"Develop an 'Attitude of Gratitude'. Say thank you to everyone you meet for everything they do for you."

--- Brian Tracy

The Shillong Times

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Taking the state to court

MUCH has been said by the political class against judicial activism but the fact remains that the executive has failed to govern and needs to be pulled up by the court every now and again. Article 39 A of the Constitution is a tool for protection of public interest. A Public Interest Litigation (PIL), as the name suggests is litigation for the protection of larger public interest. A PIL may be taken up by the court itself (suo-motu) or it can be taken up by any public spirited citizen. In Meghalaya, the High Court has been actively pursuing cases where the executive has failed to deliver. Every other day we see reports of the Meghalaya High Court pulling up the state government for its failure to deliver basic civic services from garbage collection to proper water supply and even in speeding up the completion of the Umroi Airport. One reason why the judiciary has had to be active is because the laws enacted by Parliament and the state legislatures since independence have not been properly implemented. Non-implementation of various laws affects the most vulnerable groups who form a large chunk of the Indian population. Let us not forget that a large majority of Indians have fallen between the economic cracks and have no means of sustenance; not even a roof over their heads. They also don't have the wherewithal to knock at the doors of the judiciary. This is where NGOs can help file PILs on behalf of the powerless.

In a democracy the three pillars –namely the legislature, executive, and judiciary have their respective mandates. The judiciary interprets the Constitution and delivers justice based on the principles therein. When the executive and legislature fail to discharge their statutory, constitutional duties, the common citizen has no option but to approach the judiciary. In the case of Meghalaya when the legislature meets very infrequently and for short periods, the woes of the citizens remain unaddressed. The legislature is supposed to checkmate executive. It is because of the failure of the legislature that the courts have had to step in to push the executive to carry out its mandate. Very often the executive looks the other way when rights of different segments of society such as children who are forced to work instead of being at school, are violated. The Right to Food and Right to Education are important legislations for a country where food security and education for all are still major challenges.

Elections in Meghalaya: Constituency managers versus visionary leaders

By Patricia Mukhim

Every thinking voter in Meghalaya wants to see CHANGE in 2018. But it's not the thinking elite that influence election results. Those who live desperate lives and see in their MLA a person with the wherewithal to pay for their needs during domestic exigencies are the ones who will determine whether a candidate wins or loses, because the latter far outweigh the former in terms of numbers. So to those who continue to cogitate about change in 2018, I would say, get real and stop believing in change. Yes there will be some change of faces but the government that will rule Meghalaya in the next five years beginning March 2018 cannot be very different from the present one.

Thos who labour on about change forget that every candidate has one goal: to win elections. All the rhetoric about public service is a lie. MLAs serve the public because they want to be elected or re-elected. Out of curiosity as to why people continue to elect rogues and seemingly purposeless politicians, I read the book called, "The Political Brain: The Role of Emotion in Deciding the Fate of the Nation", by Drew Westen. The author claims he wrote the book for those interested in how the mind works, how the brain works, and what this means for why candidates win and lose elections. He is also targeting readers interested in politics, psychology, leadership, neuro-science, marketing and law. The book is also for parties such as the United Democratic Party (UDP) who can't figure out why their party isn't able to win enough seats to form a government when the average voter seems to agree with the UDP's position on most issues.

Westen says that candidates who proceed from the premise that people vote intelligently and from a very dispassionate mind and that they weigh the issues at hand, usually don't win elections. There is no relation between logic and how the mind and brain actually work. Hence when campaign strategists start talking of a vision for Meghalaya, their candidates will invariably lose elections. Westen is a practicing clinician and has trained psychologists and psychiatrists for over twenty years in how to understand the nuances of meaning in what people say, do or feel. In working with patients if a psychiatrist/psychologist misses out on those nuances – if they misread what the patients may be trying to communicate, if they misjudge the patient's character, if they don't notice when their emotions, gestures, or tone of voice don't fit what they're saying, if they don't catch the fleeting sadness or anger that lingers on their face for a few milliseconds as they mention someone or something they might otherwise not know was important – they lose their patients. In politics if a candidate misreads the exact same things they lose elections. Emotions are pre-eminent!

In the 2004 Presidential elections of the US, Westen and his colleagues Stephan Hamann and Clint Kilts put together a research team to see what happens in the brain as political partisans that constitute about 80 % of the electorate get ready to vote. They studied the brains of 15 committed Democrats and an equal number of Republicans. The reason they could not study those with no ideological commitment was because it was hard to find such people especially as elections drew near. At the end of the study, it was found that voters respond to candidates who can move them to tears, laughter, compassion, anger and feelings of sanctity. They vote for candidates who can provide emotionally compelling examples of the ways they would govern and the principle issues they would stand for.

The candidates who "read" the emotional signals of their constituents and can show that they have been through the poverty and pain that their constituents experience are most likely to win because voters like to feel that the leaders they elect resonate with their experiences and are likely to be more empathetic to their needs. Hence when Sanbor Shullai the Shillong South MLA who distributed jobs to his constituents in the Assembly when he was the Deputy Speaker there, defends his nepotism by saying that he never violated any law because as MLA it is his duty to give as many jobs to his constituents, he is actually scoring brownie political points because that sort of statement resonates with the unemployed voters in his constituency. For those using the rational mind, what Sanbor Shullai has done is completely unethical and illegal but that is how elections are won. Hence if Sanbor Shullai, a man with unsavoury credentials, is pitted against opponents who believe that the electorate votes on logic and reason and will reward fair play and justice, then the opponents still have a lot to learn about how the political brain functions. Sanbor Shullai and his ilk represent the broad spectrum of dispossessed voters who live hand to mouth existence and although he has made his fortune from being a politician, these same people are still willing to bet on him! That's the irony of politics. And what do political parties do? They too don't care a hoot about the antecedents of a candidate. They will give the ticket to the wining horse, no matter how dirty their personal and political conduct is. This is what Drew Westen and his team found after years of research.

The moral of the story also is that only the educated and informed voter cares about issues and manifestoes. The rest, and they are the deciding factor, vote for a candidate because they are obliged to him/her for having stood by them at their hour of need, especially at the time of bereavement, of weddings of illness and other family emergencies. That is real-politik in India and if we believe otherwise we are deceiving ourselves. I know this will sound like a death knell to those who hope for change but as far as I can see how politics is played out in Meghalaya, the NPP might get the largest number of seats in 2018 and team up with the UDP and the BJP. The NPP has in its kitty the likes of the Dhar brothers plus more who had got the best and most cushy departments during the MUA -2 regime such as PWD (Roads) etc., and given us the most pot-holed roads ever. But the Dhar brothers are affluent and can finance their own elections and also the Party they are in. Then there are other seasoned political players in the NPP who also have made their bucks from being in the Congress. Why do we expect them to be any different? What change are we looking at?

Democracy has never been about public service. It has always been about serving the party and serving the self. Is it any wonder then that the judiciary is now taking on all executive functions? But for the judiciary the old Umsning road would have remained unattended. So too several other areas of governance would have remained untouched if the judiciary didn't pull up the executive every now and again in our state of Meghalaya and in the country.

I was having a conversation with a NEHU professor earlier on Thursday and as usual the topic veered towards elections. He too was cynical about the much anticipated change. His contention is that MLAs are not visionaries but only constituency managers. That's what they have been voted for. People expect their MLA to be present at their time of grief and celebration. And that's because we are a community that lays much store on a "big" person visiting our "humble" abode. That really means a lot to the voter. The voter hates an arrogant MLA with whom they cannot rub shoulders. Many of us may not have sought any personal help from our MLAs but there are hundreds of others who approach their MLAs for personal help and also get it! And that's how the MLA scheme comes handy.

So that's it! Let's not get our hopes up so that we will not be disappointed big time!

China's experiment with marxism in capitalist economy

Xi's balancing exercise is being watched closely

By Arun Srivastava

It is a misnomer that China under Xi is turning socialist. It is a façade Xi is wearing to confuse the global fraternity. With China pursuing the capitalist path assiduously over the years it is naïve to construe that it would make a paradigm shift, embrace Marxism and convert to a communist country.

Of course, some stray glimpses of Mao were seen at the venue of the 19th congress of the Communist Party of China, but that does not mean it has renewed its romance with communism. Even the social background and class character of the present set of leaders do not instill trust to accept the speculation that China would take rebirth as a communist country.

Thirty years ago, when the United Soviet Socialist Republic got disintegrated and the "Death of Communism" was being celebrated throughout the world, at the prop of the capitalist economy and its lackey elements, ironically China preferred to maintain a stoic silence instead of condemning the capitalist stooges.

Mao Zedong, had warned his comrades about 'taking the capitalist road.' Since 1949, China's social, political, and economic life was dominated and tightly controlled by Mao and the Chinese Communist Party (or the CCP). But the same CCP, under Deng Xiaoping, took to the capitalist path and introduced reforms. Mao died in 1976, leaving the liberal Deng Xiaoping (DUNG she-YOW-PING) in charge of the CCP. Though the CCP's repressive policies eased somewhat, the party maintained a tight grip on political and social life. Deng had realised that without a capitalist-based economy, China would not prosper. So he transformed the economy, allowed private property, open markets and international commerce. Due to Deng's reforms, the Chinese economy opened itself up to the world. It exported mass-produced goods and invited foreign investment.

China has been transformed by the changes ushered in by Deng Xiaoping 30 years ago. "Engels never flew on an aeroplane; Stalin never wore Dacron" with this remark at a meeting, Deng Xiaoping had made it abundantly clear that he had launched his economic and political reforms. Deng's words meant pragmatism was in. The current president Xi Jinping, who was at that time the vice president, the heir-apparent to President Hu Jintao, was the chief organiser of the celebration programme. It included concerts, exhibitions and endless speeches celebrating the "turning point" in China's history when Deng gained the upper hand over the Maoists.

Certain portions of the proceedings of the 19th congress of the Communist Party of China gave the impression of Xi Jinping's quest to revive Stalin's communist ideology, but that was not true. That Western media still suffers from Maoist phobia was evident from the phrases they used in their write-ups. They wrote: "The Bolsheviks in Beijing—What the Chinese Communists Learned from Lenin." Guardian was exasperated "Xi Jinping's Leninist quest for a dynasty inspires congressional love-in," and BBC talked of China's "unreformed Leninist political system."

The western media was far from truth, but the impression they created incidentally helped Xi. Sitting in the lap of capitalism, he managed to create the impression that he was still an ardent believer of Marxism.

It was a strategic move of Xi to terrorise the western world. With Russia already shattering the American hegemonic policies through its intervention in Syria, the global fraternity is split and is in a state of trance. In this backdrop, Xi wanted to project himself as the only person who can be the alternative by combining Marxism and capitalism. He intends to be the cufflink between liberal democracies and the socialist authoritarians.

In fact, China, pretending to continue to subscribe and believe Marxism, is a strategic move to maintain its distinct separate identity amongst the capitalist countries. It also faces the threat that the official declaration of abandoning Marxism-Leninism would invite the wrath of the people and may witness an upsurge. A majority of Chinese people still believe that Marxism-Leninism-Maoism is still alive in China and this ideology shapes their destiny.

Xi does not intend to send any contrary message or signal to its people. That would prove to be disastrous. This is the reason that in the matter of evolving the development policy and strategy, the Chinese leadership has been reiterating the phrase 'socialist mode of growth'. It is worth noting that the socialist theory practiced by the present Chinese leadership, post Deng Xiaoping, is different from classical socialism.

In 1978, Deng Xiaoping adopted capitalist methods and reforms in order to stimulate economic growth and restore confidence in the party. He and U.S. President Jimmy Carter signed a historic accord in 1979, reversing decades of China-U.S. tension. Deng launched several economic reforms that allowed the private sector to start and operate their own businesses once again. He also established four special economic zones along the coast of China with the objective of attracting foreign investments.

There is no doubt that China has transformed itself from a global centre of low-tech manufacturing into a major hub of innovation and consumption. The country has taken significant steps towards becoming a more market-oriented economy.

In the wake of 19th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, one question that surfaced in a strong manner is whether China is socialist or, maintaining a facade of being so. The other question that haunts the people is why the capitalist roader China is pretending to be a believer in Marxist-Leninism and Maoism while it is trying to look more like the developed western economies with a large regulatory and welfare state.

China intends to present itself to the global fraternity as the political blend of Marxism and capitalism. While this is enough to scare the West, at the same time it would claim to be the leader of the developing economies. In this backdrop, Xi Jinping's emphasis on defending and developing Marxism did not come as surprise. This is a strategic move to maintain its distinctive identity in the global race of asserting individuality. Xi has been spending huge financial resources in promoting Marxism in academia. It is really fascinating to watch China's experiment with Marxism and capitalism as the theoretical synthesis to hasten growth and development. (IPA Service)

TO THE EDITOR

Political parties with no vision

Editor,

The State Assembly elections are close at hand and all major regional as well as national political parties are busy. None of the regional or national political parties have spelt out their vision for the State and their agenda. Above all, is their silence on how to tackle critical issues of concern ranging from to social to economical issues. A brief idea of their manifesto will tell us that there is nothing concrete in them. Their manifesto is more or less a copy, cut and paste job. The UDP-HSPDP alliance looks more like an ' arranged marriage ' which has led to a number of their party supporters switching over thanks to their contradictory stand. The NPP which is banking on new entrants from the Congress is more like a copycat of the Congress while the PDF is centered more on drawing new crowds and new friends turned enemies from other parties. What we need is more of a pragmatic action plan that is realistic and achievable within a time frame but not which is ill-conceived and half baked.

Yours etc...
Dominic S. Wankhar
Shillong -3

Let's vote wisely!

Editor,

As the state is prepares to usher in a new government, aspiring candidates are equally geared to arm themselves for the upcoming elections which is no less than a wrestling match. Every day, newspapers are flooded with news of mudslinging between candidates. At the same time candidates are also making their presence felt everywhere. Well, we all know don't we, that these are strategies to win votes? However, the fact of the matter remains is that we the people cannot afford to be bought like commodities. As responsible citizens we are to use all our wisdom and wise judgement as we make our choices. We must make the best use of our intelligence and wrestle with our thoughts and weigh the pros and cons thoroughly before we cast our vote; after all our one single decision will define our fate and destiny for five long years. The beauty of our country is democracy; our freedom to choose representatives and exercise our rights. The purpose of elections is to choose representatives that will not belie our hopes but candidates who will work for the good of their people and constituencies rather than the self. The choice is entirely ours and our fate lies entirely on us the electorate. While the ball is in our court at the moment let us play the match to our advantage.

Yours etc.,
Jenniefer Dkhar,
Via email

Sorry plight of Deficit School Teachers!

Editor,

I joined R.B. Anupchand Hindi Secondary School as an assistant teacher in 1975 and retired as the headmaster of the school on 31st August 2014. Throughout my career (of about 39 years), I experienced the miseries of deficit school teachers in the state which, I am afraid will continue in the future as well. Forget the past, now, the state government has ruled out the extension of the Fifth Pay Commission recommendations to deficit school and college teachers as they are run by managing committees or private bodies.

I dare ask the ministers a few questions. Will they answer? (1)Are deficit school teachers less qualified or less competent than those teaching in government schools? (2) How many students from government schools are placed in the top ten or top twenty in the SSLC examinations held by M.B.O.S.E? Will you compare? (3) Did you not sell Teachers Day Flags on the streets when you were in schools? That way did you not 'beg' for your poor teachers? Now that you came to power you forgot your own teachers! I ponder if you still have the same love or respect for your own teachers. You pay respect to teachers only on 5th September every year, that too, only for a few hours and forget everything as soon as you leave the auditorium. Are deficit school teachers hungry for this kind of respect? (4) How many of you were educated in government schools? (5) Why do you send your children to deficit or private schools when there are government schools in the state? (6) Why are you so reluctant to extend the benefits of pension to deficit school teachers? (6) After teaching for about 40(forty) years,you give a deficit school teacher only 3.5 lakh as gratuity(which is the maximum amount) .On the other hand, an M.L.A serves the state only for 5(five) years (or less when it comes to by-polls) and gets all the benefits including pension throughout his/her life. After his/her death, the spouse enjoys the pension (7) Can you walk in the shoes of a deficit school teacher? (8) How can you forget that today if you enjoy some power or position it is (mostly) because of a deficit school teacher?

I have retired and am not entitled to get any pension .But what about thousands of my brethren who are teaching at present? Will they not experience the same sorry plight?

I must say one thing here, deficit school teachers in Meghalaya are highly disciplined. They raise their voices but hardly go on strikes and if they ever, do so, it is only for two or three days. They do not press hard their demands and after a lollipop (assurance) from the government side, go back to classes as they do not want children to suffer for no fault of their own while in a few states, strikes continue for months till their demands are fulfilled? When will you stop taking undue advantage of your disciplined and loyal deficit school teachers?

Our late president , Dr. A.P.J Abdul Kalam had said" TEACHERS ARE THE BEST CREATION OF GOD." Does it stand true in Meghalaya?

Yours etc.,
Zahiruddin
Headmaster(Retd.)
R.B.Anupchand Hindi
Secondary School
Shillong - 1

Revelers create nuisance!

Editor,

I am a resident of Lummawrie, Laitumkhrah. Through your paper I wish to bring to the notice of the public and law enforcement agencies that cars and taxis are parked in lanes and bye-lanes especially after dark. The occupants of the cars consume alcohol and get boisterous when told that they are violating the locality laws. Then invariably the empty booze bottles are left in the drains of the lane leading to my place. Can something be done to solve this menace?

Yours etc.,
Christina Tina,
Via email

"Do your work with your whole heart, and you will succeed - there's so little competition."

--- Marquis de Sade

The Shillong Times

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Stranglehold of dynasty

SO the Nehru-Gandhi scion is all set to become the President of the grand old party. If Rahul Gandhi is to be elevated to the post of Party President by stepping into the shoes of his mother Sonia Gandhi, then why is the word "election," used at all? An election by definition is an activity where people are chosen from amongst a list of candidates. The electors choose a candidate who is most capable of carrying out a particular task; in this case leading a 132 year old political party. For quite a while Rahul Gandhi has worked as the Party's Vice President and to his credit he has traversed the length and breadth of the country especially during state assembly elections. At the moment all eyes are turned towards his Gujarat campaign. The media reports his every movement, including which temple he visits and what he has written in the visitors' book. To be in the media glare every second takes a toll even on someone who is impervious to the paparazzi. Interestingly Rahul Gandhi seemingly enjoys this limelight! But that's about it! Rahul Gandhi's speeches lack depth and substance. They are all targeted at Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the NDA Government's policies.

Wisecracks such as Gabbar Singh Tax for GST etc are just schadenfreude (benefitting from another's trouble). They are not going to take the Congress Party too far. It has to spell out its own programmes and policies that will resonate with voters. Aligning with the likes of Hardik Patel and promising the Patidars of Gujarat the reservation they are seeking is an appeasement trap that the Congress is yet again falling into. The Party has been accused of appeasing minorities to the point of losing the support of Hindus, who in 2014, turned to the BJP. There has been no change whatsoever in the Congress Party's stand so far. In fact the party is yet to emerge as an alternative to the BJP at the national level. Whether Rahul Gandhi can actually lead the party to victory in 2019 remains the big question! And the baggage that the Congress carries as its cross, is its dependence on the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty. As a result, some of the upcoming grassroots leaders with political acumen and educational credentials are stunted and not allowed to take charge of the party. How can the Congress even speak about democracy when it does not believe in inner-party democracy and the sanctity of elections? Sadly, not a single Congressman/woman dares file his/her nomination for the top job!

World AIDS Day: Everyone is at risk!

By Baphinda S Thangkhiew

The World Health Organisation (WHO) observes December 1 each year since 1988 as World AIDS Day to unite people from across the world in the fight against HIV and AIDS. This day is dedicated to raising awareness about HIV infection and AIDS, to show support for people living with HIV (PLHIV) and to commemorate those who died from an AIDS-related illness. It is on this day that success of worldwide efforts to combat HIV AIDS are highlighted as well as the importance of continued support for these efforts.

An internationally recognised symbol associated with this day is the Red Ribbon. It was in 1991 that the Visual AIDS artists were inspired to design a visual symbol i.e., the red ribbon for HIV AIDS which symbolises: Care and concern, Hope and Support - for those living with HIV, for the continuing education of those not infected, for maximum efforts to find effective treatments, and for those who have lost friends, family members or loved ones to AIDS-related illness.

But simply wearing a red ribbon is not enough. The ribbon is a useful symbol attached to words and deeds that actually make a difference. Wearing it means that you are: Paying tribute to the millions of people living with or affected by HIV and AIDS worldwide; saying that you will talk about HIV to your family and friends; convincing oneself and loved ones that condoms save lives; convincing oneself and loved ones that an HIV test is the only way to find out about one's HIV status.

This year UNAIDS launched the World AIDS Day campaign theme as -My Health, My Right. If a person's right to health is compromised, they are often unable to effectively prevent disease and ill health, including HIV, or to gain access to treatment and care. My Health, My Right encourages people to share their views and concerns about ensuring their own right to health and to create a movement highlighting the importance of erasing health inequalities.

According to the UNAIDS data, since the start of the HIV epidemic, an estimated 78 million people have become infected with HIV and 35 million people have died of AIDS-related illnesses. In 2016, an estimated 36.7 million people were living with HIV (including 1.8 million children) and of these 1 million people have died. The National AIDS Control Organisation (NACO) in India estimated about 2.1 million HIV prevalence till 2016 i.e. 0.3% adult HIV prevalence, 80000 new HIV infections, 62000 AIDS-related deaths, 50% adult on Anti-Retroviral Treatment (ART) and 33% children on ART, accounting India as the third largest HIV epidemic in the world.

Though our state falls in the 'C' category, but as per NACO HIV Sentinel Surveillance, East Khasi Hills, East Jaintia Hills and West Jaintia Hills are already categorized as 'high burden' districts in terms of HIV prevalence in these areas. "We are sitting on a time bomb, and if our people do not wake up to understand HIV and AIDS as an upcoming epidemic, we will surpass other North Eastern states", said one of the HIV AIDS activists. It is high time for our people to realise that the HIV epidemic in our state is distressing. As per report, the number of new detection is an average of 2 (two) persons per day. Within a span of only 18 years there are more than 3000 people who are infected with the virus. It is also a fact that the virus is no longer concentrated only among the High Risk Groups (HRGs) or the Most at Risk Population (MARP), but it is spreading to the general population. The virus has reached even places and villages where vehicles have not reached.

The Meghalaya State Network of Positive People (MSNP+), a network solely of the People Living with HIV (PLHIV) is having more than 1557 HIV positive members (male = 593, female = 836, MSMTG = 10, male child = 55 and female child = 63) and out of these, 115 HIV positive members have died.

One major issue our state is facing is denial, since HIV AIDS is often seen as "someone else's problem"- as something that affects people living on the margins of society whose lifestyles are considered immoral. Stigma and discrimination are major 'road blocks' to HIV treatment, care and support and its prevention. In Meghalaya, stigma and discrimination attached with social, cultural and religious taboo seems to be an obstacle in reaching the PLHIV to come out and seek help. The social prejudices associated with HIV infection has helped increase the epidemic; thereby leading those infected and affected individuals to retreat into a world of silence and isolation. Stigma and discrimination is often layered upon pre-existing stigma concerning socially marginalized and vulnerable groups like the Injecting Drug Users (IDU), Men who have Sex with Men or the Trans-Genders (MSM-TG) and the Female Sex Worker (FSW). PLHIV may become implicitly associated with stigmatized behaviour, regardless of how they actually became infected. Hence, stigmatizing and discriminating the PLHIV makes them hesitant to come forward to seek help and to avail services provided for them.

People working directly or indirectly in the field of HIV AIDS in Meghalaya inform that stigma and discrimination happens due to ignorance, myths, holier than thou attitudes of people and lack of responsibility in spite of continuous efforts by these people to educate and sensitize the general public. Redressing the impact of stigma and discrimination on PLHIV becomes a burden as they might give in to their problems and live in depression and fear and become less engaged in preventive behaviour or deny seeking treatment or they can even spread the virus to others. Simultaneously there will be persistent decrease in testing/knowing one's HIV status, lack of disclosure to partners/family members or others, decrease in seeking healthcare and other services, silence PLHIV about their status thus resulting in invisible epidemic and worse of all turning many PLHIV to become LFU (Loss to Follow Up).

LFU has become the ultimate challenge that service providers in Meghalaya face. As per the NACO guidelines every PLHIV who is taking ART should visit and report to the nearest Anti-Retroviral Therapy Centre (ARTC) every month for medicines and regular check-ups and testing, and every PLHIV who is not on ART or in other words the Pre-ART, should visit the ARTC every six months for the baseline and for the CD4 test. But since there is only one ARTC in the whole state, the prevailing problems and challenges still persist. Although there are three Linked ARTCs located in three districts i.e. in Jowai, Nongstoin and Tura, but all investigations and other processes have to be done first at the ARTC Shillong, then only they can be linked to these Linked ARTC. This poses a great difficulty for PLHIV as most of them come from distant places across the state, adding to the increasing number of LFU. Another hurdle is added with the latest NACO guideline, where it is mandatory that anyone who tests positive has to start ART treatment irrespective of their CD4 count.

As per the report provided by MSNP+ there are around 634 LFUs as on October 2017 scattered all over the state, and it is a prime concern as there is a risk that these people will spread the virus to others or they will be facing health problems in the future.

Ever since the first HIV cases were detected in Meghalaya, the trend of the HIV epidemic has increasingly become apparent with the changing nature of infection. HIV AIDS which was unheard of two decades ago in Meghalaya has now gained entry into our households. Hence no individual or community can afford to dismiss HIV as a condition that happens to others. The perception of most people in the state is that HIV AIDS is a medical issue and PLHIVs are patients whereas most associated socio-economic variables are barely taken into consideration. Prevalence of HIV AIDS is mostly associated with various dimensions of ignorance and poverty which not only increases the chances of HIV transmission but it also increases the sufferings of the PLHIV.

As one of the front runners of the PLHIV community has quoted, "HIV AIDS knows no barriers. It does not concern who you are, what tribe/community you belong to, what profession you are in or which religion/denomination you follow. HIV does not discriminate anyone so why should we discriminate or stigmatize anyone especially the PLHIV. Let us unite to fight against HIV AIDS and for the cause of the PLHIV".

(The writer is a Research Scholar, NEHU Shillong)

MP's Gang Rapes

Governance under question

By Proloy Bagchi

The capital of Madhya Pradesh, Bhopal is seething with anger and outrage. Recent incidents of gang rape have put a big question mark on not only the safety of women in the State, but Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan's claim of overall "good governance".

In a span of two weeks, a Nirbhaya-like gang-rape of a 19-year-old civil service aspirant by six men and another of a 38-year-old labourer woman by five men, have hit the headlines. While the girl was returning from her coaching classes and was to take a train to her home town 70 kms away from the local Habibganj Station, the woman was allegedly gang raped for seven hours near Bhopal's Obaidullaganj railway station.

Worse, in both the cases the police lacked utter insensitivity. The girl's family was turned from one police station to another although the victim's parents are also cops. They, for a long while, could not decide the matter of jurisdiction of the specific police station that, according to them, could entertain the complaint. In the process, several cops even took the victim's version of her rape as a "filmy" story apart from making some pretty uncomplimentary comments against her. Likewise, the woman alleged that when she went to Obaidullaganj police station, they turned her away without registering a complaint and asked her to go to a police station in Habibganj.

Bhopal is a town where women are utterly unsafe. Reports appear in the local newspapers with unceasing regularity about alleged rapes, molestations, stalking and sexual assaults on women. Even as the police claim to be 'investigating' the latest cases, another gang rape case came to light wherein two brothers were allegedly raping an abducted 23-year old for over a month.

Whether it is rape or assault on women or violence against them or even robberies, loots and murders, the reports appear with uncanny regularity and yet local police seem to be unable to stem the rot. Though it is the seat of the State government, it appears to prefer to remain a mute witness of the goings-on in the capital.

Likewise, deaths due to road accidents are so frequent that it has started ringing alarm bells. A huge number of bikers, mostly engineering students, have met their end in the highly disorganised and unmanaged traffic of the city. Even the city roads, broken down and decrepit as these are, account for a number of accidents. Open manholes, unrepaired broken down roads or roads with massive pot-holes have killed numerous unwary commuters.

Ironically, while local newspapers were full of reports on bad city roads, recall Chouhan made a statement from Washington that the roads of his State were better than those of Washington! On being confronted, he said he had in mind the Indore Super Corridor created for transport of human organs for transplantation elsewhere. But one doesn't know what the CM had in mind - the surface of the road or other amenities. The Corridor itself has no signage, transportation facilities for commuters to offices that have come up on the Corridor are scarce; even traffic management on it is absent resulting in frequent fatal accidents.

In any case, 99% of the roads in the State, including Bhopal, are far inferior to the Super Corridor. Surely, such is not the case in Washington. The CM forgot that he was comparing his State with the capital of the most advanced nation in the world! It will take more than a lifetime for him to build roads anywhere nears the quality of those in the US.

Sadly, all through his three terms the Chief Minister has paid little attention to governance. In every sphere where people's happiness is involved there has been singular absence of governance. Whether it is healthcare, education or civic amenities, people are reported to have been made to suffer for want of facilities. The State is said to have the highest rate of infant and post-natal maternal mortality. Yet he wears the pretensions of being very effective and has even set up a Department of Happiness to emulate Bhutan's experiment of spreading happiness.

Bhutan's is an entirely different story which in no way matches up with that of Madhya Pradesh, which continues to be a an illiterate and largely unethical backward State. This is regardless of its proclaimed agricultural revolution that was presumably wrought by big farmers as otherwise there wouldn't be record-breaking numbers of suicides by farmers in the State.

The lackadaisical attitude towards the environment of the capital is reflected by total inaction for conservation of its biggest asset, the Upper Lake and its catchments. While despite commissioning of various projects sewage continues to flow into the Lake, its catchments have been thrown open for construction against all environment norms. He has merely sat over on the report of the Centre for Planning & Environment & Technology which was commissioned by his government to suggest ways & means for the Lake's conservation. No wonder the quality of its waters is deteriorating by the day.

And, recall BJP President Amit Shah publicly declared he had given Chouhan 100/100 marks (presumably for that D word - development). Shah seems to have glossed over the reports of alleged corruption against the CM. From the very first term the case of dumpers has been hounding him; then came the infamous Vyapam scandal and he or members of his family were allegedly involved in illegal mining of sand from River Narmada. It was also alleged that the Narmada Seva Yatra was organised largely in an attempt to cover the trails of illegal sand mining.

Shah stayed in Bhopal for all of three days and sniffed around, talked to various people, mostly of his own party. But it was widely reported that those who were not the CM's sycophants would not be allowed to meet him. Whether they did or not was, however, not reported. But, strangely what stands out is that Shah couldn't smell the rot in MP and did not get even a whiff of the alleged cases of corruption against the Chief Minister. Perhaps he did not have the nose for these. A few issues of local Hindi newspapers would have revealed to him the prevailing state of affairs.

Despite all this, it looks like people of Madhya Pradesh may well be condemned to suffer another five years of non-governance, lack of security, corruption and progressive regression under a government which, in all likelihood, is going to be of the same colour in 2019 as the present one. Unless the Opposition gets its act together and a miracle unfolds. --- INFA

TO THE EDITOR

Plight of tourist taxi drivers/ owners

Editor,

Tourism is one of the prime economic activities especially for Shillong and Meghalaya as a whole but the plight and the struggles of tourist taxi drivers and owners is an untold story. Due to improper and scattered tourist taxi stands, the tourist taxi drivers and owners struggle to earn their day to day living. But the media has not highlighted their plight. The tourist Sumos face a similar fate. The non-availability of a proper tourist taxi stand exclusively for tourist taxis has made it difficult also for passengers. They are in utter confusion about finding a tourist taxi that will take them to the correct destination. While trying to meet the deadline of 8 am every morning, there is a huge jostling for space and cat fights among tourist taxi drivers at different places in Police Bazar and elsewhere every morning. This is not how a state that promotes tourism treats its tourist taxi drivers/ owners. It gives a very poor impression to tourists as well. At present the situation is such that some tourist taxis solicit passengers at the Civil Hospital point, some in front of the SBI Main branch, some at the Khasi Hills Tourist Taxi (KHTT) stand and some at Khyndailad point. The tourists have to run helter-skelter to find a tourist cab.

These days tourist cabs are mostly parked at the Municipal parking areas; some in the parking lot opposite SBI Main branch, some at MUDA Parking lot ever since the old Khasi Hills Tourist Taxi Stand was taken over by the Shillong Municipality. A case against this is still pending in court. As a matter of fact, the tourist taxis of KHTT stand were told to shift to Polo Parking lot where drivers have to shell out fifty rupees every day as parking fee out of their meager income even as the Shillong Municipality seems to be silently benefitting out of this. It is appalling that the State Government and the Tourism Department are least bothered by the plight of a critical mass for the Tourism sector, namely the tourist taxi drivers/owners. They seem to have a political and imperialist agenda or are trying to benefit some capitalists.

Yours etc.,
Manoj Pukhrambam,
Via email

Glaring nepotism in Meghalaya Assembly!

Editor,

I am not at all surprises at reading you're the report in The Shillong Times of November 28, 2017 regarding nepotism in appointment of 5(five) family members of Mr Sanbor Shullai in the Office of the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly. I also came to know that former Speaker Mr. Charles Pyngrope, created the post of Law officer and appointed his own daughter a fresh Law Graduate by setting aside the requirements of work experience and exposure in dealing with court cases. It also bears mention that the outgoing Lady Secretary also appointed her own daughter as Personal Assistant and a few years later just before her superannuation, promoted her daughter as Grade-I Stenographer or Reporter as they are called at a Gazetted scale of pay More RTI queries will unfold the truth and more skeletons will tumble out of the State Assembly cupboard. What about the recent 435 sanctioned posts where appointments were made without any advertisement? Will the NGOs do their homework?

Yours etc.,
M. Synrem
Via email

Rejoinder

Editor,

Apropos the letter to the editor titled "Nepotism in Agriculture Department" (ST Nov 14, 2017) by a person whose name has been withheld on request, the Government is constrained to file this rejoinder based on facts available with the Govt. :-

As per our records the Officer concerned will attain the age of superannuation on Dec 31, 2017 and is holding the post of Director Agriculture till date. The Officer had been holding the posts equivalent to the Director level within the framework of the Agriculture Dept, pending promotion of officers from lower posts to the Director level posts of which the same has to be processed according to rules and procedures. The Govt. has not showered undue privileges to the incumbent as charged, due to the officer being in the "good books" of anyone. The officer has held an impeccable record throughout her service, as her records in the Department speak.

The promotion orders of the Departmental Promotion Committee of the Agriculture Department were issued after due processes were followed and not after media' reports opened up a "flood gate" of promotions, transfers, etc.

A remark that the said Director left no stone unturned to seek extension of service till March end next year is totally baseless and an unconfirmed report of which the Govt has absolutely neither knowledge nor intention.

It appears to the Govt that the writer of this letter has a personal vendetta to indulge in character assassination and slanderous mission against a Govt. employee, who, as far as records go, has been an example of dedication and responsibility towards her duties.

Yours etc.,
Under Secretary to the
Govt. of Meghalaya,
Agriculture
Department

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.

For inclusive education

By Duggirala Sesi

WORLD DISABLED DAY TODAY

Come World Disabled Day and one hears the shrill chorus of academicians and activists engaged in the field of disability shouting themselves hoarse on the need for Inclusive Education. The cue is perhaps taken from the razzmatazz of globalisation, which despite its detractors and dismissive criticisms has contributed to a paradigmatic change in various disciplines. The idea of a global village notwithstanding its idealist semantics has questioned the status quo of an era of 'exclusives' replacing it with daunting inclusives. Much to the delight of Special Educators and Disability Activists and as a result of their painstaking efforts, education has lost the tag of being an 'exclusive' enterprise and is now seen moving towards acquiring a more enabling 'inclusive' avatar, aimed at creating an equal opportunity for all. While there can be no argument on that count about the need for inclusive education and its intended benefits, a nagging question still haunts the mind — what of its teachers?

A change to inclusive education from special schooling has put the onus on the teacher. It is apparent that providing equal opportunities to raise standards of education for all pupils require a change of attitude on the part of the teacher initiated by comprehensive teacher development or training process that would move away from teacher-led to pupil-centred learning.

Teachers being the interlocutors of knowledge and skills have to break free of two conventional clichés — the way they think and the way they teach. If this is not done then excellent principles would remain empty rhetoric.

For an inclusive curriculum to move beyond its reclusive nature, a shared platform to critically engage with varied modes of teaching is a must, lest with each school pursuing its own curriculum, it remains a subjective exercise with no uniform guidelines to cater to.

Teachers must shed their oracular role and choose to be mediators to enable students' access to the same subject content but with different levels of response from the teacher. This approach is much more effectively applied if the students are in control of their own learning.

Rather than try and move the entire class at one pace, teachers will do well to appreciate and empathise with individual differences. Hence the need to seek to explore the challenges on Teacher Education for Inclusion, emphasising on the knowledge, skills and attitudes for inclusive teachers with development on inclusive vision, inclusive practices and inclusive language keeping in mind the interdisciplinary concept of inclusive education.

If providing a quality education for all students in inclusive settings is identified as perhaps the most challenging, yet the most important issue in education, there is little doubt, however, that inclusivity, rather than exclusivity, will characterise the schools of the next century. To be ready for that future we must prepare teachers who can teach in settings that are inclusive, meeting the needs of all students. This will require a different model of teacher education, one that incorporates what we know about inclusive educational practices into the pre-service preparation of special and general education teachers.

There have been a lot of changes that have been seen in our schools today, one of the greatest is in the amount of diversity in our classrooms. Teachers are being called upon to teach students with a wide range of abilities and needs. Perhaps the factor that has had the greatest impact on diversity is the movement toward the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom. Many writers have identified this as one of the most challenging, controversial and confusing issues in education today.

Even the term "inclusion" itself is perplexing with much debate and discussion regarding its meaning. To some, inclusion is another word for mainstreaming, a familiar word that has been around for decades.

But while inclusion means different things to different people, it is fairly well established that it is fundamentally and philosophically different from mainstreaming. Under the concept of mainstreaming students with disabilities were taught in pull-out programs until their academic skills increased to the same, or very nearly the same, level as their same-age peers in the regular (general) classroom.

The student with disabilities would then be "mainstreamed" back into the general education setting. Thus, the emphasis was on changing the child to better fit the "regular" system of education.

The concept of inclusion places the emphasis on changing the system rather than the child. Proponents of inclusion insist that it isn't necessary for a student with disabilities to be "at grade level" in order to receive instruction in the general education setting. The argument is that our educational system, structure and practices need to shift and become more flexible, more inclusive, and more collaborative in order to better accommodate students with learning differences.

Inclusive schooling is often thought of as the inclusion of all students, regardless of ability, into the same schools and classrooms with peers who are not considered to have disabilities. Inclusive schooling, however, extends far beyond mere physical proximity to providing students and adults the support required to belong and achieve in classroom and school communities. Inclusion is both a process for and outcome of understanding, acceptance, and valuing of differences among today's school children and youth. It is potentially both a process and an outcome for achieving social justice and equity in our society.

Inclusion requires a large vision and specific competencies for all teachers. Now the teachers need to know that diversity is present in the classroom, and that they should attend to learners with a range of diverse needs. In this frame, it is imperative to prepare teachers for inclusion in all curricular plans for pre-service teachers, also for teachers in services, with professional aptitudes like research, strategic, resilient.

The knowledge, skills and attitudes for all inclusion teachers must emphasize that the purpose of all teacher interventions is the students' learning. They also need to have high expectations for all (inclusive vision), develop inclusive projects including diverse teaching strategies and support systems (inclusive practices) and participate in a collective work (inclusive language).

For these three important educational aspects have been identified that every teacher needs to be 'inclusive' — equality, quality and equity. Every inclusive teacher needs to move among these three realities in his/her classroom. It also allows co-teaching or concurrent participation.

Inclusion promotes co-operation in the classroom. In inclusive education, the school and classrooms are very dynamic and have a lot of interactions and roles. The exchange and experience enrich individuality.

Diverse contexts indicate diverse relationship and interactions which include a team sharing knowledge, making decisions, solving problems together and generating actions in order to improve the school and increase learning for all. In consequence, the collaborative work is a source of dialogue, co-teaching and updating.

Hence we can infer that all this can be possible if empowerment of teachers happen through curriculum empowerment, the concept of which sees teachers as intellectuals, who work out a process towards a critical pedagogy of learning, bring about teacher effectiveness through actual classroom research.

If schools, colleges and universities are to prepare teachers to teach in inclusive settings, they must mirror inclusive practices in their teacher preparation programmes. That is not easy to do because higher education has traditionally been very discipline-driven and inflexible in its approach to teaching.

Most school and college professors enjoy a great deal of autonomy and are not used to teaching collaboratively or accommodating for students with differences. In addition, the environment of the institutes, being very competitive, does not lend itself well to collaborative and inclusive practices. However, inclusionary practices are commonly utilised by using the following team-teaching models:

One teach, one support: In this model, the content teacher will deliver the lesson and the special education teacher will assist students individual needs and enforce classroom management as needed.

One teach, one observe: In this model, the teacher with the most experience in the content will deliver the lesson and the other teacher will float or observe. This model is commonly used for data retrieval during IEP observations or Functional Behavior Analysis.

Station teaching (rotational teaching): In this model, the room is divided into stations in which the students will visit with their small groups. Generally, the content teacher will deliver the lesson in his/her group, and the special education teacher will complete a review or adapted version of the lesson with the students.

Parallel teaching: In this model, one half of the class is taught by the content teacher and one half is taught by the special education teacher. Both groups are being taught the same lesson, just in a smaller group.

Alternative teaching: In this method, the content teacher will teach the lesson to the class, while the special education teacher will teach a small group of students an alternative lesson.

Team teaching: Both teachers share the planning, teaching, and supporting equally. This is the traditional method, and often the most successful co-teaching model.

The profile for the inclusive teacher should be as follows:

The inclusive teacher is a professional educator committed to his/her community, that recognizes individual differences and considers them in his/her educational intervention actions. S/he participates in collective teaching because it is essential for collaboration and dialogue and is also creative in implementing education by facing the challenges of diversity in specific educational project interventions.

The inclusive teacher by their multi-tiered formation has a holistic educational view with strong skills and experience in order to participate in diverse contexts. In our teacher programs, we are promoting each one of the seven essential components; combining the federal program (by mandate) with our complementary program.

While it is usual to advocate for 'disability awareness' as part of the efforts towards inclusion, this tends to be interpreted as awareness of characteristics associated with disability labels. A critical aspect of working towards inclusion does in fact involve 'disability awareness' – that is, resisting dominant normative narratives or understandings of disability. Supporting children and teachers to genuinely develop disability awareness opens possibilities for actively reducing the barriers that result in the experience of disability for many children.

Hence the development of a culture of inclusion, in which diversity is valued, is crucial, rather than a clichéd implementation of an inclusive curriculum. This requires support for children, families and educators to develop a positive understanding of inclusive education.

It has been demonstrated that prejudice can be reduced by engaging in inclusive education and participating in education about disability awareness focussed on dismantling 'ablest' views. Issues like lack of teacher confidence and preparedness may be countered by compulsory modules in training programmes in both inclusive education and critical disabilty studies.

However, the transformation to inclusion is not an easy one as the path is fraught with arguments and counter –arguments. While conceptually 'Inclusion' is increasingly being seen as having made inroads into the paradigm called Education one still needs to recognize the fundamental role of teachers in the advancement of social justice, human rights, and opportunities for welfare thereby making Education for All an exercise in 'unity in diversity'

(The author can be reached at duggiralasesi@gmail.com)

See colours of success

By Ranjan K Baruah

Many of us are fond of art works because an artist or a painter can explain many things through art. We have seen famous artworks like 'Monalisa'.

Many of us had taken part in painting competitions in our childhood but only a few have chosen painting as profession. An artists' field is competitive and takes a lot of hard work, determination and overall perseverance to succeed.

One needs immense talent for creating original, unique pieces of art to be a successful painter.

Painting is an art in which colours and lines make a visual impression. It is the means of expressing ones ideas or feelings to others in pictorial forms. Painting not only means the traditional paintings on canvas, but also on glass, ceramic, pot, fabric etc as well as it could be using different paint media such as water colour, pastels, oil etc.

Not only brushes but knives, spatula, nibs and even twigs can be used for painting designs. There are new things like live painting which are in demand these days and it is very attractive too.

To become a successful painter there is no formal qualification required or we can say that painting is an art that requires no qualification. But by taking up a course a person can be trained and his inherent ability can be polished and developed under a trainer. There are many fine arts colleges and institutions offering undergraduate level to higher level degrees in drawing and painting. One can do bachelor, master's or diploma courses to brush up skills.

Creativity is more important than educational qualification. Some of the courses include B.A. Painting, B.A. Painting, Sculpture, Applied Arts, B.F.A. Painting, Certificate course in painting, Diploma in painting, M.A in Drawing and painting, M.A in Painting, Sculpture, Applied Arts, M.F.A in Painting, etc.

Some institutes are Government Maharani Laxmi bai Post Graduate Girls College, Indore, Jawaharlal Nehru Architecture and Fine Arts University (JNAFAU), Hyderabad, Kala Bhavan (Institute of Fine Arts), Santiniketan, Sir J.J Institute of Applied Arts, Mumbai, College of Art, Delhi, etc. Some of the job profiles are Arts Administrator, Art Restoration Specialist, Visiting Artist, Commercial Artist, Painter, Interior Designer, Decorator-Wall Papering, Painting Engineer, Teacher, Comic Artist, Art Director, Animation Programmer, Graphic Designer, etc.

It is very challenging to be a successful painter as initially one needs to struggle a lot.

Aspirants studying in a good institute can get a break easily but people who are from remote areas or do not have any formal degrees or diplomas need to struggle initially.

Communication skill is also important as it helps in reaching out to others and showcases the hidden talents.

Art or painting can become a tool for generating awareness on various social issues. As it speaks many things so it helps in disseminating information.

One can get engaged with various campaigns through their artwork and earn a good livelihood. It is important to have perseverance if someone wants to be successful in life through art works or any other paintings.

(Ranjan K Baruah is a career mentor and can be reached at bkranjan@gmail.com or 98640 55558 for any career related queries)

Beauty on the floor

By Uttara Gangopadhyay

No matter how amiably we lived round the year – 'we' meaning cousins of school going age – battle lines would be drawn on the days of the annual Saraswati and Lakshmi puja. Who would draw the best 'alpana' in front of the goddess? To keep us from fighting, our grandmother would apportion different corners to us in her thakur ghor (prayer room) which also doubled up as the temporary seat of Goddess Saraswati or Lakshmi for their respective day-long festival , so that each one could draw his or her version of the alpana. By the time the priest arrived, the entire floor would be covered in geometric and floral patterns, executed by childish hands.

This childhood memory rushed back to mind recently while watching scores of art-college students kneeling on the ground and drawing a huge 'alpana' on the surface of a street in Kolkata at the start of Durga Puja. Although an adaptation of the original 'alpana', the complete work was a pretty sight that was soon doing the rounds of social media. Kolkata witnessed again at the Salt Lake Stadium during the Under-17 FIFA World Cup football the city hosted.

Drawing auspicious motifs, especially on the floor, is a practice seen across India among various communities. Called Rangoli, Kolam, Aripana, Mandna, etc., together they form a part of the folk art genre, which preserves within a combination of religious, aesthetic and social expression.

Alpana (or 'alpona') is the traditional, ritualistic floor drawing, popular in Bengal. Usually, it is drawn during auspicious occasions, such as Hindu religious festivals and social occasions (barring funerary ceremonies). Although there is no recorded history of alpana, it is said that the word is derived from the Sanskrit word alimpan.

Traditionally, the drawing is done by women, using a water-based paste made from uncooked rice kernel of unprocessed sun-dried paddy, called 'atop chaal'. Tiny pieces of clean cotton cloth or cotton ball is dipped in the paste and held in between the fingers. It is then pressed to release the liquid to draw the pattern with the finger. In its simplest form, the alpana is a freehand drawing, a mix of hollow and solid patterns drawn using lines, circles, etc. to create ornamental or geometrical shapes. Then there can be representational motifs of trees, flowers, water bodies, animals, etc.

The traditional alpana in Bengal is invariably white in colour.

As an auspicious sign, the alpana is drawn on the floor where the religious ceremony or a social function may take place, along the entrance to the house or to rooms, in the courtyard, etc. Interestingly, the alpana not only adds to the aestheticism of the occasion but can also be a record of social history.

During the autumnal Lakshmi Puja, the festival honouring the goddess of wealth, women not only draw ornamental patterns, motifs representing owls (the mount of the goddess), lotus, etc. but also rows of a pair of tiny feet with a wavy line in between. The wavy line is representative of the paddy stalk. For a traditionally agrarian society, a good harvest of paddy is considered wealth.

In Bengal, women are known to observe broto (or vratas it is known as in many parts of India) on various occasions. Some of these rituals require some particular alpana. The 'Bhaduli' broto is observed post monsoon. In the bygone days, travelling great distances was a dangerous task, more so during and after the rains. So after the monsoon was over, the women would pray for the safe return of their menfolk. One of the key features of Bhaduli broto is drawing a series of alpana, with motifs symbolising boats, rivers, seas, dangerous animals, thorny bushes, etc., anything that would pose a risk for the people returning home. The women hold a flower over each motif and pray that their family members return safe.

Or take the 'Punyipukur' broto, where a waterbody is the main motif. Held at the start of the summer, the women pray that the ponds and rivers, which provide water for the agricultural fields and daily necessities remain full. In rural Bengal, 'nabanna' is a big festival, marking the harvesting season. So women draw elaborate alpana around the granaries where the paddy will be stored.

Like any other folk art form, there is no formal training for drawing alpana. It is a tradition that has been passed on from one generation of women to the next. Although much later one could find albums containing intricate motifs for alpana being sold at the Calcutta Book Fair.

Unfortunately with urbanisation setting in, the alpana, like many other traditional aspects, has taken a back seat. Besides, the concept of colourful Rangoli has also influenced the alpana, and it may not be only-white anymore. Few people are interested in the back-breaking and time-consuming task of drawing the motifs with cotton ball brush. So use of paint brushes and commercial colours have crept in. Nowadays, many urban homes prefer to buy the sticker sheets with intricate designs and use them in the place of hand-drawn alpana.

While the concept of alpana is still largely enmeshed in religious sentiments, Shantiniketan – the place coloured by the memories of Rabindranath Tagore – was the first to liberalise it. Students of Shantiniketan still draw elaborate alpana during their social functions and festivals.

Neighbouring Bangladesh took it further when they introduced it as a secular art to observe public functions. The finesse of the colourful and elaborate alpana across the roads during 'Ekushey' celebration (February 21, when Bangladesh observes it as the Mother Language Day) celebration has to be seen to be believed. The alpana drawing is also an integral part of the traditional New Year's Day celebration in the capital city of Dhaka.

Kolkata's maiden street alpana venture has now set the trend in West Bengal too. The feat was repeated in front of the city's Vivekananda Yuba Bharati Krirangan (stadium) prior to the final rounds of the Under-17 FIFA World Cup football matches recently. Local artists from Fulia, a town in Nadia district, better known for its handwoven cotton textile, drew a two and half kilometre long alpana on the road, on the final day of the recently concluded Jagadhhatri Puja.

While alpana as street art has given a new twist to the traditional art form, it is also necessary to preserve the original art form. INTACH and Daricha Foundation have joined hands to revive the alpana as part of its efforts to preserve the folk arts of India, according to media reports. Rabi Biswas of Nadia, who initially learned the art from his grandmother, is also researching on the subject and has been collecting the motifs associated with the 'broto' observations. With efforts such as these, one can only hope that this traditional folk art form will not be lost for posterity. (TWF)

And Quiet Flows The Rhine

By Parag Dutta

August 10, 2012: Hotel NH Koningschoff, Eindhoven, Netherlands:

TRAVELLER'S DIARY

We shall move into Germany today, visit Cologne and after a cruise on the Rhine spend the night at Heidelberg, a centre of excellence for education. After two and half an hour long drive from Eindhoven, we reached Cologne. Cologne sprawls on both the banks of the Rhine and is the fourth largest city in Germany. It was in Cologne I had a first glimpse of the Rhine, the lifeline of Germany, and a source of major transportation for both man and material. The iconic landmark of Cologne, the Cologne cathedral, is the largest Gothic-style cathedral in Germany. Orientation tour of the city began with a visit to the cathedral, which dominates the Cologne skyline, and was the only landmark that survived heavy bombings by the Allied Forces during the World War II. Our manager informed us that prayers in the cathedral never go in vain. On entering the cathedral I was struck by the beauty of works of art on the walls and the ceiling. All the members of the group moved near the altar, lit candles and offered our prayers.

After a brief tour of the city, we went for our lunch at Taj Mahal Restaurant. I never realised in the wildest dream that the most exciting moment of the entire trip was to be dramatised here. After a very good lunch, on way to the washroom, I overheard our manager talking to the owner in Hindi. I could not resist the temptation of joining them. I asked the owner which part of India are you from? A surprise was in store for me when he said he was Bangladeshi. "Amar nam Jahangir Alam, Dhakaiya, ar amar wife Sylheter. (My name is Jahangir Alam, from Dacca and my wife is from Sylhet)."

Jahangir called his wife Nazma and I started conversing with her in fluent Sylheti. That was not the end of this one-act drama. Her brother Shadrul soon joined the conversation and with a surprised look on his face told me that was for the first time they heard someone speaking their dialect in Cologne. He asked my wife did you like the cuisine and need anything special? My wife told him lunch was excellent but would love to have some paan(betel leaf) I Shadrul replied-oh only this, please wait, my sister stays nearby. I shall be back within minutes. He was back within five minutes with lots of paan, betel nut and zarda, neatly wrapped in a foil paper. I was just daydreaming about what happened in a Cologne restaurant.

The wheels of the coach rolled on and we were off to Boppard for a cruise on the Rhine. Never thought that the stretch from Cologne to Boppard could be so picturesque as Germany gradually started unfolding its natural charm. After half an hour we crossed Koblenz, gateway to the ruined castles of the Rhine. Nestled in a lovely valley and surrounded by beautiful low lying mountains and the Rhine, this 2000-year-old city was a treat to watch from our speeding coach. Along the route to Boppard, we experienced the only traffic jam in Europe. Thanks to an accident that occurred elsewhere, because of traffic congestion we were held up and were lucky to enjoy the beauty of the German countryside. As we neared Boppard, the coach left the highway, took a left-hand turn and started descending downhill. The narrow road was flanked by lush green scrubland and lovely little trees.

The Rhine valley in Boppard could be rightly called "The Valley of the Kings" as there are a number of castles along both the banks of the Rhine. Most of the castles along the Rhine stand on the low-lying hills, but Boppard's main castle, "Alte Burg", or the "Old Castle", lies in the centre of the town. There are a number of cruise liners that operate from Boppard to St. Goar. Here the Rhine is flowing through a rift valley in between two block mountains- the Black Forest of Germany and Mt. Vosges of France.

After alighting from the coach the tour manager went to collect our tickets and we moved towards the jetty. I was struck by the beauty of Boppard, that looked awesome. Boppard is a state-sponsored tourism resort and was aptly declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO. On the other side of the jetty, across the road, there were beautiful cottages with balconies adorned with bright flowers, restaurants, hotels, and shops. The small town of Boppard was an unforgettable holiday destination. We had to wait for some time for our steamer to arrive from St. Goar. We were booked on KD Lines (Koln-Dusseldorfer), which is a river cruise operator based in Cologne. On board the steamer it was a lifetime experience for us. There were commentaries in English and German. The landscape was breathtaking. I took a vintage position to capture the best shots with my still and video camera. But that was only for a brief period. I got up from the chair and started moving around the upper deck clicking as many pictures as possible. The left bank was dotted with hotels, vineyards, terraced crop-fields, and medieval castles where the German flags were flying high. There are six castles en-route. Some of these are under private entrepreneurs that are transformed into four-star hotels. All these exquisite frames formed a collage of sorts that unknowingly took us to Germany's medieval past.

On the upper deck, there was a small counter selling coffee, tea, wine, beer, and coke. It was rather a warm day in Germany, so I got two bottles of coke, for me and my wife, paying five Euros. Some ladies were singing and dancing enjoying the beauty of the countryside. I simply did not realize when this one and a half hour journey had ended abruptly. A sense of sadness crept into my mind thinking that I cannot rewind these wonderful moments anymore.

With a pensive mood, we started walking slowly towards the coach which was driven from Boppard to St. Goar by our coach captain, Liandro. There were lovely little cottages on the hilltop on our right. I looked up and amazed to find elderly citizens waving at us. Some of us reciprocated their wonderful gesture. Germans are naturally very conscious about their cultural identity, about their superiority, a class apart as a pure Aryan Race. I just could not believe my eyes and was very much moved by this act that touched my heart to the core.

We continued our journey after a hectic day's tour to Heidelberg. The Rhine was still our companion to the left. We passed by a number of small beautiful hamlets, but could not find a single soul. I asked myself where all the people have gone? Suddenly one Mr. Abraham, from Ratnagiri, Maharashtra, got up from his seat, picked up the microphone and said 'Friends did you remember our prayers at cathedral this morning?' I wondered what he was up to? Drops of tear started rolling down his face. He informed us that a very big consignment of fish product export that was held up by the government of Maharashtra for long did get a clearance only today. Hardly anyone realized that our prayers were heard by the Almighty this morning. We continued our journey after a hectic day's tour to Heidelberg. We were the third lucky couple to hear a very good news from home, on the third day after the cathedral visit, while seated outside a cathedral at Innsbruck, Austria. So who says God has religion because we never offered our prayer in a temple in Germany! We reached Heidelberg during the twilight hours and the city looked gorgeous under the mellow sun.

(The author is a retired professor of St Edmund's College)

But it's my emotional support turkey

THE FUNNY SIDE

Nury Vittachi

Mothers of nursing babies are banned from flying into Australia with breast milk, unless it is retained within the originating boob, a reader was told.

"If it is pumped into any other container, other than my child, it will be confiscated. I plan to keep this news close to my chest," the young mother told this columnist.

A colleague said he knew someone who tried to take a frozen turkey from Asia to Fiji as a Christmas gift. But the flight transited in Australia and the bird was confiscated.

I told him that these days you might be able to get away with it if the bird was alive and you claimed it was your "emotional support turkey". Or would it? This writer contacted an aviation industry friend for comment. He said no. Ultra-liberal trends start in the West, falter as they try to cross Eastern Europe, but are totally rejected in Asia Pacific.

"Airlines in America are forced to allow passengers to bring 'emotional support animals' on board and there are campaigns to introduce this in Western Europe," he said. "But Eastern European airlines have expressed reluctance and Asia Pacific airlines just laugh."

He said that US law even protects air travellers who want to take multiple animals, "including pigs and miniature horses". This columnist refused to believe that, but he emailed me a copy of the US Transportation Department policy document. It says (and I am not making this up): "Unusual animals such as miniature horses, pigs and monkeys should be evaluated on a case-by-case basis."

One passenger can take multiple animals, the policy says: "You should make every reasonable effort to accommodate them in the cabin in accordance with part 382." What if they don't fit? You should relocate them where these is more space such as giving them "bulkhead seats", it suggests.

Expect to hear the following conversation at a US airport departure gate one of these days: "Excuse me, sir, you cannot take that herd of wild horses on board the aircraft."

"But they are my emotional support herd."

"Ah, I see. In that case, have an upgrade. I'll order the vegetarian option for them."

This writer strongly approves of the extreme political correctness of liberal Western countries. For example, a news report said that a Canadian university cancelled a yoga class because yoga is Asian and "cultural appropriation is wrong".

Dear Canadians, speaking on behalf of the population of Asia, I think I can say that we'll be okay if you re-start yoga classes, but consider paying passing Asians a licensing fee for each student in each class. You can just toss the money out of the windows as we walk past. Thanks.

All this may sound silly, but that's where the extreme political correctness leads. Case in point: A study by Scripps College and two other US institutions concluded that society should accept individuals who "identify as real vampires". They should never be considered odd for their belief, since "they are born with it, somewhat akin to sexual orientation".

Final thought: If your kids sound like a herd of wild horses on a flight, don't be embarrassed. Somewhere in America, airline staff are buying nosebags and extra large pooper-scoopers.

(Nury Vittachi is an Asia-based frequent traveller. Send ideas and suggestions via his Facebook page)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi ***Sunday, DECEMBER 3, 2017***

Moon opposite Venus on your solar return chart denotes a good year .Freedom and individuality are essential ingredients in your relationships. However, later in the year you're likely to crave a deep connection. You enter a yearlong cycle that improves your intimate world and your relationship with yourself as you embrace your deeper needs. Improving your skills will be a focus this year, and some of you will do so formally, benefiting greatly from it. Businesspersons and professionals shall have a good chance to strike profitable deals and start new projects. Nagging issues like diabetes, irregular blood pressure etc. may also need to be handled with due care.

Aries: (March 21 - April 20)

This phase brings mixed results. You are able to find a healthy balance between work and home. Relationships and partnerships benefit from expansive, warm energy, or successful new ones are entered into in this period. You are likely to benefit through marriage, business partnerships and negotiations. You need to negotiate with more care than before. Financial benefits could possibly come through partnerships. You may find yourself taking on the role of consultant or advisor. Good publicity may come your way. If your work takes you before the public, you can safely expect popularity.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21)

You would have an excellent aptitude for understanding the fine arts; especially activities related to dance, music and singing. You are more productive with a responsible outlook. Although you have a desire to make contacts, you are now rather pre-occupied with learning or producing. You could feel an unusual pressure to structure your time and effort, and to cut out communication that seems unnecessary. You will have ideally gained a greater depth of understanding, having focused on information and communication that you really can use to feel more effective in the world. You maintain harmonious relations in friendship and love.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21)

This is a phase that brings fortune, trips, creativity and communication. Plenty of social activities also figure at this time. A strong mental connection with a loved one is likely. You might meet a partner through learning avenues. A tendency to think too much and to focus on serious or even negative issues should be watched. The skills you are working so hard on will be valuable in the coming weeks. Work could involve more counseling or collaborating with a partner.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22)

This phase brings new beginnings, whether this means a fresh start in existing relationships or new ones altogether. Power struggles are possible in close personal relationships. Your relationships tend to have distinct themes revolving around personal power, domination, jealousy, manipulation, or self-will. Study business offers and professional opportunities in detail before rejecting or accepting them. You are especially fond of higher studies, children and spirituality.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23)

The planetary configuration would help to boost your morale and self-confidence as you meet difficult tasks and resolve work related issues. The lines of communication open up between you and your partner. Sharing daily events and goings-on with one another gives you much pleasure. This can also suggest a real learning experience with someone with whom you can share ideas and come to a better understanding of how you define yourself. Partnering with a co-worker, or working with a partner, could also figure strongly.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22)

This period brings commercial transactions and business deals to the forefront. Money matters take priority, as some unexpected expenditures have to be met. You would have cordial relations with colleagues and friends and have an enjoyable time in interacting and conversing with your loved ones. Life picks up pace considerably, and you feel like you can move mountains; and you probably can. This is the time to go after what you want. It is easier than usual to be sensible about your diet, health, hygiene, and fitness needs.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23)

Love, romance and excitement in personal relations would be highlighted. Intimate personal relations and business partnerships are likely to get closer and limited relationships are likely to fall apart. It is right to make important decisions. Relationships would move to a completely new level for you. You will form a partnership that either leads to marriage or is otherwise significant. Opportunities for fun and romance are particularly strong. You have tremendous energy at your disposal.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22)

You would exhibit mastery in your field of activities during this phase. You achieve goals and targets on time. This is an exceptionally exciting time as professional and business opportunities are offered to you at this time. Your communications, presentations and style brings you closer to people who matter to you as you make a favourable impression on them. You need to keep your eyes open for opportunities in these areas of life. You might also spend a lot of time in physical activities like sports and games.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21)

You are emotional, loving and caring in personal relationships and family situations. You are more receptive and gentle on a romantic level, and tend to be sentimental with your family and relations. If you do get a chance to travel, which could come up quite unexpectedly, unusual, eye-opening experiences may be in store for you. The people that you meet tend to stir you into new ways of thinking. You are more inclined towards a personal philosophy that is traditional now. You may encounter some challenges regarding shared finances or property.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20)

Issues of shared resources, shares and possessions are featured this week. Take charge of your life by taking the necessary steps to make yourself feel secure--on solid financial ground. You have more work and you may be offered a leadership role in your organization. This is a phase of professional stability and good financial returns. You are called upon to take a stand. If you continue to tend to your partner's comfort levels while ignoring your own, feelings of resentment and neglect can affect your relationship.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18)

You would get mixed results this week. You would initiate a current of forceful energy to achieve success in an important venture. Finances are a serious matter for you, and you could take pleasure in building your resources and analyzing your cash flow. There is a fine line between financial discipline and worrying excessively about financial details. You tackle domestic and work related issues and handle all these issues successfully. Surprises surrounding personal matters, shared finances and resources and financial support may be in store.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20)

This phase brings cooperation and harmony professionally and enhances your reputation and public standing. You would find more joy in your daily routines. Although work can be rather hectic at times, you tend to enjoy taking care of all the details. A move towards working out of the home is likely for many of you. If you have been trying to land a dream job, this is more likely to occur now. Get in touch with what feels most comfortable for you, and the intimacy level in your relationship will step up. Avoid over-analyzing your relationships, or treating them more like businesses.

How to fight global warming

By Swapnil Deb

Climate change is the greatest environmental threat humanity has ever faced. It is caused by the built-up of greenhouse gases from burning fossil fuels and destruction of areas that store massive amounts of carbon like the world's rainforests. In recent years, global warming has been the subject of a great deal of political controversy.

The March 2014 report by the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was unequivocal: Human-induced climate change is happening and the effects are already evident — shrinking ice caps, droughts and flooding, storms and extinctions. If greenhouse-gas emission levels continue to rise, future changes are likely to be even more extreme. Though scientists warn that global warming may continue for centuries because of the long natural processes involved. However, there are a few things that we can do to decrease the effects.

