development of the region, affected by militancy, must be taken forward and the youths must see hope in the air. Tourism was the mainstay of Kashmir's economy. Militancy killed it. Lasting peace is a prerequisite to promote tourism. With the cooperation of the people, the government should be able to achieve this while also ensuring full democratic rights to the people in due course of time.

Fighting for Meghalaya's soul

By Patricia Mukhim

In the last few days when citizens silently suffered the transport strike and a seven-hour load-shedding [H1] [H2] [H3] social media became the battleground against the government. Some dependent souls even called Meghalaya a failed state. And this while the Chief Minister was in Delhi meeting Union Ministers, after which he took off for Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh for a function. While at Tawang the CM tweeted vigorously as he walked on the snow and was seen with a bow and arrow doing target practice. This is all fine and the CM deserves a break but not when the State is passing through 'dark' [H4] [H5] times literally.

To be fair to Conrad Sangma, his government inherited a decrepit system and near empty coffers. The MeECL did not suddenly reach a point of collapse. It has been in the ICU for a while now but no one had the guts to take the necessary action to turn it around because those actions have a political cost and vote-bank politics has always been more important than the state and its people. And that is how Meghalaya's soul has been mortgaged to the goddess of political expediency. That soul is being squeezed out and now has reached a point when it might just die. It is our collective duty to redeem the soul of a state that our ancestors envisioned many years ago.

Why has the soul of Meghalaya suffered this assault? It is because our elected representatives and all of us who elected them have forgotten our commitments to the standards of right and wrong so cogently elucidated by our ancestors. We are mixing fact with fiction and truth with falsehood in determining what sort of governance we should have. The pitch of the battle for the soul of Meghalaya is whether or not we the people will assume the burden of healing that troubled and ailing soul and bring it back on track. We live in a democracy (not a pre-independent state with archaic and arbitrary laws and rules). The broad consensus in a democracy is that it is in debating, contesting, and determining the standards of governance without

resorting to violence that preserves the vitality, freedom, and equality of a democracy.

Democracy lives or dies depending on the freedom that citizens possess to determine who should rule, but that freedom is bound to standards of right and wrong. Democracy is a communicative reality that withers when silence or a dreadful monotone allows a rule by forces that bypass the Constitutional principles of safeguarding the environment and the larger good of the citizens. Freedom of religion, speech, and assembly for everyone are necessary conditions for that non-violent work of self-governance. Thinkers like Hannah Arendt, Vaclav Havel, Martin Luther King, Jr., John Lewis, and others, have attested that when standards of fact, truth, and

appetites), (2) wisdom (knowledge and prudence), and (3) courage (not being afraid to do what is right). All the three principles are missing in those that govern the state of Meghalaya. The rulers have an insatiable appetite for lucre and this dictates their every action; there is neither knowledge nor prudence in our rulers, and, citizens lack courage to stand up and be counted. They see their Rights and Freedoms guaranteed in the Constitution as gifts that would fall from the heavens without putting up a fight. That's where we are wrong. Nothing comes easy and nothing can be achieved without questioning the government.

For a long time, citizens have learnt to approach pressure groups with their problems and therefore given them illegitimate

and lies. The fact is that coal mining carries on unabated. The lies fed to us the citizens by the state, is that coal mining isn't happening. The Government is allowing coal mining to happen because it has a pre-election promise to coal mine owners to fulfil. So coal is mined surreptitiously with the full support of the government machinery. The government is lying. It is committing perjury every time it says there is no coal mining and trucks are seen carrying coal by the hundreds daily. Facts cannot be played around, nor can the safety and security of citizens be sacrificed for political gain. The government does not exist to advance the personal wealth or advantage of its ministers, bureaucrats and police.

This dark side of the government has also pushed the citizens to turn against each other; it's the mine owners versus those who care for the environment. The mine owners are fired by hatred and the desire to do violence to others. They have lost the rational constraint and no longer think of the future. For them it's now or never and anyone who stands between them and mining must be treated as the enemy. In this struggle for the soul of Meghalaya, it is unfortunate that the legislators have sided with the destructors of the environment when they should have acted in accordance with the law and not acquiesce in activities that undermine the rule of law.

As citizens we need to get past the veneer of politics and narrow self-interest and to look at the larger picture of Meghalaya which is today at the crossroads. The choice is that of moving towards a healthier soul, healing from its wounds, uniting to fight corruption in all its forms and perhaps even moving towards a clean election campaign. The alternative is to plunge deeper into the dark, chaotic, self-defeating cauldron where Meghalaya's soul might be finally buried.

The young are getting despondent and impatient. They are looking for someone who can start the revolution of cleansing Meghalaya of the stench of corruption and bad governance. Who will lead this fight for Meghalaya's soul?

Why has the soul of Meghalaya suffered this assault? It is because our elected representatives and all of us who elected them have forgotten our commitments to the standards of right and wrong so cogently elucidated by our ancestors.

right no longer vitalize public debate about governance then tyranny engulfs a people. We the people (the voters) need to reaffirm our faith in the Constitution of India and not on any diktat outside of it.

Many will question if the state has a soul. It was Plato who spoke about the soul of a nation in the Republic. Plato says the state is infused with a soul that resembles the soul of a person. "Must we not acknowledge," Plato averred, "that in each of us there are the same principles and habits which there are in the State; and that from the individual they pass into the State?" These principles, he maintained, are reason, will, and appetite.

According to Plato, in a healthy individual which in turn extends to the state, reason directs the soul by orchestrating cooperation between the passions and the will. Accordingly, the healthy individual must possess (1) temperance (rational constraint over the

power over themselves. That's because protesting means sacrifice and citizens are hesitant to make that sacrifice.

Plato remarks that the healthy state is akin to a healthy individual, for in such a state the leader who leads by reason, is wise. This means that he is knowledgeable and prudent in statecraft and his decisions are aimed at promoting the welfare of the state and its citizens. The citizens, in turn are temperate. This means they exercise rational self-control including over destructive impulses such as ones motivated by hatred and blind rage. In a healthy state the police should represent the people not the rulers. While they have to follow the rules, that does not mean blind obedience at the expense of endangering the soul of the state. And police should not allow themselves to be used by politicians.

In Meghalaya today there is a blur between fact

West Khasi Hills District, 36 to 38 coke factories constructed during 2017-2018 have been producing and exporting coke to Assam and beyond and also causing air and water pollution beyond imagination, yet the land owners, the land agents, the village durbars, the Syiems, the District Councils and the various government authorities remained unconcerned and mute to the large scale pollution of the precious environment in our state.

Much of our God-given natural environment has already been destroyed, plundered and polluted by the people of the state, mostly by the rich to further enrich themselves and to satisfy their greed, while the poor and the have-nots have long gone or remained poorer than before with no hope whatsoever.

I appeal to the people of our state to look beyond their noses. Let us respect and preserve our God-given natural bounty for our own honourable survival and for the good of our present and future generation.

Yours etc.,
Philip Marwein,
Shillong

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

Coup in Myanmar

India's guarded response

By Dr. DK. Giri

For the third time since gaining independence in 1948, Myanmar politics became a victim of a military coup d'état. For a long period of 49 years between 1962 and 2011, Myanmar was under direct military rule. In 1990, elections were held and Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) was overwhelmingly victorious. The military (Tatmadaw) disregarded that election and continued their control of Myanmar politics. Under various pressures, the military once again called for elections in 2011 that led to a massive victory of NLD. This time around, the military did concede power to civilian rule. On February 1, this year, the Myanmar military took over the government, arrested Suu Kyi and President Win Myint. It declared an emergency for one year.

Curiously, the Commander-in-Chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, who was to retire from service in a few months, took over the administration of the country and ensconced himself in an unchallenged position of power. There have been massive nationwide protests against the imposition of military rule. There has also been varying degree of reactions from different corners of the world. The Embassy of USA and 15 other Missions in Yangon have issued statements, the import of which is, "Opposing any attempt to alter the outcome of the elections held in November 2020 and impede Myanmar's democratic transition." New Delhi, as expected, has been cautiously balanced in its reaction to the coup although the international perception is that Indian response along with that of Japan will determine the course of events in Myanmar and will arrest their domino effect.

The provocation for the latest coup is the nature of the last elections which is being questioned by the military as unfair and non-transparent. Some nine million votes are in question. The military demanded that the electoral body of Myanmar, United Elections Commission (UEC) proves that elections were conducted fairly. The Election Commission rejected this demand as unnecessary. While this was the stated reason for the military action, the other was the attempt by NLD to reform the Constitution, mainly the role and privilege of the military incorporated in the Constitution.

To recall, the present Constitution was drafted by the military junta in 2008, and it was approved in a questionable referendum. According to Article 147, the military could take over the governance in an emergency. Apparently, they have invoked this Article. Furthermore, in this Constitution, the military had a provision of 25 per cent of seats reserved and the control over internal security, defence and border affairs. That is how, although there was a civilian government for about last ten years, the military had considerable unedifying influence over the governance process.

Aung San Suu Kyi, the supreme political leader of Myanmar was conscious of the stranglehold of the military over the government. She had to do a tight ropewalk in balancing the military and the civilian forces in governance and that is why perhaps she supported the military action against Rohingya in Rakhine state and defended them in the International Criminal Court. Many world leaders went up in arms and demanded that the Noble Peace Prize conferred on her should be taken back. Little did they realise the com-

plexity of Myanmar politics; the nexus between the military and the corporate, the low rate of growth, ethnic fragmentation, emasculation of civilian institutions and the economic slowdown. She wanted, in a way, to push the army back in the barracks.

In fact, the economy was the main weapon used by the military with promulgation of Investment Law in 2017 and New Company Law in 2018. The West did not invest much. Somewhat like Indonesia, Myanmar had a guided political system with a clear role of arm forces, which also protected their economic interest. What was worse was that after the pogrom in Rakhine state displacing around one million Rohingya Muslims; the West, led by Donald Trump imposed sanctions, condemned the military actions as genocide and so on.

Be that as it may, to nullify a popular election and to prevent victors from entering Parliament and forming the government, by a military crackdown, is not maintainable. At the time of writing, the military has promised that their intervention is only temporary and civilian rule will be restored sooner than later. The new administration in US under Joe Biden has already threatened and imposed sanctions and is demanding restoration of parliamentary democracy.

The other strategic perspective is to leverage the goodwill enjoyed by countries like India and Japan with both Myanmar civilian leadership and military junta. Both India and Japan could perhaps give a gentle nudging instead of condemnations or sanctions. The third possible scenario which is worrying the democratic world is that Myanmar military might join the Chinese camp in desperation.

Talking of India's immediate response to the coup, it has been balanced and calibrated. New Delhi did not mention the coup, but said that it was deeply concerned with the developments in Myanmar. The statement read, "India has always been steadfast in its support of the process of democratic transition in Myanmar. We believe that the rule of law and the democratic process must be upheld". New Delhi has maintained equally good relations with civilian leadership as well as military junta. It counts on Myanmar military for controlling the insurgents operating in the North-East of India. In May last year, 22 insurgents were handed over by Myanmar to India.

Admittedly, India has strategic interests in Myanmar. It conducts bilateral army exercise around Rakhine state bordering Mizoram. New Delhi has to continue the development activities as Myanmar is the bridge between India and South-East Asia. It has invested up to US\$1.4 billion in connectivity running through Myanmar, a trilateral road running between India, Myanmar and Thailand. The project KMMTP (Kaladan Multi-Model Transport Transit Project) connects Eastern India with Myanmar. The East-West Economic Corridor connects India to Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam through Myanmar. Finally, New Delhi is wary of growing Chinese influence in Myanmar.

Thus, India's relations with Myanmar are based on six Cs - commerce, connectivity, capacity building, civilisational links, community interaction (India has a large diaspora in Myanmar) and China, the dragon in the room. Given these interdependent linkages, New Delhi had to be cautious. Many democracy watchers perhaps do not endorse India's restraint. --INFA (The author is Prof. International Relations, JIMMC)

TO THE EDITOR

Wake up Meghalayans!

Editor,
As a Khasi working and residing in Mumbai, Maharashtra I was delighted to read the two part article by Dominick Dauni Roising Rymbai. He has melded the idea of being Khasi and Indian, so seamlessly and brought in the right examples to show that no one can lay claim to a unique identity. We are the sum total of many cultures, races and identities and we can only progress as a people if we stop the ethnocentric movement that are populist and are intended to create the political spaces for successive political aspirations since the 1980s. Once these aspirants are elected they forget all that they had promised the people who voted them. Love for the jaidbyrniew then translates to love of the self and their kith and kin.

My only window to the State of Meghalaya is through The Shillong Times and I feel happy and proud that younger writers are filling up the op-ed space in this newspaper. I have enjoyed reading Albert Thyrmiang's searing pieces on issues such as the silence of the church and on other matters that affect Meghalaya and its people.

It takes courage to speak out but that is the role of intellectuals. Having lived here for over twelve years, each time I travel home, I am overwhelmed by a sense of disquiet over the levels of corruption, the silence of those who should be speaking up and the compromises that the educated lot have made with the system without a care for the future of the next generation. I have also noticed that all those who can afford are sending their children to get educated outside the state and the affluent (politicians, bureaucrats and businesspersons) are sending theirs abroad to some of the best institutions. This means our own education system is failing us.

The Shillong Times should encourage this band of young writers to articulate their thoughts regularly because young minds need to read their writings and find hope and a way out of the gloomy scenario of failed governance and lack of accountability of the elected representatives both in the ruling and opposition. Let's not forget that the Opposition today was in the ruling seat a couple of years ago, so they cannot be playing the blame game. It just doesn't stick. Personally speaking, I couldn't care less whether the Chief Minister is a Khasi, Jaintia or Garo. The person should

lead the way and think of creating job opportunities for the burgeoning youth population. I was hoping that Conrad Sangma at the helm and with his management background and exposure to life abroad would bring in fresh ideas and better governance. But, it has been a disappointing two year plus journey. I am not too sure if the Covid situation too was handled well. I was in Shillong for nearly six months and all I could see were signs that not all is well with Meghalaya. Add to all this is the continued agitation for this that or the other. I don't understand why a state would want to travel backwards in time and ask for the Inner Line Permit (ILP) but what is worse is that a progressive chief minister would lead that charge and ask the Centre to implement this colonial law. This actually saddens me and others who have had to leave the state to work outside.

The only hope is for many more young people to start writing and speaking their minds so that the rest of the world does not think that the only sensible people in Meghalaya are those in the KSU, HYC and other sundry groups whose pastime it has become to defend the jaidbyrniew as if this 'jaidbyrniew' is sick, disabled or mentally handicapped and incapable of

looking after its own interests. In any case there are too many of such groups that have mushroomed in Meghalaya and I often wonder if they even work for a living. If they are working, would they have time to continually be on protest mode? People of Meghalaya, learn to speak up for yourselves and don't contract others to protest on your behalf because you are actually looking like clueless morons.

Yours etc.,
Banwan Lyngdoh Tron,
Mumbai - 51

Pollution in Meghalaya aggravates

Editor,
Being an enemy of environmental degradation including environmental pollution (environmental activist) through my writings in the print media (especially in newspapers and magazines) for a long time, I wish to congratulate the East Jaintia National Council (EJNC), an NGO, for bringing to the notice of the public at large through the media, especially the print media, about the horrible choking and breathlessness of the residents of Nongrim Hills village, under Sutnga Elaka, caused by inhaling the toxic fumes emitted con-

tinuously by Contalo Coke Factory set up at Nongrim Hills itself, allegedly by a coal baron, Thomas Nongdu in 2018-2019.

Going by media reports, the women of the village deserve to be congratulated and awarded, especially Kong Rida Bareh and Kong Tiplemp Lapsam, for daring to oppose the setting up of the toxic smoke factory in larger public interest while the officials of the village, for whatever reason, went ahead by issuing a NOC to the owner of the factory. Not contented with that, the women lodged their complaints to the Doloi of Sutnga Elaka, the Deputy Commissioner of East Jaintia Hills and the owner of the factory about the health hazards caused by the factory. It was pointed out that the black toxic smoke has also polluted drinking water sources and crops. As no one seemed to care, the women asked EJNC to help them remove this life threatening problem.

It may be mentioned here that the owner has initiated steps to construct another Coke factory near the existing one and is producing and exporting coking coal. In East Jaintia this is not the only one; in fact there are many coke factories already in existence which have caused the same hazards. In Shallang belt in

"Home ownership is the cornerstone of a strong community."

— Rick Renzi

The Shillong Times

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Victory for women

THE acquittal of journalist Priya Ramani by the Delhi court in a criminal defamation case brought against her by former Union Minister and editor M J Akbar is a landmark judgment that will empower other women to speak up against all forms of sexual violations and sexually nuanced remarks and actions by their employers or male colleagues. The Court's remarks that the timing of the sexual assault or sexually implicit advance is immaterial and that women can bring up the matter when they gather courage to do so is very empowering for women. In fact the judgment marks a progressive mindset and a historic moment for the #MeToo movement in India. It was in 2018 that women across this country broke their silence by calling out powerful sexual predators on social media. Some in the state of Meghalaya too had called out those who molested them during their childhood years.

Priya Ramani had accused M J Akbar of sexual assault when she had gone for a job interview some two decades ago. In October 2018, Akbar who is presently a Rajya Sabha MP had resigned from his post of Minister of State for External Affairs after allegations poured out from various women journalists who he had made sexual advances towards. He sued Ramani for speaking up, accusing her of tarnishing his "stellar reputation." The Delhi High Court ruled that reputation is no defence against wrongdoing. The #MeToo movement worldwide attempted to break the asymmetry of patriarchal power that makes sexual harassment invisible, and silences and discredits women's voices. Hence Judge Ravindra Kumar Pandey has with one stroke of the pen given legitimacy not just to Priya Ramani but to countless other women who silently suffer sexual harassment from male bosses for fear of losing their jobs.

Twenty years ago the Vishakha guidelines that deals with sexual harassment and the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act, 2013 were not in place hence women then were at a disadvantage. The recent order takes into account the essence of those guidelines and upholds the rights of women to a violence-free, safe workplace. The judgment further emphasizes that a woman cannot be punished for speaking up against sexual abuse by the accused filing a criminal complaint of defamation against her.

The #MeToo movement resulted not only in a re-evaluation of toxic patriarchal cultures but also resulted in convictions of powerful men like film producer Harvey Weinstein, comedian Bill Cosby and gymnastics coach Larry Nassar. In India too many film stars and journalists were emboldened to call out their sexual predators. The allegations against Akbar were backed up by accounts of no less than 20 journalists. Ironically Ramani had to pay a heavy price and stand trial for speaking up. Yet she has stood up for hundreds of other women who are intimidated by powerful men. Hopefully, sexual harassment in the workplace will see a downward trend.

Cornerstones of the Khasi ethos

By Aristotle Lyngdoh

The fight for ILP appears to have encountered a rocky mountain. Many are stupefied by the attitude of the Union Home Minister and the Centre concerning the resolution of the State Legislative Assembly and what will follow next. But the question is whether the ILP is the only solution against influx. Are there no other options to counter the perceived threat that may sweep away our culture, land and tradition which we consider our only identity? On another plane the uniqueness of our cultural identity derived from the rare system of matriliney is also under serious attack from weird ideas of a group of citizens who are guided by the thought that unequal distribution of property and wealth are the sole reason that led many Khasi men astray. What a simplistic logic for coming to conclusion on such a complex matter and without substantial cultural and social research. Whereas the problem of landlessness, poverty, premature marriage are other causes that may drive people to any extent. But somehow the bond of kinship that originated from the maternal clan system keeps people intact even in difficult situations.

I feel the time has come for us to revisit the principles and values planted in the thoughts and beliefs of our forefathers. Patricia Mukhim has rightly pointed out the feeling of the present Khasi generation towards others in her article (ST Jan 15, 2021) 'Inner Line Permit as identity marker and placebo and the facts pointed therein cannot be denied. But the ancient Khasis felt that they were different from others simply because of the belief they professed and the practice they followed through certain principles that guided the whole conduct of life and behavior with regards to oneself and towards others in reverence to their Maker (U Blei Nongbuh Nongthaw). The ancient Khasis did not believe they had evolved from apes; neither did they become barbarians eating human flesh nor practice animism, atheism, idolism, etc. Right from the beginning of earthly life, they faithfully believed in God the Creator and practiced certain moral etiquettes to develop integ-

ity and acquire justice. They carefully regarded the law of sacro-sanctity (ka sang ka ma), sincerity and righteousness (Ka im hok leh hok), honouring fellow humans and God (tip brier tip blei) and to work or earn with fairness and honesty (Kamai ia ka hok). These are few of the primary cornerstones where the entire administration and conduct of social and political life was constructed. In fact these ethos are divine in nature and when we choose to practice them, we reflect the characteristics of God the creator here on earth. Only then we will be able to have

Government to put its seal of approval on the Act. How many more trips and appointments our Chief Minister and his team will make to Delhi and what will be the outcome we don't know. Whether we agree or not, as a state, our strategy on how to lobby with the Centre for various benefits is very poor. The reason I say so is because for the past many years we the people have failed to understand this logic. Being one of the landlocked states with marginal infrastructures, total dependence on the centre for revenue, we should have developed various ap-



a good and healthy political system in our society. No matter what faith we belong to, the divine principles remain unchanged. The church is just a body of individual believers and it is the nature and characteristics of the individual members that define the entire entity.

Remember the Khasis have survived in this land for thousands of years not because of warfare skills, but simply because their right to live and survive in

proaches where we can lobby better with the Centre in many areas. Besides the strong political relationship with the party in power, we should also have professionals and bureaucrats in various sectors and ministries who can intelligently maneuver policies and decisions that are beneficial to their home state. We need people who are concerned and care about the welfare and affairs of the home state and its people. If local NGOs such as the KSU, HYC and

He is an exemplary figure that our youngsters should be aware of.

Coming back to the security and protection of our cultural identity and the point raised by Toki Blah on the structure of local governance in his article, 'Dorbars and the need to be relevant' (ST Feb 10 2021), the other problem with our Dorbar Shnong is the withering image of intellectual relevance. And the problem lies with the fact that we the people have completely chosen to ignore our cultural principles that guide our conduct in our daily social and political life. Therefore, with due respect to everyone, I don't wonder

why we should not reap what we have sown. With the prevailing quality of leadership in local bodies and government, the entire business of developing a state and society will rotate only in areas where there is a possible flow of cash. For instance, important legislation such as the KHAD (Clan Administration) Bill 2018 did not catch

the attention of the present MDA government and in particular the elected representatives from Khasi & Jaintia Hills who are very much part and parcel of the clan system. The Bill which was meant to codify the age old clan system, was upheld by the then Governor Thathagatha Roy on the advice of the MDA Government. Such an important legislation which is also constitutionally valid that will ultimately regulate the hidden influx, the frequent misuse of Khasi Clan name by non-Khasis, the recognition of clan sanctity to prevent marriage of consanguinity and other welfare related with clan organization should have been given due importance.

It is sad to see that we are governed by representatives who themselves are still in the learning stage and under the patronage of their financiers. As already mentioned, the ILP may not be real and if the partners in the MDA government are serious about matters that affect the indigenous population, they should right away initiate legislation to safeguard the traditional system of governance and the cultural identity of the community.

"Remember the Khasis have survived in this land for thousands of years not because of warfare skills, but simply because their right to live and survive in the land was empowered by the principles and ethos they believed and practiced sincerely."

the land was empowered by the principles and ethos they believed and practiced sincerely. But today we are more driven by the attitude of ethnic minority and the mindset of individualism rather than the idea of collectivism. ILP may not be real for the time being, and it looks funny for the State's political leaders to rush off and on to the national capital to persuade the NDA

others understand this logic, they should encourage youngsters to focus on these approaches so that the future of our state and the people will be bright. We need a person like Phrang Roy, a bureaucrat-cum-diplomat who is solely instrumental in bringing IFAD (International Fund for Agricultural Development) in our state and the entire North Eastern region.

Where does India stand in Biden's America?

By Ambassador T P Sreenivasan

Ever since it became clear that Joe Biden would be President of the US, India was preoccupied with the question as to what his policy towards India would be. But now, as he completes the first month in office, Biden has revealed his cards through his own statements and telephone calls carefully calibrated by the White House staff and the comments of his newly appointed cabinet members.

But there has been no public response from Delhi to help the President understand Indian sensitivities. Presumably, this is taking place between the officials of the two countries, but there is very little public debate on the good, the indifferent and the problematic aspects in the emerging India-US relations.

The White House has clarified that the order in his calls to friends and foes has no particular meaning, but we have noted that his call to Prime Minister Modi came even when Israel, Turkey and China were waiting for their turns. India was the first among the non-treaty countries to be called.

But reading between the lines of the read outs of the two sides, there are hints of differences even on democracy. The White House readout mentions that Biden spoke about his commitment to spreading democratisation, while the Indian transcript does not.

This may be seen as an indication that Biden will not be uninterested in domestic social cohesion, the state of democracy and freedom of speech in India.

Linked with this is Biden's intention to revive an initiative taken at the time of Madeleine Albright to set up a Community of Democracies with a vague UN linkage. India should attend, but recall at this stage the last experience of such an exercise, which did not have the desired results.

It was hard even to choose the democracies to be included. India has not been in the business of evangelising for democracy. On democracy in Burma, the US position is different from ours. We have dealt with the army even before Aung San Suu Kyi joined hands with the army and the US had shown understanding of our stand.

But if Biden takes a tough stand on the military leadership of Burma and imposes sanctions, the investments we have made in that relationship will be wasted. The limitations of democracy in Burma, which has several insurgency groups may have to be driven home to the Americans.

