

"The undertaking of a new action brings new strength."

— Richard L. Evans

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No. 141 SHILLONG, WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 1, 2025

What's new in 2025

WHILE individuals make New Year resolutions even if those are more broken than observed, what has never been witnessed is a political party resolving to do better. Perhaps this comes from the assumption that every political party is on the right track and does not need course correction. It is this smugness that prevents political parties from taking stock of their performance, more so if they are in the government. In fact, what used to be called in Hindi a chintan-baithak or a soul searching exercise is much needed for political parties so that they honestly review their performance and check whether they have been able to deliver on their promises as per their election manifesto. It is this lack of monitoring from the public which encourages politicians to disregard their lapses and to dare return to people every five years to solicit votes.

Some politicians have in fact learnt the trade of keeping their seats intact every five years. They have perhaps engaged researchers to study the profile of their voters and in areas with a large non-tribal presence they have learnt how to control their minds and to act as the protector from the occasional strife where non-tribals become unnecessary targets. Politicians are wily people and know what the weaknesses and strengths of their voters are. Those seeking votes from constituencies with larger number of poor households know how to keep their vote banks intact by giving out doles from time to time. This dependency syndrome is what assures victory. Such voters who have no idea of the issues, never read the manifesto and are too poor to ask questions actually make the bulk of our voters and politicians would rather have more such voters than the enlightened types that will ask uncomfortable questions and seek accountability from their elected representatives. It does not look as if this trend will change any time soon since the number of very poor households in Meghalaya at last count stood at 37%. That was some years ago. There are no indications to show that these poor people have been specially assisted by any scheme to come out of the dark hole of poverty. On the contrary, poverty appears to be on the upswing with school drop-outs on the upswing due to parents being too impoverished and therefore unable to meet the education expenses of their children.

If the present MDA Government does not take stock of the economic condition of the state and comes up with a series of measures for employment generation, more young people are going to take drugs out of desperation. Already about one tenth of the populace which is also at its most productive age is on drugs and therefore out of school and colleges. Drug rehabilitation is a long and tedious process involving behavioural change. In fact, several of those on rehabilitation backslide and get back to substance abuse. The journey is time-taking and fraught. Whether the State is seriously considering opening up rehab centres in all districts is the moot question. The MDA Government needs to prioritise its actions. A business as usual attitude will no longer be acceptable. Its only a matter of time when people start asking the right questions.

District Council Elections: A crucial test for Meghalaya's Governance

By Bhogtaram Mawroh

Meghalaya falls under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, which is a special provision provided for creating a model of self governance for the administration of indigenous tribal areas in the states of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram. While the concept and framework of the Sixth Schedule was the brainchild of BR Ambedkar (father of the India Constitution) and Gopinath Bordoloi (the first Chief Minister of Assam), Rev JIM Nichols Roy, a Khasi social, religious and political leader also played an important role defending special status for the indigenous tribal communities during the debates of the Constituent Assembly. He and Jaipal Singh of Jharkhand put up a spirited defence on the question of indigenous tribal autonomy when confronted by those who favoured assimilation of the indigenous tribal community into the mainstream. We must not forget that Meghalaya (except a few municipal areas) was exempted from CAA (Citizenship Amendment Act) because it fell under the Sixth Schedule.

The Sixth Schedule provides for the setting up of Autonomous District Councils (ADCs), of which there are 13 in number. Three of them are in Meghalaya, viz., Garo Hills Autonomous District Councils (GHADC), Khasi Hills Autonomous District Councils (KHADC) and Jaintia Hills Autonomous District Councils (JHADC) are going to the polls in the next few months. Although these elections do not get the same attention that the assembly elections get, we need to pay more focus to them as well. This is because the District Councils have been given power to make laws on an exhaustive list of items, viz., land management of forests, except reserved forests, regulation on trade by persons not being local Scheduled Tribes, appointment of traditional Chiefs and Headmen, inheritance of property, marriage, divorce, social customs, establishment and maintenance of primary schools, markets, taxation, issue of lease for extraction of minerals, etc. Many of these items are very critical. An accountable and capable District Council will go a long way in ensuring that citizens get their due rights. However, recent news coming out of the District Councils has been quite distressing. The recent Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG) report for the year ending March 31, 2018 has revealed significant lapses in the utilisation of funds sanctioned under the "Special Town and Rural Welfare Programme" by the Khasi Hills Autonomous District

Council (KHADC). The audit discovered 15 members of the District Council (MDCs) had not submitted utilisation certificates (UCs) for Rs 68 lakh in grants disbursed in March 2018, raising concerns about transparency and accountability. What was most shocking is that these 15 MDCs remained non-compliant despite repeated reminders. It is surprising that no political party has tried to reveal the identity of the 15 MDCs, considering the District Council elections are just around the corner. One can easily file an RTI and find out the name of the MDCs who did not submit the utilisation certificates. Such a revelation could easily open up the contest in these 15 seats, especially if the same MDC is still the incumbent one or if the same

of KHADC because of the Congress and NPP combining to bring down his Executive Committee, he went around checking the trading license of non-indigenous shops in the city. Why does the head of the KHADC have to check licenses when any other official could have done the job? It was all meant to create a perception amongst the people that he is the most jaidbynriew loving politician and that he was about to be wronged by those who are against the jaidbynriew. After Pnyiaid Sing Syiem became the new CEM he also engaged in the same theatrics: he also went around checking the licenses in order to create the same perception, i.e., he is the protector of the jaidbynriew. Such theatrics aren't exclusive to politicians seeking to

Another concern with the upcoming District Council elections is whether the upcoming Executive Committee can function smoothly. I will look forward, and I hope others will do the same, towards the road map that those aspiring to winning the District Council elections propose. Of particular importance will be plans to make the District Council more financially autonomous.

party was in power in those seats. Why would someone miss this splendid chance of challenging their rivals? Why is no political party, even those who are trying to win the election for the first time, not revealing the identity of these 15 MDCs? What are they hiding? The answer lies in the list of the 2014-2019 KHADC members list, which has some prominent names that are still around. Some are part of the present KHADC while others are playing an important role in state politics. The membership list is easily available online and I would encourage others to look at it themselves. In the meantime, it doesn't look like the voters will get to know the identity of these 15 MDCs and the same people could very well win the election this time as well. So, whichever party wins, a business-as-usual scenario is what we are looking at for the next five years.

It is highly likely that efforts will be made to divert public attention, preventing any scrutiny of the potential illegality that has occurred, which may continue into the new session. There is a strong possibility that certain theatrics by the outgoing District Council will be repeated, either just before the elections to secure votes or after the elections to consolidate their control. When Titosar Well Chyne was about to be removed as the CEM (Chief Executive Member)

improve their image. Pressure groups then took over the mantle of checking licenses leading to harassment of migrant workers and a murder in Mawli-Mawroh. Therefore, I suspect that the weaponising of jaidbynriew politics to harass the non-indigenous residents of the state and migrant workers will continue this year as well. It will in most probably start just before or after the District Council elections.

Jaidbynriew politics and anti-immigrants sentiments, therefore, will again be prominent this year with the outcome of the District Council elections (whoever wins) being an important catalyst in strengthening that perception. This is despite the fact that there is no evidence of any large-scale illegal immigration into the state. Meanwhile, officials will continue siphoning public funds while falsely blaming non-existent illegal immigration for people's problems. We will not be a minority in our homeland, but we will soon be the poorest.

Another concern with the upcoming District Council elections is whether the upcoming Executive Committee can function smoothly. I will look forward, and I hope others will do the same, towards the road map that those aspiring to winning the District Council elections propose. Of particular importance will be plans to make the District Council more financially autonomous. The

report of the Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG) for the financial year ended March 31, 2019, revealed that the KHADC depended highly on state government funds to meet its financial needs. It could generate only 30% (Rs. 19.25 crore) from its own sources while 55% came from the state (Rs. 35.46 crore), 15% (Rs. 9.95 crore) as grants-in-aid from the central and state governments, and Rs 10 lakh as recovery of loans and advances. This dependency becomes even more critical considering that the total revenue receipts of KHADC decreased 49% from Rs 127.85 crore in 2017-18 to Rs 64.66 crore during 2018-19. There was a shortfall between the Budgetary Estimates and the actual collection of revenue, showing that the KHADC could not make its revenue collection mechanism effective. This made the District Council highly dependent on the state government.

This dependence on the state government will become a big problem if a non-MDA party were to win the elections. In such a scenario, it is very much possible that there will be delays in disbursement of funds which will affect the functioning of the District Councils. This has been a constant complain of the District Councils in the past as well. However, this does not mean that the same party should get to rule the District Councils. People should choose those who are actually going to work rather than those who only make hollow claims and siphon money meant for the people. It is therefore absolutely critical for the citizens to know if those who want to rule have any plan to counteract any such impediments that are going to come their way. Or are we going to have a blame game for the next five years? Is this going to be the destiny of the people of Meghalaya? We are faced with a choice between being governed by the corrupt or by the incompetent. The outcome is the same: lack of any improvement in the well-being of the citizens of the state.

The upcoming district council elections are therefore going to be highly crucial. It will lay the groundwork for the next assembly elections. But beyond the political manoeuvring of power-seekers, we must not ignore the plight of ordinary people. The District Councils were established to protect the interests of their citizens, and it's time we held them accountable for fulfilling their mandate.

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

Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

New Year Advice for India...

And as the New Year dawns and we Indians face another year like the rest of the world, let us realise that we are living not in isolation but with the Rest of the World. Because, lately, like the Koreans in North Korea, we are being made to believe that all's well with us, and all's wrong with the rest.

Unfortunately, contrary to what we are being fed, all's well with the nations we are led to believe are not well, and all's not well, with the nations we are slowly gravitating towards.

In a country that believes in mentors and gurus, we seem to be moving away from the very concept that admonishments are not punishments but just a course correction, and we as a people are being misguided by national leaders that when developed nations across the seas issue course corrections to us, they are jealous and are trying to derail our economy.

Far from it, this 2025, let us listen to these developed gurus and mentors, like the US and UK, like Germany and other countries with robust democracies and economies and realise that the warnings they give are not to pull us down but for our own good.

And yes, for the good also for the ones in power.

When we are told that we rank somewhere at the very end in the 'hunger index' let us not attack the ones who have formulated the index and accuse them of bias but listen to what they say, because people are starving, and are jobless and angry.

When we are told that Freedom of Speech and that of Press Freedom is gradually reducing, let us not poo-hoo the facts but look closely to ascertain if this could be true. We don't keep hearing about hundreds of journalists being incarcerated but for every one journo who is threatened, ten start remaining silent in fear.

In India we are not a very courageous lot by nature, but this 2025, start infusing courage back in us!

This 2025, let us understand that the freedom we fought for and won in 1947, was not just freedom from the British, but freedom of oppression from our own leaders.

Coming back to what we are doing as developed democratic nations criticize us is deftly moving towards nations that have hardly any morals, and have no problem being called bullies. Watching our foreign minister bending over backwards to a bully China, another bully Russia, and making friendly gestures to North Korea is frightening.

These are not countries we should be seen with, and yet, we have started accommodating. Ask yourself, where most of our Indians would love to migrate to? Russia? China? North Korea?

No! They would all love to cross the seas to the 'streets paved with gold' of the US or Germany or maybe the UK. Why? Because, these countries don't just have a flourish-

ing economy but a healthy democratic system, which the other three can't even come close to.

We should aspire to get there, instead of choosing as bedfellows the bullies on the other side, and who would not hesitate to stab us in the back if push came to shove.

This 2025, let us bring our country back on course.

This 2025, also, do realise that nobody is going to steal the religion that our majority follow, away from them. Nobody can, nobody will, and nobody wants to.

Yes, this 2025, let this realisation percolate into the mind of everyone in the majority community, that being a majority and being made to become fearful of a minuscule minority is not just stupidly silly, but a masterful ploy.

It's like a tiger being shown a rabbit, and being told the 'rabbit will swallow you!'

Say this lie a billion times to a billion people, make the billion look at that harmless rabbit and start attacking it.

Hey stop it! You are a powerful tiger, stop being made a fool off, because as you are being made a fool, the money you pay in taxes is being used to give freebies to voters, put money in their bank accounts, and bribing those voters to give their votes.

Cash for votes should be stopped this 2025, but only if you open your eyes this New Year and realise there is no need to be afraid of the rabbit. Because that's the bogeyman that is held in front of you, while your wallets are emptied. So this 2025, as you see your wallets emptying due to taxes increasing, remove the blinkers from your eyes.

Remove, also this 2025, the hate that is being manufactured from a national mass production plant and distributed free to the millions who stretch out their arms and ears to grab that hate.

This 2025, remove the blindfolds that you have put on yourselves, or at the end of the year, a bankrupt nation will order even the air you breathe to be taxed. Maybe, the polluted air Delhi and Mumbai breathe today, is the forerunner towards a billionaire piping fresh air into your homes at an astronomical cost.

Great business idea, right? Many years ago, a great man wrote a letter to me, saying, 'the prophets of yesterday are the journalists of today!' So do not react with amusement to my words today, but treat them as prophetic.

This 2025, open your eyes and look not just around, but look at where the country is heading, and then make every effort you can to right the course!

Happy New Year dear reader, and may we together make India great again, this 2025..!

The Author conducts an online, eight session Writers and Speakers Course. If you'd like to join, do send a thumbs-up to WhatsApp number 9892572883 or send a message to bobsbanter@gmail.com

Letters to the Editor

Good governance requires reforms for effective administration

Editor,
Appropos of the editorial "Modi and Manmohan" (ST December 30, 2024) India's economic growth has seen significant fluctuations over the years, with notable highs and lows. The global financial crisis (GFC) in 2008 and the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 had substantial impacts on the growth rates. If one assesses whose period was the best growth Manmohan Singh's or Narendra Modi's period Both Manmohan Singh and Narendra Modi have had significant impacts on India's economic growth, but in different ways. The table below speaks for itself.

and various factors such as inflation, consumption and global uncertainties.

Manmohan Singh is often credited with initiating the economic liberalization in 1991 at a time when the GDP growth rate was just 1.1% and which went up to 7.5% in 1996, that transformed India's economy from a closed, socialist system to a more open and market-oriented one. His tenure as Prime Minister from 2004 to 2014 saw consistent economic growth, with significant reforms in various

Year	Dr Manmohan Singh's	Year	Narendra Modi's period
1	2	3	4
2005	7.92	2015	8.00
2006	8.06	2016	8.26
2007	7.66	2017	6.80
2008	3.09	2018	6.45
2009	7.86	2019	3.87
2010	8.50	2020	-5.87
2011	5.24	2021	9.69
2012	5.46	2022	6.99
2013	6.39	2023	8.20
2014	7.41	2024	6.50*

sectors. Singh's policies helped lift millions out of poverty and positioned India as a rising global economic power. Narendra Modi, on the other hand, has focused on structural reforms and digital transformation. His tenure has seen initiatives like "Make in India," "Digital India," and the implementation of the Goods and Services Tax (GST). Modi's government has also emphasized financial inclusion and infrastructure development. Under his leadership, India has continued to grow, aiming to become a \$5 trillion economy. Both leaders have contributed to India's economic journey in their unique ways. Singh's era laid the foundation for liberalization and growth, while Modi's era has focused on modernization and structural reforms. Both Manmohan Singh and Narendra Modi have had significant impacts on India's economic growth, but in different ways. Both leaders have contributed to India's economic journey in their unique ways. Singh's era laid the foundation for liberalization and growth,

while Modi's era has focused on modernization and structural reforms.

I do not agree with the editor that "Modi failed to effect administrative reforms to shake the bureaucracy out of its slumber and corruption." Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government has implemented several administrative reforms aimed at improving governance and reducing bureaucratic inefficiencies. Some notable reforms include the scrapping of nearly 2,000 obsolete rules, promoting transparency, and introducing measures to enhance bureaucratic accountability. The government has also focused on digital reforms and cleanliness as part of its governance initiatives. However, challenges within the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) and the wider bureaucracy persist. Issues such as political interference, lack of specialization, and outdated personnel practices continue to affect the effectiveness of the bureaucracy. While the Modi government has made efforts to address these shortcomings, critics, whom Shakespeare calls "brushmen of noble people," argue that more comprehensive reforms are needed to fully modernize India's administrative machinery.

To fully modernize India's administrative machinery, several comprehensive reforms are needed: Structural reform that empower local governments and decentralized decision making to ensure swift and effective governance. Create autonomous agencies for specific functions to enhance efficiency and accountability. Then there is a need for procedural reforms like streamlining administrative procedures to reduce red tape and improve efficiency. Implement digital solutions to make government services more accessible and transparent. Institutional reforms demand strengthening of institutions so as to enhance their capacity to deliver public services effectively. Establish new regulatory and oversight agencies to ensure accountability and performance. There is also a need for behavioural reforms by providing continuous training and development programs for government employees to improve their skills and attitudes. Introduction of performance-based incentives to motivate employees and improve service delivery is imperative. Then there is a need for citizen-centric reforms by strengthening mechanisms for addressing public grievances and en-

suring timely resolution of public grievances redressal. Promote transparency and accountability in government operations through the Right to Information and other measures. Legal reforms call for reviewing and updating outdated laws to reflect current realities and needs. Then there is need to improve the efficiency of the judicial system to ensure timely justice. Technological reforms call for investment in digital infrastructure to support e-governance initiatives and for data driven decision making. Utilizing data analytics to inform policy decisions and improve governance is another key area. These reforms aim to create a more efficient, transparent, and responsive administrative system that meets the needs of India's diverse population.

Yours etc;
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

A call to reform our politics

Editor,
As we come to the close of 2024, I was fortunate to have had the chance of attending the programme organised by Sein Raji Shillong on

December 30, 2024 as we commemorated the 162nd Death Anniversary of U Woh Kiang Nangbah. Dignitaries including Habapan Sing Syiem, Syiem Khynnah of Hima Khyriem and Dr HH Mohrmen who graced the occasion as the Chief Guest and the Guest of Honour spelled out the sacrifice and the willingness of the martyr to fight for his land and people 162 years ago.

As I listened to the speakers and sat looking at the flex that had the image of U Kiang Nangbah, words that resonated in my mind were leader, courage, betrayal. Dr Mohrmen spoke about what lessons we could learn from a legend like U Kiang Nangbah? Amongst the various lessons, I find this lesson that says each one of us have something to offer to have a very deep meaning. U Kiang Nangbah offered his leadership and courage for the sake of his people and the love that he had for his land and country.

Come the new year, what do we have to offer to our land, our people and humankind in this wide world? As individuals we work towards the betterment of our lives at a personal level but can we be selfless and more compassionate? Can we start thinking beyond ourselves? Can we offer a helping hand to

those who are in need? Can we become less corrupt? Can we have leaders of the likes of U Kiang Nangbah, U Tirot Sing Syiem and Pa Togan Sangma? Representatives we sure do have as we voted for them but once in power our representatives no longer represent our cause but simply theirs!

We people are made to take a back seat to the point of neglect and oblivion. This is nothing but betrayal of the common people's hopes and expectations. The saying - Promises are made to be broken holds true with our representatives. Tall claims made are seldom fulfilled. This calls for courage of a different kind; one bereft of conscience, ethics and morality. To cheat, to loot, to plunder, to swindle must not become a way of life but surely these are qualities that can be found in abundance.

However, keeping spirits high and bright, I still have a lot of faith in each one of us and look forward to a year filled with positivity and righteousness. Can we? We sure can!

Yours etc.,
Jennifer Dkhar,
Via email

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

Hope, hopelessness

AS Year 2025 wears on, there's both hope and hopelessness. The year that has gone by was marked by a general election that brought back the BJP-led NDA to power for a consecutive third term. Prime Minister Narendra Modi could, however, not laugh his way to power because his alliance was not blessed with a majority in Parliament. Two crafty regional leaders – Chandrababu Naidu of the Telugu Desam and the Janata Dal (United) of Nitish Kumar -- came forward to fill the numbers required for the NDA to run government. They would demand their pound of flesh at the right time. The result is also that Modi cannot take any hard decisions for fear that these two leaders could rebel and bring down the government.

The Delhi assembly polls are set for February. All eyes are on AAP chief Arvind Kejriwal's AAP, which will have a hard struggle retaining power there. The Bihar polls are set for June. The BJP is weaker there compared to Delhi. Chief Minister Nitish Kumar is playing his cards close to his chest. He's most untrustworthy and could shift alliances like a chameleon changing its colours. How the assembly results would shape up in Bihar is important. His bitter rival, Lalu Prasad Yadav, has extended an olive branch to Kumar, inviting him back to the Mahagadbandhan. A question is, can the BJP keep the present power sharing arrangement at the Centre intact for the present full term – and whether the main opposition, the Congress, show the courage to unsettle the government. Year 2025 will give clear clues to such possibilities. The BJP is set to have a new president in January. The power equations in the saffron party would change with the installation of a new head. The RSS would be observing its centenary this year and it could have a new head in place. The Congress party would increasingly feel the weight of Priyanka Gandhi in Parliament, where she got in a couple of months ago. The CPIM, which is steadily losing its national clout, will also have a new general secretary when it holds its party Congress in April. A new set of leaders would shape future politics from this year.

Modi himself is perhaps on his last lap in power. The shaping of a new leader to the prime post could start after the installation of the new party chief this year. Modi's failures in governance are as stark as his successes. He has failed to take any strong step for two full terms, other than on Kashmir and in the implementation of a common market taxation mechanism in the form of GST. Those like Indira Gandhi and Manmohan Singh left lasting impressions on the nation with their strong steps or reformative zeal. Both are missing in the Modi era.