Fossil Fuels: This is perhaps the most daunting challenge as citizens of most developed and developing nations literally eat, wear, work, play and even sleep on the products made from such fossil. We must try to employ alternatives when possible — plant-derived plastics, biodiesel, wind power — and to invest in the change.

Infrastructure Upgrade: Buildings worldwide contribute around one third of all greenhouse gas emissions. Electric grids are at capacity or overloaded, but power demand continues to rise. Bad roads can lower the fuel economy of vehicles. Investing in new infrastructure or radically upgrading existing highways and transmission lines will help cut greenhouse gas emissions. Mining copper and other elements needed for electrical wiring and transmission also causes global warming.

Move Closer to Work: Transportation is the second leading source of greenhouse gas emissions. One way to dramatically curtail transportation fuel needs is to move closer to work, use mass transit, or switch to walking, cycling or some other mode of transport that does not require anything other than human energy.

Consume Less and Be Efficient: The easiest way to cut back on greenhouse gas emissions is simply to buy less. Paradoxically, when purchasing essentials, buying in bulk can reduce the amount of packaging. Good driving and car maintenance can limit the amount of greenhouse gas emissions from a vehicle and also lower the frequency of payment at the pump station. Similarly, employing more efficient refrigerators, air conditioners and other appliances can cut electric bills while something as simple as weatherproofing the windows of a home can reduce bills. Such efforts can also be usefully employed at work, whether that means installing more efficient turbines at the power plant or turning the lights off when you leave the office. Purchasing energy-efficient gadgets can also save both energy and money. Swapping old incandescent lightbulbs for more efficient replacements, such as compact fluorescents would save billions of kilowatt-hours.

Stop Felling Trees: Every year, 33 million acres of forests are cut down. Timber harvesting in the tropics alone contributes 1.5 billion metric tonne of carbon to the atmosphere. That represents 20 percent of human-made greenhouse gas emissions and a source that could be avoided relatively easily. Improved agricultural practices along with paper recycling and forest management — balancing the amount of wood taken out with the amount of new trees growing — could quickly eliminate this significant chunk of emissions.

Family Planning: The UN Environmental Programme estimates that it requires 54 acres to sustain an average human being today—food, clothing and other resources extracted from the planet. Continuing such population growth seems unsustainable. Falling birth rates in some developed and developing countries have begun to reduce or reverse the population explosion. It is clear that more humans mean more greenhouse gas emissions.

Future Technologies: Replacing fossil fuels may prove the great challenge of the 21st century. Many contenders exist but all of them have some drawbacks too and none are immediately available at the scale needed. Massive investment in low-emission energy generation, whether solar-thermal power or nuclear fission, would be required to radically reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Geo-engineering is one area that has gathered momentum in recent years. It requires the deliberate intervention in the climate system with the aim of curbing global warming. One example is Solar Radiation Management, which involves reflecting more of the sun's rays away from the planet back into space. This could be done by pumping sulphur aerosols into the high reaches of the atmosphere, where they would have similar reflective properties to the ash released naturally by volcanoes.

IPCC's third report also considers a technique called Bio-Energy Carbon Capture and Storage. As the name suggests, this would combine the burning of biomass, such as wood, for energy and then piping the CO_2 into rocks.

Considering the several indicators and the growing adverse impacts of climate change and global warming at an alarming rate, it is of prime importance to implement methods and technology so as to curb the damage and work towards attaining sustainable development.

(The author is a law student at Symbiosis Law School)

"Competition is the keen cutting edge of business, always shaving away at costs."

--- George Leonard

The Shillong Times

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Child Abuse

ONE may wonder how little children can be sexually abused and what bestial pleasure was derived from assaulting a 4-year old in a school in Kolkata. Whatever mental perversion may cause such brutal acts, it appears that such shameful occurrences increased by 82% in 2016. According to National Crimes Records Bureau Data (NCRB), the increase in such incidence may however be due to the greater focus on such crimes and improved registration. The indications are that greater stress is now put on the need for safeguarding our children. There are cases of consensual sex among adolescents. Such action is criminalised in India. Rape cases are filed in such circumstances by parents, who are perhaps not aware of the involvement of their children. The law should be more enlightened about adolescent love making. All this however should not minimise the disgrace of an 82% spike in child abuse. Homes and schools should be made more secure and the offenders should be severely punished. Teachers who have such depraved orientation should be thrown out of their work and the law should be strict about them.

Laws on sexual crimes as distinct from consensual sex out of wedlock among adolescents should be made far more stringent. Besides, the judicial system should be more effective in implementing revised laws. It is regrettable that while the number of sexual crimes registered has shot up, conviction rate remains low. Special courts should be set up to dispense speedy justice in cases of child abuse. The police should ensure swift punishment. Children themselves cannot raise their voice against such inhuman perversity. Civilised society should be vocal on their behalf.

LOOKING BACK

May 5, 1989

Counting time by hours

A 300-hour bandh has now been called by the agitating Bodos and it starts a few days hence. The next one is to be a 500-hour bandh, followed if necessary by yet another to last as long as 1000-hours! It seems Bodos have come to count time by hours only and not also by days weeks and months etc. The hourly count is, of course, still confined to bandh periods only, but since bandhs have lately been coming so insistently and frequently, the practice of counting by hours may eventually get into a habit and become part of life itself. We have so far known that the clock resolves round a 24-hour circuit of a full day and night.

Fractured mandate imminent in Meghalaya

By HH Mohrmen

It does not take an expert in analysing election (psephologist) to predict that the outcome of the post February 2018 election in Meghalaya is going to be a fractured mandate. The signs are obviously indicating that no party will be able to come up with the required simple majority to be able to form the next government in the state. No matter how hard they work or how optimistic the parties are, no party will cross the half way mark or single- handedly garner more than thirty seats in the next house.

The situation is already in chaos because for the first time in the history of Meghalaya we have maximum numbers of national parties joining the fray in the election to the state assembly. Apart from the major contenders like the Congress, the National People's Party and the Bharatiya Janata Party, we also have the Nationalist Congress Party and the Lokjan Shakti Party which are contesting few seats in the forth coming assembly election. The national parties' supporters are in a dilemma and they are spoilt for choice because there are too many national parties to choose from. In such a situation the votes will split in all directions and the outcome of the election will not be a real mandate. Because of the split of votes, a candidate with minority support will win the election.

The case of the regional parties is no different either. There are too many regional parties than required and they are all major contenders in this election. This is especially true in the Khasi Jaintia hills where regional influence is still very strong. The two prominent regional parties in the state were hoping that the pre-poll alliance will be able see them sail through the next election but the problem is that the other regional parties including the newly formed People's Democratic Front will play spoilsport and spoil the regional alliance game plan.

The Khun Hynniewtrep National Awakening Movement (KHNAM) may not be a top contender to win many seats in the election, but it will cut into the vote bank of the regional parties and prevent another regional party from winning the seat in whichever constituency it is contesting. But the regional party which will greatly upset the regional alliance is the newly formed Peoples' Democratic Front. It is yet to be seen if this party like many other regional parties before it will disappear into thin air after the elections but its mere presence in the fray will have a major impact in the prospects of the regional party alliance and their aim of winning many seats in the election.

As time goes by the prospect of the Congress coming up with the magic number of thirty is drifting further and further away. The only hope for the party is if Dr Mukul Sangma can use his magic wand and help the Congress win the maximum number of seats from Garo hills. Unlike in the Khasi Jaintia region of the state, in the Garo hills except in few constituencies, in many cases it is a two way fight between the NPP and the Congress because there are not many strong contenders in the region. The Chief Minister's claim that the independent candidates from the region are willing to join the party and contest on a Congress ticket is also going to go in favour of the Congress and help the Party win many more seats from Garo hills.

In the Khasi Jaintia region of the state, in addition to the exodus of Congress party leaders to join other parties and the decision of the senior party leaders to hang their boots will have a huge impact on the party's prospect of winning the next election. Perhaps the timing that the leaders have chosen to quit fighting elections is too late in the day, thereby making it difficult and even impossible for a replacement to garner the same amount of votes as the veterans would have done to retain the seat they have vacated. But the absence of a second line of leadership in the Congress will also make it difficult for the Party to retain the constituencies which used to be its stronghold. The only hope for the party is with the new entrant to politics who (in all likelihood) will give the defectors from the party a good fight.

The NPP is in euphoria after the exodus of four Congress MLAs to join its fold. Two other independent candidates from Jaintia hills also will join the party soon. This instantaneous development changes the status of the party from one with no MLA from the Khasi Jaintia hills to a party with six MLAs in the region. In all likelihood the NPP is also going to gain another MLA and it will be another loss for the Congress in Jaintia hills but the pertinent question is whether the defectors be able to retain the seats they had earlier won.

The three factors that will go against the NPP is the perception of the people after the defection of Congress' bigwigs and many MUA II MLAs to the party. People will see the NPP as just another version of the Congress because the same people who were in power during the MUA II regime will rule the roost if the NPP wins the election and comes to power. The second factor is its support to the NDA government at the centre which will affect the Party's chance of winning and the third and the most important factor is that it all depends on its performance in Garo hills. The question is whether the NPP can destroy the Congress bastion and win maximum number of seats from Garo hills?

The division of votes makes predicting the election results difficult and it cannot be denied that in a constituency where there are many candidates contesting the election, an unexpected candidate can come up successfully and win by fluke. It shouldn't be a surprise if there are surprise wins in the next election because the sheer numbers of parties in the fray have divided the votes and a small swing in favour of any candidate will help him/her clinch the title.

If anybody claims that he or she can predict the results of the ensuing election to the state assembly, then that person is a supporter of a certain candidate or party and is already biased in his/her assessment.

The current scenario also raises another equally important question and that is the kind of coalition government that the state will have after the election. What kind of coalition government is in store for the Meghalaya? The moot question is will it be stable? The reason is because a fractured mandate will also help even small parties win one or two seats which will make formation of government difficult and more likely increase the chances of horse trading.

The post 2018 election scenario could be advantageous to the UDP-HSPDP alliance- they can be king-makers if they can only stick together. And in such a situation the only option for the regional alliance in the foreseeable future is either to form a government with the Congress or the NPP. Chances are that the NDA government in Delhi will not be in favour of a government in which the Congress is part of the coalition partner and aligning with the NPP is also like supporting the BJP because it is already known that the party is part of the NDA alliance at the centre. So post February election scenario for the regional alliance is a situation 'of between the devil and the deep sea' because both the parties are its enemies and the alliance will have to chose between the lesser of the two evils.

The Poor's Tardy Consumption

Is GDP Growth the answer?

By Dhurjati Mukherjee

India's consumption growth has experienced nothing short of an explosion over the last two-three decades according to reports. Importantly, the steady rise in the country's national income over the period 2006-2012 at a compound annual growth rate of 13% clearly had a primary role in driving annum growth in the private final consumption expenditure over this period.

Besides, even after the national income growth slowed down during 2012-2017 to 12.4%, consumption growth recorded at an average of 13.6% over the period. Reports also indicate that despite a slowdown on income growth, employment growth as well as networks' growth, consumption growth remained strong.

It is no secret that employment growth came to a standstill and is a subject of intense debate as since 2012 there is lack of expansion in the industrial sector, increase in automation and subdued tendency in sectors like construction. Obviously, the question arises that if income growth, employment growth and network growth remain compressed over the next few years, then can consumption growth remain unaffected?

Given that there is a widening disparity between incomes of the upper and lower segments of society which has been increasing over the years. In fact, a recent paper by Lucas Chancel and Thomas Piketty rightly concluded that income growth of the top 10% grew at a much faster rate than the average, while income growth of the balance 90% fell below average. Moreover, the increasing wealth concentration among the rich has been corroborated by Credit Suisse Global Wealth Report 2016 wherein it revealed that the top 1% which owned 36.8% of the country's wealth in 2000; now owns close to 58% of it. The global average is just 50%. An Oxfam 2017 report showed that 57 Indian billionaires own as much as the bottom 70% of the population.

Thus, it can be easily be concluded that consumption uptrend that is witnessed is mainly due to the increase in expenditure of the upper sections who mostly reside in metros and big cities. Apart from this class, a certain section of the middle income groups, who work in the formal sector in Government and private sectors or have their own business are quite well off and capable of increasing their consumption expenditure.

Moreover, current studies clearly indicate that the economically weaker sections and even the lower class are not capable enough to increase their expenditure except for essentials of livelihood. Pertinently, it would not be out of turn to say that there are two India's within the country --- one comprising 5-6% or a little more --- who are well off and increase their consumption expenditure on various fronts and the other 80-85 % who are just making both ends meet. Within the latter group, 50% are indeed struggling for existence.

Though former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh recently maintained that the principle one-person-one-vote has put unprecedented political power in the hands of a hitherto marginalized 90% of the country's population is absolutely incorrect. This section votes without knowing the political agenda of the Party and has little knowledge of the candidate.

Further, as true decentralization has not come into practice, the grass-root organizations have little power to finalize and carry out projects that may be beneficial to the masses.

The other point made by him was that the Planning Commission now Niti Aayog was destined to ensure that inequality did not increase with growth in the economy. But it is well known that the Commission failed to achieve its objective, as various studies undertaken from time to time have revealed.

It is indeed surprising that a respected politician like Manmohan Singh would make such theoretical propositions without outlining the causes of the failure of development planning in the country.

Undeniably, economic growth has benefitted the rich and middle income sections as everything has been planned to suit their interests. They have such a high purchasing power that even foreign manufacturers and traders want to enter India to sell their consumer products. One may mention here that in metros and big cities, most people have at least two mobiles, both costing above Rs 10,000 or higher.

Scandalously, most of the measures the Government has been taking are not aimed at uplifting the conditions of the poor and marginalized sections. Modernizations of airports, bullet trains and various sops to corporates or even helping the private sector by giving land etc. at cheap rates to set up schools and nursing homes, where charges are very high, even beyond the capacity of the lower middle income groups, are certainly not in the interest of the poor.

Any wonder, there is a clamour for reducing the GST rates in some sectors. Sadly, there is no organized force for helping small farmers and landless farm labourers.

Clearly, real consumption of the masses is imperative which can increase if the earning capacity of the impoverished sections goes up. For this to happen, the whole plan and prgoramme towards rejuvenation of the rural sector has to change and this can only happen if our politicians and planners have a genuine concern and grass-root approach.

Notably, our system of governance, real dedication and sincerity towards increasing consumption levels for a healthy living has to be ensured. A plan has to be evolved in this regard so that there is a steady increase in incomes in the next two-three years.

In sum, unless real incomes of the rural population increase, poverty would continue to haunt villages. Hence, our leaders should focus more attention on trying to remove farmers' distress by doing what is necessary at this juncture along-with strict monitoring of welfare schemes. To ensure good governance, retired Government officials, specially from the armed forces, academics and senior activists could be directed to review various welfare programmes at the district and sub-divisional levels, if necessary and the block levels as well.

They need to review the benefits received by stakeholders and try to address their problems. This could improve performance and give a new direction to effective implementation and might help in boosting consumption of the bottom 20% of the population. ---- INFA

TO THE EDITOR

On the Assembly building!

Editor,

One would like to thank N Hynniewta for the letter "Assembly Building" (ST Nov 23, 2017). It is indeed a matter of great shame and embarrassment for the state and its people that even after 16 long years the government has not managed to rebuild an Assembly Building. The different governments since 2001 have failed to show their prowess in the construction of one and the present government has only joined the bandwagon as our legislators are determined to not have one, but to simply waste their time and public money. Like Hynniewta, I too have voiced my anxiety on the lack of a permanent Assembly Building through this prestigious daily. We have all been witness to the truth that for the last one and half decade time and again discussions and deliberations on the issue have taken place but it ultimately boils down to zero as nothing concrete emerges. This time again the High Powered Committee has thought it fit to cancel the tender! Well again this is nothing new. By now, the people of Meghalaya are too used to this equivocal and lackadaisical attitude of the authorities concerned. As Hynniewta says' "the jinx would continue." Even if the construction work starts, the Assembly Building will be amongst one of "the unfinished or abandoned projects that (embarrassingly) Meghalaya is famous for."

On a serious note and based on their performances in the past and the present, our legislators have not and do not make ground-breaking development policies for the state and its people. So why should several hundred crore rupees be wasted on a new building? It's not as if the a new Assembly building would also ignite minds and glorious ideas would spring forth and people-centric decisions would be taken. Where they are presently located they fit in snugly as nothing will change. Hence I fully agree with Hynniewta that the Arts and Culture Auditorium in Rilbong can be converted into a permanent Assembly Building. This issue is now a stalemate and a thing of the past. The state requires urgent attention on more crucial matters like health care, education, roads and connectivity, unemployment etc. Funds and resources should be channelized towards more meaningful and need based projects that would cater to the general population of the state and not a handful of people for whom much is given but very little is received by way of public service.

Yours etc.,
Jenniefer Dkhar,
Via email

Responsive civil servant!

Editor,

I have met many government officials regarding on various issues but never have I met an officer like Mr MS Lhuid, IAS, Deputy Commissioner, East Jaintia Hills District. The DC has been very helpful on resolving public matters particularly those from the rural areas. He patiently hears the grievances of the people and takes whatever possible action at his level. I particularly appreciate him for his willingness to visit the border villages of the district which have never been visited by any DC. In spite of the fact that there is no road in these border villages, he and his officials in the district toured the villages and listened to the public. This is much appreciated. It is also because of his intervention that the villages were recently provided solar electricity by the government.

Mr Lhuid has been taking up many important issues regarding the poor condition of the roads in the district. But this district still suffers from skewed development as there is lack of political will and support. It is because of the DC that the PWD (Roads) has taken up repair and maintenance of road despite funds constraints. The people of the border villages namely Huroi, Hingaria, Lejri and Lailong are grateful to Mr Lhuid for taking the construction of roads and implementing other schemes with sincerity hence making progress visible today.

The people of the East Jaintia Hills should approach the DC for any grievances and he will glad to help. Such an officer should be appreciated and should get more support from the people for him to serve us better. While we see him working and taking up different issues with the Government, it is the Government which has failed and neglected the people of the district.

Yours etc.,
Kynjaimon Amse
Umkiang Village, East Jaintia Hills

Much talk about tourism!

Editor,

Sometimes we wonder why there is so much of big talk about promoting tourism when the roads leading to the most frequented places are in such a horrible condition. For instance a trip to Mawlynnong, Dawki along Pynursla will reveal just how poor the road condition is. The PWD is not bothered about the state of the roads. So too the local MLA who seems is least concerned and even ignorant about the dangers that a boulder might come rolling off towards unsuspecting cars or buses. If the state of our national highways leading to places of interest are left like they are now, how can we expect the state to progress?

Yours etc..
Dominic S. Wankhar
Shillong-3

Need to strengthen Social Sciences

Editor,

Our country needs more social science scholars. As a matter of fact, if all good students focus just on science and technology ignoring subjects of social sciences such as Economics, Sociology, Political Science etc. then there will be a situation like having a beautiful car but no one to drive it!

Social scientists are very much in demand all over the world to make policy frameworks and to use science and technology for the welfare of the people. Both science and social science are necessary to have a holistic approach in achieving a healthy inclusive economic growth and to develop humanism. To achieve this goal, research and study of social sciences are as essential as that of science, technology and medicine. Students must not buy the ludicrous notion that to prove one's masculinity and intelligence, one has to study science!

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

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.

"Competition is the keen cutting edge of business, always shaving away at costs."

--- George Leonard

The Shillong Times

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Meghalaya's score card

THE India Today group does an annual ranking of states based on their performance on some key areas of development. Meghalaya ranks 35th out of 36 states in total fertility rate with the last one being Bihar. Meghalaya's high fertility rate is a cause of concern as resources do not match its population growth. But there are other indicators as well which put Meghalaya in the last or second last rung of the ladder. It is surprising that even in Tourism which is a much touted term in Meghalaya, the state ranks last. Tourism is not ranked by the spectacular sights and sounds that tourists visit but by their experiences at the time of their visit; the kind of hospitality offered and whether they are getting value for money. Much of what is happening in the tourism sector today is a private venture. The state government is expected to provide quality roads and connectivity to the tourist spots amongst other facilities. But the road leading to Laitlum, a tourist spot popularized by the movie Rock On 2 and which today is a much visited destination, is back-breaking to say the least. The road condition to Mawlynnong and beyond to Dawki is pathetic. No one is really bothered about the state of the roads. There is not even a competition among the MLAs to makes the roads in their constituency the best.

Meghalaya ranks poorly among the ten small states picked up by the India Today- Nielsen survey. It ranks last or second last in health, infrastructure, education, tourism et al. Interestingly, while Meghalaya has several projects that are hanging fire, lately there are a series of foundation stone laying ceremonies without any explanation as to where the money for these new projects is going to come from; the timeline within which they will be completed and the cost at which they will finally be completed. This election gimmick unfortunately continues to fool the voters. Remember the plethora of MOUs signed with various power companies before the 2008 elections? Has a single project been completed? Not that we know of, and yet we continue to clap each time the chief minister or his colleagues lay a foundation stone, which is happening nearly every day until the election date is announced. It's time to call the bluff!

Christianity and Political Leadership

By Boxter Kharbteng

The article by Dr. Prof. Glenn C. Kharkongor - "Meghalaya: Dead Last,"(November 28, 2017) should be an eye-opener, a wake-up call, and a soul-searcher for all the leaders of Meghalaya - particularly in the two categories: the political and ecclesiastical leaders. Why leaders? Because, as John C.Maxwell, a world-renowed leadership guru, has reminded us, "everything rises and falls on leadership." In archaeology there used to be a discerning explanatory principle couched in these words: "like gods, like priests, like people." The people were like the priests, and the priests were like the gods they worshiped. In context, they were talking of the immorality of the priests and their people, and they traced this problem to the gods they worshiped who were just as immoral.

Meghalaya does not lack any brains or skills. It has enough of these to transform this state into a thing of beauty and a joy forever. Neither does it lack a vision. The fact that there are umpteen number of projects and schemes in different departments of the government - in both state and district levels - shows they know what they should be doing for the state. The good news is that money has been made available for several if not for most of those projects and schemes. But why aren't those projects and schemes getting off the ground and getting done? Where has the money gone? Where is accountability? Disappearance of money in different governmental departments as well as lack of accountability is a sure recipe for making any state dead last, and ultimately, - dead!

The above-mentioned article of Dr. Glenn Kharkongor also points up the role of the church in curing the ills of Meghalaya. It cites the sufferings and helplessness of women in terms of their inability to protect themselves from unwanted pregnancies, abandonment and rapes - as well as the numberless uncared for and unlooked after poor and orphans, to name a few of the state's woes.

That Christianity alone has been singled out in this article is easily explainable by the fact that it is the majority religion in the state. It is so big that in the language of prophet Isaiah, it can lift up every valley, make low every mountain and hill, level every uneven ground, and smoothen every rough place. But sadly and shamefully, this religion is not doing enough to make a real and noticeable difference in the lives of the poor and the needy within and outside their churches; not enough in uprooting illiteracy and ignorance among the underserved and underprivileged. Merely lifting the littler finger to address these islike putting a band aid over a gash. We need to lift the other fingers as well.

"On the other hand, if we Christians are as corrupt or something even worse, not only have we betrayed Christ and crucified him all over again, but we have betrayed the Christian cause in the Northeast and in the rest of India. In the end, the most dangerous enemies of the Christian faith turn out to be Christians themselves - to be precise, the nominal and non-practicing Christians.It is time for Christians to get real, to stand up and be counted."

The preoccupation of the churches for these many years is in the enlarging of their own territories in terms of numbers, institutions, money, and influence. In a number of instances, leaving one church and joining another is not for the faint of heart. Not long ago one lay church leader told me of an instance where one church warned of stripping the clothes of those of its members who wanted to leave their church and join another church. That should those membersdare do so, they would be made to march naked to the church they wanted to join. While these sort of threatening"Christians" have the political and constitutional right to march for religious freedom, yet they have already lost the moral right to do so. In reality, they march only as hypocrites and oddballs.

It is high time that the church wake up to its higher and nobler duty - that instead of focusing its energy, time and resources on competition with the other church or churches, it shouldchannel these energies and resourcesto looking after the sick, the poor, the needy,the illiterates..., as well as in promoting and championing personal and social ethics and righteousness.

The cause of Christianity in India will not be served by showing how it is superior to other religions, but by how well it lives out the life of Christ. Imagine if every Christian leader and officer in a government office, every Christian employee in every walk of life, practices ethics and righteousness. What kind of a Meghalaya would we have by now? Imagine if every government rupee that goes through the hands of a Christian government employee is documented and accounted for. What kind of a Meghalaya would we be having by now? I believe this will happen: New Delhi will find that the Christian hands in Meghalaya are the cleanest and safest to entrust its developmental money for the state. It is only when Christians reach this level of righteousness as government servants and employees, that non-Christians will take their religion seriously. It is only when they see this happening in the lives of Christians, that they will see the power of Christ in in Meghalaya. Once this takes place, Christians donot need to go to non-Christians to tell them about their Christ and his teachings. They themselves will troop to our churches to find out more about this Jesus. No theology or apologetics is required. All that is required is living out Christ in the work place.

On the other hand, if we Christians are as corrupt or something even worse, not only have we betrayed Christ and crucified him all over again, but we have betrayed the Christian cause in the Northeast and in the rest of India. In the end, the most dangerous enemies of the Christian faith turn out to be Christians themselves - to be precise, the nominal and non-practicing Christians.It is time for Christians to get real, to stand up and be counted. It is time we dust our faces down so they can shine and reflect Jesus Christ for others to see him in us, to admire and even to worship him. But this can never take place as long as we find ourselves servilely and shamelessly bowing before the goddess of money and materialism.

I sign off this response by leaving the reader with this famous quote from Ellen G. White:

"The greatest want of the world is the want of men-men who will not be bought or sold, men who in their inmost souls are true and honest, men who do not fear to call sin by its right name, men whose conscience is as true to duty as the needle to the pole, men who will stand for the right though the heavens fall."

(Dr Boxter Kharbteng is Retd. Prof. of Theology, Ethics and Philosophy and can be reached at bxb.kharbtg@gmail.com)

Land Management and Land Records in India

By Ibu Sanjeeb Garg

Beating the Rhetoric

The recent Amchang eviction in Guwahati evoked strong reactions from different sections of the society. The image of men, women and children being ejected out of their homes by groups of police, forest and revenue officials armed with bulldozers and elephants made for a heartbreaking site. The state administration was following orders issued by the Hon'ble Gauhati High Court which had ordered the forest areas to be cleared of all illegal encroachers.

Such an eviction however can never have black and white narratives. Opinions would vary and so would the position as to how one sees it. Yet one of the first facts that bears mention is the fact that in 1980 there were only two recognised villages in the Amchang area - Ekarabari and Sowali. This means that the people staying in these areas have only settled in the last thirty years. While their pain is understandable one must not forget that illegal encroachments in and around the hills and wetlands of Guwahati have led to massive deterioration of the environmental quality of a city like Guwahati. Any city, Guwahati included must develop, but in a planned manner which would take into account environmental concerns while planning for the future. Unplanned haphazard expansion of a city can lead to a Delhi like condition where even the air becomes impossible to breathe! And this is why cities across the country must move forward cautiously towards expansion including cities like Guwahati and Shillong.

While the debate between environment and development would continue, one thing that must also be the focus of the debate is the question of land rights and land titles in India. Since independence the absence of any large scale land reforms have ensured that thorny issues relating to land and land rights always remain unsolved. The Amchang controversy too can be seen from the prism of land rights and titles and deeds. Land in a state like Assam consists primarily of government owned lands and privately owned lands (patta-mati). The patta owned mati become the building blocks of revenue villages which in turn forms the bedrock of administration in the country. Forest land once declared a reserve forest or reserved sanctuary cannot be classified as patta land unless the government recognises so. In this scenario the fact that many of the Amchang settlers were able to produce land documents or patta documents proves that the question of land rights and land titles have not been adequately addressed in the country.

Land records and titles are never properly managed in government offices. Often when land is bought and sold the government office is not intimated resulting in non updation of land records. These in turn result in evading of taxes as well. Discrepancies are often noticed in land records where maps do not reflect the actual ground position. Hence land record management system is poor in the country. If the question of land records had been streamlined proper records would have been available with all as to how the forest land of Amchang reserve changed into revenue villages' along with proper documentation. Had this been available not only would it have offered protection to the government but it would have offered protection to the evicted people as well since their land title deeds would have been clear and accurate.

"The first is that land titles in India are often done reflecting the transaction and not the land itself. This makes the position of land unclear. While a particular piece of land may have been sold multiple times yet the owner on record might be someone else, since the original records may not have been changed. Secondly the cost of stamp duty in land transactions is very high resulting in people bypassing the same which results in further blurred results with respect to records and titles of possession of land."

Land in India and administration regarding the same also suffer from other problems. The first is that land titles in India are often done reflecting the transaction and not the land itself. This makes the position of land unclear. While a particular piece of land may have been sold multiple times yet the owner on record might be someone else, since the original records may not have been changed. Secondly the cost of stamp duty in land transactions is very high resulting in people bypassing the same which results in further blurred results with respect to records and titles of possession of land. Thirdly spatial level data is almost never correlated with administrative records clearly demarcating boundaries. Once again this leads to ambiguities in classification of land and its title.

In order to address the same the Digital India Land Records Modernisation Programme is being undertaken since the past few years. The project has achieved considerable results. Till September 2017 almost 86% of the available land records have been computerised while almost 35% of total areas have been surveyed. 47% of the mutation deeds have been computerised while land records in close to 9% villages have been completely digitalised and computerised. While the pace has been slow yet this project once complete would undoubtedly give a big push to land reforms in the country and at the same time protecting the rights of all individuals. Once this program is completed and such data is in place the pain of Amchang would perhaps not be suffered by others.

(Views expressed are personal)

TO THE EDITOR

Ugly side of Indian politics

Editor,

Perhaps nowhere else in the world, would you find politics turning into "mudslinging" as is prevalent in India today. Indian politicians even at the level of the Prime Minister, still indulge in ugly mudslinging. Personal attacks have become the stereotyped political strategy in our country. Many times vital issues are sidelined in favour of this archaic and inhuman political strategy. The leaders of the ruling BJP right from the PM to the least significant member of the party, all have recourse to the same approach. But the leaders of the opposition too fall into the same category. In fact, we often get bored or indignant watching television channels because what we hear are only foul speeches from these politicians. They tear at each other like ravenous wolves and do not seem to have enough of it. When will our politicians begin to discuss issues of development and progress in their public rallies and stop discussing persons? Perhaps they do not realize that when they talk ill of others, they only expose their own ugly selves. In psychology this is called "projection." Is it because many of our politicians come from poor backgrounds with poor education? I believe this has a lot to do with it. How can we expect a gentlemanly behaviour from a politician who is uneducated or who even has a criminal record?

It is high time that Indian politics take a turn for the better. It is time that the Election Commission enacts stringent measures with regard to eligibility of candidates. Is it not an insult to the nation to have a representative who is either a criminal or poorly educated, as our leader? We need to set a certain standard before the world community or else we become the laughing stock. Does our nation not deserve politicians who are well educated, well groomed and spotless in their character? We do have them but the problem is that our system is so vicious that such persons either refuse to soil their hands or are outspoken or outwitted by the goons. This is the reason why we need to revamp our system once and for all.

Yours etc.,
Barnes Mawrie sdb,
Via email

Ethical Voting

Editor,

It is interesting to learn from a recent report in your newspaper that the State Election Authority is identifying prospective voters who were born in the millennium year 2000 and who for the first time will participate in the electoral process starting with the 2018 election in the state. As in the past, one is impressed with the innovation, creativity, ingenuity and enthusiasm of the Election officials to enroll more eligible voters. The visible result is the increased turnout in elections in recent years. This time, however , one is also impressed with the call of the State Chief Electoral Officer (CEO)upon the people of the state to not sell their votes and for creating awareness on the Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trial (VVPAT)through street plays which were held on a particular day across Khasi and Jaintia Hills Districts. Also there was a simultaneous effort to create awareness on informed and ethical voting to dissuade people from the practice of "cash for vote" (Poll Officer warns against selling votes , ST 21st Nov 2017). It is certainly perturbing that the "cash for vote " practice exists in the state and is well entrenched too as the same news item reported of elections in Meghalaya having a history of money power being used during polls. Though all candidates or voters may not indulge in this practice but the general occurrence of such dependency between participants from both ends will certainly have a negative impact on our collective future unless this practice is curtailed now. There are already manifestations of unfavourable outcomes in recent years which could be attributed to this practice. Therefore the call of the State CEO is timely and one hopes that the initiative of creating awareness to curb this practice is not limited to the election season only but one that is consistent and spread across the nooks and corners of the State.

It would however be an onerous task for the election authority on its own to sustain this widespread awareness campaign and to reasonably succeed unless it has the support of well established organizations with widespread appeal and which still enjoy the respect and confidence of the people. As of now it is unclear as to whether such organizations exist in the state other than the religious institutions which may hesitate to venture into this activity as it is beyond their realm. At such a time, however, and without casting aspersions on any one, it might help if these religious institutions also exhort their followers of the need to exercise their right to vote as a divine duty to be performed with honesty.

Community organizations like the Durbar Shnong which are ubiquitous in Khasi and Jaintia Hills Districts and still have the following of the local communities could take up the onus. Although there is a cynical perception about the credibility of these organizations, they cannot all be painted with an unflattering brush. The identification and engagement of a suitable few for the purpose can be the starting point for replication elsewhere later. Moreover, most election advertisements which usually reinforce the need for mandatory voting should also focus on ethical voting too while other approaches may be explored .

Undoubtedly, drawing people away from the "cash for vote "practice is a challenging task but to make more people informed and conscious of the principles of democracy is equally challenging since conventional quality education might not have universal reach to cultivate the desired attitude for this. As such, there could still be a narrow institutional view of many that democracy is just about elections and not a driving force for change, or an instrument for improving the society and for removing social inequities and injustices. Hence the prevalence of unexpected inadequacies even now, much to the disadvantage to the people!

Ultimately voting is essential but as of now to make people vote well is a tall order since cultivating the desired mindset for this is still a remote possibility. Changing peoples' voting behaviour is an uphill task and calls for greater innovative creativity , ingenuity and determination of the election authority or any other authority assigned to bring about the transformation process. Informed and conscious citizens have a big role to play too.

Yours etc.,
KL Tariang,
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.

"The biggest things are often the easiest to do because there is so little competition."

--- Colin Powell

The Shillong Times

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Chabahar opens

THE first phase of the Chabahar port in Iran has been inaugurated. It is a major event in promoting India's strategic interests in Central Asia. India's shipping ministry played an active role in developing the Chabahar port which is situated on the Gulf of Oman and is a great thrust to Indian connectivity. India's overland trade with Afghanistan will now be in a position to bypass Pakistan with which its relations are now pretty sour. India sent 11 lakh tonnes of wheat through Chabahar to Afghanistan in October this year. Pakistan's strategic hold over Afghanistan will consequently be diminished. Chabahar is also connected to the International North South Corridor (INSTC). That corridor links up Russia, Central Asian Republics and Iran through road, rail and shipping networks. It gives India access to a much larger Eurasian market. Trade between India and Eurasia can go up to as much as $170 billion. Chabahar can also be India's answer to China's one belt one road project through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. The port is just 80 kms from China's Gwadar port project in Pakistan.

The Chabahar port development project was conceived by India and Iran during the previous NDA regime. US sanctions on Iran during the Presidency of George Bush slowed down progress. The nuclear deal with Iran signed by the western powers in 2015 improved prospects for the Chabahar project. However, Washington under President Donald Trump is threatening to put pressure on Iran again. That may hurt the Chabahar project. The US wants greater Indian engagement in Afghanistan and that should however prompt Trump to give the green signal to the Chabahar project.

LOOKING BACK

May 5, 1989

Enrolment of new LPG consumers decline

The enrolment of new customers for cooking as by the oil companies has progressively declined in the past three years, the number of new customers enrolling for LPG connection in 1988-89 was only 1156000 as compared to 1437000 in the previous year. The number of new LPG customers enrolled in 1986-87 was 1708000 Petroleum and Natural Gas Minister Brahm Dutt told the Rajya Sabha in a written reply today.

The Minister said the LPG customer enrolment target fixed for the current financial year is only one million. Answering another question, the minister said the current average daily production of oil from Cauvery Basin was only 190 tonnes per day, the production of gas from the basin was 12,000 cubic per day.

The Political Gods

By Peter A Dohkrut

The apotheoses of Indian politicians may not be openly expressed, but its implied connotation is widely comprehended by intellectuals and perceptive individuals. The question that lingers in my mind is whether the people of Meghalaya or of this country have elevated the politicians to the status of gods or whether the politicians consider themselves as gods. We do have a disputed answer in this regard. Politicians will disagree with this but the ground reality remains that with the exception of a few, when the politicians are in power they automatically become the masters of the masses and forget that they are elected to the chair to serve and not to rule according to their whimsical ideologies.

Following the article dated December 1, 2017 by Patricia Mukhim in this daily I am further inspired to express my political concern with regards to elections and the voters under the influence of the political gods. Perhaps, the said article had rightly stated that "Every thinking voter in Meghalaya wants to see CHANGE in 2018," but these thinking voters are only 10% to 20% in our state or in this country therefore change seems next to impossible. In fact, there are only a handful of genuine candidates who take their role of public servant seriously and sincerely and not for their personal development. Politicians in our state act not only as managers but as financial secretaries who spend most of their energies on accounts; on how to make bill books etc; busy like hell calculating how to get maximum net profit from the little they do. They have no time to identify the plight of the masses and even to properly address the socio-economic problems faced by the masses. However, we are greatly blessed by the presence of the Judiciary which spares no political gods or any of their agents whosoever and whatsoever, when it comes to public interest.

The five year gods (lei san snem) have started their campaign now with many vain promises that if people re-elect them to power in the coming election they will bring new life to their voters and transform their constituencies into paradise. Even some of the fresh candidates follow the same strategies in their campaign and read out the list of actions they will take and schemes they will implement if they are elected, almost as if manna from heaven is assured should they be elected. They are also playing with the emotions of the masses by entering each household like Santa Claus promising big gifts in return for their votes. It is also not surprising that some of these experienced political gods have not even started campaigning because they are waiting for the right hour and right moment to shower their blessings of mercy on the voters in the form of gifts, grants and tips - let me be bold here - "the distribution of money."

The truth remains that we cannot consciously exercise our voting freedom in the elections because we are bought either with money or deceitful promises, and it is this lack of consciousness that controls the masses. The political gods are very smart indeed. They buy some voters with a cup of tea; others with a packet of cigarettes; some with a cheap bottle of liquor and some with notes - Rs 500, 1000, 10000 according to the situation or number of votes guaranteed, respectively. Many presume that demonetization would be a catastrophe for non- BJP candidates, but if we believe this then we are no better than educated fools. Now many roads and footpaths, everywhere, are repaired not for their own sake but as one of the political strategies to deceive the innocent and the ignorant who form their vote banks.

Also, let me get real with some practical instances. In the Shella constituency which is served by the Hon'ble MLA, Dr Donkupar Roy, the road from Sohra to Sohbar, Mawlong, Tharia etc. is so horrible that pregnant ladies who travel on those roads face a grave risk of miscarriage/abortion and for the sick it would be a near death experience. And when the voters ask that the roads be repaired the only answer of assurance is "Yes, it will be done." But till date nothing has happened and even through the next election is approaching, the road continues to be in disrepair. Frankly speaking the concerned MLA need not be told to repair the said road. It is his duty and responsibility to do the job. I expect Dr Donkupar Roy to read this article with the receptivity that a public servant should and show courtesy to the people of his constituency who supported him for more than two decades, by repairing the road at least before the end of his present term or before the next election.

The political gods are very smart indeed. They buy some voters with a cup of tea; others with a packet of cigarettes; some with a cheap bottle of liquor and some with notes - Rs 500, 1000, 10000 according to the situation or number of votes guaranteed, respectively. Many presume that demonetization would be a catastrophe for non-BJP candidates, but if we believe this then we are no better than educated fools.

In another instance I happened to witness the supporters of the MDC PT Sawkmie while they were approaching the Mawlai voters to solicit votes for the coming election. One of the supporters rhetorically praised the MDC beyond the skies and also reminded the group of voters of his past popularity in Mawlai. To my astonishment one educated old man, suddenly, cried out that he does not wonder about such acclaimed popularity because of the trade mark 'PT Sawkmie' which he sees emblazoned everywhere, even in cups and saucers and spoon, when this MDC was once upon a time an MLA. The crux of the matter remains that the large number of voters are still being fooled by the political gods and blinded by their hypocritical sympathy with vain promises which they themselves are not certain if they can deliver.

Some days ago I had a conversation with (Retd) Prof. Philomath Passah who had contested the Assembly Elections twice before but never made it, regarding to the prevalent political scenario in Meghalaya. What I could gather from the conversation is that money still plays an important part in every election in our State. It does not matter whether you are a professor or scientist but money has its own role. And also, when we look at the Dhar brothers, the crore- patis, we can assume how effectively they can address the issues of the people or debate in the Assembly, but that does not matter for the masses because wealth speaks louder. The Dhar brothers are very confident of winning the next election because they know they can meet all the expectations of the innocent, the ignorant and self- interested individuals even at the eleventh hour of the voting day. They are gods for some and for others a walking, living ATM.

On examining the political scenario in our country especially the states including Meghalaya, our democracy is a living replica of a beautiful novel by George Orwell, "Animal Farm". The majority refuses to vote for the qualified, honest and reputed individuals with a record of public service, to be their leader. They prefer instead a moneyed person or witty individual but not a wise individual with integrity. Therefore, change seems next to impossible with the present government and the next, especially when there is only a change in the blankets and their colours while the people inside those blankets remain unchanged.

After all, only 10 to 20 percent of the voting populations have attained enlightenment to recognize the evil snare of the so called political gods. What can the minority do against the will of the majority? However we cannot stop inspiring someone to strive towards perfection. There is always hope for a change. One of the prominent ancient philosophers by the name Hilaclitus proposed a theory that nothing is permanent and everything is changeable. We pray that one day will see change in the politics of Meghalaya. Till then we cannot give up hope!

New narratives of history

By Ananya Guha

History is a thin wraith today. It has been seamlessly crafted into the politics of the times. Three instances warrant our attention. Firstly the Taj Mahal, secondly the movie Padmavati, and thirdly the temple Somnath. In all three, politics and politicians have been involved in the controversy and verbal battles.

In the case of the Taj Mahal, apparently it was not mentioned in the brochure of the Tourism Dept of the Govt of Uttar Pradesh. To this someone replied that the Taj Mahal is of universal fame and need not be mentioned anywhere. Then the Chief Minister of the state entered into the imbroglio and declared that it was of international tourist importance, and he would personally visit it which he did. He declared a cleanliness campaign there, visited the place with much fan fare and muted fear, what with so many escorts, police escorts in the pitch. Just around the same time a Swiss couple were beaten up by some youth in Fatehpur Sikri, thereby adding fuel to the fire, although direct connection with the Taj Mahal controversy could not be made, prima facie. In the meantime one or two ruling party politicians made derogatory remarks about the infidel Shah Jahan, who lived some five hundred years ago. One called the Taj Mahal a grave, with much panache and of course virulent animosity against Muslim marauders. In the meantime the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh was preparing his massive entourage for the visit.

The second controversy revolved around the legendary Rajput Queen Padmini, in the movie Padmavati based actually on a poem, yes a poem, and not based on history. The film was not even released when a Rajput group accused the producer of insulting the Queen, who committed Jauhar on the sacrificial pyre, in depicting a supposed relationship between the notorious Alauddin Khilji and Padmini. The trouble spread to other adjoining states of the country, even to the South with political parties of diverse opinions joining the fray in the protest against attack on the sensibilities of a royal family. The tensions have not subsided; the film has not yet been released and the debate continues, especially on television channels.

The third and the latest is Rahul Gandhi's visit to the Somnath temple. How dare he when his great grandfather was opposed to building it, and his grandmother was so touchy about wanton poverty and stench? And the insinuation was also that, how dare he garner Hindu votes, taken up again most vociferously in television debates. This added to the fact that his signature was found in the ' Not Hindu' column register for tourists. Somnath Temple apparently, after the ill fated looting by Mahmud of Ghazni, had to make such a distinction, with honour and chastity.

In all these three events it is history which has suffered. A majestic building has been demeaned. A movie based on a poem has been distorted beyond proportions. And, a visit to a temple, for political reasons yes, has been pigeon holed into a place for people masquerading as 'holy.' History can always light the imagination, kindle stories and tales, and explore new narratives. But in these three instances history was seen as a shortcoming of facts. Are facts and history the same? Does not history emanate from facts and then goes on to build succinct narratives of society, culture or architecture? Is politics an adjunct of history? Yes it is but contemporary politics; of that specific time and place. But by investing the politics of today in history; in the past, we have made it into almost a sanguinary battle field.

The present narrative we hope will not be recorded in the annals of the history of our nation. Making such petty debates and tirades will only make history a slaughter house for those we hate. Surely history cannot suffer from such an ignominy of crisis. Every person who has read history in school knows that history is studied as a series of events, eras and dynasties. School text book history highlights certain chosen facts as the narratives for history. Thus everyone knows about the monumental Taj Mahal, or the illustrious Padmavati who made a sacrifice for her husband and the land, the kingdom. Textbooks also say that the Somnath temple was looted for its wealth by Mahmud of Ghazni. These are factual representations of history. But whether history is a chronology of facts is the question. When we did our school board examinations, we were asked say to give an account of Cornwallis' Permanent Settlement. The answers were factual, focusing on taxes levied. But when you read Shashi Tharoor's book on the British in India, one realizes the damage that it did to the Indian economy, as a source of exploitative measure, the money going to the coffers of the Empire and not for development within the country. A chronicle of events, merely cannot be a historical narrative. The narrative will lie in interpretation. So will Cleopatra's nose change the course of history, or for that matter Padmini's act of Jauhar, or the destruction and rebuilding of the Somnath temple?

But wait, Shah Jahan's Taj Mahal has often been described as a monument of love dedicated to his wife, and this has endured through time and space as a historical type. Historical spaces need reinvention of typology, and cannot remain static as simply a building or event. The changes have to come through discourses or narratives. Shah Jahan might have been a cruel administrator, but the monument dedicated to his wife, became in the course of time a product of history, because of its stupendous technical craft merging with the notion of a monument for love. And there were skilled men behind the creation of such a technology. Because the historical monument cannot be overlooked for its craft and stupendous technology, the controversy of it not being mentioned in a tourist brochure could not withstand its sheer history, colour of imagination and the controversy petered out because the rationale of history is withstanding the onslaught and ravages of time. True the Somnath temple was recast after destruction, but the marauders did not create history, they destroyed it, and the invader versus the native dialogue became a perpetrating sense, not for history, but for justice, political justice, cashed on by politicians, when ballot boxes become bullet boxes, as is happening now.

So to say, simply that history is being distorted, is to see at what point imagination and emotion take over from the mantle of history, a world of interpretation, charting out the course of events, change or the future. It is the dynamics of change, which is central to its logic. Interpretations will arise out of such situations. In all the above instances history has been used to shield emotions, because of the interplay of contemporary politics.

TO THE EDITOR

Will the State Govt take a decision on Aadhar?

Editor,

The bold step taken by Hon'ble Chief Minister Dr. Mukul Sangma not to enroll for Aadhaar No. is a move against intrusion into our fundamental rights to privacy. A personal suggestion to the CM is for the State Government of Meghalaya to take a cabinet decision to withhold further enrolment for Aadhaar card. Government of India may be requested to review linking of the Unique Identification Aadhaar Number to banks, for educational entrance examinations, etc as the various messages that we are receiving on our mobiles are all warnings that our Bank Account is to be linked to Aadhaar and before December 31, 2017.

Yours etc.,
WL Lyngdoh,
Shillong-6

Commuters at the receiving end!

Editor,

I wish to express my distress and outrage at the frequent traffic jam on the National Highway right from Lad Nongkrem up to Shillong city, which has created untold problems for commuters. The frequent commuters on the National Highway are having a harrowing time everyday for the past two weeks due to the tarring of the road right from Lad Nongkrem. Commuters are stuck in the jam for 40 minutes to 1 daily. Office goers reach office late and so too others going about their business. The problem is exacerbated by vehicles overtaking despite the jam even while the Traffic Police department is clueless on how to resolve this crises. Further they have shown their incompetence by not being able to punish the undisciplined drivers. I wonder what will happen to the commuters who may be in dire need of medical aid and are desperate to reach a hospital in Shillong.

Now the question is why should the road repair/ maintenance work be carried out during peak hours when the flow of traffic is at its zenith. Why is the district administration turning a blind eye and deaf ear to this acute problem? Is the Administration so weak that it is unable to handle the situation? Can't they find a better way to ease the situation by directing the road construction company to undertake the work during the night hours when traffic slows down in order to avoid distress for daily commuters? The District Administration and the Traffic Police Department should take complete responsibility for the loss of precious time of the commuters on the National Highway (Shillong-Jowai Road). They should find quick solutions at the earliest to ease the situation. Will the MLA also take up this case?

Yours et c.,
Joannes JTL Lamare,
Nongkrem

Qualification of MPs/MLAS

Editor,

For the first time, at least one member of the Nehru-Gandhi family, Varun Gandhi, had the courage and conviction to admit that had he not been a 'Gandhi ,it would not have been possible for him to become a Lok Sabha member at an early age of 29. While attending a program at Guwahati on November 10, he had also advocated that people from non-political families should come into politics on the basis of talent and not on issues such as caste and religion. Mr Gandhi said this based on his experience of the Zilla parishad elections recently held in his constituency where he ensured that talented people were given an opportunity to contest and most of them won. He has perhaps realized that no dynasty is a factory/ production system where raw material is fed as input and a quality product (matured politician) is obtained as an output. A political party and centre of power to lead a country cannot be kept confined within the four walls of a family or dynasty from here to eternity especially in a large democracy like India. It has to be a national party consisting of talented representatives from non-political families for holding executive posts and functioning far beyond the ambit of filial relationship of a mother and son of a particular family. He also expressed his opinion against the present day culture that is prevalent in other fields like business, cricket and films and affirmed that it must end.

Yours etc.,
Samares Banerjee ,
Via email

Pathetic road condition!

Editor,

Through your esteemed daily, I would like to bring to the notice of the concerned Authorities the condition of the road near the CRPF Camp, Polo Area upto The Shillong High School. After you published with a photograph the condition of the culvert in your esteemed daily during the month of June,2017, some minor work was carried out after that. But the major portion of the road still remained unattended for which the condition of the road became from bad to worse. Of late all the vehicles coming from Mawlai, Lawmali etc. are also diverted through this road due to which it has become almost impossible for the people living in and around the area to travel on this road even on foot. As two schools are located in the area, it is apprehended that some major accidents may take place any time. Although we have taken up the matter with various authorities including the local MLA, but no action has been taken to repair/ diverting the vehicles coming from Lawlai/ Lawmali area.

Yours etc.,
S. Dey
Shillong- 1

GDP growth not the answer!

Editor,

Apropos Dhurjati Mukherjee's article, "Is GDP growth the answer?" (ST, Dec 4, 2017), GDP growth is meaningless and lopsided if it fails to generate employment. What India needs now is a job generating inclusive growth that can rescue us from our abysmal 131st position in Human Development Index. In spite of GDP growth, India's unemployment problem has been growing since the much hyped 1991 liberalization of the economy. While employment to population ratio was 58.6 per cent in 1994, it has, alarmingly, come down to 52.4 per cent in 2016. It is time to have a paradigm shift in our policy from giving priority to capital intensive technologies to labour intensive ones and to improve employment generating sectors like farming, cottage, micro, small enterprises and tourism.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

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.

"Peace is the beauty of life. It is sunshine. It is the smile of a child, the love of a mother, the joy of a father, the togetherness of a family. It is the advancement of man, the victory of a just cause, the triumph of truth."

--- Menachem Begin

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LX No.117 SHILLONG, THURSDAY, DECEMBER 7, 2017

Congress Leadership

SONIA Gandhi retires from the office of the Congress Party's president and son Rahul Gandhi is about to take over as the new leader. Sonia Gandhi led the Congress for 19 years and had the longest tenure as leader of the grand old party which is 132 years old. She was a little reluctant to begin with but ruled with firmness throughout. With Rahul Gandhi's succession, the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty still remains at the helm of the party. Meanwhile the party machinery has received a setback and its presence in Parliament has become minimal. Sonia Gandhi leaves a mixed legacy. Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated and after a brief interlude, Congress Prime Minister P.V Narasimha Rao led a shaky government and it cast a gloom over party prospects. The demolition of the Babri Mosque on December 6, 1992 led to the rise of Hindutva and secularism advocated by the Congress got severely dented.

The Rao economy stood for market forces which was a departure from Indira Gandhi's socialist approach. Under Sonia Gandhi, the party revived somewhat and won the general election in 2004. The UPA government was cobbled together and Sonia Gandhi was prevented by an inner voice from becoming Prime Minister. However, she remained the controlling force behind the scenes. Democratic accountability got blurred as a result.

The setting up of the National Advisory Council made Sonia Gandhi a parallel power centre outside the government. The Prime Minister's office held by Manmohan Singh was weakened. That also led to the weakening of the Congress government and its eventual ouster. The party needs a new leadership model and it is hardly likely that Rahul Gandhi can provide it.

LOOKING BACK

May 5, 1989

Concern over growing drug addiction in Shillong

There has been a general concern over the growing drug addiction among school and college students of Shillong. It has been noticed over the months that the addiction has been taking an appalling turn. Last week, some teachers from the St. Joseph's High School Jaiaw had reported to the DPI, Mirs M.R. Mawlong, about the menace of drug addiction in their school. Mrs Mawlong said that it was found that girls of Classes V and VI were habituated to taking scented tobacco with some substance suspected to be heroin.Mrs Mawlong has asked the Civil Surgeon to visit the school on June 30 to clinically examine the girls. Meanwhile, police raided a govt high-up' shouse at Mawprem and seizd from his son's possession 20 ampules of morphine. The boy, who is in his teens, is a student of St Edmund's College.

In the name of the people: Meghalaya elections and political opportunism

By Banshanlang Marwein

The political scenario in Meghalaya at this juncture is of demagogues playing the blame game against their rivals and appeasing the voters through their flawed agenda in order to convince the electorate to vote for them in the 2018 Assembly elections. The political gimmicks are a daily dose that we read and see in the news. These things usually happen when the elections are ahead of us. Of late, political parties are expanding their tents in various parts of the state. We have to understand their hypocrisy and expose it because all this while none of the political parties have shown serious interest in working for the welfare of people. This political patronization should be uncovered and understood on a larger context especially among those who seek to understand the problems besetting the state over the years. The electorate in Meghalaya has never elected unpretentious political leaders or statesmen. We have been electing politicians who are excellent at manipulating emotions and selling a fake agenda during elections. Mudslinging and slandering are the order of the day and we the spectators are witnessing all this political slug-fest.

That the MUA-II Government is facing anti-incumbency should be acknowledged and the Congress party itself should accept this before it is too late. What the Congress Government claims to have done for the state particularly in the last 7 years is indescribably preposterous. The lethargy of the present government stems from the usual adamant attitude of every public representative who does not actually work for the people. The concerns of the people Meghalaya have been undermined. In short, there's no room for the people to exercise their right in the five yearly transition of power although we are supposedly living in a democratic set up. This is reflected in the issue of the Village Administration Bill.

Meanwhile, the impulsive orators who claim to be the torchbearer of the 'Jaitbynriew' are having a tough and hectic schedule in trying to organize themselves for the upcoming elections in their respective constituencies'. They are also busy building up their party because the party loyalists have shifted their allegiance to other parties. They are busy cutting ribbons (especially those who are in the ruling party) to inaugurate various schemes etc. It is sheer duplicity on the part of the current legislators who claims that they are responsible leaders when the border issue with Assam has not been resolved despite several talks. We expected a lot from these 'Saviours' of the 'Jaitbynriew' to take this issue seriously but are left with doubts and uncertainties about their seriousness in escalating the issue to a higher scale. Meghalaya just celebrated its 45th year of statehood without having a proper border of its own. Meghalaya through its present setup can also be described as a 'house without a door,' not to mention other grave concerns such as rampant unemployment, pathetic health care, corruption, downward spiral of education, sports and youth affairs and pathetic power supply that is interrupted several times a day. Even tourism is in the doldrums and other developmental and infrastructural activities have hardly taken off. This happens because government is disconnected from the issues that affect the people.

I just feel that if elections are held every year, then a lot of developmental activities will take place as we can see candidates running helter- skelter to give away what they have for the welfare of the people and are only now expressing their sympathy for the plight of the people.

Parliamentary politics has failed us miserably; the political spectrum has to be relocated otherwise the sanctity of democratic ethos will be washed away without us realizing it. The political parties show their concern only during elections. After the elections their concerns end, especially when they are in power. If this is the attitude, then what is the point of having MLAs who supposed to look after the well-being of the people and to frame necessary policies?

This upcoming Assembly election is quite interesting because the mighty Saffron party with power derived from the center is trying to get a foothold and even to form the government in Meghalaya using the developmental agenda put forth by Prime Minister Modi. But it is now more than three years of BJP rule in Delhi. We see no development, no black money returned, no jobs are created. Instead we see failed policies like demonetization, price rise, GST etc., not to mention the hate speeches made by its leaders. The PM and his party members are not keen to punish the cow vigilantes.

Meanwhile the newly emerged Peoples Democratic Front has a lot of catching up to do to get people interested in the political discourse. Incidentally, the founder is yet to publicly reveal his intentions. The regional parties (HSPDP,UDP,KHNAM) who keep talking about indigenous rights, protecting the culture, the Jaitbynriew and so forth have once again come forward to present their elections agenda. How we wish that those agenda will become a reality but as usual these are just dreams that are doomed to be shattered after elections. The Congress party, apart from preventing its own party men from running away from the party, has also to convince people to repose their faith in it yet again. Needless to mention about the NPP which is celebrating the fact that rebel Congress leaders are joining its fold. This speaks volumes of the NPP's ethical stance because these rebels are the same leaders who were not serious enough in bringing change and working for the benefit of the state while they were with the Congress. This is nothing but a clear case of opportunistic politics.

"The people should be conscious and sensitized about their rights and responsibilities as citizens of a democracy."

Against this backdrop, the underlying premise in Meghalaya politics has hardly been about political parties. It has always been about individuals and family members especially those belonging to elite backgrounds. As far as Meghalaya is concerned the political spectrum cannot and should not be seen through the eyes of an argumentative analogy but we should rather look at the strategy with which individuals and parties plan to execute (or have executed) their policy and program.

It is high time that the electorate introspect before electing crooks. It is obvious that we the electorate have hardly elected statesman. We usually elect demagogues with astonishing rhetoric and are easily brainwashed, bought and emotionally blackmailed with end numbers of promises, which are invariably broken after elections. But this time let us ask some uncomfortable questions and keep asking them even after they are elected. The kind of public representatives we elect reflects the system we are in. Let us be educated enough to choose representatives who represent not only their family members or their party workers but those who work for everyone.

The proactive engagement of individuals, civil societies and organizations is imperative to help the uninformed electorate to question the system and elect the right public representatives. Moreover the civil societies and organizations should be neutral and non-partisan in this regard and should not be patronized by politicians. Doing this will take a lot of courage but it is not impossible. The people should be conscious and sensitized about their rights and responsibilities as citizens of a democracy. We should realize that politics at the end of the day is not about power and nepotism and we should shun such dubious practices. Let us not allow the elite class to govern and control the masses. Democracy is beyond that, it is all about the people and their power to question the authorities. It is people who have to decide.

Shillong's peculiar cultures

By Barnes Mawrie

Shillong has earned many names in the last few decades. First it was known as "Scotland of the East" a title which it no longer deserves due to its faded beauty and charm. Then it is called the "Education city" of North-east India, a title which it still holds on to. Of late it is called "Rock City" of North-east India for the sole reason that it has become the preferred venue for many national and international rock concerts. However, this unique city possesses some of the most peculiar cultures one can imagine. These are unfortunately, not so positive cultures which one would desire to have. Instead they are destructive by nature and the city would be better off without them. Let me list down a few of these cultures.

First of all, there is a culture of "speed breakers" which manifests itself in every nook and corner of the city. Some localities like Mawlai, Mawkhar, Jaïaw or Lummawbah, are notorious for a large number of speed-breakers. What is more perplexing is the fact that every time a road is repaired (which takes place once a year in most cases), a few more speed-breakers are added. It looks like every family on the roadside has the birthright to claim for a speed-breaker. Sometimes in a stretch of road of less than 100 metres, you find not less than 5 speed-breakers. So if Shillong is to earn another name, it would be called a "City of speed-breakers."

The second interesting culture of Shillong is the "culture of road digging" or "road excavation." Invariably, whenever a road receives a face-lift, within a day or two someone would dig it up. In most cases, the PHE or the village authority would dig up the water pipelines, either because they are leaking or because they want to remove or lay new pipelines. Thus many a times, an immaculately repaired road would have to bear the brunt of such reckless excavations. It looks like there are no rules to check or put a stop to such a destructive behaviour. Why can't the PHE and the PWD work together to find a practical solution to this permanent issue? In a particular part of the road in Mawlai adjacent to the Presbyterian cemetery, there is a perennial leakage of pipelines and every time the road is repaired, it is damaged by the pipelines. The PHE or the village authority seems to be short of ideas to find a permanent solution to this problem.

The third culture of our city, is the culture of "unrestricted decorative lights" on automobiles. There are so many car owners who take pride in decorating their vehicles with fancy lights of every hue and kind. It looks like there is a competition between one owner and the others to put up as many fancy lights as possible. In the night, these lights pose a great danger to other drivers especially those on two wheelers. Many times LED lights are used and the glare that they emit can blind the drivers coming from the opposite side and cause accidents. This causes also what we call today "photo pollution" which is as hazardous to health as air pollution. Strange that the authorities concerned have no rule in place to curb this aberration.

The fourth culture, is again related to automobiles. This is a culture of "oversized tyres." This is a crazy culture which has emerged lately and it is catching up with the youth hailing from well-to-do families. There is a sort of unreasonable pride in displaying such automobile freaks. Again this is also a dangerous culture as it can confuse other drivers especially at night. These protruding tyres can escape the attention of the other drivers in the dark and can lead to fatal accidents. In a city like Shillong where roads are exceptionally narrow, these oversized tyres cause more congestion. Again, can the authority concerned not do anything about this?

"The second interesting culture of Shillong is the "culture of road digging" or "road excavation." Invariably, whenever a road receives a face-lift, within a day or two someone would dig it up. In most cases, the PHE or the village authority would dig up the water pipelines, either because they are leaking or because they want to remove or lay new pipelines. Thus many a times, an immaculately repaired road would have to bear the brunt of such reckless excavations."

The next culture is again related to the usage of automobile accessories, namely, music system. Families living by the roadside in the city's locality often complain of frequent man-made earthquakes caused by moving vehicles with loud pounding music. Here again there seems to be a competition between young people to have the loudest and deepest bass music system in their vehicles. They appear to be forgetful about the noise pollution they are causing to people around and the nuisance they bring to society.

Another peculiar culture of our city, typically of Khasi people, is the display of "abstract art" in public. By this I mean the careless rubbing of lime on walls and public places and the red spittle of those who eat kwai. It is enough to go to MUDA parking lot or to Garikhana Jeep Stand, to witness this type of art in abundance. Unfortunately, it is not the kind of art that people would admire, nay, they would be appalled by it. It is a display of an unhygienic habit, a disrespect for public places and a manifestation of a lack of good manners and civic sense.

Well, Shillong seems to be the city of "permissiveness" and "tolerance" for such adverse cultures which in turn have tarnished her image in the eyes of the world. Today it has become one of the dirtiest cities in India and with all these negative cultures, the city's credibility and respectability are diminishing. I hope someday our people will realize the need to become more responsible and more sensitive to the feelings of others. It is time that we let go these negativities and start doing something constructive.

TO THE EDITOR

Of fake Mr Universe!

Editor,

I am amused to know from your esteemed daily about the participation of one Prasanto Basumatari of Meghalaya in the so-called 'Mr Universe' Body Building Championship. I am associated with the body building sport for about 35 years now. The Indian Body Builders Federation with its headquarters at Mumbai is the only federation recognised by the Government of India, Ministry of Sports and Youth Affairs. This Federation is the official body which controls the sport in India and sends participants to various international championships. I know for sure that presently there is no 'Mr Universe' contest in which India is taking part.

What is amazing is that this Prasanto Basumatari is not even a zonal champion, far less a national championship (in his weight category). Needless to say that the Indian team for any international event is selected from amongst the national championship in their respective weight categories. Unfortunately, many unauthorised and dubious organisations are springing up and to justify their existence promoting sub-standard body builders who are winning "'high sounding titles," and getting undeserved temporary publicity. This class of body builders is short- circuiting hard-scientific workout and becoming BIG by random use of banned drugs.

My own state has a quarter of a dozen so-called "Mr Universe" who faded away from

public memory within weeks. Some years ago a literally small man from Assam became "Mr Universe'" after participating in a contest organised by an American TV Channel. He came first out of two contestants. What is amazing is that he had never even won the state championship. India had the privilege of having produced legendary body builders (Mr Universe) like Late Monotosh Roy, Late Manohar Aich and Premchand Dogra, who brought international laurels for the country. Late Roy and Aich are even today remembered by the body building community of the world. They belonged to the class of legends like Reg Park, Bill Pearl and Larry Scot. Compared to their standard, today's Tom, Dick and Harry are a shame to the country. Equally shameful is the role of the publicity seeking promoters of the sport.

Yours etc.,
J. Bhattacharjee
Guwahati

The 'right' mistake?

Editor,

What could be the worst possible mistake on our roads today? As much as we talk of safety, we often forget that we drive ourselves into it by our wrong ideas and concepts. The current mistake which leads to a big nuisance on our roads is caused by the wrong idea about the right signal light. This indicator light is to be used only and ONLY IF we want to turn right and not to let the person behind overtake you. It is frequently observed that a person indicating right is turning or stopping to the left. This is the right mistake which many drivers make. It causes a big confusion for the person behind as he\she does not know whether the person in front is moving to the right or making way.

