

*"Never succumb to the temptation of bitterness."*

— Martin Luther King, Jr.

**The Shillong Times**

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**Alert from Apple**

AN alert from i-Phone giant Apple to multiple individuals including political leaders and journalists has hinted that they might be targets of "state-sponsored" hackers. "They are trying to remotely compromise the iPhone associated with your Apple ID ... and they may be able to remotely access your sensitive data, communications, or even the camera and microphone," was how the alert went. While such alerts are not specific to India, and these have reached the phone users in several countries repeatedly since 2021, there's more to this than meets the eye. What Apple stated in a circumspect manner, apparently in order not to get into a tiff with the Indian government, effectively exposes the obsession on the part of the government to undermine individual freedom and fix those set against the establishment. On both these counts, the government is in the dock. It remains to be seen how the Opposition handles this matter.

A safe assumption is that the government is now spying on Opposition leaders and also journalists. Fact is also that this is a continuation of the previous exposes linked to the Pegasus spyware, which also had directly targeted prominent politicians, media personnel etc. Opposition leader Rahul Gandhi has launched a sharp attack on the government on this count, saying all these were part of the BJP-led government's attempts to stonewall the opposition's investigations into the "unholy nexus" between the establishment and the Adani group. It is unlikely that the issue limits itself to Adani. When a government spies on the Opposition and the media, its indulgence would be on a larger canvas. The extent of this spying is as yet unclear, though.

Governments engage in spying in the normal course and on the plea of "national security." There's no escape from it. Autocracies and dictatorships, far removed from the people, do this all the time. In democracies like India, the scenario was not all that ugly in the past. Prime Minister Narendra Modi is believed to have a special penchant to make full use of the intelligence network. As chief minister, he famously kept a close tab on the activities of not just the opposition leaders in Gujarat but those who caused trouble for him within the BJP itself. The media is dead scared of Modi - evident also in the fact that there is hardly any expose about the wrongdoings of the establishment. The lethargy on the part of the Opposition is legion too. Despite this alert too, the game of spying might perhaps continue unhindered. Meanwhile the Communications & IT Minister Ashwini Vaishnav has stated that an investigation into this matter will be taken up at the earliest but that must be seen to be believed.

**Provided Sunday is kept holy**

By Albert Thyrniang

especially the party goes. In the revelry, semi-clad men and women sang, danced and drank. Among them were also LGBTs. For the radical Hamas this is all haram (unclean). For Islam the party makers were brutally 'punished'. There is no comparison with the opposition to the Cherry Blossom Festival but the seed of intolerance is the same. There is no alluding that they will go down that extreme path. However, we already see the element of fundamentalism in Christianity.

In a way it is good that the pressure groups (social organisations) are now involved in politics and religion. Why should the privilege be reserved only for the RSS and its multiple associates? The Sangh Parivar claim to be social-cultural bodies but speak politics and religion all the time. They even fight for a Hindu Rashtra. The pressure groups here are welcome to take up political issues and may engage should they entertain intolerance and narrow mindedness?

The Hindutva fascists forcefully stop screening of films they dislike and promote propagandist movies, stall book fairs and chant 'Jai Shri Ram' while lynching Muslims. Islamic fundamentalists' ban 'anti-Islam and anti-Quran' books, issue fatwa to their authors besides the numerous jihadist terror attacks world-wide. Now a Christian in Kerala has bombed his own people for 'nationalism'. Given the shrill 'Islamophobic sermons by clergymen and pastors in Kerala Muslims could be the next target in 'God's own country'. In our hill state we have not succeeded in cancelling the upcoming festival on a Sunday but we have managed to push it to 3 pm when all church services are over. The common decisive element in all these cases is religion. We exploit religion. We are religious supremacists.

Now we have been officially given the permission to attend the Cherry Blossom festival post 3 pm. It is considered alright because we have fulfilled the Sunday obligations. We have been given the licence to dance, sing and maybe drink. It is fine for we have kept the Lord's Day holy. We are free to party all night as we have attended church sessions. This is the direct implication of the commencement of the

final festivity from 3 pm.

More seriously, the pressure groups don't mind collecting 'donations' from shops and business establishments in Lew Duh (Bara Bazaar) and elsewhere provided they keep Sunday holy. We don't care when prices of commodities rise sharply since we honour Sunday. We are absolutely not pained when poor people, particularly from villages, have to pay through their nose because of the NGOs' induced inflation. There is no guilt because Sunday is given the highest reverence. Who are those who blatantly run illegal check gates to mint money? Are they not Christians? Who are those who extort cash from trucks on highways? Are they not part of the 75% population? Has KHADC no part in the illegal business? Is it enough for the NPP to blame the UDP and the UDP to demand for evidence from the former? Is it not true that the gates flourished during the latter's regime? The MDCs are absolved since they regularly attend church prayers and even pray before the media in the House. If we expand the subject to the illegal coal business, the 'high level privileges', to shoddy works, to scams, to nepotism, are not many of the indulgers 'followers' of Christ?

Among the proudest church attenders are in Nagaland. 'Nagaland for Christ' they proudly declare. They proclaim Christ even to the prime minister during the swearing in ceremony of the present government. The biggest church in Asia is in Nagaland. But beneath the glory are the extreme corruption, widespread nepotism and sale of jobs. Corruption is among the politicians, the society and the insurgents. In 2011 a weekly asked citizens, "Is Nagaland the 'corruption capital' of India?" In 2016 Al Jazeera told the 'tale of taxes and corruption' in that state. That the Nagaland elections are won by money power is widely reported. This level of corruption prevails in a state where Christians monopolise the governance. And guess what? The Church is an indifferent silent spectator.

This essay is not intended to agree with the BJP's attempts to belittle Sunday. The central government intentionally fixed October 1, Sunday, for cleanliness campaign though the practice for the same is October 2. If Gandhi Jayanti coincides

with a Sunday then it is perfectly understandable. The other day a principal of a school in Assam informed that students were strictly asked to plant saplings only on a particular Sunday with live photographs. Information was also received that ITIs were required to have convocation on no other day but on the scheduled Sunday. The issue here is that there is no choice. If decree is defied the consequence/s will follow. So, it is deliberately disparaging the Christian holiday. If the Cherry Blossom festival follows this pattern, as the JAC alleges, then it must be exposed and opposed but blocking it by hook or by crook is unjustified. Attending or not attending the festival is completely left to one's free will.

Who is behind Dominic Martin? Did he carry out the explosions on his own? How did he turn radical? Who brain washed him? Is it not the Hindutva forces who have been trying to make inroads into the Southern state? What about the JAC? Are they acting on behalf of religious leaders? A church forum has distanced itself from the controversy. Then do the constituents of the JAC have no one behind them? Paul Lyngdoh, the Tourism Minister smells a rat. The minister advises the JAC leaders to run for elections and occupy his chair and then take decisions in favour of Sunday. This is the second time Lyngdoh has advised his detractors to oppose him only through the ballot. The first time was to the cab drivers who went to his residence to solicit his support for the VPP-led demand for review of the Reservation Policy. This time he alleges that the JAC is only the face of some political parties who do not want tourism to come of age in the state. The minister won't expose the JAC or the political entities because the deputy chief minister has succumbed to hue and cry and directed the organisers to start the grand finale well post the churches' activities.

Are we mere church goers? Do we just perform Sunday services? Are we simply fulfilling Sunday obligations? So, are we essentially only Sunday Christians? The fuss over the Cherry Blossom festival while being unperturbed by the unethical donation demands, the illegal gate collection and other improprieties indicate we care a damn about every other moral compass except keeping Sunday sacred.

These areas are home to some of the most ecologically important ecosystems. While recognising the need for military security, it is equally if not more important to recognise that ecological security is an important part of national security. This Act will be a threat to the forest dwellers as the people will no longer be consulted for forest clearance. This Act is in direct conflict with special provisions given to the tribals under the 6th schedule and also under Article 371(A-J). This Act will likely ride roughshod over the rights of forest dwelling tribals and other people.

The law goes against tribals and could cause unrest in the North Eastern States which share over 5000 km with international borders while only 21 km border with India- through the chicken neck corridor. The state assemblies and civil societies must oppose such Bills at all costs. I hope that this letter awakens the sleeping minds and that we raise our collective voice towards protecting the natural forest and safeguarding the rights of the forest dwellers in particular and Northeastern states and hill states in general.

Yours etc.,  
Uranim KC Shaiza,  
Via email

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**Bob's Banter**

By Robert Clements

Dream Big Through Books...

My childhood was spent in innumerable escapades, getting lost in caves with Tom Sawyer, solving mysteries with the Five Find-Outers and their dog, and hunting man eaters with Jim Corbett. Oh, what a glorious time I had, sometimes even going 'twenty thousand leagues under the sea' with Jules Verne or hearing the Hound of the Baskervilles, howl over the English marshes, with my hair standing on end along with Sherlock Holmes!

All these adventures were mine, without spending a single pie, as I entered the cover of one book or another, that my mom or dad brought me from various libraries they became members of, and later which I also became a member of.

Oh the world of books, that kept me propped up in some different corner of my home or perched on a window sill, and without a 'do not disturb' board around, me everyone kept away from me as

being white outside and white inside too, decided to have a man of Indian origin as their Prime Minister. Something that would have made the likes of Winston Churchill and Queen Victoria turn in their respective graves. But as they voted him in, it was not the colour of his skin the Tories saw but his rhetoric, his skill in oratory and his brilliant language!

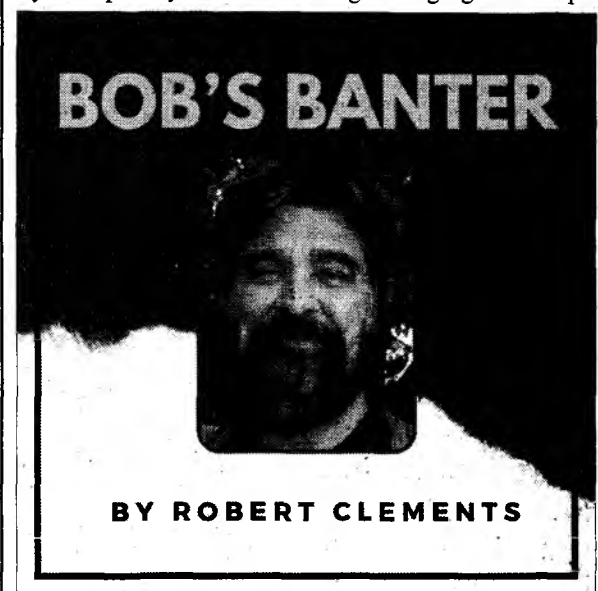
That skill won Rishi the impossible!

That skill can do the same for anyone of us! And to a very great extent the command over language does not come from learning the dictionary by heart but comes from a passion for reading!

The best textbooks on grammar are not the Wren and Martin we studied in school, but the billions of books written so painstakingly by authors over centuries.

Read and learn!

Many of us think that by learning a new word a day or by keeping a lexicon as our study book, we can master the English language. The simple



I disappeared often from one meal time to another into the imaginary fantasies of some wonderful author.

Never a dull moment for me, as holiday mornings saw innumerable authors calling out to me from within the confines of their very descriptive or picturesque covers, shouting, "Bob, you want to be kidnapped today? And I would grin at Robert Louis Stevenson as he took me into the realms of his book, 'Kidnapped!'"

It was a happy world, and a joyous one, certainly not escapism!

No, I was not running away, because when I returned to the world of flesh and blood it seemed the very ones who I'd spent some hours before were there, spinning tops or flying kites or even playing cricket with me, because good authors, make their characters so real, that later when you meet those in flesh and blood it's as if you've met them before in some tale in the hardbound covers of a book!

That for me was fiction!

And those books helped, because as my classmates often struggled through grammar and adjectives and adverbs I found the stories I'd read had automatically got me used to writing and speaking right and this was an additional bonus in my travels into a world, authors laid out and kept their doors open for me.

And then with all that reading, what better than to one day decide that I would continue my life's journey by becoming a writer. But that's another story, this is about reading, learning and yes, leading too!

A writer rarely has free time, not because he's always writing, but that he's thinking his next article or story or play or plot. But, on those delightfully glorious occasions I find I have that odd hour or two, I pull out a huge volume of short stories by Roald Dahl, and lose myself in his world of fantasy, and unexpected story endings.

I was pleasantly surprised that Dahl is also a favourite author of British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak!

What a special day it was for all of us here in India when a country that prided itself in

fact is, that if the word needs a dictionary to be understood then that word is not one that is commonly used, and instead of helping us master the language, may come in the way of communicating with others. You don't want your friends or audience glancing at a dictionary to find out the meaning of what you speak, do you?

They won't and you will remain the most misunderstood person that lived.

But the dictionary you need to use are books!

Read, and speak better!

In the Writer's and Speaker's course I conduct, I tell my class month after month, to pick bestsellers, and instead of reading just content, to also carefully read a page and then the next page, studying the style in which the author has communicated. Very soon the reader will be able to do the same. Not grammar books, nor dictionaries, but novels, short stories and articles.

You want to become a thinker whose thoughts will be much sought after, read, absorbing each word. You want to become a world leader whose language will convince and whose voice will command? Read! You want to change the world, and bring changes to the world you live in and like Rishi Sunak, lead a world with skin different from the colour of yours, read! Reading books is all the textbooks you need to do well in life!

Reading books takes your mind through your imagination to places you never thought you would go to, and soon your body follows to those same areas and helps you scale those same heights that those in the books climbed.

My childhood, as I mentioned, was spent getting lost in caves with Tom Sawyer, solving mysteries with Enid Blyton's, Five Find-Outers and Dog, hunting man eaters with Jim Corbett.

They were my only textbooks, and today I thank God for all the authors who through their books made me dream big and often helped me scale heights I never would have dreamt reaching...

The Author conducts an Online Writers and Speakers Course. For more details send a thumbs-up to him on WhatsApp 9892572883. [bobsbanter@gmail.com](mailto:bobsbanter@gmail.com)

Letters to the Editor

**Much ado about 'Sunday'**

Editor,  
Succumbing to the dictates of some fanatics, the Government of Meghalaya has decided to begin the final day of the Cherry Blossom Festival after 3:00 pm. By giving in to extraneous pressures the Government has exposed its spineless attitude. At the same time the Government shows little or no respect for the minorities in our State, in spite of them having written it in a very clear and transparent manner that Meghalaya is not a Christian state by virtue of our Constitution.

I do not know about others but I feel that our government often falls prey to the dictates of many pressure groups in almost all the government policies and orders. The various pressure groups seem to be running a parallel government and at times it appears as if they always have their way.

Mr. Paul Lyngdoh, Minister Tourism correctly pointed out that if the different pressure groups always impose their might and violate government orders, they should actually fight the elections and then legitimately oppose all and everything.

In 2011 too, there was this same agitation regarding this very Festival but the Government at that time paid no heed and the festival went off smoothly. But the present government is showing its ineffectiveness by succumb-

ing and compromising to the agitating groups. This is now how a state is run when everyone is holding the Government to ransom.

Yours etc.,  
Helen Dkhar,  
Via email

**Border security of the NE states**

Editor,  
The lack of secure border formalities such as immigration and trading has led to various unwanted problems in the region. The NE states have international borders with China, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan. The region has a length of 5182 Km of international border and the topography and rainforest jungles of the region also makes it difficult to access. Moreover, the region has diverse races, ethnicities and communities and suffers from development backlog and attention from the central government. The separatist movements which have been going on since Independence are due to many other factors. The North East international borders have become a breeding ground for various illegal activities such as illegal immigration, human trafficking, drug businesses, arms trading, and every illegal thing under the sun. The Government of India has tried to develop and connect the NE states by launching policies such as Look East (1992) and

Act East (2014) but in vain. Some of the problems faced by the states due to the border issues are:

1. Separatist Insurgency Groups: There are various insurgency groups in NE India which are funded by China and Myanmar in order to disrupt the peace in the states. These groups often cross over the borders and get military training from Myanmar. The insurgencies in the states have been a big issue for the Government of India as these groups will not sign peace treaties and have been causing chaos.

2. Drugs and Arms: The Indo-Myanmar border is located near the 'Golden Triangle' and due to this the NE state have become a hub of all kinds of drug business and supply of arms.

3. Illegal Immigration: Due to the length of the international border and the terrain many people have migrated illegally into the Indian states and this has been causing population increase and many other issues such as loss of indigenous population.

4. Goods Trading: I strongly believe that the government should open up the borders for trading because people are still trading illegally. So if we instead open up the borders with a proper system, the NE region has the potential to become a trading hub internationally.

There are many more problems. I hope the Government of India would pay due attention to the NE states and put in more effort into

securing a better international border.

Yours etc.,  
Sapam Niroda Devi  
Via email

**Forest Conservation Act 2023- A hornet's nest**

Editor,  
I am writing to draw your attention to the Forest (Conservation) Amendment Bill, 2023 passed by the Lok Sabha on 26th July, 2023. The Bill amends the Act to cover specific forest lands and exclude certain others. The Forest Conservation Amendment Act received the assent of the President a month ago and will become a law once it is notified in the government gazette. The Act aims to amend the 1980 Forest Act which adopted a rather protectionist stance, making forest clearance time-consuming and a costly option.

In this context, I am deeply concerned about the Act which was passed in the Parliament behind the facade of the Manipur violence without any debates and discussions. The Act significantly dilutes the Supreme Court's 1996 judgement in the T.N. Godavarman Thirumulkpad v. Union of India & Ors. case, which extended protection to wide tracts of forests, even if they were not officially recorded as forests and rather gave a

narrow interpretation of the term forest.

I fear that the latest FC Act will result in thousands of kilometres of forest losing legal protection. The Act also introduces exemptions for construction project such as zoos, safari-parks and eco-tourism facilities. In my understanding, a zoo or a safari park is neither a forest nor it can provide us the complex functional units and once it is destroyed it is very difficult to restore them. I find it highly illogical to destroy a natural forest and replace them with zoos, safari parks and eco-tourism services.

In Umpling (Meghalaya, Shillong) 2021, the Forest Department said it had received orders from the Ministry of Forest and Environment to cut down 4,447 pine trees in the locality which is 71-km-long, some of them over a century old for a "mega road project." The Forest Department said as compensatory deforestation, they would plant ten trees for each tree felled. However, they have not yet fulfilled the promise.

Recent events in Uttarakhand and North Indian states have shown the grim results of human interference with nature. Forest and other natural ecosystem cannot be replaced by any man-made ecosystem. What concerns me is that under this Act the land within 100 km of Indian borders needed for national security projects, land for security and defence projects are exempted from this Act (NE shares over 5000

km - International Border).

These areas are home to some of the most ecologically important ecosystems. While recognising the need for military security, it is equally if not more important to recognise that ecological security is an important part of national security.

This Act will be a threat to the forest dwellers as the people will no longer be consulted for forest clearance. This Act is in direct conflict with special provisions given to the tribals under the 6th schedule and also under Article 371(A-J). This Act will likely ride roughshod over the rights of forest dwelling tribals and other people.

The law goes against tribals and could cause unrest in the North Eastern States which share over 5000 km with international borders while only 21 km border with India- through the chicken neck corridor. The state assemblies and civil societies must oppose such Bills at all costs.

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Yours etc.,  
Uranim KC Shaiza,  
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"Tradition is a guide and not a jailer."

— W. Somerset Maugham

## The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXV No. 84 SHILLONG, THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 2, 2023

### When tourism becomes invasion

TOURISM Minister Paul Lyngdoh has spoken about high end and high value tourism. This is the need of the hour as Meghalaya is increasingly becoming a destination for day tourists from the neighbouring states who spend little but leave behind humungous carbon footprints. The number of vehicles entering Meghalaya per day from Assam has reached alarming proportions. This is no comparison to the number of Meghalaya vehicles bound for Assam other than the goods carrying trucks which in any case move on the highways. Meghalaya needs to learn from countries like Barcelona where the locals have become so fed up of tourists that they have started attacking them. Tour promoters will of course differ on this point. For them the more tourists enter Meghalaya the better the earnings. But has Meghalaya done a study of how many tourists enter the State every day and how many actually spend on hotels and homestays? The numbers would be negligible. In fact, some homestay owners have said that since September-October the number of bookings has come down. Whether that is because there are now more homestays than there are tourists wanting to stay back is another issue. In Sohra, there are homestays galore and the occupancy ratio is poor compared to the hotels which attract high end tourists.

Mass tourism, characterized by high visitor volumes especially in mature destination areas, has resulted in profound environmental degradation. These tourism-centered locations inevitably witness elevated levels of waste output, thereby raising the question of sustainability. Groundwater pollution and plastic littering in some of these areas have resulted in huge ecological footprint. Overcrowding leads to habitat disruption, possible extinction of local flora and fauna since there are tourists that don't hesitate to pull out orchids from forests. This is likely to result affect the biodiversity of the region. Let's also not forget that the tourism industry contributes immensely to greenhouse gas emissions, primarily through transportation, which in turn leads to global warming. Meghalaya's unique selling proposition (USP) is its environment which comprises waterfalls, treks to the double decker living root bridges, caves and the canyons, a climb to the Nokrek peak - a rich biosphere; river rafting, boating on the Umnogot among others. Essentially the tour operators of Meghalaya are selling its environment which they do not own. No one owns the environment not even the communities who live around it. That people are making money by selling the environment without thinking of the consequences is highly problematic. Unfortunately, any attempt to point this out is seen as an intrusion into the livelihoods of the people who are 'selling' the environment and the natural sights and sounds.

Then fact that places beyond the district headquarters have no waste management system to deal with the waste generated by tourists is also a major challenge. The Tourism Department has a huge task before it. So too the tour operators.

### Letters to the Editor

## Making mathematics relevant & interesting for students

Editor,  
I welcome the announcement of the state government to consider making mathematics a compulsory subject at the SSLC examination. In 2010, MBOSE made English and Language subjects compulsory at the SSLC examination and the option that students would be declared as passed even if s/he clears only three of the remaining four subjects which include Mathematics, Science and Technology, Social Science and Health Education/Computer. Since then, there is a growing apprehension that this has resulted in students taking mathematics lightly leading to a deterioration in the learning and teaching of the subject at the school level.

Mathematics is a subject that builds mental discipline, logical reasoning, and analytical thinking. It is the foundation for the other STEM subjects (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) and is needed in understanding even social science subjects. It builds the problem-solving ability which is one of the most required skills of the 21st century. Studies

have shown that the lack of knowledge and appreciation of the prominence of mathematics in different careers is one of the reasons for students' disinterest and lack of engagement with the subject. It is therefore imperative that school students in Meghalaya are informed about the usefulness and relevance of mathematics for a range of career options and in day-to-day life.

Studies have also shown that students' fear and difficulty in mastering the subject is because of the way it is taught which is often dull, boring, and abstract and that lacks context. The challenge therefore is how to make mathematics interesting and practical to students to enhance learning outcomes. One such approach is called the Real Mathematics Education where the emphasis is to put mathematics into real life contexts and the use of flexible models to make sense of problems rather than relying on a given set of formulas.

Another problem that we face in Meghalaya is the huge rural-urban gap as far as the standard of education is concerned, particularly in teaching of subjects like mathematics (and Science and English) which is mainly because of lack of teacher preparation and support for teaching these subjects. While there has been a constant endeavour to revise the syllabi and adoption of standard textbooks, the ben-

Whether one likes it or lumps it, the rising traffic congestion in Shillong City and in the adjoining areas, has become more of a man-made affair, than anything today, where many, if not all, are directly or indirectly involved in it. Hence, solution to this serious issue should be a possibility, provided 'we the people', voluntarily decide, or are otherwise compelled to decide and wake up now and to be realistic enough, to make a small sacrifice for a lasting public cause, with the government to be, not only ubiquitous, but in the fore-front, being the sole whistle blower of these affairs.

The seriousness of this growing congestion, prompted even the Hon'ble High Court of the State to express its advisory note on the deteriorating situation about a fortnight ago, this being not only a public issue of utmost importance, but also to see that those who are in public affairs should initiate positive measures for a lasting solution.

Interestingly, even nature participated in this agenda, by striking a note of warning, when coincidentally, around mid-day of August 14 last, on a busy Saturday, in the midst of all the normal hurly-burly activities and excitements, suddenly like a bolt from the blue and reportedly, like what goes on in the Gaza strip, a ball of smoke, followed by blazing fire, rose to the sky from the Janata Furniture of the Singhania in Thana Road, Police Bazar, adjoining the biggest Barabazar (Lewduh), forcing the people to run helter-skelter in a daze, in the midst of wild screaming voices, added by the rushing Police and Army personnel, blowing whistle and sirens to drive away all the road-side vendors, to enable fire-brigade vehicles to proceed to the site of fire accident.

Despite all these attempts, the Janata Furniture building suffered a serious devastation, including the loss of life of one worker, due to delay caused. This is only one small instance, which will ever go down in memory.

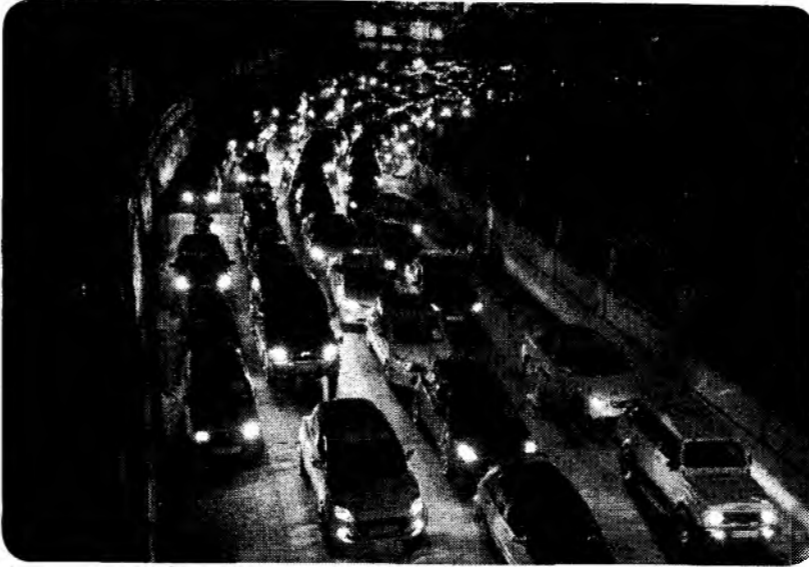
This old narrow motor-

# A few tips to curb traffic congestion

By B M Lanong

able strip, cutting across Police Bazar to Umsosun junction, whose length is about 400 meters more or less, should be restored exclusively for the public as traditionally used earlier, strictly restricting all hawkers from crowding, most of who are workers of the big

buildings have sprung up or otherwise, encroached over the public roads both by individuals and shop keepers, leaving the width of roads narrower. In some cases, by fencing the area or erecting a wall and in many cases, protruding to the road side by making parking spaces



wholesalers behind these make-shift stands, affecting seriously movement of vehicles and pedestrians.

In a sensible demonstration of public unity for a common cause, is the decision of Laitumkrah Dorbar to address the issue within its jurisdiction, where hawkers have occupied all the routes which were earlier used as

or with connecting slabs and platforms over the entrance by encroaching on the public roads, affecting normal flow of vehicles, especially on the narrow thoroughfares.

Government may initiate legal proceedings against encroachers of public property within various sections of the IPC. But considering the need for speedy widening of

since the British era, whose width, stretching from Madantrng Happy Valley, down to Mawlai-Mawiong site, cutting across areas along Fire Brigade to Barik Point, onward to Garrison site, then to Sunny Hills and other localities, before reaching the above destination. The entire width of the above mentioned stretch, respectively ranges between 8-9 to 12-13 meters approximately, that is, the existing width of the above-mentioned length of the road, minus the several encroachments of the past.

Considering the above width over the said route, where all kinds of light and heavy vehicles ply over to and fro on a daily basis, to several districts of Meghalaya and beyond, at least one Fly-Over, along the above stretch of the road, whose total length is around 20 kms approximately, is a dire necessity as of now. Builders will take all necessary care and precautions to erect the pillars all along the stretch, preferably for medium and light vehicles, to ply over the bridge, whereas heavy vehicles will continue to use the ground road level. Diversion points, wherever feasible, can be looked into by experts.

In many Metros like Delhi, Mumbai, Calcutta and others, many high-rise structures, including those lawfully erected, have been demolished, for public needs, taking precedence over the others. In Guwahati City too, similar demolitions are being carried out from time to time, to provide spaces for several fly-overs, one can witness today.

If other states can do, why not Meghalaya? The Conrad Sangma Government may consider, at least to take a decision and lay a foundation stone by the end of the year, if not earlier.

In conclusion, why can't individuals and NGO's, as a gesture of good will and solidarity, appeal to concerned land owners, to voluntarily come forward to donate, at least a foot of land each for this noble cause, something like a tip of an iceberg, but will act as a panacea during the ongoing dire strait.

*"In many Metros like Delhi, Mumbai, Calcutta and others, many high-rise structures, including those lawfully erected, have been demolished, for public needs, taking precedence over the others. In Guwahati City too, similar demolitions are being carried out from time to time, to provide spaces for several fly-overs, one can witness today."*

parking spaces for vehicles of local people and other customers and buyers. It will be advisable for other localities also to follow suit. Government should also press for immediate completion of Laitumkrah Municipal Market Complex which has been under reconstruction for several years, this snail-pace unconcerned execution is the cause of all congestions in and around the area.

### Judicial Approach

One can witness and compare the width of the roads everywhere in and around congested Shillong, then and now, when the protuberant

roads for public interest, it may not be advisable to go by legal approach as of now, for there are other lawful and administrative options available, that the Government can even acquire private land for public interest. It may even apply dual or multiple processes, considering the intensity of public need. Initially however, a negotiable approach is advisable.

### Fly-Over a must

Erecting a Fly-over is possible and a must, even while considering the narrow width of the main life-line, that is, the traditional backbone of the State standing loftily

residents are facing a lot of inconvenience due to the road condition.

I have seen the road deteriorate over time. The potholes are getting bigger and more numerous and the cracks are getting wider. They have not been repaired for quite some time now. The potholes on the road are a major cause of concern. This makes driving a very dangerous proposition.

We need safe roads for our drivers, our cyclist and our pedestrians. I therefore request you to kindly highlight these issues.

Yours etc.,  
Haphisha Nongbri  
Mawlai (Mawtarwar)

## India's ambivalent stance on the Israel-Palestine conflict

Editor,  
This refers to Munmun Majumdar's article, "Lessons for India from Hamas' Assault on Israel" (ST, October 31, 2023). India's decision to abstain from a United Nations General Assembly vote on a resolution calling for a humanitarian pause in Israel's bombing of the besieged Gaza Strip is a horrific departure from its long-standing foreign policy. India has always championed the cause of the oppressed be

it in South Africa, Vietnam or in East Pakistan (Bangladesh). India always spoke against Israel's occupation in Palestine and supported a two-state solution of the 1993 Oslo Accords.

India's argument that the United Nations resolution lacked a clear condemnation of the Hamas attack on southern Israel on October 7, does not hold water as the resolution condemned attacks on both Israeli and Palestinian civilians. The United Nations secretary-general António Guterres rightly said that Hamas attack did not take place in a vacuum. The truth is that 15 million Palestinians have been suffering the brutality of Israel's oppression for decades. There were acts of terrorism against British civilians during the British Raj in India. Had they still ruled India, we should not have given the British a moral support to continue their Raj in India for some terrorist acts against them, should we?

Yours etc.,  
Sujit De,  
Kolkata

## Tickets in PVR Cinemas

Editor,  
I wish to bring to the urgent notice of the management of PVR Cinemas and authorities in the Government about the "bad"

practice in PVR Cinemas to compulsorily and forcefully take the mobile numbers of cinema-goers and forward the movie tickets electronically on mobile phones. Mobile numbers are personal details and should remain in the domain of Data Privacy. Mobile numbers are used as passwords. Many financial transactions take place using mobile numbers. For example, many mutual fund houses make mobile numbers as part of passwords for transactions and statements.

Customers are also giving away, unsuspectingly, mobile numbers to shopping establishments, etc., without knowing the adverse implications, and thus making it easier for fraudsters to do wrong and illegal transactions using the mobile numbers. Recently, there were media reports of Aadhar details of about 81.50 crore Indians being put in the Dark Web.

We urge the management of PVR Cinemas to issue physical tickets in their cinema halls, and request Government authorities to intervene in this matter, and take corrective measures in this regard.

Yours etc.,  
D Bhutia,  
Guwahati - 24

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

# War exposes man's irrationality

By Barnes Mawrie

"All war is a symptom of man's failure as a thinking animal" John Steinbeck

Pope Francis in his message to the world on International Day of Prayer for peace on 27th October, said that "war is a defeat for all." How true this is, for what we witness in every war is not only collateral damages and waste of human lives, but it is a "potentiality for the next war." History tells us that at the end of World War I, in the treaty of Versailles, Germany was extremely humiliated as the Germans were defeated by the Allies. This was a national humiliation which paved the

pense in defence. The US budget for defence in 2023 is \$1686 billion, China's defence budget for the same year is \$224 billion, Russia's defence budget stands at \$109 billion while in India the defence budget has risen to \$73.8 billion. Just imagine if such investment were made in poverty alleviation, no one would be poor on this planet. President Dwight D. Eisenhower has rightly remarked "Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are



way for a radical patriotism. Thus, when Adolf Hitler and the Nazis came to power in 1933 they fed on this patriotic sentiment and they easily got the unconditional support of all Germans. Emboldened by such national support, Hitler went on to invade Poland which finally led to the start of World War II in 1939. The war

cold and are not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children. This is not a way of life at all in any true sense. Under the clouds of war, it is humanity hanging on a cross of iron." Yet these amounts continue to be spent

*It is a matter of shame that we humans call ourselves "rational beings" when all the while we do irrational things. Is war not an irrational behaviour? Think of the loss in terms of lives and money that every war entails. In World War I the money spent by warring parties amounted to over \$208 billion and the lives lost stood at 20 million.*

ended with the unconditional surrender of the Axis in 1945 and the creation of the United Nations Organization (UNO). History has shown that even the UNO was not able to curb human greed and ambition and consequently we have seen bloody conflicts and genocides in different parts of the world. To name a few, we have the Korean Peninsula War from 1950 to 1953, the infamous Vietnam War from 1955 to 1975, the Indo-China war in 1962, the two Indo-Pakistan wars of 1962 and 1971, the genocide in Bosnia between 1992 and 1995 where thousands were murdered and 1.2 million people were displaced, the Afghan War led by US from 2001 to 2021; the invasion of Iraq by the US in 2003, the Crimea war between Russia and Ukraine in 2014 and the latest Russia invasion of Ukraine started in 2022 and the Israel-Hamas war that started on 7th October this year and which is still raging on. In all these wars and conflicts there is one common factor and that is "death and destruction."

It is a matter of shame that we humans call ourselves "rational beings" when all the while we do irrational things. Is war not an irrational behaviour? Think of the loss in terms of lives and money that every war entails. In World War I the money spent by warring parties amounted to over \$208 billion and the lives lost stood at 20 million. The cost of World War II was a whopping \$4 trillion and the lives lost was between 75-80 million (that is 3% of the then world's population). After these wars trillion of dollars had to be spent for the rebuilding of infrastructures. In other words, humans build and destroy and then rebuild again and that is undoubtedly an "irrational" behaviour. Think of the financial ex-

in manufacturing weapons of destruction which humans use in exterminating each other which implies that we create tools for self-destruction.

The craze for possession of nuclear weapons which some countries like the US, Russia, China, Iran or India, vie with each other is evidently the most potential threat to human survival. The so called MAD (mutually assured destruction) which is a military and national security policy of nuclear power countries, is veritably a "mad" concept. Is this not another example of how "irrational" we humans are? The manner we wage war on our own planet by exploiting its resources in the most destructive way and polluting the environment, is being realized today as the cause for global warming and climate change and the effects of these are being perceived as a threat to the survival of all living beings. This is what we call digging the ground beneath our feet and it is another proof of human irrationality.

The two major conflicts that we are witnessing today, in Ukraine and Gaza, are proof that we human beings are "self-destructive" by nature. The extent of destruction that we see in both these places defies every kind of "rational" thinking. To conclude this argument let me cite three persons - Plato who said "only the dead have seen the end of war," Bertrand Russell said "war does not determine who is right, but who is left" and the notorious war-monger Adolf Hitler who said "If you win, you need not have to explain...If you lose, you should not be there to explain!" Humorous but true, these sayings only verify that "human beings are the most irrational of rational beings."

(The writer can be contacted at barnesmawrie@gmail.com)

*"Satisfaction of one's curiosity is one of the greatest sources of happiness in life."*

— Linus Pauling

**The Shillong Times**

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**Frosty INDIA ties**

THE INDIA alliance is blowing hot and cold when it comes to targeting its rival – the BJP-led NDA – and Prime Minister Narendra Modi at a personal level. Starting with a meeting in Patna in June and following this up with another meeting in Mumbai by end August, it's time for another conclave of the high and mighty on the opposition front. But, there is no word on this yet. Meetings by themselves do not take a cause forward. There are no indications that this recently formed alliance is cohesive or that it seeks to have the cutting edge. Worse, its constituents, rather than standing united, are punching each other, as was generally the wont with these entities made up mostly of regional satraps and the Congress party. Internal disenchantment is evident in the statement by Bihar strongman Nitish Kumar that the Congress failed to take the INDIA campaign forward though the party was "granted" the lead role.

The reason cited for this was the grand old party's preoccupation with the five state assembly polls. For the Congress party, these elections are a 'do-or-die' battle. It badly seeks to build on the windfall it had in Karnataka – where it neutralized the ruling BJP and grabbed power on the back of a manifesto that promised the moon to major segments of the voters. Chances now are that the Congress could win power in Madhya Pradesh and retain its grip over Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh. As the campaign progresses, it is putting up a tough fight with the BRS in Telangana. The Congress calculations are that if it wins at least two of these states, the BJP is neutralized and put on the defensive. Analysts say the anti-incumbency factor is strong in Madhya Pradesh and anything could happen in Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh. If the Congress gains as much, the gain would be for the INDIA alliance as a whole. If it fails to win at least two of the five states, the BJP would continue to hold its head high.

At the same time, however, the Congress party is duty-bound to maintain the tempo generated from Patna in June. This is the principal warfront for the 2024 parliament polls. If the Congress does not seize this opportunity, the relevance of Rahul Gandhi as its figure-head itself could sooner or later be called into question. On the one hand, the relations between the Congress and the AAP that attended the Patna conclave but staged a walkout over lack of support from it to Arvind Kejriwal on some Delhi-centric issues remain frosty. At another, the Congress and the Samajwadi Party of Akhilesh Yadav are failing to "adjust" in Uttar Pradesh. The Communists would fight the Congress in Kerala. The lack of cohesion and a common vision is there for all to see even today.

**Lure of tradition: When mental laziness pushes us to dwell on a romantic past**

By Patricia Mukhim

As a society we choose symbols we venerate and they have not changed in a long, long time. The same heroes are venerated because we have not produced any in recent times. Forget about heroines. These are out of our mindscapes. We are not used to honouring women! Period. Actually, tradition should be a sort of moral framework that has stood the test of time and one we should rest our moral compasses on. Our tradition never mentioned extortion as a livelihood. But we have defied that part of tradition to embrace a culture where we don't want to work but want all the pleasures of life. In our tradition the men had well brewed rice beer. Now that is forgotten and people readily embrace Indian Made Foreign Liquor (IMFL). But the same set of men who enjoy IMFL and other cocktails in the evening at some bar or some affluent friend's place will argue until they are blue in the face why tradition is sacred.

An important argument is that tradition is linked to identity. So those guys who extort money are no longer part of this society right? Then which society are they part of? Are they outcasts? What about those that steal from the public purse or people's collective money-bag? Are they still Khasi, Jaintia, Garo tribals? Show us one moral-ethical teaching in any of the three languages where stealing is condoned. There isn't any. Tradition tells us that those who stole were given a public upbraiding and due punishment. Is there anyone in this society today including the sacrosanct traditional institutions that can call out the thieves that regularly steal from the public purse, not in lakhs but in hundreds of crores of rupees? No. On the contrary we give them a place of pride at every function and push our way through the crowd to be able to shake hands with them. It gives us a mental kick. Like having a super strong beverage!

The spiritual part of tradition is a roadmap that tells us what's right and what's wrong and how we

ought to avoid the pitfalls of wrongdoing because we believe that every wrong we do invites divine retribution. This is the reason why those embracing the indigenous faith regularly appease their ancestors and the creator (U Blei Nongbuh Nongthaw). Humans, no matter what religion they claim to belong to, actually pray when they seek for something beyond themselves. The material part of tradition is a trajectory that we have been following because our ancestors did certain things in a certain way. Our ancestors have, through a process of selection and rejection, come up with a certain framework. As a living society we have to hold ourselves to some standards in a world that is fast changing. Can we adopt the rules of governance in the pre-written script era and hold fast to it just because we fear to step out and experiment with new ways of doing things?

It is interesting how we selectively use tradition to resist any reforms in governance at the very grassroots where it is most needed. Take our Dorbar Shnong which are classic examples of institutions that have refused to change because of the fear of losing power and dominance in case elections are held, as they should be for every constitutional body, unless the Dorbar Shnong feel they are not part of the Constitution. There is a weird sense of reasoning that since the Dorbar Shnong are guided by the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution, they are outside the purview of the main constitutional doctrine. This implies that the Sixth Schedule is a stand-alone document. But it is not! The Sixth Schedule cannot override the Indian Constitution.

The District Councils created under the Sixth Schedule actually believe they have control and command over the traditional institutions, especially the Syiemships, Raids and Shnongs. Whether these three organs of traditional institutions feel a sense

of belonging towards the Councils is a different matter. In the present scenario we find the Dorbar Shnong of different localities coming up with different writs to suit their own purposes. One of these is to collect parking fees from vehicles that are parked by the roadside even when such roadside parking is what causes traffic jams or slows down traffic. The questions here are: Who has granted permission to the Dorbar Shnong to collect parking fees from cars parked on roads that belong to the public and have been constructed from public funds? Can any of the Dorbar Shnong enlighten us as to which authority has given them permission to allow vehicles to park on the main road on payment of a certain fee? Since the Dorbar Shnong do not come under the purview of the Right to Information, they can take this question as one that carries the public mandate.

This is not to say that all Dorbar Shnong operate on a "laissez faire" model. Many of them try their best to serve the interests of the public residing within their jurisdiction. But they suffer from funds constraints and are therefore heavily dependent on the MLAs/MDCs for development work even for the smallest repairs related to water pipes, footpaths and roads. Much has been written about the need to fund these institutions along the lines of the 73rd Amendment – (the Panchayati Raj System) so that they too can avail direct funding from the central government. For how long can the office bearers of the Dorbar Shnong work pro-bono? Is it fair to expect them to sort all intricate para-legal issues within the shnong without being paid for their services? Isn't the need for funds the reason why some dorbars are collecting parking fees or some other forms of collection?

Let's come to the crux of the matter now which is garbage. Recently we were privy to the news that Mar-

ten is about to go kaput if it has not already done so. Can all of us living within Greater Shillong and hugely dependent on that garbage dump sit with folded hands and pretend that it's not our problem? Should garbage be the problem of only the Government? What is the civic responsibility of every citizen? As a collective, citizens tend to unite under the Dorbar Shnong. Is it not time for every Shnong to brainstorm on how to deal with garbage generated within that Shnong? How long can we sleepwalk and like hermits who have retired from active life, go on a long meditation and pretend that the garbage from our homes do not impinge on our natural environment? We no longer have that luxury! Remember that as per our tradition we never had plastics, aluminium foils, batteries that leach out poisonous lead, computer hardware parts and toxic hospital wastes that are carelessly discarded. Life was simple and much of the waste was organic and it was dumped in our backyards and became the manure we used in our kitchen gardens.

Tradition was that we constructed houses at least six feet away from our neighbour's boundary. Today we encroach on our neighbours' space and on public roads. Where did that tradition come from? When did it start? Who started it? And if we are so gung-ho about tradition, why did we follow these ugly traits started by one or two people so much so it has now become a way of life and therefore an ugly tradition!

So next time we build our arguments on tradition remember we are going down a slippery slope. Tradition is built on the practices of some humans that are emulated by others until they become a standard practice. There is nothing sacrosanct about tradition. And tradition is certainly not linked to identity. Tradition is good only as long as it serves a public cause. And tradition is not written in stone that it cannot change. The only thing constant is change!

**Union Minister Rajeev Chandrasekhar's comment on Kerala blast, communal**

By P. Sudhir

Union Minister Rajeev Chandrasekhar, by seeking to make communal capital out of the bomb blasts at a Christian group gathering in Kalamassery in Kerala, has exposed the vicious nature of the campaign the BJP-RSS circles are conducting regarding Israel's war on Gaza.

Chandrasekhar, immediately after the blasts, hinted that jihadi elements had targeted a Christian congregation. He blamed the Kerala government because it had "allowed" a Hamas leader to address a gathering and as a consequence within twenty four hours the bomb blasts had occurred. He further accused the CPI(M) and Congress of "appeasement politics". There is no question of "allowing" any speech by a

have always supported Zionism and the establishment of an Israeli State by driving out the Arabs and Palestinians.

It is this Hindutva worldview which today dictates the stand of the Modi government. Narendra Modi has joined the likes of Joe Biden, Rishi Sunak and Olaf Scholz in supporting Israel fully and opposing any call for ceasefire in the war on Gaza. India, by abstaining in the vote in the UN General Assembly on a resolution calling for a "humanitarian truce" (that was adopted with 120 countries supporting), distanced itself from the stand of the Global South and aligned itself with the western countries in their blind support for Israel.

While the barbaric attack and invasion of Gaza unfolds,

*There is no question of "allowing" any speech by a Hamas leader as the particular speech of the former Hamas chief Ismail Haniyeh is available on the internet and can be downloaded by anyone. Further, unlike what Chandrasekhar and his party says, the Hamas is not designated as a terrorist organisation by the United Nations.*

Hamas leader as the particular speech of the former Hamas chief Ismail Haniyeh is available on the internet and can be downloaded by anyone. Further, unlike what Chandrasekhar and his party says, the Hamas is not designated as a terrorist organisation by the United Nations.

The Indian government is silent on the war crimes committed by the Israeli armed forces. After the savage bombardment of the Jabalia refugee camp in northern Gaza, in which over a hundred civilians were killed, the foreign ministers of even some of the European Union states



Unfortunately for Chandrasekhar, within a few hours after the blast, a man surrendered before the police, claiming responsibility for the attack. He happens to be a dissident member of the fringe Christian group. This has made Chandrasekhar appear ridiculous but the viciousness of his remarks cannot be over-

called upon Israel to abide by international rules of war, but the Indian foreign ministry was silent.

The Modi government has abandoned whatever pretense it had of balancing support for Israel with a commitment to the Palestinian cause for a separate independent State. The United States has given

*This has made Chandrasekhar appear ridiculous but the viciousness of his remarks cannot be overlooked because this is the type of anti-Palestinian communal campaign being conducted by the social media groups associated with the BJP and the Hindutva forces. They label all Palestinians as jihadis and Hamas as a terrorist outfit; they warn Hindus that they can face similar threats from Muslims in India, just as Israel is experiencing terrorist violence.*

looked because this is the type of anti-Palestinian communal campaign being conducted by the social media groups associated with the BJP and the Hindutva forces. They label all Palestinians as jihadis and Hamas as a terrorist outfit; they warn Hindus that they can face similar threats from Muslims in India, just as Israel is experiencing terrorist violence. Fabricated reports about atrocities committed by Palestinians and Hamas are being widely circulated to promote Islamophobia. Israel is held up as a model exemplar in fighting Islamic terrorism.

It is this communal worldview which sees the Palestinian struggle for an independent state as a Muslim issue and instinctively supports the Zionist project which seeks to ethnically cleanse the Palestinians from their homeland. The RSS-BJP adopts the rhetoric of the Jewish extremists and the Israeli State who call Palestinians who fight for their rights as "terrorists". From the days of V D Savarkar, founder of Hindutva, Hindu rightwing nationalists

carte blanche to the obnoxious Netanyahu regime to perpetrate mass murder and subject the civilian population in Gaza, including women and children, to mass starvation and lack of water to drink.

The Modi government is complicit with this inhuman strategy. Not only will it not support the Palestinian people in their hour of distress, the Modi government at the centre and the BJP governments in the states are suppressing protests against the Israeli aggression and in support of the Palestinian people. The latest instance is the arrest of a 92 year-old former Jan Sangh leader in Jammu, who was going to organise a meeting in support of the Palestinian people.

Given the refusal of the Israeli government to accept the ceasefire, the battle in Gaza is going to be a prolonged one, it is necessary for the Left and democratic forces to widen and intensify their campaign in solidarity with the Palestinian people and expose the Modi government's reactionary and communal stance on the issue. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

**Don't pollute the academic environment**

Editor,  
As a concerned parent of a boy studying in class 12, I wish to bring to the attention of the concerned authorities how our children's studies are affected by deafening noise of Bollywood music emanating from the premises of the Hindu Mission, Lower Mawprem. My son is appearing for his selection exams starting from October 30, 2023 while a daughter of my neighbor studying in class-11 is going to write her half-yearly exam starting on the same day. The SSLC Selection examination of St. Margaret School has started since October 2. Similar kinds of exam schedules have been set by the majority of schools. But to our utter disgust, the loud music blasted by Hindu Mission completely wreaked havoc with the exam preparation of the students since last Friday evening (October 27). On the premises, some of the boys who were dancing were drunk. Later police also came to control the crowd and noise. It was a shameful situation.

It is important to mention that this Hindu Mission regularly organizes one program after another and disturbs the neighboring residents. Another appalling thing is that they organized Bollywood dance competition and auditioned a program right in front of Idols of Maa Durga. Is this the real meaning of Puja? As far as my knowledge of Hindu scriptures are concerned, it is the most sinful act. Can we see people dancing to Bollywood songs in the premises of mosques, gurdwaras and churches which was pointed out by the previous writers through this daily? I have practically no idea how sacrilegious activities and boisterous entertainments have been included by Hindu

Puja organizers. They are setting the wrong precedent for our younger generation and misleading them. They are polluting the sanctity of Sanatan Dharma.

I humbly appeal to the Deputy Commissioner and Police Departments to take the necessary action, keeping in mind the future of our young students. The studies of our children should not be disrupted by the noise of mindless organizations involved in godless indulgences. We are more concerned about the future of our kids and their studies.

Yours etc.,  
Frustrated parents  
Name withheld on request,  
Via email

**Govt sponsored festivities & perennial deficit budget**

Editor,  
The decision of the government to spend Rs 9 crores in Shillong Cherry Blossom festival to be organized in Bhoirymbong from 17-19th November 2023 where I am not sure if there is any cherry blossom tree, is shocking and perhaps, avoidable. Personally, I am against government's involvement in organizing festivities spending public money. Instead, it should be completely outsourced and receive some revenue for the government in return. I hope the Government has past experiences of gaining revenues directly or indirectly and increase in local economy through increase in the footfall of tourists in several previous festivities like cherry blossom festivals, autumn festivals, etc.

It is unjustified for Government that owes Rs. 565 crores to NTPC and therefore its inability to supply uninterrupted power supply during dry seasons, poor roads quality, non-existent

street lights across Shillong city and other towns, water crisis in many localities, unable to pay timely salaries to deficit school teachers, poor school infrastructures such as libraries, Wi-Fi and internet connectivity, poor college infrastructures in nooks and corners of the state, to spend Rs. 9 crores of public money on a festivity which does not seem compulsory from any point of view.

The other aspect of this particular Cherry Blossom festival is the lack of sensitivity to conclude it on a Sunday which is considered a sacred and solemn day for majority of the people of the state. It is not fair to say that Meghalaya is a Christian state since India is a secular country as per our constitution; nor am very religious from any angle. However, all previous Governments, not the NPP-led ones, have respected the sentiments of about 75% of populations (about 22.13 lakhs) who are Christians in Meghalaya and has avoided important programs on Sundays, beginning or conclusion, unless it is extremely unavoidable.

Indeed, the United Christian Forum and other organizations have rightly objected to the concluding day of the Cherry Blossom Festival being on a Sunday. It is funny to hear the statement of Deputy CM, Prestone Tynsong that the concluding program will be after the church service, i.e. 3 pm onwards. It shows the lack of understanding on the functioning of the churches on Sundays and the sentiments of Christians. Indeed, respect to religious sentiment of majority of the population is followed by every state across the country within our secular boundaries, be it in Maharashtra, Gujarat, West Bengal or Assam. However, of late, our government seems to be importing whatever comes from outside and has forgotten the local ethos and respect for the sentiments of other religions.

Indeed since 2014, there

has been an increase in such insensitivities. The Government of India had declared in 2014 that 25th December will be celebrated as 'Good Governance Day' to honour former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee which happens to be his birth anniversary as well. There was wide criticism by Christian minorities across the country including in Meghalaya for setting Good Governance Day on the same date as Christmas as well as for declaring this date as a government working day. Could it have been avoided while upholding the stature of Vajpayee ji? Certainly yes, if you have respect for religious minorities and sentiments at the national level. The problem arises when your own elected state government displays such insensitivity, then where do you go to complain?

We are not in USA or Europe. Sensitivity and respect for the sentiments of a large section of Christian population here need not be spelled out but has to be felt from within by any government unless they feel that they don't need their support at all in future. I am sure people will respond to this insensitivity at an appropriate time.

Yours etc.  
Prof. Lakhon Kma,  
Shillong-4

**Tragic, to say the least!**

Editor,  
About a month ago we read on various media platforms of the tragic death of two youth, a boy and girl, from around Marbisu village, about 20 Kms or thereabouts from Shillong. Their deaths, as per first hand evidence, was a case of mutual suicide of their own accord. Either way, I wish to convey my heart-felt condolences to the bereaved family of the said deceased!

Incidentally, even as I was

dwelling on this lamentable occurrence, my thoughts led me to revisit the recent cable TV telecast in one of the Crime patrol episodes where two young research students during an off day decided to go to an isolated place to vent their feelings for each other but met with violent deaths. They were murdered by two robbers, who robbed them of whatever valuables they had. In the ensuing scuffle the two students were killed by the robbers. After committing the crime the duo waited till darkness before going to a nearby well to wash their blood stained clothes in order to obliterate a tell-tale sign of crime committed. Incidentally, while doing so, two passers-by in a somewhat inebriated condition happened to see the killers, whom they knew. The latter on seeing these curious onlookers threatened them with dire consequences warning the drunks that if they reported to anyone, what they had seen, a similar fate awaited them as well!

The nervous duo were utterly unnerved by the menacing warning and mechanically promised never to utter a single word elsewhere of what they had seen.

Such heinous murder of young scholars had left the police department in a quandary as they had to face a relentless public outcry for not being able to crack the murder case even after several days. Stung by insurmountable public protestations, the police had to explore every conceivable space to bring to book the elusive culprits. One option was by circulating the portraits of the victims in public places noting thereon their names and the precise moment and date of their being murdered. Even after such overreaching exercises the police could not get any clue of the murderers, leaving the police authorities and the public distraught. Then one late evening, as luck would have it, one of the alcoholics who had seen the murderers on that spe-

Yours etc.,  
Jerome K Diengdoh,  
Shillong-2

cific date as published on the victims' portraits, spilt the beans to a co-boozer that he knew who the culprits were as they were seen by him and his friend. Thereupon that co-boozer rushed to the police station and briefed the latter of what he had heard. Police immediately swung into action and brought the two eyewitnesses to the police station.

After much cajoling and under duress the latter unwillingly divulged the names of the assassins. Subsequent to this confession, the police could easily arrest the two accused, who, in the end, had admitted to the atrocious crime on the innocent victims for just a few hundred rupees and for which they were charged under relevant sections of Indian Penal Code (IPC) for murder and concealing evidence.

From the foregoing set of circumstances, it may perhaps be advisable for our young and prospective love birds not to venture to any secluded places far from human habitation in order to pour their love for each other given that there are unforeseen circumstances awaiting the innocent. We now have deadly drug abuse, family feuds, rampant unemployment, grinding poverty in India, which is why as per Global Hunger Index, India woefully ranked 111th out of 125 countries, a demonstrable proof of the seriousness of the levels of hunger in our country. Even our arch enemy Pakistan is better placed at 102th position. And wonders never cease as to why our poorer nearest neighbours like Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka have notched up better marks in this respect. Who's to blame then?

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

"The greatest wealth is to live content with little."

— Plato

The Shillong Times

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Health seeking behaviour in Meghalaya

A study conducted by the World Health Organisation finds that people in 10 out of 12 districts in Meghalaya suffer from high levels of hypertension with many of them not diagnosed timely, leading on to serious consequences. Health related literature informs that hypertension or high blood pressure is when the pressure in the blood vessels is too high (140/90 mmHg or higher). The danger is that people with high blood pressure may not feel any symptoms until it is too late. The only way to know one's pressure is to test it regularly. Some people with high blood pressure, however, do show symptoms such as headaches, shortness of breath especially while climbing stairs etc. Others could suffer from nosebleeds. But again these symptoms are not specific. Physicians advise that it is good to have blood pressure checked at least every two years starting at age 18. Some people need more-frequent checks. They also recommend that those that can afford to, should keep a blood pressure measuring machine at home so they can do the testing themselves. Medical science tells us that untreated, high blood pressure increases the risk of heart attack, stroke and other serious health problems.

There is plenty of material on how healthy lifestyles such as regular exercise, a healthy diet and not smoking or drinking alcohol is good for heart health. Hence it is not as if people are ignorant about what could cause hypertension. It is the unhealthy habits that finally take a toll on human lives. However, it is also true that stress has become one of the prime causes of hypertension. A burgeoning number of people working in the corporate sector and having to meet cruel deadlines and unrealistic goals are known to battle hypertension. A healthy work-life balance is preached in most institutions but in a highly competitive world all that is read and known remains in the realm of theory and is not practised. That a 45 year old Indian Forest Service officer serving the State, recently died of cardiac arrest and quite a few others, too of a younger age are succumbing to heart attacks should alert the State Health Department of the need for better testing. This statistic should alert the Government that hypertension needs to be tackled by diagnosing hypertension through health camps that take health care closer to the people.

Health care providers advise that once hypertension is detected it is advisable to treat the ailment with medicines and revert to a healthy lifestyle and also have regular health check-ups. In Meghalaya, it is seen that people's health seeking behaviour is erratic and most people don't believe in regular check-ups. Better awareness about the need for health check ups would help address the problem of hypertension and other diseases too.

Political 'War' for Maratha Reservations

By Rajdeep Sardesai

While joining journalism 35 years ago in Mumbai, a senior colleague offered advice: "If you really want to witness political drama, you should move to Delhi, in Mumbai nothing much happens except the usual Congress versus Congress battles." But as the last five years have shown, the country's political map has altered: no state has seen quite as much turbulence as Maharashtra. Three chief ministers in five years, dramatic party splits and family break-ups, pre-dawn swearing-ins and prolonged legal tussles, Maharashtra hurtles from one chaotic situation to the next. The latest flashpoint is the revival of the Maratha reservation agitation that has turned violent in several parts and threatens to escalate into a full-blown crisis for the Eknath Shinde government.

In keeping with the unexpected twists, a 40 year old pencil thin, relatively unknown serial protestor, Manoj Jarange Patil has suddenly been transformed into the face of the reservation protest. His hunger strike and a clash between his supporters and the police in September have given him enough political equity for almost every state leader to line up to meet him in Jalna, the epicenter of the agitation. Conspiracy theorists suggest that Patil is being propped up by a vengeful opposition to put the Shinde government on the mat. If the BJP used state power, especially the Enforcement Directorate, to bring down the Udhav Thackeray government, the opposition Maha Vikas Aghadi would be accused of using street power to extract revenge. With both Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabha elections due next year, the stakes could not be higher.

And yet, the Maratha agitation didn't happen in a vacuum. The tension has been simmering for a while now, a consequence of a state's polity gradually cracking apart. For the first five post-independence decades, Maharashtra's relatively stable politics was marked by a 'dominant party' system where all disputes were settled within the large Congress tent. At the

heart of this monopolistic politics was Maratha caste supremacy. Twelve of the state's 19 chief ministers (including the incumbent Mr Shinde) have been Marathas; almost every major sugar cooperative, education institute or banking facility in rural Maharashtra is controlled by Marathas.

But this once unchallenged Maratha-centric model of politics and business is disintegrating under its own contradictions. While 'higher' Marathas claim warrior Kshatriya status, the numerically strong Maratha Kunbis are a backward caste community, largely peasant cultivators. An iconic figure like Shivaji — himself

greater political empowerment. Whereas in Congress-led governments, Maratha writ was near total, now there is fierce competition amongst caste groups for a share of the power pie.

It is this rivalry for scarce resources that is at the heart of the Maratha reservation battle for education and government jobs. Ironically, those who once prided themselves on Maratha social superiority are now seeking to re-acquire Kunbi status by tracing their generational roots to old Nizam state records, if only to get reservation benefits. Several thousand Marathas have now applied and been granted Kunbi caste certificates, a

failed the apex court test earlier this year with the court maintaining that Maratha reservations were unconstitutional. But in 2023, the reservation battle is less about constitutional barriers and more a no holds barred political war. A Jarange Patil-like figure has no place for legal niceties when he threatens to carry on with his protests till all his demands are met. The instant cult status is enough for him to insist that the Maharashtra government bypass the courts and give Marathas immediate reservation benefits. That the homes of influential legislators are being attacked by furious mobs shows just how the reservation drive has now been hijacked by lumpen elements who have little fear of the law and order machinery. Jarange Patil, in fact, may well be a pawn on an unsettled political chessboard where each leader is out to checkmate the other.

In a sense, Maharashtra is paying the price for a broken development model where a deepening agrarian crisis and cash and carry politics has created growing frustration amongst youth groups. When power-hungry leaders have no party or ideological loyalties nor are willing to seriously address core issues like farm incomes, jobs and falling social indices, then the political vacuum will be filled by unapologetic caste and community warriors. For the notion of Maharashtra's asmita (self-respect), which once prided itself on social reform and economic development, the growing chorus for greater reservation is a troubling indicator of a state in steady decline.

Post-script: Most state leaders admit in private that Maratha reservations will eventually invite a backlash from smaller OBC groups who feel threatened. "But not one of us can oppose it publicly because it is election season," a senior leader confesses. Clearly once the reservation genie is uncorked, it can't be put back in the bottle.

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

Concerns expressed too serious in electoral bond case Can SC verdict do away with money power in polls

By Dr Gyan Pathak

Concerns expressed during the final day of the 3-day hearing on petitions challenging the constitutional validity of the Electoral Bond Scheme case were too serious to be resolved immediately, and hence the Bench hearing the case decided not to announce the verdict instantly at the conclusion of hearing on November 2, but reserved it. In the course of hearing the issue of political funding in India was found to be more complex than it was previously presumed.

It can therefore be argued safely that irrespective of the final verdict, there will remain miles to go for evolving a better transparent and cleaner system than the present Electoral Bond Scheme being implemented by the Narendra Modi led government, that goes on enriching the ruling BJP and impoverishing the entire opposition making the elections neither free nor fair by denying the opposition of a level playing field.

The Constitution Bench comprising Chief Justice of India DY Chandrachud, and Justices Sanjay Khanna, B R Gavai, J B Pardiwala, and Manoj Mishra, has clearly revealed their mind that the Electoral Bond Scheme was flawed. The court remarked that while it was not asking

ing of political parties which can help strengthen political democracy by providing parties with the resources they need to run effective campaigns. However, the opposite is the ground reality.

The petitioners challenging the scheme submitted before the Bench hearing the case that keeping citizens in the dark about the source of funding of a political party and they not knowing who is funding which party, and are therefore unable to take informed decisions regarding their votes, actually breeds corruption.

Moreover, they argued that electoral bonds could be misused to funnel illegal money into political parties, especially the ruling political party. For example, a company could donate money to a political party in exchange for favourable government contracts. Additionally, electoral bonds make it difficult to hold political parties accountable for their finances leading to corruption and nepotism.

During the hearing it came to light that after the introduction of this scheme political parties could get donations even from shell companies, or any other company, even loss-making ones, which defeats the very purpose of the scheme.



the government to go back to a cash-based system, it was asking the scheme to be made in a proportional, tailor-made manner which took care of the serious deficiencies arising out of the current scheme. Various aspects of the scheme with its complexities were brought before the Bench, which included its impact on transparency, and the potential for corruption.

Ever since the scheme was introduced in 2018 by the Modi-led government, it remained one of the most controversial topics in the country. The government said that under the scheme the identity of the donor would not be revealed to any one, which was contrary to their claim that the scheme was a transparent and clean method of political funding. The claim of transparency was even false, which was clear in the Centre's assertion that citizens have the right to know the source of funding, on which the Bench said that it was difficult to agree upon. On the other hand, the Banks and the Government have access to the record of the donor purchasing the bonds. It makes the ruling establishment privileged while the opposition are made to remain in the dark. Moreover, the information regarding the donors is kept purportedly for auditing purposes and to ensure that only legitimate sources of funding are used. This gives the government enough scope to manipulate donors and the amount they want from them.

The scheme was challenged in the Supreme Court by several petitioners, including the Congress leader Jaya Thakur and the Communist Party of India (Marxist). They contended that the scheme violated the citizen's right to information and the principle of free and fair election. They pointed out how the scheme favours the ruling party and enables corporate lobbying and quid pro quo.

It was claimed by the government that electoral bonds were designed to reduce the use of black money in political funding, and increase in fund-

Senior Advocate Prashant Bhushan argued that the scheme not only violates citizen's rights but also promotes corruption by allowing companies to give kickbacks to parties in power, while Kapil Sibal argued it to be unconstitutional, undemocratic and unfair.

It should be noted that electoral bonds generated donations worth Rs 9,188 crore in the last 6 years. BJP bagged 57 per cent (Rs 5,272 crore) of the total donation, according to the ADR data. Congress received only Rs 952 crore. The seven national parties including the Congress and 24 state parties received only Rs 16,437 crore.

Obviously, the chief beneficiary of the scheme is the ruling BJP at the Centre. However, in the last six years, the Supreme Court of India declined to stay the scheme twice in 2019 and 2021. In the meantime, six chief justices came to the Supreme Court.

During the final hearing on Thursday November 2, the Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court have flagged "serious deficiencies" in the electoral bond scheme, and also directed the Election Commission of India (ECI) to submit within two weeks complete information on each and every donor and contributions received by political parties through Electoral Bonds till September 30, as it reserved the judgment in a batch of petitions challenging the validity of the scheme. The report has to be submitted by ECI confidentially after collating the required information from all political parties that have received funds since 2018.

In all these circumstances one can see that the complexities and concerns regarding political funding in the country could continue further irrespective of the Supreme Court's final verdict on the Electoral Bonds Scheme. Democracy in the country needs to be freed from the shackles of money and muscle power. Can the Supreme Court lead the way through its verdict? It remains a million-dollar question. (IPA Service)

"In keeping with the unexpected twists, a 40 year old pencil thin, relatively unknown serial protestor, Manoj Jarange Patil has suddenly been transformed into the face of the reservation protest."

originally a Kunbi — might be a unifying symbol but the socio-economic ground realities are starkly different. The small group of elite Maratha-Kshatriya families have little 'roti-beti' (inter-dining and inter-marriage) relations with their Kunbi brethren, many of whom live on small land-holdings, especially in Vidarbha and Konkan.

In the post-1947 period, an enlightened Congress leader like YB Chavan was able to hold together a Maratha-led non-Brahmin caste coalition by reaching out to other groups, including Dalits and Muslims. But the rising political and economic clout of the 'creamy layer' of Marathas meant that other communities felt increasingly marginalised and even discriminated against. The BJP's rise in the 1990s in Maharashtra was driven not just by the appeal of Hindutva but also by a MADHAV social engineering formula, an acronym representing increasingly assertive Mali, Dhangar and Vanjari OBC communities, each seeking

sign of how a despairing government is trying to get temporary respite from the gathering storm.

Politically, no party in Maharashtra can afford to ignore the reservation demand since it would mean alienating a substantial vote bank. Chief minister Shinde needs to bolster his credentials as a Maratha leader for his own political survival while deputy chief minister Ajit Pawar knows that any failure to address Maratha concerns will see his uncle Sharad Pawar seize the initiative. The other deputy chief minister, Devendra Fadnis is also in an unenviable position: a rare Brahmin leader in a non-Brahmin political milieu, he has gone out of his way to endorse Maratha reservations.

But giving reservations is easier said than done. In 2021, a five judge bench of the Supreme Court unanimously set aside the 16 per cent quota granted to the Maratha community on various grounds, including breaching the 50% quota limit. A review petition also

critical issue.

I urge the local authorities to adopt a comprehensive, long-term strategy. This should include, but not be limited to, stricter regulations on industrial emissions, promoting renewable energy sources, expanding green cover in the city, and implementing stringent vehicular emission controls. Additionally, greater public awareness campaigns on reducing individual carbon footprints can significantly contribute to the cause. Delhi's inhabitants are enduring the adverse effects of this pollution, facing serious health hazards, especially among the vulnerable sections of the population. Our responsibility as a society is to act swiftly and decisively to alleviate the pressing environmental crisis. It's high time for a collaborative effort where government initiatives, corporate responsibility, and individual commitment come together to combat this pressing issue and secure a cleaner, healthier future for Delhi's residents.