Letters to the Editor

Religion not a playground for publicity stunts

Editor,

The unmatched tranquility of Mawlynnong village has attracted countless visitors and they have always left the state with a deep sense of gratitude and admiration. Unfortunately, it has also attracted an insensitive vagabond recently, whose disgusting act left a bitter taste in the mouths of the entire state. I dare say, to call such a person a Hindu would be an insult to the religion itself. He is nothing more than a moron with base instincts, as reflected in his vulgar YouTube videos. The core principles of Hinduism are rooted in love, tolerance, compassion, "purity in action" and respect for all living beings, as also pointed out by Sudarshan Dasgupta through his letter – "Denouncing violence and respecting the sanctity of all places of worship" (ST, December 31, 2024). Hinduism does not condone actions that hurt the sentiments and feelings of others. This is called "adharma".

Ramakrishna, a revered Hindu saint, out of great respect, immersed himself in diverse religious practices in his quest for spiritual truth, epitomizing "interfaith respect." During one profound moment of intensive meditation, he envisioned Jesus Christ, whose radiant form approached him in a spiritual embrace. In that divine moment, the figures

of Ramakrishna and Jesus merged, symbolizing the unity of all religions and the "oneness of divinity" – a truth that can be realized by our ardent devotee through practices. Such examples invariably remind us that the path to true spirituality lies in love, compassion, and service – not in divisive acts or disrespect toward others' faiths.

Hence, every sane citizen should vociferously condemn such people with goddess proclivities. They certainly deserve "exemplary punishment" so that others will not dare to repeat such acts. Needless to say, sacred traditions, symbols, and spaces of any religion are not arenas for mockery or divisive rhetoric. No one should be allowed to make religion a playground for cheap publicity stunts.

Yours etc.,
Salil Grewal,
Shillong

Land a critical factor of production

Editor,

Apropos of the news "Paul Lyngdoh not in sync with UDP stand on investment plan" (ST December 31, 2024). Paul Lyngdoh, Minister Tourism and Art and Culture etc; has rightly stated, "I don't think it is the right approach to just oppose without suggesting an alternative," on the Meghalaya State Investment Promotion and Facilitation Act MSIPFA). In fact, op-

If everyone's talking, who's listening? Why dialogues degenerate to parallel monologues

By Patricia Mukhim

This New Year's eve has to be the loudest ever in the history of Meghalaya. The bursting of fireworks that must measure several decibels above the permitted loudness is unprecedented. Naturally the dogs and cats had to run for cover. The fireworks exceeded the normal Diwali noise. But what is there to celebrate about 2025 and what was so bad about 2024 that people seemed to let loose their fury through those fire-crackers. The district administration which usually cautions people not to overdo their fireworks during Diwali was curiously silent on the days preceding the New Year's eve. Anyone who had gone to bed at the usual time of 10 or 11 pm and had just gone into deep slumber must have been rudely awakened much to their chagrin.

It's not possible that the elderly would be so enthusiastic as to step out at midnight in the forbidding cold and blow those fire-crackers to smithereens with the intention of making a point. Those who enjoyed creating that over-the-top loud noise would have been young people and that loud noise is a noise of protest since there is no other way of making a point and no other way to make the powers that be, to listen to their deepest angst. No one ever asks a young person -What do you really want and why? Can we have a conversation and reason out your choice of a college/school/university or the subjects you want to take up? Almost 99 % of the time parents decide what's best for their kids without allowing them room to even express their opinions. This must be frustrating. It is the reason why the young seem to trust their friends and to confide their deepest secrets with them. Parents are disinclined to listen with any empathy. They are forever judging their children. In school, teachers have no time to just listen to different points of views. They are too busy chasing the syllabus.

It must be frustrating for the youth standing as they are at the crossroads of an era that their parents lived by and the present one where technology runs their lives wittingly or unwittingly. The smartphone has become a constant companion making up for the lack of empathy

from elders. How many parents would really leave their assumptions outside and just spend time prodding their children's mind and have a conversation without using words that show impatience and a face that communicates the words, "I know what you're going to say before you even say it." That would shut up the young person who was actually longing for a listening ear – a heart that would resonate with theirs and a mind that would temporarily suspend judgment and try and feel what that young soul feels – the desperation – the fear – the hopelessness – the frustration. If only we adults could listen to their hearts and sense what's going on there. But how do we do that unless we have created a safe space where they know they can speak up and be understood and not shouted down? How many families have taken time off to change the tone and tenor of their conversations with children which veers around only telling their kids to 'do this, don't do that and what's most jarring for young people to hear is their parents telling them, "We've been on that road before so we know; you don't have to tell us." How do we tell parents that every journey is unique; every experience is a never before one?

Too often it looks like the parents need more counselling than the child, what with their unreasonable expectations and comparing their own children with someone else's kids. Don't parents know that comparing even two siblings, one a fast learner and the other a bit of a slow coach is devastating for the second child and if that is done early in life the impact must be far reaching. Sometimes one wonders if there could be classes for parenting so that parents don't blunder their way through life and destroy the lives of those they love most – their children. Think especially of kids whose mothers are barely out of their teens and who never had a father. What would be that kid's comfort zone? Nothing! Only a vacuum unless she/he finds a friend, a soulmate or a teacher who would be that redeeming figure helping a

child find her/his way in a cruel world.

The reality is that it is very difficult to be a young person in this day and age. Sadly youth policies are made by adults who assume they know everything that matters to the youth without ever consulting them. Think Meghalaya where about 10% of the population is on drugs and some more are alcoholics. What drove the young people to drugs or alcohol. Both are illnesses and not just human frailties or a conscious choice. If we really care to listen to these young people who have fallen between the cracks our hearts would break. They were ordinary kids that had hopes and dreams but somewhere along the way those dreams were shattered and the reasons are many. They always begin with the family. And we cannot deny that too many families in our state are dysfunctional with mothers playing the role of both parents. If only men realise that fatherhood is a huge responsibility and sex cannot be an accidental affair, nor is pregnancy for women in this age of contraception. Sex is not to be experimented with yet unprotected sex is what a large number of our youth indulge in. And who pays the price? It's always the girl who turns into a woman and mother overnight. Does anyone care to listen to her? Or to help her deal with the situation? No there won't be because this is a highly moralistic and judgmental society. But is that moral yardstick of any help?

Meghalaya actually needs more counselling centres in the villages where those in need of help can go confidentially and can hope that the confidentiality is maintained. You will find any number of young people looking for help on how to manage their lives because their parents either don't know the art of conversing with their children or are too religious to accept that their children have strayed and instead of being condemned those young people need emotional healing. That's it! Emotionally hurt young people in turn hurt others in the same way that victims become oppressors in a given situation.

It's time for those in politics and social work to start valuing the opinions of youth and not just brush them aside. Taking young people's contributions into account fosters a sense of citizenship in them. Also assisting them in the development of key competencies such as cooperation and communication skills, self-efficacy, responsibility, civic-mindedness, and respect for the value of democracy is very helpful. Only when the government begins to act upon these suggestions for young people will this be seen as an indicator of young people's voices starting to be heard.

Most young people will not speak out publicly but will rave and rant privately; young men might physically and mentally abuse their wives or girlfriends. These young people are unable to articulate their feelings and give voice to their emotions because our schools and colleges have not empowered young people to speak without fear. And neither have our homes! There's no space for such speaking classes in our curriculum. Without the power to voice their angst how can the youth be a part of the democratic process? Merely shouting slogans mindlessly on behalf of a political party is not youth empowerment. In fact, those that shout the loudest don't have much to say about the party they support when engaged in a one-on-one conversation.

Coming to youth aspirations, each time I watch Chief Minister, Conrad Sangma nurse his guitar in an almost romantic embrace and sets the strings in motion, I feel he could have become a Bryan Adams or some other rockstar too. But being sucked in by the tornado of politics also meant that he had to give up his first love – music and stumble into politics. One wonders if that career option was an individual choice or a family duty. If only the youth could get into the kind of work they love, life would perhaps be less cruel to them and to those around them. On that note, would it be too much to ask school and college administrators to create space for young people to speak up and to also empower the diffident ones to stand up and hold their ground?

Some hard questions on the Indian economy

As we step into a New Year, what does the economic outlook look like

By Jagdish Rattanani

More than half a century after the economist-philosopher E F Schumacher talked of "economics as if people mattered", India is caught in an economic story that is increasingly about numbers bigger than the people they are meant to serve.

As 2023 drew to a close, Prime Minister Narendra Modi reiterated in Parliament that India will soon become the third largest global economy. The Union Minister of State in the PMO Dr Jitendra Singh repeated the promise on Dec. 30, 2024, with these words: "Hopefully this year (India) will emerge as the 4th largest economy and during PM Modi's 3rd term, India will be the world's 3rd largest economy, marching on to become the No.1 economy by 2047." The claims of a march to global superstardom come ironically not at a good time, even when looked at from a numbers-only perspective.

To begin, in the near term, growth is down and inflation is up.

GDP was 9% in 2022-23 H1, fell to 8.2% in 2023-24 and further slipped to 6% in 2024-25 H1. GVA (Gross Value Added), which is growth on the supply side, was 6.2% in 2024-25 H1, down from the 8% mark in the same period for the previous two years.

Inflation (CPI-Combined) crossed the targeted upper threshold of 6% in October 2024, with food inflation at an alarming 9.69%. Food inflation this close to double digits was at a 14-month high. CPI inflation came down to 5.48% in November 2024, with continued high food inflation at 8.2%.

Largely, inflation has been on a higher trajectory since 2020, above the mandated upper target of 6% for as many as 25 months in the last four years. It is plain that the Indian economy has had a bumpy ride in the year gone by, with many red and yellow warning lights. The hope being expressed is that the ride will settle and pick up pace, an optimism reflected in the statement of the newly appointed RBI Governor Sanjay Malhotra: "... prospects for the Indian economy are expected to improve after the slowdown in the pace of economic activity in the first half of 2024-25."

How do we "improve"?

Here comes the clamour for a rate cut as a panacea, but since food inflation is alarmingly high, a rate cut must come by ignoring this fact. Yet, food inflation hits the poor the most, so this approach translates to ignoring the poor while keeping the engine going along the lines of failed trickle-down theories. As the illustrious former RBI Deputy Governor, the late Savak Tarapore once remarked: "(High) food inflation just cannot be wished away as a supply side problem... it gnaws into the vitals of large tracts of the population."

In November, Minister for Commerce and Industry Piyush Goyal said it was "absolutely flawed theory" to consider food inflation when deciding on bank interest rates. The call for excluding food inflation while working the central bank's inflation targeting framework rather than expressing alarm at galloping food inflation ignores the simple wisdom that the common man suffers first from food inflation, not from core inflation. Keeping to first principles, lower rates should push credit delivery, drive increased investment, see more projects take off and deliver growth -- the sign of a nation on the move. Yet, these first principles don't translate to practice when the signals going out are contrary to the idea of growth that is fair, balanced and equitable.

Regulatory frameworks must work for all sides and all parties. Good governance is a pre-requisite for good growth. But the Indian economic story has been marked by weak governance and strong signals emanating from the top that all business houses are not created equal. The continued inaction on allegations against the house of the Adanis, the

loss of moral authority of the premier regulator the SEBI, with the Chair personally embroiled in connected allegations, the political donations that came through the opacity of electoral bonds, since struck down by the Supreme Court, the selective use of the investigative agencies, and the willingness to use strong-arm tactics to silence critics are all part of a philosophy of command and control. These signals sit at odds with the idea of free market entrepreneurship and investing; they kill creativity, innovation and risk-taking that can fire animal spirits and take the economy to a higher orbit. Before considering an investment today, a prudent businessman must consider how his or her statements and positions and partners will sit with the powers that be, then carefully tip-toe around any potential political minefield before making an investment decision.

Separating good governance from good economics, almost cutting them into neat exclusive sets and then expecting durable growth is like asking everyone to join in the marathon when the winners are pre-decided. The game will soon be seen as a charade, with longer term implications for investments, reputation and growth numbers. Not far from the headlines of laudatory mentions on growth is the story of a per capita income that keeps a majority of Indians away from the benefits of the claimed growth success. Coupled with a pervasive joblessness that shows up in events that are eye-popping, like the stampedes when lakhs queue-up for a limited number of vacancies, it speaks of a nation divided, its businesses subdued, its citizens reduced to searching for non-existent jobs.

Communal divides are bad. Economic divides being created can be equally so, with increasing concentration of wealth in the hands of fewer people so that we have a nation split, literally and metaphorically, between the few within gated communities and the majority who cannot step in. In that sense, Mumbai's glittering high rises built by BJP-friendly builders are a symptom of a deeper rot. Economists will tell you that good growth and price stability are the two pillars of a robust economy. These work on the backbone of financial stability. In this context, note the accolades being claimed over the headline statement that bank non-performing assets (NPAs) have been brought down in the system. It is indeed true that NPAs in the banking system have fallen. To quote the official statement titled "Public Sector Banks: A Resurgent Force": "The Gross NPA ratio of Public Sector Banks (PSBs) has witnessed a remarkable improvement, declining to 3.12% in September 2024 from a peak of 14.58% in March 2018. This significant reduction reflects the success of targeted interventions aimed at addressing stress within the banking system." But how has this reduction been achieved?

There is an increased tendency to clean the books with write-offs. For example, reduction in Gross NPAs during 2023-24 for all public sector banks was of the order of Rs.1,73,090 crore (~1.73 lakh cr), of which as much as Rs.1,12,515 crore (~1.13 lakh cr) were plain write-offs. This tendency will need some further probing if financial stability is not to be reduced to a joke. Further, there is an urgent need to study the quantum of new NPAs being added to the system as more of the old ones are written off. In 2023-24, Rs.84,435 crore new NPAs were added to the public sector banking system.

This is a cautionary tale as we step into the New Year. Governance and economic management cannot be reduced to headline grabbing for long.

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

posing without suggesting an alternative often means criticizing or rejecting an idea, policy, or action without offering a constructive solution or a better option. This approach can be seen as unproductive because it focuses solely on the negatives without contributing to progress or improvement. Constructive criticism, on the other hand, involves not only pointing out flaws but also proposing viable alternatives that can lead to better outcomes. One fails to understand how there can be alienation of land when the Government of Meghalaya will own the land and it will only lease to the corporate entities or companies. Let us not be misled by rhetoric of those who simply oppose for the sake of opposing but have no ideas to suggest. Businessmen say that an idea is 75 paise and to implement that idea you need 25 paise.

The factors of production are resources used to produce goods and services. They are typically classified into four main categories, namely, land, labour, capital and entrepreneurship. Land includes all natural resources used in production, such as land, water, minerals, and forests. Land is considered a passive factor as it provides the raw materials needed for production. Labour refers to the human effort used in the production process. It includes both physical and mental work contributed by employees, workers and managers. Capital includes all man-made resources used in production, such as machinery, tools, build-

ings and technology. Capital is essential for increasing productivity and efficiency. Entrepreneurship involves ability to combine the other factors of production effectively. Entrepreneurs take risks, innovate, and make strategic decisions to drive economic growth and create value. These factors work together to produce goods and services, driving economic activity and economic growth. The Minister has aptly stated "We have now reached a stage where our people are no longer job seekers but are job creators. Why should we not be able to find 500 or 1000 entrepreneurs to form their own companies, and take the land on lease through this policy?"

Land Banks play a crucial role in fostering industry and economic growth. Some of the key reasons why they are important. 1. Land banks help in utilising unused or underutilized land efficiently. This can lead to better land management and reduce wastage of valuable resources. 2. By providing pre-cleared and ready-to-use land parcels, land banks simplify the process for businesses to set up operations. This reduces delays and bureaucratic hurdles, making it easier for industries to start and expand. 3. A well-maintained land bank can attract both domestic and foreign investments. Investors are more likely to invest in regions where land acquisition is streamlined and transparent. 4. By facilitating the establishment of industries and businesses,

land banks contribute to overall economic growth. They help in creating jobs (not government jobs which are saturated in Meghalaya), boosting local economies and increasing Gross Domestic Product (GDP). 5. Land banks promote transparency in land allotment, reducing chances of corruption and land disputes. This creates a more favourable environment for business operations. 6. With comprehensive data on land availability, infrastructure, and connectivity, land banks enable investors to make informed decisions about where to set up their businesses. By addressing these aspects, land banks play a pivotal role in driving industrial development and economic prosperity. The Minister has rightly stated that "Land is an asset which stays with the government. The question that the ownership of land will go to the entities from outside does not arise". The Minister has also given a classic example of big tourism projects which has a great future in Meghalaya.

Creating furore in parliament denotes the inefficiency of our representatives. The mistaken notion that noise can suppress good reasoning is really a matter of great concern today. Noise culture has started enveloping parliament in recent years in the country reducing it to a fish market.

There should be a law in the country to rid parliament of such objectionable scenes and to restrict rude and uncultured politicians by curtailing their allowances. The scene creators should be suspended for whole parliament session irrespective of the party the MP belongs to.

Yours etc.,
Deepak Chhetry
Tura

Furore in parliament unwarranted

Editor,

Through this esteemed daily I wish to express my anxiety over the matter of not allowing parliament to function each time the parliament session begins in this coun-

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

"We may encounter many defeats
but we must not be defeated"

— Maya Angelou

The Shillong Times

Vol No. 1477 No. 143 SHILLONG, SATURDAY, JANUARY 4, 2024

UDP's strange prescriptions

IT is not often that a coalition partner of the government prescribes a series of actions for good governance through the media. While the suggestions given by the UDP General Secretary, Jemino Mawthroh on various sectors of governance are much needed, these are better discussed internally and in the cabinet rather than outside it since the UDP is a prime coalition partner of the Meghalaya Democratic Alliance (MDA) Government and this alliance is on its second tenure. The question is - who is the UDP talking to and why should such prescriptions emerge now that the NPP, the senior coalition partner, has enough MLAs to run the government single-handedly?

Out of the 12 ministers in the cabinet, the UDP has three and they are holding important portfolios such as Tourism, Social Welfare, Food and Civil Supplies, Water Resources, Home (Passport) Department, Revenue & Disaster Management, Excise Departments among others. Are these ministers delivering on the departments entrusted to them? The UDP has asked the Government to win the trust and confidence of the people but what are those confidence building measures that the Government needs to put in place? Which are the areas of governance that people have very little or no confidence in? It is important to spell out specific departments rather than make a generic recommendation. The UDP has literally tasked the MDA Government to be transparent, accountable and responsive to the needs and expectations of the poor. Should this exercise not have been undertaken first within the Party and each of the three ministers assessed for exactly what the UDP is demanding from the Government? Only if the UDP ministers are not found wanting in any area of governance would the Party have the legitimacy to urge the other coalition partners namely the NPP and BJP to meet the above expectations of the Party.

It is noteworthy that the UDP has also spelt out the demographics most in need of government assistance namely the urban poor, farmers, women and children and also for the MDA Government to create job opportunities for the burgeoning youth population. The UDP has also pointed to the need for improving road connectivity and to enhance quality education, healthcare services, tourism, power and the agriculture sector. To the discerning public it is evident that the UDP has pointed to all the departments run by the NPP, barring tourism which is held by their own party members. Further, the UDP suggests that a people-centric governance is the need of the hour but the Party has not raised its voice when certain laws were passed without public consultation. Governance without involving people is a top-down model that is destined to fail and lead to non-cooperation. Government agencies alone cannot implement development projects without the cooperation of the people. Have any of the UDP ministers had a peoples' consultation in running their departments? Innovation in governance is integral for a focused development but has the UDP placed all this agenda before the Government in the past? Now that elections to the ADC are close at hand and all the coalition partners of the MDA Government are going it alone it is customary for the finger-pointing to start once the campaign season begins. People can no longer be fooled!

The dangerous nexus: Religion and politics in Meghalaya

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

Meghalaya is finally getting its own state university named after the first Chief Minister of the State, the Captain Williamson Sangma State University. Inaugurated in January 2023, the Meghalaya government is preparing for a massive Christian prayer service to consecrate the occasion. Rakkam A Sangma, the Education Minister, defended the highly irregular decision, arguing that if Hindu rituals can consecrate the new Parliament, "why not Christian rituals in a Christian state?" On the face, it sounds like a reasonable argument. If the Union government can choose to favour a particular religion, why shouldn't others do the same? However, such tit-for-tat action is going to be highly counter-productive.

The BJP-led NDA has to take a lot of the blame for this mixing of religion and politics that is becoming pervasive in the country. Not that religion and politics were kept separate in the past. Vote bank politics, by dividing people based on religious identity, was what gave birth to the modern nation of India. However, while Pakistan declared itself an Islamic republic, India chose not to adopt a state religion but favoured a version of secularism where, officially, all religions received equal validity. However, the government did not give official recognition to indigenous faiths such as Niam Khasi, Songsarek, and Sarma Dharma, categorizing them as "others". This was an injustice done to the indigenous people of the country, which persists till date. The wait will go on because the intention of the BJP-led government is to ultimately play the politics of janjati, vanwashi, ghar wapsi to get these smaller religions assimilated into Hinduism.