The right way for stopping to the left is to indicate the left signal light and leave it on for a quick stop, then indicate right signal light for joining the traffic again. A single indicator light cannot have two contradicting indications. To simplify what I wrote - intending to turn RIGHT use the RIGHT signal and intending to turn LEFT use the LEFT signal. As a responsible driver I urge the fellow drivers and concerned authorities to take up this matter and see that the roads remain safe for all.

Yours etc.,
Luke Warjri
Shillong-6

Deficiency in supply of LPG cylinders

Editor,

With reference to the caption I wish to state that 'Khasi Pnar Gas Agency, Bara Bazar, Shillong' is supplying domestic gas cylinders to our residents at Upper Mawprem, Shillong. The last date of delivery was on September 27, 2017. As of today over two months have passed but till date the Agency has not supplied the next cylinder. We are all informed that we are entitled to get yearly 12 Nos. of domestic gas with subsidy; unfortunately we are getting only 6 or 7 Nos. of cylinders annually with subsidy. Further, we should get as many cylinders as are needed many but without the subsidy, however we are not even getting that! Interestingly we can get LPG cylinders in the black market at Rs 1200 per cylinder. I have the enclosures showing the date of delivery of gas cylinders to the residents at Upper Mawprem near Dairy, Shillong. From this enclosure it appears that from 2012 to 2017 (till date) 40 Nos. of gas cylinders have been delivered whereas it should have been 71 cylinders till date @ one per month. From the given enclosures it appears that the gap between deliveries of consecutive two gas cylinders is 52.72 days whereas we should have received one in every 30-31 days. We should have received 12 cylinders whereas we are receiving 6 or 7 a year.

Will the Deputy Commissioner (Supply) be kind enough to take necessary action against the dealer? For the sake of transparency please make necessary directions to the Indian Oil Corporation Limited and to the State Government to get an independent audit to verify the reasons for short delivery of gas cylinders to the residents at Upper Mawprem, Shillong under the supplier `Khasi Pnar Gas Agency', Bara Bazar, Shillong.

Yours etc.,
Dil Bahadur Chetri,
Shillong-2

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"The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched - they must be felt with the heart."

--- Helen Keller

The Shillong Times

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Process of acculturation

THERE is a strong move to bring in the Hindi, Hindu, Hindustan notions of nationhood under the present BJP dispensation. Recently an absurd idea of dressing up the image of India through the religio-cultural symbol of Bharat Mata (Mother India) in tribal attire so as to appease the tribes and draw them into this thought process, has gained traction. The image of Bharat Mata in the Tripura tribal attire has been doing the rounds. Soon the image of Bharat Mata in the jainsem or the dakmanda will circulate. This attempt at political enculturation is alarming. The 'tribals' of the North East follow their indigenous faith which is not Hinduism. To equate that indigenous faith which is largely animistic and connected to nature worship than to Hinduism and its plethora of gods and goddesses shows a lack of depth of understanding the tribal worldview. The Roman Catholic Church, for instance, has tried to absorb the cultural traits of its adherents across countries and cultures in what is known as the process of 'enculturation' where the social norms, values, behaviours and language of the people who have accepted the faith are embedded as part of the worship rituals. Hence Christianity is indigenized instead of having to emulate a western model of worship. It is a different matter that some Christian preachers have denounced the tribal practices as "paganism" and influenced the tribes to give up their indigenous worship practices.

However, Christianity has remained in the realm of the spiritual and has not tried to claim a political space. The idea of Bharat Mata which is symbolized by a Hindu Goddess, as a symbol of nation may not go down too well with the tribes. The BJP is trying to bring about a process of acculturation where it expects tribals to accept the idea of a Bharat Mata dressed in their attire. This cannot possibly endear the Party to the tribals.

LOOKING BACK

May 5, 1989

Vamuzo blames Election Commission for defeat

Nagaland People Council(NPC) leader today termed the election commission as the "stooge of the Congress(I)" and alleged that it has lost its "credibility and impartial nature". Addressing newsmen here Mr Vamuzo claimed that the commission favoured the Congress (I) candidates during the recent state assem-bly elections 'denying jus-tice to Opposition candi-dates." The NPC leader held responsible the commission for his narrow defeat in the Chazouba constituency. Repolling was ordered in the Thenyzumi booth under the constituency following disappearance of 50 unused ballot papers, which he claimed, were later found in the briefcase of the presiding officer. A seemingly agitated Mr Vamuzo regretted that the election commission, while ordering the repoll "ignored the fact that the inner seal of the ballot boxes from the booth remained intact."Vamuzo chared the poll-ing officials with convincing with the Congress (I) work-ers to a brighten their poll prospects. The commission flouted established rules while ordering repolling in Chazouba. The NPC leader said he was confident that he would still win from the Chazouba constituency if votes polled on January-1 were recounted.

Dr Mukul's predicament versus peoples' expectations

By Patricia Mukhim

It is not easy to be in Dr Mukul Sangma's shoes at this moment. He has to explain to the High Command the steady attrition in the Congress Party and also assure Delhi that he will yet make it to the finishing line first. Both are tall orders. The India Today ranking of small states is not a very flattering report card for Meghalaya. Among the ten small states which comprise Puducherry, Sikkim, Delhi, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Nagaland, Manipur, Tripura and Meghalaya, our state is last in the overall ranking. The indices on which the states were marked were law and order, tourism, economy, health, agriculture, education and infrastructure. Meghalaya ranks last in infrastructure and tourism. It ranks 9th in law and order, economy, and education. The state ranks 8th in health and 4th in agriculture.

We have always known that education and health in Meghalaya were two laggards in the doldrums but that we should feature at the last rung of the ladder in tourism and infrastructure was a bit of a shock. But the two are also interconnected. Meghalaya is poorly connected by air and not connected by rail. Hence tourism is still an expensive proposition for visitors on a shoe string budget. For the high end tourist, however, Meghalaya is a destination of choice. I don't think we need to worry too much if that is the only indicator for poor tourism. But law and order is also connected to the growth of tourism. Puducherry has several plainclothes policemen in key tourist destinations and in market places. The state also has a Tiger Brigade - a patrol squad for the city and the suburbs. Perhaps these are lessons to emulate from Puducherry. The state has rounded up notorious trouble makers and history sheeters in 2017. The properties acquired through force and threat are being returned to owners or used for public purposes. Can Meghalaya adopt this example? There are many in our state that have acquired property through forceful means (intimidation) and acquired wealth through extortion. We know them but don't have the spine to name them; far less to take action. This is the bane of law and order.

Now let's take a quick look at Dr Mukul Sangma's performance over the last five years. On the law and order front he has been able to contain street brawls, office picketing, bandhs and other blackmailing methods adopted by pressure groups. The Meghalaya High Court has, of course been instrumental in curtailing these hugely damaging activities which hamper tourism and governance. But the Chief Minister is accused of continuing to support his cabinet colleagues who have indulged in acts of improprieties such as the infamous education scam and the acts of commission by members of the Home Minister's son. Being loyal to individual ministers is like treating Meghalaya as a family property. Not having the courage to take swift action has reduced Dr Sangma's own credibility. It is easy to say that the law will take its course but we all know that justice is a long haul, not just in Meghalaya but in the country too. Dr Sangma is therefore hiding behind this easy alibi.

In agriculture we are far from being organic, going by the huge import of fertilisers and pesticides. In education the state could not come up with the medical college which has only recently been blessed with a foundation stone. There are no state run engineering colleges and no state university as yet. Health care or its limited reach can be gauged from the high fertility rate and poor nutritional indices of children and mothers in Meghalaya. Entrepreneurship is not yet developed and this needs a push considering that employment in the government sector is saturated. The Basin Programme is yet to meet its intended outcomes. The road condition has deteriorated most during this government. One very pointed allegation against Dr Sangma is that he has aggressively pushed all development projects to Garo Hills, more particularly to his constituency, Ampati. How Dr Sangma counters this will be interesting.

Overall, the MUA-II government can be certified to have generated much hopes and aspirations which have largely been unmet.

Dr Sangma's cabinet colleagues allege that he interferes in their department and does not allow them a free hand. Also that he functions like a dictator. To these allegations one can only blame the ministers who have neither weight nor substance to challenge their 'Big Boss' in cabinet meetings. Only weak and spineless people can turn an ordinary human being into a tyrant, a bully or a Boss. Now those supine individuals have jumped to another party where they think they can wield clout. Really? Perhaps they jumped fences too soon. To Dr Sangma I would suggest he read the book, "Collaborating with the Enemy: How to Work with People You Don't Agree with or Like or Trust, by Adam Kahane. In the book one paragraph is strikingly accurate. It says, Enemifying, vilifying, and demonizing pervade the political discourse around the world. And we enact this enemifying syndrome not only in politics but also at work and at home. Each one of us does this enemifying bit by telling ourselves how other people are messing things up: colleagues, clients, and those who work for and with us. It's always the 'other' who is the problem; never us. This enemying which feels exciting and righteous and heroic actually obfuscates the challenges we face rather than give clarity. It amplifies conflict and narrows the space for problem solving. It distracts us with dreams of decisive victory which cannot be realized, instead of helping us focus on the real work we need to do.

In politics, at work and at home collaboration is both necessary and difficult. We all need to get work done which is important but to do so we need to work with people who view things differently than us. And the more important the issue and different the views, the more necessary and difficult the collaboration! The challenge with collaboration is that in order to make our way forward, we must work with others, including people we don't agree with or like or trust. Such is the challenge in running a ministry and heading a government. And although collaboration is not the only option, the others being Force, Adapt, Exit, collaboration is by far the only way out in politics. But the collaborative method must be creative enough to make others feel it is their idea too and it is to their advantage, rather than for one person to take credit for everything. Hence conventional collaboration does not work! This is where leadership comes in. A leader follows unconventional means of collaboration.

So what is leadership one might ask and what sort of leader/s does Meghalaya need? Was Dr Mukul Sangma a misfit as a leader or did the elected representatives he had to work with fall short of his expectations of transforming Meghalaya? Socrates envisaged rulers to also be philosophers and vice versa. Socrates' prescription is idealistic in our situation because our elected representatives still need to grasp the meaning and purpose of philosophy. Sadly they want to rule us without any idea of democracy as a philosophy.

One can empathise with Dr Mukul Sangma for losing hope in his ministers. He had given Health to AL Hek but the man failed to envisage the breadth of understanding that health care in Meghalaya demands. Health was reduced to working out an insurance package. The CM gave PWD to Sniawbhalang Dhar and that was a major error of judgment - a former PWD contractor then lorded over the Department! What a horror! Earlier the CM gave the Power Ministry to Clement Marak. It was a disaster. Later the CM gave Power to Comingone Ymbon who has now deserted the Congress ship. Senior MLAs like Prestone Tynsong and Rowell Lyngdoh who lost their lucrative portfolios in the reshuffle naturally want sweet revenge. PN Syiem, the Mawsynram MLA has converted his differences with Dr Mukul Sangma over the one-man- one- post legislation into a personal feud. So Dr Sangma has several old and bitter enemies who would like to see his political epitaph written sooner than later.

Alas, none of these legislators actually care about the fate of Meghalaya and if one were to ask them to make a presentation on the road map they have in mind for this state, I am sure they will fail as miserably as they are clueless about such issues. They want to win elections and sit on the ministerial chair. That's it! That's their political vision. Hence for the next election it would be a good idea to have fresh new faces enter the political battle. We are so tired of the faded and jaded, been there, done that type of politicians and opportunists who will join any bandwagon where they see themselves as power holders, not as public servants.

Dr Mukul Sangma meanwhile should take time off on a Sunday and read the book, "Transforming Leadership," by James Macgregor Burns. The author has analysed all kinds of leaders from Napolean to Hitler before prescribing what transformational leadership is all about. And this is the leadership we sorely need in Meghalaya today.

Mother Earth and World Soil Day Musings

By Dr. Ratan Bhattacharjee

In 1912 Curley an Indian chef refused to sell any more of his land to the Federal government. He rejected the Government offer for a land cession. The words he said were heart rending, " "The land you see is not ordinary soil. It is the dust of the blood ,the flesh , the bone of our ancestors We fought , bled and died to keep other Indians from taking it." Essentially, all life depends upon the soil . There can be no life without soil and no soil without life, they have evolved together. Land is not merely soil, it is a fountain of energy flowing through a three-tiered hierarchical circuit of soils , plants and animals. Each soil has had its own history. Like a river , a mountain , a forest or any natural thing its present condition is due to the influences of many things and events of the past. Nature has endowed mother earth with glorious wonders and vast resources that man may use for his own ends. Soil is the most remarkable wonder and nothing can be more important to our ancestors to ourselves and to our children than the soil. In fact, soil provides living space for humans as well as essential ecosystem services which are important for water regulation and supply, climate regulation and biodiversity conservation.

The Latin name for man , homo ,derived from humus, the stuff of life in the soil. Pearl S. Buck in her novel, 'The Good Earth,' once said, "And roots , if they are to bear fruits , must be kept well in the soil of the land." These words seem significant when the world was celebrating World Soil Day on December 5. Out of the land we came and into it we must all go. Even going beyond these symbolic words, we can understand the value of soil and land in our life. The Global Soil partnership dedicated World Soil Day 2017 to the theme of 'Caring for the Planet Starts from the Ground'. Soil plays the essential role in human livelihoods although there is a worldwide increase in degradation of soil resources due to the inappropriate management practices, population pressure driving unsustainable intensification and inadequate governance over the essential resource. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) soil holds three times as much carbon as the atmosphere and can help us meet the challenges of a changing climate. 815 million people are food insecure and 2 billion people are nutritionally unsafe, but we can mitigate this through soil. Actually 95% of our food comes from soil, 33% of our global soils are already degraded. All focus now should be given on the importance of soil and land use management in a sustainable manner. Protection of soil is most important in the hilly regions like Meghalaya and other states of the North East where landslides occur frequently. As Marion Cran wrote it, " If I wanted to have a happy garden , I must ally myself with my soil ; study and help it to the utmost , untiringly. Always, the soil must come first."

Sometimes we can make a land beautiful like a flower as William Blake sings in Auguries of Innocence : " To see a world in a grain of sand and a heaven in a wild flower. " Some nations consider various other solutions. Whereas an overabundance of carbon in the air has been disrupting our climate, plants are hungry for the stuff. Farmlands essentially operate as a vast lung , breathing carbon dioxide through photosynthesis and converting it into plant tissues. It results in less of the heat -trapping gas in the atmosphere, but the healthier the soil , the more carbon is stored in plants. Soil beneath our feet has a huge potential to sequester carbon. Actually the earth possesses five major pools of carbon. Of those pools the atmosphere is already overloaded with the stuff. The oceans are turning acidic as they become saturated with it. The forests are diminishing and underground fossil fuel reserves are being emptied. It leaves soil as the as the most likely repository for immense quantities of carbon. Advent of agriculture started about 10000 years ago and it accelerated over the last century as industrial farming and ranching rapidly expanded.

To avoid catastrophic climate, soil cannot be ignored. Sequestering carbon in soil can produce double dividend one by reducing climate change by extracting carbon from the atmosphere and it restores the health of degraded soil and increases agricultural yields.

(Dr. Ratan Bhattacharjee is Associate Professor and Head ,Post Graduate Dept of English Dum Dum Motijheel College. He can be reached at :profratanbhattacharjee@gmail.com)

TO THE EDITOR

Much ado about Bharat Mata

Editor,

There is so much ado about nothing in the BJP's plan to portray the so called 'Bharat Mata' in traditional attire in Northeast India. 'Bharat Mata' or 'Mother India' is a new concept brought in by the BJP after it regained political power in the country in 2014. In the past, we had 'Mother India Biri' for all those who wanted to smoke tobacco without any religious implication. But today under the BJP rule, we have 'Mother India' or 'Bharat Mata' with a religious connotation. One respectable scholar has enlightened me that the figure used by the BJP to represent 'Bharat Mata' is that of the Hindu goddess Saraswati. But in Hindu concept, a female goddess can be represented as Parvati, Lakshmi, Durga, Kali, whatever name used, even as the Khasis call 'Thabalong', according to definite purposes of divine interventions in the cosmos. All these female goddesses are consorts to the male god who may be represented as Shiva, Vishnu, Krishna, Rama, etc., The issue is still inconclusive as to who among them is the real Mahadev (supreme god-head), because it depends only on the claims of particular devotees to particular god-heads.

The Indian society in general does not respect women but always subdues them because they are human beings in flesh and blood, but once women enter into the spiritual realm through death, even through the suicidal 'sati', the spirits of deceased women become respectful, honourable, and even adorable. Temples have to be built on the spots where they died. It all indicates the social attitude that women in flesh and blood are not to be feared and rather held with disdain, but women in the form of 'ghosts' are not only to be adored but to be feared. This is a reality. Many seekers of spiritual enlightenment, not only among the Hindus but also among the tribals, are reported to have encountered with powerful female deities of the hills, the rivers, the caves, and what not. A human patriarch is powerful over female human beings, but finds himself powerless before these female spiritual beings. That is how we find in our Indian society, that though women in flesh and blood are treated as properties and slaves of the males, but more religious sacrifices are offered to female spiritual beings. It is a country of courageous and aggressive males with no respect for living females, but of submissive and slave-like males to female spirits. Hence, though Indian society today is in general dominated by patriarchy, it seemed more profitable for the males to represent the country as a female, 'Bharat Mataji'.

India is a political entity, not a religious entity, hence, let 'Bharat Mataji', being a modern concept of Indian unity be only a political concept of democracy and accordingly too is not to be represented by any of the Hindu gods or goddesses, or by Mohammed, or by Jesus or Buddha or by any religious god-head in the country. Indian integration will come only through the process of democratisation in the realm of secularism, not merely by adorning a Hindu goddess in tribal attires, as this could actually be an insult, as the tribals, especially the Khasis who do not conceive God or the Divine, in human form whether in sari or in jaiñsem, but only in the ideal of U TraiKynrad (Lord the Master). This God intervenes in human affairs in mother-concepts of kaHukum, kaSynshar and kaHok, and can never be represented in the female or male form of a statue or a painting. So the BJP's attempt to represent a Hindu goddess as 'Bharat Mata' by dressing her in tribal attire would only alienate the tribals further from the objective of making India a strong democratic and secular state.

Yours etc.,
FabianLyngdoh,
Via email

NEHU's anti-student attitude

Editor,

The North East Hill University (NEHU) is no doubt a progressive university producing great scholars through the decades and it will continue to do so. But there are certain issues that concern the University which have been neglected but which affect the students and their future prospects. Some grievances of the student community are the following:

In some courses the questions are not student-friendly because of the use of bombastic language. Hence much of our precious time is lost in just figuring out what the teachers actually want us to write about. Some students don't even attempt the questions in spite of knowing the answer because of one pretentious word. That student ends up losing marks for no fault of his/her. This shakes our confidence as it stands in the way of our scoring marks despite knowing the answer.

The duration of semester, as we understand the word 'semester' is 6 months but in NEHU we have odd semesters from July-October (4 months approximately and another semester from November-April (4 months, with winter breaks in between of 2 months) . This makes it difficult for teachers to cover the course because of the short scholastic duration. As a result there is large scale infusion of facts and information overload which makes it difficult for students to grasp or retain. In some courses offered by NEHU, due to reshuffling of papers, some papers which should form the basis of our studies are taught at the end of the semester while those that should be taught in the end semester are taught at the initial stages. How is this going to help us students?

We face difficulties in getting our papers re-evaluated since the time limit given is one month from the date of declaration of results whereas the original mark-sheets are distributed only after a month. It appears that this is done intentionally so that the students lose out the opportunity to seek re-evaluation.

Will the Vice Chancellor and those who claim to have the student's interests at heart bring in the corrective measures sooner than later?

Yours etc.,
Concerned students

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.

"Life is nothing but a competition to be the criminal rather than the victim."
--- Elbert Hubbard

The Shillong Times

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Trump on Jerusalem

PRESIDENT Donald Trump has scuppered a possible deal with Palestine. He has made nonsense of diplomacy by recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital. The decision has nothing commendable. It does not stipulate that Israel has to stop its programme of building settlements in occupied land. Tel Aviv has not been called upon to recognize the Palestinian state. Israel is not obligated by Trump's decision to protect the rights of the roughly 1,00,000 Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem who are cut off from the city's services. Trump's team on Israel-Jason Greenblatt, David Friedman and his son-in-law Jared Kushner – is simply lacking in experience. Kushner's family trusts have made financial contributions to organizations building illegal West Bank settlements. An Israel supporter, tycoon Sheldon Adalson is one of Trump's major campaign donors. U.S Jews who form a vocal lobby have been critical of Donald Trump's failure to condemn neo-Nazis in the United States. Trump may now be trying to win over Israel to garner the support of US Jews. The Christian right wing in the US is also in favour of Jerusalem being freed of Muslim control in any part. The decision of Trump to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital may be a part of his crusade against Muslims.

A Palestinian state with East Jerusalem would have made the decision sensible. The status quo concerning Israel and Palestine is hardly satisfactory. Palestinians suffer under occupation. Israel faces global isolation as its occupation is not generally justified. Trump's decision to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital causes instability in West Asia. Prime Minister Narendra Modi is hardly likely to view this development with equanimity.

LOOKING BACK

May 5, 1989

Unusual volcano activity may affect global climate

Recent analysis of volcanic data has shown unusual volcano activity on the "ring of fire" around Pacific Ocean which scientists fear may result in critical period for global climate around September this year.

According to Dr Ram S Shrivastava, Professor of Physics at the Holkar Science College here, of more than 600 active volcanoes all over the world at present on an average nearly 50 new volcanoes erupt each year.

He said there had been unusual solar activity this year and most of these volcanoes located on the "ring of fire" were showing abrupt activity. According to Dr Shrivastava the satellite data proved that nearly 50 to 100 watts per square meter solar energy was reflected back into space over the Indian sub-continent.

The 'Rohingya' Crisis, Colonialism and the North East

By JyotirmoyProdhani

The Rohingya issue, where image dissemination in various platforms including electronic and social media has played a major role, is no doubt a massive humanitarian crisis. Bangladesh has given an official count of about 600,000 Rohingyas being taken in and presently clueless as to how to handle them. If the newspaper articles of Bangladesh are to be believed, considerable amount of resentment is brewing up in the country following such large scale influx into their territory; they even accused the 'Rohingyas' of having destroyed huge areas of forest land, leveled miles of hills and felling scores trees in a matter of weeks. In fact, the pressure is so acute that many indigenous people in the region are reported to have been turned homeless. Syed Badrul Ahsan in his article in the Indian Express writes, "Rohingya…has emerged as a new class of Islamist militants hostile to the growth of liberal politics in the country." Quite curiously, with the bait of Nobel Peace Prize dangling from some dubious quarters, Sheikh Hasina is on a queer mat who might as well be dumped by the West if she fails to toe their line.

The'Rohingya' question, however, has a peculiar historical connection with Assam, vis a vis the North East. It is through the Yandaboo treaty of 1826 following the first Anglo Burmese war that both Assam and Burma became part of the British colonial rule. The British intervention brought an end to the atrocities of the Maans (Burmese) in Assam but at the same time Assam also lost its sovereignty. Similarly, Burma too became part of the British colony and consequently both in Assam and Burma (especially in the Arakan region)scores of landless farmers from East Bengal were implanted by the British to exploit and plunder the vast stretch of lands. However, unlike Assam, the Arakan region had sizeable presence of Bengali Muslims prior to colonization but after colonization in 1826 the population of the East Bengal settlers increased with such ferocious speed that, as written by Derek Tonkin, "By the time of the 1931 Census "Chittagongian" immigrants outnumbered indigenous Muslim residents of Arakan by at least four to one." This is also the time when the native Arakanese Buddhists were steadily pushed to the periphery by these settlers. This was the fallout of one of the most vicious colonial crimes.

The overwhelming presence of the Chittagongian settlers led to social anxiety, which became more pronounced when the immigrants made the sinister moves of turning the occupied Arakanese territory into a hard core Islamic state by driving out the native Buddhists from their own homeland. The British had armed the East Bengal immigrants of Arakan to fight the Japanese during the World War II. But the East Bengal immigrants in 1942 had, instead of resisting the Japanese,massacred more than 20,000 native Rakhine Buddhists with those weapons in places like Maungdaw where 214 Rakhine Buddhist villages were wiped out, which was also so far one of the biggest massacres of indigenous people by immigrants in the history of the twentieth century South Asia. Being emboldened by this successful massacre of the natives, these settlers campaigned to make Arakan a part of Pakistan after Burma got independence in 1948. However, Jinnah was not keen to meddle with Burma.

The Rakhine people, also known as Mog, some of who are there as native tribes in Tripura and other parts of the North East, are the original inhabitants of Arakan who have been there since time immemorial, at least since 3525 BCE, from the time of their King, Marayu and earlier. Lord Buddha is believed to have gone to their territory in person in 326 BCE to spread His message and since then Arakan had become a major seat of Theravada Buddhism. The native Rakhines consider themselves as being repressed by the majority Burmese on the one hand and the immigrant East Bengal settlers on the other who have successfully outnumbered the Rakhine people in Northern Arakan. Nevertheless, the Bengali Muslims of Arakan who had settled early were very much a part of Burma who even had elected members to the first Constituent Assembly in independent Burma.

The origin of the term Rohingya is rather vague. The Arakan settlers began to call themselves Rohingyas mainly since 1982. Derek Tonkin in one of his essays revealed that it was Dr. Francis Buchanan who had used the word "Rossawn" in 1799 in an article published from Calcutta.After this, he writes, "Throughout the remainder of his life, Buchanan, who was a prolific writer and gazetteer, never used the word "Rooinga" again." (26 May 2016). However, the East Bengal origin settlers of Arakan now prefer to call themselves as "Rohingyas" with the objective of claiming indigeneity, though their claims of indigeneity would be as much intriguing and problematic as it is to call the White Americans as indigenous over the American Indians or the White Australians and the White New Zealanders as indigenous over the Australian aboriginals and the Maoris respectively. Quite curiously, in order to deny their East Bengal origin the "Rohingyas" even claimed to have originated from Saudi Arabia. Rodion Ebdighausen significantly points out that the term "Rohingya" is a 'highly politicized one' which, he writes, "media, activists and politicians use to take a political stance."The native Myanmarese, therefore, contest the term "Rohingya" as they consider it a tactical term used by the East Bengal origin Arakan settlers to camouflage themselves as indigenous to Myanmar.

Nevertheless, there have been East Bengal Muslims in Arakan from the medieval period whom even the Junta government had accepted as citizens including the ones who were brought in hordes by the British colonizers till independence, though the Myanmar government has not been ready to accept the immigrants who had infiltrated the Arakan province after 1948. Despite their claims, quite significantly, the oral history, folklore, folk songs etc. of the "Rohingyas" reflect their deep and indelible linkages with the culture, history and language of East Bengal/ Pakistan. In fact, the New York based Burmese author, HlaOo, writes, "(When) I went back to Maungdaw I needed a Bengali interpreter to shop… it is completely unthinkable to recognize them as an indigenous ethnic group of our Burma." The popular "Rohingya" folk singer, Muhammad Soufa in one of his pensive songs narrates the tale of their "suffering after migrating to an alien land chasing false dreams and greed for wealth without heeding the words of the Almighty" (Rohingya jatina bujilam keella o bujmon/ ….Janambhor ailam choli misa jutha kotha fandi re/…. Dhonsom pottir lubhe pori/ Bhuillar asool erto rika re).

The recent activities, especially in Assam by some Islamist organizations campaigning for the 'Rohingyas' to settle them in Assam and in some other parts of the North East, keeping in mind Tripura and places like South Garo Hills in Meghalaya etc., is ominous for it might lead to new social and demographic anxiety, besides North East has never been involved or responsible for the Arakan mess.

In fact, Myanmar should take back all the Rakhine refugees who are found to be genuine citizens of the country. Despite having their origin in that country Bangladesh may not be able to take the burden of such a huge number of additional people. The hypocrisy of the West and the oil rich Islamic countries is rather appalling. Instead of pontificating, threatening and bullying a poor and fledgling democracy like Myanmar as well as demonizing one of South Asia's greatest icons of Democracy, Aung Sang Suu Kyi, they should make their position clear as to whether they would at all accommodate any of the displaced refugees in their own lands. In this context the West has just extended their colonial attitude. Quite intriguingly none of these exorbitantly rich and wealthy countries with high voltage moral rhetoric have opened their borders to officially allow a single hapless person in, which is, arguably, the biggest shame. Hopefully, the world will also wake up to the plight of the indigenous tribes of Arakan, who have fled their homes in Myanmar and are now seeking shelter in Mizoram.

(The author teaches at NEHU, Shillong).

Is our culture slowly drifting into oblivion?

By Dameshwa M. Warjri

It is definite that we are aware of the political, economic and social predicaments in our state but are we oblivious of the downgrading of our own ethnic culture. The world is growing and changing rapidly but we must understand that a world without history is like a measurement without reference. There is no way of judging the future but by the past. Are we just going to stand and watch as our roots gets sucked into the abyss of uncertainty? We are always ready to cavil at the political imperfections, flaws faced by the state and even the 'famous Shillong weather,' but are we too ignorant to see the dying of our own native traditions; our language, our musical instruments, our food and most importantly our principles? Who makes us ignorant? We ourselves! "We put our hands over our eyes and weep that it is dark," says Swami Vivekananda. Half the ills of mankind are due to ignorance; the other half due to egotism. The prerequisites that constitute a community is culture and in it lies the language, music and so on. Language is not just a set of words but it is a tool to see culture in its own perspective.

As quoted by Noam Chomsky, "A language is not just words. It's a culture, a tradition, a unification of a community, a whole history that creates what a community is. It's all embodied in a language". Within the language we speak, both non-verbal and verbal communications reflects whether or not a culture values individualism or collectivism. It is sorrowful to find that we give less relevance to our own language. We prioritise it to be less significant than English. As S Bryon said, 'He who loves not his country, can love nothing'. Here, to love your country means to love everything about it and what it stands for. Many citizens of countries around the globe refuse to speak foreign languages among themselves. They have that sense of pride in their mother tongue and they embrace it to the fullest; a true expression of patriotism! It's a true fact that we look down upon our principles, we opt to find pride in other customs and not our own. A noticeable change that our honourable prime minister, Narendra Modi has done is that, he refuses to speak in English at any international summit. This is a question to be put forth to each and every individual; will you destroy your own vineyard to help others grow theirs?

Over many years, author after author have dedicated their lives to ensure the growth of our literature and articulation by publishing books, writing poems and translations. But their effort has all been in vain, as we the heirs have failed to take them into our care and give them the importance they deserve. Truth be told, we prefer speaking in English than in Khasi. We assume that it elevates our intelligence, which is immensely incorrect. English is just another language and not a measurement of intelligence.

Why are Khasi, Jaintia and Garo not kept as compulsory subjects by the Board of School Education for all local students studying in the state? Khasi students will opt for Khasi as their Major Indian Language and same goes for both Jaintia and Garo.

Students of Kendriya Vidyalayas and schools affiliated to the CBSE may have to read Hindi till Class X after President Pranab Mukherjee gave "in-principle approval" to a suggestion of a parliamentary panel. E.B. Tylor defines culture as a complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, laws, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society". In the Khasi community, the phrases ,'Ka Ri tip briew, tip Blei,' translated in English means, 'The nation that knows God and man,' and 'Ka Ri don akor don burom', in English is, 'The nation that knows honour and respect' are what have to be taught as they were followed by our forefathers. But the question arises as to where have all these noble teachings disappeared? Frankly speaking, our youth including me have drifted away from the teachings of the old and are strongly influenced by different forms of diversions which have corrupted our minds and replaced those noble teachings. Moral values are extinguished; minds have been rid of their character, discipline and authenticity. We do not have that sense of fraternity or brotherhood that unites us to protect and promote what is ours. Our selfish nature has brought us to the precipice.

Our country thrives on the phrase, 'Unity in Diversity.' Just consider the North Eastern states of India. There are about 220 languages spoken according to the 1971 census. Each and every culture has equal importance and they are not to be separated but if we do, it should be because we celebrate the diversity.

The number of different tribes around the world makes it impossible to record or otherwise preserve more than a tiny percentage of the knowledge being lost. Since 1900, 90 of Brazil's 270 Indian tribes have completely disappeared, while scores more have lost their lands or abandoned their ways. More than two-thirds of the remaining tribes have populations that are fewer than 1,000. Some might disappear before anyone notices. A recent study by M.I.T. linguist Ken Hale estimates that 3,000 of the world's 6,000 languages are doomed because no children speak them. Researchers estimate that Africa alone has 1,800 languages, Indonesia 672 and New Guinea 800. If a language disappears, traditional knowledge tends to vanish with it, since individual language groups have specialised vocabularies reflecting native people's unique solutions to the challenges of food gathering, healing and dealing with the elements in their particular ecological niche. Hale estimates that only 300 languages have a secure future.

The legends of Tirot Sing, Kiang Nongbah and Pa Togan Sangma which are woven into remarkable and impressive chronicles; the folklores of 'Ramhah', 'Kyllang bad Symper' and so on; the monoliths or 'mawbynna' erected across the Khasi and Jaintia hills; the traditional dances; the music; the food; the traditional medicine all contribute to our majestic history. This will all dissipate if we show no respect and importance to them.

The evanescence of our culture is inevitable. We will be nothing more than people without a history, without a language and without culture. Nothing but a tumble weed in the wind. "Ioh shah shong kulai h'u mynder shisngi, tang katta ar khiewja la bynta" - extract from a poem written by B.C. Jyrwa. Let us heed the teachings of the old and revive our spirit to love our own culture.

TO THE EDITOR

Does Rahul Gandhi merit to lead the Congress?

Editor,

Rahul Gandhi's ascension to the top post in the Indian National Congress has always been a question of 'when' rather than 'if'. Rahul Gandhi is now the fourth-generation and the fifth individual from the Nehru-Gandhi family to officially lead the 132-year-old party. His elevation to the post of Congress President is happening at a difficult time for him and his party. Is he really good enough to lead the grand old party? That's the pivotal question. Is he the best and only candidate to lead the party? Does the Congress not have any other alternative candidate other than him? Is he better than the likes of P Chidambaram, Jyotiraditya Scindia, Sachin Pilot Madhav and Shashi Tharoor? Can he connect with the people? Does he have the organizational skills like the BJP chief Amit Shah? Does he have the oratory skills like Modi? Only time will tell. We have seen in the past that even a mediocre political science student can force his mouth shut on politics. His quotes always court controversy and are full of gimmicks like 'Aaloo ki factory,' 'Jupiter velocity for dalits', 'Politics is in your pants', 'Poverty is a state of mind,'' 'Mahatma Gandhi is an NRI' etc, have made him the laughing stock on social media. However social media is not the real battle. The real battle will be elections . First there will be the Lok Sabha elections in the first half of 2019, when Rahul Gandhi would be the automatic Prime Ministerial candidate for the Congress. The election schedule means Rahul Gandhi will have to lead the Congress in 10 assembly elections and the Lok Sabha polls in the next 18 months. Only the elections results will tell us whether Rahul Gandhi is a leader by 'merit' or by 'default' .

Yours etc.,
Manuel Carey Lymba
Shillong -8

Abolition of begging!

Editor,

It is highly unfortunate that some people are speaking in favour of abolition of begging in our country on the pretext of our progress and development. Though there is no doubt about India's progress but this unfortunately remains a lopsided and jobless growth. Indeed, India's unemployment problem has been growing since much hyped 1991 liberalization of economy that has, unfortunately been followed by all successive UPA and NDA governments. Employment to population ratio is a clear indicator of what is the general outcome of this policy. While employment to population ratio was 58.6 per cent in 1994, it has, alarmingly, come down to 52.4 per cent in 2016. The disinvestment policy and the policy of ignoring cottage industries, farming and tourism are the reasons for growing unemployment in India.

In this scenario, it is too much to ask a beggar to fend for her/ his job when almost half of our work force are unemployed! Government should generate employment for all. But before doing so, if we abolish begging, it will be tantamount to killing most of our beggars.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

Law needed for governments to take over errant private hospitals

Editor,

It is a known and bitter fact that private hospitals have become money-making industrial institutions through their negligent and inhuman attitude. There are reports that employed super-specialists are given daily targets of business for profiteering of hospitals when treatments are done irrespective of their actual needs. People going only for some tests etc are unnecessarily alarmed for some serious disease to ensure admission to hospital even without any need.

Recent two cases of raising exorbitant bill of rupees sixteen lakhs by Fortis Hospital Gurugram also charging disproportionately for consumables like gloves and syringes, and giving body of a live child wrapped as dead child by Max Hospital (Shalimar Bagh) are two such media-highlighted examples even though such examples are otherwise routine for private industrial institutions called hospitals.

Public-memory is very short, and the guilty ones escape after some lapse of time. Law should be enacted that such erring hospitals may be taken over by governments to be run as premium hospitals. Such a system will make effective utilization of huge money invested in these hospitals for public good. It will also serve as deterrent against wrong-doings by private hospitals.

Yours etc.,
Madhu Agrawal
(Guinness Record Holder for letters in newspapers)
Delhi - 6

Zebra crossing for what purpose?

Editor,

Kudos to the Government for painting zebra crossings to allow pedestrians to cross the roads, especially at junctions where traffic is very dense. There is a zebra crossing at the gate of the Meghalaya High Court and another near the Deputy Commissioner's Office. It was very important to have either a zebra crossing or an over bridge at these two places as pedestrians are always faced with the challenge of crossing the road against the heavy traffic driven at high speed and endangering their lives.

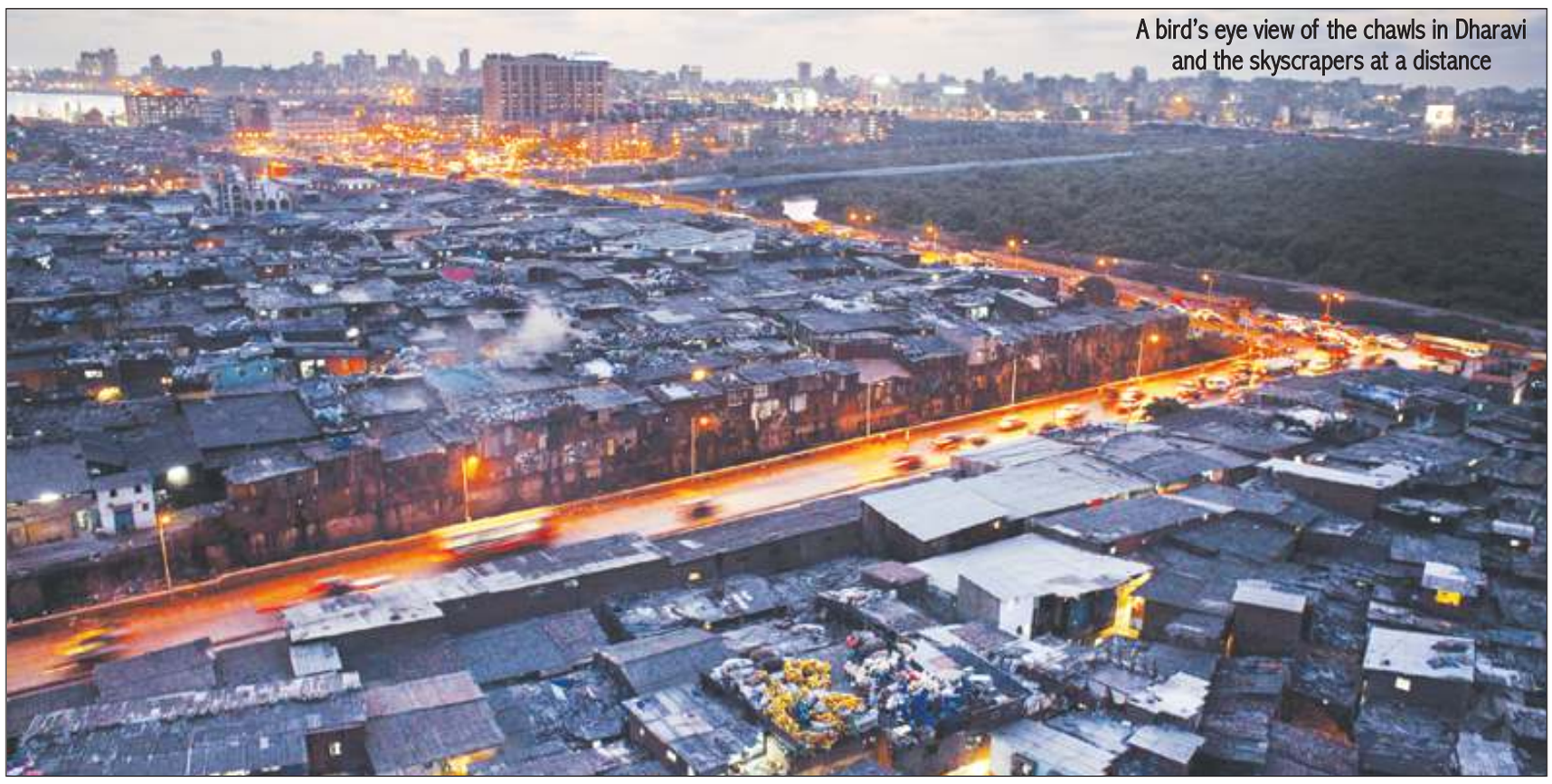
After the zebra crossings were painted at these places, I thought it would become convenient for us to cross the road. Unfortunately it has become more difficult. We cross the road thinking that there is a zebra crossing and the vehicles would stop or slow down but the speeding vehicles drive past as if there is no zebra crossing in spite of seeing the pedestrians waiting to cross. Barring a few, most vehicles refuse to slow down at the zebra crossings unless the traffic police stop them. And then pedestrians are made to rush to the other end to make way for traffic. I have also witnessed similar predicament at other zebra crossings in the city.

As per the Rules of the Road Regulation, it is the duty of the driver to slow down when approaching a pedestrian crossing but the same is not followed. Perhaps the drivers are ignorant about the rules or they are not bothered. In January this year I visited Thimphu, the capital city of Bhutan and there I found many zebra crossings in the city but surprisingly when we crossed the road the drivers always halted their vehicle at the crossings until pedestrians had crossed.

The concerned authorities must educate the errant drivers about rules pertaining to zebra crossings so that they adhere to it.

Yours etc.,
Netra Kumar Rai,
(Advocate)
Shillong -1

In the Maximum City



A bird's eye view of the chawls in Dharavi and the skyscrapers at a distance

Filmmaker Basu Chatterjee in 1972 made *Piya Ka Ghar*. The Jaya Bhaduri-Anil Dhawan starrer was the story of a reality check for a newly-wed couple desperate for their moments of privacy as they live in a cramped room in a Mumbai chawl with the entire family. Journalist and writer Chandrima Pal's new book *At Home in Mumbai* (Harper Collins) is inspired by the never ending search of Mumbaikars — be it Shah Rukh Khan or a commoner — for a living space they can call home in the Maximum City.

There are two things that anyone living in Mumbai is concerned about. Getting famous and/or buying your own home. The first is fuelled by its beautiful and glamorous residents who have made the city more famous than the national capital.

The second is a dream shared by all the people who have landed here from all over the world. In Maximum City, Suketu Mehta writes about how scarcity of land is what shapes the city's culture, philosophy, politics and economy. That and the cumulative energy of the homeless who have been braving the struggle and the dystopian living conditions in the hope of a better future and more than a toehold.

In 1977, Gulzar wrote *Gharonda*, a film starring Amol Palekar and Zarina Wahab that captured the essence of the Bombay mirage. Palekar and Wahab are your regular middle-class working couple, who dream of getting married and moving into a small flat of their own. They share their respective homes with flatmates and family and work hard to build a corpus for their ideal home. Unfortunately, the builder turns out to be a con man and the young couple's dreams of starting a new life in a new home comes to a bitter end, and so does their relationship.

Not much has changed since the film was made. In 2014, while covering the Maharashtra assembly elections in Mumbai, veteran journalist Shekhar Gupta wrote an article titled 'Mere Pass Space Hai'! He said: 'No other city is perhaps as obsessed with the idea of space as Mumbai. ... It defines its people, its culture and its conversations. It defines what they do, what they are pushed to do and what they are unable to achieve.'

At Home in Mumbai: Stories from the City's Living Spaces dwells on Mumbai a place you can call home and yet remain homeless. No other city obsesses as much over space with such passion as Mumbai.

Excerpts:

A house for Bollywood stars is more than just an address. It is a trophy they like to gift themselves. A reward more powerful and satisfying than any of the statuettes that the award functions dole out every year. A trophy that tells the world that the star has arrived.

CITY OF STARS

It was the day before the release of his most unabashedly commercial film. Shah Rukh Khan, in his inimitable style, had thrown open the doors of his palatial bungalow to hundreds of media persons, friends and colleagues. It was a grand Iftar party and a toast to the success of the film – a foregone conclusion at that time. There was a lavish spread on long tables – kebabs that melt in the mouth, rich, layered biryani, fresh dahi vadas and an array of desserts. Outside the high walls, a sea of people had gathered, the tide swelling every minute. Men, women, star-struck rookies, veteran writers, producers, distributors, close friends and his trusted PR aides buzzed around the split-level, Victorian lawns, eyes trained on the grand stairway.

Well into the party, he appeared. Pausing at the door on the upper level overlooking the lawn. Dressed in a black kurta and salwar contoured for his incredibly sculpted body, a pair of dark aviators, he paused dramatically, waving out to his 'guests' who dropped whatever they were doing to reach out for their cameras, microphones, to get the moment evidently planned to heighten the drama – the dark knight against the pristine, venetian backdrop of the white building. 'Shah Rukh' 'Khan Sahab' the voices urged, as the star slowly walked down the winding stairway, pausing, blowing kisses, waving, smiling and then finally stepping into the lawn greeting, hugging every one. Seasoned journalists were reduced to giddy-headed teens in his presence, as he gave each one what they would say was a 'moment' – a hug, a smile, a few words, an 'exclusive' sound byte.

In a few minutes, there was a fresh ripple at the durbar. The star's family – his wife Gauri, and his two children (Abram was not in the picture yet) and his sister had made an appearance. He joined them on the stairs, pausing at every turn of the picturesque setting for photo ops – each member of the family handling the hundreds of cameras with the ease of one to the manor born. And when the star climbed on to the platform next to the high walls, into a caged enclosure to wave out to his fans, with his daughter Suhana by his side, the crowd erupted in joy. From the other side of the wall, it seemed as though Sachin Tendulkar had hit a winning sixer. A moment that was recreated in his critically acclaimed film Fan.

A young journalist, in his early twenties, looked at the slim silhouette that looked so much larger than life on the screen, and now against the blue Bandra sky, nodded his head and murmured. 'Isn't it amazing how this middle-class boy with no connections or money arrives in the city and creates an asset that is a destination in itself? An outsider who has left his unique stamp on Maximum City?'

It was hyperbole but true. Just like the city.

I recalled an earlier interview that the star had given to a news magazine. He had said: 'People will always remember me for Mannat. It belittles my other achievements but it's okay. Beyond your house, whatever you get is value addition. As they say, you're not going to eat money and the food won't taste better if you eat from a silver plate.'

FINE LINES

It was a pleasant December day in 1992, almost a decade after the textile mill strike fronted by Dutta Samant seeded the first germs of rot in the heart of the working-class ecology of the city. The residents of Natunchi Chawl had gathered around a large television set one morning. Some of them had subscribed to Newstrack, India's first video news magazine, produced and anchored by Madhu Trehan. This particular edition was special.

It was about the demolition of the Babri Masjid that had happened a week earlier. The residents, drawn into the spectacle that was unfolding on the screen, joined in the war cry blaring from the television, 'Jai Sri Ram!'

'Jai Sri Ram', jubilant men thundered. Young boys ran around cheering for friends and jeering at imaginary enemies. It was all in jest. Some jolly good fun. Something to talk about and make games around. Until, of course, the milkman called that fateful morning and everything changed.

'The Muslims have poisoned the milk. They want to kill our children,' he said.

'I get goose bumps even today,' says Swaroop, recalling that phone call, rubbing his fingers on his bare forearms. The whole game of demolishing enemies had suddenly turned real. It was a game that adults were playing and it was not funny at all.

The chawl, which was close to Bhendi Bazaar, the Muslim hub of the city, was on the edge and armed. When the riots did break out, male members formed groups to keep vigil all night. Cadres of the most influential political party taught young boys how to make petrol bombs. Weapons were fashioned out of playthings and kitchen stuff – stumps, knives and bats. Some even brandished scythes.

Every now and then there would be rumours. 'Five thousand Muslims are headed this way, be prepared.' Luckily, none of the weapons had to be used at Natunchi Chawl. 'It was mostly rumour-mongering,' insists Swaroop.

But there was damage.

When the boys did venture out, they saw shops that had been ransacked. Houses burnt. Some of them belonged to their school friends at the St Xavier's Academy.

'Why is this shop destroyed?' Swaroop and his brother Harshad asked the adults. 'Because they belonged to a Muslim.' Many of the shops, restaurants belonging to the minority group were burnt down by hooligans. There was retaliation as well. But the ethnic cleansing had begun. Most of the 'others', those who eat meat, offer namaz or worship different gods, were pushed away from the vicinity. Eventually, the cleansing extended to anyone who ate different kind of food as well.

Something changed in the city after the riots. Something in the air, in the sands of the Chowpatty, the iconic city beach, in the dark tidal waters of the Mahim creek. 'There is too much mistrust, too much labelling, too much fear in all of us,' says Swaroop.

'The chawl was a symbol of peaceful coexistence, it reflected the old character of the city,' he says. 'All the bread that I sell here is supplied by Muslim bakeries. South Bombay does not have any shopping malls. We all go to Crawford Market, which is run mostly by Muslims. People from all over the city come to buy kites from Dongri, and fly it for Makar Sankranti. How can we live without each other?'

Swaroop's six-year-old son Ishaan is a fan of Bollywood actor Akshay Kumar. The family was watching a film, Holiday, in which the star goes around killing terrorists. Ishan burst out, 'Look at those terrorists he is killing. They must be Muslims.' A shocked Swaroop asked his son where he had picked it up from. 'Everyone says Muslims are terrorists,' the boy replied. It took Swaroop a while to convince him otherwise.

Back at the Chill Mar, the world outside Swaroop's food joint has got busier. One of the senior craftsmen in his team steps in to have a chat with us. He is from Kolkata. Artisans from Bengal are highly prized for their skills in gem and diamond setting. He is one of them and has been working here for fifteen years, commuting from distant Virar to Girgaon every day. Swaroop steps out to have a word with a young woman, possibly on her way home. Introductions are short and swift.

And almost unnecessary.'Could you guide her to the Keshavji Naik Chawl?' he says. I am greeted with a warm smile and the woman takes me through the narrow gullies through a 'short cut' to emerge in the heart of the historic chawl. 'Where do you live?' I ask her.

'In a chawl close by,' she points to another similar building around the corner, speaking in the easy, sonorous Mumbai English.

'Do you like it there?' I ask, suddenly aware of how shallow I sounded.

'I love it ... wouldn't trade it for anything in the world.'

She disappeared in the crowd returning from workplaces, pausing to pick up supplies, flowers and fruits.

I look around. In the darkening hour of the day, two young boys were playing cricket in the corridor of the chawl, women leaned over to exchange gossip and goodies, clothes were hung out to dry, and fragrant tulsi plants thrived in cement planters. Everything seemed just the way it used to be. Only the boys playing corridor cricket may soon demand an attached bathroom, a bride and a bedroom, perhaps in that order. *(IBNS-TWF)*

Image Credit: Harper Collins

Be your own boss at home

By Ranjan K Baruah

Many students ask me how to earn from home when they are still studying. Youths fresh out of college also ask this question and I tell them about different possible options.

Options and opportunities to work from home may be different from place to place. One needs to know the demand and accordingly planning can be made. In today's edition, we are publishing some of the 'work-from-home' options. One must be good in networking and communication to excel in jobs being done from home.

Online Tutor: Online tutoring is the process of teaching in a virtual or networked environment in which teachers and learners are separated by time and space. Online tutoring, as a reflection of the diversity of the wider internet, is practised using many different approaches and is addressed to distinct sets of users.

The distinctions are in online content and interface as well as in tutoring and tutor-training methodologies. Definitions associated with online tutoring vary widely, reflecting the ongoing evolution of the technology, the refinement and variation in online learning methodology and the interactions of the organisations which deliver online tutoring services with the institutions, individuals, and learners that employ the services.

Blogger: A blog is a discussion or informational website published on the World Wide Web consisting of discrete, often informal diary-style text entries ("posts"). Posts are typically displayed in reverse chronological order so that the most recent post appears first, at the top of the web page. Blogger is a blog-publishing service that allows multi-user blogs with time-stamped entries. One may start a blog or an Internet site offering expertise on a particular subject and sell advertising on the site. Blogs may be use for branding, publicity or even for online trading like selling goods through online mode.

Data Entry: One needs to be familiar with computers and speed of typing using key boards. Good typing and numeric key entry skills are a common prerequisite. Knowledge of database software, spreadsheets and word processing is helpful. Good spelling, grammar and punctuation skills are also necessary, as well as strong reading comprehension. There are demand for data entry operator and interested may work from home by engaging into data entry.

Makeup Artist: A makeup artist's medium is human body, applying makeup and prosthetics for theatrical, television, filmmaking, fashion, magazines and other similar productions including all aspects of the modeling industry. Individual may work from home by becoming makeup professionals. There is huge demand when there are marriages or other special occasions.

Flower Arrangement: Flowers are always in demand on all occasions and there is need for arranging them to make them attractive. It is an organised way of design and colour towards creating an ambience using flowers, foliage and other floral accessories. Demand is high when there are weddings or special events and festivals. One may start this work from home.

Cake Making: Cakes cover a wide range of preparations that can be simple or elaborate and that share features with other desserts such as pastries, meringues, custards and pies. As cakes are in demand in many occasions like birthdays and anniversaries, one may think of taking up this task according to the need of customers. There are short-term training programmes for many options like cake making, designing, wealth from waste, flower arrangements, make up etc. Aspirants may join these training programmes and start their ventures from homes. In Meghalaya, one may think of traditional souvenir designing and become successful entrepreneur. There are many other options and opportunities which can be termed as home based careers.

(Ranjan K Baruah is a career mentor and can be reached at bkranjan@gmail.com or 9864055558 for any career related queries)

Google Images

Animals play major role in world mythology

By Maneka Sanjay Gandhi

In the ancient world, humans were not just close to animals but in most cases, deeply dependent on them. Since they were part of the local culture, they could not be separated from religion. So there was a willingness to use animals as gods. As time went on, humans fused with animals in all the major religions as a way to get beyond human limitations.

Animals were, and are, seen as wiser, more mysterious, with access to secrets in nature that are hidden to humans. They gave added meaning to the divine. They were stronger, faster, could live in the sea or air, had abilities and senses that the human could not even aspire to. So they made the divine so much more than the mere superhuman.

The Indians, Greeks, Mesopotamians and Egyptians led the way but every culture, strangely enough, used the same animals to represent the same powers. The bull and the lion represent power and protection, the cow represents love and giving, the snake is the creator of the world, the birds are seductresses.

The Echidna is a cave dwelling half woman-half snake who is the mother of all monsters of Greek mythology. On the other hand, Nuwa of Chinese folklore is the goddess who created mankind and repaired heaven. Nureonna, the Japanese half woman-snake, is amphibious and wants to be left alone, but will suck the blood from her victim's body if disturbed.

The Hatuibwari of the Soloman Islands has the head of a human, four eyes, clawed arms, bat wings and the body of a snake. The belief is that he created and nourished all living things as the male version of Mother Earth.

In Egyptian mythology, the cobra headed Meretseger, meaning "she who loves silence", exerted great authority and was considered to be both a dangerous and merciful goddess. She spat venom at anyone who tried to vandalise or rob the royal tombs. Gorgons were women with snakes instead of hair. In Greek mythology their powerful gaze could turn one to stone.

In Sumeria, Kusarikku had a human head and torso, with bovine ears and horns and hindquarters and is known as the Bull Man. He is a door keeper to protect the inhabitants from malevolent intruders and evil spirits. He is associated with the God of Justice.

The Lamassu is a Mesopotamian protective deity encompassing all life, depicted with a human head, a body of a bull or a lion, and bird's wings.

Large Lamassu figures, spectacular showpieces in Assyrian sculpture, are the largest figures known to have been made. They represent power and protection and are placed at entrances in palaces. Unfortunately, the Lamassu now represents the International Xenotransplantation Association, a collection of companies/scientists who are trying to make animal organs fit to be transplanted into humans.

Montu is the Egyptian god of war with the head of a bull and the body of a human. Egypt's greatest general-kings called themselves Mighty Bulls, the sons of Montu. Mentuhotep, a name given to several pharaohs, means "Montu is satisfied".

In Greek tradition a Sphinx is a mythical creature with the head of a human and the body of a lion and sometimes the wings of a bird.

Those who cannot answer its riddle are killed and eaten. Unlike the Greek sphinx, the Egyptian sphinx is male, benevolent, with a ferocious strength. Both are guardians flanking the entrances to temples and tombs

Each of these Egyptian Gods has the head of a lion. Maahes is an ancient Egyptian lion-headed god of war, protection and weather, knives, lice and devouring captives.

Pakhet is a lioness headed deity associated with flash floods. Sekhmet is a warrior goddess as well as the goddess of healing. It was said that her breath formed the desert. She was seen as the protector of the pharaohs.

Tefnut is the goddess of moisture, moist air, dew and rain. Married to her brother Shu, she is the mother of Nut, the sky, and Geb, the earth.

Hindu god Vishnu's incarnation was Narasimha, the lion faced and clawed being, who came to destroy evil and religious persecution by defeating the demon kings Hiranyakashipu and Hiranyaksha.

Pratyangira, also known as Narasimhi, is a Hindu goddess who has the head of a lioness. She is an aspect of Durga. In the Ramayana, the son of Ravana, Indrajit was performing the "Nikumbalayagya" (a sacred ritual to worship Prathyangira) while Rama's army was waging war in Lanka.

Hanuman came down to stop this ritual because he knew that if Indrajit completed it, he would become invincible. In some temples Pratyangira Devi Havan is performed on no moon (amavaas) day.

(To be continued)

Things you can do yourself like nuke fission

THE FUNNY SIDE

Nury Vittachi

Sometimes I order weird stuff from Amazon and tick "same-day delivery" just to make Jeff Bezos swear. "@#$%! Someone wants the life-sized big foot statue! Get the extra-large drone!"

We nobodies have to use what little power we have. This comes easier to some than others.

This columnist, teaching a friend to drive, told him that he could not cross a white line painted on the road. "Of course you can! I'll show you," he replied, slipping across it. I told him he could not go through a red traffic light. "Sure you can," he said, sneaking through a junction. This man is going to go far in life, assuming he survives.

Welcome to the era of making your own rules.

A few days ago, a motorist named Cai, 28, fed up of traffic jams where he lived in Lianyungang, Jiangsu, painted lines and arrows to reconfigure the roads. "Police painted over them but I think they should have tried his revised road markings for a week in case they worked better," said a reader from China named Wen Wu.

Motorists in China have several times been caught making their own parking areas on the sides of roads, including one man earlier this year in Zhejiang province who found that holding a stick of chalk sideways makes a believably thick straight white line on road surfaces.

Also a few days ago, a man named Alex Bowen went into a 24-hour restaurant called Waffle House in the US state of South Carolina and found staff asleep. He slipped behind the counter and cooked himself a double Texas bacon cheese steak with extra pickles. "He posted a picture of his adventure on social media, complete with a sleeping employee in the background," said a contributor from the US. The food looked good.

The fact is amateurs are often better than professionals. I note that the BBC's new TV show, featuring impersonators of stars such as George Michael, Amy Winehouse and Whitney Houston, is called "Even Better Than The Real Thing". Technically speaking, the title is right. Even this columnist can sing and dance better than the average corpse, albeit only marginally.

Of course there are some things that no amateur should ever do. I once cut my wife's hair and the next time she went to a real hairdresser he almost died of shock. I hid behind a magazine in the waiting area.

But one should be ambitious. Some years ago, this columnist and his kids tried to split an atom at home. 1) You get a smoke detector and take out the smidgen of radioactive isotope that makes it work. 2) You buy a pre-1950 watch and extract the radium 226 that makes the hands glow. 3) You put the radium in a small box with a tiny hole in it. 4) You bounce the alpha rays that come out of the hole against tinfoil, resulting in free neutrons which can split an isotope atom. Unfortunately my wife thought nuclear fission might stain the kitchen table and told us we had to do it outside.

But it was raining, so we baked a cake instead.

(Nury Vittachi is an Asia-based frequent traveller. Send ideas and suggestions via his Facebook page)

SHE IS A WITCH

Ishu, Utpal Borpujari's debut film, throws light on the practice of witch-hunting, reports Ranjita Biswas

Ishu is a young boy from the Rabha community living in a village in western Assam near Goalpara. His world revolves around playing with his cronies on the river bank, or indulging in a little harmless fun by taking a detour on way to school, and going to bed with his grandmother telling stories. Sometimes he accompanies his favourite aunt Ambika, who lives on her own, to the jungle to collect roots and herbs to cure illnesses at which she is an expert.

Into Ishu's innocent world barges the dark cloud of adult conspiracy when the village shaman, or bej, in collaboration of a quarrelous woman with her own axe to grind, declares his aunt a witch, a dakini. He blames her for a few deaths in the village, that includes Ishu's new-born sister. The villagers have blind faith in the shaman. Following his verdict they beat up Ambika, burn her house, and throw her out of the village leaving her to fend for herself in dense jungle outside the village precincts.

She is not a witch, Ishu protests again and again, but who would listen to his young voice? So he sets off on his own to search for her and finds her injured and frightened in the jungle beyond the village stream. With the help of a sympathetic young man and a woman he manages to rescue her with the help of police. The bej and conspiring woman are arrested.

Ishu, debut film by director Utpal Borpujari, journalist and film critic, premiered at the recent 23rd Kolkata Film Festival. The narrative of the film is straightforward enough and simple to grasp by a young audience. The film has been funded by Children's Film Society, India.

However, the subject is not so simple. It throws light on a superstitious practice of witch-hunting among some ethnic communities in Assam.

Asked why he thought about witch-hunting as subject of his debut film, Borpujari says, " It was not deliberate though I had wanted to make a film with the backdrop of witch hunting someday. It's one of the biggest social problems facing several ethnic communities in Assam and also in other parts of India. Then I read Manikuntala Bhattacharjya's novel Ishu and made a mental note that this was a story I would like to make into a film someday. It looks at the whole issue from the perspective of a small child, and thus presents a new point of view."

Interestingly, among these ethnic communities in Assam like, Rabha, Hajong, Bodo, Mishing, etc, there are also men condemned as witches but they are much fewer in number. According to social activists, over a hundred people were killed in more than 200 cases of witch hunting between 2008 and 2016 in Assam. About 80 percent of the victims were women. Even a veteran state athlete, Debojani Bora of Karbi Anglong district, was tortured for 'practicing' witch craft in 2014. Though she escaped death she had to be hospitalised.

About her novel of the same name, Bhattacharjya says, "When my husband was posted in Goalpara, I came across two women from the Rabha community with their heads tonsured as they were declared as witches. Later, I spoke to many women there and I was astonished at the blind faith in this superstitious custom that affect women and thought their story had to be told. I chose the protagonist as a young boy, his innocence and questioning mind in direct contrast to the viciousness of the elders and their customs."

In Ishu' role Kapil Garo, uninitiated into the reel life yet, brings in a certain wide-eyed simplicity into the character. Award winning actress Tonthoingambi Leishangthem Devi from Manipur as Ambika and veteran Bishnu Kharghoria as the village quack stand out in the milieu.

The village life is authentically portrayed which could prove to be an apt introduction to this corner of India about which not many are aware of, even today.

Witch-hunting as a practice prevailed widely in pockets of Africa where the village medicine-man held sway. In 'white' Europe too, women were burnt at stake in the Middle Ages condemned as witches. Even in the New World America, in the early days certain women were castigated as witches and kept outside the village. Sociologists and historians opine that ignorance, superstition, and not the least, conspiracy to take over land and property of single women in a male-dominated society played a part in the practice of witch-hunting.

Ipsita Roy Chakraverti, self-proclaimed witch (priestess of Wiccan) says that in older times if a woman was more knowledgeable than the men, or challenged a village elder or shaman it was convenient to declare her a witch for the benefit of superstitious people who could blame anything untoward happening in the community on her black magic.

In Ishu, Ambika is much more knowledgeable about herbal medicine with which she has cured many villagers. This is a direct challenge to the bej, who resorts to fearmongering to secure his own place in the community. *(TWF)*

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi ***Sunday, DECEMBER 10, 2017***

Moon square Sun on your solar return chart indicates a mixed year. It is advised that you should go with the flow this year and have faith in your instincts. You may not find luck in your favor on many occasions, yet there will be times when your own good luck will surprise you. Have faith! As the year begins, you may be feeling clueless about the best course of action for you, which may leave you feeling slightly scattered. Apprehensive and agenda-less, you shall proceed ahead at a slower pace than usual, remaining quite cautious and suspicious. Relax a bit! However, do watch out against wasteful expenditure, which is quite likely. Do take care of your health too, and steer clear of mindless, careless eating patterns. In the former half of the year, you may have a spat or two with a friend, colleague, or a loved one, which may derail you somewhat. Or, you may simply be feeling lonely or left out. In that case too, a creative hobby or a physically demanding activity like regular gymming will keep you occupied. If you are into a business, expect to start seeing positive inflows and effects in the second half of the year. Around the same time, you may also expect many of your woes nearing an end. A new meaningful relationship is also foreseen. Plan short vacations with your family and close friends to revitalize yourself.