At the recent Quad ministerial meeting, the US appears to have modified its position.

The participants, while reiterating democratic values of the region, expressed commitment to 'upholding rule-based international order' and 'peaceful resolution of disputes', in accordance with the Indian position.

Biden clubbed Russia and China together as advancing authoritarianism, including the growing ambitions of China to rival the US and the determination of Russia to damage and disrupt US democracy.

He gave pride of place to Russia for taking aggressive actions and pledged to work against it with the allies of the US. His condemnation of the treat-

ment meted out to Navalny is no matter to India.

But Biden must not be unaware of our special relations with Russia and the exemption given to India to import S-400 missiles. It may be necessary to ensure that the US does not see our relationship with Russia as hurtful to the US.

Biden's description of the threat from China as the most serious competitor is music to our ears, but it is clear that he will take a lenient view of areas in which the two countries have the scope to work together.

He did not mention India-Pacific in this context, but his defence secretary had unequivocally supported the Quad dialogue as an important part of keeping the region peaceful and free of interference. In fact, India-Pacific is the only area in which Indian cooperation is being sought.

American return to the Paris Agreement has been universally welcomed, but there is a tone of coercion when Biden speaks of raising the ambition of climate targets. 'That way we can challenge other nations, other major emitters,' he declares.

Since the Paris Agreement does not endorse "common but differentiated responsibilities" and the principle of per capita emissions, India is likely to come under pressure in the negotiations. A special representative may have to be appointed to begin discussions.

The scaling down of American relationship with Saudi Arabia may have no implications for us, but together with the uncertainty of the Iran nuclear deal, the situation in West Asia may take a turn for the worse for which we need to be prepared.

The prospects of an end to the war in Yemen is welcome.

The renewal of the appointment of the Afghan envoy is a good sign, but Biden's position on Pakistan and cross border terrorism will crystallise only after the Afghanistan issue is settled.

Biden is not likely to restore funding to end terrorism, as Pakistan's duplicity in the matter is well documented, but he will have to reward Pakistan in some way if the Afghan deal is helpful to the US. Given Biden's past association with Pakistan, there is some concern in India about his Pakistan policy.

Even though we were tantalisingly close to a trade agreement with the Trump Administration, nothing came of it because of other preoccupations. We should actively lobby with the Biden administration to begin trade talks, even though he has stated that he is in no hurry to sign any new trade agreements.

Biden's reference to 'middle class diplomacy' opens up the possibility of some limited trade agreements involving certain goods produced by the middle class in the US. After having waited for the phone call from Biden, the world leaders will be now waiting for their turn to visit Washington.

This will depend on the success in controlling, if not eliminating COVID-19.

The reduction of tension on the Chinese border may have reduced the urgency of a Biden-Modi meeting, but the sooner Modi starts a bromance with Biden the better as he had done with Obama and Trump.

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

TO THE EDITOR

Proud Indian, Happy Khasi

Editor,

I would like to add my 'thumbs up' to the amazing two-part article by Dominick Rymbai which appeared in the Shillong Times this week. In a composed, sensitive manner he convincingly laid out the cultural landscape of our hills and how mainland Indians and hill tribals are inextricably woven into the fabric of one and the same tapestry. Of course, on one side we have a distinct Khasi identity and culture, but at the same time our history, geography and destiny are tied to that of our fellow Indians. Not to mention, most importantly of course, that we are all members of the human race and that above all, it is the common welfare of all humans on this planet that we must devote ourselves to.

Unfortunately, some of us cannot live in this dichotomy and tend to be chauvinistic about one identity, elevating it above all else and becoming blind to the harm that we do to ourselves and those around us, especially the poor and

marginalised who get caught in the crossfire of jingoistic artillery. Such an attitude is equivalent to painting oneself into a corner or sawing off the branch that you are sitting on. Mankind has evolved into a tree, and if we take hold of just one branch it will wither away.

Being born of a Khasi mother and a non-Khasi father, the dichotomy runs in my veins and the brouhaha that surrounds me is sometimes confusing and bruising. At the same time it is so unscientific. DNA-wise, there is no such thing as a pure Khasi. A few intermarriages will permeate the genes of succeeding generations for all time to come. DNA studies will tell us that just half a dozen intermarriages between a Khasi and a Garo have given a smidgen of Garo DNA to almost all Khasis, except maybe a few families among the War who have been geographically isolated.

All kinds of other blood courses through our veins: non-tribal Indian, Nepali, Chinese, English and what not. Luckily it's all the same colour. Apart from blood, adopting Christianity and Western lifestyles have

contaminated true Khasiness according to some. Many backgrounds and social environments have contributed to whom I am today. In the end identity and culture is the good and valuable that you choose to embrace as yours from your given heritage. And those good and valuable components must make you a better human being.

Yours etc.,
Glenn C. Kharkongor,
Via email

Solution to the ongoing MCS case

Editor,

I am writing only to suggest solutions to this quagmire and not to criticise any party. A proposal for a solution to the aggrieved candidates is for a prayer that the Honourable High Court will order for the advertisement of vacant MCS posts from April 1, 2017 to March 31, 2022 "in advance" for new and vacant MCS posts since it will take more than one year for the MCS personal interview to be conducted if such an order for the ad-

vertisement of vacant MCS posts is ordered by the Honourable High Court with age relaxation for only these 6 candidates as well as for other youths to get the opportunity to apply since many MCS posts had become and will become vacant for these 5 (five) years 2017-22. A prayer for an order would be an order for (i) the month for which these vacant MCS posts will be advertised this year, (ii) the months for conducting and declaring the preliminary exams and results this year (iii) the months for conducting and declaring the mains exams next year (iv) the pattern of assessment of marks for both the Prelims and the Mains and finally (v) the presence of the MPSC logos with number codes like the UPSC answer sheets in each and every sheet to remove the alleged insertion of answer sheets including the supplementary MPSC answer sheets which are at present absent. Besides, MCS exams should be conducted every 5 years as was done before and not every 10 years in which Meghalaya is alleged to have the dubious distinction of being the only state in India that does that (advertises MCS

posts every ten years).

The case regarding those aggrieved candidates who filed a case in the High Court and in the Supreme Court and for the many candidates who do not have the power to file cases but who had been wronged nonetheless is valid and legitimate because what had been given in the advertisement has to be adhered to strictly in letter and spirit just as the UPSC adhered to its advertisement strictly. When I first read about this issue, I instantly thought that the whole examination would be dismissed in one month easily with full confidence and it is a no brainer because their case is very much legitimate and valid since the rules of the game were changed and thinking logically in my mind that justice would be delivered to the thousands who had been wronged but it was allowed to be dragged on till this stage now.

Justice has not been done for them for which it is obvious and plain to see that they were wronged. That is why I had made the above solution which to me is simple and not to made into a quagmire of sorts. I pray that that the right call

would be made by the divisional or full bench of the honourable high court. An extra issue which to me is not related with this issue directly for which they are currently fighting but an issue which will certainly help clear the air in future job examinations to come is that "constitutionally," can a reservation not be placed within a reservation? Especially, when the details of the reservation have not been mentioned in the "state reservation policy." Going back to this main issue, it is fervently hoped that justice would be done to the thousands who had been wronged by either of the Courts because if the MPSC gets scot free for tweaking with the advertisement in 2018 post exams then it may do so in future exams too. The decision of the court in the months to come on this matter will be most significant.

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request
Via email

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

Documentary pays homage to Jews victimised during WW II

By S. Ravi

Keeping alive the horrors of the genocide that the Nazis committed against the Jews is required for soul-searching and impressing upon the millennials to rise beyond caste, creed, race and religion. Recently, the International Holocaust Remembrance Day was commemorated world over to recall the killing of six million Jews and 11 million others by the Nazi establishment led by Hitler.

Coinciding appropriately with this year's event is the DW DocFilm *The Warsaw Ghetto: Memories of Horror*, a touching film about the suffering that Jews had to undergo at the hands of the Nazis. The documentary was screened virtually by the India International Centre, New Delhi.

The 40-minute-long film, directed by Eric Bednarski, explains how the Warsaw Ghetto came into being, how the Jews — both Polish and others — brought from Europe, fared there. Besides the first-hand account of the Warsaw residents, including Jews, the film is insightful as it includes rare footage of an amateur 8 mm film shot by a Pole, Alfons Ziolkowski. He filmed the Ghetto, risking his free-

dom and life, and left for posterity, invaluable evidence.

All those Jews interviewed fondly remember the Warsaw they lived in.

Krystya Budnicka says she spoke Yiddish and Polish, and had no problem with the Poles while Zygmunt Walkowski, recalls his Jewish neighbour and shopkeeper, who impressed him and other children by performing a trick of stitching his fingers.

Notably, Warsaw then, a major centre of Jewish life and culture boasted of more than 3.5 lakh Jews, the second largest in the world after New York City. As Chief Rabbi of Poland, Michael Schudrich puts it, "Jews were almost everywhere, and interacting with non-Jews daily."

All that bonhomie came to a halt with the Germans invading Poland in September of 1939, which they occupied from October till January 1945. Right from the beginning, the idea was to dismantle Warsaw and build a city for the Germans with no Jews.

As Niels Gotschow, an architectural historian, remarks, "It was to reduce Warsaw next to nothing the intention was to destroy the capital of Poland." With no capital, the concept of Poland would cease to exist.

Pursuing this objective, the Jews were isolated in a section of the city called Warsaw Ghetto, a settlement surrounded by a wall. The footage vividly depicts heart-wrenching scenes of families with children and individuals, carrying in the hands and carts, their meagre possessions, shifting to the Ghetto. The displacement shattered them physically but also psychologically.

Irena Agata Boldok who earlier lived in a decent neighbourhood, says she didn't want to live there and wanted to return. As a child on seeing a poster showing a Jew as evil, she says, "I didn't want to be a Jew." So deep was the psychic impact! With hundreds packed like sardines, survival in isolation on meagre ration was a nightmare. Those with money or Polish friends managed to survive. Smuggling became rampant. Ziolkowski's film shows little children with small packets and firewood bundles, passing them through holes in the wall. It has scenes showing a policeman beat up these kids with a broom and baton. A small boy battered mercilessly with the baton makes one revolt in anger!

The footage also shows the mass graveyard for burying the exterminated Jews, ironically located in a vast field right next to the Jew-

ish cemetery. Intrigued by the sickening odour, Ziolkowski, enquired from a Jewish policeman, and learnt about it.

With the 1943 Uprising by the Jewish resistance opposing the transfer of the remaining Ghetto population to death camps, the place was burned down and its inhabitants killed. Walkowski in a pensive tone says the Germans wanted to cover the place with earth and create a park on the demolished ghetto, a garden paradise.

Amidst all this misery, the footage showing a group of Jews playing violin, drums, trumpet and accordion, displays the ray of hope the human race has even in the gravest of situations.

Bednarski weaves a seamless narrative through the interviews, footage and pictures making it an immersive viewing. His last shot of the historic tram, which runs with a Star of David atop every year on January 27 to remind Warsaw residents of their murdered Jewish, returning to the depot, with the door slowly closing, has sub-text for the viewers. The haunting background score by Daniel Bloom fits well with the subject.

(This content is being carried under an arrangement with indianarrative.com)



A Jewish woman pushes a pram on the streets of Warsaw.

Books & Literature

What it means to be a woman in Modern India

By Sukant Deepak

She was in London when she saw the image of the hanging children, aged 16 and 14, circulating on Twitter. Though she had planned to write a book about the wave of sexual violence, seeing that visual of two teenage girls — Padma and Lali who disappeared from their home in the village of Katra Sadatganj in Uttar Pradesh, author Sonia Faleiro felt that this case, coming barely two years after the 2012 Delhi bus rape, could serve as the focus of her next book — the recently released *The Good Girls: An Ordinary Killing* (Hamish Hamilton/Penguin Random House India).

Faleiro flew down from London to Delhi and then drove six hours to the girls' village, Katra Sadatganj, in Badaun, Uttar Pradesh, expecting to stay only a few days. But by the end of that trip it was clear that nothing was as it seemed. "I was then faced with a choice between choosing another case or digging deeper into this one. I decided to stay with the Katra case, and over the next few months it became clear that the story of the girls and of how their lives were impacted by gender, caste, politics, notions of honour, and the threat of violence, was really the story of what it meant to be a woman in modern India," she recalls.

An experienced journalist, the writer reported the case over four years and interviewed more than a hundred people, many of them repeatedly. Supplementing this material with more than 3,272 pages of official records, she says it was a gruelling process, complicated by the fact that many individuals who were central to the events of the night the children went missing and kept changing their sto-

ries. "The main challenge was to pin down a clear and accurate narrative, the writing came much later," says Faleiro, who will be speaking during the ongoing Jaipur Literature Festival (JLF).

Ask Faleiro, who also has to her credit non-fiction titles including *Beautiful Thing: Inside the Secret World of Bombay's Dance Bars*, *13 Men* and the fiction *The Girl* if it was easy to keep herself 'absent in the text', and she says, "It was a conscious decision in order to allow the story to unfold naturally and to allow facts to speak for themselves."

Stressing that it is important that she is moved and intrigued enough to want to stay with the subject matter for at least five years, as that is how long it takes her to write a book, Faleiro adds, "In the case of *Good Girls*, I had been thinking about writing about sexual violence in India for a while. And with *Beautiful Thing*, I had already been writing about bar dancers, when the ban came around. I knew that I needed to chronicle its impact on the thousands of women whose livelihoods were destroyed."

Agreeing that it is not easy to move away from the many complex characters in her works once the writing is over, the London-based author says, "But it's important in order to maintain my objectivity and also to allow myself to become immersed in my next reporting project."

While the series of lockdowns in London may be a struggle at times, there's plenty to keep Faleiro occupied including new writing and walks in the park with her dog. "I have recently published pieces with the *New Yorker* and *Time*, and am thinking about a new non-fiction book." (IANS)

Cinema is part of my acting career, not my life: Anupam Kher

Veteran Indian actor Anupam Kher, who has mastered his art onscreen, was the guest at Ek Mulakat Visesh session organised by Prabha Khaitan Foundation and Shree Cement late last month. In a conversation with Ina Puri, Kher spoke not just about his films but his two books. Souvik Ghosh brings excerpts

Your book *The Best Thing About You is You!* brings hope and says today is the best day, not tomorrow or day after. How did you come up with such a book?

I am not an author by profession. I wrote books because I wanted to share something. My books are not fictional but about the things which I have learnt in my life. *The Best Thing About You is You!* is a series of articles which I wrote in a newspaper called *Change Within*. It was basically telling how we have to find our own strength to deal with the world. So that became a book and I had no idea that it would become a best seller.

How did you decide to write an autobiography, *Lessons Life Taught Me Unknowingly*?

When I came from New York finishing my shooting last year, I was horrified to see the deserted streets of Mumbai (due to COVID-19 and lockdown). It was fear that crept in me genuinely. Initially in New York, I thought people were paranoid there (over COVID-19). I am an eternal optimist and to get over that fear, I decided to write. So I had decided to pen down all my inner feelings. In this dark cloud of COVID-19 and lockdown, I wanted to see what is the silver lining around me.

You have also spoken in the book that you make stories of people on the streets in your head, which leaves you depressed or hopeful at times. That is an amazing quality.

Few years ago, I discovered that I had depression. So

I went to a psychiatrist who had suggested that I should stop making stories of unknown people in my head. Then I became the brand ambassador of mental health and spoke about my issues publicly.

Your career has remained all eventful. But it started very simply, if we look back to your early days.

When one lives a life fully and does not pretend, he can talk about anything. That is the joy of not carrying the burden of Anupam Kher. If I don't have issues around me, then it's easy for me to convey who I am. We burden ourselves either by our past or the thought of doing something in the future. The COVID-19 pandemic has taught us that we need only three things in the world and they are family, essential goods and wifi connections. The popular characters which I have portrayed onscreen are parts of my acting career. My life is not cinema.

You are a multitasker and a professional who doesn't skip preparations for a show.

This is because I always want to be the best. The difference between the ordinary and extraordinary is an extra effort. Moreover it is about not taking the audience for granted, I don't take myself for granted as an actor. Theatre does not allow one to do that. So I never regret my mistakes on stage because I give the effort. I don't take myself seriously but my job and authenticity seriously.

Is there any plan again to make a film?

My first film as a director, *Om Jai Jagdish*, had failed in the box office though was popular on television. I had won an award for *Maine Gandhi Ko Nahin Mara*. I am producing films now. I recently produced *The Last Show* with Satish Kaushik recently. I had also produced *Bariwali*. But as a director, I won't do anything now. (IBNS-TWF)

"Always had a storyteller in me"

By Siddhi Jain

Kochery C Shibu, a former navy veteran and now a bestselling author of *Men and Dreams in the Dhauladhar*, says that there was a story teller in him since school days. The 1981 National Defence Academy graduate adds that a vast amount of travelling and seeing places and people first hand goes a long way in adding authenticity to the writing.

Faith and the Beloved is his second book. Many of the characters in the novel are inspired from those whom the Bengaluru-based author has encountered during his extensive travel.

An IANSlife chat with author Kochery C Shibu:

Could you tell us about your work in the Navy and the hydel projects you undertook?

SHIBU: I served in the Indian Navy for more than two decades in the executive branch. I specialised in Antisubmarine warfare and commanded two warships during my tenure before taking VRS in 2005. From 2005 to 2017 I was closely associated with Hydroelectric projects. I have executed Hydroelectric projects in the Cauvery river basin in Karnataka, the Beas river Basin in Himachal and Teesta River basin in Sikkim. I wrote my first book *Men and Dreams in the Dhauladhar* whilst working at a remote project site in Himachal.

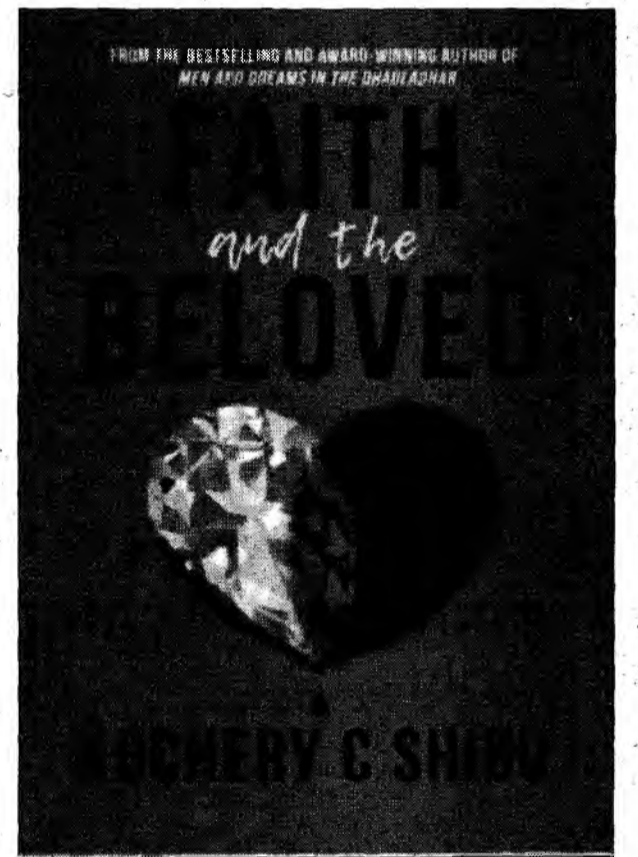
I have had a career shift and have shifted from the snow clad mountains to the blue oceans. I have been busy with the setting up of a shipping company since 2017. This job entailed extensive travel to various places. These experiences have been inspirational in the second book *Faith and the Beloved*.

How did the storyteller's hat come about for you, after decades of serving the country in the Navy?

SHIBU: The story teller has been there in me since the school days. As a career soldier, the writing was mostly related to strategy, tactics, and technical evaluation of weapon and equipment and of course war games and war gaming. As a career soldier, it was not possible to dedicate time beyond professional writing to fiction writing. During the naval career, I was in the think tank of the Navy in Delhi for four years, during which period, I have done extensive writing. Most of the writing was about simplifying military concepts and weapons and Equipment technology to the Bureaucrats in the MOD and the Finance ministry teams. In many ways, it was telling the story of a concept of warfare. This was instrumental in honing the skill set further for writing. It was only after leaving the navy that I was able to dedicate four years' time in research and writing of the first book. Followed by another year of editing.

Both of your novels have elements of thrill, mystery and human relationships. What's your process of writing? How do you try to bring out your experience in your words?

SHIBU: My process of writing starts with character sketching. This is an ongoing process to observe and write about places and people you meet, and read about and to sketch a character which could be used in storytelling. Once I start writing the novel, the characters are picked from the panorama of characters and then they are further adapted as the plot develops. I believe that the characters should come alive as the reader reads. There is always substantial amount of research which goes into the environment and time and space co-relation and events and technology co-relation. Experience and vast reading forms the bed rock on which all the elements are developed. The development of thrill is always a challenge and requires meticulous planning of time, space events and people.



This has been at times like a puzzle solving exercise of the mind, to think through events and people at various places and different times and events which ultimately tie up together as the events unfold. Mystery and mystique is also built in with the development of thrill as a combined exercise. The human relationships are developed as part of character sketching and is often challenging as the character needs to follow a behavioural pattern with out the author being judgemental. The vast amount of travelling and seeing places and people first hand goes a long way in adding authenticity to the writing. In many cases, it would be deep research and talking to people and inferring to develop the experiences in words

Can you give us some insights as to how are you are as a reader?

SHIBU: By choice I have stopped reading fiction since 2009 when I started writing the first novel and have continued that. This is to develop a style of writing that is unique and un influenced, even unknowingly by any fiction novel that one has read during the period that the writing was done. Otherwise I have read across the spectrum from all kinds of fiction, non-fiction and technical books. There was a period when I used to read a book a day. I believe that vast reading forms the base of any good writing and I still follow that in terms of the research.

How are you responding to reader reviews so far? What's next for you?

SHIBU: The reader is the king and the queen. I take the reader reviews in a stride. Till now the majority of the readers have liked the books that I have written. I have written a literary fiction in the first novel which was a combination of technical fiction, classical writing and thriller combined into one. In the second book, it has been a crime thriller interspersed with classical literary writing. The third book would be different, though not yet crystallised. The next book would be out in 2022. (IANSlife)

Understanding world cinema through 10th century Kashmiri philosophy

By Vishnu Makhijani

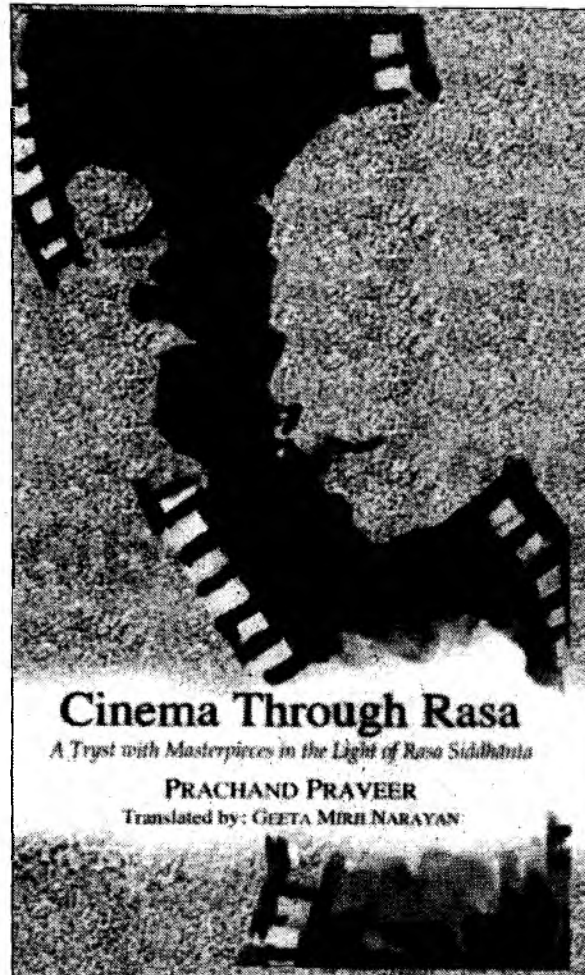
A new book that unravels the nuances of world cinema harkens back to the 10th century philosopher Abhinavagupta (924-1020), a highly revered Kashmiri Shaiva master, as it pays tribute to his commentary on the *Natyasastra* (an ancient treatise on dramaturgy) and the concepts of *Rasa Siddhanta* (theory of aesthetic experience) and *purusartha* (life-pursuits). "Abhinavagupta was a great scholar who had meticulously developed Kashmir Shaivism school of non-dualistic philosophy dealing with epistemology, metaphysics, aesthetics with an unbelievable coherence. Sadly, we have given up on understanding our heritage to western scholars who try to understand Tantra, Indian Epistemology, and complicated metaphysical aspects of Indian classical philosophy," author Prachand Praveer, a B. Tech in Chemical Engineering from IIT-Delhi, told IANS in an interview of his book *Cinema Through Rasa - A Tryst with Masterpieces in the Light of Rasa Siddhanta* (DK Printworld). "This book uses the Indian Classical Aesthetics framework for introducing the major cinematic works. Abhinavagupta in his commentary *Abhinavabharati* links Purushartha (the cultural value system) to four basic sentiments. Now, the nature of sentiments and idea of transcendental pleasure of viewing an artwork should be understood carefully. "The major cinematic works point out to the universal dilemma mankind encounters such as the idea of truth, freedom, value comprehension in some novel way. Since cinema is a recently developed art, we can comprehend artworks in the light of some philosophical system. Kashmir Shaivism is a highly developed philosophical system which is built on the great debate of Buddhism vs Sanatana, dualistic v/s non-dualistic traditions. "Incidentally, Kashmir Shaivism is also a recent discovery for contemporary Indian philosophical con-

templation in early 20th century as much of the texts were either lost or forgotten," Praveer said of the book, which is an English translation of the Hindi original, *Abhinava Cinema*, an introduction to World Cinema as per the *Rasa* theory of Indian classical aesthetics, that was published in 2016. It has been translated by Geeta Mirji Narayan. Apart from *Abhinav Cinema* she has also edited three other published works of Praveer: *Bhootnath meets Bhairavi* (2017), *Uttarayana* (2019), and *Dakshinayana* (2019). She has also edited many of his short stories and articles which have been published in Hindi e-magazines and web-magazines. Praveer also lamented that Indians were "largely ignorant of our traditions as well as the achievements of many great scholars. Kashmir scholars such as Anandvardhan, was the founder of the dhvani school of poetics, great philosophers such as Utpaladeva and Abhinavagupta, and other important scholars of poetics such as Kshemendra and Mammata are often quoted in philosophical and literary criticism discourses. Sadly, much of their scholarly work is only discussed in Sanskrit departments and not in the Hindi departments or any contemporary literature discourse". To this end, the book catalogues the world's major cinematic works in the light of the *Abhinavabharati* and outlines the links between *purusartha*, the cultural value system

of life pursuits in Indian tradition, and aesthetics while citing examples from the works of major directors such as Orson Welles, Luis Bunuel, Ingmar Bergman, Akira Kurosawa, Andrei Tarkovsky, Alfred Hitchcock, Carl Dreyer, Charles Chaplin, Sergei Eisenstein, Robert Bresson, Satyajit Ray. The meaning of the book is summarized by the verse — *na hi ras-*

clusive of reality. "In a way, our comprehension is built on how we perceive knowledge, what we think of emotions, what we consider right and wrong and why we do so. Artworks, especially drama and now cinema, force us to reflect on important matters in a way that is classically called as endearing persuasion," Praveer explained. How did he come to be interested more than just History, Geography, Mathematics or Physics and he did have an affinity to films, but that was limited to Hindi films. "Cinema is not taught in school; it has to be learnt by oneself. I owe this love for cinema or let me say world cinema to some of my friends and teachers in IIT. My journey to learn started with watching *Ladri di Bicicletta* (Bicycle Thieves), a masterpiece by Vittorio de Sica. Later, after watching many classics, I realised that there should be an introductory book for cinema studies. "Typically, all introductions have some framework. I used the Indian classical framework for which I developed an interest in the philosophy courses I took during my undergraduate studies. Hence the book," Praveer elaborated. Considerable research went into the writing of the book. "Primarily, much of the content including the choice of cinematic works and names of important directors has been guided by my teachers and friends at IIT Delhi. I took an interest in philosophy courses which dealt with difficult and classical cinematic works for examples works of Bresson and Tarkovsky.