Yours etc., Maimul Safui, Via email

Holy religions never divide us

Editor, Published articles by mature writers do not go to waste. Discerning readers can quickly figure out what the writer is up to. The recent letter "Time to end Hindu-Muslim divide" (ST, dated October 31, 2023) by Sujit De also gives a certain kind of curious impression. Can we sincerely work to bridge the divide between

Muslims and Hindus? It will be the best thing if ever possible. However, mere writing will not be helpful until we "identify" the underlying issues and take significant action to address them. Sujit De has beautifully discussed the thoughts of Swami Vivekananda. No doubt Vivekananda's works always come in handy in performing "surgery" not just for the external world but also for the internal world. They inspire each of us to look within and seek the real meaning of life, which is so transient and beyond one's control. Most of the thoughts of Vivekananda exhort us to practice spiritualism with all earnestness rather than parroting the holy scriptures without committing to them. That is why, on the auspicious day of Mahasaptami of Durga Puja, Swami Vivekananda knelt to touch the feet of a poor Muslim girl. It was intended to kill the ego and cleanse the self.

Hence, unless we practice the doctrine of the "universal brotherhood," God keeps eluding us. Racial discrimination, gender discrimination, and religious discrimination are the biggest stumbling blocks in the pursuit of God's realization. My God, Your God, has done greater harm. Here is the million-dollar question. Are we doing anything to end the existing discrimination in society and the eye-for-eye attitude among believers of different faiths? Are we practicing seeing each human being, irrespective of his/her religion or race, as the creation of the same God — very crucial in promoting peaceful co-existence and love? How quickly one gets spiritually evolved when one begins to believe in "Nar

(human being) is equal to Narayan (God)" — the fundamental doctrine of Upanishads. Alas! Discrimination and hatred have become the hallmarks of some religions. Is the blatant gender discrimination in Afghanistan, now ruled by Taliban, not a serious concern for world leaders? Just google to know how women are being so oppressed and terrorized there, not less in the countries under the control of certain extremist forces. Even Nobel Laureate Malala Yousafzai has raised this concern, particularly gender discrimination, on various platforms. Can we objectively analyze what led to 22-year-old Mahsa Amini's death in Iran and the nation-wide protests and unprecedented bloodbath thereafter?

With the increasing "misinterpretation" of Islam and the rise of extremist forces, a very renowned Islamic scholar of Kuwait, who is the author of "The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from the Extremists", Khaled Abou El Fadl, says that it's disheartening to witness fellow Muslims committing such atrocities. We should be ambassadors for Islam, not advocates for terror. Hope Sujit De also agrees with disillusioned Khaled Abou. Nothing is more dangerous than those who use religion as a springboard to further their diabolical ambitions. If we try to close our eyes to the cruelty on humanity, peace on earth will be completely impossible.

Yours etc., Salil Gwali, Shillong

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

Letters to the Editor

Organizational governance & challenges in NEHU

Editor, The North-Eastern Hill University (NEHU) is an esteemed institution that plays a pivotal role in education and knowledge dissemination in Meghalaya. However, recent events have raised concerns about the effectiveness of its internal organizational structure. It is imperative to understand that an organization's success is contingent upon the obedience and compliance of its subordinate staff to its leadership.

In the realm of defence organizations, this principle holds a special significance, where the orders issued by a commanding officer are followed with unwavering dedication, akin to a divine decree. The commanding officer's authority is considered unquestionable, fostering a culture of absolute adherence to orders. This steadfast obedience is a key element in the successful operation of defence units.

While the operational dynamics of a civil unit may differ from those of a military one, the fundamental principles of effective command and control remain consistent across all types of organizations, whether they are government entities or non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Recent headlines in the media have drawn attention to a perceived deficiency in this aspect at NEHU.

It is vital for NEHU, as an academic institution, to uphold the same principles

of governance and obedience to its leadership as any other organization. The current situation calls for introspection and rectification to ensure that NEHU's mission of providing a temple of learning and wisdom is not compromised.

In conclusion, the issues facing NEHU should be addressed promptly to restore confidence in its organizational structure and uphold its status as a revered centre of education and knowledge in Meghalaya.

Yours etc, Krishna Chettri, Shillong -2

A disparate I.N.D.I.A

Editor, The editorial "Frosty I.N.D.I.A ties" (ST September 3, 2023) is an incisive analysis of the INDIA coalition. The editor is right in saying that "there is no indication that I.N.D.I.A is cohesive" and correctly analysed that "if the Congress fails to win two of the five states going to the polls, the BJP would continue to hold its heads high". Damodar Narendra Modi has found a way to connect with an ordinary Hindu voter in a way almost nobody has been able to do, not necessarily with the urban educated voters. They are people in the 2nd tier or 3rd tier cities who have some education but not a college education but are now upwardly mobile and have a sense of pride in this upward movement. The Prime Minister has been able to speak to and resonate very powerfully with the bulk of these Indian voters. He has been able to powerfully represent their aspirations, sense

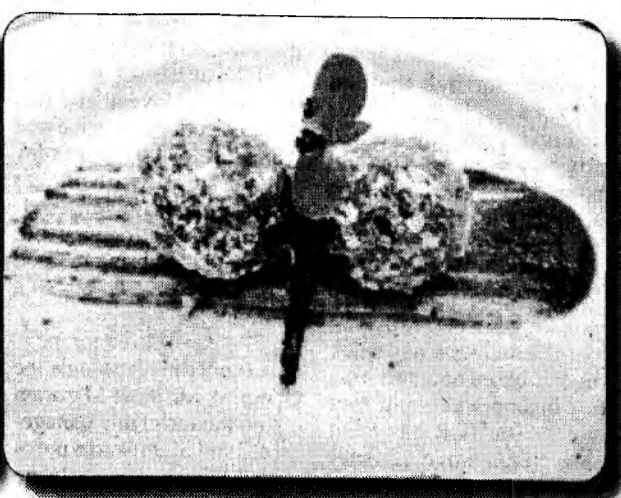
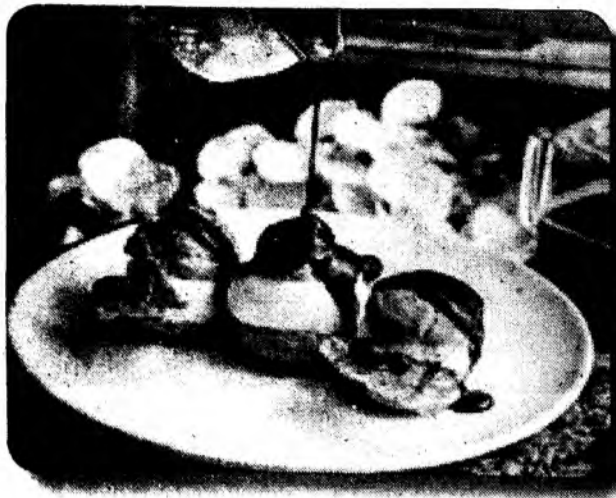
of progress and pride. You cannot deny his achievement which is extraordinary. Yes, chances of being re-elected after 10 years become difficult because in democracies there is a thing called "voters' fatigue". But the Prime Minister seems confident that the BJP solely depends on him. To defeat him would require the entire opposition to come together in a cohesive way. It will have to be BJP versus the Opposition coalition. At present I.N.D.I.A does not seem to have a unity of purpose. To defeat Modi's BJP, they will need to have an alternative charismatic leader. Right now, the opposition that is strategically united and disciplined is not visible at all.

Yours etc., VK Lyngdoh, Via email

Urgent measures required to combat Delhi's pollution crisis

Editor, The recent resurgence of severe pollution in Delhi is an alarming concern that demands immediate attention from both authorities and citizens. The detrimental impact on public health and the environment calls for urgent, collective action to mitigate the crisis. The closure of schools for two days, alongside construction bans and car usage restrictions, though commendable, remain only a temporary solution to a persistent problem. It's imperative that more proactive and sustained measures are implemented to address this

# Healthy desserts for Diwali



Festive seasons are that time of year during which our health goals tend to take a back seat. Many times, given all the culinary temptations on offer everywhere, even getting back on track after the festive season seems not just difficult but impossible.

To stay on the right track we need to maintain at least a few healthy habits during this period which can be achieved by sticking with simple, healthy recipes.

Here's where RAW recipe options for traditional festival dishes are the perfect answer and replacement which will go a long way in ensuring that one does not feel deprived during the festive season! Here are some recipes curated by Chef Joy Mathew, Wellness Chef at Prakriti Shakti.

## DATE SQUARE

**Ingredients:** Date Orange juice Pistachio Almond Cinnamon powder Orange zest

**Method:** Soak the dates in orange juice and cinnamon powder for 2 hours. Coarsely blend the nuts in a jar and mix the soaked dates and orange zest and pulse the two times and make in to thick dough. Shape in to a square mould and serve.

## ANJEER BURFI

**Ingredients:** Dry fig sliced Soft dates chopped Pistachio chopped Cardamom powder Honey

**Method:** In blender, add sliced

fig and pulse it two to three times. Add chopped soft dates, cardamom powder and pulse the mixture again. Take out the mix and knead well with hand. Shape the mix into squares in a pan and glaze it with honey. Cut and serve in desired size and garnish with pistachio slice.

## APRICOT BITES

**Ingredients:** Dried apricots chopped Dried grated coconut Vanilla powder Raisins chopped

**Method:** Add all ingredients in the food processor and blend till it forms "dough". Make gooseberry size balls and rolled it in dried grated coconut.

## BROWNIE BITE

**Ingredients:** Cocoa nibs Almond Walnuts Dates Vanilla Salt

**Method:** Powder the cocoa nibs in a blender. Add walnut and vanilla salt and pulse again. Add dates and blend well, don't blend too much it will release the walnut oil. Remove from blender in to bowl. And make small dumplings and roll over little cocoa nibs and serve.

## PUMPKIN ENERGY BITES

**Ingredients:** Pitted soft dates chopped Pumpkin grated Dried grated coconut Walnut chopped Vanilla bean powder Cinnamon powder Nutmeg powder Salt

**Method:** Reserve 20 gm grated dry coconut Blend the rest to obtain dough consistency Form the dough

to small balls Coat the ball the reserved dry coconut and serve

## RAW CHOCOLATE BROWNIE

**Ingredients for Brownie:** Soft dates chopped Peanut powder Walnut coarsely powder Almond powder Cacao powder Vanilla bean powder Salt

**Ingredients for Glazing:** Honey Water Cacao powder Vanilla powder

**Method:** Grind the all nuts separately in a coffee grinder (or food processor) until powder. De-seed and chop the soft dates. Blend all nut powder and walnut coarse in food processor add dates and mix well and make like dough and moulded in a tray. Combine the glaze ingredients in a blender and make in to a smooth sauce that can be poured over the brownie. Cut a square piece and garnished with tender coconut and cashew nuts sauce.

## COCONUT WALNUT BAR

**Ingredients:** Walnut Almond powder Raisins Dehydrated coconut Fresh grated coconut Cardamom powder

**Method:** Blend the raisins in blender in paste form. Add walnut and blend again in to powder form. Change to mixing bowl add rest of the ingredients and mix well. Arrange on tray in to 1 cm height and cut in to diamond shape and serve. (IANSLife)

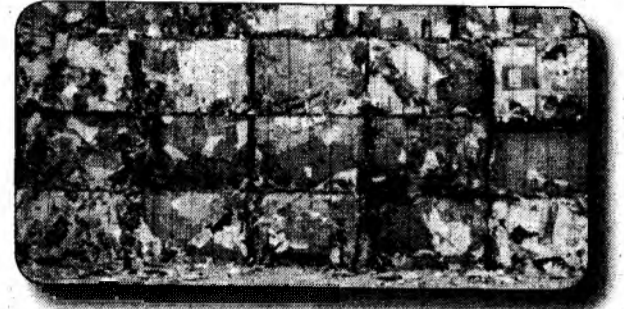
# India's Blue Nudge imprints its name in Guinness World Records

In a benchmark feat towards addressing issues related to climate change, Blue Nudge along with Blue Planet, one of the leading advocates for environmental conservation, has clinched the Guinness World Records title for the "Most Paper Collected in 24 Hours".

They achieved this milestone by closely collaborating with around 300+ schools, leading aviation company IndiGo, and distinguished public sector units, including the National Security Guard (NSG).

While congratulating the team on this huge success, Rishi Nath, Adjudicator at Guinness World Records, expressed his profound delight towards the noble cause, stating, "In these challenging times for our planet, such initiatives are indispensable. It fills us with immense pride that India, through the tireless efforts of the Blue Nudge and Blue Planet teams, has achieved the Guinness World Records for the Most Paper Collected in 24 hours. This moment is truly exceptional and holds great significance for all of us."

Around 3,25,000+ students in Delhi NCR collaborated to collect paper waste from schools and institutes, and over 3,500+ teachers, and 7,500+ dedicated Blue Nudge Ambassadors actively participated in the initiative, raising awareness about environmental safety among young minds.



The core objective behind the initiative was to safeguard Mother Earth from the clutches of waste.

The verification process was meticulously overseen by Guinness World Records esteemed Adjudicator, Rishi Nath, and Surveyor, Ashu Mittal.

Their dedication ensured the authenticity and significance of this monumental record.

"It is indeed a moment of immense pride for us to get our name imprinted in the prestigious records. Our broader aim is to inspire people to focus on environmental conservation by contributing even the simplest of what they can. With this, we reaffirm our commitment to keep being fervently dedicated to taking every action to foster sustainable growth," mentions Harsh Mehrotra, co-founder and CEO of Blue Nudge. (IANSLife)

# The Great Hornbill Festival: Celebrating Naga cultures



The immersive TUTC (The Ultimate Travelling Camp) repitches their eco-luxurious Kohima Camp for the 10-day Great Hornbill Festival after a three-year hiatus.

An annual cultural meet of native tribes, the Great Hornbill Festival is held every year from December 1 to 10 at the Naga Tribal Village.

Offering travellers an exclusive opportunity to experience the festivities and cultural extravaganza of enthralling dances, traditional sports, local music and even mock fights, while being immersed in TUTC's bespoke hospitality, Kohima Camp by TUTC opens on November 29 for a period of 14 days, until December 12 this year.

Located in deep forest slopes, a mere 20 minutes drive from the venue of the Festival, the Camp features 8 intimate and uber-luxurious canvas tents that aesthetically combine modern luxuries, sophisticated design and earthy elements borrowed from the region's raw landscape.

Another TUTC signature, Kohima Camp's team of highly-trained guides craft personalised itineraries of alluring activities and excursions as per the guests' preferences.

Besides guided experience of the Hornbill Festival, the team consciously curates tribal village visits that unfold the region's age-old culture and influences. For, besides the authentic traditional Naga villages that are all unique and command individual identities, there are some that are inspired by the Japanese while a few others by the British.

Surprise picnics, sundowners with local music, interactions with the local tribes, campfires with many stories and anecdotes, talks on various aspects of the astonishing local culture etc are also curated.

Kohima Camp by TUTC is a 3.5 hour-drive from Imphal's Bir Tikendrajit International Airport. (IANSLife)

# We still need more art around queer narratives: Filmmaker Raghuvir Joshi

Filmmaker Raghuvir Joshi's movie *Sahela*, an Australian production in English, set to make its South Asian premiere at the Jio MAMI Mumbai International Film Festival 2023 is inspired by his own lived experience of having discovered his sexuality post-marriage.

"It was a big milestone in my life and I had to express it through the medium of film. I directed a short film called Yaman a few years ago which then became the proof of concept for the feature film, *Sahela*," he tells IANS. He however adds that it would be unfair to call the feature film an 'extension' of *Yaman* as the story and characters, and the milieu itself is very different. "But yes, the emotional core is the same, of love and loss."

*Sahela*, shot in Australia, boasts of a cast including Antonio Aakeel (*Eaten by Lions*, *Tomb Raider*) and Anula Navlekar (*Brahman Naman*, *BA Pass*) in lead roles along with Sheeba Chaddha, Vipin Sharma, Harish Patel, Anita Patel and Nicholas Brown.

The film captures the journey of Vir Oza and Nitya Behl, a young married couple residing in Western Sydney. Struggling beneath the weight of Indian familial expectations and ingrained gender norms, Vir and Nitya's paths intersect at a critical breaking point, propelling Vir to disclose his true sexuality to Nitya. This revelation causes a disconnect between the couple, casting a cloud of societal disgrace over their family's deeply held cultural values.

As Vir embarks on a voyage of self-discovery, Nitya grapples with the very fabric of her own reality, leading them down pathways of exploration and transformation. Albeit still emotionally tethered to each other, they unearth an alternate perspective on love.

"My growth as an artist and a human being in this film has been exponential. I love the process of filmmaking as much as I am passionate about telling stories.

Both go hand in glove for me. I feel so invigorated after this experience. I want to make newer mistakes and get better at my craft," he says about the experience of directing the film.

Stressing that it was an incredible experience surrounded by some of the best HODs in the world of cinema, from Nialdri Kumar (sitar maestro) to Wayne Pashley (Sound designer, Oscar-nominated for *Elvis*) and the DOP, Michael McDermott who shot *Hounds of Love*, he adds, "it was a great learning curve as an artist."

Talk to him about the fact that there isn't enough art, literature, or cinema on same-sex relationships produced in India and he feels while things have changed for the better in the recent past even in mainstream Hindi cinema and OTT platforms, we still need more art around queer narratives.

"We can't be fatigued by queer films and art just yet. It should not matter if they are cliches or too abstract, mainstream or niche - so be it. Let there be more ... we need a bigger collective voice around queer films and art in general in our society. Let's keep fighting the good fight, continue to speak truth to power and soon we shall see the rainbow at the end of the tunnel."

For someone who has been living in both India and Australia, it has been an enriching experience straddling these two worlds. Stating that both these cities - Mumbai and Sydney - are melting pots of diversity and culture, he adds, "I am lucky to absorb and witness. I value it immensely as it has expedited my growth as an artist."

Joshi, who was a student of Hindustani Classical music as a child, started seriously considering film during his school years. "It started with visualizing stuff I would read. Be it a book or an article in the newspaper. And those visual triggers led me to pursue the medium of film." (IANS).

# 'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, NOVEMBER 5, 2023

## 'Birthday Forecast'

Moon square Jupiter on your solar return chart ensures an excellent year ahead. This will be the year of completion and transition. You may need to let go of things that no longer serve their purpose, and hold on to things that have a future. You will get to clean out dead wood, not necessarily for new beginnings. You will also feel as if a burden has been taken off your shoulders. The coming year can be a year of giving of yourself. Advice - let go of things that are holding you back, give of yourself and express your sympathetic, compassionate side.

## 'This week for you'

**Aries:** (March 21 - April 20) You are industrious and earnest in all that you do. This attitude bodes well for making good progress at work as the focus is on working relationships, partners, and colleagues. A cheerful and hopeful outlook increases your chances of gaining cooperation from others. This is a good time to promote harmony and good relations with friends and family members. Monetary matters seem to weigh you down with their complexities. You are blessed with intuition and foresight that take you in the right direction. You are relaxed within and relate well with others at home and at work.

**Taurus:** (April 21 - May 21) Family matters as well as monetary concerns move smoothly but not at the pace you would like them to. Advice from older people in the family or someone close to you would help you finalize your financial plans. You plan for your career, setting goals and objectives and planning the right moves with the larger picture in mind. You cultivate your friendships and revel in the intoxication of a new love or a love re-kindled. At home a number of fine developments take place.

**Gemini:** (May 22 - June 21) You establish your authority and take the responsibility. Self-confidence and action are highlighted and you follow your instincts as you seek to enhance your spiritual strength too. You focus on inner growth to keep pace with the assertion of authority and responsibility. This holds true for your personal life too - you realize the strength of the mind. At times you feel fun loving, energetic, and willing to explore new ideas. You discuss these aspects with your soul mate as you look to give a practicality to your new learning. Investments and speculation are favoured.

**Cancer:** (June 22 - July 22) This is an excellent phase in which you bring more harmony and pleasant interactions to your relationships with loved ones as suffering and negativity will be eliminated once you make a significant change in personal relationships. You would expand your social circle and make more contact with groups and friends. Avoid hasty and rash decisions when it comes to change. The matter will need thinking through not procrastination. A can-do spirit will help overcome any obstacles that you may encounter.

**Leo:** (July 23 - August 23) You are ambitious, authoritative and courageous. This period brings for you socializing, romance and stability at the work place. It is an excellent time to make a lifestyle change and you will also improve infrastructure of the office. Any unresolved argument may create rifts in your relationships, take a softer approach in your interactions when comes to the family related matters. Your actions and emotions are balanced as you bring more accuracy in your work area. Economy at home and management of business and work are important issues. Personal relations are satisfying and you have plenty of goodwill and friendships around you. You are likely to get back to fitness routines and diet programs to enhance health and energy.

**Virgo:** (August 24 - September 22) You tend to entertain people with your conversation and sense of humor. You may change your personal style to present a glamorous and unconventional image. Your social life would be busy as you would popular among this people. Domestic relationships and the home environment would be harmonious and peaceful by self-efforts and care. People in fine arts, creative line and communication related fields would give a non-traditional blend to their creations and get popularity by the work done. Communicative abilities will largely be applied to professional world, ambitions where knowledge and education are pursued in order to enhance career prospects and financial matters. There may be minor health ailment troubling you as you need to give more attention to your health.

**Libra:** (September 23 - October 23) This period brings entertainment, communication and popularity among people and harmonious relations in personal and professional life. Your main focus is love, harmony and unity in family. This is a very significant phase, when you are inspired creatively and emotionally. Love and emotional bonds keep the family and loved ones together. You are more attractive when you show your responsible, managerial, ambitious, and constant side. You exhibit individualism and brilliance in handling business ventures and collaborations. Sharing ideas, talking, writing, and studying can be good ways to handle any stress that crops up. This is a fabulous time for joining a gym or stepping up exercise and health routines.

**Scorpio:** (October 24 - November 22) People in fine arts, creative line and communication related fields would give a non-traditional blend to their creations and gain popularity through their work. Communicative abilities will largely be applied to professional world ambitions where knowledge and education are pursued in order to enhance career prospects and financial matters. You tend to entertain people with your conversation and sense of humor. You may bring about some changes in the image that you present. Your social life would be busy as you would popular among friends and family. Domestic relationships and the home environment would be harmonious and peaceful by self-efforts, love and care. There may be some minor health ailment as you need to give more attention to your health. Stick to a regular exercise routine and regular pattern of nutritious diet.

**Sagittarius:** (November 23 - December 21) You would face new circumstances, changes and unfamiliar situations. A positive approach and well-spoken words would benefit as you gain favors from people in authority and power. You may take up new assignments and projects that would bring creativity and innovation 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. Being more loving and appreciative relationships with your children may also figure prominently. Your romantic affair and pleasure-seeking activities give you a big boost of confidence and your personal magnetism runs high to be appreciated. This is an especially spiritual time for you, this is a time when you renew your energy and consider what things are important to you.

**Capricorn:** (December 22 - January 20) Authority figures, elders, parents, or influential people in your life tend to support and respect you. They are more willing to help you on your road to success. An event may occur that expands your career or professional interests, and you derive more pleasure from these activities. More freedom is likely to be experienced in your career. Integrity and honesty will get you everywhere now. The more willing you are to put yourself in the limelight, the more positive the rewards. You need to keep your eyes open for opportunities and furthering family relations. You would be sensible about your diet, health, hygiene, and fitness needs.

**Aquarius:** (January 21 - February 18) You are likely to take your hobbies and talents more seriously. This is an excellent week for materializing a personal hobby and turning it into a business. You are bold, courageous and frank while dealing with controversial, professional and family matters. You are likely to spend time in different places and work closely in new associations as you combine good luck and good management to each other. Self-confidence and action are highlighted and you tend to instinctively know the right course of action to take in most situations. Excellent work opportunities for those working with overseas and you may go out for business dealings. You accept the individuality of loved ones and that would be helpful to resolve your conflicts and move ahead in harmony. Stress may crop up at unexpected turns and this would require you to look at some lifestyle changes and even incorporate some techniques like exercise and meditation.

**Pisces:** (February 19 - March 20) You would be able to give an unconventional look to your work and creativity. Your beloved ones, children and hobbies are in prominence. Pleasure and amusement play an important role in personal relations. You would be more sensitive and dedicated to your professional life. You focus on having fun, enjoying romance and expressing yourself creatively. Your hobbies, leisure time, moments spent with family and children, all come into focus. You find joy in expressing your views and ideas with people around you. You are likely to feel good in general, and you tend to spread the joy and happiness. You work hard to meet the goals. This is a good time to build your skills, to get organized, and to attend to your health and wellbeing.

"Pride makes us artificial and humility makes us real."

— Thomas Merton

The Shillong Times

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Rationing the poor

INDIA remains a poor nation – and over 60 per cent of its people need to be fed directly from government funds. A reassertion of this pathetic scenario came from Prime Minister Narendra Modi himself as he campaigned for the BJP in the poll-bound states. His offer was that the PM Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana (PMGKAY) started in 2020, through the Covid-hit years and providing five kilo free foodgrains to the poor that was to end next month, would be extended by five more years. This is over and above the subsidized foodgrain scheme launched for this segment of the population by the UPA-II government in 2013. On the positive side, these governmental initiatives are proof that our governments care a wee bit for the underlings. The poor can rest assured that they need not starve.

In the past, western nations flushed with funds had demonstrated a commitment to such social security and welfare steps. The landmark decision by the UPA II a few months before the 2014 polls, made at the initiative of Sonia Gandhi to provide rice and wheat at highly subsidized prices under the National Food Security Act (NFSA), is written in golden letters. Since 2018, the BJD government in Odisha is giving five kilo free rice per person per month at Rs 1 per kg to the poor over and above the benefits from the NFSA. The AIADMK-government in Tamil Nadu had come up with a lot of freebies for the poor. Governments in the southern states have been providing several freebies/kits to the poor. Considering the sad plight of the poor, such steps must be appreciated. This, even as the ulterior motive of these politicians is to win the votes of the poor. Evident here is a subtle combination of selfish interests and public interest.

A proverb from ancient Chinese philosopher Lao Tsu has this to say: "If you give a hungry man a fish, you feed him for a day; but if you teach him how to fish, you feed him for a lifetime." When we transport its meaning to the present times, the advice to rulers is to provide the people with opportunities for work, rather than feeding them, as this would simultaneously turn the nation too more productive and eventually wealthy. Governments must help create more work opportunities in rural areas (farms) and jobs through fast-paced industrialization in urban areas. India has done a commendable job in turning barren lands into farms through the spread of irrigation facilities. The manufacturing sector, however, remains under-performing. The corruption and lingering Licence Raj are dissuading potential entrepreneurs from starting or profitably running such ventures. PM Modi failed to change such scenarios for the better.

The Audacity to rule

By H H Mohrmen

At a workshop held recently, a former professor of a university said, "In Meghalaya we have governments but there is no governance." The wise professor also clarified to the youths in the workshop, the difference between governance and government. He said it looks like the state of Meghalaya has not really experienced good governance since its inception. The question is how the politicians still have the audacity to contest for elections when they have not been able to provide good governance to the state? The very fact that the High Court of Meghalaya has to step on the toes of the government and direct it to ensure that its agencies serve the public that they are supposed to, is a glaring example of the lack of governance in the state.

**Court intervention on illegal transport of coal**  
That the Hon'ble High Court has to intervene in almost every activity of the state is one illustration that the government is not able to rule as per its mandate. In the last few years the Court spent many precious hours of its time trying to take the government to task with regards to the illegal transport of coal from the state which happened despite the coal ban. It is not that coal was transported by air and that it can happen without the knowledge and the support of the different agencies of the government like the Transport Department, the Police and the Directorate of Mining & Resources. It is only because of the Court's intervention that the illegal transport has now stopped and the infamous group of people who benefitted from the illegal activities called the 'High-level' have also vanished into thin air.

The High Court also had to intervene on the issue of illegal toll gates and overloading of trucks despite the fact that there are 26 weighbridges and six weigh pads in the state. The Court ordered the implementation of stringent measures to ensure no overloading trucks plying on the roads in the State.

**Court had to intervene even in road construction**  
The unfortunate situation in the state is such that the Court has to take the government to task even on issues like road construction and repairs. I mean what is the government expected to do if it cannot even construct a good road for the public. The sub-standard construction of the Jowai bypass by the company owned by one

of the important members in the cabinet has to be condemned in the first place. Not even embarrassed with the construction which is sub-standard and not properly designed for the safety of the travelers, the bypass had to be repaired almost immediately. The audacity of this government to rule or rather misrule the state by constructing roads which are of poor quality is obvious from the fact that this same road was repaired last year and it is now in a pathetic condition.

The High Court in the case titled: Kynjaimon Amse Vs. National Highway Authority of India (NHAI) and others has also pulled up NHAI for its negligence over the condition of National Highway 6. The Court has also taken cognizance of the negligence of the local officials of the state who failed to report the condition of the road in time. The major cause of this embarrassing situation is the fact that in the State of Meghalaya not only is there a deep contractor-politician nexus; the fact is the politicians themselves are the contractors. The politicians by default are contractors because they are engaged in contract work by using their family member's name.

I think all politicians across party lines are engaged in contract works and sadly, they do not think that it is wrong or that there is a conflict of interest in the process.

**Court intervention on Jowai waste**

Perhaps the most embarrassing situation is when the Meghalaya High Court had to intervene even in trivial matters like waste management. In the case titled: Synjuk ki Wahah Chnong Jowai Vs. State of Meghalaya and others, the Meghalaya High Court bench comprising Chief Justice Sanjib Banerjee and Justice W. Diengdoh directed the government to ensure that there is no piling up of waste or garbage in any place in Jowai till the waste disposal unit is commissioned. The waste issue in Jowai has grabbed headlines for many months in the last few years and yet the government was not able to resolve the issue. This then compelled a private citizen to go to the Court for resolving the issue. Unfortunately waste collection in Jowai is done as usual and segregation of waste at source is not implemented. The town

waste management is now back to square one and the irony is that the citizens do not know where their waste is being disposed of by the Jowai Municipal Board.

**Construction on the banks of the river**

Protecting the rivers in the State is one area which consecutive governments have failed. The once beautiful river which flows through the middle of the city would have been a natural beauty but for the lack of governance. The river is now not even a river but a drain which carries all the filth of the city. A similar fate awaits the other rivers in the State if we only rely on the Government and the respective Autonomous District Councils.

Now the Court in a case Cleanliness of Umiam Lake Vs. State of Meghalaya has ordered banning construction 50 meters from the river bank. The Court in order to ensure protection and conservation of water bodies in the state directed the state and local authorities to not allow construction within 50 meters of the high-water mark of the water body. The irony here is that again the onus lies on the different government agencies that will implement and enforce the order. There are constructions going on beside and on different rivers in the State but the agencies are not enforcing the order in letter and spirit. Do citizens now need to go to court for this too and if that is the case then isn't it true that governance is literally going down the drain in the state?

**ADC staffs without salary**

The failure of governance in the state is also obvious from the fact that the Government has failed to come up with a permanent solution to solve the issue of non-payment of salaries to the staff of the two ADCs in the State. Of the three ADCs in the State, the Jaintia and the Garo Hills Autonomous District Councils have not received their salaries on a regular basis. The NPP cannot wash its hands of the matter and say that it is the problem created by the previous Executive Committees in the respective ADCs. The truth is that this is the second term that the NPP is at the helm of power in the state and also in all the three ADCs too. So if the issue is delayed further then it is only because the NPP has failed the people of the State.

**Stem without a bud**

Ordinarily you cannot win a trophy or an award without achieving certain feats, but the State Government has recently received an award for its program with a fancy name called Sustainable Transport and Efficient Mobility Society (STEMS). Everybody knows that this project is still-born as the Government is unable to implement it successfully yet it received the award. This is why one should not trust government awards.

**Political appointments**

Another feat that this Government has achieved which no other government in the past has accomplished is in political appointments. This Government made political appointments left, right and centre with no consideration

of how this will affect the public exchequer. Almost all defeated MLAs belonging to the NPP were accommodated and appointed to different posts with various pay and perks. It may be mentioned that the MLAs who belong to the different ruling parties were also accommodated and appointed to different posts with pay and perks equivalent to minister or cabinet ministers as the case may be. Perhaps the incumbent Chief Minister is the only one in the history of the State who has the maximum number of people to advise him on payment.

The irony is that no pressure group has ever protested against this blatant spending of public money. Even the new political party which was established with the sole objective of fighting corruption in the State has not done anything to protest against this misuse of public money. The VPP is keeping mum with regards to political appointments which are eating the vitals of this poor state.

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The audacity of politicians to pretend that they are ruling the State and are performing their duty is but a sham and the height of deception.

Administering the public universities

By H. Srikanth

Administering public universities in India was never easy. In recent years, it has become more difficult because of the interplay of different internal and external forces. With several academic and administrative departments, affiliating colleges, hundreds of faculty members, officers and supporting staff, the public universities resemble mini-empires. Every empire has issues to address; universities are no exception.

To meet public demand for increasing access to higher education, the central and state governments have established many universities and other institutions of higher education. Although there is an increase in the number of colleges and universities, there has been no corresponding increase in the budget allocation for the education sector, higher education in particular. Consequently, public universities are forced to work with limited funds, which are barely sufficient to meet the demands for expansion of infrastructure and human resources in the university. The funds are inadequate to meet the requirements of new academic departments, classrooms, hostels, laboratories, library, research and other facilities. There is general resentment among the students and faculty. The fund crisis and administrative restrictions make it difficult to address the stakeholders' aspirations for admissions, appointments, promotions, and increments. The widening gap between the resources available and growing public expectations has laid the ground for conflicts between the university administration and the stakeholders.

How effectively the public universities meet the demands and expectations depend considerably on the ability of the academic leadership. Public universities are not bureaucratic institutions. It is not possible to handle students, teachers and non-teaching staff, the way the entrepreneurs or bureaucrats deal with their employees and subordinates. Those heading public universities should have an in-depth knowledge of how such universities function. Persons heading institutions of higher education command respect and acceptability if they have a sound academic record. But experience shows that academic qualifications and academic experience alone will be of no avail if the academic administrators lack administrative capacity to handle complex issues and carry along with them different stakeholders. Institutional heads must be well conversant with the rules, and dynamic enough to take risks when needed. They should neither be meek nor stubborn. Academic leaders should have sound judgment and good communication skills. They should know where to push and also when to step back. Having good rapport with the government and political leaders is as important as having working relations with the staff and students. No plan for the university, however flawless that be in theory, cannot be implemented without the willing cooperation of the teachers, non-teaching employees and students.

Most successful Vice-Chancellors in the country evince the qualities I have mentioned. Unfortunately, their number is insignificant. In recent years, it has dwindled partly because of the politicization of the appointment of heads of higher education institutions (HEIs). At one time, the state and central governments would appoint persons with high educational qualifications and personal integrity as institutional heads but in recent years, the governments—both central and state—look for political loyalists to fill the positions. Qualifications, experience and character are secondary factors. What is expected of such heads is whether they are ready to toe the party line. Despite their highest degree and experience, VCs are expected to submit meekly to the bidding of academically less qualified ministers. The respect that the VCs commanded at one time is no longer visible today. We hardly see any critical debates and meaningful discussions on the philosophy or purpose of education. All that

the heads of the institutions discuss when they meet are the technicalities of how to implement what the political masters want. The heads of institutions are aware they hold positions only as long as they enjoy their masters' blessings. Hence they consider the appeasement of their political masters more important than working for the betterment of higher education. These days, we rarely find the academic heads daring to take a stand against the dictat of the government.

This is not to say that all heads of HEIs are incompetent. Even in the politically suffocating environment, we can see some VCs who demonstrate the urge to do something good. But their ability to deliver is often constrained by political and economic factors. Every day, universities receive so many notices and circulars from the UGC and the Ministry ordering them to meet deadlines. They even demand the universities to organize non-academic functions and send photos and videos as proof. In the name of better governance, new rules and administrative practices are imposed, making it difficult for universities to carry on day-to-day administration. Most often the heads and deans are busy compiling information and data to meet deadlines for sending one report after another. As the administrative burden has increased enormously, there is little time for the academic heads to focus on teaching and research. Failing to fill in the academic and administrative vacancies on time, many universities in the country are working at sub-optimal level and are not able to meet public aspirations. Unable to satisfy and lead all the stakeholders, the heads of institutions rely on coteries to run the day-to-day administration.

No university can insulate itself from events happening around them. Social and political environment influences the functioning of the universities. In India, factors like caste, religion, ethnicity, regional feelings have a bearing on the working of educational institutions. Political factors such as government policies, party politics and pressure groups also exercise their influence on academic institutions. The nature and extent of their influence may vary from state to state. The universities led by mature academic leadership can effectively manage and direct these influences in a positive direction. If the institutional heads lack insight and leadership, then the universities become the haven for regressive politics.

While acknowledging the importance of leadership, one should not forget that even the heads of institutions should work and exercise powers within the legal framework, respecting the Act, Statutes and Ordinances of the universities. Not just the VCs but other functionaries such as the Registrar, FO, deans and heads of the departments also play a conscious role in discharging their duties. All bodies in the university - Academic Council, Executive Council, the Court, the faculty and the staff - should perform their assigned duties and functions. There should be a clear division of labour, and checks and balances, so that no individual or body wields excessive powers to the detriment of the whole.

Apart from fighting for the demands of the members they represent, the associations representing the teachers, employees and students sometimes confront the administration on issues such as corruption, favoritism, discrimination and vindictive attitudes of the administration. They act as watchdogs to ensure that authorities work responsibly and not violate the university rules. While acknowledging their role, it is necessary to ensure that their activism does not promote anarchy. Their relations with the administration should always be professional. While it is alright to criticize and oppose wrong administrative decisions, it is also necessary to lend support to all good initiatives taken by the administration. Their opposition should be constructive and they should avoid getting personal in their dealings with the university officials.

Letters to the Editor

What's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander

Editor,  
The row over the Cherry Blossom festival has spiralled in all walks of society lately. It is baffling yet intriguing to see the sudden enthusiasm of holiness of the many hypocrites when in reality they won't be able to recite a single relevant Biblical reference to back their hegemonic demands. The Government should not bend to the whims and fancies of these so called Christian crusaders and if it does then it smacks of an appeasement attitude. The picture painted by the many self-proclaimed devotees that this particular festival will not be held, are too idealistic to consider. The Government should maintain equipoise between different sects of our societies by distancing itself from any religious affairs.  
Any dealings with religion should be maintained at the private and individual sphere. The spirit of liberalism should prevail upon each one of us for a state of peace and solidarity. "What's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander," holds true in this context. The Government while accommodating one section of society should not do so at the cost of the other, keeping in mind that spiritual matters should be kept aloof from politics.  
Yours etc.,  
Kevin Shangpliang,  
Via email

Leaking water pipes of Shillong

Editor,  
Today, I would like to draw your attention towards a pressing issue that affects the daily lives of Shillong's residents - the problem of leaking water pipes. Shillong, known for its natural beauty and vibrant culture, has been grappling with a growing concern - a deteriorating water supply system. The leaking water pipes in various parts of the city have become a significant cause for concern. This issue is not just an inconvenience but poses a serious threat to the city's water security.  
Consequences of Leaking Water Pipes:  
Wastage of a Precious Resource. Every drop that leaks from these pipes is a wasted resource, especially in a world where water scarcity is a growing concern.  
Financial Burden: The constant repairs and maintenance of these pipes put a strain on the municipal budget, which could be utilized for other essential services.  
Health Risks: Leaking pipes can lead to contaminated water, increasing the risk of water borne diseases.  
Environmental Impact: The wastage of water has ecological implications, impacting our local environment and water bodies.  
It's time for all of us to come together and address this issue.  
Here's how each one of us can help:

\* Report Leaks: If we notice any leaking pipes, we should report them to the local authorities promptly. Our vigilance can make a significant difference. Let's Conserve Water: In our homes, practice water conservation by fixing any leaks within our properties and let's use water judiciously.

\* Support Maintenance Efforts: Understand that the municipality is working tirelessly to fix these issues. We ought to be patient and supportive.

\* Advocacy: Let's join or support local initiatives that advocate for water infrastructure improvements in Shillong.

Water is a fundamental resource, and its wastage affects us all. Let's take collective responsibility and work towards a Shillong where clean and accessible water is a reality for every citizen. Together, we can overcome the challenge of leaking water pipes and build a sustainable and thriving community.  
Yours etc.,  
Kishor Ramchiary,  
Via email

Why indulge in name change?

Editor,  
Recently a high-level committee for social sciences constituted by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) to revise the school curriculum has recommended replacing 'India' with 'Bharat' in new text-

books. This is a follow-up to government's actions of sending out a G20 Summit dinner invitation in the name of the 'President of Bharat' instead of President of India and declaring Narendra Modi as the 'Prime Minister of Bharat' in a government booklet on the Prime Minister's visit to Indonesia for the ASEAN - India Summit and the East Asia Summit.

All these happened just after the opposition parties made an alliance under the banner of Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance or INDIA. The ruling party at the Centre after naming various programmes and initiatives as Digital India, Skill India, Start-up India, Stand Up India and Make in India, suddenly started creating an impression that there was an urgent need to replace internationally popular name of our country (India) with the local name (Bharat).

If such a replacement really happened in every sphere, it would result in a loss of valuable time and public money. The Supreme Court of India, India Post, Reserve Bank of India, SBI, CBI, IITs, Government of India and many others are to change their nameplates in such a scenario. From currency notes to letterheads everything is to be changed.

The Outlook Business report estimated a whopping expenditure for 'India' to become 'Bharat' using the Darren Oliver method. Oliver calculated the cost of renaming a country when Swaziland was renamed

Eswantini. Apart from this huge financial expenditure, our country has to bear a terrible emotional cost. 'India' is a word that not only helped emotional integration of our country but also it acted as an emotional and historical bridge to connect with the rest of the world. By this word, the world recognises a country that has a civilisation (Indus valley) as early as in 2500 BCE. It is pertinent to recall the name of a book, Arthur. Llewellyn Basham's 'The Wonder That Was India' to understand the value of the word 'India' as it is totally associated with our country's historical as well as present international identity. It would be a great loss if this emotional international connect has to go out of the window to satisfy a temporary need of the ruling political party.

Our Constitution accepted both India and Bharat as the name of our country but rightly gave priority to India over Bharat by declaring "India that is Bharat" and not vice versa. Article 1(1) of the Constitution of India clearly says, "India, that is Bharat, shall be a Union of States." This was a judicious step. Many countries like Japan, Germany and China gave priority to their respective international names over their local names to get maximum advantage in international trade, politics and global recognition.

Nippon gave priority to its internationally popular name Japan. Bundesrepublik Deutschland also did

the same to its international name Germany. Similarly Zhongguo (or Zhonghua Renmin Gong He Guo) does not mind to be recognised as China (or People's Republic of China). South and North Korea embraced the English name for the same reason. Spanish 'España' also accepted English 'Spain' as the official name of their country. There is no problem in retaining two names of a country. But it is a wise decision to give priority to an internationally accepted name over the local name.

India is as much a foreign word as the word 'Hindu' is. 'Hindu' is a Persian cognate form of the Sanskrit 'Sindhu' which came into currency with the Achaemenid Persian conquest of the Indus valley that began in the 6th century BCE. As a matter of fact many words in Indian languages like 'Hindustan' have a foreign root. But they have been assimilated in Indian languages and culture.

If the process of replacing internationally recognised name of our country with the local name continued, it would result in a considerable loss to the exchequer and an irreparable damage to our international position and identity.

Yours etc.,  
Sujit De,  
Kolkata

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

"The key to successful leadership today is influence, not authority."  
— Ken Blanchard

The Shillong Times

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Have women lost their voice?

IT is said that "Voice is Agency." The recent case where a well-heeled businessman stabbed his wife for whatever reasons, should have raised the hackles of all women's organisations in the State. They should have voiced out their protests vehemently. This incident should have prodded the State Commission for Women to take the case up suo-moto. After all, this Commission was created to address the very issue of violence against women which could be physical, mental or by use of harsh words etc. But there has been a stunning silence from all quarters. This is a frightening scenario and it reveals the indifference of women themselves

To what happens to one of their own. Since the controversy that arose about the outgoing Chairperson being involved in active politics and of campaigning actively in the last elections (an allegation she hotly denies) therefore being removed, which was at least about eight months ago the task of appointing another chairperson to this important body has been hanging fire. Why should it take so long to find a capable woman who can take on this job without fear or favour? The outgoing chairperson was known to be a member of the National Peoples' Party (NPP), yet she was appointed and there was not a whimper from the several women activists and women-led organisations in the State. Or is there a vacuum here too? These days the voices of women seem to have been muted. Yet voice in the only agency that women have to get their manifold grievances addressed. Has any women's organization approached the Social Welfare Minister, Paul Lyngdoh to urge him to speed up the appointment of an effective and efficient, non-political person to head the State Commission for Women? If not, why not? Why this indifference to the fact that an Agency meant to address violence against women has been headless for so long?

What is it that is delaying the process of the appointment of the Chairperson, State Commission for Women? Is the Government looking at appointing someone who will not be a trouble maker and will only adorn the office because she is appointed to it? Why must every appointee have political affiliations or be someone who is beholden to the Government for the appointment? Why can't things move flawlessly without any need for any push from any quarters. It has to be said of Meghalaya that some of the great women leaders it produced have now all passed away. The next generation of women leaders seem to have no spunk to take on those in power. If the educated women in the city remain silent, can it be expected that women from the rural outback of Meghalaya would raise their voices against the oppressions they face? Would they have the courage to speak up when their peers in the city are silent in the face of daily aggression into their rights? Matrilineal Meghalaya indeed is a contradiction in terms!

Anonymous political donations harming India's democratic system  
**Electoral bonds promoting crony capitalism**

By Nantoo Banerjee

Increasing secret business donations to political parties to help fight state and general elections threaten to harm India's democratic system. The practice protects the anonymity of contributors. If France, one of the world's most vibrant democracies, can ban political donations by business corporations, why do political parties in India need to raise election funds from undisclosed business barons? Business funding of political parties in India is increasing by leaps and bounds. Introduced by the government in 2018 as part of the finance bill in Lok Sabha, the electoral bonds are allowing business corporations to anonymously donate large sums of money to political parties, mostly those in power in both the states and the Centre.

The electoral bonds allow Indian citizens or a body incorporated in India to purchase bonds, enabling anonymous donations to political parties. It may not be wrong to suggest a quid pro quo factor is strongly linked with such anonymous political donations. The essence of democracy is its people-oriented nature. Unfortunately, political parties in India keep the people in the dark about the sources of their election funds. The existing law needs to be amended to make political donations transparent.

Almost all major democracies in the world have laws on financial transparency in political life. India, the world's largest democracy following a multi-political party system, is different. The country's political parties fight shy of disclosing the details of their sources of funds in support of their vigorous election campaigns. Few will disagree that the anonymous funding of political parties before national or state elections is against the democratic ethos. In India, actual spending by leading political parties and their candidates during the elections are believed to be far in excess of the ceilings prescribed by the Election Commission. Cash plays the king in democratic India's state and national elections, mocking the concept of financial

transparency in political life. It challenges one of the key ethics of democracy that is to ensure free and fair elections.

The electoral bond system has vastly increased business funding of political parties. Introduced by the government in 2018 as part of the finance bill in Lok Sabha,

facie perceived certain shortcomings in the scheme's transparency. The five-member Supreme Court bench, headed by Chief Justice D Y Chandrachud, felt that the current system has created an "information black hole." The bench stated that the problem with the electoral bond scheme was the



the electoral bonds are allowing business corporations to anonymously donate large amounts to political parties, mostly those in power in the states and at the Centre. For instance, the Bharatiya Janata Party, ruling at the Centre and also in a number of states, received about three-fourths, or 76 percent of the electoral bonds sold in 2019-20. The Election Commission data showed that the Congress party got just around nine percent of the electoral bonds, worth a total of Rs.3,355 crore, sold in 2019-20. Interestingly, over 96 percent of West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee-led Trinamool Congress (TMC)'s income came from electoral bonds in 2021-22, revealed the party's audited annual report. It said out of the TMC's total income of Rs. 545.74 crore in 2021-22, as much as Rs.528.14 crore came from electoral bonds. It also said that only Rs.14.36 crore came from fees/subscriptions/collections from primary party members. The TMC showed an income of only Rs.42 crore from electoral bonds in 2020-21.

Now that the validity of the present form of electoral bonds has been challenged before the Supreme Court of India, the apex court prima

selective confidentiality to the donor's name and the political party to whom the contribution was made. "The other problem is that a donor may not necessarily be the purchaser of the electoral bond as a corporate donating a huge sum can ask a large number of people to buy electoral bonds by paying a premium over the cost price, then aggregate it to give it to political parties. This does not rule out the play of black money," the bench observed.

It is feared that in its current form, the electoral bonds may be utilised by the country's business barons to establish a strong grip over the government's economic policies at both the Centre and state levels. The elected government's pro-poor initiatives are mostly limited to doles — cash or in kind such as free rations. While the political parties and the rich continue to manipulate each other to build and protect the system to their advantage. Going by the Oxfam report, India's top one percent owned more than 40.5 percent of the country's total wealth in 2021, highlighting the large disparity in wealth distribution in the country.

The report said over 40 percent of the wealth created in India between 2012 and

2021 had gone just to one percent of the population while only three percent had trickled down to the bottom 50 percent. The democracy and the political system continue to favour the rich and help ruling party satraps and their followers amass money. The ongoing selective CBI and ED raids on the assets of political leaders and their henchmen provide a glimpse of the faulty democratic system increasingly promoting financial corruption. This also explains why transparency in electoral funding is important for the proper functioning of the democratic system. In fact, electoral bonds pose a threat to Indian democracy.

In France, the Law on Financial Transparency in Political Life, 1988, as amended in 2011, 2013, 2015 and 2016, and the Electoral Code regulate the financing of political parties. They provide comprehensive limits on the private income of political parties. The law bans donations from business corporations, foreign entities, trade unions and anonymous donors. There are also limits on how much political parties and candidates can receive. In Germany, corporate donations to political parties are banned but not on donations from trade unions.

According to a University of Warwick study of donations to political parties in the UK over the last 20 years, political donations have almost tripled over the period, rising from £41 million in 2001 to £101 million in 2019. Individual giving has also risen substantially, with 60 percent of donations in 2019 coming from private individuals. The Federal Election Commission in the US maintains a database of individuals who have made contributions to federally registered political committees. If the developed democratic countries are so concerned about the financial transparency in political life, must India stay aloof in the matter? Anonymous election donations in India are encouraging crony capitalism, fostering close and mutually advantageous relationships between business barons and political rulers at the cost of the poor, who vote parties to power. (IPA Service)

Religion & violence

An Indian perspective

By Dr D.K. Giri

There are verses in the Bible (Ecclesiastes 3:7-8) which prescribe war. The Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu quoted the Bible while justifying the ongoing war Israel has unleashed on Hamas following the savage terrorist attack by Hamas on 7 October. It is in order that we read those verses. "There is a time to tear apart and a time to sew together. There is a time to be silent and a time to speak. There is a time to love and a time to hate. There is a time for war and a time for peace."

Similar tenets can be found in other world religions that can be interpreted to legitimise war or any kind of violence. In Hinduism, the great epic Mahabharata is primarily the description and justification of war between righteous and the evil what is called 'Dharmayudha'. In Islam, it is jihad which means a holy war waged as a religious duty against the infidels.

In popular terms, many Islamic fundamentalists resort to violence against the so-called enemies of Islam. Hamas, Islamic jihadists in Gaza are precisely following this doctrine. Hamas Covenant comprising 36 articles all of which promote the basic Hamas goal of destroying the state of Israel through jihad, the Preamble of the Covenant states that, "Israel will exist and will continue to exist until Islam will obliterate it, just as it obliterated others before it."

In India, bombs exploded on 29 October in a religious convention of Jehova Witness (JWs). Over 2000 people had gathered in a small town in Kerala to pray and listen to sermons. Quite unbeknown to them, the bombs suddenly went off killing two worshippers and injuring over 40 of them. A former Witness who disagreed with the strictly orthodox interpretation of the Bible which makes them boycott elections, forsake any activity driven by nationalist symbols or spirit, refuse blood donation etc., triggered the serial blasts. The person triggering the bombs thought the Witnesses were a threat to and a burden on the country. Hence, he wanted to eliminate them. A section of the press was attributing the explosion to Hamas. It is not worth speculating. Investigations are underway. The lesson to draw from the above instances is the challenge of placing religion in public life and international relations. The next step is to establish India's perspective on religion in governance and internationalism so that we could conduct our diplomacy and articulate reactions to religious violence in our country and across the world.

Under Marxism, the dominant belief was to push religion completely into the backburner of governance. Karl Marx had famously said that "religion is the opium of the people". In European democracies, religion played a predominant role as churches controlled the state until they were separated organically from each other. In India, it was called secularism which meant for the state, equal respect to and equal distance from all religions. Whether that strategy is practicable is a matter of debate. I have written consistently that it was not. Secularism in India came to be understood as anti-religion which would not appeal to the public. People simply could not give up their religious practices or utterances.

Martin Luther King was at ease with the rhythms of the pulpit and he used Biblical language to supreme effect. As a clergyman and the son of a Baptist pastor, he was entitled to do so. But it does not always sit comfortably with others. The UK Prime Minister Tony Blair was embarrassingly messianic. President Obama's religious assertions were not so rapid, they re-

flected a mission. Perhaps the most infamous use of a word with religious subtext in recent years was when President George W Bush deployed crusade after the attack of 9/11 to describe the war on terrorism. Indian political leaders use religious metaphors in most of their speeches. The trend has become more evident in recent times.

The question that arises is whether politics is a secular business or a sacred trust. In fact, it could be both. Mahatma Gandhi displayed the combination of the two in his lifetime. The only departure or rider to Gandhian approach to religion could be identifying the mediating principles when religion and politics collide. Mahatma Gandhi was essentially a pluralist. While affirming his abiding faith in Hinduism, he respected, accommodated, and even embraced the practices of other religions.

Remember, the multi-faith prayers in his meetings. And the famous words that define his multi-religious approach, "I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the culture of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any."

Let us elaborate the critical need of mediating principles in resolving the conflict between religions and politics, which is causing sporadic violence across the world. We need not take the Marxist approach of derecognising religion. That is not practical. We also could not embrace the theocratic approach which is based on faith and multiple interpretations. Someone critically defined faith as 'the ability to believe in something you know is not the case'. So, without verifiable evidence one could not formulate plans on the basis of faith.

Look at the interpretations and divisions of perspectives in all religions. In India, Christians constituting 2.5 percent of population have over 200 denominations; Muslims are bitterly divided mainly between Shias and Sunnis, there are Bohras, Ahmadiyas and so on. Hindus again do not have a single text and have multiple Gods, several castes. So, no religion has a single perspective. In such a context of religions, how can it ever become the base for nation building? We have seen Pakistan splitting away from India on account of religious difference; Muslims creating their own state. Why did then Pakistan split and Bangladesh emerge as a separate country? The war between Israel and Hamas has to be seen from a religious angle and countries react accordingly. It is clear from the statements made by both parties and objectives scanned from their manifestoes, that the fight is a religious one not about territory. That is dangerous and should be called out.

Then we accept the premise that religion should not be the basis of governance or statehood, but it is an inalienable part of human life. There is a provision of human right enshrined in the United Nations Declarations which is called 'Freedom of Religion and Belief' (Article 18 of UDHR). So, we must defend it. But whenever a religious or any belief conflicts with politics defined by the Constitution of the country, the latter should prevail. That is the mediating principle. The Constitution of a country that reflects the acceptance and aspirations of each individual citizen, each faith group, non-believers should be supreme. The political leaders and citizens must be wary of this mediating principle while conducting and managing religions. —INFA

(The writer is Secretary General, Assn for Democratic Socialism)

Letters to the Editor

Exposing the Rot: Shillong's network of influence & intimidation

Editor, I write to express my concern about a dark underbelly of our city, a network of power and manipulation that corrodes the very fabric of justice, morality and fairness. The recent harrowing incident involving a businessman's unspeakable crime where he stabbed his wife in-front of his daughter, the brave testimony of the daughter, and the subsequent illegal actions of the police in protecting the accused have laid bare a sinister nexus that demands our immediate attention.

It is deeply disturbing to discover the extent to which individuals exploit their connections within influential circles in Shillong. The accused, Suresh P Singh, is not just a member and Director of the Shillong Club but also enjoys close ties with high-ranking government officials and police officers. The Ad-

ditional Advocate General of Meghalaya, who is also incidentally the Golf Secretary in the Golf Club under The Shillong Club, shares an evident camaraderie with Singh, as evident from their social media pictures. This connection sheds light on why Naushad Khan, the officer in charge of Laban Police Station and the AAGs brother, is desperate to manipulate this case.

What is equally concerning is the omission of relevant IPC (Indian Penal Code) sections in this case. Despite the daughter's explicit account of her father's attempt to murder her mother there is no reason for the inexplicable absence of the charge of attempt to murder. This blatant disregard for the severity of the crime showcases the lengths to which these influential individuals will go to protect one of their own.

Even more alarming is the calculated manner in which these individuals exploit their positions in social organisations. These individuals hobnob shamelessly with bureaucrats, high-ranking government officials, police officers, and even members

of the armed forces and top-notch business people, creating a web of corruption and cronyism. These connections, far from fostering genuine camaraderie, are used to shield criminals like Suresh P Singh.

It is also extremely sad and agonising to hear the victim's allegations that Suresh Singh has been bringing other women to their matrimonial home and doing all sorts of merrymaking which is completely opposed to the moral fabric of our society. These so-called intellectuals and torch bearers of morality parade around pretending to be part of social organisations while in reality they are pure scum.

It is crucial for us, as responsible citizens, to recognize the magnitude of this crisis. The audacity with which these individuals manipulate our system is not just a stain on our city, but a cancer that has infected our society. We must demand more than just accountability; we must demand a reckoning. Government officials who read this must understand that their complacency in the face of such blatant corruption and injustice will

not go unnoticed.

Let this be a wake-up call, not just for these high-profile people, but for our entire community. We must rally against this pervasive culture of fear, intimidation, and abuse of power. It is time to reclaim our institutions, restore justice, and ensure that the guilty are held accountable. The people of Shillong deserve nothing less.

In defiant solidarity!  
Yours etc.,  
Batskhem P. Marbaniang  
Via email

Is MDA a puppet of Assam CM?

Editor, We are attracted by the news item appearing in the front page of your esteemed Daily (S.T. October 9, 2023) on the caption "VPP terms MDA a Puppet of Assam C.M." The accusation and attribution might both be true as this writer has experienced an incident which may confirm the news item. This writer met a very important and very senior leader of NPP some time ago to discuss the problem arising unceasingly

in the disputed area of the well-known Blocks I & II. But instead of listening to the problem, the leader tried to divert my attention to the so-called popularity of the Assam CM who, according to him, might likely become the leader of the Northeast. I simply kept quiet and left him alone. But I must tell him and his likes now that except the NPP leaders of Meghalaya, the Assam CM will never be acceptable to any political leaders in other hill states like Mizoram, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh nor in the rest of the other states in the northeast. Even in Meghalaya, perhaps with the exception of the NPP, no other party leaders would accept him as leader of the northeast insofar as the boundary dispute is concerned.

We the people of Jaintia Hills do not at all understand as to what motive Block-II was entrusted by the state government to the Regional Committee of Ri Bhoi district instead of the West Jaintia Hills district. Is the motive of the MDA to mislead, misguide and misinform the people of Jaintia Hills? It is feared that the consequences of the interstate discussion on the so-called remaining

six areas in the second phase would be much worse than the controversial MoU of the first phase. As a matter of fact, the case of Blocks I & II is of a different nature from the rest of the disputes. It is a case of re-transfer of the two Blocks to Jaintia Hills as per the pre-1951 Map which defines the constitutional boundaries of the erstwhile Jowai Sub-division and as approved by the Constituent Assembly of India, rather than a border or boundary dispute. As per its commitment declared on June 23 last which was widely circulated by the media in Shillong the next day, we trust the present state government will be able to convince Assam for the re-transfer. We also hope that if Assam does not yield but stick to its earlier suggestion that Meghalaya should move the Union Government under Article 3 of the Constitution, our State Government would act accordingly.

Yours etc.,  
Prof. P.M. Passah  
President, Jaintia Hills  
Solidarity & Welfare Union  
Via: e-mail

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

"It always seems impossible until it's done."

— Nelson Mandela

The Shillong Times

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Pressure and polls

AS the election season has dawned on the nation, this is time for one and all to apply pressure on leaders and "bend them like Beckham." A whole lot of freebies and other promises will now be in the offing. In the forefront of such "pushers" now are the unions of government employees across states, demanding that the Contributory Pension Scheme be scrapped and the Old Pension Scheme be restored. Notably, when the nation shifted to the CPS from OPS, a major rise in salary had been granted to government employees by way of 'compensation.'

After having accepted that too, the unions have started demanding a return to the OPS. Clearly, a tendency on the part of all is to have the cake and eat it too. Knowing the greed of politicians to win power, they will be ready and willing to go any lengths.

If so, the inherent dangers to the well-being of the national economy are beyond comprehension. Already, the pension bills of some state governments are higher than the salary bills. Sooner or later, other states will follow suit. As analysts point out, government employees forming only 3.2 percent of the workforce get nearly 20 percent of governmental earnings. 90 percent of the workforce – in private and the agricultural and service sectors, hardly have a finger in the governmental pie. What the poor, that form nearly 40 percent of the population, get is a paltry welfare pension or kits, which are justified because their earnings from the manual labour they put in are too meagre.

Manifestos are the key to feeding the greed of organised vested interests and other segments of the population that have bulk votes. The more avaricious or weak a politician running the affairs of the state or the nation is, the more the chances of vested interests extracting the maximum -- with a promise to vote him or his party back to power. The Congress party, which was in the wilderness in recent years, has come up with the promise of restoration of OPS and won the recent elections. So did the AAP. The states of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Punjab, Himachal Pradesh and Rajasthan have thus reverted to OPS. The manifestos of the Congress in Telangana and elsewhere might offer the same. Government employees claim the Congress, or the AAP, won the polls because their families voted en-bloc. Polls, rather, are fought on multiple issues. The Congress party's desire to return to power is understandable. But, the party also has a great history of service to the nation. When parties make decisions, they must uphold national interests.

# Cherry Blossom Festival: Are the criticisms justified?

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

As the date for the 2023 Shillong Cherry Blossom Festival draws near, another group has emerged from the woodwork criticising the festival. The Ri Bhoi Mihngi Presbytery, part of the Ri Bhoi Presbyterian Church Synod, has expressed that the festival is going to take place on a Sunday, which, according to them, amounts to disregarding the sentiments of churchgoers in the district and the broader state. Not long ago, the Khasi Jaintia Church Leaders Forum (KJCLF) also raised apprehensions about the festival concluding on a Sunday, which according to them is a sacred or holy day for Christians. However, it is not only the religious groups that have voiced their concerns regarding the Festival. Pressure groups from Ri Bhoi district, which include Meghalaya People United Front (MPUF), Ri-Bhoi Youth Organisation (RBYO), United Hynniewtrep Movement (UHM), Saindur Tipkur Tipka Ehrngiew Hynniewtrep (STIEH), and Meghalaya People's Social Organisation (MPSO), have also voiced their opposition against the Festival. And they are not the only ones.

In general, the criticism against the Festival can be divided into two groups, viz., religious groups unhappy that the festival is taking place on a Sunday, and groups and individuals who believe that the Festival is a waste of precious financial resources that could have been used productively elsewhere. In response to the criticisms, Tourism Minister, Paul Lyngdoh has hinted at a political motive behind the move to oppose the Shillong Cherry Blossom Festival. This allegation seems far-fetched but it is nevertheless important to evaluate the concerns raised by the different groups. Is the 2023 Shillong Cherry Blossom an affront to the devout Christians of the state and a waste of financial resources?

First of all, let's assume that organising the Festival on a Sunday is indeed a violation of the sacred nature of the day for Christians. The response to it, put very bluntly, is "So, what?" Meghalaya is not a Christian state, and as such, Christians don't have the privilege to define what should or should not happen in the State. If something were to be organised in the State, it should be based on convenience or feasibility and not on the whims and fancies of a religious group. At the moment, the Constitution of the country has defined India as being a secular state and not a theocracy.

By extension, Meghalaya is also a secular state where religion should be kept away from interfering in matters of state. By criticising the organisation of the festival on a Sunday, the Christian bodies are trying to hijack the state apparatus, which, for as long as the Constitution is in vogue should not be allowed. In fact, going down that route could be very harmful for Christians in the long run.

The Christian population in Meghalaya is around 75%. This is lower than the proportion of Hindus in India, which is around 80%. Ever since the election of the BJP, there have been overt and covert attempts to steer the country away from the ideals of secularism to one where Hindutva is the overriding principle. In a representative democracy where Christians are less than 5%, if ever India were to deviate from the idea of a secular country, it would be Hinduism that would capture the state apparatus, not Christianity. Once the idea of a Hindu Rashtra has been achieved, steps will be taken to implement MS Golwalkar's (RSS ideologue) observation from his book 'Bunch of Thoughts' (freely available online), where he labeled Christians as "bloodsuckers" and one of the three internal threats that India faces. If ever the idea of a Hindu Rashtra were to come true, what kind of policy is going to be instituted against Christians? That is something I will leave to the imagination of the readers (just imagine Palestine).

However, it does not mean that the scenario I have described will come to pass. There are still forces in the country that are against the destruction of the secular fabric of the Constitution. There is a need to build solidarity with such forces. But that cannot be done by practicing favouritism in Meghalaya, where the rights of other religious groups are being ignored by giving preference to the Christians. It is guaranteed that when the rights of religious minorities begin to be violated, the same Christian groups that are complaining about a festival on a Sunday will cry hoarse and appeal to the secular principles on which the country was founded. At that moment, that will be a very hypocritical appeal. Let's not go down a path that will not just be hypocritical but also detrimental to the prospects of secularism in the country.

The other complaint against the Shillong Cherry

Blossom Festival is that it is a waste of financial resources, considering the state is one of the poorest in the country and one of the least developed. Instead, it is argued that the amount should be spent on improving the facilities and amenities in the state while enhancing the delivery of services to the public. The argument is actually quite sound; money not spent on the Festival is actually money saved for the public. However, the amount of money that might be saved is not going to be enough to do all that is required to raise the standard of living in the state. According to media reports, the Government of Meghalaya is investing Rs 1.99 crore out of the total investment of Rs 9 crore. Rs two crore is a big amount, but not enough to solve the problems of the state. We need more money.

According to the 2023-24 state budget presented in the Assembly, the Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) of Meghalaya for 2023-24 (at current prices) is projected to be Rs 46,600 crore, amounting to a growth of 11.5% over 2022-23. This, however, will still be one of the lowest GDP figures in the country. The argument that Meghalaya is a small state does not hold water since Goa, which has just 16% of Meghalaya's area, already had a GDP of more than 80,000 crore in 2019-2020. Low GDP also translates to low Per Capita Net State Domestic Product or per capita income. According to the Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India, the Per Capita Net State Domestic Product of Meghalaya was only Rs. 98,572 during 2022-2023, which was the lowest of all the states for which data was available.

Curbing corruption, plugging leakages, and stopping extortion will help, but unless there is more money in the economy, it will be very difficult to increase the living standards of the citizens in the State. One thing that might seem counter-intuitive but is essential to remember is that "in order to make money, one has to spend money." The question, therefore, is not about saving the Rs 2 crore but about investing in such a way that it can generate more revenue from the State. Can the Shillong Cherry Blossom Festival be one such avenue?

The logic of the Shillong Cherry Blossom Festival is very simple: attract tourists from different parts of the country and abroad to attend

the festival, and the money they will spend on tickets and availing services in the State helps generate revenue for the State. In 2017, the festival was able to attract around 30,000 tourists to Shillong. If we assume that one tourist would have spent at least Rs 5,000 during the four-day period of the festival, the total business generated by this footfall would have been to the tune of Rs. 15 crores. Tourism Minister, Paul Lyngdoh, has claimed that this year the festival will have around one lakh visitors, which, if true, will create a total of Rs. 50 crores for the local businesses.

It is therefore not a surprise, as shown in the documentary 'Ha Lyndet Ki Tamasa' by the Youtube channel 4front Media, that many artists and business owners are looking forward to the Festival. In fact, one of the artists who will be taking part in the festival has appealed to the pressure groups not to take away his livelihood. There was some sadness and frustration in the voice, which is understandable given that artists cannot form an NGO and ask for 'donations'. The only thing they have is their talent, and what they want is an opportunity to showcase that. In the process, the economy of the state is also benefited, which in turn will mean more revenue to spend on development initiatives.