'This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) You are likely to swing to extremes in this period, sometimes happy, celebratory and at other times heavy, serious and even low. Professional situations and personal relations are sensitive and tend to go through ups and downs. Finances and material effects need to be evaluated; do not make investments or speculate heavily. This would be the right time to concentrate on your career prospects and professional skills. A healthy body holds a healthy and positive mind - work towards this.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) The planetary configuration brings to the fore activities related to communications, competition and examinations. You feel touchy and sensitive but would be more accommodating and compassionate in relationships. You would create a work of art in your field of activity. This brings success and good fortune at work and opens new horizons for expansion. This is the right time to participate in current events and share views, ideas and feelings with people around you. Sports and physical activities keep you fit and energetic.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) This week highlights friendship, love, romance, spirituality and children in your life. There would be positive results from written and oral communication. Short trips, shopping, and journey are on your agenda. This is a good time to promote harmony and good relations with people around you. You are also dealing with issues that force you to rid yourself of guilt about under-performing, and to develop faith and trust in a larger more spiritual plan. It's time to let go of some of your fears that you are not doing enough; to develop more compassion and understanding of others, and to be humble, feeling content in the knowledge that you are putting in your best.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) This week brings mixed results for you. After dealing with tough people and complicated issues you feel much stronger and clearer about your priorities. You are compassionate and generous with family, friends and relatives, drawing respect from them. It's also important to let go of some of your obsessions with rules, details, and fears of not doing things perfectly. The movement is towards a more balanced approach to dealing with practical, worldly matters and your own spiritual growth. Health needs extra care and old habits detrimental to your health need to be discarded.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) Mixed results are indicated this week. If you feel especially angry, frustrated or restless, it would be great to find a little more work and things to do so that you can channel excess energy constructively. Your heart and head pull you in different directions when domestic and family related decisions are to be addressed. Communications and business associates from overseas bring good news and offer lucrative opportunities. A marriage proposal is worth considering. Children may be a stronger focus as well. Sponsoring or supporting other people would be rewarding. New or changed responsibilities around the home or towards family also figure at this time.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22) This phase indicates income and gain from investments and speculations. This is a time of increased psychological understanding, intimacy, and perhaps accumulation of wealth if you manage your resources well. You are more capable of helping friends and loved ones who are dealing with a crisis-you can be leaned upon. Any type of in-depth study or research is likely to go well. Be careful when expressing feelings and emotions as others can misunderstand you. You might spend a lot of time in short frequent trips, communicating with people.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) An intimate relationship develops or figures strongly in this period. Learning to share on a personal level brings you some measure of joy. Money matters make big headlines. A bigger drive for security is with you and reorganizing your home and domestic life comes into play. Other people's money may come your way or you might secure some real estate. You adopt new styles and invest in clothes, jewelry, perfumes and this brings color and glamour in your life. Your thoughts turn to children, pleasure and romance. You focus on having fun, enjoying sports and expressing yourself efficiently. You maintain a fitness routine and a healthy diet program.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) The planetary configuration brings mixed results for you. A partner's resources could have a significant impact on your home life. Finding joy in developing intimacy is featured, and this is a time where you develop and enhance your love on a deeper level. Work could be moving towards more research and development. The work you do could be supported by your spouse or other people's money in general, such as work in finance. You achieve success as you are brilliant and there is good fortune attending professional, personal and material aspects.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) This phase brings new associations and beginnings in work areas as new opportunities and changes may come about. You are likely to see benefits in the areas of finances, shared resources, personal transformation, research, investigation and emotional matters. An insurance settlement, tax rebate, could come your way, and this is an excellent time to work on financial planning and strategy. Financial gains may come through a partnership or there may be an increase in income. Benefit can come through jointly held resources, loans, or taxes. You need to be aware of the areas that could add value.

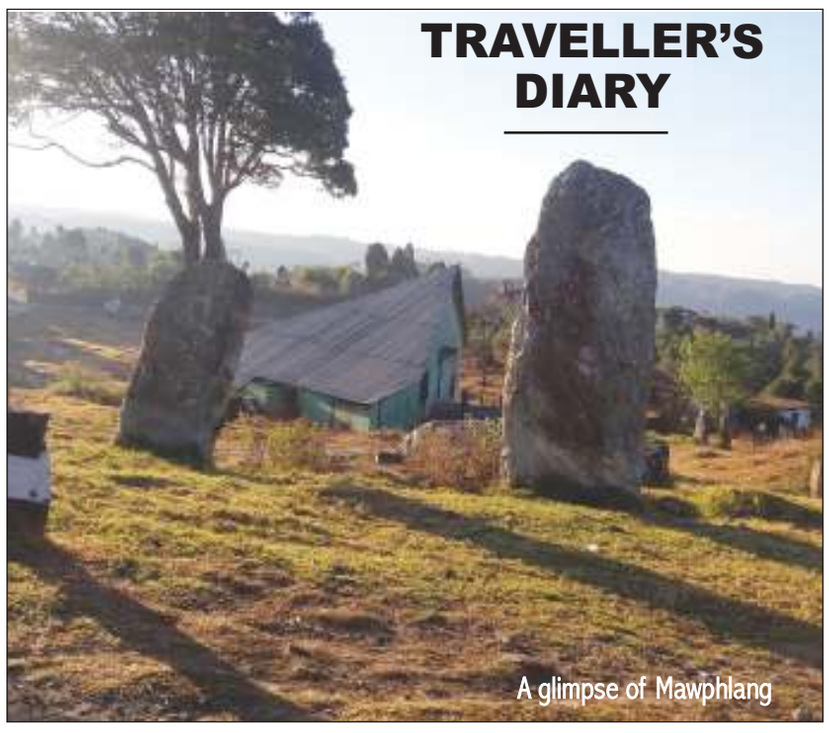
Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) You would enjoy making things that are beautiful and you succeed in areas that require an aesthetic sense as well as technical ability. You would compromise and adjust and take a softer approach while dealing with people at work and home. It's a passionate time, although you are unlikely to be displaying a whole lot of self-discipline. This is a time when you could get a mortgage or other property- and home-related financial backing. You would get serious about home, family, and domestic concerns. Health food, yoga and meditation would help to overcome from health problems.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) The ability to build up financial and monetary pursuits and good returns from overseas business are on the cards. Sharing your interests and communication with your loved one may be especially appealing to you. Family obligations may get in the way of your experience of pleasure and of the achievement of your personal goals. There may be some emotional distancing as well in your home. Your current living conditions may feel restrictive, limiting, too small or cramped (physically and/or emotionally). Delays and slowdowns may be experienced in the areas of health, mobility, and career.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) This period brings wisdom, knowledge and creativity in your behavior and cooperation and harmony in personal relationships. Your drive for personal freedom and insistence on your rights is pressing, and a confrontation in which you have to stand up for yourself is likely. You certainly don't like to follow orders. Do your best to avoid impulsive decision-making that is built upon your desire to be a free spirit. You may recognize talents that you never knew you had, and this can be a sudden, exciting discovery. A health program finds favour with you.

Trip to scintillating Shillong

TRAVELLER'S DIARY



A glimpse of Mawphlang

The end of December marks the starting of vacation. The time is to escape from the busy schedule. There is Christmas in the air, followed by New Year to Bhogali Bihu and picnic. Parents are being forced to take holiday to take care of their children. There is time to meet relatives. Most importantly, the idea is to have fun while exploring new places, interact with locals, eat and enjoy culture. But the real difficulty is to choose the right destination for a leisure vacation. Rich people have natural tendency to plan foreign trips.

But the North East has plenty of lesser known unexplored destinations. National Highways have opened up opportunities for tourism. Assam being the gateway of the North East is not very popular either. Its only hill station, Karbi Anglong, is yet to be explored. Only Kaziranga could carry its name. Come what may it quickly gained momentum now after Namami Brahmaputra/Barak festival and Awesome Assam Campaign.

Nagaland has contributed significantly through Hornbill Festival. The other geographically isolated NE states are facing difficulties to attract visitors. Tourists rarely find history amid natural beauty of Arunachal Pradesh. Mizoram and Tripura are largely inaccessible through road. Manipur has been crippled by economic blockades by Naga groups until recently. But neighbouring Meghalaya is cashing in on its tourism industry. So does Sikkim, she proved travellers' expectation.

Last Christmas, our family set off for the beautiful Shillong, often referred to as the "Scotland of the East" due to its striking similarity with the Scottish highlands. It is the most preferred destination as it is easily accessible through incredible roads from Guwahati.

After an hour-long smooth driving, a generous menu for breakfast at Jiva felt very pampered and refreshing. And suddenly we woke up after a glimpse of vast scenic reservoir of beautiful lake Barapani surrounded by hills. It is a favourite place to experience boating and collect beautiful memories of that serene lake while Orchid Resort offers facilities for motorboat rides. The Umiam was the first hydro electric project in the North East.

While entering the city, we found a serpentine queue of vehicles with AS series of number plates. Being weekend, traffic was painstakingly slow. Kudos goes to Shillong Traffic that put the road discipline in order. We saw a large radar at the top of a mountain at a distance that is monitoring air and terrestrial traffic of Bangladesh border. Strategically it has great importance of air surveillance to control enemy airspace. It is Shillong Peak, the highest point of Shillong. A great view of Shillong is visible from the Peak View Point, Laitkor, which is often surrounded by dense fog. The only cumbersome was to wait long for entry pass from the Radar unit of IAF. There were fresh potato, tomato and green vegetables sold at roadside shops along the way.

The cool breeze caressed our face. The pine trees swayed in the breeze. Down the mountain shadow, Eastern Air Command of Indian Air Force stands tall as an epitome of India's defence establishment.

Shillong golf circuits are one of the oldest and natural in the world.

The entire valley is dotted with thick vegetation. There are old Churches embracing Catholicism. The people were in festive mood. Visitors were mesmerised by the steep hills, glittering waterfalls and stunning green canyons along Cherrapunji border. The view of Bangladesh was mesmerising.

Meghalaya houses many unexplored natural caves. Indian Navy organises caving expedition every year. It was a treasured hunt inside Mawjymbuin cave there. Being isolated, the villages are scattered near Cherrapunji. Finding an eating joint is a thorny task there. But boiled rice and fish curry somehow satiated our hunger. Visiting Elephant Falls, Root Bridge, Ward's Lake are just a short picturesque drive away. The Don Bosco Centre Indigenous Cultures is a place to explore the vast culture and tradition of the North East.

As time passed by, darkness was surrounding us and we felt intimidated travelling from Upper Shillong.

The heritage buildings in Shillong still hold the legacy of the bygone British era. The famous shopping haunt at Police Bazaar was crowded and found no way moving even late at night.

The hotels and home-stays are all booked during festival. People here are really passionate about their music. There is no dearth of local talent. We came across good drink-dinner cum entertainment at Polo Towers. Surely it was a memorable trip that could inspire everyone to revisit to this spectacular view of Khasi hills. The Jaintia and the Garo are other communities which add colour to this romantic city. It was truly amazing!

(Contributed by Kamal Baruah, Guwahati)

"Goodwill is the one and only asset that competition cannot undersell or destroy."
--- John Ruskin

The Shillong Times
Vol No: LX No.121 SHILLONG, MONDAY, DECEMBER 11, 2017

Inter- caste marriage

IN a welcome move, the Centre has decided to lift the income ceiling on its scheme which provides Rs 2.5 lakh to every inter-caste couple provided the bride or the bridegroom is a Dalit. The purpose of the Dr. Ambedkar Scheme for Social Integration through Inter-Caste marriage which was introduced in 2013 is to prevent social ostracism of people marrying outside their caste and to provide state help to them to have a prosperous married life. But the scheme does not appear to have helped much in promoting inter-caste alliances. According to the National Family Survey (2005-06), inter-caste marriages account for only 11% of all matrimonial alliances in the country. The continuance of caste marriages in large numbers is a sign of social orthodoxy. Politics have not helped in overcoming the barrier. Marriage is seen as a means to perpetuate the caste system. Not only Dr. B.R Ambedkar but also Mahatma Gandhi in his later years supported inter-caste marriage at his Sabarmati ashram. The founding fathers of the Indian Republic were all for the eradication of the caste system. Political empowerment of the downtrodden castes is a step towards this end. Inter-caste marriage plays a role in achieving this goal. But that should not be an electoral ploy.

The assertions of the lower castes in recent years have in fact heightened the arrogance of the upper castes. Transgression of the caste system is increasingly under attack. Promotion of inter-caste marriage is not on any political party's electoral agenda. On the contrary, conservatism is becoming increasingly aggressive in a surreptitious manner.

LOOKING BACK
May 5, 1989

Jakhar offers to face motion for his removal

Speaker Balram Jakhar offered in the Lok Sabha today to face a motion for his removal from the office of the speaker if the opposition wanted it. Referring to certain allegation of a personal character made against him in a section of the press, Mr Jakhar said, "First and last I am a servant of the House and I place myself fully in the hands of the great House."

Mr Jakhar's observations in the House were obviously in connection with his alleged role, as Chairman on the Bharatiya Kisan Samaj, in the controversial import of fodder machines with the help of a foreign firm.

Mr Jakhar said if the opposition found any difficulty in bringing a motion because of the requirement of 14 days notice, "I assure the house I shall have no objection to the house to suspend the rule to enable a discussion on the motion during this session itself. Later, at a meeting with opposition leaders Mr Jakhar made it clear to the opposition leaders that he, in his capacity as the chairman of Bharat Krishak Samaj, recommended to the government that duty exemption be allowed in the import of fodder machines "purely in the interest of the kisan".

Slander Is Now Virtue

More vulgar the better!

By Poonam I Kaushish

Rajnetik virodhi ya jaani dushman? Tragically, the lines between a political opponent and a sworn enemy have got blurred. Nothing epitomizes this better than the brazen slanderous ongoing campaigning for the Gujarat Assembly, which has trashed basic courtesies and decencies, ended camaraderie, bonhomie and respect among healthy rivals with the devil taking the hindmost!

Everyone and everything has become game in the land of the Mahatma. From desh bhakts to desh drohis. For the Congress, confused about its support base, devoid of a vote plank and desperate about stopping its main opponent, the BJP from returning to power, it fell back to its tried and tested formula --- abuse and blatant casteism. For the Saffron Sangh it is a do-or-die battle for its 'Gujju' poster boy Prime Minister Modi.

All hell broke loose when Congress ex-MP Mani Shankar Aiyar called the Prime Minister, "Ye aadmi bahut neech kisam ka aadmi hai. Is mein koi sabhyata nahi hai aur aise mauke par is kisam ki gandi rajniti karne ki kya avashyakta hai." As a counter to Modi's attack on the Gandhis while inaugurating the Ambedkar International Centre in Delhi.

True, he expressed regret post his public censure and suspension by Rahul who lambasted Aiyar for his tone and language but the damage was done and could cost the Party heavy in the polls. Never mind that Rahul himself had summarily slammed UPA Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in 2011 describing his Government's ordinance as "nonsense" and tearing it up.

Retaliated Modi, "He gave this 'gaali' to me or you? Did he abuse me or Gujarat? Did he abuse the cultured society of India or me?' They can call me neech, but I will keep doing oonche work." Adding, "The Congress leader gave 'supari' while on a visit to Pakistan to get me 'removed' from the way to ensure peace between India and the neighbour. It is an example of the Congress' Mughal values that teach to demean castes and talk about upper and lower castes."

What's new? Aren't we accustomed to gutter-sniping, sleazy and vitriolic tu-tu-mein-mein between political opponents and Parties? Of dirty linen being increasingly washed in public serenaded by a frenzied audience's seetees galore, more vulgar the better, dil maange more!

Today we may hang Aiyar but has the Congress forgotten it showered the choicest of abuse on Modi since the Godhra riots in 2002. Remember Sonia's intemperate "Maut Ka Saudagar" remark while electioneering in the State 2007 which led to the Party's defeat. As also, "Yamraj, Ravan, Gandi Nali Ka Keeda, Bhasmasur, Rabies Victim, Gangu Teli etc to describe NaMo.

Importantly, will this stop the mud-raking. "No". All are tarred by the same brush. Be it the Congress, the BJP or X,Y,Z Party. If the BJP is upset now, it too has to accept its share of the blame. Remember, Modi had described Sonia as "Italian mud will not stick on me. Sonia has a hatred for Hindus. She speaks against Hindus and chooses to remain silent when atrocities are committed against the community."

Snapped another leader, "Modi is a terrorist…an unchanged lunatic... He is a cynical and criminal challenge to democracy and Gujarat has become a hub of Hindu terrorists." Or senior BJP leader Advani calling then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh "nikamma" in his poll campaign in 2009.

What to speak of VHP's obnoxious Togadia calling Sonia an "Italian kutti…." DMK's Karunanidhi mad ravings about Lord Rama being "a drunkard" over the Ram Setu issue. Varun Gandhi's hate speech against the Muslims. BJP's late Pramod Mahajan comparing Sonia with Clinton's Monica Lewinsky resulting in a torrid of abuse by Congressmen against bachelor ex-PM Vajpayee, "Aulaad nahin, damaad hai."

Of NCP's Sharad Pawar being described as "so big that he can't walk properly," and Samajwadi's Amar Singh malicious rancour against Congress leaders and vice versa. Of BSP's Mayawati being called a "prostitute," by a BJP leader, "when a veshya enters into a contract with a man she sticks to it. But the ex-UP Chief Minister does not follow any binding when selling tickets. If she has sold it for Rs 1 crore and gets another who pays Rs 2 crore, she will give it to him."

This see-saw battle between the BJP, Congress and others seems to tell us everything, yet nothing about our polity. Indeed, a sad reflection on the depth of political depravation we have come to. Wherein there is no dividing line between statecraft and witchcraft, what is correct and incorrect? Transgressing all limits of political etiquette and public decency.

What is most worrying is that our politicians have perfected the art of cultivating low morality and high greed according to their whims and fancies—and the need of the hour which has been made a lot more malignant by our fragmented politics wherein slander, sensation smear and sully are the new political dialogues chanted by one and all Parties with each propounding its own recipe of harmony, according to their own warped and selfish political needs.

In this nouvelle vote-catching mantra in the hope that this gutter sniping would bring them tripti--- and power, none cares a damn for decency and decorum except for scoring brownie points against each other. Ends matter not the means and winning is the name of the game.

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This kind of election campaign has resulted in immorality becoming a way of life, wherein the argument becomes, "what difference does one more slanderous attack make?" Undoubtedly, harsh words are part and parcel of politics. Even Westminster, the mother of all Parliamentary discourses is not free from this. One notorious case is that of a leading Labour right Nye Bevan who often crossed swords with Winston Churchill describing the Conservatives as gutter snipes and vermins.

Undeniably, in our present all pervasive decadence, interspersed with growing public distaste, cynicism and despair there comes a moment of truth and reckoning, it is time to pause and ask: Are we putting a premium on slander? On immorality. Will profligacy be the bedrock of India's democracy? How long do we suffer the stampede for sensation and slander? And, what is in the best interest of India and its democracy?

True, one can argue that all is fair in elections yet we must draw a lakshman rekha specially when it comes to the office of the Prime Minister. Plainly, no leader or Party can abuse the head of the executive body of the nation as he is not anybody but symbolizes the power of the nation and the dignity of his office is paramount for our democracy.

Any slur, slight and disrespect to this institution would deal a body blow to the credibility and authority of the State. We might disagree, criticize, run down policies even demand a change of Prime Minister but none ever desecrates the Prime Minister's dignity. It's a strict no no.

The BJP, Congress and Opposition Parties need to heed, put electioneering back on the rails of dignified debate on issues affecting the nation and not personalities. They should remember one age-old truth: If you point one slanderous finger at another, four other slanderous fingers will point back at you! Can a nation be bare and bereft of all sense of shame and morality? And, for how long? ---- INFA

Rahul queers pitch in battle for Gujarat

Can anti-incumbency Trump Modi at home?

By Harihar Swarup

How fast the election scene is changing in Gujarat is reflected in the poll surveys conducted now and when the poll dates were announced. The Gujarat elections could be a dead heat between BJP and the Congress, according to an opinion poll released on last Monday (Dec 4). The poll predicted that both parties—Congress and BJP—would get 43 per cent each. This means victory for either of the two parties but the ground reality shows that wind is blowing in favour of the Congress. Who knows—it may turn into a hurricane? That's what Congress leaders say. However, poll surveys predict a victory, may be a narrow one for the BJP, with the party getting 91 to 99 seats in the 182-member house while the Congress would get 78 to 86 seats.

In sharp contrast, the survey done by same agencies in August predicted that the BJP could cross 150 marks while the Congress would struggle to cross 30. The BJP won 115 seats in 2012 assembly poll while the Congress got 61.

The Lokniti-CSDS poll survey done for ABP News indicated that the sentiment against both demonetization and the GST has hardened as the campaign progressed and even the changes made to GST rates last month left more people dissatisfied than satisfied. Farmer resentment is also playing an important role in fuelling the rise of Congress in the state, according to poll survey.

Those who have visited Gujarat, and reports from Prime Minister's state, reveal a widespread desire for change. PM's popularity has not dipped as has the BJP's stock in the state. The Gujarat elections are being watched internationally; it may have bearing on PM's strongman image. It is not that people of Gujarat have great love for the Congress but when those unhappy with the BJP look other way, they find only the Congress. So, if the Congress gains, it will be by default.

There is evidently anger in some sections today—like Patidars, demanding reservation in jobs and education or farmers reeling under the fall in prices of their produce. There are some who feel the BJP must be taught a lesson for their "arrogance". Rahul Gandhi is not ridiculed as before but listened attentively and the points made by him goes home. He has managed to put BJP on defensive with the help of a smart social media team, on "development" and "unemployment". He has kept his election speeches away from usual Hindu—Muslim polarization and avoided any mention of 2002 riots. Also, Ahmed Patel's election to Rajya Sabha was a turning point; it send a message to the Congress workers that victory could be snatched from the jaws of defeat.

Congress's main problem is that the party does not have a well-oiled organizational muscle to convert peoples' anger into votes; nor a charismatic chief ministerial candidate. In contrast, the BJP has a well-oiled poll machinery and there is no lack of resources.

In the changing situation, three very important young leaders have emerged on the electoral scene. Hardik Patel, Alpesh Thakor and Jignesh Mevani have captured the imagination of youth in their respective communities. Hardik's strategy is to try and deliver the disaffected Patidar votes to Congress, not merely to oppose BJP and divide the anti-BJP vote. The Patidars have been the mainstay of BJP's support since the 80s, and the 23-year-old Hardik has come to symbolize their anguish. He has emerged as the star campaigner of this election with crowds thronging to hear him.

There is also anti-incumbency of 22 years, compounded by the absence of a figure like Modi at the state level. On his part, PM is going all out to make an emotional pitch to woo voters, particular fence-sitters. Modi is the son of soil, who may have gone to Delhi, but has not forgotten the people of Gujarat, the poll outcome being a matter of Gujarat's pride, and the Congress always having insulted the state.

The resentment against the BJP appears to be more visible in rural Gujarat, though people are vary of revealing their mind. A silent anger against the BJP is visible in Saurashtra, even in prosperous central Gujarat or the tribal belt in Bharuch, according to those journalists who visited these areas. But in cities it was back to Modi, and the urban and semi-urban seats account for 84 seats out of a total 182.

Even in Surat, where traders held a month-long agitation against GST, many are still inclined towards BJP. The Patidar factor has made the fight tough in four of 12 seats in Surat, traditionally BJP stronghold. If Congress can swing 6-7 per cent more votes than it did last time, the game will change. But the Congress leaders have to face the reality; while Gujaratis' love for the BJP is diminishing, their faith in Modi still endures. (IPA Service)

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TO THE EDITOR

Pine Mount School and blocking of main road

Editor,

As a resident of Shillong I would like ask the Shillong Traffic Police why they have blocked the main road from the BSNL office tri-junction near the Lady Hydari Park up to the bust statue of Mr TH Rangad by installing a big NO ENTRY board? Is it because Pine Mount Schoool is located in this area? There are a number of schools in Shillong but no other school ever tries to openly block the PWD roads that pass by those schools. As such, the city of Shillong is already overburdened with vehicular traffic and all the roads remain jam packed almost throughout the day and even up to late evenings. In such a situation the vehicles en-route to Laban, Lumparing and other areas of south Shillong try to avoid the traffic snarl in front of the Civil Hospital and take the road by the Pine Mount school to save time but are shocked to find the NO ENTRY sign at the tri-junction and are bound to turn their vehicles on the spot, thereby creating temporary traffic chaos. Alternatively vehicles have to go to Malki point by taking a round by the Seven Set School. The attempt also is not always fruitful as that too remains almost impenetrable due to heavy traffic. Through this, I request the Shillong Traffic Police to abandon these arbitrary "No Entry Zones" to either allow entry of the vehicles of the parents and guardians to park inside the premises of the school during exams or other school functions, as there is sufficient space inside or find out an alternative parking area leaving the main road free for the flow of normal traffic both up and down.

Yours etc.,
Bibhash Dhar,
Via email

Why can't Bharat Mata wear tribal attire?

Editor,

So who, indeed, is Bharat Mata? Following the letter dated December 8, 2017 by Fabian Lyngdoh in this daily I am further inspired to express my opinion towards-Bharat Mata, that is, Mother India and relatively seen by some as a mother goddess of fertility.Bharat Mata is shown as a four armed Indian goddess wearing saffron colored robes, holding a book, sheaves of rice, a garland, and a saree. This shows that this is not modern concept but it was there throughout history. This has nothing to do with RSS or BJP. And if some party relates itself to Bharat Mata then I feel nothing wrong with it because Bharat Mata is not a religious identity – this is a geographical and cultural identity. What kept us together longer than any other nation on this planet is that essentially, we have always been a land of seekers – seekers of truth, liberation and freedom? In this seeking, we found togetherness. When we look for oneness, we try to become a land of believers. This seeking is not something that we made. It is the nature of human intelligence to want to know more, realize, and liberate itself. A nation is the people. The boundaries and the definition of a country come from the land. We have always seen nation or earth as a mother, because if we sow a seed, life grows. Almost everywhere in the world, except in certain very martial cultures, a nation has always been seen as a woman or a mother, because in a certain sense, a nation is defined by an aspect of geography. Hence saying that Bharat Mata is alien to North East is misleading and if Bharat Mata wears a tribal attire, there is no threat to the tribal culture. No matter how badly you contaminate human beings with belief systems and brainwash them, once their survival is taken care of, they always want to know the nature of their existence and of everything around them.

Your etc.,
Anil Kumar Rai
Bahrain

A drama that shook our conscience!

Editor,

Recently, Shillong's ace theatre performer Lapdiang Syiem who trained from the India School of Drama enacted the play, " A being – human; being human human-beings,"at KC Secondary School Shillong. Lapdiang graduated from the National School of Dram, Delhi and the Commedia School, Copenhagen, Denmark. Thank you Lapdiang for reminding us of the fact that our boundaries are constantly being trespassed upon. A query made by a guest at the second splendid artistic rendition of our present world brought home the disturbing fact that our boundaries, especially personal ones are being systematically and methodically trespassed without as much as a murmur being heard from any quarter. Lapdiang in her comments said that she felt that where she performed is a safe place and it probably still is. A scathing commentary on life such as hers would bring awkward and uncomfortable notice from undesirable elements. Our only hope is that her art would not be immediately understood by those who would intrude on our personal space and connoisseurs of art would continue to be treated to this feast.

May God continue to bless and protect Lapdiang in her endeavour to hold an artistic mirror to the world.

Yours etc,
Dr S. Syiem,
Vi email

An Assembly Building in six months!

Editor,

The news item in your paper captioned, "Next House Session in New Building" (ST Dec 8, 2017), left me wondering if our honourable Speaker, A.T Mondal is being overly ambitious, when he said the next assembly session would be held in the new building. While it's good to be positive and optimistic in life but as human beings blessed with wisdom and reason we also need to be logical and practical. The state is geared for elections in February next year and the first session of the new government should tentatively be held in a month or two after the declaration of the election results. So if we go by what our Speaker says then in less than six months the state of Meghalaya will be blessed with a new and hopefully permanent Assembly building. If what could not materialise in 16 (sixteen) long years will stand tall in 6 (six) months time then it would surely be no less than a miracle. Sadly, miracles don't happen these days. Therefore I'm curious to know as to what type, model and make would our new building be? Will Mr Mondal please amplify!

Yours etc.,
Jenniefer Dkhar,
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.

"Peace is the beauty of life. It is sunshine. It is the smile of a child, the love of a mother, the joy of a father, the togetherness of a family. It is the advancement of man, the victory of a just cause, the triumph of truth."

--- Menachem Begin

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LX No.122 SHILLONG, TUESDAY, DECEMBER 12, 2017

Darkness in Rajasthan

MOHAMMAD Afrazul, a 47 year old migrant from Malda, West Bengal was brutally murdered in Rajasthan. A number of such crimes have been perpetrated in the BJP ruled state. Killer Shambhulal Ragar fumed against love jihad and attacked Islam vehemently. The killer's nephew videotaped the murder. Some BJP Members of Parliament and legislators have hailed the murder. Pehlu Khan, a dairy farmer, was killed earlier by cow vigilantes. Chief Minister Vasundhara Raje has condemned the killing of Afrazul but that is a routine gesture. Vigilante groups are on the rampage in the state to protect cow, caste and community crime. The threat against Deepika Padukone for her role in Padmavati was given a sympathetic hearing by the government. The film was then banned until the censors gave it the green signal. History books and other school books are being re-written in Rajasthan in the name of Hindutva and Ministers as well as legislators are approving it. The likes of Ragar are not likely to have criminal actions taken against them. The killer has been arrested in the Afrazul case. But the government has failed to uphold the Constitution and the rule of law. Raje runs an ineffectual administration. Non-state actors are targeting vulnerable citizens.

The rule of the mob and the terror exercised by the vigilantes will plague Rajasthan for some time to come. Tourism will take a hit. Jaipur which hosts music, dance and literature festivals will be losing its appeal. Hate and crime with impunity will foul the atmosphere and make a mockery of culture.

LOOKING BACK

May 5, 1989

18 killed in orgy of violence in Punjab

An indefinite curfew was clamped on the walled city of Amritsar today after an orgy of terrorist violence claimed eighteen lives in Punjab. One terrorist was also killed in an encounter with security forces near Haipur village in Jalandhar district this morning.All but four of the killings took place in Amritsar district where a dozen terrorists raided a house in Jagdev Kalan village and shot dead all twelve members a family. The villagers came to know of the killings only this morning. Indefinite curfew was clamped on the entire walled city of Amritsar and Durgiana Mandir area this afternoon in view of tension, official sources said.The sources said a funeral procession turned violent andstoned a police party accom-panying it. The procession was in connection with the funeral of vie people who were shot down by terrorists yesterday near Dubarji on the Amritsar Taran-Taran road in Amritsar district. Po-lice opened fire injuring two people. Terrorists shot dead two people at Kaonka Kalana village in Ludhiana district last night, police said. Police said two terrorists forced their way into oneVeer Singh's house and escaped. Later, the terrorists gunned down a panchayat member Pal Singh in his house and escaped. One person was gunned down by four terrorists out-side his home at village Balpur last night, a report from Batala said. Police iden-tified the victim as Mr Apar Singh (35). Police said the terrorists called him out of his house and shot him dead. In another incident in Amritsar six terrorists shot dead a Communist Party of India(CPI) activist. Tilak Raj and injured his party colleague invillage Khadur Sahib, policesaid. Police recovered twobodies in Naurangabad village this morning, police believed that the two were killed by terrorist. One terrorist was killed in an encounter with security forces near Haripur village this morning, a report for Jallandhar said. Police claimed to have recovere done 12-bore gun along with12 cartridges from the person of the slain terrorist.

V.P. Singh asks P.M toown Bofors scandal

Former Defence Minister V P Singh today urged Prime Minister Mr Rajiv Gandhi to own the responsibility in the Bofors scandal. Addressing a public meeting here this evening Mr Singh said it was a pity that the Prime Minister had to make a statement in Parliament to clarity that neither he nor any of his family members had taken commission in the deal. Justifying his action to hire Fairfax, Mr Singh said if foreign Government's help could be sought to arrest General. Vaidya's killer, there was nothing wrong in "my taking foreign assistance to book economic offenders. "Mr Singh said the fact that the Prime Minister had announced an inquiry into the amassing of wealth by Ajiabh Bacchan in Switzer-land showed that there was a case against him.

Splinter Janata partyto retain identity

The national executive of the truncated Janata Party today decided to maintain its identity and elected Mr Innubhai Patel as its presidents. A meeting of the national executive resolved to maintain the identity of the party at all costs and take steps to strengthen the organization. "The president was authorized to oppose the Janata Dal application for transfer of the party symbol and take necessary steps to reoccupy the office.

New Congress President

Will he usher in change?

By Dhurjati Mukherjee

The elevation of Rahul Gandhi to the top position of the Congress augurs well for the party's fortunes, which needs a dynamic leader to steer it in the right direction. The sixth scion of the Nehru-Gandhi to take over the leadership on the Congress, it is widely believed that he would bring about transformative changes in the organisation and arrest its decline. Political analysts believe that Rahul's elevation is expected to identify the organisation with the aspirations of a modern, progressive and democratic India.

Rahul has become a full-fledged politician and lately demonstrated that he could mix with the masses and win their support. His leadership qualities and commitment, which was once suspect, is no longer being questioned. Moreover, in the coming years his strength would lie in his steadfast adherence to idealism notwithstanding the practitioners of realpolitic in favour of pragmatism.

However, he would have to make the party more democratic through dialogue, discussion and contestation of ideas without fear of political repercussions for those who choose to express judicious dissent. The party president would have to be more democratic and be easily accessible so that diverse views and opinions are heard.

There is another important role before Rahul to unify the dissenting views prevalent among party leaders in the various States. He has to become a symbol of leadership that is powered by selflessness and an unswerving commitment to the party and national governance.

The question, however, before the new chief is whether he has capacity to frighten the leading rival party that is, the BJP and take on the various problems created by the latter. Issues relating to political, economic and secular matters have created lot of controversy and Rahul has to take advantage of the fallacies of the party in power.

Firstly, let us take the case of condition of minorities who are being terrorised and humiliated in various ways. There is need for the Congress leadership, led by the new president, to assure the minorities that the country is peace loving as secularism is ingrained in our Constitution. Religion should not be allowed to take upper hand in the running of the government as is now manifest to the detriment of social balance.

Gandhiji's uncompromising belief of the need for co-existence between faiths and Nehru's emphasis on cultivating a modern scientific temper has to be the new approach of Rahul so as to promote amity and social and communitarian unity. Fascist forces – whether supported by Hindutva or Islamic forces – have to be dealt with an iron hand by people like Rahul.

Secondly, the recent measures off demonetisation and the GST have become subjects of controversy as the economy has shown a downward trend. While demonetisation has not achieved the desired objective of unearthing black money, GST has come not in the right manner with the highest tax being fixed as high as 28 per cent, defying all economic rationale and rarely levied in most other countries. These have been taken up by Rahul and his sharp criticism of the government has been accepted by the people.

There can be no doubt that the economy is in a bad shape and the GDP growth rate may not be more than 6.3 per cent for the current fiscal. Thus all promises of the prime minister of 'achhe din' have become a joke with the condition of farmers having deteriorated in a big way and unemployment and underemployment having increased greatly. Rahul has already taken up these issues at the national level but there is need to organise movements in each and every State and give more thrust to the these vital matters plaguing the nation.

Thirdly, Rahul has to ensure that corruption in the organisation is tackled with an iron hand. During the UPA government, there were various scams that resulted in the image of the Congress being tarnished to a considerable extent.

Finally, dissent in the country is slowly being throttled virtually in all spheres by a section that has the support and active encouragement of the establishment. Discussion and debate has to be encouraged in a healthy society and Rahul has to demonstrate this through his own actions. The killings that have taken place in the past few months bear testimony to societal decline that is, no doubt, a cause for concern in the country.

The country is at a flux and there is cause for serious concern keeping in view the recent developments that have taken place. The Congress party has an upper hand in the matter and Rahul has to take full advantage of this. As Modi mania ebbs, he has enough time to build a credible challenge in 2019. However, it needs to be pointed out that would have to give credit to the BJP masterminds for bringing the country to such a critical situation.

Rahul has the leadership qualities but more maturity and dynamism would be needed in the coming years. One way mention here that he has withstood caricature of Modi and the BJP leadership which he tackled in a commendable manner. His rebellious voice was initially not quite strong but over the years this has is being taken due cognisance. The Assembly election in Gujarat would definitely show that the Congress may not get majority but would fare much better than the previous result.

The future has the potential of transforming society in line with Mahatma Gandhi's ideals from all aspects, whether economic social and political. The new Congress president has the onerous task of gearing the party along proper lines to ensure a healthy social atmosphere. How much he will succeed and how far he will be able to gear the party in not just tackling the diverse problems but also in creating the much needed bondage among members of the community only time will tell.To conclude, we need an inclusive and sustainable society which the masses very much expect political leaders like Rahul Gandhi to steer ahead with a judicious and rationale approach. We have to keep hope to face the challenges with courage and determination so as to bring about transformation in society.---INFA

TO THE EDITOR

A graveyard of foundation stones ?

Editor,

Does the recent spurt in the laying of foundation stones for different projects in the whole state of Meghalaya bring us a sense of hope that "achhe din aane waale hain" (good days are coming) waiting for all of us in the near future or will they turn out to be just another gimmick to fool the electorate before the elections? After the elections we just hope that we don't see a graveyard of foundation stones and cobwebs of unfulfilled promises. So cast your votes wisely fellow citizens if Meghalaya is to quickly catch up with the more developed states in India and the developed countries of the world.

Yours etc., ,
Michael N. Syiem,
Via email

Of Kangaroo courts and lynch mobs

Editor,

An old English proverb says, "Give a dog a bad name and hang him." It rips a very sinister design open. As the proverb suggests it contains two actions in it ~ first criminalize a person and then kill him. Generally, social terrorists adopt this design to vilify a victim. It helps those terrorists who are actually the real criminals, look like the champions of public morality. The modus operandi of this design can magically turn a helpless tribal widow into a witch ~ a lover into an intruder ~ a cobbler into a cattle smuggler ~ a person with non-Aryan features into a chinky drug pedlar/ cannibal etc. More often than not, the "hang him" cry gets replaced by "lynch him". After the first act of giving the victim a bad name on the khap/ kangaroo stage, the mob starts lynching the victim on the pretext of witch-hunting, honour-killing, cow-saving or criminal-bashing.

We know that kangaroo courts are sham legal proceedings which are set up to give the impression of a legal process. But the fact of the matter is that the verdict against the victim is decided in advance. Previously, the proceedings and execution of such courts were in the open. Now, such courts have got very sophisticated electronic avatars. Kangaroo trials can now go on under the guise of social media and television channels.

Sometimes, a victim has been targeted in social media. Then a khap - social - media starts trolling the Internet to hurl unprintable filthy language on that person against whatever she/ he posts. On the other hand, kangaroo trial on some news channels are getting good TRPs. We are witnessing such trials while enjoying our meal inside our homes or while searching the Internet before going to bed. Therefore, Kangaroo trials can no longer be called a street justice as it legitimately enters our living room thanks to - television - court and khap - social - media. However, it is true that though electronic media can malign a person it cannot murder her/ him on the spot. It can only give a person "a bad name" leaving the final job "to hang him" at the hands of a lynch mob that has been intoxicated by hate speeches.

Now, what happened to Afrajul Khan, a poor labourer from West Bengal, was a case of combination of street and electronic trial. He was hacked to death and burnt in Rajasthan by a lone assassin who made inflammatory comments and footage of the murder was uploaded on social media. It has been reported that the killer gets influenced by hate speeches and messages on social media. So, this murder is actually a chain of events that originated in hate speeches in social media and then it snowballed to a street murder and then again it went back to social media for further snowballing. Generally, there is a common link between all the victims of hate crimes. They are poor people ~ labourers, cobblers, a butchers, hawkers et al are the most soft and easy prey of hate crimes.

The need of the hour is to impose a total ban on hate speeches. We must protect our poor brothers and sisters from becoming scapegoats at the hands of vested interests and some TRP hungry market players.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Via email

Wonderful tourist sites without signages

Editor,

It was a spur of the moment decision for four golfers to visit Cherrapunji on December 6, last. Having an inkling of information about the existence of a waterfall near Mawmihthied and with a spirit of adventure, it,prompted Mr.A.Marbanianh, Mr.T.Zamal, Mr.MB.Phanbuh and self to motor from Mawmihthied south westwards for 12 km via Mawkma village to emerge at Dain Thlen and Sa-i-Mika. The road is a rocky divergent from the highway,but improves from Laitduh onwards. Midway,a group of 4 youths from Shilling had parked their Maruti beside the road and continued on foot to the waterfall. Observing the bad condition of the road, the golfers almost abandoned the trip, but decided, otherwise, and pushed on doggedly towards their objective, thanks to the dexterity of the man behind the Scorpio wheel (Mr.T.Zamal).

The waterfall is located amidst a vast tract of flat grassy land of outstanding beauty. From here, the view of Lum Symper of Weiloi and Lum Kyllang of Mairang is magnificent. Further ahead, at Laitduh is a splendid cluster of monoliths over a large area. The road finally gets better to Dain Thlen and Sa-I-Mika and onto Cherrapunji where the golfers practised on the Golf Driving Range, near Jiva Resort. The range was established by Mr Rudi Wariji, a retired IFS diplomat. A Golf course on the grass land would be ideal. It is recommended that tourists visit the waterfall via Sa-I-Mika a distance of 5Km only, instead of the difficult route taken by the golfers. Two other spots of tourist interest are the century old stone motorable bridge at Mawkdok and the famous bridle path starting from Lad Mawphlang to Mawphlang. However signboards would be necessary to pin point these sites

Yours etc.,
C.M Smith Mawlong,
Shillong

The Outer Space Treaty touches half a century

By Ibu Sanjeeb Garg

Beating the Rhetoric

The Outer Space Treaty was signed by the United States, the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union in January 1967 and it came into force in October 1967. Since then, this treaty has been signed and ratified by more than a hundred countries across the world. The Outer Space Treaty or OST forms the bedrock of the international law that governs outer space. The basic philosophy behind this treaty is rooted in the period that it was set in. The 1960s were a period when Cold War was at its peak and the Western Block and the Soviet Block thought of restricting the theatre of war or nuclear escalation. Since both the US and Soviet Union had by then launched extensive space probes , these powers decided to come togther to restrict the use of Outer Space as theatres of war.

This treaty bars parties from placing weapons of mass destructions in bodies orbiting Earth in Outer Space or any other celestial bodies. The treaty specfically was directed towards the Moon since both the US and Soviet Union at that point had launched lunar programs. This treaty exclusivly limits the use of Moon to peaceful and scientific purposes and bars the use of military maneouvers or excercises of any kind. The Treaty does not however prohibit the placing of conventional weapons in Space and declares Space as free for all. Astronauts are recognised as ambassadors of mankind rather than the individual country that they belong to.

The treaty contains seventeen articles which the nations must adhere to. Article 1: This can be called the soul of the treaty. It states that the exploration and use of outer space, including the moon and other celestial bodies, shall be carried out for the benefit and in the interests of all countries, irrespective of their degree of economic or scientific development. This shall be used for the benefit for all mankind in accordance with equality without discrimination of any manner. Outer Space is the domain for scientific investigatin and States will encourage and facilitate each other towards the same.

Article 2: It Prohibits the use of outer space including moon and other clestial bodies from being earmarked by claims of sovreignty by nations by occuptation or any other means. Article 3: This article states that all states and nations will conduct themslevs in outer space in accordance to international laws and conventions. Article 4: Prohibits the use of weapons of mass destruction from orbiting in outer space or their stationing in any manner.

Article 5: It outlines that the moon and other celestial bodies shall be used by all States Parties to the Treaty exclusively for peaceful purposes. The establishment of military bases, installations and fortifications, the testing of any type of weapons and the conduct of military manoeuvres on celestial bodies shall be forbidden. The use of military personnel for scientific research or for any other peaceful purposes shall not be prohibited. The use of any equipment or facility necessary for peaceful exploration of the moon and other celestial bodies shall also not be prohibited. The 5th Article of the treaty regards astronauts as envoys of mankind in outer space.

Article 6: It fixes international responsibility for national activities in outer space, including the moon and other celestial bodies, whether such activities are carried on by governmental agencies or by non-governmental entities, and for assuring that national activities are carried out in conformity with the provisions set forth in the present Treaty. Article 7: It fixes liability for damages on nations partaking in activties in outer space. Article 8: Fixes responsiblity of goods as well as of acitivties of outerspace and tries to harmonise the nation claims within the framework of international cooperation.

Article 9: It talks about principle of cooperation and mutual asistance and also urges nations to restrict the contamination of the outer space environment. Should a state beleive its activties can contaminate the outer space it must seek international consultations before indulging in such a beahviour because the treaty beleives that space is for all. Article 10: It forms the bedrock of international equality. It states that to promote international co-operation in the exploration and use of outer space , nations must favourly consider requests of other nations.Such examples are in vogue when India launched 104 satellites recently into space with satellites from not only India but also more than six other nations.

Article 11: It gives primacy to the Secretary General of the United Nations to conduct activties in a bipartisaian manner which would benefit mankind as a whole and ensure international cooperation. Article12: It states that all stations, installations, equipment and space vehicles on the moon and other celestial bodies shall be open to representatives of other States Parties to the Treaty on a basis of reciprocity. Article 13: states that the provisions of this Treaty shall apply to the activities of States Parties to the Treaty in the exploration and use of outer space, including the moon and other celestial bodies, whether such activities are carried on by a single State Party to the Treaty or jointly with other States, including cases where they are carried on within the framework of international inter-governmental organizations. Article 14: It says that the Treaty is open for all. Article 15: It gives the power to propose amendment to this treaty by any party. Article 16: It talks about the terms as equal. Article 17: It is merely an administrative direction towards how the treaty is notified by the UN to the Depository Governments as well as the acceding states.

This treaty is one of the most sucessful in terms of the fact that nations have acceeded and lived by it for the past fifty years. Also by seeing all nations as equal this treaty truly respects the spirit of international cooperation. In the history of mankind the treaty on outer space stands as one of its biggest achievments in international cooperation and unity.

-(The views expressed by the author are personal)

"The only competition worthy a wise man is with himself."
--- Thomas Hobbes

The Shillong Times
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Whither CPI-M?

THE CPI-M politburo met in Delhi last weekend. The focus of the debate was on its stand vis-à-vis the Congress. It will be a burning issue at the time of the general election in 2019. The discussion was not up in the air. Two documents were gone through with a fine toothed-comb. One was prepared by former General Secretary Prakash Karat. The other document has been drawn up by the present chief, Sitaram Yechury. The 16 comrades who constituted the brains trust of the party could not arrive at a decision. The debate will continue in a larger forum, the party's Central Committee(CC). The CC has nine members and ten invitees. If these members cannot arrive at a consensus, the party congress to be held in April next year will have the last word on the major issue. The discussions are surprisingly going on in a highly civilized manner. Such polite exchanges cannot be expected in the BJP or the Congress. These parties hardly devote time to a serious analysis of the character of potential allies. For instance a Bengali Muslim labourer was killed in Rajasthan recently but there were hardly any repercussions in the higher echelons of the BJP. The CPI-M is the only party in India which takes a long time to deliberate on an issue even if without any result.

The CPI-M's tally in the Lok Sabha has fallen from 44 MPs in 2004 to 9 in 2014. There is something unrealistic about Communist polemics on the role of the Congress which has also lost strength significantly. The alliance of the Congress with the CPI-M was a historical fact in the past and was very productive. Why are the CPI-M theoreticians splitting hairs over an urgent and unavoidable strategy?

LOOKING BACK
May 5, 1989

Bodo ultras gun down 2 persons

Bodo extremists shot dead a woman home guard, near Kokrajhar police station in Assam this morning, an official report said. The victim Rani Basumatary was killed while she was coming to join duty at the Kokrajhar police station. High civil and police officials rushed to the spot and started an investigation. No person has so far been arrested, the report said.

Meanwhile, police arrested 17 Bodo extremists from Afagaon under Kokrajhar police station yesterday and recovered one pipe gun and five cartridges from them. On Sunday the extremists set on fire a high school also in Kokrajhar district, but police with the help of local people extinguished the flames before any damage could done to the school building, the report added.

Foreign Policy

What is Rahul's world view?

By Dr DK Giri

Rahul Gandhi, president-in-waiting for quite some time will finally take over as head of the Indian National Congress, a 132-year-old party, the second oldest democratic party in the world after the social democratic party of Germany born in 1883. The Congress was the principal agency for our freedom struggle against British colonialism. For good or bad it was responsible for building independent India simply because, out of 70 years since independence Congress was in power for 50 plus years. The party has been led by men and women of great ideas and vision.

Interestingly, RaGa's ideas on politics, governance, development etc are derided in social media. He has also been perceived as a reluctant politician. Natwar Singh, once close to the family, wrote in his autobiography, "One Life is not Enough", Rahul is not cut out for politics. All these perceptions and slurs notwithstanding, Rahul is in thick of politics, leading the oldest political party and the largest Opposition in India of 1.3 billion people.

I will focus in this piece on his world view, how he may like to see India in world politics. Because the measure of the power of a country these days is the position it occupies in the constellation of world forces, and the role it plays in world affairs.

Let me throw a caveat here. Foreign policy or world affairs are remote to the concern and comprehension of many politicians let alone the common people. India's foreign policy is made and articulated by career diplomats who pass the examination called IFS. That is why foreign policy is left to the ruling party which controls and secures the services of diplomats.

Political parties do not even designate a foreign policy spokesperson, do not speak much or often on foreign policy issues. This is an anomaly. RaGa can begin by correcting this by naming a foreign policy spokesperson of his party. Surely, RaGa understands that foreign policy in a globalised world deeply affects each individual and community in a country. Hence, it should be a popular political subject forming a part of public discourse.

One is not sure of RaGa's perspectives on India's foreign policy except his occasional reactions to NaMo's policies. Besides, RaGa's international engagement has been seen as faux pas when he 'secretly' met the Chinese ambassador as Indian soldiers were in a face-off in Doklam, or as flip-flops on Kashmir when he said NaMo's policies have created space for foreign militants in Kashmir. This is the second correction he ought to make by formulating a well-thought-out, robust foreign policy instead of giving knee-jerk reactions.

In dearth of RaGa's foreign policy pronouncements, until they unfold through his exalted office of national president, we could draw on the latest manifesto of the party released in the last General elections. In past three years much water has flown down Yamuna but the main contours of their approach can be discussed. Curiously, foreign policy figured towards the end of their 50-page manifesto and was captured in less than 2 pages.

The major formulation in the manifesto document was that the Congress party saw India's role as a "critical bridge between the developed world and the developing world". It mentioned countries like China, Brazil, South Africa, Pakistan, Afghanistan, SAARC and Sri Lanka. Intriguingly, there was no mention of the single super power, USA, India's major ally since Manmohan Singh's premiership of 10 years, nor of Russia, India's long-standing supporter. It made a general and vague reference to these two countries and others like EU and Japan as "building peaceful, stable and mutually beneficial relations with all major powers".

Alternatively, and quite correctly, the manifesto emphasised the party's commitment to contribute to global challenges such as climate change, sustainable development, non-proliferation, cross border terrorism. The party holds on to the so-called heritage of non-aligned movement and pledges to continue to support many developing countries. It, however, saw India's role as 'a bridge' rather than a 'power' which the world is anticipating India to become. That is why there was no mention whatsoever of India's relations with major powers – the US, EU, Japan, UK, France, Germany, Australia, Israel, etc.

Although not a part of foreign policy platform, Congress made a bold commitment to regain eight per cent growth in the economy and promised greater integration with the global economy and encouraged foreign direct investment, the name of the game in the era of globalisation.

The Congress party believes in 'continuity and change' in India's foreign policy but it is more continuity than change in its approach. In dealing with the neighbourhood, there is no change, no fresh initiative on Kashmir, no new ideas to revive SAARC, which is a dead duck at present.

More worrying, it fumbles on seeing India as a rising global power. This is the third correction RaGa has to introduce. The nature of Asian politics will catapult India into a much higher position in the world. India needs to grab the opportunity. RaGa will do well to understand that if he fails to comprehend India's geopolitical advantage, aspiring Indians will not be enthused by his leadership.

Admittedly, foreign policy is usually based on consensus and has less impact on electoral process. But since NaMo's major claim to success as PM as his so-called acceptance as a world leader, RaGa can tease him into making a wrong posture.

For example, Donald Trump has shocked the world by recognising Jerusalem, the sanctum sanctorum of three religions as the capital of Israel. NaMo has assiduously built close partnership with both Israel and its mentor USA. Will NaMo endorse Trump's audacious declaration of moving his embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem? Will he follow suit? Likewise, what is NaMo's policy on China? The Doklam stand-off was resolved but the details of the rapprochement is not known and what is reported is Chinese are still active around the disputed site. What about NaMo's policy towards Pakistan? Shall we treat Pakistan as a permanent enemy or a potential friend?

RaGa is known for saying things unexpected. He is not predicatable. That is the quality of a leader who breaks the mould and sets the pace. His great grandfather, grandmother, all prime ministers were world renowned. Will he follow their footsteps in world politics? It should not be in terms of policies but in active engagement with the world. More importantly, will he break away from the Nehruvian legacy of our foreign policy which has cost us dearly? ---INFA

(The author is Prof. International Politics, JMI)

Make in India success hinges on global value chain manufacturing

Low wages and lower costs make India ideal hub

By Subrata Majumder

The bounce back in the share of manufacturing in second quarter GDP in 2017-18 unleashed a fresh impetus to the Make in India initiative, which remained tardy in the post demonetization period. The manufacturing sector growth resurged to 7.0 per cent, nearly to the previous year's level, after a sharp drop to 1.2 percent in the first quarter of 2017-18. This shows that the impact of demonetization was a short term effect.

Today, the Indian economy is globally integrated. It has become one of the important engines for global growth. To this end, polarization of Make in India on sectoral growth and labour intensive industries is not the panacea for success. Integration of manufacturing through the global value chain (GVC) had become vital for Make in India.

Firms in developed countries combined their high tech knowhow with lower wage labour in developing countries to produce their goods at lower costs. Eventually, production has become increasingly fragmented through the growing prevalence of GVC, with production of components across the borders. South East and East Asia, especially, exemplified this new pattern of production.

In this process of GVC value added manufacturing, many of the developing countries, such as China Vietnam, Thailand, Bangladesh, Mexico and other South East Asian countries, have benefitted by sharing labour intensive production with low cost for the developed nations . But India trailed behind in this race. Reasons: there were limitation of scale, difficulty in accessing cheap credit and lack of adequate skilled labour. These economic ills shadowed India's potential as a manufacturing exporter and became detrimental for it to enter the GVC network of manufacturing.

Given the new wave of manufacturing in the world and India's growth being globally integrated, sectoral development and labour intensive industries are not the only catalysts for the Make in India success. Technology upgradation and skilled manpower are imperative for India to become party to GVC manufacturing network. Even though the country's manufacturing landscape has made transformational change from traditional to modern industries, such as automobile and electronics, which resulted in traditional labour intensive industries being outstripped by technology base industries, the changes are yet to make India potent for GVC network for manufacturing, like Vietnam and other South East Asian countries. This is despite the fact that India is already engaged in multilateral FTA with ASEAN and bilateral FTAs with Malaysia and Thailand.

Success of GVC value added manufacturing network depends on how the component makers, dubbed "supporting industries", function efficiently to upgrade technology, which is required for the assemblers. To cut costs and re-enter competitiveness, Toyota Motor Company, after the Japanese currency yen appreciated, adopted the GVC system of manufacturing to produce their Asian car models. It set up a five-country network for auto part production in four ASEAN countries and India. Production facilities for diesel engine, press parts and axle were set up in Thailand, manual transmission (middle type) in Philippines, engine computer in Malaysia, gasoline engine and door lock in Indonesia and manual transmission (large type) in India.

In this current trend of global production, how should India's manufacturing landscape fit in if Make in India vows for a success? India's manufacturing sector needs to be divided into two parts. The first part should include development of natural resource based industries, such as agro-based, textile, mining and metal industries. The second part can cover component-based industries, such as automobile. electronic and digitization.

It is the second part where GVC value added manufacturing will work well. India can be the manufacturing hub for component and parts in GVC production network, which are labour intensive, for the developed nations. Factors which go in favour of India are India's demographic dividend and edge in low cost manufacturing competitiveness over South East and East Asia countries.

However, one of the important headwinds for low cost manufacturing In India is the lack of skill development. It is an important factor to make a nation potent for GVC manufacturing network. India is yet to ramp up its bottom down skilled workforce. Only 2 percent of the workforce is skilled in India, compared to 40 percent in China. The reason for abysmally low skill development is that formal education does not impart suitable skills to make candidates viable for employment. The ITIs – government run training institutes -- are either poorly managed or outdated. In China, skill development is geared up by steering secondary schools students into formal skill training programme.

Given the Indian economy's integration into the global economy, which depends on advancement of technology, Make in India warrants the Supporting Industry model, which Vietnam adopted for their success in industrial growth.

Supporting industries are a group of manufacturing industries that supply parts and components or process them for the assemblers, such as automobile, electronics and precision equipment. Supporting industry is low cost, capital intensive and high labour intensive with high –skilled labour.

In Vietnam, Supporting Industry proved to be a boon to the growth of automobile and electronic industries The country has achieved 90 percent localization in manufacturing motorbikes. Vietnam is the second biggest manufacturer of motorbikes in ASEAN. Electronic exports from Vietnam are ten times more than India's.

Electronic is a Support base industry. Manufacturing of mobile phones and electronic components is low capital and high labour intensive industries. There are several factors which favour India as a better destination for mobile phone and electronic component manufacturing. Cheap wages and low land cost can prove propitious for the development of component and parts for mobile and other electronic equipment manufacturing in the GVC network of manufacturing.

India is moving towards digitization. To this end, the GVC network of manufacturing will work well. According to Morgan Stanley, digitization and Smart City will boost the country's GDP growth in 2026-27. (IPA Service)

TO THE EDITOR

Why extort fuel from petrol pumps?

Editor,

With reference to the news report in your paper, "HNYF Wants Free Fuel To Complete 'Pending Work'" (ST Dec,11 2017), it is my opinion that this is nothing but a method used by such organisations to extort fuel. The petrol pumps bear no duty towards any person or organisation to provide free fuel. A petrol pump is a business like any other and provides their products at a rate set by the government. Instead of demanding free fuel, these organizations should be more concerned about bigger things such as health, education and the condition of the roads that the common man uses on a daily basis. I strongly condemn such practices and request the media not to print such reports as they are in bad taste and would only encourage other organizations to do the same. I bear no ill will to any party but wish to call a spade, a spade.

Yours etc.,
Banshai Dkhar
Zoo Road, Guwahati

Need for hassle-free enrolment in voters' list.

Editor,

Many eligible women voters could not enrol their names in the voters' list for want of marriage certificates. The officials engaged in the enrolment process often insist that women applicants should produce marriage certificates even while the names of their respective husbands are already there in the voters' list of the constituency where they become residents consequent upon their marriage. Widows are also not spared. Where will a widow get a marriage certificate from when her husband has passed away and her marriage was not registered? Another instance is when a first time voter wishes to enrol his/her name in the voters' list and the application has to be supported by requisite documents including the EPIC of his/her parents. It is justified for the officials to ask the new entrant to produce the marriage certificate of his/her parents?

If anyone questions why a marriage certificate now, the reply is obvious. A marriage certificate is now compulsory for all official purposes. The Meghalaya Compulsory Marriage Registration Act, 2012 nowhere provides that it is mandatory to produce a marriage certificate for official purposes, except in the second paragraph of the preamble which reads, "Whereas further it is mandatory for a married man and married woman to compulsorily furnish a marriage certificate for all official purposes...." The term "official purposes" is ambiguous as the same has not been defined under the said Act. It is unclear whether the term "official purposes" means anything related to the State Government or the Central Government or the "official purposes" of any other body created under the Constitution of India. The general public fails to understand what is official about enrolment of name in the voters' list. The process of enrolment in the voters' lists is only to ensure that every citizen of the country gets to vote and participate in our democracy, the ideal which we as citizens of India cherish with pride.

We all know that the enrolment of citizens in the voters' list, holding elections, declaration of election results and other analogous matters connected with elections fall within the realm of the Election Commission of India. For new enrolment, Form 6 is required to be filled up by the applicants. In the guidelines for filling the application, nowhere is it mentioned that a married woman is required to produce a marriage certificate in order to enrol her name in the voters' list, then why unnecessarily insist on this? Will the authorities enlighten the general public and remove all doubts and uncertainties around the idea of having to produce a marriage certificate for enrolment in the voters' list?

One more document insisted upon by the officials for enrolment in the voters' list is the birth certificate. But non-production of a birth certificate cannot itself be a ground for rejection of application for enrolment. The guidelines for filling up Form-6 provides that if the age of the applicant is between 18 and 2l years, a documentary proof of date of birth should be attached. A copy of any one of the following documents can be attached as a proof of date of birth:-Birth certificate issued by a Municipal Authorities or district office of the Registrar of Births & Deaths or Baptism certificate or Birth certificate from the school (Govt./ Recognized) last attended by the applicant or any other recognized educational institution. If a person is class 10 or more passed, he should give a copy of the mark-sheet of class 10, if it contains date of birth as a proof; or mark-sheet of class 8 if it contains date of birth; or mark sheet of class 5 if it contains date of birth; or Indian Passport; or PAN card; or Driving License; or Aadhar letter/ Card issued by UIDAI.

In case none of the above document is available, a declaration in prescribed format given in Annexure II. In cases where the applicant is over 21 years of age and physically appears to be so the Booth Level Officer /Assistant Electoral Registration Officer /Electoral Registration Officer, will take a personal declaration of age by him / her as age proof and no documentary proof will be insisted on. The age should be indicated in years and completed months as on the qualifying date i.e. 1st January, of the year with reference to which electoral roll is being revised /or has been revised. The question that arises is whether the officials make the applicants aware about the admissibility of others documents (apart from birth certificate) as proof of age or date of birth?

Through your esteemed daily, I request the Chief Electoral Officer, Meghalaya and the District Election Officers of all the districts of Meghalaya to do the needful, so that the enrolment in the voters' list is made as per the requirement /instructions / guidelines of the Election Commission of India and nobody is harassed. There should be no room left for any arbitrariness. I also request the Meghalaya Board of School Education to urgently make a provision from this year onwards for entering the date of birth of the candidates in their SSLC and HSSLC mark sheets to expand their utility since a mark sheet with date of birth written on it is admissible as proof for the purpose of obtaining PAN Card, EPIC as well as AADHAAR Card.

Yours etc.,
Aneeta Synrem
Shillong-1

Using religion for politics

Editor,

If all available options fail us then we usually turn to God. Of course, this alone ultimately pays us back. But in politics, the act of falling for God looks sometimes too artificial. Political leaders show their love for God for the reasons which only reeks of their unholy ambition and expectation. How can the leader use the images of gods and goddesses and bring them all to the level of the materialistic gutter? What is disgusting is that those very leaders, who vocally deride and brand the practice of the native yoga and meditation as a communal agenda, are now seen posing in posters against the backdrop of Hindu deities! Are they not the ones who even call the secular and universal wisdom of the Bhagavad Gita, without any sincere study and knowledge, as a divisive force and dress down the believers with the help of a biased media? But how suddenly have these leaders now started believing the whole gamut of Hindu rituals! One Facebook friend calls them a bunch of "laughing stock" as they have been shown in the media smearing the forehead with chandan tilak and performing elaborate homas and chanting Vedic mantras. Does it not appear awfully absurd?

Beware of those who use the "divinity" to achieve their self-centered goals. It is not just outrageous, it's spiritually sinful too.

Yours etc.,
Salil Gewali,
Shillong -2

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.

"Success is no accident. It is hard work, perseverance, learning, studying, sacrifice and most of all, love of what you are doing or learning to do."

--- Pele

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LX No.124 SHILLONG, THURSDAY, DECEMBER 14, 2017

Meghalaya's Power Scenario

CHIEF Minister, Mukul Sangma recently admitted that a lot of money is being pumped into the Meghalaya Electric Corporation Ltd (MeECL). The MeECL in its former avatar as MeSEB has been a classic case of throwing good money after bad money. Obviously there is much that is wrong with the Corporation which includes bad financial management including servicing of loans that have been taken year after year to run the Corporation. Consumers have reported a nearly 100% increase in the bill amount of November this year when heaters have not yet been much in use. Will the MeECL explain this sudden rise in tariff? Despite this high tariff there is no assurance of constant power supply. Police Bazar and other commercial areas are worst hit by the frequent power cuts but even residential areas suffer too since many now use electricity as a cooking medium.

Meghalaya has a major power shortfall and has had to purchase power from the national grid. As of March this year, the Meghalaya Government owed Rs 527 crore to the North East Electric Power Corporation (NEEPCo). It is learnt that the accumulated amount till date is to the tune of Rs 700 crore. Certainly this is not the way to run a power corporation. And it is only a matter of time before the Corporation crumbles under its own weight. It needs to be restructured, trimmed down and recapitalised. Those who run the MeECL need to demonstrate that they have the capacity to turn the Corporation around or to show a better way forward instead of being stuck in the same loss-making mould. Efficiency, accountability and outcomes are the three key principles on which any profit-making organisation is run. But the MeECL although having been named a corporation hardly functions like one. Any other profit making entity which requires such frequent bail-outs would have been auctioned off by now. The Opposition parties have listed Power as one of the issues for deliberation in what is to be the last Assembly session for the present government. We hope to see some clarity emerge on the Power scenario in the state. This issue should in fact become the talking point in the run-up to the next election. Political parties that do not take the issue of poor power generation and supply with the seriousness it deserves cannot be considered serious contenders for forming the next government in Meghalaya.

Foggy times

By ParamjitBakhshi

One wonders what has happened to the media! There is much unhappiness, discontent and anger on every media you connect to. News channels have been bombarding us with needless debate for a while, but even on social media many peoplenow seek either signatures on petitions, or are busy railing at some communal or religious injustice, they perceive. Many columnists too have caught the bug, and write such depressing pieces,that our usually bright mornings get shrouded in despair. At social gatherings too, many friends turned social activists and endlessly enlighten us about the sorry state of the world, the country, the state, the city or even one's locality.

Yet in the middle of Laitumkhrah, on the solitary pine in my compound, I still hear the birds chirping, happily and loudly, every dawn. My two dogs nudge me awake in the early hours of the morning, barking enthusiastic entreaties, to be taken out to the larger world. As I step out of my compound, I find abundant energy in the steps of the joggers and hear animated chatter amongst the walkers. Even the sweepers cleaning the streets seemto be in good humour and I always get a cheery "Sat Sri Akal", from the jovial old Sikh, busy at his job. The Khasi ladies selling jadoh just outside Nazareth,seem lively enough, as do the couple of Bengali families frying puris there, and so does the pretty Bodo woman who steams rice cakes on a stove, right on the footpath. Life as I see, it is normal everywhere, and buses and taxis arrive and depart as usual. Children attend schools and adults go to office, the shops open for business and there is a rush of people everywhere.