As for the other religious minorities, harassment is a tool which is being deployed extensively. During the recent Christmas celebration, a video surfaced depicting two indigenous Christian women from Orissa bound to a tree and being compelled to chant "Jai Shri Ram." These women appear to belong to one of the local Austroasiatic groups who are linguistically and genetically related to the Khasis. Imagine a non-indigenous mob tying up Khasi women and beating them in their own homeland. This happened in Orissa. Reports came from across the country of many disruptions to Christmas celebrations. If

there's one minority which has faced the brunt of this toxic concoction of religion and politics, it's the Muslims. The year 2024 saw a continuation of violence on the pretext of cow protection and attempts at finding destroyed temples under almost every mosque. The situation was getting out of hand, prompting the RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat to condemn these attempts of raking up temple-mosque disputes by 'wannabe Hindu leaders'. However, at the beginning of the year another Muslim was killed in the name of cow protection. The experiment of the RSS has worked only too well for their own good. When one looks at what is happening in the country, it is understandable that the minorities, which include the indigenous people, will be wary and concerned. Bigotry in the country will force them to respond with their own bigotry. The consecration of the state university by organising a Christian prayer and by ignoring other religions in the state, including the indigenous faiths, is a mirror image of the Hindutva politics that is playing out in the mainland. But this is not the first time that the MDA government has tried mixing religion with politics. Chief Minister Conrad Sangma had held similar Christian prayer services in the past when the cabinet took charge. In 2020, he had led an Easter prayer service when the state was reeling under COVID-19 with a Christian prayer. Why should the head of a secular state lead the prayer service of a particular religion? Irrespective of what Rakkam A Sangma and others like him think, Meghalaya is not a Christian state, just like India is not a Hindu Rashtra. We must condemn the bigotry that is unfolding in the mainland, but we must also condemn attempts at replicating it in our state as well. What instead is required is what the CPC (Central Puja Committee) of Shillong did when a YouTuber Akash Sagar desecrated the premises of the Church of the Epiphany by chanting 'Jay Shri Ram' using the church microphone. The CPC immediately condemned the incident, urging the district administration to investigate the matter and take stringent exemplary action against the offender as per the law. I was involved in this issue because I had accompanied

Angela Rangad to file the FIR against the individual. Apart from the CPC, what was most heartening is when I went to the personal Instagram page of Akash Sagar, under the comments section, I saw many Hindus condemning his actions and some even stating they were going to unfollow him after the incident. It is absolutely important to reiterate that the desecration of the Church by this individual was an individual act and had nothing to do with the larger Hindu community. Despite all the bigotry unleashed in the country, majority of the Indian voters still voted against the BJP. It was only money power and the capture of institutions that helped them narrowly win the 2024 Parliamentary elections. This shows that not every Hindu in the country has been radicalized. Any reaction to the Hindu fundamentalist, therefore, must not be based on Christian fundamentalism in our own state. There is a need to build solidarity, not division. This solidarity has to be built on respect for the rights of minorities and their history and culture. An excellent example of this is the ongoing issue of a ban on worship at Mawjymbuin cave in Mawsynram.

After the ban was announced by the Mawsynram Durbar Shnong a group based in Assam known as Kutumba Suraksha Parishad (KSP) issued threats against the people of Meghalaya by vowing to disrupt their travel to Assam. They demanded a meeting with local stakeholders to resume worship. What was most curious is that they wanted the local Seng Khasi organisation to be part of the discussion. It's undeniable that Christians have discriminated against Niam Khasi faith adherents. But this doesn't mean that they will somehow become part of Hinduism. Niam Khasi is a religion connected with the Khasi people, who are the second oldest inhabitants of South Asia, with their history going back at least 5000 years. Hinduism emerged in the region only after 1500 BCE (3500 years ago), having arrived with the Indo-Aryan speakers from Central Asia. Many Niam Khasi know this very well and, they are very aware of their indigenous identity and the distinctiveness of their religion. A well-respected member of the Seng Khasi

conveyed this to me during our discussion.

This individual was a member of the BJP and had accompanied a high level leader of the party when he visited the state. But when the party leader entered a Hindu temple, the Niam Khasi adherent refused to follow him inside. When I asked for the reason, he/she replied that Khasis (Niam Khasi) don't worship idols and therefore he/she refused to take part in the worship. It makes perfect sense. Khasis are nature worshippers but they don't have any idols of the gods they worship. Khasis venerate natural objects (like the monoliths where they conduct their rituals), but unlike Hindus, these objects don't represent a particular deity.

Khasis know the cave in Mawsynram as Mawjymbuin, which translates to a rock which resembles a breast and not a phallus which represents the Shivaling. The structure is actually a stalagmite, which are mineral formations made by water dripping onto the floor of a cave and are a common feature of limestone geomorphology. If we consider this a religious symbol, then every limestone cave in Meghalaya is a potential religious site. I am not sure when the practicing of allowing worship in the cave started, but a non-Christian and non-indigenous friend of mine told me that till around 30 years ago the site was a picnic spot. He had visited the cave in his childhood and played inside with his friends. There was no worship happening back then. So, it appears to be a recent phenomenon.

We must condemn the attempt to force the Khasis to allow Hindu worship at a picnic spot in Mawsynram which is a distortion of their traditional belief system. Any attempt to twist the history of indigenous peoples and weaken their identity by forcing cultural assimilation should be rejected. Instead we should condemn both Christian and Hindu fundamentalism. It is only by rejecting such attempts at polarisation of the state, which is being attempted by both the State government and the Assam-based Hindu group, that we can have peace. Any hypocrisy in this matter will only create more problems in the future. We must not allow that to happen.

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

PM Narendra Modi has to be firm with hard core Hindutva in 2025
Lots of confusion in Sangh Parivar over places of Worship Act

By Sushil Kutty

2024 was a happening year. Happenstance, 2025 also will be. There was a new government at the Centre in 2024 — with the same old Prime Minister and a brand new Leader of the Opposition! In year 2025, there will be a new government in Delhi and the same old Chief Minister, maybe?

None of this ensures that 2025 won't be very different from 2024. There are carryovers and spillovers. Like the turmoil over the Places of Worship Act, 1991 and the fracas over the Waqf Board Amendment Bill, 2024. Both of which are invasive and have been roiling society and country since 2014.

A lethargic central government allowed the issues to drag on despite their poten-

tion of the Places of Worship Act.

Which is in line with RSS Chief Mohan Bhagwat's thinking on the topic. Bhagwat is Modi's 'Boss' and the BJP's "conscience-keeper", who also wants no more digging looking for mandirs under mosques. Bhagwat says "social harmony" is a must for "Viksit Bharat", which is what Prime Minister Modi also wants — "Viksit Bharat."

Owaisi wants hospitals and schools, colleges and universities (no police outposts in Muslim areas) — all of which also translate to "Viksit Bharat." The Supreme Court is waiting for the central government to take a stand before it makes its own stand clear.



cial to create trouble afresh. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has a parsimonious record in decision-making. It goes back to 2002 when Gujarat broke out in flames. Quick action is not one of Modi's strengths.

Now, in 2025, the Modi government faces a decisive moment. The contentious Waqf Board Amendment Bill, 2024, the Modi-led NDA government has set aside for a yet to be decided date in the next Budget Session of Parliament. The Waqf Board Amendment Bill, 2024 will likely go the way of the Uniform Civil Code, now renamed the "Secular Civil Code".

That leaves the Places of Worship Act, 1991, which, whether he likes it or not, will test both Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his government, begging the question, what's the government's stand on the Places of Worship Act, 1991?

Prime Minister Modi must have a stand. It can't be otherwise. But Modi is hampered by his own mind-set, which is against taking a stand, any stand. Modi has always balked at speaking his mind. His way is to live on borrowed time. But, maybe, not this time, he won't be able to.

Finally, like it or not, Modi is at his tether's end. No more extensions. No more excuses. Modi has to step out of the recesses of indecision. The indecisiveness he applies everywhere every time is no longer tenable, Modi has to bare his soul for whatever it is worth. The three-judge bench of the Supreme Court, hearing a batch of petitions on the Places of Worship Act, will not be denied.

The top court has drawn a line between inaction and action — denying yet another opportunity to lapse into procrastination: the apex court gave four weeks to the Modi government to say its piece on the issue and be done with it. Thereafter, another four weeks for the government's decision to sink in and the next hearing has been set for February 17.

What will be the Centre's stand? AIMIM Chief Asaduddin Owaisi has joined the battle with a petition of his own asking for stricter application of the Places of Worship Act, 1991. Owaisi's AIMIM is said to be the "BJP's B-team" and Owaisi wants stricter implementa-

For the time being, the three-judge bench of CJI Sanjiv Khanna has put a stop on registering fresh suits challenging ownership and titles of places of worship. Also no more surveys and "effective" orders. CJI Sanjiv Khanna is not of the same bent as Justice DY Chandrachud was.

To put it in context, CJI Khanna is "secular" and on February 17, 2025, we will get an inkling on whether the two other justices, P V Sanjay Kumar and K V Viswanathan, are also of a "secular" bent of mind or not. The operative part of SC's order was "we want the Union of India's position to be brought on record."

The bench brought everything else to a standstill — from Gyanvapi in Varanasi to the Shahi Idgah in Mathura; from Shahi Jama Masjid in Sambhal to the Ajmer Sharif Dargah in Rajasthan, where "small-small courts" have been bypassing the Places of Worship Act, 1991 in a "race with the Supreme Court."

The ball is in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's court. There's a caveat: Modi cannot shift to secularism and look the Hindu gift-horse in the mouth. The BJP's Hindu vote-bank is his mainstay and Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath is the latest rage among Hindu voters in the Hindu-heartland!

Why did PM Modi on January 2 send a 'Chadar' to the Ajmer Sharif Dargah? Is Modi unaware that Ajmer Sharif Dargah is also "disputed" with a Hindu outfit claiming it's a Shiva temple? If he does, why the 'Chadar', unless he wants the Places of Worship Act, 1991 to stay? Unless he agrees with RSS Chief Mohan Bhagwat and wants "social harmony" for a "Viksit Bharat" — will the Modi government vote for the continuance of the Places of Worship Act, 1991?

Will Modi survive the Hindu backlash? On December 20, the Ajmer Sharif Dargah Committee filed a 5-page application in a Munsif Court in Ajmer. The next hearing is scheduled for January 24. Offering the "Chadar" is regarded as a "powerful form of worship and fulfills vows." Has Prime Minister Narendra Modi made up his government's stand on the Places of Worship Act, 1991? (IPA Service)

Christo-fascism threatens secularism

Editor,
It would be dishonest to say I was surprised by the news titled "Christian consecration for first state university" (ST Jan 3, 2025). I recall a similar Christian ceremony taking place when the MDA returned to power in the 2023 elections. In fact, many problematic things have been done in the past by the majority in our state that reinforces the idea that they are against pluralism; examples of this abound unless you have your head buried deep underground. Secularism is slowly being disregarded in our state and in its place Christo-fascism — a politicized version of Christianity that seeks to enforce archaic Christian values at the expense of democracy and pluralism-reigns supreme.
This trend is alarming for many as it mirrors another form of fascism at the national level, i.e., Hindutva fascism. Both Christo-fascism at the state level and Hindutva at the national level demonstrate the ugliness of majoritarianism. While these two are similar in nature,

they are actively at loggerheads with one another. As many have pointed out before, like in the article "Is the VPP the Christian version of BJP?" by A Thyriang, the adoption of Christo-fascism will only delegitimize any complaints the Christians have against Hindutva and furthermore embolden followers of the said ideology to assert themselves. Secularism in the state will further erode as the VPP becomes more popular. Additionally, the minority religious community in the state will suffer under this majoritarianism driving its followers to embrace outside forces. In the end, economic growth will have to take a back seat as everyone is busy fiddling with communal politics.

What is more concerning is that while Hindutva has actual Hindus as some of its biggest opponents, Christo-fascism seems to be unopposed by moderate Christians. Recently, a Hindu fanatic trespassed into a Christian church and desecrated it by shouting religious slogans. Every corner of the state from politicians to NGOs and even Hindus rightfully reacted to this with severe criticisms against the lunatic. However, one struggles to find condemnations when the desecrating is being carried out by Christians. Back in

2019, a Christian fanatic clad in white, desecrated the Behdienkham festival in Jowai and not a single NGO or politician dared to speak out against this; in fact, many praised him on social media for being a brave soldier of the Lord. Similarly, in 2020, an MLA claimed in the assembly that it was because of homosexuals and non-obedient women that God punished the world with the Covid pandemic; he was hailed as a hero. I can go on and on. For those willing to learn, these incidents can teach you a lot about the lunacy of the people in this god-awful state!

Clearly, this is not conducive for the well-being of our state. Prosperity will only come when this madness and hypocrisy stops.

Yours etc.,
Heirtami Paswet,
Via email

Depreciation of the rupee and managing currency fluctuations

Editor,
Critiquing the UPA leadership on August 20, 2013 on the falling value of the rupee to the dollar, Nar-

endra Modi, former Chief Minister of Gujarat stated "Crises come, but if during a crisis if the leadership is directionless, hopeless, then the crisis becomes very grave... It is our country's misfortune that the rulers in Delhi are neither worried about the country's defence nor about the falling value of the rupee... If they are worried, it is only about saving their chair." It was quite a strong statement, wasn't it? In 1991, the exchange rate of INR to USD was approximately Rs 22.74. In 1994 the rupee to the dollar was Rs 31.37 and by 2004 it was Rs 45.32, 10 years later the rupee depreciated by 44.18 percent in 2004. On 16 May, 2014, the rupee closed at Rs 58.58 per USD. Ten years later, the rupee has touched an all-time-low of Rs 85.27 per USD. It depreciated by 45.56 percent. This is 1.38% higher when compared with the depreciation rate in 2004 over 1994.

When the rupees depreciate against the dollar, it sends several important messages about the economy. A weaker rupee makes imports more expensive, which can lead to higher inflation as the cost of goods and services rises. On the flip side, a depreciated rupee can make Indian exports cheaper and more competitive in the global market, potentially boosting

export revenues. The cost of servicing foreign debt increases, as more rupees are needed to pay off dollar-denominated loans. Persistent depreciation can deter foreign investors, leading to capital outflows and further weakening of the currency. It can indicate underlying economic issues such as trade deficits, inflation, or lack of investor confidence. In such situations the policy response prompts intervention from the Reserve Bank of India to stabilize the currency and manage inflation. Understanding these implications helps in grasping the broader economic impact of currency fluctuations.

Managing currency fluctuations is crucial for maintaining economic stability. Here are some of the strategies. 1. Businesses can use financial instruments like futures, options and forward contracts to hedge against currency risk. This helps lock in exchange rates and protect against adverse movements. 2. Diversifying investments and revenue streams across different currencies and markets can reduce the impact of fluctuations in any single currency. 3. Central banks can intervene in the foreign exchange market to stabilise the currency. This can involve buying or selling foreign currency reserves to influence the exchange rate.

4. Adjusting interest rates can help manage currency value. Higher interest rates can attract foreign investments, leading to an appreciation of the currency. 5. Government policies that promote economic stability and growth can also help manage currency fluctuations. This includes maintaining a healthy budget balance and reducing public debt. 6. Monitoring economic indicators such as inflation, trade balance, and foreign exchange reserves can provide insights into potential currency movements and help in making informed decisions. 7. Implementing robust risk management practices within businesses can help mitigate the impact of currency fluctuations. This includes setting up contingency plans and regularly reviewing financial strategies. By employing these strategies, businesses and governments can better manage the risks associated with currency fluctuations and maintain economic stability.

Yours etc.,
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

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

How small diet tweaks can lead to sustainable weight loss

It's a well-known fact that to lose weight, you either need to eat less or move more. But how many calories do you really need to cut out of your diet each day to lose weight? It may be less than you think.

To determine how much energy (calories) your body requires, you need to calculate your total daily energy expenditure (TDEE). This is comprised of your basal metabolic rate (BMR) - the energy needed to sustain your body's metabolic processes at rest - and your physical activity level. Many online calculators can help determine your daily calorie needs.

If you reduce your energy intake (or increase the amount you burn through exercise) by 500-1,000 calories per day, you'll see a weekly weight loss of around one pound (0.45kg).

But studies show that even small calorie deficits (of 100-200 calories daily) can lead to long-term, sustainable weight-loss success. And although you might not lose as much weight in the short-term by only decreasing calories slightly each day, these gradual reductions are more effective than drastic cuts as they tend to be easier to stick with.

Hormonal changes

When you decrease your calorie intake, the body's BMR often decreases. This phenomenon is known as adaptive thermogenesis. This adaptation slows down weight loss so the body can conserve energy in response to what it perceives as starvation. This can lead to a weight-loss plateau - even when calorie intake remains reduced.

Caloric restriction can also lead to hormonal changes that influence metabolism and appetite. For instance, thyroid hormones, which regulate metabolism, can decrease - leading to a slower metabolic rate. Additionally, leptin levels drop, reducing satiety, increasing hunger and decreasing metabolic rate.

Ghrelin, known as the "hunger hormone", also increases when caloric intake is reduced, signalling

the brain to stimulate appetite and increase food intake. Higher ghrelin levels make it challenging to maintain a reduced calorie diet, as the body constantly feels hungrier.

Insulin, which helps regulate blood sugar levels and fat storage, can improve in sensitivity when we reduce calorie intake. But sometimes, insulin levels decrease instead, affecting

metabolism and leading to a reduction in daily energy expenditure. Cortisol, the stress hormone, can also spike - especially when we're in a significant caloric deficit. This may break down muscles and lead to fat retention, particularly in the stomach.

Lastly, hormones such as peptide YY and cholecystokinin, which make us feel full when we've eaten, can decrease when we lower calorie intake. This may make us feel hungrier.

Fortunately, there are many things we can do to address these metabolic adaptations so we can continue losing weight.

Weight loss strategies

Maintaining muscle mass (either through resistance training or eating plenty of protein) is essential to



counteract the physiological adaptations that slow weight loss down. This is because muscle burns more calories at rest compared to fat tissue - which may help mitigate decreased metabolic rate.

Gradual caloric restriction (reducing daily calories by only around 200-300 a day), focusing on nutrient-dense foods (particularly those high

in protein and fibre), and eating regular meals can all also help to mitigate these hormonal challenges.

But if you aren't someone who wants to track calories each day, here are some easy strategies that can help you decrease daily calorie intake without thinking too much about it:

1. Portion control: reducing portion sizes is a straightforward way of reducing calorie intake. Use smaller plates or measure serving sizes to help reduce daily calorie intake.

2. Healthy swaps: substituting high-calorie foods with lower-calorie alternatives can help reduce overall caloric intake without feeling deprived. For example, replacing sugary snacks with fruits or swapping soda with water can make a substantial difference to your

calorie intake. Fibre-rich foods can also reduce the calorie density of your meal.

3. Mindful eating: practising mindful eating involves paying attention to hunger and fullness cues, eating slowly, and avoiding distractions during meals. This approach helps prevent overeating and promotes better control over food intake.

4. Have some water: having a drink with your meal can increase satiety and reduce total food intake at a given meal. In addition, replacing sugary beverages with water has been shown to reduce calorie intake from sugars.

4. Intermittent fasting: restricting eating to specific windows can reduce your caloric intake and have positive effects on your metabolism. There are different types of intermittent fasting you can do, but one of the easiest types is restricting your mealtimes to a specific window of time (such as only eating between 12 noon and 8pm). This reduces nighttime snacking, so is particularly helpful if you tend to get the snacks out late in the evening.

Long-term behavioural changes are crucial for maintaining weight loss. Successful strategies include regular physical activity, continued mindful eating, and periodically being diligent about your weight and food intake.

Having a support system to help you stay on track can also play a big role in helping you maintain weight loss.

Modest weight loss of 5-10% body weight in people who are overweight or obese offers significant health benefits, including improved metabolic health and reduced risk of chronic diseases.

But it can be hard to lose weight - especially given all the adaptations our body has to prevent it from happening.

Thankfully, small, sustainable changes that lead to gradual weight loss appear to be more effective in the long run, compared with more drastic lifestyle changes. (*The Conversation*)

Meet the fungi that live in sea

Fungi don't just live in soils and with land plants, or breaking down complex materials like wood. They also thrive in the marine environment. Indeed, ocean-living fungi account for 5% of total ocean biomass.

Unlike their counterparts on land, most marine fungi are only visible with a microscope. An exception are marine lichens (fungi that live in symbiosis with photosynthetic algae or cyanobacteria and other microbes), which can be seen living on rocky seashores.

Despite being known to science for over a century thanks to a few early pioneering marine mycologists, most people have never heard of marine fungi. Even scientists like me still only have a limited understanding of their diversity and ecological importance, because few researchers are working on these fungi.

The field of marine mycology (the science of studying fungi in the sea) is often overlooked, but there's so much to discover.

The fungi that live in the sea fall into two main categories. There are well-defined species of marine fungi that are only found in the marine environment. These include marine lichens as well as many species of fungi that are found growing on wood and plant material collected from coastal marine habitats.

The second group are more ambiguous and currently undergoing an identity crisis. These fungi are found in the sea but seem the same as, or closely related to, fungi found on land. They are the most abundant fungi found in marine biodiversity surveys, but present a challenge to researchers because some may simply have been washed into the sea via rivers. That said, some of these fungi are at least feeding and growing in marine ecosystems.

Scientists like me are asking how marine fungi evolved, and how they adapted to living in saltwater. Because marine and non-marine fungi are so closely related, evolutionary transitions from land to the sea probably occurred relatively recently, and on lots of separate occasions.

Living in the sea has many chal-

lenges. Food availability can be patchy, leading to feast and famine conditions. Marine fungi need a range of adaptations to survive, and those isolated from the open ocean can change their cell shape and size in response to changing availability of resources.

When resources are low, smaller yeast cells dominate because they are more efficient at absorbing nutrients. When there are more resources, larger cells dominate, and sometimes grow into drastically new forms.

While we don't yet know the exact reason why these larger complex cell shapes develop, it could be adaptation for dealing with different resources, or to improve dispersal.

Fungi on the move?

Moving into new habitats means new opportunities, such as different surfaces to grow on or hosts to exploit. The marine fungus *Paradendryphiella salina*, for example, is commonly found growing on seaweed in the intertidal zone, with its closest non-marine relatives living on land plants. The evolutionary switch from land plants to marine seaweeds is a challenge because of their differences in chemical composition. However, *Paradendryphiella salina* has gained new enzymes not found in its land plant living relatives, possibly passed from seaweed-degrading bacteria, that facilitate seaweed breakdown by the marine fungus.

Exchange between land and sea is probably happening all the time for fungi. Some of the fungi we have studied in the coastal marine waters off Plymouth, southern England, show signs of originating on land. Fungi growing on leaves and twigs in the woods that rivers pass through are probably washed into the flowing water (in Plymouth, the river Tamar) and transported via the estuary out to sea.