Even after college I have been in touch with knowledgeable scholars and with their guidance, I have explored the intricacies of Indian classical aesthetics and major works in world cinema," Praveer explained. What prompted him to write the book in Hindi? "My mother tongue is Hindi. I also think that there is a large uninitiated and uninformed audience among the Hindi speaking people, surely much bigger than any English audience. My book is an introduction of World Cinema to those who have a background in Hindi Cinema and are largely familiar with key terms such as *Saundarya*, *Purushartha* etc. These technical terms spell our cultural legacy and have come to us from the great Indian tradition of knowledge pursuit which was primarily in Sanskrit for millennia. Hindi is one such indigenous language if someone wants to have true understanding of our cultural heritage. "This book has been translated into English so as to reach readers who are incapable of reading good Hindi or have a step-brotherly attitude towards the language. Also, they are ill-equipped to deal with Indian classical philosophy and/or need support to look at things with a fresh mind," Praveer said. He also hopes the book will change the way in which audiences look at cinema. "When we were young, we used to crave for movies to be shown on TV. Later on, we craved for good movies with advent of satellite TV. Now when all the good movies are easily available thanks to internet, why do we watch inane soap operas and vulgar reality shows? This surprises me. I hear that people have an instant turn-off with silent, black & white movies. I sincerely hope that people will leave aside their biases and watch the great works, e.g. immortal classics of Charlie Chaplin or the dances of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers or westerns of John Ford or thrillers of Alfred Hitchcock," Praveer concluded. (IANS)



IANS photos

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi Sunday, February 21, 2021

Moon trine Jupiter on your solar return chart ensures an amazing year ahead for you. You will have the energy and ability to do perfect things. You will be popular and sociable at work and will be appreciated by peers and superiors. You will be raring to go and achieve best in your field. New job opportunities will come with a good pay package. Those already in job will get promotions. Those in business may enter into partnership or joint venture. They will get good profits. And will also plan expansion of their business. You will be able to take people along with you. Your popularity in family and social circle will increase. Somebody known to you may get attracted to you and it would result in a cosy affair leading to marriage. Your overall health will be fine. Financially you will remain strong and stable. Health will be perfect.

Aries: (March 21 - April 20)
Your self-confidence and positive attitude will reward you. Constructive connections with others can be made fairly easily. A comfortable level of personal popularity helps to keep conflict to a minimum. Your attitude towards life would be changing. You are no longer willing to make compromises in the important areas of your life, particularly with regard to career. You are more determined, and it is an excellent time to get rid of bad habits. A new project or goal begun now has a good chance of being successful and long lasting. You would be able to find a way to strike a balance between self-gratification and the obligations of daily life.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21)
This phase brings success and good fortune at work and opens new horizons for betterment and expansion. People are bound to recognize your leadership skills and talents. You want your life path and your objectives to reflect what you're really about. A balanced approach to life, in terms of realistic expectations, is the best approach for maximizing success. You benefit from being more decisive than usual, and your ability to concentrate and focus helps you to achieve what you set out to do in the coming weeks.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21)
There will be harmonious relations in professional and personal life. Positive new relationships are formed. You are instinctively starting a new phase in your life. It is time to give your life a makeover, a time of new beginnings and fresh energy. It is a friendly time, when it is easy to enjoy life and other people. Focus is on personal freedom, reaching out to others, making new friends and exploration. A new project begun has a good chance of being successful and long-lasting. You are more enthusiastic and ready for adventure. You have to get yourself organized and work to build your resources.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22)
This period brings good financial returns as you communicate well and present cordial relations with co-workers. You are inspired and could even inspire others with your words. You think more creatively and express yourself with more sensitivity, compassion, and warmth. You want your objectives to reflect what you are really about, and you are likely to rid yourself of unsatisfying goals. You benefit from being more decisive than usual, and your ability to concentrate and focus helps you to achieve what you set out to do. You possess a strong artistic sensitivity, and you are able to express your feelings openly and candidly.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23)
This is a period of work and development and a boost to your self-confidence. It is a time to deal with practical matters, and it is not a time to be lazy or especially gregarious. It can be a time that feels hard, monotonous and lonely. Try to get yourself organized, work to build your resources, keep busy. Your main focus is on personal freedom, reaching out to others, making new friends, and exploration. You are more enthusiastic and ready for adventure. It is also a good time for expressing your creativity. Reach out, but avoid scattering your energies.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22)
The planetary configuration brings unusualness and curiosity in your relationships as you feel they are more important to you. You are more receptive and gentle on a romantic level, and tend to be sentimental. This is a good time for reflection, prayer, and meditation. A higher purpose to your life is what you seek, and you rely more heavily upon your intuition in

order to achieve it. Your physical activities tend to be more intense, passionate, and focused this week. You are more enthusiastic and ready for adventure. The way you present your ideas, certainly helping to smooth over differences in your personal relationships.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23)
New associations and beginnings as well as new opportunities and changes come your way. You would form new connections and relationships that enhance your spiritual and personal growth. This is an excellent influence for negotiations, marriage, and business partnerships. You are likely to be actively involved with teamwork and collaboration with others. You are taking on new responsibilities, but generally enjoy the challenges.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22)
You have to get yourself organized, work to build your resources and keep busy. There are better financial returns. You might have a more materialistic view of life and are more attracted to objects and possessions that give you a sense of comfort and status. You might find that you are very often encouraging and supportive of others. Certainly, you are more accepting and understanding of your friends and loved ones. Emotional security and being content in love will help to attract positive circumstances into your life. You are outgoing and your initiative is stronger than ever. Advice stand alone, take action, start afresh and express independence.

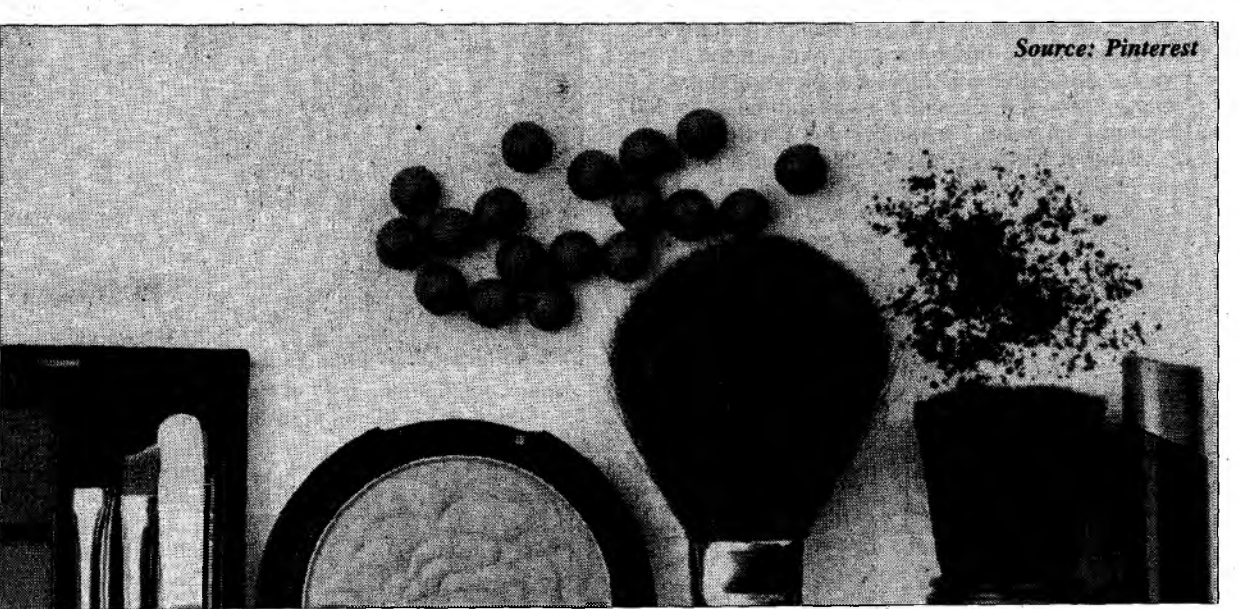
Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21)
New horizons in your romantic and love life open up. You might enjoy a favorable outcome when it comes to legal affairs, education, and travel. This week, you're bound to enjoy increased social opportunities as well as a boost in your personal popularity and magnetism. You are more friendly, optimistic, and big-hearted than usual. A cheerful and hopeful outlook increases your chances of gaining cooperation from others. This is a sociable, and perhaps self-indulgent, time when the pursuit of pleasure is one of your high priorities. Financial benefits may come your way. You may find that you have the right information at the right time. You could also have big ideas and plans. Work, especially in communications, goes well.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20)
You have powerful, transformative energy at your disposal. It is likely to be a rather lighthearted time, when opportunities are greater than usual. Much will depend on how you handle it. Channelled positively, you could move mountains when it comes to pushing your projects ahead. If mishandled, however, you could be argumentative, stressed, and hell-bent on having your way. Avoid taking extreme measures to make things happen your way, and avoid people who might be doing the same. You need not over analyze personal relationships but rather respond with your heart and deep feelings: as a new understanding and maturity with others around you at home and work.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18)
There will be mixed results in domestic life and people you care for. You are practical, realistic, and your judgment is especially sound—and you derive much satisfaction from practical accomplishment. The key to harnessing this wonderful energy is to identify and find pleasure in the simple things that make you happy. You might enjoy a favorable outcome when it comes to legal affairs and travel. Financial benefits come your way. You find that you have the right information at the right time. You could also have big ideas and plans. Work, especially in communications, goes well. It is time to express your feelings and ideas and share what you have learned through a variety of experiences in this life.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20)
The ability to express and communicate your ideas is extremely important to you this time. Surprises surrounding intimate matters, shared finances and resources and financial support will be in store. You spend more time on phone calls, emails, short frequent trips and communicating with friends. You pay attention to various ways to increase personal funds, resulting in more than one avenue for monetary gain. Your attention turns to domestic matters for a large part of the time and building, decoration and purchase of households for your home figures strongly now.

Career Options in Beauty Industry



Source: Pinterest

Ranjan K Baruah

Many of us may wonder how beauty can be an industry. We might think it can be an industry. If it is an industry then what is involved in it or who is associated with it, these kinds of thoughts would definitely come to our mind. If we try to make some assessment, it is not very difficult to understand how important the beauty industry in India is. Beauty Industry in India is worth billions now and it is one of the fastest growing industries in India. Such a high growth rate means plenty of job opportunities. The use of cosmetics has been a practice for thousands of years. In Ancient Romans applied oil-based perfumes in baths and fountains, in Egypt aristocrats used minerals in their faces to provide color and definition of features. This industry attracts many people because it is high paying, there is huge demand, comfortable job timing and most important is one can start her or his own business or enterprise. Cosmetology is the study and application of beauty handling. Although tastes and trends in beauty keep on changing, the basic job of a beautician/ beauty care professionals remains the same. Cosmetologists take care of our beauty professionally. They may be Medical professionals and Non-medical cosmetologists. As it is directly related to the health and wellness industry, there are different avenues where trained and experienced people get their chances. Cosmetologists can get jobs in cosmetic companies, Cosmetic firms as a salesperson, etc. Beauticians may get engaged in beauty salons, spas, resorts and star hotels as Beauty Salon-Manager / Assistant Manager Beauty Salon-Director, Beauty Therapist, Beauticians, Beauty Counsellor, Beauty Salon Receptionist, Fitness Instructor, Fitness Director, Massage Therapist, Hair Stylists, Creative Director, Nail Technician, Spa Director, Spa Manager/Assistant Manager, Spa Trainers, Spa Therapist, Cosmetic Sales-Manager, Cosmetic Sales Director and many more. Makeup artists & hair stylists are in great demand in the fashion, advertising, film, television and theatre industry. Some can join media houses as beauty experts for newspapers, magazines or televisions channels or some web portals. Medical professionals can be in this after they complete their MBBS or BDS, etc. They can be experts with their experiences and either start their own enterprise or join other beauty clinics, etc. All those who are from non medical professionals have more opportunity in this industry. One can take up certificate or diploma courses after passing out Class X exam but it is always good to have more qualifications like 10+2 or beyond to become successful in this field. There are Certificate Course in Beauty Therapy or Hair Dressing, Diploma in Beauty Therapy or Hair Dressing, course in Beauty Management, Beauty Technology and Cosmetology, etc. Now, it's a global multi-billion dollar industry where millions of people are working. Today the Indian cosmetics and beauty industry has been in rise. We should not forget that although modern make-up has been traditionally used mainly by women, an increasing number of males are gradually using cosmetics usually associated with women to enhance or cover their own facial features. This shows the demand and growth of this industry. There are demands for trained young people. It is important to know more languages and have a good communication skill if we want to work in this industry and progress in future. (The author is career mentor and skill trainer and may be reached at 8473943734 or email at bkranjan@gmail.com)

"When one has a grateful heart,
life is so beautiful."
— Roy T. Bennett

The Shillong Times

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COVID's second wave

THERE is both good news and bad news on the Covid Front as the nation – and the world – edges close to a one full-year period under the terrible impact of the Chinese-induced Covid-19 pandemic. Maharashtra has sounded an alert of a likely second wave of Covid spread in districts like Amaravati, Yavatmal and Akola on the eastern side of the state, while there is palpable relief for the past couple of months in the western sector including the principal mega cities like Mumbai and Pune. Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray has warned the affected regions that he would impose lockdown and curfew if need be to control the situation as the state has overall registered a 7000-strong daily infections in the past few days. Kerala in the south too is recording substantially high figures in recent times, but deaths linked to the pandemic are fewer across India. This is emboldening many to throw Covid regulations like wearing of masks, regular hand-wash and social distancing to the winds.

Maharashtra, the worst-hit state since March last year, is a pointer to the danger that lies ahead for other states too if the regulations are not observed until the time the mass vaccination programme covers at least half the population. With health workers largely being drawn into the programme, the next stage is set to start with those above the age of 50. So far, there is no serious concern about the after-effects of the vaccination in any adverse manner. The few deaths of those who had taken the vaccination is under close scrutiny of the medical experts deputed by the vaccine manufacturers as also the Union Health ministry. The Health Ministry too has sounded a word of caution that the Covid scenario is still not under control in at least five state/UTs. At the national level, nearly 14,000 cases are being reported daily and the active case load is of the order of nearly 1.50 lakh as on Sunday. Yet, the fact is also that three-quarters of the active cases are limited to Kerala and Maharashtra. Another worst-hit state, Delhi, is now reporting only about 150 cases a day and just 2 deaths as on Sunday. Mumbai too has been reporting low daily figures at around 800. Notably, India's national Covid tally so far stood at around 11 million, of which more than 97 per cent have recovered. The deaths were of the order of over 1,56,000 which is indeed a huge number. Hence there's all the more reason why the vaccination programme must be carried forward with all seriousness.

MDA Govt taking the state on a downhill slide

By H H Mohrmen

The MDA alliance is a marriage of convenience where many political parties with different principles and ideologies have joined together to form a government. The alliance which comprises of regional parties and two national parties of diverse ideologies joining hands to form a government just for the sake of it is bound to hit hurdles from the word go. It is a classic testimony to the fact that politics is the art of the possible with the sole objective of obtaining power no matter what. The government of such incongruities is not surprisingly found acting against the interests of the very public they are supposed to serve or even contradicting itself.

No matter how much the government tries to deny that coal mining and transportation of the mineral is happening, evidence keeps coming up to the embarrassment of those in power. It is also ironic that while the state government has itself filed 254 cases on illegal coal mining and transportation of coal only in the year 2019 to 2021, the central minister for coal Pralhad Joshi on February 12, had to lie on the floor of the Parliament on behalf of the State Government. It looks as if this government will go to any extent to protect those involved in these activities. But how can the government deny these cases which were filed by none other but the different agencies of the same government?

Obviously this government does not respect the rule of law not only in the illegal mining and transportation of coal but the way it runs the transport check gates and weighbridges too is a blatant disrespect of the law. In the West Jaintia Hills for best reason known only to the Meghalaya State Transport, the weighbridge was shifted from Ynfawmer (7 mile) to the new Jowai bypass. The new Weighbridge does not have any government signage and it is alleged that it is being run by person(s) who run the Transport department in the present government. Not only that the weighbridge is allegedly run by someone in the government but the people call it by the name of a person who heads the department.

To the common man's new weighbridge is even known as 'ka kata u ma ...'

or the weighbridge of the person who heads the department and not that of the government. As if the weighbridge is a private property of the person in charge. On a lighter note the two words 'ka kata' in Pnar parlance also means 'pocket' and of course no explanation is needed as to how this coincidence happens.

The point is that in this government even public offices like (in this case) a government weighbridge is known by the person's name instead of by the department's name. Hence the question is - where is the government? The two questions that arise from this abuse of power by those in authority is whether the government in the first place



ST File Photo

called for tenders to allot to any bidder the responsibility to run these government weighbridges? Or on the other hand how can the government allow any entity to run these weighbridges or check gates without floating a tender? Is it not a case of abuse of power if a person or relative of one close to power is allotted to run the same without floating any tender?

It is an open secret that the economy of the state is in a bad shape and the ban on mining and transportation of coal is blamed for this sad state of affairs, but the question is what has the government done to improve the economy of the state? Since the government is complaining about the revenue shortfall after the mining ban and now the reducing of the tax on petrol products is being implemented, the public have the right to know how much the government has collected from these weighbridges monthly/annually?

In the current government dispensation, various departments are fast becoming like ministers' individual fiefdom. No why do the ministers treat the government agencies as their private businesses. If this is true and it continues, the question is whether Meghalaya is on the verge of becoming a despotic state?

Just few months after lockdown and as the state was gradually limping back to normalcy, all of a sudden the drivers of the commercial vehicles in the state went on an indefinite strike against the increase of price on petroleum products in the state. While it is within the taxi drivers' right to protest, why did it take the government so long to

address the issue? Why didn't the government immediately invite the protestors to the negotiating table but instead took its own time to resolve the issue? At end of the day any kind of protest or strike and whatever the cause may be ultimately, it is common public that are being affected the most and have to bear the brunt.

The people of the state may have breathed a sigh of relief after the owners and drivers of all the commercial vehicles' have finally withdrawn their indefinite strike, but unfortunately it happened after a prolonged strike of more than ten days. The manner in which this government handled the strike called by the drivers and owners of commercial vehicles, left much to be desired. Isn't this a clear case of unprofessionalism on the part of this government in handling this very critical issue which is a matter of life and death for the common people of the

state? After the government had succumbed to the pressure of the organisation of commercial vehicles and reduced the price of petrol and diesel in the state, the public were left in the lurch as the government has not immediately announced the new taxi fares in the entire state. The taxi organisation took advantage of the situation and in spite of the fact that the price of petrol and diesels was reduced, they continued with the old fare which was an extraordinary arrangement to address the post COVID 19 lockdown period.

As if the issue of illegal mining and transportation of coal to the strike by the different taxi associations was not enough, the people of the state had to undergo an unexplainable ordeal of an unusual load shedding which went on for 7-8 hours a day. Thank goodness the issue was resolved sooner than later, but the question is for how long? The money the government borrowed from the market may be sufficient just to repay the pending dues of the distributors and the generators of electricity, but what next? How will the government ensure that load shedding will not happen again? Who did not pay their electrical dues? Surely not the public, because if a public household do not pay their bills, the Corporation is quick in disconnecting their electrical supply, so the question that the public needs to know is who did not pay their dues? Hopefully the government will come up with strategy to see that the dues are paid regularly and on time, to ensure that load shedding does not happen again in the state in the future.

The state government recently announced that it encourages the people of the state to install solar panel on their rooftops, which of course will help in reducing the household need of electricity from the grid but it is yet to know if this is effective. The MDA government has completed more than half of its journey in serving the state and its people yet there is not much to talk about its achievements. Like someone rightly said the MDA is now becoming the government of only Minimum Development Achieved (MDA) so far.

The state government recently announced that it encourages the people of the state to install solar panel on their rooftops, which of course will help in reducing the household need of electricity from the grid but it is yet to know if this is effective. The MDA government has completed more than half of its journey in serving the state and its people yet there is not much to talk about its achievements. Like someone rightly said the MDA is now becoming the government of only Minimum Development Achieved (MDA) so far.

PSB disinvestments Privatisation not mantra

By Shivaji Sarkar

The country is in a quandary about the privatisation of the public sector banks and needs to reconsider. Amendments to the Banking Companies (Acquisition and Transfer of Undertakings) 1970 and 1980 are on the cards. The two laws led to bank nationalisation of the banks in two phases.

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman has announced privatisation of PSBs as part of disinvestment drive to garner Rs 1.75 lakh crore, in reality not a very large sum. That has raised another question whether for such small gains, the nation should sell the family silver. Or why should it go back to 1969 when these were taken over? The banks were in the hands of large houses. They have been defying regulations and many unsavoury practices were in use, including taking out funds risking the banks and quietly refunding causing immense interest and operation cost losses. This apart, the small lenders had little space in the controlled practices. Some banks were off and on were in the news of facing liquidation thought the 1960s.

The takeover was then considered a bold step as now the announcement of selling off is being projected as a bold decision. The Narendra Modi government is in a financial crisis and wants the nation to steer out of it. All of it though is not the doing of this government. The bank crisis has built up with the changes in Basel recapitalisation norms as well as the growing NPAs.

As of March 31, 2010, gross PSB NPAs were Rs 8.06 lakh crore. A 2020 JC Review study by four academicians -- Sunita Sharma, Rajesh Kothari, DS Rathore and Jagdish Prasad -- say that the private sector banks were not doing well post 2012 (as also were many public sector banks) and the NPAs have been growing. They say that the economic performance had not declined 2012-2019 but sharp rise in NPAs raise questions on transparency in showing correct picture of their health. The banks, they note had been concealing facts particularly about high value accounts, which in their opinion, had come under NPA even before 2010-13. "Increasing NPAs suggest that high number of credit defaults affect profitability, liquidity and solvency positions of (all) banks", they say.

They found Axis Bank profitability since 2017 has continuously been falling due to rise in NPAs till partly checked in 2019. Similarly, the ICICI bank NPAs continuously increased since 2015 and reached a peak of 8.85 per cent in 2018. Though in 2019 it reduced to 6.7 per cent but the net profit further came down due to higher provisioning.

Banks in general have witnessed a decline in the profitability during the last about eight years. That raises a question whether the PSBs should be singled out in a choppy market particularly when some private sector banks indulged in major malpractices. Does it mean that privatisation is not a panacea? This is a critical question that the government and the society need to have a review. The privatisation cannot be a mantra. It seems the problems lie in practices and those in the country need severe corrections.