Though it may not be obvious, but we are in fact being brainwashed by the media. News channels routinely make us feel that the world has become a more dangerous place. They have a self-serving purpose in getting us to focus on the negative. They know that our brains are wired to seek negativity and threats because this is what enabled us to stay alive down the ages. So by showing destructive events they get us hooked. Increased eyeballs so obtained bring them higher TRPs which translate into enhanced advertising revenues. The fact of the matter is that the world today, in spite of isolated instances of war, terrorism and violence, is a much safer place. Separate studies carried out by an eminent psychology Professor (Steven Pinker) and an economist (Max Roser) reveal that the world today is not just safer but a much better place than it was even a few decades ago. There are fewer deaths (about one twelfths of them were due to wars in 1950), lesser homicides, more democracy, less disease and poverty. According to Steven Pinker, the media is largely responsible for depicting the world to be a scary place. "News is a misleading way to understand the world", he says, "it is always about events that happened and not about things that didn't happen. As long as violent events don't fall to zero there will always be headlines to click on." Max Roser expresses a similar view, "To really understand how the world is changing you have to look at the big picture.....The news is very much focused on singular events. All of these trends that I'm looking at are slow changes that happen over decades, or sometimes even centuries. These developments never have a 'now' moment that would make them interesting for news that is following current events."

Of course media is not the only party guilty ofpresenting a bleak perspective of the world. Many other well-meaning entities also contribute to our sense of insecurity. Very early in our life, a dismal picture of the world is painted by our own parents, who articulate a never ending tale of the utopian world they grew up in. Though the fact is that human beings continue to evolve with each generation, they feel youngsters today are up to no good. They caution us against present day society, little realising that nobody can live only within the confines of their own family. If we did how incestuous would that be! In many unnatural households, family still means only the brothers and sisters, and their parents leaving little room for their own spouses and none for friends. On a macro level some religious and social leaders highlight the virtues of their particular flock and often sow distrust of other religions, communities and cultures. One truly wonders why it never occurs to the bigoted that it is their beloved God,who while fashioning just one earth, one sky and one sun for the entire humanity still chose to inhabit the world with such human diversity. Without realising the fact that they too have been brainwashed many leaders of different communities and religions,(and their followers), continue beating either the drum of racial purity or of religious superiority.

And of course politicians amplify such sentiments especially during elections. As elections kick off in our state many candidates will approach us as our saviours and we are likely to be brainwashed one way or the other. Only the very naïve amongst us will believe that any of the candidates actually want to improve our lot. The cynical voters and the seasoned politicians will work out a purely monetary arrangement while we will needlessly stain one fingerand twiddle our thumbs. Our only recourse as we wait for real change, is to turn to humour.

It will do us little harm to put a political twist to the screenplay of an old blockbuster and get a few laughs. I invite you to imagine Gabbar Singh from Sholay, leading not a bunch of dacoits but a political party? Some of you might think that there is no difference between the two but let us not debate serious matters now. Surely, our dear Gabbar must at this point in time, be wondering about the candidates he is going to field. His concern would be broader than, "Ab tera kya hoga, Kaliya, and go to "Ab tera kya hoga, Tom, Dick and Harry(our candidates in reality have more interesting names) from this constituency and that. He may dwell on, ab mera kya hoga, also. Surely he must have quizzed his candidates individually and found out: "kitne voter hain", and counted, kitne paise hai, and pondered whether he has enough financial ammunition to get the better of his rivals. Just think what a tough call this election is going to be for the Gabbar Singhs of every political party. Anti-incumbency this time is not limited to the ruling party, since many incumbents have joined, or are set to join, the opposition ranks. Won't some of these candidates be indulging in shadow boxing by opposing their own lustreless past?That should be quite a performance. It is like abusing oneself in the mirror and making us believe it is somebody else. Though even my dogs realise that it is a futile exercise to bark at your own image, politics is a more sophisticated art and such performances are de riguer in a democratic pantomime.

To give our leaders their due, being a candidate is a tough job, and electioneering is not just a walk through Sholay (hot embers) but more like an excursion over hot tin roofs. Wonder if you saw, "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" which unlike the movie mentioned before, is a Hollywood classic. Its attraction, apart from its cast of a very alluring Elizabeth Taylor and handsome Paul Newman, is that its motifs are very similar to politics. It features greed, superficiality, moral decay and mendacity. Now most of the readers know that the first three are an integral part of any electoral joust, but must be wondering what in the devil's name is mendacity. I assure you that though the word, not being in popular usage is unfamiliar; its meaning does not require much explanation. While in Sholay the neta was the hero in this movie we can be the Big Daddies. Any voter can justly use the dialogue of Big Daddy, artfully played by the burly BurlIves, to address his old political masters:"What do you know about this mendacity thing? Hell! I could write a book on it! Don't you know that? ---- -- Well, I could, I could write a goddamn book on it and still not cover the subject anywhere near enough!!–Think of all the lies I got to put up with!– Pretenses! Ain't that mendacity? Just think how many electoral promises, we have believed in the past and none of them have ever come true. And yet we are expected to line up again up and cast our vote.And that is something wefaithfully and unfailing do.That is our mendacity.

The difference between the voter and the voted is not of kind but just of degree. We all exist to keep the dramas meaningful; including the ones we call politics or news.There is a bond which connects the voter to the neta and the viewer to the broadcaster.Being connected often leads us to becoming disconnected from deeper realities. Winter or not we exist in a state of cerebral hibernation.

Happy holidays.

The writer is a life skills trainer and can be contacted on bakhshi03@rediffmail.com

Long haul for Rahul to save Congress

Gandhi scion has finally rattled Modi

By Amulya Ganguli

The Congress's "existential crisis", as one of the party's voluble supporters, Jairam Ramesh, said recently, is over. If the party's campaign in Gujarat (though not in Himachal Pradesh) is any indication, the 132-year-old party has regained its balance. It may not win in either state, but there is little doubt that it will give the BJP a run for its money, especially in Gujarat.

What is more, the person responsible for this sign of recovery is someone who was the butt of jokes on the social media not long ago. Now, all of a sudden, it is clear that he has left his unprepossessing past behind him and is ready to lead the party with greater efficacy than his mother, Sonia Gandhi, who can be held responsible for the Congress's 2014 defeat by stymieing Manmohan Singh's pro-market policies with her "socialism".

The Congress, therefore, is now expected to embark on a new growth path where the new president, Rahul Gandhi is unlikely to have much time for his mother's crypto-communist friends of the National Advisory Council, the power behind the throne when Manmohan Singh was the prime minister.

Even as Rahul sets out on his new role as the party chief, there will be some who will think that he is stepping into shoes that are too large for him. It is these doubts even in his own party which perhaps explains the delay in his anointment. But if these misgivings have been set at rest, the reason is the change for the better in Rahul's body language, as the spokesman of a party opposed to the Congress conceded, and in his energy levels and articulation.

It is obviously Rahul's emergence as a formidable challenger which was behind the viciousness of the attacks on him by his opponents, who not only fell back on the familiar stick of dynastic succession to beat him with, but also referred to Aurangzeb, Babur and Alauddin Khilji in their comments on his ascent.

While the branding of an adversary as a Mughal/ Muslim may be the worst abuse in the BJP's lexicon, its use against a person who was once called "Pappu" or an adolescent is also suggestive of a sense of nervousness in the Hindutva camp.

Moreover, the BJP appears to have realized that Rahul is now capable of not only leading the Congress, but also the opposition camp where thereis no one else who can don the mantle of a leader with greater impact than the Congress president – neither Sharad Pawar nor Mamata Banerjee nor Lalu Prasad Yadav nor Akhilesh Yadav.

Even in the Congress, neither of the two chief ministers, Amrinder Singh and Siddaramaiah, has it in them to be the leader of an anti-BJP alliance at the national level. If it is now possible to envisage Rahul in this role, which was not only a few months ago, it is not only because of his emergence as a mature leader who occasionally reveals his humorous side – "unlike Narendra bhai, I am human", he said recently - but it is also an implicit recognition of his lineage, which marks him out from the other opposition leaders who are all inextricably identified with their respective provinces.

There is little doubt that the longstanding pan-Indian aura of the Nehru-Gandhi family which detaches its members from their provincial background – whether Kashmir or Uttar Pradesh – distinguishes Rahul Gandhi from the other politicians.

In this respect, the Nehru-Gandhis are a quintessential modern "Indian" family, with a cosmopolitan outlook, who are at home anywhere in India, and not tied to any community, let alone caste. Their fluency in English and Hindi also makes them readily acceptable all over the country as does their lack of overt religiosity and the consequent fetishes about diet.

If the Congress can run the BJP close in Gujarat, as some opinion polls indicate, it will mean that the dark clouds which have enveloped the party from before 2014 (it lost four assembly elections in 2013) are lifting.

Irrespective of the results, it is clear that Rahul is in for a long haul to pull the Congress out of its present moribund condition where it is more dependent on the failures of its opponents to succeed than on doing so on its own steam.

Whether Rahul Gandhi has the intellectual acumen to steer the right course between the extremes of populism and neo-liberal reforms will only be known when he enters the deep end of the political swimming pool. So far, he has given few hints about his economic outlook, but if his comment that he wished Manmohan Singh had undertaken something like Narendra Modi's "make in India" scheme is taken at face value, then it is clear that he is not left-of-centre like his mother. Which means that the former prime minister will regard him as a man after his heart and not only a "darling" of the Congress. (IPA Service)

"Even as Rahul sets out on his new role as the party chief, there will be some who will think that he is stepping into shoes that are too large for him. It is these doubts even in his own party which perhaps explains the delay in his anointment. But if these misgivings have been set at rest, the reason is the change for the better in Rahul's body language, as the spokesman of a party opposed to the Congress conceded, and in his energy levels and articulation. It is obviously Rahul's emergence as a formidable challenger which was behind the viciousness of the attacks on him by his opponents."

TO THE EDITOR

Promoting bamboo products

Editor,

On November 23rd 2017 the President of India cleared an ordinance amending the Indian Forest Act, 1927, omitting bamboo grown in non-forest areas from the definition of trees. Definition of tree in the Indian Forest Act, 1927 u/section 2(7) included palms, bamboos, skumps, brush-wood and canes. The brief ordinance is aimed at increasing bamboo plantations. Now felling and transportation of bamboos would be exempted from requirement of permits.

At present, India imports timber and allied products such as pulp, paper and furniture. In 2015, India imported about 18.01 million cubic meters of timber and allied products worth Rs 43,000 crore. The amendment will help in addressing some of these issues, besides meeting the demand from domestic production. According to the United Nation Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), the bamboo business in the North-East region alone has a potential of about Rs 5000 crore in the next 10 years.

The measure will go a long way in enhancing the agricultural income of farmers and tribals, especially in North-East and Central India. The amendment is also aimed at encouraging farmers and others to take up plantation of suitable bamboo species on degraded land, in addition to plantation on agricultural land and other private lands under agro-forestry mission.

The amendment would help millions of people in rural sector of the North East and also in the remote villages throughout the country for construction of bamboo- huts where they live in. Increased growth of bamboos sans policing by forest department and permit granting regime would also help faster civil constructional activities in the urban sector.

A major objective of the amendment finally is to promote cultivation of bamboo in non-forest areas to achieve the twin objectives of increasing the income of farmers and also increasing the green cover of the country.

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

Power cut woes!

Editor,

Through your esteemed daily I would like to draw the attention of Meghalaya Energy Corporation Ltd (MeECL), Shillong about the frequent power cuts in Police Bazar almost daily for about 7-8 times for reasons best known to the authorities of the Corporation. When there is shortage of water in the Umiam lake there is power cut and now when there is enough water in the Umaim lake then also power cut is making our lives miserable.

Is there no mechanism to regulate power supply when the consumers have to pay through their noses for the high price of electricity consumption? Hope the authorities or the engineers will look into the matter and ensure constant supply of power.

Yours etc.,
S.L Singhania,
Shillong -1

Rise of PM Modi and roar of subversive forces

Editor,

If your son befriends the difficult and long time enemies of your own family/ clan then how do you describe him and how do you feel about your future? Will it not be likely to open the door to countless tragedies? But in India, such thing is now being openly celebrated. In the last couple of years the political leaders of certain parties have been taking the wrong step forward in having closed-door meetings with the leaders of Pakistan/ China. What transpires among them is obviously against the present government and the nation's fundamental ethos. Those leaders have often been heard to be sympathetic towards the terrorists or those who, "roar against the nation" or against its patriotic values. Yes, those leaders jump forward to defend them who wreak havoc on peaceful citizens. Some leaders are apologetic that certain NGOs/media should not be harassed in the name of fighting the terrorists and ISIS. This is how the country's leaders defend the dangerous postures of dangerous outfits. Will this trend not invite greater troubles to the nation in future?

One wonders how the apex judiciary of the country allow political parties to pour out their pent-up anger before the leaders of neighboring countries who are always aggressively in a combative mood. Why is the Supreme Court silent on such blatant subversive activities?

Very recently, one senior leader of the national party even scoffed at Prime Minister Modi by calling him a depraved being "Neech". What are the criteria for one being morally low? Has PM Modi fallen short of any standards of integrity since he works sincerely and formulates innovative plans and schemes for the greater welfare of the nation? Well, has he not been constitutionally elected by the people of this country? Why is the media is less aggressive and more defensive of those transgressors who wield daggers behind the cloak.

Whatsoever be the political dispensation at the Center, such open rebellion against the government will not augur well for the nation and its 1.25 billion citizens.

Yours etc.,
Salil Gewali,
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.

Competition is the spice of sports; but if you make spice the whole meal you'll be sick.

--- Marshall Field

The Shillong Times

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Nepal Elections

POLITICS in Nepal has been volatile for years. The recent elections are expected to bring in some stability. The Left alliance has secured a substantial majority in the historic provincial and parliamentary polls. The CPN-UML emerged as the largest party. The Left alliance was led by former Prime Minister K.P Oli and the CPN-Maoist leader Prachanda. The alliance backed 116 out of a total of 165 seats. It is now in a comfortable position to form a government at the Centre. CPN-UML leader K.P Oli is likely to lead the next government. The combined strength of the two Madheshi parties-Rashtriya Janata Party and Federal Socialist Forum, Nepal accounted for 21 seats. The remaining four seats were divided among three fringe parties and an independent candidate. The Left alliance also secured a majority in all but one provincial assemblies. Out of a total of 330 seats, the CPN-UML bagged 168. The Maoist Centre won 73 seats while the Nepal Congress captured 41.

Under the proportional voting system, however, the CPN-UML has only a thin majority over the Nepal Congress. The CPN-UML has so far garnered 2.25 million votes and the Nepal Congress 2.16 million votes. The House of Representatives in Kathmandu consists of 275 members. 165 of them would be elected directly under the first-past-the-post system. The remaining 110 will come through the proportional representations system. K. P Oli, the Prime Minister to be, makes no secret of his leaning towards Beijing and so the poll results do not look to be in India's favour.

LOOKING BACK

May 5, 1989

ABSU denies Church hand in Bodo stir

The All Bodo Students' Union has squarely denied the involvement of Christian Missionaries with the ABSU movement. In a statement released on Monday, ABSU Vice President Mr Pradip Kumar Diamary said that neither the Christian Missionaries nor the Hindus or any other religious people wee helping the Bodo agitation. He said that Assam Chief Minister Mr Prafulla Kumar Mahanta and State Home Minister Mr Bhrigu Phukan were "attacking the religious rights of Christians and others in a secular state like India by bringing false allegations that Christian Missionaries are helping the Bodo gitators."

Denying the involvement of any central leaders in the agitation said that the ABSU is "not guided by anyone, it is independent" and stated that they wanted to ensure the survival of the Bodos and an ethnic group with its distinct identity as others have within India.

Panchayat Bill not to affect state list

A Constitution Amendment Bill, to be introduced in Parliament which will be approved by the cabinet after being discussed at the AICC-I special session will neither affect the state list nor the concurrent list. The Bill, which would take into account the views of the Chief Ministers' conference, is expected to provide for regularity of elections in panchayati raj institutions, reservation for weaker sections and women. Official sources recalled Prime Minister Mr Rajiv Gandhi's assurance at the Chief Ministers' conference that the bill would not be rushed through in Parliament. It would be open to discussions and suggestions and would not be passed before the monsoon session.

On holding of elections to panchayati raj institutions, the bill is likely to make a provision that the elections should not only be regular but in case of supersession of these bodies, they should be held within a specified period of six months or so. Whether the term of these bodies should be for three years or five years is another issue that would be spelt out in the bill.

Nongtdu reminds state's financial dependence on Delhi

Meghalaya PWD Minister Mr O L Nongtdu has warned that the people of Meghalaya should not be misled by wistful thinking that we are self sufficient. Speaking at the inaugural function of the Sohmynting Community Hall recently the Minister said that the government of Meghalaya depended much on the Central government assistance. The State government will spend Rs. 406 crore for the current fiscal year, out of which Rs. 360 crore comes from the Centre.

The Minister asked for the full cooperation of the people so that various development plans and schemes could be carried out promptly and successfully for the upliftment the standard of living of the people of the State. Minister for Community and Rural Development Dr R C Laloo said that he had requested Mr Nongtdu to come and inaugurate the hall, so that he would see the condition of the Sohmynting road, and would instruct the PWD officials to complete the work before the onslaught of the monsoon.

Referring to the demand of the local populace for the take over of the Sohmynting ME School by the government , Mr Laloo said that the government would be able to do so if the school produced better results. The Minister expressed his concern that except for three boys all the ME students are girls.

Redeeming political discourse from "neech" wisecracks and barbs

By Patricia Mukhim

The Gujarat elections brought out the worst from all parties involved. Some Congress veterans who graduated from the best institution of the country now claim they did not know the Hindi nuances of the word 'neech' which was used to describe Prime Minister, Narendra Modi. That the same Congressman earlier used the word chai-walllah in a demeaning sort of way to define the future prime minister of this country just shows how intemperate language can kill the soul of political discourse. Also there is a hubris which the diplomat turned politician carries with him as do many of the Queen's English speaking type of politicians that the Congress has in its fold. However, the Prime Minister too should not have plunged himself into the cesspool of politics to the extent of forgetting that he is the Prime Minister of the country and not just a party worker out to redeem his party the BJP from imminent disaster in Gujarat, at any cost. As the Prime Minister of India, Mr Modi embodies the hopes and dreams of 1.3 billion people; as a leader of the BJP and an RSS pracharak he represents a political party that not all Indians subscribe to. There is a clear divide between the two and the PM ought to have restrained himself from taking on a purely political role in a state election.

Meanwhile, the Congress Party seems to have recovered its bearings with the crowning of the Nehru-Gandhi scion recently. Many who felt that the Indian political system which derives its ethos from democracy needed to have a credible and strong opposition, now rest their hopes on Rahul Gandhi to provide them the leadership that his late grandmother Indira and his father Rajiv Gandhi did. So far Rahul Gandhi has put his best foot forward as far as media interactions post his elevation to the post of Party President are concerned. He has been temperate with the choice of words and seems to have made progress since the time that Arnab Goswami trapped him into putting his foot in his mouth. However, the fact that Rahul Gandhi too had to do a temple hopping exercise in order to keep pace with his rivals in the BJP suggests that the Congress Party too might take an about turn insofar as its commitment to secularism as it is enshrined in the Constitution is concerned. Secularism does not mean pandering to any religious community or relegating adherents of one religion to the status of a minority and others a majority. Democracy requires that all religions are treated with equal respect. And why do citizens have to be defined by their religions anyway? Isn't this what is inhibiting the potential of India to become a superpower? A country divided against itself cannot prosper, the good book says. When will this country rise above the nasty attempts to politicise every single space and institution? If it was the so-called Left liberals earlier, now that space has turned Right, quality be damned!

Meghalaya, Nagaland and Tripura are headed for the polls and electioneering has begun in right earnest. By February-March 2018 the three states should have new governments in place. In the North East, politicians have so far refrained from using 'neech' language and on heaping stinging remarks against political opponents. After all, when the elections are over, political rivals have to work together in the larger interests of the state and people. Language that polarises and appeals that communalise are not in the best interests of a polity that is racially so diverse and which follows different belief systems. Without a common respect for all religions, we would be negating the very idea of India which has stood the test of time. Most of us were therefore shocked by the language used against the minority community by certain BJP leaders. One of them said he was ready to die to defend Hinduism against repeated onslaughts on it. There are those who make pointed references to "Muslims" as being more loyal to their faith than to the country. These sort of lewd attacks on religious minorities are certainly mischievous and destructive. It is ironic that the Election Commission of India turns a blind eye to such remarks which are intended to instigate and inflame.

There is also a view that is gaining ground in the country today that both Christianity and Islam are religions that proselytize and that they convert their adherents into the faith and then look down on non-converts as pagans or infidels. While this is true of both Islam and Christianity and sometimes missionaries have been at the forefront of promoting a western mode of worship which makes it difficult for the tribes of the region to identify with their fellow Indian brethren, to undo this by aggressively pushing in the Hindutva ideology is catastrophic. Of course it would be naïve to say that religion should be left out of politics. This is easier said than done. Why can't we just live and let live? Why do we need to preach against another religion? Why do we need to compare between religions and develop a religious hubris that exudes a sense of superiority because it is the only religion that can save humans from eternal damnation?

Religion has to do with the soul and spirit. It is and should be a personal faith. Mixing religion with politics is toxic. In a democracy, what religious leaders of all hues need to preach to their captive audience is that they should vote candidates with certain desirable qualities and avoid electing those with a track record of corruption. Why should people vote a candidate just because he belongs to their faith? And why should religious leaders go around campaigning for candidate A or B and start a whispering campaign within church/ temple/mosque circles? This is destructive to say the least. I was speaking to a non-tribal friend in Shillong. He was earlier a supporter of the BJP but later said he lost respect for the Party after it appointed a temple priest, Yogi Adityanath as the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh. Now every religious leader would also want to wield political power since a precedence has been set. Is this good for India? Personally I think it is disastrous, and why a politically suave Modi would do such a thing is beyond comprehension. Of course if building the Ram temple at Ayodhya is the overriding factor and a political priority, never mind the decrepit state of health, deaths of infants due to encephalitis and poor law and order in Uttar Pradesh, then Yogi Adityanath will indeed feed Hindu pride. But is this going to take India anywhere?

It would be in the best interests of the North East and of our own state of Meghalaya to remain vigilant at attempts to polarise voters along religious and communal lines. We cannot afford to be divided because we are already small communities fragmented by tribal allegiances. Election comes once in five years but we have to live as neighbours and friends for as long as we are on this earth. Let's not take a short view of life. There's more to life and human relations that we need to cherish and respect. Let politics not colour our views and spread hatred where there was none! We need politics to govern ourselves not that politics should govern us. The government we elect must serve all constituents and not just those who voted for it. Amen!

TO THE EDITOR

Fraudulent activities by Reliance

Editor,

Reliance has asked its customers to port their numbers to other service providers. Being a former client of Reliance (Assam Circle), I applied for Mobile Number Portability from Reliance to Vodafone. It's now over a month and there is no formal communication from any service provider relating the status of my MNP. When I asked Vodafone they said that my application is rejected due to wrong port code. In spite of providing all information and paying all my bills, Reliance is troubling its old customers. Reliance was charging security money when the post paid connection was taken but they are not mentioning about returning that amount. Reliance Communication is really harassing its customers. Is the government authority aware of this? I appeal to the concerned authority to make some provisions to help out the existing customers get their portability as soon as possible. No communication for over a month is a problem and entails loss of business for each of us. Reliance or any other service provider must be transparent in the process and they must inform customers about the status of any application. It is difficult to locate any office of Reliance to get an update. This means they are not transparent with the customers. I have paid bills to Reliance without getting any service from them. The Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) should intervene and help out the customers to get number portability at the earliest.

Yours etc.,
Ranjan K Baruah
Nayanpur, Guwahati

India's ranking among world universities

Editor

India has been facing considerable challenges in getting recognition for her première institutes in the world university rankings for decades. Many are upset about this and think that the international accreditation and evaluation agencies are not fair towards Indian institutions. Very few in India are actually aware of the deplorable conditions of Indian universities that look superb only from the surface! The factors behind the chronic diseases of Indian universities are listed below:

1. Poor management and acute politicization of the funding, monitoring, evaluation and accreditation agencies in India is directly and indirectly impacting on the quality of education and research in universities across the country.

2. Unimaginable political influences within institutes of higher learning disturbing educational growth, culture and lack of proper management.

3. Negative influences of ruling political parties in the daily running of the institutes across India.

4. Most appointments in Indian universities are purely political, resulting in hiring of below average faculty with questionable credibility, accountability, expertise and necessary experience. The dedicated, apolitical, teaching and research minded faculty remain an 'endangered' group and are actually marginalized, pushed and overpowered by political appointees in most institutes.

5. The top management is too busy catering to their political masters; having little or no attention in upgrading university capability and infrastructure for decades.

6. Most heads of institutions have political loyalties hence universities have little opportunities of any independent decisions and development.

7. High level of corruption, nepotism, existence of self-destructive students, faculty and non-teaching staff unions.

8. There is very little or no awareness among Indian universities regarding the necessary parameters for international rankings, as a consequence they are unable to take appropriate steps to improve the ranking and visibility of the university. Many universities feel that having a clean campus, proper facilities for car parking and modern gymnasium facilities etc are essential components for international recognitions; which is light years away from what the actual requirements are.

9. Poor quality publications.

10. Lack of credible international research collaborations.

11. Poor track record of attracting international students in most campuses.

12. Lack of available state sponsored international fellowships/scholarships for deserving candidates to go overseas for gaining valuable research experience in famous international campuses, and even those rare 'geniuses' that are selected have 'admirable' political contacts;

13. Most campuses do not even have the vision, funding, contact or credibility to attract reputed speakers from top overseas institutes to come and make a presentations in their campuses.

14. Private universities are being recognized as new frontiers of Indian education. Unfortunately, private Indian universities are money making machines with nice campuses and fat tuition fees. Majority of them have zero vision or credibility or interest to develop into world class campuses other than making huge annual profits for the business groups running these universities under some so called education trust. These universities are just factories churning out graduates in exchange for a fat tuition fee; that's all. A publication brings nothing for them; but an additional student helps in lifting their bank accounts. Expecting private universities to make any change to the deplorable quality of Indian education system is a distant dream.

15. Under such a destructive atmosphere with every political party both at the Center, State and Union Territory being hell bent upon influencing the top institutes in India in their own color; it will be super challenging for any Indian university to make to the top global list.

Yours etc.,
Saikat Kumar Basu
Lethbridge AB
Canada

Left victory in Nepal may ensure stability

Indian government should wait and watch

By Sankar Ray

The first national parliamentary elections in Nepal in the post-royal era connotes the most spectacular political transition from the bullet to the ballot, fitted into a constitutional revolution from the world's only Hindu state into a secular democratic polity. The UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres hailed the elections as "a historic moment for Nepal in implementing its federal structure as enshrined in the 2015 Constitution". This was preceded by a decade-and-a half civil war, ended in 2006, killing of about 17000 people. But perhaps even more significant is the victory of communist alliance of Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist-Leninist) and Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Center) that achieved a near-two-thirds majority, its pragmatic and nationalistic cushion notwithstanding.

The CPN(UML) will just miss the majority in the new national assembly . It has won 80 out of 165 seats in the Federal Parliament in direct election (First-Past-The-Post system), and is expected to win another. It polled 1637694 votes (36 per cent) in the seats already won. . In the second Constituent Assembly (2013), it got less than 30 per cent. Its ally CPN(MC) has got 36 seats, thanks to seat-sharing with the CPN(UML). The latter got 649136 votes (14 per cent) .In the last national elections to Constituent Assembly in 2013, the Maoists who fought alone bagged 26 out of 240 FTPT seats and over 17 per cent of votes. Rashtriya Prajatantra Party, formed by merger of six Madhesist Parties bagged 11 seats. Federal Socialist Forum, Nepal, opened its account winning 10 seats. Naya Shakti, Jan Morcha and Nepal Majdur Kishan each won one each. An independent candidate too was elected.

The final shape of the law-making body will be known after proportional seats are filled in. The strength of NC will be larger than the Maoists. FSFN will also have significant presence as it got 3 per cent of votes

In election to provincial assemblies, CPN(UML), CPN(MC) and NC got 168, 73 and 40 seats respectively, followed by FSFN and RJP winning 24 and 16 seats respectively. Janmorcha and Nayashakti got one each.NMK won one, while three went to Independents. Others drew blank.

The mass support of CPN(MC) is shrinking, if one looks at the performance in the Federal Parliament.. Whether the party will learn the lesson from this is to be awaited, although its chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal aka Prachanda will most probably be offered the post of President by the CPN(UML) which is almost certain to choose the former Prime Minister Khadga Prasad Sharma Oli as the PM. He won by a margin of 28,000 votes from Jhapa-5. He polled the highest number of votes - 57,139 votes. Consider the contrast with his comrade and a prominent leader Deepak Prakash Bhatta who scraped through by a slender margin of 258, defeating the Nepali Congress heavy weight Ramesh Lekhak from Kanchanpur-3 constituency. Bhatta secured 26,364 votes whereas Lekhak garnered 26,106 votes.

CPN (Maoist Centre) Chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal aka Prachanda has been elected from Chitwan-3 by a margin of 9,327 votes. Nepali Congress President and PM Sher Bahadur Deuba won from Dadeldhura constituency for the sixth time. He bagged 28,044 votes, almost 7000 votes more than UCPN (MC) . The NC, despite fractured within by internal bickering, is the second largest party, having polled 1,437, 709 votes (34 per cent). In 2013, it got less than 30 per cent of votes. Sagaciously enough, K P Oli promised that the new government would take the Opposition into confidence.

One of the main reasons for the setback of NC is the inept handling of nationwide economic crisis during the Indian blockade by the NC-led government and inability to curb widespread corruption - together building anti-incumbency, afflicting the Deuba government.

The Constitution puts a bar on the Opposition from registering a no-confidence vote for two years, but does not bar coalition partners from pulling out. Observers await how the political parties - mainly CPN (UML), NC and CPN (MC) which together received 84 per cent of votes - build the Himalayan state into a model of secular democracy. Well-known constitutional expert Bipin Adhikari observed in a precautionary tone that nothing - no rule or statute - can ensure guarantee for stability, implying that all this depends on the players - not only the law-makers but political parties and individuals too. The land-locked state confronts "a constitutional experiment, and we are yet to see whether it works in our favour."

The CPN(UML) mixing pragmatism and developmentalism have to strengthen the emerging democratic polity. Both K P Oli and Prachanda are keen on bonhomie with China but the spirit behind this is more emotional than political. Which is why the new government may scale up the priority on extension of the Chinese railway network into Nepal and implement hydro-electric, airport and other infrastructure projects which are expected to open substantial employment potentials. But it cannot reverse the cancellation of Budhi Gandaki hydel project (storage type) with the Chinese Gejuwa as it was a sequel to a recommendation by the parliamentary committee, which having gone into the doings-on during the gestation phase, found that the agreement was. 'marred by irregularities and lack of transparency". Whether the new regime will keep the Indian government in loop on this issue, is to be seen. Nepal is a natural buffer between China and India.

Political analysts are keen on assessing the modalities of merger of the two communist parties, particularly the pattern of sharing leadership. The imperative for togetherness is stronger after the spectacular performance of Left in the national elections. The leaders of two parties announced the move for merger almost synchronously with the forging of Left alliance. This had an effect on the elections. But the question is whether Maoist party accepts the status of junior partner, as the CPN(UML) is way above the CPN(MC) in poll performance.

The Left alliance with big majority, has enough leverage to start the process of economic rejuvenation in Nepal. For India, the moot issue is how the new Communist leadership shapes Nepal's future relations with India and China. (IPA Service)

"Strength does not come from winning. Your struggles develop your strengths. When you go through hardships and decide not to surrender, that is strength."

--- Arnold Schwarzenegger

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WTO Conference

IT is very much in India's interest that the World Trade Organisation (WTO) should be strengthened. But the eleventh biennial ministerial conference held at Buenos Aires hobbled to an end. India did not suffer a setback as the right to continue the food security programme using support prices was not interfered with. However, the 164 country multilateral organisation which is called upon to frame rules of trade through consensus failed to produce even the semblance of a positive result which exposed the ineffectiveness of the world body. As usual, the US, the most powerful economy in the world put up the major hurdle. The US seems to have no faith or interest in the international body. That has greatly weakened the most successful weapon it had so far, the mechanism for resolving disputes among nations. So far the US has been directly involved in nearly 50% of the cases which have come up before the WTO. True, large groups of countries have acted separately to carry on negotiations on such areas as ecommerce, facilitation of investment and removal of trade obstacles for medium and small scale enterprises. That may be regarded as a distinctly positive development. But the way its progress is halted is extremely discouraging.

India's stand for its food security programme was indeed laudable. This reformed package which is very much on its way means a greater use of direct cash transfers to beneficiaries. That is what is done in developed countries but for the successful implementation, India has to ensure that the WTO does not lose its efficiency. It proposes to arrange a meeting of some member countries early next year to provide a forum for ironing out differences in promoting their interests of a diverse group of nations. India should be in the forefront of the WTO movement as it has been since Davos and Doha.

LOOKING BACK

May 5, 1989

Demand for F.P.O certificate

The Secretary of the North Eastern Council, Mr P H Trivedi has strongly pleaded for thestring up of a Regional Office for F.P.O.(Fruit Processing Order) for the North-Eastern Region with a view to removing the difficulties experienced by the manufacturers of theNorth-Eastern Region and thus to promote industrial development in the region. Mr Trivedi in his letter addressed recently to the Secretary to the Department of Food and Civil Supplies. Government of India, referred to the delay in obtaining Fruit Processing Order Certificates by the exporters from the North-Eastern Region because of the location of the F.P.O. Office at Calcutta. The NEC Secretary also mentioned in his letter how the NEC had been exploring possibilities of increasing the volume of export of processed fruit products from the North-Eastern Region for which there is great potential.

He also mentioned that the NERAMAC has recently executed exportorders of Processed fruit product to the tune of 370 tonnes valued at Rs. 30.50 lakhs and it has now offers for export of about 1200 tonnes.

Ebacle in Buenos Aires at WTO ministerial

World body loses focus, becomes litigation-oriented

By G. Srinivasan

In the lingo of multilateral trade negotiations the words collapse, stalemate or lack of consensus are purported to convey the plain meaning that the system presiding over the dialogue among as many as 164 member nations of the World Trade Organization (WTO) is in disarray. It has been reduced to a mere talking shop sans action because a few influential members from both the developed and the emerging economies were obsessively interested in riding their own hobby-horses, refusing to budge on issues they deem basic to their national priority and development concerns, as the case may be.

The fundamental concept of give and take in negotiations has lost its sell-by date in these days of the ugly manifestation of protectionism and self-aggrandizement without due regard to weigh the obligations of others as basic decency demands. How else can one construe the closing observations of the WTO Chie Azevedo when he desperately stated that "if we are not improving the lives of the poorest or giving the smallest a chance to compete, we are not doing our jobs"! Even his enlightened appeal to self-interest for the survival of all, if not for their welfare, went on tin deaf ears and in exasperation he pithily told the trade ministers and envoys pointblank thus: "It is not compatible to expect multilateralism to work and at the same time to expect walk out with everything you wanted. This is a recipe for failure".

This is what exactly each member or a few powerful trade majors, including the United States, China, Brazil and India, persisted without attempting to find a common ground for compromise to clinch issues of gravitas that would lift the waning spirit of multilateralism, which is in a moribund state now. It is a sad but sardonic state of affairs in global trade negotiations that the world trade monitoring body, charged with evolving a rule-based trading arena to the common benefit of all, has had to end its three-day ministerial conclave in the Argentina capital in discord in the face of frontal U.S criticism of the group and vetoes from other member nations.

The grim reality was summed up by European Trade Commissioner Cecilia Malmstrom when she told a wrap-up news event that "We have not achieved any multilateral outcomes. The sad reality is that we did not even agree to stop subsidizing illegal fishing". The disgruntlement was so deep-seated that it led some ministers, including U.S. Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer, to suggest that negotiations among smaller groups of "like-minded" WTO countries were a better approach going forward! In fact, the plenary began on December 10 with Lighthizer setting a somber tone in a stinging rebuke of the WTO, pointing out that it was impossible to negotiate new rules while many of the current rules were not being followed and that the WTO was losing its focus and becoming too litigation-focused.

One key area where no agreement was feasible was public stockholding for food security purpose, an issue dear to Indian trade negotiators but which drew a blank with the US steadfastly not yielding an inch on the concerns voiced by many a nation that are earlier called the Third World!

Interestingly, a trade expert and Senior Fellow at the Peterson Institute for International Economics in Washington, Chad Bown, said the potential focus on plurilateral parleys between like-minded countries is a natural and positive outcome, if It turns out to bear fruit". Bown cited the 1996 WTO Information Technology Agreement (ITA), which began with just 29 countries lowering tariffs on information technology (IT) products, later got expanded to 82 countries covering 97 per cent of trade in the sector!

As if acting on a cue, on the last day of the Ministerial Conference, the WTO website declared the advent of three such groupings on e-commerce, investment facilitation and micro, small & medium Enterprises (MSME), It further noted that "each representing many WTO members and encompassing participants from developed, developing and least developed countries unveiled their plans to move forward with discussions in the three areas". A point to ponder is that India is obdurately opposed to inclusion of the new issues into the Doha Development Agenda before exhausting the extant remit of the development round to the entire satisfaction of the developing world, If one could recall at the first Singapore Ministerial too in 1996, India opposed stridently the inclusion of non-trade issues, such as investment, competition policy, government procurement and trade facilitation. But these issues had over the years got into the WTO parlance in one garb or another while the trade facilitation agreement had been part and parcel of the WTO in which India also ratified recently! One can oppose topics that one finds disagreeable but one's options get closed in multilateral forum when others join the bandwagon to reap potential benefits! This is the sheer commercial logic that one can ignore at one's own folly and exorbitant cost!

Be that as it may, as many as 71 WTO members would set off exploratory work towards future negotiations on trade-related aspects of electronic commerce with participation open to all WTO members. Together the group accounts for around 77 per cent of global trade. On investment facilitation, 70 WTO members, recognizing the link among investment, trade and development, unveiled plans to pursue structural discussions with the aim of developing a multilateral framework. The proponents of this group, accounting for around 73 per cent of trade and 66 per cent of inward foreign direct investment (FDI), would meet early next year to discuss how to organize outreach activities on this issue. On MSMEs, 87 WTO members, accounting for around 78 per cent of world exports, issued a joint statement declaring their intention to create multilaterally an informal working group on MSMEs at the WTO that would be open to all members. The discussions here would encompass constraints related to foreign trade operations that represent a significant burden for MSMEs interested in participating in global trade. So much for India's resistance and opposition to the new issues that in any way got pushed into discussion stage to start with!

In fairness, the WTO conceded that "no agreement was possible in a number of the substantive issues that were under discussions". One key area where no agreement was feasible was public stockholding for food security purpose, an issue dear to Indian trade negotiators but which drew a blank with the US steadfastly not yielding an inch on the concerns voiced by many a nation that are earlier called the Third World! The WTO was merely content with stating that ministers gave their commitment to continuing to move forward on the negotiations related to remaining relevant issues, including to advance work on the three pillars of agriculture (domestic support, market access and export competitiveness) as well a non-agricultural market access (industrial goods/ tariffs), services, development, rules, trade and environment and trade-related intellectual property rights (TRIPS).

For the suave Suresh Prabhu, who took a contingent of Indian media as the guests of the Union Commerce Ministry to cover the ministerial proceedings, the moment of glory was confined to issuing a tepid statement couched in ponderous prose that during the Ministerial "India stood firm on its stance on the fundamental principles of WTO, including multilateralism, rule-based consensual decision-making, an independent and credible dispute resolution and appellate process, the centrality of development and special and differential treatment for all developing countries". It is time India reconsidered expending its energy, efforts and resources in the waning multilateralism but instead tie up with 'like-minded' groups to wrest the best of benefits as the majority of WTO members have so patently demonstrated by subscribing to the three new issues. (IPA Service)

Cheers: A Time for Social Inquisition

By Ananya S Guha

That politics can become so lowly is one of the saddest things in our country today. It is also a global phenomenon with a maverick American President also leading the way. But what is happening in the country today, is a caricature of the past. True there were political crises ever since the country attained Independence, attaining a climax in the internal emergency declared in the seventies, but a respect for the ruling party and the opposition were mutually present to some extent. But with a central government that enjoys absolute majority, there is trepidation in whatever it says, or does. Why? This should be disconcerting even to its avid supporters. There are imaginary things evinced everywhere, but the real things are seemingly ignored. A formula of divide and rule has been viciously evoked. Divide the majority on the basis of caste and religion. That the majority perceives threat from the largest minority is a travesty. The killing of a worker in Rajasthan, in the most brutal ,manner has not even drawn lip sympathy from the powers that rule the country. The name of Aurangzeb is invoked to titillate hatred. The legion of dynasty is connected with the Mughal rule. There were other dynastic rulers in the history of India so why is dynastic rule compared only to the Mughals or the Muslims? What about Mauryan rule?

"The other major political group openly advocating a dynastic regime was voted out because people wanted a change. Political analysts call this anti incumbency. But the change was worked out because of corruption, total apathy for the poor, a sense of dynastic rule (the monopoly of both power and ' love') and ingratiating people who were currying favour only. Nepotism and its strongest ally had become inexhaustible."

Touting a brand formula of hatred to rake up passions and animosity is the order of the day. The formula is like this: we the people, they the major irritants, a legacy of blasphemous rule. Obliterate this from our historical memory. Confound past and present, advocate a ruthless thought process of decimating the past, and bring chaos into the present.

Then of course the inevitable happens. Those apparently moderate also are infected with virulence. The caste factor reopens like a huge wound. The paradox of theory and practice, of what is mouthed, such as democracy, secularism and equality are mangled in present actions. All the efforts at unifying a diverse nation have become null. The tolerance of the nation as a whole is shaken, notwithstanding the improvement of things in say regions like the North East of the country. Instead of capitalizing on this, issues like beef eating have been unnecessarily raised. We have not learnt from the past about the pitfalls of alienated feelings. We do not understand alienation of religious minorities; we say they were always pampered. Should not the majority not assure the security of the monority? Apparently no, they must live according to our wishes is the succinct but terribly generic reply.

Our wishes inherit from the past, an incorruptible one, a sense of godliness. Opprobrium is only in the perpetration of the invaders in the past. Justice has now to be meted out. Correcting the wrongs is today a fascinating myth. What happened five hundred years back, or even more has to be logically (illogically) corrected. History is a phantasmagoria of all that is wrong.

This moral edification, and self righteousness rules the firebrand and utterly wrong politics of the times. The internalization of real-politik, is indeed totally unreal. The design of history, its currents of synthesis, even if not Hegelian becomes a grand myth. At the same time myths of religion are brought in to water down history.

In the process, terrible things are happening in health care and nutrition. Children are dying of starvation. The poor are ruthlessly and crassly ignored. Education has taken a back seat, notwithstanding pious utterances to save the girl child.

And then of course is the other. The other major political group openly advocating a dynastic regime was voted out because people wanted a change. Political analysts call this anti incumbency. But the change was worked out because of corruption, total apathy for the poor, a sense of dynastic rule (the monopoly of both power and ' love') and ingratiating people who were currying favour only. Nepotism and its strongest ally had become inexhaustible. So the demand for change was inevitable. It had to come, and come it did!

No sooner had it come, then the formula or recipe became evident. When will the catharsis come? When will the implosion dawn? The cross roads of change have once again been tangled in bearing witness to sad realities. It is not only elections which reflect change, but in protestations, that can happen silently, inwardly. The people of India cannot be fooled too long, or live in a miasma of hate, insufferably.

Voices of protest maybe muted by killings or charging people with sedition, but those who watch in muted silence know best. Those whose children die of starvation also have supporters. Those who object to the behemoth of hatred have voices that can be heard. And those who are pilfering the history and body politic of this great nation, which freed itself from the ramparts and nightmare of thievery, should know this glaring truth, which is staring us in the face and saddening so many Indians today. Cheers. A word frequently used in our FB literature today or in our emails, but a word, which may also demand social inquisition.

TO THE EDITOR

Clarification

Editor,

This clarification is about the statement made by Mr Sanbor Shullai that I am a BJP worker and that I work for Mr Sounder S Cajee and Mr Banri Wahlang. I vehemently deny this allegation and would like to remind Mr Shullai that I have been a very prominent worker for his party and have sincerely contributed towards his election and re-election campaigns for the past 25 years during the MDC elections. I would like to remind Mr. Shullai that not only have I helped him professionally, but on a personal level too I have assisted him. From taking care and ensuring proper health care when he needed it in Nazareth & Woodland hospitals to helping him in Delhi when he needed further consultation on his health issues, I have done everything.

As a token of appreciation Mr. Shullai appointed me as a staff with a monthly income. However, I have not received the complete salary as promised in spite of working at his office for about four years. He later appointed me to the post of Vice Chairman of the Programme Implementation & Monitoring Committee (PIMC) only to forcibly demand my resignation after about 4 months' of work on this Committee without any severance pay.

Therefore, I demand that Mr Shullai should show professional courtesy and duly compensate me for my work and also the severance pay for the PIMC work at the earliest.

Yours etc.,
Disyona Passah.
Shillong- 4

Should Opinion Polls be Banned?

Editor,

Should opinion polls be banned? That is what some of my friends were discussing. In recent years, TV channels have taken to this idea of opinion polls whenever an election comes up. One may ask what is wrong with opinion polls. I would say many things are wrong with it. Since 2014, most opinion polls have favoured the BJP. As of now with the elections in Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh the opinion polls have indicated a victory for the BJP and painted a dismal picture of the Congress. When the people are still going to the polls, this practice can be highly dangerous for freedom in political thinking and electoral choice. Let me explain - a voter who goes to vote after seeing the opinion poll where he sees the BJP as the imminent winner and the Congress a loser, will undoubtedly be inclined to vote for the BJP because he or she is psychologically conditioned by the foregone conclusion made by the exit poll. Who would want to vote for an already losing party?

The channels which present these opinion polls do them with such proficiency that ordinary people and uncritical viewers would easily fall prey to them. Opinion polls in my opinion are an infringement on the freedom of thought of citizens. It is an indirect way of brain-washing the voters. Another reason why we should not trust the opinion polls is that they have gone wrong many times in the past. Moreover, the sample population they construct could be a purposive sample and highly polarized towards one party or the other. Opinion poll is also another form of bias or injustice towards one party or the other. For this reason, the Election Commission should actually ban opinion polls prior to any election. Today TV channels in India seem to be crazy about opinion polls and exit polls and knowing how politically they are biased towards one party or the other, these poll predictions could be the most dangerous strategy to curb the political freedom of citizens. Let us hope that some good sense will prevail amongst those in a position to put an end to this malpractice.

Barnes Mawrie sdb,
Via email

Of hate crimes and impunity

Editor,

Your editorial, "Darkness in Rajasthan" (ST, Dec 12, 2017), is right in pointing out ~ "Hate and crime with impunity will foul the atmosphere and make a mockery of culture." As a matter of fact, Hindutva vigilantes just like the ISIS and the Taliban brigades are making a mockery of their religion also. Swami Vivekananda had warned us about the dangers of religious prejudices. He said, "We are neither Vedantists, most of us now, nor Pauranicks, nor Tantrics. We are just "Don't-touchists". Our religion is in the kitchen. Our God is the cooking-pot, and our religion is "Don't touch me, I am holi". If this goes on for another century, every one of us will be in a lunatic asylum." Inter caste and inter-religious marriage vigilantes, cow vigilantes and fairy - tale vigilantes want to limit Hinduism to such a narrow space that it will make us forget the great teachings of Maha Upanishad ~ Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam meaning "the whole world is one family". Our regressive mindsets are making things happen in such a narrow way that sooner or later as Swamiji said "every one of us will be in a lunatic asylum".

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

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.

WHERE HISTORY LINGERS

By Amlan Home Chowdhury

As you step inside the serene, sublime and tranquil precincts of the centuries old Mahabodhi Mahavihara at Bodh Gaya in Bihar, you would certainly have an uncanny feeling of entering inside a time machine. The temple where the story of Prince Siddhartha ended and the saga of Gautam Buddha began had mutely witnessed the passage of time for centuries together. No wonder it is a virtual time machine by itself.

With the pervading of hum of the hymn "Buddham Sharanam Gachhami, Samgham Sharanam Gachhami..." you feel you have gone back to the 6th century BC when the Buddhist monks used to sing it in the same tune as today.

When Fa Hien set his foot here from far off China nearly 1,600 years ago, the recital of "Om Mani Padme Hum…" by the monks from China, Tibet, Sri Lanka and Myanmar would reverberate within the premises of the temple. Today, the same hymn gets echoed within the temple premises keeping alive the past glory.

Even the ancient roads that brought you to Bodh Gaya were also the same ones followed by Prince Siddhartha nearly 26th centuries ago to come here. Just imagine it were the same very dusty-roads that were trekked by the mighty Maghadhan Emperor Asoka to land here from Pataliputra (modern Patna) about 2,300 years ago.

(Above) Monks pray in front of the Mahabodhi tree in Bodh Gaya and a statue of the Buddha

Can you imagine Asoka's chief Queen Tishyarakshita also came to this temple by that very road to destroy the Bodhi Briksha: the Bodhi Tree under which Siddhartha attained the supreme enlightenment. The Chinese monks Fa Hien and Hieun Tsang also trotted the same route in 404 AD and 637 AD respectively to step inside the Mahabodhi Mahavihara.

The only difference is that the earth was younger then and history of Aryavartha was in the making. In those turbulent days, Aryavartha was torn in strife. At that very crucial juncture of history, what Aryavartha very desperately needed was the message of peace. And Gautama gave that. Bodh Gaya was the place from where Tathagata tried to shape the philosophy, facilitate the ways of search for attainment of cosmic knowledge and spread the message of peace.

It is perhaps the only shrine in the world whose construction, re-construction, extension-process and restoration continued for over 2,400-years. It is also the only temple in India in whose restoration several countries of the world contributed over the past about 1,600 years.

Restoring 'The Navel of Earth'

You cannot be blamed if you feel you have entered into the time machine on entering Mahabodhi Mahavira as the time really stands frozen in the periphery of this ancient-most temple that has been mentioned as "The Navel of Earth" in Jataka. It means the premises where the temple stands today will disappear at the last at the end of the worth and also will appear first in the next recreation of the earth.

In simple-mundane term, this temple is indestructible. Strange it may seem the history of the temple indeed shows that many steps were taken to destroy the Mahabodhi Mahavihara but it again sprang up to its old glory. Let us have a peep into this interesting fact.

The Islamic invaders had been trying to demolish Mahabodhi Mahavihara since 11th century AD. But the rulers of Myanmar had been restoring the temple and the Bodhi Tree several times since 11th century AD.

Way back in 1874, the Myanmar's ruler Mindon-Min even laid open his royal coffer to undertake restoration works for 11-long years. Again in 1880-84 phase, the Myanmarese Royal House spent money to repair and restore the shrine. Recently, four years back, Thailand donated 300 kgs of gold to this temple. However, the first step to restore Mahabodhi Mahavihara and built the Diamond Throne beneath the Bodhi Tree where Siddhartha is said to have attained enlightenment to become Buddha was taken by the mighty Magadhan Emperor Asoka Priyadarshi in 250 BC after 200 years of his (Buddha's) Mahaparinirvana or demise.

As there had been efforts to destroy the temple and the tree, so there were counter efforts to rebuilt it and restore the Bodhi Tree to its health. Since the Asokan period, the temple was built, rebuilt and restored several times. Even an ancient inscription dating back to 1st century AD says the temple built by Asoka was replaced by a new one.

During the Sunga period in and around 150 BC railings were created around the Mahabodhi Temple. In the 7th century during the Gupta period, these railings were extended. Way back in 1st century BC columns with pot-shaped bases were constructed around the Vajrasan.

Witnessing hundreds of raids and wars, including those by the Muslims, Mahabodhi Mahavihara still stands mutely, majestically. The Mahabodhi Mahavihara beacons over 15,00,000 visitors from across the world annually.

The UNESCO had accorded the World Heritage Site status to this 170 feet tall structure in 2002.

Place of Attaining 'Maha Bodhi'

If the millions throng here every year from all across the world, it has a reason. It is widely believed if mankind steps inside this shrine and stands beneath the Bodhi Tree for a while, they have their inner-self awakened or gain 'Bodhi': the Gyan (knowledge). Literally, 'Maha Bodhi' means Great Awakening as Buddha attained Enlightenment in 589 BC after defeating the dark forces of Mara.

The Jataka says around 589 BC Siddhartha left his royal palace to come to Gaya situated on the banks of the Phalgu and started meditation under a peepul tree. He attained "Bodhi" or enlightenment after meditating for three days and three nights. He then spent seven weeks at seven different places in and around where the temple now stands. These seven places or spots (that can be visited today) are:

i. Bodhi Tree: Spent the first week (attained enlightenment under this tree)

ii. Animeshlochan Stupa: Spent second week standing and staring uninterruptedly at the Bodhi Tree. During this period, he did not blink hence Animeshlochan

iii. Ratnachakrama: During the third week, Gautama walked back and forth between the location of Animeshlochan and Bodhi Tree. The Jataka says as Buddha took steps, lotus flowers bloomed at each step.

iv. Ratnagar Chaitya: The fourth week was spent at this spot which still exists

v. Ajopala Nigodh Tree: The fifth week was spent here where the Enlightened One answered questions of a group of Brahmins.

vi. Lotus Pond: He spent the sixth week at a place adjacent to the Lotus Pond.

vii. Rajyatna Tree: He spent the seventh week under this tree.

As per Jataka and local legends, four weeks after the Buddha began meditating under the Bodhi tree, the sky darkened for seven days and torrential rain followed. He sat totally unprotected. Suddenly, the king of snakes Muchalinda sprang up from the pit of the earth and extended his hood over his head. He was protected from the rain. When the rain stopped, Muchalinda appeared before Him in human form and bowed. Muchalinda then disappeared.

Bodhi Briksha: The Tree of Knowledge

The Bodhi Tree is central to Buddhism. As per Jataka, a Bodhi Tree had sprang up just out of nowhere on the day of the birth of Prince Siddhartha. He also attained "Bodhi" beneath this tree. The stories surrounding Bodhi Briksha also are extremely enthralling. If only this venerable could speak it would have narrated them to you.

Several attempts were made to destroy this tree over a span of 2,300 long years, yet it survived to enable millions of people to bow to it. Interestingly, it is perhaps the only tree of the world that was subjected to famine jealousy. That too of principal Queen of a mighty Emperor!

As you stand beneath the Bodhi Tree and gush of cool air passes through your face, you really cannot help but imagining that this was the same place where Asoka sat to supervise the creation of Vajrasana or Diamond Throne.

The Emperor Asoka's Queen Tisyarakshita tried to destroy the tree as her husband was too much attached to it. But Asoka again restored it to health with the help of milk, curd and honey. Fa Hien vividly narrated it in his travelogue. He wrote: "Asoka would always be busy with Bodhi tree during his stay at the temple premises neglecting the Queen. Hence, Tisyarakshita cursed that tree and asked her men to destroy it. Another Chinese traveler, Hieun Tsang also noted in his travelogue that the people from all across the world would offer curd, milk, honey, perfumes and camphor to this tree. The sampling of Bodhi Tree was taken to Sri Lanka by Asoka's daughter Sanghamitra and planted it there.

In the 2nd century BC King Pushyamitra Sunga tried to destroy the temple and also cut down mercilessly the Bodhi Tree. Again in 600 A.D. King Shashanka of Bengal tried to break the temple and also root-out the Peepul Tree or Bodhi Briksha. But the tree was restored to its health and the temple rebuilt.

Truly, "The Navel of Earth" cannot be destroyed.

(Photo courtesy: Datanews photo)

Booming finance sector

By Ranjan K Baruah

Google Images

Many students ask me about careers in banking and financial sectors. We are aware of the importance of banks and this has increased after demonetisation last year. Banks are busier than before post demonetisation.

Banks play an important role in our day-to-day life as they are the organisations that take care of our money. After economic liberation there has been progress in the financial sector as many banks, both national and international, have set up shop in India. Establishment of banks means bringing new opportunities for eligible young people.

In India, the banking system was introduced in 1786 with the establishment of General bank and the Bank of Hindustan, which are now out of date. In 1806, East India Company established Bank of Calcutta which later became Bank of Bengal, and Bank of Bombay and Bank of Madras in the respective years of 1840 and 1843.

These three banks were merged in 1921 to form the Imperial Bank of India and after independence it was nationalised and became the State Bank of India (SBI), which is the oldest bank in the country.

The oldest Joint Stock bank in India, Allahabad Bank was started in 1865 and in 1894, Punjab National Bank; the first complete Indian bank was established.

Thereafter, a number of banks came up such as the Bank of India, Central Bank of India, Bank of Baroda, Canara Bank, Indian Bank and Bank of Mysore between the years 1906 and 1913. The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) was set up in 1935 and as per the Central Banking Authority, RBI is the apex body in the banking.

Technology has also affected banking in a positive way. Banking is a career with great opportunities.

Candidates after 10+2 of any stream can take up banking as their career, but graduates specialised in Commerce, Mathematics or Economics; post graduates, Chartered Accountants and Chartered Financial Analysts get more preference.

Communication knowledge and idea related to technology always helps the candidate who is aspirant for the job in banking sector in the country or in abroad. Nationalised banks recruit candidates through competitive examinations while private banks recruit candidates with MBA degree or Chartered Accountants directly.

Selection depends upon the qualification of the candidates. International banks usually go for experienced candidates for managerial posts.

Public sector banks recruit graduates at the entry level (as probationary officers) on the basis of an All India Level examination. All India Test for professionals (for senior post) who wish to enter the banking profession is being conducted. Bank Clerical Grade Examination is held for the clerical posts in banks.

The Banking Service Recruitment Boards recruits for various posts in the nationalised banks (including State Bank of India) in their respective regions. RBI conducts tests for three types of entry level positions like clerical grade; for Grade I officers and Grade II officers. We shall write more options and opportunities related to banking in our next edition.

Scholarships:

Students may apply for scholarships from Tata Trusts, who are studying at the undergraduate and post graduate levels in Colleges/Institutions. The application process will be exclusively online and last date of sending application is 27th December. The Scholarship is for the current academic year.

(Ranjan K Baruah is a career mentor and can be reached at bkranjan@gmail.com or 9864055558 for any career related queries)

Mythical medicines I am impatient to try

I hate it when I want to sneak out of work early but invisibility pills have not yet been invented. Science moves soooo slooooowly. It's nearly 2018! Sci-fi stories promised us that technology would bring us flying cars; instead it has brought us "Press 7 For Even More Maddeningly Irrelevant Choices".

I was moaning about this when a reader informed me that one group of people is serious about making fiction into reality. Officials in Uttarakhand, India, are investing cash into finding sanjeevani booti, the magic herb from the Ramayana which the god Hanuman uses to raise Lakshmana from the dead. What a great idea. I asked readers and colleagues: What other potions from literature could governments turn into reality?

The first response came from an over-educated workmate, who said that ancient Greek literature had two medicines, Nepenthe and the Waters of Lethe, which made those who drank it forget their sorrows.

Bleeaaah. (That's me making the Wrong Answer Noise from TV quiz shows.) Reject! Modern society already has many magic potions which do exactly that, including Carlsberg, Kingfisher, Bud Light, etc.

Then he suggested the elixir in Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, which puts you in a death-like coma. Bleeaaah. Reject again! We already spend most of our days in death-like comas.

So I handed the question to the Internet's Hive Mind and it concluded that authors in general are shockingly lazy.

Fiction is full of disappointingly vague potions that instantly heal any type of wound, including Athelas elixir from Lord of the Rings, Dittany potion from Harry Potter, Chamalla extract from Battlestar Galactica, the Senzu Bean from Japan's Dragonball stories and so on.

THE FUNNY SIDE
Nury Vittachi

In fact we found only four literary potions which were a bit more creative — and possibly worth turning into reality.

1) Dried Frog Pills: From Terry Pratchett's Discworld stories, these make you hallucinate that you are sane.

This would help pretty much all world leaders at the moment, the hope being that they would behave like sensible people for a change.

2) Extract of Phoenix Feathers: From Japan's Final Fantasy stories, this not only re-animates the dead but turns zombies back into humans. I know some people say there's no such thing as zombies, but clearly they've never met modern teenagers.

3) Blinkmoth Serum: From Magic: The Gathering, this gives you extreme intelligence, self-awareness, and understanding, making you a person of great wisdom. (This is not to be confused with drinks such as Prosecco and arrack, which make you think you have become a person of great wisdom.) Problem: Everyone I mentioned this to declared that they would rather be stupid all their lives than eat a moth. Good point.

4) The Spice Melange: This stuff from the Dune stories makes your senses super-sharp and gives the whites of your eyes a strange blue glow. This would be useful to hide the red, blood-shot eyes I'm going to have later this afternoon.

"Barman, bring me your biggest jug of the Waters of Lethe." Cheers! But of course I have to wait until those lazy scientists invent invisibility pills so I can sneak out of work. Come on, guys!

(Nury Vittachi is an Asia-based frequent traveller. Send ideas and suggestions via his Facebook page)

Animals in mythology

(Continued from last week)

The Egyptian Hathor, the cow headed goddess, personifies the principles of joy, feminine love, music, dance and motherhood. Bat, meaning soul, is also an Egyptian Goddess with the horns and ears of a cow. She is associated with the musical instrument called the sistrum, one of the most frequently used sacred instruments in Egyptian temples. Bat is similar to Hathor except that Bat's horns curve inwards and Hathor's curve outward.

Anubis is the African golden wolf (previously thought to be dog or jackal) headed Egyptian god of death, mummification and the god who ushered souls into the after-life. Bastet is the cat-headed Egyptian goddess of warfare and the protector of cats.Khepri is the famous dung beetle(scarab) headed Egyptian God. Like the scarab pushes dung in a perfect ball before him using his horns, Khepri pushes the sun across the sky down into the underworld, from where it emerges the next morning. The word Kheper means 'to come into being' and the god is associated with rebirth and renewal and the sun at daybreak.

Tawaret, meaning the Great One, is the hippopotamus-headed Egyptian Goddess of childbirth and fertility. The ibis-headed Egyptian God Thoth maintains the universe, arbitrates godly disputes and judges the dead, handles the arts of magic, the system of writing and the development of science.

Japanese mythology has a warrior god named Amida who has a human body with a dog's head.

The JapaneseTanukiis a badger or raccoon who can turn into a human and trick people by impersonating Busshist monks.

The fox-like creatures, known as Kitsune, also possess similar powers, and they trick men into marriage by turning into seductive women.

In Chinese Mythology Chu Pa-chieh is a divine being who, because of his licentiousness in heaven, is sent to earth with the head of a pig and the body of a man. He kills his family and preys on travellers until he is turned to the path of virtue by the goddess Kuan Yin. He then becomes a priest. (We have a similar story of Valmiki, the author of the Ramayan).

Khnum, the ram-headed Egyptian God, is the god of the source of the Nile River and the creator of the bodies of human children, which he makes at a potter's wheel from clay, and places in their mothers' wombs. The crocodile-headed Egyptian God, Sobek is associated with pharaonic power, fertility, and militaryprowess, but serves additionally as a protective deity against the dangers presented by the Nile river.

In the modern world, most of the religions have abandoned the concept of man-animal divinities. Our Gods now are purely anthropomorphic. Even the new Goddesses that are added to the Hindu pantheon, like SantoshiMaa who was created in the seventies, are just simply divine women without any animal magic at all.

(Concluded)

(To join the animal welfare movement contact gandhim@nic.in, www.peopleforanimalsindia.org)

FRENCH SOIRÉE

Two French rock bands recently performed in the city as part of the Bonjour India Rock Tour 2017. In a series of 11 exceptional concerts in different cities, the bands shared the stage with homegrown rock bands. The band members tell* Willie Gordon Suting *about their experience in 'beautiful' Shillong

French rock band **Last Train** *was recently in the city as part of the four-month-long Bonjour India 2017-18 tour. Band members, but first childhood friends — vocalist Jean-Noel Scherrer, guitarist Julien Peultier, drummer Antoine Baschung and bass player Timothee Gerard — say they are inspired by different sources such as 60s rock music but also pop music or electronic or even movie soundtrack.*

"As soon as the music is interesting and well-arranged we are listening to it. We are big music consumers in daily life so everything can possibly inspire us," the members said in an email interview.

The band, which was formed in 2007, shares its experience of performing in front of the music aficionados in Shillong.

How was the experience performing in Shillong?
Performing in the rock capital of the country was a great experience. People love their music here which is a really a nice thing.

How were the audience?
The audience turned in full numbers to the club, which is a big compliment for us. We loved the way they participated with us in each of our songs.

Do you plan to perform here again in future?
Definitely! The Indian Tour is our biggest tour outside of France, so we are really lucky to stay in this huge country for almost three weeks, try new things, and then go back to France, with a different point of view of the world, because we will always have a part of India in our hearts!

What is the band up to nowadays? Any upcoming gigs?
We will end our tour for this year this month and after do a break to compose and record the second album. We'll try to tour a bit abroad to export our music outside from France so maybe why not coming back to India?

Have you listened to any Shillong band?
We hadn't heard bands from here before. But we got to play with Dossers Urge and they were great. We've discovered really good bands on this tour.

How did you find the culture and beauty of Meghalaya?
It's a beautiful city, the natural beauty here is just so amazing, the travel to Shillong was a visual treat in itself, would love to visit Meghalaya again.