So, next time you think about the wonderful diversity of marine life, along with whales, mackerel or penguins, consider all the fascinating marine fungi that are surviving and sometimes thriving under the surface of our blue planet. (*The Conversation*)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, JANUARY 5, 2025

'Birthday Forecast'

Moon square Mercury on your solar return chart which will give mixed results. You will find new openings in your job/profession but will have to work hard to prove your worth. New job/business offers will keep coming but you will remain confused. And will rely on advice and wisdom of your friends/well-wishers to take an appropriate decision. A person will prove to be a source of inspiration for you and will guide you well. Your seniors will support you but there will be some people who will be jealous of you. Financial position will keep getting better. Relationship with family members will remain cordial. Auspicious functions will keep taking place. Students will clear exams/interviews. Those in politics, media and social activities will get recognition for their contribution to society.

'This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) You need to concentrate your vital force on self-nurturing as well as nurturing those close to you. It is a time to honor your roots, stabilize your home life, and build the connections you have with the family. It's a favorable time to open up conversations with loved ones. This is a good time to go for higher learning and joining new courses to enhance your professional skills and efficiency. Your mind is especially inquisitive and you bring in a new perspective too. Short trips, and other forms of communication and making connections, appeal strongly.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) Your social life is likely to increase and bring you in contact with influential and helpful people. It's a good time to do something that requires additional bravery or courage, as some of your inhibitions are released and you live more spiritedly. Competitive activities, such as sports or business, thrive in this period. Career and reputation matters require extra attention. Realistic levels of optimism and confidence are with you, and you are able to attract fortunate circumstances into your life. Problems are easier to resolve.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) You would be establishing a happy and harmonious work environment through friendly relations with co-workers. Tying up your work area too comes into focus now. Romantic and social activities may revolve around your working environment. You are generally well liked and respected socially on the job right now. Some laziness is possible now, as you tend to be drawn to leisure activities. Perhaps you are socializing more than usual. You have good team spirit and are more tactful with your co-workers.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) This phase brings new responsibilities. These are likely to present themselves and you would take them more seriously. You are especially fond of the home life and are more family oriented. Take care when it comes to presenting ideas, writing letters, and any detail work. You may not see the whole picture. Extra care should be exercised when it comes to real estate matters and domestic issues. Be as non-judgmental as you can with family members. Business expansion and new professional opportunities are worth considering; you have to positively use your talents and efficiency.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) Matters related to higher education, religion and worship and publishing proceed smoothly. This is an excellent time to seek advanced training and further your education. You would work in association with well-experienced people and this brings more confidence and you use your best talents and co-relate all activities related to augment the business and boost work opportunities. It may be challenging to keep a healthy perspective regarding deeply personal matters and family. It's an excellent time for entertainment and to pursue hobbies.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 23) People in authority tend to be more inclined to appreciate you and recognize your work. This is the right time to share views, ideas and feelings with people around you. You would do best to allow yourself to explore your inner needs so that you can nurture yourself and others in a healthy, growth-oriented manner. You are looking to expand your activities, and you may find that you have a lot of energy for higher studies, travel, or brand new subjects. You would

be able to see the world around you in practical terms. There are chances of new associations and beginnings as new opportunities and changes come about.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) Any love affair begun now will be characterized by good cheer, having fun, and a fair share of emotions. You would enjoy increased powers of concentration. You may require solitude in order to get mental work done. Your memory is more retentive than usual, and your thoughts often turn to personal matters, family, and loved ones. Try to hold off on household repairs if you can. Put off decision-making with regard to home improvement, moving, and family matters for the time being. New initiatives surrounding home and property are best left for a better time.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) You are less inclined to fall in love for the sake of love itself during this time: your tendency is to consider whether it is clever to do so. You're most successful doing tasks that involve cooperation and team harmony. You could find that your talents or skills are especially appreciated. Romantic and social activities may revolve around your working environment. You would be recognized or rewarded in some way for the efforts you put forth because you project a more responsible and credible image. This planetary combination promotes your good luck in physical and laborious work related areas this week. You could feel stressed and anxious while meeting people's expectations and approval.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) This is a very self-expressive time when you have lots of energy, but not necessarily the self-discipline to match. You have more energy at your disposal to express yourself creatively, through activities with children, romantic activities, hobbies, or sports. This could be an especially passionate time as your love life may step up and you tend to put more energy into play and pleasure. You are more playful than usual, and especially magnetic. The flowing, expressive, and spontaneous energy surrounding you attracts like-minded people. Be sure to take time to enjoy yourself. You remain practical, realistic and your judgment is sound.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) You would maintain an optimum balance between optimism and practicality. You might have a more materialistic view of life and are more attracted to objects and possessions that give you a sense of security and status. Your business partnerships are highlighted right now, and it's time to compromise and adjust. Insecurities in your partnerships are brought to light now, and the best way to handle this is to understand that you need others instead of competing. Trying to go it alone won't work just now. Concentrate on truly listening to those close to you, and on playing a supportive role. You feel reflective rather than expressive.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) An especially busy, and perhaps hectic, period on the domestic front is indicated. For example, you might take work to your home or find that people drop by your home often. You may need to adjust your plan of action. Errors in judgment made now are likely due to impulsiveness and the overlooking of crucial details. You could have so many new ideas that you don't have time to implement. Your family, home, property concerns. It's perhaps not yet a time to make a vital presentation or to come on strong to the world.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) You would express your sympathetic and compassionate side. The seeds you plant now, you will reap later. You might pay attention to various ways to increase personal funds, resulting in more than one avenue for monetary gain. Career and reputation peak at this time. Your credibility is important and efforts at self-promotion might be made now. You're at your best when you are showing the world your practical, competent, and responsible side. There will be a fluctuation in energy levels before a balance is achieved. Health will take a turn for the better.

Lone wolf terrorism looms

The deadly Jan 1, 2025, attack in New Orleans serves as a reminder of the persistent threat to the US from individuals inspired by extremist Islamist groups.

While the investigation is still ongoing, some details about the suspect have been released. Authorities say Shamsud-Din Jabbar, a US Army veteran, was behind the assault in which a truck was driven into a dense crowd in New Orleans' French Quarter a few hours after midnight, killing at least 15 people and injuring dozens more. Jabbar, who died in a shoot-out with police, had pledged loyalty to the Islamic State group in online videos posted on Dec. 31, according to the FBI.

It represents the first major assault on an American city by an individual purportedly influenced by the Islamic State group, or one of its affiliates, since a 2017 truck assault in New York City that killed eight.

The New Orleans attack, like that earlier incident, underscores an important point: While the Islamic State group's territorial caliphate - the area in Syria and Iraq in which it assumed both political and religious authority and sought to enforce its interpretation of Islamic law - has been dismantled, the group's ability to inspire acts of terror on US soil through online propaganda and ideological influence remains alarmingly potent.

As a terrorism expert and a scholar specializing in radical Islamist militant groups, I believe the case of Jabbar - an American soldier who was radicalized in the US - echoes similar lone wolf attacks in the West over the past decade.

With lost territory in the Middle East, the Islamic State group has sought to exploit personal grievances, mental health struggles and ideological vulnerabilities, transforming isolated individuals in the West into deadly instruments of violence.

An attack inspired by Islamic State

The New Year's Day attack took place in New Orleans' famous French Quarter. At about 3:15 a.m., Jabbar plowed his truck into a dense crowd along the popular Bourbon Street.

In the immediate aftermath, investigators discovered a black banner in his vehicle - the flag used by many Islamist militant groups, including the Islamic State.

While the Islamic State has not yet officially claimed the attack on any of its social media platforms, subsequent reviews of Jabbar's online



activity revealed videos posted just hours before the incident, in which he pledged allegiance to the group. On Jan. 2, Christopher Raia of the FBI's counterterrorism division said Jabbar was "100% inspired by ISIS," using an alternative name for the group.

Jabbar's background adds complexity to the narrative. A 42-year-old veteran, he had no prior known links to extremist networks, according to the FBI, underscoring the challenge posed by self-radicalized individuals who operate outside the scope of traditional terrorist cells.

At this early stage of the investigation, it appears the attack was planned independently, driven by an ideological alignment with the Islamic State group rather than at the direction of any of its leaders. This highlights the decentralized and unpredictable nature of the current terrorist threat landscape.

Growing threat of lone actor attacks

At the height of its power in 2014-2015, the Islamic State group controlled significant territory across Syria and Iraq, establishing a self-declared caliphate.

While this physical caliphate was dismantled by 2019, following sustained efforts by the US-led Global Coalition to Defeat the Islamic State, the group continues to operate, conduct and inspire attacks.

Lone wolf attacks, inspired by Islamic State group propaganda but lacking direct operational support, have become the hallmark of the post-caliphate era.

By inspiring individuals to carry out attacks independently, the Islamic State group aims to create an atmosphere of fear and instability, demonstrating its global influence despite

lacking a physical caliphate.

It has actively sought to radicalise and mobilise individuals in the US, through digital platforms, spreading violent narratives and offering tactical guidance to potential attackers.

This strategy allows the group to maintain relevance and project strength despite its physical losses in the Middle East.

The New Orleans incident follows a pattern seen in previous attacks in the West - such as the 2016 Nice truck attack in France, the 2016 Berlin Christmas market attack and the 2017 London Bridge attack. In each case, individuals were motivated by the Islamic State group's call to action, using readily available means - vehicles, knives or firearms - to inflict mass casualties. This model of terrorism is not only low cost but also difficult for intelligence agencies to intercept, as it often lacks the logistical trail associated with larger, coordinated plots.

Ideological reach, online propaganda

A critical component of the Islamic State group's continued influence is its sophisticated use of online platforms to spread propaganda. Even after significant efforts by social media companies to dismantle extremist content, the Islamic State group, al-Qaida and their affiliates have adapted by migrating to encrypted messaging services, dark web forums and niche platforms. These digital spaces enable extremist groups to distribute radical content, call for violence and foster a sense of global community among supporters.

Western strategy

The Islamic State group's broader strategy in inspiring lone actor attacks extends beyond mere acts of violence. By inciting terror in Western nations, the group aims to polarize societies, foster anti-Muslim sentiment and provoke overreactions from governments - conditions that can fuel further radicalization and recruitment.

This cycle of violence and social division serves not just the Islamic State group, but other Islamist militant groups' long-term objective of destabilizing the West and reinforcing its narrative of a civilizational clash between Islam and the West.

Attacks such as that in New Orleans serve as powerful propaganda tools, demonstrating that the Islamic State group's ideology remains alive despite its territorial losses. (*The Conversation*)

"A warm smile is the universal language of kindness."

—William Arthur Ward

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No. 145 SHILLONG, MONDAY, JANUARY 6, 2025

Hostile neighbourhood

AT the dawn of the New Year, India under Narendra Modi is faced with an unenviable situation in foreign relations. The year that went by saw New Delhi's close ally, Bangladesh, turning hostile — following the abrupt exit of Sheikh Hasina from power and her escape to India. All the goodwill generated in Bangladesh for the past half a century after the formation of Bangladesh has evaporated in a day's time. This has come as a shock to New Delhi, which apparently failed to feel the pulse of the Muslim nation in its neighbourhood. An anti-Hasina mood was building up there also because of the anti-incumbency factor. Hasina had been at the helm for long. When the worst happened in Dhaka, instead of being in a position to help Hasina hold on, the Indian agencies blinked. This is the public perception, based on available evidence. To blame New Delhi for what went wrong in Bangladesh is, however, not justified. This being a Muslim nation, there's a limit to how New Delhi can operate there.

This is also the scene in Afghanistan, another Muslim nation that India had helped for many years. The Taliban is fundamentalist in its outlook and practice, and its regime is keeping a long distance with New Delhi after the exit of the US forces from there and formation of a new regime. Though the regime seemed to edge closer to Pakistan in its aftermath, several issues have cropped up between them. India is caught in another fix. A restoration of the old friendship between New Delhi and Kabul seems impossible. The scenario vis-a-vis India and Nepal too is far from satisfactory. With change of many governments in Kathmandu after the turn of the century, the old bonhomie is no longer evident while China has successfully wooed Nepal. As for Sri Lanka, the change of governments there has not helped improve bilateral relations in any significant manner. The leftists now in power there might attempt to strengthen the island nation's ties with China. Maldives, another tiny nation in the neighbourhood, too has drifted away from India and built bridges with Pakistan and China, much to New Delhi's discomfiture. Over and above all these, Pakistan and China continue to give pinpricks to India.

At the global level, the contention is that India has inched closer to Russia. Whether this is a credit or a discredit to the Modi dispensation is not clear yet. Rather, unlike in the past, Moscow is closer to China in recent times. Where Putin would stand in a future scenario is unpredictable. The games that New Delhi played in the context of the West's sanctions against Putin perhaps alienated the West from New Delhi to an extent. With Donald Trump returning to the White House later this month, how this would reflect on future relations between Washington and New Delhi remains to be seen.

Remnants of the Royal Path

By H H Mohrmen

I first came to know about the existence of this path from a lesson during my high school days. It was part of a chapter in a Khasi text book, "Ki Dienjat Ki Longshuwa." In the book, there is a chapter on a journey from Jowai to Jaintiapur by U Hajom Kissor Singh Nongbri. The remnants of this stone path attest to the existence of "Ka Luti Syiem," or the royal path, which connected the hills and the plains regions of the Jaintia Kingdom. This track, which extended from Jaintiapur (now in Bangladesh) northward to the upland region of Nartiang, has fallen into disrepair due to neglect.

According to folk narratives, the path is believed to have connected Nartiang, the summer capital of the kingdom, with Jaintiapur, the winter capital. It may have even extended beyond Nartiang to Nowgong (now Nagaon) in Assam. Sayeed Murtaza Ali (1954) stated that, according to J. H. Hutton, Nartiang was the sole capital of the kingdom before the annexation of Jaintiapur. This report also mentions that the highway from Nartiang passed northwards through Amchoi (now Amsoi in Morigaon district) and Kholahat in Nowgong district. From Amchoi, it continued southwards through Bar Amni, Bara Rangkhoi, Umpanai, Nartiang, Jowai, Jaraifi, and Muktapur, ending at Jaintiapur. Ali (1954) noted that Dr. J. H. Hutton traveled along this track during his visit to the Jaintia region in 1925.

By road today, the distance from Nartiang to Jaintiapur is 91 km, and from Nartiang to Nagaon, it is an additional 149 km. At its longest, the royal path spanned 240 km. If, as Ali (1954) suggested, the path from Nartiang to Nagaon passed through Amchoi (now Amsoi), the distance would have been longer—up to 253 km if the route included Umpanai.

Remnants of the Path
The stretch of the royal path generally known today is the section from Jaintiapur to Nartiang. Not much is known about the remaining portion from Nartiang to Amchoi and Nagaon, even among locals. The remnants of the stone path in the Jaintia Hills suggest it was built twice, as there are two sets of stone bridges. In some portions, new paths have been constructed over the old ones.

While there have been articles about the stone bridges, Ka Thlaw Sum Syiem, the Rupasor bathing ghats, and parts of the path, there has been no comprehensive study of the entire royal path. The History Department of Thomas Jones College, Jowai, conducted a survey in 2017, focusing

on the remnants of the path between Muktapur and Nartiang. The study revealed that most of the more than 70 km of the path spanning two countries has disappeared.

Along the way, there are many monoliths, some locally known as Kor Shongthait or resting places. Examples include the collection of stones near the Thlumuwi stone bridge and those at Khimmusniang, Jowai. In Amlarem, a subdivision of West Jaintia Hills District, sections of the stone path remain well-preserved. Four stone bridges in this region can still be seen today.

The Stone Bridges
While the entire stone path may be considered a historical monument, its significant features include the four megalithic bridges built

"The Thlumuwi Stone Bridge is located between Chkenpyrsit and Chkentalang villages on the Jowai-Amlarem road. It is easily accessible, just a few steps from the present highway, and is about 16 km from Jowai."

on the southern slopes. Proceeding from Jowai southwards, there is the Thlumuwi megalithic bridge over the Umji River, Umiaknieh/Amjaknieh, near the Krangshuri waterfalls, a bridge at Syndai, near the Rupasor bathing ghat over the Umkabeh River, and a bridge over the Umpubon River, near the Amlarem-Muktapur road.

The Thlumuwi Stone Bridge is located between Chkenpyrsit and Chkentalang villages on the Jowai-Amlarem road. It is easily accessible, just a few steps from the present highway, and is about 16 km from Jowai. The construction is simple, comprising a series of slabs on support stones with a total length of about 26.50 meters. Local folklore attributes the construction of the bridge to the legendary giants of Nartiang, U Luh Laskor, and U Mar Phalangki. Nearby, on the Chkhenpyrsit side, overgrowth covered the dolmens and menhirs used by travelers as resting stones.

The bridge at Umiaknieh, or Amjaknieh in the War Jaintia dialect, is more refined. At first glance, it appears incomplete, but during a visit, Danny Burke, an archaeologist from Ireland, noted that the present bridge seems to have been built on an older one. It seems that additional stones were added later, possibly to repair or strengthen the original bridge. Some large stones in the river suggest that the old bridge had partially collapsed. The length

of the Umiaknieh Bridge is 24.80 meters.

There are several engravings on the bridge. A rough sketch of a human footprint is carved on the top surface of one of the stone slabs. There are also engravings of a blooming flower and a horse, finely done, appears on one side of a support pillar. These motifs are similar to designs found on coins issued by Bor Kusain II, who reigned from 1731-1770. These royal motifs may help date the later portions of the bridge.

Two Different Types of Stone Bridges
It seems likely that the bridge was constructed by two different builders at different times. The name of the bridge is Umiaknieh in Pnar and Amjaknieh in War. The

prefixes "um" and "am" mean water or river, and "iaknieh" and "jaknieh" mean fighting for position, fame, honour, or any other cause. Therefore, Umiaknieh or Amjaknieh translates to "the water they fought for."

According to local lore, the king commissioned his giants to construct the path, assigning the bridge on the plateau to U Luh Laskor and U Mar Phalangki, and the slope and plains portions to U Bailon Khyriem. U Luh Laskor and U Mar Phalangki were giants from Nartiang, while U Bailon Khyriem hailed from Thangbuli. The giants quarreled over this portion of the work which is between the plateau and the slopes, and this incident is said to have given the bridge its name.

When we first visited, the approach path to the bridge at Umiaknieh from the Krangshuri waterfall side was largely intact. It had side drains and culverts at regular intervals to discharge water and protect the path from being washed away by torrential rain. The design of the path demonstrated the engineering prowess of its builders. However, I was disheartened during my visit to Krangshuri in November when I saw what had happened to this portion of the bridge. During his visit to Krangshuri, I met with Chief Minister Conrad K. Sangma and C.V. Diengdoh from the Tourism Department to stress the importance of preserv-

ing this portion of the path. Unfortunately, my concerns fell on deaf ears. The entire section of the path has now been renovated. While the repair work may have used elements of ancient architecture, the originality and uniqueness of the path have been lost forever.

As one gentleman remarked, "We don't have historical structures, so these are our Taj Mahal and our Qutub Minar." Unfortunately, the megalithic bridges are now the only remaining structures of this ancient pathway.

The Other Megalithic Bridges
The other two stone bridges are located at Syndai, near the Umpubon River and the Rupasor bathing place. These two megalithic bridges feature different masonry styles. The workmanship of the bridge over the Umpubon River is rudimentary, similar to that of the upland bridges.

The bridge over the Amkabeh River at Syndai, however, is more sophisticated. It features stone block arches, with some support stones fixed together using iron rods. The stones were cut to interlock with one another. Each of the three arches includes a keystone in the middle. Interestingly, neither lime nor cement was used to bind the stones, and it is believed to date back to the 18th century CE.

It is safe to conclude that the Thlumuwi Stone Bridge, the original portion of the Umiaknieh Bridge, and the bridge over the Umpubon River were earlier works, built in the same style and with similar workmanship. The later portion of the Umiaknieh Bridge and the bridge over the Amkabeh River appear to have been constructed in a later period, likely under the patronage of a later king.

Who Built the Bridges?
To conclude, there are at least three possibilities regarding who and when the stone path was built? It may have been constructed by Bor Kusain II, the king who renounced the throne and became an ascetic. Alternatively, it could have been built by Bor Kusain I, the first Jaintia king to issue coins. A third possibility, suggested by Catherine Shadap-Sen (1981), is that the Sutnga kings built the path in the prehistoric period.

Shadap-Sen's proposition is convincing, suggesting that the earlier bridges were built before the kingdom was fully established in the plains—or perhaps even earlier. Later additions to the path and bridges, with improved masonry, were likely made under subsequent rulers of the Jaintia kingdom. (This is an abstract from the thesis "Cultural History of Jaintia Hills in Stories, Stones, and Traditions," 2017.)

Appointment of VC of first State University of Meghalaya

By Prof Lakhon Kma

I have gone through 48-pages of the Principal Act-Captain Williamson Sangma Technical University Act, 2011 (Act No. 17 of 2011), published in the Gazette of Meghalaya Extraordinary, Part-IV, 17th October, 2011 and also gone through the 3-page-Captain Williamson Sangma Technical (Amendment) Act, 2023 (Act No. 12 of 2023) published in the Gazette of Meghalaya Extraordinary, Part-IV, 19th October, 2023 which is available in the public domain. It says, "The Vice-Chancellor of the University:

Section 14 (7) The Chancellor shall have the powers to appoint and remove the Vice-Chancellor as approved by the Board of Governors and any other powers as may be conferred on him/her by this Act and Statute made hereunder...

Section 15. (1) The Vice-Chancellor shall be appointed on such term and conditions as approved by the board of Governors for a term of four years by the Chancellor.

(2) The Vice-Chancellor shall be appointed by the Chancellor from a panel of three persons recommended by the Board of Governors and shall hold office for a term of four years...."

What is surprising is that the eligibility criteria for the appointment of the VC is nowhere visible in both the Acts and obviously should be there in the 'Statutes' enacted under the Act which is not available in public domain but the aforesaid Act says and I quote-

Chapter 5-Statutes and Rules
Section 27. Subject to the provisions of this Act, the statutes may provide for any matter relating to the University and staff, as given below:-

(a) The constitution, power and function of the authorities and other bodies of the University not specified in the Act, as may be constituted from time to time;

(b) The mode of recruitment and the conditions of the service of the 'other officers', teachers and employees of the University...