The study is almost in tune with the 2018 report of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Finance

where it observed that the capacity to lend has been severely affected due to NPAs. It says, "A lot of the loans currently classified as NPAs originated in mid-2000s, at a time when the economy was booming and business outlook was very positive. Large corporations were granted loans for projects based on extrapolation of their recent growth and performance. With loans being available more easily than before, corporations grew highly leveraged, implying that most financing was through external borrowings rather than internal promoter equity. But as economic growth stagnated following the global financial crisis of 2008, the repayment capability of these corporations decreased. This contributed to what is now known as India's Twin Balance Sheet problem, where both the banking sector (that gives loans) and the corporate sector (that takes and has to repay these loans) have come under financial stress".

So the prescription of privatising the PSBs needs a review and a new approach to curing the disease than shifting it from one clinic to another. Poor regulatory frameworks and related problems are some of the pitfalls. Additionally profit-centric and shareholder wealth maximising monopolies by banks will not cater to the needy individuals.

The government would also be losing out on potential dividends that give significant budgetary support. In 2014, Rs 88,188 crore were paid by PSES, including Rs 43996 crore from PSBs. Since, however, the PSB dividend contribution has been dwindling though RBI has paid about Rs 2 lakh crore during the past two years.

A problem the government faces is of continuous recapitalisation - pumping in funds as per Basel norms. During financial year (FY) 2015 to FY2019 the government infused Rs 2.5 lakh crore plus Rs 70,000 crore in FY2021 and Rs 25,000 crore in FY2022 - Rs 3.5 lakh crore. This is natural if the profitability of banks comes down. But so it has happened to private banks as well. It means there is a basic flaw in the banking operations. The PSB losses mounted to Rs 85,000 in FY 2018 crore and came down to Rs 50,000 crore in 2019.

Suggesting a solution is not easy. The deposits with PSBs are rising. In 2018 it was Rs 117 lakh crore and in FY2018, it rose to Rs 128 lakh crore. Savings bank deposits also rose by Rs 4 lakh crore between FY 2018 and FY 2019 from Rs 35.9 lakh crore to Rs 39.1 lakh crore.

But liabilities are rising due to defaults, increase in operational costs of larger low-quality accounts like Jandhan, digital and other populist operations. The recapitalisation despite a high for the government has been below the operational needs as the banks were to support announcements like farm loans, MUDRA and other schemes.

The faults are for extra-banking causes. Privatisation is not likely to solve these but even in their dwindling health, the PSBs have enormous wealth and before these are sold to a select group of eager large corporate buyers, the country needs to wait and reconsider massive revamping of the system and through that how to strengthen the economy. Once the silver is lost, it could again be reinventing the wheel.---INFA

TO THE EDITOR

BJP-NPPs daily snipe

Your newspaper reports on the daily name calling between the NPP and BJP; between the NPP and Congress and at times the BJP and UDP shows that all is not well in the MDA coalition government. What's worse is the infighting in the BJP. Now a BJP legislator, Sanbor Shullai, who of course is larger than the Party and knows it, has thrown the spanner into the works by publicly declaring that the present BJP President, Ernest Mawrie was elected to the post by manipulation. This is an allegation that delegitimizes the BJP in Meghalaya. The BJP is yet to take roots in this hill state and it needs a leadership that is credible and cannot be challenged especially by its own party MLA. Interestingly, the BJP-in-charge, Meghalaya, Dr M Chuba Ao, does not seem to be in touch with the party affairs here. Sanbor Shullai has actually said in so many words that under Mawrie the BJP is losing its grip over Meghalaya. The emboldens the BJP baiters like the NPP National President, and Chief

Minister, Conrad Sangma to cock a snook at the BJP and to also dare the two MLAs supporting the present MDA Government to leave the coalition if the Party is unhappy. This is looking like a very inconvenient marriage. The constant taunt by the NPP and the bickering between the NPP and BJP over the Garo Hills District Council affairs makes it untenable for the BJP to be part of the MDA.

The BJP President revealed to the media the scams in the Garo Hills District Council, details of which he got via RTI. Since then the NPP has been badgering the BJP without showing even the minimum respect for a coalition partner. Of course the right thing to do for the BJP is to stop the bickering and tell its two MLAs to cut ties with the MDA Government. But the BJP President does not seem to have any control over the two MLAs who are both larger than the BJP and nor does he have their respect. Ernest Mawrie has a very unenviable task as BJP State President. I wonder what the rank and file in the BJP have to say about this entire imbroglio which has taken a very ugly turn and dented the image of the BJP in Meghalaya.

The BJP bigwigs in Delhi

care two hoots about what happens to a small state with 60 MLAs and just 2 Lok Sabha MPs. Before the next Assembly elections, Amit Shah and Modi will both come and begin to woo people here and make big talk, without actually understanding what makes people vote a particular candidate. The BJP should know that in Meghalaya as in Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland fighting elections requires a lot of money. Both Sanbor Shullai and AL Hek have the money. Other BJP candidates will find it difficult to match them, at least monetarily. Moreover, people know that the BJP even at the national level only makes big talk about corruption. They don't really care as long as they win elections. So much for, 'Na khaunga, na khane dunga.' Politicians, be it Modi or anyone else never say what they mean or mean what they say. Period!

Yours etc.,
NL Sawkmie,
Via email

Indian-Khasi or Khasi-Indian

The two part article, 'On Being Indian and Khasi' by Dominick Rymbai (ST Feb

17&18, 2021), is very thought provoking. It reminds me of Amartya Sen who said that as Indians our identities are and should be fluid. We have multiple identities depending on our race, religion and community and should allow this fluidity to prevail. The freeing of identity into an exclusive little domain in a country that once believed in diversity is fraught with grave consequences. A Khasi is an Indian and that should be gracefully accepted since our ancestors signed the Instrument of Accession into this country on their own volition and not under duress. In that sense it is a well considered view that acceding to India is no accident. We have to learn to live with that and give up the idea that we are a special people descended from some mythical umbilical cord and every other myth that makes us believe we deserve special treatment. We are Indians and are subject to Indian laws which also grant us 80 reservations in jobs and education by virtue of our scheduled tribe status. Let's also learn to accept that no human species is unique.

Yours etc.,
Pdiangti Khongsngi,
Via email

Fuel price hike

Editor,
Faulty and unfair system of taxation by the Central and State governments has led to frequent hike in fuel prices in India. In fact, Indians pay four times for a litre of petrol compared to crude oil prices. Governments levy high taxes, commissions and other charges on the consumers so that fuel prices do not go down significantly in India even when crude oil prices are very low. The government's only response to the soaring fuel prices has been a deafening silence.

Fuel prices in India are fixed not in proportion to the international crude oil prices. Every time global crude oil prices increase, Indian oil companies pass on the increase on highly taxed petrol and diesel. If crude oil prices drop in the international market, prices in retail should come down too. But this does not happen most of the time. Statistics shows that even though crude oil prices dropped many times before and after the COVID-19 lockdown, Indians paid very high prices for petrol. This happens because every time crude oil prices fall, the government imposes fresh

taxes. On May 5, 2020 when crude oil prices fell to Rs 14.75 from Rs 28.84 per litre, the government increased excise duty by Rs 10 per litre on petrol and Rs 13 per litre on diesel. In this way the government garnered an additional revenue of Rs 1.6 lakh crore. Notwithstanding the drop in tax collection in other sectors, tax collection from fuel has not dropped. Fuel prices are revised daily and the government has no control over fixing prices. When oil prices fall, the government imposes taxes on the base price so that it gets sufficient revenue from the taxes. In fact, it is not right to tax fuel heavily. As fuel prices increase, it will lead to price rise. The poor will be at the receiving end and they will have to bear the brunt of price rise. Hike in fuel prices will adversely affect the poor and the lower-middle-class. It is ironic that while the government is determined to place an intolerable burden on the poor, it is reluctant to tax profits earned by super rich people.

Yours etc.,
Venu GS,
Kollam

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

"When a thing ceases to be a subject of controversy, it ceases to be a subject of interest."

— William Hazlitt

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No. 187 SHILLONG, TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 23, 2021

Money and elections in Meghalaya

THERE is much agonising in the Congress camp about whether they will win the bye-election in the now vacant Mawryngkneng MLA constituency, following the demise of sitting MLA, David Nongrum recently. Congress MLA, Ampareen Lyngdoh had recently told the media that money will be the main driver for the bye-election and she is right. Across political parties, money has played a key role in deciding the winner or loser in every election since the 1990s. With time and with the growth of the coal business and the need of the coal 'barons' to control the politics of Meghalaya the role of money has gained momentum. Today political power is vested in the hands of a few families and individuals, all of whom run some business or the other. An MLA cannot afford to live only on his/her salary. He/she must also engage in some business or the other to survive the constant demand on his/her resources, mainly financial.

The situation in Meghalaya today is such that even basic healthcare is not accessible to rural constituents and the urban poor. To meet their healthcare needs, people go to their MLAs and expect them to fund their hospital and medical bills. That is only one area of need. There are many other areas for which the constituents depend on their MLAs. As a result the MLA scheme was conceived of to deal with these exigencies of the constituents, apart from building and repairing roads, footpaths and schools etc. But the MLA scheme has over the years become an election investment. MLAs don't give an account of how the MLA scheme is spent. The money is used to dole out cleverly contrived "assistance" to the constituents who believe that it comes from the MLA's private pockets and hence feel obliged to vote for the MLA concerned.

The Mawryngkneng election will be fought against this reality and the other cruel reality that the Congress is today in the Opposition and hence the Party is not flushed with funds at the state or the central level. People in some of these constituencies have been so used to getting money on the eve of casting their votes that their appetites are already whetted and there's no putting back the clock. Like a former bureaucrat turned politician of Nagaland recently said in an interview, "The people of Nagaland have become so corrupt that they will slip on a one rupee note." It sounds offensive but it's also a universal truth of this region. Money talks and wins elections. There may be several candidates and all of them may be spending money but the one who spends the most is sure to win. That's democracy in Meghalaya today. Take it or leave it! The moral and ethical fibre of the so-called tribes that spoke sanctimoniously about their traditional values has all but collapsed.

A needless controversy

By Albert Thyrniang

Last week there was a preventable controversy. The Hynniewtrep Youths' Council (HYC), Sohiong Circle went public with its complaints to the CEM of KHADC alleging that at least three non-Khasi families were integrated ('tangjait') into the Khasi community. Based on information via RTI, the Youths' council accused certain opportunistic persons ('riew shim kabu') of performing the 'Tang Jait' ceremony of non-Khasi couples and their children with connivance ('ia don kti lang') of the district council disregarding ('iaid lait') its responsibility. The sensational claims/revelations went viral on social media.

At the very first glance, the allegation could not be true. There might be individuals who might perform the ritual but to do it with the sanction of KHADC looks instantaneously impossible. This is not in hindsight. On 17th when this writer saw the complaint he immediately posted on Facebook, "Ban tang jait ia arngut shilok ki bymdei Khasi da kito kiba la shah kyntoh ryngkat bad ka jingiatreilang jong ka District Council? Ym lah sngweidi phi." (to perform the 'Tang Jait' ceremony for non-Khasi couples by the accused with the connivance of the District Council does not appear plausible) The Khasi Hills Autonomous District (Khasi Social Custom of Lineage) Act, 1997 clearly states that "Tang Jait" is performed on the person or persons born of a Khasi father and a non-Khasi mother. So for the District Council to break its own law and for the alleged incidents to take place is inconceivable.

Predictably the CEM, Titosstarwell Chyne, in a news briefing, clarified that all the men mentioned in the lodged letter are in fact Khasis. The confirmation came after scrutinising the papers submitted to the District Council. The mistakes were in filling up the forms (Appendix A) where the surnames of the father/s appear as non-Khasi. The rest of the testimonials are in order as per the statement of the CEM. The matter should rest and the controversy end here. But lessons could be learned from this avoidable episode.

The HYC, Sohiong Circle seems to have jumped to conclusions too soon. It might be true that they based their objection on details obtained through RTI. However, the leaders of the organisation were told by the CEM to wait till he inquired into the matter and would meet them

again. They didn't do so and decided to release their findings to the world. They could have held their horses. Their motives are now free for interpretations. No one can be prevented from doing so. Was it a mere over enthusiasm or something else?

The decision of the HYC, Sohiong Circle to go to the press caused a lot of heartburns in the whole of Khasi-Jaintia Hills. Mentioned persons and those who are emotionally and politically associated with them were aggrieved. Former CEM, KHADC, Ardent Miller Basaiawmoit, during whose tenure the alleged illegal incidents took place gave a week's time to the concerned to prove that he used his office as CEM for the 'Tang Jait' to be organised. Now will proofs be provided? Will Basaiawmoit proceed further? Will a compromise be worked out between the two parties? Will the supporters of Basaiawmoit be satisfied and pacified? Is there a hidden intention in naming the former Nongkrem legislator in the first place? The Sohiong Circle of HYC might have been wiser to be slower in judgement.

The most glaring (or made to be so) highlight is the first point in the first page of the letter which reads, "...la don uwei u briew uba kyrteing Bah Sylvanus Sngi Lyngdoh" (There is a person whose name is Mr Sylvanus Sngi Lyngdoh). This statement offended a lot of people. (Late) 'Mr. Sylvanus Sngi Lyngdoh was a well-known Catholic Priest, theologian and writer, who was also well versed in Khasi customs and practices. The description was seen as disrespectful to the renowned personality particularly because he is no more. The HYC, Sohiong Circle did clarify that the use of 'Bah/Rangbah' is not disrespectful as Khasi men are respectfully addressed so. The clarification also stated that the neutral prefix is not to give a communal colour to the issue. This seems unconvincing as in the 'Signature of the person who performed the Tang Jait' the initial 'Fr.' is clearly visible beside the seal of the institution he was a member of. Apart from the tone of the letter sounds communally suspect. The HYC, Sohiong Circle might have discredited itself.

One important note worth remembering in life is that every story has two sides just like a coin. Even when things appear crys-

tal clear there may be a clearer side. The photo copies in the RTI clearly indicated that the gentlemen are 'Adivasi', 'Rajbongshi' and 'Nepali'. But unfortunately they are only appendices. Other documents that matter testify otherwise. A deeper dig would have saved all the blushes. An investigation would have spared the uncalled-for animosity and unpleasant verbal exchanges, online and offline.

The tendency in Meghalaya most of the times is 'my way or the highway'. Alternative opinions are not solicited. On ILP there is no discussion. On railway there is no debate. ILP has to be implemented. Railway should not come to Bymihat. Alternative views are frowned upon, even interpreted as anti-'Jaitbynriew'. The 'Tang Jait' affair teaches us that even extremes can converge. There could be meeting grounds even from diverse views. There is a centre of the right and the left. There is a middle path.

It is not only pressure groups who are averse to dissent but the government seems to resist negotiation. During the two weeks of transport strike the government refused to call the strikers to the table. The deputy CM, Prestone Tynsong was seen issuing ultimatum, like withdrawing commercial permits, rather than easing the tension.

The country is passing through a difficult phase where dissent is not tolerated. Anyone who dares to question the government or back those who are critical of the powers that be are threatened with arrest and life in prison. Journalists, social activists, intellectuals, even farmers are liberally awarded with FIRs, arrested and charged with sedition. The administration, the police and the law enforcers exhibit an inhuman face while cracking down on dissent. Do we in Meghalaya too want a similar situation? Then discourse is to be facilitated by both the civil society and the government.

Switch off the diversion! Our thread of thought back to the 'Tang Jait' issue! The cited families may have suffered emotional pain for no fault of theirs. Though they are well within the law they were unreasonably dragged into a pointless controversy probably due to a bit of carelessness. Who will make up for their ordeal? Will they receive an apology? Will an apology alone suffice?

There seems to be a philosophy of puritanism subtly prevailing in some quar-

ters in the Khasi Society. May be it is an opportune and apt time to rid ourselves of the religious puritanism in the United Kingdom in the 17th century. To come straight to the point puritanism contributed to civil war in England. Should we be fore warned that division on religious lines or on any other unjustifiable form will lead to 'civil wars'? It is destructive to attempt to identify who a 'pure' Khasi is and who is not. We are in the 21st century not in the 17th century colonial UK.

Evidences stand testified that we have been affected by social interactions with different groups of our fellow earth inhabitants. There is nothing dishonourable in acknowledging the truth. Our DNA has been contributed by others too. That DNA might have come through the mother or father or both, who knows? It is not only our 'scientific being' but our social and religious life has been influenced by other ways of life. One of our B.Ed teachers in PGT used to remind us, "look at the 'jainspong' (turban) and the 'jainboh' (dhoti). They are very similar to ones anywhere in India". The other day there was a long list of illustrations of being Indian and Khasi.

This writer is currently residing at the Assam side of Umiam (Barapani) river. A good stretch of Meghalaya (Ri Bhoi district) and Assam is divided by the famed river. But the border existed only for less than 70 years. There was no Assam and Meghalaya prior to 1970/72. Social contact has been there from time immemorial. The beauty of this history of interaction can be seen in dresses, dances, festivals, food habits, dwellings, inter marriages and the like on both sides of the border. To this day cross-border marriages and 'interchange' of ethnic identity are common. Assuming of surnames is quite liberal. Madur, Madar, Maslai, Malai, Rongpi, Rongpeit, Khelein, Khlien are commonly interchangeable. The Meghalaya ADCs regularly descend maternally while Karbi Anglong ADC may do it paternally but the fact remains that we have evolved through social interface and it will continue to be so.

In the meantime, the world is going at a super speed but something needs to be slow. Justice cannot be too fast. Judgement is after a complete consideration of the two sides of the dispute. Email thalbert@rediffmail.com

Learning the unlearned

By Darilyn Syiem

In the recent past there has been much talk about the lack of mindfulness and what a tragedy it is that we the Khasis who are known for 'ka akor ka burom' (courtesy and respect) are now bereft of such values that were part and parcel of our ancestors lives. Is this a doomed situation or can we revive these mindful practices again? If we agree that we can, then the questions that pop up include, who will do this and how? Where will the financial support come from? When will one find the time to do this? These roadblocks that we ourselves create before we can even begin a task dilute the initial enthusiasm (if it was there). We abandon the idea and eventually forget all about it. Seriously though, is such an imperative doable? I say with confidence: Yes It Is. I share below my story with a village school and how together we made things happen.

In the last four years I have been fortunate to be associated with the Umroi Madan Upper Primary School, Ri Bhoi District as a social worker, philanthropist and retired teacher. Established in 2009, the school has both girls and boys from Nursery to Class 8 and the teachers are all wonderful ladies, which immediately created the bond between them and myself, considering my commitment to women's development. Financially, the school manages with the tuition fees from students and with a little help from the government. In spite of their meager salary and challenging working conditions, they are dedicated and always cheerful. They did not mind putting in an extra hour every month to be involved in the monthly meetings I proposed to them. They also accepted my proposal to have an extra class for the two senior classes every last Friday of the month from March to November each year to impart learning that is not included in the school curriculum.

Since then, meets have happened as planned except for last year due to the pandemic. In December, all the students get a treat, such as pre-Christmas celebration, educational tours and the like. Learning resources, snacks as well as December treats are all donations from friends in Shillong and abroad. Soon after I connected with the Girls Empowerment Movement (GEM) in the United States in 2016 of which I am a supporter in spirit and we formed an Indian Chapter of GEM in the Umroi School. Until 2017, the meetings were only with the girls. But I noticed that the boys felt left out, and I realized that I may have been discriminating them. So, in 2018, I included the boys in all our meetings and called them BUP (Boys Up). The boys are taught to support and stand up for girls' empowerment and the girls are taught to collaborate with the boys, thereby engendering gender equality.

Lessons/activities are all need based and in line with the issues and concerns that affect young minds nowadays. These include value education, courtesy and respect, kindness, love, gratitude, helpfulness, awareness on environment, health, pen-friendship, personal protection, art and craft, creative writing, communication, gender sensitization, walks and runs for a cause. During November we always undertake participatory evaluation through games and other fun exercises so that we get to know how the GEMS and BUPs feel; what they have learned and what else they want to do in future. These exercises have revealed that students in rural areas do have potential but lack opportunities and training to bring them out of their shells.

It is from the monthly empowerment programs that I observed the difficulties that the school silently faces. As in most village schools, a room is divided into two parts, to create two classrooms. The Umroi

Madan Upper Primary School is no different. Classrooms are small and partially divided by thin partitions that do little to muffle the sound between classrooms. The students are crammed together in these box-like spaces, exposed to health and other social risks. The Headmistress herself operates from the teachers' common room, which is a tiny cubicle. Despite these odds, these boys and girls seem to enjoy attending school and the teachers dedicate themselves to imparting the best education possible under the circumstances. There have been offers of learning aids like books for a library that is non-existent, water filters, white boards and some furniture. While these gestures were well intended, they are not practical because of lack of space. I have not been able to make the monthly meetings more interactive because the rooms are not big enough to allow for participatory exercises or screen visuals.

When I shared the space problem with the teachers and members of the School Managing Committee they were also concerned and suggested that building a multipurpose hall above the current school building would provide solutions to the current space problem. As a result, an agreement was reached to build this hall in the available area above the ground floor. The big question then was who would fund the construction estimated at Rs 800,000 in 2017. This was when the idea of crowd funding began taking shape and we decided to appeal to the GEM in the US. Our GEM sisters received our appeal with enthusiasm and in no time created through their website, a donation link for donors to contribute online. The response was amazing and soon I extended this appeal to my own family and friends from around the world and from this village itself. When the funds started to pile up, we began the construction work in January 2019; the Hall was completed in February 2020. Fortunately, due to the generosity of donors, we were also able to construct a mini library by the side of the hall.

The inauguration of this Multi Purpose Hall was finally held on 19 February 2021. The VIPs for this inaugural event were the students themselves. A GEM and a BUP cut the ribbon and unfolded the plaque and then read the Tenets (based on GEM principles) in English and in Khasi. We once again thank each institutional donor, business establishments and individuals, international and local, for caring and giving to enable these girls and boys of this school access opportunities usually available only to city schools but most of all to learn the unlearned. We also want to say 'Thank You' to the builders who worked meticulously and honestly thus helping us to operate almost within the estimated costs. Finally, as this school was set up by the villagers themselves, it is only right that they also get to use the hall for special events - hence the name multi-purpose hall.

My dream is to see that such learning is replicated in other schools too and that in a decade or so we will have young people who adhere to the following principles:

Your Instincts are Your Super Power; Trust Them
We are Pro Self, not Selfish
My Accomplishments Do Not Diminish You or Yours, So Proudly Boast
The Unkind Things People Say to You Are More About Them Than About You
We Do Not Attempt to Elevate Ourselves By Putting Others Down
We Practice Mindfulness/Meditation
We Use Technology to Enrich, Not Corrode Relationships and Health
We Invest in Serious Self-Care: Nutrition/Balance/Financial Health
"Stop Saying Sorry"
"My Body, My Boundaries"
We believe in Bravery, Not Perfection

TO THE EDITOR

Much ado about a toolkit

Editor,

What is happening in this country today is shocking. An international climate activist, Greta Thunberg lends her support to the ongoing farmers' movement. The Modi government is rattled and smells an international conspiracy. The next thing is that Thunberg's associates in India, Disha Ravi, lawyer Nikita Jacob and Shantanu Muluk. Why is the sedition law suddenly being used against all those that criticise the Modi government and its policies, more particularly the Farmers' Bills that were pushed through without a debate. The farmers have the right to oppose; so too every citizen in this country. This is a constitutional right of and no government can take away this right from us. But since 2014 we have been seeing the oppressive side of the BJP. The government seems to

spend more time in arresting people than in implementing the long list of schemes declared by Modi.

This government's economic policies are tuned towards empowering those already high up in the corporate ladder like the Adanis and the Ambanis. The BJP is not what it shows itself to be. Before the 2014 elections, Modi attacked the Congress-led UPA Government and vowed to cleanse up the system. But nothing like that happened. In fact, even senior persons and activists have been arrested by this Government for sedition. They are spending time in jail at great cost to their mental and physical health. It's unbelievable that a government can use the police against those protesting against the CAA which is a discriminatory piece of legislation. Muslims in this country feel a deep sense of insecurity because of the CAA. Yet they can do nothing. Journalists are being arrested for reporting the

Hathras rape case and other untoward incidents happening in this country.

We in Meghalaya don't seem to realise this but we too are losing our freedoms along with the rest of the country. The only difference here is that we don't have people speaking up against the current regime. Everyone is focussed on the ILP and expecting the NDA government to grant it. I, for one don't foresee that the Modi government granting ILP to Meghalaya because it has been pointed out earlier that this state already has the Sixth Schedule.

Now Disha Ravi is in jail because of a 'toolkit.' How can a toolkit be such a potent instrument when all it does is to brief a climate activist on how to carry out their activism. We need a break from this claustrophobia, this sense of being hemmed in by a state that will not tolerate dissent. But who will lead the way?

Yours etc.,
Saralini Thangkiew,
Via email

Myanmar's woes

Editor,

The recent army coup in Myanmar has impacted India and Bangladesh in entirely different ways. As for India, it is a wait-and-watch situation. There has been a close cooperation between the Indian and Myanmar armies on insurgency-related issues troubling the two countries. Hence, the relations between the two countries are likely to be normal. The impact of the coup on Bangladesh is profound compared with that on India. Myanmar authorities had agreed to rehabilitate over 40,000 refugees removed out of a list of 800,000 people by Bangladesh.