Hailing from the city of Strasbourg, Colt Silvers comprises vocalist Tristan, bass player Nicolas, guitarist Florian and drummer Julien. The band, which produces intense indie electro rock, has been termed as the French Alt J by the popular magazine Les Inrockuptibles. Colt Silvers started gaining popularity beyond France within a year of their inception with the debut release 'Night of the Living Robots' in 2009. Their latest album Swords, co-produced and mixed by the Grammy nominated Fab Dupont received rave reviews. The band was recently in the city. Bassist **Nicolas Lietaert** *speaks about the group's experience in Shillong.*

How has the band's sound evolved over the years?
We used to create only in practice room. It was more urgent and punk in some way. In time we have incorporated more electro and focused more on the ambiance of songs, in a cinematographic way. So it might have gotten less punk and more ambient I guess. More world music too, thanks to the use of computers and all the sounds we can explore

How has pop culture influenced the band?
We met at a fantastic film festival in Strasbourg in 2008 and found out we had in common not only this love of sci-fi and horror movies but also a rock n'roll background that we could mix together. So we tried to make rock music, but always starting with a movie vibe to it, for example we covered movie themes like Gattaca or The Fountain, our first album's name night of the living robots was a tribute to Zombie movies, and we also worked on a ciné-concert show of blade runner all re-written by us.

How do you feel about electro-pop making an impact over the years?
People around the world are familiar with rock bands adding electro and hip hop sounds to their music now, it's been that way for quite some time so I think I do not come as a shock.

How was the experience working with Grammy nominated Fab Dupont (on the latest album Swords)?
Well the experience was surreal, when you get the opportunity to collaborate with such big legends, it is always an honour. They were extremely humble about the collaboration and we learnt a lot in terms of music from them

How was the experience performing in Shillong?
Shillong was a fantastic experience for us, the people here are extremely hospitable and warm, they were in full numbers to support us, the city has got a very western vibe to it and people really love their music here.

How were the audience?
The audience were electrifying in shillong, like I mentioned they quite understand their music and follow all kinds of genres. It was good to see them come out in numbers and support us. We really loved performing here. The crowd was great, they started dancing pretty soon and seemed to be well acquainted with what we do. I saw people singing the lyrics along with us. It's a great feeling for us when it just connects right away like this, it seems natural and encourages us to play a better live show.

What is the band up to nowadays? Any upcoming gigs?
Yes, we are playing this huge orchestral live set this we're releasing this week. We are very excited for that. It's a huge challenge and we are very proud of this experience. Then we will go back to writing our next record.

> ***Shillong was a fantastic experience for us, the people here are extremely hospitable and warm, they were in full numbers to support us, the city has got a very western vibe to it and people really love their music here***
>
> *~ Nicolas Lietaert*

Have you listened to any Shillong band?
We played with Dossers Urge in shilling and that's the only band we have heard for now. But we have been playing with an indian band in every city this tour, some really raw rock bands. We believe that there is a rock scene here, and young Indian dudes love to play loud guitars too.

How did you find the culture and beauty of Meghalaya?
It's a beautiful city, very calm and peaceful. The people here are very hospitable. Hope we get to come again to this part of the city and perform again.

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi ***Sunday, DECEMBER 17, 2017***

Moon square Neptune on your solar return chart indicates a mixed year. You need to be careful throughout the year. Watch for a tendency to become involved in power struggles and one-upmanship, and watch for asserting yourself defensively or explosively. You should make extra effort to respect and validate others when expressing what you need and want. Benefits come from cooperation this year. You may suffer struggles as far as your finances are concerned. A more organized approach to money and business can work well for you now. You enjoy making long-term plans and learning about a variety of subjects. Always receptive to new ideas, you are absorbing a lot of information this year. The problems in the family will get resolved, provided you are patient - don't let yourself overcome with anger. There may be a break with a friend, but a new connection is indicated as well. Your generous nature will need to be tempered with reality, or you end up being the only one giving toward your relationships.

'This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20)Some associations can be competitive in business as you shine and work well in your field of activity. You initiate a current of forceful energy to achieve success in an important venture. You are likely to protest against domination by people at work. You may have to face egoistic people. This week brings love, romance and excitement in personal relations. Deep personal relations and business partnerships are likely to get stronger. Good luck in finances and new opportunities are encouraging. This is an excellent period for starting new regimen to improve your health and well being, such as regular exercise, more structured and productive use of your time, and so forth.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) You have the desire for love, harmony and a peaceful life. It is a gentle, considerate, and sensitive vibration. You are diplomatic, warm and sensitive. This week brings for you socializing, romance and stability at the work place. Love, friendship and relationship are emphasized. There are strong chances of materialization of friendship into a long term relationship during this time. Your social life may be restricted to business and family related obligations. Luxury shopping may make a hole into your pocket but makes your family happy and brings a smile to their face.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21)Self-confidence and prompt action are highlighted. 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. You stand in the middle of a doorway in the middle of the week while making an important decision be it professional or personal. It would be better to listen to your own judgment and do what is good for you. People around you could be judgmental or manipulative. Do not forget to share your feelings with the one who loves and cares for you.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) You are loving, stable, and harmonious in personal relations. There is conflict within and discord outside. You may be divided about business and professional matters and finally come to terms with compromise which might be the best thing to do at this time. You may disagree mentally with your partner but the love between you allows peace and acceptance. Emotions and moods can swing to extremes and it is important to achieve equilibrium. You can get stressed and manifest a health problem as you worry about everything.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) You are practical, trustworthy, hard working, and helpful. This week influences your finances and material aspects, suggests that you are considerably more goal-oriented related to earnings. Your ability to concentrate and focus helps you to achieve what you set out to do. A new project or goal begun at this time has a good chance of being successful and long lasting. It's an excellent phase to make a lifestyle change. Self-confidence and action are highlighted. You may go in for a change of your image. Personal relationships especially with your loved one are stable and rewarding.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22)You have intellectual vibration and ability to adapt to most situations. This period brings financial gains for those in banking, investment, hotel industry and those who are in the teaching profession. There could be alteration in ideas or plans, increase and decrease in finances and fluctuation in business. You can be lead away by undue enthusiasm unless careful inner balance is maintained. Marriage, business partnership and collaboration can be strengthened through understanding and commitment.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) You are introspective and quiet. This week brings some changes in the way you look at professional goals and new interests are developed. You connect with fun loving people, artists and entertainers. Strong existing relationships are likely to grow and transform. Your finances could also improve as long as you employ a tried and tested strategy. Attending an important social occasion or festival may put you in the public eye. Meditation and introspection is therapeutic and revealing as you intuitively get to the bottom of things.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) This phase brings youthful energy and you accept challenges in your life. You are diligent and pedantic at work and specialize further in your field of activity. You are on the threshold of a creative and inventive work that brings you name and exposure. Meditate on the constant changes happening around you and centre within. Good health and energy enables you to participate in sports and related pastimes. A pleasant surprise awaits you at the end of the week.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) You would be more accommodating and compassionate in relationships and not take things personally. You would express your adaptability and persistent energy in professional projects. You deal with official and personal matters with calm authority. You possess great power to attract creative and charismatic people around you to make your social life enviable. You would be dynamic, forceful and assertive in professional ventures to establish a position of authority. Health and energy need to be conserved through a busy time at work.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) You are practical, hard working and helpful in personal and professional matters. New friendships and group associations are likely to come about and you will experience increased energy and a stronger ability to assert yourself. A new approach to friendships or new friendships altogether will pave a new path towards happiness and fulfillment. New associations or affiliations, or plenty of social activity are in store for you. This is an excellent period for beginning a new health regimen.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) This phase brings excellent work opportunities for sportspersons and lawyers and also a favorable time to appear in written exams, handle court matters and attend to legal matters. Self-confidence and tremendous efforts are highlighted to attend professional goals. Financial benefits may come your way through investments. You need to be careful in your interpersonal dealings and you must avoid confrontations with your family. Your financial situation looks promising if you manage it well personally rather than look to others. Make sure that you do not get caught up in arguments as a simple and straightforward approach is all that's called for.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) You may see the light in a friendship, realizing its importance in general, as well as the importance of acceptance and camaraderie. Circumstances may be such that you bring a new spirit of friendship into a romance or another connection in the next months. This can be invigorating. Surprises coming from children may be part of the picture. Your creativity, romance, pleasure, and children are involved. This could manifest, for example, as a romantic proclamation from a lover, a creative project bearing fruit, a child revealing something significant to you, and other such possibilities during this time.

All you need is motivation

What comes to your mind when you hear about motivational speakers? Hours of boredom in the company of a garrulous man/woman and bombardment of advices to gain control over self? Well, two local boys, Santosh Sunar and Kalyan Bhattacharjee, can prove it wrong.

The young motivational speakers say motivational speeches have always been didactic but we want to come closer to the listeners through words.

The duo has already spoken at many events and is planning to set up a centre to encourage more youths to think positively. "Unemployment is a major problem and many youths often lose their confidence. We can help them by showing the right way and counselling for future," says Sunar, who has a degree in Zoology but experience in various fields, including teaching and marketing. "I am now pursuing my career as a Motivational Speaker in Shillong and Visakhapatnam," he says.

Bhattacharjee, who has completed his MCA from St Anthony's College, was also involved in the Spoken Tutorials project which was coordinated by IIT Mumbai sponsored by the IT Department, Government of India.

"I think a motivational centre in Shillong will go a long way and not only the youths but also other professionals and students can benefit," says Sunar.

Santosh Sunar speaks at a programme in the city

"Take up one idea. Make that one idea your life - think of it, dream of it, live on that idea. Let the brain, muscles, nerves, every part of your body, be full of that idea, and just leave every other idea alone. This is the way to success."

--- Swami Vivekananda

The Shillong Times

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BJP: Not a decisive win in Gujarat

EVER since the BJP-led NDA Government came to power at the centre, every state election thereafter has been keenly watched. The BJP's bugle of, "Congress mukth Bharat," seems to have been realized in state after state barring Punjab. This time the Gujarat election has taken the form of a mandate for Prime Minister Narendra Modi who led the state as chief minister for three terms until he contested the Lok Sabha elections in 2014. The BJP has been at the helm of affairs in Gujarat for 22 years and the Party seems to have bucked the anti-incumbency factor that normally afflicts all political parties in the seat of power. While Himachal Pradesh also went to the polls along with Gujarat, neither Prime Minister Modi nor BJP chief Amit Shah spent as much time and energy as they did in Gujarat.

The duo had all guns blazing during the Gujarat poll campaign. They left nothing to chance and used every single opportunity, including gaffes from senior Congressmen to convert them to votes. The consummate actor that he is, Modi turned the entire election into a narrative about himself and Gujarati pride (asmita). Amit Shah had also stated that anything short of 100 seats for the BJP in Gujarat would be taken as a fall from grace for the BJP. Well, the fact that BJP got 99 seats, just one short of the 100 figure should give the party bosses some sleepless nights. This is a far cry from the 150 seats that Amit Shah had claimed the Party would win. But this is a wake- up call for the BJP. The Congress has established its strength in rural Gujarat especially the Saurashtra region which is essentially a farming region. Farmer's distress is something that the BJP did not pay enough attention to. On the contrary the BJP thought its major competitor was Hardik Patel who stood for reservation for the Patidar community. Finally, it turned out that Patel was not much of a vote-catcher. Every political party has to learn lessons from every election result. The winners cannot rest on their laurels and the losers cannot blame others for their failure. All need to be humbled by the peoples' verdict!

Prioritise Investment in Human Resource Development

By Dr Lakhan Kma

Successive governments in Meghalaya have never paid enough attention to human resource development. This has resulted in the swelling of repertoire of ill-prepared human resources who are finding difficulty in getting suitable placements due to lack of proper training, preparation and avenues. Not surprisingly the overall growth rate of the state is snail-paced, largely contributed by poor human resources combined with other factors. In the process of human resource development, there is no doubt that teachers play a central role. In order to realise the full potential of teacher's ability to produce quality students, their own development cannot be ignored. They themselves comprise of human resource entrusted with the task of shaping the next generation and beyond by investing on human resource at their disposal in our classrooms. However, we have not been able to do justice to our teachers. We could neither tap their talents nor have been able to fully utilize them to develop the critical human resource necessary for our immediate future.

On this instance, let me restrict myself only to woes and plight of teachers across different levels, particularly at school level, hampering their full commitment to teach their best to our students. In the process, the strengthening and enrichment of our human resource gets reduced. The State of Meghalaya has at its disposal the faculty of NEHU, the faculty of reputed colleges of Shillong and other learned people as Education Minister, Minister of Higher and Technical Education or Minister of School Education and Literacy. However, the plight of teachers continues. The step-motherly treatment of teachers can be highlighted by the recently approved Meghalaya Fifth pay Commission's recommendation keeping deficit school teachers out of its purview. Are teachers in deficit schools less important or less qualified to teach students across nooks and corners of Meghalaya? Why is it that teachers instead of focussing on their teaching assignments, had to come to the streets under the umbrella of Khasi-Jaintia Deficit School Teachers' Association and other similar associations to get their voices heard? Is it so difficult to streamline the recruitment of teachers in deficit schools in order to bring them at par with government teachers and ensure monthly salary and job security? Certainly not, although the Chief Minister's statement in the recently concluded Assembly session to extend the pay benefits to deficit teachers is welcoming, the commitment should be in black and white and leave no room for scepticism.

Another glaring example of disinterest of Meghalaya Government in human resource development is the non-payment of salary for four months and arrears for eight months of the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) teachers forcing the Meghalaya SSA School Teacher's Association (MSSASA) to probably knock the doors of Meghalaya High Court to redress their grievances.

"Had they meant it and given teachers their rightful dues we would have not been discussing the matter here today. As far as rightful dues are concerned, even deficit college teachers are still waiting for their job security for decades while their counterparts in government colleges are at peace."

Can the current School Education and Literacy Minister Ms Deborah Marak or other Ministers, MLAs or MDCs postpone the payment of their salaries for 4 months? Just delay it by a month and watch the response of our so-called 'representatives'. Yet, there is the usual lukewarm response to the injustice meted out to our teachers. Being a teacher myself, I cannot imagine a scenario of not to be paid salary even for a month. What should these teachers do? Should they leave the classroom and do some alternative work to survive leaving the students to suffer and pile up the degraded human resources?

Whenever the plight and sufferings of teachers are brought to the fore, financial crunch seems to be the ready-made answer of governments down the ages. However, looking at the MUA-II government's recent inauguration and sanctioning spree of Rs. 19 crores for State Technical University, Tura, Rs. 26 crores for College of Architecture & Urban Planning, Jewilgre, Engineering College at Ampati, Rs. 210 crores road project at Mangsang, East Garo Hills, several road projects worth crores of money, etc. the government seems to be sitting on and overflowing coffer. With elections round the corner, one is justifiably tempted to out rightly reject these inducements as election gimmicks. However, lets us mindfully digest it with a pinch of salt and take it as it may be at face value. Additionally, the combined expenditure of around Rs. 10 crores on Terra Madre, Cherry Blossom, 18 Degree and Film Festivals, etc., lakhs of money spent on payment of salaries and perks on Parliamentary Secretaries which has been declared illegal by the Hon'ble High Court, etc. adds to this proposition and nullifies the MUA-II's financial predicament. In spite of all the lavishness, alas! MUA-II government has no money to pay for the monthly salary of its teachers. Indeed the Hon'ble High Court of Meghalaya has rightly observed that teachers are not getting their dues and the State Govt. is avoiding its responsibility on some pretext or the other while hearing the case between Greater Phulbari Area Deficit School against the State Govt.

Mr. Chief Minister, create state-of-the-art libraries with subscription of good books and journals across subjects, high speed internet and printing facility that is open 24/7 in every district headquarter and possibly other towns across Meghalaya under 'students' digital learning aid scheme'. It will be more sustainable than erratic or opportunistic distribution of tablet PCs or m-tabs without internet facility. In the process, good and sustainable repertoire of human resources will be developed over a period of time. With elections in mind, populist ideas are popping up in MUA-II government but public are not naive anymore. The government should rather focus on basic issues like paying someone his/her due salary. Once basic requirements of our teachers and others are fulfilled, one can probably afford to even pay attention to Time Squarish ideas and honeymoon train to Sohra.

Aristotle, the famous Greek philosopher had said, "Those who educate children well are more to be honoured than parents, for these only gave life, those the art of living well'. Time and again politicians have pronounced these or other reverend words suitably and pretentiously on 'Teacher's Day' only. Had they meant it and given teachers their rightful dues we would have not been discussing the matter here today. As far as rightful dues are concerned, even deficit college teachers are still waiting for their job security for decades while their counterparts in government colleges are at peace. Yet, they continue to produce good students who become successful in life and occasionally become political intrigues once in power.

In this election season, let's be sensible so that we don't have to rue our decision for the next five years. It's high time to replace and dump all those so-called 'representatives' who have never stood up to fight to remove the plight of teachers and who have contributed to the degeneration of the human resource development process. Without good human resources, Meghalaya will continue to lack people with innovation and entrepreneurships that drive the economy of the State forward. The Hon'ble High Court of Meghalaya has very aptly reiterated recently that teachers are the backbone of society and they cannot be avoided or neglected and all right thinking people cannot have agreed more with this observation of the Court.

Political price for hard core economics

Burden of compliance creates suspicion in people's minds

By Anjan Roy

If ever an election was fought and decided on the undertones of economic issues, Gujarat one was. The astute politician that Narendra Modi is, he had realized this and even stated it upfront. He was prepared to pay a political price for his economic policy decisions. The Gujarat election results vindicate that assessment. How?

The BJP should have turned out a far better result in the state than it did. Here was a Gujarati prime minister leading the country, with confidence, scoring several domestic and international wins. He had met the global leaders and dealt with global affairs successfully. Pakistan, after all, was somewhat cornered and the US, even if for its own reasons, was bearing down on it much to our rejoice.

The economy had gained global acceptance and money was flowing in. Stock markets were somewhat dizzy and giving good returns. Prices were stable and continued growth was taken for a given.

Money matters, and in Gujarat it does more intensely.

And yet, BJP has just barely managed to retain its government in the state. It has lost marginally here and there, but by and large kept its hold. The powerful Gujarati prime minister had campaigned indefatigably, along with his formidable political strategist to lay out the ground plan for the election battle. These are weighty plus points to have swung the voters and create a favourable atmospherics for achieving at least a Congress-free Gujarat.

And yet, it is the Congress, under its callow leader, that has resurged in the state. It is as if, despite the party's lackadaisical record from similar leaders, the proverbial sphynx has come back into life from ashes. Was it due to the metamorphosis of Rahul Gandhi as a political leader under some unseen hands, mostly suspected residing abroad, that carved out this new image, out of the plastic clay that the in-house prince of the first family was?

All these factors might have contributed their mighty little. But it is the enormous economic policy decisions of last one year that appear to have done the trick.

Demonetisation, immediately followed up with introduction of the so-called "Good and Simple Tax", as Modi once described it, would have subtly changed the Gujarati mindset to their leaders.

The indications had come quite early. In October, I was travelling in Uttarakhand and trying to assess the impact of the Mudra loans in creating either jobs or giving a boost to small businesses. While passing by Haridwar, I happened to come across some Gujarati young men. Hoping that talking to them would offer some clue to the newer kinds of micro-loans which the government was claiming to have worked wonders, I struck up a conversation.

It was a kind of mild surprise that the Gujaratis were indignant about their supreme leader Narendra Modi and regretted that the government policies of demonetisation and, worse GST, had ruined their small businesses. "If our business was going full steam ahead, do you think we would have had the time to spend two weeks here and get to see some places", he put a counter question.

But then, what was so wrong with such a right policy - that is, a nation-wide regime of a single tax framework replacing a plethora of taxes of varying rates across states and even within states? The young businessmen read out their litany of problems with the GST regime, which was making their business a hugely onerous task. It was not the policy of a uniform tax throughout the country, but the paraphernalia of compliance that was doing the wrecking, he explained.

Indeed, the over-burden of compliance had for one created a fear of government interference in the day-to-day life of businesses and of businessmen and women. It was constant tracking of their activities through a myriad of instruments from multiple GST returns every month to the requirement of stating PAN and still lately Aadhaar numbers of buyers and sellers. The end-result of all these tracking, people feared, would complete data transfer about every business and trade to the hands of the government.

Mind you, sharing information is the bugbear in this country. Every sample survey data collector at villages and towns had encountered this problem. While collecting consumer expenditure data or even employment data or other economic surveys, the numerators had invariably found reluctance on the part of the people being surveyed to even part with information on family income and sources of income. They invariably hedged and hawed.

Secondly, GST is a piece of impeccable public finance wisdom. But bringing it into the tax net in one stroke when they were used to paying none, generates inescapable resentment. The GST regime had, in fact, anticipated this and had allowed exemptions. But then, the system put compliance burden on those who were exempted by requiring reverse charges and what not. These have since been partially rectified, true. But then, the initial damage has been done and suspicions raised.

Thirdly, the company entrusted with formulating the IT backbone for the GST system had done - to say the least - sloppy work and the huge initial system bugs had spoilt the new mechanism, to begin with. The systems faults have now been openly recognized and are hopefully being addressed.

And then, trying to take credit for introducing what was a simple tax makeover with a historic mid-night session of parliament and doing the entire pageantry about a so-called culmination of a Second Freedom for India was a crass miscalculation.

Going by the account of Saki Mustaad Khan in his Maasir-i-Alamgiri (History of the Court of Aurangzeb Alamgir), the subject is reported to have said; "Life changes in a moment", this could be life changing moment for national politics just now.

We were riding on the crest of a wave. BJP was unconquerable. Its march has not been checked. But somewhat slowed down at least for the present. If this is the verdict in Gujarat, then getting an absolute majority in 2019 could look askance. That will mean an era of drift as coalition in the Centre could result in fuzzy times as we had in the times of second UPA.(IPA Service)

TO THE EDITOR

Political wave is uncertain.

Editor,

In India, December 16, has a historic significance. This is the day when Pakistani Army had surrendered before the Indian Army during the Indo-Pak War of 1971. The visit of our Prime Minister to Meghalaya where he addressed a gathering at Polo ground as well as Rahul Gandhi becoming the Congress president coincidentally happens to fall on December 16. With Rahul Gandhi taking charge of Congress leadership, the Congress party workers and its leaders at various levels were jubilant.

The BJP in Meghalaya were optimistic that the visit of Mr Modi would create a BJP wave in the state. The Meghalaya BJP President, Shibun Lyngdoh had earlier claimed that four sitting MLAs would share the dais with Mr Modi while he had already spoken to these legislators. But on the very eventful day, none of these legislators had turned up and all the tall claims of the BJP were shattered. Earlier BJP claimed that it would contest the 2018 Meghalaya Assembly election on its own and would not go for any pre-poll alliance. As the election is nearing, the most debated topic among the public is whether BJP in Meghalaya will get sufficient numbers of candidates to even contest the 2018 Assembly election on its tickets, with the exception of a few urban seats. Political waves are the most uncertain and nobody knows when they will change.

The BJP here in Meghalaya seems to have no agenda of its own and its only expectation is to gets some of the sitting MLAs of other political parties to its side, so that it could repeat the formula applied in 2016 Assam assembly election i.e., the formula of inducting the legislators from the other political parties. In politics one set of formula may yield very good results in one state or region but the application of the same set of formula may be very disastrous in the other cases. The need of the hour for every political party is to strengthen its base, get itself connected with the public, advocate for development and highlight issues that are of public importance and most importantly they must set up candidates who are educated and have a clean public image. But if political parties count their successes on grounds that so and so legislator from A , B, C party have joined us or are likely to join and therefore, people should vote the said party then such proposition is highly illogical one. Hence, the focus of the BJP or any political party is to connect to the people.

Yours etc
S. D. Upadhaya
Shillong-1

Can India remain secular?

Editor,

In her incisive article, "Redeeming political discourse from "neech" wisecracks and barbs" (ST, Dec 15, 2017), Patricia Mukhim has highlighted the bitter fact that Rahul Gandhi too had to do a temple hopping exercise in order to keep pace with his rivals in the BJP. We have enough evidence in history that proves without a shadow of a doubt what has categorically been said in the article ~ "Mixing religion with politics is toxic." Recently, we are made to taste the level of such toxicity in the laboratory of Syria. So, now if an assembly election in the twenty-first century India is reduced to a temple-hopping competition, then it poses a serious threat to the basic tenets of our Constitution and its ideals of secularism.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

Rising above religion

Editor,

I have read the article "Redeeming political discourse from "neech" wisecracks and barbs" (ST, Dec 15, 2017. I am fully in agreement with you that the integrity of our country has suffered because of religious rivalries. People show more allegiance to their religious beliefs than to the Constitution India. It has become very difficult for any political dispensation to persuade its citizen to be united and march towards the commitment given in the Constitution - to be secular.

Lip service alone does not make a person secular. A person should be secular in thoughts deeds and lifestyle. Unless a person is secular in his mind and spirit he is bound to tilt towards his own religion even initiating public policy. The people at the receiving end will always suspect the impartial intention of the dispenser. The question arises how to make a person truly secular. It is a difficult task because we cannot ask our leaders to forsake their religion and stop believing the god they believe. So, we have to look elsewhere to find out a neutral god, secular god and supreme god - a God who is acceptable to all religions, scientists and even to an atheist. The answer to this will be the Sun God, the supreme and natural God.

The Sun is the creator of this earth and everything on it. He (the sun) is ruler of this earth. We, including all living creatures, are surviving at his mercy. If he wants, he can destroy everything in a moment. He has created man, among all other creatures, to be wise, beautiful, intelligent and capable of doing many things. Unfortunately, men are creating gods out of their own images. Where is the need of searching for any other god when the supreme god is readily available and blessing us? Is not the Sun our supreme god? Naturally, by logic, some may ask, who is the creator of the Sun. Well, the answer is it is not necessary that all things that exist should have a creator. There is a limit to this logic. The Sun is a ball of energy, heat light etc. Science tells us that an energy can neither be created nor it can be destroyed. So, the Sun was always there in the sky and will remain there forever into infinity. No one has created it.

I am bringing the example of the Sun to rescue India from its perpetual woes because the sun is indisputably neutral, secular and not influenced by any prayer or praise. Naturally, all those who believe in the supremacy of the Sun would be a secular person. The Sun is the ultimate solution to our power, fuel and all other non-renewable energy crisis. It is also the final solution to our economic, religious and political crisis.

I am aware that this letter will not influence anyone to abandon their religious beliefs. I will be happy this letter can change our mindset! SURYA NAMASKAR.

Yours etc.
Krishna Chettri
Shillong -2

Individual commitment to a group effort - that is what makes a team work, a company work, a society work, a civilization work.

--- Thomas Szasz

The Shillong Times

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Why BJP bagged Himachal

WHILE Gujarat gave the BJP a bumpy ride to victory, not so Himachal Pradesh. Since 1985, the hill state never gave a successive mandate to any party but this round went decisively to the BJP. The incumbent Congress party under the aged eagle, Virbhadra Singh lost his seat himself and Congress just about won 20 seats out of 68. Himachal Pradesh is considered one of the best in governance parameters and that may account for the government change every time polls were held. The BJP had to suffer a surprise setback also as the chief ministerial candidate, Prem Kumar Dhumal had to bite the dust. There had been speculations for some time about a factional fight between Dhumal and Union Health Minister J P Nadda. But eventually the party had plumped for Dhumal as the CM face. Virbhadra Singh was also in a leadership clash with the state Congress chief Sukhwindar Singh Sukku. In the end, Virbhadra Singh had to fight the elections almost singlehanded. He had his long stint in public life to strengthen his position but charges of money laundering and disproportionate assets put him on a spot.

One other factor which went against the ruling Congress was the mess-up over the Shimla gang rape-murder case which made women's safety an issue in the poll campaign prejudicing the Congress Party's chances. The Party is now in unhappy isolation in North India with only Punjab under its belt. The Congress in Himachal Pradesh now has to groom a young leadership to fight the general election in 2019. The BJP for its part has to deliver on its promise of jobs, improved transport and safety for women. The state continues to sit on a see-saw.

LOOKING BACK

May 10, 1989

Inconsequential resignation

We confess we were a little hasty in concluding that the controversy over the location of a Central University in Assam has after all ended. The Union State Minister of Education's statement in the Rajya Sabha that it has been allotted to Barak Valley has since met with a prompt Cabinet decision at Dispur disapproving of New Delhi's decision and reiterating the claim for the other valley. There is no evidence either of any further initiative on the part of the Centre to counter this suggestion from the state government, nor any move to introduce a Bill in the Parliament as a follow-up measure flowing from Mr Sahi's announcement. The long and busy monsoon sessions of the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha are getting to a close but the failure to introduce the expected University Bill may not be for the only reason that the Parliament has since been too much pre-occupied with too many of the more urgent national affairs.

In the Barak valley, the Vice-chairman of the nominated Silchar Municipal Board has resigned in protest against, among others, this dilly-dallying on the part of New Delhi.

The Road to Election 2018

By Albert Thyrniang

The clock is ticking. The day is approaching. The road is nearing. We have less than two months to go for the Assembly election 2018. All political parties foresee themselves are rulers of the state after the last vote is counted which is expected to be by the end of February. What about us, the general public? Who do we think will come to power?

The Congress which has ruled the state for 15 years is facing a huge anti-incumbency. The situation is made worse by constant internal bickering and rebellion leading to heavy weights quitting the party to join and seek tickets from rival parties.

Rowell Lyngdoh of Mawkyrwat was the first sitting Congress Legislator to declare publicly that he would join the Nationalist People's Party after the announcement of the Assembly elections even informing that a group of legislators would pledge their allegiance to the late PA Sangma's party. In the meantime his 100 youth Congress members in Mawkyrwat, South West Khasi Hills have recently embraced a party symbolised by a book. The senior leader might have been upset over his removal as Deputy Chief Minister in August this year.

The next to follow suit was the Pynursla MLA, Prestone Tynsong whose supporters have, in thousands preceded him in joining NPP on October 8 last following the dissolution of the Pynursla Block Congress Committee. Blaming the Chief Minister for a conspiracy to oust him, the Pyrursla strongman unofficially became a NPP member in a function attended by Manipur Deputy Chief Minister, Yumnam Joy Kumar, national president Conrad K Sangma, MLA and party spokesperson James K Sangma and State president WR Kharlukhi.

The two brothers, Sniawbhalang Dhar and Ngaitlang Dhar were the next to join the NPP's bandwagon. The Dhar brothers from Nartiang and Umroi respectively wanted Ngaitlang's son, D. Lamare to contest form Mawhati and Sniawbhalang's brother-in-law, W. Shylla to be given a Congress ticket from Jowai. Jowai is currently the seat of Deputy Chief Minister, R.C Laloo. Drawing flak for the move to promote his brother-in-law the minister was issued a show cause notice. Sniawbhalang was subsequently dropped from the Cabinet doubling the coal barons' resentment. After quitting the Congress, the NPP may fulfil the ambition of the four in the family to contest in the same election. A record of sorts!

Another Congress man who might seek NPP ticket is the former Meghalaya Power Minister Comingone Ymbon who has resigned from the cabinet just four months after being inducted into the ministry. The resignation letter records personal reasons but an eye on the NPP ticket might be the hidden real reason.

A prominent absentee from the Congress list will be MLA P N Syiem who has even resigned from the Assembly two days ago. Also an MDC, the Chief Executive Member (CEM) of the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council (KHADC) has been at loggerheads with the Chief Minister for a long time particularly over the Prevention of Disqualification (Members of the Legislative Assembly of Meghalaya) Amendment Bill, 2015 passed by the government prohibiting one from being MLA and MDC at the same time. The CM critic was ultimately suspended from the party for three years and will contest the next year election from the Meghalaya's newest political party, the Peoples' Democratic Front (PDF).

Missing from election process will be three veterans, the party president and four times chief minister D D Lapang, Health Minister, Roshan Warjri and deputy chief minister RC Laloo who have announced that they will call it a day as far as contesting election is concerned. The House has bid them farewell in the last Assembly session.

There is suspension over Pynthorumkhrah's MLA, AL Hek. The Congress-turned BJP-turned Congress MLA is rumoured to be going back to the saffron party. The anticipated dais sharing with Prime Minister on 16th December in Polo did not take place as he along with Sanbor Shullai (NCP), Robinus Syngkon and Justine Dkhar (Independents) did not turn up.

The above notable exits might hit the ruling party hard. Or new faces might come up to take the grand old party to an unprecedented third term. You and I can't predict for certain. These days ministers are busy inaugurating and laying foundation stones of guests houses, police stations, new blocks, educational institutes etc. Chips and stones are also seen dumped by the roadside to impress the voters. Whether this will work or not the electorates will answer on polling date.

The UDP and HSPDP have formed a pre-poll alliance. The alliance led to protests, discontent and even rebellions from party workers from both sides especially those aspiring for party tickets.

The biggest gain from the Congress' loss is the NPP particularly in Khasi and Jaintia Hills. Even inner sources admit that the party will do better in Khasi-Jaintia Hills than in Garo Hills (Winnable candidates in its stronghold are not too many). Once viewed as a Garo Party, the NPP's future in the eastern sector of the state looks bright. The acceptance, perhaps is due to the fact that the party did will in Manipur. It even has four MLAs in Rajasthan. The image of a national party and disgruntlement with the Congress has temporarily strengthened the NPP in Khasi-Jaintia Hills. Time will tell. Over all NPP might do well in the next election but might not get enough seats for a majority.

After the maiden landslide victory in Assam and Manipur, the BJP had hoped to extend its juggernaut in the 'Abode of Clouds'. The morale of the party was sky high as it thought the Modi wave would sweep Meghalaya. However, 'beef ban', cow slaughter, demonetisation and GST put spokes in its wheels. The party that is currently ruling more than half of India had hopes of forging an anti- Congress alliance with the UDP, the NPP and other parties. Doubting the Amit Shah led party, the regional parties were in no mood to align with the perceived communal party. Plus they are not willing to sacrifice the possibility of expanding their own horizons. Contrary to expectation no legislator has expressed their intention to join the BJP. The hope of capturing power in the state next year may not materialise for the ruling party at the centre.

The UDP and HSPDP have formed a pre-poll alliance. The alliance led to protests, discontent and even rebellions from party workers from both sides especially those aspiring for party tickets. While there were allegations that the pact was to safeguard the interests of party chiefs, Donkupar Roy and Ardent Basaiawmoit, top leaders maintained that the alliance was for the larger interests of the state. An alliance of all hills parties was even attempted but KHNAM was never to bury its bitterness against Paul Lyngdoh and others who almost succeeded in merging KHNAM with UDP.

While UDP and HSPDP combined may do well in their own turf but they have almost zero presence in Garo Hills. You cannot hope to come to power when you get nil result in the other half of the state. The blame goes primarily to the UDP. It has made little effort to organise and strengthen itself in Garo Hills over the years. A united party is effectively remaining in its comfort zone or better still safe cocoon.

What will happen after the 2018 election? This writer spoke to a few prominent citizens in Tura and Shillong. Almost all predict a hung Assembly. Instability looms large. The chief minister's seat will be a musical chair. There might be repeated president's rule. The reason is simple. Everyone will crave for one of the twelve cabinet berths. The absence of parliamentary posts adds to the complication. The scenario is quite dismal. You and I can vote to change the picture.

No winners in Gujarat?

No tide, but signs of ebb visible

By Amulya Ganguli

The Gujarat election results are likely to leave both the two main contenders unhappy. While the BJP has found it difficult to cross the psychologically important 100-seat mark, the Congress may have improved its tally but has still fallen well short of its rival's figure.

The Congress may be able to congratulate itself on putting up a good fight, but it knows that the party is back to where it has been in Gujarat for the last 20 years, with power still out of its grasp and with no local leader capable of strengthening the organization at the ground level.

The BJP, on the other hand, will heave a sigh of relief at the fact that it will be able to form a government after all because it cannot deny that it had the fright of its life. For the party, the scare came out of the blue with Rahul Gandhi's sudden and unexpected emergence as a serious challenger.

It forced the prime minister to fall back on his old trick of equating Gujarat with himself as he did with considerable success during the 2002 riots. He lashed out, therefore, first at the Congress maverick, Mani Shankar Aiyar, with the outlandish charge of having organized a "supari" operation to eliminate the prime minister, and then with an equally preposterous allegation against Manmohan Singh for conspiring with Pakistan.

If anything, these absurd allegations, which the BJP leader, Shatrughan Sinha, described as "unbelievable", served to emphasize how nervous the BJP was. The comparisons that were made between Rahul Gandhi and Aurangzeb by none other than Modi himself were another instance of the BJP's panicky state of mind. It must have awaited the results, therefore, with much more trepidations than the Congress. In the end, the BJP must have thanked its lucky stars for having escaped with its honour intact, though barely.

Even then, it should be obvious for the BJP that the Modi magic is fading, as a Shiv Sena spokesman said some time ago. If the BJP is hard put to hold on to what was touted as its bastion as well as a Hindutva laboratory, then it is clear that the going will be much tougher for it in the three BJP-ruled states of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, which will go to the polls next year. It is unlikely that the Modi-Amit Shah duo will be able to stave off the anti-incumbency factor in the three states as they did in Gujarat.

The Congress, on the other hand, will realize that its spell in the political wilderness is over. If it almost succeeded in bearding the lion in its own den, then the Grand Old Party (GOP) will have a much better chance elsewhere if only because Gujarat cannot but have dented the BJP's confidence.

It is not known whether this will make the BJP more aggressive in the matter of making "unbelievable" accusations or mellow it down, but there is bound to be some changes in its campaigning tactics. At any rate, it is unlikely that the party will continue to boast of ushering in a Congress-mukt (free) India any longer. Nor will its myriad trolls persist in describing the BJP's ascent as marking the end of 1,200 years of slavery - 1,000 years under Muslims and 200 years under the British.

On the Congress's part, it will have to come to terms with the fact that the party cannot rely on untested newcomers like Hardik Patel, Alpesh Thakor and Jignesh Mevani to make any headway. True, Gujarat is a special case for the GOP in this respect because it does not have any leader of note at the local level and has neglected to build one up all these years.

It had no option, therefore, but to rope in the three musketeers who appeared from among the Patidars, the backward castes and the Dalits because of the disenchantment among these communities with the BJP's rule in the state. But for them and for Rahul Gandhi's success in taking them along, the Congress would have been in deep trouble. This isn't the case in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh where the Congress does have influential local leaders. It can look forward, therefore, with a great deal of hope to the elections in the three states.

It may be an exaggeration to say that the tide is turning in the Indian political waters. But the signs of an ebb are visible. At least, the Modi wave cannot be said to be advancing since the Himachal Pradesh outcome can be seen as a manifestation of the anti-incumbency factor.

It isn't only dissatisfaction with demonetization and the GST, which is responsible for the BJP's declining fortune in Gujarat, but also the rampages of the saffron fundamentalists who have been assaulting and killing all those whom they abhor, especially the Muslims. They have generally been more active in Rajasthan, but Gujarat has also felt the heat. (IPA Service)

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TO THE EDITOR

BJP Rally – A damp squib

Editor,

Being one of the media persons of Meghalaya, I was shocked to see that entry by the public into the Rally ground at Polo organised by the Meghalaya BJP Mandal on December 16, last was highly restricted. Thousands of people could not enter the ground where PM Modi was to address the public. The result was that many were bitter and had to turn back for want of a proper place and space to see him even from a distance and to hear his address.

That was not the only problem. Even media persons having valid passes issued by DIPR were reluctantly allowed by the security guards and the BJP volunteers, and were giving confusing directions where to usher them. In the end many media persons were not even allowed to enclosures closer to the dais from where they could have proper positioning for taking photographs of the PM, other VVIPs and the proceedings taking place at the dais. This has demonstrated a media unfriendly attitude and smacks of absolute lack of common sense on the part of the organisers.

The rally turned out to be a small and compacted audience of only BJP followers nicely tucked with saffron turbans on their heads. The rally was meant to be for the public in general and not only for the saffron party followers as public invitation was extended through the widely published advertisements in the English as well as the vernacular print and electronic media. Moreover, PM Modi wanted to address not only the BJP supporters and followers but the public in general as could be gauged from his public speech on that day. On the other hand the BJP Organisers, BJP volunteers and security guards denied this opportunity to the members of the general public.

Last of all, this rally has clearly demonstrated that the BJP think tank and leadership of the state have failed miserably in organising such rally. They are bereft of ideas, plans, lack simple understanding and concept on how to organise such events and how to execute them. This reflects very poorly on them. In fact such events should have been entrusted to some reputed event managers who can deliver the goods to save the prestige of the party. I personally could read the body language of the PM even from some distance from the dais that he did not show much contentment over the crowd presence. In fact, the people present in the rally hardly qualified to be called a crowd. Again, the rally, which was supposed to be an election launching rally for 2018 General Elections to the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly, turned out to be a damped squib. Hence, it further reinforces the already notion that Meghalaya BJP needs capable, proven and far sighted leaders who can deliver the goods for the party to convince the people of the state that, yes, this is the best alternative to the political ills afflicting the state.

Yours etc.,
Philip Marweiñ,
Shillong-2.

Stop the noise pollution!

Editor,

Noise is one form of pollution that seems to be totally unchecked in Shillong. It is only during festivals that we see the government coming out with public notices prohibiting the bursting of crackers beyond a certain decibel. For the rest of the year, the district administration and the police turn a deaf ear to all other sorts of noise pollution. Maruti 800 and two wheeler owners modify their vehicle's silencers to create a deafening sound when they rev up. Cars cruise through the streets and lanes of the city with blaring music. Then you have late night parties with the music turned on to deafening proportions disturbing all and sundry. The administrators and the police just look the other way as if it is none of their concern.

Recently I had a distressing experience of noise pollution. A relation of mine staying at Nongrah in Nongmarboh locality fell suddenly ill on the evening of 12th December. I rushed to her place with a doctor and was with the family till 2 a.m. on the 13th. What shocked me was the loud music being played from open air speakers in a wedding within the Windermere estate near my friend's house – this loud and riotous music continued well beyond midnight. What was worse was that crackers were being burst at regular intervals up to 1.30 am of the 13th. The dogs in the locality were howling continuously at the bursting of crackers. No one in the house could sleep a wink the entire night and it was so traumatic for the patient that we had to eventually shift her to a hospital simply to get away from the noise. I am told that this is not the first time that such incidents occur within that estate. Why do the police not take action on such people who flout the rules under the Noise Pollution (Regulation and Control) Rules, 2000? Same also goes for the Rangbah Shnong, Rangbah Dong and other officials of the dorbar shnong. They must have heard all the commotion but yet did nothing. It is utterly shameful that these people do not care for the well-being and comfort of the others staying in a residential area. No one would have dared to do such things in my own dong of Nongrimmaw, Laitumkhrah.

I would request the district administration and the police to be more proactive and exert its powers where it is needed the most as in such occasions in all parts of the city. And will these so-called traditional heads do their jobs rather than just holding on to their dorbar chairs.

Yours etc.,
R.B. Ryntathiang,
Shillong – 3.

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

"Don't wait to be successful at some future point. Have a successful relationship with the present moment and be fully present in whatever you are doing. That is success."

--- Thomas Szasz

The Shillong Times

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Why target Christians?

THERE is a tendency by Hindu fundamentalist groups to consider Islam and Christianity as alien faiths that make the nation-building project difficult. The insinuation is that Christianity and Islam did not originate from India and therefore its adherents owe their allegiance elsewhere and not to India. The Hindu fringe elements have been raising their ugly heads since the BJP-led NDA Government came to power in 2014. Recently the Madhya Pradesh police detained a group of Catholic seminarians and priests for Christmas caroling in Satna. The carolers were accused of outraging the religious feelings of non-Christians. They were charged under the anti-conversion law. The carolers' car was set aflame and the carolers assaulted. When some priests later went to the police station to enquire into the matter they too were detained. It appears that Christians and Muslims have to live as underdogs in this country. The central government turns the other way each time such incidents flare up.

In Uttar Pradesh the Hindu Jagran Manch another Hindu fringe group warned all Christian schools in Aligarh not to celebrate Christmas because it is not an "Indian" festival. One of the leaders of the HJM was on national television saying he would not allow Christmas to be celebrated in Uttar Pradesh, come what may. We can be sure he has the support of Yogi Adityanath the Chief Minister and a former temple priest. There is something sinister in the manner in which Christians and Muslims are attacked and made to feel they don't belong in India. That Prime Minister, Narendra Modi chooses to remain silent instead of castigating the loudmouths who bring discredit to his Party, the BJP, makes us wonder whose side he is on. As Prime Minister he is to serve a cross section of constituents and India is a country of many religions, races and ethnicities. If this is the trend in which India is moving then right thinking, liberal Hindus should speak up and reclaim their real faith from the tentacles of Hindutva.

LOOKING BACK

May 10, 1989

India-Windies President XI tie

India today made no realattempt to force a win overthe West Indies BoardPresident's XI in theiropening tour fixture whichsubsided in a tame draw. Thehome side, left with an overalldeficit of 417 runs and fourhours to bat to save thematch, were 183 for three atthe close, this scorecontaining a breezy 116 notout by opening batsman PhilSimmons.The main contribution toIndia's second innings whichended seven minutes beforelunch was a fiery 97, off 102balls by Kapil Dev, who hit14 fours. Kapil Devovernight partnership for theseventh wicket with skipperDilip Vengsarkar, who made60 was 110, the only centurystand of the match. Clearly,batting practice was moreimportant to the Indians thantrying to win the match. Butthe only batsmen to achievethis objective today wereVengsarkar, who batted forwell over three hours andKapil Dev.Their partnership formed21 minutes before the closeyesterday, lasted for 72minutes this morning andthen Vengsarkar attemptinga rare hold shot was caughtat mid wicket. He had hit onlythree fours in his long way.

Con-men: In Retrospect

By Avner Pariat

I have known a lot of con-men in my life. They have been of various shades and colours. They've come in all shapes and sizes. Most don't stay around very long because they are wary of the investigating eyes and inquisitive thoughts that people would inevitably impose upon them. Nevertheless the time that they do spend with us is rife with fabulous stories and miraculous imaginings. In a way, they are the descendants of jesters and tricksters. Many old stories from all over the planet have such characters in them and some have endeared themselves to us. However, this short account is about the modern-day variety - the con-men, the scalawags who strut around cities like Shillong and feast upon their unsuspecting naïve residents.

First off, though you might be infested with con-men at any social strata depending on what it is they are after, it is generally a problem associated with the middle and upper classes. This is because these strata are easily impressed by fancy-sounding English words and preening talk of big dreams and big bucks. So for the longest period of time, my family which owned a rather prime piece of real-estate along the Assam-Meghalaya border was beset with these human parasites. The con-men would emerge out of nowhere and would descend upon my unsuspecting family with purpose and ferocity like the ravaging Golden Horde. Under a variety of guises these artists would come to sell us their act. They would, for instance, come as great visionaries who wanted to start a "resort" (this is a word I cringe at) or a "university" (another cringe inducer). To thwart these cretins one MUST fight fire with fire, use their own language against them. Ask them for the complete DPRs and estimated expenditure reports, insist on a SWOT analysis, ask them for client testimonials etc etc., basically say as many awful officious things as possible.

Most of the time from my experience, they will ask for your email because for some strange reason they will never be able to furbish the required documents at the moment you ask for them. Since they are such 'important' people I usually have no problems giving them my email address. They assure me that the files will be sent in by the evening. And then I wait. And wait and wait and wait and wait. Nothing comes through into the inbox. Initially I would call these people repeatedly and remind them to send me the necessary paperwork. I used to think that it had simply slipped their minds. Only later on did I realize that this was a pattern. That there was no paperwork whatsoever. All they wanted was the land, not a partnership. They had no intention to "develop" it. This group is quite interesting because they are speculators. They believe that by acquiring land from cash-strapped owners and eventually re-selling it, their vast debts (this is usually the case with con-men) will be erased. However, their debts are never erased entirely usually because con-men like to live BIG. Two crores and a half is nothing for such people. They burn through it like a hot knife through butter. Before you do any business with these human lampreys, make sure you know their financial strength. The fact that someone owns an iPhone X, an expensive car and has a "name" should NEVER ever be the reason to do business with that person.

There are so many con-men in Shillong today. You might be related to a few yourself. Look around your neighbourhood. How is Mr P able to afford such an expensive car? What does Mr K do in Ri Bhoi exactly? The answer sadly is that they are either thieves who work in the government and/or police force or are independent "businessmen" aka con-men. These people give other legitimate business persons a bad name. They go around and ruin other people's chances by promising the moon and delivering them a garbage dumpster. On that note: is that why such people end up in politics? Hmmm, that is food for thought. And as I say this I don't think that I am too far off the mark when I consider the rank and file of next year's candidates.

Another interesting variation of the con-man is, what I have come to call, the 'white devil'. Genetically the same as the run-of-the-mill Indian prototype, the outward appearance of this creature is what sets it apart and guarantees its success. It has evolved a layer of 'white' skin and a clever tongue in order to lure and capture its prey. They are usually derived from Caucasian stock or claim to be. This immediately qualifies them for first class treatment in a society obsessed with fairness and which associates the same with superiority. Places like Shillong in particular with their colonial hang-ups seem to be just the sort of places such creatures thrive in. I am assuming that the testing grounds for their mannerisms and affectations must have been learned in old colonial settlements like Calcutta where they combined metropolitan charm with ruthlessness. After the crumbling of the old world order in 1947, many of these con-artists made their way to the last reservoirs of this 'ancien regime': the hill-stations. This is why so many dubious characters stalk the Shillong streets. Clinging onto preppy "proper English" diction and half-baked ideas about the world, rehashing dull stereotypes and spewing bourgeois adages, these men are much beloved by many middle class people especially among the older families of Shillong. When the British left the country, this ilk settled in fast and re-colonised the old stomping grounds.

A smile and a way with words are all that are required to sway certain people. Many of my own family members have been sucked in as well by such acts losing money and assets in the process. It is sad to see such things but it comes on because we continue to associate people who speak the "Queen's English" with refinement. In reality we don't aspire to truly challenge the West and their ideas or even to take them up wholeheartedly, we are just in love with the appearance of Civilization. And some people have noticed that and carved a niche for themselves at the cost of others. Many so-called entrepreneurs continue to offer up faux sophistication for a price, they loathe the use of "American" slang in conversation and protest vehemently when certain famous aphorisms are misquoted. Most, in reality, last read a novel in BA (English Honours) some 20 years ago and have since resorted to Scoop Whoop for their entertainment. Yet these are somehow the supposed purveyors of 'high culture' in our society. Why do we still entertain these dinosaurs in our day-to-day lives? They are irrelevant, complacent, sanctimonious and dull.

Because we'd rather let a man's words and not his actions determine our measure of him, we continue to be made fools of. In my own lifetime, I have met many "uncles" who came and went: people who professed this and that, transnational movers-and-shakers, people who awed us with tales of London, Toronto and Sydney. In reality they were only trying to scope out an angle for themselves, trying to ingratiate themselves with certain influential uncles and the moneyed classes. As stand-alone figures these characters are generally harmless and quite amusing at times, with their antics and anecdotes, but real problems arise when one actually believes them and starts doing business with them. That can be a costly mistake. Taking such people in can be hazardous to one's peace of mind; once inside they do not leave on their own unless dislodged forcibly, which can be an unpleasant, bitter experience.

" Many old stories from all over the planet have such characters in them and some have endeared themselves to us. However, this short account is about the modern-day variety - the con-men, the scalawags who strut around cities like Shillong and feast upon their unsuspecting naïve residents."

"Two crores and a half is nothing for such people. They burn through it like a hot knife through butter. Before you do any business with these human lampreys, make sure you know their financial strength. The fact that someone owns an iPhone X, an expensive car and has a "name" should NEVER ever be the reason to do business with that person."

The irrationality of Hindu nationalism

By Barnes Mawrie

These days the BJP government and its hardcore supporters the RSS, the VHP and BD, are harping on the theme of Hindu Nationalism. In fact, they have hijacked the very concept of Nationalism given us by our Father of the nation, Mahatma Gandhi. According to Gandhiji, Indian Nationalism is quite different from Hindu Nationalism. Gandhiji, Nehru and other freedom fighters conscientiously tried to distinguish between the two concepts and they dissociated themselves from religious sentiments in their nationalist struggle. Indian Nationalism is characterized by a "secular" spirit, while Hindu Nationalism propagated by the Hindu fundamentalist today, is highly polarized on religion.

The founders of Hindu Nationalism like M. S. Gowalkar speak of nationalism in terms of Hindu Rashtra with the narrow and sectarian concept of India as "Hindu land", "Hindu religion", "Hindu race", "Hindu culture" and "Hindu language." It is this narrow concept of nationalism that is being propagated today among the masses which consequently leads to religious intolerance and oppression of the minority religions. The recent incident of religious intolerance in Satna (MP) where a catholic priest and young clerics were rounded up by the police and their vehicle burnt, because they were out singing Christmas carols, is just one incident of this sort. This is a dangerous direction our country is taking which one day may end up in a civil revolution. Is this what the BJP government wants in the long run? I am surprised that in spite of such ominous portents, the majority of good Hindu brethren are still pampering this government as evident in recent elections. Have the Indian people given up their age old ethical values of non-violence and tolerance for which the whole world reveres us?

What perplexes me is how certain people can take their religious conviction to such a radical level as to oppose any religion other than their own. What is worse still, is their attempt to convert (which they conveniently term "reconversion") other people to Hinduism through their programme ofghar-wapsi. Perhaps it is good to consider how such people have failed altogether to understand what religion is and what is its goal. Religion in anthropological term, can be defined as a "sacred dimension" of human culture which puts man in contact with the ultimate meaning of his existence. Theologically, every religion is created to ensure a way to reach the divine being or in short to attain salvation or eternal happiness. Every religion proposes a pathway to eternal happiness or bliss and every person is free to choose the pathway he sees best for him or for her. After all, we are destined to go to the same God who may be called by different names (Allah, Yahweh, Brahman, U Blei, Pathian etc). If our final destination is heaven or nirvanaor call it whatever it is, then why should we bother which pathway a person takes. Therefore the Hindu radicals who are trying to make everybody a Hindu in this country, are implicitly claiming that only Hinduism is the true religion and the only pathway. This is the most ridiculous belief, a total theological fallacy and a sheer arrogance and pride. Such people cannot in the least be considered religious. In fact, they are a shame to their own religion. India is not a theocracy but the largest democracy in the world. It is not merely the home of many religions, but the cradle of many world religions as well. We are proud that our land teaches people different paths to reach the infinite and we should not sacrifice this honour at the altars of these religious fanatics.

The so called Hindu nationalists, are a curse to the country because they sow the seed of hatred and violence. All these decades, Indians irrespective of religion and ethnicity, have been living in peace and harmony. The Congress government which upholds the secular values of our country has been able to keep at bay every kind of religious fundamentalism. Unfortunately, our Indian citizens seem to be easily duped by the propaganda of development championed by the BJP and have voted it to power in 2014. Little do they realize that by doing this, we have sacrificed our freedom. What is development without freedom? Any sane person would always prefer freedom to development. The right to religion and to expression are among the most fundamental rights. But as of now, the Hindu nationalists are gradually taking away those rights from us and our citizens are being hypnotized by their development jargon "sabka saath sabka vikas" which still remains a wishful thinking.

If there is one great threat to India's future today, it is not Pakistan or China, but it is Hindu Nationalism. This is an internal threat, a woodworm that gnaws at the integrity of our nation. Hindu Nationalism is the antithesis of nationalism. It is no nationalism at all for its outcome is sectarianism, fundamentalism and division. Nationalism that leads to disunity is a misnomer in itself. Good citizens of India should by no means allow such harmful ideology to take control of our nation. We ought to fight against such threats to preserve the wonderful heritage of "unity in diversity" which our country boasts of. Jai Hind.

"The founders of Hindu Nationalism like M. S. Gowalkar speak of nationalism in terms of Hindu Rashtra with the narrow and sectarian concept of India as "Hindu land", "Hindu religion", "Hindu race", "Hindu culture" and "Hindu language." It is this narrow concept of nationalism that is being propagated today among the masses which consequently leads to religious intolerance and oppression of the minority religions."

TO THE EDITOR

Too many CM candidates

Editor,

That the 2018 elections will throw up a fractured mandate is a given.It is difficult for the Congress Party to return with a majority. The NPP too is unlikely to get a majority hence it will need the UDP-HSPDP combine to form the government. Over and above that every political party in the fray other than the BJP has projected its own chief ministerial candidate. Hence it would be naïve to expect that the next government that will be formed will have a smooth sailing. There will be a real jostling for the chief minister's chair. I expect Meghalaya to go back to the old days of instability with a stint of President's Rule thrown in as it was during the tenure of Governor RS Mooshahary. All the chief ministerial candidates, other than Dr Mukul Sangma have no idea where to lead the state and have no experience of providing state-wide governance which is a challenging task. None of them have emerged as leaders of the state, but of the Khasi-Jaintia Hills only.

It is ironic that after 45 years of statehood we don't have leaders who stand out and who are accepted across the state. This is the bane of Meghalaya that we are still fragmented as tribes and politicians take full advantage of these societal fissures. I for one would not want PN Syiem to be the chief minister considering that even a small event like the Monolith Festival ran into rough waters and there were allegations of mismanagement of funds. How will a man who cannot run the district council efficiently ever manage to run the state? Syiem has a over-inflated view of himself and this is borne out by his body language.

None of the chief ministerial candidate actually have the people in mind when they aspire to this post. They are all thinking of the direct benefits that will accrue to them if they sit on that chair. No one sees that chair as symbol of great responsibility and greater public service. This is what ails the state of Meghalaya. At no point in time have we had chief ministers who understand the meaning of what it is to lead the government. Each one thinks about how they can benefit from holding the Chief Minister's chair. Divisiveness has been our Achilles Heel and politicians don't seem to have learnt any lessons! Instead, before the election they are trying to use class, and religion as props to garner votes. Meghalaya needs to come together to discuss the pressing needs of the state and present their shadow manifesto before the people.

Yours etc.,
AS Nongrum,
Via email

Silent before the PM?

Editor,

The "Rally vignettes" in the Shillong Times of December 17, carried a short news report that the church leaders of different denominations met the Prime Minister at Upper Shillong helipad before he departed for New Delhi. According to Union Minister KJ Alphons the church leaders supported the initiatives of the PM towards the poor and the downtrodden. Further the union minister stated that the church leaders did not raise any issue with the PM and had only words of appreciation for his good works.

This is quite curious. Is it true that no church leader raised any concern with the PM? Is the general sense of insecurity among Christians, Dalits and minorities in the country a non- issue for the leaders not to bring it to the notice of the PM? The PM in his election rally in Gujarat was at his rhetoric best labeling the letter of the Archbishop of Gandhinagar a jihad. Just before the PM's visit to the state a group of priests and seminarians were detained on charges of forced conversion in Madhya Pradesh just because they organized a Christmas Carol in a village. It is strange that the leaders decided not to led the feelings of aggrieved Christians known to the PM.

Or it might be well true that the Union Minister did not speak the truth, in which case the leaders should clarify and let their faithful know the agenda they took up with the PM, otherwise they stand the risk of letting their followers down. They might lose the high esteem they enjoy.

Yours etc., ,
Albert Thyrniang
Tura, West Garo Hills

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.

"Our life is not really a mutual helpfulness; but rather, it's fair competition cloaked under due laws of war; it's a mutual hostility."
--- Fulton John Sheen

The Shillong Times
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US Security Strategy

PRESIDENT Donald Trump has unveiled the National Security Strategy (NSS) of the US which is the most important American policy document of the year. There is a refusal to accept the notion that American power is diminishing in the international arena. Russia and China are the main challenges to the US influence, values and wealth. Iran and North Korea are regarded as rogue nations for their alleged nuclear designs. A dim view is taken of transnational terror groups and crime syndicates. India has been recognised as a leading global power. The Trump administration wishes to expand its strategic partnership with India and support its leadership in protecting security in the Pacific region. That view is designed to counterbalance Chinese muscle flexing leading to clashes with other Asian nations- the Doklam confrontation for instance. The US document clearly assails Chinese aggrandisement through compromising the sovereignty of other nations.

It is good that the US is behind India in its occasional standoffs with China. The US has also slammed Pakistan's role in fomenting terrorism. Islamabad has been asked to put an end to its mischievous game to destabilise Afghanistan and support terror groups. Unlike in the past, there appears to be a distinct US tilt towards India. India likes to work with Russia and Iran. Trump is unpredictable and India's policy may prompt him to lay off terror militias. Cooperation between the US and Russia will be in India's interest. But the US investigation into Russia's interference in the latest US elections may undermine whatever good relations may have been growing between Washington and Moscow.

LOOKING BACK
May 10, 1989

Purno's anguish over poor job opportunities for tribals in central govt offices

Meghalaya Chief Minister Mr P A Sangma expressed his deep dissatisfaction with Central Government offices and agencies in Meghalaya, that do not make "adequate efforts" to employ the local people. In a state where 80 per cent of the people are tribals, Central Government agencies still enforce the 7.5 percent tribal reservation quota. There is 10.5 reservations for Scheduled castes in a state where the scheduled caste population hardly exists, he said.

He was speaking on the occasion of release of a publication of the Staff Selection Committee in Shillong on Tuesday. "We are very unhappy about it", Mr Sangma said, adding that 77.5 percent of the jobs in Central Government agencies in the State were open to about 20 percent of the population. He urged the Central Govt. agencies in the State to give more importance to the local people, especially the trials that form the bulk of the population, "not as an act of charity, but on merit". It is only by involving more of the local people in Meghalaya and other North Eastern States in Central Govt offices that "emotional integration" can achieved.

Speaking out strongly against "some people who are not willing to change over to the 10+2 system in line with rest, of the country", Mr Sangma warned that unless vocational and job oriented education is introduced, the number of educated unemployable' would rise and cause further problems. He said that a number of posts were lying vacant in many offices all over India because of the lack of suitable personnel to man them. On the other hand there were a large number of educated unemployed were unemployable as they had not the necessary skills for the posts.

Mr Sangma said that unless the educational pattern is changed, Meghalaya would be churning out more and more "educated unemployed" girls and boys. Union Minister of state for Planning Mr B S Ingti spoke of the need to decentralize the State Service Commission (SSC) recruitment centres in the rural areas of the North East. Dwelling on some of the problems faced by the SSC, he said that often selected candidates posted in major cities did not join their duties because the cost of housing in some of those cities was as high as their entire salary. He said that the Government would have to think of some way to make accommodation facilities available to candidates coming from far-flung tribal areas of the north east.

Chairman of the SSC Mr SC Mittal spoke of the role played by the Staff Selection Committee to recuirt staff for middle and sub-level posts of the Govt. of India and said that the number of appointment are steadily increasing. The SSC also conducts regularly prerecruitment training programmes for the candidates in various centres of the North East.

Lok sabha sitting extended by 3 days

The Lok Sabha today voted in a division of Government motion to extend the sittings of the house by three days upto May 15. The house was originally scheduled to adjourn sine die today. The opposition forced a division as an expression of its protest against what Mr Jaipal Reddy (JD) called the "casual manner" in which the Government sought the extension. When the house divided, the motion mustered 198 votes in favour and 53 against.

The Modi Visit: An Analysis

By Patricia Mukhim

Meghalaya defies all stereotypes. The tribes practice a matrilineal culture but women are nowhere to be seen at the helm of affairs. Not a single political party is headed by a woman. When women do get elected to the legislature it's almost as if they have hit the glass ceiling. It is in this light that one looks at the Modi visit. The programme for the inauguration of the Shillong-Nongstoin and Nongstoin-Rongjeng highway was an all male party. I captured some pictures of that brief function and the scene was familiar. It was an all male affair and it did not even seem as if there was anything wrong just as it happens at every panel discussion or any other function where the organizers are gender-blind. I thought that the BJP in Meghalaya had some star functionaries who also happen to be female. I had met one such articulate young college lecturer at a radio discussion programme. But she was invisible at the Modi Rally. Only one lady was seen carrying a tray with the accoutrements that would adorn Modi's person. And of course only ladies carry trays, serve tea and also anchor programmes because that is expected of them. Come on BJP Mahila Morcha why do you get busy only when the Chairperson, National Commission for Women is around? Why are women relegated to women only activities? This is a shame more so since its happening in matrilineal Meghalaya. What's the point of the "Beti bachao, beit parhao" slogan when the person who has coined it does not even wonder where all the women have disappeared from the welcome party right from the Upper Shillong helipad?

Then we come to more substantive issues. Mr Modi may not be part of a dynasty but his body language is distant and unfriendly. He is good with addressing crowds from a distance but not when it comes to a one on one with party colleagues. He seemed dismissive and conscious of his position. I am not sure if our democracy forces leaders to distance themselves from the people. For reasons best known to the BJP, its leadership here had announced that certain personalities would be sharing the dais with the Prime Minister in a sort of launch pad to their new political journey in a new uniform; some of course are prodigals who return with the turn of the tide. Now that did not materialize and we are told by informed insiders that the much-touted dais-sharing agenda with the PM never got the concurrence of the PMO. Now this is confusing! Was Mr Modi in Shillong as the Prime Minister or as a BJP honcho? If the former than the PMO clearance is imperative but if he was here to enthuse party workers then is the visit official or personal? Things seem a little muddied here. Or am I clueless about protocol?

The SPG assumed a larger than life role here and would not allow even media persons into the venue. One can understand not allowing every Tom and Dick but why prevent media persons who have been security-scanned and cleared, from doing their jobs? The local BJP too seems nonplussed. Certainly the organisational capacity of the Party was tested to its limits. At this rate will the Party be able to manage its booths the way it does in other states? Does it have foot soldiers that are committed to the cause and work, not because they expect something from the Party but because they believe in its ideology and its Pradhan Sewak - Narendra Modi. That is one thing the BJP boasts of - its karyakarta - who slog to bring people to the polling booths on the D-day. Political parties with no foot soldiers usually struggle to win elections. And that is the problem with the Congress and regional parties! Those who support the party do so because they are looking for payback time. No one will work out of pure commitment. I wonder if this will change in 2018.

Then Mr Modi launched a tirade against the ruling Congress-led Government, calling it a government of scams, scams and more scams and serving the interests of the mining mafia. The fact of the matter, Mr Modi is that no government can come to power in Meghalaya or survive without the active monetary infusion from the mining mafia. Earlier, chief ministers have even been dethroned for withholding permission for setting up cement plants in Jaintia Hills. The new incumbent quickly gave clearance to 19 cement plants in Meghalaya. That's the way we do politics here. And incidentally, the BJP leaders here have been saying that they will ensure that the mining ban by the NGT is lifted if they are elected. That's a very attractive carrot dangling before the voters with a vested interest in mining.