However, it is intriguing to observe that out of the 12 matters relating to the University and staff under the above section, none of the provisions specifically mentioned the eligibility criteria for appointment of the VC and only mentioned 'other officers' in Section 27(b) above'. As per the Act-Chapter 3, Officers of the University

Section 12. The following shall be the officers of the university:

(a) The Chancellor;
(b) The Vice-Chancellor;
(c) The Registrar;
(d) The Finance Officer; and

(e) Such other officers as may be declared by the Act or Statute to be officers of the University.

I believe that the State Government has clear-cut statutory provisions/eligibility criteria for any person to be appointed as a VC. The UGC Regulation 2018 clearly states as under:

"Section 7.3. Vice Chancellor:

i. A person possessing the highest level of competence, integrity, morals and institutional commitment is to be appointed as Vice-Chancellor. The person to be appointed as a Vice-Chancellor should be a distinguished academician, with a minimum of 'ten years' of experience as Professor in a University or 'ten years' of experience in a reputed research and / or academic administrative organisation with proof of having demonstrated academic leadership.

ii. The selection for the post of Vice-Chancellor should be through proper identification by a Panel of 3-5 persons by a Search-

cum-Selection-Committee, through a public notification or nomination or a talent search process or a combination thereof. The members of such Search-cum-Selection Committee shall be persons of eminence in the sphere of higher education and shall not be connected in any manner with the University concerned or its colleges. While preparing the panel, the Search cum-Selection Committee shall give proper weightage to the academic excellence; exposure to the higher education system in the country and abroad, and adequate experience in academic and administrative governance, to be given in writing along with the panel to be submitted to the Visitor/Chancellor. One member of the Search cum-Selection Committee shall be nominated by the Chairman, University Grants Commission, for selection of Vice Chancellors of State, Private and Deemed to be Universities.

iii. The Visitor/Chancellor shall appoint the Vice-Chancellor out of the Panel of names recommended by the Search-cum-Selection Committee."

The adherence to the UGC Regulation-2018 is not optional; even for the Selection of Principals in the affiliated colleges-deficit or even private colleges, the above regulation has to be strictly adhered to. In light of this and the appointment of Dr. Vasanthi Vijayakumar, former Associate Professor, Department of History at Madras Christian College Tambaram Chennai and retired Principal of C.S.I. Ewart Women's Christian College, Melarapuram, Chengalpattu as the VC of the Captain Williamson Sangma State University, Meghalaya, the question is: Are all Associate Professors/HoDs/Principals eligible to become VCs even if they are not Professors? Certainly there is no precedence in the last few decades where a person is appointed as a VC of any State or Central University who is an Associate Professor and Not a 'Professor with ten years of Professorship' since the UGC Regulations came into being which makes it compulsory that a candidate for vice chancellorship should be a Professor for at least 10 years. The State government must clarify this so that all Associate Professors/Principals/HoDs in universities and colleges in our State will be aware that they can also one day become the VC of the State University no matter what the UGC Regulations says.

It is interesting because the Captain Williamson Sangma State University Act also states as under: "University to be subject to standards of UGC."

Section 52. Notwithstanding anything contained in this Act, the establishment maintenance of standards and any other matter concerning private universities established under this Act shall be as per the provision of UGC (Establishment and Maintenance of Standards in Private Universities) Regulations, 2003 as amended from time to time and any other regulation or direction as may be issued by the UGC and the State Government from time to time."

Can the State government dilute the provisions of UGC Regulation 2018 on the eligibility criteria for VC's appointment and still conform to UGC standards? Folks, controversy on the appointment of the VC is the last thing expected for the 1st State University of Meghalaya. Let the first State University not start on a wrong footing, as the saying goes 'Well begun is half done.'

(The author teaches at NEHU)

Letters to the Editor

Education minister's controversial remarks

Editor,
I commend the Sein Niamtre Ki Khynnah Purae Shillong for their proactive engagement with the evolving dynamics of secularism in Meghalaya. The statement made by the Minister of Education, Rakkam A. Sangma, asserting that Meghalaya is a "Christian State," raises significant constitutional concerns regarding the secular nature of India. The Indian Constitution explicitly designates the country as a secular state under Articles 25 to 28, which guarantee freedom of religion and prohibit the state from favouring or endorsing any particular faith. Secularism is a fundamental feature of the Constitution, and state governments are prohibited from favouring one religion over another. It serves as the foundation of our national identity. Therefore, declaring a state as aligned with a single religion could infringe upon the religious freedoms of minority groups such as the Niamtre and Niam Khasi. When such extreme statements come from a lawmaker, it raises serious con-

cerns about the expectations we can have from individuals with such strong beliefs.

The population of Meghalaya exemplifies a highly open and pluralistic society. However, the growing trend of religious polarization for political gain poses a risk of division among the populace, exacerbating communal tensions and undermining the fundamental principles enshrined in the Constitution.

We respectfully request an apology from the State Cabinet Minister in charge of Education, Rakkam A. Sangma, and urge him to consider resigning on moral grounds due to his controversial remarks.

Yours etc.,
K.Lato (Member of Niamtre Sein Raji)
Via email

In appreciation of STEMS school bus service

Editor,
The service of the STEMS School Bus has been a blessing indeed to my daughter and the family. The main reason is that my daughter is happy, comfortable and satisfied with the Bus in many ways.

Earlier before we availed the Bus Service, I would have to take her to and from school on my two-wheeler. It's good because we never suffer traffic problems too much. But with the School Bus she always reached school on time. The STEMS bus service has reduced the number of vehicles on the road thereby reducing the traffic chaos.

There's a saying, 'Time is money.' Many times I had to stop my work midway to pick up my daughter from school. I was really at my wits end since there was no alternative. The STEMS school bus service has come as a boon since I don't need to leave my workplace and I am also confident that my daughter is well looked after by the STEMS personnel.

Travelling on a two-wheeler is extremely difficult during rainy days. We used to dream of a better public transport system that would cater specially to school going children and with STEMS that dream is a reality today. My daughter is so comfortable with the Bus that even if I volunteer to pick her up sometimes she refuses as she prefers to use the school bus service.

Whenever we asked about those manning the Bus our daughter has only positive words about them. The Bus

is always punctual but that punctuality also depends on the parents dropping their kids at the pick-up point. Often, parents fail in that duty and the Bus is kept waiting for that one student. I was also late in dropping my daughter sometimes and the caretaker had to call me because the Bus had reached the boarding point.

We cannot but appreciate the effort put in by the staff to do their best in all aspects. The driver and the caretaker are very polite and they take their responsibility seriously. A special salute to them! The Bus is clean and comfortable. Although it's just the beginning of the service, yet the team has done their best despite the negligible shortcomings. Parents have to work in close collaboration and cooperation with the STEMS family to improve services.

As a parent, I am so grateful to the STEMS team and encourage them to do better in the days to come. STEMS is an attempt to contribute towards easing the city's traffic problems and for the welfare of students and parents as well.

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request,
Via email
Jowai

Too many projects hanging fire in Meghalaya

Editor
The Govt has stated that many key projects are set for completion in 2025. The most important and key project is the Assembly building which in spite of celebrating the 25th year of its destruction due to fire is yet to see the beacon of light through the dome which was once destroyed while the new one is yet to be installed. The two medical colleges in Meghalaya are also in the backburner as years have gone by but the medical colleges are yet to function whereas the medical college started by the USTM is already functioning. In this meantime our neighbouring state of Assam has started a medical college in each district headquarter.

Vehicles are increasing and the roads remain the same but the traffic congestion has not yet been resolved. The two wheelers which have become a menace by their pranks go scot-free and no fine is imposed on them, whereas in Guwahati when the traffic police see vehicles violating the traffic rules on the CCTV cameras they im-

mediately send the fine slip to the car/two wheeler owner's address. Crores of rupees have been collected through this system.

There are more projects which are yet to start or are incomplete due to various hurdles, which the Government is fully aware of. There cannot be any development if the Government continues to succumb to objections by various pressure groups.

The Government has to be more strict and take up development projects without being hamstrung by objections on flimsy grounds. Government is elected to carry out development programmes and not to hedge on its responsibility to please certain constituents. The Government has promised to make Shillong a smart city but the snail's pace at which development is carried out makes it impossible to deliver on its promises. Who knows when Shillong will really become a smart city!

Yours etc.,
S.L. Singhania,
Via email

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

"If you're going through hell, keep going."
— Winston Churchill

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No. 147 SHILLONG, TUESDAY, JANUARY 7, 2024

Religio-political shadow-boxing

A University by any definition is an institution of higher learning where liberal education is provided, so students have the liberty to question and critique without fear of offending any religion or faith. In a University, no single religion should have a defining role, more so if the University is state-sponsored. But the statement by Education Minister, Rakkam Sangma that the Capt Williamson Sangma University would be inaugurated with Christian rituals has sent the wrong message that Meghalaya is replicating what the Prime Minister did when he got all the sadhus, sants and mahants to inaugurate the new Parliament complex in May 2023. This sort of negative reciprocity is ill-intentioned. This is the first time that a building constructed out of taxpayers' money is inaugurated by using priests of one religious faith in a country of diverse faiths and with a known track record of promoting secularism, until 2014 when things took a definite pattern and people of different faiths began to be attacked even while those attacked remained silent, barring occasional protests. Such attacks on Muslims and Christians are today normalised which is deeply problematic. From demolishing historic buildings merely because they were built by the Moghuls to assuming that every mosque is built on a temple, some fanatics seem hell bent on tearing apart the secular fabric of India. Does Meghalaya want to follow this route of tit-for-tat politics?

Hindutva is the BJP's agenda for vote bank politics. It is catering to the whims of a particular section of Hindus since not all Hindus voted the BJP. In Meghalaya we have not had an overt appeal for votes based on religion. While whispering campaigns are unstoppable and have pre-existed Hindutva politics, to make religion a coat of arms of any political dispensation is fraught. Ministers of the Government when giving public statements should be more circumspect and not go overboard on any issue. Ministers have a responsibility to remain unaffected by religious dogmatism because Meghalaya has a sizeable population of non-Christians too. To call Meghalaya a Christian state is to ride roughshod over the secular credentials of the Constitution that has guided this country for 75 years. It is also a flagrant violation of the spirit of co-existence that the State has maintained for over 50 years. Granted that attacks on Christians elsewhere especially on Christmas Day are a painful reality but that cannot lead to a similar adoption of the very tactics that we abhor in others.

It is time for Meghalaya as a state to rise above religious politics which pays negative dividends. Those who have played with this short-term vote winning strategy have paid the price. People are more reasonable than politicians think them to be. Sadly the penchant of most politicians has always been to take shortcuts to political one-up-manship. This has serious consequences and could lead to disharmony in the State.

Happy New Year! Is There Anything New?

By Kyrsoibor Pyrtuh

Ecclesiastes once said, "Is there a thing of which is said, 'see this is new?' It has already been in the ages before us." These words remind us of a timeless truth about the cycle of life and the human experience. No doubt, there are certain aspects of life which remain unchanged, but each year brings new experiences, perspectives, opportunities for growth, besides anxieties and fears as we tread into the unknown. As we begin the new year, let us re-enforce our core values and beliefs in the "Kamai ia ka hok" (to earn through just/righteous and fair means) and "ka tip brier, ka tip blei" (to respect fellow humans and to acknowledge the fact that every being, whether human or non-human, is equal and possesses inherent divinity).

Repetitiveness Versus New:

Since the days of my theological formation, about a quarter of century ago, I am still being challenged by S J Samartha's public sermon. He was a renowned Indian Christian Theologian, where he addressed the pertinent question of what is repetitive and what is new in the human cycle of life? Delivering his timeless message to the students of Bishop Cotton Girls' School, Bangalore way back in 1981, S. J. Samartha rightly pointed out that, "Repetitiveness has a place in human life. Most creative acts of life that sustain our being are indeed repetitive. What is familiar looks safe and comfortable. Repetitive actions provide continuity, stability and opportunities for growth in our personal lives or in our institutional existence. Tradition has an important place in human life because it provides us with the foundation without which life would lose its sense of direction and orderliness." At the same time S. J. Samartha put out a counter argument towards repetitiveness and tradition. He said all traditions have a tendency to become hard and they resist change. New ideas or suggestions find no place in Conservatism or amongst the traditionalists. New ideas get rejected in the name of tradition, sometimes brushed aside by authoritarian bulldozers. He further argued that old institutions, outmoded slogans and meaningless rituals or practices leave no room for the green grass to emerge from the concrete tradition.

As against the old, the Christian Bible in the New Testament propounds the idea of a new creation—that the old has passed away and behold the new has come.

This idea aims at giving people the assurance and hope of a new beginning. However, I concur with S. J. Samartha that there are resources in the faiths of our neighbours as well that can provide us with the same hope and assurance. In the multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious society within our State and Nation, it is sinful and irresponsible to believe that only one religion has the resources to contribute to the emergence of the new.

The Biblical idea of a new creation is manifested through the life and works of Jesus Christ, one of the great teachers, which the Palestinian or Arab-Jewish society had ever produced. He did not outrightly reject the old, rather the idea of a new creation is about transforming lives, challenging established structures, changing directions and planting small and creative communities. (S. J. Samartha). To quote a few of Jesus' teachings which can usher in radical changes in society— "You have heard that it was said you must love your neighbour and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies. And the second greatest commandment is, 'Love your neighbour as yourself. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me...When did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you?... Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.' Do we have the gumption to follow what our Sants or Prophets or Messiah had taught us in the past. Their teachings are as radical as they were thousands of years ago. We have failed many of our prophets and we have betrayed our own Messiah. Period!

What is in store for the people in the Land of the Clouds?

As usual, festivities will continue till the last week of January or may extend to February and there is no dearth of festivals in this place. Some of them are for free and some you have to empty your purses to be able to participate and many couldn't afford them. The festivals which had happened and soon to hap-

pen in the State, are mere facades and do not reflect the reality. The fact is that a major section of population in Meghalaya are living in impoverished condition and their purchasing power is extremely weak. While the number of tourists visiting Meghalaya is on the rise, the impact on the livelihoods of the local population will be limited unless there are significant policy changes that prioritize inclusivity and support for the poorest and most vulnerable segments of society.

For Lease/For Sale:

Of late, certain critical issues that are so dear to the people of Meghalaya, especially the Indigenous community, that have evaded public attention or scrutiny, are the enhancement in the lease period of government land from 30 to 60 years, the establishment of Invest Meghalaya Authority (IMA) and the passage of Meghalaya State Investment and Promotion and Facilitation Act 2024. Now it is a common practice in Meghalaya not to engage in pre-legislative consultation on significant bills or policies, like land, forest, environment, employment, economic development policy etc that have a direct bearing on the lives of the people. Such practice is unhealthy and it only displays a sense of arrogance and insensitivity on the part of the executive. The State Government claims that all these are done in the name of economic development, to attract investors and to create employment. But at what cost?

Through the Invest Meghalaya Authority and Investment Promotion law/policy, the Government is gearing up to create land banks and ease investment in the State. There is no second guessing that the State needs development and employment opportunities. It has been argued that the creation of land banks will facilitate easy access to land for economic opportunities. That land banks can help Indigenous communities develop sustainable businesses, agriculture, or cultural tourism, thereby creating jobs and increasing self-sufficiency. However, the decision to establish the Invest Meghalaya Authority via a vis Investment law/policy should not be left to the government alone. The State's local/traditional institutions, pressure groups and civil society collective must demand for wider consultations and that

to align one's actions with ethical and moral standards and to contribute positively to the world around us.

The intersection of religion and politics can indeed be a complex and potentially volatile mix. When religious beliefs influence political decisions, it can lead to both positive and negative outcomes. On one hand, religious values can inspire leaders to promote justice, compassion, and ethical governance. On the other hand, it can also lead to divisiveness, discrimination and conflicts, especially in diverse societies where multiple religious beliefs coexist. In a state like Meghalaya, where there is a rich tapestry of cultural and religious diversity, it is crucial to maintain a balance. Ensuring that political decisions are inclusive and respectful of all religious communities can help foster harmony and prevent conflicts. Ultimately, the key is to promote a secular and inclusive approach to governance that respects the separation of religion and state while ensuring that all citizens' rights and beliefs are protected. Balancing religion and politics is a delicate act, but it is crucial for maintaining harmony in diverse societies.

What does 'to labour for righteousness' mean? "To labour for righteousness" means to work diligently and consistently towards living a morally upright and virtuous life. It involves striving to do what is right, just and ethical in all aspects of life. This includes personal conduct like being honest and having strong moral principles, showing kindness and empathy towards others and recognizing one's own limitations and valuing others. As a social responsibility, justice demands working towards fairness and equality in society, helping those in need and contributing to the well-being of the community, standing up for the rights of others and promoting positive change. As a spiritual commitment faithfulness demands to stay true to one's beliefs and values; devotion is engaging in practices that nurture one's spiritual growth and being obedient to the teachings of one's faith. In essence, labouring for righteousness is about making a conscious effort

the Government must put in public domain all papers, including file notes/cabinet notes and comments etc made by various government or non government agencies in this regard.

While defending the decision of the Government, Bah Paul Lyngdoh, Minister of Tourism etc, called out the "Sengbhalang" or NGOs/Pressure groups to provide an alternative to economic development. It is easier for the minister who is privy to all information to brush aside the critique made by pressure groups on the issue. On the other hand, other civil society groups that are seeking access to information via RTI Act are facing a tough time with the Government's delaying and denial tactics and the department concerned is yet to provide all the information. It is understood that as a minister and spokesperson of the government, Bah Paul Lyngdoh, has to justify the decisions made by the government of the day, but there was also the "old Paul Lyngdoh", who was once loved and admired by the people of Hynniewtrep, and who had prophesied upon this land through his powerful poem entitled, "For Sale" - this battered, autistic land with all its lucre-laden earth, our precious minerals, medicinal herbs and rare orchids, and trees and fields and waters—all these and all else...No contact number is needed. Our agents are everywhere..." (As quoted from Souvenir, Khasi Students' Union 20th Anniversary Celebration 1978-1998).

It is believed that the pressure groups, like the Khasi Students' Union and other civil society group (s) who are critical about the establishment of IMA are well armed with knowledge and information to take on the Government. Meanwhile, it can be said that land banks can contribute to further dispossession of land from Indigenous communities, particularly if lands acquired are culturally significant or ancestral. It will lead to potential conflicts and issues of marginalization. Economic development initiatives driven by land banks will always prioritize profit over people. Indigenous communities often face significant legal and political hurdles when attempting to reclaim the lands or negotiate terms with land banks in countries where such systems have been established.

Let me end with a line from the hymn— "There's no time for idle scolding, while days are going by."

Concerns regarding grant sanctions and awards at Hello Meghalaya Conclave

By Damang Kharbuli & Mewan Rynjah

The Hello Meghalaya Conclave, held on December 17, 2024, at the Marriott, represents a significant step towards fostering a vibrant and supportive filmmaking community in Meghalaya. By awarding grants to filmmakers such as Simi Khongtiang, Dominic Sangma, and Pradip Kurbah, the initiative demonstrates a commitment to nurturing local talent. However, there are pressing concerns that need to be addressed to ensure the fairness, transparency, and credibility of this platform.

According to the guidelines, a filmmaker must have won a National Award to be eligible for Category A nominations. Renowned filmmakers such as Pradip Kurbah and Dominic Sangma, celebrated for their national and international accolades, exemplify the high standards of this category. Their work, honoured on prestigious global platforms, showcases their remarkable talent, commitment, and adherence to the criteria established by Hello Meghalaya.

Simi Khongtiang's inclusion in this category has ignited considerable debate among filmmakers regarding the selection process. While her body of work is commendable, it often lacks consistent artistic merit or craftsmanship, prompting questions about her inclusion. Her latest film, Ka Chithi, was primarily crafted and technically executed by Kamki Diengdoh. The film was showcased at select festivals in India, primarily through the efforts of Pradip Kurbah, who played a crucial role in its promotion. While his support highlights his dedication as a senior filmmaker to fostering collaboration, it has also raised questions about the criteria he uses when choosing projects to promote. This has led to concerns about whether the film's inclusion in festivals was based purely on its merit or influenced by other considerations. Additionally, Simi Khongtiang's lack of significant accolades, such as a National Award, adds to doubts about the selection process. Her political involvement with the United Democratic Party (UDP) in Jaintia Hills, a coalition partner in the MDA Government, has further fuelled speculation that her nomination may have been influenced by affiliations rather than artistic achievements.

Meanwhile, acclaimed filmmakers like Wanphrang Diengdoh, whose film Lomi has received international recognition, were overlooked for the same grant. This inconsistency underscores the need for a transparent and fair selection process that prioritizes talent and creativity over external influences. While collaboration within the industry is essential, it is crucial to ensure that merit remains the primary factor in recognizing and providing opportunities.

For Hello Meghalaya to maintain its integrity and inspire trust within the filmmaking community, it is crucial to clarify the criteria used in such selections. Transparency in the decision-making process will ensure that opportunities are allocated based on merit, not affiliations. Upholding fairness is essential for building confidence in the platform and for inspiring filmmakers to strive for excellence in their craft. Turning to Category B, it is evident that this section requires greater focus on ensuring quality and merit. The eligibility criteria mandate that filmmakers must be registered in the state and have released 2-3 films with CBFC certification within the last five years. However, a critical question arises: are the films produced in this period of sufficient quality, and do they reflect the seriousness and commitment of the filmmakers? Meeting the technical eligibility requirements alone is not enough if the films themselves lack artistic or technical excellence.

Many projects under this category fail to meet the artistic and technical standards required to elevate Meghalaya's cinema. A review of films streaming on Hello Meghalaya reveals that several works lack compelling storytelling, technical finesse, and artistic depth. This trend underscores the urgent need for a more rigorous and impartial evaluation process to identify and support filmmakers who can truly contribute to the growth of the region's cinematic landscape.