When the newly elected NLD (National League for Democracy) government headed by Aung San Suu Kyi displaced, it had aroused

hopes that the 40,000 people could be repatriated in the Rakhine province in a short while. Now around 11,00,000 Rohingyas are sheltered in different parts of Bangladesh. Now that the military is in complete control of Myanmar after the coup, Rohingya refugees are even more afraid. The coup could make it more challenging for the Rohingyas to return home. The coup has taken place at a time when the two countries agreed to start the repatriation. The new military regime is unlikely to prioritise return of Rohingya communities.

As per the new citizenship law announced by Myanmar authorities, Rohingyas Muslims are "resident foreigners" and not citizens. Over the years, many ethnic cleansing raids have been carried out to drive out the community. According to the Burmese law, while

the Rohingyas can stay on in the Rakhine region, their children are not supposed to study beyond the primary level. They won't get official jobs or medical help either. The government also has the right to seize Rohingya property.

A great deal was expected from Aung San Suu Kyi. However, she took a tough stand on the issue. The world was shocked at how she treated the hapless Rohingyas. She approved the decision to marginalise the community and defended the army raids. There have been reports of genocide of the Rohingyas.

Yours etc.,
Venu G S,
Kollam-78

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"Public transportation is like a magnifying glass that shows you civilization up close."

— Chris Gethard

The Shillong Times

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Assemblies set for polls

WITH a broad hint from Prime Minister Narendra Modi at an event in Assam, assembly election schedules for four states and one Union Territory are likely to be announced by the Election Commission in a fortnight's time. The elections must be over by May, so that new governments in these provinces can take charge. The scenario in Puducherry remains fluid in view of the resignation of the Congress-DMK alliance government there this week, while the four states are raring to go for the polls.

In Assam, the stakes for the BJP are high. It will seek to ensure a continuation in power even as local issues might crop up and a weakened Congress party and regional entities will seek to turn the tide against the BJP and chief minister Sarbananda Sonowal. There is little doubt that the Trinamool Congress is retaining its hold on the masses in Bengal despite the exit of some senior-level leaders from the party. The BJP is still not in a strong position there while the Congress-Left alliance has little hope of capturing power. The 'nephew' factor and the latest coal scam plaguing the CM's family might work against the Trinamool Congress, though.

The Left Democratic Front in Kerala is seen in a strong position and this view is reinforced by the two opinion surveys this week. Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan has worked hard on the welfare and developmental fronts. The E Palaniswami dispensation in Tamil Nadu is losing popular support. The DMK, led by Karunanidhi's son MK Stalin, is seen to be in a commanding position, going by the support the DMK-Congress-Left alliance got in the 2019 Lok Sabha polls. The VK Sasikala factor might or might not reshape the political equations in the state after her release from jail a week ago.

The Congress took a hit in the exit of its government in Puducherry this week, as this, of late, was the party's only fiefdom in the South. A compensation could come in the coming assembly polls in the UT by way of re-election for the Congress; and it might be able to share power in Tamil Nadu too.

The last word on Kerala is yet to be heard; the Congress is the main opposition there and could return to power based on the previous trends in the state — where no political formation could retain power in successive polls and the Opposition was voted into power. The BJP is too weak in Kerala as also Tamil Nadu and Puducherry. It hardly has any seat-strength in these state assemblies and has not been able to consolidate its strength in the southern states.

To whom it may concern

By Janet Moore Hujon

"Calling The Church Out" - Finally someone has had the courage and the conviction to express what I hope is the opinion of many in Meghalaya. Albert Thyrniang's passionate and clearly argued charge against the Church is long overdue. Furthermore the subsequent responses to his evaluation echoing the simmering discontent in our State also offer some comfort in the gloom. If Meghalaya continues to call herself a Christian State then the Church is not doing Christianity any favours by not speaking out against the corruption that is rotting our beloved hills.

For decades governments have begged and been allocated funds for 'development', but apart from the wealth of those in power, there is virtually little to show for it. The only exponential growth we have experienced is that of a sense of betrayal accompanied by incredulity that the status quo persists. We have been consistently betrayed by successive governments and yet, the other 'centre of power', is doing nothing to wield the moral power it possesses in order to reassure the populace that truth and justice should be reinstated.

In the moral crisis we are in as citizens, if we can't trust the Church to show us what is right then who can we trust? Like all religious/spiritual organizations the Church is meant to offer guidance but if in this respect the church is found wanting then believers are left struggling with the huge gap between theory and practice, between preaching and practising. Gospel teachings if not seen in action, might as well just be mere words on the page.

This silence on the part of the Church is alarming as it invariably leads you to speculate on her unholy alliance with wealthy politicians, as has been alleged with regard to the missing funds from Mawkhar Church. Will this theft be shamelessly swept behind the protection of the pulpit? And is indulging in cover-ups now a function of the pulpit? Church and State merging in this way is a matter of grave concern for it means Meghalaya will continue to have a government benefitting the few. The irony in all this, how-

ever, is that while such a theft is overlooked, the street pastor Reverend Kyrsoibor Pyrtuh who tirelessly works for the marginalised, 'the least of [Christ's] brethren', is suspended from the same church for being too political in calling out the uncaring powerful amongst us. So don't you think it is politicking that we should be more worried about because this clearly explains the rise in wealth amongst a few who for years have shamelessly diverted into their own bank accounts money intended for welfare projects. It is therefore imperative that the Church exercises its leadership role for if the Shepherd goes astray there too will the sheep follow.

As Thyrniang correctly points out "...No one is independent of politics...and the church, if it is faithful to its mission, has to be vo-

kind of awareness at least not in public life — all we are left with is a show of power defined by trappings of wealth unimaginable to the ordinary citizen. This has led me to ponder on the nature of this kind of power. What does it tell us, and why are we constantly driven to remind others that we possess it? Is it the rest of us don't forget who is in charge? Surely authentic authority and efficiency do not need to be trumpeted for the benefits will inevitably be seen in the improved quality of life for everyone. One therefore cannot but suspect that all this tamasha hides the real truth that actually there is nothing of substance at the heart of Meghalaya. Meghalaya's many emperors are really strutting around naked.

Yet ostentation has become so normal that this is what we have come to as-

this is the only way to gain control of their lives. Given the opportunity they then shamelessly exploit and rob the helpless amongst them, doing unto others what has been done to them. Common land becomes private property and the state's natural resources become a personal source of income as if environmental damage and climate change are fairy tales invented by the west. And if such schemes are not on offer we then cosy up to ministers and bureaucrats - even those with dubious reputations - believing that some of their power will rub off on us. And woe betide anyone who does not want to be part of this network of sycophancy - they are looked down upon as rank outsiders for foolishly not subscribing to that popular club promising ease and instant gratification.

As a young local poet concludes:

I am no longer welcomed at the table of the powerful... I courted ruin by refusing the pillow of their indulgence... And when I told them that this was my Way The way of Thorns not Thrones, the long way... The way of Pain, the way of Poverty, The way of Passion, the way of Freedom They shuddered and looking past me Fingered their food and washed it down with beer

Nearly fifty years ago we won freedom from Assam rule dreaming of a future where our distinct identity as a hill people would blossom. Yet today dictated and enslaved as we are by greed I wonder if we have really gained freedom. We have abandoned all sense of community, jealously guarding status, we have disregarded ancient lessons of sustainability by pillaging waterways and forests and we have ceased to challenge the oppressors amongst our own people accommodating them instead within our worldview as thorns in our flesh to be endured. Are we really free? Or are we in another prison - one we have built by ourselves...brick by ominous brick?

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In the moral crisis we are in as citizens, if we can't trust the Church to show us what is right then who can we trust? Like all religious/spiritual organizations the Church is meant to offer guidance but if in this respect the church is found wanting then believers are left struggling with the huge gap between theory and practice, between preaching and practising.

cal'... Otherwise with self-interest and nepotism driving government policies and appointments, the idea of a common good will forever remain an illusion. 'Tip Blei, Tip Briew, (Know God, Know One Another) we are told as Khasis and this simple lesson expressed so succinctly contains a weight of meaning and responsibility. To know (Tip) is to delve deep beneath superficial knowledge. It is to be aware and to be aware is to step away from the comfort of the complacent self in order to recognise one's place in a community of beings. It is related to 'jingiatplem' the Khasi word for conscience which when translated means to be mutually aware, to know how our actions are mutually impactful, that no man or woman is an island. Tragically in Meghalaya today there is little of this

sociate with high office and we no longer expect ministers or their cronies to fulfil their oaths of office, and that in its turn is dangerous for it shows how resigned we as citizens have become and how we are losing sight of the urgent need to demand what is good. Understandably when life is so bleak we can be forgiven for enjoying all this tamasha like the various festivals periodically on offer, forgetting that they are but condescending gestures to keep the populace happy who, in the general bonhomie, then delude themselves that all is well when really all is well only for the self-serving 'elite'.

Sadly this way of wielding power self-perpetuates and has now become what people emulate because after years of being crushed, cornered and helpless, they finally tell themselves that

Shillong and its public transportation service

By Benjamin Lyngdoh

Of all the public transportation one can ever come across, Shillong has got to have one of the worst services ever! In truth, a robust public transportation service is the hallmark of a systematically developed place. It forms the backbone for driving economic growth and operates as an engine enabling smooth flow of daily activities for the masses. Sadly, here in Shillong the trend and the understanding are in the reverse. In general, people believe that having a private vehicle is the only means of moving freely. As such, if you do not have one, you are bound to suffer and your activities along with it.

Yes, the recent strike of the taxis and buses under the banner of Meghalaya Joint Action Committee of Commercial Vehicles (MJACCV) including the subsequent road-bandh call of February 15-16 are fresh in our memories. However, this column is not only focussed on the recent events; rather, it is also about the shambolic nature of public transportation service in Shillong existent for perpetuity. The fact is that even during normal conditions the masses do face a lot of hardship when it comes to satisfactorily accessing public transportation. As the saying goes, the Romans expanded their empire because they built roads; the British colonised the world because they charted waterways and railways. But, for our beloved Shillong the transportation interventions that need be made just seem to be too many!

Nonetheless, the identification of the starting point towards mitigating the woes of public transportation is important. Well, it requires no rocket science to deduce that they are basically twofold. Namely, 'fare rates' and 'cost of petrol/diesel'. The fare rates have always been a matter of hot debate amongst the commuters and the people at large. Here, complaints of over-charging are a common occurrence. In addition, there is a tendency by the taxis to induce the commuters toward booking of the service in totality. Moreover, the practice of price discrimination whereby a taxi charges a different rate from different commuters for an identical route is a frequent occurrence. True, not all public transportation drivers are dubious and deviant; but, it takes only one bad apple to spoil the image of them all. As such, the only way out of this quagmire is to implement the long demanded call for installation of 'fare rate meters' in public transportations such as taxis and related small commercial vehicles. This will ensure fairness and do away with the hassles concerning fare rates charged. Ultimately, it results in transparency and satisfaction for all. However, in relation to fare rate meters there are many who oppose the idea. They say it is impractical and illogical. This is because when four/five commuters travel in a taxi not all will have a uniform disembarking point (as such the route can vary). For example, on a route from Lew Duh to Nongthymmai; some will disembark in Barik point and some in Laitumkhrh, etc. In such a case how will the meter reading work and be interpreted? Well, the answer to this is available and it is in defining a set route for vehicles under public transportation. It is high time that the public transportation vehicles be identified and coded as per the routes that they would ply to and fro. Hence, this will solve the problem. The point to be factored here is that the fare rate meters will only work if they are implemented specific to a certain route identified for a certain set of public transportation. The other

advantage of this is that the taxis will not be in a position to bargain with and refuse commuters of a certain route. This will also be of great help to the traffic police who at times have been seen forcing taxis to pick up commuters of a certain route (say PB to Madanrying during evening hours).

As we move towards the issue of cost of petrol/diesel then eyebrows would frown. However, at the very outset it is to be mentioned that the recent decision of the state government to reduce rates per litre of petrol and diesel by Rs. 7.4 and Rs. 7.1 respectively has resulted in the initiation of a dangerous precedent. So, what now? Every time the petrol/diesel rates hits Rs. 90 the state government will keep on intervening? Is it sustainable? Yes, the state government taxation rates are high (and may be looked upon), but on the other side of the coin we are all aware that mineral oil in India is primarily imported from other countries and as such the prices, are determined by the international market. Currently, the price of oil in the international market continues to rise daily and this is primarily on account of the increase in demand due to the revival in economies post the covid-19 lockdown. As of now, oil shares and stocks are a darling of the stock market. All of this simply means that the price of petrol/diesel will continue to rise as we move through 2021. The end result of all this is that the government will have to be proactive and strengthen its provisions of public transportation rather than just looking at reduction in petrol/diesel rates frequently.

In relation to the above, a 'better option' would have been to revive the Shillong Public Transport Service (SPTS) buses. A number of such buses are lying unused in places like Laitkor, Mawngap and Mawkynroh-Umshing. In some cases their condition is dilapidated and fast losing their use value. Why does the state government not intervene here? Or are such buses only to be used for picnics? On hindsight, if these buses were plying effectively in full strength then the pressure on taxis would be less and as a result the masses would not be held to ransom through strikes/bandh. This is food for thought! In any case, the SPTS buses should not have joined the recent strike and bandh as they are primarily properties of the government (even if they are run and managed by private parties). Why did the state government not pursue this? The fact is that just as the price of petrol/diesel was reduced; this matter of SPTS buses should have been intervened into aggressively. Oh how we would have loved for Meghalaya Transport Corporation (MTC) to be 100% functional still; then these buses would have been run by MTC from the very first instance and these issues that we face regularly may have been mitigated.

In the end, the hallmark of a robust public transportation service is not one that depends on small vehicles but one that is driven by bigger modes such as buses. This will also help in easing traffic during rush hours. Moreover, if schools around Shillong uniformly agree to use school buses; it would be a huge bonus. Lastly, if public transportation is to be robust; then parking bays and appropriate points of embarking and disembarking are a must. Else, everything will come to naught. After all, Shillong has a lot of wonderful things to offer; but alas, its public transportation service continues to be a discomfort/harassment for many!

E m a i l : benjamin21in@yahoo.co.in; The Author teaches at NEHU

TO THE EDITOR

Unwarranted interference

Editor,
It was rather surprising to read the letter titled, "Solution to the ongoing MCS case" (ST Feb 20, 2021) written by someone who did not wish to reveal his/her identity. This is regarding the issue surrounding the MCS recruitment matter. At the outset, this writer begins by stating that he/she does not seek to criticise any party involved in this mess. Funnily, by the time one reaches the concluding section of the letter, it ends up doing just that. The letter writer needs to be reminded that it was the Division Bench of the High Court of Meghalaya which on December 10, 2019 had stated in unequivocal terms that the petitioners have not made any prima facie case to convince the Court on their allegations. The current issues raised by the letter writer such as the non-communication of exam pattern and other challenges to the Preliminary Exam such as the computation of marks of both Paper I and Paper II of Preliminary Examination, has already been conclu-

sively decided by said Division Bench and upheld by the Supreme Court of India on November 09, 2020. Therefore, who is the letter writer to open up these issues once again and question the constitutionality of the same? Furthermore, I am astonished that the letter writer should express strong opinions on the current matters under litigation and in directing what the High Court should and should not do on the recently filed appeal. The letter writer is trying to influence the decision of the Court with emotional appeals when the matter is clearly sub-judice. I would request them to please stay out of the matter under consideration and allow the Court to do its duty. Such suggestions and emotional appeals are unwarranted.

Yours etc,
Jeremiah S
Via email

In Memoriam

Editor,
We continue to see the winds of change blowing from all directions and yet we aren't able to harness the right velocity to propel a change in our state. This is

what (Late) Prof. Aurelius Kyrham Nongkynrih vocally pointed out in one of his write-ups, "Ki Nongialam, Ka Politik bad Jingkylla" literally translated as, "The Leaders, Politics and Change." In one of the meetings I had with him at NEHU in 2019, on a program which I had envisaged to work upon - 'Landless Farmers and Landlessness', he stated that if a change in our farmers livelihoods was to come it should come from the inner hearts and minds of those who have allowed this to happen. Very true indeed! He was one of those who was astute and vocal yet humble and pragmatic in his approach to social issues. He was able to touch the hearts and minds of the literary world beyond our state and helped shape the way our community should be able to choose its path for the greater good. Interestingly he was also a pioneer in formulating the idea of creating Land Banks for our landless farming community, a voice of the voiceless. Truly he lived and gave his best to us all. Rest in Eternal Peace Bah Kyrham.

Yours etc.,
Dominic Stadlin Wankhar
Shillong - 3

Need for clear Line of Control (LoC)

Editor,
The India-China disengagement is reported to have been completed in Pangong Tso area. With China, the entire length of border from Ladakh to Arunachal Pradesh is not demarcated. An ambiguous Line of Actual Control(LAC) works as the actual alignment. This has caused occasional conflicts between the armies of the two countries.

True, disengagement can avert an immediate confrontation. On the other hand, it cannot eliminate the possibility of a conflict in the future. Hence, a perfect solution for the border issue needs to be worked out. The present disengagement must lead to permanent settlement by delineating and demarcating the entire border.

It is an indisputable fact that Arunachal Pradesh has always been an integral part of India.

Aksai Chin has been under the control of China for a long time. Chinese national highway G219 that connects Xinjiang and Tibet passes through Aksai Chin. The claim of China over Arunachal Pradesh and that of India over Aksai Chin are rhetorically matching. However, neither country is in a position to realise their claims in the near future by using military power. A practical solution lies in border settlement through negotiation. Both countries need to recognise the boundary alignment based on the widely accepted watershed principle. China must accept Arunachal Pradesh as an undisputed part of India and the McMahon line as the border. Notwithstanding the fact that it would be a difficult task to reach an agreement on Ladakh sector, it would certainly be a step forward to reach a practical solution. The solution lies in a negotiated settlement between the Chinese 1959 claim and the claim by India.

Yours etc.,
Venu G S,
Kollam-78

DSC, LDA recruitment

Editor,
It is amusing that the District Selection Committee, East Khasi Hills, published in their website a notice stating that candidates can approach the Deputy Commissioner's Office if one wishes to know the score of typing test held last year. What stopped them from showing the score of candidates during the typing test? The software used for the typing speed test can give the results the moment a person finishes the test. Why did it take one whole year for the Committee to show the score of the test? As there was opacity during the test it is doubtful that the score of a candidate is authentic if he or she requested for the same at the moment.

Yours etc.,
Kevin M Shangliang
Via email

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

*"Turn your obstacles into opportunities
and your problems into possibilities."*

— Roy T. Bennett

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No. 189 SHILLONG, THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 25, 2021

Courts to the rescue of citizens

A Public Interest Litigations (PIL) is the only mechanism that citizens can resort to when government fails to provide basic necessities. Water is a basic need but even today in the capital city of Shillong many residents and women in particular, have to wait in long queues at public water stations in the morning hours. The Greater Shillong Water Supply Scheme (GSWSS) has not delivered even after considerable amount of money has been pumped into the project which started in 1977. In 2006 an Assembly question was raised as to the total amount spent since the inception of the GSWSS up to the time of the question. The answer given was Rs 94.13 crore. Now 15 years later the GSWSS has not made sufficient progress with turbid water being supplied to residents from time to time. It is intuitive that the Meghalaya High Court should have to direct the State Government to come up with a water policy only now in 2021. In 2019, Meghalaya was touted as the first state to come up with a draft water policy. The Policy has remained a draft till date. The process of putting together a water policy was set in motion in 2013 when the German Foundation, GIZ had offered to undertake a participatory process in putting together the draft policy.

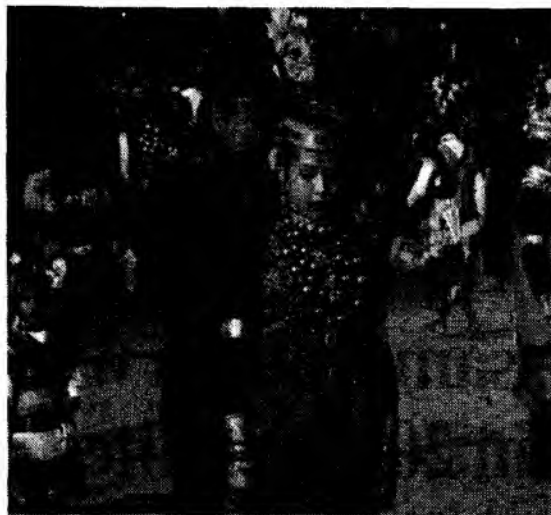
The draft policy was readied and submitted to Government of Meghalaya in 2014. Several discussions and workshops with various stakeholders were held around the draft before its finalisation. Unfortunately the draft policy has remained in cold storage. It suddenly surfaced in 2019 but it continues to remain a draft policy and hence not operative. Now with the High Court setting a deadline of March 2, for the Government to come up with the Policy, the draft will hopefully become operational. Water quality in Meghalaya especially in the coal mining areas is highly suspect. Water quality testing is yet to take off. Reports state that at the time of commissioning water supply schemes the water quality is not tested. As of 2007-08 only 3 out of 816 water supply schemes were tested. This is clearly an area of concern as it leaves users vulnerable to water borne diseases. Rampant mining has also led to pollution of water sources. Also rivers from where water is sourced are affected by anthropogenic activities such as rampant car washing, bathing, washing clothes etc. Under the Jal Jeevan Mission every household in Meghalaya is to get piped water by December 2022. Will this remain an aspiration only? As of today most citizens are buying water from private sellers. Water tankers do brisk business in Meghalaya. The High Court might take note of this too as it suggests the failure of the state to provide potable water to its citizens.

The Dormitory - A lost cultural institution: Can we revive it?

By Barnes Mawrie

Most of us must have heard or read in books about the tribal cultural institution of bachelors' dormitory. This was a common institution among many tribes of Northeast India. It is known by different names in different tribes - Morung among the Nagas, Nokpante among the Garos, Giti Ora among the Mundas, Ing khyrrow among the Khasis and Zawbuk among the Mizos. This institution integrates in itself all the basic elements of a tribal community, socio-cultural, economic, moral and religious. What is being

practiced in the west as compulsory civic service (military service or social service) for the youth, already existed among the tribal communities in the form of the bachelors' dormitory. Essentially, this institution was meant for a holistic formation and training of the youth. A bachelors' dormitory was essentially a house built usually at the entrance to the village. Here the youth of the village were expected to live for a period of time not less than a year. They were to live under the supervision and training of an elder who was considered to be a good and exemplary person. The young girls would have their own dormitory and were supervised by an elderly woman chosen by the community.



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These dormitories were schools where learning and skilling took place. Here they were taught basic trades of life, everything about their culture and tradition which included learning of folk songs, dances, folktales, myths and legends of the people. The young men were also given training in martial art so as to prepare them to be warriors to defend their communities. The girls were taught

basic skills in housekeeping, weaving and farming etc. Besides all these, the dormitories were schools of self discipline. The young boys and girls were taught strict discipline and how to conduct themselves in society. The result was that the young men and women who came out of this institution were well disciplined, well cultured, skilled in traditional trades, knowledgeable in culture and tradition and martially well trained.

experience a double disadvantage with the weakening of the kinship. Earlier the kni used to discipline his nephews and nieces so as to instil in them a moral and ethical grounding and a strong sense of right and wrong. Today this institution is also dying and consequently the Khasi youth are left unbridled. Historians say that the reasons why the Roman Empire dominated the ancient world for so many centuries, was the discipline of the Roman

bachelors' dormitories both for boys and girls. It is sufficient to change the nature and characteristics of these institutions, namely, the curriculum, the style of management and a greater thrust on cultural education and discipline.

As of today, hostels mainly focus on boarding and lodging, formal education and other western type of training. This is the reason why boys or girls in these hostels are quite adept in western music, songs and dances but rather ignorant about their rich cultural heritage. If a cultural dimension, as



"The disappearance of the bachelors' dormitory is a great loss to the tribal communities. Had this institution been preserved, we would have witnessed a different quality of tribal youth in Northeast India."

Army. Great armies of the then world were no match against this disciplined war machinery. One primary reason for the fast development of China is definitely the culture of discipline present in that country. It cannot be refuted that discipline among citizens of a nation is the key to its growth and development.

This brings me again to the discussion on the bachelors' dormitory as a powerful cultural institution which must be revived at all cost for the good of our tribal communities. Since majority of tribal people have adopted Christianity as their religion, it is imperative for the Christian churches and their leaders to discover ways and means to do this. In my humble opinion, the many hostels that Christian missionaries run in different parts of Northeast India, can be transformed into

well as discipline are given primary importance in our hostels, we can be sure that the quality of our youth would be enhanced. The future of our society depends so much on the young generation. Consequently, when our youth are well disciplined and love their culture and tradition and are well informed and trained in their cultural heritage, then we can hope for strong and progressive tribal communities in our region. The government's Department of Art and Culture should look seriously at this aspect and encourage and support efforts in this area. It is to the advantage of the state and the country when we have youth who are well disciplined and culturally well formed. Looking at the present youth scenario, such initiatives should become a primary concern of the government, of churches and of civil society in general.

Delhi Court order on Disha Ravi bail has put the issue in proper perspective

Time to do away with draconian provisions of present sedition law in India

By Nitya Chakraborty

The Delhi Court order on the bail granted to the climate activist Disha Ravi issued on February 23 has imparted a new dimension to the debate whether the present sedition law provisions are too draconian, giving enough leeway to the ruling dispensation to charge citizens for sedition for expressing views contrary to the government's policies. The order of the additional judge Dharmendar Rana is an objective observation on the present state of affairs relating to democratic dissent in the country when the police can arrest anybody on sedition charges without having the required incriminating documents.