Yes coal mining is such an important agenda for all political parties that the present Chief Minister is pushing for the activity to be undertaken by Meghalaya Mining Development Corporation (MMDC). We have heard little about the activities of the MMDC in all these years. And one wonders if they have the wherewithal to carry out scientific mining as per the requirements of the NGT. One also is unsure if the mine owners will be happy with entrusting the mining to an agency as they will not be able to manipulate things, the way they have been doing all these years. Also what is the equity share between the MMDC, the mine owners and the Government? The NGT is very specific that the environmental destruction that had been allowed to carry on for decades is arrested. It has a mandate to ensure that mine closure is also done scientifically and such land reclaimed for afforestation. Will the MMDC which is but an arm of the state have the ethical environmental conscience that the NGT is trying to push for? Indeed these are troubling questions that we don't seem to have answers to. And as of now, surreptitious coal mining is carrying on beyond the reach and visibility of the monitors appointed by the NGT. It is difficult to believe that coal extracted before the NGT suddenly clamped down on mining continues to be transported day in and day out. Who are we fooling anyway?

As of now, elections in Meghalaya will hinge a lot on the stance taken by political parties on the coal mining agenda. Coal has funded elections in the past and this will be the first election post the NGT ban. It will be interesting to watch how the 2018 elections pan out without the filthy lucre from the coal mines. Interestingly, Justice Swatanter Kumar who heads the NGT justified the ban on the plea that Article 21 of the Constitution gives predominance to right to life than any other interests including economic interests. He is said to have stated thus: "In the largest democracy of the world, we cannot permit economic interests to be preferred over to right to life and live in a healthy environment just because the activity should be allowed to carry on. " Justice Swatanter Kumar was referring to the unscientific coal mining in the state by a primitive surface mining method - the "rat hole" mining that entails clearing ground vegetation and digging pits ranging from five to 100 sq.m. to reach the coal seams. Labourers including young children are engaged to go deep into these holes to extract the coal using primitive tools such as pickaxes, shovels and buckets. In Garo Hills at least 15 people were killed when a mine collapsed and the bodies were buried inside the mines. This was the last straw and it raised a furore among human rights activists across the country. These aspects should be kept in mind before re-launching into a second bout of coal mining by pretending that there is no history to this ghastly activity which is highly extractive and damaging to the environment.

Lets also not forget that the rivers, streams and groundwater that were polluted by acid mine drainage have slowly regained their lives after the ban. Do we want to kill these rivers and streams yet again?

We would like to know whether the BJP has an action plan on sustainable mining and whether it has implemented that action plan in any of the states where it is holding power. If the BJP in Meghalaya is only going to promise to lift the ban on coal mining through smart litigation and not by taking concrete steps to prevent the past cruel onslaughts on the environment, then how different is it from the Congress, the NPP or the UDP-HSPDP and PDF? That none of these parties are even talking about this issue shows a deep nexus they all have with the coal and cement mining mafia.

Mr Modi's next visit might try to answer some of these troubling questions in Meghalaya. He did say that this is a state blessed with natural resources. He also spoke about making Meghalaya a tourist destination par excellence. Well. Mr Modi you can either have a Meghalaya that is open to tourism because of its natural beauty or you can have a Meghalaya where mining will eventually destroy the biosphere that is the source of our sustenance. You cannot have both!

TO THE EDITOR

Power projects on election eve?

Editor,

In 2007 December several power projects were signed between the Government of Meghalaya and several power producing companies. At that time the present chief minister was the Power Minister. None of the projects took off and Meghalaya is now suffering acute power shortage. Nit a single day passes without long hours of power cuts. We the public are out on a limb especially now during the severe winter season when we need to use heaters. And mind you the Power Corporation is not doing us a favour. It is charging for every unit of electricity at a price that is higher than in most other states. This is the festive season and most housewives are busy baking Christmas cakes etc. I know of many ladies who are very upset because power went off just when their cakes were rising. We can imagine how terribly frustrating that is! The only explanation given by the Area Managers is that repair and maintenance works are going on. Surely there must be something really wrong when repair and maintenance work has to be carried out in the same areas day after day because these are the same areas where electricity vanishes on a daily basis for hours together. So who do we hold responsible for these frequent power cuts? The Chief Minister, the Power Minister or the Chairman MeECL? One of them has to answer to the public for the failure of this public utility. They cannot escape scrutiny.

And now when elections are just a few months away we hear of yet some more Memoranda of Agreement (MoA) between the State Government and a company called M/s E Renew Joule Private Limited. I did a back check on this Company and found that the registered address is Singhania House, Polo Hills, Shillong and among the four directors are Vikash Agarwal and Dolly Mary Nongrum. The Company Renew Joule Private Limited was registered at Registrar of Companies Shillong on 04 July, 2017 and is categorised as Company limited by Shares and a Non-Govt company with a paid up capital of Rs one lakh and authorised capital of Rs one lakh. No balance sheet of the company is available online and the date of the last annual general meeting is not known. It is not a listed company

The question I want to ask as a discerning member of the public is whether the MoA can be put up online for a public audit. How can a company registered only this year have the expertise to carry out a power project in the state? Why did the Government not call for expression of interest from the best and credible power producers in the country which have a track record of producing power and are also of national/ international repute? Of the All these make us believe that this is yet another attempt to dupe the gullible public of Meghalaya that all will be well in the power sector and that we should stop complaining until April 2018 which is when the first unit of 24 MW at Byrnihat will be commissioned. And will the Government please explain what is "renewable technology?" One of the directors Manojkumar Vasudevbhai Sompura

Is on the board of several companies one of which is Rachna Energy Projects Pvt Ltd, registered at Ahmedabad. Rachna is also a mining and exploration company and is also involved in chemicals.

Power generation is not child's play and having been bitten in the past (none of the power projects taking off) the Chief Minister should have been more vigilant before announcing that the initiative will unleash a new positive energy. I am not sure what energy we will end up having but for some reason this MoA does not sound right to me.

Yours etc.,
Gordon Kharkongor,
Shillong- 8

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.

Waiting for Godot

By Ananya S Guha

A formula for division and dismemberment of the country has been neatly raked up, on religious, caste and other lines. In its midst is of course talk of democracy and secularism. This double speak is the hallmark of 21st century rant in India, and of course rants between political leaders continue to capture news headlines. The fight for brute power, abrasive politics, to say the least, in a conflict scarred country will continue unabated till the 2019 elections at least.

But the conflict does not begin and end here. None of our supposed leaders are talking of poverty, education, health and the farmers' plight. The class levels and inability to afford a comfortable life with right and dignity, pale in front of clash among political titans. This politicization has percolated into everything: sports, movies, the right to have a decent living and education. Till now the National Policy on Education has not been officially declared. It remains in murky waters. The dilemma of private and public universities continue. Having a large number of private universities, with quality courses on offer is fine, but what about affordability? High Court and Supreme Court injunctions in the past have been clear on capitation fees.

Education also spins into school and primary education, the issue of addressing drop outs both at the primary and secondary levels. We are jumping issues, we talk about technology in education, without getting the basics sorted out. Education starts in school, its focal and starting point. Then only can the continuum work out effectively. Vocational education must be introduced not only at the 10 plus two levels, but also at the college levels for employable reasons. In fact there must be core vocational courses which should be compulsory.

One hears of bizarre cases of heath negligence in the most vaunted hospitals in and around the country's capital. Gross negligence of children in hospitals in Uttar Pradesh have led to anger among people. The debates mostly on television on private public partnership in health care have remained in the four walls of the rooms where these debates took place. We must have a concerted blue print on this across all the states.

The farmers' plight continues, with suicides after suicide continuing unabated. An economic problem has led to a social malaise, but all that politicians do is to promise waiver of loans. What about agriculture based innovations, to counter crop failure? The likes of M.S.Swaminathan seem to be forgotten and cast out of scientific memory.

In all these aspects hardly a word has been said. The recent farmers' protest in New Delhi was a significant marker, but they were all avoided by our leaders. Only one or two leaders who are out of favour in their political parties, walked with the farmers.

The farmers' agitation is a very raw nerve. Poor farmers constitute the bulk of the country's poor who are trying to earn and green the country. Their suicides are a tragic plight of waste and insensitivity.

In the midst of this pandemonium, and what with politicians thinking only about the vote banks, comes Anna Hazare's clarion call for action, starting from 23rd March 2018. Politics is made redundant. His acerbic comments on both the major political parties, show how social movements can eclipse the politics of the times. It is social questioning, bereft of political alignments. Such social questioning can only be a counter revolution to the morass that present day politics has led to.

Education also spins into school and primary education, the issue of addressing drop outs both at the primary and secondary levels. We are jumping issues, we talk about technology in education, without getting the basics sorted out. Education starts in school, its focal and starting point. Then only can the continuum work out effectively. Vocational education must be introduced not only at the 10 plus two levels, but also at the college levels for employable reasons. In fact there must be core vocational courses which should be compulsory.

Politicians again and again, boast about the youth strength of our country. But they also forget that the youth is a fulcrum for unrest, in the midst of seething unemployment. The unrest in four major universities in the country over a space of one and a half years has dissipated it seems, from public memory. What one forgets is that these instances are significant reminders, of how the youth hold power, call the shots, and are not willing to bow in front of tyrannical oppression. Both men and women students are actively involved in campus politics, as they are in their career or studies.

Poverty, heath, education, farmers' plight and unemployment are the crux of the matter if we are to maintain developing standards in contiguity with progress. But what is happening is harping on religious divide, taking this back to situations which are four centuries back, obnoxious comments on movies and monuments. The main issues are side stepped for political expediency. Let us wait for 23rd March 2018.Or will it be a proverbial wait for Godot?

The socialization processes which started after Independence, must be recycled with mass awareness on these issues to be addressed, not besotted with power and money. Philanthropy will come not from business magnates, but lesser mortals.

"If you make the unconditional commitment to reach your most important goals, if the strength of your decision is sufficient, you will find the way and the power to achieve your goals."

--- Dr. Joyce Brothers

The Shillong Times

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Black Christmas

WHEN Prime Minister Narendra Modi went on a campaign trail in the NE, he had with him his minister for tourism, KJ Alphons who prided himself on being a practising Christian. It was obviously an election ploy in poll-bound Meghalaya. But the BJP seems to be largely without faith in national integration that has already hit it hard in its bailiwick, Gujarat. Another state where the party has a footprint for a long time, Rajasthan appears to have loudly offended the religious sentiments of practising Christians. Intolerant Hindutva groups are threatening to stop Christian festivities. A right wing Hindu mob reportedly muscled into a community centre in Rajasthan's Pratapgarh district to disrupt a Christian event. They apparently believed that the event was a religious conversion programme. There is no constitutional bar to conversion by Christian missionaries. Some years ago, Rajasthan prevented Mother Teresa from entering the state for fear of it being on a proselytization ride. And now a group belonging to the Hindu Jagran Manch has warned schools in UP's Aligarh against celebrating Christmas. In Madhya Pradesh, Bajrang Dal activists reportedly thrashed a Christian priest and four seminarians. Ghar wapsi cannot be a monopoly of the votaries of Hindutva which can be accompanied by vandalism. What is a silver lining is that UP Chief Minister Aditya Nath has ordered that Christmas celebrations in the state should go on unhindered.

Christmas is not just fun and games, Turkey and Christmas pudding. It is a holy night when one of the greatest men in history who is worshipped as a God by Christians was born in a manger. It has long been a global religion with even Russia celebrating it. In India, the participation of all communities in Yuletide festivities has always been a proof of India's secularism. Prime Minister Narendra Modi should tell the extremists in his party that secularism is not just a value to be professed but should be an article of faith.

LOOKING BACK

May 10, 1989

ABSU denies Church hand in Bodo stir

The All Bodo Students' Union has squarely denied the involvement of Christian Missionaries with the ABSU movement. In a statement released on Monday, ABSU Vice President Mr Pradip Kumar Daimary said that neither the Christian Missionaries nor the Hindus or any other religious people were helping the Bodo agitation. He said that Assam Chief Minister Mr Prafulla Kumar Mahanta and State Home Minister Mr Bhrigu Phukan were "attacking the religious rights of Christians and others in a secular state like India by bringing false allegations that Christian Missionaries are helping the Bodo agitators."

Denying the involvement of any central leaders in the agitation, the ABSU vice president said that the ABSU is "not guided by anyone, it is independent" and stated that they wanted to ensure the survival of the Bodos as an ethnic group with its distinct identity as others have within India. Bodo problem, the statement said that Mr Mahanta displayed "Assamese hegemony" and "wanted to annihilate totally the other minorities and tribals especially the Bodos from Assam."

The humility of the messiah

By Rev. LyndanSyiem

We usually associate Christmas with angels in the night sky announcing the birth of JesusChrist; shepherds who witnessed the angels and went searching for the new born baby in Bethlehem; the Star in the East that guided the Wise Men to the Christ child; their gifts of frankincense, myrrh and gold. These gifts signified him as prophet, priest and king: a mighty prophet from God; an unusual priest who would sacrifice his own life for all of humankind; and a King who would rule in the hearts and minds of men and women who followed him. Another fact of Christmas was that Jesus was born in exceptionally humble circumstances.

He was born in a stable, which is a shelter where animals are kept. He slept in a manger, which is a feeding trough made of wood or stone that contains grass or hay or grain for farm animals.He was born surrounded by cows, horses, donkeys and perhaps sheep. He was descended from the royal house of the great King David and the magnificent King Solomon. By rights he should have been born in the palace at the royal city of Jerusalem. But God arranged circumstances so that he was born in a humble stable in a small village.

Now a stable is not necessarily a dirty, smelly place. Jewish cattle rearers had a religious obligation to keep their animals clean. But it certainly was a humble place. Nobody but the poorest people stayed in stables. It is most surprising, and therefore significant, that the Messiah entered the world through a stable and not a palace. But why a stable?Why not a house? … Because there was no house available in Bethlehem, not even a single room –no room in the few local inns and lodges, no room even in private homes. There had been a sudden influx of people to Bethlehem and all the rooms were fully occupied. As it happened, Jesus was born during the time when Augustus Caesar ordered a general census of his vast Roman empire.

People throughout the empire had to register their names at their native places. So all the rooms at Bethlehem were occupied by Jews who had returned home for the census. Joseph and Mary had travelled 130 kilometres from the town of Nazareth in the North to Bethlehem in the South.But there was no room for them, even though Mary was about to give birth. So they had to stay in a wooden barn or perhaps even a cave. And the babyJesus was laid in a manger. It was not a proper bed but it was comfortable: the hay was soft and Mary had wrapped the baby in swaddling cloths.

But there is a deeper reason why Jesus was born in a stable. It was to show his identification with the common people and his associationwith the poor and powerless. Now Jesus was the Son of God:Scripture teaches that he was supernaturally conceived through the Holy Spirit in the Virgin Mary.From his mother's side he was biologically descended from the royal line of King David. From Joseph, his earthly,legal father, Jesus also traced his legal lineage back to David. As the divine and the royal Messiah, people naturally expected him to be born in a palace.

In fact the Wise Men initially went searching for him at King Herod's palace in Jerusalem. They were not wrong. The palace was the logical place to go if you were seeking for the "King of the Jews." But in choosing a stable over a palace and accepting a manger over a royal bed, Jesus was revealing a different kind of Kingship, a king who was humble, a king who would serve others. In the first century Jewish nationalist imagination, the Messiah would be a strong, haughty, all-conquering warrior. They were utterly shocked by this simple, unassuming, peaceable Messiah.

Throughout his life Jesus remained consistently humble and approachable. He spent considerable time with the poor and needy; he reached out to the outcasts and the rejects of society. He cared for the sick and healed them; he served the dispossessed and hungry and bid his followers share their possessions with others. So when Jesus asked his disciples to follow his example, he was calling them to self-denial and service. Of course his followers were notable to perfectly follow his example; often they failed miserably. But at least they had a noble ideal before them.

But is humility effective? Can it really impact the world? What is the use of being humble when the world respects only wealth and power? … But look at the example of Mahatma Gandhi. With the weapons of humility and sacrifice he defeated the might of the British Empire in India. Just think of the British Indian Army, Navy and Air Force. At its height in 1945, there were over two million military personnel. Think of the powerful bureaucracy and the well-disciplined police that governed British India. They numbered over half a million in 1947. Yet Gandhi and his freedom fighters defeated the British with humble, non-violent resistance. What Western missionaries preached as religious virtue, Gandhi transformed into a successful political strategy.

It is indeed amazing that God, the Creator of the Universe, with all his power, knowledge and authority can still be humble. Scripture teaches that Jesus was the Son of God. He reflected the character of God, he was the mirror image of God. He had no compelling need to be humble, yet he displayed humility in his brief thirty-three years on earth. The Apostle Paul wrote that, "He humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death –even to death on a cross" (Philippians 2:8). Throughout his life and even in death Jesus the Messiah exemplified humility. He did not possess a palace. He did not even have a home of his own. He was a wandering preacher who ministered to both rich and poor, saints and sinners, Jew and Gentile. He even washed the feet of his disciples, which is the duty of the lowest servant.

In North India and in South India, people bow and touch the feet of their parents and elders as a mark of respect. In the many years that I've lived at various places in North and South India, I've gradually learnt to appreciate this cultural practice which is generally not understood by the North East tribes. Elders do not have to demand respect but younger people automatically recognize their elders' stature and bow before them. In a similar Middle Eastern culture of bowing and deference, it is significant that the shepherds and the Wise Men bowed before the baby Jesus. Though he had humbled himself, they clearly recognized that he was not an ordinary human being but the Son of God who had become human. Humility does not veil divinity.

If the Messiah was humble, his followers must likewise be humble. Jesus made it such a prime concern in his life and teachings that all his followers, whether priest, pastor, preacher or lay person, will be evaluated on the criterion of humility.What is humility? Humility is obedience, as we read in Philippians 2:8. Jesus in his earthly life was perfectly obedient to God the Father. Obedience is humility in practice. Disobedience is exalting ourselves above God. Disobedience is rebellion against God. If you are obedient to God in your public and personal life, you are truly a humble person. If you are not obedient, you are a proud person.Mere bowing is not humility; bowing sans obedience is meaningless.

Only the humble before God, can truly be humble before people. Otherwise it is just an outward show. Humility means recognizing God for who he is and acknowledging his authority over us.Humility is not humiliation. Humiliation in putting others down. Humility is recognizing God as Sovereign over our lives and that all people are equals with one another.In the same way, bowing before elders is not humiliation but rendering the respect due to them. Humility is not thinking poorly of yourself but acknowledging God for your life and your achievements.

Jesus overturned stereotypes of the Messiah. It was not with force but with shining humility that Jesus touched the hearts of ordinary people in the Jewish regions of Judea, Galilee and even in mixed-race Samaria. In contrast, the religious leaders of his time had become incorrigibly proud of their ancestry and religion. There was hubris –fatal, overweening pride in their nation's privileged position in God's plan for the world. They were arrogant towards Gentiles and the outcasts and the marginalizedof society. The time was ripe for a Messiah, a Saviour who would gather up the despised and the forsaken.

Jesus came with a message of love and forgiveness; reconciliation and restoration. Your sins can be forgiven. You can have a relationship with God. He himself would be the sacrifice for their sins: his name is Jesus, which means "he will save his people from their sins." People who were burdened with guilt and condemnation found hope and peace. God would restore their broken lives and grant them a place in heaven. This simple message, delivered through the powerful medium of humility, eventually won the hearts of multiplied millions across the world.

Unfortunately, we the followers of Jesus have not been as humble and loving as our Master was. Sometimes we,Christians who bear his name,have been downright arrogant and self-seeking. Christmas therefore comes as an annual reminder of the lowly-birth and humility of our Saviour. We must search ourselves and ask for forgiveness. At Christmas we are gently reminded of the supreme example of humility and service. Humility is not weakness; humility is being exactly who we are in the sight of God; humility is truly followingthe Messiah.

May God grant all of us a wonderful Christmas and a blessed New Year.

What's Christmas all about?

By Barnes Mawrie

Many must have read the famous story "The Christmas Carol" of Charles Dickens which has been made into a beautiful animated movie by Walt Disney. The story presents a penchant message of Christmas. In the story we have the protagonist, Mr. Eleazar Scrooge who was a rich miserly money lender. He was an exacting man who did not have any kind thought for the poor and had great love for the poor and would secretly drop gifts into poor homes. So even today, children would pray to Santa Claus to come and bring them Christmas gifts. There is a beautiful tradition on every Christmas day in the basilica of Santa Maria Trastevere in Rome, wherein the whole basilica is turned into a mighty lunch hall and the poor people of Rome are invited to a free meal and are given gifts. It is part of Christmas tradition all over the world, that Christians display a sense of solidarity with the poor by visiting old age homes, hospitals, orphanages, slums etc.

There are those who live in royal mansions while others live in rented ramshackle structures prone to any calamity. It is in such an unjust socio-economic system that this Christmas message of "giving" and "sharing" needs to be resounded more. There is need to change our attitude from "grabbing" to "giving." Rephrasing the quote of Gandhiji, I may say "there is enough wealth in India for everyone's need but not enough for anyone's greed."

It is opportune that Pope Francis has declared this year, a year of the poor and inviting people all over the world to show solidarity with the poor and marginalized. This is truly celebrating the spirit of Christmas. In our country India, where we see so much of disparity between the rich and the poor, such a message is very relevant. A vast majority of our population live in misery and are underprivileged while a handful of people live in exaggerated opulence. Even in our own city, we see such a socio-economic phenomenon. There are families owning thousand acres of land, while many others own not even a square feet of land. There are those who live in royal mansions while others live in rented ramshackle structures prone to any calamity. It is in such an unjust socio-economic system that this Christmas message of "giving" and "sharing" needs to be resounded more. There is need to change our attitude from "grabbing" to "giving." Rephrasing the quote of Gandhiji, I may say "there is enough wealth in India for everyone's need but not enough for anyone's greed." Let this Christmas message touch the heart of every citizen of this country, so that we may learn to give more and expect less. Let us not forget that "there is joy in giving and sharing than in anything else."

miserable folk of his town. Christmas season had no meaning for him except to make more money. On Christmas eve when the town's folk were making merry and celebrating, Mr. Scrooge was unhappy and wore a long face. But on Christmas eve he had a horrifying vision in which he was shown all the misdeeds he had committed against the poor and the imminent death he would have to experience. This shook him up and he repented and changed his life. He became a generous man and began helping the poor families to have a good celebration. This brought happiness and smile to his face and he experienced a sense of joy he never knew before.

Christmas is in fact, a feast of "giving." On this day God gave his only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, to our sinful world. This was the greatest act of giving made by God to the whole creation. Secondly, Christmas is also a celebration of Jesus' total self giving to the world. Thus as St. Paul would say "although he was God, he emptied himself of divinity and took upon himself human likeness" (Phil 2:7).

Christmas is in fact, a feast of "giving." On this day God gave his only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, to our sinful world. This was the greatest act of giving made by God to the whole creation. Secondly, Christmas is also a celebration of Jesus' total self giving to the world. Thus as St. Paul would say "although he was God, he emptied himself of divinity and took upon himself human likeness" (Phil 2:7). This meant that Jesus in order to insert himself into human society, into our culture, humbled himself so much as to assume a human form. It is this very event, namely, the incarnation of God's Son among us that we celebrate at Christmas.

That Christmas is a message of "giving" is clear from the tradition of Santa Claus (St. Nicholas). Santa Claus is the neo-personification of St. Nicholas, the good and compassionate bishop who

TO THE EDITOR

The 2G scam and after

Editor,

In this country we are never short on drama. Just as there have been several high profile cases with media playing judge, jury and executioner such as the Sheena Bora murder case where Indrani Mukherjee is the main accused for the cold blooded murder of her daughter, it may so happen that Indrani too walks away scot free for want of evidence. Those of us who watched the case being discussed in the media are led to believe that Indrani Mukherjee is guilty as hell but courts don't pass verdicts until every shred of evidence is examined and the judges are satisfied that they are not hanging the wrong person. In the Aarushi murder case for instance, after the dentist parents of the girl who initially were the prime suspects, were recently released by the court for want of conclusive evidence, everyone now asks, "Who murdered Aarushi?" Our faith in the criminal justice system stands shattered. Aarushi and many more like her will never get justice. It is a sad day for the Indian Judiciary that the Supreme Court had earlier cancelled the spectrum licenses of 122 companies merely on the basis of the CAG report which has raised the bogey of a notional loss of Rs 1.76 lakh crore - a mind boggling figure. It will be interesting to watch what happens when the CBI goes on appeal to the High Court. Why is the CBI charge sheet so shoddy not just in this case but in case after case? Clearly this investigating agency needs to be overhauled completely. And that also means that it remains free and independent to do its work and is not burdened by having to please a government in power.

The Congress now rides the high horse of morality. And perhaps people like Barkha Dutt who got stung in the course of this scam will also now be justifiably vindicated. This is the story of all scams in India. So few actually end up in the guilty being convicted. Does this not affect the credibility of the judiciary? Or should A Raja and Kanimozhi now await the verdict of the High Court before they are finally acquitted? So much time lost in the process.

Yours etc.,
S Choudhury,
Kolkata

Christmas commercialized

Editor,

At this time of year it is difficult to reach certain commercial areas of the town such as Police Bazar. Traffic is choc-a-bloc and the traffic cops are at their wits end. As parents we cannot help shopping for last minutes gifts not just for our kids but also for those who we cherish. But the shops too are overcrowded and salespersons have little time to attend to customers. The meaning and significance of Christmas seems to me to have been completely diluted with the passage of time. Its now all about new clothes, shoes and what have you?

It is time to sit back and reflect why Christmas which celebrates the birth of a Messiah who was born in a lowly state, has become what it is today. Most of us celebrate the symbols and not the spirit of Christmas which is about love, peace and sharing. And we need not wait for Christmas to share out love and gifts with those who actually are in need of such. Today a large number of people in Meghalaya have become poorer while a small section has become very rich. This divide must shock Christ inasmuch as our manner of observing Christmas must sadden Him.But where do we start the change? Can the churches do more to instil the true meaning of Christmas in their congregation?

Yours etc.,
Mary J Lyngdoh,
Shillong-3

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

'Tech-devp relation complex'

(Left) At the Uttara jetty where the Jarawas came out from the forest for the first time in large numbers, 1998; the mangrove forest in Constance Bay, a Jarawa Tribal Reserve, 2002; the author and the cover of his latest book; and (inset) edible nest in Baratang Island.

Pankaj Sekhsaria *does not need any introduction after so many years of activism against environmental degradation in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, a relatively lesser known part of the country, and research on the indigenous groups dwelling in the archipelago for centuries. He is a member of the environmental action group, Kalpavriksh, and edits the Protected Area Update, a bi-monthly newsletter. The freelance journalist and photographer has authored four books on the A&N islands, the latest being 'Islands in Flux – the Andaman and Nicobar story', which is a collection of his essays and newspaper articles. In an email interview to* **The Shillong Times**, *Sekhsaria talks about the successive government's lack of commitment to green issues, the current scenario in the Bay of Bengal islands and explains the complexities in environment preservation and development.*

In the last decades, how serious has the Centre been about environment issues? What is the attitude of the current government?

One would say that the record has been disappointing, both with the former governments and also with the current one. Policy seems to be driven completely by economic considerations and vitals of a country and its ecology are being grossly neglected and undermined be they forests, wetlands, grasslands or the coastal and marine systems. This is the natural infrastructure which is fundamental to life – basic things like clean air and water – and destroying natures systems is undercutting this infrastructure and the security it provides

We are so caught up in pursuing projects such as dam construction, infrastructure projects like roads and railways, mining and things like ports etc that we forget that nothing of this will survive if natural systems and this natural infrastructure is not cared for.

Have you worked on environmental issues in the North East? Can you please give details of your findings? If not, do you intend to take up the various environmental issues plaguing the region?

I had an opportunity many years ago of working on a film project in the Kaziranga National Park. But that was more focused on the wildlife there. I've not really worked on environmental issues in the NE and it seems unlikely that I will be in the near future in any substantial way. I do follow developments quite carefully and the same applies here as it does in the rest of the country — the points that I have made earlier about the lack of care and concern where natural resources and nature's infrastructure is concerned!

Is it a dichotomy to say that development and environment conservation can go hand in hand? How can technology be used to make development inclusive?

This is complex, and the technology question is one at the heart of a lot of research and thinking and also in some ways very ideological. There is the idea that technology is the devil where environment is concerned but I think it is much more complex that this straightforward relationship. My recent research work has been in academic field of what might be considered the Sociology of Science and Technology and the one big lesson there is that the technology we have is a result of choices made by society and by us. I am not denying that technology has had a hugely negative impact on the environment but we have to figure out different ways to understand this and also respond to the challenge.

You have been part of the Narmada movement too. Do you think years of protests went futile?

I've not really been part in any direct kind of way, except for being part of some small support activities when I was a student in Pune. But the influence of the Narmada movement was huge for many of us who were growing up in the 1980s and 90s. And no, I don't think that the movement was futile because the impact it has had on

TALKING POINT

a whole generation of this country is not easy to fathom. It was able to challenge an idea of development that is indeed development only for a few and one that comes at a huge cost for the already marginalized. IT made fundamental questions such as 'What is development?', 'Whose development at whose cost?' central to the discourse in the country and that is no mean feat at all.

If you have to sum up the problems of Andaman and Nicobar Islands, what are the issues that you will list? Tourism growth in the islands has spoiled the natural habitat of indigenous people. Do you think there should be a check on tourist movement in the islands? Where does the Jarawa problem stand now? What is their future? What are the vital socio-politico-economic changes in the islands post tsunami?

Where the Andaman and Nicobar Islands are concerned, my key concern and contention is that government policy and planning on the one hand and bureaucracy and political establishment has not understood the key challenges faced by the islands. This is the main thrust of my new book 'Islands in Flux – the Andaman and Nicobar Story', which is a collection of 20 years of my journalism and academic writing about the islands. Central to thesis is the idea of 'flux', on constant change. There are three levels of flux that the islands are facing — socio-cultural, ecological and most important, perhaps, geological. Each is dependent on the other and at the same time intricately linked. The geological is critical in the islands like it is in the case of the NE. The islands, for instance, are located in one of the most seismically active zones in the world and the gigantic tsunami of 2004 was caused by an earthquake off the coast of Sumatra, just a couple of hundred nautical miles from Nicobar.

For the last 50 years, we have not acknowledged these independent, but connected realities. A recent NITI Aayog report does not take any of this into account while planning large infrastructure projects. In 2009, at a defense-related seminar, President Kalam talked about building a nuclear power station in the islands, in a landscape where you've had earthquakes which have been 9.3 on the Richter scale. Imagine the vulnerability we're setting ourselves up for. What happens to the nuclear power plant if another earthquake or tsunami happens? Similar plans were made long ago in a 1965 report. The same ignorance is still prevalent in 2017, despite so much more information being available, despite a deeper understanding, despite technological advances.

What project(s) are you working on currently?

I continue to work on the A&N islands as a researcher and in trying to create a network of people interested in the place and the issues there. The other thing I have been doing as a member of the environmental action group, Kalpavriksh, is to edit a newsletter on wildlife called the Protected Area Update. It is published every two months and carries information and news on wildlife and conservation related developments from the country. The newsletter is now in its 23rd year of publication and has become and important resource for all those interested in wildlife related issues. And in addition to this there are a couple of other projects I am involved in that are based broadly in the field of the Sociology of Science and Technology – one which looks at processes of technology visioning, another on Citizen Science initiatives in ecology in the country and a third that is looking at issues of air pollution in the city of Hyderabad where I am currently based.

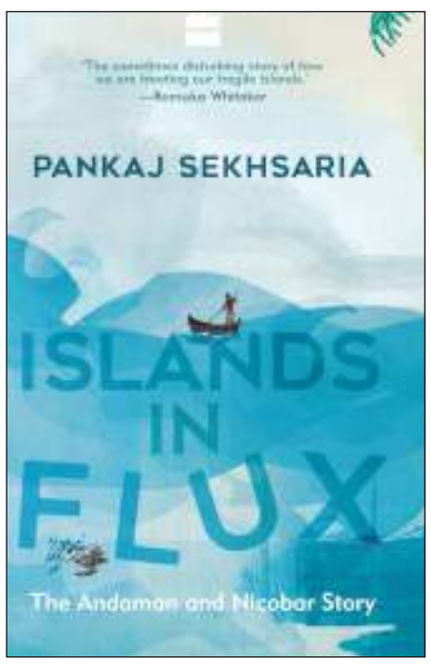
In one of your interviews, you mentioned about "cognitive justice". How feasible do you think the approach is? Is this implementable in all parts of the country where there is a conflict with indigenous people?

The idea of cognitive justice is not mine, but I think it is a very powerful, even beautiful formulation. What it is saying, in my understanding, is that there are different ways of life and there is huge diversity of cultures, particularly in the country like India. Each has a right to be and to exist and each has something to offer to the other. And there is nothing in this for anyone to disagree with, particularly because it then means we have to give equal space and respect to those ways of living and those cultures that have become or have been made marginal. And many of these have been marginalized by the large scale development I have mentioned below and which movements like the Narmada movement question and challenge.

How serious is India about environmental issues when compared to other countries in the world?

I don't think a comparison amounts to much. There are one set of environmental problems like global warming and depleting natural resources that affect all of us. There are others that are specific to particular countries, regions and systems. The challenge is to be constantly aware of each of these as in many cases they are linked. It shouldn't matter what another country is doing or not doing. We have to, all countries have to make the environment and environmental issues top priority in their policies, economics and politics.

(Photo courtesy: Pankaj Sekhsaria)



Robot dogs for smelly people

Used my wife's lemon-herb-mint shampoo, and now my head smells like a slow-roasted leg of lamb and everyone in the office is complaining that they feel hungry.

So I turn to mail from readers and find several have forwarded me a story in which a bus traveller was arrested after passengers complained about his smelly feet.

At last! As a frequent traveller, this columnist has long been baffled as to why Being Stinky In Public is not seen as a medium-to-high grade criminal offence, somewhere between Manslaughter and Listening to Justin Bieber in Public.

I once shared a taxi with a driver so smelly that I had to lean my head out of the window for breathable fresh air — and that was in Beijing, where the air is brown and chewy.

But further research revealed the sad truth that stinkiness has not been formally criminalised in the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh, where the smelly-feet-on-a-bus incident took place recently. The man was arrested for "causing public nuisance" by arguing with the other passengers.

People don't like being told their feet smell. "There was a case last year in Omaha where a man thrown out of a car because of his foot odour picked up a pipe and smashed the back windscreen," said one of the US-watchers among my colleagues. A Europe correspondent said that in Berlin last year, two men were arrested for fighting in a train after one of them complained about the other's smelly feet.

THE FUNNY SIDE

Nury Vittachi

I called a lawyer to ask if smelling bad was illegal anywhere in the world. "Not really, except for token efforts," he said. "A US town made it illegal to have body odour in parks and libraries, but people realised it was really just an attempt to get rid of homeless people. In Italy earlier this year, a court in Rome ruled that cooking smelly food was a criminal offence if it annoyed your neighbour."

But having smelly feet while travelling is not a crime — which is bad news for travellers with delicate noses.

Now this is where the Japanese come to our rescue. They just announced the invention of a robot dog called Hana-chan who sniffs your feet and faints if they smell bad. Hana-chan should be placed at aircraft gates. If the dog faints, you don't get on the plane. Simple.

But a colleague spotted a flaw in this plan. What if you nip into a duty free shop at the airport for a free burst of perfume? Your smell-level will go up and Hana-chan will faint.

The only people whom the dog will allow to fly will be Canadians. In that country, many organisations have no-perfume policies, and even wearing nice-smelling hair gel can get you sent home if you work in a school or a hospital. The policy was introduced to help people who feel "assaulted" by perfumes.

Dear Canadians, if you want to feel assaulted by a smell, come to Asia. I have the business card of a Beijing taxi driver who will make you want to swim in a lake of Chanel No. 5.

Oops. I just scratched my head and now I feel hungry.

(Nury Vittachi is an Asia-based frequent traveller. Send ideas and suggestions via his Facebook page)

Enjoy & earn this festival season

By Ranjan K Baruah

Christmas is an annual festival and billions of people around the world join this religious and cultural celebration. This also brings job opportunities and career perspectives. Some of the career options which are linked with Christmas could be holiday planner, baking, decoration, organising winter camps for kids and others, organising shopping carnivals, gift wrapping in style, flower arrangements or decorators and also volunteering may be paid or unpaid.

Holiday Planner: During holidays people go out to new places and explore them. People who are involved in holiday planning are called holiday planners. People with degree in travel and tourism management can think of becoming holiday planners. A holiday trip planner is dedicated to travelling plans which aim to help travellers plan their trips to different destinations, either domestic or international. During Christmas, many people travel so holiday planners are in demand.

Baking: Baking is a career that demands lot of creativity, commitment and passion for food. It is an exciting career for those with an intrinsic interest in cooking, have natural culinary talents, artistic skill and social nature. From cookies and gingerbread, to biscotti and shortbread, baking during Christmas is a profitable business. One may learn baking and other cooking through regular courses or short term courses. Skill development courses are available in the short term whereas management courses are for the long term and like diplomas or certificate courses.

Decoration: Festive season also involves decorations. From crepe paper streamers to professionally-designed displays of colour and beauty, decorations generally work within a theme determined by event sponsors and coordinators, setting the stage for the bulk of the event proceedings. Christmas decorations are typically put up in late November or early December, usually to coincide with the start of Advent.

Christmas carnivals: As people are fond of shopping and Christmas is one of the best occasions to organise carnivals. These are not only for shopping but it includes other activities too. This is popular in many countries. These carnivals are organised in different cities in India too. Entrepreneurs may think of organising Christmas carnivals which can be linked to the New Year celebration.

There are other options apart from the above mentioned. The best part is one does not need much formal qualification to be part of these professions. Some of the qualities which are important are skills like good communication skill, self confidence and must be able to manage people and also work in team. Having good knowledge over language, including writing, is another advantage. Leadership skills, work under pressure are also needed.

Most important in this regard is the value of time, it means service must be provided on time. People who are lazy have no place in this profession. One needs to be fast and connected with technology like internet and others. These are professions which demand high perfection, hard work and a lot of patience. With the event management industry poised to grow by leaps and bounds, trained candidates have excellent job opportunities related to occasions like Christmas.

The success of an event or carnival depends on its capacity to procreate themes which have never been thought of before.

Updates

JEE Main: Admission criteria to undergraduate engineering programmes at NITs, IIITs, other centrally funded technical institutions, institutions funded by participating state governments and other institutions should include the performance in the Class XII/equivalent qualifying examination and in the Joint Entrance Examination, JEE (Main). The last date for applying for the entrance of JEE Main is 1st January 2018.

NIFT Entrance: Application are invited for admission to 4 years undergraduate and 2 years post graduate professional programmes for the academic year 2018. Last date for applying online is December 29.

IRMA Admission: Aspirants may apply for admission in Institute of Rural Management Anand (IRMA) on or before December 31.

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

ALL WE NEED IS LOVE & PEACE

By Fr. Cedric Prakash, SJ

One of the most meaningful features of the Christmas season is that of giving gifts. Across the globe, people love to give gifts on Christmas, and of course to receive gifts too! Gifts come in a whole range: from the inexpensive yet lovingly handmade cards to perhaps a gold-crusted diamond purchased from an expensive jewellery store.

Santa Claus (a caricature of the saintly Bishop Nicholas who went round caring for the poor and the hungry) comes laden with gifts; Christmas stockings bulge with gifts and one can find gifts under the family Christmas tree. Children look forward to special celebrations during the Christmas week when they receive gifts, it does not matter if they are just trinkets or some 'made-in-China' stuff; balloons or plastic toys!

Giving gifts on Christmas perhaps originated from the fact that when the shepherds ran in haste to worship Jesus they probably took with them the best of their flock to present to the new-born King. The little shepherd boy had nothing to offer Jesus; just the music he could play on his drum: that was his gift.

The Bible makes no mention of all this (media today rarely reports the good done by the poor and simple folk). What, however, takes the cake are the gifts offered by the Magi (the three Kings) — gold, frankincense and myrrh. All these gifts were rich in symbolism — gold of kingship on earth; frankincense as symbol of God; and myrrh to remind one of death and mortality. There perhaps lies the cue as to why gift-giving during Christmas has such a central place.

The tradition of giving gifts continues even today but unfortunately the 'gift' today is merchandise which has to be purchased by the shops that lure us, by the tinsels and baubles, the advertisements and commercials, the discounts and the sales.

The gifts today come with a price tag, often very expensive! It is no longer the giver that counts but the value put on the materiality of the gift. If the gift is wrapped in an attractive paper and tied with the right ribbons then there is added value to the gift. After all, in a highly commercialised world we are made to believe that branding and presentation is what matters the most.

What we all need to realise is that the real gifts of Christmas have nothing to do with materialistic things. They are not gaudy or glitzy, they are not sophisticated or expensive. These gifts cannot be 'purchased' in a super mall or even in a Christmas bazaar. They are there for the asking: for giving and receiving! They are totally free: one only needs the humility, the transparency and the courage to see them as the real gifts of Christmas

Christmas is Jesus! The most complete and precious gift of the season; a non-negotiable. There is no Christmas without Jesus. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."(Jn3:16). The essence of Christmas is that Jesus comes to us as our Saviour. Sadly we live in a world that has very systematically taken Jesus out of Christmas. We are made to believe that Santa Claus and Christmas trees, the jazzy lighting and the heavy decorations are all that matter. We conveniently forget that Jesus was born in a manger in the midst of stench and squalor. Mary and Joseph did not even have enough of clothing to wrap up their just-born child. Jesus is indeed the greatest gift of Christmas!

Christmas is Joy! The Joy to the world as revealed centuries earlier by the Prophet Isaiah (9:1-7).

The angels proclaim this joy on a melodious note, 'Glory to God in the highest' (Lk.2:14). The specificity of this joy is that the ones who receive these 'glad tidings' first are the shepherds. It is an extraordinary gift for these poor, simple, ordinary folks who live a tough life on the periphery of society, people who are marginalised and vulnerable yet are 'pure of heart.'

It was a totally unexpected gift, but perhaps the best gifts, the most meaningful accolades are those we never expect! The ways of God are strange: he lifts these ordinary folks with the good news through the angels. Their hearts are filled with joy. The only way they can express this gift is to run in haste and worship Jesus the Saviour. The gift of unbounded joy, beautifully wrapped in simplicity and spontaneity, poverty and magnanimity.

Christmas is Peace! A gift given to all by the angels as they sing 'And on earth peace among men in whom he is well pleased'. A vibrant, living peace, a peace which is not the prerogative of a few but needs to be shared with all. In the context of what is happening in our world today it is a gift which we all desperately need. Peace in our hearts, peace in our families, peace in our neighbourhoods, peace in our countries, peace among warring nations — a peace that silences conflicts and the military-industrial complex. We are all called to be channels of God's peace just like the shepherds who first Christmas night. To be bridges, to heal our broken world, to be reconcilers in the midst of divisiveness and fragmentation, to be merciful yet courageous to take a stand, when those around, make hate and violence their primary aim. It is a gift from Jesus — 'Peace be with you! My peace I leave! My peace I give you!'

Christmas is Tenderness! Mary, the mother of Jesus embraces her newborn with the gift of tenderness. Her tender loving care of her son –is a gift to the world. It is a gift which Pope Francis has been constantly speaking about — "the revolution of tenderness".

In a TED talk on 26 April 2017, Pope Francis said, 'And what is tenderness? It is the love that comes close and becomes real. It is a movement that starts from our heart and reaches the eyes, the ears and the hands. Tenderness means to use our eyes to see the other, our ears to hear the other, to listen to the children, the poor, those who are afraid of the future. Tenderness is the path of choice for the strongest, most courageous men and women. Tenderness is not weakness; it is fortitude. It is the path of solidarity, the path of humility.'

Mary epitomises this tenderness. She is the revolutionary of tenderness. A gift we need to willingly and gladly share today with many.

Christmas is Hospitality! The manger was a warm and welcoming place for Mary, Joseph and Baby Jesus! There were surely the animals in the stable but there must have been some poor people there that night too who looked after the animals. These were the people who made Mary as comfortable as possible so that she could give birth to Jesus. They would have given of their all — to these strangers who earlier had the terrible experience of being told that there was 'no room to stay in the inn.'

Later, the Holy Family had to seek refuge in Egypt to escape the murderous wrath of King Herod! There in Egypt they once again found welcome and hospitality. Our world today has millions of refugees and other forcibly displaced; unfortunately, there is a growing rise of xenophobia, racism, jingoism, bigotry, exclusiveness and discrimination. The gift of hospitality, the courage to welcome strangers and make them feel at home in our midst is what Christmas is all about!

Christmas is all these gifts and much more! The gifts of love and fellowship, of mercy and reconciliation, of sharing and caring, of justice and solidarity, of dignity and equity, of hope and life. The list is endless. These are gifts which no money can buy! There is no sale, pitch or advertisement.

These are gifts of the spirit which have to reflect in our attitudes and essentially be translated into substantial action. They have to be internalized and mainstreamed; joyfully and lovingly shared with others. Christmas is Christmas only when we have the courage to gift Jesus and the values of his Kingdom: Joy, Peace, Tenderness, Hospitality and the rest, unconditionally to those around us!

(Fr Cedric Prakash, SJ is a human rights activist. He is currently based in Lebanon, engaged with the Jesuit Refugee Service in the Middle East on advocacy and communications)

Christmas tidings

By Rev. PB Lyngdoh

Christmas is not simply a time for singing carols, giving presents and merrymaking. It has a deeper meaning.

The joy of Christmas emanates from the mystery of Christmas. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth…"

This passage from the Bible makes clear that the son of God became the Son of man in order that we the sons of men might become the sons of God. He was born of Mary after the flesh so that we might be born of God after the Spirit. He took our human nature that we might be partakers of His divine nature.

To read the Christmas story with the eyes of faith and with spiritual understanding will kindle within us a spirit of genuine devotion and bring us to our knees, lost in wonder and praise.

Hence the Christmas festival is essentially a call to worship. On the first Christmas night, the angels burst forth into songs of praise and gave glory to God: "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among men of good will with whom He is pleased".

The shepherds followed their example; for after they had found the babe lying in a manger, they returned to their flocks "glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen". So their faith showed itself in action. They did three things: first "they came with haste" driven by a sense of urgency in the light of the revelation they had received.

Second, "they found the babe lying in a manger" in accordance with the sign the angels had given them. Third, "they made known the saying which had been told to them concerning the child". So they came, they found, they told. Faith leads to obedience. Obedience results in discovery. Discovery expresses itself in testimony.

May the Humility of the shepherds, the Faith of the wise men, the Joy of the angels and the Peace of Jesus Christ be God's gifts to us this Christmas and in the New Year.

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi ***Sunday, DECEMBER 24, 2017***

Moon trine Mars on your solar return chart denotes a good year. Your natural optimism has been a powerful force for you throughout your life, and it will continue to assist you throughout the new year. You can negotiate more successfully than usual, and, if applicable, you are that much more likely to win in legal matters or other forms of official negotiations. Financial benefits could possibly come through partnerships. For those of you who are already partnered, you are likely to find more joy in close relationships due to a more easygoing and tolerant attitude towards others and partnering in general. It's especially important to be fair with one another and to share your ideas and ideals. Legal matters or challenging relationship problems from the past might more easily be resolved now, and even more casual disputes are likely to be settled during this cycle. that your freedom is compromised.

Aries: (March 21 - April 20)

The planetary configuration indicates that you would be ambitious, realistic, practical and disciplined towards work and commitments. This is a time when you can be bold and enjoy new experiences. You tend to talk more readily, particularly about your own personal likes and dislikes or your past. This is an excellent time to work on intellectual tasks with more vigour and passion. You are likely to draw emotional and sensitive individuals into your social circle. At the root of this is likely to be a quest for a sense of personal freedom.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21)

This is a period that brings desire for love, harmony and peace in your life. Personal and professional relations are loving, stable, and harmonious. This week brings social meetings and events, and for situations that call for treating others with equality and respect. This would be a good week for financial undertakings involving electronics, technology, arts as well as group activities. Learning new things is your passion this week. You are more sensitive and your artistic imagination is stirred, and you have an increased appreciation for subtleties.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21)

Financial benefits accrue and this week proves good in terms of investments and finances. This is the time when gifts and rewards come to you, as well as opportunities to expand your horizon through travel, a broadening of your "audience" if you have one, or higher studies. Career moves in the form of new offers could also arrive now, is a particularly auspicious period for such matters. You come across as especially articulate, and your good nature is bound to attract some attention.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22)

You would be generous, pleasantly emotional and creative. Striking a balance between your attention to career and to your family life is necessary. Taking steps to improve your family and home life as well as your career and public life will be in order. You will also thoroughly enjoy artistic, musical, or cultural events and activities, especially in the company of a loved one. This is a good time to build your skills, get organized, and attend to your health and well being. You are able to stand your ground and assert yourself more than usual.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23)

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 gracefully and diplomatically. Your finances could also improve through continuous efforts and follow-ups. In love and romance your personal relationship takes on a special quality as you communicate beautifully. You have energy at your disposal to move your plans forward and you are more enterprising. Health needs care and old habits of excesses need to be discarded; this would benefit both you and your family.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22)

Self-confidence and quick action are highlighted in this phase. This is a good time to promote harmony and goodwill as you have to garner a good team spirit right now and be more tactful with your co-workers. You need the energies, companionship, and support of other people. It can also be a time of endings and new beginings, relationship concerns, and wistfulness. Personal and social contacts may be secretive as you don't want to disclose personal matters. There may be gains from property, shares and assets in hand.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23)

The planetary configuration indicates that your domestic and career needs are likely to be fulfilled. New ideas and concepts floated by you at your work place will be appreciated. You find an intoxicating romance and express your feelings to your loved one. At work, you may take up new assignments and projects that would bring creativity and development of new ideas. Your inner hopes and desires come to the fore even as you tackle your job with a realistic and practical purpose of mind. You extend your hospitality to family and expenses occur this week on purchasing of luxurious household items.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22)

You are unusual, introspective and reserved this week. It is good time to organize your workplace and make it more effective and equipped with good infrastructure. This is an exceptionally exciting time as professional and business opportunities are offered to you. You are just fair and generous in family and professional situations. Health needs to be looked at; also be careful in your interpersonal dealings and avoid confrontations. Your mind is focused on private matters and past issues during this cycle. This is a time when you are least likely to speak out of turn or to express yourself freely.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21)

You may take up assignments and projects and this would end on a winning note for you. Your mind is bright, alert, and active during this cycle, and you have the ability to come up with unusual and inventive ideas. Sharing your thoughts with others is a prime interest. Others tend to particularly enjoy your conversations during this transit--you are willing to listen as well as add your own thoughts. Your ability to grasp unusual subject matters and to intuitively understand what others are trying to say win you some brownie points. You could also do a lot of thinking and muse about your own happiness and long-term goals.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20)

You succeed in areas that require a creative bent of mind as well as technical ability. Some of you may find that your career is moving towards a more service-oriented direction. You have more faith in general regarding your career and the direction in which you are headed. You will have the ability to build up financial reserves and resources, for this placement can bring a good deal of success in all monetary pursuits. You are able to stand your ground and assert yourself more than usual during this transit.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18)

The focus would be on responsibilities and workload. You want to leave your mark on the world in some way--however big or small--and you are able to make an impression more than usual. If circumstances are such, you are able to easily fight back. In fact, you may be somewhat combative under this influence, and you may have a short temper. If you've been off track, be kind to yourself, but make sure you re-commit to your personal goals. Take charge of your life, but don't bulldoze others in the process. This is an excellent transit for assertiveness and physical vitality.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20)

This week brings for you socializing, romance and stability at the work place. Connections can be made now and networking pays off. Being part of a community or circle of friends and building your social network is important to you at this time. This is a period when practical vision may be at a high, during which you can see what needs to be done and just how to go about doing it. Career and vocational issues may benefit from the increased clarity you possess. Much of your energy will be applied to vocational achievement, professional success, and leadership.

Finding the fabric of life

By Jason Chiang

American textile designer John Robshaw has had a lifelong passion for art and experiencing different cultures. Through his extensive travels across the world, he has discovered many patterns and fabrics that have sparked an American cultural trend of Asian and tribal aesthetics in contemporary textile designs. Robshaw's brand of vibrant fabrics and eclectic homewares has been featured in Vogue and Elle Décor magazines. His bedding designs have also been used in the White House.

Robshaw's unique take on Indian block prints and his masterful blending of colourful patterns have brought the traditional designs of India to American consumers in many new and exciting ways, ushering in a true melding of cultures and design perspectives.

Travel

After earning a fine arts degree from Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York, and studying traditional block printing in China, Robshaw travelled to India in the 90s in search of natural indigo dye for his paintings. But, he ended up falling in love with the fabric-making traditions of local Indian artisans. "The hands-on immediacy and vitality of textiles piqued what was to become a lifelong fascination," says Robshaw on his website.

Ever since his first visit to India, Robshaw has gone on to build a textile empire, creating a vast collection of bedding, pillows, fabrics, furniture and home decor accessories, which he sells through his website www.johnrobshaw.com, and as exclusive collections for retailers like Bloomingdale's and Saks Fifth Avenue.

Robshaw continues to be involved in many workshops in India, which he visits every year from New York to oversee production, experiment with new dyeing and printing techniques, and to work alongside the artisans creating the fabrics used in his collections.

Block printing

Traditional block printing is the process of printing patterns on textiles with carved wooden blocks. It is one of the earliest, simplest and slowest methods of textile printing. In India, skilled artisans methodically hand-carve elaborate traditional designs on blocks of wood, which are then used to apply dyes onto textiles with a common stamping or pressing method. It is a precise and meticulous handcraft.

John Robshaw in India and block-printed gift items

While in India, Robshaw found he could apply a painter's aesthetic to traditional block printing by mixing patterns and overlapping them. And his signature aesthetic was born—a contemporary reimagining of traditional Indian and Asian block-printed patterns, using a distinctive mix of sophistication and romanticism. Robshaw's eye for beauty and authenticity has made him seek out highly-skilled block carvers, dye masters and printers, as well as quilters, weavers and seamstresses, to bring his ideas to life.

Karma

Robshaw takes great care in cultivating and preserving India's traditional techniques, while also supporting the local artisans who mentor him in their craft. As a strong believer in the idea of karma, in 2001, he started serving as a consultant for 'Aid to Artisans', a Washington, D.C. based nonprofit organisation dedicated to creating economic opportunities for craftspeople and disadvantaged youth in developing nations. Aid to Artisans supports artisans around the world, including in India, and works to preserve their craft.

"By working abroad, I become a minor character in the lives of the people I work with, and get inspired by what I see and do there," says Robshaw on his website.

"When you look at my textiles, it's as if you've been on the world tour alongside me." *(SPAN/Trans World Features)*

"Take a leap of faith and begin this wondrous new year by believing. Believe in yourself. And believe that there is a loving Source - a Sower of Dreams - just waiting to be asked to help you make your dreams come true."

--- Sarah Ban Breathnach

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LX No.137 SHILLONG, THURSDAY, DECEMBER 28, 2017

Jadhav's Christmas

PAKISTAN allowed Kulbhushan Jadhav, sentenced to death for espionage in that country, to meet his wife and mother at Christmas. The decision was prompted by multiple motives, domestic and international. In any case, the meeting had to be on the premises of Pakistan's Foreign Office and only for 40 minutes under close vigilance. India has accused Pakistan of violating agreed principles in the meeting. Pakistan allowed what may be called a media circus. The Foreign Ministry supplied photographs of the meeting only to assure that it had kept its part of the bargain. After the meeting, Jadhav was described as the face of Indian terrorism in Pakistan. The whole show was an act of opportunism. However, Jadhav's family may be grateful for small mercies. It is clear that Jadhav is not to be granted consular access. India denies that he is a spy and taken his case to the International Court of Justice citing the Vienna Convention. Pakistan has taken refuge in a 2008 bilateral agreement to frustrate this exercise. India claims that Jadhav is a retired naval officer while Pakistan denies it. Pakistan claims that it has given a fair trial to Jadhav but the quality of legal assistance offered to him goes against the contention.

The Christmas meeting however proves that India and Pakistan have backchannel negotiations on Jadhav. But there is no prospect of a way out of this episode in the circumstances. Pakistani politicians would not like to be accused of leniency in the Jadhav case with Assembly elections in the country due in 2008. Indian soldiers crossing the LOC and shooting 3 Pakistani soldiers will not improve matters.

LOOKING BACK

May 10, 1989

"I would have killed Rushdie"

The Muslim IntegrationCouncil here has called aBombay bandh on Friday toprotest against the BritishGovernment protecting andsheltering author SalmanRushdie, who has beensentenced to death byIranian spiritual leaderAyatollah Khomeini for hisnovel "The Satanic Verses."Council general secretaryMr Anwar Sadar told UNIthat procession would betaken out from Mastan Talavin central Bombay to theBritish Council after namazjuma (Friday prayers). Heappealed to members of allreligious to observe thebandh and join theprocession.Extolling Imam Khomeinias the "Only Imam of theMuslim world," Mr Sadarsaid "Shaitan (devil) SalmanRushdie was a hypocriteand he deserved to be killedfor writing a novel whichblasphemes Muslimreligion". He said if Rushdiewas in Bombay, he himselfwould have killed him.

Right-wingers suck and so do the "Liberals"

By Avner Pariat

The BJP has been popularizing the slogan 'Congress Mukht Bharat' everywhere and at every opportunity. Many people especially on the side of the Congress have reacted towards this with some heat and have devised similar stupid slogans of their own. Once again it has turned into a situation where diametrically opposed sides fling bags full of crap at each other while we the poor and dumb-founded people must look on at the primetime show as it unravels. Like many people all over the country I was offended by the crudeness and violence implied in the slogan. It has become a slogan associated with intolerance and retribution, and is on the face of it, very un-democratic. That is one reading of such phrases anyway. Later on however I began to re-think my earlier stance and today I must say that, I do in fact, favour the idea of a 'Congress-Free India'! How did this change come about, you might ask? Well, strangely enough, my desire for an India free of the odious Congress is actually borne out of my utter dislike of the odious BJP. Unlike some of my friends who have scribbled op-eds expounding why the BJP will never be able to get rid of the Congress or others who profess to defend Liberalism by defending the Congress, I cannot bring myself to believe this falsity. The truth is the BJP cannot live without the Congress. Plain and simple. They need each other in order to keep swindling the Indian masses.

So while we are gripped by the BJP v/s Congress battles, we fail to realize how badly this country is being sliced up by the powerful and wealthy. These people - who are the single biggest threats to the Indian republic - don't care about Right or Left wing, they care only about their bottom-line bank balances. If you have trouble believing me, please have a look at the various disclosed campaign funders for both parties and I think you will be rudely surprised. I don't give two shakes of a rat's tail whether BJP or Congress come to power, it will mean nothing for you and me except the continued theft from public coffers and the consolidation of oligarchy in this country.

In fact, we need to wholeheartedly encourage the BJP to rid India of the Congress. In the process of pushing the Congress overboard, may they both fall into the ocean! By striking down the INC pillar, may the house of lies come tumbling on them both! The Congress is the Liberalism that we don't deserve, it is a 'just enough' sort of Liberalism. It is not a Progressive platform only a mere mirage in the desert of Indian politics. It is a lie that is being pushed down our throats. Would it not be terrible if after all these years of Congress bashing they somehow ride back into power? But that is exactly what is going to happen eventually. No government can rule without its hiccups and over time even the currently unsinkable INS Modi will be out in the scrap yard. It will be a horrible cyclical farce for the Indian people if these two are continually allowed to perpetuate this scam. Look at the failures of the two-party system in America. Neither party even cares about their demographics anymore. Only the donors are the ones that receive special consideration from both parties. This is terrible. Somehow we have lost the plot to these BJP-INC goons as well. When has the Congress really protested anything that the BJP has done recently? Think about it carefully. Have they staged a walk-out at the passage of any controversial bill? No, they have simply stalled for time, to make themselves appear to be heroes. Did they launch an all-out campaign to quash the Aadhar act? Did they viciously attack the dangerous proposed legislations for the financial sectors like insurance and banking? Not a squeak to my knowledge. So the conclusion that one needs to make is this – Parliament House is a stage and all in it are but players. They perform when it suits the interests of the Ambanis and Adanis of the world.

I appreciate the rants of funny-man Jimmy Dore (he has a Youtube channel if you are interested) who has, since the Trump Presidency, done an unusual thing. Unlike the Corporate Democrat triumvirate of John Oliver, Stephen Colbert and Bill Maher, Dore seldom attacks Trump or the Republican Party. Instead he has been consistently and aggressively poking holes in the sides of the Democratic Party. This is not because he is being paid by the Right wingers. He, in fact, supports Bernie Sanders completely and has actively campaigned for him. But over the years he has come to realize that the Republicans are not the problem. Like the BJP isn't the problem. Right-wingers don't know how to govern, so why go after them when they expose themselves to be imbeciles on a daily basis? No, the people we should be attacking are the so-called intellectuals and experts of the Liberal nest. Already we can see how 'acche' is our 'din'. How empty the boasts have been, how feeble and vacuous the work! Yoga centres, uncalled-for river linkages, nationalist hysteria – these are the great monuments of the Indian Right wingers. Let them rule and you will see for yourself how impotent they really are. People secretly know inside that these guys are nuts!

It is such a disappointment to have groups like the Congress serve as the foil to the BJP. Take note of how they appear on-screen - cool and calm, positioning themselves as modern, educated and refined adults. Contrasting themselves to their often incoherent, wild-eyed rivals. Even their mannerisms reflect their politics. Which is why a Right winger who acts and looks like a Liberal is usually the most dangerous person in the group. So a Jaitley is much more dangerous than an Adityanath. We need opposition but not like this. We don't need a "lesser evil". We deserve a proper opposition that will raise the issues of the people and not of the corporate economists and Big Business. The BJP and Congress are vested interest groups. Two sides of the same coin. And I will repeat it again and again: let us toss this old coin into the water and get new ones.

"They need each other in order to keep swindling the Indian masses. So while we are gripped by the BJP v/s Congress battles, we fail to realize how badly this country is being sliced up by the powerful and wealthy. These people - who are the single biggest threats to the Indian republic - don't care about Right or Left wing, they care only about their bottom-line bank balances."

"If you have trouble believing me, please have a look at the various disclosed campaign funders for both parties and I think you will be rudely surprised. I don't give two shakes of a rat's tail whether BJP or Congress come to power, it will mean nothing for you and me except the continued theft from public coffers and the consolidation of oligarchy in this country."

Religion has not erred

By Ananya S Guha

Love Jihad an expression coined today to denote supposedly how women are entangled in the Islamic faith, is a term which needs contesting. How many such cases have been proven? If there is a marriage between a Hindu woman and a man of Islamic faith is it only for a jihad? If so has not the woman willingly done it, and is complicit in the supposed jihad? And, if she is complicit, then must not criminal laws be invoked for the woman as well, for further investigation? It would be naive to assume that a woman is entangled by compulsion, or by forces beyond her control. Secondly, if there is matrimony and if there is conversion willingly, then who can stop it? But by juxtaposing love and jihad, the protagonists of this warped theory are only waging a war themselves. If there is love, there cannot be a jihad. This brings to the mind that the faith is intrinsically warring and seeking conversions. Such are animadversions today against a particular religious faith. The common people must suffer because of the IS and Pakistanis. Those who intermarry are reprobates of their chastity. A secular order must be subverted by a fanatical one.

The Hadia matter is still subject to a final decision. One thing is clear. She is legally married. If she has joined terrorist ranks, then the intelligence must find out. The NIA has given an adverse report they say, and this is flaunted. But it has also been pulled down by the High Court.

The second case, that of Afrazul, in broad daylight accused of love jihad, which has been discovered to be patently false. A poor labourer, and bread earner from West Bengal was hacked to death by a maniac, who apparently was jilted by his lover, who went on to fall in love with a Muslim. Love Jihad.

Both these instances are corruptions of sanity and thought. Both these instances are incendiary attacks to divide communities on racial and religious lines. Whipping up sentiments, Padmini, Aurangzeb, Mughal rule are clear instances of falsifying reality and instilling hate. Love Jihad is synonymous with the culture of hate. The very expression is a grotesque expression of devilry, by people who want to instill into the body politic of the nation, a ravenous and vicious hatred.

Who says politics is mixed with religion? It is religion which is entangled with the worst form of unscrupulous, rabble rousing politics. Religion has become a masthead for fantasy and hatred, malefaction. The behemoth of caste and politics have been foisted on religion. It is not religion that has erred. But our more than wily politicians have and they are holding this monolith of a great nation, with strongholds of diversity, to ransom. They are building a structure of one religion. They are recasting history to fan malevolence. It is only a social process which can lead to upheaval, not a political one.

Love Jihad the terms, are denotations of a warped hatred, antagonistic to pluralistic cultures. It is an oxymoron, of the worst kind, spouting venom and hatred for the other- the very other that has made India a home for centuries, the very other that has contributed impeccably, to the language, culture, music, fine arts, religion and literature of a country. How can we think of an India without the Sufis and the Bauls? How can we think of an India without Urdu? But we want to, we want to think of an India without a Taj Mahal.

The grotesqueness of love jihad is the grotesqueness of present day India. And then, the recent attacks on Christians in Madhya Pradesh, against a group of seminarians who were preparing for Christmas! The National Association Of People's Movements has protested strongly against this in a signature campaign. Simply because they constitute only 2% of the population as against the 11 of Muslims attacks against them are going unnoticed, but they have gone unnoticed. You send your children to schools run by them, and behind their backs you bad mouth them and also physically assault them, not sparing even nuns. What has their religion done? Have they harmed anyone, barring of course the strident accusation that they ' convert '. What about re conversion that has taken place. We have taken religion to abysmal depths. It is we who are erring in an inviolate, unprecedented manner, not religion.

"Such are animadversions today against a particular religious faith. The common people must suffer because of the IS and Pakistanis. Those who intermarry are reprobates of their chastity. A secular order must be subverted by a fanatical one. The Hadia matter is still subject to a final decision. One thing is clear. She is legally married. If she has joined terrorist ranks, then the intelligence must find out."