Hello Meghalaya should also prioritize nurturing new and promising filmmakers who bring originality and creativity to their work. By supporting fresh voices and innovative ideas, the platform can inspire emerging talents to develop their skills and contribute meaningfully to the state's film industry. Establishing an experienced and unbiased panel to assess projects would ensure that grants are awarded based on genuine artistic merit and potential, rather than meeting only the minimum eligibility criteria. This approach would not only improve the quality of films supported under Category B but also set a higher standard for what filmmaking in Meghalaya can achieve, encouraging both established and emerging filmmakers to strive for excellence.

Does the "most viewed" film, short film, or music video genuinely reflect artistic merit? The introduction of an award for "most viewed" content prompts important questions about its criteria and whether high viewership translates to true creativity and quality. While popularity may signify audience engagement, it should not serve as the primary benchmark for artistic excellence. Many highly-viewed entries often lack narrative depth and exhibit subpar production quality, resembling casual home videos rather than polished cinematic achievements.

It would be wise for Hello Meghalaya to rethink its award criteria to prioritize creativity, originality, and technical proficiency. Shifting the focus to these elements would reinforce the platform's credibility and inspire filmmakers to produce meaningful and impactful content. By setting higher standards, the platform can encourage creators to elevate their craft and deliver works that not only engage viewers but also contribute significantly to the artistic and cultural landscape.

Meghalaya's film industry is undergoing a dynamic transformation, with a new generation of filmmakers redefining creative storytelling and raising the bar for technical excellence. As this thriving community continues to expand, there is an urgent need for platforms like Hello Meghalaya to take a proactive role in supporting and nurturing these emerging talents.

Filmmakers like Kamki Diengdoh, whose short film Nongshun—now streaming on Hello Meghalaya—exemplifies remarkable depth and originality, are at the forefront of the industry. Similarly, El Dhar and Sankirang Khongwir have produced exceptional works that have earned recognition at festivals, highlighting the immense talent in the region. Adding to this is Elvachisa Ch Sangma's significant achievement at the Mumbai International Film Festival (MIFF), further solidifying Meghalaya's potential on a larger platform. Beyond short films, many filmmakers are excelling in creating visually striking music videos, merging technical brilliance with compelling narratives. These projects not only demonstrate their artistic prowess but also signal their readiness to transition into feature filmmaking. However, this leap requires significant institutional backing, financial investment, and access to resources.

To harness Meghalaya's creative potential, Hello Meghalaya must adopt a more inclusive and transparent approach, positioning itself as a transformative force in the region's film industry. Establishing fair grant systems, equitable awards, and robust mentorship opportunities can empower filmmakers to confidently transition into larger cinematic ventures. Such structured support is essential not only for nurturing individual talent but also for building a thriving ecosystem that positions Meghalaya as a hub of creative excellence. By addressing current gaps and implementing rigorous guidelines for content selection and recognition, Hello Meghalaya can inspire future generations, set new benchmarks, and solidify the region's status as a significant contributor to Indian cinema.

Letters to the Editor

A biased approach

Editor,
Apropos of the letter by the Sein Raji leader, K Lato, we agree with him that though Meghalaya has a majority Christian population it should respect the sentiments of the indigenous faith by refraining to consecrate the new Captain Williamson Sangma University in Christian dominated Garo hills with Christian traditions. We also agree with him on maintaining the secular nature of this State, however I find it far-fetched for Lato to demand that Education Minister, Rakkam Sangma should resign from his post. It is interesting that the same Mr K Lato maintained a conspiratorial silence on the blatant act of Prime Minister, Narendra Modi consecrating the new Parliament complex in Hindu rituals. Mr Lato cleverly maintained silence on this, so will the Sein Raji now please demand an apology from the Prime Minister of India and ask him to resign for breaking the very secular fabric of India?

It's a fact known to the whole world that India under this present government is no longer maintaining the secular fabric of this country as it was during the erstwhile governments. Will Mr K Lato please demand in the same secular spirit that the Central Government should step down due to the recent atrocities committed on Christians during Christmas celebrations in various parts of India? The various atrocities

committed by those Hindu organizations that disrupted places of worship of both Christians and Muslims, spreading terror among minorities while the hatred infested organizations that break up the very secular fabric of India commit these acts without fear of the law because they are aware of the current situation in this country. Whilst we wholeheartedly agree with K Lato on his urging to make Meghalaya a secular State, his silence on the recent consecration of the Parliament with Hindu rituals make him look biased.

Hope that we as the people of Meghalaya with our diversities work towards making this State and the rest of India a safer place for people of all faiths to coexist and respect one another

Yours etc.,
E.K Challam,
Via email

Of religion and politics in a diverse society

Editor,
The special article "The dangerous nexus: Religion and politics in Meghalaya" by Bhogtoram Mawroh (ST January 4, 2025) made interesting reading. The author has brought to the fore many important points on the subject. My uncle, a Khasi song composer, used to work as a manager in the Industries Department in Mawsynram during 1964-65 and we would go to stay with him there. I am now 70 and while in Mawsynram I was just

10 years old and remember going to Mawjymbuin for picnicking with my cousins. It is strange how people have converted this place into a place of worship which is a misplaced practice. We are living in the 21st Century in the age of the fourth industrial revolution. I wonder whose stupid idea it is to convert this picnicking site into a place of worship.

The Khasis do not worship idols but believe that the Creator has given a Khasi three commands. 1. To know oneself and one's fellow humans and then know God. 2. To honour and respect relatives on the mother's side and the father's side of the family. 3. To strive for righteousness. (In Khasi the three commandments are: 1. Tip Brier Tip Blei. 2. Tipkur Tipkha. 3. Kamai ia ka Hok).

What does 'to know oneself' and 'know God' mean?

"To know oneself" is a phrase that often refers to a moment of self-realisation or self-awareness. It means to gain a deeper understanding of one's true nature, values, and purpose. This can happen through introspection, life experiences, or significant events that prompt a person to reflect on their life and choices. In essence, it is about reconnecting with one's authentic self and gaining clarity about who they are and what they want in life. This process can lead to personal growth, a sense of inner peace, and a more fulfilling life.

"To know God" can mean different things to different

people, depending on their religious beliefs, spiritual practices, and personal experiences. Generally, it refers to having a deep, personal relationship with a higher power or divine being. Here are a few interpretations. From a religious perspective, knowing God involves understanding and following the teachings, commandments, and scriptures associated with that faith. It often includes prayer, worship and participation in religious rituals. From the spiritual standpoint, knowing God means experiencing a sense of connection with the divine through meditation, contemplation or other spiritual practices. It can involve seeking inner peace, wisdom and a deeper understanding of the universe. For some, knowing God is a personal journey that involves moments of revelation, insight or profound experiences that lead to a sense of closeness with the divine. This can be a deeply transformative process that shapes one's values, beliefs, and way of life. Philosophically, knowing God can involve exploring the nature of existence, the meaning of life, and the concept of higher power. It can be an intellectual pursuit that seeks to understand the divine through reason, logic, and philosophical inquiry. Ultimately the meaning of "knowing God" is deeply personal and can vary widely based on individual beliefs and experiences. It is a journey that many people find enriching and fulfilling in their own unique ways.

What does 'know a rela-

tion from the mother's side and from the father's side' mean? "Knowing a relative from the mother's side and from the father's side" refers to understanding and recognizing one's family members from both the maternal and paternal lineages. In many cultures, knowing and maintaining relationships with relatives from both sides of the family is important for preserving family heritage, traditions and support networks.

What does 'know a rela-

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

"Trusting our intuition often saves us from disaster."

— Wilson Schaeff

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No. 148 SHILLONG, WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 8, 2024

Power-shift in Canada

JUSTIN Trudeau's exit from power in Canada -- and his simultaneous step-down from the leadership of his party -- might have an element of surprise in them, but this was in the coming. The exit of his finance minister, preceded by the resignation of the housing minister in recent days were tell-tale signs of the gathering gloom there. The serious crises vis-à-vis rising cost of living and shortage of homes were an invitation to political instability. Both these were a result of Trudeau's huge widening of the immigration numbers in recent years. His ambitious goal to welcome so many -- and as high as five lakh permanent residents per year from 2025 -- was not balanced with a matching infrastructural build-up. Price rise and shortage of housing turned the generally easy-going people, including immigrants, against Trudeau. All the good that he did in the past 10 years failed to keep his profile high now. Once a government fails to manage the economy well, its days could as well be numbered. Trudeau himself gauged the fall in his esteem when he admitted after the resignation that he would not be the right choice for his party in the next elections. His rival and Conservative leader Pierre Poilievre, who is tipped to succeed Trudeau, is bound to tighten the immigration laws even as Canada is badly in need of people by way of immigration to power its economy.

Young and dapper, Justin Trudeau inspired his nation for the past several years with his attempts to empower Canada. However, his commitment to uphold global environmental goals reduced the tempo of his economic push. His humanitarian approach to global issues, including his intake of large numbers of refugees from Syria, Ukraine etc, ultimately hurt the national economy. Canadians were compelled to stretch their limits. Trudeau, who had close personal and political links with the Sikh community there, has also erred perhaps in blaming the Indian government for the shooting down of a Khalistani militant leader outside a Sikh shrine in 2023. His failure to provide evidence to back his claim led to a major diplomatic stand-off between the two nations. Expectations are that the post-Trudeau period would help Canada build new bridges with New Delhi. Curiously, the re-election of Donald Trump as the US president also spelled fresh trouble for Trudeau. Trump strongly denounced the immigration reforms that the latter has spearheaded in Canada, which had an adverse spillover effect on the US. His warning of punitive steps in the form of additional taxation on goods imported to the US from Canada obviously accentuated Trudeau's exit. All said, Canadians cannot afford to ignore the good sides of Trudeau's 10 years in power, carrying with him the legacy of his father, the former premier Pierre Trudeau.

Democracy, Privacy, and Accountability in India's Digital Polis

By Napoleon S Mawphiang

India's Data Protection Revolution and Its Cons

Few events in history have changed society as much as the digital revolution. As with the printing press, the internet has transformed how we communicate, do business, and see the world. However, with great power comes great responsibility, and the digital era has presented unparalleled privacy and data security threats.

The draft Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Rules, 2025, released by the Indian government on January 3, 2025, addressed these issues. These guidelines will enforce the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023, a milestone in India's data protection legislation. This evolution has critics, and a closer look shows a complicated environment of progress and perils.

The Privacy Evolution
The historical backdrop that led to this breakthrough is necessary to comprehend its significance. Privacy has changed considerably over the centuries due to cultural, technological, and legal pressures.

The right to one's own person—"ius in se ipsum"—protected privacy in ancient Rome. Personal autonomy in Western law was based on this idea. In the 17th century, English jurist Sir Edward Coke said "the house of every one is to him as his castle and fortress." This home privacy idea influenced the Fourth Amendment to the US Constitution, which prohibits unreasonable searches and seizures.

Urbanisation and technology rendered privacy more vulnerable during the industrial revolution. In 1890, American lawyers Samuel Warren and Louis Brandeis wrote "The Right to Privacy" advocating for legal protection of the right to be left alone. This work shaped US and international privacy law.

Discontents of the Digital Age
However, privacy has faced tremendous threats in the digital age. Personal data is easy to acquire, keep, and analyse, creating a new paradigm in which our digital footprints reveal more than we want to share. The 2018 Cambridge Analytica scandal showed how personal data can be used for political manipulation in this new world.

In 2018, the EU passed the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) to address these issues. India's DPDP Act and Rules, which aim to protect digital rights, reflect the GDPR.

India's Data Protection Journey

The 2025 proposed DPDP Rules are vital to India's data protection path. The DPDP Act, 2023's principles will be operationalised to provide data fiduciaries and data principals with clear instructions.

The suggested guidelines need specific consent before processing personal data. This follows the medical ethics

ideal of informed consent, which is now a cornerstone of data protection laws globally. Rules require unambiguous and specific consent to empower individuals to make informed personal data decisions.

The new guidelines also incorporate "consent managers," intermediaries who handle consent for individuals. This novel solution, inspired by financial account aggregators, simplifies permission management across platforms and services.

Improved data privacy for children is another key guideline. The US minors' Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) and EU GDPR restrict tracking, behavioural monitoring, and targeted advertising to minors. This shows a rising global consensus on protecting vulnerable populations' privacy.

Data Protection Board
The Data Protection Board (DPB), which enforces the DPDP Act, is also described in the draft rules. Similar authorities exist in the UK's Information Commissioner's Office and France's Commission Nationale de l'Informatique et des Libertés.

Concerns and Criticisms
However, the suggested guidelines are controversial. The DPDP Act included sanctions, but not here. Privacy activists worry about the rules' enforceability due to this absence. The history of data protection legislation implies strong enforcement is essential for compliance. The EU's GDPR allows fines of up to €20 million or 4% of global annual revenue.

The guidelines provide the central government broad authority to exempt certain corporations from compliance, which civil society groups have criticised. Similar to the US Patriot Act dispute, numerous governments debate the balance between national security and privacy rights.

Concerns for government accountability and constitution

The government's treatment of citizen data may infringe the right to privacy, declared by the Supreme Court in 2017 under Article 21 of the Indian Constitution. Massive data breaches, such as the ICMR database leak of 81.5 crore citizens' data, cast doubt on the government's ability to defend this fundamental right.

DPDP Act aside, India lacks a comprehensive data protection law. Data protection laws in different sectors don't work together to secure citizens' data. This fragmented approach leaves big protection and enforcement holes.

Denying and Not Transparent Government
As in the CoWIN database leak, the government's refusal to acknowledge data breaches damages public trust and inhibits inquiry and remediation. Lack of transparency in investigating and reporting

earlier instances worsens this issue. Citizens are unaware of the size and consequences of past data breaches due to the lack of public investigations.

Lack of Enforcement and Overreach

Without truly independent data protection regulators and a wide range of remedies, present data protection regulations are ineffective. The government's 2019 National Cyber Security Strategy failure shows the lack of a comprehensive cybersecurity strategy.

The central government has broad rights to exempt certain businesses from compliance with the DPDP Act, which raises worries about misuse and undermines data protection regulations. Other jurisdictions have debated the balance between national security and privacy rights.

Insufficient Security and Conflicts of Interest

The recurrent intrusions of government databases like Aadhaar, ICMR, and state government websites suggest a systematic security failure. Over 100,000 ex-Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology personnel had unfettered access to the UIDAI system after leaving, demonstrating weak access control and data governance.

Data protection rules and citizen data custodianship by the government may create a conflict of interest. The Tribune's Aadhaar data leak reporting case shows this. The government has sued whistleblowers and journalists.

Unfair Penalties and Breach Notification

Data breaches can result in fines up to Rs 250 crore under the DPDP Act, yet government institutions guilty for breaches are not held accountable. This accountability gap between commercial and government institutions undermines equal law enforcement.

Though rigorous, the government's 6-hour data breach reporting rule may be unworkable and unproductive. Short deadlines may result in inadequate or erroneous reporting, limiting reaction and remedy.

Surveillance and Privacy Future

Credit information systems, which are supposed to preserve privacy, may increase surveillance. This casts doubt on the government's data collection and processing goals. As we examine these events, Sun Tzu's "The Art of War" advises: "If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles." Knowing oneself in data protection implies appreciating the value and risks of personal data misuse. Knowing the enemy means recognising privacy concerns from hostile actors, aggressive corporations, and overreaching governments.

India's draft DPDP Rules try to balance innovation, economic growth, and individual rights. As Robert Greene may

note, this is a delicate dance of power in which the government must safeguard civilians while promoting technical growth.

The guidelines' emphasis on consent and transparency supports Greene's "winning through seduction rather than force." The government hopes to develop confidence in the digital ecosystem, essential for its ambitious Digital India plan, by giving people data management.

The principles also follow Greene's axiom that "the best deceptions are the ones that seem to give the other person a choice." The vast government exclusions and potential for backdoor data access under the guise of national security could be regarded as subtle control masked as protection.

Finale

Future projections show that digital privacy is still a challenge. Lawmakers will perpetually be playing catch-up due to the lightning-fast rate of technology innovation. The Internet of Things and AI are expanding data collecting and analysis, challenging privacy and consent.

The worldwide nature of the internet makes data protection difficult to solve alone. India's DPDP Rules must meet international standards to facilitate seamless cross-border data transfers and strong citizen protections.

India's data protection journey has reached a milestone with the proposed Digital Personal Data Protection Rules, 2025. They handle issues specific to India while simultaneously reflecting a rising worldwide agreement on the need of digital privacy. However, the government's data breaches, lack of transparency, and potential overreach cast doubt on these measures' efficacy.

Changing the course of India's digital future is an inevitable consequence of these regulations as they go from draft to implementation. The government must address enforcement, accountability, and transparency to protect citizens' privacy and data. It must strengthen security, apply the law equally, and promote privacy across all industries.

Edward Snowden said, "Arguing that you don't care about the right to privacy because you have nothing to hide is no different than saying you don't care about free speech because you have nothing to say." One of the most important aspects of being a decent human being in this digital era is having the right to privacy. As India becomes a global digital powerhouse, its data protection policies will inspire developing nations and shape privacy in the 21st century. Following the rules to the letter is important, but the government's dedication to protecting citizens' personal information is what will really make this effort a success.

(The author is a practising Advocate, Trade Unionist and Humanist)

Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

Smelly Potatoes and A Dose of Forgiveness..!

Something that startles me no end is to hear people talk about old hurts, insults and old humiliations, and know that forgiveness has not taken place. And as I listen to bitter, shrill voice expounding on such old incidents, I want to shake them and say, "It's you who are killing yourself carrying your bitterness on!" And more than that, "You kill present day relationships, because nobody knows when the dormant volcano within you will erupt and intrude into everyday situations!"

Dr Frank Boehm says, "My father who escaped the Holocaust believed that anger, resentment and unforgiveness bred disease of the soul, as well as the body. Swallowing a dose of forgiveness is good medicine, he told me."

A patient came to see Dr Boehm about her constant neck pain, headaches and high blood pressure. But he couldn't find a medical cause for her ailments. "Tell me about your life," he then said. She told him she was in conflict with her two sisters. Recalling his father's words, the doctor encouraged her to forgive her sisters. Years later Boehm received a letter from his patient. She had made peace with her sisters and sure enough her physical ailments had abated. "She found forgiveness and from this good health," said Boehm.

"When you are treated unjustly by another, anger is a natural response," says Robert Enright, professor of educational psychology and author of "Forgiveness is a Choice." "But if these resentful feelings are not resolved, a grudge will form; victims may want to hold a grudge because it gives them a regained sense of control and superiority. However, when nursing a grudge you're essentially stuck in the victim role and are inviting anger to become a companion in your everyday life and a toxin to your body!"

Let me quote from Dr Redford Williams, author of "Anger Kills": "If you don't forgive, resentment can erupt at any time and the cost to your body is ongoing. It's like taking small doses of poison daily!"

Forgiveness is not denying you're angry or pretending the injury didn't happen. Forgiveness is to reframe how one feels about the offense and those seen as responsible. It is moving from continually replaying your personal grievance story to revising it so that you are no more a victim of your past.

Start small by learning how to forgive minor slights. If your wife serves you a meal which is not up to your standard, recognize that she isn't out to get you, and forgive her.

"By changing your thinking, you can decide whether your anger is appropriate," says Williams, "and over time you will be able to forgive tougher injuries."

"One forgiving act is the beginning," says Enright, "as you continue offering forgiveness, your identity will no longer be that of a victim but of one who is powerful in the face of adversity!"

Have we ever realized what

a stench we raise when we carry grudges and unforgiveness around?

A kindergarten teacher decided to let her class play a game.

The teacher told each child in the class to bring along a plastic bag containing a few potatoes. Each potato would be given a name of a person that the child hated, so the number of potatoes that a child put in his or her plastic bag would depend on the number of people he or she hated.

So when the day came, every child brought some potatoes with the names of people they hated. Some had two potatoes; some four while some had up to five potatoes.

The teacher then told the children to carry the plastic bag with the potatoes in them for a week, wherever they went.

Days passed by, and the children started to complain of the unpleasant smell let out by the rotten potatoes. Besides, those having five potatoes also had to carry heavier bags. After the week, the children were relieved because the game had finally ended.

The teacher then asked the children: "How did you feel, carrying the potatoes with you for a week?" The children let out their frustrations and complained of the trouble they had to go through having to carry the heavy and smelly potatoes wherever they went.

Then the teacher told them the hidden meaning behind the game: "This is exactly the situation when you carry your hatred for somebody inside your heart," she said. "The stench of hatred will contaminate your heart and you will carry it with you wherever you go. If you cannot tolerate the smell of rotten potatoes for just one week, can you imagine what it will be like to have the stench of hatred in your heart for a lifetime?"

Well I am sure the children learnt a lesson for life, though I wish some teacher had done the same thing for each of us, and we could have saved all those years carrying dislike, hatred and grudges in the plastic bag of our minds, right?

As I write, my thoughts go to what kind of a plastic bag God would have carried had He decided to remember all our mistakes and wrong doings? But God doesn't do that. His forgiveness is so great that he allows us to commune and have fellowship with Him because there is no plastic bag of our stuff that He carries along and puts between.

If God can forgive, what fools we are to carry our grudges and hate, and burden ourselves with this unnecessary load.

Let's get rid of this stinking bag of potatoes we've been carrying till now, by throwing our potatoes away!

Want to be healthy this year? Throw your smelly grudges away and swallow a dose of forgiveness..!