There was concern raised in the documentary about the misappropriation of funds, which is a genuine concern. That's where pressure groups can play an important role by filing for RTIs after the Festival to reveal the flow of funds and the people who got undue benefits. Then they can file a case in court where they can expose the losses that the state incurred because of the corruption. But until then, it is premature to say that the Festival is going to be a waste of financial resources. In fact, we need more of such festivals.

The 2023 Shillong Cherry Blossom Festival has got into a lot of controversy even before it has begun. Some concerns are genuine, though misguided, while others are just plain ridiculous. However, in a democracy, everyone has the right to voice their concerns. Now that the Festival is taking place, let's hope those against it can also respect the rights of others to enjoy and earn their livelihoods. That, in fact, will be the Christian thing to do.

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

# Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

There's Music In the Boos..!

Yes, there's music in the booping of a crowd. A music that lies within us and will only start playing when hardship or challenges or the booping of friends and enemies stirs us to try even harder in some venture where the world expects us to fail, and then we succeed, bringing through our success a melody, a rhapsody and a roaring crescendo that will be heard the world over!

There's a legend of a German baron who at his castle on the Rhine, stretched wires from tower to tower, so that the winds would convert them into an Aeolian harp.

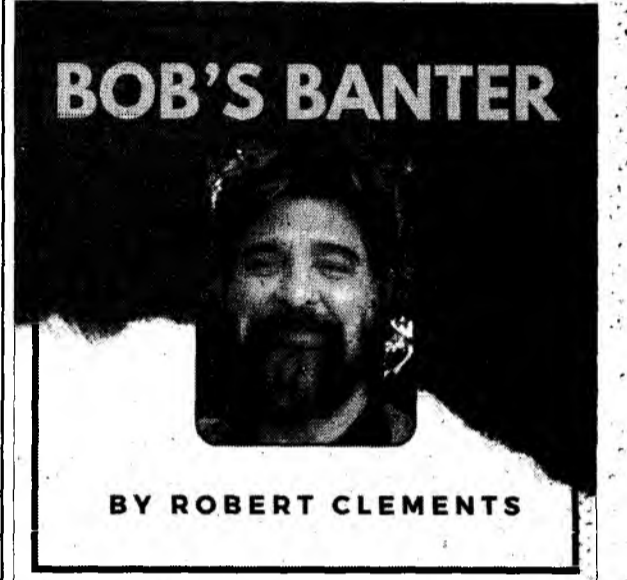
After he had installed the wires, a soft breeze played about the castle, but no music came out.

One night there arose a mighty tempest. The hills and castle were assaulted by the

storms are producing new music from him. This is not a political article, even though I might be referring to one of the two main contenders in the soon to be fought general elections: Rahul Gandhi! For nearly a decade he has been joked about, lampooned, ridiculed and booped, and yet suddenly the whole nation is looking at him as a formidable opponent to the once invincible Modi!

In Karnataka he started making music out of the loud boos he had to undergo!

I remember an instance when I was called to be a judge at the IIT Mood Indigo for One Act plays. I asked whether I could bring my two daughters along, and they gave me permission to do so. Since I loved plays, I enjoyed each one of the plays put up by the different Mumbai colleges, despite the noisy whistles and other sounds



fury of mighty winds and late in the night the baron went to the threshold to look out upon the terror of the storm. Standing there, above the sounds of the storm he heard the harp filling the air with soft music.

A tempest was needed to bring out the music.

And, so it is with our dear friends: Tempestuous times may find us buffeted by the strong storms of life. If we are out at sea and not in the harbour, we may find it difficult to draw into a sheltered place safe from the storm.

Life tosses us around and we find it difficult to navigate rough waters even if we are guided by a compass.

But, and here I want each one of you who have been buffeted lately to listen: It is in this very process of groping around and fighting the tempest that we find we have inner strength and derive a strong sense of purpose.

Our own Aeolian harps get tuned to play music that makes the world richer for its sounds.

Ancient mariners found out that it was not age alone that improved the quality of the fibre of wood in a ship, but the straining and wrenching of the vessels by the wind and the waves, the chemical action of the bilge water and the weight of many kinds of cargo she carried.

It's the same with human lives stressed and tested in times of conflict and strife!

A friend of mine, started a courier company a few years ago, "Do you think I'll be a good businessman, Bob?" he asked me.

"Only when you face tough times," I told him, "Will you know!"

And as I see him tough and resolute every day even as his company goes up and down, I look at him and hear sweet music, the strains of the Aeolian harp above the terrors of the tempest, how lovely the sound!

So, be strong my friends, hold onto the vision of distant harbour lights and row with the tempest howling: Then and only then will you hear a sweet melody!

And now I'd like to bring into this column someone who faced the boos, the sneers and jeers of being called a 'pappu' and other degrading names, but like the aeolian harp in the castle, those same

boisterous crowds are bound to let off. Somewhere in the middle of the competition I realized there was an even bigger commotion and found one of the organizers at my ear, telling me that some of the women participants who had not yet performed wanted to call the competition off, because there was too much booping and other sounds from the crowd.

I asked for the mike and went up to speak, and these might not be my exact words but an sure went something like, "Participants!" I said, "There is no such thing as a perfect audience! As you go through life, whenever you dare to do something different, or go up in front to do something better, there will always be people who will try to boo you down. Your job is not to tell them to shut up! Your job is to quieten those boos with your performance! That is the challenge you will face, and today you can decide whether you can do it within you to do so or run away!"

"Today, decide to make sweet music out of the sneers and jeers from the crowd!"

They all performed. And performed well, and I do remember there were moments of pin drop silence as actors and actresses excelled themselves on stage! I would like to think that my two school going children learnt something from that experience as both became excellent at public speaking, the elder, even becoming a TV anchor with Bloomberg and my younger, so proficient with words as a very successful clinical psychologist.

They learnt that day to make music out of the boos!

Ignore the boos as you go through life! Dare to quieten those people despite their jeering and heckling with your performance! That's how you win this journey called life, that's how you also win against people whom others till now thought were invincible!

Just imagine if the one they called 'pappu' becomes the 'prime minister' how well he learnt to play the harp in the storm..!

The Author conducts an Online Writers and Speakers Course. For more details send a thumbs-up to him on WhatsApp 9892572883. bobsbanter@gmail.com

Letters to the Editor

## Mothers as a force for change

Editor,  
I write this as a response to the article by Dr Melari Shisha Nongrum titled "What foundation are we laying for our children?" (ST October 17, 2023). On one hand, I am fortunate to be able to send my child to an urban school in Shillong, as well as privileged to be born and brought up in this city. My child uses public transport to go to school. However, I feel remorseful about the privileges I enjoy because countless other mothers have only one option vis-a-vis their children's education and that is to tell their child, "Khun hap ban sangeh noh ka leit skul mynta, namar ngam lah kyrshan shuh" (child you have to drop out of school because I can no longer support you).

It angers and frustrates me that children's education is still not a right in our state and we are still debating about it. As mentioned in the article, there is a State Education Commission constituted since July 2023 and MBOSE is celebrating its 50th anniversary. Yet our children's education is going from bad to worse. I would also like to reiterate the question, "What should we celebrate about MBOSE?" The newspaper in its June 12 2023 issue highlighted that the dropout rate at the secondary-level

is highest in India at 21.7%. The national dropout rate for secondary school is 12.6% in India, while Odisha has a dropout rate of 27.3% and Assam (20.3%).

Congratulations Meghalaya for being the second from the bottom! We need to take a hard look at our education system and reflect on what reforms are needed. It is time to revamp the curriculum, employ skillful and passionate teachers and pay them well and timely. However, we mothers are to blame and so also the Khasi society. We are led by the whims and fancies of short-sighted politicians (or so-called policy makers) and we keep electing them. When teachers were on strike very few urban mothers supported them.

Hence, my question to all city-based mothers is, "If we can afford to send our children to study in the best schools in Shillong, can we spare a thought for children in rural Meghalaya?" No one should be left behind. All children are equal and deserve the best education. If we have had the opportunity for quality education, can we in turn not use our power to turn the wheels of fortune on behalf of others? To ensure that every child in Meghalaya has access to wholesome and quality education we must bring radical reforms in the education sector.

P.S. This is not an attack on mothers, this is an attack on my educated self, this is an attack on Our Silence on

such a critical issue!

Yours etc.,  
Dr Ibasaralyne Thabah  
Synthiang,  
School of Social Work,  
(Martin Luther Christian  
University, MLCU  
Via email

## State of our economy

Editor

The current state of affairs in the State is dismal and the Government's objective towards achieving the ten billion dollar economic dream still seems a little unrealistic due to factors best known to some within the government machinery. Critical sectors ranging from healthcare, poor penetration of IT education, rural development, lack of housing, land and water scarcity including bombed out roads all portray a very dismal picture to anyone who has an understanding of governance. The officials manning various crucial departments have no idea of finding long term solutions but are good at applying temporary cosmetic solutions believing they will solve the problems, which is an absolutely wrong method. A temporary solution in management terms is called recourse improvisation which is a short-term measure. Addressing unemployment requires a long term vision.

Meghalaya is also not an investment-friendly state

for reasons best known to us. There is a high level of extortion and demand for cuts from sundry pressure groups and those in the government. Another factor is lack of the ready availability of local skilled workers which is crucial in the industrial, farm, real estate and construction sector. And the less we speak of our roads, the better. Let tourists see the state of our highways and then possibly we can all think of achieving the ten billion dollar economic goal.

Yours etc.,  
Dominic S. Wankhar,  
Via email

## Politics & its pernicious effects on academia in NEHU

Editor

The ongoing tussle between the Vice-Chancellor (VC) and his allies on one side and their adversaries on the other on the alleged "malpractices" of the VC has eventually degenerated into nasty politics and a clash of egos rather than any concern for academic progress. The series of dramatic developments in the course of confrontations have exposed the two groups and become an eye-opener for those following the events. All are least concerned about the issue; but all have been obsessed

with power, politics and ego. Whether good or bad, when the entire country has implemented the NEP-20, the protesting groups have had a prolonged resistance against its implementation. If they have any concern for the students of the State, they should realise the vulnerabilities of students when they need to seek admission in other universities for further studies or when applying for jobs.

The protesting groups came to terms with the inevitable by approving implementation of NEP-20 post-facto only when their ego was assuaged by certain concessions. Alas! These protesters are not bothered about how much harm has been done to the students, as, in many colleges classes have been suspended for several months thereby seriously affecting the course of studies and the academic calendar. Whatever the consequences that have emerged from this drama it is the students who are at the receiving end. On the pretext of launching a protest against the NEHU VC's alleged malpractices and mismanagement these protesters are punishing the students.

NEHU is the lone University in Meghalaya affiliating over 80 colleges. Because of the ongoing tussle between the two groups, Academic Council (AC) meetings have been repeatedly cancelled or suspended. A number of critical issues are to be addressed and crucial decisions are to be taken

in AC meetings. To mention a few are the exam schedules for semesters, syllabi for upcoming semesters, passage of ordinances for NEP-20, affiliation of courses in colleges, etc. If the AC meetings remain blocked, the entire system will be paralysed. The colleges will be in trouble and students will be at the receiving end.

As someone who believes in integrity and against "malpractices" in appointments or any other "mismanagement," I have one suggestion to make. The protesters are all "academicians" and therefore they must be able to plan wisely and organise their protest against the University authorities without hampering the students' lives and careers. Please act wisely and avoid actions and words that are emotionally-hyped. This is an irrational way of handling problems. Most importantly, act timely and responsibly instead of mobilising an issue ex-post facto. Please remember that a society will progress only when the academic institutions become the spaces for truth and intellectual progress. Any movement mobilised inside the University should primarily aim at improving the academia

Yours etc.,  
L. Laloo,  
Via email

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*"Ignorance is not innocence but sin."*  
— Robert Browning

**The Shillong Times**

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**Conflict of interests overlooked**

A conflict of interest occurs when any entity or individual becomes unreliable because of a clash between personal (or self-serving) interests and professional duties or responsibilities. Such a conflict occurs when a company or person has a vested interest which puts into question whether their actions, judgment, or decision-making can be unbiased. In Meghalaya, it has been a tradition that MLAs/MDCs/Ministers are also contractors and they often take up government contract works such as in roads, bridges and building constructions. If a minister of the State Public Health Department is also a contractor in that Department, will not be guided by profit motives only? Similarly when the Deputy Chief Minister of the state co-owns a construction company will the profit motive not override the quality of the road?

Presently what is causing much heartburn is the shoddy construction of the 16 Km Jowai-Amlarem-Dawki road at a cost of Rs 43 crore. Several groups including the local headmen of the area have formed a Joint Action Committee and threatened to take the company undertaking this work – the Dhar Constructions company to court. Leader of the Opposition in the State Assembly, Ronnie V Lyngdoh has blamed the State Government for not keeping a close watch on the quality of construction carried out by Dhar Constructions a local construction company owned by the brother of the Deputy Chief Minister, Sniawhalang Dhar. He claims that the engineers should have been present to oversee the construction work and to certify if it meets with the specification of the State Public Works Department (PWD). In the last few years, Dhar Constructions have won most of the road construction tenders in the State and have also demonstrated that they are incapable of constructing roads that meet the quality outlined by the State PWD. In fact, this is a clear case of conflict of interests but the Government has always looked the other way, because the Dhar family allegedly fund elections in the state and are part of the "high level" that also control coal mining in Meghalaya and have for years now been engaged in illegal coal mining, after it was banned by the National Green Tribunal (NGT) in 2014.

Dhar Constructions had also undertaken the repairs of the Jowai by-pass a couple of years ago but the road is now in a dilapidated condition. The road did not even last a year. Everyone knows this yet the Government continues to award road construction contracts to the same Company because of vested interests. If the Modi Government is accused of granting multi-million dollar contracts to Gautam Adani by violating all norms, can Dhar Constructions get away with what is a clear case of conflict of interests? Should the people of Meghalaya allow this to continue?

**Israel-Hamas conflict – the inability to transcend religious beliefs**

By Albert Thyriang

The most deep rooted living irony - the 'Holy Land' is in a war. It is 'holy' but we have jihad, ethnic cleansing, genocide, open prison, 'apartheid' and the rest of it in the land. Holy for the Jews, Christians and Muslims but these, directly and indirectly, are involved in the war. The area between the Mediterranean Sea and the Eastern Bank of the Jordan River is deeply entrenched in the three sacred scriptures. Ethnic cleansing and genocides were God's commands and enslavements were punishments. The Jews claim divine rights over the "Promised Land." It was given by Jacob via Abraham while Muslims say it was handed to them through Ismael, Abraham's first son. The current conflict is a continuation of the saga of violence dating to pre-historic times.

Scripturally speaking, 4000 years ago Abraham's wife, Sarah, forced her husband to banish Hagar, the Egyptian woman he had taken as his wife and who bore him a son-Ismael. Sarah who gave birth to Isaac in her old age told Abraham that their son should carry on his father's so that God's promise of making him the father of a great nation equal to the 'stars of the heavens and sand on the seashore' be fulfilled. The twist that is felt to this day, however, is that Ishmael flourished in the desert and went on to become the Father of the Arabs.

The dispute followed Abraham's grandsons, Esau and Jacob. Rebekah, the mother tricked her old and blind husband to bless her favourite younger son, Jacob. Enraged Esau sought to kill Jacob, forcing him to flee to his uncle Laban. Jacob and Esau eventually reconciled but Jacob changed his name to Israel making him the Father of the Israelites while Esau is forgotten. Through deceit Jacob's progenies went on to 'inherit' the Promised Land, which today is called Israel or Palestine.

Due to famine Jacob's twelve sons landed up in Egypt where they and their descendants remained slaves for 700 years. The famed Moses delivered his people out of slavery and set their eyes back on Canaan, the Promised Land. However, it was not an empty land. Canaanites were there. The community was convinced it was theirs but the inhabitants would have none of it. So the entry into Canaan was a violent military conquest by Joshua and his troops. The Israelites overran the first obstacle, Jericho kill-

ing every man and woman of every age, as well as all the animals. Then followed the plunder of 31 kingdoms, mostly repetitions of Jericho! And all the acts of 'genocide' and 'ethnic cleansing' were 'God's command to kill and take possession of the land'.

David established the royal dynasty with Jerusalem as the capital city but he endured a long rivalry with king Saul who plotted to kill Goliath's victor several times. The consolidation of the Israelites is a tale of assassinations, plunders and the mass killing of the Canaanites. The slaying of 'men and women, infants and suckling, oxen and sheep, camels and donkeys' were on God's orders. Parts of the description lack archaeological evidence, including the fall of the wall of Jericho. But that is precisely the point. It was a nationalist propaganda for God and the 'Promised Land'.

The Israelites were plundered too. King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon who invaded them first destroyed even the temple of Jerusalem built by David's wise successor, Solomon and took the subjects into exile. The Israelites managed to return and rebuilt the Temple but the Persians were the next to conquer them. Alexander the Great took the land from the Persian Empire. Then the mighty Romans dealt a grievous blow. Jesus appeared at this time. After a revolt the Romans destroyed Jerusalem, burned down the second Temple and dispatched the Jews as slaves across the Roman Empire (second exile) across the world. The Romans renamed the region Palaestina (Palestine) after the Israelites' better enemy, Philistia to spite them and force them to sever ties with their land. The Byzantine Empire favoured Christianity prompting clashes between Christians and Jews until Ottoman Turks put an end to the 1000 year empire. This led to migration of Arabs (majority Muslims) into Palestine changing its demography. In between, the crusaders took a brief control of the "Holy Land" treating the Jews unkindly.

As a diaspora the Jews faced anti-Semitic persecutions wherever they were. The worst was Hitler's holocaust that killed six million Jews. Since Turkey sided with Germany in World War II, the Ottomans in Palestine were out. The British, the authorised rulers oversaw the

mass return of the remnant Jews, enthused by Zionism, mainly from Europe. On landing in the land of their ancestors there were nostalgic moments for the Jews. But for Arabs they were irritations to say the least. Tensions followed and riots were the order of the day. Remarkably though, in 1948 the United Nations created the state of Israel. The Arab countries refused to go along and immediately declared war on their 'strange' new neighbour. The new state had no time to celebrate.

In 1948 Israel won the war inflicting violence on the Arabs. Seven hundred thousand (85%) Arabs fled (still referred to as 'nakba', catastrophe) to Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, Egypt and Iraq. In the ensuing wars and conflicts of 1956, 1967, 1973 Israel occupied the West Bank, East Jerusalem, the Golan Heights, Gaza Strip and the Sinai Peninsula. Terrorist activities and Israeli brutalities were a constant occurrence.

In 1993 the Oslo accords were inked to implement the two-state proposal that would lead to the creation of the state of Palestine too. The Palestinian Authority came about. Area-wise Israel was left with 20% of the land. However, extremist groups like the Hamas rejected it and continued the armed resistance against Israel's occupation, prominently the well-equipped settlements in the west bank. Radical groups aided by some Arab countries still hold that Israel should not be in the world map. Palestine should be the lone nation. This ideology is not limited to Palestinians but to millions of Muslims around the world as visible in the slogans 'From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free' in mass protests.

Motivated by scriptures the Palestine-Israeli conflict is a religious and not merely a political or nationalistic one. At least 170 references in the Bible mention Canaan as a gift by God to the Jews. On 55 occasions the promise was in the form of an oath while on twelve occasions it was stated that the covenant was everlasting. Hence whenever and wherever the Jews were in exile they longed to return to their 'God's given land'. For them the final fulfilment was in 1948. They will do whatever it takes to preserve their belief. They firmly claim the Holy Land. The fight against Hamas includes this objective.

Islam too claims the Holy Land. The Supreme Islamic Research Council in February 1970 proclaimed, "The Palestine Question is not a national issue nor is it a political issue. It is first and foremost an Islamic question." The Palestinians, majority of the Arabs and Muslims in general adhere to this proclamation. The Quran too says the land is blessed by God. In Islam the land of Israel is the second most significant place after Arabia. Sacred Islamic sites dwell there. The third holiest city is Jerusalem because tradition says Prophet Muhammad was carried by a horse on the "Night Journey" there. The Al-Aqsa, the third most sacred mosque is located in Jerusalem.

The Quran, however, unmistakably admits that Allah gave the Holy Land to the Jews. Then why should Israel be 'Palestine?' Muslims believe the Jews had forfeited their right by their disobedience to God who punished them through exiles, the final of which was by the Romans as they rejected Jesus, the prophet. So the land was given to Ishmael's descendants instead. Many Muslims also believe that Ishmael being Abraham's first son, whether legitimate or not should possess Canaan. Thus the rightful owners should be under an Islamic sovereignty.

With opposite theology the 'Holy Land' will perpetually remain violent unless religious elements are edited. Did God physically promise Canaan to Abraham? Did God really reveal to him that he would be the father of a great nation? Were they his own desires which he attributed to God? Did God command him to enter the 'Promised Land' and to mercilessly slaughter humans? Were they human actions which invoked God for justification? They happened in the pre-bronze age. Should they be pretexts to perpetuate the violence today? The land promised to Abraham is multiple times larger than Israel/Palestine. The biblical promise can't be achieved. Why not accept that the Arabs too have a claim over Palestine for they too were there for a long time.

Muslims need not feel humiliated by the existence of Jews. The "righteous Islam" and the "evil Jews" mind-set must go if the 'holy war' is to end. We await the day when both Israel and Palestine will stand side by side. For that to happen both Jews and Muslims must transcend their religious beliefs.

**Religion & man-made rules**

By Sujit De

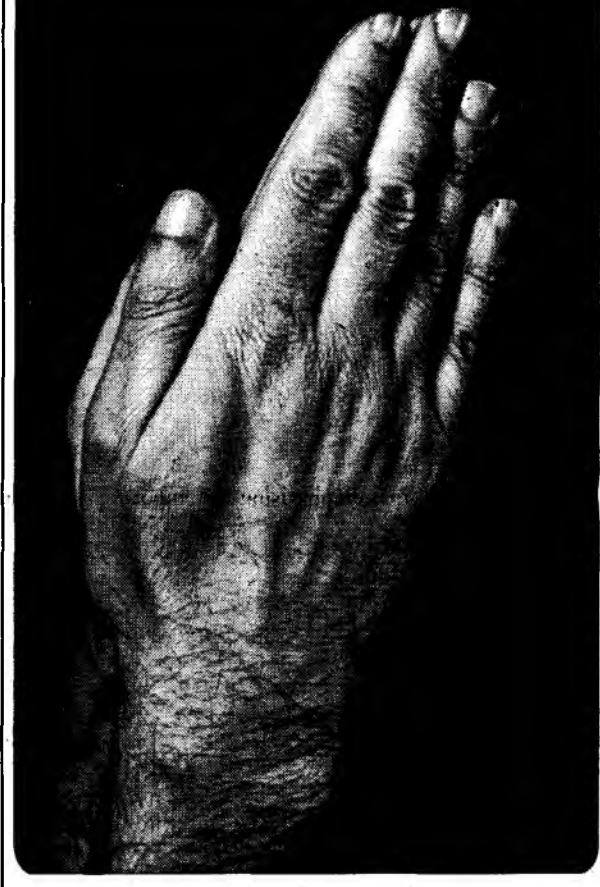
With reference to Salil Gewali's letter, "Holy religions never divide us" (ST, November 4, 2023), it is indeed childish to say that my religion is holier-than-thou. Some years ago, a friend of mine jokingly told our Swiss friend, who was about to get back home, "Look at the sun of Kolkata. This is not the sun of Zurich!" Our Swiss friend enjoyed the joke. But in religion, it is not a matter of joke! Our-your conflicts between different religions or between different castes within the very same religion can make people bay for blood.

Sri Ramkrishna used to say, "Many opinions, many paths."

you alone possess the one or the highest truth, you will not be able to impress people and make them flock to you."

Salil Gewali quoted from Khaled Abou El Fadl, "We should be ambassadors for Islam not ambassadors for terror." It is a beautiful quote and a good message to some dogmatic Muslims. This should also be a message for all dogmatic religious persons in every faith. When some Christians killed six million Jews in the Holocaust, those Christians were not ambassadors for Christianity but ambassadors for terror. Historian DN Jha's 'Brahminical Intolerance in Early India'

*"Many opinions, many paths.  
This means that every religion has the same goal even though their paths are different. Sri Ramakrishna practiced what he preached. He embraced Islam and religiously followed its path. Then again he embraced Christianity and did the same. Actually, he lived what he said.  
"Many opinions, many paths."*



This means that every religion has the same goal even though their paths are different. Sri Ramakrishna practiced what he preached. He embraced Islam and religiously followed its path. Then again he embraced Christianity and did the same. Actually, he lived what he said, "Many opinions, many paths."

cites accounts of Pushyamitra Shunga destroying thousands of Buddhist stupas and monasteries. Pushyamitra and his officials were certainly not ambassadors for Hinduism but ambassadors for terror. The same thing can be said about those who tortured and killed a fruit vendor's specially abled son, Mohammed Isaaq, on suspicion of stealing prasad from a stall near a temple in the national capital in September this year. The victim was mentally ill and could not provide satisfactory answers when confronted by the attackers.

Salil Gewali named two gender inequality victims Malala Yousafzai of Afghanistan and Masha Amini of Iran. But gender inequality is not confined to one particular religion. Unlike Afghanistan, Muslim women in Turkey enjoy great amount of freedom. The fact of the matter is gender inequality exists in many parts of the world and in different religions. That is why we still need Raja Rammohan Roy, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar and Kemal Atatürk among us.

It is a shame that 22-year-old Masa Amini was arrested by religious morality police of Iran for not wearing a hijab in September 2022. Later she died in a hospital under suspicious circumstances. Her death raised a storm of protest against Iranian government.

It is also a shame that 21-year-old Prasanna Reddy was killed and beheaded not by any moral gang but by her own father for falling in love with a local youth of a different caste in Alamuru village in Tirupati, Andhra Pradesh in February this year in one of the many cases of honour(?) killings. Not a single religion is bad. But dogma which exists in every religion can bring out the worst in people.

Letters to the Editor

**India a rich country with poor people!**

Editor,  
Apropos of the editorial, "Rationing the poor" (ST November 6, 2023), the Government of India has announced the extension of the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana (PMGKAY) free ration scheme for another five years. The scheme introduced in 2020 during the Covid-19 pandemic provides free foodgrains to eligible ration card holders under National Food Security Act, 2013. The scheme covers two kinds of ration card holders under NFSA – the Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY) 35 Kgs of foodgrain per month per family and Priority Household (PHH) 5 Kgs of foodgrain per person per month. The NFSA covers about 20 crore families or a total 81.35 crore beneficiaries, who account for two thirds of the country's population – 50% for urban and 75% for rural. This free ration was in addition to subsidised foodgrains provided under NFSA.

In the financial year 2022-23, AAY families had annual savings of Rs 2705 crore and PHH families had annual savings of about Rs 11,142 crore. As for the cost of the scheme, the Government of India has allocated Rs 2,87,000 crore for the

next five years. The scheme is expected to benefit 80 crore poor people of the country. Whether the scheme is worth the cost is a matter to debate and depends on various factors. It is important to note that the scheme aims to provide food security to the most vulnerable sections of the society and has been extended due to the ongoing pandemic and its impact on the economy and livelihoods of people.

The quality of foodgrains distributed under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana scheme is a matter of concern. The Government of India has taken several measures to ensure the quality of foodgrains. The Food Corporation of India (FCI) is responsible for procurement, storage and distribution of foodgrains under the National Food Security Act, 2013. The FCI has implemented several measures to ensure the quality of foodgrains, including the use of modern technology for storage and transportation, regular inspection of godowns and strict quality control measures. However, there have been reports of poor quality foodgrains being distributed under the scheme. To address this issue, the Government of India has launched a mobile application app called 'Consumer Voice' to enable beneficiaries to lodge complaints about the quality of foodgrains. The government has also set up a toll-free hel-

pline number (1967) for registering complaints related to the scheme. In addition, the government has taken steps to improve the nutritional quality of foodgrains. It has launched the Fortified Rice Kernel (FRK) scheme to provide rice fortified with iron, folic acid, and vitamin B12 to beneficiaries under the NFSA, as well as Annapurna Milk Scheme to provide milk to children in Anganwadi centres.

We must appreciate the initiatives of the Government of India for extending free ration scheme for five more years which according to some estimates will cost the exchequer of the country Rs 2 Lakh crore annually which means Rs 10 Lakh crore while the poor's saving amount to Rs 69,235 crore in five years. Doling out money in the form of free grains for a rich country inhabited by poor people in the long run will harm the economy as the savings of the poor families does not match the expenditure of the government. Therefore, the editor has rightly pin pointed out that "Government must help create more work opportunities in rural areas and jobs through fast-paced industrialisation in urban areas" so that the poor learn to take the right opportunity made available to them in a rich country like India.

Yours etc.,  
VK Lyngdoh,  
Via email

**Will changing textbooks raise educational standards of Meghalaya?**

Editor,  
A few weeks ago, a report captioned, "Education Upgrade: Meghalaya may adopt NCERT textbooks (ST October 27, 2023) stated that the Education Minister, Meghalaya, had suggested that Meghalaya would adopt NCERT textbooks, "to raise the standard of state education system to a level that is comparable to the national standards." NCERT has been publishing books since 1961, and there is no question about the credibility of these publications. However, an analysis of this statement raises several questions.

If the State education system is to be 'at par' with the rest of the country, then it is an acknowledgement of the poor education system of our State. We acknowledge that the certification received by our students at the secondary and higher secondary level of education, does not guarantee that they have acquired the 'required' levels of competence to be at par with students from the rest of India who are have been granted certification at the same level of education.

I presume the Education Minister is suggesting the use of NCERT textbooks because of the content in

these textbooks which are well presented, intelligible and comprehensible. These textbooks are also said to promote Constitutional values, provide students with conceptually clear content, and adhere to the CBSE curriculum. These qualities of the NCERT textbooks, will hopefully provide a competitive edge to students from Meghalaya.

In today's world of the internet, a comprehensive knowledge of various subject matters is not difficult to come by. However, the process adopted by the students, the learning styles, the teaching strategies, and the pace of learning of each child needs to be given due focus. The 21st century learning skills of critical thinking, reasoning, and inquiry needs to be presented skillfully in the classrooms. The need to change content for learning, especially at the school level, can arise when the existing content no longer triggers the thinking process – skills that are much needed to solve the 21st century problems and provide students with life skills for in these challenging times.

The Directorate of Education Research and Training, Government of Meghalaya which is involved in the process of developing text books and learning material for school education, should have realised the disadvantages of adopting the current syllabus. Time and again, we have seen how textbooks with wrong information and grammatical errors have

been prescribed by MBOSE. What sort of an arrangement does the Education Department, Government of Meghalaya and MBOSE have with these publishers? Meghalaya is well equipped with resources to develop content for school learning; content which is nuanced and locally relevant. This, in my opinion will enable critical thinking, inquiry and reasoning among our learners on issues they are more familiar with.

There is need for MBOSE to introspect and tap into our local human resources for material development, and also to train teachers to present content to help students develop the 21st century skills and mindsets? DERT, MBOSE, and the Education Commission of Meghalaya have the expertise and capability to hopefully steer the course of education of Meghalaya.

If the Government, through its Education Department, is serious about raising the standard of education in Meghalaya, then changing text books is only a fraction of what has to change in our education system. The Teachers' Education system too must be overhauled.

Yours etc.,  
Fabian Marbaniang,  
MLCU, Shillong

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"Live as if you were to die tomorrow.  
Learn as if you were to live forever."

— Mahatma Gandhi

## The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXX No: 90 SHILLONG, FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 10, 2023

### Fighting fake notes

IT'S not easy yet to wish away the sway of counterfeit currency. Yet, the growth of the digital banking system is reassuring that the bane of fake notes can be largely, if not fully, overcome with sustained efforts. The Unified Payments Interface (UPI), India's own digital payment system, is gaining wide currency and connects over 300 banks. Having started the push since 2016, the volume of digital UPI transactions has grown from a meagre Rs 1.8 crore in 2016-17 fiscal to a whopping 8,400 crore in the last fiscal and has crossed 10 billion recently. Globally, such transactions were of the order of \$1.7 trillion in fiscal 2023, as a functionary of the National Stock Exchange has stated. UPI provides an easy, practical and safe way to make payments and it connects India with the world. At an individual level, it can be done with the press of a button on one's mobile phones. Across cities and rural areas, even payments at groceries and pan shops are done by many today via this mode.

RBI governor Shaktikanta Das, in a speech in Mumbai on Thursday, noted that UPI has played a "phenomenal" role in the fin-tech revolution here and that its success has become an international model. The system is also being made use of by NRIs and others abroad in personal as also business transactions. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent visit to the Gulf region has led to the introduction of this system there, where millions of Indians live and work. In India's near-neighbourhood, the system was adapted by Singapore this year.

The fake note scenario had turned lethal to the national economy with the pumping in of Pakistan-printed notes, largely through porous borders from Bangladesh and Nepal and by maritime routes too. Notably, the nation's fight against counterfeit currency took a serious turn after the high-denomination note ban on November 8, 2016 -- ostensibly to check the sway of Pak-printed currency. That was the time when the central government started the push for digital transactions through the introduction of some apps. However, such a campaign weakened after a while, rather than the government more aggressively encouraging one and all to adapt themselves to this mode of payment wherein the need for currency payments is eliminated. Yet, the detection of counterfeit currency notes by RBI and banks showed a 10 percent increase in 2021 -- the number of fake Rs 500 notes having risen by 102 per cent compared to the previous year. The withdrawal of Rs 2000 notes from circulation by the middle of this year should also work against the tendencies of hoarding of currency and circulation of fake notes. Its introduction itself was a wrong step.

# We have a shared responsibility to make education a priority

By Patricia Mukhim

The Unified District Information for Education (UDIE) reported that in 2021-22, in Meghalaya out of 5,30,390 students enrolled in Classes 1-5, 9.8% of them or about 53,000 dropped out. From Classes 6-8 out of an enrolment of 2,42,417 the dropout rate for the same year is 10.6% meaning that about 24,241 fell between the cracks. In all, about 78,764 students were invisibilised and therefore forgotten. Once kids drop out of elementary school the system forgets them. They face a bleak future and one has to walk in their shoes to know the pain of a life without hope.

This can be a depressing scenario but this article does not wish to be an incubator of disillusionment. We need to overcome the setbacks, rise from the ashes and think afresh on how we can do better in the coming years and also re-admit and welcome those that have turned their backs to the schools through better retention strategies. For too long the people of Meghalaya have made the Government the scapegoat for everything. Now it's time to get our act together. We are all stakeholders in education and 'We' here means -- parents, students, teachers, community leaders and political leaders. But before launching into what is a massive exercise in soul searching we need to know why our kids who should be in school and have their first exposure to the world outside their homes are unable to do so.

### Poverty the biggest enemy of education

The primary reason for children's schooling being disrupted is 'Poverty'. Parents don't see the bigger picture of what their kids stand to gain when they go to school. But even if they did, poverty is a cruel master and unsparing. About 32% of our population live below the poverty line (BPL) and the reality is that many of us don't understand what that means. It means to live from hand to mouth one day to the next with no money to spare for education which to the poor is a luxury only the wealthy can afford.

### Accessibility & Availability

In the rural areas of Meghalaya, most schools function in the breach. There are single school teachers with children of different age groups and learning levels. How does one teacher cope with such a situation? An SSA teacher I met at a village said that she had to engage one more teacher to manage the class since there were

too many students and she was the lone teacher. She had to pay the teacher out of her own salary. Hence even if a school is within walking distance it may not be the best school. Sometimes if the school is functioning well, the fees are high and the cost of purchasing books and uniforms at the start of the academic year makes it difficult for most parents. **Tough curriculum and out of sync with local situation**

A child in the rural out-back sees farming from very close quarters and can relate better to a curriculum that can teach better farming practices; teach them to recognise medicinal plants, edible leaves, fruit etc. To have the same curriculum for students across the state is to make education inequitable. Equity means that everyone starts from the same vantage point and no one has an unfair start. But is that the case with students across Meghalaya? Think of those that come from privileged families where the language of communication at home is English. Then think of the kids in rural Meghalaya for whom English is an insurmountable mountain. What's needed are reforms in the curriculum framework. The State should have this much liberty to be able to address its unique problems. Also concepts in Arithmetic and Science are best understood in the local language.

### Academic Pressure to Perform

Our examination system measures children with different learning abilities, different economic backgrounds, family situations that disadvantage children such as those brought up by parents who are both not educated, or a single parent family or a family where one parent is violent. Kids from such backgrounds already carry an emotional baggage that they cannot share. How then can we have an examination system that measures everyone with the same yardstick as if they all started from the same starting point. And then when the results are out at the end of term the child that "Fails" is distraught and feels guilty that the parents have sent him/her to school at great cost but he/she has failed them. Surely there is a better way to measure learning outcomes.

### Need to build a coalition of stakeholders

One way of addressing

school retention and to make it work is to build a team comprising parents, teachers, community members (dorbar shnong) or other bodies such as the seng kynthei/seng samla and it would be best to rope in the local MLA and MDC too. This body should exercise some kind of oversight over the schools and the quality of teaching that children get. Some of the members of the Dorbar Shnong are in the school managing committees. Do they really take a keen interest in the teaching-learning outcomes? Do they know how many children failed in a particular year and why? Do they take interest in how many of the students who fail, actually come back to school the next year or what happens to them? Every village has elders who can be called to be mentors and who should be given the right to speak to students every once in a while. Studies have shown that drop-out rates decrease when the community takes active part in the functioning of the school.

### School Environment:

How friendly is the school environment and what meaningful relationships do kids have with their teachers or their peers? Are they being guided into such relationships so that they learn social skills early in life? How engaging is the teaching for the child to want to be in school? This is where teaching pedagogy matters. We need teachers who have enough passion to innovate and stir up the child's reasoning powers by rewarding those students that ask questions. Most often teachers think that a student asking a question is being impudent and shuts him/her up. And that's it! That student would learn that questioning is wrong. Yet critical thinking which is the sine-qua-non of education means asking questions and clarifying doubts. This never happens in our classrooms. No wonder the poor learning outcomes and the boring lessons. In fact, the contrary happens. The teacher asks questions and dumbs down a student that cannot answer the question. I was having a conversation with a former teacher colleague. She told me that in her village there is a school where teachers hit the students when they cannot answer questions or don't do their homework. Isn't corporal punishment outdated?

### Teaching beyond the school textbooks:

Textbooks are mere guide posts. So much more learning happens through storytelling and role plays and also through visual arts or music. The video of a teacher who uses innovative methods such as through music to teach his students and because of which they are eager to come to school every single day, has gone viral. These are the kind of teachers we need. They are teachers who choose to teach as their first love and not because they can't find any other job. Remember the infamous phrase, "Those who can't...teach?" Most textbooks are written with the larger Indian context as the framework. They are not culturally nuanced to our tribal context. They seem distant and unrelatable. This is an area that needs focus.

Classes where students discuss issues that affect them outside the classroom and where they can have healthy exchange of ideas without being judged and where they don't feel threatened would be emotionally healthy classrooms. The students should be given some credits for engaging in such conversations because this is how they learn communication skills.

### Flexible school timings

Students that need to do part time work should be able to check in a little late or come in for morning or evening classes. This is one way of integrating those that have fallen between the cracks back into the system.

### Teaching must necessarily be student-centred

In B Ed classes teacher students are taught this one dictum -- JOHN teaches Maths to alister. In this sentence, the student doesn't matter. The teacher JOHN is the most important factor; the subject Maths is the second most important factor; alister doesn't really matter in the scheme of things and once the teacher JOHN has taught Maths he doesn't really help alister recall what was taught just to check if the student has understood what was taught. This is how education happens in our State and this is how it has been happening for aeons. If things don't change and ALISTER does not become the most important part of the equation and John the teacher realises his role, mathematics will remain outside ALISTER'S cognitive domain. And mind you, ALISTER will then have to take extra tuition from John the teacher.

On this note, one hopes that our Education Minister, Rakkam A Sangma, takes note of these suggestions.

## Arbitrary powers of state governors must end Guvs under Modi govt disregarding legislature

By P. Sudhir

One of the ways federalism and the powers of the elected state legislatures are being undermined, is by governors sitting over the bills passed by the legislatures without taking any decision regarding them.

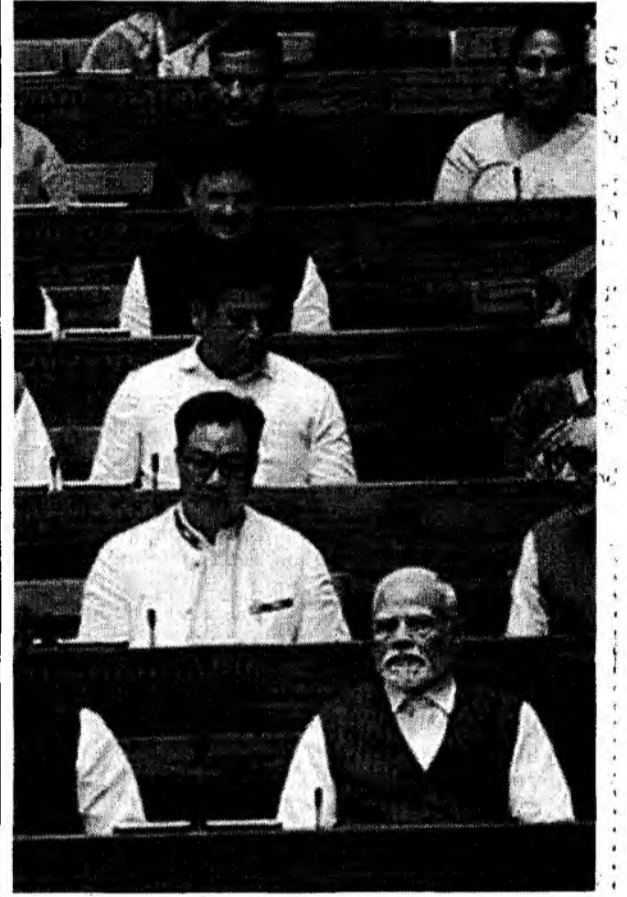
According to the constitution, bills passed by the state legislatures have to be given assent by the governor in order to become law. As per Article 200, the governor could either give his assent to the bill passed by the legislature or withhold the assent, if it is not a money bill, or reserve the proposed law for the consideration of the president, if he or she thinks the bill derogates from or endangers the power of judicial review of the high court.

In case the governor chooses to withhold assent, he or she should return the bill "as soon as possible" with a mes-

state assembly. However, since Article 200 does not state clearly any timeframe for the governor to decide on the legislation, except the words "as soon as possible", the governors are sitting over the bills indefinitely to exercise a "pocket veto".

Earlier in the year, the Telangana state government had filed a writ petition in the Supreme Court on the ten bills not being given assent by the governor. On April 23, a bench comprising the Chief Justice of India Chandrachud and Justice PS Narasimha observed that the bills sent for assent to the governor must be returned "as soon as possible" and not sit over them, making state legislative assemblies wait indefinitely.

However, this direction of the Supreme Court does not seem to have had any effect



sage requesting the legislative assembly to reconsider the bill or any specified provisions or suggested amendments. The assembly, if it reconsiders and passes the bill, again the governor cannot withhold his or her assent. This means, the constitutional head of the state should give way to the considered decision of the elected legislature.

Under the Modi government, the overall assault on states' rights has also taken the form of governors sitting over bills passed by the legislatures in states run by opposition governments. In Kerala, the governor, Arif Mohammed Khan, has sat over eight bills passed by the state legislature, three of them are pending for over two years. In Tamil Nadu, the governor RN Ravi has been sitting over 12 bills passed by the state legislature. In Punjab, the governor Banwarilal Purohit has kept seven bills pending without any decision. The bills not given assent cover issues such as public health, procedure of appointment of vice chancellors, higher education, lokayukta and cooperative societies.

The Punjab state government had approached the Supreme Court regarding the governor's inaction and it has been followed by the governments of Kerala and Tamil Nadu.

The Kerala government, in its special leave petition, has stated that: "The conduct of the governor, as would presently be demonstrated, threatens to defeat and subvert the very fundamentals and basic foundations of our constitution, including the rule of law and democratic good governance, apart from defeating the rights of the people of the state to the welfare measures sought to be implemented through the bills".

The Constitution does not provide for any discretionary power of the governor to veto any legislation passed by the

on the governors of Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Punjab.

On November 6, the Chief Justice of India, heading a three-member bench of the Supreme Court, while hearing the petition of the Punjab state government, observed that governors should not start acting only after a petition is filed before the Supreme Court. He further stated that state governors must not be oblivious of the fact that they are not elected representatives of the people. The chief justice also agreed to hear the petitions filed by the Kerala and Tamil Nadu state governments, along with the Punjab petition on November 10.

The refusal of the governors of these states to decide on the bills by the state legislatures as per the provisions of Article 200 of the constitution is patently unconstitutional. The constitution does not provide for a governor to sit over a bill indefinitely and the phrase "as soon as possible" in the Article indicates the spirit that there should be no undue delay. In fact, Justice Rohinton Nariman, in a 2020 judgment in the Keisham Megha Chandra Singh case, had said "reasonable time" would mean three months.

The observations made by the Supreme Court so far indicate that the governor cannot exercise the powers of an elected representative, nor does he have discretionary powers in the matter under the constitution. It is now up to the Supreme Court to give a definitive judgment on what a reasonable timeframe would be for the governor to take a decision on a bill passed by the state legislature presented to him or her for assent. The arbitrary role of governors, under the Modi dispensation, of disregarding the legislative powers of an elected state assembly, must be put an end to. (IPA Service)

### Letters to the Editor

## A Call to justice & accountability

Editor,  
Having read the deeply unsettling report detailing the horrifying incident involving a businessman's morbid crime against his wife, I find myself compelled to react.

In the shadow of recent events, where a man's brutality knows no bounds, we find ourselves confronted with a chilling reality: a web of power, manipulation, and moral bankruptcy that threatens the very foundation of our society. The incident, where Suresh P Singh ruthlessly stabbed his wife in the presence of their daughter, is a stark reminder of the depths to which humanity can sink.

The daughter's courageous testimony has shattered the facade of decency, revealing the grim truth that lies beneath. What is even more disconcerting is the illegal shield thrown around the accused, Suresh P. Singh, a member and Director of the Shillong Club, who brazenly exploits his connections with high-ranking government officials and police officers. This exploitation of influence is not just morally reprehensible but a testament to the decay within our institutions.

Equally troubling is the deliberate omission of crucial IPC sections in this case. The absence of charges related to the attempt to mur-

der, despite the daughter's harrowing account of her mother's near-fatal ordeal, raises alarming questions about the integrity of our legal system. It is a glaring example of how influential individuals manipulate the very laws meant to protect us, leaving justice gasping for air.

What adds to this distressing narrative is the revelation of the accused's immoral escapades, bringing other women into his home and subjecting his wife to psychiatric medication, only to prove that she is mentally unstable. Our society is being twisted and contorted by those who parade as upstanding citizens, while in truth, they are nothing more than vultures preying on the vulnerable.

In the wake of this heinous incident, it is crucial to highlight the grave state of the victim, who, after undergoing surgery, now lies in the Intensive Care Unit of the Civil Hospital. Her condition serves as a stark reminder of the severity of the crime committed against her. The courage she displayed, not only in surviving this brutal assault but also in her pursuit of justice for so many years, resonates deeply with our shared humanity. It is our collective responsibility to ensure that her fight for justice does not go unanswered, and that those responsible for this heinous act are held accountable to the fullest extent of the law.

In the face of such heinous acts, we must not succumb to apathy. The immediate suspension of the Police

Officer who tampered with evidence and coerced the daughter into silence is imperative. This officer's relationship with a high-ranking official, a close associate of the accused, raises serious doubts about the fairness of the investigation. Justice demands transparency, not clandestine alliances that undermine the very essence of the law.

I urge local NGOs and Women's Groups to rally behind the victim, offering her the support and strength she needs to navigate this daunting journey for justice. The indomitable spirit she has shown in the face of adversity deserves our utmost respect and unwavering solidarity. It is through our collective determination to stand against this moral decay that we can begin to rebuild the trust we once had in our institutions.

Yours etc.,  
John Thabah,  
Via email

## 70-hour week work schedule

Editor,  
The editorial "Work more, earn more" (ST October 30, 2023) proposes 70 hrs work a week by a gentleman who quit his job in 1981 and borrowed Rs 10,000 from his wife to start Infosys and in a span of only four years grew to be a tech giant employing two lakh (2,00,000) people and making Bangalore an Information Technology hub. Little did this gentleman know that his company would go on to

become India's second largest Information Technology company with annual earnings of Rs 21,539 crores in 2019 (The Economic Times). It is a proposal worth emulating. But is it possible for a country like India where the standard working week for most office jobs begins on Monday and ends on Saturday?

The work schedule is 48 hours per week. However, most government offices and the software industry follow a five-day workweek. All major industries along with services like transport, hospitality, healthcare etc. work in shifts. Central government offices follow a five-day week. State governments follow half-day working on the first and third Saturdays of each month and rest on the second and fourth Saturdays, except West Bengal, Rajasthan, Bihar, Punjab, Delhi, Tamil Nadu, and Maharashtra government which follows a Monday-Friday workweek. There is usually no half working day in the private sector, and people work in two or three shifts of 8 hours each.

Around the world, the average workweek ranges from less than 40 hours in length to close to 50 hours. High Income and/or developed countries with a cultural emphasis on work/life balance and adequate leisure/family time generally have shorter official workweeks (some short as four days) and more vacation days. These countries also trend toward more generous overtime compensation, more worker friendly

regulations, more favourable parental leave laws, and an increased chance of landing on the list of the world's happiest countries. By contrast, countries with longer workweeks, fewer worker protections, and reduced amenities often rank as hard-working countries, but also tend to have a populace that is less happy and possibly overworked. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) tracks a wide number of labour statistics, including hours actually worked per week by both employees and employed people. These two terms would be interchangeable in most cases, they have different meanings with regard to labour statistics.

Employees are people serving either full-time or part-time in a traditional employment arrangement. Employed people, by comparison, include not only the aforementioned traditional employees but also self-employed individuals. The Economic History Association points out, determining the average hours worked per workweek in a given country compared to another can be a challenging task due to differing philosophies on what activities qualify as work and who is considered a worker. However, with enough data to compile and consider, trend do emerge. As a rule, more high-income countries such as Germany and France enjoy shorter workweeks than do middle-income and developing countries. It is likely that work weeks in the low-income and least-developed countries are the longest of all, at least for

those people who can find work, but reputable data are often difficult to obtain.

Perhaps, people who are self-employed (entrepreneurs) who have the grit to work can practice the proposal of Mr Narayan Murthy. It is wonderful that the Holy Bible has this to say about work. "For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat" This command in 2 Thessalonians 3:10 is often interpreted as a call to work and contribute to society. It is also a reminder that we should not be idle and rely on others for our sustenance. Instead, we should work hard and earn our livelihood. This verse is part of a larger passage in which Paul, the author of the epistle, urges the Thessalonians to lead a disciplined life and avoid idleness. He also warns them against associating with those who are disorderly and refuse to work.

These verses if we cannot work for 70 hrs a week provide guidance on how we should approach our work and labour. They emphasize the importance of working hard and being diligent in our efforts. They also remind us that our work should be done with a sense of purpose and meaning

Yours etc.,  
V.K.Lyngdoh,  
Via email

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*"By failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail."*  
— Benjamin Franklin

**The Shillong Times**

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**Campaign to end TB**

TUBERCULOSIS is a disease caused by a bacteria and mainly affects the lungs. It spreads very much like the Covid virus through droplets when a person with the illness coughs or sneezes. It is common knowledge that tuberculosis spreads easily where people gather in crowds or where people live in crowded conditions. People with HIV/AIDS and others with weakened immune systems have a higher risk of catching tuberculosis than those with better immune systems. India has the highest burden of TB with more than 2.5 million cases in 2021, which is around a quarter of the cases worldwide. In 2021, more than half a million people in India died from TB – around a third of the global deaths. The Indian Government has now set a very ambitious target to end TB by 2025 – five years ahead of the WHO goal. But is this a realistic goal? With India now being a country housing the world's largest poor and under-nourished population it is doubtful if TB can actually end by 2025. There are clear social determinants to tuberculosis – it's the disease of the world's poor and poverty is India's biggest challenge.

There has been a huge setback to TB treatment during the pandemic years as resources were diverted towards treating Covid. Now the World Health Organisation (WHO) has started an aggressive campaign to end TB by taking testing and treatment to the people instead of waiting for people to come to the primary health care centres. Also testing has now improved with new and effective testing kits available and easily taken to the people even while the results are now available in much less time. However, ending TB or any disease requires that people's health seeking behaviours change and they don't wait until its too late before coming for testing and treatment. This would mean that people in the rural outback are given constant messages in a language they understand and can relate to. The dangers of not coming for testing until the disease is full blown and therefore more difficult to treat can be overcome by proper messaging. This is why WHO has to invest more in awareness campaigns not just by health personnel but by all stakeholders of society such as the different youth and women's groups. This community awareness campaign conducted by an informed community in every village/locality is the best way to end TB.

Over-dependence on health workers to create awareness about every ailment is a wrong strategy. The classroom is another place where TB should be discussed because children are some of the best communicators of public health concerns. Most often children can put pressure on their parents to take the right action. Testing for TB should be as rigorous as testing for Covid. Only then can India expect to end TB by 2025.

**Letters to the Editor**

**All education should be enjoyable**

Editor,  
Although I live far away in another country, I could relate deeply with the education crisis in rural Meghalaya, as portrayed by Ms. Mukhim, in her editorial, "We have a shared responsibility to make education a priority" (TST, Nov 10, 2023). I found this essay impressive in its details, analyses of problems, recommendations – and above all, in its empathy for the impoverished rural child. No child should have to forfeit school for want of adequate income. Children are the future of a society. To call them "resources," is to dehumanize them, by reifying them to objects. Children are the most treasured members of any society, as are the elderly.

Most relevant, perhaps, is this point made by Ms. Mukhim -- that even when they get education, rural children receive pedagogy and curricula that are authoritarian, culturally alien, substandard, and not quite geared to their needs. Adding to this, the disproportionate focus on exam results is particularly tragic -- leading to suicides, low self-esteem, and lifelong trauma. When will these things change? When will Alister (the name of the fictional student in this article) become the prime focus of Indian education?

I live and work in a very different educational environment, where the problems seem to be the opposite -- yet similar. American education is full of fun and games and gimmicks -- but without adequate attention on basic skills. Students are rewarded

for opinions -- not objectivity, critical and cogent thinking, or accurate reading-comprehension. Young children are never challenged for their power of memory (a sign of character). If rote learning is one extreme, this neglect of memory is another. Add to this, a lethal over-reliance on devices, and you have a perfect recipe for disaster. Often, the fun and games and painted laughter conceal serious problems -- like epidemics of mental illnesses and addictions. Unlike the pedagogic authoritarianism Ms. Mukhim speaks of, here students rule teachers. Administrators pander to spoiled customer-students, joining hands with them to gang up on (and sometimes fire) instructors. Administrators claim to be student-focused. But this is more advertisement than concrete policy. Alister is valued for the fees he pays -- not his academic potential or educational needs.

But there are striking similarities. Here too, a cultural gulf separates town from gown. Although my students have always been the underserved, I have had no choice but to teach them mainly western classics. The messages in these classics may be uplifting, immortal, and universal. But to the inner-city kid, raised on rap music -- the kid whose main goal is survival, and main skill is to dodge bullets and gun violence -- a Plato or an Aristotle is meaningless. A young student once told me (in vernacular English): "I don't get none of this." My heart broke for her, but there was little I could do to help her at the level of the classroom. Since the budget is the God of American academia, there are no remedial classes to fix the serious learning problems of incoming students. And yet, when I tutor

What is it that we ought to know? That's a question to begin with. It sounds like something is to be uncovered, doesn't it? The answers are there but one must take challenging roads to find them. The above-mentioned exclamation relates to an issue which is of grave concern to every layman and which will also require a questioning mindset. Do we bother to question something which can affect our human existence and welfare? The crux of the matter is that it is a common issue of "access to safe domestic water." It is good to know that a mission is already in place where every household will have access to water for consumption, but merely providing water will not serve the purpose of the mission. The public needs water deemed fit for use. On a sarcastic note, this reminds us of a few lines from, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" written by an English poet S.T Coleridge which says "Water, water, everywhere, not a drop to drink". So, the situation for us perhaps may be as described by S.T Coleridge. This also reminds us of a statement made by someone out of frustration, "The names of many places across our state start with the prefix "Um" (Water) such as Umsning, Umpling, Umihar etc but none of them have enough "Um."

The sad truth is that quite a number of these villages don't have enough supply of water for domestic consumption, perhaps for many intricate reasons which cannot be elaborated here. However, sarcasm aside and going by the statement, "Water is the elixir of life," it is indeed an indispensable state of matter which supports life forms, and there is no other option to think of if life has to exist on this beautiful planet. No wonder our man-made machines are placed into deep space and planets to detect the presence of water. On the other side of the story, if one tries to explore one can still witness areas and localities in the Shillong agglomeration which till date have long queues of young folks with buckets of all sizes in their hands waiting for their turn

individual students, paying adequate attention (usually impossible in the classroom), they blossom and perform really well. This means they can perform well, but not on their own.

All education, whether elementary or college -- should be a good balance of the moral and the utilitarian, of knowledge and information, and of creativity and basic skills. All education should be enjoyable. A young mind is fertile soil. Full of curiosity and a sense of wonder, it should not be denied expression or silenced by ego-centric authoritarian teachers. It should not be starved of knowledge. If rural children cannot come to school, the school should reach them -- through idealistic itinerant teachers who, like good gardeners, know how to cultivate the fertile soil of a young mind.

Ms. Mukhim is perhaps ahead of her times in her innovative ideas about rural education ...

Yours etc.,  
Deepa Majumdar,  
Via email

**Urgent need for road repairs**

Editor,  
I write with reference to Salil Gewali's recent letter captioned, "Killer potholes taking a toll on Shillongites," (ST October 28, 2023) highlighting the perilous state of roads in Shillong. The Public Works Department (PWD) of Meghalaya seems to be in a deep sleep, unconcerned about the daily hazards faced by the town's citizens. The appalling condition of our roads is not just a discomfort but a danger.

Accidents are not un-

to get water from public taps. At times even the old folks too are part of the queue just so they can get the so-called "elixir of life". The water woes will increase from time to time with the expansion of construction into water catchments and forests. This would be a challenge which needs collective attention and it definitely calls for an exclusive and continuous Research and Development (R&D).

Reiterating the point about water reaching every household it is great if the State could provide water to every nook and corner of our state and hopefully the current Jal Jeevan Mission Scheme should accomplish the entrusted mission in letter and spirit. Now if one goes by the book, the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) number six says "Clean Water and Sanitation," so the point to note is that providing access to "safe water for domestic consumption" must be a priority for all concerned.

Referring to the reports of the recent findings on the water quality of Shillong City, one can speculate and also conclude that it is unfit for domestic consumption. This is a great public health risk which if not addressed at the earliest may perhaps also lead to a public health disaster. Heaven forbid that should not occur, but yes if not attended to this impending disaster will strike eventually.

In the context of Shillong city in particular and within urban areas much of the piped water into homes comes from designated sources managed wholly by the concerned authority -- the Public Health Engineering Department (PHED). However, in the rural areas water sources are managed by communities. The quality of water may differ from region to region for the rural areas which, however, are not devoid of impurities. However, water for the Shillong City comes from a designated source which is treated and supplied to the public. The other additional source for do-

common, with two-wheelers particularly at risk, as potholes turn into traps for riders, particularly during rush hours and in the darkness of the night. Similar to Anjalee Petrol Pump, I also witnessed one such accident that happened in Mawlai some weeks ago, where the riders were thrown off, visibly hurt. It's a common sight. Yet, there seems to be no lasting solution in sight. I completely agree with Gewali that what all PWD may do are temporary fixes that will be swiftly washed away, only to reveal the gaping cracks and cavities again. This is because of the corrupt contractors. Why is the Government so lenient with them. Are the Government agencies hand-in-glove with the corrupt contractors that enjoy a cosy relationship with the political leaders? This is shameful to say the least!

This is a plea for immediate action by the Government if it wants to restore the trust of the public. It's high time the PWD awakened and addressed this pressing issue. The safety of Shillongites can no longer be compromised.

Yours etc.,  
Robert Lyngdoh  
Via email

**A hundred years of electricity in Shillong**

Editor,  
It is enthralling to think that our city Shillong has completed 100 years of its electricity connection this year October 2023. "The project received its formal inauguration in October 1923, graced by the presence

of the illustrious Maharani of Cooch Behar". [Ref: 'A Hundred Years of Lighting Shillong with Hydro Power'. The Sunday Shillong Times dated October 15, 2023, Author D.P. Bhattacharya, Retired Principal Chief Engineer and Member Hydro, Me.S.E.B., Shillong].

It was on October 17, 1923, a Wednesday, when with sheer amazement, the city of Shillong sparkled with electric lights, conquering the dark after sundown. Cheers and hoorah echoed all over the city! (Ref: Uma Purkayastha The Sunday Shillong dt. March 26, 2023) Today it is unthinkable how the old Shillongites passed their lives without electricity, and proceeded with important official works of a capital city, education of children, medical treatment of patients etc. only with the help of candle light, kerosine lamps (lantern), open Mashal etc. Some celebrity tourists like Swami Vivekananda, and Rabindranath Tagore, also visited Shillong during that dark period, and praised the calm and quiet life of Shillong. Braving that dark period of Shillong, many talented students of this city got exceptionally good results and were well placed in life. But today electricity is a bare necessity without which city life is paralysed.

The main architect of the project of introducing electricity in Shillong was Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy, former Chief Minister of West Bengal, who was then (1921-22) a student of Medicine but visited Shillong frequently as his parents lived at Kench's Trace Shillong. The first Hydro Electricity office was named after him - 'Bidhan Chandra House' (opposite to old Secretariat Building) which is not visible now.

Today, Shillong, with all its grandeur, is flooded by electric lights! But the present generation of Shillong does not know its history. It would be highly appreciated if the Meghalaya Energy Corporation Limited (MeECL) could take the initiative to celebrate the Centenary of Electricity in Shillong, this year with special electrical illumination in the city, to commemorate its foundation.

Yours etc  
Uma Purkayastha  
Shillong - 4

**Menace of Durga Puja kiosks, hoardings, etc.**

Editor,  
During the recent Durga Puja and other festivities, extra layers and pieces of hoardings, kiosks, pandals, etc., were constructed and put up, many of which were on temporary and on unsafe structures. This is true in many places, and more specifically in the cities and towns. These are hazardous and unsafe, and encroach public spaces, roads, and pathways. Perhaps, many of these were unauthorized and without permission.

As a concerned citizen, I urge upon the authorities to initiate steps to get these removed immediately, as these pose a serious threat to public life, and seriously hamper movement of pedestrians and vehicles alike.

Yours etc.,  
D Bhutia,  
Guwahati - 24

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**We ought to know!**

By Maiphang Syiem

the pH value (Acid /Alkaline nature) acceptable limit is 6.5 to 8.5. Turbidity should not be above 1.0 NTU (Nephelometric Turbidity unit) and TDS should not exceed 500 mg/l. Total Hardness should not surpass 200 mg/l benchmark, Iron content should be below 0.3 mg/l.

The Central Pollution Control Board, the apex body and watchdog for environmental matters sets the benchmark for total coliforms (Most Probable Number) MPN/100ml should be Nil, the pH value must be between 6.5 to 8.5, dissolved Oxygen 6 mg/l and Biochemical Oxygen Demand 5 days 20C 2 mg/l or less. The parameters are explicitly defined; perhaps one can assess which parameter of the water that we consume was not cleared.

In this context, the WHO has issued, "Guidelines for drinking-water quality, 4th edition", which emphasises on a framework for safe drinking water and it exclusively mentions that, "The most effective means of consistently ensuring the safety of a drinking-water supply is through the use of a comprehensive risk assessment and risk management approach that encompasses all steps in water supply from catchment to consumer." The Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation likewise has put forth a Uniform Drinking Water Quality Monitoring Protocol and have elaborated the guidelines. Referring to these guidelines and connecting them to the kind of scenario that our Shillong City has, it does present a scope for rigorous inspection and surveillance of all utilities associated with the supply of water (pre/post monsoon).

As water is a subject of public health, everybody concerned will have to rectify this matter and there should be no room for complacency. It is suggested that these guidelines may be referred to from time to time in letter and spirit to improve upon the current water supply system and reinforce safety measures taken.

(The writer is a Geospatial Technology Expert and all views are personal)

**Round the states**

By InsaF

**Naga Women's Voices**  
Winds of change are indeed blowing in Nagaland. On Thursday last, at a special session, the Assembly unanimously passed Nagaland Municipal Bill 2023, which retains 33% reservation for women in urban local bodies (ULB), paving the way for civic polls stalled for two-odd decades. However, women's reservation for chairperson post in municipal bodies has been denied. Recall in March, the State Election Commission had notified ULB polls on basis of an earlier Act, which was vehemently opposed by apex tribal bodies and civil society organisations, forcing the Assembly to repeal the Nagaland Municipal Act 2001 altogether. With consultations leading to change in mind, the SEC will soon announce the dates of elections, last held in 2004. The Bill has also done away with provisions for taxes on immovable property, however other revenues such as fees, service charges, maintenance charges will need to be paid by the public. A give and take alright. Chief Minister Rio

mentation is to be taken up during the winter session of Parliament, due to meet on December 4. Once the report is tabled in Lok Sabha, which will then vote on a motion to put the recommendation into action. Will Moitra be an MP only for a month from now? It won't be just "que sera sera".

**Bihar Quota Gamble**  
Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar realises the value of time being of the essence. With an eye on election 2024, the Assembly on Thursday last unanimously approved the Bihar Reservation Amendment Bill, which increases quotas for SCs (16% to 20%), STs (1% to 2%), EBCs (18% to 25%) and OBCs (12% to 15%) -- all from existing 50% to 65%. Importantly, bills providing for the same in educational institutions and government jobs were passed unanimously. This just within a month of the caste survey released, which reveals over one third of families live around Rs 200 a day; among SCs the number stands at 43.93%; only 7% of the population are graduates; and 96% have no vehicles!

*"Delhi-NCR's air quality had declined these past 2 weeks due to a gradual drop in temperatures, calm winds that trap pollution and a surge in paddy straw burning, forcing the government to prepone December school winter break to November 9-18, banning all construction work, and entry of polluting trucks; contemplating odd-even car-rationing scheme."*

would be keeping his fingers crossed women come on board and 'not let issue of reservation for chairperson post be a bottleneck in successful conduct of ULB election.' The time for Naga women has arrived and all eyes will be on them to make their mark.

**TMC MP Moitra's Expulsion: 'Fixed Match' - 'Kangaroo Court'?**

Will the West Bengal TMC MP Mahua Moitra's "cash-for-query" case go down in parliamentary history, as claimed by her, is a big question. On Thursday last, the Lok Sabha Ethics Committee adopted its 479-page report and recommended her expulsion on grounds of "unethical conduct" for accepting gifts and sharing her Lok Sabha login credentials with an unauthorised person, having an impact on "national security". Six members supported the adoption of the report and four have opposed it. The Opposition members have put in dissent notes and alleged the inquiry process as a "farce" and a "proverbial kangaroo court!" They insist the complaint against Moitra has 'no merit, is unfounded and without a shred of evidence, and is being used to malign and defame a Lady Member of the Lok Sabha... the recommendation is 'erroneous' and has been framed 'purely for political reasons.' A 'fixed match' from day one, is what Moitra herself says. Her X post reads: "first expel & then ask govt to ask CBI to find evidence. Kangaroo court, monkey business from start to finish". "Never Waste a Good Crisis they say... this just helped me double my 2024 winning margin."

So be it, but there are critical issues raised, such as there's no evidence (of cash and gifts) being given or taken which was made against her; the complaint is 'pure animosity' by BJP MP Nishikant Dubey; the first rule of an ethics complaint is it can't be "false, frivolous, vexatious" and must be made in good faith; Worse, it will set a dangerous precedent and open up MPs to all sorts of harassment by interested parties in future. Besides, the Ethics Committee says Moitra can't expel, and it's a matter for the Privileges Committee. A lot depends on how Speaker Om Birla proceeds with the report submitted. The recom-

Nitish assured the House his government will implement a quota ASAP, adding 'if Centre gives Bihar special status, the State will excel even further.' The big question is will it pass the legal test as the bill, together with the 10% EWS quota, pushes reservation to 75%, well past the Supreme Court's 50% ceiling! While time will tell, Nitish managed to show flaws within the BJP. While the party's MLAs lent support, the BJP at Centre is hedging on a national caste census. Well, in the present political scenario, no party can afford to oppose quota raise for the backward and oppressed -- a major vote bank. Indeed, Bihar has got 'Mandal politics' returning. Not only will it have an impact on Bihar's polity, economy and society, but the entire nation. BJP's 'inclusive growth' needs to get realistic!