In the last two years, especially since the coming of the Narendra Gandhi Government for the second time in May 2019, the dissenters have been suspects in the eyes of the government's law and order agencies and most of them have been termed as anti-nationals. The BJP leadership is consolidating supreme power in the country by fair means or foul with the objective of establishing a one-party the in both the centre and the states. Any agitations against the discriminatory policies like CAA, NRC and the latest three farm laws, have been termed as anti-national acts and the leading figures of the movement have been arrested in fabricated charges.

The arrest of the activist Disha Ravi on sedition charges and the pathetic performance by Delhi police during hearing and the consequent observation of the judge show how just for expressing disagreement with government policies and vowing to fight that within the democratic framework, the young 22 year old activist had to bear the ignominy at the hands of the state which could not produce any tangible documents in support of their contention.

As the learned judge said in his 18 page bail order the offence of sedition cannot be invoked to minister to the wounded vanity of the governments. Differences of opinion, disagreement, divergence, dissent or for that matter, even disapprobation, are recognised legitimate tools to infuse objectivity in state policies. An aware and assertive citizenry in contradiction with an indifferent or docile citizenry, is indisputably a sign of a healthy and vibrant democracy."

This participation of aware citizenry in the debate on national policies of importance is against patriotism to the present BJP government and that is why the civil society activists are the targets and anybody who works for the welfare of the distressed including the Delhi riot victims are hounded and falsely charged. The Bhima Koregaon activists are languishing in jail and despite failing health, only the 82-year old Varavara Rao was granted bail last week out of the nine activists.

At time when there is need for expanding the areas of democratic rights, the presence of sedition laws and its misuse by the ruling establishment have brought to spotlight the need for doing away with the existing sedition laws provisions or to dilute the law in such a way that there are enough safeguards to protect the rights of the citizenry who will be targeted by the ruling

regime. The British discriminated against Indians when they introduced this provision into the statute books. Sedition was made a far harsher offence here than it was in England. However, in the 1970s, by changing the rules about when the police could arrest a person accused of sedition, the government of independent India made sedition more potent than it was even during the colonial period.

The IPC was enacted and brought into force in colonial India in 1860. At that time, it had no section concerning sedition. There are two theories for why sedition was not in the original text. The official version is that it was a blunder—though sedition was supposed to be in the final version of the IPC, it was left out by mistake.

According to the eminent lawyer Abhinav Chandrachud, it is quite likely that sedition was excluded from the IPC because it had virtually ceased to be an offence in England by that time. According to one 19th century British author, prosecutions for sedition in England from 1832 onwards were so rare that the offence had virtually ceased to exist.

The IPC was part of the colonial experiment of codification. There were no codes in England at that time; as the "common law" was contained in cases decided over centuries. The great Indian "codes"—the IPC, the Indian Contract Act, the Indian Evidence Act—were meant to be models for adoption in England.

According to this eminent lawyer, when sedition was finally inserted into the IPC in 1870, it had the ill odour of colonial discrimination about it. Englishmen who were accused of sedition back home were entitled to be tried by a jury of their peers. These juries tended to be sympathetic towards their countrymen and it was, therefore, difficult to secure a prosecution for sedition. In the new Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973, which came into force in 1974 and repealed the colonial-era 1898 Code of Criminal Procedure, sedition was made a cognizable offence for the first time in India's history. The police now have the power to arrest a person accused of sedition without a warrant from a magistrate. This extraordinary power of the police is being misused and the adversaries to the government of the day can be arrested without producing a warrant. This has continued to be a big danger to democracy and free expression.

Interestingly, the offence of sedition was formally abolished in England, in 2009 but it stays in India with the same draconian provisions. Many eminent lawyers have been demanding its withdrawal since 2009. The Disha Ravi case now underlines that the democratic forces in the country who stand for free expression and dissent as the fundamental right under Article 19 of the Constitution, must vigorously assert for the removal in India of sedition law.

To begin with, at least as a part of dilution, the offence of sedition can be made bailable and non cognisable. Time is running out. The battle for the removal of sedition provisions or at least substantial dilution with safeguards, has to be won. This is imperative for protecting the necessity of dissent as a part of our making democracy vibrant. (IPA Service)

TO THE EDITOR

Speaker is above Party & Govt

Editor, Banshan Lyngdoh makes interesting and pertinent observations in his letter "Be impartial, Mr Speaker, Sir!" (ST Feb 17, 2021). In fact, I compliment him for his knowledge of the unique constitutional position that the Speaker holds in this country and elsewhere. He is spot on when he argues that it is not the job profile of the Speaker to meddle with the government's affairs. Seldom have I heard of a Speaker getting involved in governance. Legislature is supposed to be as independent as our Judiciary is. In some of the western countries, like in the UK, it's once a speaker always a speaker. Speaker enjoys a special status and unique position. UK Speaker with all the traditional regalia and stipulated Long Coat enters the House with such royal finesse that is a treat to the eyes. In UK usually the Speaker has to seek re-election every five years. Because the Speaker does not partake in the day to

day politics of survival, he is usually granted free passage by other political parties. Indeed, in this country too the Speaker enjoys an exalted position in our parliamentary democracy. The only difference is that although the Speaker has to sever ties with his political party, he remains focussed on his constituency. For, he has to ensure his return to the House five years later.

In Meghalaya, the Speaker holds a respected position. Both sides of the House have generally shown respect for the chair. There are a few jarring exceptions though. One partisan Speaker who being politically motivated, declined to adhere to the rule book. He suspended six members on political expediency. After brazenly defying law and political niceties, he was brought down to his knees through court intervention. Another time, because of political turmoil and instability, another speaker had the misfortune of being targeted by a member of the House who went threateningly up to the Speaker's ramp for taking him on physically. There are some more instances when the Speaker did not acquit himself well. But that's not the purpose

of this letter. Our focus is the Meghalaya Assembly Speaker's unfazed direct involvement in taking governmental decisions. The question is, as Lyngdoh rightly pointed out, whether the Speaker has transgressed. Indeed, he has, perhaps, quite unwittingly. Let us not forget that our Hon'ble Speaker is concurrently the President of the political party that is part of the ruling coalition. As President of UDP he has to remain active in steering the course of the coalition. That is his political compulsion. But this blatant practice is repugnant to the Constitution and the established parliamentary practice.

Honestly, why blame the incumbent Speaker? After all, a precedent was made by his predecessor Late Don Kupar Roy who was both Speaker and UDP President. That's where the wrong precedent had been created. That there is no such instance in the entire country, makes Meghalaya dubiously unique. To observers, this sacrifice of the time-tested constitutional practice of Speaker's open partisanship is worrisome. Those holding Constitutional office should be careful not

to violate the letter and spirit of the Constitution. I feel, that the Speaker should be told to resign as UDP President forthwith in order to maintain a modicum of neutrality of the Speaker's chair. In any case, he should not be seen openly influencing decision-making of the present government and also letting the public know about it. Every Speaker gets his political job done but only with subtlety. Most Speakers have done it in the past. He should follow the same to avoid controversies that Lyngdoh has raised through his letter.

Yours etc.,
N K Sharma,
Via email

Where's Meghalaya's Water Policy?

Editor, Apropos the news item "Formulate policy to provide potable water to citizens: High Court directs state govt" (ST Feb 24, 2021), I am reminded of a news item in 2019 where Chief Minister Conrad Sangma tweeted that Meghalaya is the first state to come up with a water policy. His tweet read, "The cabinet after detailed

deliberation approved the Meghalaya State Water Policy 2019. It is historic for Meghalaya as we have become the first State in the country to have a State water policy." The PMO and the Water Resources Minister were tagged to this tweet. Now the Government has got a rap in the knuckles for failing to provide water to its citizens even within the state capital, leave alone the rural habitats where people have to walk long distances to fetch water. This task usually falls on women. But Meghalaya being a failed state, even the fact that the taps run dry and people are forced to buy water from tankers is normalised. We take all this in our stride because we have developed fortitude to live as citizens of a lesser God. Incidentally, the numerous pressure groups never take up such citizen-centric issues because they are on a different trip.

The claims made by the PHED that many villages are open defecation free (ODF) are false. A resident of Nongmynsong the only place for regular walkers like me is along the Umkialiar River. I see piles of human defecation and I would ask the PHED officials to visit

the place to see this for themselves before making tall claims about any place being open defecation free. I say this because human fecal matter enters water sources and pollute the water that comes through pipes to our homes. Many of us might have expensive water filters but many don't have that facility. I have seen children drinking water straight from open taps. How dangerous this is! No wonder we are still prone to dysentery, diarrhoea and even typhoid. And we live in the 21st century?

Sometimes I wonder why we vote the same people who have cheated us out of our entitlements, including water which is our basic right. The United Nations says, "It is vital to recognize first the basic right of all human beings to have access to clean water and sanitation at an affordable price. It is not as if we are not paying for water either to the Government or the Dorbar Shnong. I wonder if the proposed water policy will insert this clause by the UN so that we can hold the Government accountable.

Yours etc.,
Daminot Wahlang,
Shillong-2

"No science is immune to the infection of politics and the corruption of power."

— Jacob Bronowski

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No. 190 SHILLONG, FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 26, 2021

Ceasefire along LoC

THE proof of the pudding is in its eating. The militaries of India and Pakistan have issued a joint statement saying a ceasefire has come into force since Thursday along the Line of Control. It said that the existing mechanisms of hotline contact and border flag meets will be used to resolve any unforeseen situation or misunderstanding. It remains to be seen how strong is this resolve on the part of both Pakistan and India, given the kind of belligerence that the LoC witnessed in recent years.

Though a ceasefire agreement signed in 2003 was in existence, the recent years saw frequent violations resulting in several deaths. As many as 24 security personnel had been killed in the border firing between Pakistan and India as per counts here in the last one year. There was a 70 per cent increase in such violations in 2020, which meant over 5000 incidents, as against some 3,500 the previous year. India has not lagged behind in the ceasefire violations and the explanation here was they were responses to the Pakistani firings.

What prompted the present thaw is not clear. Overall, the Pakistani military is not as aggressive against India as it had been in the past, at least in terms or rhetoric. The Balakot aerial attack by IAF fighter jets hit the pride of the generals there and a partial loss of esteem for them before the Pakistani public and political leadership. The Imran Khan-led government is not being aggressive against India; and after a long standoff, word now is that bilateral discussions will be resumed.

This fits in well with the thaw along the Line of Actual Control vis-à-vis China, where too tension is easing and peace has beckoned. If China softened its stand on India, it was bound to have a positive impact on Pakistan's attitudes towards India. The return of peace in the Ladakh region could also help India turn its attention to the western side and keep its powder dry there for any eventualities. Pakistan understands as much if the present ceasefire agreement is any indication.

India is a soft power. It has not entertained any military designs on neighbours or others in the past. It was attacked by China and Pakistan and there were only counter-offensives. In a way, this helps the government to concentrate on the developmental front; something that Pakistan will take more years to learn. Be that as it may, the present ceasefire agreement is a good step in the right direction.

At no time in Meghalaya's history is corruption being discussed as it is today. As if to shame those in the Government that continue to deny that coal mining is going on, trucks turn turtle every other day and vomit out the coal they carry. Illegal coal mining has become an indecent obsession of the MDA Government. The word 'illegal' here has a double entendre. Sure the Supreme Court has allowed mining but not without conditions. The Government has not fulfilled those conditions because its ministers who are also coal mine owners view those conditions as unprofitable to their trade. So the best way out is to continue to mine coal illegally without having to follow any of the SC stipulations. The Government which includes key officials of the Directorate of Mining, the Transport Department, the Deputy Commissioners and Superintendent of Police of the coal bearing districts are all hands-in-glove in this indecent obsession. Everyone who facilitates this murky trade is paid off.

So when government officials earn more money by facilitating the coal trade than from their salaries why would they blow the whistle? Their creature comforts are maximized while their earthly acquisitions escalate. Today in Meghalaya the who's who are in a race to acquire the most expensive vehicle which is now like an adult toy and to own a dream house (never mind if the home is a ramshackle mess of bitter recriminations and the family torn apart by a vulgarity fuelled by excessive greed): Anyone who has her ears to the ground knows which minister is acquiring real estate and where. They know the astounding costs of such properties but they are not even shocked. On the contrary there is a kind of reverence for the person for daring to indulge himself and his family by dipping into the public exchequer. We have indeed normalized corruption!

The utterly broken, eroded, pot-holed roads of Shillong tell their own story of sleaze in the PWD which starts from the top and goes right down to the bottom of

Normalising corruption in Meghalaya

Who will break the silence?

By Patricia Mukhim

the hierarchy. And on these battered roads that are now dry and dusty some minister who has just bought the latest Mercedes drives past. The other day a fantastic 3.67 crore Lamborghini was seen racing past a stunned citizenry. Soon we will have someone else flaunting the 26 crore Ferrari because in Shillong, Jowai, Tura the competition is to own the most expensive car. The Mercedes and Avanti are passé.

MLAs and ministers today and some bureaucrats and technocrats own opulent buildings, complete with swimming pools. Those who don't own similar mansions are a little shy of admitting it. But they too will make it their single point agenda to construct or acquire a mansion at the earliest; before their five-year tenure/service career is done. There is complete ab-

to as a 'Christian state,' (whatever that phrase implies) the rampant corruption in society today reflects the abject failure of the churches which have capitulated and have become part of the corruption in the state and society. If the church fails to challenge its members to stand up for truth, justice and to fight corruption at all levels then what is it actually preaching? Is a dead sermon of any use? No wonder those who think and reflect, no longer want to attend church just to keep their names on the list. Those who continue to attend, do so only to be allotted a space for their burial. The MLAs and ministers attend church to keep their congregation's vote bank intact. Hence they also keep those captive vote banks amused with small crumbs and favours.

The truth is that as a

crossroad where people valorize corruption by giving those indulging in scams a place of honour in society instead of socially blacklisting them. Those who patronize the corrupt, and that includes church leaders and preachers, are mutually reinforcing corruption.

In the rest of India, there is at least an attempt to battle corruption and to challenge the corrupt at every level. For instance, Magsaysay winner and journalist P Sainath clearly calls any idea that legitimizes bribery 'an obscene one'. Sainath says, "Bribery is systemic. To ask a people burdened with it to accept bribe-giving as legal is to demand they accept both corruption and the existing structures of power and inequity it flows from. This is a perverse idea."

The other day the newly elected Rajya Sabha from Meghalaya, advised people not to use words like "coal barons" for the coal mine owners because he says, the people of Jaintia Hills were very poor earlier but it was because of coal that they became rich and could send their children to the best schools. Will the Rajya Sabha MP provide a list of the present mine owners so that we know how many of them are poor and defy the phrase "coal baron"? This writer has visited the coal mining areas in recent times and spoken to people there. It is not possible for ordinary 'poor' people today to mine coal because the payment (bribes) all along the journey is far too high for them to survive in the trade. Many have handed their mines over to a cohort of mine owners - the coal mafia who virtually run the state today.

In Meghalaya today the state is run by people whose personal ambitions extend no further than their bank accounts? And what do we citizens do? We watch in shock and awe as a Lamborghini drives past us and covers us with dust! We are simply stunned into silence. Perhaps our only hope is "The Revolution" led by Ardent Basaiawmoit. But when will this Revolution begin its journey? Isn't it already too late?

"The failure to check corruption in government imposes a steep cost on society, easily dwarfing that of street crime. The moral and ethical dilemma is that all of us have started to accept that corruption in government and politics is inevitable."

sense of guilt or fear of the consequences. For a state that is continually groveling before every minister in Delhi and begging for money, has anyone ever wondered where all this "black" money that's floating around comes from? Is it not from funds that should go to building good roads and bridges; providing better health care facilities; constructing school buildings that don't leak? In short, investing in building human resources for the state? The height of hypocrisy is that these MLAs and ministers and their business cohorts go to church and are entertained there mind you; not challenged, because without their patronage the churches would be poor!

I also wonder whether those running churches and preaching there Sunday after Sunday have the guts to call out corruption. For a state that some like to refer

tribal society we have forgotten all the tribal values we love to espouse at seminars and public meetings. It is a wearying exercise to keep reminding ourselves of the societal values that our ancestors (gender neutral) lived by. Those values have already been trampled on our feet so let's stop going back to those halcyon days.

The failure to check corruption in government imposes a steep cost on society, easily dwarfing that of street crime. The moral and ethical dilemma is that all of us have started to accept that corruption in government and politics is inevitable. So normalized is corruption here that we are no longer shocked by the blasé manner in which public funds are used to feather private nests. In Meghalaya today, corruption is not just taken for granted but also perpetuated. In fact we have reached a dangerous

TO THE EDITOR

Shillong a City under siege

Editor,

At first it was the commercial vehicles calling for a chakka bandh in protest against rising fuel prices. For a complete 48 hours the citizens of Shillong were held hostage, unable to go about their day to day business. Crucial exams had to be abandoned; daily wage earners to forgo their daily earnings; patients to hospitals denied the medical attention their ailments demand; important social events postponed.

We, the citizens of Shillong bore this with stolid patience and fortitude. We remained silent on a mess that was none of our making. The transport system of Shillong City collapsed but we scarcely heard a squeak or a word of comfort from the Transport authorities. Now that this particular problem has been solved we wiped our tears; brushed ourselves and sallied forth once again in the belief that it was all part of a bad dream. That it will never happen again.

On the February 25, 2021 the people of Shillong woke up to a collection of Whatsapp photos of a horrible accident that happened late 24th night at NH Shillong-Jowai Road, at Demthring involving a couple of speeding overloaded coal trucks. The traffic jam that ensued lasted till late Thursday morning, once again severely affecting commuters all along

Nongthymmai, Laitumkhrab and adjoining areas. At 3rd Mile Umshyri, another overloaded coal truck overturned during the night and blocked traffic on this crucial road for hours on end. The rippling effect of the jammed roads spread throughout the city and once again the residents of Shillong had to bear the brunt of all these mishaps for no fault of their own. We are paying in blood sweat and tears; in precious time and money; with our health and wellbeing for allowing the coal mafia to run their overloaded coal trucks through our narrow streets.

The Government seems determined to turn a blind eye to the illegal transport of coal within the state of Meghalaya. Why it's being allowed is too shameful a subject to be discussed here and if the Government has lost all sense of shame there is pretty little else to be said about it, is there? If Government is wilfully negligent of our well-being and welfare we the citizens cannot afford to allow that. Aside from the road blocks caused by overloaded coal trucks passing through the city, the same trucks are also being allowed to pass through our narrow city streets throughout the night. Innocent citizens; their families; vulnerable aged citizens and blameless babies lose sleep because of the continuous roar, din and honking from these trucks at night; our lungs breathing carbon monoxide fumes while we sleep. Can this be tolerated any longer just that

some uncaring, callous and indifferent coal baron might earn a few bucks or for some crooked Minister to pocket more bribes? I believe that it's time we the citizens of Shillong rise up and put a stop to the passing of these coal trucks through our city. Let Government continue its ridiculous denial over illegal mining but let them travel by some other way not through the city. Why is the repair of the bridge at Dwardsuid taking so long? Who is responsible for the delay? Why is the PWD or Transport Minister silent on the subject? Enough is enough. We have had our fill. Government has a responsibility. It just can't sleep over such issues. Please put a stop to this nonsense and let us citizens live in peace and dignity.

Yours etc.,
Toki Blah,
Via email

Each voice must be heard

Editor,
Apropos the letter by Jeremiah S, on the MCS issue, I would appeal to all MCS candidates not to let anyone smother their voices on the current MCS issue.

And Jeremiah S, please don't pick on people's wish for privacy, when you're clearly hiding behind a pseudonym. Everyone is entitled to an opinion. Your tone was condescending and has a lot of self righteous attitude. Let us call writer of, "Solution to the ongoing MCS

case" as writer X. Writer X was simply offering his perspective. Don't fret about him being able to influence the Court. He stated facts of which the Honorable High Court itself mentioned that the petitioners did present facts that need to be answered but which the Court refused to do based on technicalities.

When you call out MPSC on its lackadaisical and non-transparent modus operandi, it's supposed to be God's truth! When others do too, they are just being emotional and their opinion is irrelevant and needs to be dismissed. How arrogant is that! Reservation is about adequate representation; it's not anybody's right to claim something which wasn't mentioned in the "State reservation policy" and certainly not MPSC's right to give away freely. Reservation within reservation is illegal! Period!

Yours etc.,
Mason Lyngdoh,
Via email

On behalf of the church

Editor,
The two articles which appeared in the ST of Feb 9, 2021 by Albert Thyrning and another dated Feb 24, 2021 by Ms Janet Hujon allegedly seemed to indict the church and have provoked the undersigned to join in the debate on the role of the church in Meghalaya. The moot question is what is the church? In layman's language the church is a called-

out community of men and women who voluntarily decided to follow Jesus as Lord and Saviour and live according to His teachings as indicated in the Bible. There is a story about Mahatma Gandhi who read the Bible and one of his favourite meditations were on the Sermon on the mount by Jesus. One day he was asked by an English pastor why he didn't become a Christian? Gandhi replied, "How can you expect me to become a Christian when you Christians do not live as Jesus taught in the Bible?" A true Christian is a forgiven, born again person. He/she becomes an agent or a channel of God's mission through the church by bringing peace, reconciliation, hope and healing. If the members of the church fail to do so, why blame the church? Blame the so-called members of the church.

It is not unusual for people to blame the school when its students are involved in drunkenness and unwholesome revelry. The church as a corporate body needs no advocate to defend itself. It is self evident as its policy and guidelines to its members are holy and transparent for the universal good of all people. In a fallen world you sometime cannot differentiate between a genuine product from an imitation, true news and fake news, a true Christian and a nominal Christian or Christian in name only. It is a debatable question to call Meghalaya a Christian state just because

most of its citizens are Christians; in fact most are nominal Christians only, judging by what we see - corruption, exploitation, injustice etc practiced by these so-called members. It is sad when people take membership of the church without conviction but only as a badge to wear for their own ulterior motives. It is equally sad when leaders of the church involve themselves in politicking or allow themselves to be used by unscrupulous leaders of political parties.

The church as a conscience keeper of society is called to be in the world. It is unfortunate if the world instead is in the church. Ever since the first century the church has been persecuted and blamed for turning the world upside down. In fact it is turning the world right side up. It is no surprise if the church becomes the punching bag even today and one day every member has to give account of himself/herself. The church has to be the visible symbol, a witness, a forerunner and a signpost of the kingdom of God. In a parable about the kingdom of heaven Jesus mentioned about a field where wheat and tares grow together. Similarly in the church today we have wheat and tares growing together until the harvest where the tares will be gathered together and burnt in the great fire.

Yours etc.,
Torist Mark,
Via email

How expensive is India's vaccine diplomacy?

By Ganga Narayan Rath

India is one of the most advanced countries in terms of the number of detected COVID-19 cases and suspected undetected cases whose number far outweigh the former according to reported sero-surveillance studies. India needs to vaccinate at least a minimum of 700 million people to achieve herd immunity. At the same time, the director of AIIMS Dr. Randeep Guleria has recently warned that "herd immunity is very difficult to achieve and one should not think of it in practical terms in India, especially in the time of variant strains of COVID-19 and waning immunity." Therefore, it is imperative that every vaccine produced in the country must quickly reach the people who need it. Quite rightly, the authorities have drawn up an ambitious programme that includes the inoculation of nearly 30 million health care workers and service personnel in the first phase and another 270 million of the identified population in the second phase by June 2021.

The UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres has called India's vaccine manufacturing capacity the "best asset in the world." India's current vaccine production capacities are entirely on account of the private sector pharma companies which are able to produce high quality vaccines on a large scale and at a very reasonable cost. This fits the expectation of those who believe in a bigger private sector role in shaping India's future. The Prime Minister also recently acknowledged the role of the private sector in India's growth, national progress and enhancing the country's prestige. Affected somewhat, is the more than half-century old narrative on the role of the public sector in India.

This brings us to the tricky issue of vaccine diplomacy recently undertaken by India. As per a statement made by External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, India has already supplied COVID-19 vaccines to 15 countries and another 25 nations are in the queue at different levels for the job. India's vaccine diplomacy rests on being able to earn goodwill by providing the vaccine in grant. However, does India have any other instruments to influence neighbours in the form of loans, grants and military equipment? Or not?

And in a bid to do vaccine diplomacy, are we forgetting our own citizens? The pace at which the inoculation drive is progressing within the country makes one wonder whether we can vaccinate 300 million people even within two years! In a recent article published by a leading business newspaper, noted industrialist Naushad Forbes has calculated that it may take 17 years to cover the whole of India if the current glacial speed is not up-scaled considerably! By donating vaccines to other countries while ignoring Indians, the authorities also risk failure in discharging their constitutional obligation. Further, delaying the vaccination to vulnerable Indians could only mean more illness and death and its knock-on effect on the country's fragile economic revival.

The government has allowed commercial exports to countries seeking them, while placing an embargo on the commercial sale of vaccines in India. This policy requires an urgent review. There are millions of our countrymen who can happily bear the cost of two doses of the jab. And for this to happen, the government must involve the private sector in a big way in distribution and administration of vaccines among people and corporate houses who are eagerly waiting to be allowed

this change in stance. This can be supported by doing appropriate changes to the Co-Win app for the purpose of reporting and keeping track of the progress achieved. Remember that commercial export of vaccines to some of the countries is taking place at the price that the Indian government pays to the vaccine makers.