The Author conducts an on-line, eight session Writers and Speakers Course. If you'd like to join, do send a thumbs-up to WhatsApp number 9892572883 or send a message to bobsbanter@gmail.com

Letters to the Editor

Delay in screening test

Editor,
As we venture into the new year with positivity and aspirations in our daily endeavours especially among the educated jobless youth of our state that yearn for a government job as they endlessly apply for fewer vacant government posts, yet one government department has put on hold the screening test of some already advertised vacant post that had been advertised for over 5 years. As usual the pretext is some unfounded ostensible reason. The aberrant department is the Directorate of Agriculture that wantonly dithers on the screening exam of various posts within the ambit of the said department. These vacancies range from ministerial posts to Grade B vacant posts. Most of these vacant posts are occupied by contract and muster roll employees for decades. This is invalid and unconstitutional, as all vacant sanctioned posts are to be filled by recommended candidates from mandated recruitment authorities viz MPSC, DSC etc.

This conduct of the aforementioned department leads to frustration and anxiety among the aspiring candidates

of the State that hanker after government jobs which has become saturated over the years. I therefore urge the administrative authorities to intervene in this matter and hasten up the screening exams of these vacant posts so that candidates who clear the competitive exams conducted by recruitment authorities are appointed instead of adopting the path of nepotism. The administrative authorities had recently in the official circular prohibited appointment of temporary staff in sanctioned posts and vacant posts are to be filled immediately to mandated recruitment authorities, thereby leaving no lacuna in inconsistency of appointments to vacant posts. I hope this is followed in letter and spirit by the incumbent department.

Yours etc.,
Lionel Pyngrope
Via email

Respecting the sacred: A call to action

Editor,
The recent incident in Mawlynnong village, where an individual used a sacred space for a publicity stunt, has left a bitter taste in the mouths of the entire state, as

Salil Gewali aptly expressed in his letter—"Religion Not a Playground for Publicity Stunts," (ST January 2, 2024). I found the letter very meaningful. This disrespectful incident in our state reminds us of the imperative to protect and respect the sacred rituals, icons, and spaces of every belief system.

As Salil Gewali rightly said, Hinduism is based on love, tolerance, compassion, and respect for all living beings. But this person's actions blatantly disregard these values and are an insult to the religion. Ramakrishna's example of embracing diverse religious practices and experiencing the unity of all religions is a powerful reminder of the importance of interfaith respect. True devotion to God lies in love, compassion, and service, not in divisive acts or disrespect toward others' faiths.

It is imperative that we, as a society, come together to condemn such actions and ensure that sacred spaces are protected from mockery or divisive rhetoric. We must promote a culture of respect, tolerance, and understanding, where individuals from all faiths can coexist in harmony. We may follow different paths, but the ultimate goal is God.

As Gewali emphasized, exemplary punishment for such acts is necessary to deter others from repeating them. However, it is also equally important to educate and raise awareness about the importance of respecting sacred spaces and traditions.

Let us join hands to promote a culture of respect and tolerance, and ensure that sacred spaces remain sacred.

Yours etc.,
Rangme R Marak,
West Garo Hills

UDP's prescriptions too generic in nature

Editor,
Apropos of the editorial, "UDP's strange prescription" (ST January 4, 2025), the editor rightly pointed out that prescriptions for good governance are better discussed internally and, in the cabinet, rather than outside since the United Democratic Party (UDP) is the prime coalition partner of the Meghalaya Democratic Alliance (MDA) Government. In a coalition government, especially in a politically diverse state like Meghalaya recommendations of a coalition partner have

to be categorized more specifically and not in a generic manner.

There is a difference between specific and generic recommendations. Specific recommendations are customized to address particular issues or challenges faced by the coalition government. It is a tailored solution. For example, a specific recommendation might focus on improving infrastructure in a particular district or addressing the needs of a specific community. They often come with detailed steps and timelines for implementation or say a detailed action plan. For instance, a recommendation to improve healthcare services might include specific measures like building new hospitals, hiring more medical staff, and increasing funding for medical supplies. The outcomes are clearly defined and measurable. On the other hand, generic recommendations provide broad guidelines, which provide general advice or principles that can be applied across various situations. For example, a generic recommendation might suggest promoting transparency and accountability in government operations without detailing specific actions. They allow for flexibility in how they are implemented. For

instance, a recommendation to improve education might suggest increasing funding for schools but leave it up to the coalition partners to decide how to allocate the funds. The outcomes are more general and can be applied to multiple areas. For example, a generic recommendation might aim to improve overall governance and public trust without specifying particular metrics.

Therefore, the editorial correctly pinpointed that before tasking the MDA government to meet the needs and expectations of the poor, this exercise should have been taken first within the UDP to assess what the Party demands from the Government, not in a generic but a specific manner. In Meghalaya, coalition governments are common due to the fragmented nature of political parties and the socio-cultural dynamics of the state. Specific recommendations might focus on addressing the unique needs of different tribal communities or improving infrastructure in remote areas. Generic recommendations, on the other hand, might emphasize the importance of maintaining political stability and fostering cooperation among coalition partners. Understanding the difference between these types of recommendations can help

in effectively managing a coalition government and addressing the diverse needs of the population.

Yours etc;
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

Niam Khasi-the correct perspective

Editor,
With reference to the article by Bhogorath Mawroh captioned, "The dangerous nexus: Religion and politics in Meghalaya," (ST January 4, 2025), the author mentioned in one of the paragraphs that "Khasis are nature worshippers...". Here I would like to state that in reality the Khasis (Niam Khasi faith adherents) are the worshippers of U Blei (in English meaning God). To the Niam Khasi adherents, U Blei is U Nongthaw U Nongbuh U Trai Kynrad (in English meaning The Almighty The Creator The Supreme Lord).

The adherents of the Niam Khasi worship U Blei through prayers and rituals. They worship U Blei at homes, in open fields (e.g. Shad Suk Mynsiem, etc), in religious organization (e.g. Seng Khasi) and at a sacred place, U Lum Sohpet-bneng.

My late father taught me and my brothers and sisters to pray to U Blei for His Blessings and His Guidance. The elders of the Niam Khasi taught the same and kept on teaching to the adherents of the Niam Khasi.

With regards to Nature, the Niam Khasi adherents respect Nature. In the past before the British came to 'Ka Bri U Hynniew Trep,' (the abode of the Khasis) the Khasis used to invoke Nature and the various phenomena of Nature (the earth, the water, the sun, the fire, the wind, the forest, the mountain, the river, the rain and so on) through prayers to U Blei, and through sacred stories (Ki Khanatang). Nature and its various phenomena were invoked to serve humans in times of sowing and harvesting seasons, in times of religious ceremonies and so on. This practice is still prevalent even today.

So, the Khasis of the Niam Khasi worship U Blei U Nongthaw U Nongbuh U Trai Kynrad, and respect Nature.

Yours etc.,
Wallambiing Rani
Upper Shillong

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

"Don't wait until you're in a crisis to come up with a crisis plan."

— Phil McGraw

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No. 149 SHILLONG, THURSDAY, JANUARY 9, 2024

Meghalaya's impending water crisis

THE news that 749 water sources are in a critical condition, meaning that they are drying up due to various reasons should have alarmed the citizens of the state but there has been no reaction from any civil society group that otherwise has a view on every issue. Perhaps water is not a politically sexy issue otherwise political parties would have jumped to make political capital out of the issue which is a matter of life and death for the state and its people. Of the 17 sustainable development goals laid out by the United Nations, Goal 6 says, "Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all." Without a clean and sustainable source of drinking water public health will be compromised as polluted water is also the source of diseases. In Meghalaya a common sight is people washing vehicles in the middle of a river. This despite the clear warning from the State Pollution Control Board that washing vehicles in rivers is a criminal offence.

Rivers are precious sources of fresh drinking water but when rivers are so polluted by coal mining and anthropogenic activities it can become a case of life and death. Rivers originate from sources and when those sources are denuded by reckless felling of trees for quarrying and mining then water becomes the first casualty. Everywhere in the State large tracks of forests have been cleared for timber and charcoal production. While on paper charcoal production is banned the trade carries on unabated. At the rate at which trees are felled for this business it is doubtful if Meghalaya can revive the lost forest cover which must be seen to be believed.

The PHE Minister has said that the Government has identified and mapped out 749 water sources under critical condition. Perhaps what is faulty in Meghalaya is also the distribution of portfolios. Why cannot the PHE minister also be the Minister for Water Resources. After all the concerns for both are similar and can be handled better under one head instead of being divided. The public need to know what the rejuvenation plans of the Government are and they have to be involved for the plans to succeed. The PHE Minister says the Government has consulted experts. The public also needs to know who these experts are and what they see are the major reasons for the drying up of water sources. While global warming is an important reason for rivers drying up, what cannot be ruled out is also the environmental degradation and clearing of community forests. In fact, even inside reserved forests trees are being felled. Unless there is strict control over the forests which is the mandate of the District Councils, Meghalaya will be heading towards a major water crisis.

"Parched Lives: The Water Crisis in Shillong's Urban Slums"

By Dr Firdaus Samad

India's urban landscape presents a stark paradox in water accessibility. The World Health Organization prescribes 50-100 litres of water per person daily as a basic human necessity, and Indian urban standards mandate 135 litres per capita per day (LPCD). However, the reality across urban slums of India tells a drastically different story. In these densely populated corners of cities, families struggle with as little as 5-10 litres per person per day. That's insufficient to meet their most basic needs. This glaring disparity isn't just about the amount of clean water required—it involves countless hours spent in water collection, compromised health and hygiene, and lost opportunities for daily earning. In the case of children, who often spend hours in queues to collect water, it means a loss of time that could be spent on education. The water crisis in the urban slums of India has reached a critical point where nearly three-quarters of slum households survive on less than 100 LPCD, with many managing with far less. Even more alarming is that only half of these households have direct water access, forcing the rest to depend on unreliable and often unsafe public sources. This isn't merely an infrastructure challenge; it's a humanitarian crisis unfolding in the heart of cities, one that demands immediate attention and action.

While the National Family Health Survey 5 (NFHS-5, 2019-20) data indicates that 93.6% of urban Meghalaya households have access to improved drinking water sources, these statistics mask a complex reality. An improved drinking water source encompasses facilities that protect against external contamination, including piped water connections, public taps, protected wells, boreholes, and rainwater collection systems. However, mere classification as "improved" doesn't guarantee consistent water accessibility or adequacy. In Shillong's slums, the harsh reality persists where families subsist on merely 40-50 litres of

water daily, far below basic requirements. This severe shortage makes achieving the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 6 — ensuring water and sanitation

and essential cleaning, it creates a dangerous cycle of health vulnerabilities. The inadequate water supply not only compromises personal hygiene but inevitably leads

"This glaring disparity isn't just about the amount of clean water required—it involves countless hours spent in water collection, compromised health and hygiene, and lost opportunities for daily earning. In the case of children, who often spend hours in queues to collect water, it means a loss of time that could be spent on education."

tion for all — seem increasingly unattainable. The crisis deepens as climate change accelerates, further strain-

to increased disease burden among slum residents. This situation starkly illustrates how statistical improvements



ing already limited water resources. The implications of this water scarcity are profound and far-reaching.

in water source classification don't necessarily translate to meaningful improvements in daily life and public health.

"An improved drinking water source encompasses facilities that protect against external contamination, including piped water connections, public taps, protected wells, boreholes, and rainwater collection systems. However, mere classification as "improved" doesn't guarantee consistent water accessibility or adequacy."

When households lack sufficient water for basic hygiene practices like daily bathing

The water crisis in Shillong's slums stems from multiple systemic challenges

that deeply affect community life. The uncertainty of water access creates a daily struggle where today's availability offers no assurance for tomorrow. Women bear the heaviest burden with children following closely. These communities face a cruel paradox: despite their limited means, poor families often pay higher prices for water than their middle-class counterparts. The situation is further complicated by the constant threat of water-borne diseases like diarrhoea and typhoid, while community conflicts over water access create social tensions. A critical technical challenge lies in Shillong's Unaccounted For Water (UFW) losses, where over 50% of water disappears through leakages and siphoning before reaching consumers. This wastage is particularly alarming given Meghalaya's abundant annual rainfall of 63 billion cubic litres, of which only 1 billion cubic litres is retained. According to the American Water Works Association (AWWA), such high losses demand immediate intervention, as anything exceeding 25% is considered problematic.

Access to safe water and basic sanitation stands as a fundamental legal right of every citizen, not a charitable service. The path forward requires implementing inclusive community-managed distribution systems that ensure equal access for both tribal and non-tribal residents. Current supply levels in slum areas must be elevated from below 50 LPCD to meet WHO's minimum recommendation of 50-100 LPCD. Priority should be given to installing additional public taps, particularly in areas where women currently walk 1-2 kilometres to collect water. A comprehensive solution must include regular water quality monitoring, infrastructure repairs to address the high UFW losses, and systematic leak detection. Furthermore, implementing an equitable water distribution policy that transcends community status is essential to resolve existing social tensions and ensure fair access for all residents.

2025 AI boom may not exactly be celebration time for Indians

Apart from economic impact are implications for social order

By K Raveendran

As we enter 2025, the accelerating proliferation of artificial intelligence (AI) is poised to reshape the global landscape in ways akin to the transformational impact the internet had in the late 20th century. Within the first few days of the year, AI-driven technology stocks have seen substantial surges, with shares of major tech companies increasing by up to 20 percent.

The financial stakes involved are rapidly growing, with US AI start-ups raising a staggering \$97 billion in 2024 alone. Similarly, European counterparts have raised \$62 billion, a quarter of which has been directed specifically toward AI ventures. This significant influx of investment signals an AI boom that is not only reshaping the tech landscape but also promises to revolutionize industries across the globe. However, the rapid growth of AI also casts a shadow, particularly for countries like India, where the widespread deployment of automation and AI technology presents both opportunities and serious challenges, especially within the labour market.

AI's potential to reshape economies and industries is enormous, particularly in areas like automation and data processing. Major tech companies are launching AI products that make these technologies increasingly accessible to everyday consumers, bringing AI assistants and other tools to a wider audience. While this opens up new possibilities, particularly in terms of efficiency, cost savings, and business growth, the implications for workers are far from universally positive. The introduction of automation technologies could drastically change the nature of work, especially in labour-intensive economies such as India's. With labour-intensive sectors forming a significant part of India's economy, the rise of AI brings with it the risk of displacing millions of workers across various industries.

India's manufacturing sector, which is one of the largest employers in the country, faces considerable disruption due to the ongoing AI revolution. The McKinsey Global Institute estimates that up to 60 million workers in India's manufacturing sector could be displaced by automation by 2030, particularly in areas like textiles and electronics. These are industries where human labour has been traditionally integral to production, and AI systems capable of handling tasks like assembly, quality control, and design may replace the need for a large human workforce. In textiles, for instance, AI and robotics could perform tasks such as fabric cutting and stitching with greater precision and efficiency, leading to fewer jobs in production lines. In electronics, AI systems could take over not only manufacturing processes but also tasks related to testing and system management, making large swathes of the current workforce redundant.

Many of the displaced workers in the manufacturing sector, especially those in low-skilled positions, may not possess the skills required to transition into new roles. Without adequate training and reskilling programmes, these individuals may find themselves left behind in a rapidly changing economy, exacerbating the issue of unemployment and underemployment in the country. The shift toward automation also raises the question of what kinds of new roles will emerge. While some argue that AI will create new job opportunities, especially in fields such as AI development and maintenance, the question remains whether these new roles will be accessible to the displaced workforce, particularly in India's rural and semi-urban regions, where the bulk of the workforce is concentrated.

The IT and services sectors, long considered the backbone of India's eco-

nomie growth, are not immune to the changes brought about by AI either. India has been a global hub for IT outsourcing, with a significant number of its workforce employed in fields such as software development, system testing, and technical support. However, as AI technologies such as automated coding systems, testing tools, and virtual assistants become more advanced, many of the basic IT tasks traditionally performed by Indian workers are being automated. The McKinsey report highlights that the automation of these basic IT functions could result in a significant reduction in entry-level jobs, traditionally a major source of employment for India's growing middle class. These workers, many of whom rely on IT outsourcing for their livelihoods, may face displacement as AI systems increasingly take over tasks like code generation, bug testing, and routine system maintenance.

The potential for job losses in India's IT and services sectors underscores the challenges posed by AI. India's IT workforce, once the envy of the world due to its ability to provide high-quality services at low costs, may find itself facing intense competition from AI-driven systems that can do the same work faster and at a fraction of the cost. As AI becomes increasingly sophisticated, it may soon be capable of performing a broad range of tasks that were once considered too complex to automate. This could lead to large-scale disruptions in the IT sector, particularly among entry-level employees, who may struggle to find new roles in an AI-dominated landscape.

Beyond the formal sectors of manufacturing and IT, India's vast informal workforce faces even greater risks as AI and automation technologies begin to infiltrate the economy. Approximately 90 percent of India's workforce is employed in the informal sector, where workers typically lack formal contracts, social security benefits, and access to retraining opportunities. This lack of job security and institutional support means that many informal workers are particularly vulnerable to technological disruptions. Whether working as street vendors, drivers, or in small-scale service jobs, many informal workers lack the safety nets that formal sector employees might have, such as unemployment benefits or severance packages.

As AI technologies increasingly enter the economy, it is likely that informal sector workers will be among the first to feel the effects. For instance, the rise of autonomous vehicles and delivery robots could lead to massive displacement in sectors like transportation and logistics, where a large number of informal workers are employed. Drivers, delivery personnel, and small-scale service providers who rely on their skills for income may find themselves replaced by AI-driven alternatives, with little recourse to support systems. Similarly, jobs in agriculture, construction, and low-skill services may also be vulnerable to automation, particularly in urban areas where businesses are eager to embrace technology that can reduce costs.

The challenges posed by AI proliferation in India are not only economic but also social. The informal workforce, by its very nature, lacks the formalized mechanisms through which workers in the formal sector can access retraining programs or transition to new roles. In India, where access to education and skill development programs is already uneven, workers in informal sectors may find it increasingly difficult to adapt to the demands of an AI-driven economy. Moreover, the lack of a robust social safety net further compounds these challenges, leaving displaced workers to face uncertainty with little financial or institutional support. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

All hail the Lord of Roads!

Editor
From Shiyap to Langkyrding... to Mawpat and all the way to Ishyrawat, I glide through the buttery road with appreciation. The smell of new tarmac excites my nerves as I shift the gears and ease the throttle. I remember one stormy evening as I returned from NEIGRIHMS, I nearly lost my limbs as I landed on several landmines on the Mawpat road. As a frequent visitor of NEIGRIHMS Hospital, I wholeheartedly express my gratitude to the Lord of Roads for renovating the road which serves as a lifeline to a great number of sickly travellers. It was a joyride indeed as I did not even bother to overtake the tractor with its trailer. Suddenly a CHAPRI driver of a Maruti 800 taxi passed my bike and the tractor with its trailer, at the curve next to the main Mawpat junction. He almost hit an oncoming Bolero pickup. The Chapri yelled and spewed a few "English" words, much to the dislike of the Bolero driver. I witnessed the drama with enthusiasm and pleasure. The audacity of the CHAPRI to overtake two vehicles on a curve and reprimand the oncoming traffic for not giving way amused me greatly. With great roads come great responsibility. I congratulate the residents of Mawpat and at the same time urge them to be wary of CHAPRIs. Like nectar attracts bees, new

roads attract chapris. And they come in all shapes and sizes. Stay Safe!!
Yours etc.,
Kyntiewborlang Kharakor
Shillong - 17

Is the Education Minister ignorant of the Constitution?

Editor,
The statement made by Minister of Education, Mr Rakkam A Sangma that Meghalaya is a "Christian State" raises a concern in the constitutional context about the secular nature of India. Secularism is the bedrock of our nationhood. Secularism as Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru defined it is Sarva Dharma Samabhava which allows every religion to flourish in our country. Several landmark cases address these principles and could be relevant to this matter, viz.
Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala (1973)
Principle Established: The "Basic Structure Doctrine," which includes secularism as one of the inviolable principles of the Constitution.
Relevance: Any state action or statement asserting a religious identity of a state could potentially violate the basic structure of secularism.
S.R. Bommai v. Union of India (1994)
Principle Established: Secularism is a basic feature

of the Constitution, and state governments cannot favor one religion over another.

Relevance: The Court emphasized that the government should not identify with or promote any particular religion, reinforcing the secular character of governance.

Bijoe Emmanuel v. State of Kerala (1986)

Principle Established: Freedom of religion under Article 25 includes the right to practice, profess, and propagate one's religion without interference.

Relevance: A declaration of a state as being aligned with one religion could infringe on the religious freedom of minority groups like the Niamtre and Niam Khasi communities.

Indra Sawhney v. Union of India (1992)

Principle Established: Affirmative action and recognition of diverse communities must not create exclusion or discrimination against minority groups.

Relevance: Government acknowledgment of only one religion could marginalize indigenous religions like Niamtre and Niam Khasi, violating principles of inclusivity.

Aruna Roy v. Union of India (2002)

Principle Established: The secular state does not mean irreligion but equal respect for all religions.

Relevance: Labelling Meghalaya as a "Christian State" could be challenged as inconsistent with equal respect for indigenous religions.

Hence, a declaration of a lawmaker as being aligned with one religion could infringe on the religious freedom of minority groups like the Niamtre, Niam Khasi, Hindu, Islam, Sikhism, Jainism and Buddhism communities.

We are the most open and pluralistic society. The rise of religious polarisation is mainly to score political mileage; divide people, flare up communal feelings and sabotage the basic principles of the Constitution. If the right to freedom of speech is abused by using a statement to incite a feeling of hatred etc., then the citizens of Meghalaya have every right to demand the resignation of the Honourable Minister of Education.
Yours etc.,
Marbiang Rymbai,
Via email

Exorbitant exam application fees

Editor,
I am writing this letter through your esteemed newspaper to bring attention to the exorbitant exam application fees associated with job advertisements circulating in our state. Although Meghalaya has limited employment options for young people, the amount charged for these job applications is burdensome for those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. I wonder why

organizations such as the SSC can offer free job applications, yet the government or other organizations cannot provide either free or at least nominal application fees? This change would motivate more young individuals to apply for available positions. Currently, even a middle-class job seeker like myself feels the financial strain. I would also like to encourage the student union and other advocacy groups to pay attention to this issue, as it significantly deters young people from submitting applications when faced with such a large fee.
Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request
Via email

Why the long queue at the Speed Post counter?