**Polluted Delhi**  
Delhi's AAP government must be thanking the rain god. Thursday's overnight rain in the capital provided much improvement in the air quality and cleared the smog hovering for over 10 days. Delhi-NCR's air quality had declined these past 2 weeks due to a gradual drop in temperatures, calm winds that trap pollution and a surge in paddy straw burning, forcing the government to prepone December school winter break to November 9-18, banning all construction work, and entry of polluting trucks; contemplating odd-even car-rationing scheme. Doctors have said breathing in the polluted air is equivalent to smoking approximately 10 cigarettes a day and a report by Energy Policy Institute, University of Chicago said air pollution is shortening lives in Delhi by almost 12 years! The Supreme Court too is exasperated, observing 'there were several reports and committees on the pollution issue, but nothing was happening at the ground level'. Kejriwal government, for one, can no longer pass on the buck of bad air to Punjab, as it's in power there. But it continues to accuse the Centre of not lending a helping hand. It's now planning inducing artificial rain through cloud seeding to curb pollution, but this requires obtaining basic clearances and permissions for using the technology from both central and the state governments in 'a time-sensitive matter'. Will the BJP oblige? *INFA*

# Psychology behind why we delayed climate action so long



We now have a very narrow window to significantly and rapidly slash greenhouse gas emissions to avoid the most disastrous effects of climate change, with just an estimated six years left before we blow our carbon budget to stay below 1.5°C of warming.

We've known how gases like carbon dioxide trap heat for over 100 years and alarm bells have been ringing loudly for over 35 years, when climate scientist James Hansen testified that global warming had begun.

As extreme weather and temperatures arrive, many of us wonder whether it had to get this bad before we acted. Did we need to see to believe? What role has our own psychology played in our sluggishness?

## How do we respond to threats?

From a psychology point of view, motivating us to take action on climate is a wicked problem. Many factors combine to make it harder for us to act.

The necessary policies and behaviour changes have been viewed

as too hard or costly. Until recently, the consequences of doing nothing have been seen as a distant problem. Given the complexity of climate modelling, it has been difficult for scientists and policymakers to lay out what the specific environmental consequences would be from any given action or when they would manifest.

As if that's not enough, climate change presents a collective-action problem. It would do little good for Australia to reach net-zero emissions if other countries keep emitting without change.

When we write about climate change, we often frame it as an ever more urgent and significant threat to our way of life. We do this thinking that showing the seriousness of the threat will galvanise others into faster action.

Unfortunately, this isn't always the case. When we're confronted with big risks - and the need for a painful shift from the status quo - some of us respond unexpectedly. We might find ourselves motivated to seek out evidence to undercut the reality of the threat, and use this uncertainty to justify staying on the

same path.

One unfortunate aspect of this is that people motivated to avoid or deny climate risk are actually better able to do so when they have more scientific training. This background equips them better to counter-argue and rationalise the dissonance, meaning they seek out information to align with their beliefs and justify their passivity. Misinformation and doubt are particularly damaging to climate action. They let us feel OK about inaction.

This tendency to rationalise away risk was also clearly visible among people who downplayed the impact or even denied the existence of COVID-19.

## Is there an antidote?

We've found explaining the simple and well-understood way that emissions of specific gases trap the Sun's heat and warm the planet can be effective, because people can't rationalise these facts away. The greenhouse effect is a well-accepted phenomenon, even by those most sceptical of global warming. After all, it's essential to life on Earth - without these gases

trapping heat, the world would be too cold for life.

## Why are we finally acting?

As climate change has moved out of the computer models and become very much a part of our present, we are seeing stronger efforts to cut emissions.

More and more of us are experiencing tangible events such as forest fires, droughts, sudden floods, rapidly intensifying hurricanes or record-breaking heatwaves. This has removed one barrier to inaction. Until now, the consequences of doing nothing seemed far off and uncertain. Now they are seen as certain and already present.

Better still, technological advancement and economies of scale in production have meant clean energy and clean transport have fallen significantly in price.

At government and individual levels, there are now measures we can take that aren't too costly and come with immediate gains such as cutting power bills or avoiding petrol price increases. Greater political consensus in many countries is also helping challenge the inertia of the status quo. That's another barrier to inaction evaporating.

As climate damage gets worse, we're likely to see ever-starker warnings.

## Does fear motivate us?

When faced with threats, we are more likely to take action, particularly if we think we can make a difference.

Yes, we now have a very narrow window to avert the worst. But we also have an increased certainty about climate change and the damage it causes, as well as greater confidence in our ability to bring about change.

For years, our own psychology slowed down efforts to make the sweeping changes necessary to quit fossil fuels. Now, at least, some of these psychological barriers are getting smaller. *(The Conversation)*

# Extreme weather may help invasive species outcompete natives

Non-native species appear to be better able to resist extreme weather, threatening native plants and animals and potentially creating more favourable conditions for invasive species under climate change. That's the conclusion of a new study in the scientific journal *Nature Ecology and Evolution*.

Wildfires, droughts, heavy rainfall and storms are all increasing, and predicted to become more frequent throughout the next century due to human-driven climate change.

At the same time, humans are transporting more species into new areas, despite concerted global efforts to increase biosecurity across borders and to target the eradication of specific species. Some of these non-native species can go on to become invasive, damaging native ecosystems.

## Capitalising on opportunities

Invasive species introduced by humans often possess traits that help them survive or even thrive when ecosystems are disturbed (perhaps by wildfire, a storm or human buildings).

Invasive plants are generally fast-growing, for instance, allowing them to quickly fill gaps before native species can recover from disturbances. They are also often very good at dispersing their seeds, allowing them to quickly colonise disturbed areas.

This is why scientists have long suspected that extreme weather and the success of non-native species could be linked.

If extreme weather removes native plants and animals, that increases the availability of resources such as water and space. Non-native species can then capitalise on these new resources to establish themselves.

Even more concerning is the potential for extreme weather and

non-native species to interact, exacerbating their effect on native biodiversity. For instance, in a recent field experiment in the US, scientists deliberately started a fire which killed about 10 per cent of the longleaf pine trees in the area studied.

But in areas where an invasive grass - cogongrass, an Asian native - was allowed to establish itself alongside the pines, the fires had more fuel and were larger, hotter and burned for longer.

Where the scientists had added rain shelters to simulate drought conditions, the grass dried out further and the fires became much more lethal. A combination of drought and the invasive species meant longleaf pine mortality soared to 44 per cent.

Similarly, on the small Macquarie Island in the south west Pacific, a combination of extreme rainfall and the presence of invasive European rabbits reduced the breeding success of nesting black-browed albatrosses. Heavy grazing by the invasive rabbits reduced plant cover, exposing the albatross chicks to the harsh weather conditions.

## Bad weather, good for non-natives

To better understand how native and non-native species respond to extreme weather events, the scientists behind the new study reanalysed information from 443 peer-reviewed studies on how species responded to wildfires, droughts and storms. In all, they gathered data on 187 non-native species and 1,852 native species from all major animal groups. Their results suggest that native and non-native species may indeed respond differently to extreme weather. Across all studies, a total of 24.8 per cent of non-native species benefited from extreme weather events compared to only 12.7 per cent of native species. *(The Conversation)*

## 'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, NOVEMBER 12, 2023

### 'Birthday Forecast'

Moon semi-sextile Mercury on your solar return chart ensures an excellent year ahead. This year investments will bring you fresh gains and you will spend more on luxuries and other comforts. Romantic entanglement will be pleasant and chances to enter into a matrimonial alliance will be very strong. Religious feelings will arise making you embark on a pilgrimage later in the year. Expect gifts and goodies both in cash and kind, but some unexpected expenses will take you by surprise.

### 'This week for you'

**Aries:** (March 21 - April 20) Your efforts and confidence and courage bring success in the form of monetary gains and your energy increases for work projects and your job environment is lively. Domestic relationships and the home environment tend to be harmonious and peaceful through devotion and considerable efforts on your part. You may find your children at an age that requires more attention and discipline. You have more energy at your disposal to express yourself creatively, through activities with children, romantic hobbies, or sports. Short trips, and other forms of communication and making connections, appeal strongly now.

**Taurus:** (April 21 - May 21) This phase brings love and harmony in professional and personal relations. You have the chance to shine, largely because you project yourself with self-respect and modesty. You are especially appealing and charming in personal and family relations. Your children may need more discipline than they previously did. You may enjoy the challenge of tackling a variety of subjects. Talking, writing, and studying can be good ways to handle stress. You might invest time in traveling and visiting friends and relatives. There will be a fluctuation in energy levels before a balance is achieved. Health will take a turn for the better.

**Gemini:** (May 22 - June 21) This period offers a natural curiosity, facility with words, and the ability to multi-task successfully. You are especially good at mediating conflicts. Smoothing over differences and using your diplomacy skills figures now. Your mind is always active with new ideas for an increase of income. This is a very self-expressive time when you have lots of energy, but not necessarily self-discipline to match. You are inspired creatively and emotionally. You want others to take notice, and you are more sensitive to the appreciation of people. Personal projects are on the rise. You will be considerably more productive, healthy, and focused.

**Cancer:** (June 22 - July 22) This is favorable period for hobbies, sports and competitive exams. Beware of a covetous and suspicious person around you who could cause misunderstanding in your personal relationships. You are bold in your love, yet not aggressive either. Artistic self-expression is important, possibly through music, fashion and writing. Your communication style tends to be sharper, more direct and to the point. You may work hard at making yourself feel more secure, and you may be called upon to take charge on the home and family front. You may have more energy to invest in homemaking, house repairs, re-decorating, or family activities. In fact, if you are feeling very restless, moody, or defensive, it would be a good idea to do any of these things.

**Leo:** (July 23 - August 23) The present planetary configuration increases confidence in personal relations; courage and efforts at work place. It is a great time to do something entirely new and pioneering. Discussions and ideas about finances and material security figure strongly. You may find yourself in a position in which there is a blending of the financial with social or public affairs. Although you like the good things in life and may spend quite a bit on clothes, furniture, and entertainment, your innate sense of security will not permit you to go overboard to the point of extravagance. 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.

**Virgo:** (August 24 - September 23) This is a period that brings love and understanding in personal and professional relations. Friends and loved ones take priority. People at work might be surprised by your ability to assert yourself and your needs. You do not find yourself lacking in opportunities to socialize. You are likely to

enjoy a strong feeling of happiness and solidarity in friendship, or with groups of like-minded individuals. You are more peace loving than usual and slightly detached on a personal level and feelings towards religion are enhanced this week. Examining the past in order to improve the future is certainly worthwhile, as long as you don't waste your energy.

**Libra:** (September 23 - October 23) Success, responsibility and maturity are the keywords. You have a great deal of energy for new money making projects, or for stepping up existing ones. Matters of the heart touch you deeply. You may willingly play a supportive role to the family and offer compassion and selfless love. This is a rather happy, goal-oriented time on the professional front. This is a time to follow your dreams and ideas, and to plant a seed in the form of a wish for the future. You possess extra charm in your professional life. Strong opportunities for love and fun occur. More opportunities to socialize and network could present themselves now.

**Scorpio:** (October 24 - November 23) This phase is good for money, family, status and happiness. Money matters come into focus for you. You would adopt a serious approach to business because you are in the spotlight. 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. Being part of a community or circle of friends and building your social network is important to you at this time. Your love life is more attractive and charming. Public relations work, promotion, and other such endeavors are favored now. You give attention on fitness and health related programs.

**Sagittarius:** (November 23 - December 21) Diplomacy, correctness in manner, finesse, and charm will be a big plus in aiding financial gains, especially in areas requiring public interaction. You feel attracted to intelligent people with whom you can communicate well and exchange ideas. You know how to relate to others and you do so in a natural and warm manner. More contact with authority figures is likely. Recognition is likely to come your way whether you ask for it or not, and the responsibility that comes right along with it. Do what you feel is right, keeping in mind that you are at your most visible during this time. It's a great time to make improvements to your regular routines.

**Capricorn:** (December 22 - January 20) This is an excellent time to create a budget or financial plan, or to rid yourself of old habits that undermine your sense of personal power and self-mastery. You are looking to expand your horizons, and you may find that you have a lot of energy for higher studies, travel, or brand new subjects. Smoothing out your close personal relationships is what makes you happy. If single, you are more willing than normal to work out money problems or other issues of a good time to enter into a committed relationship. It's a good time to share with a partner. You receive pleasure from anything that expands your horizons, both physically and mentally.

**Aquarius:** (January 21 - February 19) All that is deeply personal comes into focus now. Conflicts with a partner over values or personal possessions are more likely to occur. Circumstances are such that your diplomacy skills are required. Your self-mastery skills matter more than usual. This is the time when you are most desirous of change on a deep level. You are more willing than usual to explore life's secrets. On a more practical level, you may be dealing with joint finances and shared resources now more than usual. Social life takes priority in your life. Social interactions of a personal, one-on-one kind are emphasized.

**Pisces:** (February 19 - March 20) You would be generous, emotional, and sympathetic with people around you. You will also thoroughly enjoy artistic, musical, or cultural events and activities, with a loved one. You have good team spirit right now, and you are more tactful and obliging with your co-workers. You need the energies, companionship, and support of other people, and they may also seek out your support and companionship. It's important to include others rather than to go solo for the time being. However, bending too much to the will of another is not advised either. You take more pride in the work you do and in your health routines.

# Air pollution and respiratory problems during Diwali

Diwali, the festival of lights, is celebrated with great enthusiasm and joy across India. However, along with the festivities, this vibrant festival also brings a spike in air pollution, which can have detrimental effects on respiratory health.

The combination of firecrackers, bonfires, and other festivities leads to a significant increase in air pollutants, posing a serious threat to individuals, especially those with pre-existing respiratory conditions.

In this article, we will explore the impact of air pollution during and after Diwali on respiratory health and provide some essential tips on how to take care of your lungs during this time.

## The Diwali Air Pollution Hazard

During Diwali, the air quality in many parts of India deteriorates dramatically due to the widespread use of firecrackers.

The main pollutants released during this time are particulate matter (PM2.5 and PM10), sulfur dioxide (SO2), nitrogen dioxide (NO2), and various heavy metals. These pollutants can have severe health effects, particularly on the respiratory system. Short-term exposure to these pollutants can cause symptoms such as coughing, wheezing, and exacerbation of pre-existing respiratory conditions like asthma and bronchitis. Long-term exposure can lead to chronic respiratory diseases and reduced lung function.

## Tips for taking care of your respiratory health

**Limit Outdoor Activities:** During the peak Diwali celebrations, it's advisable to reduce outdoor activities to minimize exposure to air pollutants. This is especially important for individuals with respiratory conditions. If possible, stay indoors during the fireworks display to avoid direct exposure to the smoke and pollutants.

**Use Air Purifiers:** Investing in a good quality air purifier with an HEPA filter can significantly reduce



indoor air pollution. Keep your windows and doors closed while the air purifier is running to ensure that the air inside your home remains clean.

**Wear Masks:** If you need to go outdoors, especially during the days surrounding Diwali, wear a mask that can filter out fine particles and pollutants. N95 or N99 masks are effective in reducing your exposure to harmful airborne particles.

**Stay Hydrated:** Drinking plenty of water helps keep your respiratory system moist and healthy. This can help to alleviate some of the irritation caused by airborne pollutants.

**Avoid Smoke and Fumes:** Refrain from lighting fireworks or participating in bonfires if you have respiratory issues. If you are lighting fireworks, maintain a safe distance and ensure there is adequate ventilation. It's crucial to avoid direct exposure to smoke and fumes.

**Create a Clean Indoor Environment:** Clean your home thoroughly before Diwali to remove dust and allergens. Use exhaust fans to reduce indoor pollution and keep your living space well-ventilated.

**Consult a Physician:** If you have a pre-existing respiratory condition, consult your physician before Diwali

to discuss any necessary changes to your medication or treatment plan. They can provide guidance specific to your health needs.

**Practice Breathing Exercises:** Regular breathing exercises, such as deep breathing, can help improve lung function and reduce respiratory discomfort. These exercises can also help in managing stress, which can exacerbate respiratory symptoms.

**Follow Local Air Quality Updates:** Stay informed about local air quality levels during and after Diwali. Many apps and websites provide real-time air quality data, allowing you to plan your activities accordingly.

While Diwali is a time of celebration and joy, it's crucial to be aware of the potential health risks associated with the increased air pollution during and after the festival. By following these tips and taking precautions to protect your respiratory health, you can enjoy the festivities without compromising your well-being.

Remember that respiratory problems can be aggravated by air pollution, so taking care of your lungs during Diwali is essential for a healthier and happier celebration. *(IANSLife)*

"The journey of a thousand miles begins with one step."

— Lao Tzu

The Shillong Times

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Modi's two terms

AS Narendra Modi enters the final phase of his second term as Prime Minister and has set the ball rolling for the election season spread over the coming six months, it's time for a series in stocktaking. The main question before the electorate ought to be this: has India changed for the better – and how? Alongside governmental statistics, the ground realities too should guide us in this analysis. Take a look at India's largest public sector undertaking, the Railways with a history of nearly 200 years, spread over the entire nation and employing over a crore of staff. When Modi started in 2014, he promised bullet trains and ended up in his ninth year with a Vande Bharat that has a speed of around 150km per hour – a minor improvement. Vande Bharat has less to crow about even in its structure; only an improvement on the antiquated styles of Indian Railways. Those who travel on it do feel a difference in terms of passenger comfort and speed. Yet, its speed counts last among a list of ten major train services in the world.

As for Aviation, the domestic passenger strength rose from 45 million in 2014 to 60 million in 2014 -- the end of the UPA II term -- and currently stood at 84 million. The number of airports has increased from 74 in 2014 to nearly 150 by now. As far as road traffic is concerned the national highways sector recorded impressive growth. The total length of national highways was less than one lakh kilometres in 2014, which rose to about 1.50 lakh km by now. Massive funds mismanagement is also cited. The length of four-lane NH increased two-fold. In the defence sector, India spent around \$51 billion in 2014 while this annual spend rose to nearly \$77 billion by now – a rise from 2.54 per cent of the GDP to 2.66 per cent. Some 13 per cent of the Union Budget allocations are reserved for Defence. Defence sector manufacture via Make In India initiative helped also in significant exports income. The national economy rose to be the fifth largest, its present growth pegged at 6.3 per cent. While the economy of some nations in the neighbourhood faced serious odds and some faced a near-collapse, India maintained its forward momentum.

Modi, overall, failed to reform India. Its rusted systems, plagued by bureaucratic and political corruption, remain more or less the same. He avoided facing serious challenges. Modi had promised to tackle the scourge of corruption when he campaigned for the PM post in 2014, but did precious little. His attempts to reform the agriculture sector fell flat; yet he implemented market reforms that were initiated and left undone by the UPA-II.

H K Singh's Unitarianism: An Indigenous Connection

By H H Mohrmen

Hajom Kissor Singh Nongbri, the founder of the Unitarian church in the region, remains a lesser-known personality in the contemporary society of the North East. Although HK Singh started the Unitarian movement in the hills 136 years ago, the church, being a non-proselytizing religion, remains a small minority, hence its founder's lack of popularity. Today marks the hundredth anniversary of HK Singh's death. He was born on June 15, 1865, and died on November 13, 1923. He converted to Christianity, probably on the same day as his younger brother, U Nissor Singh, who is famous for the first-ever Khasi dictionary published in 1885. He grew up in an era when Christianity had just begun to take root in the hills. Later in his life, he witnessed the resurgence of Khasi Traditional religion; perhaps these events shaped his thoughts and philosophy.

The Unitarian Church established by H K Singh maintains its liberal roots and grows in the thoughts and philosophy of the region where it started. Its claim of being an indigenous religion is based not only on the fact that it was started by a native of the land but also because it is a liberal Christian denomination that absorbed and adopted the basic tenets of Khasi traditional thoughts and philosophy. H.K. Singh has to his credit composed 63 hymns in the Khasi hymn book of the Unitarian Union, representing his thoughts and philosophy.

His concept of the oneness of God was based on both traditional beliefs and that of the Bible. He further indigenized the concept of God by using the Khasi word "Phi" (you) to address the Almighty, a term commonly used to address those in a position much higher and more respectable than the Khasi word "Me" (Thou). This was sometimes misunderstood as worshipping many gods or in the plural sense of the term. By replacing the Khasi word "Me" with "Phi" to address the Almighty, he made a landmark move because it is a polite term in the Khasi Pnar context.

H.K. Singh's concept of God is a synthesis of the father in heaven of Jesus and the ultimate God, the Creator, of the Khasi tradition. U Blei Nongthaw Nongbuh is not the only name with which the Khasi Pnar address God; He is also called 'U Trai

Kynrad.' Whether 'U Trai Kynrad' is a Khasi translation of the English 'Lord,' which is the Greek word "Kyrios," is a matter of debate. In the Christian context, the use of the word 'U Trai' connotes the New Testament concept of the Lord, which many times refers to Jesus Christ as the second person of the Holy Trinity.

U Trai is not a post-Khasi-Christian period invention, but the term has been in use since time immemorial. Apart from using the name God, the Khasi also uses the word Kynrad or U Trai Kynrad in paying obeisance to God Almighty. Trai in Khasi also has the same meaning as that of the English Lord, which means owner, foundation, foothold, etc.

The Pnar of Jaintia Hills use two terms when referring to God, God the creator, 'U Blai,' is similar to Yahweh and God the Father, and U Blei Nongbuh Nongthaw in Khasi. In the Pnar of Jaintia pantheon of gods, the creator, the molder, and the keeper is a female deity known as 'ka syiem waboo, ka syiem wathoo.' The Pnar has another term they use for God, and that is "U Tre Kiroi," which is equivalent to Lord, and "Kiroi" means caring, compassionate, bountiful, and perfect. The War Jaintia have only one word for God, and that is "Prai"; U "Prai u ae thia" means God the Creator. Whether 'Prai' means both God and Lord is another question, but based on the evidence used by the War Jaintia people, 'Prai,' which is incidentally similar to both 'Trai and Blai' in the Pnar language, connotes the same meaning.

Hajom Kissor Singh's concept of God is that of a traditional Khasi Pnar concept, God the Creator, who is both God and Lord at the same time. Like the traditional concept, he does not differentiate one from the other, but his concept of God is much more than the God our forefathers understood. In his Statement of Belief, H.K. Singh, in stanza 2 of hymn number 1 in the Khasi Unitarian hymnbook, describes God as the living God, the one and only God. He is our real father-mother, filled with love and compassion and forgives those who repent.

H.K. Singh went a step further than the traditional concept of God by ascribing

God as being both a "Father and Mother," God is genderless or beyond gender in the Khasi Unitarian context. Khasi Pnar tends to use the prefix 'U' before the word God, which represents the male gender, but God is more of a spirit that pervades. In the Pnar tradition, the creator God is a female deity, "ka Syiem waboo," and this influenced Singh's concept of God beyond gender. God among the Khasi Unitarians is formless, a spirit that is beyond the traditional Khasi concept of God.

The two original readings H K Singh wrote are reading number 10 and 11 in the Khasi Unitarian Hymnbook 12; both these readings were dated 1891. Reading number 10 is another piece that describes his concept of God. "...who is our creator and our foundation and source of everything else; Who is eternal, Everlasting, Perfect in all respects, Who loves us most, Who is eternally good, the Wisest, who is present around us and inside us and who pervades everywhere and permeates everything."

Two Khasi stalwarts Radhon Singh Berry and Job Solomon were contemporaries of HK Singh. They were also known for their contribution to the literary world of the nascent Khasi language. RS Berry and Job Solomon also immensely contributed to the growth of the Unitarian movement by composing hymns for the Church. Radhon Singh Berry of Seng Khasi, who composed more than 30 hymns in the Unitarian hymnbook, later became Unitarian, and Job Solomon remained in his faith until he breathed his last. Both these men of letters emphasized in the hymns they composed in the Unitarian hymnbook the truth that Khasi Unitarian's God is God in the traditional Khasi Pnar context.

R.S. Berry in hymn number 40 stanza 3 says: /This is not a foreign God / God of our own he is/ He created you the way you are/ Now he comes to awaken you/. Job Solomon in hymn number 7 again stresses the idea in stanza 5, which says, /This is our God/ God of our ancestors too/ God of the Pnars and the Khasi/ He is also Lord of the Lords/. The concept of God in the Khasi Unitarian context is a unique concept of a universal and formless God; the Khasi God is God in spirit and an all-pervading

God. It is not God in the Judeo-Christian context—the father in heaven, or God in an 'anthropomorphic' form.

In the Khasi Jaintia language, there is only one word for the English words the spirit and the soul—which is "ka mynsiem." So when one says "mysiem," it could either mean the soul or the spirit. To the Khasi Pnar, the human soul is the same as the all-pervading spirit. The Khasi does not differentiate between the two. To the Khasi, 'ka mynsiem' is that which connects one soul with one's body and that which encompasses the entire universe, transcending all creation. The universe and the entire creation are linked by the spirit or filled with the spirit.

H.K. Singh's concept of the everlasting life of the soul is inspired by the indigenous Khasi thoughts and philosophy of life after death. The Khasi concept of life after death is that the soul departs from the body to go and eat betel nuts at the corridor of God's dwelling place; traditionally, the Khasi also believes that the soul lives eternally. The immortality of the soul also proves that the spirit even transcends the realm of mortality. The Khasi Pnar believe that during conception, the mother conceives only the body that which is mortal, the soul or the spirit was divinely sited in the womb. The Khasi Unitarians believe that the spirit in the human body, divinely placed in the mother's womb, lives and grows in the human body and on its death returns to God, who is the everlasting source of all spirits.

The Khasis lay great emphasis on the other cardinal principle of life, known as 'Kamai ia ka hok,' to earn righteousness. In the Khasi way of life, one's entire life is governed by this principle alone. He who does not earn righteousness in his life, whatever wrong one does in his life, evil will befall him or his descendants. One who walks in the path of righteousness shall go to eat betel nut in the corridor of God's dwelling. Unitarians also share a similar belief that salvation is by one's deeds and character and not by faith alone. His idea of an after-life is that the spirit departed will return to the kingdom or the realm of the spirit. There is no concept of the saved and the damned; hence, salvation is universal.

National TV channels Gung Ho about PM Modi's win

For Godi media 2024 elections already won by BJP

By Sushil Kutty

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been campaigning against the Opposition's INDI-Alliance for as long as the alliance has been in existence, i.e., since July of this year. That should answer the question - Is the ruling BJP worried about what the INDI-Alliance could do to it in the 2024 general elections? Also, the Prime Minister has been laying extra stress on rooting out corruption and eradicating dynasty and appeasement from the fabric of India since the day of the announcement of 'INDIA'.

Embroiling the INDI-Alliance in corruption charges is the prime focus of the Modi government. And the BJP has an ally – the media, which is focused on helping BJP haul a huge majority come 2024. On the evening of November 9, for example, television news channels spent the entire primetime discussing the INDI-Alliance and how in the

liance constituents and it was hard defending the AAP and the Congress. As also for the Trinamool Congress, whose leader, West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's nephew Abhishek Banerjee, has been doing the rounds of central investigating agencies in Delhi. With the five states assembly elections underway, Delhi's captive electronic media are on mission-mode, going after the INDI-Alliance with all the weaponry at their command.

The fact is, an INDI-Alliance victory will be traumatic for much of Delhi's electronic media though the media are known for their somersaults. But as of today, NCR-based television channels are all solidly in the rightwing camp. Add to that, the Prime Minister poisoning the minds of the electorate against the INDI-Alliance and things cannot get worse for the opposition parties making up the alliance.

That being said, the INDI-Alliance has no other go but to stick together and present a solid phalanx. It is a difficult task, but so far there has been no major break or threat of a major break. The feeling one gets is that once past the five states' assembly elections, INDI-Alliance will go for the Bharatiya Janata Party's

jugal in the general elections, together as a single lethal fighting unit with the resolve of the Israel Defence Forces and the ruthlessness of the Hamas.

For, finally, at the end of the day, it will be the electorate which will cast the vote that will decide whether Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Bhupesh Baghel is the winner or loser. If on December 3, the Congress retains Chhattisgarh, it wouldn't matter to the Congress whether Bhupesh Baghel's corruption is proved or not. It is winning the Assembly that matters. Whichever party/alliance takes the Chhattisgarh Assembly gets to eat the cake and keep it, too.

Ditto AAP and its incarcerated leaders. If Modi loses the 2024 general elections, Manish Sisodia and Sanjay Singh will be out of the Tihar in a jiffy. The BJP-led NDA, therefore, has to win the 2024 Lok Sabha polls for the corruption charges against INDI-Alliance leaders to hold. If the INDI-Alliance wins the general elections, the corruption charges will fold and it will all be a waste of TV-time for the media that have been lining up to serve BJP's diktats. It is too late for the media to grow a spine with many of the top anchors out on a limb, their future fortunes linked to a BJP victory as much as the BJP is depending on them for a 2024 Modi victory. The BJP-Captive Media nexus is out in the open. (IPA Service)

short while of its existence, the alliance has been swept by allegations of corruption and hit by dissonances with the constituents fighting among themselves and defeating the very purpose for which the alliance came into being – forge unity so as to overthrow the Narendra Modi-led regime.

Not surprisingly, every single 'Godi Media' channel had this same topic for primetime debate. From the 'Republic' to the 'Time', whether Hindi or 'Angrezi', almost as if they were fed the diktat "go after INDI-Alliance, all of you together at the same time". It is true, that minus the captive media to help, the BJP-led NDA government may not make it three times in a row.

Truth is, the BJP has been laying the foundation for a 2024 general elections victory right since 2019, the last time it won. And today, the issue of corruption has taken centre-stage for the saffron party's 'Modi-Modi, Har Ghar Modi' crusaders. Whether it's the AAP corruption or the Congress corruption; the Trinamool graft or the RJD graft, none of the opposition parties in the length and breadth of India has been spared.

And as long as the Opposition was split wide open, there wasn't panic. But when the Opposition got together and named its alliance with the acronym 'INDIA', the Bharatiya Janata Party spiralled into panic-mode. One after the other, INDI-Alliance leaders started getting charged with corruption and there has been no let-up. That politicians, irrespective of which party, are prone to graft made it easy.

On the evening of November 9, primetime TV anchors of the captive media, favouring the BJP, targeted INDI-Alliance



Letters to the Editor

Educational transformation: An imperative!

Editor, I'm greatly elated at what Patricia Mukhim writes to educate and draw in readers to respond and in this case to the article, "We have a shared responsibility to make education a priority" (Nov 10, 2023). I share not only the same opinions and thoughts expressed, but her deep care and concern at the dismissal situation in Meghalaya across all departments. She's a hands-on person and has her ear to the ground that's why realities are exposed with no embellishments! I've rarely seen editors of other dailies of the country write so regularly. What draws my admiration is that she's on the ground studying and observing in order to feel the pulse of the people and not being scholarly or academic. It's so easy to be an Armchair Reporter these days!

Readers may now brand me as being condescending, but that's all right! Because all my life I have been viewed as quite the opposite! I'd like to expand on 'School Environment' because it can be harsh, cruel, severe and damaging, particularly on weak students. I believe that the turning point of a student's life rests solidly on a conducive, learning friendly, encouraging atmosphere supported by caring teachers and sympathetic parents. A studied observation reveals that slow learners gets caught up in their inadequacy. It is

further aggravated when peers and teachers laugh and jeer at the student, giving nicknames and some parents do the same too. The child is then branded a dunce or something else for the rest of his/her school life.

If a child cannot break through this vicious stage then he/she struggles and doesn't finish schooling. I'm old enough to have seen many not make it in life. It's sad that they talk with such hate and bitterness of their school days! Imagine indelible scenes being played out in their minds over and over again when they are down and out!

The "JOHN teaches Maths to alister." was not lost on me! I had a cynical grin! This is the absolute truth!

I would like to add that many teachers too just give up on weak students who then fall by the wayside. As Principal of The Army School 101 area, way back in the late 80s to mid 90s, I had parents seek admission in the middle of school term from renowned city schools. I would ask why and the child would pour out their hearts about the school environment. I admitted them on a priority basis and they never disappointed. I know of three who are medical doctors here in Shillong and I hope they read this letter!

The school environment is further compounded by the over-crowded classrooms. It's hard to fix accountability given the multifarious shortcomings, poor and inadequate infrastructure, teacher requirements not met, availability and readi-

ness of teachers for rural areas, and so on.

May the transformation now be energized under the present Education Minister through all the various committees and ground workers.

Yours etc., Kevin Phillips Shillong - 19

Mental health matters

Editor, The World Health Organization has defined Health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease and infirmity".

Yes, that is what we have been taught right from our school days. But there is one issue that has not been addressed well or recognised, when it comes to our country and especially our State and society and that is MENTAL HEALTH. We tend to ignore this part of the definition because our society has stigmatised it to the core.

Sad, but many are dealing with mental health issues, but they shut themselves up because of our ignorance regarding mental illness. Mental illness doesn't really mean that a person has become a maniac or "mad/crazy." With the increase in competition to fight for survival, in other words to be able to do well in studies to beat the unemployment syndrome, the pressures are just mounting and our young people have been drained mentally.

Depression is increasing at an alarming rate but we fail to see the signs and symptoms within the youth community. Young people suffer from stress, confusion, self-doubt and financial uncertainty. One important reason is not being able to secure a GOVERNMENT JOB even though they have attained high academic merits etc. Other risk factors include sexual abuse, exposure to violence, conflict with close friends or family members, use of alcohol or drugs, social isolation, academic pressure, loss of a valued relationship, impaired social skills; impaired peer relationships and bullying. Moreover, young people have a STIGMA associated with asking for help. The barriers to accessing services along with cultural and religious beliefs are other factors which have contributed to the ill-fated side of young people ending their lives – or SUICIDE.

How can we deal with this grotesque phenomenon claiming the lives of our young people?

Suicide prevention efforts should focus on educational institutions where the problems most often arise. Crisis centre hotlines, screening programs that seek to identify at-risk adolescents, media guidelines and efforts to limit toxic drug overdose are other important interventions. It is important for parents and family members of adolescents with suicidal tendencies to seek professional help immediately. They need to find spaces to share their feelings. They must encourage their children not to isolate themselves from their family and friends and recommend relaxing exercises. Parents should be counselled to notice that their children are suffering depression or anxiety so they can take them to a mental healthcare professional. Parents today need to pay attention to their children's behaviour and never shrug off threats of young people as "melodramatic." Most importantly, parents, teachers and other elders ought to listen to what the children are saying with compassion and concern.

Our young people need to be protected, cared, loved and listened to. Together we can overcome mental health illness and decrease the grim prospects of death of youth by suicide.

Yours etc., Chanmiki Laloo, Shillong-02

is one of the leading causes of fatalities.

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Our young people need to be protected, cared, loved and listened to. Together we can overcome mental health illness and decrease the grim prospects of death of youth by suicide.

Yours etc., Chanmiki Laloo, Shillong-02

Insensitive NEHU

Editor, We were informed that as per the approved academic calendar 2023-2024, the Third and Fifth Semester Practical & Theory End Semester Examinations have been scheduled from November 16 and December 1, 2023 respectively. However, till date, the NEHU is yet to publish the Programme for the said examinations. Do our children have to sit for these examinations with an overnight notification? Advanced notification as per the University guidelines is mandatory in the interest of the students. The University authorities and the Vice Chancellor must know that students pursuing degrees in colleges affiliated to NEHU come from different states and need to buy their train or flight tickets much in advance. As parents and guardians, we are concerned with the study performance of our children. Therefore, the conflict that has come to the fore between teachers and the Vice Chancellor should not harm the students. If NEHU is indecisive with the programme for examination, please communicate the same and not keep our children in the dark!!

Yours etc., A concerned parent Name withheld on request Via email

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

"Amazement awaits us at every corner."

— James Broughton

## The Shillong Times

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### Roads: MDA's Achilles Heel

BAD roads have been the hallmark of the MDA Government. Every second day there are groups in one district or other protesting against badly constructed or half constructed roads which have made travelling a painful experience. In the Garo Hills region, South Garo Hills district has borne the worst brunt; this district has been neglected for decades. For the financial year 2023-24 the amount allocated to roads and bridges is Rs 1,594 crores which is 7.1% of the total revenue expenditure of Rs 21,034 crore. Roads are the lifeline of the state, yet the national highway connecting Shillong to Dawki and Jowai-Amlarem-Dawki are in shambles. But these are not the only roads that have deteriorated and are a hazard for drivers, especially heavily-laden trucks. The Lumshnong to Silchar road via Sonapur resembles a war zone bombed to rubble. Even within the capital city of Shillong the roads are riddled with potholes and are causing frequent road accidents especially for two-wheeler drivers.

Meghalaya's problem is that legislators are elected not based on their performance but on the bribes paid in the run-up to the elections. If people voted with their eyes open and as informed citizens the man holding charge of the Public Works Department (PWD) would have been roundly defeated, never mind which constituency he contests from. But what is evident is that voters of Meghalaya are sharply divided by constituency and they don't care for the overall development of the state.

However, what is important is the role of the Public Works Department and the supervisory role that the Chief Engineer of that Department has to play to ensure that the roads constructed meet the department's specifications and that the standards are not lowered to enable contractors to rake in more profit which in turn has to be shared with the engineers and the PWD minister. This has been the biggest bane of governance in Meghalaya. In recent times things have gotten worse because the present Deputy Chief Minister is also a co-owner of a construction company and that Company is now holding a monopoly over road construction over large sections of the state especially in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills. If a minister in the Government has a vested interest in promoting his own company then how can it be expected that good roads and bridges be built? Today roads in every part of the city of Shillong are in dire need of repair even though some of them were constructed/repared only a year ago. Clearly the social audit body created during the time of the MUA Government has been given a quiet burial because it is not heard of. The Meghalaya High Court has been pulling up the Government from time to time but to no avail. The present MDA Government has learnt to take the people of Meghalaya for granted, knowing they can be bribed to vote the same set of legislators back in 2028. People indeed deserve the government they elect.

# Tourism and the dangling railways incentive

By Benjamin Lyngdoh

It is an accepted fact that railways contribute to economic vibrancy through fast and efficient transfer of goods thereby opening up employment opportunities for many. The biggest plus point is the decrease in prices of goods due to bulk transportation. One of the economic sectors of Meghalaya that stands to be significantly impacted by the absence of railways is tourism. It can be said that due to this strategic intervention of the Government of India (GOI), tourism of Meghalaya now stands at the crossroads. The railways incentive for development dangles in plain sight, but, no one is willing to take a decisive leap for it. There will be far-reaching consequences unless a wise decision is made.

Literature tells us that the synergy between tourism and railways is enshrined in history. The grand tours of the 17th - 19th century involved the sons and daughters of the British aristocracy travelling throughout Europe (in particular France and Italy) to improve on their knowledge. The tour was a necessary part of the training of future administrators and political leaders. The fag end of the grand tours (19th century) which culminated with the industrial revolution was mainly driven by railways. The industrial revolution in Europe created the base for mass tourism whereby there was a rapid growth of wealth and education level of the middle class and which as a result led to an increase of leisure time and a demand for holiday and tourism activities. This demand for travel was mostly met by railways.

Further, Thomas Cook (1808-1892, considered as the father of modern tourism) utilized the then new railway technology to organize inexpensive journeys for the new working class created in the industrialization processes of United Kingdom. His organizational skills and foresight started to pay-off in profits

from the 1850s onwards. Cook's business model of short train journeys in England expanded in scope and in industrial organisation to develop all-inclusive tours to the great exhibition in Paris in 1855 and then to destinations around the world such as India, Egypt and Jerusalem. Modern tour packages can be traced back to Thomas Cook and the driving force was railways. The point to be noted is that Cook was not motivated by business profits alone, but, by the broad social agenda which underpinned his efforts.

The three popular luxury tourist trains in India are Maharajas' Express (owned and operated by IRCTC with routes in north-west India), Golden Chariot (operated by Karnataka State Tourism Development Corporation with routes in south India) and Palace on Wheels (joint collaboration between Indian Railways and Rajasthan Tourism Development Corporation with routes in north India). Luxury tourist trains are primarily government owned/run with itineraries of about a week. Importantly, they have business collaborations with local suppliers who provide them with most of the raw materials and human resources at destination specific locations. For example, when the train halts at Agra the local transport operators get the benefit of taking the tourist to The Taj Mahal and other spots. Now, if GOI has invested heavily in north-eastern railway connectivity then the probability of luxury tourist trains being introduced becomes viable. In fact, this is already happening with Indian Railways operating Vande Bharat Train and Bharat Gaurav Deluxe AS Tourist Train for 'north-east discovery tour'. GOI is moving fast on the matter while the issue of railways in Meghalaya continues to remain in a sulk mode. The railways incentive is dan-

gling like a carrot for all to see but no one is willing to jump for it. If this continues into the near future then Meghalaya tourism shall be at a disadvantage as far as attracting high-end tourists is concerned. The other parts of north-east India will quickly grab the opportunity and this is likely to hit tourism stakeholders of Meghalaya like a bolt from the blue!

The fusion between railways and tourism can reap huge benefits for Meghalaya. Its scenic beauty and cultural richness are the strong points. The addition of luxury tourist trains would provide a different and more valued view of the tourist attractions. This would also open up many self-employment opportunities. This includes direct opportunities such as shops and services at the railway station and indirect opportunities such as suppliers of raw materials and agri-produce to the stations.

It is true that the employment positions in the trains to be run by Indian Railways/IRCTC would be competed at the All-India level. However, there are many Meghalaya students who have passed out from business studies, tourism and hospitality with a good chance of grabbing the opportunities available. Further, ever since the state government has been talking about high-end tourism, there has been a search for a trigger point to initiate the process. In recent times, it has been tried through luxury cars, festivals like Meghalayan Age, etc. However, they have small scope of making a big impact as one that is required for high-end tourism to take-off. That way, railways are the answer to the initiation of high-end tourism purely on account of its scale, viable pricing, services, comfort and leisure. As is seen in the cases of other luxury tourist trains in India, such services are availed by tourist who are willing to spend but are

on the lookout for excellent service quality. Meghalaya tourism can cash in on this and this is one area which needs serious brainstorming and strategizing.

The demand for ILP remains a hurdle for railways. Going by the number of years the struggle for ILP has been on and a strategic delay and silence by both the central and state governments, it shall be a never-ending saga. Especially now with the gradual roll out of MRSSA, there is a chance that the ILP struggle will start losing steam. The best way forward then is for the State Government and all the pressure groups to revisit the issue and have a new perspective to things. A starting point can be a study of the Mendipathar station in North Garo Hills. A dialogue based on facts and logic is the best way out. In the entire scheme of things, civil society too will have to come out and make their stand clear. Their long-standing silence is only hindering a breakthrough on the matter. Now, data and observations show that tourism in Garo Hills has been growing and gaining in popularity ever since the decline of GNLA in 2018. If the region moves forward and embraces railways across its plains and hill areas, then they will reap many benefits from it. Garo Hill is no less than Khasi-Jaintia Hills in terms of natural beauty and cultural richness. Combine this with its unique selling proposition of wildlife and biodiversity tourism, then who is to say that they will not be pioneers of railways tourism in Meghalaya?

In the end, the railways incentive that is being taken by the other north-eastern states will pinch the masses of Meghalaya. That way, it is just a matter of time before railway connectivity comes to Meghalaya as well. This will only happen when the masses get tired of government indecisiveness and pressure groups posturing on the issue. (Email - benjamin@nehu.ac.in)

## Indian origin American presidential candidates have long term objectives

By Kalyani Shankar

How do the Indian origin American presidential hopefuls fare in the 2024 polls? With a year before 2024, they are far behind Republican leader and former President Donald Trump. It is noteworthy that Trump has a significant lead over other contenders, which could make the race more competitive and exciting. No one said they would win the presidential nomination from their parties, as the gap between them and Trump was vast. Ultimately, Trump and President Biden will be chosen as the official candidates.

Knowing they have slim chances of winning, why did the Indian Americans throw their hats in the Presidential ring? First, their bid had skyrocketed their political profile, whether they won or lost.

Bobby Jindal, both of Indian origin, became Governors and made a significant impact. While Jindal had faded away, Nikki still made the news.

A former South Carolina governor and later U.N. ambassador for Trump, Haley generally aligns with the party's traditional establishment. The five Indian American members of Congress make up slightly less than their share of the population. There are no current senators or governors of Indian descent.

According to the Migration Policy Institute, in 1960, there were only 12,000 Indian immigrants residing in the United States. However, today, census data reveals that the number has increased significantly to more than 4 million. Indian Americans comprise about 1.3% of the



Their names are better known nationally. Second, though they are polling far behind former President Donald Trump, Haley and Ramaswamy represent the growing political influence of American Indian descent.

Thirdly, the Indian diaspora has become a robust and influential community in countries like the U.S., U.K., and Australia. They have emerged as a powerful lobby in Congress and society. Fourthly, there was a time

country's population and have become prominent members of both major political parties. Although the Republican Party may not be able to win over the Indian diaspora in America, even slight gains could be significant in closely contested states.

Kamala Harris, who was hoping to succeed, is now reconciled as Biden's running mate. Haley and Ramaswamy have 6 per cent and 5 per cent support, respectively. The political parties are yet



when Indian Americans were satisfied with giving hefty donations to Political parties. Of late, they have realized where the power lies and try to become candidates. Fifthly, Kamala Harris and Nikki Haley have already established themselves, and Vivek Ramaswamy has emerged just now. All three are children of immigrants and were raised in the U.S.

Some sections of the Indian Diaspora continue to support, fund, and engage in American politics. There has been some attention and pride regarding the three candidates. During her presidential campaign, Hailey said, "I am the proud daughter of Indian immigrants. Neither black nor white. I was different."

Kamala Harris has already broken the glass ceiling and become the first woman vice President. Kamala's mother, Shyamala, came from Tamil Nadu. Hailey is known for many firsts — the first Asian American woman to serve as governor in U.S. history, the first Indian American member of a presidential Cabinet, and the first woman seeking the GOP nomination. Hailey boasts impressive foreign policy experience amid the conflict in Ukraine and the war between Israel and Hamas.

Kamala Harris and Ramaswamy are South Indians, and Haley has a Punjabi heritage. They are a source of pride for their respective communities in India. When Kamala Harris became the vice president in 2020, Tamil Nadu burst crackers and celebrated the event.

The parents of the first major Indian American presidential candidate, former Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal, came in 1971. Hailey and earlier

to announce their candidates officially.

In 2020, Indian Americans voted over 74 per cent for Biden compared to 15 per cent who voted for Trump. The PEW found similar results, with 68 per cent of Indians identifying or leaning toward the Democratic Party compared with 29 per cent who leaned Republican.

The Sangh Parivar's overseas outfit in the U.S. has existed since the 1960s. Prime Ministers Vajpayee and Modi helped organize NRIs with facilities. First-generation Indian immigrants were highly educated, became skilled in the labour force, and affluent through hard work. According to ABC News, they were allowed into the U.S. Indian Americans now have a median household income of nearly \$142,000, according to the census. It is double the average. Haley and Ramaswamy wanted Trump to consider them as his running mates. They positioned themselves in a way that wouldn't rule out this possibility. Even if Nikki Haley fails to become the first woman Republican nominee, this election will mark yet another first for her as it will be the first election she has ever lost. Ramaswamy has a new political profile that will help him later.

Overall, the confidence of the three candidates is also the story of the rising Indian Diaspora. Whether they win or lose in 2024, they will make news. They will someday achieve their American dream. (IPA Service)

(Kalyani Shankar travelled in the USA for three weeks observing the Presidential election campaign. This is the last of her two part series.)

### Letters to the Editor

## Urgent need for responsible event management in Shillong

Editor,

I am writing to express my deep concern regarding the recent procession organized by the Catholic Church in Shillong - an annual event that unfortunately resulted in significant chaos and inconvenience for the city's residents.

The lack of proper planning and execution, particularly in terms of traffic management, was glaringly evident. Shillong, already burdened with congestion issues, was brought to a standstill during the event. The minimal presence of traffic police officers compounded the problem, making it nearly impossible for citizens to navigate the city.

It is disheartening that such events are allowed to proceed without comprehensive consideration for their impact on public life. The Government must reassess its decision-making process when granting permissions for large gatherings, especially in an already congested city. Furthermore, the responsibility lies not only with event organizers but also with disaster management authorities and the concerned ministerial department to ensure smooth traffic flow and public safety.

The confluence of this procession with Diwali only exacerbated the situation, highlighting a lack of foresight and coordination. In the event of a serious concern or emergency during such occasions, who bears the onus for the resulting chaos and potential harm to the public?

Furthermore, the aftermath of the procession adds another layer of distress to the residents of Shillong. It is disheartening to witness the blatant disregard for basic hygiene exhibited by attendees, who indiscriminately lit-

ter and leave behind a trail of garbage throughout the city. The streets, which were once a symbol of communal unity during the procession, transformed into an unsightly mess. This lack of civic responsibility not only reflects poorly on the participants but also raises questions about the event's overall impact on the city's cleanliness and environmental well-being. It is imperative that event organizers emphasize and enforce stringent waste management practices to preserve the sanctity of the city and to instill a sense of responsibility among those participating in such events. The beauty and cultural significance of these processions should not come at the cost of degrading the very city they aim to celebrate.

It is distressing to note that what should be a solemn religious affair transformed into a disruptive party scene, with individuals from distant places openly indulging in alcohol consumption. This not only undermines the sanctity of the event but also poses a threat to public order. Moreover, the double standards in response to inconveniences during other cultural events, such as Pujas, raises questions about fairness and consistency in governance. It is appalling to witness patients in ambulances being delayed en-route to hospitals due to the inadequate planning of such events.

I urge all stakeholders, including the Government, the event organizers, and local NGOs, to reevaluate and re-strategize the planning and execution of such gatherings. Strict standard operating procedures (SOPs) for traffic and crowd management must be implemented to prevent a recurrence of this total chaos in the future.

The general public should not be made to suffer due to the inefficiency of the Government, and it is high time that responsible and meticulous planning becomes the norm for large-scale events in Shillong.

Yours etc.,  
S Singhania  
Shillong.

## Need to better define "Work"

Editor,

The editorial "Work more, earn more" (ST October 30, 2023) made interesting reading. The proposal for a 70-hour week by a gentleman who quit his job in 1981 and borrowed Rs 10,000 from his wife to start Infosys and in a span of only four years grew to be a tech giant employing two lakh people and making Bangalore an Information Technology hub is remarkable. Little did this gentleman know that his company would go on to become India's second largest Information Technology company with annual earnings of Rs 21,539 crores in 2019 (The Economic Times). This is an example worth emulating. But is this possible for a country like India where the standard working week for most office jobs begins on Monday and ends on Saturday?

The work schedule is 48 hours per week. However, most government offices and the software industry follow a five-day workweek. All major industries along with services like transport, hospitality, healthcare etc. work in shifts. Central government offices follow a five-day week. State governments follow half-day working on the first and third Saturdays of each month and rest on the second and fourth Saturdays, except West Bengal, Rajasthan, Bihar, Punjab, Delhi, Tamil Nadu, and Maharashtra governments which follow a Monday-Friday workweek. There is usually no half working day in the private sector, and people work in two or three shifts of 8 hours each.

Around the world, the average workweek ranges from less than 40 hours in length to close to 50 hours. High income and/or developed countries with a cultural emphasis on work/life balance and adequate

leisure/ family time, generally have shorter official workweeks (some short as four days) and more vacation days. These countries also tend toward more generous overtime compensation, more worker friendly regulations, more favourable parental leave laws, and an increased chance of landing on the list of the world's happiest countries. By contrast, countries with longer workweeks, fewer worker protections, and reduced amenities often rank as hard-working countries, but also tend to have a populace that is less happy and possibly overworked.

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) tracks a wide number of labour statistics, including hours actually worked per week by both employees and employed people. These two terms would be interchangeable in most cases, they have different meanings with regard to labour statistics. Employees are people serving either full-time or part-time in a traditional employment arrangement. Employed people, by comparison, include not only the aforementioned traditional employees but also self-employed individuals.

The Economic History Association points out, determining the average hours worked per workweek in a given country compared to another can be a challenging task due to differing philosophies on what activities qualify as work and who is considered a worker. However, with enough data to compile and consider, trends do emerge. As a rule, more high-income countries such as Germany and France enjoy shorter workweeks than do middle-income and developing countries. It is likely that work weeks in the low-income and least-developed countries are the longest of all, at least for those people who can find work, but reputable data are often difficult to obtain. Perhaps, people who are self-employed (entrepreneurs) who have grit to work can practice the proposal of Narayan Murthy.

It is wonderful that the Holy Bible has this to say about work. "For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat" This command in 2 Thessalonians 3:10 is often interpreted as a call to work and contribute to society. It is also a reminder that we should not be idle and rely on others for our sustenance. Instead, we should work hard and earn our livelihood. This verse is part of a larger passage in which Paul, the author of the epistle, urges the Thessalonians to lead a disciplined life and avoid idleness. He also warns them against associating with those who are disorderly and refuse to work. There are several verses in the Bible that talk about work and labour. Here are some of them:

● Proverbs 14:23: "In all toil there is profit, but mere talk tends only to poverty."

● Proverbs 12:11: "Those who work their land will have abundant food, but those who chase fantasies have no sense."

● Ecclesiastes 9:10: "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for in the realm of the dead, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom."

● 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12: "And to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life: You should mind your own business and work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody."

These verses if we cannot work for 70 hrs a week provide guidance on how we should approach our work and labour. They emphasize the importance of working hard and being diligent in our efforts. They also remind us that our work should be done with a sense of purpose and meaning

Yours etc.,  
VK Lyngdoh,  
Via email

## Upscale local wine

Editor,

The present MDA government's initiative to legalize and promote local wine of and from the state is an excellent initiative that has helped local entrepreneurs and local wine making units to come up with more varieties and quality wines. In fact, the organisers and founders of the Shillong Wine Festival should be given due recognition for taking this festival to a new level by not only promoting local wine making talent but also for developing a market linkage with other partners and units as well as helping local entrepreneurs in the wine making sector. Though the local wine industry is at its nascent stage, what can be done is to bring greater awareness amongst the local individual farmers and farmers' groups that are engaged in horticulture activities to collaborate with registered wine and spirits manufacturers across the state. They form the back-end support in the entire value chain and supply line in sync with these local entrepreneurs. Another aspect is to establish a state-funded Wine and Spirits Institute for standardization of wine processing as well as to train people to become wine makers, or trained wine professional who can advise on what wine tastes better with what (sommelier) or even certified wine specialists to inculcate courses that are at par with the wine industry. There is so much of potential to create indirect and direct jobs from this initiative in the coming years but the last call is that of individuals with interest in the trade and more support from the state government.

Yours etc.,  
Dominic S. Wankhar  
Via email

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*"Whoever is careless with the truth in small matters cannot be trusted with important matters."*

— Albert Einstein

**The Shillong Times**

Vol No: LXXV No. 95 SHILLONG, WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 15, 2023

**World at war**

THE War in the Middle East is raging without a let-up. By latest headcounts, more than 12,000 people have died, mostly women and children. That over 5000 of these were children adds to the poignancy of the situation. Starkly, one out of every 200 people in Gaza with a population of 2 million is dead. Some 3,000 persons, half of them children, are "missing." Nearly 30,000 people have been injured. "A whole generation has been damaged or disabled." The United Nations lost over a hundred of its peacekeeping staff in action on the warfront. The UN, rather, is helpless beyond a point – as is also evident in other recent wars. Founded in 1945, in the backdrop of World War II, its express purpose was to maintain international peace and avoid future wars. Its role in brokering peace is often called into question – more so with the overarching influence the US and the West wield over this huge entity represented by all nations across the globe.

This time, the trigger was a Hamas offensive into Southern Israel on October 7, killing over 1200 people and taking over 250 as hostages to bargain for a future truce. Predictably, Israel responded with a killer instinct. Hundreds are killed every day by attacks from air and by the land forces of Israel, aided by weapons and fighter jets it got from the United States and aided by the rest of the West. The Islamic world is hardly in a position to challenge the US, as had also been the case when Saddam Hussein was taken head on, his establishment uprooted, the nation seized in a war that lasted just a few days and the despot liquidated in quick succession.

There have been many casualties on the Israeli side too, but very little compared to the catastrophe faced by the Palestinians in Gaza. Compared to the fighting in 2009, 2012, 2014 and 2021, "This is the most deadly," say analysts. In what is described as an asymmetrical warfare, Hamas is fighting in a more pronounced way this time. Involved in this war are a "cocktail" of foreign weapons accessed by rival sides. In the past, the Palestinian fighters fought Israel with stones and Molotov cocktails. Now, they are targeting the Jewish nation with laser-guided missiles and anti-tank munitions, sniper rifles, magnet bombs etc in Gaza and beyond. Hamas, with a fighting force of 30,000, gets its weapons from what was left behind by the fleeing militants in Iraq, Libya, Sudan, and also those sent from Iran or, even from North Korea. In other words, in the besieged Gaza, the world is at war with itself.

# Is Meghalaya Bored of School Education?

Dr CR Kharlukhi

The Meghalaya Board of School Education (MBOSE) has constantly been in the news, from discrepancies in SSLC mark sheets to mathematics not being a compulsory subject at the secondary level, MBOSE has always been in the spotlight for all the wrong reasons. There has always been a question mark regarding the quality of the secondary and higher secondary school syllabus as well as the prescribed textbooks of MBOSE. However, not much has been said about the quality of the Board question papers of the SSLC and HSSLC examinations.

Being intrigued with the quality of the syllabus, textbooks and question papers of MBOSE, investigations have been carried out for science education at the secondary level and research was conducted in these specified areas for the higher secondary science stream and comparisons were made with those of the CBSE higher secondary science stream. Some of the major findings of the secondary science education investigations and the descriptive research on higher secondary science education will be shared here for the benefit of all stakeholders.

A well-constructed syllabus is supposed to have well-written objectives to guide textbook developers, teachers and evaluators to successfully achieve intended learning outcomes. Surprisingly, the higher secondary science syllabus of MBOSE followed till 2017, unlike the CBSE syllabus, did not have any objectives in its syllabus. Another critical component of a syllabus is the question paper design to direct evaluators prepare a balanced question paper to cover all areas of cognitive abilities of students to develop their critical thinking skills and to discourage rote memorization, two of the various features which have been strongly emphasised by the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005 as well as the New Education Policy (NEP) 2020. Interestingly, it was found that, unlike the CBSE syllabus, the higher secondary science syllabus of MBOSE did not include the question paper design. The absence of course objectives and question paper design were also found by Tron (2018) in the secondary science syllabus of MBOSE.

Based on the descriptive research conducted, it was found that the MBOSE textbooks used till 2017

for the higher secondary science stream, had similarities with that of the NCERT textbooks followed by CBSE. However, the main differences found between the MBOSE textbooks and that of the NCERT textbooks include the absence of a Textbook Development Committee and the non-inclusion of practising teachers in textbook development of MBOSE. Additionally, MBOSE did not encourage the use of e-resources and local resources were not given importance; contribution of scientists was not highlighted, use of students' previous knowledge was absent and science process skills were not encouraged. Thus, the absence of course objectives has greatly impacted the quality of the higher secondary science textbooks of MBOSE. The shift to CBSE syllabus and NCERT textbooks since 2018 is therefore a welcome move by MBOSE.

With regards to the MBOSE science secondary textbooks, the investigation on the activities and experiments of the present textbooks of Classes IX and X revealed that the development of science processing skills was not given importance whatsoever. In almost all the activities and experiments given in the textbooks, the observations and conclusions were already provided in the textbook which left no room for students to think, to reason and to draw inferences on their own. This goes against the ideals of the NCF 2005 and the NEP 2020 which aimed for inculcation of critical thinking, creativity and innovation in students.

Additionally, a study by Tron (2018) on the secondary textbooks of MBOSE revealed that the content of physics, chemistry and biology were given separately which was a non-compliance of MBOSE to the NCF 2005 guideline to make the learning of science composite at the secondary stage. Tron also found that locally available resources to supplement materials for activities in the secondary science textbooks were not provided by the authors. Therefore, it is evident that the absence of course objectives in a syllabus affects the textbook development process. It is troubling, therefore, to know that students at the secondary level of MBOSE are still using very low-quality textbooks.

Now we come to the question papers. Based on the research conducted, it was found that between 2014 and 2018, the question papers of the MBOSE Higher Secondary Science Stream, unlike the CBSE question papers, stressed more on lower order thinking skills and less on the higher order thinking skills. The highest order objective that was tested in all the science subjects was the application objective with very few analytical questions. These findings were similar to the findings of Nongkhaw (2013) who conducted the study on the higher secondary question papers of the core subjects of all the three streams, that is, arts, science and commerce between the years 2005-2009.

Thus, it can be concluded that the similarities of the findings of the studies conducted between the years 2005-2009 and 2014-2018 revealed that the MBOSE has made very little or zero effort in helping our students develop their higher order thinking abilities, which in turn, is having serious repercussions in their performances in competitive examinations to various professional studies as well as job recruitments. The reason for such quality question papers is the absence of a question paper design in the syllabus. Interestingly, based on these observations, if MBOSE is now following the CBSE syllabus and using NCERT textbooks, then the question arises, is it following the question paper design of CBSE to prepare the question papers? If not, then what is the point of changing the syllabus when the same low quality question papers are set?

The same quality was also found in the question papers of MBOSE Secondary School Leaving Examinations. The question paper tests students' lower order thinking skills and encourages rote memorization. However, it is to be reminded that because of the poor-quality question papers, some hard working students easily score 90 per cent and above in science, thus, making them join the science stream at the higher secondary level. It was only when they start their Class XI classes which are following the CBSE syllabus that they realised that their concept of science is superficial. This was evident from a case study conducted and feedback from many

students who passed out from schools following the MBOSE syllabus.

The findings of the investigations carried out have brought to light an issue that requires serious consideration, and that is the gap that was found between the two transitioning classes, that is, Class X and Class XI. The science concepts taught at the secondary level are not given in detail and the easy Board question paper made it a problem not only for students to grasp concepts taught at Class XI but also poses a challenge for Class XI teachers to help students understand concepts at the Class XI level when basic concepts of students are lacking. With the vastness of the course, Class XI teachers will not be able to use extra time to reteach what is supposed to be learnt at the Class X level.

Thus, it is suggested that to fill the gap, the Classes IX and X MBOSE syllabus needs to be revised immediately such that core essentials of each of the science subjects, that is, Physics, Chemistry and Biology will be given fair treatment and students pursuing science at the higher class will greatly benefit from it. This gap would be more prominent now, since the MBOSE had followed the CBSE syllabus and the NCERT textbooks at the higher secondary level since 2018 while the MBOSE syllabus and textbooks are still being followed at the secondary level. The gap thus has become wider with different syllabi and textbooks followed at the two stages.

This issue which is of a serious nature needs to be corrected at the earliest especially now with school boards across the country gearing up for implementing the NEP 2020. Curriculum planners and syllabus designers need to include course objectives at the secondary science syllabus to incorporate objectives targeting higher order skills such as critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving skills and other core competencies that could be developed at this particular stage. Question paper design also needs to be included and paper setting needs a complete overhaul such that expected learning outcomes can be easily attained by students so that their performance will be at par with the rest of the nation.

## Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

Climb and Make an Ass of Yourself...!

At 11:30 a.m. on May 29, 1953, Edmund Hillary of New Zealand, and Tenzing Norgay, a Sherpa of Nepal, become the first explorers to reach the summit of Mount Everest, which at 29,035 feet above sea level is the highest point on earth!

Ah the joy of winning! Whether it's the building of an empire or raising of family and children or the climbing up of a formidable mountain! But winning doesn't come easy.

When Sir Edmond Hillary and Sherpa Tenzing Norgay successfully scaled Mt. Everest, Hillary commented: "Without a strong inclination to overcome and achieve you simply wouldn't try to climb Everest. It's a very tedious, miserable slog. But if you can persist and get to the top, there's a great feeling of satisfaction. In life, I think everyone is battling a mountain like Everest and the key to success is the same!"

We all battle mountains, sometimes every day is a climb up a mountain, but with every step up, we build muscle. Hillary and Tenzing, we would like to believe made it to the top like a breeze, but they didn't. There must have

been days of stumbling and perilous falls, of wounds and illnesses and near-death situations. There must have been days, when their own families must have told them, "Enough!"

They must have looked at their family members and shook their heads, because they knew that the mountain peak they saw, their friends and family couldn't see: Because theirs was a dream to reach the top!

Yes, the key to success is to climb to the top!

Years ago, Lew Kraft, a cheese manufacturer, used to drive his horse Paddy from store to store selling his product, though without much success. One day despite the fact that his debts had been piling up and his cash register down, he said to his horse, "Today we'll sell two hundred dollars' worth!"

When evening came however and Kraft counted up the day's earnings, the total came to \$15.76! The worst day's business he had ever done. "Lew," his close friend told him, "you're licked and you don't know it."

But Lew was not licked. He plodded and pushed, he dreamt and worked hard and went on to build a hundred-million-dollar cheese business!

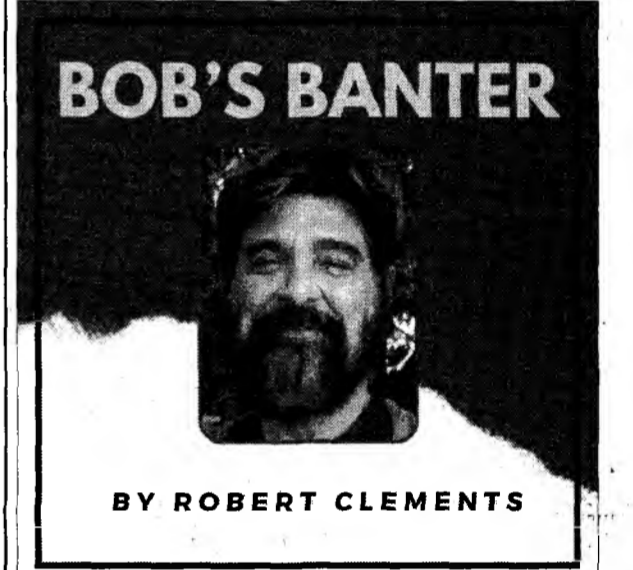
You have all heard of Kraft Cheese!

One day in a letter to his employees, he wrote, "The greatest blessings of my life have been a result of overcoming failure!"

Ah the joy of success! Whether it be the building of an empire or raising of family and children, or struggling against an illness:

Go climb your Everest! But climbing Everest has its share of bystanders who will scoff and jeer and tell you that you are a fool, and here comes another bit of advice, "Dare to make an ass of yourself as you climb!"

Last month I was asked to be the Chief Guest and give the Valedictory Address to the students at a school in Mumbai who were passing out, "Dare to Make an Ass of Yourself!" I told the students,



been days of stumbling and perilous falls, of wounds and illnesses and near-death situations. There must have been days, when their own families must have told them, "Enough!"

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an ass of myself once in a while and start speaking in public."

"What did you do?" she whispered.

"I visualized myself on a stage like this. I perceived myself speaking to an audience like you all and I set about developing a persistent belief that I could do it."

There was silence in that hall. "Then," I said, "I decided to become an ass. I wrote to different organizations, telling them that I would like to address them on a particular subject. Can you guess what the subject was?"

"Writing?" she asked.

"Public speaking," I smiled. "The first to reply was a club from the neighbourhood. They asked me to speak to them on a Thursday on the elements of Public Speaking. I nearly fainted with nervousness when I accepted the invitation."

"And did you speak?" she asked.

"Yes," I said with a grin. "I was scared but I spoke, and today I am not afraid to speak in public anymore!"

"What is it you want to do next?" she asked as the others in the room laughed.

"To sing a solo in public," I said.

"Are you afraid?" she asked.

"Very," I said, "but the day I can visualize myself doing it and develop a persistent desire to excel in it, I know I will succeed!"

"Dare to Make an Ass of Yourself," I told the students. "That's what separates Bill Gates and many other successful people from the rest of the world!"

I left the school hoping I had made new asses of the students, and would like to do the same with each of you my readers, "Go climb your Everest, and in the middle of the scoffing and jeering dare make an ass of yourself..."

The Author conducts an Online Writers and Speakers Course. For more details send a thumbs-up to him on WhatsApp 9892572883. [bobsbanter@gmail.com](mailto:bobsbanter@gmail.com)

Letters to the Editor

### Urgent need to improve road safety measures

Editor,  
I am writing to draw attention to the pressing issues of road safety in our community. The recent increase in road accidents demands immediate action to protect lives and ensure the well-being of our residents.

Despite efforts to promote road safety awareness, it is evident that more comprehensive measures are required. First and foremost, the maintenance of road infrastructure needs careful consideration. Potholes, uneven surfaces, and poorly marked crossings contribute significantly to accidents. I urge authorities to prioritize these issues to enhance overall road safety.

Additionally, there is a critical need for stricter enforcement of traffic regulations. Reckless driving, over speeding, and disregard for traffic signals continue to pose significant threats. Law enforcement agencies should intensify their efforts to ensure compliance and penalize those who violate traffic rules.

Educational campaigns focused on responsible driving behaviour should also be

intensified. Creating awareness about the consequences of distracted driving, driving under the influence of liquor, and other risky behaviours can contribute to a safer road environment.