"The NIA has given an adverse report they say, and this is flaunted. But it has also been pulled down by the High Court. The second case, that of Afrazul, in broad daylight accused of love jihad, which has been discovered to be patently false. A poor labourer, and bread earner from West Bengal was hacked to death by a maniac, who apparently was jilted by his lover, who went on to fall in love with a Muslim."

TO THE EDITOR

SBI ATMs dampen Christmas spirits

Editor,

When everyone is busy preparing to welcome the birth of the saviour, the SBI in Tura simply pours cold water on our plans. No one seeks their favour but they simply fail to appreciate that during Christmas all and sundry would need cash. All ATM booths in Tura became a mere showpiece on December 24 and 25. They no longer dispense cash, but arrogantly displayed the sign 'no cash available, go to other ATM'. It is the same story in every booth; in some booths shutters are already down and the rest said no cash. Is this the way the largest public sector bank should behave just because they have the largest number of depositors? The callousnesss of the Bank officials is displayed in no uncertain measure. Or is this due to total lack of application of mind? This is not the first time such arrogant and inept handling is displayed by the Banks, especially by SBI in Tura. It is definitely a deficiency of service and the district authorities should pull up the errant banks. Perhaps the banking ombudsman needs to take action against these banks.

Yours etc.,
Jibonsing R Marak,
Tura.

Winds of change in Tamilnadu

Editor

The monumental election victory by underdog TTV Dinakaran in the Radhakrishnan Nagar bypoll by a massive margin of over 40,000 votes is a writing on the wall for the ruling AIADMK in Tamil Nadu. Post Jayalalitha and Sashikala exodus; the party has been suffering drastically under a topsy-turvy leadership with strong negative message to the local electorate. Furthermore, with the latest 2G acquittal for Raja and Kanimozhi, the DMK has stood up in Tamil Nadu with new vigour and energy. With the media circulation of possible alliance of DMK and BJP, a wind of change is expected now in Tamil Nadu. Lastly celebrities like Kamal Hassan and Rajnikanth taking active interest in local politics can further change the Dravidian electoral equation forever. Time will unveil the new political drama that is slowly moving towards an epic climax in the southernmost Indian state.

Yours etc.,
Saikat Kumar Basu
Lethbridge AB Canada
T1J 4B3

Regional parties a force to reckon with

Editor,

Apropos the article, "The Road to Election 2018,"(Dec 20, 2017) by Albert Thyrniang, it is illusory on the part of the writer to say that the UDP-HSPDP presence in Garo Hills is zero. In fact people of Meghalaya are aware (if not the writer) that our party the UDP will jointly fight elections with HSPDP in Khasi and Jaintia Hills and with GNC in Garo Hills, all of which are the oldest regional parties of Meghalaya. It is also rubbish to allege that one cannot expect and hope to come to power when one gets nil results in the other half of the state. Our party, the UDP has a good number of supporters owing to the fact that the spirit of regionalism is very strong in Garo Hills. During the time of the erstwhile HPU which later became the UDP the Garo people voted for about 10 legislators. At present, we have a good number of winnable candidates who are contesting in this upcoming Assembly Election, 2018. In the first list of 28 candidates released by the UDP, 10 are from Garo Hills. The list includes our former MLA Nimarson Momin who would be contesting from Salmanpara constituency, amongst other prominent candidates. As we all know, in almost all the constituencies in Khasi and Jaintia Hills, HSPDP is roaring up support for UDP while UDP is drumming up support for HSPDP. In Garo Hills too, the same logic applies between UDP and GNC. Our party workers in Garo Hills had worked vigorously in the past to strengthen the party and even now and in future they will continue to work hard. We have high hopes that the aforementioned regional political force in Meghalaya will do well and will obviously form the next government.

Yours, etc…
Mr. Anvil Lyngdoh.
Mawkyrwat.

Vishal Mart must expand

Editor,

Vishal Megamart in Jail Road must be one of the busiest supermarkets in Shillong, if not the North East. The only problem that most people face is having to wait in the queue at the payment counter. Also the goods are scattered because there are too few salespersons to tidy up after customers have rummaged through the clothes et al. Vishal now needs to expand the store or open up another outlet. Perhaps it's the competitive pricing which makes its affordable for all pockets that draws people to this supermarket at any time of the day or evening. It's always crowded. On Wednesday, anyone whose shopping crossed Rs 1500, got three kilograms of sugar free. Such incentives are not given by other supermarkets elsewhere. Considering all this and to make it easier for shoppers, Vishal needs to think of another outlet somewhere in Laitumkhrah.

Yours etc.,
BS Nongdhar,
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.

" Make New Year's goals. Dig within, and discover what you would like to have happen in your life this year. This helps you do your part. It is an affirmation that you're interested in fully living life in the year to come."

--- Melody Beattie

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LX No.138 SHILLONG, FRIDAY, DECEMBER 29, 2017

At the helm in Gujarat

VIJAY Rupani has been re-elected Chief Minister of Gujarat and Nitin Patel remains his deputy. The two took over charge of the administration in the state last year as Anandiban Patel resigned from the Chief Ministership. He was hemmed in by a combination of hostile forces such as the Patidar agitation, the Una Dalit flogging incident and the BJP's weakening grip over the state. Rupani had taken over at a time when the situation was grim for the party. However, the BJP won in the recent Assembly polls in the state though the opposition proved formidable. Rupani and Patel both won their seats in constituencies which was not smooth sailing. Rupani's equation with Prime Minister Narendra Modi is said to be strong and his relations with the party president Amit Shah are also quite friendly. What makes Rupani all the more acceptable is that his manners are mild which should be an asset in the tough Gujarat politics.

Rupani has formidable challenges ahead of him in his hot seat. The BJP's seat share in the Assembly has come down from 115 to 99. A major portion of the influential Patidar community has gone away from the BJP following the agitation mounted by Hardik Patil. The much advertised Gujarat model does not seem to have gone down well and needs refashioning. The rural-agrarian crisis in the state continues to be a threat. Rupani needs a free hand to promote agriculture and create job opportunities for local youth. The BJP has to gear itself for the Parliamentary election in 2022 especially in Narendra Modi's home state.

LOOKING BACK

May 10, 1989

APHLC (A)Ministers not to join Cong-I

The two APHLC (A) Ministers in the Congress(I) led coalition have denied that they were contemplating on joining the Congress (I). In a joint statement issued here on Monday, the Housing Minister Mr Armison Marakand the Veterinary Minister Mr Crunden Sangma said that they would "continue to support and work together as coalition partner in the best interest of the State. 'The Minister were reacting to a news item appearing in the Shillong Times of February 23. They said that the Chief Minister had not conveyed his displeasure to them over the APHLC (A)'s fighting on its own in the recent District Council election in Garo Hills. "There is no difference between us and the Chief Minister," the statement said.

Where is Christ in the Government?

By Patricia Mukhim

This will be the last article of the year and since we have all just enjoyed the fervor of Christmas it would be worth reflecting on the Christianity that we practice here. Many have the propensity to call Meghalaya a Christian State because the majority of tribals here are Christians. Whether this claim is politically correct in a secular country is a debatable point and many readers have expressed their unease about the adjective "Christian" before the noun Meghalaya.

So why am I dragging the word Christ to Government? There is a reason. In the Bible, Isaiah 9:6 says, "For unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given, and the Government will be upon his shoulders. And His name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." A government is a group of people elected to govern a country or state. A government makes and administers public policy taking into account the ground realities obtaining in a state or country. A government also exercises executive, political and sovereign power through customs, institutions and laws within a state. In Meghalaya, nearly all the elected representatives are "Christian" by faith. Within the government, the political executives are nearly all Christians. A few in the top rung of the bureaucracy are also Christians. So in effect the Government should reflect Christian values and like Christ reach out to the most needy who are precariously hanging on the last rung of the economic ladder. But is that what the government is doing?

Going by the track record of successive governments in Meghalaya, they have been ignoring the weak, the illiterate and the impoverished and serving the interests of the powerful business lobby that stalk the secretariat day in and day out. Christ spent his life on earth reaching out to the lost and the sinners, who, in today's context would mean the school drops outs, the alcoholics and drugs users, the commercial sex workers who are judged because of their profession. In fact, Jesus defended the woman caught in adultery and allowed another so-called sinful woman who was scorned by the Pharisees to wash his feet with the best perfume and to wipe them with her long tresses. Christ never preached to a select audience inside a beautiful church costing crores of rupees. Do we have people with the compassionate traits of Jesus in the government? Do we have them in our churches? We would have to be looking for them like needles in a haystack. That is why Christianity today is like a garb worn on Sundays and special days like Christmas and Easter. The rest of the days the apparel is taken off and Christians don't think they need to be like Christ in their thoughts, words or actions.

Since the majority of elected representatives in Meghalaya are Christians and the ministers in the Government are also nearly all Christians why are we not able to see Christ reflected in their attitudes, their works and their policies? Would Christ have travelled around with an entourage of menials to guard his life? But Christ's followers will not spare a thought about flaunting their VIP statuses. As a result of travelling in such a protected ecosystem they get to meet only those that their camp followers think they should meet. Our ministers would not want to shake hands with dirty drug addicts and alcoholics. They would choose to cavort with sex workers in the quiet of the night but during the day they are holier than thou.

One of the key teachings of Christ is to be the salt and light in the world. But the point is that salt can lose its flavour and the light can go out if there is a strong gale. Might it not be true that most Christians are today like the salt that has lost its saltiness? Or the light that has died? In the middle and lower rung of the state government nearly all employees are practicing Christians but they think nothing about stealing time. Time is money. So essentially there are employees who have been stealing from the public exchequer for decades without even feeling a twinge of guilt. Where is Christ in that employee? Why is the person not carrying the teachings of Christ like an armour? Why are we all adopting double standards? So much so that non-Christians who watch us wonder at our loud proclamation of faith which do not match our actions! And then there are Christians who take off from work because they go to preach. Isn't service to the public also service to God?

And coming to corruption and nepotism and the backdoor appointments to people who are relatives of the powerful or who have paid money under the table, would Christ endorse such actions? No, Christ would call sin by its name but we have become adept at using euphemisms to camouflage such sinful acts. So if we are not following the teachings of Christ then are we still Christians? Does going to church on Sundays absolve us of all sins? And for the Catholics, does mere confession of sins cleanse us of all wrongdoing which is repeated again and again?

The reason one writes an article based on Christianity is because religion has become a hot topic these days. There are people out there who will stand to defend their faith but whose actions belie their faith in Christ. So what are they actually defending? A false ideology or Christ's teachings? Those teachings are more action oriented. They show Christ having mercy on the sinner and the weak. Christ's teachings therefore are not just some general statements but an entire lifestyle. He preached love as only he understood it. To love one's friends is no big deal he says but to love and forgive one's enemy is the challenge. How many of us can do so wholeheartedly? So why is it that Christians have this superiority complex about being the only ones who will be saved from eternal damnation because they believe in Christ? Is belief alone without the action to back up that belief system enough?

And I also wonder how Christ feels about the denominational superiority that his followers today demonstrate. Denomination prevents Christian unity because denominations are constantly vying with one another to pep up their numbers. The bottom-line is that the more followers a denomination has the more money it also collects. That money is necessary to maintain the church and its pastors. Recently one person asked me why all religions need middlemen? Can't people pray directly to God? Did Christ suggest that his teachings be differently understood in one denomination than in another?

Clearly there is a lot of soul searching to be done. As we approach the elections, there will be people campaigning in the name of Christianity and creating in voters the fear psychosis that if they vote certain parties then Christianity stands threatened. Well, people have voted one national party for several decades, so are their lives any better? Their religious worship may not have been threatened but their poverty has grown. I have been repeatedly hammering the point that poverty in Meghalaya has led to a situation where 76% of its rural populace is landless. Neither the churches nor the government have responded to this horrific statistics. The churches are busy preaching about the after-life while those in the Government are busy acquiring land from penury stricken citizen without an ounce of mercy. And those at the helm of power in the Government are Christians. Hence at the best of times I am baffled by Christianity but I understand full well what Christ taught. I find a huge dissonance between the teachings of Christ and Christianity as it is practiced today. I may be forgiven for my faltering faith although I believe my faith in Christ is intact. It's a different matter that one oftentimes fails to live that faith.

May I wish all readers a very Happy New year!

A Christmas Crucifixion of Humanitarianism

Pak stunt shows deep - seated hatred towards India

By Sushil Kutty

Avanti and Chetna Jadhav had no choice but to go to Pakistan. Their emotions were tied and nailed to the man in Pakistan. And the control was in the enemy's hands. The last time the two saw and spoke to Kulbhushan Jadhav was 22 months ago. One was the mother and the other the wife of the man on death row in Pakistan. It was now or never.

Unaware of what was in store for them, they stepped on enemy soil. There was an agreement between India and Pakistan. An Indian High Commission official would accompany them and he would not be separated from the two women even when they met Jadhav. Islamabad broke every word on that pact. It allowed things to happen that civilized countries would not have. The enemy could not be stopped from being an enemy.

Avanti and Chetna were forced to a change of attire as if the clothes they wore from India were soaked in arsenic or anthracite. And later after the glass cage encounter was over, Pakistan's Foreign Office spokesman in a command performance said, "Pakistan keeps its commitments."

The wife and mother of the Indian national held in captivity were subjected to indignities reserved only for the condemned. Pakistan allowed a hostile pack of journalists to heckle and hector and humiliate Avanti Jadhav and Chetna Jadhav as if they were the ones on death row in Pakistan.

The "humanitarian gesture" of Pakistan was a stunt, a sham, an orchestrated pantomime that signalled Pakistan's intent, an imitator of all that was ugly in the ties between India and Pakistan. The enemy was eager to draw blood but was held back by what would be international condemnation. It was not for nothing that stories floated in Pakistan of the inhuman treatment meted out to Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto before he was hanged to death. And he had been Pakistan's Prime Minister!

Was it a surprise then that the Islamic Republic of Pakistan disregarded religious and cultural sensitivities, basic human dignity? Avanti and Chetna were strip-searched, to change clothes and take off all signs Hindu, including their mangalsutra and bindi – what more proof that Pakistan hated everything Hindu?

The two women closest and dear to him were presented before him as if he was dead and cremated. The man who sat before them on the other side of the glass screen was for all purposes a corpse. The symbolism and deadliness of the intent could not have been more telling or missing.

The biometrics of Avanti and Chetna were taken as if they were common criminals. What use to any country the fingerprints and iris scans of two women who had not committed any crimes on its soil? The statements made by several Pakistanis of note on Indian television answered that question. "But they are the mother and wife of a terrorist who killed hundreds in Pakistan, aren't they?" asked a former Pakistani envoy to the United States. Condemned and punished by association!

By that token Jesus Christ's parents should also have been crucified. It was after all on Christmas day that all kinds of insults were heaped on the mother and wife of a man on death row. Maybe the dark side in the nature of the Pakistanis came out like lava because it was also the birth anniversary of Quiad-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the father of a nation spawned over scotch and pork, on the two-nation principle based on religion.

They even took the footwear of Jadhav's wife Chetna and kept it with them. She had to leave the Foreign Ministry in her socks. Inside the steel container where they were allowed to "meet" Jadhav, his mother was not allowed to speak to her son in her mother tongue Marathi. Avanti was repeatedly interrupted while doing so and eventually prevented from proceeding further. Not surprising coming from a people who have killed many of their own languages. Ask Nawaz Sharief to write a sentence in Punjabi or Kashmiri script and he would look askance!

Avanti and Chetna were forced to a change of attire as if the clothes they wore from India were soaked in arsenic or anthracite. And later after the glass cage encounter was over, Pakistan's Foreign Office spokesman in a command performance said, "Pakistan keeps its commitments."

On the strictly diplomatic level, too, the Pakistanis, as was their wont, reneged. The understanding was that India's deputy high commissioner J P Singh would be allowed to be present at the meeting. But he was kept at arm's length throughout, as helpless as the women he escorted.

The Pakistan Foreign Office spokesman had earlier claimed that Pakistan allowed the meeting because Pakistan being an Islamic nation was compassion-incarnated. That compassion did not show in the atmosphere of intimidation inside and outside the steel container where Kulbhushan Jadhav was presented to his mother and wife.

The government of India on Tuesday said the family members of Jadhav "handled the situation with great courage and fortitude", begging the question could they have behaved any different? And could Jadhav do anything else other than "thank Pakistan" for allowing him the chance to see and talk to his mother and wife?

Tutored or not, what can a man say when in the custody of medieval barbarians dressed in coats and ties, men who held the Islamic sword? The coat and shirt Jadhav wore were only for the world's consumption. In the dark cell of his solitude, in his prison clothes, he must be fair game to all his captors, to be heckled, hectored and intimidated, much worse than his mother and wife were subjected to outside the Pakistan Foreign Office in Islamabad. Pakistan cannot afford to let Kulbhushan Jadhav leave Pakistan alive. Not after the Christmas crucifixion. (IPA Service)

TO THE EDITOR

List of candidates does not inspire hope

Editor,

Your paper announces names of candidates selected by different political parties on a daily basis. As a citizen and a voter I must admit that none of the names inspire confidence. All are tried and tested and have been found wanting. Till date I have not heard of any name of women candidates being declared by any political party. The Congress Party will obviously nominate its two sitting legislators cum ministers – Ampareen Lyngdoh and Deborah Marak and the sitting MLA Dikanchi Shira, wife of Mukul Sangma. The other parties have not as yet announced the names of any women candidates. I expect the NPP to nominate Agatha Sangma, former MP and Union Minister of State. That is a good choice since Agatha Sangma has experience of having been a parliamentarian and has learnt the ropes of what it is to handle a ministry at the centre. What is surprising is that the BJP which has appointed two women to two important portfolios at the Centre, namely Defence and External Affairs has not been able to project any women candidates of substance from Meghalaya. Are the women themselves shying away from contesting elections or are they not considered winnable? Or is it about money and muscle which still are prerequisites to winning elections in Meghalaya? Women in Meghalaya have shown their calibre in so many fields and have successfully managed important positions in and outside the government. There are several successful women entrepreneurs, so what is holding them back from contesting elections? There has to be something that deters women from taking the leap from their circumscribed domestic duties to running the affairs of the state. I wonder what women themselves have to say about this. The collective desire for change cannot come if only the party that runs the government changes its profile but with the same set of MLAs. The people of Meghalaya will have to take charge of things and not be led by emotions, by fear and by rhetoric. We have had enough of all this. We deserve better than the governments we have had so far.

Yours etc.,
N Lyngdoh,
Via email

India must retain its diversity

Editor,

This refers to Ananya S Guha's article, "Religion has not erred" (ST, Dec 28, 2017). To impose Hindi - Hindu - Hindustan as the ideals of Indian culture is nothing but an attempt to thwart our great legacy. The ideals of our culture is to achieve unity not only by showing respect to diversity but also by accepting it as our own. In his famous Chicago speech, Swami Vivekananda had said, "We believe not only in universal toleration, but we accept all religions as true." Sri Ramkrishna was an embodiment of a real Catholic Hindu who himself practiced Islam, Christianity and other religions to live his words - "many opinions, many paths". Sri Aurobindo had said, "There are two Hinduisms; one which takes its stand on the kitchen and seeks its paradise by cleaning the body; another which seeks god, not through the cooking-pot and social convention, but in the soul. The latter is also Hinduism and is more enduring than the other."

On being asked about his views on Hindi being the common language of India, Sri Aurobindo had said, "English will be all right and even necessary if India is to be an international state. In that case, English has to be the medium of expression, especially as English is now replacing French as a world - language." Now, if we try to impose Hindi and allow intercaste marriage vigilantes, interreligious marriage vigilantes, cow vigilantes and fairytale vigilantes to make us forget the great teachings of Maha Upanishad ~ Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam meaning "the whole world is one family" then it will be against the ideals of what India has always stood for. The danger is that it will brand India as a Hindi speaking Gobalaya and the Indians as the followers of a cooking - pot centric religion.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

Myanmar and India's Expressway to ASEAN

Editor,

The Global Investors Summit of Assam will be held in February. Assam has geo-strategic advantage and now she is considered India's expressway to ASEAN. The summit will explore vibrant business opportunities. Delegations have been sent to both domestic and international locations and various road shows are organised to showcase Assam to the world. Business houses are contacted for potential investment. The Assam Government is considering the inclusion of knowledge partners like foreign Universities to collaborate with our institutions.

Myanmar is India's strategic neighbours that shares a 1,640-km-long border with India's North Eastern region. It has significance as the only country of ASEAN with which India has a common border. Myanmar is a key pillar of India's Act east policy. Both the countries have shared history of colonization by the British. The Ahoms of Assam are the descendants of the ethnic Tai people of Burma. Myanmar also is attached to India from the time of Buddha. Myanmar is rich in energy and natural resources. India is yet to exploit its geographical proximity to the fullest.

OBOR initiative is expected to cement China's dominance over Asia. To counteract this expansionist agenda, India is trying to develop railway connectivity with Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar and Nepal. India now finds a strategic sea route via the Iranian port of Chabahar to Afghanistan that bypasses Pakistan. New Delhi needs to get closer to Nay Pi Taw to plug the loopholes as it has done successfully with Bhutan and Bangladesh. Myanmar is not just a little corridor for trade but a gateway to the South East Asian countries.

Yours etc.,
Kamal Baruah
Rukminigaon,
Guwahati

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.

"Desire is the key to motivation, but it's the determination and commitment to an unrelenting pursuit of your goal - a commitment to excellence - that will enable you to attain the success you seek."

--- Jean Baudrillard

The Shillong Times

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Law against triple talaq

FOUR months ago the Supreme Court set aside the centuries- old practice of triple talaq. On Thursday, the Lok Sabha passed the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights of Marriage) Bill, outlawing triple talaq. Law Minister Ravi Shankar Prasad hailed the decision as a historic one. The proposed law makes triple talaq a "cognizable and non-bailable offence". There are provisions of imprisonment for a term which may extend to 3 years plus a fine. It also provides for subsistence allowance for Muslim women and custody of minor children as may be determined by the magistrate. Opposition parties like the RJD, AIMIM, BJD, IUML and AIADMK objected to the introduction of the Bill in the House. But they did not rally together when the time came for voting on the Bill. The Congress did not even give notice to oppose the introduction of the Bill. The Trinamool Congress however did not participate in the discussion.

The Opposition showed a semblance of unity only in demanding that the Bill be sent to a standing committee for wider consultation. The request was however turned down by the Union Government. Law Minister Prasad emphasized that the Bill was prompted not by "siyasat" (politics) but by "insaniyat" (humanity). He said that no attempt was being made to interfere with the shariah. The issue was not one of religion but of gender justice. On behalf of the government, MJ Akbar recalled that when Jawaharlal Nehru passed the Hindu Code Bill, he said that the time was not opportune for banning triple talaq. The time has now come especially as it is prohibited in many Muslim countries including Pakistan. The passage of the Bill however may not be smooth sailing in the Rajya Sabha.

LOOKING BACK

May 10, 1989

Bodo violence unabated, one killed

10 Bodo extremists shot dead one person and seriously injured another in Kokrajhar district of Assam during the past 24 hours, an official report here today said. Two persons who were catching fish in the Chambati river were seriously injured when extremists opened fire on them. While one of them succumbed to his injuries in Hospital, the other person was still fighting for his life the report said.

Meanwhile a house committee of Assam Assembly led by Sp3eaker Mr Pulakesh Barua today visited some of the areas in Darrang district affected by the movement of the All Bodo Students Union (Upendra Faction).

The Fuel Economy of Enginelessness

By Indrajit Borah

In a report released by Niti Aayog, it is projected that accelerated adoption of electric vehicles has a potential to save $60 billion in diesel and petrol costs while cutting down as much as 1 gigatonne (GT) of carbon emissions by 2030. With this road map, what are the fuel sources to cater the demand for incremental electricity generation? As per the Ministry of Power, GOI, the power grid receives 66% of electricity from thermal sources, out of which coal contributes to 58% of total grid power, gas 8% and oil minuscule 0.3% only. Rest, hydro, nuclear and renewable sources contribute 14%, 2% and 18% respectively. Presently, with total installed generation capacity of 311 GW, India generated around 1236 TWHR of electricity in 2016-17 with a peak power demand of only 153 GW. Even, India's coal generation capacity alone is higher than this peak demand. Notwithstanding the installed capacity exceeding overall power demand, there are acute power shortages predominantly due to coal supply shortages, high level of transmission and distribution losses, and poor financial health of utilities. Further, unlike domestic coal, the price of imported coal is unregulated; its price can be quite volatile. These fundamental problems in the power sector are impeding the efficient use of the existing system to meet even the grid-connected demand.

Now, what is the energy demand in the transport sector? During 2016-17, the consumption of diesel in the transport sector was around 55 million tonnes and petrol 25 Million tonnes. With the prices of diesel and petrol at 1274 USD and 1522 USD respectively per metric tonne, total transport fuel cost is around $108 billion in a year. In India, transport sector is the major consumer of diesel accounting for 70% of the total Diesel sales. The share of Diesel consumption by cars, utility vehicles and 3-wheeler sector is highest at 28.48%. Out of this, private cars and utility vehicles account for 13.15%, commercial cars 8.94% and 3-wheelers 6.39% of the total Diesel consumption. Again, trucks account for another 28.25% of the Diesel consumption. Buses consume about 9.55% and railways about 3.24%. On the other hand, petrol is almost entirely (99.6%) consumed by the transport sector. Two-wheelers account for 61.42% of total Petrol sales while that by Cars is 34.33%. 3-wheelers account for only 2.34%. The annual CO2 emission by diesel and petrol consumed in transport sector is about 265 million tonnes which includes 80 million tonnes from petrol vehicles and 185 million tonnes from diesel vehicles.

In terms of tank to wheel efficiency, petrol engines achieve at an efficiency of 20%, whereas the Diesel engines a little more up to 25% on road. Presently, total shaft energy required is 240 TWHR in a year. To meet this requirement, with efficiencies of electric vehicles and the T&D losses in the grid, the electricity demand from the power plants will be 402 TWHR, which is 33% of India's electricity generation in 2016-17. As per various studies, this demand is expected to rise at a rate of 8% per year to sustain present economic growth. Looking at the present fuel portfolio, two obvious thermal sources for this incremental demand are coal and gas. In a study, "Centre for Science and Environment" analyzed and rated 47 coal-based thermal power plants in India on nearly 60 environmental and energy parameters. As per the assessment, the average efficiency of the plants was 32.8 per cent, one of the lowest among major coal-based power producing countries. In line with these findings, we need 290 million tonnes of coal at a cost of $30 billion in a year to meet this additional demand, which is 50% of current annual coal consumption in the power sector. At present, out of 725 million tonnes of domestic coal production in India, 80% is used in power sector. However, the projected additional coal consumption will yield prohibitively high CO2 emission of 440 million tonnes. However, upgrading the power generation to combined cycle can improve the efficiency up to 50% and correspondingly saving of 100 million tonnes of coal and 150 million tonnes of CO2 emission in a year. Again, considering combined cycle gas-fired power plant efficiency of around 55%, we need 68 BCM of gas at a cost of $6.7 billion in a year which is twice the domestic production in 2016-17 i.e. 32 BCM. This gas consumption will yield 81 million tonnes of CO2 to the atmosphere.

India imports coal up to around 200 million tonnes in a year based on needs. However, the expansion of coal fired power generation is prohibitive due to carbon emission. Again, the supply of natural gas is limited to developed projects till date and importing gas is also troubled with geopolitical risks.

India imports coal up to around 200 million tonnes in a year based on needs. However, the expansion of coal fired power generation is prohibitive due to carbon emission. Again, the supply of natural gas is limited to developed projects till date and importing gas is also troubled with geopolitical risks. Therefore, the requirement of 68 BCM of gas over present annual gas production level of 32 BCM is a huge challenge. It's true that renewable technologies have increased in cost effectiveness over time, but parallel improvements also in fossil fuel technologies so far, make it harder for the economics of renewables to expand by themselves. Again, turning carbon subsidy regime into carbon taxation regime with slump in oil prices has become a disincentive to renewable green energy for climate change targets.

Undeniably, a strong thrust towards the large scale deployment of electric vehicles can ideally complement renewable power supply by acting as storage buffers. As per the Ministry of Power, India's solar potential is greater than 750 GW and its announced wind potential is 302 GW. The estimate shows a possibility of achieving a high of 410 GW of wind and 479 GW of solar power by 2047. The potential of biomass and small hydro is also significant. Developing domestic renewable resources could avoid revenue outflows for imported fuels. However, the financing cost being 70% of renewable energy tariffs, financing renewables is a big challenge. The bigger question is the nature of this finance. As per the recommendations by the Expert Group on 175 GW RE by 2022, the ecosystems should ensure that all direct and indirect incentives should get reflected in the tariff of renewables at the procurement end. It is also to be noted that fiscal or market driven monetary gain in net energy may not be sustainable in maintaining the current physical growth of the economy.

Electricity is not a primary energy source; rather a mode of energy consumption. However, in this process of shifting the combustion engines to distant power generators, apart from the perceptible benefit of moving the vehicular exhaust away from the polluted cities, the overall gain in terms of fuel efficiency and consequent reduction in CO2 emission are bound to promote this transition. At the same time, with this incremental demand, the alternative fuel portfolio for the power sector will be ruled by the palpable troika - technology, fiscal policy and market.

(The writer is Superintending Engineer (Production) JVOG-RJ, Joint Venture Operations Group, ONGC)

Young Himachal

A long-term vision?

By Insaf

ROUND THE STATES

Winds of change blow in Himachal Pradesh. The hill State finally gets a young Chief Minister Jai Ram Thakur and a new team, which speaks of a generational shift. After week-long uncertainty, BJP's top brass zeroed in on 52-year-old Thakur, five-term MLA, over former Chief Minister Dhumal and Union Minister Nadda. His simplicity, clean image and close connect with RSS are factors which went in his favour. The swearing in ceremony at the Ridge on Wednesday last, in the presence of PM Modi, Amit Shah and BJP Chief Ministers would be encouraging, but he literally has an uphill task. Reversing his predecessor's Vir Bhadra Singh's orders, like removing government retirees who were either given extension or re-employed, is run-of-the mill. To make a mark, he would need to eventually work towards good governance to beat the anti-incumbency disadvantage, governments have faced all along. Will his line-up of 11 ministers so far, eight first-timers and below 55 years, be able to deliver a longer innings as being imagined by party headquarters? While age is on his side, his work will need to be closely watched.

TN Poll Upheaval

Political churnings and twists in Tamil Nadu leave many astounded. Shocked and jittery after its candidate lost in the prestigious R K Nagar byelection to Dinakaran, AIADMK's ruling faction of Palaniswami and Panneerselvam expelled a number of senior party leaders and 44 party functionaries seen as 'violators' and close to Late Jayalalitha's nephew. These included five district secretaries, Karnataka State secretary, propaganda leader and women's wing deputy secretary. The action is bound to lead to further uncertainty over the stability of the government, already wobbly since disqualifying 19 MLAs supporting Dinakaran, who is obviously upbeat with this emphatic win. Will he now extract his pound of flesh and lure more MLAs to his camp? Will Palaniswami and team try for a compromise, under fear of their government falling? Likewise, Opposition DMK too is worried. Its candidate finished third and lost his security deposit! This after the party was gung-ho over its leaders getting a clean chit in the 2G scam. What is the next game plan is anybody's guess, but coming weeks need a close watch.

States' Favourites

States may no longer be able to appoint their blue eyed boys as Directors-General of Police, if the Centre has its way. The Union Home Ministry has pleaded with the Supreme Court to modify its 2006 order, which stipulates a two-year fixed term for DGPs. It has argued that some States were 'misusing the order and appointing officers about to retire, giving them a fixed term of two years, irrespective of the superannuation date.' Cases in Andhra and W Bengal are examples, wherein posts were kept vacant deliberately and appointments made a month or two before the officers were to retire. This says the Centre is done for 'political gains' as the officer is bound to return the favour. Further, the governments are violating All India Services Act, 1951, which bars any officer from remaining in office after retirement, unless cleared by the Centre.' But, it must remember, the States could throw the Act back on its face, for there are umpteen cases of 'favourite' officers being retained by it after or close to retirement. Is this a classic case of the kettle calling the pot black?

J&K Brother-hood

Fingers will be crossed for the quote "Brothers and sisters are as close as hands and feet," turns out to be model in Jammu and Kashmir. On Thursday last, the suspense over Chief Minister Mehbooba Mufti's brother, Tassaduq Hussain Mufti, joining the government was finally over. He along with Chadoora MLA Javaid Mustafa Mir took oath as ministers. Recall, Tassaduq, a trained cinematographer, came back to the Valley to support his mother and sister after the passing away of Mufti Muhammad Sayeed last January. His involvement began with looking after the CM's Grievance Cell, which he gave up last week after nomination to the Legislative Council to fill a vacancy, pending since October, when Karan Singh's son Vikramaditya Singh resigned from the PDP. While he makes a debut on the political stage, the big question is whether the cinematographer is on the same page as his sister on the gag order on government employees and officers, who are now barred from posting anything against the PDP-BJP government on social media. Surely, the right to freedom of expression must be close to his heart and could he change the script?

Karnataka Politics

Election fever already seems to be gripping Karnataka. The Mahadayi river water dispute, between the State, Maharashtra and Goa, is set to turn into a full blown war between the Congress and the BJP. Both are eyeing the Assembly elections next year. On Wednesday last, Bangalore got a taste of what the future might hold—an ugly brawl between both the parties' workers in front of the Karnataka Pradesh Congress Committee office. It started with BJP staging a protest outside the office, following the *Mahadayi Kalasa Banduri Horata Samithi*, which is spearheading the agitation, declaring a half-day bandh in North Karnataka's districts. The police had to deploy 400 personnel to control the mob. While some semblance of order was brought, the issue will get more intense. The BJP governments in Maharashtra and Goa are far from resolving the issue as sought by Congress Chief Minister Siddaramaiah. Playing politics over farmers'grievances appears to have become a norm. When will enough be enough?

Delhi's *Atal Aahaar Kendras*

The way to a voter's heart is through the stomach. At least, our politicians believe so. The trendy "Amma canteens" in Tamil Nadu are now being cloned in nation's capital Delhi. Monday last, civic bodies rolled out six *"Atal Aahaar Kendra"/"Atal Rasoi Deen Dayal Aahaar Kendra"* centres offering a *thali* (whole meal, of rice, *chole, rajma, puri,halwa* etc) for just Rs 10! The scheme, to mark former PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee's birthday, will cover one such centre in every ward in a phased manner this coming year. Open between noon and 2 p.m., the kiosks run by NGOs, expect to get 500-700 *thalis* per day, with civic bodies promising to provide Rs 4-5 per *thali* subsidy. Recall, Congress' Shiela Dikshit government had started *Jan Aahaar* project but had to shut down for lack of funds. AAP too, had promised to open *"Aam Aadmi canteens"* but so far been unsuccessful. Will the BJP, with its corporations cash-strapped be able to sustain the *thalis* or will its scheme turn sour? —INFA

TO THE EDITOR

Kudos to Ardent!

Editor,

The non-vegetarians of Meghalaya and other hill tribes of the North East ought to be definitely beholden to Mr Ardent Basaiawmoit, MLA, for his having shot off a successful letter of complaint to the Union Ministry of Health regarding the recent dietary restrictions imposed on the entire NEIGRIHMS complex where consumption of any type of meat was virtually banned and only vegetarian meals were being enforced on the inmates, the in-patients and others since the fresh appointment of the incumbent Director in this premiere health institute, the pride of the North East. This arbitrary stricture clamped by the Institute on the normal food habits of the indigenous people has created social resentment and the people suffered in stoic silence. At this critical juncture, it was incumbent upon Mr. Basaiawmoit as an iconic people's representative to shoot off a letter of complaint to the Union Ministry of Health in New Delhi regarding such prejudicial eating regimentation. And lo and behold! I am now made to understand that the said injudicious restriction has been revoked to the immense satisfaction of the affected sections of the society at large.

From the narrative above, it transpires that an attempt was made to ban the meat-eating culture of the majority people of Meghalaya in line with Hindutva ideology with the installation of the Modi- led Government at the centre. In the aftermath of this episode, Basaiawmoit has truly exhibited his calibre and leadership qualities thereby capturing people's imagination to perhaps, merit the status of a leader in this state in the near future.

Yours etc
Jerome K. Diengdoh
Shillong 2

MBOSE - wanted a level playing field!

Editor,

This is to draw the attention of the MBOSE authorities towards the 2018 Class XII Science exam timetable. Whereas, for science students, Chemistry is a major subject, there is not even one day's gap before the paper for the students who are taking Computer Application as a subject. This is bound to affect the performance of the students. Whereas for students who are taking Biology, there is adequate gap before the Chemistry exams. Hence, I request the authorities to shift the Computer Application paper to the day of the Biology exam. This will give a level playing field to all the students irrespective of subjects.

Yours etc,.,
D P Deb
Shillong-4

Neat & clean Jowai

Editor,

As I walked past the Kiang Nangbah Memorial Stadium, Ladthadlaboh, I could not help but admire the young kids practicing football. After a few seconds walk, I stumbled upon piles of junks and mini plastic bags surrounding the artificial turf of the ground. After a careful survey I found that the plastics came from street hawkers who sell fruits/ snacks/bidi etc., during the football matches which are very common in our state. Watching football is alright and people have a great time doing so. Spending Rs 10 on fruits/snacks which serve as refreshment during a hot sunny day is a relief from the heat and stress. Besides, the street hawkers gain temporary employment. But the question is where is our responsibility towards our dear earth. We talk so much about cleaning our homes and getting them ready for Christmas, and most of us are busy cleaning ourselves, our homes but what about our surroundings?

Christmas symbolizes the birth of Christ, and it is supposed to bring in positive effects on the lives of people. But where is our Christmas spirit? Do we like to sit on dirt? I bet no, but why do we continue littering our beautifully laid artificial turf and planet earth? Why can't we start this life with a new meaning and a whole new perspective to save the least of what we can for our future generation? After all we are mere custodians for our future generations. They say cleanliness is next to Godliness, but where is our Godliness in this matter?

Even the Jowai, Iawmusiang is piling up with junk from the recent sales made by most of the vendors. It is good to have flea markets as it enables us to save for the festive season, considering that Christmas is a costly affair and we need to buy new clothes and a lot of meat and other unnecessary accessories. But do we have to litter the marketplace?

Iawmusiang market near, Shairwar dalloi building and just outside the DC's office is now a dumping ground. It is here that junk is piling up as if there is no workforce/locality members or municipality to clean it or maybe it is a holiday for all since its Christmas? People are walking past the smelly waste on the roadside even as they are all dressed up in their finery before attending church services. I noticed that many people were frowning as they passed this dump yard. It is a disheartening sight!

Dec 31 is arriving and like every year, we will witness people preparing for the New Year and of course, fireworks where people will spend a lot of money to please themselves at the cost of our lungs. In some localities in Jowai, there have been instances when their air became unfit for breathing. The massive bursting of firecracker starts from approximately 10-11pm and continues till dawn. It produces disrupting substances that may be harmful to our environment, not to mention the lung-clogging smoke they release and plastic debris that is scattered. In the morning it is a familiar sight to see every household cleaning up of all the crumbs from the firecrackers.

So much for our 'Swachta hi seva' which was initiated in 2014, where the Prime Minister called upon the nation to fight filth and open defecation, change old habits and achieve a Swachh Bharat by 2019. We have two more years to go before we can achieve this goal. Or it is a case of "Humko gandagi bahut pasand hai?"

Yours etc.,
Chanlang K Bareh,
Jowai

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.

Sanchi: Where time has frozen

By Amlan Home Chowdhury

Baked by scorching summer sun and bathed by relentless monsoon torrents continuously for 2300 years, the Great Stupa of Sanchi in Madhya Pradesh still stands in its total grandeur proving a place where Lord Buddha's ash lies, just cannot be destroyed.

The sacred relics of Lord Buddha and his two chief disciples Sariputta and Mahamogallan were buried in caskets at this stupa.

At Sanchi, time seems to stand frozen. As you look at the stony-human statues, you really have an uncanny feeling they would answer if you ask them about Emperor Asoka, Queen Devi, Sanghamitra and Mahindra. So lively the eyes of the ancient men and women in stony statues appear you feel they are gazing at you.

The eyes seem to be asking: "Why don't you converse with us? What are you waiting for?" Those eyes appear to request you to hum the hymn "Buddham Sharanam Gachhami" (let us take shelter under the umbrella of Lord Buddha) as monks would chant centuries ago.

Sanchi witnessed the grand royal wedding of Emperor Asoka with Devi, the daughter of rich Sresthi or businessman of nearby Vidisha. Of course our ancient ancestors living in Sanchi and Vidisha must have received the wedding invitation some 2300 years ago. Who knows?

It was from Sanchi the Buddhism sprawled to Sri Lanka and entire South East Asia. Mahindra and his sister Sanghamitra, children of Queen Devi, set out from here to Anuradhapura (today's Sri Lanka) and Thailand, Java, Sumatra and Korea. From there, the religion sprawled to China, Japan and Vietnam.

No wonder of the 360,000 foreigners coming to Sanchi Stupa from all across the world, nearly 59 percent of them belong to South East Asia. A stupa is a burial mound containing sacred relics or other very precious religious items.

(Top) The eastern view of Stupa No. 1 in Sanchi; (below right) eastern gate of the stupa and the stupa before conservation.
Photo courtesy: Archaeological Survey of India

A Virtual Pictorial Album on Lord Buddha's Life

When we read a book, half of the meaning of it is construed through the photographs and paintings. Similarly, you can virtually read all aspects of Buddha's life described in Jataka through the scenes etched in stone at the Great Stupa. We wonder at the fertility of brain of those who conceived the idea of telling the Jataka-tales through the stones. Just imagine, they were not photographers but sculptors. With hammer and chisel, they portrayed different scenes from Buddha's life.

If you look at the story of the maiden Sujata of Uruvilla hamlet (today's Bodhgaya in Bihar) as etched in stone-panel, it would appear just like a photograph. On finding Prince Siddhartha reduced to a virtual skeleton under the Bodhi Tree at Uruvella, Sujata offered him a bowl of rice-milk pudding with the advice that through fasting no one can attain enlightenment. It was after this that Siddhartha attained the supreme Enlightenment to become Buddha.

Take another scene of evil Mara troubling Prince Siddhartha so that his meditation is distracted and he fails to achieve Bodhi or the Enlightenment. You really wonder how could those ancient sculptors chisel such lively scene? How could they be so exact?

How could they be so exact to depict the historical records that tells about the "war over Buddha's ashes" after he was cremated following his Mahaparinirvana or death? More your imagination takes flights about those sculptors, more interested you become.

Let us now have a look at this particular stony-scene. The story of a near war over the sharing of Buddha's mortal remains as depicted in Jataka appears like an action-packed thriller. The Southern Gate of Stupa Number One, we get the depiction of the story of Buddha's relics.

Lord Buddha attained his Mahaparinirvana at Kushinagar (in modern Uttar Pradesh state of India), kingdom of powerful and warlike Mallyas. The Kushinagar people wanted to keep the entire ashes of Lord Buddha with them. However, the other eight powerful kingdoms of those days too wanted their share of the ashes of Buddha.

Since the Mallyas were not willing to part away with any portion of the ashes, the rulers of those eight kingdoms attacked and besieged Kushinagar. Seeing no way out, Kushinagar agreed to divide the ash into eight parts for the eight kingdoms. This scene of Jataka finds its most wonderful expression in stone

Despite Relentless Attacks, the Great Stupa Survived

Sanchi, located 45 kilometers away from Bhopal, fell on the 3800-years old trade route of Aryavartha: today's India.

The 71 ft (21.64 m) Great Stupa, located on a hillock, has a strange history of going into ruins and again rising up with all it's gleam at different junctures of history.

A strange fact about the Great Stupa is that it fell into ruins and had been victim of vandalism by very ancient hands. Yet it rose up.

After about a century of the construction of the Great Stupa, Emperor Pushyamitra Sunga who had overthrown the family of Emperor Asoka from the seat of power invaded Sanchi to break the Great Stupa as he was opposed to Buddhism. The greatest symbol of Dharma or the wheel of human life was broken at the orders of Pushyamitra Sunga.

The Buddhist book Ashokavadana, written in 2nd century BC, mentions Pushyamitra Sunga as an "evil king who persecuted the Buddhists across Aryavartha." If you want to have a glimpse of his ancient villainy, you must know that he had offered to pay one hundred gold coins to whosoever bringing the head of a Buddhist monk in the city of Shakala (modern Sialkot town of Pakistan).

The history of Pushyamitra Sunga cannot be completed without the story of Vibhasa, a book written in 2nd century A.D. On turning over the pages of Vibhasa, you come across that Pushyamitra Sunga once went to Bodhgaya to destroy the Bodhi Tree under which Lord Buddha had attained his Bodhi or Enlightenment.

When the evil king tried to destroy the Bodhi Tree, the god of the tree appeared in the form of a beautiful woman and killed him. It may be the imagination of the ancient authors of Vibhasa but the story circulated in South East Asia in those days and it was translated into Chinese in 317 A.D. by a monk named Shariputrapariprichha.

And lo what happened after the death of Pushyamitra Sunga?

His son Agnimitra Sunga on becoming the Emperor of Magadh, repaired the Great Stupa, extended it and asked sculptors to create new scenes from the Jataka at its various gates. It rose again in the 85BC to 75BC.

Between 12th century A.D. and 14th century A.D. the Great Stupa at Sanchi was vandalized by the Muslims as they were intolerant to temples, stupas, idols, sculptures, frescos and murals depicting any religious thoughts.

Modern Day Restoration of the Great Stupa

The credit to restore the Great Stupa of Sanchi goes to the British East India Company's Gen. Taylor, Capt. Johnson, Sir Alexander Cunningham, Captain F.C. Maisey, James Princep and Sir John Marshall.

They did it before the independence of India. After independence, it was K.K. Muhammad, former Regional Director of the Archaeological Survey of India, who brought the ruinous Stupa to its present wonderfully beautiful stage.

It was Muhammad who gave this UNESCO World Heritage Site its present unique shape. He used all those "original" ingredients in mortar and binding agents that were used in the days of Emperor Asoka.

Really, history stands frozen at Sanchi.

The glorious and the great who bid adieu

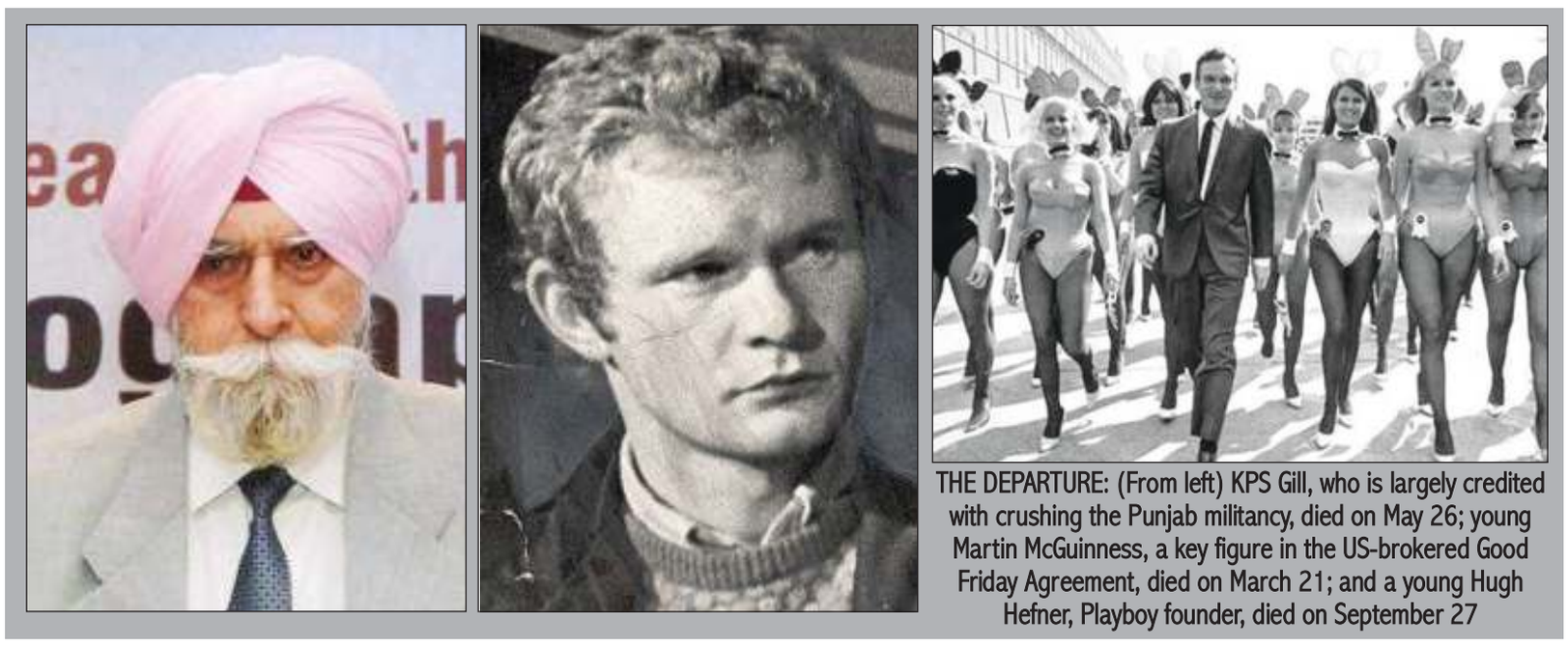
By Vikas Datta

It is the inevitable and unavoidable outcome of human existence but still death seems tough to countenance. Even when it beckons those whom we never knew personally or had seen face-to-face but cheered in films, sang along when playing their songs or appreciated or benefited from their contributions across a wide spectrum of activity. This year was no different.

The year saw a wide spectrum of people — actors, astronauts, authors, bankers, filmmakers, monarchs, singers, statesmen, scientists, sportspersons, thinkers, et al — shuffle off the mortal coil and achieve immortality.

While our attention, as usual, went more to the celebrities, a prime loss this year was English physicist Sir Peter Mansfield (born in 1933, died on February 8), whose studies in nuclear magnetic resonance made magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) of the human body possible and won him the 2003 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine (shared with American chemist Paul Lauterbur, who also did key research in the field).

The statesmen who died this year included former Iranian President Akbar Hasemi Rafsanjani (born in 1934, died on January 8), a conservative but pragmatic cleric-leader, known as the "Shark" for his lack of facial hair; Irish politician and Sinn Fein leader Martin McGuinness (born in 1950, died on March 21), a key figure in the US-brokered Good Friday Agreement that brought hope of peace to Northern Ireland; and former German Chancellor Helmut Kohl (born in 1930, died on June 16) under whose charge Germany was reunited and Europe became more integrated.



THE DEPARTURE: (From left) KPS Gill, who is largely credited with crushing the Punjab militancy, died on May 26; young Martin McGuinness, a key figure in the US-brokered Good Friday Agreement, died on March 21; and a young Hugh Hefner, Playboy founder, died on September 27

Also departing was Polish-born American diplomat Zbigniew Brzezinski (born in 1928, died on May 26), President Jimmy Carter's National Security Adviser, in whose time the US began arming the Afghan Mujahideen — with results we know too well. He was not convinced he had done any wrong with this, maintaining: "What was more important to the history of the world? The Taliban or the collapse of the Soviet empire? Some stirred-up Muslims or the liberation of central Europe and the end of the Cold War?"

Among other notable leaders were US-deposed Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega (born in 1934, died on May 29), former Bangladesh President Abdur Rahman Biswas (born in 1926, died on November 3), the first President of united Yemen Ali Abdullah Saleh (born in 1947, died on December 4) and Communist-deposed last Romanian monarch Michael I (born in 1921, died on December 5).

Also to be mentioned here is English model and showgirl Christine Keeler (born in 1942, died on December 4), the key person in the Profumo scandal which rocked the Harold Macmillan government in the 1960s.

Two redoubtable soldiers who marched off this year happened to be both Air Force officers — with one of them having possibly saved the world. Soviet Air Force Colonel Stanislav Petrov (born in 1939, died on May 19) kept his cool when his systems indicated that US nuclear missiles were on the way and his gut reaction it was a technical glitch turned out to be correct. Marshal of the Indian Air Force Arjan Singh (born in 1919, died on September 16) joined the fledgling outfit at its inception and saw its transition into a world-class service.

Police officer K.P.S. Gill (born in 1934) who is largely credited with crushing the Punjab militancy died on May 26.

Then, we also bid adieu to well-known screen faces like Sir Roger Moore (b. 1927, died May 23); John Hurt (b. 1940, died January 25); Adam West, the first to play Batman (b. 1928, died June 9); Jerry Lewis (b. 1926, August 20); French icon Danielle Darrieux (b. 1917, died October 17); Gorden Kaye, the lead in TV sitcom "Allo Allo" (b. 1941, died January 23); and Clifton James, who played a redneck US sheriff in two James Bond films (b. 1920, died April 15).

In India, we mourned the versatile Om Puri (b. 1950, died January 6), Vinod Khanna (b. 1946, died April 27) and Shashi Kapoor, who reinvented himself from a lover-boy to a more nuanced actor and filmmaker (b. 1938, died December 4)

Also dying were American author William Peter Blatty (born in 1928, died on January 12), who adapted his cult book "The Exorcist" to an Oscar-winning film, and director Jonathan Demme (born in 1944, died in April), known among others for "The Silence of the Lambs".

A large number of singers also saw their voices stilled — Al Jarreau (b. 1940, died February 12), Chuck Berry (b. 1926, died March 18), Gregg Allman (b. 1947, died May 27), Glen Campbell (b. 1936, August 8), Don Williams (b. 1939, died September 8), Tom Petty, (b. 1950, died Oct 2), Antoine Dominique "Fats" Domino (b. 1928, died October 24) and Johnny Hallyday, who introduced rock-'n'roll to France (b. 1943, December 5).

Also to be mourned were Indian vocalists Kishori Ammonkar (born in 1931, died on April 3) and Girja Devi (died on October 24) and sitar exponent Abdul Halim Jaffer Khan (born in 1927, died on January 4).

We will also miss 'Playboy' founder Hugh Hefner (b. 1926. died September 27), American Nobel economist Kenneth Arrow, (b. 1921, died February 21), Russian theoretical physicist and mathematician Ludvig Faddeev, who moved us ahead towards quantum computing (b. 1934, died on February 26), American boxer-turned-standup comic Jake LaMotta, (b. 1922, died on September 19), Turkish Olympc weightlifter, "Pocket Hercules" Naim Suleymanoglu (b. 1967, died November 18) and Czech tennis player Jana Novotna (b. 1968, died November 19.)

Those who won't be missed are Italian mafia gangster Salvatore 'Toto' Riina (b.1930, died November 17) and American cult leader and murderer Charles Manson (b. 1934, died on November 19). *(IANS)*

The Sacred Pushkar: A Winter Sonata

Supriyo Hazra *basks in the spirit of vibrant festivity in this town in Rajasthan*

With the setting sun, an aura of divinity slowly engulfs the entire ancient town of Pushkar. Music reaches its crescendo as an enthralled audience who had assembled to be a part of the festivity on a mid December day savour the moment of absolute bliss. While the morning commences with meditation and another walk across Pushkar and visiting the Savitri Temple on the top of mountain, the evening is a flavour with variance when music of different genres, including baul and Sufi, is belted out to create a harmony that promises to stay in the souls forever.

All these events and many more marked the just concluded two-day-long Shree Cement Sacred Pushkar 2017 (December 16-17) which now celebrates Pushkar's spiritual diversity with some experiential events. The festival is emerging as one of the sought after cultural events in the annual calendar of Rajasthan.

The sacred Pushkar ghats become the epicentre of celebrating the diversity of cultural exchange with people from across the globe attending events that glorify the colourful medley which is reflected in the spirit of this Rajasthani town.

People this December were seen reaching the ghat early in the morning to be a part of the "meditation in movement" by Zoltan Cser of Bulgaria that eventually culminated with a flute recital by Atul Shankar.

In the meantime, like the first day, guide Robinson Robert was back again to guide a group of enthusiastic travellers to know more about the deep secrets of heritage which the town of Pushkar preserves closely in its hearts.

The heritage walk sessions in the town and then a trip to the serene Savitri Temple at the top of the hill, needing a ropeway to reach the holy shrine, conjoined the spirit of adventure and mystery to the two-day-long festive journey in the state of sands and camels.

On December 16, Robinson had taken the visitors for a walk in the holy town and then to the ghats of the Pushkar lake, explaining the significance of each of them to the enthusiastic crowd which followed him in the journey to know more about the uniqueness of Indian culture that the holy city symbolises.

Pushkar, unlike other cities and towns in India, holds a unique secret of its own as it boats to be the only part in the entire nation to shelter a temple dedicated to Indian god Brahma.

(Top left) Pushkar and artistes from different states perform at the festival

Legend says that it was Brahma who had himself created the lake named Pushkar.

Priests here say that Brahma himself had performed a "yagna" beside the lake and the spot is still considered by devotees as pious.

A walk beside the temple and touching your body with the water from the lake surely helped people experience the essence of Indian concept of spirituality which Pushkar glorifies.

Says Sanjay Mehta, President (Commercial) and Chief Happiness Officer, Shree Cement Ltd,: "Sacred Pushkar festival draws thousands of people from India and abroad and is one of the biggest fairs in India with a socio-spiritual-cultural orientation.This is the third time we are associating with the event."

"This year's festival is a spiritual experience as well as musical treat for visitors," Mehta says..

Meanwhile, with the third edition of the event kissing success, Sanjoy Roy, Managing Director of Teamwork Arts, promises to bring more uniqueness to the annual extravaganza in the coming years. "We are hoping that year by year this whole event will grow. We hope that people understand that it is not only about music and yoga, it is also about body, soul and healing. The event is also about people feeling connected to the city in itself," he says.

Roy is hopeful that the event will attract more people from across the globe over the years. He says, "We are confident that the event is going to grow every year and will attract more people from across the globe."

As night set in, the entire area around the lake was lighted up and the lotus-shaped centre stage was set for some delightful music sessions that begian with singer Rashmi Agarwal's devotional compositions, followed by music in the Indian Baul tradition by Simon Thacker's Swara Kanti.

Speaking on the event, Rashmi Agarwal says, "Events like this one help in showcasing Indian traditions and cultures quite strongly."

The experience of performing at the Shree Cement Sacred Pushkar 2017 was 'beautiful', she says.

Away from sufi and baul music, the audience were also left spellbound by the electrifying performance of polyphonic singing and shaman drums by Laboratorium Pieśni, a group of female singers from Poland.

As the evening faded, paving its way for the night to set in, Mukhtiyar Ali took the stage on fire with his captivating voice as he churned out some of the popular qawwali numbers that echoed across the lake and added to the beauty of the night that marked the culmination of the grand festival. *(IBNS-TWF)*

Images: Avishek Mitra

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi ***Sunday, DECEMBER 31, 2017***

Moon Vertical Sun on your solar return chart indicates a mixed year. The Universe is asking you to focus all of your attention on domestic issues this year, so you will find that the coming year is not an especially profitable year for you. Your finances are stable, and you won't see to much fluctuation in money matters until the year's end. Be careful around the middle of the year, as you could lose some money in an unwise investment endeavor. Better to leave money matters alone, and don't get too aggressive, as the Universe has other plans for you. If you focus on your natural born domestic skills, by the year's end, you will find the joy in home and family that you have been dreaming about!

Aries: (March 21 - April 20)

You are individualistic brilliant and daring in professional aspects as new projects get under way. This is an exceptionally exciting time as professional and business opportunities are offered to you during this time. You could be impatient in love and relationships as you are overflowing with energy this week. Relationships take on a lighthearted aspect as children play an important role. You are more stimulated by all that is unconventional during this cycle, and your ideas are original and progressive now.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21)

You win debates, competitions and sports with your dynamic energy and power. Emotional attachments and relationships are rewarded with reciprocation. Some interesting people are drawn to you and invite you to work with them. This is a good time to attend to matters that require attention since you are received well by others. Think about the attachments you have--to things, people, and routines--and consider which ones are dragging you down. This is a time when competitive energies and the ego are on a bit of a break.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21)

You would be able to face truths, deal with emotional choices or difficult situations. 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)

Personal relations are packed with emotions and feelings and you enjoy the company of loved ones. Practical details are to be dealt with clarity and efficiently. 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. You will work in a 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. You connect with new people and discuss important business matters. Your professional skills wisdom and craft is appreciated and fresh opportunities for expansion are made available to you. Personal relations are satisfying and you have plenty of goodwill and friendships around you. Your partner is especially supportive. You could be attracted to new people and ideas as you are open and receptive. But you must conserve your financial resources for priorities that have to be met at the end of the week.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22)

The unpredictable is likely to happen and 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. Don't be thrown by new developments. Balance in all areas and field of activities is recommended this week. You could be depleted of resources and forces if you don't manage them properly. Meditation and spiritual pursuits can be rewarding and worth pursuing.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23)

This week opens up a world of romance and love in personal relations. You are gracious with family and children. You are likely to be involved in creative pastimes. You would express yourself in a gracious and exalted manner and influence people in authority this week. You may handle more than one project at the same time with expertise and success. Commercial transactions and business deals could be conducted effectively this week. Money matters take priority, as some unexpected expenditures have to be met.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22)

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 a life lived fully, which also has a quality of wisdom and the acceptance of the ever changing wonders of life. It would be good to say what you feel as you would be appreciated for your honesty. Good luck in finances and opportunities is encouraging. You are restless and move from one task to the other and pay impromptu visits to friends.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21)

You are bold, courageous and frank while dealing with controversial, professional and family matters. You are likely to meet well known authoritative people and share ideas and spend a fruitful time in their association. A stimulating project should be taken as a challenge that would further and promote your business prospects. Good planning and management lead to progressive and productive ventures. 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 youthful energy.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20)

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. Don't take the one you love for granted but show your love and appreciation. Communications from overseas are hopeful and exciting as business opportunities are extended to you. Meditation is needed for gaining deeper insight into personal relations and complex situations

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18)

You have the ability to stand alone and have strong positive energy. You are independent, creative, original, ambitious, determined and self-assured. Adopting a realistic, practical and disciplined approach towards life would bring harmony at home. You would have good support from family members. While you work on one project another suddenly gains more importance and demands more attention. A financial windfall is possible as some backlog is handed to you after a period of time. Sports and physical activities keep you fit and energetic.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20)

You are fortunate as things turn out well in difficult situations at work and home during this period. Your financial situation looks promising if you manage it well personally rather than trust upon others. Personal relationships are warm and comfortable as you spend beautiful moments with your loved one. A relaxed and light attitude would help to overcome negative thoughts. Examining the past in order to improve the future is certainly worthwhile, as long as you don't expend all your energy. Creative opportunities should not be ignored as it is likely to bring substantial professional material gain.

Dog walkers ahoy

By Maneka Sanjay Gandhi

I was in Argentina to attend a Child Labour Conference. Buenos Aires has wide roads, green trees which are almost the same as what we have in India. It is Jacaranda season and purple blossoms cover the pavements. The scent of magnolia flowers wafts through the city. Fresh air, fresh air, fresh air!!! I can breathe again after choking in Delhi.

On the way to the 8.30 am meetings, I see a new thing: Young people with at least 15 dogs each walking in the parks, crossing the road, or on the wide pavements. The dogs are of all sizes and they walk docilely cheek by jowl with each other. I see at least 14 groups of dogs being walked on just one stretch of road.

The driver informs me that this is a common occurrence in the city. Young people join dog walking companies. They are trained on how to handle dogs, how to hold them, talk to them and to pick up their faeces with a scooper as they walk. These companies even give diplomas on dog walking. The walkers are taught rudimentary first aid in case there is a traffic accident. The company gives you an App. With that you can see the start and stop times of the walk, a map of where your dog was taken, along with pee, poo and water breaks. You get pictures and, sometimes, a note talking about what your dog needs.

Apart from dog walking, companies offer services like pet taxis, which will take the dog to the vet on specified days or as an emergency service. Pet vet visits are also arranged for the home. Dog day care can be arranged daily, either at the company's site or the person will come home for a specific number of hours and look after and play with the dog while you are at office or away for the weekend.

There are drop in visits where the person will come for only 10 minutes to check on the dog twice a day.

The companies are registered, fully insured and police checked. Each member of the staff is trained — even if it is a young person doing it for their summer holidays — and registered with the police. The company has both, pet sitters and dog walkers, and both know pet nutrition as well.

There are different rates for half an hour onwards for walking. There is another rate, which is less, for something known as a toilet visit. At a specific time, the person will come to your flat, take the dogs out, wait till they relieve themselves, and then return them to your flat. No walking. Pet vet visits, pet taxies and dog day care are given in a rate card.

Sometimes, when you are at work, you cannot go home for lunch but your dog walker can come in at that time to give your dog a thirty minute walk. Most companies vary the times according to what you need and some offer the dog walker as many as three times a day on whatever days you need them. You can cancel and exchange days according to your convenience. You even have play dates when the company will arrange for your dog to meet a friend at their house, or bring him/her to yours. People who want to recruit these services are encouraged to meet the dog walker first and see them in action.

Whether a stroll around the block with an older dog, or a fast-paced walk with a fit youngster, the companies tailor their services. If you have an older dog who can't walk far, then it's just a short easy walk and lots of petting.

(To be concluded)

Pinterest

Spreading peace

Prem Rawat is a globally renowned motivational speaker attracting audiences from all walks of life. His speech motivates people in creating culture of humanity and peace. The honorary title, Ambassador of Peace, has been granted to him by the International University of Peace, Brazil.

As the world advances globally in every sphere Rawat asks, "Are human beings really thriving, achieving their true potential, or are we just surviving?"

Addressing 'The Young President's Organization' in Europe on the subject of "How do we become better Leaders?", Rawat said, "We talk about the need for prosperity. In my formula, prosperity without human contentment is chaos."

Prem has won numerous awards in recognition of his work. In 2012, he was awarded the 'Asia Pacific Brand Laureate Lifetime Achievement Award'.

Rawat says we do not need anybody else to judge us. "We can easily do that ourselves. And, of course, in case we ever miss, there is the world waiting to judge us. And if the world misses, you have your relatives. It is like there are all these built in safety checks, just in case somebody misses."

"But there is a world, where there is no judgment. There is a love—a love that can reach every human being and touch every human heart. There is a feeling. There is an understanding. And that is the world inside of you. Which world do you want," this is what Rawat has to say in conclusion.