The Reopening Challenge

This uncovers another significant issue: that of reopening of private residential professional institutions. It must be noted that the reopening of schools without any rejigging can create more stressful situations. If we have to reopen schools with the observance of Standard Operating Procedures, as advised by the government, more teachers need to be hired, more classroom space is required, smaller in-person classes, staggered school days, breaks and classes in shifts or reorganised groups using blended learning. Sadly, the country lacks the required resources to support this approach. While we cannot time travel to the gurukul system of education in ancient India, we can probably explore utilising stadia, sports complexes, marriage halls, disaster relief camps in coastal states and any other community premises for imparting education to ensure safe distancing beyond physical school spaces.

Meanwhile, our teaching and academic fraternity need to devise condensed curricula so that learners can catch up as done by countries like Liberia, Mozambique and the Philippines. Interestingly, a recent study conducted by the Azim Premji University has revealed that almost 90 percent of the respondents (parents) are willing to send their children to school if the health of their children is taken care of when schools reopen. Another important question that needs attention is whether we can allow our school going children to come face to face with a new setting, new procedures that COVID-19 may bring about and a different grade in a different classroom with different teachers and classmates, should schools decide to allow children to be promoted to the next grade at the end of the academic session. Besides, allowing a roll over to the next grade without the normal pedagogic rigor could endanger the future of a new generation. So, alternatively, the academic year 2020-21 could be treated as a "zero" academic year with a pre-decided concession in age criterion for COVID stamped students for the purpose of government employment in future.

The Future Stake

This brings us to consider and decide the fate of students undergoing professional courses, mainly housed in fully residential facilities in both the public and the private sector. No parent would agree to a "zero" academic year as it involves considerable financing commitments. If these students can return to their campuses by mid-March, with some changes in their summer holidays schedule, they can largely make good the academic loss suffered during the last ten months. Fortunately, Covaxin and Covishield, the vaccines approved by India for emergency use can be administered to children above the age of 12 and 18, respectively. The issue that needs reconsideration at this stage is whether we can tweak our jabbing priority to accommodate this lot whose number may not exceed ten million, including the faculty and other support staff, on a payment basis. (The writer is a former Chief General Manager of the Reserve Bank of India) (Syndicate: The Billion Press) (email: editor@thebillionpress.org)

"Good alliances are made of strong, capable partners."

— Mark Esper

The Shillong Times

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Enemies of civilisation

WHAT happened at Umoid, South West Khasi Hills on the night of February 24 is a heinous, pre-meditated crime that reeks of hatred and revenge. The labourers who came to the district for construction work from the neighbouring state of Assam have all the necessary documents. If at all the local people are aggrieved about non-locals being employed they should take the matter up with the contractor. To injure and kill innocent labourers who are here to earn a livelihood with the sweat of their brow and not by engaging in any illegal activity is a crime that must be investigated and the perpetrators must be booked and convicted. Indeed, the problem with several such crimes in Meghalaya is that the investigation is invariably shoddy and the evidence-gathering for piecing together the events is full of gaping holes and collapses like a pack of cards when it comes before the courts. A good criminal lawyer for the defence will make the case look so bad that the person who died and others like him who have been attacked and killed in the past would appear that they died of their own carelessness without anyone attacking them. What else can be expected from a police force that is not held accountable by the state and citizenry?

What is a matter of grief is that the labourers were involved in construction work in the College run by the Jesuit priests who are the intellectual repository of the Catholic Church. Their objective has always been to spread the light of education and critical thinking which the people of South West Khasi Hills would have benefitted greatly from. Well, it would appear that a section of the people of the District and more specifically Umoid, are against the idea of progress and civilization. They want to keep people in the dark so that they continue to remain unquestioning and so that those with evil intentions continue to rule the roost. Now that the college is closed indefinitely, it remains to be seen how the problem is resolved and whether the State Government gets its act together and puts pressure on the police to perform. Chief Minister, Conrad Sangma has termed the attackers as "criminals" and "murderers" and said that he would ensure they are arrested. All right thinking people too would want the rule of law to prevail in this State. But such incidents tend to recede into the back-burner once the heat is over. It is important that this incident and similar ones where people have been brutally murdered are brought to a close. Let justice prevail.

South America is an unexplored territory for India and likewise this county is looking beyond their former colonial contacts to build new relations. India obviously is an attractive candidate for its plurality, diversity, democracy and market opportunities. As it takes two to tango, it would be worthwhile for the two countries to explore opportunities which appear to be coming their way.

One such opportunity presented itself in a summit between India and Ecuador organised by Indian Economic Trade Organisation this week in New Delhi. Out of all the speakers, the Ecuador Ambassador to India Hector Gonzalo Cueva Jacome spoke eloquently about India grabbing the opportunities in Ecuador, which could potentially turn to be the gateway for Indian entry into South American continent.

South America, which is also called Latin America in terms of cultural and linguistic identity, consists of 20 odd countries inhabited by about 420 million people. It has been largely under Spanish rule with some states having been under French and Portuguese influence and yearning for a change.

A small beginning perhaps has been made at the summit, organised by a non-state actor in the format of what is called the track-II diplomacy. It was very much in order as it is now universally accepted that business, global civil society, research organisations and think tanks could contribute to enhancing diplomatic relations. One is reminded here of the humdrum words of Charles de Gaulle, the mercurial former President of France, "Politics is too serious a business to be left to the politicians alone". The same could apply to diplomacy. The summit in reference was therefore enriched by the participation of people from multi-sectors of the country.

India-Ecuador relations could be the prototype of bilateralism that can be replicated across South America. Tracing the ties between the two countries, the first diplomatic contact took place in 1969. Two years ago, both countries celebrated 50 years of their bilateralism. The diplomatic

India-Ecuador ties

Gateway to South America

By Dr. D.K Giri

relations expanded when Ecuador opened its Consulate in Mumbai in 2013 preceded by only two other South American countries - Brazil in 2006 and Argentina in 2013.

The ties between India and Ecuador have been mainly on trade. By the figures of recent years, India has imported more from far away Ecuador than it has from its immediate neighbours Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. India-Ecuador trade of USD 1.29 billion in 2014-15 was higher than that of India's trade with Norway, Kazakhstan and Bahrain. India was also fifth largest importer of Ecuador oil, which by the way, is about 20 per cent of India's oil import accounted by South American countries. Indian companies have a sizeable presence in Ecuador. Notably, HCL, the IT company, has over 2000 people working there.

All in all, India-Ecuador trade relations have been defined by two elements -- trade and defence. Trade has been improving albeit slowly but it is the defence transactions that had run into a bit of rough weather. In 2009, Indian defence manufacturing, public sector organisation HAL bagged a contract in a competitive bidding to supply seven Dhruv helicopters to Ecuador. It beat competitors like Israel, Europe, Japan and Russia to a USD 45 million contract of chopper supply. Interestingly, this was the first defence contract that India won in a competition.

The Dhruv helicopters are popular in India, served effectively in the Kedarnath floods of 2013. About 200 choppers have been deployed by Indian Air Force and are said to have clocked 150,000 hours of flying. But sadly, four of the choppers supplied to Ecuador crashed; two owing to pilots' mistakes and other two for mechanical errors. Although all the seven helicopters were transferred to Ecuador, the contract was unilaterally cancelled by the Defence Ministry of Ecuador. The contract contained insurance and supplementary supplies in addition to the helicopters. Those parts were cancelled. The

ground staff support from India was withdrawn before the crash.

The helicopter episode left a bad taste in the mouth for Ecuadorians as a visit by their President was called off the same year the crash happened. Several ministerial level visits have taken place from either side but not by the heads of governments. The bitterness seems to have evaporated over a period of time as the crash points to the issues of technology transfer. Along with the machinery, the operational know-how needs to be transferred for gradual and eventual absorption of the technology by the host country. The skill upgradation of the handlers of the new technology is also equally important.

Mechanical accidents are bound to occur despite rigorous care and precautions. India-Ecuador relations need to move beyond this incident and expand into newer areas. In this summit, the Ecuador Ambassador listed the opportunities in various sectors for entire South America using Ecuador as an experimental ground. Following the pandemic, the 'ease of living' has become as important as 'ease of doing business.' The Ambassador hailed India's tremendous success and promptness in manufacturing the vaccines. In fact, he was the first diplomat in Delhi to take the vaccine injection.

The Ambassador highlighted the big disparity in access and affordability of health care in both countries. A particular treatment costing Rs 350 in India could cost 5000 in Ecuador, most treatments cost 10 to 15 times more in Ecuador. India with its pharma manufacturing base and health care professionalism could enter Ecuador in a big way. The second sector is agriculture. India imports quite a few products from Ecuador; it could set up food processing plants, storage and transport facilities there. A centre of excellence in agriculture like it has planned in IT will come handy for Ecuador. The third sector is IT. India as the international hub of software could export this technology and

know-how to Ecuador and South America. Fourth, education is another sector in Ecuador that needs expert intervention.

The Ambassador zestfully pointed out in anecdotal terms the popularity and practice of the English language in Latin America. Only 5 per cent people speak English although they consider this language to be the window to the world. The Spanish educational organisations are engaged in teaching and spreading English language in South America. Indians with a huge population speaking English could do better in teaching English there. He specifically mentioned the presence of American school, British school, French language institutes in New Delhi and posed the question, why is New Delhi not setting up Indian schools abroad?

The fifth sector is tourism. Indian tourists are in hundreds in South America whereas it has tremendous tourists' attractions. One Ecuador Ambassador preceding the present one, talked about adventure destinations and honeymoon tourism in South America. India, with its huge young population could look at it as a tourist avenue. Likewise, many South Americans are not aware of the colour, festivities and diversities in India. The tour operators should be facilitated to advertise and attract tourists from South America.

In addition, there are other sectors like environment, art and culture, science and sports which can bring the countries together. All these sectors must be explored to build a robust and complex contact with South America. Ecuador is a part of integration economies, namely Andean, Mercosur countries comprising five sovereign countries, seven associated and two observer countries. So deepening of relations with Ecuador could lead to seamless expansion of Indian relations into other countries. It is time New Delhi focussed on the uncharted territory of South America. — INFA (The author is Prof. International Relations, JIMMC)

The barbaric act at Umoid a disgrace

By Aiborlang Nongsiej

As an educator and a writer from the region of South West Khasi Hills District I condemn the barbaric act committed on the workers at St Xavier's College, Umoid on the Feb 24, night. The inhuman act of the miscreants has shocked the entire district and the incident has become the headlines of most of the local newspapers and news channels. I personally convey my heartfelt condolences to the family members of the one who lost his life in this incident. I also empathize with the entire Jesuit society particularly those working in Northeast India for the brutal attack committed in their newly constructed institution. Let us not forget that the western part of Khasi Hills is usually against the non-locals. In fact, there are several incidents in the past where non-locals were being attacked in this part of the region of Khasi Hills. Nevertheless, the people of my district have not learned till date the consequences of what they had done in the past.

Personally I am against the old idea of attacking non-locals without ascertaining why they have come to the district. The recent incident at St. Xavier's College Umoid is condemnable and unacceptable to the people of the district. In fact, immediately after the incident many organizations held a meeting to condemn and to find out the culprits involved in this incident. It is unfortunate that such an event happened in a newly set up institution that can bring lots of development and valued education to the young people of the area. Let us not forget that the Jesuits are well known for their contributions to the field of education around the globe. This Catholic Society of Jesus known as Jesuits is working in many countries in the world and the best students are usually the product of their institutions. Perhaps, the Jesuits society found the need for standard and valued education in the western part of Khasi Hills which led them to purchase land and start the college for the betterment of the young people of my region. Unfortunately, there are people in my region who do not see the potential of the college and which perhaps made them attack on the newly arrived workers.

As an educator from the region I write this article with a heavy heart and tears in my eyes to lose such a prestigious institution in the region. I condemn the barbaric acts committed on the innocent workers who had just arrived for constructing the new building of the institute. In my conversation with few elders of the district, they said that all the necessary permissions were granted for the workers who had come for constructing the building. So why did some people go to disturb and attack the innocent workers? What were the reasons they went to attack the workers if all the necessary permissions were granted? Personally I have seen vast difference between the locals and the non-locals in constructing big buildings. We should accept that there are very few local skilled workers for big construction works and such buildings are usually constructed by non-locals. Having said so I don't condemn the local workers for not being able to construct big buildings, but in general the non-locals are faster and hardworking people with minimum wages.

However, the point of my writing is not to compare between local and non-local construction workers but to point out that such cruel attacks on the inno-

cent workers is absolutely wrong and should not happen again in future. Nevertheless, the plan of the priests who run the institution is not to give all the construction work to the non-locals, but there are certain works which are best executed by non-locals who are experts in their field while the rest of the work can be done by the locals. The plan of the Jesuit priests is not only to give employment to the non-locals but also to the locals. Definitely, we are against non-locals coming to purchase land and permanently settle in our region but not to go to the extent of attacking and harming them physically.

If the people of my region are against the employment of non-locals for construction, then they should speak up and negotiate with the people concerned but not to attack innocent workers physically. It is unfortunate that people should harm the innocent workers who perhaps come to earn their daily wages in order to feed their families.

The people of my region must understand that our sons and daughters are also studying and working in different parts of the country. If such cruel incidents happen in our region, what will happen to our own people who are staying outside the state? Are they also not in fear? Let us not forget that all of us belong to a family and if any member of our family is being attacked, how would we feel? Let us imagine the reaction of the family members of the workers particularly those of the worker who died due to this incident? What would be their opinion of the entire state particularly the Khasis? Are we not in danger when we are outside the state for various reasons?

It is very unfortunate for the people of South West Khasi Hills to lose such a prestigious institution just because of a few individuals. Let us not forget that the institution is meant for all and the entire Khasi Hills particularly for the young people of the district. Though, it is a Catholic institution it is meant to serve all people irrespective of religion and denominations. Have you ever seen a Catholic institution that serves only the Catholics? All the Catholic institutions are meant for all and they provide valuable education to all. In fact, many leaders and well placed people in the society are the products of Catholic institutions. Hence if people of my region have this mentality, then it is a self-defeating action. The people of my district must see the potential of the institution to employ several people in the future. The students of my district must qualify themselves in order to enroll themselves as employers in this particular institution. Hence, there are lots of opportunities for the people of the region if such an institution exists in the district. In fact, many young people of my district are worried and unemployed but when such an opportunity comes through an institution they forget to see it. Nevertheless, whoever was involved in such a cruel attack against the innocent workers is an enemy of the people of the District.

It is very shameful to claim ourselves as Christians and Khasi when such events continue to happen in our society. The Christians are taught in the ten commandments of God that we should not kill and the traditional religion (niam Khasi) teaches us to 'Im Tip brieu Tip Blei' (to know God and man). Hence this crime defies all moral and ethics norms and must be condemned by all, especially by the people of South West Khasi Hills.

TO THE EDITOR

A horrific incident

Editor,
The horrific incident that took place at Umoid Village, South West Khasi Hills is shameful and disquieting. Our state has been and still is making a lot of noise over the need to curb the entrance of non-tribal labourers into our state. Proper documents must be procured by contractors who need to rope in labourers from outside the state. Sadly, what happened at St. Xavier's Campus was nothing but a show of might by ill-informed uneducated goons. When these labourers have with them permissions to work why were they still brutally attacked at the dead of the night? The miscreants were armed which means that they came with intentions to cause harm and rob lives. Subjected to this violence the workers were injured and bruised and unfortunately, the 20 year old labourer succumbed to his injuries. Sadly what is left of him for his family members to embrace is a cold lifeless body of their son. 15-20 armed men is not a small number. Though three have been detained, will the miscreants be brought to book and be punished? They should but when, how and where are questions that will linger. The fact remains that this sad, despicable act

has happened in our state amidst times when what is more required is sensitivity, information and knowledge. This is yet another stumbling block on the way to progress for the all work in Umoid will be put on hold. Alas! For the lack of sense of a few, the majority stand to lose!

Yours etc.,
Jenniefer Dkhar,
Via email

Biden's China policy

Editor,
US President Joe Biden spelt out the priorities for foreign policy recently. The USA wants to return to active global engagement, work closely with allies, promote multilateralism and uphold democratic values and human rights. Biden acknowledged China as a strong competitor and Russia as a threat. With regard to specific issues, Biden announced an end to US support to Saudi Arabia in the civil war in Yemen and revive the Iran nuclear deal. Considering that Biden has appointed a key adviser, Kurt Campbell for the Indo-Pacific, it evident that the region is of enormous importance to the US. Further, the third ministerial meeting of Quad was convened at the request of Secretary of State.

Biden elaborated on his foreign policy at the Mu-

nich Security Conference. He announced his intention to revive transatlantic alliances. It is reasonable to assume that the US-Europe alliance, particularly NATO will occupy a central place in Biden's foreign policy. However, it remains to be seen whether the Europeans will respond. Key European countries have interests different from that of the US on the issues of competition with China and the threat from Russia.

Biden's speech is reflective of his China policy. According to him, one must prepare for long-term strategic competition with China. However, he sees Chinese threat more in economic than in security terms. Obviously, Biden's Indo-Pacific strategy is directed towards China.

China has released statements in reaction to the US foreign policy. The Chinese Foreign Minister has called for a reset in US-China relations and a withdrawal of all the tariffs and trade measures imposed on China by Trump. With regard to Quad, Chinese media attempted to trivialize the latest meeting. According to China, there is no prospect of Quad emerging as an "Asian NATO". With regard to India's intention to join Quad, Global Times editorial claims that

it is not in India's interest to completely tie itself to the US. China has accused India of having gone over to the dark (American) side. It expects India to continue its policy of non-alignment. It can be assumed that Biden's foreign policy and India's intention to work closely with the US have prompted China to take a hasty decision to withdraw its troops from India-China border and to change track.

Yours etc.,
VENU GS
Kollam - 78

FDI from China?

Editor,
It is reported in several newspapers and in the electronic media that the Union Government is looking at easing restrictions for Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) from China by allowing companies from the bordering country to invest up to 25% in Companies in India through the automatic route. It also means that Chinese FDI can further increase if approved. This is in addition to the news that VIVO would be the sponsor for the next edition of IPL for Cricket.

In the recent past, India had extremely serious threat to its internal security, best certified by the events in Galwan Valley and other places. India lost many brave soldiers because of aggression by China.

Though the military de-escalation process has started, it is in the preliminary stages, and most experts have warned that it would be unwise to believe that China would go back to the original positions it occupied prior to the recent conflicts. Because of certain constraints as also weaknesses, China has taken advantages in many sectors including in Arunachal Pradesh, Akshai Chin, Ladakh, and Sikkim to name a few. China definitely has been a much bigger threat to India compared to Pakistan. And, it continues to be.

Further, in business and commerce, the trade surplus is hugely in favour of China, and China's export to India, at present, is at least 3 times more than Indian exports to China. Many industries and businesses in India are almost in control of Chinese companies. The mobile phone industry, for example, is dominated by Chinese Companies, and these have almost killed the Indian mobile handset makers.

And in this context, the move to favour Chinese FDI in India is extremely puzzling. The people of India must be made aware of the deal struck with China as also the steps to open its heart to Chinese FDI, which may harm Indian interests-trade, defence and internal security to name a few.

Yours etc.,
D Bhutia,
Guwahati - 24

LDA recruitment by DSC

Editor,
As a follow up to the above subject in the letters to the editor (ST Feb 24, 2021), I would reiterate that there is something fishy in the recruitment of the LD assistants conducted by the District Selection Committee (DSC), East Khasi Hills. The system is that those who cleared the written test should sit for the typing speed test. This is understandable and logical but the manner in which the scores of the candidates during the typing tests are monitored by them and not allowed to be entered by the candidates is a clear case of manipulation by the DSC. In other exams the scores in the typing tests are shown there and then and this makes the candidates satisfied that at least there is transparency and we know how to rate ourselves but the way DSC conducted this test made us doubt the very system.

Why at this point of time are we asked to check the marks scored in the test? Are the marks manipulated? Can we trust the system? Can we get justice? The best candidates are being discarded as always. Who is responsible for this corruption? Will the DSC answer?

Yours etc.,
E.War
Via email

Poetry, music & miniature paintings

By Vishnu Makhijani

His keen interest in the 'riti genre of Hindi poetry (romantic works of the 18th-20th centuries) and classical music helps him understand the nuances of Rangmala paintings that depict variations of Indian musical modes. Today, art historian and art critic Vijay Sharma is widely recognised as a fine miniature painter and has travelled extensively in India and abroad, giving lecture demonstrations on the techniques of the Pahari paintings of his native Himachal Pradesh.

"The pictorial treasure displayed in the gallery of the Bhuri Singh Museum, Chamba, had cast a considerable influence on me. The beauty and brilliance of these splendid paintings enhanced my interest in fine arts. Incidentally, most of the paintings are based on Sanskrit and Hindi poetry. The studies in Indian love-poetry helped me greatly for the proper understanding of Pahari miniature paintings," Sharma told IANS in an interview of his latest book, *Painting In The Kangra Valley* (Niyogi Books).

"The Pahari painters rarely inscribed their works," he explained of his research into the book, adding: "We have only sketchy information about the lives and working process of Pahari painters; hence attempts to describe their careers remain uncertain."

"The inadequate consideration of what we know about artists' works and stylistic developments in their milieu can lead to erroneous conclusions. Unfortunately, for want of evidence, in the case of Pahari painters, it is not possible to write on the lives and works of individual painters. In addition to the absence of any biographical information, signed Pahari works are extremely rare and dated inscriptions are almost unknown.

"The discovery of scores of centuries-old archival records containing the names and genealogies of Pahari painters retained by priests at various pilgrimage centers seemed to open up new possibilities. My tours to the places of pilgrimage yielded copious evidence related to the Pahari painters, which I have reproduced in my book," elaborated Sharma, the recipient of several awards, including National Award of Master Craftsman in Basohli Painting in 1990 and Padma Shri in 2012. He is at present, a Senior Artist in the Bhuri Singh Museum, Chamba.

The painting activity in the region began with Kashmiri painters, who started receiving royal patronage during the reign of Raja Dalip Singh (1695-1741) of Guler. But it attained culmination during the long reign of Maharaja Sansar Chand (1776-1823) of Kangra. The royal atelier of Kangra produced a large number of paintings covering diverse subjects. The advent of the Bhakti movement in north India had a tremendous impact, resulting in a preference for Krishna themes for the artists of Guler and Kangra.

Thus, the sentiment of love is the main subject of Guler-Kangra paintings. They illustrate the finest specimens of various kinds of nayika described by



PAINTING IN THE KANGRA VALLEY

VIJAY SHARMA

Foreword by J.P. LOSTY

the Hindi poets of the riti genre. The female figures seen in these paintings are depicted as graceful and beautiful idealisations, handled by the painters with utmost delicacy and tenderness.

Sharma's analytical approach, based on facts, gives new insights into the origin and development of the Guler school and the marked influence of later Mughal painting on the styles of Manaku and Nainsukh. Featuring more than 160 images this book is a significant read for researchers as well as connoisseurs.

"Being myself a miniaturist, I believe that the sty-

listic changes that occurred in the works of Guler painters were possible only through their contacts with painters working in the Mughal style. In fact, I am convinced that Guler painters almost certainly visited centres of later Mughal painting in north India, at Delhi, Lahore or even Awadh," he elaborated.

Noting that classical music and art of painting "were the court arts patronized by the art lover aristocrats" Sharma lamented that after Independence, "Hindustani classical music was promoted by the government by introducing it as a subject, whereas



miniature painting was never given such treatment. At present, there is not a single government institution where one can learn the art of miniature painting. It is pity that Lalit Kala academy fosters only contemporary artists," he lamented.

Sharma has co-authored several books and research articles, the notable ones being *The Temple of Devi-Kothi: Love for Pleasure; Vision of an Enlightened King* (ed.); *Pahari Paintings of an Ancient Romance: The Love Story of Usha-Aniruddha and Painted Words: Kangra Paintings of Matiram's Rasraj*. He has also written *Kangra ki Chitrangan Parampara* (in Hindi).

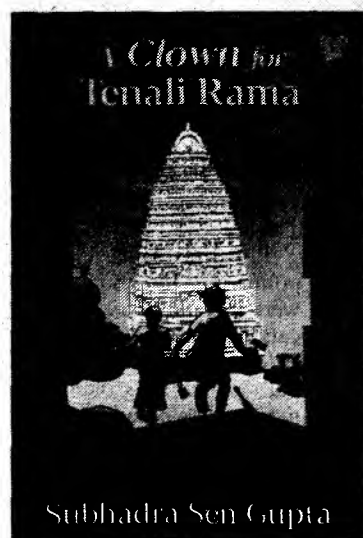
What's his next project?

"I am preparing a series of paintings on Bhagavata Purana in Guler style for the Triveni museum in Ujjain. Also, I am working on Pahari Ragamala paintings," Sharma concluded.

(The author can be reached at vishnu.makhijani@ians.in)

Books & Literature

New books to keep young readers company



By Siddhi Jain

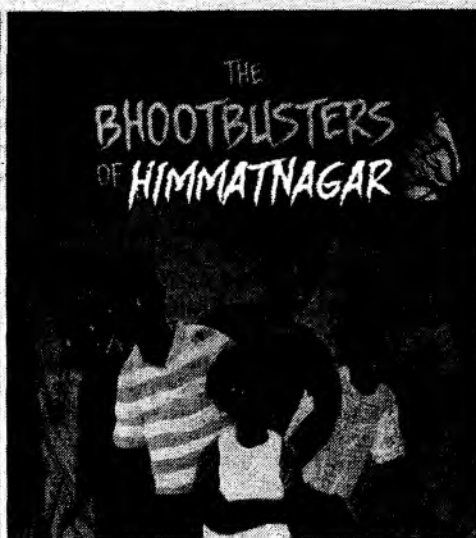
With an unprecedented year of transformation in education, children's reading has gained a new significance. Here are new children's titles from Talking Cub and Scholastic that will keep the young readers company as they navigate these challenging times.