As happened on November 13, 2023 a woman by name Larisa lawrod who was just 50 years of age lost her life in a minute as she was crossing the road at Mawlai Mawdatbaki (Umjan) due to the reckless driving of a biker. Incidents such as these prove that there are still many deficiencies in the road safety system in our city and localities.

Having strict and well-designed laws and regulations to be followed by the drivers of all vehicles and making sure that those indulging in reckless or drunken driving are punished would deter others from following the same trajectory. This would ensure the safety of pedestrians. To add to this, the already present zebra crossings are not respected by drivers and hence they of much in our community, hence making it compulsory to follow all traffic rules would bring greater safety for all concerned and would also help in minimising the frequent occurrence of road accidents.

In conclusion, I implore upon the local authorities to address the current road safety challenges prompt-

ly. The implementation of comprehensive measures, ranging from infrastructure improvements to strict law enforcement and awareness campaigns in educational institutions is crucial for safeguarding our community members from becoming victims of motor vehicles accidents.

Yours etc.,  
Andy J Kharbuli.  
Via email

### Of derogatory remarks

Editor,  
I wish to refute the derogatory remarks in the letter appearing in your esteemed daily on November 14, 2023, under the name of S Singhania who seems to be all out to tarnish our family name in Shillong. We have been permanent residents of this city for the last 150 years without any blemish on our family. This letter, it appears, intends to create animosity between different communities of different faiths for selfish and ulterior motives. Right from 1897 when the great earthquake rocked Shillong and razed several buildings belonging to private individuals and to the government, my great grandfather did yeoman's service and helped people by extending all possible help. Since then there have been instances of

social service galore which speak for themselves.

Taking cognisance of this article we are filing an F.I.R against "S Singhania" who is not at all related to our family and is tarnishing the name of the Singhania in Shillong.

Yours etc.,  
Shankarlal Singhania  
For on behalf of Entire Singhania Family  
Shillong

### Water scarcity in Shillong; a daily battle for many

Editor,  
It is very unfortunate that this pleasant capital city of Shillong is battling with water scarcity. Meghalaya, is a hilly region and receives heavy rainfall and one would expect that there would be abundant water all around. But uneven distribution of water and lack of proper water management has contributed to the shortage. Shillong is a tourist destination and attracts many tourists. It is also an educational hub where people from other states come here to study and reside but water scarcity has made them wonder if they made the correct choice of coming to study here. In terms of water supply this

city is rated below average.

Obviously rapid deforestation and change in land use patterns affect water retention and quality. Addressing water scarcity in Shillong requires a comprehensive approach, including responsive infrastructure development, sustainable land management, and community engagement to ensure a resilient water supply for the city and its inhabitants. Most people usually complain about water scarcity but what they should know is that they are also one of the reasons for water scarcity. Also, many people depend on the government to provide solutions but it is the duty of the people to take steps to solve the problem of water scarcity. It is not easy to solve the water scarcity crisis but one can start from a small point by using water judiciously at home. For instance, everyone has been taught in lower classes to turn off the tap when not in use so as to prevent wastage of water. Instead of using the shower one can shift to taking a bucket bath. People can implement either traditional or modern methods of water harvesting as it is one of the most relevant methods of conserving water.

Addressing water scarcity demands a concerted global effort. Through sustainable practices, technological innovation, conservation and education, community in-

volvement etc., people can navigate this challenge and secure a water-abundant future for generations to come.

Yours etc.,  
Sentsola Aier  
Shillong

### Huge burden on unaccounted poor

Editor,  
Economists and food rights activists pointed out that more than 10 crore deserving Indians would not get the benefit of the five-year extension of the free rations programme for the poor because of the government's failure to conduct the long-overdue population census. These 10 crore people will also be deprived of getting other welfare benefits as well. This is horrific as poor people are burdened with rising inflation, nagging unemployment and negative growth in real wages as per the Economic Survey of 2022-23.

Yours etc.,  
Sujit De,  
Via email

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

"A wise man gets more use from his enemies than a fool from his friends."

— Baltasar Gracian

## The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXV No. 96 SHILLONG, THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 16, 2023

### Too many under-aged drivers

IT took the life of a woman for the police to crack down on two-wheeler drivers. The fatal accident on November 13 last should wake up the authorities here to stop people from going as they please. Already there is an undercurrent of resistance to rules and laws in Meghalaya. The slogan emblazoned across the city says, "Ha Ri Lajong, Leh Katba Mon." (In your own land, do as you please), which tells us the state of mind of a section of youth that actually believe in the slogan. During school hours young kids are seen driving two wheelers and some are behind the steering wheels of vehicles while doting parents look on. Such is the indulgence by parents that the young believe if they can get away with breaking driving rules they can also get away with breaking the law. It makes no difference to them because they have never been told to follow rules at home; they defy the rules in school and they violate societal rules.

The young man who ran over a lady who was only 50 years old, on his speeding two-wheeler at Mawlai — an accident that led to the death of the lady, is a minor. Obviously, he would not have a driving license. So whose license was he using? Or was he driving without a license? Why is the penalty for driving without license or for rash driving almost non-existent in Meghalaya? Police rounding up two-wheeler drivers on Wednesday after a public outcry is a case of too little, too late. The manner in which motorcycles speed within city limits and take a pass from whichever side they please, has been a matter of concern for car drivers. They never know when a motorbike will cut across their path without any signal.

The glut of two-wheelers, especially motorcycles has become a matter of concern because they have no separate lanes and drive along the same narrow roads. In Shillong city, crossing the roads has become a dangerous exercise since car drivers don't respect the Zebra Crossings either because they don't know its purpose or they don't care. The elderly are particularly daunted by the road crossing exercise at certain points in the city. The Transport and Police Department in tandem should have more Zebra Crossings at vantage points in the city where vehicles don't give right of way to pedestrians. It is also hoped that the Traffic Police will step up their vigil against under-aged drivers who come from homes that have lost control over their kids. Else which responsible parent would allow a boy of 14-15 years of age to cause danger to himself and to others? Families have a responsibility to raise up law-abiding citizens but if families themselves have lost control over their wards then there's very little the state can do.

# Shillong annual procession — Time to learn lessons

By Albert Thyrianiang

On November 14 a letter 'stressed' the need for responsible management of large events in the city to minimise traffic chaos and messy streets. Readers saw religious motives in the content accusing the writer of attempting to spark animosity among communities. Now that an FIR has been filed against the concerned, the law will study the merits of the case and judge the intentions of the individual. Let us first look at the summary of the letter. The author expresses his deep concern at chaos and inconvenience created by the annual procession organised by the Shillong Archdiocese in the capital city on November 12. It was stated that life came to a standstill during the event halting even ambulances with patients. The writer questions the authorities for permitting the massive gathering without a comprehensive plan in place in the already congested city. Disturbed by the attendees' blatant disregard for basic hygiene who indiscriminately littered everywhere leaving the city in a mess, he/she exhorted the organizers to enforce stringent waste management for such events. The letter alleges double standards as other cultural events are seen as causing inconvenience. A call was also made to local NGOs to take note of the event and its aftermath.

The letter does appear to have ulterior motives. It could be interpreted as an attempt to appeal to NGOs, pressure groups and other denominations to take a stand against the organisers of the massive religious Assembly. If it is true then it is disgusting. Why should there be a grudge against one faith? Every Christian denomination is allowed to hold religious functions in the city. Non-Christians too organise religious processions on the streets. The Seng Khasi is permitted to walk on the main thoroughfare. The RSS too march on the Shillong roads. Every group likes to have the biggest crowd possible. Should the size be restricted? It is debatable.

The police will look into any 'communal' angle. But let us ask these questions, 'Was there traffic jam?' 'Was Shillong in a mess after the event?' Leaving aside the particular procession, after every gathering, social, political or religious do we

not leave eye soring garbage behind?' Do we not have the habit of indiscriminate littering?

As this writer was not around he solicited a tiny sample of respondents seeking their response on the observations in the letter. Some disagreed with the allegations. They say traffic was held up but it was limited only to the duration of the actual procession. Form the rest of the day traffic moved on, albeit slowly. A person even confirmed it with Google map. Volunteers did a great job and the event this year was organised much better, was the general opinion. With regards to the garbage they acknowledged that there was littering but also pointed out that other religious gatherings too did the same.

Others agreed with the writer. They stated that it was expected for the traffic to come to a grinding halt when a phenomenal crowd flocked to the city from all directions. The garbage left behind was true and the city was in fact in a mess. Strong views were expressed against holding such huge gatherings. They are more a public display of faith and a demonstration of numbers than anything else. 'Why should an unmanageable crowd head for Shillong when everyone knows the numbers that the church has?' someone asked. They also observed that a large chunk of the 'devotees' go to buy stuff in Police Bazaar and roam the city rather than participate in the function. The city does not have sufficient toilets for such a sea of people another one pointed out. A person wonders whether the Church has an environment policy and feels that the 21st century concern is not talked about in church services, in schools, in seminars and the various programs the church conducts.

The church has commendable tradition, documents and literature on the environment dating back to hundreds of years. Every pope, in one way or the other, addressed environmental issues. One of Christianity's basic beliefs is that the Earth was created by God directly and it was gifted to humans to care for it. The Bible says so. Monastic tradition is embedded

in agricultural activities and the care of the surrounding environment. Mystics are declared patrons of the environment and ecology. On October 4, 2021 Pope Francis told religious leaders, "Future generations will never forgive us if we miss the opportunity to protect our common home." In 2015 Francis wrote the famed encyclical Laudato si to call on all peoples to be protectors of the environment, the integral and all-embracing entity. Hailed as a landmark text the first encyclical on the environment also states that caring for creation is a virtue. It is inferred that for the declaration of future saints the 'environmental virtue' will also be a consideration.

The encyclical encourages dialogue. So when a view is articulated in the public domain the church does not need to be alarmed. Self-assessment and engagement with the society is a wiser option. Laudato Si itself is a sharp criticism of the abuses of the environment. Pollution is one among such exploitations. Scholars have found Laudato Si as the basis for Catholic (Christian) environmental ethics. Therefore, the church should be quick to take responsibility for the garbage and litter and declare publicly that what the faithful did on the procession day is not something virtuous and ethical.

By the look of it, documents largely remain on paper and are not implemented on the ground and in local situations. 'The Shillong mess' did not come from nowhere. It is a habit transported from the places of origin. It was brought from different parishes and villages. Invariably we see that after every religious function in parishes and villages the place is in a mess. The last two episcopal ordinations in Nongstoin and Jowai were no different. Plastic bottles, bottle caps, plastic bags, potato chip covers, and food wrappers are scattered all over the place. In many instances they lay right there for a long time. When they are removed they are dumped somewhere else. Depending on the material and other factors plastic can take anywhere between 20 to 500 years to decompose. Long after our bones and hair are decayed in our graves,

the plastics we litter will still be around causing havoc to several generations after us. Science tells us that our carelessness affects generations. Even the typical one-time-used plastic bags take around 20 years to fully decompose. In many places plastics are burned down without knowing that chemicals remain in the soil and are harmful for living organisms.

On November 12 the Catholic Church was singled out. But traffic jams are caused by every religious, social and political gathering. Tonnes of garbage that are left behind are a common sight. We need not name the type of congregation. Last February after every single rally and meeting by political parties, venues turned into a garbage zone. Watch out for the parliamentary elections that are coming soon. And it is not as if dirt is only brought to Shillong. Shillong picnickers too leave behind beer and liquor bottles and garbage in river banks and tourist spots in villages. Civic sense and public cleanliness is not a strong point.

In August 2020 the Ministry of Urban Affairs, Government of India, through the fifth edition of Swachh Survekshan, tagged Shillong one of the dirtiest cities in India. Hence it is wrong to target only the Catholic Church's procession in Laitumkrah. However, the unfortunate 'garbage episode' should serve as an example to usher in new practices sensitive to the environment. All gatherings should be environment friendly. Unless someone points this out we may carry on the unhealthy patterns.

Is the crowd for the Archdiocese procession now unmanageable? A former archbishop did try to restrict the size of the multitude. He kind of discouraged the large participation of the faithful from the two dioceses of Nongstoin and Jowai on grounds that they have their own Eucharistic processions. But the bishops of the two dioceses were not open to the idea. Probably it is time to rethink. Should we take pride in the show of strength? Should not the focus be on prayerfulness and devotion? Can Nongstoin and Jowai only send delegates to the annual event. The rest can watch the live telecast if they wish. In such a scenario the procession could be more sacred and hazard free.

session of nuclear weapons by Israel. This has confirmed earlier speculations that Israel is a nuclear weapons state. The Israeli aggression on Gaza which is said to have been prompted after the Hamas attack on Israel on 7th October has literally turned into ethnic cleansing of Palestinians.

The USA was in the forefront to attack Iraq on the false pretext and unproven evidence that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, has kept quiet on the statement of the Israeli minister. The US is always accusing Iran of having nuclear weapons, but now when the Israeli minister has openly threatened the use of nuclear weapons, the silence of the US government and its allies is intriguing. The IAEA too has not spoken a word. The International Criminal Court (ICC) which has the jurisdiction to prosecute individuals for the international crimes of genocide, crimes against humanity, is also silent even after watching thousands of children being massacred by the Netanyahu government with the explicit support of the US. It is a matter of anguish that the US and allies voted against Jordan's resolution for immediate ceasefire between Israel and Palestine in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). India's abstention from voting amounts to siding with the Israeli government's justification of the killings. Israel's Prime Minister has already praised India's position. Attack by Hamas on 7th October cannot be justified; but as has been pointed out by the UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres that "Hamas attacks on Israel did not happen in a vacuum". Israel and the US have built a narrative that Israel has the right to defend itself, whereas the history is full of events to show that Israel has not only occupied Palestinian land but also pushed them out and made them stateless citizens thus clearly defying the international law and two nation principle of peaceful co-existence as was adopted in 1967 between Israel and Palestine with the intervention of USA and USSR.

False narratives are built by the aggressors to justify their crimes. They demonise

## Threat of use of nuclear weapon in Israel-Hamas war ominous Anti-nuclear movements & world bodies must work for immediate ceasefire

By Dr Arun Mitra

The humanitarian crisis in Gaza is of the worst kind in the on-going century. Almost 11,000 people out of which 70 per cent are women and children, 40 percent of them children less than 15 years have been killed by the disproportionate aggression and unprecedented bombardment over the densely populated area. In Gaza one child dies every 10 minutes. Most of the infrastructure, including hospitals and refugee camps have been turned into rubble. Not satisfied with the destruction, the Heritage minister of Israel Amichai Elyahu has threatened the use of nuclear weapons.

Such bigots also talk of their being a superior race and justify their right to subjugate, even eliminate the 'inferior ones'. Churchill held similar views. In 1937, he told the Palestine Royal Commission: "I do not admit, for instance, that a great wrong has been done to the Red Indians of America or the black people of Australia. I do not admit that a wrong has been done to

the opposite on one pretext or the other. The Nazis blamed Jews for the ills of Germany. They spread the myth that Germany did not lose in the First World War on the battlefield, but through betrayal at the home front. The Jews, Social Democrats, and Communists were held responsible. The prejudices about the role of the Jews in the war were false. Over one hundred thousand German and Austrian Jews had fought for their fatherland. Hitler completely ignored the above facts and used false narrative against the Jews to build mass hysteria and eliminate over 6 million of them.

These people by the fact that a stronger race, a higher-grade race, a more worldly wise race to put it that way, has come in and taken their place."

In 1943, India, then still a British possession, experienced a disastrous famine in the north-eastern region of Bengal. At least three million people are believed to have died. Churchill blamed the Indians for the famine, claiming they "breed like rabbits". The truth however is that food meant for the people in Bengal was diverted to the British army in Burma.

In 1994 the Hutu ruling tribes in Rwanda spread hatred against the Tutsi minority that left eight lakh people dead in just 100 days.

India faced a serious humanitarian crisis during partition in 1947 in which 25 lakh Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs were killed by the fundamentalists on each side. Unfortunately anti-minorities rhetoric is being spread at present as we see the minorities particularly the Muslims being demonised by the Hindu fundamentalists with the overt support of the ruling dispensation at the centre.

We must understand that Zionism has to be differentiated from Jews, Nazism from Germans and Hindutva (Hindu Fundamentalism) from Hindus. All Muslims cannot be equated as terrorists. Such ideology can be disastrous and serve only the war mongers. Therefore the statement of the Israeli Heritage Minister's statement has to be taken seriously. It appears he was made to speak to see the reaction of the world.

The US is trying to resolve its economic crisis through building up the Military Industrial Complex and generating wars in different parts of the world. NATO is already on the door steps of Asia. Organisations like the QUAD and the AUCKUS are a threat to peace in Asia Pacific.

People's voice is for peace. There have been huge protests all around the world for an immediate ceasefire. South Africa's peace plans for immediate ceasefire are very apt and should be taken seriously. The anti-nuclear movement has to be more vociferous at this moment. (IPA Service)



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### Letters to the Editor

#### PT Sawkmie hobnobbing with the MDA Govt

Editor, I was bemused with the report, "Sawkmie holds Opposition Leader wrong for censure of MDA gov't" (Shillong Times, Nov.12,2023) Why has the former MLA of Mawlai constituency, P.T. Sawkmie taken offence at Ronnie V Lyngdoh's standpoint with respect to the substandard quality of road projects in Meghalaya, under the present MDA 2 government? Things appear quite fishy here. The former MLA's commendation of the current state leadership vis-à-vis the deplorable road conditions we are experiencing in the State speaks volumes about his vested interests. Blaming the Congress party for the lack of development in the State in the last 40 years sounds ridiculous as Sawkmie was once a Congress MLA from Mawlai. If he is the case, shouldn't he be held accountable for the lack of development of his former constituency and that of the State as well? As a matter of fact he was elected thrice to the Meghalaya Assembly from Mawlai but woefully that constituency still lacks development. So why blame the Congress alone? As a matter of fact PT Sawkmie should have called a spade a spade considering the dreadful road conditions implemented by a particular

road Construction Company. He should stop eulogising the MDA 2. Is the former MLA hobnobbing with the present ruling dispensation as MP elections are just round the corner? Yours etc., Stanley LK Diengdoh, Via email

#### India drifting away from its long-standing foreign policy

Editor, India has never occupied territories of its neighbours since Independence. So how can we be in the same terrorism-victim boat with Israel? How can we consider Israel's stand against Hamas equivalent to our country's stand against Pakistan-backed terrorism? The United Nations secretary-general António Guterres rightly said that Hamas attack did not take place in a vacuum. The truth is that 15 million Palestinians have been suffering the brutality of Israel's oppression for decades.

There were acts of terrorism against British civilians like Kennedy ladies during the British Raj in India. Khudiram Bose and his friend Prafulla Chaki threw a bomb at a carriage thinking that the district magistrate of Muzaffarpur, Douglas Kingsford was in the carriage. However, Kingsford was seated in a different carriage and the bomb killed two British women. Can such attacks on

British civilians ever justify the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre by the British? Had the British still been ruling India, would the world have lent moral support to the colonial regime against the freedom fighters? The killing fields of Gaza has put the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre to shame. It has taken the lives of almost 10,000 people including 4,000 Palestinian children.

India's decision to abstain from a United Nations General Assembly vote on a resolution calling for a humanitarian pause in Israel's bombing on the besieged Gaza Strip was a horrific departure from its long-standing foreign policy. India had always championed the cause of the oppressed be it in Vietnam or East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). India always spoke against Israel's occupation in Palestine and supported a two-state solution of the 1993 Oslo Accords. India's argument that the United Nations resolution lacked a clear condemnation of the Hamas attack on southern Israel on October 7, does not hold water as the resolution condemned attacks on both Israeli and Palestinian civilians.

This was a foreign policy blunder. By abstaining from voting, India earned a dubious distinction of being the only country in South Asia that did not support the resolution. This isolated us not only from our immediate neighbours but also from the BRICS group of emerging economies. Other members of the BRICS, Brazil, Russia, China and South Africa

(BRCS) voted for the resolution.

The first sign of strain was noticed in Qatar. It had kept the government of India in the dark about a court verdict that gave death penalty to eight retired navy personnel. Some experts on international relations said that the differences in the positions adopted by India and Qatar on the crisis between Israel and Palestine in Gaza, might have made Qatar give India the cold shoulder. This is an unfortunate development as many Indians have settled in Qatar. Moreover, Qatar is the main supplier of LNG to India.

In September this year, opposition candidate Mohamed Muizzu fought and won Maldives presidential election for taking a pro-China shift leaving its traditional partner India. Indian foreign policy makers should ask themselves why our traditional ally Maldives left us.

More than that, our China policy needs serious re-examination. India's external affairs minister S. Jaishankar said that India could not pick a fight with China because the latter had a bigger economy while commenting on Chinese intrusion into the Line of Actual Control. This is a bad excuse. Many countries with smaller economies in comparison with that of their neighbours, have successfully been keeping their territorial sovereignty intact. India should use its diplomatic resources and economic means to stop Chinese intrusion. It is a pity that India's trade deficit with China crossed for the

first time a USD 100 billion mark despite Chinese attacks on our borders. The trade deficit for India stood at USD 101.02 billion in 2022 crossing the 2021 figure of USD 69.38 billion. This should immediately be checked instead of just banning some Chinese apps here and there and letting China have a whopping trade surplus with our country.

Yours etc., Sujit De, Kolkata

#### Voicing public concerns a democratic right

Editor,

A person identifying himself as S Singhania expressed concern about the huge crowd that assembled in Shillong on November 12 for the annual Eucharistic procession organised by the Catholic church. I was a passer-by during the time when the procession wended its way through Laitumkrah and I could see that people did not walk; they actually shuffled their feet because there was no place even to walk. S Singhania has voiced an opinion and in a democratic country anyone is free to voice their concerns — in this case about the public road being completely demobilized and everything having come to a standstill for over three hours. As the writer pointed out there was massive littering and it is

obvious that the Shillong Municipality would have to clear the mess.

What I don't understand is the reaction by SL (Shankeral) Singhania and his family) to this letter and the filing of an FIR against someone merely for voicing an opinion. Is the surname 'Singhania' the exclusive claim of one family here in Shillong? Are there no other families in this country with the surname Singhania? How do we know that the writer is not a visitor to the State? Why should SL Singhania have to declare all that has been done by his family for the people and State of Meghalaya? If he has earned his megabucks from Meghalaya then it is his corporate social responsibility to also put his money on welfare measures. There was no need for this holier than thou declaration. Meghalaya Police already have so much on their hands. Why should they go around trying to track down who has written a letter to the editor to a newspaper. Or is this some kind of paranoia that the non-tribals live with in Meghalaya and SL Singhania wants no repercussions to fall on him and his family on account of the letter? This whole drama reeks of selfish motives.

Yours etc., A R Pillai Via email

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

"We live on an island surrounded by a sea of ignorance. As our island of knowledge grows, so does the shore of our ignorance."

— John Archibald Wheeler

## The Shillong Times

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### BJP's no-go South

THE South, mostly, is a no-go area for the BJP that claims to be the strongest national party today. Evidence is also in the way the party is getting sidelined in Telangana, where it had raised some hopes about being the main challenger to the regional BRS party. The resignation of a BJP national executive member and prominent actress – Vijayashanthi – from the party to join the Congress is reflective of the general mood in the state, where elections are set for later this month. While the BJP suffered several such defections in recent times there, the Congress stock in the state is rising. The Congress might not capture the state this time too, but would emerge as the principal opposition if the present trends are any indication. In between, the Modi establishment suspectedly attempted to woo chief minister K Chandrashekar Rao by going soft on his daughter who was a main suspect in the Delhi liquor scam. This disappointed those who pinned their hopes on the BJP as a credible alternative to the BRS.

In state after state across the South, the BJP is groping in the dark, except for Tamil Nadu where it found a young and energetic leader in Annamalai, who is making some waves. Even then, the strong Dravidian sentiments in Tamil Nadu are generally against a party of the Hindi "Aryan" belt. The AIADMK has parted company with the BJP in Tamil Nadu, which should be another constraint for the party there. In Andhra Pradesh, the BJP is a non-entity. The polity is split between the ruling YSRC and the TD-Jana Sena alliance. In Kerala, so far, a Left bastion and half the population being non-Hindu, the BJP could never raise its head count. Attempts by the party to woo the Christians, who are generally not anti-Hindu, have also failed to click as the state party leadership is bedevilled by groupism.

In Karnataka, the BJP received a hit below the belt in the last assembly polls, when it was routed from power by the Congress through a fancy manifesto. To take on the ruling Congress, it is now tying up with the JD-Secular of ageing Deve Gowda. This might help the alliance win several seats in the Lok Sabha polls. Yet, by hoisting a weakling like Basavaraj Bommai as chief minister, the BJP was perceived to have lost much of its ground in Karnataka. All these strengthen feelings that the BJP central leadership and its present chief JP Nadda are at their wits' end when it comes to strengthening the saffron party in the South.

# Examination fever grips students, parents, teachers

By Patricia Mukhim

Come November and examination fever grips students, teachers and parents. Students are cautioned not to waste a minute of their time because when the day of reckoning arrives (report card day) if they don't make the grade and make a good grade at that, then they have to reckon with their parents who will sulk, give their kids a drubbing of their lives and cut down some or all of the allowances the kids were bribed with before the exams. This part is of course for students coming from affluent urban homes. For the kid in rural Meghalaya or the ghettos of Shillong, a failed report card means having to drop out of school so that there is an extra hand at home to look after the smaller siblings or better still the kid can earn something for the family by shepherding sheep and cows. There are no long term calculations here as to what the child stands to lose in the long run by dropping out of Class 3 or 5 because rural folks are not used to planning too far ahead. In any case, life has been the same for them for decades. It's a cycle of poverty and destitution barring for a few that somehow manage to climb out of the deep and dark poverty hole.

The question that arises here is why the fear of examinations. What is expected of students during an examination? The answers are complex. It leads me to a counter question. Is an examination a test of the students' ability to retain what was taught or the teachers ability to break the lesson down to the point where students are excited about what they learn and happily store that in their memory bank. Should examinations only test students? What about the teachers' capacity to communicate? Remember, no teacher is evaluated once appointed, especially in Deficit and Government funded schools? Shouldn't teachers be evaluated too?

Enough has been said about what students learn and how they learn. I recently came upon a book called TeacherVision and some of the pointers in the book tell us that we really are at a point when the old teaching methods need to be discarded because they have not worked or worked in the breach. The book speaks of a series of Laws or Learning such as:

**Law of readiness.** Students learn more easily when they have a desire to learn. Conversely, students learn with difficulty if they're not interested in the topic.

The point is how to get the student interested in the topic and what other pedagogy can the teacher adopt especially in a class with 40 or more students. This is something our education system has to find ways to deal with.

**Law of effect.** Learning will always be much more effective when a feeling of

satisfaction, pleasantness, or reward is part of the process.

There are teachers who use storytelling techniques to get the attention of students and then launch into the lesson. This never fails to work.

**Law of relaxation.** Students learn best and remember longest when they are relaxed. Reducing stress increases learning and retention.

Do teachers really care to know if students are under stress? Do they reach out personally to such students? This is doubtful under the present classroom arrangement where the personal touch is missing; where the teacher is doing the bare minimum just to complete the syllabus and complete her/his time of 4-45 minutes and no interaction thereafter. It is here the role of class teachers is so important.

**Law of association.** Learning makes sense (comprehension) when the mind compares a new idea with something already known.

We already know that it is easier to remember things

Last week I had written about how rural kids cannot relate to what is written in their textbooks because the things mentioned there such as the kind of food that provided protein, namely cheese, eggs, milk butter are things their parents cannot afford and things they have not seen or handled – such as cheese. Hence what protein can there be in a rural person's diet. It would be good to explore that.

**Law of intensity.** A vivid, exciting, enthusiastic, enjoyable learning experience is more likely to be remembered than a boring, unpleasant one.

This goes without saying. A classroom cannot be a staid, serious space where laughing and joking is considered out of bounds. The more humour one can bring to the classroom the better is the student response. I know a boring teacher when I see one. Students too switch off when such a teacher enters the classroom.

**Law of challenge.** Students learn best when they're challenged with novelty, a variety of materials, and a

from the neighbourhood. Bringing money to the classroom and making children do buying and selling is the best way to teach profit and loss and percentages.

**Law of expectations.** Learners' reaction to instruction is shaped by their expectations related to the material (How successful will I be?).

Its important to communicate very clearly to students what they will gain out of learning Science, Mathematics, or English or Social Science for that matter, rather than just launching into teaching 'subjects' on the first day of school when the teacher enters the classroom.

**Law of emotions.** The emotional state (and involvement) of students will shape how well and how much they learn.

Much has been spoken about the role of emotional intelligence and emotional IQ in aiding the teaching learning process. Like Prof Sanjoy Mukherjee who teaches values and ethics in Management at IIM Shillong says, human emotions need nurturing else we will produce heartless automations. Positive and noble emotions are born in a classroom with a teacher who has empathy and can show the light.

**Law of differences.** Students learn in different ways. One size does not fit all!

This need not even be reiterated because we all have our own learning capacities. So perhaps the measurements used to test our ability to reproduce what we have learnt are themselves faulty. One student may have learnt one thing from a class; another one might have got a different idea so can a system that measures just the capacity of a student to learn by rote a good yardstick? I am not sure why we have failed to figure this out and labelled our students as 'failed' thereby consigning them to a future of hopelessness.

One area that needs immediate remedy is to make the classroom dynamic and interactive. Students have the right to ask questions. No question is a 'stupid' question. Critical thinking happens when students are able to ask questions to their teachers and their peers without any sense of fear or of being judged. Those that don't ask questions have either not understood the lesson taught or have just switched off both their emotional and practical brain... the right and left brain.

Nobody ever said that teaching is an easy vocation. Sadly those that enter this profession do so as a last resort because they can't find a better job or a government job. That and appointing teachers on the basis of political string-pulling or on the basis of religion is what what haunts education in Meghalaya and will do so for a long time.



when we can compare them with what we already know. From there it is just a continuous learning curve.

**Law of involvement.** Students learn best when they take an active part in what is to be learned.

This is where role play is so powerful where that is possible. Not all subjects and lessons however lend themselves to role playing hence teachers need to constantly unlearn and relearn their teaching techniques.

**Law of exercise.** The more often an act is repeated or information reviewed, the more quickly and more permanently it will become a habit or an easily remembered piece of information.

I am sure we are all familiar with this law. The more we learn about a topic and find out more about it and also do some exercises on that topic the more easily it will remain with us.

**Law of relevance.** Effective learning is relevant to the student's life.

range of instructional strategies.

This needs no further elaboration. What can be touched can be remembered. It's pointless talking about fossils or ferns if students have not touched them or even seen them. Nature rambling therefore is an integral part of education.

**Law of feedback.** Effective learning takes place when students receive immediate and specific feedback on their performance.

Do teachers leave enough time for interaction? Students learn better from one another. Get the fast learner to sit and teach his/her peers. Nothing helps like collaborative and cooperative learning.

**Law of recency.** Practicing a skill or new concept just before using it will ensure a more effective performance.

For instance, when learning mathematics it would be good for the teacher to resort to the mother tongue and to cite immediate examples

in their life. Anyone can be a victim of depression. The statistics for the lifetime risk of suicide among patients with untreated depressive disorder is nearly 20%.

Depression is a topic we do not talk about openly although it is curable. Unfortunately 35% of adults receive no treatment. A treatment plan that includes medical interventions, support, and lifestyle changes can enable a person to live a normal and full life with the condition. Not all people share about their battle with depression. As much as we try to help our loved one battling depression, it is something we need to treat with therapy and sometimes medication.

Anyone who has been feeling sad, hopeless, or irritable for a long period of time should talk to a therapist. It is not very common here for someone to have a therapist. However, as much as one takes care of their physical health, our mental health is just as important. Online therapy is also available if needed. Depression should be addressed more openly. Research shows that one in six people will experience depression at some time

## A call for more footpaths and wider roads

By Gilbert Sangriang

This year, I went out for an evening walk on five occasions with the intention of refreshing the mind. But not once was my mind refreshed. Instead, each time I walk down the Shillong streets, I am overwhelmed by unpleasant feelings. I am never at peace. Whether alone or with others I am always worried; worried about my life as well as that of others. It's not because of the people who are around the streets. People out there are cool and friendly. What scares and also irritates me are the passing vehicles. Vehicles shatter my peace. They honk loudly and almost hit me every time I go for a walk. In fact, once I actually got hit by a taxi. Fortunately I recovered after two weeks of bed rest.

Frankly speaking, when going out for a walk, I only feel free when I see a footpath. So the absence of footpaths is the reason for my anxieties and why I don't go out for a walk. I wish there were more footpaths so that I can feel safe every time I go out. Without the footpaths I have to remain alert as to where I put my feet in because if I lose balance, tragedy is waiting to happen.

their vehicles. Imagine if there are 500 people inside their vehicles and each of them wastes 30 minutes. Mathematically they have together wasted 15,000 hours which is equal to 26 days.

This is just an example. I'm sure there are more people wasting their time inside vehicles due to traffic snarls. We don't realize that time is money. Sorry, time is more valuable than money. When we waste time we are wasting life itself. Time is life. Practically speaking, if we don't have time we don't really have life. That's why we can't afford to waste time unnecessarily. However, if we waste our time happily, and willingly, that's a different matter.

Recently we took our boys to Laitlum for a picnic. On the return journey home there was heavy traffic all the way. Believe it or not, from Laitkor to Mawlai, it took us over three hours. Our boys were very happy because they got more time to dance. But that's not the case with everyone. What about those who are sick; those who have urgent work and those who are not well off? Naturally they would be sad and depressed.



If I slip, I may land up in the middle of the road. And imagine that happening when vehicles are running non-stop. I will then be gone surely and untimely!

And its not just the vehicles, the bikers as well ride as if the roads are free. Some bikers believe they are the protagonist in the movie, "Ghost Rider." Please riders, don't ride too fast, reaching home late is better than reaching heaven early. Many have met with accidents and some even died due to careless driving and riding. Recently a lady from Mawlai lost her precious life because someone drove carelessly. It's on this ground that I frequently think about death when I walk on the streets of Shillong. It's the kind of thought that no one would want to entertain.

Come to think of it, all of my senses are hyperactive when I walk on the streets. This is the reason why instead of experiencing freshness after a walk I am even more exhausted. I have verbally expressed this issue to some of my friends and practically all of them have the same kind of experience. It is obvious therefore that our streets should have more footpaths.

But its not just the footpaths; we should widen the roads as well wherever that is possible. We all know the importance of roads. Sadly our roads are really narrow. Many have spoken about this. Many have suggested different ways to overcome traffic chaos. Some of the suggestions have even been executed. But the effect is just too little. In my opinion, our economic stagnation is because we don't have proper roads; instead we have bad roads, narrow roads and also no roads. Thousands of people every day waste their time inside their vehicles because of traffic jams. Some waste 10 minutes, some 30 minutes, some even waste hours inside

Generally, people in Shillong are hard working. They don't want to waste their time unnecessarily. But when they go to work in their vehicles, they are forced to waste time. No doubt, it's the traffic that victimizes them. I personally have walked many times because of the traffic. I don't have patience as many others do.

Few months ago, as we came down from our village, Mawpat, South West Khasi Hills, upon reaching Sanmer, we waited for over an hour inside the vehicle due to traffic jams. I tried to be patient but I couldn't. Although we already paid our fare, we still had to walk all the way from Sawmer to Motphran. Interestingly, many people who were inside the vehicles were cool and calm. I really salute them for their patience. They still gave their radiant smiles even after hours of being stuck in traffic.

Another point that I want to mention is that there are many students who come late to their schools because of traffic jams. It's a loss for them. But the kind of loss they suffer is personal. The big problem is when teachers arrive late to school due to traffic jams. It's not their fault. It's the fault of the system. But if the teacher arrives late the whole class loses. If the teacher is late or let's say is absent for 1 hour and if there are 60 students. They have together wasted 60 hours which is equal to almost three days. I'm quite sure there are many teachers who don't reach the classroom on time due to traffic jams!

More than anything else, the worst part about the traffic in Shillong is that people are now taking advantage of it. How? There are many people who blame the traffic whenever they are late. Not all those excuses are true. They blame the traffic because when it comes to traffic jams, it's always believable and justifiable in Shillong.

### Letters to the Editor

#### New traffic arrangement not working

Editor,  
The new traffic arrangement from 4th furlong junction to Polo Bazar made effective from 6th November, 2023 on a trial basis appears to have failed to achieve the desired result of decongesting the roads. Rather, it has greatly inconvenienced the residents of McCabe Road, Bishop Cotton Road and nearby areas who now have to cover a distance of 3-4 KMs to reach their nearest market for purchasing their daily needs that too after enduring traffic jams right from BJP Office at Bivar Road till Polo Towers Hotel. Moreover, the road from Polo Bazar Point to 4th furlong junction, which has been made one way gets jammed with two-lanes of vehicles especially during peak hours hardly leaving any space

for pedestrians. That apart, the new traffic arrangement has increased manifold the volume of traffic in the road from 4th furlong junction to Chief Secretary's Bungalow. As a result the users of this stretch always find the road very congested (both ways) from CRPF, IGP office onwards. I therefore, urge the authorities to re-look into the issues and revert to earlier traffic arrangement.

Considering the volume of ever increasing traffic in all the roads and alleys in Shillong such re-orientation would hardly help in decongesting the roads. Instead, the authorities should develop efficient public transport network of medium sized buses and simultaneously consider drastically increasing the parking fees (Minimum Rs. 500) for private vehicles in all commercial areas so as to dissuade users from using private vehicles.

Yours etc.,  
D. Bhattacharjee,  
Shillong-1

#### Depression; A global public health concern

Editor,  
I would like to highlight the leading rate of depression in today's society. As estimated by the World Health Organisation (WHO), depression has become the second largest illness in terms of morbidity. Depression is a common mental disorder. It is characterized by persistent sadness and a lack of interest or pleasure in previously rewarding or enjoyable activities. It can also disturb sleep and appetite. An estimated 3.8% of the population experience depression, including 5% of adults (4% among men and 6% among women) and 5.7% of adults older than 60 years.

Depression is one of the most common health conditions. It can occur at any age. Some mood changes and de-

pressed feelings occur with normal hormonal changes. But hormonal changes alone don't cause depression. Research suggests that genetic, biological, environmental and psychological factors play a role in depression. It can also be caused depending on a person's behaviour. A pessimistic person is more likely to be depressed than an optimistic person. Around the world, depression affects around 300 million people. Women are more likely to have depression than men. Depression is the most commonly experienced mental health challenge for young people aged between 12-25 years.

Anyone can be depressed and it may look different for different people. Many things such as genes, brain chemistry, stress, health and hormones, daylight and seasons, life events, family and social environment and reaction to life situations can cause depression. For some people, a negative, stressful,

or unhappy family life can lead to depression. Other high-stress living situations — like poverty, homelessness, or violence — can lead to, too. Dealing with bullying, harassment, or peer pressure also leaves some people feeling alone or anxious. Depression can sometimes mean feeling empty or nothing at all. A person can also be in denial of their depression, afraid to be misunderstood, or not able to find the words to explain.

Anyone who has been feeling sad, hopeless, or irritable for a long period of time should talk to a therapist. It is not very common here for someone to have a therapist. However, as much as one takes care of their physical health, our mental health is just as important. Online therapy is also available if needed. Depression should be addressed more openly. Research shows that one in six people will experience depression at some time

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

"Every day brings new choices."

— Martha Beck

The Shillong Times

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**Politicisation of higher education**

AT a recent meeting of Vice Chancellors (VCs) of private universities in Meghalaya, the National Education Policy 2020 was discussed in great details and there were suggestions that instead of pleading for more time to implement the NEP which actually is an attempt at dynamic educational reforms, universities should work at collaborating and sharing spaces. Vice Chancellor, University of Science and Technology (USTM), Prof GD Sharma who was formerly with the University Grants Commission, offered to collaborate in the value addition of local produce such as tea, turmeric etc. in their well-established laboratory at their main campus in Baridua. In the course of his deliberations, Prof Sharma also rued the fact that appointment of Vice Chancellors to central and state universities under the present dispensation has been completely politicised and political affiliation has replaced merit. While politics in itself is part and parcel of human life, what is adversely affecting universities is the ideological thrust that is being imposed on how universities should be run and who should or should not be appointed in the academic and administrative cadres.

Vice Chancellors are people of eminence with a good academic record. The Supreme Court in a judgment had said that a VC should have a minimum teaching experience of 10 years as a professor in a university and his/her name should be recommended by a search and select committee. The court referred to Section 10(3) of the University Act, 2019 which provided that the committee should prepare a list of three persons for appointment as VC based on their qualification and eligibility. According to the University Grants Commission (UGC) Regulations, 2018, the VC of a university, in general, is appointed by the Visitor/Chancellor, from a panel of three to five names recommended by the duly constituted Search cum Selection Committee. The Visitor is empowered to call for a set of fresh names in case of dissatisfaction with the given panel.

The Vice-Chancellor (VC) is considered the 'Principal Academic and Executive Officer of the University.' As head of the University, he/she is expected to function as a 'bridge' between the executive and the academic wing of the university. It is precisely to facilitate this expected role that universities are always in search of persons with values, personality characteristics and integrity in addition to academic excellence and administrative experience. Vice-Chancellors are to ensure that the provisions of the Act, Statutes and Ordinances and Regulations are fully observed and he/she should have the power necessary for the discharge of this duty. What is happening in the North Eastern Hills University (NEHU) would appear that the VC has acted in a manner that is prejudicial to the smooth functioning of the University by appointing people in the administrative cadre without following due procedure. In this manner he has ignited protests that have mired the functioning of NEHU. This extra-constitutional act is unwarranted and has given rise to the alternative politics of ideology within the campus. The University is not a place for promoting political ideology of any colour. It is best if Universities remain wedded to academics and not to political partisanship.

# Madhya Pradesh's 'kaante ki takkar'

By Rajdeep Sardesai

Is the 'new' BJP a bit like the 'old' Congress? And is the 'new' Congress a slice of the 'old' BJP? These might seem incongruous questions to raise when the BJP and the Congress claim to be waging a sharply polarised ideological war at the Centre but on the campaign trail through battle-ground Madhya Pradesh, the lines between the two major national parties seem unusually blurred. Which might also explain why it isn't easy to pick a definitive winner in an electoral fight that has much at stake.

Take for example the visual impact of the large hoardings splashed across the state. The BJP's publicity material has prime minister Narendra Modi typically tower above all others but even four time Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan is sharing space with nearly a dozen state BJP leaders. For nearly two decades, a resilient Chouhan, or 'Mamaji' as he is affectionately referred to, has been the face of the BJP in Madhya Pradesh; now there is a conscious attempt to project a 'collective leadership' concept beyond any individual focus. The messaging is distinctly similar to the 'old' Congress which was always reluctant to project its proven state leadership, preferring to rely instead on the appeal of a ubiquitous Delhi high command. By contrast, the Congress's pitch is almost entirely being driven by life-size images of its chief ministerial face Kamal Nath with even the Gandhi family missing from many party posters. Rarely has the grand old party placed its First Family well below the pecking order in this manner.

Ironically, the Congress as a result appears for once more cohesive on the ground than the BJP. The saffron party has entered this election amidst growing concerns over a creeping divide between 'netritva' (leadership), 'prashasan' (administration) and 'sangathan' (organization). In a state where the RSS has always

prided itself on a strong grassroot network, many old-time 'karyakartas' (workers) complain of being ignored by the central leadership. Almost all those who defected from the Congress in 2020 to bring down the Kamal Nath government have been rewarded with tickets. With half a dozen MPs, including union ministers, being drafted in to fight the state elections, the pulls and pressures within the BJP factions are apparent.

By contrast, the Congress, which for decades was racked by intense faction fighting, now appears to have settled on a working arrangement between the last of its old guard leaders, Kamal Nath and Digvijaya Singh. Neither of them are genuine vote catchers but together the duo provide the

ambivalent on its stance on sanatana dharma, in Madhya Pradesh the Congress wears its religiosity on its sleeve. Asserting that the BJP has no monopoly on Hinduism, Kamal Nath is even taking credit for Rajiv Gandhi's role in opening the locks of the disputed site in Ayodhya.

Not only are the BJP and Congress competing for the Hindu vote, their slew of promises are also markedly similar. If Chouhan is hoping to turn around the election with his 'ladli behna' scheme that provides Rs 1,250 per month as financial assistance to approximately 1.3 crore women from poor families, the Congress has promised to raise the amount to Rs 1500 per month. From subsidized LPG cylinders to monetary support for tribals, Dalits and unemployed youth, cash

is almost as if Madhya Pradesh is a state trapped in a time warp, untouched by the winds of change that have blown through much of the Hindi heartland in recent times. Neither the BJP nor the Congress have been able to effect a generational change in leadership nor in throwing up new ideas that might influence the electorate. Even on the troubling issue of surging localised corruption – a matter that seems to resonate with the youth in particular – both sides only throw mud at each other, neither going into the debate with clean hands.

Which is why a word most frequently heard on the road in Madhya Pradesh this time is 'thakavat' or 'fatigue'. A sense of tiredness at the lack of viable options in what is still a well-entrenched two party state system has left voters feeling weary and frustrated. This weariness may express itself in an anti-incumbency mood against sitting MLAs – both parties have repeated a majority of their legislators – but it is unlikely to reflect in any dramatic change in political fortunes. In 2018, the vote share of both the BJP (41.02%) and the Congress (40.89%) was near identical and the gap in seats was only five. The term 'kaante ki takkar' (nail-biting fight) is often overused in election lexicon but in Madhya Pradesh it may well hold true once again. With one caveat: a decisive woman vote could yet tilt the delicate balance of power.

Post-script: On a train from Bhopal to Gwalior, a group is furiously debating on who will win Madhya Pradesh. Amidst the cacophony over the numbers game, a sobering voice is heard: "Madhya Pradesh mein BJP haarti nazar aati hai par Congress bhee jeetti nazar nahi aati" (In Madhya Pradesh, the BJP looks like it is losing but the Congress doesn't look it is winning either).

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*"The messaging is distinctly similar to the 'old' Congress which was always reluctant to project its proven state leadership, preferring to rely instead on the appeal of a ubiquitous Delhi high command. By contrast, the Congress's pitch is almost entirely being driven by life-size images of its chief ministerial face Kamal Nath with even the Gandhi family missing from many party posters."*

party with experience and continuity. If Kamal Nath is the acknowledged chief ministerial candidate, Digvijaya is still the leader with the worker connect.

This is not the only role reversal in the Hindi heartland state. While the BJP unsurprisingly is seeking votes in the name of a Ram Mandir, the state Congress too is keen to ensure that the BJP isn't allowed to usurp the Hindutva agenda. A promotional video highlights a 101 foot Hanuman statue built by Kamal Nath in his Chindwara constituency, gau-shalas (cow-sheds) sponsored during his 15 month tenure as chief minister and effusive endorsements from the sadhu-sant samaj. While a section of the opposition 'India' alliance appears

hand-outs are seen by both parties as their ticket to power. The prime minister may well rail against the 'revadi' (freebie) culture bankrupting the exchequer but in Madhya Pradesh his party is locked in what is best described as a fierce 'freebies for all' fight with the Congress.

Here then is the conundrum for voters: if the ideological differences have narrowed, if the shower of goodies being offered by both parties are identical, how does one choose one over the other? Even the leaderships on either side of the political divide have a sense of sameness to them. Chouhan has been the BJP's longest serving chief minister while Kamal Nath made his electoral debut way back in 1980. It

Lok Sabha Election the BJP got only 38% of the popular vote which means that less than half of the Hindus voted for the BJP.

Now we have to brainstorm and find out which are these 50 percent Hindus who are not voting for the BJP. This is politics in India. It is for the opposition to set the agenda for the next election. We need competitive and not monopolistic politics if India is to remain a strong and vibrant democracy following the principles of Mahatma Gandhi who once said "Where is Independence with all this poverty? If I live, my task will be to reform politics."

Yours etc., V.K.Lyngdoh, Via email

all that they receive as incentive is a measly 50 paise per household. Have we forgotten how they served the society during those dark COVID-19 days braving the dreaded disease while we ourselves were safely cocooned in the safety of our homes? How short the Government's memory is. And yes, the same Government called them warriors. Well, these warriors too are mothers with mouths to feed, with hopes of educating their children on a princely sum of Rs 2000 a month. Shame on the Health Department. I hope someone in the echelons of power has some conscience which will prick them to do something for the plight of ASHAs.

Yours etc., A Wahlang, Shillong-6

## Spare a thought for ASHA workers

Editor, One cannot help but sympathize with the ASHA health workers who had to hit the streets on a cold and wet November to demand better pay for their services. It was even more shocking to know that these health workers were earning a paltry salary of Rs 2000 a month. Beggars on the streets of Shillong easily earn more than this. I understand that the State government has fixed a minimum wage for skilled and unskilled workers ranging from Rs 400 to Rs 500 approximately per day which begs the question – why this double standard? Can't the same yardstick too be applicable to the ASHAs? These hard working ladies are the backbone of the health programs of the Health Department and one can see them trudging from door to door come rain or sun and

## Greed got Sahara India

Editor, The success story of Subrata Roy, Chairperson of Sahara India Pariwar, who died a few days ago, suffered an irreparable jolt because of his insatiable appetite for money. This should be a good message in favour of honesty. However, crony capitalism in which a handful of business persons are getting undue political favours, the opaque electoral bond scheme and write-off of huge amounts of bank loans for some super-rich business persons have unfortunately been sending an altogether different message.

Yours etc., Sujit De, Kolkata

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# Round The States

By Insaf

## TN Governor-Govt Rift

**Bills returned, gets worse**  
Governor-government tussle in Tamil Nadu is getting worse. On Thursday last, Governor RN Ravi returned 10 pending bills to the ruling DMK government. Within hours, a special session of the Assembly has been called on Saturday and according to Speaker M Appavu these Bills, including the power of the state government to appoint university VCs, one on anti-corruption measures and early release of prisoners would be taken up. Apparently, the Raj Bhavan has chosen to ignore the Supreme Court's 'serious concern' a few days ago about Governors not acting on Bills. Or would it argue, it hasn't sat on these and acted promptly by returning them? Whatever inferences are made, the big question is whether Ravi's action triggers a constitutional dilemma. Once the Assembly passes these Bills again, Ravi will be bound to approve them, says Appavu. However, recently at an event at Raj Bhavan, Ravi had said if a Bill doesn't get his assent, it means that the Bill is dead. While that needs to be watched, the sheer returning of the Bills en masse puts the spotlight about his role and powers. Is he over stretching it? For, while, a Governor is expected to approve Bills passed by the Assembly, returning these, raises questions about the balance of power between the State and Central authorities. In this case, there is a need to set that glaring imbalance right. Enough is enough.

## Muscle & Money Power

The Election Commission has a long way to go before it can rein in 'money and muscle power' in elections. Details of candidates in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh Assembly polls are the most recent examples to confirm the misgivings of the democratic system being 'free and fair'. As per Association for Democratic Reforms data, of the 2,534 candidates in MP, where polling took place on Friday last, 472 candidates have declared 'criminal cases' against them: Congress (291), BJP (65), AAP (26), SP (23), BSP (22) and Independents (215). Worse, 291 have declared 'serious criminal cases': Congress (61), BJP (23), AAP (18) and BSP and SP both 16 each, Ind (157). In Chhattisgarh, which too wrapped up its 2nd phase of polling it's no different: of 958 candidates, 100 declared criminal cases: 13 of Congress, 12 each of BJP and AAP, JCC-J, 12, BSP 2 and Ind 50. Of the 56 'serious criminal cases, Congress has 7, BJP and JCC-J 4 each, AAP, 6, BSP 1 and Ind 34. Next is the 'crorepati' list in MP which reveals 727 are in the fray: 200 fielded by BJP, 196 by Congress and rest belong to other political parties. In Chhattisgarh 253 crorepati candidates are contesting: 60 candidates by Congress, 57 by BJP, the rest from other parties. People's representatives, is what they are known as?

## Now Bureaucratic Scam

All eyes are on the latest rift between the Delhi government and the Centre. On Thursday last, Delhi vigilance minister Atishi wrote to the ED and CBI, seeking a probe into Chief Secretary Naresh Kumar's alleged financial irregularities in the acquisition of land for the Dwarka expressway. The scam has led to Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal writing to LG Saxena recommending Naresh's immediate removal and sending the 670-page to CBI or ED for further investigation. Atishi has said the investigation found that the Chief Secretary benefited a company linked to his son with over Rs 850 crore of "illicit profits". "A clear nexus has been found between Naresh Kumar, his son Karan Chauhan and the beneficiary land owners who were provided a windfall gain of Rs 897.1 crore at the cost of public exchequer..." it read. She also recommended removal of Divisional Commissioner Ashwani Kumar to ensure a fair investigation. Expectedly, Naresh has denied all charges, claiming he was being targeted for ordering probes into several

cases, including Kejriwal's home renovation and alleged excise policy scam. Be that as it may, the truth must come out and not be pushed under the carpet as one of the ongoing brawls the ruling AAP has with the Centre over control of the bureaucracy.

## Tunnel Tragedy & Warning

The Silkyara tunnel tragedy in Uttarakhand, trapping 40 labourers, sadly reinforces the government brazenly ignoring the eco-warning time and again. The tunnel near Uttarkashi, whose portions caved in on Sunday last is part of the controversial Rs 12,000-crore Char Dham all-weather road project involving four-laning of hillside highways. These mountains said Minister of State of Road Transport and Highways V K Singh 'are young and fragile...according to data, it (tunnel) was stable for four-and-a-half years. But for some reason, the cave-in occurred.' Absurd, to say the least as the government and National Highways & Infrastructure Development Corporation Ltd failed to heed to environmentalists and scientists' warning that excavating such highways and building many tunnels in the name of development of backward regions is a recipe for engineering disaster at high altitudes. 'For the future, we will review wherever such tunnels are being constructed,' was Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhami response to not heeding to warnings and playing around with the fragile ecosystem in the Himalayas. No solace for the families of the labourers.

## Southern States Firm

Five southern States have forced the National Medical Commission to put on hold its decision to limit number of MBBS seats to 100 per 10 lakh population in every State. On Wednesday last, the apex medical education regulator announced that these "Guidelines for undergraduate courses under the establishment of new medical institutions, starting new medical courses, increase of seats for existing courses, and assessment and rating Regulation 2023" will now be implemented for 2025-26 academic year, only after their consensus following further stakeholder consultations. While the restriction would have allowed 40,000 more MBBS seats in states such as Bihar and Jharkhand, where there's over 70% deficiency as per new seats-to-population ratio norm, the States of Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Telangana and Kerala, would have been barred from raising their medical seat capacity, which they all plan, for the next academic session (2024-25), as these have already exceeded the ratio. The Commission must tread carefully for not only States, but students too mustn't be penalised!

## Curbing Female Student Dropouts

Three cheers to the Supreme Court! It has sought to ensure that adolescent females between 11-18 years, hailing from poor families, don't drop out of schools because of lack of basic facilities such as toilets and sanitary towels. It has asked the Centre to put down a "national model for the ratio of number of girls' toilets per female student population across government-aided and residential schools in the country," before finalising the draft National Menstrual Hygiene Policy, 2023. Besides, it must bring about uniformity in modalities to be followed for distribution of sanitary napkins by considering practices followed in States. The top court was dealing with a PIL seeking free sanitary pads to every female student in classes 6-12, separate toilets for females in all government-aided and residential schools and awareness programmes on maintenance of toilets and spread of awareness. Earlier, it asked the Centre to engage with all State governments and UTs to ensure a uniform national policy is formulated with sufficient leeway for them to adjust based on prevailing conditions. This would aid the National Health Mission steering group to re-evaluate national guidelines the sooner the better.---/NFA

### Letters to the Editor

#### Check illegality of underage driving

Editor, I write to draw attention to the growing concerns regarding the under-age drivers of scooters and the need to address traffic congestion in key areas of Shillong.

I have noticed that there is a rising trend of under-age individuals operating scooters, thereby posing a significant risk to their safety and that of others on the road. I urge parents and two-wheeler owners to be vigilant and not allow under-age or unlicensed persons to drive scooters. There is need to emphasize the importance of responsible driving practices.

Furthermore, the issue of U-turns for cars in busy areas such as the Civil Hospital junction, Police Bazaar Road, GS Road, Nongthymmai Jowai Road, and other parts of Shillong demand immediate attention. Restricting U-turns in these congested zones would undoubtedly contribute to smoother traffic flow and reduce the likelihood of jams.

Speaking of traffic jams, it is disheartening to witness the increasing congestion in various parts of Shillong. The inconvenience caused to residents and commuters is a matter of serious concern. I urge the authorities to implement effective traffic management strategies, such as optimising signal timings and expanding road infrastructure where possible.

In conclusion, it is crucial for our community to collectively address these issues to ensure the safety of our roads and the smooth flow of traffic. By fostering a

culture of responsible driving and implementing thoughtful traffic management solutions, we can contribute to making Shillong a safer and more efficient city.

Yours etc., Rishotbaskhem Kharlyngdoh Via email

#### Plea for rectification in Rapido's driver practices

Editor, In recent times, the ride-sharing app Rapido has been an integral part of our daily commuting experience. However, it is disheartening to observe a concerning trend among some drivers who seem to be deviating from the app's intended purpose, compromising the trust of users and the reputation of the service.

One prevalent issue that demands immediate attention is the growing number of drivers requesting extra money beyond the stipulated fare. This not only violates the transparent pricing structure promised by Rapido but also places an undue financial burden on passengers. Such practices erode the foundation of trust that users place in the app and its services.

Furthermore, instances of drivers misusing the app for personal gain have come to light. Some drivers manipulate the app to inflate fares or engage in unauthorized detours, leaving passengers with unjust charges. This not only tarnishes Rapido's reputation but also raises questions about the effectiveness of the app's monitoring and accountability mechanisms.

It is crucial for Rapido to address these issues promptly to maintain the integrity

of its service. Implementing stricter measures to prevent drivers from requesting extra money and enhancing the app's security features to curb misuse should be a priority. Additionally, conducting regular training and awareness programs for drivers can help reinforce ethical and professional behavior.

As users who rely on Rapido for our daily transportation needs, we ask the company to take decisive action against these malpractices. It is in the mutual interest of both users and Rapido to foster an environment of transparency, reliability, and accountability. Only through swift and effective measures can Rapido regain the trust of its user base and ensure a positive and ethical experience for all.

In conclusion, addressing the issues of drivers requesting extra money and misusing the app is pivotal for Rapido's continued success. By taking proactive steps to rectify these concerns, Rapido can uphold its commitment to providing a reliable and trustworthy transportation service for all users.

Yours etc., Inrilador Gatphoh, Via email

#### BJP not invincible

Editor, The editorial "BJP's no-go South" (ST November 17, 2023) made interesting reading. In 2014 the popular perception in the Hindi heartland and western India was that Narendra Modi would come and change everything. In 2019 the perception was that he is trying and making an effort and now the perception is that he has not delivered on many fronts and

the discontentment is visible. The editor has analysed very well as to why the BJP cannot go South that has "strengthened feelings that the BJP central leadership and its present Chief JP Nadda are at their wits' end when it comes to strengthening the saffron party in the South." It would not be inappropriate to say that starting from Bihar, Bengal, Odisha, United Andhra, Tamil Nadu and Kerala are areas which the BJP has not been able to conquer and one of the primary reasons is the 'language barrier' which the BJP leaders have not been able to master. This places them in a difficult position to communicate in Tamil, Telugu, Oriya or Bengali or Malayali. This region has 220 odd Lok Sabha seats where BJP has got less than 50 seats. If in the West and North where BJP gets roughly 250 to 270 seats, other parties are able to snatch 100 seats from them then power will shift overnight and the power game will come into play as there are 200 seats which are literally redundant.

For instance the 39 MPs from Tamil Nadu are not in the game and are in the opposition for name's sake. They cannot tilt the power balance. But in 2024 if the combined Opposition that oppose the BJP wins 100 seats in the North or Western India, then these 39 seats from Tamil Nadu become very important. Naveen Patnaik's 10-12 MPs are also integral and so too Mamata's 22 MPs. Those of the TRS (Now BRS) and YSR MPs also become relevant. There is a misconception in India about the Hindutva ideology that the BJP has been trumpeting. In India more than 80 percent of the population are Hindus but we are so scared of the BJP and their call of Hindutva but we forget that in the 17th

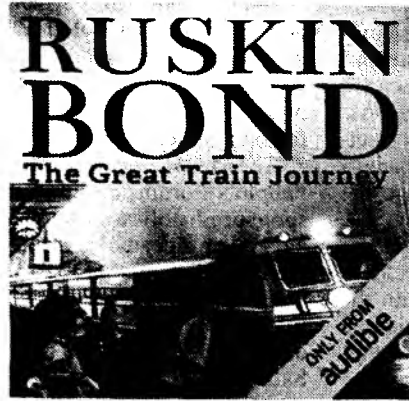
century, the British were the ones who were imposing their ideology on the Indian population. It is time we realize that we are the ones who are being imposed upon.

Yours etc., Inrilador Gatphoh, Via email

# The joy of screen-free storytelling

In today's digital age, it's crucial to rekindle the magic of screen-free storytelling for kids. Think of it as 'edutainment' - education meets entertainment. Authors like Ruskin Bond, Sudha Murthy, R.K. Narayan, and more have brought their timeless tales to Audible, making it easier than ever to set on literary journeys. Here's a list of some brilliant titles that will transport your children to exciting adventures, teaching them valuable life lessons, and kindling their love for words in the most entertaining way possible!

**The Great Train Journey**  
(Written by: Ruskin Bond;  
Narrated by: Ranvijay Pratap Singh)



**The Great Train Journey** by Ruskin Bond is a fantastic audiobook for kids. It's all about the magic of train adventures, from dragons emerging from tunnels to meeting interesting people on the journey. Join one of India's greatest storytellers as he takes you on a fun ride through small-town India and its Great Train Journey!

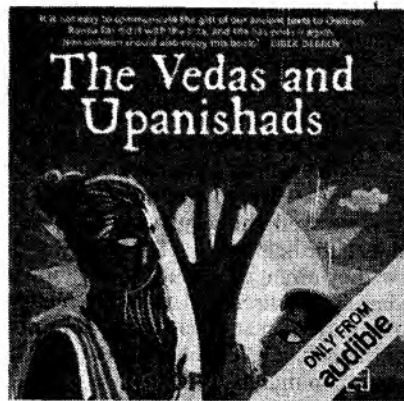
**Great Stories for Children**  
Written by: Ruskin Bond;  
Narrated by: Adnan Kapadia

With its diverse tales of adventure, humour, and the supernatural, this audiobook makes for a perfect choice to spark a child's imagination and entertain them through engaging storytelling. It is a potpourri of short stories that effectively transports young listeners to the fascinating world of its characters - including Tutu the monkey; a pet python who makes sudden appearances at the most unusual places; Himalayan bears who feast on pumpkins, plums and apricots; a crafty thief who has a change of heart; and

Ruskin Bond himself, who meets a ghost at a resort in the middle of the night.

**How the Sea Became Salty**  
Written by: Sudha Murthy  
Narrated by: Neha Faraz, Sumit Kritarth

**How the Sea Became Salty**, by India's beloved storyteller Sudha Murthy, is a delightful children's audiobook. Her tales often carry a moral lesson, encouraging young minds to reflect on the values and principles that guide human behaviour. This audiobook offers an opportunity for young readers to learn important life lessons in an engaging manner. Through Sudha Murthy's wit and simplicity, the timeless tale comes alive, making it the perfect introduction for



children to her magical world of stories in an immersive audio format.

**Grandparents' Bag of Stories**  
Written by: Sudha Murthy;  
Narrated by: Poonam Srivastav

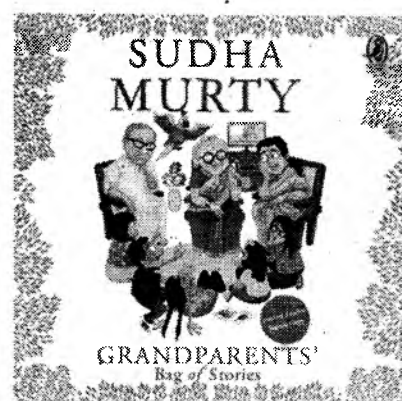
Set against the backdrop of the 2020 lockdown, the story revolves around the experiences of children as they stay with their loving grandparents, Ajja and Ajji, in Shigaon. It is a beautifully crafted audiobook that provides a perfect escape for children during challenging times. It combines the magic of storytelling with the wisdom of generations. This one is an un-put-downable audiobook that is a must-have for every child's audio library.

**Maalgudi Ki Kahaniyan**  
[Stories of Malgudi]  
Written by: R.K. Narayan;  
Narrated by: Toshi Sinha

In this audiobook, the narrator takes

the audience on a journey through the picturesque and culturally rich village of Malgudi, providing an immersive experience filled with the sights and sounds of rural South India. It is a fantastic choice for children and even adults interested in the world of Indian literature, with a collection of short stories. These tales transport listeners to a bygone era, offering a glimpse into the diverse lives and experiences of the village's inhabitants, including astrologers, postmen, doctors, beggars, and priests.

**The Vedas and Upanishads for Children**  
Written by: Roopa Pai;  
Narrated by: Sharanya Gopinath



It takes young readers on a journey back 3000 years to the depths of Indian forests, where brilliant philosopher-scientists pondered questions about the universe and human existence. This audiobook introduces kids to the age-old questions about the universe, perception, and identity, as explored by the great philosopher-scientists of ancient India. It's an engaging and thought-provoking guide to the Vedas and Upanishads, making these timeless teachings accessible and enjoyable for young minds.

**A Children's History of India**  
Written by: Subhadra Sen Gupta;  
Narrated by: Manisha Sethi

From the ancient cities of Harappa to the Mughal era, the British rule, and India's independence, this book provides a comprehensive look at the nation's history. It is an engaging and informative exploration of India's rich past, taking readers on a captivating journey through time. (LANSlife)

## Ancient grains for modern health

When it comes to nutrition, there's a group of unsung heroes that have quietly sustained civilizations for millennia - millets. These unassuming, small-seeded grasses have been cultivated for both sustenance and fodder for thousands of years, silently thriving in environments where other crops falter. Members of the Poaceae family, millets have been the resilient backbone of societies across the globe, especially in regions grappling with limited water resources.

From the heart of ancient civilizations to the modern dinner table, millets have traversed time and cultures. The Yajur Veda texts also identify this superfood, with Foxtail Millet being called Priyangava, Barnyard Millet being referred to as Anava, and the Black Finger Millet brought up as Shyamala, thus indicating the consumption of the grain even during the Vedic period. These grains are more than just food; they're ingrained in the very fabric of cultures, shaping culinary traditions that are as diverse as they are delicious.

However, as the world moved toward modernization, the significance of millets seemed to dwindle. With the allure of new and exotic crops, these ancient grains fell into the shadows, waiting for their second coming.

In recent years, millets have undergone a remarkable revival, thanks to their exceptional nutritional value and eco-friendly characteristics. As consumers increasingly prioritize healthier choices, these grains have emerged as nutritional superstars. The world is now rediscovering what ancient civilizations knew all along - millets are not just grains; they're a sustainable source of nourishment and a bridge between our culinary past and a healthier future. Raju

Bhupathi, Founder, Troo Good, India's largest millet snacking company, explains the significance of millets in ancient culture and their applications in the modern world:

The annals of time have seen the millets facilitate the transition of human beings from being predominantly hunter-gatherers to farming society. Playing a pivotal role in ancient cultures like the Indus Valley civilization and China, millets contributed to the overall nutrition and sustenance of these societies. Enriched with protein, fibre,

and an array of essential vitamins and minerals, millets emerged as stalwart guardians against malnutrition and the sentinels of food security. From being used in humble flatbreads, nourishing porridges, and fermented drinks, this ancient grain's versatility has furthered a tapestry of cultural traditions and rituals. Apart from being nutritional powerhouses of the past, millets held economic significance in ancient trade and barter systems.

As modern agriculture heralded the era of high-yield crops like rice and wheat, the once-potent presence of the millet faded into obscurity, changing the once cherished traditional farming practices and indigenous wisdom from our collective memory. However, in recent times the millets have revealed themselves not just as a nutritional juggernaut but also as a champion of sustainability. These hardy crops, characterized by their minimal water requirements and inherent resistance to pests and diseases, have assumed a critical role in the spotlight, offering a promising solution for sustainable agriculture and climate change adaptation. (IANS)



## 'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, NOVEMBER 19, 2023

### 'Birthday Forecast'

Moon square Jupiter on your solar return chart indicates excellent year ahead. This is a year of power and accomplishment. Actively seeking to expand, taking educated risks, and moving forward are highlighted. This is a year of opportunity, particularly in the material and business world, and opportunities need to be seized. It's generally not a year to find a new love partner, simply because the focus is on the material world and your place in the world. This is a problem-solving year in which you can expect real, tangible results. Advice - take action, plan ahead, seize opportunities.

### 'This week for you'

**Aries: (March 21 - April 20)** This week brings good results through your efforts and continuous hard work. You are committed, bold and adventurous right now and avoid delays by proceeding exactly the way that you want to. Your popularity is increasing, and is reinforced by your own ability to cooperate and harmonize. Taking care of business is a focus. You may find your children need more love affection and attention. In general, you are adaptable when it comes to new situations. You pour more energy into self-promotion or business activities. There will be a fluctuation in energy levels before a balance is achieved. A health routine started now is likely to be successful.

**Taurus: (April 21 - May 21)** Fine arts, drama, fun, glamour and creativity come into focus. This is the right time to participate in current events and share views, ideas and feelings with people around you to feel a part of the whole. This could also be the harbinger of new professional opportunities. It's a great time to make improvements. Your vision is practical right now, and you want to see tangible results for your efforts. Relationships take on a fun aspect and activities with children increase. You are more stimulated by all that is unconventional and your ideas are original and progressive now. This is a good time for research and meditation; but do avoid being dragged down by issues that have outgrown their worth and purpose. Health will take a turn for the better.

**Gemini: (May 22 - June 21)** This is the time of year when personal finances and possessions receive maximum attention as your focus is on material affairs and comfort issues. Pour your energy into your work and your finances, and you might just be able to take your ideas to the bank. You will be considerably more productive, healthy, and focused. You might consider furthering your education and hobbies. It is a fabulous time to do so or simply broadening your knowledge in a more informal manner. Some form of pleasant result in your professional life brings rewards and recognition. You feel on top of things with good health and energy at your disposal.

**Cancer: (June 22 - July 22)** This phase brings fabulous results in domestic matters. You are strong and masterful while turning things around in a positive direction at work. You are more attractive when you show your responsible, managerial, ambitious, and constant side in your personal and professional relations. Media and the arts involve you in creative pastimes while professional ventures and assignments bring financial stability. You are fond of love and admiration. Artistic self-expression is important, possibly through music, arts and writing. You would be infused with positive energy and gain recognition for your talents and hard work.

**Leo: (July 23 - August 23)** You can look forward to increased funds and monetary gains as you may earn from investments and insurance done earlier. Your most natural talents would meet with reward and acceptance. Work done behind the scenes may be incorporated into your career or public life. Some of you may find that your career is moving towards a more service-oriented direction. There will be times when you feel stressed over details or the job you do and the recognition you get for it. 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. A sense of humor allows free expression and does wonders for your love life too.

**Virgo: (August 24 - September 22)** The planetary configuration indicates, an excellent phase for money, career, and romance. Children, romantic trips, hobbies and other forms of communication and making connections appeal strongly. You are likely to enjoy a strong feeling of happiness and solidarity in family and friendship. This is a good time for research and meditation; but do avoid being dragged down by issues that have outgrown their worth and purpose. Examining the past in order to improve the future

is certainly worthwhile, as long as you don't get caught up in the past. You feel a great need to push your personal interests and projects forward, and this is a strong time to do so. You are bound to receive gifts and happy financial news.

**Libra: (September 23 - October 23)** Sincerity, cooperation and harmony in relationships are highlighted. Your career, reputation, and public life are influenced. Increased public recognition and professional success characterizes this period. Financial security and enjoyment of the good things in life are important to you, although you also value simple pleasures. You may find yourself in a position in which there is a blending of financial matters with social or public affairs. This is a stable period for love matters and close relationships. You value those who make you feel comfortable, and familiarity is more important to you. You give attention to fitness and health related programs.

**Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22)** This period brings responsibilities, seriousness and sensitivity in relations. This is a strong period for analyzing your cash flow, income, and earning power. You are more practical and rational in your approach. With your conscious mind focused on money and possessions, as well as personal values, this can be a strong period for gathering new profitable ideas. Alternatively, it could be a time when you tend to fret over your finances. Conversations tend to be practical rather than frivolous now. Don't isolate yourself when you are feeling down. People will support you, or at least listen, when you share your feelings.

**Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21)** This can be a time of achievement, career advancement, and success in business. There would be financial gains and profits from business. Circumstances in life are likely to create a situation where you may have to take the lead in handling complicated situations. You may be placed in a position where you have to make important monetary decisions yourself. If you have a business, it will be difficult to avoid spending lavishly on equipment and office supplies. Work-related travel or reaching out to people is possible now. There could be up-gradation, new responsibilities or transfer. You would have more contacts with authority figures. Do what you feel is right, keeping in mind that you are at your most visible during this phase.

**Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20)** This is a time of profitable productivity. There would be excellent opportunities for media studies and other related fields. You tend to be expansive and generous with people around. An event may occur that expands your career or professional interests, and you derive more pleasure from these activities. Your freedom is likely to be experienced in your career. You enjoy doing things with others at work and home, as synergy and cooperation are available to you now. You are inclined to exert energy and initiative into making money and business dealings. You can be more resourceful than usual at this time, but you could also be inclined to rash decisions or risk-taking with money.

**Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18)** Your popularity increases as you cooperate and harmonize at the workplace and at home. You need the energies, companionship, and support of other people, and they may also seek out your support and companionship. It is important to include others rather than to take up projects on your own. An event may occur that expands your career or professional interests, and you derive more pleasure from these activities. More freedom is likely to be experienced in your career. This is a time of profitable productivity. A matured or an assertive type of individual may come up with challenging offers and new suggestions. You are more motivated to make money now.

**Pisces: (February 19 - March 20)** You are patient, humble and secured with material aspects and manage finances and business ventures with ingenuity and success. Showing your authority and a "take charge" attitude is important now, but gentleness is important as well. You may begin to take on more responsibilities on the job or in another service-oriented capacity where you volunteer your services. You are likely to have many ideas and plans going and you might be inclined to scatter your energies as a result. Channelled well, this is a good time to sell your ideas to others, or to present your case. You may be especially busy running errands and communicating with others. More articulate than usual, you may also have a more assertive, self-centered, or provocative communication style.

# Celebrating Thailand's 'Festival of Lights'

Thailand is set to sparkle this November as the country celebrates one of its most colourful and picturesque cultural festivals - Loy Krathong, also known as the Festival of Lights.

To celebrate the water goddess Phrae Mae Khongkha, millions of Thais float (loy) a little raft (krathong) commonly made from banana trunk and topped with flowers and candles. The krathongs carry the hopes, wishes, and gratitude of individuals, and represent the act of letting go of the old and ushering in the new.

Loy Krathong is celebrated nationwide every year, on the night of the full moon of the twelfth month of the Thai lunar calendar. The festival takes place on 27 November this year, and is a special occasion for both Thais and travellers who flock to the country for this dazzling festival.

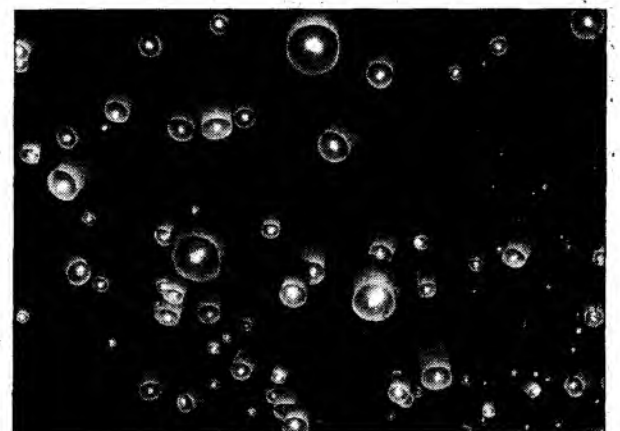
Thailand was the #1 most visited country on Airbnb in Southeast Asia last year, with Bangkok the most visited city in the country. This Loy Krathong, Airbnb has already seen a 17 percent surge in international guests searching for a stay in Thailand. The most popular destinations during this festive period are Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Pattaya, Phuket, Koh Samui, Hua Hin, Koh Pha Ngan and Krabi. Many are flocking to The Land of Smiles for the end of year holidays - Airbnb has seen approximately an 88 percent spike in searches by China travellers for November-December travel to Thailand, and an over 15 percent increase in searches by Australian guests in the same period.

If you're thinking about visiting Thailand this holiday season, make it one to remember and join the festivities! Read on for recommendations of the best destinations and places to stay.

**CHIANG MAI:** Renowned for its mountains and lush forests, Chiang Mai in Thailand's north is home to the traditional Lanna culture. Loy Krathong celebrations are marked by large ceremonies and illuminated temples and are held at the same time as the Yee Peng festival, where Thais release thousands of paper lanterns (khom loi) into the night sky - making for a truly incredible sight.

Flowing through the heart of Chiang Mai province is the Ping River, a popular place amongst locals and visitors alike to float krathongs. The Phae Gate is another; located on the east side of the old city wall. The surrounding moat is a local favourite and popular gathering place, while Three Kings Monument in front of the old town hall has a lively atmosphere and attracts many to join in the activities.

You can't leave Chiang Mai without trying the local delicacies, and there are many to choose from. Some must-tries are sai oua (Thai sausage), nam ngiao (sour and spicy noodles with tomato soup), and the always popular khao soi (creamy coconut curry with crispy noodles).



**BANGKOK:** Thailand's vibrant capital transforms every Loy Krathong, as the city embraces its cultural roots and traditions in a spectacle not to be missed. The main water artery of Bangkok, the Chao Phraya River, is a popular destination for visitors and locals to float krathongs and where you can join in the festivities against the backdrop of iconic landmarks such as Wat Arun. Alternatively, make your way to Wat Saket where you can enjoy a memorable Loy Krathong by one of Bangkok's oldest canals, Khlong Maha Nak, and explore the iconic Golden Mount nearby.

A short stroll from the Chao Phraya is the hip neighbourhood of Song Wat - recently voted one of the world's 40 coolest neighbourhoods in 2023 by TimeOut - with an eclectic mix of art galleries and historical buildings to explore. While exploring Bangkok, don't forget to try the city's food offerings, from street food vendors offering Thai staples such as pad thai and pad krapow, to markets such as Jodd Fair and Michelin-starred eateries.

**PHUKET:** There's much more to Phuket than meets the eye. Famous for its beaches and islands, Phuket is steeped in history, and dotted with temples and shrines making for a unique Loy Krathong experience with an island-style vibe. There are more than 30 beaches where locals often float their krathongs. Alternatively, explore some of the less touristy and equally popular spots, such as Sapan Hin Lake and Suan Luang Park in Phuket Town, or Nai Harn Lake in the south or Bang-Ma-Ruan Lake in the north.

When in Phuket, don't miss the opportunity to enjoy some of the freshest seafood caught daily from the Andaman Sea. Delicious Southern dishes to try include kaeng som (sour and spicy soup), massaman (Thai curry) and kaeng tai pla (spicy curry with fermented fish). And while enjoying island life, don't forget to explore the history and Sino-Portuguese architecture in Phuket Town. (IANSlife)

"In some circumstances, the refusal to be defeated is a refusal to be educated."

— Margaret Halsey

## The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXV No. 100 SHILLONG, MONDAY, NOVEMBER 20, 2023

### 'Betis' and Modi

POLITICIANS in India are known for their loose talk. There, often, is little substance in what they speak; and the level of public discourse has sunk over the years to rock bottom. The height of the loose talk was when Narendra Modi as the BJP nominee for the 2014 PM post led a campaign by promising the people he would plough back the money that "businessmen looted from banks and deposited at the safe tax havens abroad," and put lakhs into each of the bank accounts of India's poor. Appreciably, he took the initiative to encourage the poor to open bank accounts and the government put the MGNREGS wages in there, eliminating the play of middlemen in such welfare schemes. But, in the past nearly 10 years, he could do precious little to get at the sharks like Vijay Mallya or Nirav Modi to bring their parked funds back to India, leave alone reaching this money to the hands of the poor.

Narendra Modi as Prime Minister excelled in big talks as he held forth at public meetings. What matters more, for any politician or governmental functionary, is his performance. Take the case of the flagship Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao campaign that Modi started in the early part of his first term from 2014. Years later, a parliamentary committee on empowerment of women, in its report tabled in the Lok Sabha, revealed that the central government spent most of this fund for "media campaigns." The government had released Rs 446.72 crore between 2016 and 2019 for this purpose, of which about 80 per cent went into "media advocacy." In simple terms, as much money was spent for insertion of government advertisements in both television channels and newspapers, extolling the theme. What should not go unnoticed is that the campaign's natural focus was on families of illiterate parents. It can be safely assumed that others, the educated parents, send their children to school. Families of the poor might not have access even to TV sets, and certainly not to newspapers. But, the establishment that distributed the funds found this as an easy way to dispose of the funds and also buy support from the media to the Modi enterprise.

Instead, Modi's exhortations from public platforms, beamed across the nation during his regular addresses of the nation, by themselves might have served this cause more. Had he earmarked substantial funds for the scheme and if the campaign was backed by ground-level initiatives, the purpose could have been better achieved. Yet, Modi was remorseless. On the 100-th episode of his Mann Ki Baat Radio programme, the PM claimed that the "gender ratio" has improved in Haryana as a result of the Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao campaign. This when all statistics have proven otherwise.

# Police- Public relations and the war on drugs

By HH Mohrmen

### Physically fit policemen

The Police in the state are also trying to improve their physical fitness. The case of the West Jaintia Hills Police under the leadership of the District's Superintendent of Police is a case in point. The District head of the police Chemphang Syrti leads from the front and organizes regular long-distance running for the police force. The run is regularly updated on the District Police Social Media platform.

### Police's recent war on drugs

This writer was specially invited by the police as witness when drugs worth over Rs 4 crore were consigned to flames. Narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances worth over Rs 4 crore were incinerated at the Star Cement plant in Lumshnong.

*Perhaps the belief was that if the citizens are afraid of the police then they would not commit any crime. Police are paid to purposely keep their mustache and their beards to make them appear manly or give them a fearsome look. That was the kind of image that they wanted the police to have then so that people should be afraid of them. There is immense trust deficit that the people have in the police; the approach then was to treat every citizen as a potential criminal. Even the police station does not have that appealing look and the cell at the police station smells like an uncleaned toilet.*

East Jaintia Hills District. The disposal of these narcotics and psychotropic substances, seized in various cases, took place on November 9, 2023, at the Star Cement Plant's furnace. Dr. L.R. Bishnoi, Director General of Police, briefing the press mentioned that the consignments were confiscated from over 51 cases- 25 cases from West Jaintia Hills, 10 Cases from East Khasi Hills, 14 cases from West Khasi Hills and 2 from Ri Bhoi District from across the state. The seized drugs, which include heroin worth Rs 3 crore, cannabis, and even cough syrups worth Rs 80 lakh and 20 lakh respectively were retrieved from districts under the Eastern Range, which include East Khasi Hills, Ri Bhoi District, West Khasi Hills, and West Jaintia Hills. Dr. Bishnoi stated that more than 500 drug traffickers were apprehended during this process.

Bishnoi emphasized that due process was adhered to and that the Supreme

Court's orders regarding the disposal of seized drugs were meticulously followed. To ensure zero pollution, permissions were obtained from the Meghalaya State Pollution Control Board in Shillong for the disposal of these substances. But this is just the tip of the iceberg; drugs seized from the other police ranges in the state are yet to be destroyed.

### Police strategies to fight drugs

The police chief stated that in their fight against this issue, the police have adopted six strategies. These strategies involve creating awareness by engaging the community and educational institutions. The second strategy includes reinforcing enforcement and the third strategy that the police use is providing better training

of the media; hence one of the strategies was seeking media support in combating the drug menace. With the rapid development of technology, the police head also highlighted the need for the force's adaptation to modern times by utilizing available technology to combat the problem. The sad reality is the growing number of people using drugs and the much more serious concern is that the number of female users is also growing.

### Fighting drugs beyond policing

If policing is the only approach that the police use to combat the drug menace, they can only contribute to cutting the supply chain by arresting and seizing drugs entering the state. They have done a commendable job in this respect but the drug problem is a social issue that cannot be stopped by cutting the supply chain. Drug menace can be stopped if we can curb the demand site and this is one challenging task to overcome. Reducing the demand for drugs is essential to address the drug problem in the state. During his media briefing, DGP Bishnoi said that in their fight against drugs, the police have now gone beyond policing. He said that the police conducted over 1500 awareness campaigns at the community level and the same were also organized at the educational institutions across the state. Police at the police station level have taken the fight to the grassroots level by intensifying their interaction with the community.

### The police are also equipped

In the past when drugs were seized they had to be sent elsewhere since the state did not have its own Forensic Science Laboratory (FSL). The good news is that the Government now has instituted a state-of-the-art Forensic Science Laboratory (FSL) unit within the police department. The advantage of having its own FSL unit is that it eliminates the need to rely on other states for testing drugs seized within Meghalaya.

### Conclusion

There's an African saying, "It takes the whole village to raise a child," similarly the participation of the entire community is needed to successfully tackle the drug problem. The police cannot do it alone but they need the support of the community and even the churches to combat the menace which is eating away the youths who are the future pillars of society.

## Electoral bond verdict hinges on confidentiality VRS anonymity debate

By K Raveendran

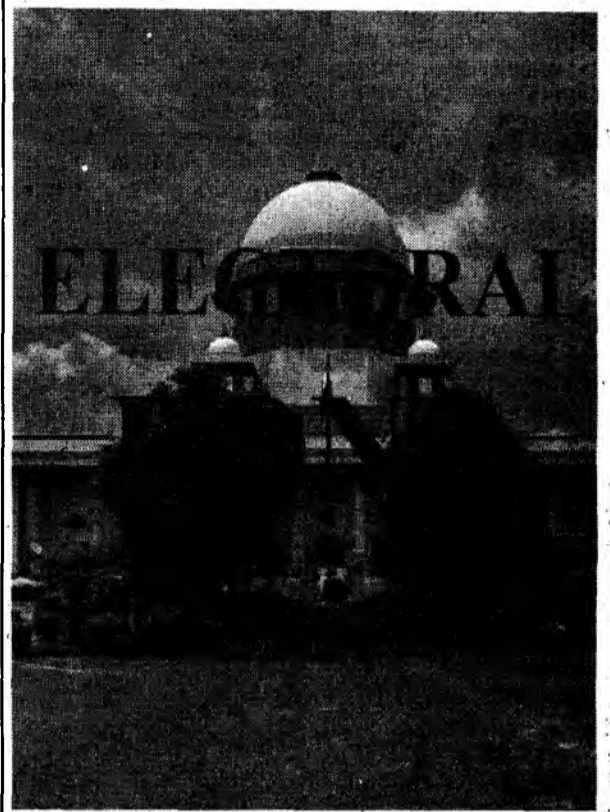
Confidentiality versus anonymity is a central issue in the consideration of the electoral bond scheme as it exists today and may well have a bearing on the verdict by the five-member constitution bench under Chief Justice D Y Chandrachud, which has reserved the judgement.

The petitioners, who include the Association of Democratic Rights (ADR) and the CPI-M have argued that the scheme allowed 'non-transparency in political funding' and as such legitimised electoral corruption at a large scale.

In 2019, a bench led by the then Chief Justice Ranjan

panies' internal disclosures of political donations, making shareholder and regulatory oversight impossible. They assert that the new scheme has put in place an asymmetrical information regime, where the only entity, other than the donor and the party, with knowledge of the funding is the State Bank of India, which in effect means the central government.

A persistent criticism about the new scheme is that it has reopened the cash channel, by making donations to political parties of up to Rs 20,000 not liable to be reported. And the political parties are not required to disclose whether they received the funding in



Gogoi had refused to stay the scheme on the ground that "such weighty issues would require an in-depth hearing" but directed all political parties to submit details of donations, donors, and bank account numbers in a sealed cover to the Election Commission. In a continuing struggle, the opponents of the scheme approached the Supreme Court multiple times to seek a stay. But a bench led by the then CJI S A Bobde once again refused a stay in 2021, and the present petitions were filed in response to that decision, pleading for early hearing so that there is a decision before the 2024 Lok Sabha elections.

Last month, a bench led by Chief Justice D.Y. Chan-

that lot or lesser amounts. For the purposes of tax exemptions, parties are likely to show the receipts in smaller bands, thereby ensuring that the availability of cash to political parties or the ability of individuals to give cash to political parties has increased. At one stage, the Chief Justice observed that a cash-based scheme and unaccounted scheme proceeds on anonymity.

The petitioners point out that while the government says the objective was to limit black money or cash money coming to political parties or to reduce it, cash donations have not been choked off. Electoral bonds were introduced because many individuals or companies do

*The petitioners have argued that the electoral bonds scheme increased corporate funding, black money circulation, and corruption and that the voters have a right to information about political parties' source of funding, as it informs the policies and views of that party. The Union government, however, contended that the scheme was designed to guarantee confidentiality and the right to privacy of the donors, who were otherwise exposed to retribution from political parties that they didn't fund.*

drachud, with Justices JB Pardiwala, and Manoj Misra referred, referred the case to a five-member constitution bench after noting the 'importance of the issue', which has since held three days of hearing of pleas by all parties involved and reserved its judgement.

The petitioners have argued that the electoral bonds scheme increased corporate funding, black money circulation, and corruption and that the voters have a right to information about political parties' source of funding, as it informs the policies and views of that party. The Union government, however, contended that the scheme was designed to guarantee confidentiality and the right to privacy of the donors, who were otherwise exposed to retribution from political parties that they didn't fund.

The opponents of the bonds are lamenting the elimination of transparency in electoral funding, making it impossible for the Election Commission and the citizens to know the source of the flow of funds to political parties. Also objected to is the elimination of com-

not want to be known that they are the donors to these political parties because they fear victimisation. The judges acknowledge, however, that change has ensured that the accounted transactions have been brought under the normal bank funds.

But the bond opponents assert that this is no big deal. Even the RBI has gone on record that the object is to make political funding go through banking channels, there are existing instruments of cheques, drafts, bank transfers, etc. which are available. This makes the need for anonymous instruments redundant.

It has been argued on behalf of the bond opponents that the electoral bonds are meant for a political party to be in power in perpetuity because the amount of money collected through these means will empower that party through capital to influence everything. This is the most unconstitutional, undemocratic, unfair scheme that destroys the very basic structure of the Constitution. (IPA Service)

### Letters to the Editor

## Cherry Blossom Festival should be more inclusive

Editor,

I write to highlight the manifold benefits of Meghalaya's Cherry Blossom Festival while proposing a solution to address concerns regarding the festival's schedule. The festival, set to enchant us from the 17th to the 19th of this month, not only showcases the natural splendour of our region but also brings about numerous social and economic advantages.

The Cherry Blossom Festival has evolved into a cultural extravaganza, drawing visitors from far and wide. Beyond its visual allure, the festival has proven to be a catalyst for local businesses, cultural exchange, and community pride. I would like to express my sincere appreciation to Meghalaya Tourism and the Government for their efforts in hosting this spectacular event.

Recognising that the festival falls on a Sunday, a day that some may find inconvenient, I propose a solution to

ensure inclusivity. Consider extending the festival to include Sunday, allowing everyone the opportunity to participate. This approach would require coordination with local authorities, event organizers, and community representatives to ensure a seamless and enjoyable experience for all.

I believe that by incorporating this small adjustment, we can not only celebrate the Cherry Blossom Festival's beauty but also accommodate the diverse preferences of our community. Let us express our gratitude to Meghalaya Tourism and the government for fostering cultural vibrancy and consider this proposal as a step toward making the festival accessible to everyone.

The inclement weather on Friday has now allowed the Festival Organisers to extend the programme to Monday.

Yours etc.,  
Rishotbaskhem Kharyngdoh  
Via email

## Plea for innovation in textbook production

Editor,  
It was comforting to read

the report, "All's not well with state's education sector: CM" (ST 19th Nov. 2023). At last we have sensible and proactive measures spelled out by the Chief Minister himself to address school education. Now all decisions arrived at must be translated into action at ground level post haste vigorously!

However, what surprised me was 'the burden of textbooks'! ELEVEN textbooks for classes I to III just shocked me! May I make a submission to reduce the number to TWO only. Here's how. If modified NCERT textbooks are to be prescribed then break them up into two parts; half yearly and finals. At this level only 4 subjects are taught: English, Maths, Social Science and 2nd language. Barring 2nd language the other three subjects can be published together with a page indicating the subjects. All written exercises after each chapter are added which follow the examination pattern. Such books were used by private schools and publishers were happy to bring out school textbooks in such a manner.

The second part will adhere to the final term chapters. The other textbook a child will carry is the second language one. The other factor is the carrying of exercises books/copies. Here's

a suggestion. Have booklets printed that have loops at the spine which can be clipped into a plastic folder/file. The above two suggestions made were followed when I volunteered to assist in setting up our church school in Tezpur. It was well received, being the first and only school to adopt this system.

On the academic side it will be of immense help if teachers read Patricia Mukhim's, "Examination fever grips students' parents, teachers". All the Laws of Learning are explicitly individualized in a hard-hitting, yet poignant manner! Yes, teachers must have a missionary zeal in "making classroom dynamic and interactive," to foster 'critical thinking'!

Yours etc.,  
Kevin Phillips  
Shillong - 19

## Why this sudden fee hike by Delhi University?

Editor,  
Delhi University has raised the tuition fee for PhD students of the English department more than eightfold at one go. This is

another horrific attempt to deprive umpteen number of students of our country of their right to education. Given DU is a government university, it reflects badly on government policy towards education. Being a backbencher in the Human Development Index (132nd position), India must emulate high ranking countries in the HDI which provide quality higher education free of cost for all - even for refugees and visitors, instead of spending money on the sun, moon and planet missions.

Yours etc.,  
Sujit De,  
Kolkata

## Home Minister's 3 new bills

Editor,

On August 11, 2023, the Union Home Minister introduced three new Bills in the Lok Sabha, namely Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita 2023 to replace Indian Penal Code 1860, Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita 2023 to replace Code of Criminal Procedure 1973, and Bharatiya Sakshya Sanhita 2023 to replace Indian Evidence Act 1872. The Bills were later referred to

the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Home Affairs for detailed examination and comments.

However, it is dismaying to find that there is very little discussion in the public domain about these three bills, which are likely to have a huge impact on the daily lives of ordinary Indian citizens. The absence of public debate and media coverage in this part of India is more pronounced. We urge everyone concerned to initiate public discourse on these three new Bills pertaining to the Union Home Ministry. The opinions of experts, and distinguished police personnel is urgently required before the legislation of these bills. Media houses should also take the initiatives in this regard.

Further, even the best intended legislation can do little if there are no reforms in the Indian Police System. Perhaps, the Governments would do better if Police reforms are carried out before such Bills are passed by the Parliament.

Yours etc.,  
D Bhutia,  
Guwahati - 24

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"Never confuse a single defeat with a final defeat."

— F. Scott Fitzgerald

## The Shillong Times

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### Acrimony of Imposition

THE Cherry Blossom Festival which was marred by the cyclonic storm on the first day ended in a pleasant note albeit with one of India's leading band 'Sanam' unable to give their best as their performance was pushed towards the last part of the programme. As far as the organisers are concerned there was little they could do to ward off a natural phenomenon- in this case the inclement weather. But what the Tourism Department ought to seriously consider is a large enough permanent venue that can house the growing audiences that come from across the country to watch the famed international rock bands that have made Meghalaya part of their itinerary. A makeshift ground that turns mushy after a bout of rain is clearly not a venue where international rock bands should ideally be performing in.

The Shillong Centre for Performing Arts in New Shillong is an example of a world class performing arts venue. But this is meant for performances with a limited audience capacity. International rock bands are an entourage that require huge seating capacities in the open air. Perhaps this needs better imagination so that there is less need for policing. The number of police personnel present at the venue in the Kurkalang Ground where the recent Cherry Blossom Festival was held was far too many. That, after a huge contingent of the Bouncers' Association of Meghalaya (BAM) were also there in full strength. Of course this time with fringe elements threatening to disrupt the concert because it included a Sunday, the District Administration of Ri Bhoi had to remain on alert.

This is where the question of religious imposition comes in. India is a secular country and has to remain so if it is to survive as a nation. The people of India no matter what religion they belong to have to learn to co-exist with mutual respect for one another. Sunday may be a holy day for Christians but to expect all non-Christians to adhere to this diktat is an imposition. It leads to acrimony that mars the spirit of co-existence. It is made worse when fundamentalists of any religion take things further by threatening to disrupt a secular gathering scheduled for Sunday. This is unacceptable and such elements need to be rounded up for creating disharmony at a time when the State is gearing up to promote tourism as one important means of livelihoods in a State that is starved of industries. All's well that ends well as they say and it's good that the last two days of the Cherry Blossom Festival went off well. But there are lessons to be learnt that need to be taken forward into the next major event in the State.

In this poll season of freebies galore interspersed with vitriolic hate speeches and venomous tu-tu-mein-mein by BJP and Congress on the assumption that populist hand-outs yield better electoral rewards than reasoned policies, notwithstanding Prime Minister Modi crying halt to free "revadi" culture, the BJP Uttarakhand Government in a groundbreaking move is quietly set to roll out the Uniform Civil Code (UCC) a long-debated legal reform genie in a special Assembly session this week granting it legal status.

The Bill aims at uniformity in personal laws, like marriage registration, child custody, divorce, adoption, property rights and inter-State property rights regardless of religious beliefs. Reportedly it gives importance to safeguarding interests of women, children and differently-abled and covers equal rights for daughters living on ancestral properties and gender equality. The State also seeks a ban on polygamy and registration of live-in relationships.

Pertinently, the Code is BJP's key agenda and Article 44 states: The State shall endeavour to secure for citizens a UCC throughout India. It divests religion from social relations and personal laws related to marriage, inheritance, family, land etc, bypasses the contentious issue of reform of existing personal laws based on religion — Hindu Marriage Act (1955), Hindu Succession Act (1956) and Muslim Personal Law Application Act (1937). It would ensure all Indians are treated equally, provide gender equality and help improve women's condition and tribal communities.

Modi hoots for it. Asserting recently, "You tell me, if there is one law for one person in a home, and another law for another person, can that house function?" No. "So how can a country work with such a hypocritical system? We have to remember that even the Constitution of India talks of common rights."

Questionably, why now? There are four theories going around in BJP circles.

### Uniform Civil Code Anyone?

# Tiptoeing stealthily

By Poonam I Kaushish

One, it is part of a larger plan for the Saffron Brigade as UCC's implementation could represent a political breakthrough that advances a narrative of uniformity and reform in law.

Two, Uttarakhand's UCC is to test political waters on how it will be received and could be the template that the Central Government will follow for a pan-India code. The Law Commission has begun consultation on it, given Opposition vehement disagreement on grounds UCC would interfere in religious groups personal laws and right of religious freedom unless religious groups are prepared for change (sic). It is a 'minority versus majority' issue and Hindutva Brigade's policy for Muslims living in India. It would disintegrate the country and hurt its diverse culture, they warn.

Three, in case the Party wins crucial States of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh it will roll out UCC in Parliament before general elections 2024, thereby fulfilling its last key agenda, part of its 2019 Lok Sabha election manifesto alongside Ram temple in Ayodhya and abrogation of Article 370 in J&K which have been fulfilled.

Lastly, in the event it loses these crucial States the BJP might still bring UCC to distract attention from its defeat. "In fact, it plans to use Uttarakhand as a model when developing its UCC Bill that it will eventually introduce", said a Party leader. As it stands, two other BJP-ruled States Gujarat and Assam too might roll the Code out soon. Haryana, UP and Maharashtra wait in queue.

However, this is easier said than done due to the country's diversity and religious laws, which not only differ sect-wise, but also by community, caste and region. Already, the All India Muslim Personal Law Board has expressed reservations, stating India has a multi-cultural and multi-religious society and each group has the Constitutional right to maintain its identity. Adding, the UCC

is a threat to India's diversity and encroachment on their rights to religious freedom which will disregard their traditions, imposing rules influenced by the majority religious community.

Besides, not a few argue it violates Constitutional freedom to practice religion of choice which allows communities to follow their respective personal laws. For example, Article 25 gives every religious group the right to manage its own affairs and Article 29 the right to conserve their distinct culture. Also, the Constituent Assembly's Fundamental Rights sub-committee deliberated did not include UCC as a Fundamental Right.

Some are wary UCC will impose a Hinduised code for all communities as it could include provisions regarding personal issues like marriage that are in line with Hindu customs but will legally force other communities to follow the same.

Legal experts are divided on whether a State has the power to bring about UCC. Some assert that issues like marriage, divorce, inheritance and property rights come under the Concurrent List, 52 subjects on which laws can be made by both Centre and States, State Governments have the power to impose it.

A similar concern is voiced by tribal groups like Rashtriya Adivasi Ekta Parishad, which approached Supreme Court 2016 seeking protection of their customs and religious practices from a potential UCC. In Nagaland's tribal territories existing customary laws have primacy over federal laws with respect to personal issues like marriage, land ownership, etc.

Goa is the only State which has a UCC regardless of religion, gender, caste. It has a common family law whereby all Hindus, Muslims and Christians are bound with the same law related to marriage, divorce, succession. When Goa became a Union Territory in 1961, Parliament authorized

the Portuguese civil code of 1867 be amended and repealed by the competent legislature.

Certainly the path to UCC is sensitive and difficult but it must be taken. A beginning has to be made if the Constitution is to have any meaning. Discrimination cannot be justified on the grounds of traditions and customs. To establish equality the law that regulates population of a country should also be one.

Where do we go from here? Time for consensus among people which addresses their misgivings and concerns before the Code can be enacted. Said a senior Minister, "There is need to tackle 'delusions' that some have 'encouraged' that UCC is against rituals and core practices of any religion. It is a scientific and modern way of achieving goals of gender justice by removing disparate loyalties in laws which have conflicting ideologies."

A common civil code will help the cause of national integration by removing desperate loyalties to laws, which have conflicting ideologies. A way forward is to follow Balasaheb Ambedkar who advocated "optional" common civil code. Whereby, Parliament in the initial stage makes a provision of the Code being purely voluntary.

What next? Ultimately, no community should be allowed to veto or block progressive legislation. Especially, if it is voluntary and does not seek to impose any view or way of life on any one arbitrarily. Time now to reject different laws for different communities, implement Article 44 and reform India.

One cannot progress riding on past's wheels. India needs uniform laws and should figure out what is satisfactory to all groups. Criminal and commercial laws are basic, so there is little purpose behind common laws to appear as something else. It just partitions Indians on the premise of religion that should not happen in the 21st century. It is beyond endurance of sensitive minds to allow injustice to be suffered when it is so palpable. What gives? — INFA

# Forgetting our history

By Lekha Rattanani

Last month, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar unveiled a statue of Rabindranath Tagore at the International Friendship Park in Vietnam's Bac Ninh province. Vietnam has cherished its link with Tagore and has been rekindling his three-day visit to Ho Chi Minh city in 1929 in many ways that includes a translation of his "Gitanjali" which is "Loi Dang" in Vietnamese and a commemorative postage stamp in the 80s in Tagore's honour. At the same time in Shantiniketan, the spiritual centre Tagore founded and the Visva Bharati University within it have been celebrating the UNESCO world heritage status accorded in September. Plaques installed in the Visva-Bharati university to mark being declared a world heritage site carry the names of the chancellor of the university: Narendra Modi and the vice chancellor: Bidyut Chakraborty, but make no mention of the founder and first Asian Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore.

In response, the University has clarified that the plaques are "temporary structures" which would be replaced. But this doesn't sit well as it comes at a time when Visva Bharati is in the midst of another controversy as it tries to evict Nobel laureate Amartya Sen from Shantiniketan. A letter signed by the deputy registrar of the University said that Amartya Sen's house has been built on land belonging to the University. "It has been found from records and physical survey/demarcation that you are in unauthorised occupation of 13 decimals of land belonging to Visva Bharati..."

A decimal is 435.6 sq feet. His father Asutosh Sen had taken 125 decimals of land on lease from the varsity in 1943, Nobel laureate Amartya Sen said after the university served him a notice in April, West Bengal Chief Minister

ideas and way of living are a contrast with the mores of today. For one, Visva Bharati represents the thinking of Tagore. Founded in December 1921 and declared a central university and institution of national importance by an Act of Parliament 1951, it is a residential school and centre for art based on ancient Indian traditions, distinct from and repudiating the British colonial educational system that was prevalent then. Instead, it looked more to an Asian modernity while drawing on ancient, medieval and folk traditions from across the region.

Both Tagore and Gandhi were keen on education with a distinct indigenous identity based on the cultural experience of India and were inspired by learning that was in harmony with nature. In keeping with this Tagore had in 1901 started with a kind of Ashram school where children could play and learn in the open and under the shade of trees away from the closed confines of classrooms. His father Debendranath Tagore had bought the land in 1863, built an ashram and lived there in accordance with spiritual values. Rabindranath Tagore settled here later to follow his literary pursuits.

Today the distance between the vision and way of life of Tagore and Gandhi and current perspectives is growing. And though the effort and work done with fervour in their names continues, most of that energy is outside India. For instance, professors teaching the "International Course on Gandhian Nonviolence: Theory and Application" offered by Gujarat Vidyapeeth, Ahmedabad (founded by Mahatma Gandhi in 1920) have found that the course has drawn students from countries in Europe, North, Central and South America, Australia, Africa and Asia. Similarly attended have been the short-

"There is no doubt that such a lapse can be easily corrected. But the controversy itself points to a growing tendency to criticise, disregard or ignore people, voices, ideas, ideologies and perspectives that don't fit. A bit of history; missing; a founder's name left out on a commemorative pillar or plaque, names and eras left out of textbooks are not uncommon now."

ter Mamata Banerjee has alleged that Amartya Sen is being harassed for his criticism of BJP's policies. Whether that is the case or not the controversy subverted Tagore's 162nd birth anniversary commemorations in May and the celebration of Shantiniketan, with its historic buildings, landscapes, gardens, pavilions, educational and cultural traditions, being declared a UNESCO world heritage site. It is the 41st Indian site after Dholavira, the Harappan city in Kutch.

There is no doubt that such a lapse can be easily corrected. But the controversy itself points to a growing tendency to criticise, disregard or ignore people, voices, ideas, ideologies and perspectives that don't fit. A bit of history; missing; a founder's name left out on a commemorative pillar or plaque, names and eras left out of textbooks are not uncommon now. Earlier this year, the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) announced its decision to remove certain parts related to the Mughal period from the Class 12 history syllabus. The move which attracted much criticism was attributed to "syllabus rationalisation" where "overlapping" and "irrelevant" portions were dropped.

While some of these instances may be attributed to haste or oversight, most of them seem to be cases of selective amnesia when it comes to people, ideas and reasoning that do not fit in with current thinking and mindsets. This seems particularly so with Gurudev Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi whose thoughts,

term training programmes organised by the Satyagraha Institute based in Brookings, S. Dakota, in Mexico and African countries like Nigeria, Ghana, Gambia, Senegal etc. A number of participants were and continue to be drawn from conflict zones and share a common angst about the growing violence in their own societies and felt it their duty to address this problem. Deeply impacted by the courses and training, most of them are now working with NGOs or have established their own organisations. True to the Gandhian tradition they focus on constructive work, resistance against injustice and elimination of violence in all forms.

Tagore's vision and ideas may be losing appeal in the new framework here, but outside candles are still being lit for India's most famous poet laureate. The Tagore Memorial Grove and walking museum, one of the first in the United States to spread the message of Tagore's borderless world was inaugurated this February at the Ray Miller Park in Houston, Texas. The energised crowd, mostly diaspora, vedic chants, recitation of Tagore's musical compositions, offers hope that his memory and what he stood for lives on at a time when borders are being reinforced and major conflicts are in progress. This may be a good time to bring Tagore and Gandhi back on the plaques and back in our lives.

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

### Letters to the Editor

#### Bad planning Tourism Department

Editor,  
As a huge fan of Sanam- the Band I am really angry with the organisers of the Cherry Blossom Festival for cutting short their performance after they had only sung a few songs. How can a performance scheduled for 3 days be cut short to 2 days? This is always the problem with organising anything in Meghalaya. Last year the Literature Festival was short-circuited leaving several writers and panelists who had flown in from across the country high and dry. When a call has to be taken on any issue that involves celebrities who are difficult to get to come here and perform and I am sure they too are returning with sad memories. Where is your professionalism, Tourism Department? You need to do some stock-taking?

Yours etc.,  
Wansuklin Jyrwa,  
Via email

#### Need to revisit the purpose of education

Editor,  
Are we as parents, teachers and individuals becoming oblivious of the real meaning and purpose of the word education? Have we become so busy that we are letting go of the need to understand the holistic meaning of education? As parents we work hard to give our children the best education in the best institutions possible. However, we must be mindful that education is not only academic pursuit or obtaining a degree. Largely and most importantly education is also about nurturing the soul, nurturing emotional health of a child and respect alongside nurturing the mind. Foundations of good behaviour must be laid when the mind is still young and tender so that a child

grows up polite, courteous, respectful of the self and others as well.

Today it is worrisome to see the elderly and the youth are trading off our manners, politeness and empathy for arrogance, pride and ego. All the high ideals, morality and virtues that were taught to us in our moral science classes in school and guidance at home are taking a back seat. What good is a rank holder if he/she lacks manners, civility and morality? What good is wealth and high social status when one is bereft of love and empathy for fellow human beings? A human being is defined not by his/her degrees, wealth and social status but his/her humility and acts of kindness. As a parent, a teacher and a citizen of the world, I pray for a world filled with love and kindness that we as adults need to sow deeply in our children. Hence, education must also focus on reviving kindness, humility, warmth and mutual love.

#### Dissent and Democracy in India

Editor,  
Dissent and democracy share an intricate relationship, integral to the vitality of any democratic society. Dissent, the expression of disagreement or opposition, is the heartbeat of democracy, fostering growth, progress, and societal resilience. Within a democratic framework, dissent serves as a catalyst for change, challenging established norms and policies, thus safeguarding individual liberties and promoting inclusivity.

Firstly, dissent fuels critical thinking and debate, essential components of a healthy democracy. Differing opinions and dissenting voices stimulate dialogue, offering diverse perspectives that enrich decision-making processes. In a democratic

society, the clash of ideas through dissent is not a hindrance but a sign of an engaged citizenry invested in shaping their collective future.

Moreover, dissent acts as a check against potential abuses of power, holding authorities accountable. It serves as a reminder that no institution or policy is beyond scrutiny, ensuring that the rights and interests of all citizens are protected. However, dissent, while crucial, requires responsible expression. Peaceful protests, civil discourse, and engagement within the legal framework exemplify constructive dissent. Embracing dissent within the boundaries of law and mutual respect fortifies democracy, preventing chaos or anarchy.

Dissent in Indian politics embodies the essence of democracy, reflecting a vibrant tapestry of opinions and perspectives crucial for a thriving society. India's political landscape has been shaped by diverse ideologies, fostering an environment where dissent serves as a catalyst for progress, change, and the protection of democratic values. India's history is replete with instances where dissent has played a pivotal role in shaping policies and ideologies. From the freedom struggle against colonial rule to contemporary socio-political movements, dissent has been a driving force in initiating reforms and safeguarding the rights of citizens.

Within India's democratic framework, dissent manifests in various forms. Political parties, civil society organizations, activists, and citizens exercise their right to dissent through protests, activism, legal challenges, and public discourse. These expressions of dissent are instrumental in holding governments accountable, challenging injustices, and advocating for marginalized communities. However, Indian politics also witnesses challenges regarding dissent. Instances of suppression,

intolerance towards opposing views, and polarization sometimes hinder the democratic spirit. The balance between dissent and governance often becomes delicate, with accusations of stifling voices that oppose the ruling narrative.

Despite challenges, India's democratic fabric remains resilient due to its ability to accommodate dissent. The judiciary, as the guardian of the Constitution, often intervenes to protect the rights of dissenters, ensuring that freedom of expression and the right to dissent are upheld.

Thus, dissent in Indian politics is the cornerstone of its democratic ethos. While occasional challenges arise, the resilience of India's democracy lies in its ability to embrace diverse opinions, paving the way for a more inclusive, progressive, and accountable governance system. The evolution of Indian politics continues to be shaped by the interplay between dissent and democracy, ensuring the nation's democratic ideals endure and flourish.

#### Growing inequalities in India

Editor,  
Amir Jahan, a 45 year old mother of three daughters, had been starving for four days in a rented room in Moradabad town in Uttar Pradesh. She had an Aadhar card and had applied for a ration card under the BPL category but it was rejected. Her husband used to pull a rickshaw till he got TB. After some treatment, he moved to Pune and had not been in touch with her for two months.

Amir Jahan's neighbour, Shabana Begum was also poor, but after hearing the girls sobbing, she gave Amir six chapattis. But when her daughters had also been

starving, how could a mother eat even a single chapatti? So, Amir Jahan distributed all six chapattis to her three daughters and went to bed on an empty stomach. She hadn't eaten for four days. Next day, Amir Jahan passed away. Shabana took her to a hospital where doctors told her that she had nothing in her stomach. It was the Republic Day in 2018.

The very next day was Day one for IPL bids. On that day, English all-rounder Ben Stokes had entered into a one year playing contract with Rajasthan Royals for Rs.12.5 crore. Kings XI Punjab paid Rs 11 crore to Lokesh Rahul and 7.6 crore to Ravichandran Ashwin. Kolkata Knight Riders gave 9.6 crore to Chris Lynn, 9.4 crore to Mitchell Stark and 7.4 crore to Dinesh Karthik. Sunrisers Hyderabad spent Rs. 11 crore for Manish Pandey and 9 crore for Rashid Khan. There were many other such deals involving enormous amounts.

These two back-to-back incidents showcased the ugliness of inequality. At one end of this inequality-ridden economy, Amir had to die because she was not able to deprive her children of food and at the other end it was a generous fun game of crores of rupees. Apart from the ugly inhuman face of inequality, the durability of inequality-ridden economic structure is always at stake. It is like a house of cards. If we keep on giving priority only to our lopsided GDP growth and beating drums of the trillion dollar economy- completely ignoring growth in human development - then it would be like a game of building a shaky high-rise with cards.

According to the World Inequality Report 2022, India is the most unequal nation in the world. India's top 1% of the population hold more than one-fifth of the total national income and the bottom half just 13%. The report stated that the economic reforms adopted by India have mostly benefited the top

1%. It has been observed that the deregulation and liberalisation policies implemented in India since the mid-1980s have led to "one of the most extreme increases in income and wealth inequality in the world". There is also high gender inequality in India as the female labour income share is only 18% which is one of the lowest in the world.

The report suggested that a modest progressive wealth tax should be levied on multi-millionaires. It can generate significant revenues for the government because of the high concentration of wealth. In our country, writing off huge amounts of bank loans for the rich has been done without much ado while subsidies to the poor are questioned as 'rewdis.'

This glaring inequality must immediately be bridged. Our banking sector needs to sanction more micro-loans for farming, cottage and small enterprises that can mainly generate employment and less NPA-generating macro-credits. Moreover, the poor who are reeling from high inequality, rising inflation, nagging unemployment and negative growth in real wages as per the Economic Survey of 2022-23, must not be further burdened with GST. GST should exist only on luxury and non-essential goods. But essential goods must have zero GST.

Policy makers should take corrective measures. Otherwise, the inequality-ridden economic edifice would crash like a house of cards. Inequality and poverty not only cause stagnation in the market but also lower the quality of the workforce in skill and health.

Yours etc.,  
Sujit De,  
Via email

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The Shillong Times

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Exploring India

AS times change, tourism trends change too. Evidence is also that, curiously, only about one per cent of the tourism-related travel by Indians was to destinations abroad -- against a total of 1.7 billion leisure trips that Indians took last year, just after the end of the long Covid-phase restrictions on travel. In a nation of 1.4 billion, where 80 per cent of the people in the lower income segments do not form part of the tourism circuit, the 1.7 billion leisure trips meant those who had the money were on a merry-go-round. The happy-go-lucky scenario obviously continued this year too. For the young, well-employed youths, every weekend is time for leisure trips. This is true of metro cities as also small-time towns. They reach out to destinations in the neighbourhood in their own vehicles, mostly, and relax. It could even be a one-day trip, but travel, they must.

The "one per cent" foreign travel by Indians is by itself a huge spread. In the past, tourism was an obsession for only the financially well-endowed. In recent years, more and more Indians have taken to such travel also as almost the entire middle-class now own vehicles, and highways are well-laid out. Lots of hotels and theme parks have sprung up to cater to individual tastes. Domestic tourism is largely family oriented while such tours abroad are both by individuals and families. A report released by McKinsey and Booking.com, which tracked air travel in specific, says "More and more Indians are now looking to discover small urban sports like two-tier or three-tier cities." In tune with this, about half the hotels in these cities will be branded (starred) hotels. Also, in matching with the present economic growth and growing interest in tourism, the study estimates that there could be five billion leisure trips a year by 2030; meaning a big boost to the hospitality sector. This could make India the fourth largest travel spender in the coming seven years. In economic terms, spending on travel and tourism could hit \$410 billion from the \$150 billion level in 2019.

It is also noted that the major metropolitan cities -- New Delhi, Bengaluru, Mumbai and Chennai -- retained the top four positions in the travel and tourism sector. Yet, the trend is increasingly in favour of smaller cities, where too huge shopping and recreational facilities are currently being added with increasing frenzy. Notably, foreign travel from India is mainly to destinations like Dubai, Bangkok, Singapore and London. The US does not figure in the list of the first 10 top destinations for Indians, while Paris took the fifth place and Kathmandu the 10th. What India lacks are cleanliness, smartness, a vibrant nightlife and quality entertainment avenues. Old necessarily isn't gold.

Letters to the Editor

AI ChatGPT: End of thinking skills?

Editor, It's clear 2023 has become 'the year of AI'. Since ChatGPT was launched late last year, a plethora of evangelists and doomayers have taken the opportunity to tell us exactly how artificial intelligence (AI) will change the world. One side heralds AI as the ultimate productivity Saviour, promising a life free from mundane tasks. The other side paints a terrifying portrait of AI unleashing chaos and destroying humanity. Without wishing to add yet more predictions, the likelihood is that neither of these extremes will happen any time soon. Yes, AI has revolutionized the world around us making it easier to access basic to tertiary needs. Yes, we need to move along with technology as with time congruence. However, what I want to stress is the impact of AI as in ChatGPT in the education system.

Since its public release ChatGPT - the artificial intelligence chatbot developed by OpenAI has experienced rapid growth and widespread adoption. Its role in education, however, remains a topic of contention. While some view it as a tool to enhance learning and reduce teacher workload, others see it as a threat to integrity which opens the door to cheating and plagiarism. I initially thought I could use ChatGPT to write this letter. I couldn't summon up the energy for a writing session so why not use AI? I recorded myself speaking into a microphone with rough notes on ideas for this letter; then I used AI to transcribe it into text, which I then put into ChatGPT, and asked for a specific word article. Hey presto, it took about five minutes, and I had my letter. Like most ChatGPT outputs, however, the result was banal and uninteresting. So, I sat down and wrote this letter myself - it obviously was time consuming, with a further couple of hours of editing and fact-checking. One sentence survived from ChatGPT.

So, did ChatGPT increase my productivity? Probably not. But what it did do was give me confidence that I could write the article. By spending those five minutes with AI, I convinced myself there was an article in me struggling to get out! Academic integrity is the primary concern for using ChatGPT in our educational institutions. Many educators believe that using ChatGPT for writing assignments will only promote cheating and plagiarism. Since ChatGPT generates responses quickly, it will decrease students' abilities to brainstorm, think critically, and be creative with their answers. With ChatGPT in the hands of students, home assignments are problematic. With rapid AI advances, almost anything that you ask students to do, they can ask AI to do for them. This is a minor manifestation of a deeper phenomenon - that of outsourcing thinking. A student getting AI to do an assignment is outsourced thinking. The same can be done by teachers; they could ask AI to develop lesson plans or assess student re-

sponses. AI will enable the possibility of outsourcing thinking for all. The human temptation to follow the path of least resistance may overwhelm other considerations. It is a distinct possibility that education, which is significantly about developing the ability to think, will degenerate and implode in many parts. Over generations, if we continue to outsource thinking, we may lose the very capacity to think, or it will get sharply diluted. I am writing this not because of the fact that I strongly disapprove of ChatGPT. No! Rather it's a silent alarm or a silent harbingers of the impact of AI on academicians and scholars should they totally depend on AI like ChatGPT. Rather than restricting the use of ChatGPT in education, bodies such as the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) and The Education Ministry of the Government of India could hold the people who provide these services to account so that the potential for harmful use is minimized. Digital skills especially the

use of Artificial Intelligence should be a part of the academic curriculum, so the Government should be considering how to ensure that schools teach students to be safe, effective critical users of this technology; just as they are already supported to stay safe online. I'd like to see this sort of critical training becoming part of not just Computer Science, but also other curriculum areas ideally led by experts with a deep understanding of such technologies, so that we will not be totally glued to the use of AI only but use our cognitive and brain generated ideas in the future too and not be cognitively impaired! Yours etc., Chanmiki Laloo Shillong -2

the under-construction Silkyara - Barkot tunnel in Uttarakashi since November 12. Structural engineers familiar with tunnel drilling challenges said that inadequate investigations prior to the excavation or inappropriate tunnel building protocols were possible reasons that could have triggered the tunnel collapse in Uttarakashi. It is a criminal negligence to evade environmental impact assessment and play with the lives of the poor workers. This must be thoroughly investigated and the firm responsible for executing the work should be penalised. Our workers deserve better and humane treatment because it is they who build our roads, tunnels, buildings and bridges. Such labourers must also be insured under proper labour laws. Yours etc., Sujit De, Kolkata

India's poor response to disaster

Editor, Time is running out for the 41 labourers who have been trapped inside

More hours not an answer

By Dhurjati Mukherjee

Increasing workers' productivity is an issue which has come into sharp focus following a recent podcast of legendary co-founder of tech giant Infosys NR Narayana Murthy, wherein he requested youngsters to work for '70 hours a week'. India's work productivity, he said "is one of the low-

Some feel that Murthy's thesis is not quite correct as productivity is not necessarily linked to how many hours people work. Indians already work longer hours than most. The Indian government's time-use survey in 2019

British, the total was still probably between 45 and 50 hours a week though presently it's not more than 50 hours a week. However, presently South Koreans have longer working hours, which may be around 60

employment of India's workforce and whether such jobs can be created for them. With more than 45 percent of India's workers engaged in agriculture and another 40 percent in enterprises employing nine or fewer workers, high productivity jobs are scarce in the country. The reason is quite obvious



est in the world. Unless we improve our work productivity... we will not be able to compete with those countries that have made tremendous progress." So, he added the "youngsters must say 'This is my country. I'd like to work 70 hours a week'". Undeniably, labour productivity in India is quite low compared to many countries, even in the emerging economies. Thus, there is need to raise productivity, as efficiency increase is the order of the day, and must be ensured to make India competitive in the global market.

However, the question arises whether this would be possible through more efficiency, which could be brought about by use of technology and/or better planning etc. or through extending a longer work week. The latter option is not evident in most other countries and therefore may not be acceptable. Moreover, working more hours per week does not necessarily improve work culture and standards.

While urging the need for increasing productivity, the prevailing situation in the country, not just in the modern industrial sector but also in the traditional industrial sector in both big and medium industries needs to be considered. A section of analysts has been harping more on the induction of technology than in longer working hours. However, it may be mentioned here that in the unregulated informal sector, the working hours are around 70 hours a week.

found that men between the ages of 15 and 59 in urban India spent an average of 521 minutes a day in paid employment. That translates to over 60 hours a week. The number is even higher if you exclude those with only primary education. Indians, according to an ILO report, already work long hours 'worked an average of more than 2,000 hours every year before the pandemic, much higher than the US, Brazil and Germany.'

Murthy pinpointed India's underwhelming work productivity, ranking among the lowest in the world, which is possibly not the fact. The case of China, which is well known for high levels of efficiency and skill, needs to be studied. The China Labour-Force Dynamics Survey in 2017 revealed that the average employee in the People's Republic spent just under 45 hours at work, though more than 40 percent reported that they were working over 50 hours a week.

There are, however, some sectors in that country where the working hours are around 60-62 hours a week. But China's progress and prosperity has been not because of long hours of work but due to high technological prowess. During the pandemic, work was being done from home but at least one survey found that Indians -- may be also the Chinese -- had to put in more unpaid overtime.

Murthy's comparison with Germany also does not appear convincing. Though Germany's workers in the 1950s certainly worked longer hours than, say, the

hours a week. These comparisons are aimed at highlighting the fact that working longer hours need not necessarily boost productivity. Though Murthy has not referred to the government sector, where it is generally believed that productivity is low, the main reason that can be attributed for this is the lack of proper advance planning. But even then, one can say that even without corporate level efficiency, government hospitals have the best doctors and best treatment is received in these places. Obviously, this is because of high levels of skill and efficiency.

Recall that more than a decade ago, Ratan Tata had complained to The Times, London that the management of the British steel company (Corus) and automaker (Jaguar Land Rover) he had taken over didn't work hard enough. They wouldn't stay for meetings that lasted past 5 p.m.; offices emptied early on Friday. Tata Steel's hard-edged management, he implied, would soon set that right. India Inc.'s luminaries lined up to drape themselves in the flag and endorse their fellow billionaire.

The five-day work culture may not be ideal for a developing nation like India, but factories operate for six days a week and most private sector companies also follow the same principle. It is necessary to mention here that if corporate India wants workers to work longer hours, it will need to create high productivity jobs for them. It is here that there is need to understand the nature of

-- we are yet to establish an efficient and technologically developed structure. The huge labour force does not find adequate employment and even those who find employment are without jobs for around six months a year. Whether it be agriculture or agro-based industries or even the informal sector, modernisation has not taken place yet.

With little capital and land to work on, the marginal product of labour is too small to convince workers to work harder. Moreover, the situation is such that harder work does not reach the employee in most cases but are taken away by the employer in connivance with corrupt political leaders. All the talk of increasing working hours is limited to the top corporate sectors which have unfortunately got all the attention of the government and the country. In fact, all the capital has been invested in these few sectors, which employs around 8-9 percent of the total workforce.

It is now necessary that a change be brought about in the informal sector of the country where pay structure, working hours, overtime allowance is fixed, and workers are not allowed to be exploited. Entrepreneurs like Murthy can talk about more working hours and can examine the labour put in by those who work in the informal sector and devise ways and means and then advise the government to conduct a comprehensive study towards reforming this sector and improving the working conditions of the workers. --INFA

Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

Struggle and Win in the End...

And as I saw the sad faces of the Indian team yesterday, I wanted to shout across, "Hold tight to your dreams and climb the mountain again.

Very often at parties, I hear someone telling me, "Bob, I also dreamt of being a writer!"

"Oh!" I exclaim politely, "Then what happened?"

"People dissuaded me from being one!" they say dolefully.

"And you stopped dreaming?" I ask.

"Yes!" they whisper.

Ah well it's a tale that's often told to me, and it's often that we don't hold too tight to our dream!

The story of a man who held tight to his dream is that of Sylvester Stallone, one of the biggest and most famous American movie superstars. Stallone was a struggling actor in every definition. He slept at the New York bus station for 3 days. Unable to pay rent or afford food, his lowest point came when he tried to sell his dog as he didn't have money to feed the dog anymore. He sold it at \$25 only. He says he walked away crying.

Two weeks later, he saw a boxing match between Mohammed Ali and Chuck Wepner and that match gave him the inspiration to write the script for the famous movie, ROCKY. He wrote the script for 20 hours! He tried to sell it and got an offer for \$125,000 for the script.

But his dream was to be an actor, and he had only one request, he wanted to star in the movie. But the studio said

sity, I asked you to pray for more persistence."

"Ah," responded the holy man, "It's through adversity that you learn perseverance...!"

We in India saw this happening at the Olympics some years ago with J.J. Shobha, the athlete from Hyderabad. Shobha ran with an injury.

Spectators cheered as they saw her surging forward, grimacing with pain from her torn ligament, they cheered as she gritted her teeth and slowly, steadily inched past her competitors.... "I was shocked," said one of the others on the track, "to see her striding past me." But Shobha put her heart into that race and finished third!

Nobody is ever going to forget the gutsy, gritty girl. She taught the world that injury, problems and adversity could spur one on to success. Yet, we pray for wonder drugs to help us win battles. We pray for easy solutions where we won't have to put too much effort or muscle. "Take away the mountain in front of us God!" we shout.

"Climb over it my child," He whispers.

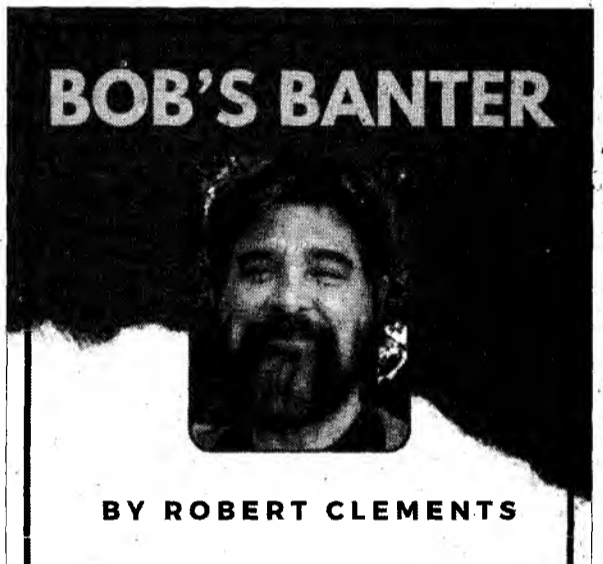
"I can't."

"You can!"

"My feet hurt, my legs ache!"

"Climb," says the Lord, "climb...!"

There is this romantic story of the father and mother of Thomas Becket: Gilbert Becket, Thomas's father, made a trip to the Holy Land and was taken prisoner by a Saracen who had a lovely daughter. She fell in love with Gilbert and told him she



BY ROBERT CLEMENTS

no, as they wanted a real star. He left with his script. A few weeks later, the studio offered him \$250,000 for the script. He refused. They even offered \$350,000. He still refused.

After a while, the studio agreed to give him \$35,000 for the script and let him star in it! The rest is history! The movie won Best Picture, Best Directing and Best Film Editing at the prestigious Oscar Awards. He was even nominated for Best Actor! The Movie ROCKY was even inducted into the American National Film Registry as one of the greatest movies ever!

Today, the same Stallone who slept in the streets and sold his dog, is one of the greatest movie stars! Have you ever had a dream? A wonderful dream? But you are too broke to implement it? Too tiny to do it? Too small to accomplish it?

Life is tough. It's a tough world. Maybe rough. Doors will be shut on you. People will steal your glory and crash your hopes. You will push and push. And then your hopes will crash.

But never let anybody crush your dream. Hold tight to your dream! Fight on! Fight for your place in history, it's waiting for you!

Most often it's adversity that helps build muscle to accomplish such dreams.

I remember well the story of a young man who asked a holy man to pray that he would have more perseverance. The holy man got on his knees and began, "Lord, send this young man problems in the afternoon, send this young man adversity in the evening, send this young man..."

"Stop!" shouted the young fellow, "I didn't ask you to pray for problems and adver-

wanted to marry him. He returned her love until he found an opportunity to escape with his servant Richard. When he returned to England he forgot the Saracen girl.

But she had not forgotten Gilbert!

She left the safety of her father's home and in disguise made her way to the coast. She had learnt two English words; "London" and "Gilbert." With these two words she went among the ships, saying again and again, the same word, "London." Sailors being sailors tried to tease her, molest her and even rape her, but she fought them off and went from ship to ship till she found one bound for London. She paid for her passage with some jewels and arrived in London.

As Gilbert Becket sat in his office one day, Richard, his servant came running in, "Master! The Saracen woman is here. She is going up and down the street, calling out, 'Gilbert! Gilbert!'"

Gilbert hurried out to find her. When she saw him she fainted in his arms. Soon after they were married and lived happily ever after.

"Take away the mountain in front of us!" we shout.

"Climb over it my child," He whispers.

And that's the mountain that our team faces today. The mountain of defeat. But if they hold tight to their dream and climb past this mountain, then they will not just win the next world cup, but show millions of our youth how to struggle but still win in the end...!

The Author conducts an Online Writers and Speakers Course. For more details send a thumbs-up to him on WhatsApp 9892572883. bobsbanter@gmail.com

"Kites rise highest against the wind  
- not with it."

— Winston Churchill

## The Shillong Times

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### Meghalaya Tourism on a roll

THE International Tourism Mart – the 11th edition, is a great opportunity for promoting and cashing in on high end tourism. 28 international delegations from 18 countries and 50 buyers from different parts of the country makes this a great event that needs to be cashed in considering that tourism is a clean industry barring the footfalls which nature can take care of provided the necessary regulations are in place. Tourism now has to transcend the traditional concept of being destination bound and capturing the sights and sounds of this favoured destination. 28 international delegations from 18 countries and 50 buyers from different parts of the country. Foreigners are known to travel in groups to states like Goa and to stay there for months together because they love the place and its culture. Meghalaya needs to emulate some of these examples where people come, stay and become part of the local milieu for several months because they just love the ecosystem. This is where the homestay concept comes in. Homestays also mean more work generated for women who need to cook and clean and who also perhaps own the homestays and are earning a today sum to run their families.

Homestays are a good model for sustainable tourism because there are long term gains. Tourists who come and want to learn and immerse themselves in the culture and practices of the people here, especially the rural folks would love these homestays. The Meghalaya Government has been promoting homestays by assisting those with enough space to create additional rooms to accommodate guests. While hotels have their charm for short stays; those with the idea of an immersive experience would love homestays provided there are story-telling sessions and some musical evenings somewhere around the place of stay. This is where tourism can bring spin-offs for more people. Most tourists love to visit places where traditional crafts are made and in the case of Meghalaya the weaving villages like Umden would be a great attraction. Women weaving the beautiful eri silk is in itself a story to be told. From boiling the cocoon of the eri silk worm to turning that into yarn and then to the weaving and the natural dyeing process is what makes the eri (ryndia) so precious a finished product. Eri silk has already found its way far and wide in the country and abroad and its sale could reach a wider clientele when tourists carry their stories by word of mouth.

Women-led tourism activities where women become the main stakeholders and create services they can provide such as massage and other healing practices is what tourism demands. People come to relax and tourists don't mind spending their money on a relaxing massage the Khasi style. That's what draws tourists to Kerala. Perhaps there is a need to reimagine tourism that offers visitors a whole range of pleasant experiences.

## Mohan Bhagwat bets against widespread Sangh disenchantment

# Modi's machinations deepen mistrust amongst RSS leaders

By Arun Srivastava

Senior RSS leaders have conveyed their annoyance in no uncertain terms to their chief Mohan Bhagwat about the functioning of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and urged him to look for a replacement in the greater interest of the BJP and the philosophical and political mission of the organisation.

For long, these leaders were feeling disenchanted with Modi's political approach to national issues. But they refrained from making their criticism too public, and stuck to the line espoused by an RSS editorial of Organiser in May this year, wherein they hoped that Modi will transform and act in a more rational manner. But that did not happen. Modi's handling of the assembly elections to the five states simply strengthened their belief that under his leadership the BJP had lost the correct political track.

These leaders also hold that Modi sidelining the senior leaders has eroded the credibility of the RSS to a large extent. They feel that the RSS should have taken preventive measures and directed him not to resort to such diversionary politics. With Modi losing his charisma and image, the issue of deliberate humiliation of senior leaders by Modi has once again emerged in a significant manner.

Some of them obliquely accuse Bhagwat for not pulling up Modi enough. It was expected that following the May editorial of Organiser, Modi would have acted in a more judicious manner and allowed space to the state satraps. But he preferred to project himself as the sole public face of the BJP for these elections.

Modi's obsession for his self-image and craving to project himself as the only leader to bail out the BJP in times of crisis has not been liked by these leaders. Raman Singh in Chhattisgarh, Shivraj Chouhan in Madhya Pradesh and Vasundhara Raje Scindia in Rajasthan were deliberately ignored by Modi and Amit Shah, notwithstanding these leaders never posed a serious threat to his leadership. The primary reason for Modi to neglect a leader like Vasundhara was that she was not willing to play the role of a subservient. Modi, who suffers from a deep complex, cannot stand a person with self-respect.

At the pressure of his think tanks and advisers, Modi has somewhat dialed down the self-projection, but much irreparable damage has been inflicted already. Sources maintain that his recalcitrant and arrogant attitude has alienated the grassroot RSS cadres. Amit Shah, while distributing tickets, had consciously ignored the demand of the state RSS leaders to accommodate some of its candidates.

The hostility of the senior RSS leaders is also having an impact at the ground level. Though the lower rung cadres parrot the "everything is fine and the BJP candidates would win the election" party line, a little scratching of the surface brings out the truth. Just as in 2009, in this election too, the RSS cadres would prefer selective voting. These RSS leaders are also not convinced of Modi ensuring the win of the BJP at the 2024 Lok Sabha election.

MG Vaidya, senior ideologue from RSS, had stoked a major controversy in 2021 by revealing that the then Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi was behind Ram Jethmalani's demand for BJP president Nitin Gadkari's resignation. As usual, the RSS distanced itself from Vaidya's revelation, but this act of looking over the shoulder proved disastrous for the party in later days. Almost all the senior BJP leaders are not pulling well with him. But it is the fear of his vengeful reaction that discourages them to speak out publicly.