A Clown for Tenali Rama

The book is a riveting blend of fact and fiction that will appeal to those who like to read adventure stories in a historical setting. First published around 20 odd years ago, this book is still relevant, enjoyable, and filled with the wonder that was once the magnificent Vijayanagar Kingdom. Author Subhadra Sen Gupta was recently awarded Parag Reads' Big Little Book Award 2020 for her contribution to children's literature.

Bhootbusters of Himmatnagar

Written by author Adithi Rao, *Bhootbusters of Himmatnagar* is a murder mystery for the bravehearts. Three dead men. A mysterious trail of Eclairs. A fainting potter. When three men are found inexplicably dead in the village of Himmatnagar, five friends get together to solve the



crime. Is it the strange young man with the matted hair? Or Biru, the nervous potter? Join Kalki, Angad, Mukund, Vasuki and Govind as they follow a string of clues straight to the village cemetery — and beyond — in their search for the murderer.

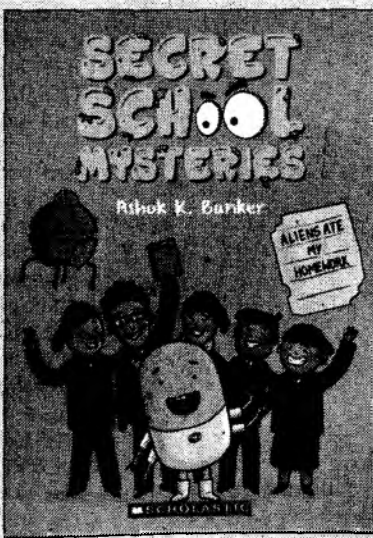
Kashmir Kashmir

While the uncertainties of a lockdown weigh heavily upon Humra and her friends; Zainab must run to protect the life of her neighbour. Buried in snow, Rehman is saved by an unexpected rescuer; and Atharva finally understands his mother when he is forced to visit his abandoned ancestral home.

Kashmir Kashmir is a collection of nine short stories by veteran author Deepa Agarwal exploring the lives of the young in a land that is beautiful, warm, yet at times, cold and turbulent. These stories cover themes of friendship, courage, sibling love, hope, coping with change, perseverance and understanding different perspectives.

Aliens Ate My Homework: Secret School Mysteries #2

Aliens ate my Homework is the second installation in the new Secret School Mysteries series by the fa-



mous author Ashok K. Banker.

Two weird aliens. Confusing identities. A hilarious shape-shifting adventure. The second book in the best-selling series follows Uru, the quirky librarian, daredevil twins Asha and Usha, super learner Arun, logical Sania and the genius Peter as they try to protect and save a friendly Green alien from a nasty alien predator. Will they succeed?

Vahana Masterclass

Italian author Alfredo Covelli, brings a story of exciting adventure, deep friendships, evil demons and four brave mice.

Anand, Karthik, Gitanjali and Kanu can scarcely believe it when they suddenly find themselves on a mysterious white plain to compete to become the next vahana of the elephant-headed god, Ganesha. Under the guidance of wise Mooshika, Ganesha's current vahana, the four mice train and challenge each other while fighting evil demons and forming deep friendships. Join in this epic adventure to find who will win the honour of becoming Ganesha's next vahana. (IANSLife)

(The author can be contacted at siddhi.j@ians.in)

Women's resilience stood out during pandemic

By Siddhi Jain

For screenwriter and filmmaker Anu Singh Choudhary, the question that led to the Audible Original series *Mad Mommas* was: "Have the gender roles within families really shifted during these turbulent times?" She has recently written the series which captures the lives of four working mothers caught up in the work-life balancing act.

Choudhary the author of *Neela Scarf* (collection of short stories), *Mamma Ki Diary* (memoir) and *Bhali Ladkiyaan, Buri Ladkiyaan* (novel), says it was curiosity around gender roles in the pandemic's context that led her to hear experiences of women around her. Some of these narratives and experiences are, she says, strung together as this relatable and humorous audio series.

Set in Gurugram and Delhi in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, *Mad Mommas* touches on the bittersweet realities of four women who are in different stages of motherhood. It is narrated by famed TV journalist and RJ Richa Anirudh.

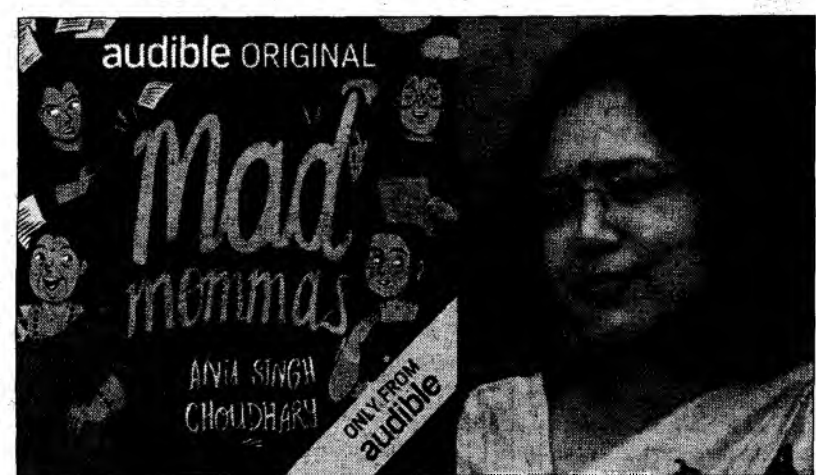
The story is told from the point of view of a successful TV anchor, Niyati Ahuja Sabharwal, who has just become a mother, as she tries to navigate through marriage, kids, family and the ongoing pandemic. Her life is intertwined with that of three other mothers: a stay-at-home Mum who gave up her practice as a Doctor to raise her kids; a psychotherapist and mother of a teen who is specialist on Mommy counselling and a grandmother (Niyati's mother) who is a health and discipline freak.

Choudhary has also co-written the blockbuster web-series *Aarya*, and is currently writing its subsequent season. She will also be speaking at this year's Jaipur Literature Festival and is in conversation with journalist Vijai Trivedi's Hindi book, *Sangham Sharanam Gachchami*, on the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS).

Excerpts from the interview:

Q. Women have carried out the dual responsibility of work and home. How have you tried to capture that in *Mad Mommas*?

Anu: We have followed women's stories and tried to be honest about



it. The title *Mad Mommas* was conceived and created during COVID-19 times. There were several stories, both personal and otherwise, that were being shared in popular media about how this was a monumental period in the lives of people working from home and the responsibility of taking care had fallen on both men and women. I was curious to know how much of the gender roles had shifted within the family systems during these turbulent times. I reached out to mothers of all ages to see how they were coping with COVID-19 while balancing work, home, children and elderly parents.

While it had been appalling, and even sometimes heartwarming to see that men were sometimes sharing responsibilities of the household work, there had been several instances where it was presumed that women would juggle as effortlessly as they have always done. A lot of women ended up working more and more, because children were home. There were stories of relationships crumbling and challenges women were faced with. Those stories became part of the series.

The protagonist is a TV journalist. When a young mother is at a crucial point in her career, now also has to be very careful about the pandemic, how does she cope? All these questions and concerns made their way into the story.

Q. The pandemic has disproportionately affected women. There is a social pattern and many women have been pushed back into the four walls of the household. What are

your thoughts on this?

Anu: When there is a catastrophe, calamity or challenge that pushes the world into transition, one hopes that it will bring about some positive change, especially for women. Look at stories from conflict-ridden zones, and you'd find women and children are the one suffering the most. The pandemic was affecting mental and physical health across, but one change that I saw was that women were coming together as part of support groups as spaces of sharing stories, advice and information. Several women entrepreneurs also got some business ideas from these networks. This watershed moment has also given us some interesting ideas. If anything that has happened, it has made women and female friendships more resilient.

Q. What are your thoughts on the medium of audio for storytelling?

Anu: I write for a variety of formats, but I really enjoy writing for this format, and also listening to audio because it's intimate, because I can easily spend an hour with my headphones while walking, driving or travelling. I'm not tiring my eyes, yet I'm getting an immersive experience as being part of the audience. I, personally, also find the audio medium very viable because I don't have to carry heavy books or tire my eyes, yet I'm getting the gratification.

Mad Mommas is a 8-episode series, now available for free for Audible.in members. (IANSLife)

The Red Planet beckons

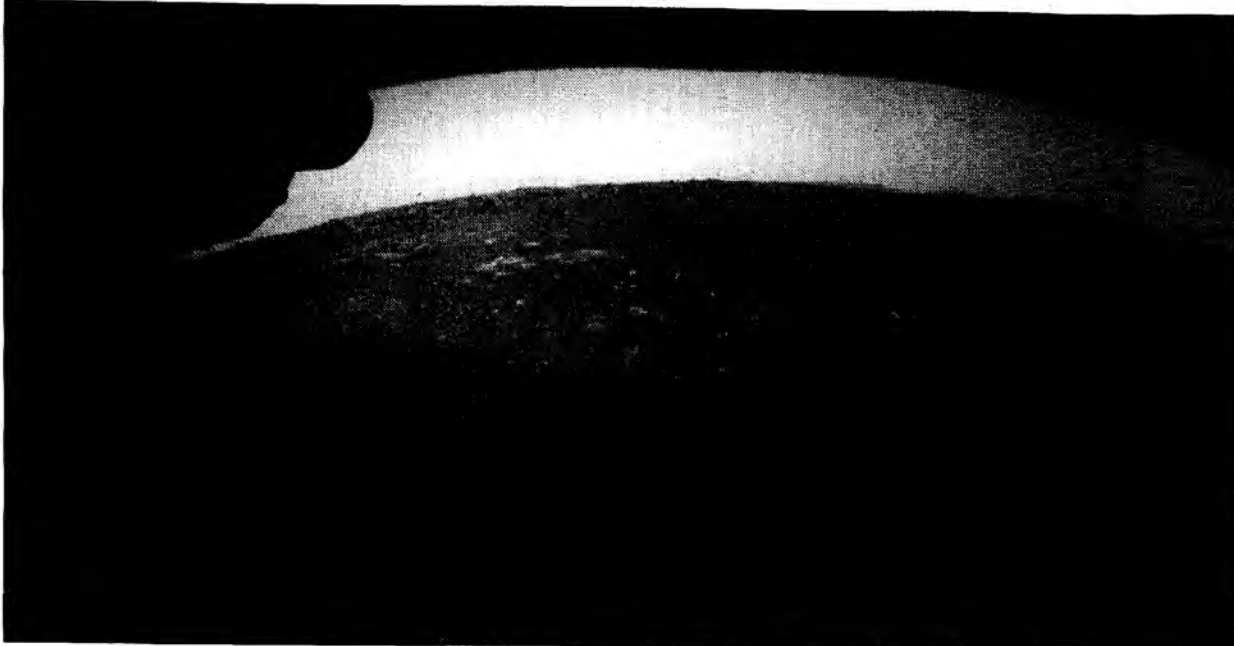
With the landing of NASA's Perseverance Rover on planet Mars recently, lots of things are surely going to change for space research and exploration in the near future. But why this race to reach the Red Planet by different nations? Will our astrologers warning of dire consequences of angering 'mangal graha' have a different take now, wonders Ranjita Biswas

Wear a prabal or red coral stone to ward off the unfavourable effects of planet Mars or mangal graha, you often heard while growing up when a practitioner of the Indian astrology visited the house and did a palm reading. You learnt that the Red Planet symbolises war and conflict and if one, unfortunately, happens to suffer from the angry eye of the graha, appeasing its ruler is imperative.

Now that NASA's Perseverance rover has landed on Mars on 19 February after overcoming the 'seven minutes of terror' before the feat, what will be the advice of soothsayers, one might wonder. In our astrology, the nine planets- navagraha, hold sway over an individual's fate one way or the other, you are told. So when science breaks into its domain it is bound to become a little confusing.

Anyway, Space has always fascinated men. For a very long time, the Red Planet has generated more curiosity among the general public and scientists than its other siblings. Is it because it seems more like 'ours'? Sci-fi fiction writers have also been attracting readers with plots where little Martians invade our planet or gobble up the living beings.

In 1957, when Soviet Russia shot off the Sputnik, the first artificial Earth satellite, it seemed almost unimaginable that man would land on another planet one day. Then the Moon landing happened. The "giant step" for humankind has now led to Mars. It is a salute to the human brain and aspiration, of course. After all, Perseverance is not just another space mission. It is a cutting-age mobile laboratory and most expensive as well. The information it is going to beam to the earthlings could well define the next course of action in the field of Mars exploration.



The first high-resolution, colour image to be sent back by the Hazard Cameras (Hazcams) on the underside of NASA's Perseverance Mars rover after its landing on February 18, 2021.

tion.

Questions, however, bubble up. Why has such an expensive mission been undertaken while our Earth, God knows, has many issues that deserve urgent attention? Why are UAE, China, etc. competing in a race to reach Mars? India's 2014 Mangalayan mission spacecraft successfully entering the atmosphere of Mars, the first Asian nation to do so, keeps up the hope that one day a bharatiya would set foot on the Mars surface.

Scientists offer different reasons that Mars could prove to be more habitable in the long run compared to other planets in our solar system. Remember Matt Damon (as astronaut Mark Watney) in The Martian where he is left behind by crew members as he was thought to be dead after a fierce storm, survives, and

grows potatoes? So art foresaw a future that science could make possible one day?

In fact, in some labs simulated as Mars' surface condition scientists are now experimenting with growing vegetables. Even some billionaires are now investing in space expeditions. So is it an attempt to establish a colony in outer space a la scenario from the Star Trek series?

Second reason: The exploration of the planet can give a glimpse of formation of the planet itself and evolution.

In its early formative years, roughly around four billion years ago, the conditions on Mars were quite similar to that of Earth humid and with the presence of water. Life evolved on Earth 3.8 billion years ago. But Mars is a fallow land now, its lake dried up and the river shrun-

ken as scientists demonstrate through photos taken earlier by other missions.

Among the positive vibes the Perseverance landing has evoked when the world is devastated by Covid 19, and unusual weather patterns- the terrible ice storm in Texas being the latest one blamed on global warming, a sober thought is bound to come up. Is this what we are going to do to our green planet with our thoughtless exploitation turning it into a red desert like that of Mars now? Is this why we want to acclimatise before the crunch?

Mangal graha, what do you say? Are you going to welcome these two legged creatures with huge brains to set up home on your surface? Will wearing the red coral lose its meaning as you become more friendly to us? (TWF)



Mars photos. (Courtesy NASA)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, February 28, 2021

Moon is forming on angle of 150 degrees with Jupiter on your solar return chart and it will give mixed results for you. You will be looking for new avenues in your job but will find things a little tough. But you will get good results after hard work. New job offers will come but it will not match your expectations. Your expenses will rise. You will also make progress in your business. Your financial situation is going to be normal. You will have good relations with your colleagues and superiors. Love birds will have a wonderful time. You will be blessed with a very fruitful and satisfying family life. Your partner will continue to keep you in high spirits. Joy and cheer will prevail in family ties. Your family members will look forward towards you to seek guidance and inspiration. Achievements of children will give you immense joy. Business related trips will keep you busy.

Artes: (March 21 - April 20)

The planetary configuration brings love, harmony and entertainment in family and personal relations. A romantic short trip may be undertaken for pleasure. People look upon you with more respect, tolerance, and acceptance. You don't feel the need to prove yourself, and that feels good. You have the chance to shine, largely because you are projecting yourself with self-respect as well as modesty. Opportunities both personal and professional are likely to present themselves as a result. You may enjoy the challenge of tackling a variety of subjects. This is a very self-expressive time when you have lots of energy, but not necessarily self-discipline to match.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21)

Activities related to communications such as journalism, literature, public speaking, debates are highlighted and would figure more prominently. You feel touchy and sensitive; the attitude should be more accommodating and compassionate in relationships and you should not to take things personally. Friendships, cooperation and synergy are available to you. You would work creatively in your field of activity. This brings success and good fortune at work and opens new horizons for expansion. You inculcate good team spirit and you are more tactful with your co-workers which bring harmony at your work place. You find yourself in a whirlwind of activities and need to slow down a bit and not neglect your health.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21)

You would have positive results from marketing, communications and public relations. This is a favorable time to go for higher learning and joining new courses such as beauty culture, computers, fine arts and in fields related to show business. Be sure you consider all the factors prior to putting forth your ideas. Do not go on instinct alone; take the opinion of someone close to you. You may modernize your work place and home and give it a new look. You may change your hairstyle, buy new clothes and spend on luxury items. Also spend sometime alone to recharge and revitalize yourself.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22)

After dealing with tough people and complicated issues you feel much stronger and clearer about your priorities. It might be hard for you to work with others in a harmonious manner, and disputes with co-workers are possible. You may feel a bit defeated by situations at home and work. Allow space and time for things to change on their own. Awkward pauses and false starts do happen; the issue is how you handle them. Use information from the data at hand and your charisma to get back on track. Take care of your health and adopt a routine of regular walk and exercise.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23)

You are more inclined to take pride in your intellectual accomplishments. Find activities and things to do so that you can channel excess energy constructively. You have mental clarity and a logical approach to resolve matters. Communications and business associates from overseas bring good news. Your heart and head pull you in different direction when domestic and family related decisions are to be taken. Personal relationships may be dreamy and transitory and commitments are to be made and promises are to be honored. A marriage proposal is worth considering. Health needs care and old habits of excesses need to be abandoned.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22)

As your confidence gets a boost, you attempt difficult tasks, resolve complicated issues and handle a multitude of activity. Be careful when expressing feelings and emotions as others can misunderstand you. You handle business seminars and

express yourself more specifically about the subject. Business expansion and new professional opportunities are worth considering. You might spend time in short frequent trips, communicating with people and visiting friends and relatives. You tend to entertain others with your sense of humor. Talking, writing, and studying can be good ways to handle stress. You interact with people in position of power and authority with grace and diplomacy. Health and energy need to be conserved through a busy time at home and work.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23)

This period brings good-luck for love and romance. Your thoughts turn to children, pleasure and romance. You focus on having fun, enjoying sports and expressing yourself. As you recall nostalgic trips, you also maintain a balance of the head and heart in professional and personal matters. You turn things around in business dealings in your favor. You are noble and generous in family situations but have a tendency to worry about those close to you. Monetary transaction brings gains in property related issues. An overseas or long distance journey with includes pilgrimage is on the cards.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22)

Mixed results are foretold this week. You achieve success as you are brilliant and there is good fortune attending professional, personal and material aspects. You interact with people in position of power and authority with tact and grace. You will be able to make good use of your talents, work experience for your work and projects in hand. You have more opportunities to improve relations with relatives and friends in your immediate environment. You can trust your intuition about people and situations when called upon to mediate in conflicts and collaborations. A new work opportunity can change the way you work and relate with people professionally.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21)

New associations and beginnings in work areas will come up as new opportunities and changes may arise. You would improve your romantic and love life by bringing more sincerity, cooperation and humanity as unusual attractions and dreams could feature at this time. Domestic members would be more supportive as this is the best time to bring more harmony and pleasant interactions to your relationships and feel more comfortable. You tend to entertain others with your conversation. Some nagging issues and details will demand your attention.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20)

This phase brings more stability in relations and professional life. You enjoy being in control but many times it is not possible. When you let go you discover that many aspects can be viewed more objectively. This objectivity lends a new edge and adds to your passion at work. This also opens new vistas in romantic relationships and helps you communicate better. Your subconscious and intuitive abilities help you forge professional associations with the larger picture in mind. Having fun that too when relaxed adds an extra element in your life.

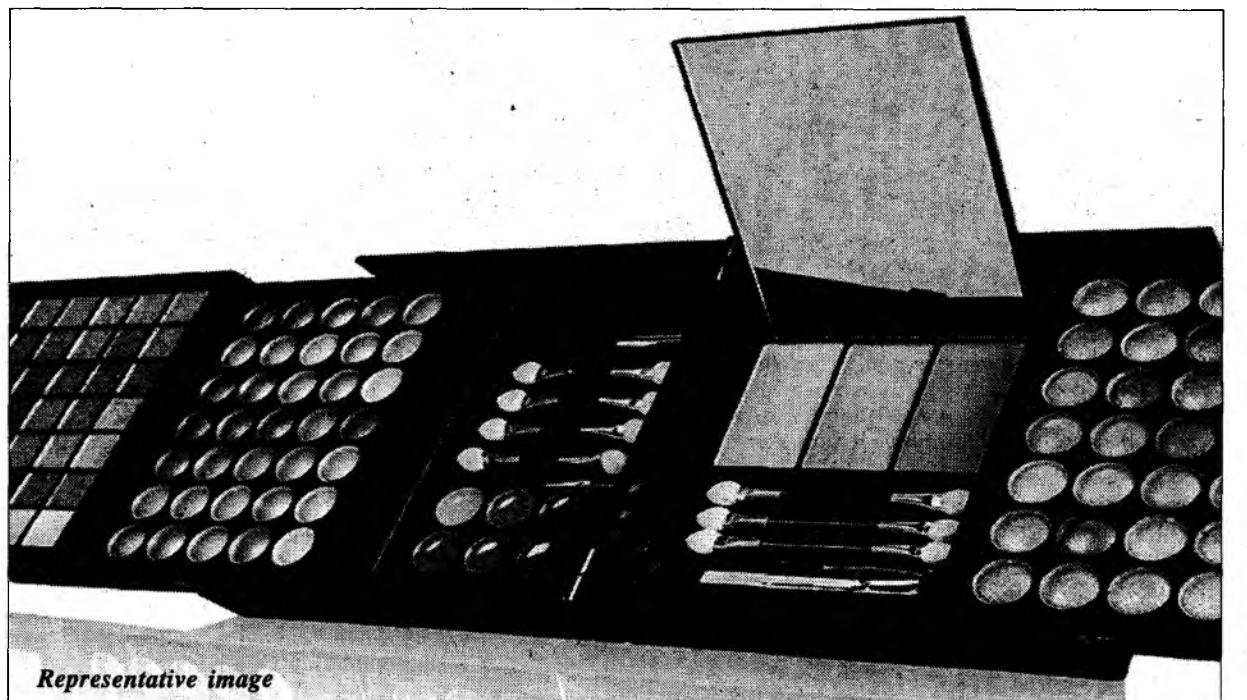
Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18)

The ability to build on financial and monetary pursuits and good returns from overseas business are on cards. As you rid yourself of your inner critic you find that concepts flow and you are able to give shape to them. You or someone close to you may finalize a marriage proposal. Sharing your interests and communications with loved ones may be especially appealing to you. You might spend a lot of time in meeting friends and beloved ones. You could be stressed while meeting people's expectations and approval. Health food, yoga and meditation are recommended as it would help to overcome health problems.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20)

This is a phase that brings wisdom, knowledge and creativity in your efforts. Your methods prove to be effective but you need to be circumspect as far as your interaction with colleagues is concerned. People are in awe of you for your intelligent mind. Your social life is enviable as are your interactions. You resolve an important domestic issue that has been causing a rift in relations for some time. Centering within and witnessing inner truth and reflection is the best meditation. You are strong and masterful while turning things around in a positive direction at work.

Career Option as Makeup Artist



Representative image

By Ranjan K Baruah

Many people are fond of makeup as beauty has a way of capturing attention. Apart from the natural beauty, people would do make up to look good or smart. These are mostly common for the entertainment industry like movies and cinemas. Apart from movie or serial, make up has been a common word amongst people these days.

Be it in party or even appearing in television show, there would be make up. As this has growth, there has been demand for the trained makeup artist.

Make-up is an art and a make-up artist is a professional artist who uses mediums applied to the skin to transform or enhance the appearance of a person.

Make-Up Artists are often referred to as Cosmetologists or Beauticians, but are different in that they specialize only in make-up and typically do not offer other services such as hair or nail care.

The best part related to this field of career is that there is no formal qualification required and even school drop outs may try to get in-

involved in this profession with some special training.

There are many centre and institute that offer free training for the drop outs apart from others who are passionate in this filed. Scopes are for both educated or drop outs but to be successful in this field it is essential to learn the skills like communication and other languages.

There are courses like Certificate in Cosmetology, Diploma in Beauty Culture and Cosmetology, Post Graduate Diploma in Beauty Technology and Cosmetology, Certificate course in Makeup and Hair Styling, Diploma course in Comprehensive Make-Up Artistry, Post Graduate Diploma in Beauty, Hair and Makeup, etc. For some courses formal education are required while for some no formal education required. Courses also includes fashion, theatrical and media hair and make-up; hair, make-up and prosthetics for performance; media make-up and character design; media make-up and special effects, etc.

Employment of theatrical and performance make-up artists was expected to grow 19% from 2014 to 2024, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Individuals looking to come in to this vocation are expected to face keen competition, and openings are likely to go to the most experienced and skilled workers.

This is in demand in all over the world and aspirants may try to get job even outside provided if they have all required skills. Various courses are available under Skill Mission which is initiated by different agencies all over the country.

Required skills include creativity, self confidence, knowledge about different products, flexibility, good communication and interpersonal skills, ability to work well as part of a team, etc. They must have patience as they shall deal with different individuals.

Technical knowledge is important like browsing internet and using internet effectively as many things can be learned through online mode. There are trainings conducted by different companies dealing with makeup products. One may work with other institutes or become self employed by starting own venture.

(The author is a career mentor and skill trainer and can be reached at 8473943734 or bkranjan@gmail.com)