Though RSS leadership distances itself from Vaidya's observation, he on his part continued to stick to his stand. He said: "While both LK Advani and Gadkari have publicly stated that they don't have Prime Ministerial ambitions, but I haven't read anywhere that Narendra Modi has denied reports of his ambition to become the Prime Minister." He said: "It is my opinion and because Jethmalani has combined two things, demanding Gadkari's resignation and making Narendra Modi as PM, I think that the need of suspicion goes to Gujarat."

Modi loyalist Venkaiah Naidu had reacted: "I am also a RSS swayamsevak, with my own experience of 40 years RSS has not expressed such views, it is not an au-

thorised opinion of RSS. Let me make it very clear. To my knowledge and understanding as a swayamsevak, I also know how RSS functions and as a BJP functionary I don't agree with reported things."

However, in the entire episode, the deafening silence of Mohan Bhagwat has been quite significant. In 2013, it was the RSS which selected Modi as its prime ministerial favourite. It is indeed debatable whether he lived up to RSS faith in him. The fact is he always tried to cut BJP loose from the stranglehold of the RSS and emerge as the definitive rightist party. This is significant, given the BJP is ideologically controlled by the RSS which sends its officers to the BJP to keep it in check, provides money and, crucially, its cadres, especially during elections.

Modi might not have succeeded in his mission to sideline the senior RSS leaders if chief Mohan Bhagwat had asked him to refrain. L K Advani was removed for the comments he wrote on the Visitors' Book at the mausoleum of Quaid-e-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah on 4 June 2005. It read: "There are many people who leave an ineradicable stamp on history. But there are very few who actually create history. Quaid-e-Azam Mohammed Ali Jinnah was one such rare individual." Certainly this went against the RSS doctrine of ultra-Hindutva and spread hatred against Muslims.

There is no denying that Bhagwat has produced a Frankenstein's monster in Modi which has even endangered the existence of the BJP, the political wing of the RSS. Though most of the RSS leaders were not amused to see Modi build up a staggering personality cult, Bhagwat was not at all concerned. He was not even worried of the BJP losing its base. In February 2020, Suresh Joshi ("Bhaiyyaji") cautioned that BJP was not "synonymous" with the Hindu community; making it explicit that it was the RSS which alone could speak on the Hindus' behalf, but his warning did not have any impact on Modi. In fact, Bhaiyyaji was divested of his responsibility.

Hitler and Mussolini did not cover fascism under a 'spiritual' or 'cultural' garb,

but Modi practiced fascism under the cover of Hindutva and nationalism. The strategy suited RSS in giving shape to its mission of turning India into a Hindu Rashtra, but this enabled Modi to project himself as a taller leader than Mohan Bhagwat. He had hijacked the pet slogan of RSS.

Modi continues to resort to divisive politics, even though he and Bhagwat share a good rapport based on mutual respect. For his own political gain, Bhagwat patronised Modi and even ignored his wrongdoings. When six months back, some of the top BJP leaders had approached Bhagwat with the suggestion to put a check on the whimsical acts of Modi, he ignored the warning. On the contrary, he worked out a consensus within RSS in Modi's favour despite several top leaders opposed to the idea of the prime minister leading the BJP in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections for a third consecutive time.

BJP leaders confide that Modi is a major threat to not only the BJP but also to the RSS. While state leaders have started deserting the party even in the midst of the assembly elections, some seniors are getting ready to quit after December 3, the day the results for the five state elections are announced. Meanwhile, Bhagwat continuing to hold his ground and expressing his trust in Modi, saying he's "remained rooted in the Sangh ideology," has endangered the RSS. This is for the first time in the history of RSS that its chief has given precedence to its legislative leader over the organization itself.

"The problem with RSS is that it is wary of taking risks and you can't be in politics without taking risks," a former general secretary said. Following this dictum, RSS is riding on Modi's shoulder to accomplish its mission. The RSS is convinced that political power is necessary for the growth of the organisation and achieving its goal of creating a muscular, Hindu-dominant India. According to Bhagwat, only Modi can deliver. But at the same time, RSS leadership is scared of Rahul Gandhi's counter-narrative. Amidst this lurking shadow, the RSS leaders lament that it could not accomplish its objective of reaching out to over 6 lakh villages in five years. (IPA Service)

## Israeli forces killing children in Gaza war is worst humanitarian disaster

# Tragic that the western nations are in denial of the genocide

By Dr Arun Mitra

Children are the best gifts of nature. It gives eternal pleasure to watch them grow because they are the hope, future and continuation of life. As a doctor it is a matter of great satisfaction to relieve the pain of a child caused by physical injury, disease or stress of any kind. It is difficult to comprehend how some people get pleasure in harming the children, even killing. Every day reports of children being killed by the Israel defence forces in Gaza is the biggest war crime of the on-going century. Nearly 120 children are being killed every day, that is one child every 12 minutes.

It is heart rending to watch



the dead bodies of children in Gaza; mothers crying in deep pain, fathers upset over the loss of hope, brothers and sisters sitting dumb beside the dead body. With the Israeli aggression still going on, there is no guarantee when the death dance of the Israeli defence forces will stop. The nightmare people of Gaza are passing through is beyond imagination. It would be wrong to call it a war. It is a clear cut aggression and genocide of the innocent people including children. Hamas, which committed the barbaric act on 7th October 2023 is nowhere in the picture.

War always causes collateral damage. Children in these situations are the worst sufferers for no fault of theirs. Now when the hospitals are being targeted with impunity, the number of dead children, infants and foetuses in mother's wombs will increase manifold including. According to the UN Rights Chief Volker Turk, "in such situations the outbreaks of disease, hunger are 'inevitable' in Gaza. Speaking at the UN in Geneva, he highlighted the extreme scarcity of food, fuel and medical supplies in Gaza and warned of the consequences of a complete collapse of water, sewage and healthcare services. Massive outbreaks of infectious disease, and hunger, seem inevitable," he said.

The long-term physical, mental and social health consequences of the war on children will be severe and long-lasting. In the absence of proper food supplies leading to malnutrition, vulnerability to infectious and chronic diseases increases manifold. The mental health and developmental disorders occur from bereavement, on-going trauma and insecurity, fear, loss and deprivation and an uncertain future.

Muthanna Samara, Sara Hammuda, Panos Vostanis, Basel El-Khodary and Nader Al-Dewik in an article published in the British Medical Journal published on 19 November 2020 point out that "Living in war situations for long periods the children develop 'toxic stress'. This leads to anxiety, loneliness and insecurity which increases in the absence of family support and separation from the parents and friends. Their inability to attend school adds to the anxiety. The uncertainty of whether they will survive the next day always haunts children's minds. They become over sensitive to any unfamiliar sound. This was observed by the team of doctors that visited violence affected areas in Manipur, a north eastern state in India, to assess the health needs of the people living in relief camps. This constant state of anxiety can lead to bed wetting, difficulty in falling asleep, nightmares,

and strained relationships with their loved ones. Living in such situations for long they develop withdrawal and aggressive behaviour even towards their nears and dears. They may develop a revengeful attitude on small matters. They may start fighting with, and shouting at their friends or bullying other children. As a result of fear many children can lose normal speech and start stuttering. Some can even experience partial amnesia. Some of them may resort to drugs. Even suicidal behaviour is observed.

In the long run, because of staying in refugee camps and losing the opportunity of education, their whole life

trajectory changes. The girls have to face sex abuse and even rejection by the family and the society. Many children get debilitated because of landmines and other forms of injury. These get worse in the absence of medical facilities. The children may lose moral values because survival for them is the basic need for which they can even resort to crime. Children may lose their community and its culture during war.

Irony of the situation is that while the citizens are feeling the pain and reacting most of the governments have become either party to Israeli aggression or just paying lip service. European leaders are vocal to label what Hamas did was a war crime, but they are silent over the disproportionate violence perpetrated by Israel. Al Jazeera presenter, Osman Ayfarah, questioned Josep Borrell, the European Union's foreign policy chief, about the EU's position on describing Israel's and Hamas' actions as war crimes. "I am not a lawyer," Mr Borrell answered when asked whether the EU would describe Israel's actions since 7th October as war crimes, and that the International Criminal Court will conduct an investigation into the matter. However, he said the EU considers Hamas' attack on 7th October to be war crimes because it was "the clear killing of civilians without any reason." Whereas the UN Secretary General's approach and his bold stand for ceasefire is appreciable, the UN as a body however has failed to contain the aggression.

That the invading forces take no mercy even on the children shows serious aberration in human behaviour. This was witnessed when the Nazis killed the Jewish children. When the Nazis were killing Jews in millions, the world ignored them for a long time saying they did not have any knowledge of the concentration camps. The western countries did not believe in the existence of concentration camps even after the Red Army discovered them. But now that excuse does not hold good any more. Thanks to technological innovations, everything is clearly visible.

It is worth remembering the poem "The Cry of the Children" by Elizabeth Barrett Browning written in the context of children's agony during forced labour in hazardous work.

"True," say the children, "it may happen

That we die before our time!  
Little Alice died last year  
her grave is shapen  
Like a snowball, in the

rim.  
We looked into the pit  
prepared to take her —  
(IPA Service)

## Letters to the Editor

### Reconstructing history

Editor,  
This refers to the article, "Forgetting our history" (ST, November 21, 2023) by Lekha Rattanani. The outgoing Vice Chancellor of Visva Bharati, Bidyut Chakraborty had created three major controversies during his tenure. The first one was his alleged involvement in creating walls, fences and divisions in Visva Bharati to uphold the vision of Tagore. Tagore created Visva Bharati as a residential place of learning, "Where the world has not been broken up into fragments/ By narrow domestic walls."

The second attempt was to undermine another landmark of Santiniketan, Pratchi by raising deafening noise over a small piece of land within it. Pratchi is another place of pilgrimage in Santiniketan because it is Nobel laureate Amartya Sen's ancestral home where he had been with his family for eight decades. The third one was keeping the founder of Visva Bharati, Noble laureate Tagore's name out of the plaque which was installed in the University to commemorate the listing of Santiniketan as a UNESCO World Heritage site.

Similar controversy has also been plagued in Sabarmati. Mahatma Gandhi's motto was simplicity. But the Gujarat government's Rs 1200 crore makeover of Mahatma Gandhi's memorial is totally opposed to his ideals.

Yours etc.,  
Sujit De,  
Kolkata

### Toxicity of social media

Editor,  
Newton's third law says, "To every action there is an equally opposite reaction." The same is happening with social media too. While social media has its uses its harmful effects have also started showing and affecting mental health.

During the last one decade social media has become an essential part of our lives. In fact, how much social media we use is a strong reason for rising health problems. The situation seems serious as we notice young people spending more than 5-6 hours every day on different social media platforms. In India the number of social media users is very high. Unless we exercise self discipline social media can become destructive.

Social media has reduced conversation time even among family members. Parents have no control over their children on this matter. The continuous and consistent association with digital content has started demonstrating weak mental health in young people. And while social media has brought the promising role of connecting people online it has also come as a challenge as they feel the need to be constantly connected. This is also the reason for conflict in the minds of youth who are using social media

solely for receiving reactions to their activities posted on the platforms. The youth need to know that those with a lot of friends on social media are not necessarily happy, famous or successful. Moreover young people are investing 'emotions' in social media platforms. This 'emotional investment' is a clear indication of mental health problems.

Continuous online activities are pushing the youth into depression that later even take the shape of suicidal and criminal tendencies. Do parents notice when a child stays up late each night and is not getting enough sleep? This follows irritability in the child's behaviour which is a reflection of growing mental health problems.

The entire generation of young people has entered a complex juncture where they start hating others who stop them from getting involved on social media platforms. A simple example to judge the harmful effects of these on-line platforms comes when you examine the reaction of young people who are asked to stay away from any platform for some days. A strong pushback comes in these situations, which reflects the 'social media addiction.' Parents should monitor their child's behaviour while they are away from such platforms. Moreover, sleep disruption caused during the night and before bedtime by mobile devices can also be the reason impacting the child.

Due to lack of consensus on such topics, it isn't easy to make specific recom-

mendations to youth. Still, we should remind young people that their 'virtual friends' are keeping them away from enjoying life with real friends and maintaining healthy relationships. Strong comparisons should be made to advise and involve youth, in other activities so that they take more breaks and keep their focus away from digital content. It is because of loneliness that everyone feels connected online. Practically speaking, all such platforms are created for commercial reasons (showing advertisements and collecting data about users).

Social media has now plagued people across ages. YouTubers, in particular, have been swaying the masses with their out of the box ideas and presentations. A recent report says there are 467 (four hundred sixty seven) million social media users in the country today, which equates to 32.8% of the 1.6 billion active mobile phones in India where 77% mobile penetration has already been achieved as of today.

Currently there are 2 million YouTubers partner programme creator base spanning over 40,000 channels with more than one lakh followers per channel. Undoubtedly, social media is today turning out to be an unavoidable passion. However, using social media is not always pernicious. Of late, it has transformed non-entities into celebrities and ordinary folks into high octane cult figures. Students preparing for multiple competitive examinations take the help of social media and

other education channels to sharpen up their skills.

The pharmaceutical industry has turned the whole media industry into a money-making machine. People across the world have hugely benefited following the exchange of medical knowledge and expert consultations. Surgeries are being performed in on-line mode and a patient now has the luxury of consulting a doctor of his choice from any corner of the world. The business community is enjoying the fruits of the digital revolution that has indirectly exposed them to the brighter side of social media. There is not a single commercial entity that has been left untouched by its gigantic presence as a result of which maximum business establishments have reconciled to the idea of using this media for widening the scope of their businesses.

Unemployed youth, well versed in graphics, digital exposition and computer based languages are pooling in all their resources to exploit the opportunities to earn a decent living. However, despite all the positives, social media is fraught with some lurking dangers. Surveys across the board have found that 36.9% social media users have common health related problems. These have been identified as eye strain (36.4%), anger (25.5%) and sleep disorder (26.1%).

Some irresponsible and unsubstantiated media posts have recently triggered massive clashes between communities. Videos blackmailing victims for money and

sex are being unabashedly uploaded day in and day out. Chats laced with expletives, invectives and insinuations make it to different media platforms freely. All this is the consequence of toxic addiction.

Society and parents have a pivotal role to play to curb this menace and if they shy away from taking up this responsibility then the whole society could be at the risk of disintegration.

Proper counselling, regular consultations and meaningful engagements can reverse the trend to a great extent. Misuse of social media has to be immediately checked and all the remedial measures in the context of this gross abuse have to be put in place.

Let social media be a source of joy, earning and knowledge without it turning into an addiction. It is the collective responsibility of all concerned to ensure that social media is used the way it is meant to. Anything contrary to this could be cramping and catastrophic.

Though technology has many uses it also has its downside. Recently the world has seen how technology failed Israel on the very first day of war with Hamas. It's a big lesson for all that technology has its own limitations.

Yours etc.,  
Yash Pal Ralhan,  
Via email

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

*"Everything in the world may be endured except continual prosperity."*  
— Wolfgang von Goethe  
**The Shillong Times**

Vol No: LXV No. 104 SHILLONG, FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 24, 2023

**Verdict in Netherlands**

AN election win for the far-right, anti-Islam political formation in the parliamentary polls in the Netherlands has come as a "shock" to many and obviously enthused some others across Europe – a continent faced with the problem of large-scale migrations. Humanitarian laws in Europe and other western nations take a compassionate view of refugees to the extent that those who put their feet on these nations cannot be driven out and must be cared for. Huge funds are set apart for this. Far right parties are more mindful of the rights of the natives and are up in arms against migrations as they argue the well-being of their future generations is at serious risk. Apart from a culture shock, there are fears on other counts too.

Muslim migrations, largely from Africa and troubled Islamic provinces, are massive across Europe, and principally to the UK and France. This surge is seen also in the context that the UK and France had colonized much of the 'dark' continent – the British Empire the eastern parts and France the western and northern parts. Muslims form nearly six crore of Europe's 74 per cent population, which is projected to rise to seven crore by 2050. While Muslim population grows faster, the predominantly Christian population is dwindling in Europe through birth control and other socially significant factors. Fears are that by the end of this century, Muslim population could even dominate Europe. Muslims form only five per cent of the 1.73 crore population of the Netherlands now, Christians 50 per cent and non-believers over 43 per cent. The polls in the Netherlands were necessitated by the resignation of the coalition of then-prime minister Mark Rutte in July on the issue of migrations. He had refused to control migrations with strong steps. An interim government was in place to oversee the polls. Populist far-right leader Geert Wilders is emerging as the front-runner to form the next government. Unable to gain a majority, however, the poll outcome would require him to go for an alliance with other parties. Some parties have already expressed their willingness to join hands with him in government formation.

Wilders' victory forms into a pattern in a season of triumph for far-right parties from "Slovakia and Spain to Germany and Poland," including Italy as well in recent parliament polls spanning EU member nations. In Europe, native Muslims are a majority in the Balkans consisting of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and the European part of Turkey, some Russian republics and a part of Kazakhstan. Occasional acts of violence, as are evident in France and UK by Muslim migrants and fears of a spread of global terrorism to Europe are major worries for the native populations.

**Autonomous District Councils: From conception to present reality**

By Patricia Mukhim

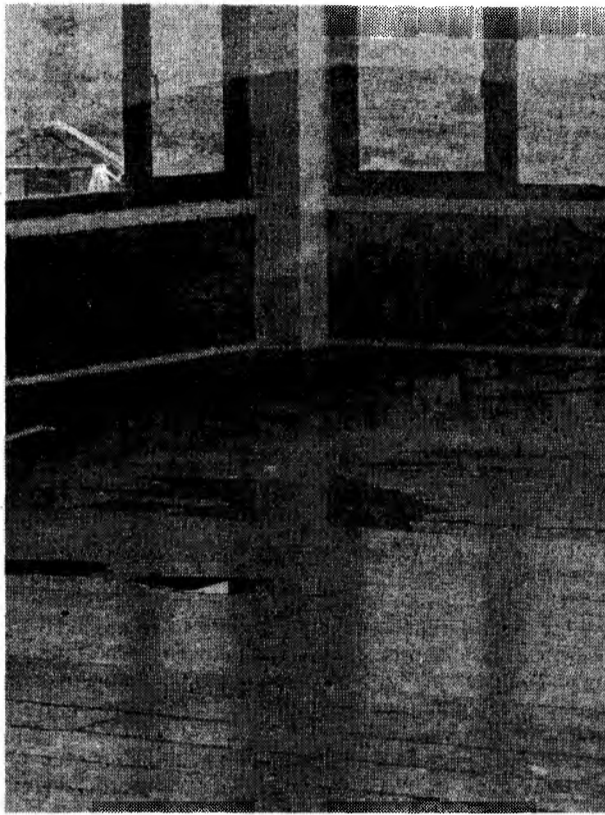
The Sixth Schedule of the Constitution was envisaged at a time when the tribes of India's North East had just entered into an agreement with "India" vide the Instrument of Accession, to live under its rule after the British left these hills. Rev JIM Nichols Roy was conscious of the unequal power status of the tribals vis a vis the plains people of Assam who were the majority in the government at the time. His arguments then were valid and they carried the hopes and aspirations of the people he represented even though they were still in a state of unresolved predicaments about how the Sixth Schedule could empower a population that was a small minority and had just got over one imperial rule by the white man who also brought the Book with them and converted a substantial number into their religion – a religion that the tribes accepted, perhaps because those who brought the Book seemed benevolent do-gooders who provided them health care and education.

Mr JIM Nichols Roy was the beneficiary of that education and was therefore able to rise to the position of a leader among tribals. Knowing to communicate in English then was a super-plus point because Nichols Roy had to convince not just the political leadership of Assam but the likes of Dr BR Ambedkar and other members of the Constituent Assembly about what he had in mind and why the tribes needed this special protection. That Nichols Roy was a man with a vision needs no retelling. The Sixth Schedule led to the creation of the autonomous district councils that were mandated to protect, conserve and promote the traditional and customary practices of the tribes.

Nichols Roy did not have it easy. Going into the debates between members of the Constituent Assembly from Assam and elsewhere on why the tribes should not be given autonomy because the region was encircled by foreign countries; that the governance of these areas should be with the President and not with the Governor else a "tribalstan" might be created that could later rebel against the Indian state etc, all show how little the region was understood then and even today.

The Councils were given the mandate to also manage healthcare at the grassroots level but above all to manage Primary Schools – the first and most important step in the ladder of education. Those who came up with this idea were visionaries because the Councils were supposed to be connected to the grassroots governance

body- the Dorbar Shnong and primary education would have been supervised better by the Council's own officers. Alas! Those who envisioned the Sixth Schedule did not take into account the human factor that would turn the Councils into institutions of self-gratification rather than of delivering genuine service to the tribes who needed education more than anything else. JIM Nichols Roy the architect of the Sixth Schedule must be turning in his grave several times over at seeing the degeneration of the institution he fathered.



The Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General has had a running battle with the ADCs because of their lack of transparency and accountability in how they manage their accounts. Dr Sumarbin Umdor informed at the panel discussion on transparency and accountability of ADCs at the Office of the Principal Accountant General recently that the collective revenue of the 3 ADCs in the State in the last five years was to the tune of Rs 1347 crores of which 50% was revenue generated from royalty on mines and minerals, 30% was from grants in aid from the Government and 10% from professional taxes. Sadly, there is no accountability on how this money was spent. As it is the ADCs are overemployed and spend nearly half their budget in paying salaries. But the employees are mostly political appointees with not an iota of professionalism. This is evident from the budget document of the KHADC for 2023-24 which immediately gives the impression that not much thinking has gone into its preparation. All the fig-

ures projected are just a 10% or less hike from the previous budget with zeroes added to the first figure. No wonder the CAG report for the year 2014-15 is dated July 2022. This means an audit backlog of nearly 8-9 years. According to the audit reports cash books are not maintained as per CAG regulations; cash is not immediately deposited in the treasury but after a lapse of several days and utilisation certificates for money used are missing.

In the section Art and Culture there is a Non-Plan expenditure of Rs 9 lakh earmarked for Conservation and Promotion of Traditional Culture and Youth Affairs. The space for actual expenses for 2021-22, 2022-23 showed that nothing was spent on this head which one would think is the most important mandate of the Councils. An important observation of the CAG is also that the ADCs don't have a recorded list of assets. Now what are the primary assets of the District Councils? From looking at the CAG reports it would seem that the ADCs are more interested in infrastructure creation (buildings) since this involves tenders and contracts. But what happens to these assets created thereafter? The KHADC's most prominent constructions include the resorts by the Umiam Lake created at least 10 years ago but lying unutilised. Then there is a huge infrastructure created near Lum Sohpet Bneng ostensibly for housing the traditional medical practitioners. But how they are going to do that is unclear. This building too remains unutilised. Then there is a sort of restaurant cum lookout place at Wah U

Tim near Mawmluh which was inaugurated in November 2022 but which is not yet taken by anyone. I visited this place only to find that the ceiling in the brand new building had caved in and water had seeped in through that ceiling. The floor was littered with water. If this is the standard of construction then is the contractor being held liable? Remember this is public money. It does not come from the pockets of the MDCs and not especially from the CEM's pocket.

It is in this light that we have to look at the ADCs. Are they really in the business of protecting, promoting and conserving our culture – the core of which is our environment (Ka Mei Ramew)? We draw our sustenance and our very lives from the environment. Without the environment we are dead. Of what use is culture then? Yet how much have the ADCs done to conserve our river systems? What role have the ADCs played in preventing the reckless coal mining business in the State? After all, the ADCs effectively own the land in the Sixth Schedule areas. How much of the afforestation activities have they undertaken to conserve the environment on which our culture rests?

Time has come for those who fund the Councils to demand accountability and transparency. For how long can the Councils, "Go as they please?" They need to buck up and ensure that every rupee spent is accounted for or else they forfeit future funding. This has to happen inevitably. There is a limit to how carelessly any institution can spend public money.

Another bigger institutional malfunction is the tenuous link between the Syiems, the Dorbar Shnong and the District Council. How are they connected? Who are the Syiems who also collect levies, taxes and tolls from forests and markets accountable to? How much are they paying the Councils? Can this arbitrariness be allowed to continue? This goes for the Dorbar Shnong too. They also collect taxes from residents for carrying out civic responsibilities. But they too are out of the ambit of the public accounting system. Clearly, we live in a very ambiguous and amorphous political bubble that we have allowed to rule our lives without a semblance of accountability. The public should be raising these critical questions from public institutions and those that run these institutions.

The ADCs have strayed from the path envisioned for them by the founding fathers.

**On Israel's Gaza war, Hindutva forces in India in cahoots with Zionists**

By P. Sudhir

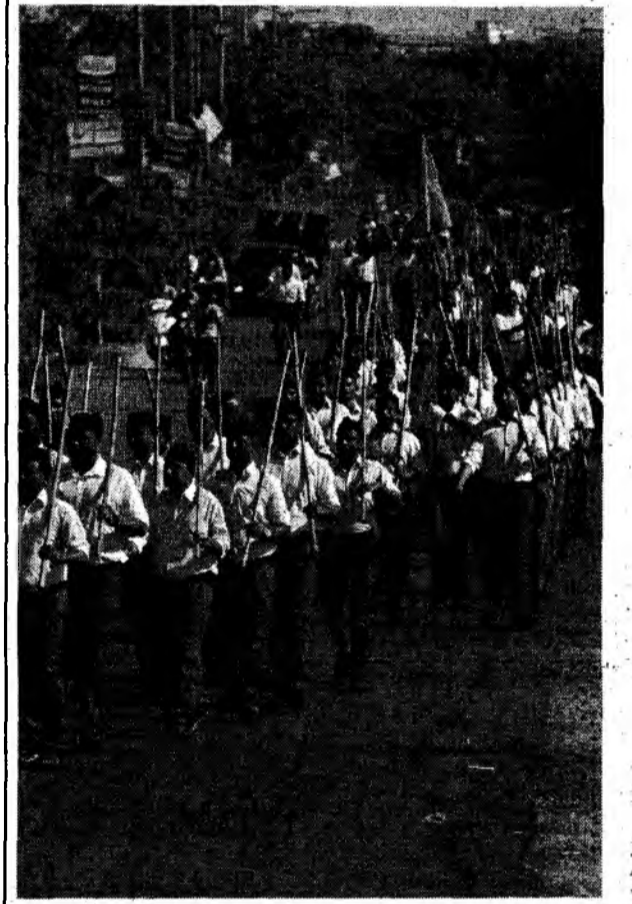
It has become a crime in New India to observe Children's Day by remembering the Palestinian children killed in Israel's war on Gaza. This is what happened on November 14 in Mumbai when a few score people, including minor girls, held a silent prayer in Juhu beach. 17 of them were arrested by the police and kept in the police station till the evening. All of them belong to the minority community. For the BJP rulers, death of 5,600 children in Gaza is of no consequence.

On the same day, the Delhi police sent out a notice to Imams of various mosques warning them not to mention Palestine or the attack by Israeli forces in Gaza during prayers or sermons. Even a prayer in memory of the thousands who have died in Gaza is prohibited. This is an attack not only on the basic right of free speech but on religious freedom.

military and security relations. Subsequently, the Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon, who represented the Zionist rightwing, visited India, the first Israeli prime minister to do so.

Narendra Modi has deepened this strategic relationship further along with his rightwing counterpart Benjamin Netanyahu. Israel has become a key supplier of technology and equipment for the internal security apparatus of the Modi government. One such technology is the Pegasus spyware, which was supplied by an Israeli company with the approval of the Israeli government.

The genocidal attack on Gaza has evoked worldwide protest and condemnation. Even in countries where the governments are fully with Israel, tens of thousands of people have come out on to the streets to demonstrate their support and solidarity



In Srinagar, the administration ordered the Jamia Masjid, the main mosque in the city, to be shut for Friday prayers on October 13 and all successive Fridays. The step is being taken to prevent any gesture of solidarity with the people of Gaza during prayers.

In all BJP-ruled states, any protest or demonstration in support of Palestine is prohibited or prevented by the police. Even in Delhi, students and other protestors were rounded up while protesting at Jantar Mantar.

All these actions stem from the BJP-RSS outlook which lionizes Israel and depicts the Palestinian struggle as terrorism. This is also reflected in the complete shift that the Modi government has effected of outright support to Israel and refusal to support the call for ceasefire in the war against Gaza which is demanded by the entire global south.

Hindutva and rightwing Zionism are ideological brothers. VD Savarkar, the originator of the concept of Hindutva wrote as early as 1923 that he supported the setting up of a Jewish State in Palestine. Savarkar consistently supported Zionism as he saw it as anti-Muslim. In stark contrast, Gandhiji was equally firm in supporting the Palestinian cause. He wrote in 1938 that "It is wrong and inhuman to impose the Jews on the Arabs. What is going on in Palestine today cannot be justified by any moral code of conduct".

The Modi government's reversal of India's stand on Palestine is the culmination of the strategic relations forged with Israel by the first BJP-led Vajpayee government. LK Advani, then deputy prime minister, had visited Israel in 2000, the first high ranking Indian government leader to do so. This resulted in various

with the people of Gaza and Palestine. In Britain, where the Conservative government and the opposition Labour party leadership are both fully backing Israel's aggression on Gaza, hundreds of thousands of people have been demonstrating every Saturday. Protests were held in Paris and Berlin where the French and German governments had prohibited such protests or the display of Palestinian flag.

The announcement of a four day truce and exchange of 50 women and children held hostage by Hamas for 150 Palestinian women and children in Israeli prisons is a temporary respite. Netanyahu has made it clear that the war will go on after the truce period. That is why it is important to mount pressure for a permanent ceasefire till a political solution is found.

In India, there are big solidarity meetings being held involving thousands of people in all the districts of Kerala. There has been a big demonstration in Kolkata organised by the Left parties. The Left parties are also organising solidarity actions and meetings in different states.

But given the dominant communal narrative put out by the BJP and the corporate media portraying the Palestinians as "Muslim terrorists", the other secular opposition parties have remained passive on the issue. This makes it all the more important for the Left forces to take up a widespread and sustained campaign in support of a permanent ceasefire, for an end to the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands and for setting up of an independent Palestinian State. They must draw in other secular and democratic forces in this mobilisation and foil the BJP's plan to make this into an Islamophobic issue. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

**Mitigating Shillong's Traffic Woes**

Editor,  
As a concerned resident of Shillong, I wish to draw attention to the escalating traffic predicament plaguing our charming city. Shillong's scenic beauty and cultural richness are undeniable, but the recent surge in vehicular congestion threatens to compromise the quality of life for its residents. It is imperative that we collectively address this issue to preserve the essence of our beloved city.

The exponential growth in both population and vehicles has led to crowded streets, longer commute times, and heightened environmental concerns. The idyllic lanes that once defined Shillong are now marked by traffic snarls, adversely impacting daily life. Urgent intervention is needed to curb the burgeoning chaos and restore a sense of ease to our urban mobility.

To tackle this issue, concerted efforts must be directed towards enhancing public transportation, promoting non-motorized modes of travel, and implementing

effective traffic management strategies. Investing in reliable public transportation, creating pedestrian-friendly zones, and optimizing traffic signals are crucial steps. Additionally, community awareness campaigns can encourage responsible commuting habits, while infrastructural development should be aligned with the city's growing needs. By adopting a multifaceted approach, we can collaboratively forge a path towards a more sustainable and navigable Shillong.

Yours etc.,  
Aryan P Prakash,  
Via email

**Meghalaya education ahead of traditional learning systems**

Editor,  
The write up by Dr CR Kharlukhi titled - "Meghalaya Bored of School Education" (ST November 14, 2023) raised a fundamental issue of 'Quality Education' besides other nuances raised

by different writers earlier. One word mentioned by Dr Kharlukhi is "inference," a word which explains the higher order of mental activity in the child's learning process. Indeed, this term, would have transformed the way we learn and would also serve as a plank for independent learning. I pray that those in the Department won't be bored by quality education! As if it were a law, people who leant independently and own a decent degree, and up to becoming a professor in any discipline, must have walked the steps of this INFERENCE.

Did our ancestors know and use this? Yes, and it is this very thing that made some of us, even scholars, say - "our ancestors never shared their knowledge system with the future generations." My informal research of Khasi knowledge system took ten years, and am still on the learning curve. A query is answered in a sentence that entails long term observation, analysis before coming to a generalization. I remember my father saying "Ka mattah ka kit kynran ya ka knup naduh dang kha haduh ban da yap" (the snail carries its shell from birth till death). I never took it

seriously, and he also never spoke of it twice. It's only one day, many years later, after one metaphysical experience that I recalled the statement. Now I say, they discovered the "Ontological foundation of existents in the cosmos which they carry in their being eternally". Through this knowledge of the law of the Infinite Nature, they created folk tales and folklores and passed them down to us in the form of stories and legends; yet we lament for not having had our own alphabets.

Ancestors of any ancient tribes and all those in the animal kingdom must have tread the same mental journey before establishing their knowledge systems. If our education is to be profound and be a tool for transformation, we have to learn the hard way.

Yours etc.,  
Isaid Khongjee  
Sohra.

**BCCI decision not acceptable**

Editor,  
It is with deep sadness that I learnt that the organizers of the ICC World cup didn't invite the former

Captain of the cricket team who brought the World Cup to India in 1983, Kapil Dev, to attend the finals of the recently concluded ICC Men's World Cup ODI at Ahmedabad. If so, then it is indeed a poor decision taken by the BCCI. My feeling is that the victorious 1983 Cricket ODI WORLD CUP winners should have been invited. To have missed the opportunity to invite the legendary skipper, Kapil Dev on that special occasion is heart-rending and a great insult to the cricket fraternity of our country. As a cricket fan, I want to state that the BCCI should be more objective and diligent about invitations in the future so as not to hurt the sentiments of any pre-eminent cricketer.

Yours etc.,  
Pinaki Nandy  
Shillong

**Not all Muslims are terrorists**

Editor,  
In his article, "Tragic that western nations are in denial of the genocide" (ST, November 23, 2023), Dr Arun Mitra rightly described

Israeli forces killing children in Gaza war as the "worst humanitarian disaster".

Unfortunately, Israel has been using Islamophobia in their foreign policy to deny Palestinians their rights for a long time. Now, they are also using this phobia to make western nations deny the ongoing genocide in Gaza. Islamophobia tags all Muslims as terrorists which is a bogus theory. We cannot tag all Christians of Germany as terrorists for what some of them did in the Holocaust. We cannot paint all the Buddhists of Myanmar with a single brush for the Rohingya massacre either. Also, we cannot tag all Indian Hindus as terrorists for the 1984 anti-Sikh riots and the 2002 Gujarat riots.

Jewish people of Israel who themselves are the victims of a phobia called antisemitism, must not use Islamophobia in their foreign policy.

Yours etc.,  
Sujit De,  
Via email

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"It's difficult to look on the bright side when you're surrounded by negativity."

— Amy Morin

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXV No. 105 SHILLONG, SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 25, 2023

Mukroh the forgotten frontier

A year has passed since the dastardly killing in Mukroh where five individuals coming from the poorest families were killed. All of them were male earning members. The reasons for the killing are still shrouded in mystery and veers around the timber smuggling activity that somehow turned ugly on that fateful day.

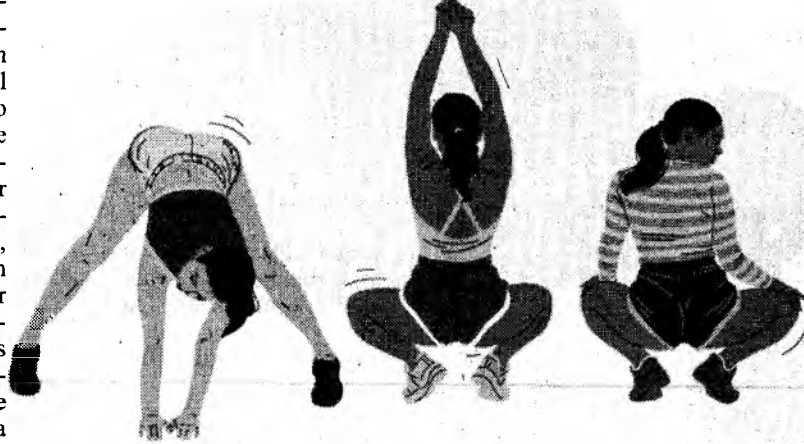
Barring the VIP visit on that one single day when the killings happened, no VIP has revisited Mukroh. There is little that the MLA can do because Mukroh is a small part of his Constituency. Besides since the MLA is from the party in the ruling coalition - the UDP he cannot even raise the matter in the Assembly.

Interestingly, the pressure groups from the side of Karbi Anglong appeared before the Enquiry Committee and submitted their memorandum to Justice Phukan. Why did the people of Mukroh not do the same? Are there no pressure groups in Mukroh? Now that both states have decided to hand over the case to the CBI both enquiry committees remain infructuous.

Twerking & The lynch bros of Meghalaya

By Angela Rangad

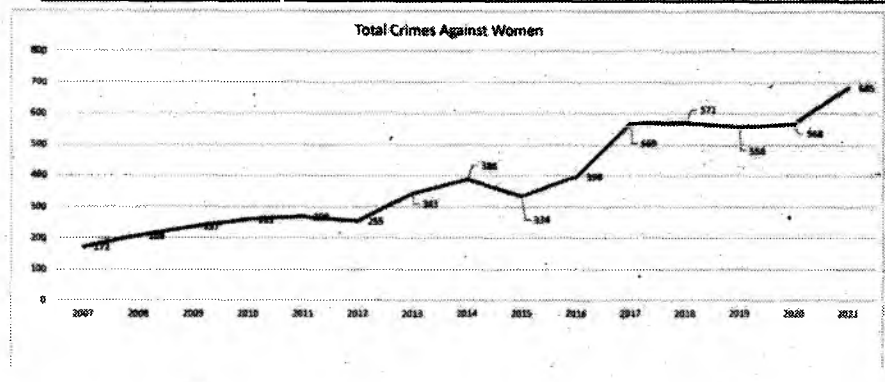
The music too but he chose to single out this woman. He will justify it by saying that she was on stage! And then local artist of repute for daring to write and perform the kind of songs she does and styling herself the way



she does. The same narrow-minded bro culture trolled a woman led dance group. We expect our elected representatives to lead by example by defending constitutional values of equality, freedom

Cases reported During the Year (CR) under Crime against Women in MEGHALAYA During 2007-2021

Table with columns for Crime Type and Year (2007-2021). Rows include Rape, Sexual Harassment, Dowry Deaths, etc.



of "protecting the image of the tribe"? And festival goers did not see this as offensive, but were actually cheering her courage to share the stage with an international star! The kind of mindset displayed by this elected representative (and some youtubers) is the one that wants to keep woman shackled in their homes, the mindset that fears women fully participating in the Dorbars and the same mindset that months ago slut shamed an acclaimed local artist for her choice of clothing, some time ago another young woman

issues of disempowerment of women in our society rather than saying and doing things that further disenfranchise half of our population.

Just take a look at the following data showing increase in Reported Violence against women.

But for the Bro mob of Meghalaya, this shocking data has no meaning. For them only thing that matters is how hate can be consolidated and transformed into vote banks. We women (and citizens) should call out this man for his irresponsible threats of arrests and we should invoke the criminal law amendment provision of

Voyeurism that this man is indulging in and that is encouraging the trolls to the hilt! Maybe by inciting the dark passion, this bro brigade wants violence against women graph to hit the heavens. And tell me what happens if the young person faced with this violent targeting starts thinking of self harm? Would the politician take responsibility and give a public statement about using section 306 of the IPC against himself? I am sure nothing like that is going to happen, the politician would have moved on to another vote grabbing issue.

These populist leaders and influencers rather than creating an atmosphere of democratic reasonable conversation, are creating a Lynch mob / troll army culture in Meghalaya. We have seen what this has done to public discourse in India for women and minorities.

While a girl is being 'lynched' for her choices at a music festival, let me remind these Bros that Meghalaya has one of the worse socio, economic, health indicators in India for women and children. Whether it is maternal mortality, infant mortality or teenage pregnancy. Some of these are closely tied to the increasing patriarchal silencing of women's voices by these Bros. Elected representatives should focus on real

Round The States

By Insaaf

Rajasthan Polling End to Bitter Campaigning

Rajasthan goes to the polls today. The campaigning has been rough and tough and while pollsters would give thumbs up to ruling Congress, the State appears to be in a neck-to-neck contest between the grand old party and BJP. Gehlot government has gone all out to woo the voters with welfare schemes and the party's 7 guarantees, including Rs 10,000 per year to female head of family, cow dung at Rs 2 kg, free laptops and tablets to first-year government college students, et al.

Governors 'Playing With Fire'

Governors need to tread cautiously; they are only titular heads and real power rests with people's representatives. The firm message comes from the country's top court. In a 27-page judgement uploaded on Thursday last, the Supreme Court asked Punjab Governor Banwarilal Purohit to 'now proceed to take a decision on the Bills' submitted for assent during Assembly's sittings on 19, 20 June 2023 and 20 October 2023, as these were 'constitutionally valid'.

However, it clarified it can't direct Parliament to amend or make laws for giving proper representation to other communities that form part of the STs as this would amount to "venturing into legislative domain". Additional seats, it said must be made available in Bengal for the STs to accommodate "principle of proportional representation."

Adamant Bihar

Bihar is pulling out all the stops to get what has been demanding. On Wednesday last, Chief Minister Nitish Kumar upped the ante on the long-standing demand for grant of special status to the state by getting the Cabinet to pass such a resolution. In a post he said the Centre has been requested for the same as it 'was necessitated by findings of the caste survey his government carried out.'

Farewell 'Judged'

A farewell speech in Allahabad High Court has not just raised many an eyebrow but could ruffle feathers. On Tuesday last, its retiring Chief Justice Pritinker Divaker in his farewell speech alleged his transfer in 2018 from Ghattisgarh HC when the collegium was headed by then CJI Dipak Misra was done to 'have been issued with an ill intention to harass me!'

Set Up Delimitation Commission

Disproportionate representation of tribal communities in Sikkim and West Bengal assemblies should go a long way to get sections of SCs and STs justice across the country. Hearing a petition of NGO, Public Interest Committee for Scheduling Specific Areas, contending the Limbu and Tamang communities (STs), were denied a proportionate representation in these States, the Supreme Court on Thursday last, directed Centre to set up a fresh delimitation commission for ensuring a proportional representation of the communities specified as SCs and STs, as mandated under Constitution.

Letters to the Editor

Disrespect to Verghese Kurien and National Milk Day

Editor, National Milk Day is celebrated every year in India on November 26 to mark the Birth Anniversary of the father of the White Revolution in India, the legendary Dr Verghese Kurien. Because of the untiring efforts of Dr Kurien and his leadership, India achieved self-sufficiency in milk production, and brand Amul was created. Millions of farmers and their families have benefitted just because of the herculean task he initiated in 1960s.

However, it is dismaying and disheartening to find that, in the last few days, almost the entire G.S. Road in Guwahati is lined up with posters of the Ministers of the Union and State Governments in the name of the ensuing National Milk Day on November 26. This is total disrespect to the very man on whose Birth Anniversary, the National Milk Day is observed. There is NOT a single acknowledgement anywhere about Dr Kurien. Ministers seem to

have usurped the very deeds of the great son of India.

Yours etc., D Bhutia, Guwahati

Freebies can kill the economy

Editor, Argentina elects Javier Milei as President and he has clearly stated that he would not provide any freebies or subsidies. He got 56% of votes and defeated his rival who had promised a slew of freebies and complete removal of income tax. Argentina has been enjoying freebies and subsidies for a long time and inflation in the country is at 143%. The Argentinians ultimately had better sense after 40 years of mad rule of freebies.

We have already seen the collapse of the Sri Lankan economy due to freebies. The other name for freebies is 'Disaster', which is well suited to Sri Lanka. But this is also a warning to all countries, including India where politicians are in a race to dole out freebies only to gain political mileage. Presently the news floating around is that the Modi Government may adopt the old pension

scheme and if it happens it can prove to be an economic disaster for the country as per the opinion of various economists.

While elections are the foundation for democracy, presently every election is being used to declare freebies, whether or not those promises can be fulfilled. For example the AAP party had declared before the election in Punjab that Rs 1000 would be paid to every woman. But that remains an unfulfilled promise even after being in power for the last 18 months. Announcements of various freebies, including cash transfers to women, farmers, students and sometimes minorities and weaker sections, free electricity, free water, free travel for women etc., has now become a common phenomenon. Every party is busy declaring freebies in their efforts to woo the voters.

In such a situation, it is a matter of concern, whether this is a healthy trend for our democracy. Will our governments be able to fund these free schemes? Will the debt burden on state governments increase with freebies? What impact will these free schemes have on essential government expenditure on health, education and infrastructure? These questions are of paramount

importance. In many countries of the world, there are examples of government debt increasing due to freebies and many countries have been ruined due to the same. Examples from Venezuela and Sri Lanka show that even reasonably rich countries can face disaster due to freebies, not to speak of poorer countries like Pakistan.

Some time ago, the Reserve Bank of India and the Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG) had published data in their respective reports about increasing debt of the states due to freebies and have expressed concern over these freebie schemes and rising debt burden of the states.

We have to understand that India is a union of states, hence the debts of both the Central and State Government together are considered as the overall debt of the Government. While on the one hand the central government has succeeded in reducing its debt which had crossed 60 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP) during the Covid19 years, to 55.5 percent in 2022; the debt of various state governments has continuously been increasing in proportion to the state GDP. According to the assessment of CAG, the debt is higher in states where higher amounts

are spent on free schemes. Punjab and Andhra Pradesh top the list where a huge part of the total revenue is spent on free schemes. Apart from Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu is another state in the south which spends hugely on freebies.

When states spend such a large proportion of tax revenue on free schemes, not only would capital expenditure on infrastructure go down due to increasing debt of the state governments but social services like education and health as well as transport and other essential services will also be impacted. For the development of any state, it is imperative to increase investment in infrastructure. Hence it is necessary to speed up the development of the country by curbing free schemes offered by the states as well as the central government.

Due to increasing debt burden the economic rating of the country is getting impacted. If this continues, our country will not only have difficulty in getting new investments but our companies and government will also have to pay higher rates of interest on borrowings from foreign countries. Increasing debt burden not only creates fiscal imbalance, but is also affecting the ability of state

governments to run welfare schemes and is also blocking the path for the development of the country and industry in particular.

According to the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management (FRBM) Act, the target debt-GSDP (Gross State Domestic Product) ratio, in any state, should not exceed 20 percent. But as per CAG, in most of the states this ratio is much more than the target. CAG also reported that the debt of the states is continuously increasing compared to the target ratio. This is a matter of concern not only for these states but also for the entire country.

There is an urgent need to take appropriate steps to ensure that political parties do not put the country in jeopardy for their narrow political gains. Due to political reasons, the legislature and executive will not address this issue but other pillars of our democracy like the judiciary and media will have to come forward in opposing freebies.

Yours etc., Yash Pal Ralhan, Via email

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

# Move over, agony aunt

## Study finds ChatGPT gives better advice than professional columnists



There's no doubt ChatGPT has proven to be valuable as a source of quality technical information. But can it also provide social advice? We explored this question in our new research, published in the journal *Frontiers in Psychology*. Our findings suggest later versions of ChatGPT give better personal advice than professional columnists.

### A stunningly versatile conversationalist

In just two months since its public release in November of last year, ChatGPT amassed an estimated 100 million active monthly users. The chatbot runs on one of the largest language models ever created, with the more advanced paid version (GPT-4) estimated to have some 1.76 trillion parameters (meaning it is an extremely powerful AI model). It has ignited a revolution in the AI industry.

Trained on massive quantities of text (much of which was scraped from the internet), ChatGPT can provide advice on almost any topic. It can answer questions about law, medicine, history, geography, economics and much more (although, as many have found, it's always worth fact-checking the answers). It can write passable computer code. It can even tell you how to change the brake fluids in your car.

Users and AI experts alike have been stunned by its versatility and conversational style. So it's no surprise many people have turned (and continue to turn) to the chatbot for personal advice.

### Giving advice when things get personal

Providing advice of a personal nature requires a certain level of empa-

thy (or at least the impression of it). Research has shown a recipient who doesn't feel heard isn't as likely to accept advice given to them. They may even feel alienated or devalued. Put simply, advice without empathy is unlikely to be helpful.

Moreover, there's often no right answer when it comes to personal dilemmas. Instead, the advisor needs to display sound judgement. In these cases it may be more important to be compassionate than to be "right".

But ChatGPT wasn't explicitly trained to be empathetic, ethical or to have sound judgement. It was trained to predict the next most-likely word in a sentence. So how can it make people feel heard? An earlier version of ChatGPT (the GPT 3.5 Turbo model) performed poorly when giving social advice. The problem wasn't that it didn't understand what the user needed to do. In fact, it often displayed a better understanding of the situation than the user themselves.

The problem was it didn't adequately address the user's emotional needs. Like Lucy in the Peanuts comic, it was too eager to give advice and failed to adequately care for the user's emotions. As such, users rated it poorly.

The latest version of ChatGPT, using GPT-4, allows users to request multiple responses to the same question, after which they can indicate which one they prefer. This feedback teaches the model how to produce more socially appropriate responses - and has helped it appear more empathetic.

### Learning sensitivity

For the first time, our study investigated whether ChatGPT's responses

are perceived as better than human responses in a task where humans were required to be empathetic.

We randomly selected 50 social dilemma questions from ten well-known advice columns covering a range of topics including relationships, ethical dilemmas, management problems, end-of-life issues, and many everyday qualms we can all relate to.

Each of our 400 participants were presented a dilemma, along with the responses by both ChatGPT and a professional advice columnist. We didn't disclose where each response was from.

About three-quarters of the participants perceived ChatGPT's advice as being more balanced, complete, empathetic, helpful and better overall compared to the advice by the professional.

One of the dilemmas came from a young marine biologist researching dolphins in Southern California. She wrote about falling in love with a seemingly perfect man who had to move to the Rocky Mountains to pursue his career. Both were unhappy at the thought of losing each other, yet the woman wasn't interested in a long-distance relationship as it seemed "irrational to commit to someone when we have no future plans to live in the same area".

### Compare GPT-4's response

*It's an incredibly challenging situation you're in. The love you both share is genuine, but your career paths are drawing you apart. While long-distance isn't appealing to you, consider discussing a plan for the future where you could potentially meet halfway. [...] Maybe there's a coastal town near mountains or some arrangement could be made. If this is not possible, the tough decision to prioritise your careers over your relationship might have to be made. Whatever path you choose, it's important that it feels right for both of you.*

### ... with the official response:

*What the hell are you talking about? Didn't you surprise yourself when you fell in love? Your exact words: "I didn't think I was capable of it!" And now you're so hip, so slick, so wise in the ways of love you won't even consider your boyfriend's happiness? You refuse to try - repeat, try - a six-month long-distance relationship? Woman, pull yourself together and give it a whirl. The dolphins, I believe, will back me up.*

Although the participants couldn't determine which response was written by a computer, most said they would prefer their own social dilemmas be addressed by a human rather than a computer.

### What lies behind ChatGPT's success?

We noticed ChatGPT's responses were often longer than those provided by the columnists. Was this the reason they were preferred by participants? To test this, we redid the study but constrained ChatGPT's answers to about the same length as those of the advice columnists.

Once again, the results were the same. Participants still considered ChatGPT's advice to be more balanced, complete, empathetic, helpful, and better overall.

Yet, without knowing which response was produced by ChatGPT, they still said they would prefer for their own social dilemmas to be addressed by a human, rather than a computer.

Perhaps this bias in favour of humans is due to the fact that ChatGPT can't actually feel emotion, whereas humans can. So it could be that the participants consider machines inherently incapable of empathy.

We aren't suggesting ChatGPT should replace professional advisers or therapists; not least because the chatbot itself warns against this, but also because chatbots in the past have given potentially dangerous advice.

Nonetheless, our results suggest appropriately designed chatbots might one day be used to augment therapy, as long as a number of issues are addressed. In the meantime, advice columnists might want to take a page from AI's book to up their game. (*The Conversation*)

## 'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, NOVEMBER 26, 2023

### 'Birthday Forecast'

Moon is forming an angle of 150 degrees with Venus on your solar return chart indicates mixed developments. You are reaching an important turning point in terms of personal growth. You may be more emotional this year, and you should watch for unnecessary conflicts and making hasty decisions as a result. Otherwise, this is a year of great energy, motivation, and growth. You are more ambitious and desirous of action in the year ahead. This should be a busy, dynamic period in your life. You will have a stronger than usual desire to improve and grow. This is a fortunate phase of life that will help boost optimism and confidence, and you will attract positive circumstances into your life.

### 'This week for you'

**Aries:** (March 21 - April 20) The week begins on a positive note. The planetary configuration indicates that your efforts, confidence and courage bring success in monetary gains and your energy increases for work projects. Your job environment is lively. Your outlook on life has been a little more serious and responsible. In the past while, you might have reached out to others in an attempt to validate yourself, looking for ways to boost your confidence. Health is likely to prosper and medical procedures or programs, if necessary, are more likely to be successful.

**Taurus:** (April 21 - May 21) This week brings love, harmony and entertainment in professional and personal relations. Your physical body and mannerisms are a focus. There would be a newfound identity and a realistic understanding of your own limitations and your capabilities as well. In terms of career and projects, outward signs of progress would lay a foundation for future success and progress. Lifeless or outworn relationships may have been especially hard to bear for you. You could take up some form of physical program that completely changes the way you feel about yourself. The things that give you joy and positive feedback figure prominently and you feel renewed and regenerated.

**Gemini:** (May 22 - June 21) This phase brings success in professional and personal relations. You would feel particularly strong and personally powerful. There is no such thing as playing the victim, you're the victor and you feel it. You enjoy an increased ability to concentrate and focus on what really matters to you. It would be wise to make something of your hobbies—even if it doesn't bring an income, you might find that expressing yourself creatively really helps to define yourself and to understand yourself better. Health is likely to be balanced.

**Cancer:** (June 22 - July 22) This is favorable period for hobbies, sports and competitive exams. Your creative abilities are reflected in your outlook on life and love and romance are life experiences you strongly identify with. You display great skills in sports or physical activity that wins you appreciation and an opportunity to travel. Try to be just and fair when making decisions, as you do your best to see both sides of an issue. People notice and admire you for your pleasant and cheerful personality. You are bolder in expressing your love, yet not aggressive either. Artistic self-expression is important, possibly through music, fashion and writing. A strong desire for companionship dominates at this time.

**Leo:** (July 23 - August 23) The first phase of this week increases confidence and courage at work place. It's a great time to do something entirely new and pioneering. Discussions and ideas about finances and material security figure strongly. Although you like the good things of life and may spend quite a bit on clothes, furniture, and entertainment, your innate sense of security will not permit you to go overboard to the point of extravagance. You will have the ability to build up financial reserves and resources, for this planetary placement can bring a good deal of success in all monetary pursuits.

**Virgo:** (August 24 - September 22) An excellent week for money, career, and romance awaits you. Friends and loved ones take priority. You don't find yourself lacking in opportunities to socialize. You are likely to enjoy a strong feeling of happiness and solidarity in friendship, or with groups of like-minded individuals. You are more peace loving than usual and slightly detached on a personal level as you feel drawn towards religion and spiritualism. This is a good time for research and medita-

tion; but do avoid being dragged down by issues that have outgrown their worth and purpose. Examining the past in order to improve the future is certainly worthwhile, as long as you don't waste your energy.

**Libra:** (September 23 - October 23) The planetary configuration brings success, responsibility and maturity. You have much energy for new money-making projects, or for stepping up existing ones. Matters of the heart touch you deeply. You may willingly play a supportive role to the family and offer compassion and selfless love. This is a rather happy, goal-oriented time on the professional front. Relationships take on a fun outlook and activities with children increase. You possess extra charm in your professional interactions. A new affair is in the offing for the unattached. More opportunities to socialize and network could present themselves now.

**Scorpio:** (October 24 - November 22) This period is good for money, family, status and happiness. Money matters come into focus for you. You adopt a serious approach to business because you are in the spotlight. The desire for some form of recognition and financial success is apparent. Being part of a community or circle of friends and building your social network is important to you at this time. Your love life is more attractive and charming. Public relations work, marketing, promotional activities and other such endeavors are favored now. You may face some minor ailments on the health front.

**Sagittarius:** (November 23 - December 21) Diplomacy, correctness in manner, finesse, and charm will be a big plus in aiding financial gains, especially in areas requiring public contact. You feel drawn to intellectuals with whom you can communicate well and exchange ideas. You know how to relate to others and you do so in a natural and warm manner. Your vision is practical right now, and you want to see tangible results for your efforts. Recognition is likely to come your way whether you ask for it or not along with the responsibility that comes right along with it. Do what you feel is right, keeping in mind that you are in the limelight during this phase.

**Capricorn:** (December 22 - January 20) This is an excellent time to create a budget or financial plan, or to rid yourself of old habits that undermine your sense of personal power and self-mastery. Smoothing out your close personal relationships is what makes you happy. If single, you are more than willing to enter into a committed relationship. In general, you are adaptable when it comes to your affections. You pour more energy into self-promotion or business activities. Foreign places may particularly appeal now. You tend to be expansive and generous when it comes to love. Dealing with one situation at a time releases some tension and anxiety.

**Aquarius:** (January 21 - February 18) Your popularity increases as you cooperate and harmonize at the workplace and at home. You need the energies, companionship, and support of other people, and they may also seek out your support and companionship. It is important to include others rather than to take up projects on your own. An event may occur that expands your career or professional interests, and you derive more pleasure from these activities. More freedom is likely to be experienced in your career. Striking a balance between your productivity, a matured or an assertive type of individual may come up with challenging offers and new suggestions. You are more motivated to make money now.

**Pisces:** (February 19 - March 20) This is a generous, pleasantly emotional, and creative phase. Striking a balance between your attention to your 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. You need the energies, companionship, and support of other people, and they may also seek out your support and companionship. It's important to include others rather than to go solo for the time being. However, bending too much to the will of another is not advised either.

## Lights, Camera, Travel

Blending proprietary flights and hotels data based on millions of searches with an annual consumer behaviour study and expert commentary, today Skyscanner reveals 2024's hottest travel vibes and types, as well as the top 10 trending destinations and best-value destinations.

Data from the report reveals that film and entertainment has a significant influence on Indian travellers, with 94% of them inclined to taking a trip to a destination they've seen on the big or small screen. Moreover, close to half (43%) of the respondents rate the overall 'vibe' of a destination as important, when choosing where to go in 2024.

Among the four key travel vibes, set-jetting took the lead in India, as travellers sought to immerse themselves into the iconic location of their favourite shows, embodying Main Character Energy. Seizing the spotlight as the top destination that Indians are inspired to visit in 2024 is Manali, India, with travellers influenced by *Yeh Jawaani Hai Deewani*, followed by Ladakh, again in India, which inspires 47% of the travellers to visit the mesmerising city as seen in *3 Idiots*.

Claiming the next spot is London in the United Kingdom, with 43% of Indian travellers seeking to add a royal flair to their life as seen in *The Crown*, and the enchanting city of Paris in France, with 42% of Indian travellers wanting to experience the city like Emily Cooper, as seen in *Emily in Paris*.

In fact, following the launch of season 3's launch at the end of December 2022, Skyscanner saw a 23% increase in searches from India to Paris in January compared to the previous month.

Just like Main Character Energy, Skyscanner data shows how the value of experiences is fuelling a range of other travel trends and vibes for 2024, with price no longer solely ruling decision-making:

**Gig tripping** - One-third of Indian (37%) travellers would fly short haul to see their favourite artist live with a huge 79% considering attending a concert overseas instead in 2024 if it would help them save money.

**Budget bougie foodies** - Indians are inherent foodies and Skyscanner's research confirms the same, with 59% of Indian travellers having booked a destination purely based on a restaurant they want to visit. Osaka, renowned as 'the kitchen of Japan' with the fourth rank in the world for cities with the most Michelin stars, claims the top spot on Skyscanner's global list for foodies on a budget in 2024, and is also one of the top trending destinations amongst Indian travellers.

**Destination Zzzz** - Citing it as one of the top activities for their next holiday, Indian travellers really just want to visit the realm of sleep in 2024. Sleep health generally is a hot topic and 85% of Indian travellers are more mindful of their sleep health today compared to a few years ago. Moreover, 66% of Indian travellers have reported experiencing improved sleep quality

during their holidays.

What's more, the thirst for experiences that drive greater lifestyle value, The platform sees these traveller types emerging in 2024:

**Analogue adventurers** - In an age of always-on and constant hype, Gen Z are craving old-school analogue adventures that ditch the digital device in favour of how it used to be done. In fact, one in four (24%) Indian travellers aged 18-to-24-year-old now bring a Polaroid camera with them on holiday.

**Celebration vacationers** - Indian travellers increasingly want to celebrate big milestones in style. 81% of Indian travellers have taken a group trip to celebrate a birthday or anniversary. That being said, it can be tricky to arrange group travel - from deciding on where and when to go, to agreeing on costs. 52% of Indian travellers said that finalising a destination is their primary hurdle when planning group trips, followed by deciding on the travel dates (48%), and agreeing on expected costs of the trip (45%).

**Luxe-for-less seekers** - While price may always be a factor when it comes to travel planning, it seems Indian travellers are still willing to splurge on comforts. 37% of Indian travellers plan to upgrade their flight to business or first class in 2024, while 44% plan to purchase airport lounge access to get their trip off to a great start.

### India's top trending and best value destinations

The 2024 report reveals that 86% of Indian travellers plan to take the same number, if not more, trips abroad in 2024 compared to 2023.

The most buzzing destinations for Indian travellers in 2024 are Da Nang in Vietnam, loved for its pristine beaches, Almaty in Kazakhstan, a captivating destination in Central Asia celebrated for its stunning natural scenes, and Baku in Azerbaijan, known for its exquisite blend of historical and modern architecture.

On the other hand, Nice in France came out top overall, securing the highest spot for the Best Value Destinations category, followed by Geneva in Switzerland, Tokyo in Japan, and Manama in Bahrain.

Commenting on the findings, Mohit Joshi, Skyscanner Travel Trends and Destination Expert said, "The desire to explore and to make the best out of holidays with richer, more fulfilling experiences is evident among Indian travellers, as they (63%) are budgeting to spend more on travel in 2024. The strong demand for travel in India, coupled with the focus on cultural exploration next year, are reasons why a travel metasearch like Skyscanner can bring value to Indian travellers.

Try the 'Explore Everywhere' search feature for example, to discover destinations ranked by prices. With our tools, travellers will realise that there are many ways to bag a bargain, so that allowances can be made to spend on the comfort they are after." (*IANSLife*)

"You haven't lost anything when you know  
were it is. Death can hide but not divide."  
— Vance Havner

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXV No. 108 SHILLONG, MONDAY, NOVEMBER 27, 2023

26/11 and after

FIFTEEN years after the 26/11 terrorist attack on Mumbai, India paused on Sunday to look back in anger, but with a sense of palpable relief. Several emerging trends effectively neutralised the sway of terrorism in the subcontinent and at the global level. Acting in unison here was the presence of a relatively strong government that has, through sustained efforts, worked at multiple levels to effect a turnaround vis-à-vis the terror scenario in India. Overall there's a sigh of relief that things are changing for the better, and this is evident even in the testing terrains of Kashmir, where life is steadily getting back to normal.

The 2008 serial strikes by Pakistan-based terrorists at multiple landmarks in Mumbai had killed 175 persons and injured over 300 in running battles punctuated by 12 incidents of coordinated shootings for four days at a stretch. Terrorists held the whole of India on tenterhooks and a shocked nation was stunned into silence for a full week. The central government headed by Manmohan Singh sat back and blinked for the most part. India, with all its might, was simply unprepared to face up to a handful of terrorists — as had also been the case when China ran into the unguarded territories in 1962 and annexed large swathes of land. When Pakistani terrorists aided by the ISI military outfit stormed the western commercial metropolis in 2008, India had the option to take on Pakistan militarily and effect collateral damage. But, silence was India's response. By contrast, India retaliated in less than a fortnight after the Pulwama terrorist attack on a CRPF convoy. It flew military jets deep into Pakistan, close to their military headquarter in Rawalpindi, and rained bombs on terror camps in Balakot. This was the time for Pakistan to experience shame and shock. This also effectively called the bluff of Pakistan's loudmouth generals who had, in the past, threatened India with nuclear bomb attacks should India dare to cross the borders. The ISI and its generals are yet to recover from that nerve-chilling shock, leave alone the weak political establishment there.

Alongside, the global terror scenario has also changed for the better with hard-edged US actions targeting terror networks in Islamic nations. There has been a lull in terrorist camps both in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Syria neutralized the IS networks and the US exterminated their masterminds one by one. What's special about terror networks is they cannot sustain their energy for long, set against the huge military might of nations. Instant revolutions had unsettled and overthrown some dictators in the Islamic world. But, even in Sri Lanka, the LTTE lost its steam when a tough leadership took charge of the island nation.

# Jowai and the plight of River Myntdu

By H.H. Mohrmen

All the villages and towns in the Khasi Jaintia hills region of the state would have stories of how the village or town was started; unfortunately, most of these communities have lost their stories. The villages or towns that still have monoliths, stones, or natural phenomena connected with the place, would of course, continue to have those stories. In the West Jaintia Hills, Mustern, Muphlang, Moosakhia are cases in point where villages' names are linked with stones or monoliths, and the stories still linger. Similarly, there are villages in both the Pnar and the War Jaintia areas which are prefixed with Um or Am, would certainly have a connection to the river or lake nearby. Jowai has always had a strong connection with the river Myntdu, but unfortunately, the river which provides drinking water to the townsfolk and also feeds the two rice bowls of the town called Pynthor wah and Pynthor nein is under threat now.

**The Beginning of Jowai and the Meaning of the Name**

Unlike modern towns and cities where we have records of the date when the place was established, Jowai, like any other town or city, is traditionally a village that has existed since time immemorial. The history of the village cannot be established, but oral narratives will, to some extent, complement the missing gap. There is no way one can establish the date or the year when the place was first settled because of the lack of historical records, but fortunately, thanks to the tradition of keeping stories, we know how this place was first peopled. Jowai is perhaps an anglicized name of Jwai because the locals still pronounce it as Jwai. However, there is another interesting dimension to the name of the town as perceived by others or their immediate neighbours. The people of Nangbah village still call Jowai 'luwai,' which literally means 'something to open with/tool to open' or a key. Jowai, which is the name of the town, is known as 'Pna' to the War Jaintia people of Amlarem Subdivision. Similarly, the people who live on the plateau or the Pnar are also called 'Pna' by the people on the southern slope.

**The Four Guards of Jwai**

Jowai has four natural monuments called 'ki Soo duar soo luti' or the four doors, four pathways, or corridors. They are called the four doors and the four entry points because the monu-

ments are located in all four wind directions. They are 'u Mooralong, u Mookhai, u Moosiang, and u Mutong,' and these are also considered as deities because sacrifices are still being offered to them by the followers of Niamtre. They are believed to be the guardians of the village which protects the place from epidemics and attacks by enemies. It is believed

that whenever attackers from other territories approach Jowai, they would sound an alarm to make the residents of the area aware and become alert to the danger that approaches.

**The Legend of the Four Divine Progenitors**

Jowai may not have a history of how it was started, but like any other old human settlement in the area, there is a story of how people came to first live in the place. Perhaps it is this story which also gives the place a primeval status. According to oral narratives, the first settlers of the area were the four divine sisters, who are believed to be (chitein i bru, chitein i blai) half-human half-divine by the name of ka Bon, ka Tein, ka Wet and the Doh. From these four sisters derived the four clans and then the twelve sub-clans, and hence the general name given to this clan is "ki soo kphat ar wynai" or the four natal clans and the twelve sub-clans. Other clans which came to immediately settle in the areas were those who entered into matrimony with the four original clans. Subsequently, other clans came to settle in the area, and that is how the place was initially peopled.

**Jowaites seize lawmusiang**

According to oral narrative, lawmusiang, the premier market of Jaintia hills, was originally located at Nangbah village, and there is evidence to corroborate this narrative. There is a place in Nangbah village which still bears the name lawmusiang. The story has it that the elders of Nangbah

Pohskur or Christian settlement, and now there are new localities spread across the entire town.

**The Aspect of Nature**

One of the prominent natural phenomena in Jowai is river Myntdu, which is also called 'ka tawiar takan' in local parlance. If we loosely translate the Pnar words 'Tawiar takan,' it means that which surrounds and guards the area which is now a township. Myntdu, which flows around Jowai almost in a full circle, is considered a guardian angel of the town, and sacrifices are also still being offered to the deity. If any follower of Niamtre has to cross Myntdu to travel to other places, he/she would offer a silent prayer of protection even when traveling to other territories. The other natural phenomena in Jwai are the sacred forest like the Khloo lyngdoh, Khloo Ram-pyrthai, and Moolikso.

**The Plight of River Myntdu**

Although river Myntdu is considered to be sacred by the people of Jowai, yet the river is under threat now. It is on the verge of becoming like the Wah Umkhrah, and all thanks to the PWD department which has designed and aligned the road along the banks of the river. The engineers did not take into consideration the impact that construction of the road would have on the river. Roads can be constructed anywhere, but can we make another river? Once the road is constructed, then houses will start coming up along the road, and the river will die a natural death and turn into a drain.

**Isn't it a Case of Violation of Court Order?**

A few months back, the CEO of Jowai Municipal Board made public the High Court order which banned any construction within 50 meters from the banks of the river, which was also carried by The Shillong Times. Despite the High Court order, the construction of the road is still being carried out. Is the PWD, or for that matter, even the District Administration not aware of the court order? Can they feign ignorance of the important court order? And what about the Jaintia Hills Autonomous District Council, which is the custodian of rivers as per the Sixth Schedule? If the construction of this road is not stopped, then the MDA government and the local MLA of Jowai will be remembered as people responsible for authorizing the construction of the road which ultimately killed river Myntdu. They are the people who hit the last nail on the coffin of river Myntdu.



## Gaza conflict ends up separating wheat from chaff among religious leaders Mirror image of divide among Israelis, Jews, Muslim leaders & scholars

By James M Dorsey

Hamas' October 7 attack on Israel has not just divided Muslim political leaders. It's also solicited diverse responses from religious figures and institutions, reflecting deeper divisions about what Islam stands for in the 21st century.

At the core of the differences is the ability and willingness to empathise with innocent victims on both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian divide, even if the focus is on the carnage caused by Israel's assault on Gaza, the West's double standards, and the international community's impotence in imposing a long-term halt to the fighting.

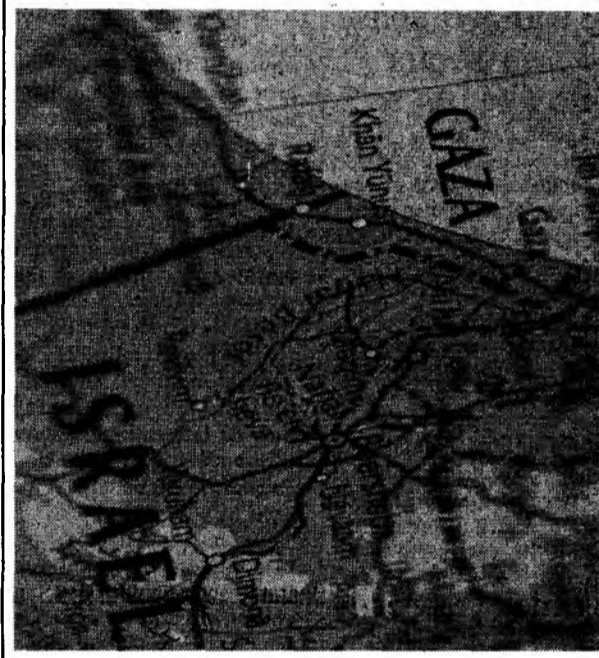
The divide is mirror imaged among Israelis and Jews, many of whom have little sympathy for the extreme suffering of innocent Palestinian civilians.

Ulama, the world's largest and most moderate, Indonesia-based Muslim civil society movement, and Al-Azhar, a Cairo-based, 1,053-year-old citadel of Islamic learning, spotlights the muddle.

In a statement calling for a "just" resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Nahdlatul Ulama urged that religious inspiration — including the values of universal love and compassion, human fraternity, and justice — be brought to the forefront of public awareness at all times, to help resolve conflict at every level of society, from the grassroots to the corridors of state power.

The statement called on Muslims "to collectively pray for the souls of all who have perished in the escalating (Israeli-Palestinian) violence."

It further advocated that "people and governments everywhere...refrain from weaponizing identity or appealing to religion to fuel hatred and hostility, including in relation to the conflict and



1967 Middle East war and Israeli policies designed to repress Palestinian resistance and thwart resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by establishing an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel.

Many also argue that the indiscriminate Israeli bombing and ground offensive in Gaza that has killed more than 14,000 Gazans, injured more than 30,000 others, and destroyed infrastructure needed for the basics of life overshadows the brutality of the Hamas attack that caused the death of 1,200, mostly civilian Israelis.

The divide among Muslim religious leaders and scholars is evident in the response of two poles of the spectrum of Muslims who define themselves as moderate.

The spectrum ranges from religious leaders and scholars who advocate reform of Islamic jurisprudence to remove supremacist and discriminatory clauses in Sharia and political pluralism to religious figures and institutions aligned with autocrats, some of whom favour greater social freedoms, but repress dissent and oppose religious law reform.

The diversity in 'moderate' interpretations of Islam reflects a struggle to define what moderate Islam means in the 21st century. It also echoes the divide between moderate and more militant expressions of the faith that run the gamut from Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to Iran to jihadists.

With the wanton killing of civilian Israelis in its October 7 attack, Hamas, an Islamist group inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood that cloaks its nationalism in a religious mantle, has blurred the lines between moderates and more militant expressions of Islam.

The muddling of the different perspectives highlights the need for reform of Muslim religious jurisprudence to ensure compliance with international humanitarian law and deprive militants of the ability to find legitimization in Sharia.

The contrast in responses to the Gaza war by Nahdlatul

violence between Israel and Palestine."

Following up on the statement, Nahdlatul Ulama has invited Muslim and non-Muslim religious authorities for a summit to discuss "religion's role in addressing Middle East violence and threats to a rules-based international order."

By contrast AlAzhar, in its statement "proudly salut(ed) the efforts of the resistance of the proud Palestinian people. It offered "sincere condolences" to Palestinians "who were martyred in order to defend their homeland and nation" with no mention of innocent Israelis killed.

Al Azhar's Global Fatwa Centre issued a religious opinion echoing Hamas' assertion that there are no innocent Israelis, a mirror image of Israeli statements that all Gazans are terrorists and supporters of Hamas.

"The term 'civilian' does not apply to the Zionist settlers on the occupied land. Rather, they are occupiers of the land who usurp rights, disregard the prophets' ways, and attack the holy sites in historic Jerusalem," the fatwa said.

It was unclear whether the fatwa was referring to settlers on Palestinian land conquered by Israel during the 1967 Middle East war or defined all Israeli Jews as settlers.

Endorsing the Hamas attack, various senior Al Azhar clerics described Jews as "the cursed descendants of apes and pigs."

At no point did a stream of other official Gaza-related Al Azhar statements and declarations by individual scholars denounce the killing of innocent civilians irrespective of religion, race, or creed.

The Gaza war has evoked human beings' most destructive instincts — survival, anger, fear, despair, and vengeance — on both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian divide.

The war constitutes a litmus test for Muslim and Jewish religious leaders on whether they can rise above the fray and adopt humanitarian and morally and ethically defensible positions. So far, they have largely failed the test. (IPA Service)

By arrangement with the Arabian Post

Letters to the Editor

### Railway connectivity — an imperative!

Editor,  
The recent news report, 'Meghalaya needs goods trains : Mayraiborn' (ST, November 25, 2023) once again highlights the necessity of railway connectivity to the eastern part of Meghalaya including its capital, Shillong. That railways will reduce the cost of transportation of commodities which will benefit the public is already a foregone conclusion. Furthermore, Indian Railways being one of the largest employers in the country will definitely provide employment opportunities to unemployed youth of the state. Besides providing direct employment benefits, the arrival of cargo trains will be a boon for local porters, transport operators and other businesses that will cater to the need of the railways thereby improving the economy of the state and augmenting the per capita income.  
The opposition of certain

organisations to the extension of goods railway to other parts of this state is nothing but vested interest as is evident from the recent arrest of a member of a prominent organisation for carrying out alleged extortion from overloaded trucks. However with the arrival of railways into the state there'll be hardly any scope for 'extortion' from goods vehicles as most imports will be transported by rail further reducing their cost benefiting the state's inhabitants.  
Yours etc.,  
Stanley LK Diengdoh  
Umsning

### Why Daphi shouts for our attention

Editor,  
Every moment can teach us a new lesson. Every stranger we cross paths with can make us more humane. A few days ago, I met a woman going from house to house selling mustard greens, locally known as "laipatta", "Didi laipatta, Didi laipatta," were her humble plea. This is

the only way to draw the attention of people inside their homes. The lady, a mother of four, probably not older than thirty-five, is from a distant village in Mawsynram. What makes her take the trouble to travel here all the way certainly calls for a case study. After my frequent meeting with the lady on by-roads, one day I inquired about her. She told me that she comes to town these days to sell mustard greens. With a distressed expression on her face, she introduced herself as Daphi. I learnt the lady has a poignant story. Her husband, the main breadwinner in the family, has suddenly succumbed to a terminal illness, rendering him bed-ridden and unable to work for the past eight months. Hearing about her plight, I become more concerned.

She informed me that as soon as she gets off the bus, she usually goes from door to door to sell her leafy greens until she sells them all. Looking at her cotton bag (pla) I guessed she can hardly bring 35 bunches of those mustard greens in a day. Her weary and tired look, possibly from poor

nutrition made me ask a few more questions. Without a hitch, she answered them all. I noticed she felt good sharing her agonies with a good listener even though a stranger.

I was very excited when she told me that all these succulent bunches were from her own garden. She informed me she gets up around 4 a.m. to pluck the foliage alone because she does not want to disturb the sleep of her children.

Then she waits for a bus to the town (Shillong). The one-way bus fare from Mawsynram to Shillong town is Rs 100. She spends additional Rs 100 to get back home that eats significantly into her meager earnings.

During the conversation she pointedly hinted that people reduce a verdant bunch of greens to even Rs 10. She says "If I ask Rs 30 per bunch, I hardly find generous buyers and I would be forced to take back home the unsold vegetables." I felt a surge of empathy and concluded that at the maximum she would only get between Rs 450 to Rs 550 for the mustard leaves she brings

and tries to sell to the tight-fisted buyers of the town.

Now just analyze the sweat and labour she puts in, starting from seed germination until these green leaves are harvested. Manuring, day-to-day care, including fending off grazing animals and harmful worms, a cultivator like Daphi invariably lives through pangs of uncertainty. Any moment nature's fury can destroy the crops.

Now look at the situation! Even after harvesting their crops farmers have to carry a load of worries about whether they will find good customers who will buy their vegetable without bargaining for them. Just imagine her labour of going around every corner of the town's localities. May I ask a modern economist, if each bunch of mustard leaves is not worth more than Rs 100? Sadly, there is no Karl Marx now to evaluate the true worth of the sweat of the oppressed cultivator! It's really ironic, pseudo-Marxists these days drive SUVs and hop into posh shopping malls even to take fruit juice and one kg of French beans.

Two days ago when I presented the lady with some

winter clothes and 4 caps for her kids, she murmured — "Ani mama, ani mama". With eyes full of tears, she did not want to accept my gifts at first. However, I very humbly persuaded her to accept them. Daphi emotionally expressed her thanks, extending her hand for handshakes. Her expression of gratitude can't be expressed in words here.

Please note there are hundreds of Daphis coming from Umsning, Sohiong, Laitkor, Mawngap, who regularly visit our homes and shout for our attention, maybe for compassion too. How good would it be if we bought their vegetables/fruits "without a bargain." If possible, we could even offer them a cup of tea, snacks, and a few words of comfort. I am sure blessings will come from them, and also flow down from heaven!

Yours etc.,  
Salil Gewali,  
Shillong

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"The only reason for time is so that everything doesn't happen at once."

— Albert Einstein

## The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXV No. 109 SHILLONG, TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 28, 2023

### Meghalaya's delayed road projects

THE Shillong-Dawki highway is an important connecting link between the state capital and a border trading outpost. It should have received the highest priority. The project which was inaugurated by Vice President Venkaiah Naidu in October 2021 on National Highway-40 is allocated a sum of Rs 1,600 crore. At the time, Naidu had stated that all infrastructure projects in the North East should be fast-tracked so that the region can become the growth engine of the country. Naidu also pointed at judicious use of development funds earmarked for the North East. The Vice President perhaps does not know the human factor in the region where corruption is the by-word. Granted that the national highway project is being constructed by the National Highways and Infrastructure Development Corporation (NHIDCL) a central government undertaking but while working in each of the states of the North East they have to contend with local conditions such as extortion by sundry "pressure groups" that exist to ostensibly put pressure on the government to deliver public goods but have become the leeches that society can do without.

It becomes well nigh impossible to complete a project when the company executing the project is hampered by obstacles at every juncture. Land acquisition that has been completed faces new hurdles from the local institutions who all wish to make capital out of the project. No one is really interested in the completion of the project but on how much they can milk out of it. At this rate there would be few takers for tendering for such projects. There are pressures on so many counts. Each village wants the company to get its construction materials from them irrespective of the quality of the materials; they want the company to employ local people despite the low productivity and so on. The demands are endless. In such a situation can we expect quality roads and infrastructure?

The Ministry of Road Transport and Highways has to take a call on this and get the State Government to provide security through use of Central Industrial Security Forces (CISF) considering the State Police are incapable of tackling these local forces. Unless some urgent measures are taken to enable the speedy construction of all national highway projects Meghalaya will continue to languish in a state of limbo. Every project must have a timeline within which it has to be completed. Failing that it would be futile to expect trade and commerce to progress. The central government which has become the milking cow should not monitor all such projects meticulously. The Centre is spending public money and it must hold the states accountable for facilitating completion of such projects within a definite timeline.

## Uncork Prosperity

# Establish a Wine & Mead SEZ in Meghalaya

By KN Kumar

SEZs (Special Economic Zones) are enclaves within a state that are governed by a set of liberal laws, to encourage private investment and generate employment. They are almost always export-orientated and less-taxed entities and are better administered because the administrative machinery is sensitized toward promoting businesses. Through this article, I propose that a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) be established in Meghalaya exclusively for the Wine and Mead Industry. I believe that such a step when taken will quickly bring in wealth because the SEZs provide minimal operational barriers, common facilities, tax exemptions, and create a favourable private investment climate in the state.

A bit of background is necessary here. The Government of India started promoting the SEZs in 2000 with the intent to promote exports. So far, 425 SEZs have been formally approved and 272 have become operational. 5,620 units have come up in the SEZs to date and total exports from SEZs stood at Rs.12.9 lakh crores in 2023. Most SEZs are located close to international airports and sea ports for obvious logistical advantages as well as the easier availability of skilled professionals. While just six states, viz., Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Maharashtra, and Gujarat, have nearly three-fourths (74%) of the operational SEZs, states like Bihar and most North-eastern States (four notified but, none operational) do not have a single operational SEZ. There is a bit of geographical skew here that needs to be remedied. The I.T. Sector reportedly is a dominant beneficiary of the SEZ policy (163 SEZs are IT/ITES). The initial anxiety to bolster exports and foreign exchange having been addressed, the Government of India is now seeking to overhaul the Special Economic Zones (SEZ) Act, 2005 to give more freedom to SEZ units to sell in the domestic markets. The Bill, being called the 'Development of Enterprise and Service Hubs Bill' (DESH) will possibly be a reform. The DESH Bill will likely enlist the State governments as key partners so the single-window-based clearances, land acquisition, regulatory regimes, and infrastructure are expedited.

With this background, let me open my premise that the Fruit Wines (non-grape wines) and Mead (wine made out of honey) industry can be a significant driving force for economic growth and tourism in our state. Let me list my reasons for thinking that a Wine SEZ will make a big difference to our farmers, entrepreneurs, government, and several stakeholders:

1. Meghalaya, with its five agro-climatic zones that range from sub-tropical to alpine, is endowed with extensive fruit biodiversity. Through the year we can expect a reasonable supply of a diverse range of fruits amenable to making wines unique to Meghalaya. Like-wise, the floral diversity (important for nurturing honeybee populations) is also high. A study found that 107 floral species of Meghalaya are suitable for the honeybees to forage nectar. This is a natural advantage that cannot be easily challenged because not too many states can boast of such a floral or fruit tree diversity. The Department of Agriculture & Farmers' Welfare can be immediately pressed into area expansion of various local fruits to ensure an adequate supply of these important flowering plants and fruits. We have the needed resources for that under the MIDH (Mission for Integrated Development of Horticulture). Undeniably, the predominant driver of Meghalaya's economy is still agriculture and allied sectors, and farmers constitute 50% of the population of the state. Most of the native and unique fruits of Meghalaya are currently unutilized or under-utilized, or simply, wasted for want of demand. Sohiong, Sophie, and Sophoh Khasi are all highly suitable for winemaking but have hardly any demand for table purposes. So, the supply side can be taken care of.

2. Fruit wine-making will create a huge demand for local fruits and can potentially minimize wastage. Food processing unlocks wealth and minimizes losses. Diversifying and optimizing these natural resources of the state into winemaking will potentially double or triple the farmer incomes of the state. The story can go beyond Wines because the culture of processing several other commodities - Honey, Jack-

fruit, Mushroom, Turmeric, Ginger, and Spice crops like Black Pepper, Long Pepper, large Cardamom, etc will be triggered through a food processing SEZ. Data from wine regions globally indicate a significant increase in tourism following the establishment of vineyards and wineries. Napa Valley is synonymous with world-class wines, contributing significantly to the Californian and U.S. economies. Champagne region and Bordeaux (France), Tuscany (Italy), Mendoza (Argentina), and closer home, Nashik's Wine tourist circuits are examples. Meghalaya too can anticipate a notable boost in tourism, potentially translating into crores of rupees in revenues and creating a substantive economic multiplier. A flourishing wine industry permeates every aspect of local life. Trade data also indicate that regions with dedicated economic geographies in the wine industry experience substantial growth in export revenues. The demand side too is not a constraint.

3. It is also time to rewrite the narrative relating to wines. The overwhelming idea that wine is necessarily an alcoholic beverage made only out of grapes needs to be de-bunked. Since the Government of Meghalaya has liberalized the excise policy to enable homemade wine production and marketing, the energies of our young entrepreneurs have found a new outlet. Globally, the grape vineyard surface area has come down from 7.7 million hectares in 2001 to 7.28 m.ha in 2022. Likewise, the global grape Wine production has come down from 294 million hectolitres (2018) to 258 mhl (2022). The global consumption of grape wines has come down by 2 mhl between 2021 and 2022. In just two years Grape wine consumption declined by 7% in the USA and by 14% in China. To put it bluntly, the future for grape wine is bleak and the sector needs a more indigenous, nutritious, diverse, and decentralized economic alternative, through unique fruit wines. Act East policy and the Indo-Pacific economic initiatives are opening the south-east and far-east, for India, and exports through economic corridors will be the order in the next decade.

Meanwhile, the false wine narrative advanced for centuries by the Europeans (Grape is native to Europe) needs to be rewritten by countries like India and a state like Meghalaya. As I write this, there are at least a dozen licenses taken by our entrepreneurs for winemaking and many of their fruit wines are slowly catching the market interest. Taj Vivanta serves our fruit wines, Marriot is enquiring, and we are showcasing our fruit wines at the global VIN-EXPO, SIAL, New Delhi this December, under the brand 'Meghalaya's Fruit Wines'.

4. Meghalaya's population density is 132 against the national average of 434 (2011 census). So, the landman ratio is favourable and we have large tracts of wastelands that can be usefully converted into SEZs without disrupting normal economic or social activities. The District Councils do have vast parcels of land that could be allocated to the SEZs. The District Councils also will benefit, because they can earn lease rentals regularly. It is unequivocally established that a direct correlation exists between SEZs and job creation. An exclusive Wine & Mead SEZ (or a food processing SEZ, as the case may be) could create hundreds of jobs across the state through the supply chain - collection, cultivation, aggregation, primary processing, packaging, branding, finished product marketing, logistics, and miscellaneous other services. The developmental spillovers due to SEZs are widely reported across the world.

By establishing a Wine & Mead SEZ, Meghalaya could tap into the lucrative international market and generate hundreds of jobs. Meghalaya's journey toward economic prosperity through this initiative is an opportunity to craft a distinctive narrative, one that covers cultural preservation, sustainable practices, and economic growth. It's time to raise a glass to Meghalaya's unique and promising future. Fruit wines can create a future for our people - it is not a question of 'if', it is a question of 'how soon?' By when can we emerge as the national fruit wine capital and who will uncork that future?

(The writer is Chairman, Meghalaya Farmers' (Empowerment) Commission)

## Climate and the costs of war

By Ishan Chauhan

Conventional calculations of the cost of war seldom include a major casualty: the environment. The toll is huge and runs on. This can be seen now with the world in the midst of war and truce. The Russia-Ukraine conflict started last February and shows no sign of letting up. The Israel-Hamas war saw the first break in seven weeks of fighting after a ceasefire came into effect on November 24. The two conflicts have seen a rapidly rising death toll, many injured and huge numbers of missiles, weapons and dollars in billions pouring in to stoke the fires. The harm this kind of conflict causes the environment is unimaginable and difficult to compute.

In addition, it comes at a time of an escalation in the climate crisis. As wildfires raged in Izmir, Turkey and July was on track to being the hottest recorded month, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres warned that the era of global warming had ended and that of "global boiling" had begun. A few months later in October the latest standoff in Gaza between Israel and Hamas started. The cost of such wars is multifarious. In the conventional sense it has been thousands of lives lost and billions of dollars spent. But what about the cost of such wars on the climate? The use of rockets and missiles, tanks or even the overall conducting of a war entails a massive consumption of resources and highly detrimental impact.

Impacts are of two kinds - direct and indirect. For the first, there is a loss of vegetation, emissions from vehicular usage or the use of gasoline-powered energy sources in war camps. The second does not lend itself to such exemplification. It is much more difficult to understand and quantify the latter, however it is the one that needs to be watched as it continues well past the actual conflict. For instance, B2B Bombers when deployed, apart from emitting greenhouse gases (GHG) also leave behind persisting cirrus clouds contributing significantly to aircraft emissions forming part of climate emissions' warnings.

As large-scale users of fuels and other energies, militaries account for 5.5% of GHG emissions. That number may not immediately strike anyone as staggering - but for context-had the US Department of Defense been a country- it would be the 55th largest emitter of GHGs. In other words, a singular department of one country, through its activities would be ahead of 140-odd countries of the world. A recent study from Brown University's "Cost of War" project says it may not be surprising then that the world's largest industrial-military complex is also the biggest polluter on Earth. In its "quest for security" America spends more on the military than any other country and much more than the military spending of its major rivals, Russia and China, says the study. With an armed force of more than two million people, 11 nuclear aircraft carriers and the most advanced military aircraft the US is capable of projecting power anywhere in the world. And it is. The US has been continuously at war since late 2001, with the US military and State Department currently engaged in more than 80 countries in counter-terror operations. All this capacity and use of military force requires great energy most of which is sourced from fossil fuel. The Department of Defense (DOD) is the world's largest institutional user of petroleum "and correspondingly, the single largest producer of greenhouse gases (GHG) in the world," finds the study. These GHG emissions are not just a result of war, but of ongoing non-war operations and maintenance of military operations.

Since the present period of American conflicts began with the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the U.S. military is estimated to have emitted a staggering 1.2 billion tons of carbon into the atmosphere. In comparison the entire annual carbon emissions of the United Kingdom are around 360 million tons. The massive additional burden is not justifiable as the biggest components of the U.S. military's carbon footprint have been in unnecessary wars and occupations that were not in any way connected with national security interests. In Afghanistan, in addition to emitting millions of tons of carbon dioxide during the conflict, the U.S. military footprint contributed more directly to the immediate destruction of the Afghan environment.

The environmental havoc wreaked by the war in Iraq has been worse. It led to a spike in carbon dioxide emissions through military activity and poisoning of the environment by toxic munitions. The environment has become so toxic in some places that it has led to elevated rates of cancer and crippling birth defects. A British doctor who co-authored two studies on the environmental impact of U.S. military operations in Fallujah said the city's population suffers "the highest rate of genetic damage in any population ever studied." Much of this is blamed on the use of depleted uranium munitions by U.S. forces. Despite promising to stop, a study by the independent monitoring group Airwars and Foreign Policy Magazine found that the military continued to use toxic munitions during the bombing campaign in Syria.

Sustained engagement as in the case of the current conflicts don't help attempts to curb emissions. The Kyoto Protocol of 1997 and the Paris Agreement of 2015 had left out military emissions saying any limitation could impinge on national security. Thus, defence forces are not bound by international climate agreements to report or cut their carbon emissions from military vehicles, flying jets and sailing ships as they were left out of the 1997 Kyoto Protocol on reducing greenhouse gases - and exempted again from the 2015 Paris accords. Both on the grounds that data about energy use by armies could undermine national security.

Now, environmental groups and academics from the British universities of Lancaster, Oxford and Queen Mary are pushing for more transparent military emissions reporting.

There has been some work undertaken to examine this question. The UK Military is looking at emissions reductions by 2050 - setting the foundations, minimising and fitting for the future. In India, while it is the fifth largest spender on the military and ranked between 20 to 25 on the list of GHG, climate change does not feature as a prominent concern. In the Joint Doctrine of the Indian Armed Forces 2017, it is acknowledged only from the security perspective, as a 'non-traditional' challenge.

How much a different approach can help with the military is left to be seen. A report titled 'Climate Collateral', published by the Amsterdam-based Transnational Institute says there is little scope for militaries to be "green" for the following reasons - lack of fuel alternatives, new weapon systems are no less polluting, most GHG reduction strategies are vague and based on false assumptions. But it is essential that ways are explored to cut the carbon footprints of militaries and not add their emissions to the pain of an ailing climate. Otherwise, the ill-effects of war will hinder efforts to save future generations from inheriting an uninhabitable planet.

(The writer is an independent researcher and author) (Syndicate: The Billion Press) (email: editor@thebillionpress.org)

## Letters to the Editor

### Let us twerk without fear of being lynched

Editor,

The write up by Angela Rangad titled Twerking & The lynch bros of Meghalaya (ST November 25, 2023) is an interesting read. The article lays a background of the sort of aggression one should stand against. She argues that a young lady has been shamed by opinions, point of views and moral policing by an "elected representative (and some youtubers)." Examining the events closely, one seconds that the young lady's participation in "twerking" on stage is not act that one is to be ashamed of. It is twerking; it is an expression. There ought to be waves of revolutionary movements, literary, feminist, gender, or any movement in Meghalaya, that would stand against an aggression of this sort. These sorts of movements are important for several reasons.

Aggression of this sort, leaves an individual or a group of people uncomfortable, insulted, and undervalued. This happens at homes, in communities, workplaces, and as pointed out by Rangad, on a public platform. People

who engaged themselves in victimising individuals and groups in this manner are those who see themselves as intellectually superior, decent, and moral human beings. It is not my intention to say that one's opinion of self as intellectually superior, decent, and moral is wrong, but then, should this opinion of self, insult and undervalue the other?

In the case being discussed, calling for the young lady to be arrested under section 294 of IPC is uncalled for. This uninformed aggression made, strips the individual concerned of her dignity, especially because it is being made by a representative who has chosen to be the Voice Of The People. I am sure this has caused a rippling effect, where there would be other minor aggressions from other members of society; for her so called "obscene" behaviour, which to a person such as I, is nothing but a response to a composition that triggers emotions and there is no other outlet but to express it. This is therapeutic.

I am sure, as an elected member sitting in the Opposition, the MLA would have been informed that Shaffer Chimere Smith was on the list of performers for the Cherry Blossom festival. A simple Google Search on the performer would tell

you that his productions are sexualised and sexist. Studies have shown that sexual or sexualised content found in music of different genres correlate with sexual cognition and behaviour. Thus, this was bound to happen and sad enough, the participation and performance has been labelled as obscene. Perhaps we have shut our doors for too long, and have been left unexposed to revolutionary thinking that is found in the Arts. We have been taught to suppress our feelings and our sexuality. If aggression such as this is not addressed, then we are reinforcing the suppression.

Rangad has rightly pointed out, that the young lady does not represent the Khasi tribe. However, if in fact the young lady represented the Khasi tribe, then going by the same equation, the elected representative represents the "male chauvinistic bro brigade" at three levels, viz. his constituency; the elected male representatives of Meghalaya, and the Khasi men in general. Many would find this conclusion as outrageous, but should we not use the same yardstick for all? If this is the case then, I would not want such narrow mindedness to be my voice, let alone the leaders of Meghalaya. Thus, revolutionary thinking is required even among our representatives.

Thus, I resonate with the thoughts of Rangad, when she defines democracy as a "beautiful choir of different voices." Voices that speak out not only in favour of or against something, but voices that express freely, the emotions, the thoughts that have been suppressed for too long. The culture of silence can be broken, if a safe space is created for creative and revolutionary thinking. Intellectual movements against any form of aggression can be viewed as form and an indication of progress. Thus, let us twerk away without the fear of being lynched.

Yours etc.,  
Fabian Marbaniang,  
Martin Luther Christian  
University (MLCU)  
Shillong

### Marriot Courtyard Hotel's divergence from its 5-Star Standards

Editor,

I am writing to draw your attention to a matter of utmost concern regarding the newly opened Marriot Courtyard Hotel in Shillong. While the establishment

proudly carries the prestigious 5-star label and is indeed the largest in the region, recent developments have raised serious questions about its adherence to the standards expected of such a reputable brand. Specifically, my concern revolves around the transformation of the poolside bar, "Tavern," during weekends into what can only be described as a discotheque. It has come to my attention that a third party is consistently taking over the operations during these times, resulting in an atmosphere more akin to a nightclub than a family-friendly 5-star hotel.

The repercussions of this transformation are significant. Families, who would otherwise consider the Marriot Courtyard Hotel as an ideal destination, are finding it increasingly challenging to enjoy their leisure time in an environment that caters more to a youthful and potentially disruptive crowd. The lack of management control over the third party involved multiplies the situation, leading to a shift from an upscale family-friendly atmosphere to one that resembles a pickup joint. This departure from the essence of a 5-star hotel is disheartening for patrons who expect a certain level of refinement and exclusivity when choosing an establishment of such

high brand value. The influx of a younger demographic engaging in inappropriate activities further compounds the issue, creating an environment that is not only uncomfortable but also contrary to the standards upheld by the Marriot brand.

I urge the management of the Marriot Courtyard Hotel to reevaluate its approach to weekend events. It is essential that the Hotel takes decisive steps to regain control over the atmosphere during these times, ensuring that the establishment remains a haven for families and discerning guests rather than succumbing to a trend that compromises its reputation. In conclusion, I believe it is crucial for the Marriot Courtyard Hotel to uphold the high standards associated with its name and brand. By doing so, it will not only preserve its image as a premier 5-star establishment but also continue to be a destination of choice for a diverse range of patrons.

Yours etc.,  
Hubert M Kharmawphlang  
Shillong -2

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*"We cannot despair of humanity, since we ourselves are human beings."*

— Albert Einstein

**The Shillong Times**

Vol No: LXV No. 110 SHILLONG, WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 29, 2023

**Churning in Pakistan**

PAKISTAN is into a deep churning, again, in the run-up to the February-2024 general elections. The eligibility of two top leaders – former prime minister Imran Khan and Nawaz Sharif – to contest the polls is in serious doubt as they have been barred from such forays for five years or more by courts in corruption cases. Imran Khan has been put in judicial remand again on Tuesday in a case in which he "misrepresented" the gifts he got during foreign visits as PM. Sharif is caught in corruption cases exposed via the Panama Papers leak. Both are facing several other cases too. It is a moot point whether, ever, any Indian politician would be dragged to court, arrested or jailed in corruption cases, other than exceptions like Lalu Prasad Yadav and Bangaru Laxman, who apparently did not have godfathers to protect them in the higher seats of authority or were left to their fate for various reasons.

In India, politicians as a rule escape from the arms of law, and even those in the Opposition are having the right connections to deflect the course of justice. They have the wherewithal to undercut the investigation process itself. Pakistan is a hugely corrupt nation, with its leaders and military generals siphoning off hefty sums abroad for their personal investment and business. Those like Nawaz Sharif are rich and feudal landlords by themselves. Former prime minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was exterminated by hanging based on court conviction. His daughter Benazir Bhutto fell like a fly to the raining bullets of unidentified killers when she landed in the country after long years of exile in the UAE. She arrived there to fight the polls. Nawaz Sharif served repeated terms of exile following court verdicts. Military dictator Zia-ul-Haq died in a helicopter crash, when a bomb was placed on the aircraft in the form of a "basket of ripe mangoes", as a "gift" from a military general's wife.

India too has its tragic moments like the killings of Indira Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi, and more importantly the Father of the Nation, Mahatma Gandhi. The undercurrents of the murders of such Indian leaders were never fully explained. Be that as it may, fact is also that India is a "safe haven" for the corrupt politicians and bureaucrats. The judicial system has enough loopholes that help the high and mighty escape the arms of law. In effect, the strength of our law enforcement is limited, per se, to targeting the weak, the disadvantaged and downtrodden sections of the society. The rest allegedly is drama. Cases are dragged, as a norm, for decades before the final order is given. It's a shame on the nation!

**Letters to the Editor**

**Reckless speeding of VIP's escort vehicles**

Editor,  
I read with concern the report 'CM's escort vehicle meets with accident' (ST, November 26, 2023). It was rather unfortunate that the pilot vehicle collided with a pickup truck at Upper Shillong. Luckily, though, according to the report, the entourage escaped unharmed. But, many a time, I have observed that escort vehicles of VIPs drive with high speed through traffic putting at risk the lives of pedestrians and other motorists on the streets. Several times, it was noticed that these escort cars overtake other vehicles with scant regard for traffic coming from the opposite direction thereby increasing the risk of accidents for its occupants. It is therefore, prudent, that escorting a VIP vehicle should not be at the risk of accidents for other road users.

Yours etc.,  
Stanley LK Diengdoh  
Umsing

**Grouse over the Catholics procession!**

Editor,  
On November 12, the Roman Catholic Mission of Laitumkhrah Cathedral took out their annual Eucharistic Procession which passed through the busy thoroughfares of Laitumkhrah in which a massive number of devotees had participated and these unique scenes were highlighted live in manifold social media. This annual event is something to write home about! However, in the aftermath of these religious rituals we have read in the print media that scurrilous objections were raised over these celebrations for affecting road communication and the city being brought to virtual standstill since roads were choc-a-bloc with processionists.

The point to note is that such religious cortege by the Catholic faithful in Laitumkhrah has become a legacy of sorts since the arrival of the Salvationist missionar-

ies from Germany over a century ago. Nonetheless, wonders never cease that in course of these prolonged years of the solemnity in question we have not heard such unfriendly reactions as this one. Incidentally, in my interactions with many knowledgeable Hindu friends I have asked them why such unaffable adrenaline levels have been on the hike since the past few years? These friends have aptly asserted, to my utter bewilderment, that these aggressive barbs against the other religions, other than Hinduism, have spiralled since 2014 when the saffron party had grabbed power from the Congress thereby paving the trajectories for an unprecedented upswing of Hindutva oriented sentiments amongst the hitherto significant latent sections. Additionally, they have impressed upon me that if the saffron led party is re-installed in upcoming parliamentary elections next year, the reactions will turn more vitriolic!

This self-confession from the horse's mouth and that too from enlightened

Hindu friends has left me nonplussed!

Yours etc.,  
Jerome K Diengdoh,  
Shillong-2

**Give Farmers their dues**

Editor,  
Through your daily I wish to thank Salil Gwali for his touching letter captioned, "Why Daphi shouts for our attention," (ST November 27, 2023). I am one of the regular readers of Gwali's letters, but this present piece deeply moved me. Therefore I can't help but write a few lines and share my sympathies for such poor farmers. What Gwali has written is a real story and similar kinds of hardships are shared by the many villagers who come to the town to sell their agricultural produce on a daily basis. Outside the Tura Super Market, we always see many Daphis sitting there to sell their green vegetables and fruits. What really disappoints me is when rich peo-

ple bargain with these poor vendors. Most of the vendors come walking all the way from distant villages. After reaching Tura Bazar, they continuously shout to solicit customers. Nobody cares to know what has forced these impoverished farmers to come to town. Why can't those town people visualize farmers as their mothers, fathers and brothers?

I also wish to point out here that most people in the town think that if they go to market after dark, they will get vegetables and fruits at cheaper rates. Their motive behind this is that before the farmers leave for their homes, they reduce the price of their crops by half. Is this not the degraded attitude of the rich? Will they do the same thing when they visit the branded shops? I absolutely agree with Gwali who writes in his letter that the true worth of one bunch of mustard greens should be Rs 100. But society has completely undervalued the labour put in by the farmers.

Why can't the Govern-

ment make a systematic arrangement to purchase the crops of farmers directly from their respective villages? We have enough of empty rhetoric from leaders during election time. They show empathy for farmers at that time. During elections they take photos with farmers and post them on their Facebook and Twitter. I think they are only making fools of us. When they come to power with our votes, they will not come back to us. Then farmers will have to take prior appointment and they have to wait for many hours to meet them in the secretariat. These are all my personal observations and they are true. Lastly, I request the leaders to display genuine empathy for the underprivileged communities or stop claiming yourselves as the leaders for farmers.

Yours etc.,  
Bithon Sangma,  
Via email

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

**Religion and indigenous identity**

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

Recently, the former Lok Sabha Speaker, Kariya Munda asserted that "those tribals who convert to Islam or Christianity must not get any benefits of reservation meant for the tribals." What was interesting about this speech was the fact that he conveniently left out Hinduism from the exclusionary criteria, thus giving the impression that tribal religions are nothing but a sub-set of Hinduism. This is quite extraordinary considering that, like Islam and Christianity, the roots of Hinduism also lay outside the subcontinent. In fact, it is a recent religion compared to the tribal religions that are still being practiced by the different indigenous tribal groups. As such, if tribals who converted to Islam and Christianity should lose their benefits, so should those who identify themselves as Hindus. The foreign origin of Hinduism was always a well-known fact. This conclusion has, in fact, become more emphatic in recent years as our understanding of the genetic history of the sub-continent has become clearer.

The 2019 paper, 'The story of the lost twins: decoding the genetic identities of the Kurcha and Kurcha populations from the Indian subcontinent' by Ranjit Das and colleagues states that the extant Indian gene pool is composed of largely four ancestral genetic components, namely Ancestral North Indian (ANI), Ancestral South Indian (ASI), Ancestral Tibeto-Burman (ATB), and Ancestral Austro-Asiatic (AAA). The Khasi-Jaintia belongs to the last group, i.e., Ancestral Austro-Asiatic (AAA). Between 4700 and 3000 B.C.E., according to Priya Moorjani (as reported in the 2018 article 'South Asians are descended from a mix of farmers, herders, and hunter-gatherers, ancient DNA reveals' by Lizzie Wade), geneticist at the University of California, Berkeley, a South Asia Hunter Gatherer lineage with close proximity to the present-day Andamanese (Ancient Ancestral South Indians or AASI) admixed with Iranian agriculturists, giving rise to what is known as the 'Indus Periphery'. It is this group that is believed to be the founder of the Indus Valley civilization. Then, around 1300 BCE, as the Indus Valley Civilization declined, some of the Indus periphery individuals moved south to mix with indigenous populations there, forming the Ancestral South Indian population. Today, this group is identified with the population that speaks Dravidian languages such as Tamil and Kannada and with those belonging to lower castes. Soon thereafter, herders from the Eurasian steppe moved into the northern part of the subcontinent and mixed with Indus periphery people still there, forming the Ancestral North Indian population. These are the people who

speak Indo-European languages like Hindi, Urdu, and related languages. Based on the chronology of the events described here, the claim that it was the Dravidians who gave birth to the Indus Valley Civilization becomes very strong. A look at the earliest beliefs of the Ancestral North Indian population further confirms that claim.

Among the many gods, the Ancestral North Indian had a chief god named Indra, who is the king of gods and is associated with the sky, lightning, weather, thunder, storms, rains, river flows, and war. He is the most-referred-to god in the Rig Veda, oldest of the Vedas which are sacred Hindu canonical texts. A god of war, Indra was also known as Purandhar and is credited with destroying the forts of Dasyus, most probably the Ancestral South Indian (ASI) or the Dravidians, and his weapon of choice was the thunder bolt. This is similar to the power of Zeus, the Greek chief god, another Indo-European deity. In fact, Zeus and Indra are very similar to other Indo-European deities such as Jupiter, Perun, Perkunas, Taranis, and Thor.

Again very similar are also the powers of Surya, who is often depicted riding a chariot with seven horses across the celestial sky, and Helios, who also drives a horse-drawn chariot through the sky. Both are sun gods. All of this hints at a Proto-Indo-European mythology that must have developed in the Steppes and carried along as herders migrated south and east. This clearly shows that the origin of Hinduism lies outside the subcontinent, and it is as alien to the indigenous tribals as Christianity and Islam. But what about the religions that must have existed before the coming of Hinduism, Christianity and Islam – what did they look like? This is where the story of the Khasi-Jaintia becomes important. Now, according to the 2015 paper 'A late Neolithic expansion of Y chromosomal haplogroup O2a1-M95 from east to west' by Arun Kumar and his colleagues, people carrying the Y-chromosomal haplogroup O2a1-M95 spread to the sub-continent from the East, most probably from Laos, arriving in the North East (i.e., most probably with the Khasi-Jaintia now mostly found in present-day Meghalaya) in the late Neolithic period, i.e., around 4000 BCE and 2000 BCE. This means that the proto-Khasi-Jaintia, some of whom later became the Munda, were present during the period of the Indus Valley Civilization. There is, in fact, DNA evidence that hints at such a possibility. In 2019, the first genome sequence of a woman from Rakhigarhi, the largest town in the Indus Valley Civilization, was completed. Her ancestry was revealed to be ancient Iranian

and Southeast Asian hunter-gatherers. Could the South-east Asian hunter-gatherers be the earliest Khasi-Jaintia who were already present in the Sub-Continent at that time?

The 2013 paper 'Two thousand years of iron smelting in the Khasi Hills, Meghalaya, North East India' by Pawel Prokop and Ireneusz Suliga does mention that the Khasi-Jaintia people had spread up to the lower Ganges around 3000 BCE. While there are still a lot of studies to be done, it is certainly exciting to imagine that our ancestors may have been one of the populations that made up the Indus Valley Civilization. In fact, after the Dravidians, the Khasi-Munda are probably the oldest population in the sub-continent, making them indigenous.

It is certain that the earliest Khasi-Jaintia people who arrived at the sub-continent must have had some kind of religious belief. The question is whether those beliefs have been passed down in an unadulterated form, which is now still being practiced by the adherents of Niam Khasi and Niamtre. It is very difficult to know since this will require knowledge of the practices from more than 6,000 years ago and comparing them with the present.

In the original homeland, i.e., the area around the Mekong (Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam), there are still indigenous groups that are also matrilineal and still practicing their traditional faiths. I am not aware of any comparative work that has already looked into this. If not, this could be an important area for future researchers so that we can learn more about our past. Such work will also allow us to see which elements have entered the traditional faith that may have been imported from outside the community. This is very important because there is an ongoing attempt to co-opt the tribal faiths into the umbrella of Hinduism, thus obliterating the identity and claim of the indigenous peoples.

Tribals in India are known as Adivasi, which roughly means native people. However, there is an attempt by Sangh Parivar and its affiliates like the RSS to bring them into the Hindu fold by changing their term of identification to Vanvasi, which roughly translates to 'forest dwellers' thus taking away their indigenous status. Tribals henceforth are no longer distinct people with their own history but simply Hindus who chose to leave civilization and live in the forests. An example of this is the Hinduization of tribals in Gujarat, of which I was personally made aware during a workshop in Surat. The process of Hinduization operates with the volunteers going to tribal villages and convincing people that there is no difference between their

native religion and Hinduism. The images of tribal gods and Hindu gods are then kept together for worship. After some time, the images of the tribal gods recede to the background, with the Hindu gods brought to the foreground. Hindu rituals are systematically incorporated, and slowly, the tribal people are declared Hindus. Most probably, this is how Hinduism also attained its present form: the millions of gods in Hinduism might very well be the millions of gods that it absorbed as it came into contact with different communities that had inhabited the sub-continent, i.e., the present day tribals.

It is very important to make sure that this does not happen to the Khasi-Jaintia as well; otherwise, we will lose our culture and our history. A new faith (i.e., Hinduism) brought by recent people will have devoured an older faith (Niam Khasi and Niamtre) of a more ancient people. Personally, I will prefer the Khasi-Jaintia becoming Christians to being identified as Hindus (this is not the same as a Khasi accepting Hinduism as a personal choice). This is because with the former, one still knows what has been lost (which could be recovered in the future), but with the latter, since it has been mixed so thoroughly with another faith, it is lost forever. So, if "those tribals who convert to Islam or Christianity must not get any benefits of reservation meant for the tribals," so should the tribals who identify themselves as Hindus. In the meantime, followers of traditional faiths like the Niam Khasi and Niamtre (Songsarek among the Garos, Sama among the tribals of Jharkhand) must be given minority status and the tribal religions recognized as separate religions, something that the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes (NCST) has also recommended. As a matter of fact, the former is very much possible since Dr. Najma A. Heptulla, the former Minister of Minority Affairs in a written reply to Rajya Sabha stated that granting of minority status to followers of Niam Khasi and Niamtre is a state subject.

If anything, this is the most 'jaidbynriev' issue that should concern the Khasi-Jaintia political leadership. If the followers of Niam Khasi and Niamtre are gone or are assimilated by larger religions like Hinduism, our very own indigenous identity will be under threat. The statement by Kariya Munda, who is actually a brethern of the Khasi-Jaintia, is an indication that the danger will only grow with time. So what will it be? Will we survive or will we lose our identity? The decision is ours to make.

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

**Bob's Banter**

By Robert Clements

No, Never Again...! After the Second World War, and knowing the atrocities committed by Hitler, the world vowed that never again would they allow such a thing to happen, or such a person like him to rule unhindered. Looks like the world quickly forgets.

I do remember that Night of Terror exactly fifteen years ago in Mumbai. I was just a few feet away as hundreds died! The Press Club where I was spending that evening is situated a few hundred feet from both the CST station where innocents were mercilessly gunned down, and nearly in front of the Madam Cama hospital where others were ruthlessly shot point blank that night, and we were also a few kilometres from the Taj Hotel where mass executions took place. As gunshots receded, we heard the sound of the lone jeep which sped down the road outside, and which carried the three brave officers who became lifeless bodies in a few minutes.

I saw photographers running in, unloading ghastly pictures of the bloodied railway station, where terrified men, women and children, in crouching positions, behind sad, pathetic remnants of their baggage were mowed down by the machine guns of Kasab and his accomplice. I was hardly a few feet away, and it was only providence that did not allow these terrorists from walking towards the bright lit Mumbai Press Club,

on forgiveness when, emerging from prison after twenty-seven years and being elected president of South Africa, he asked his jailor to join him on the inauguration platform.

He then asked Archbishop Desmond Tutu to head an official government panel, with a daunting name; the Truth and Reconciliation Committee.

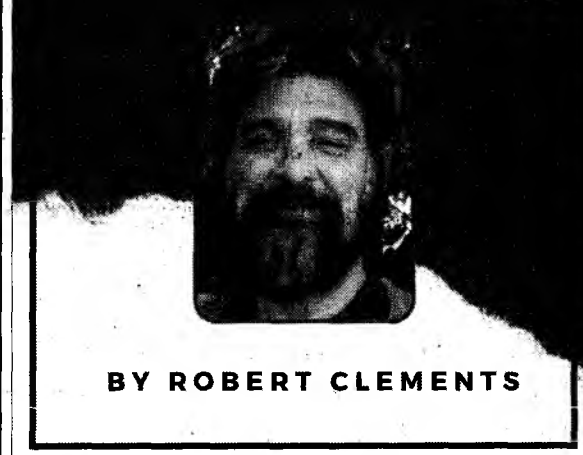
Mandela sought to defuse the natural patterns of revenge he had seen in so many countries where one oppressed race or tribe took control from another.

For the next two-and-a-half years South Africans listened to reports of atrocities coming out of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings. The rules were simple: if a white policeman or army officer voluntarily faced his accusers, confessed his crime, and fully acknowledged his guilt, he could not be tried and punished for that crime. Hardliners grumbled about the obvious injustice of letting criminals go free, but Mandela insisted that the country needed healing, even more than it needed justice!

And because of one man's spirit of forgiveness, today in South Africa, blacks and whites are learning to live together in harmony.

Maybe, it's a lesson we in our country need to learn from. We have decided to keep August 14th as, "Partition Horrors Remembrance Day". Yes, during partition the most unimaginable horrors were committed and memo-

**BOB'S BANTER**



BY ROBERT CLEMENTS

where we would have all been sitting ducks.

But I believe there's a reason we scribes were spared; and that, to tell the world, "Never Again!"

Never again should such carnage take place, where both poor and wealthy were targeted and killed, even as they looked at their bloodied selves with lifeless eyes, asking "Why?"

Yes why? What made Kasab and gang willingly sail stormy seas, risk their lives from Navy and Coast Guard, strut through strangers and walk fearlessly into four different locations to kill, and be killed?

Why? Well, evidence gathered shows they had been fed with scenes of atrocities and conditioned to believe that injustice of a high magnitude was being inflicted on their community in our country. In their minds, they repaid hate with hate. And that is how terrorism thrives; on the wheels of hate!

Those wheels are turning now. With no thought of the damage this can do to our nation, hate is being used as a tool to win elections. Anger, harnessed to create the right atmosphere for violence, and with violence comes rapes and murders as we are seeing time and again.

I was hardly a few feet away. Why, were we spared? I believe, to shout, "Never Again!"

You can stop it! By not allowing such sowers of hate get elected. Can you see lifeless eyes, from the Taj Mahal Hotel, Oberoi Hotel, CST station, Leopold Cafe and the Chabad Jewish House, pleading silently, "Never again!"

But to convince others that this should not happen again, we as a nation need to be healed of our past hurts and grievances. Nelson Mandela taught the world a huge lesson

of many of them live on. But it was on both sides. As much as they did to us, we did to them, and so, as many people across the border live in pain as there are here, but unless we as a country empty ourselves of the hate, those remembrances will impede our progress as a nation.

Our nation needs healing. By having such 'hate remembrances' we are igniting anger and hate that burned seventy-five years ago. We all know these are political moves, but now our leaders need to move beyond such petty politics. Then and only then can we as a nation, as a people shout, "Never Again!"

I love using EMPTY as an acronym which we all can use. The E is for us to Engage with those incidents or hurts that happened. Open it up, look at the festering wound, and remove the emotional memory that has a hold on us. M is to mend those areas that need healing. P is to prevent such emotions taking the place of hate and anger. T is thanksgiving, that we as individuals are alive and kicking and as a nation, robust and healthy. The Y is to yield ourselves to a Higher Power, that will teach us how to infuse love and forgiveness into hateful situations or unpleasant memories.

Our country is a tolerant nation, and just as Nelson Mandela did, let us likewise do, because we need that healing touch, and it's only we who can give ourselves that!

To be able to stop terrorism from raising its ugly head, we need to be healed ourselves and then no Kasab or gun wielding terrorist will ever again be able to enter our country.

No, never again...! (The Author conducts an Online Writers and Speakers Course. For more details send a thumbs-up to him on WhatsApp 9892572883 Email bobbanter@gmail.com)

"Happiness is a choice that requires effort at times."

— Aeschylus

The Shillong Times

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**Tunnel Rescue Mission Successful**

THE country watched in dismay as the 41 workers trapped inside Uttarakhand's Silkyara tunnel for over 17 days lived between hope and despair and their poor families waited outside in vain hope of seeing their loved ones emerge from that tunnel. Finally, several agencies pooled in their resources to finally allow the workers to see the light of day. The quest for livelihoods in this country pushes people to undertake the most daunting tasks. Union minister VK Singh and Uttarakhand CM Pushkar Singh Dhami welcomed the workers as they were brought out through a steel chute that lined a 60-metre escape passage. It is interesting that the very rat-hole mining technique adopted by coal mine owners in Jharkhand and Meghalaya became the life saver bringing to an end the 17-day ordeal. The rescue operation involved multiple plans the first of which was to drill through the debris from the mouth of the tunnel. Machines were used to drill through but after several setbacks, the last resort adopted was to use rat hole miners from Jharkhand.

Plan B was to drill vertically through the hill above the tunnel. But this meant having to drill 86 meters down to reach the workers. The work had in fact started and the rescuers calculated it would take four days for the operation if they met no obstacles. Special drills had been brought to the site for this. But these were not needed. It was when the heavy machinery broke down that the authorities called in a group of people whose profession is effectively banned in the country - "rat-hole mining." When the augur machines had dug horizontally through nearly three-quarters of the debris the half a dozen miners reach the trapped workers. The "rat hole miners" began working late on Monday with 15 metres out of 60 metres still left to reach the trapped men. They worked in two teams of three each, with one person drilling, the second collecting the debris and the third pushing it out of the pipe.

These rescuers finally pulled out the workers in wheeled stretchers through a wide pipe that was pushed through the debris after a 17-day ordeal. India is known for its 'jugaad', the genius of the ordinary Indian which often surprises even the most learned scientists. Now of course there will be many to take credit for this successful rescue operation. The question that needs to be asked, and pointedly so, is why there was no environmental clearance assessment vis a vis the construction of this tunnel along the young and unstable Himalayan fold mountains. Why the need to tamper with the fragile environment despite so many environmentally catastrophic accidents? This question demands an answer or several answers.

**MDA Government has failed Meghalaya**

By Albert Thyrniang

Rat hole coal mining in the State was outlawed by the National Green Tribunal (NGT) of the Supreme Court in April 2014. However, the order of the country's highest legal institution has been continuously flouted non-stop ever since. The illegal mining and transportation has been going on unabated. Incident after incident, evidence after evidence has surfaced establishing the blatant disregard for the law of the land. The latest is the report filed by Justice (retired) Katakey before the Meghalaya High Court on November 22. Following the visit to East Jaintia Hills the Single Member Committee found huge quantities of fresh coal dumped on both sides of Don Bosco College in Byndihati village. The catch is not part of seized and recorded coal earlier. Even a weighbridge was detected in the vicinity. The rampant illegal mining and storing continue to pollute river water bodies in Kyrhukhla and Lunar areas even as restoration of the same is being carried out. The battle to address acid mine drainage which has turned the water toxic is a futile exercise.

Locals in the area confirm the unrestricted activities. Trucks from remote coal mines and from the stocking grounds move in and out unhindered. Movement is throughout the day but more so at night. They have never seen Deputy Commissioners (DCs) and Superintendents of Police (SPs) visiting the dumping grounds leave alone the mining sites. When asked, "Why such lawlessness?" They sigh, "Ah, the coal and the quarries belong to prominent politicians. Everybody knows it. So who will keep the law if law makers break the law?" They name some local heavyweights and 'surprisingly' MLAs from South West Khasi Hills as culprits. "These are the high level," sources concede.

Following the field visits the DCs/ ADCs and the police were appraised of the report and instructed to conduct an enquiry on the illegal coal mining activities. A report may be produced within the stipulated time. These days police personnel are being dispatched to the locations. But why not at other times? Why take notice only post the report of High Court's committee? Why are they alert only when tragedies, like Ksan occur? At other times the machinery is in sleep mode. All the DCs and SPs have standing orders from the apex court to ensure the complete closure of all

coal mining activities.

Now, are the district administrations and the police department not doing their duties? Are the DCs and SPs neglecting their responsibilities? Are they intentionally not supervising the coal mines? Then why has no one been taken to task? The answer could be that DCs and SPs have an understanding with politician-businessmen and women including those who were and are in the MDA I and II Governments. This is the strong perception of the people this writer talked to. It is common knowledge that the bureaucrats comply with the instructions of the political masters. They don't dare to displease them. They don't want to risk promotion and an uneventful tenure in office by confronting politicians. They forget that they have sworn by the Constitution. It is rare to find officers who perform their duties without fear or favour. Many take the easiest option of a cosy relationship with ministers, MLAs, MDCs and others even if they fully know that illegality is central. Otherwise, how else do we explain why they have not been able to lessen the illegal mining of coal and its transportation for over nine years in a small state like Meghalaya?

The blame stops at the desk of the government. The present MDA government is responsible. The 18th interim report does contradict the state government's repeated 'no illegal coal mining and transportation' claims. But we recall that the government has also admitted its non-commitment to banish the illegality from the hills. Only in July this year, Meghalaya Chief Minister Conrad K Sangma stated that is not possible to stop illegal coal mining completely. The statement actually translates to, 'the government will not make an all-out effort to end illegal coal mining'. He blames the lack of alternative livelihoods for the workers to justify the non-compliance of the Supreme Court's order. It might have been produced in 2014 but we are now in the 10th year. The illegal business is coming to light more and more. It is the government which should provide alternative livelihoods; not the court.

After a decade not even an attempt has been made to provide alternative avenues. The promised 'modern mining technique' that takes care of environmental concerns is nowhere in sight. The

Deputy chief minister in charge of Home, Prestone Tynsong too refused to accept responsibility saying the phenomenon is not new. What does he mean by old phenomenon? Much of the illegality has been spurned during his government's rule. The inability to curb this menace is on the shoulders of the current and the previous government firmly led by the NPP. Post the Ksan tragedy the same minister dismissed allegations saying 'the police cannot reach all the corners of the state'.

This government is lackadaisical in its attitude. The illegal mining and transportation was so blatant that the Home Minister from the NPP had to be removed at the behest of the UDP. Things did not improve under the charge of the UDP home minister. The NPP is now back with the Home Department. Things are the same because coal is lucrative for everyone. Hence the coalition partners will not lambast the government. It is the High Court of the state that's doing it. In the month of May the court accused the government of "nurturing" illegal coal mine operators and suspected that the illegal activities have the blessings of people in power. Imagine 13 lakh metric tonnes of coal just went missing! The government and its arms of the district administrations and the police are clueless as to where and how the inventorised 'black diamond' disappeared. It is shamefully amazing. Left to the government alone the ugliest point of lawlessness would certainly arrive. Following its suo motto notice on March 7, 2022 hope the court will deliver a verdict that fixes responsibilities, punishes all the major culprits and rids the state of the mess.

Government includes the Opposition. That's what political science teaches us. Through criticism the Opposition helps the government of the day to act. As pointed out in this paper the Opposition has almost completely gone silent on many issues including the illegal coal mining and transportation. This is natural because the Congress and NPP cannot be rivals at the state while being comrades in the KHADC. The UDP and the NPP will never be genuine opposition in the KHADC while they are partners in the state. Apart from VPP and the TMC there is no opposition. After his 'failed efforts' to

jump to the BJP ship, Mukul Sangma sees the judge's report as clear evidence for an FIR to be filed, to probe the suspected criminal conspiracy in the glaring large scale illegal coal mining. Mukul also put the quantity of missing coal at 32+ lakh metric tonnes. This has complemented the outspoken George Lyngdoh who also battles the NPP's pulls. The largely artificial opposition is totally indifferent to the illegal coal activities. The whole state is suffering due to an opposition cursed by conflicts of interests.

The pressure groups are always in a lull where coal is concerned. Some of their members have been arrested for extortion. They call themselves 'Seng Bhalang.' Are they for the common good? One leader has been nabbed for taking protection money from overloaded trucks to ply over the Umiam bridge. Is endangering the expired bridge a common good? A leader of the commemoration of groups that opposed the Sunday Cherry Blossom festival is in police custody for demanding free fuel from a petrol pump. How is it that holding a festival on Sunday is unholy while extortion is not wrong?

In relation to the present issue if all pressure groups speak up against illegal coal mining and transportation; if they organised rallies like they do for demanding the Inner Line Permit (ILP); if they protest like they stand against railways, if they oppose with gusto like they rail against governments; if they care for the environment, if they are concerned with revenue leakage, if they are for the interest of the 'Jaitbnyriew' and the state the illegal coal mining and transportation would not have survived for so long. No pressure group has raised their voices against the hazards. I learnt from my sources that these pressure groups too have their own 'check gates'.

There is no explanation for the flourishing illegal coal mining and the ease with which trucks pass through highways except through the involvement of powerful politicians and influential dealers who could instruct cops to facilitate the trade. It is not possible for the illegal activities to thrive if the civil society united fight against this money-driven activity. We are found wanting at the administrative and societal front but more seriously at governmental level. The Meghalaya High Court seems to our only chance to help us be guided by the rule of law.

**Mizoram's devotion to education**

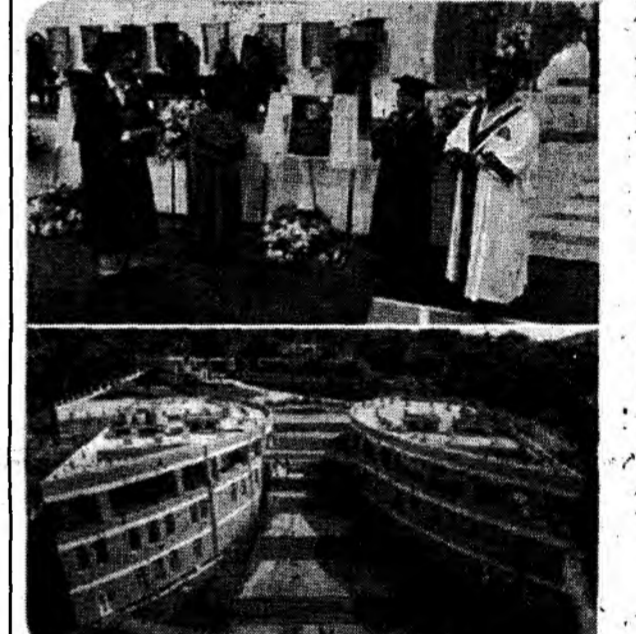
By Thangminlal Doungel

Mizoram continues to make headlines due to its disaccord with the centre on the issue of refugee influx from Bangladesh and Myanmar, and Internally Displaced People (IDPs) from the Indian State of Manipur. As of 10th October 2023, the state hosts around 72,000 refugees—12,600 IDPs from the violence hit Manipur and about 60,000 refugees from Bangladesh and Myanmar (Hindustan Times), and the number continues to surge.

Despite having to deal with the monumental task of shouldering the influx of these refugees and IDPs, the state was able to assemble its resources to successfully conduct the general election in November 2023. The task accomplished without firing a single bullet—an embodiment of a peaceful state. Furthermore, with narrow and meandering roads amidst the steep hills, the state is also recognised for its strict adherence to traffic rules—following the 'no overtaking', 'no honking' civic etiquette by all motorists. This is one feature that sets Mizoram apart from the other Indian states. According to a recent study conducted by a Gurugram-based firm,

body of the Mizos—Mizo Zirlai Pawl (Mizo Students' Association) and several other CSOs and Philanthropic Organisations came to the forefront in lending a helping hand to those that are critically in need of succour.

According to the 2011 Census, Mizoram has the third highest literacy rate among Indian states and union territories, trailing only Kerala and Lakshadweep. Mizoram at 91.33 per cent has the highest literacy rate among all of India's eight Northeastern states; Tripura follows in second, with 87.75 per cent. The state is also on the verge of being the second in the country to achieve 100 per cent literacy rate. Mizoram University founded in 2001 at the 76th position is one of the only three universities in the Northeast to make it to top 100 as per the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) by the Ministry of Education. All these remarkable achievements have been attained within 37 years of its existence as a State in 1986, a lesson that a young state with just 11 lakh population has taught 142.8 crore Indians. This is in concurrence with India's commitment to Right to



Mizoram is also ranked the happiest state in the country. A commendable achievement that deserves all plaudits. To me, these are simply the manifestations of a learned discipline fostered by high-quality education. Let me cut to the chase: when the dominant Meitei community in Manipur orchestrated an ethnic pogrom against the minority Kuki-Zos on May 3, 2023, hundreds of IDPs arrived in Mizoram. The State was a natural destiny due to the Kuki-Zos' strong familial ties and bonding with the Mizos of Mizoram. The Mizos, being the kind-hearted people that they are, went above and beyond any protocol to welcome the IDPs from Manipur. The government, from Chief Minister Zoramthanga to Rajya Sabha MP Vanlalvena, was quick to respond to the SoS in that critical hour. Not only were over 12,300 internally displaced persons from violence-torn Manipur given humanitarian relief, but all displaced students were also given free education. Till date in a remarkable display of humanitarian commitment, the Mizoram government has enrolled over 8,000 children from Myanmar, Bangladesh, and strife-torn Manipur in its schools. The apex student

Letters to the Editor

**Abandoned Jowai supermarket**

Editor, Finally, there is a news item regarding my hometown Jowai. But lo and behold! It is one which is distasteful and depressing. I am talking about the much-anticipated Jowai Super Market published by this daily on the November, 27, 2023. The news item reads "Jowai Super Market project in a limbo, people in torment." This is one of the solemn promises not kept by our politicians. What could have been a great help to the public is now just another construction left incomplete (even if authorized by the Ministry of DoNER). On another note this year, 2023 we have a fully functioning District and Sessions Court in Khliehyrshi. The date of construction for this court was July 27, 2013 as per the information given by a section of the media. It only took 10 years to complete the District Court premises. As for the Super Market Jowai, it is now 22 years since it was officially started in the year 2001, as per the information given by this newspaper, but it is still lying incomplete. Why is the JHADC not completing the construction even after 22 years have passed? Where did all the funds for the Su-

permarket disappear? These are questions that require to be answered to the public, because lately it seems as if Jowai is an orphan left at the hands of those best used to mistreating her. It is such a sad state of affairs that as a concerned citizen one cannot help but vent one's frustration in this esteemed paper even if no one else is listening. Alas! All one can do is hope that even if the Jowai Supermarket is half done, our leaders will come to its rescue even if it is late. Better late than never!

Yours etc., Omarka Laloo, Via email

**A timely reminder about growing poverty**

Editor, Kudos to Salil Gewali for his letter, "Why Daphi shouts for our attention" (ST, November 27, 2023). His letter captured the reality of rising inequality in India and how difficult the lives of small farmers like Daphi have become because of rising inflation, lack of social security and welfare measures for them. The second thing that the letter beautifully captured was the honesty, dignity and sensitivity of the poor, hard-working people like Daphi. She did not want to accept

Gewali's gift. But when he humbly persuaded her to accept them, she took it with an expression of gratitude which Gewali said, "can't be expressed in words here."

It is a fact that poor people are more honest and have more self respect and dignity than the rich and super rich. This is the reason why the pay back rate of micro loans is much more than macro credits. Nobel laureate, Mohammed Yunus of Bangladesh gave micro loans to the poor and even to beggars through the Grameen Bank and the pay back rate of such loans was as high as 95 per cent.

Sometimes, we compare some unscrupulous businessmen with beggars. But this is an insult to the beggars most of whom are victims of circumstances and they do not steal or snatch public money unlike some creamy layer looters. We see that beggars have enough compassion to feed street dogs and more often than not, they even share their food and money with other beggars. This is in total contrast to the modus operandi of some filthy rich people that can even charge a seven-year-old girl's parents Rs.18 lakh for the girl's 15 days of treatment in a hospital and that too after her death in that very hospital!

It is said that a fish rots from the head down. This biological phenomenon explains why corruption is more likely to pollute the creamy layer first rather than

the poor. Yours etc., Sujit De, Kolkata

**Collection or extortion?**

Editor, Once again the district councils are in the news for all the wrong reasons. Now the CEM, KHADC threatens to file a defamation suit against anyone questioning their functionality, authority and legal standing. Secondly, they indulge in justifying the need to mop up resources through their toll gates. If an RTI were to be filed on the acts of omission and commissions of the KHADC and JHADC without an iota of doubt, skeletons of all sizes and shapes would tumble out. The ADCs are accountable to the public who elect their MDCs to be their voice and platform for being an effective local governing body as mandated by the Constitution of India. The incident that was shared and reported in most media outlets gravely show the modus operandi of collecting money from heavy commercial vehicles and the stink is worse than our septic tanks, which is a disease in this so-called holier than thou state of Meghalaya. The Government of India has time and again asked the Autonomous District Councils for accountability but each time they are found lacking. It is

time the ADCs make themselves open to public audit and scrutiny and that they put on the public domain all financial assets and liabilities of the Councils before they lose their sheen. Yours etc., Dominic Stadlin Wankhar, Via email

**Unjustifiably high rentals for commercial space**

Editor, What has become a matter of great concern for the business community in Shillong are the unjustifiably high charges for commercial space and exorbitant security deposits that are stifling local entrepreneurship. In a particular instance, at Laitumkhrh, a 500 sq ft commercial space demanding a monthly rent of Rs 35,000 and a security deposit ranging between 10 to 15 lakhs is not only financially burdensome but also raises questions about fair and standardized practices. Given that Laitumkhrh falls within the municipal jurisdiction, it is imperative for the government to intervene and establish a transparent and fair pricing system for commercial spaces. A government-set price per

square foot would not only curb overcharging but also ensure that businesses, especially small enterprises, can operate without facing astronomical financial hurdles. The exorbitant security deposit requirements further exacerbate the challenges faced by local entrepreneurs. The government should consider implementing guidelines to cap these deposits at reasonable levels, making it more feasible for businesses to establish themselves in the area. I urge the relevant authorities to review and regulate commercial space pricing in Laitumkhrh promptly. The establishment of government-mandated prices per square foot, aligned with fair and reasonable security deposit norms, is crucial for fostering a supportive environment for local businesses to thrive.

It is my hope that the government will take swift action to address these concerns and contribute to the sustained growth of the business community. Yours etc., Name withheld on request, Via email

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