Editor,
This letter, through your esteemed daily is regarding the lackadaisical and lethargic mode of functioning of the Speed Post counter at the main Post Office, Shillong. Every time we need to send letters or parcels through this facility, we would have to spend an hour or two in the queue as the system takes a long time to move. In addition, the incumbent at the counter is so slow in attending to his duty that it pushes one's blood pressure to soar to dangerous limits.
We are directed to only

one Speed Post counter in such a big establishment while the adjacent counter having a signage saying "multipurpose counter" may be empty yet the staff at this counter refuses to entertain Speed Post letters/parcels in spite of the signage. This happens on a daily basis and one could hear the grunt and even the heated arguments amongst the customers and the worker manning the counter. This is nothing but total harassment for the customers concerned and that too on a regular basis.

I request the Post Master or the authority concerned to handle this problem as soon as possible for the smooth functioning of this facility and if there could be two counters it would save the customers' valuable time.

Hope and pray that this does not fall on the deaf ears of the concerned authority. One wonders as to why are there very few sub post offices around Shillong city. The post offices at Laban and Barabazar area have been dismantled for reasons best known to them. Had there been sufficient sub centres across the town, the burden of work on the main office would be reduced drastically.
Yours etc.,
Jenniefer Dkhar,
Via email

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

"Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other."

— John F. Kennedy

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No. 150 SHILLONG, FRIDAY, JANUARY 10, 2024

Missing work culture

WHAT started as a social media comment by a Mumbai CEO on the work culture of Indians is hogging the limelight in the established media as well. His observation being that some 99 per cent of the employees will not turn up for work if and when they gain financial security. In other words, most people are not interested in the work they do. They are straining their nerves for a few bucks or to keep their family hearths burning. This should shame a nation that's aspiring to be an economic super power in the near future. Fact of the matter, admittedly, is that there's no proper work culture across various sectors, and more so in the government sector that should normally have shown exemplary discipline. The private sector is a shade better, thanks to the cut-throat competition among units to excel and the resolve of the management to grow and show profits. It is common knowledge that more chairs in every government office remain unoccupied during the working hours than those that are occupied by those who work. Senior officials are often handicapped by the unionism prevalent among the workforce, and cannot enforce discipline. In the private sector, following the recent tightening of rules as part of the Liberalization process – which the Leftists opposed tooth and nail, but had to cave in ultimately – strikes at the drop of a hat have come down.

The other stark side of the story is private firms are now taking things easy and avoiding increases in salaries and perks even when they can afford to. In such a scenario, governmental intervention is well-advised, as the market mechanisms are oiled by larger circulation of money. Several upwardly mobile nations are having strict norms about the quality and quantity of work their institutions expect from the workforce. While working hours start at 8 am in such nations abroad, India now wakes up around that time and its workforce reaches the establishments before 10 am, as a norm, which too is often flouted. IT wizard NR Narayana Moorthy recently drew flak from many quarters when he proposed that the youth should be made to work for longer hours. A 12-hour-a day work ethic is not a bad idea, perhaps, if matching salary hikes are on offer. Yet, such a proposition would raise public tempers here.

Trade unions are a major source of income for political establishments, more so for the Leftists, and these outfits flourish with the sweat of the workforce. Their argument would often be to reduce the working hours, not necessarily to increase the wages. Unless the mindset changes, and unless the productive forces are unleashed, an economic miracle for India would remain a mirage. It is here that the strengths of a leadership matter. The run-of-the-mill politicians are lazy bums. When they run the nation, miracles need not be expected. Notably, the Indian economy is passing through a bad patch.

Leadership of our times: Do we have the right leaders to repair our social fabric?

By Patricia Mukhim

Now that the elections to the three Autonomous District Councils is knocking at our doors, we will have sundry individuals throwing in their hats into the ring to contest the elections. We will now start hearing contests and boastful proclamations of who loves the 'jaidbyrniew' (the Khasi people) more than the other contestant. The jaidbyrniew politics has dominated Meghalaya's scene since before the state was baptised. But we have not seen the fruits of that leadership because it is never allowed to bloom. The fight for power and leadership took centre-stage. Then we had PA Sangma who had a vision for Meghalaya but he was not allowed to survive because he stepped on the toes of crony capitalists who even then controlled the purse strings in Meghalaya. They are now dead and gone but their legacy lives on through their descendants. They held meetings and strategized on how to overthrow the PA Sangma-led government and they succeeded. Were those people who held those midnight meetings at the home of another wannabe leader, to overthrow a government that meant business, really our leaders or self-serving men suffering delusions of grandeur? Anyone who tries to right the wrongs of land acquisition by government for road construction which even in the late 1970s and 1980s had become a lucrative business for some, would not survive for long no matter how well-intentioned that politician is. If coal money is driving politics today then land acquisition was what funded politics then.

We now live in a Meghalaya where large sections of our own people are dehumanized. Readers may ask what is dehumanization. The essence of dehumanization is not to see suffering and to render the poor and the powerless almost invisible. When the so-called political leaders ride on their SUVs with tinted glasses and don't feel the road bumps, they also fail to see that thousands upon thousands of the people in their constituencies have to ride on those roads daily and at great cost to their health. Think especially of pregnant women! Since all MLAs and MDCs only make flying

visits to their constituencies they are least sensitised about the hardships that their people face day in and day out. Schools in the villages function in the breach and the number of school drop-outs are increasing by the day. What's the point in hanging banners across Shillong about getting children back to school. School drop-out is not an urban phenomenon; it's an affliction of rural Meghalaya and nothing much is happening to arrest this dysfunctionality. One wonders what the future of thousands of school drop-outs in Meghalaya is likely to be in a world driven by technology? Do our political "leaders" really care about this speedy descent to dystopia? I don't think so! What they don't see and feel does not hurt them. Period.

And yet election after election we see self-styled leaders taking centre-stage and paying lip service to the same jaidbyrniew which unfortunately gets repeatedly conned by sweet talk and a few thousand rupees being thrown around the night before voting. It's the money that seals the deal and politicians know they are only play-acting when they come to different areas of the constituency to campaign. We have seen for decades how progressive policies whether on education or land reforms all too often run into the wall of upper middle class opposition. Self interest takes over public interest. And who is the public anyway? An idiom loosely referred to by the word, "people?" Unless the people are organised to take on the growing capitalistic coterie that now control the government, the word "people" remains a mirage. It takes a brave politician to question the privileges enjoyed by the upper middle class. And we all thought the Voice of People Party (VPP) would be the Party to break the growing disequilibrium in Khasi society! Were we hallucinating? Or are we so depressed as an electorate that we pinned our hopes on politicians that were tried and tested and found wanting?

For Khasis to solve the problem of deepening class

division, we will have to start by admitting their existence and our collective complicity in maintaining them. How flippantly we have been talking about the Khasi society being egalitarian. That's the biggest lie we have all helped to spread. Beneath the veneer of classlessness, the Khasi class reproduction machine operates with ruthless efficiency. And there's not a murmur of moral disquiet! We all are part of it! Religious preachers across faiths hardly speak about the moral collapse of society and what moral rubric they propose in order to arrest this hastening moral disintegration.

The District Councils elections are already preceded by a call to strengthen the clan system and all the other paraphernalia of customary practices which have all but become meaningless. The District Councils should actually be questioned on the CAG reports which repeatedly indict them for their irreverent lack of accountability and which they continue to ignore as if the money they spend is from their own savings account. This time the public should have the courage to question all the sitting MDCs as to why they have not accounted for the funds they have taken to ostensibly make peoples' lives better. What's the use of all the heightened importance given to the clans and the so-called traditional institutions that are equally profligate and lack accountability in public spending? Enough of identity politics and the five-yearly injection of Khasi pride which is intended to deceive! People should tell the candidates to get real or get lost and not waste their time!

For too long we have tolerated all kinds of self-proclaimed leaders who have been found wanting when the going got tough. Such leaders become desensitised the day they are elected and are ensconced in a shell that is tough to break through. While campaigning these political leaders will tell us harrowing tales of underdevelopment and speak of corruption as if it's a sin of those who held power in the past. Once elected the same

set of guys will turn the harrowing into the humdrum and numb us all. That's how politics has played out in Meghalaya.

In Meghalaya we have politicians who have turned provocation into an art form. They are also tone deaf so they continue to repeat the same old histrionics and demagoguery. Such politicians will take the stage yet again come February-March 2025. They will mesmerise the gullible with their stem-winder speeches and we the people will be ready to vote them yet again, unquestioningly and without asking them to lay out their action plans! No wonder democracy requires constant questioning but that questioning can only come from a logical mind; one that is also empowered by education! That's why politicians prefer to stay away from discussions that might expose their wily natures and their penchant for obfuscation.

And finally, even the Party that in 2023 promised to deliver us from our poverty-stricken predicament seems to have faltered in its internal mechanics of deciding who to set up as candidates to the ADCs. In any case people have patiently listened to platitudes and raised their hopes sky high but they now want to see action and delivery. For too long elections have been the platform for spreading paranoia about us disappearing; being overrun by so-called 'outsiders'; about our land being taken away and the rhetoric goes on. It takes a constant reality check to discover the truth – more land has gone into the hands of the affluent Khasi politician and the business class. That's visible and tangible; so enough of misleading yarns! This time we should demand that the ADCs live up to their mandate of protecting our forests, rivers and our drinking water sources. With over 749 water sources in a critical condition, it's time to get real and stop the slaughter of trees and the reckless quarrying and mining, all of which are the remit of the ADCs.

So, candidates stop misleading us. Get to the point and no faking! The social fabric has ruptured a long time ago. It's time to mend not just the tear but the gaping holes in that fabric!

The Prime Minister My Father Knew

By Dr Abhinav Walia

In the tapestry of post-partition India, where destinies were re woven from the threads of displacement, two young men from Pakistan found themselves at Government College, Hoshiarpur, Punjab University - both carried with them the weight of loss and the hope for a better future in a new land. One immersed in the mysteries of chemistry, the other in the intricacies of economics. One was my father, Mr. Ranjit Singh Ahluwalia and the other one would become India's Prime Minister, Dr. Manmohan Singh. With passage of time, both excelled in their disciplines.

A curious hallmark of the linguistic tapestry woven by Partition was noticeable in their communication after they settled in India. Both Dr. Singh and my father were schooled in the elegant loops and curves of Urdu. Even when they had to provide a voice in Hindi, they often borrowed Urdu's pen to give it form, as if the two were old companions unwilling to part.

Like rare books that share a shelf but never touch, their paths ran parallel yet distinct. While those who were displaced from Pakistan have long been celebrated for their entrepreneurial spirit, these two souls chose

to the praise but what fascinated me most was my father's peculiar devotion - a devotion that asked for nothing in return. Despite the passage of years and the ascent of Dr. Singh to the highest echelons of political power, my father's admiration remained undiminished. When we urged him to meet his university contemporary who had risen to the nation's highest executive office in 2004, he would smile and shake his head. It was enough for him to know that someone he had shared a academic halls with was serving the nation with such distinction. Yet, life has its own sense of poetry.

When my father was ill in 2018, I wrote to Dr. Manmohan Singh (when he was no longer PM) on behalf of my father and requested a meeting with his college mate. During my father's illness, I wanted him to have this meeting, which could cheer him up. To our surprise, a message indeed was received from Dr. Singh's side. At that juncture, a window was opened up for the meeting, but due to my father being suddenly bedrid-

"Though I never had the opportunity to meet Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, his presence loomed large in our household; his name was invoked with almost liturgical regularity. From extended family members to fellow travellers, to colleagues over tea, to anyone who would listen, my father would paint portraits of Dr. Singh's brilliance with words that glowed like embers in the gathering dusk."

a different calling - public service.

Though I never had the opportunity to meet Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, his presence loomed large in our household; his name was invoked with almost liturgical regularity. From extended family members to fellow travellers, to colleagues over tea, to anyone who would listen, my father would paint portraits of Dr. Singh's brilliance with words that glowed like embers in the gathering dusk.

"Here was a man," he would say, eyes bright with admiration, "who carried simplicity like others carry pride." The litany of virtues would follow - integrity that stood like a lighthouse in the stormy sea of politics, dedication that burned steady as a lamp in a temple, and humility that seemed to grow deeper with each achievement. My father and Dr. Singh had little contact after their Punjab University days, reconnecting briefly at UPSC when Dr. Singh contacted my father to resolve bureaucratic delays with his paperwork. Dr. Singh became the Finance Minister of the country in early 1990s and spearheaded economic reforms that transformed India's economy. At that juncture, my father had taken an early retirement from UPSC; this was especially the period when I heard heaps of praise for Dr. Singh - about his competence to set in motion wheels of change for the nation through such reforms.

I got used to listening

den, the meeting could not transpire. Be that as it may, it was an acknowledgement of a friendship that sustained itself on principles rather than proximity.

In Dr. Singh's passing, my father's stories resurface like treasures from a forgotten chest. Their shared journey from the wounds of partition to the halls of public service speaks of an India that was built not just by entrepreneurs and industrialists, but by men who chose duty and service over success in purely material terms.

Perhaps that's why my father saw in Dr. Singh not just a Prime Minister, but a reflection of values that he held dear - a mirror that showed him that his own choices of integrity and service were not in vain. In our current age of overwhelming focus on materialism, their story reminds us of a different kind of leadership - one built on quiet competence and unwavering principles.

As I pen these words, I realize that my father's endless praise was not just about the Prime Minister - it was about a hope that such leadership, marked by humility and dedication, would never fade from our national consciousness. In remembering Dr. Manmohan Singh, I remember not just a Prime Minister, but an ideal that two young refugees from Pakistan had sacred - that true service to the nation needs no fanfare, only an unwavering heart.

(The author is former Addl. Secy./Member (HRD), Postal Services Board Min. of Communications.)



Letters to the Editor

Rejoinder to the illegal, unlawful & deceptive claims raised by the Dorbar Shnongs of Ur Masi-U-Joh & Umphyrnai

Editor, Firstly, let us start by confirming that the landed property known as "MAWSAW" situated on both sides of the Shillong-Jowai Road and Lad Smit is a Ri Kynti (Ancestral Property) which was duly registered in the office of the Syiem of Myliem on February 7, 1876 by our forefathers measuring about 300 acres more or less. This Land rightfully and exclusively belongs to the Kur (Clan) Kharkongor, Nongthymmai and is managed and controlled by the ling Khadduh Kharkongor and the Rangbah Kurs.

The false allegations of the Rangbah Shnong, Ur Masi-U-Joh that the District Council had issued the order on December 13, 2024 for the establishment of Independent Shnong (Village) of "MAWSAW" without respecting their participation is wrong and misleading. In fact, over the past few years, the Kur Kharkongor, Nongthymmai and the ling Khadduh Kharkongor have time and again approached the Syiem of Hima Khyrim for consultation with the neighbouring villages for a separate Shnong, which is well within their knowledge but

they never appeared before the office of the Syiem.

Briefly, it can be stated here that the Shnong, Ur Masi-U-Joh has been making use of the water source from the land of the Kharkongor during the life time of our Late Rangbah Kurs (clan heads).

It may be mentioned here in that the high handedness of the Rangbah Shnong, of Ur Masi-U-Joh, did not end here. The Kur Kharkongor had received a letter from him on June 9, 1999 which was dated May 26, 1999, where two families who were engaged in farming at "Mynsain" inside the Land of the Kur Kharkongor with due recognition, were threatened by the Rangbah Shnong, Ur Masi-U-Joh to stop the farming, by illegally claiming it to fall under their jurisdiction and he further took away a portion of the land from them. Thereafter on inspection by the Elders of the Kur Kharkongor it was found that the stone boundary (Maw Bri) was erected since 1800 above and after few years cemented pillars were erected beside the stone boundary (Maw Bri) were also destroyed by bulldozing them so that he could falsely lay claim on our Land. He even went to the extent of asking land for the purpose of burial ground for his Shnong (Village) from the Syiem Hima Khyrim which was denied to him by the Syiem.

The football ground which falls within our land was also requested by the Dorbar Shnong, Ur Masi-U-Joh for its use by the Sports and Cultural Club and an agreement was drawn up dated March 31, 1997 for the use of it by both the Shnong (Villages).

The allegations issued from the office of the Rangbah Shnong, Ur Masi-U-Joh are totally false and baseless. It had never been agreed by the Kharkongor Clan, Nongthymmai that the jurisdiction of "MAWSAW" shall be managed and controlled either by the Dorbar Shnong of Ur Masi-U-Joh and Dorbar Shnong of Umphyrnai which are only neighbouring villages.

It was only after the Kur Kharkongor, Nongthymmai started giving plots to its own clan heirs that the two Shnongs started their illegal demands.

When the Rangbah Kurs along with the ling Khadduh Kharkongor approached the Syiem of Hima Khyrim to create their own Village (Shnong) that trouble started. The Myntiris of the Hima Khyrim had also issued letters to the neighbouring villages (Shnong) for joint inspection of our boundaries but none of the members from their side co-operated, so after a very long wait for approval from the office of the Syiem, Hima Khyrim was delayed and put off from time to time, the Kharkongor Clan had no option left and therefore approached the higher authorities of the KHADC.

There were a number of notices which were also issued from the KHADC for the Syiem of Hima Khyrim to intervene and survey the areas belonging to our Clan but it never went through. Therefore, finally the authorised personnel of the KHADC and the Kur Kharkongor Elders made the survey in accordance with law and thereafter when our application was found to be genuine, the KHADC had allowed the Kur Kharkongor

to establish its own Shnong (village) namely to be known as the "MAWSAW" village exclusively belonging to us. There has not been any political affiliation or any commitments for any political reasons.

The real motive of these two Shnongs is just for monetary benefits where many of our Kur have been pressurised and forced to register their plots under these two villages by paying money to them, to which the original Pattas which were issued from the Office of the ling Khadduh Kharkongor were not taken into consideration at all.

Therefore, we as the Kur Kharkongor Nongthymmai stand firm on our rightful claims which is also a Ri Kynti (Ancestral Property) that does not belong to the administration of any of the neighbouring Shnongs (Villages).

Yours etc.,
ling Khadduh & Ki Rangbah Kur Kharkongor Pohkseh, Nongthymmai

Distorting history?

Editor, Revisiting the past creates a pathway towards understanding the pattern to which solutions can be worked out thereby enabling better management and security. The Dhaka Tribune in its article published on December 27, 2019, 'Remembering the 'Phantoms of Chittagong,' describes Operation Eagle, in which R&AW and the Special Frontier Force launched an audacious campaign against the Pakistan Army and gained superiority in an operation which has no official record. However, it

seems like the narratives in Bangladesh towards India are changing. Media reports last year indicate that the interim government instructed the removal of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's image from their Taka, and newly introduced textbooks stated that Ziaur Rahman declared the country's independence in 1971. If all this is true, the Bangladesh story is mind boggling. Is Bangladesh going the India way? Al Jazeera in its report on February 19, 2024, 'How RSS textbooks are reshaping Indian history and science under Modi' are clear signs of fascism slowly penetrating into the edifice of democracy. Bleeding the narratives would give the enemy the edge, as foreign powers are trying to lure this springboard of the east for their own benefits. Under Muhammad Yunus, the survival of this country would depend on diplomatic manoeuvres and thoughtful planning and sharing of crucial information with their neighbours. This could give things the right meaning.

A book to supplement as to why Northeast India is at its crucial point and how going back to history will provide the answers would be Sanjoy Hazarika's 'Strangers of the Mist.'

Yours etc.,
Christopher Gatphoh, Shillong-10

Laws don't apply in Mawkasiang

Editor, I write this letter as a concerned resident of Mawkasiang, troubled by the glaring disregard for laws that seem to exist only on paper. It is

currently 10:57 PM as I pen this letter and the air is thick with the deafening sound of music blaring from what appears to be the residence of a candidate for the upcoming MDC elections.

This is not just a trivial annoyance; it is a blatant violation of government regulations. As per a circular issued in 2022, noise levels in residential areas should not exceed 45 decibels during night time hours (10 PM to 6 AM). Furthermore, the Deputy Commissioner of East Khasi Hills has explicitly restricted the use of loudspeakers and public address systems beyond 10 PM. Yet, these rules are disregarded with impunity, as if they were mere suggestions, especially when those in question are individuals of influence. Furthermore, authorities, including the village headman, have turned a blind eye. It appears that the rules exist only for the common people, while the "important" and well-connected residents are granted immunity.

The failure to enforce regulations is not only unfair but also deeply disheartening for those who rely on authorities to maintain law and order. What is the point of issuing circulars and laying down laws if they are not enforced equally? This selective application of justice is eroding trust in our leadership and governance.

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request, Via email

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

*"Building capacity dissolves differences.
It irons out inequalities."*

— A. P. J. Abdul Kalam

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No. 151 SHILLONG, SATURDAY, JANUARY 11, 2025

Media as scapegoat

EDUCATION Minister Rakkam Sangma after being castigated by members of the public including church elders on his statement that the Capt William Sangma State University would be consecrated as per Christian rituals since Meghalaya is a Christian state, has now distanced himself from the statement. And who does he blame if not the media? Thankfully the electronic media does not lie. What is spoken is recorded for posterity. The problem with most legislators is that they don't measure their words and get carried away when confronted by the media. Perhaps their intent is to put their best foot forward but often there are slip-ups, perhaps because what is articulated is also what is uppermost in their minds.

It could not have been lost on the Education Minister that India is a secular country and as per constitutional law any state that violates the spirit of secularism as enshrined in the Constitution can become liable under Article 356. At the dawn of Independence, India had visionary leaders who foresaw the dangers of mixing religion with politics as is happening today, where the Hindutva forces have gone on a rampage to assert that Hinduism should become the dominant religion. Although secularism was not specifically mentioned in the Constitution it became enshrined in the preamble to the Constitution after the Forty-second Constitutional Amendment in 1976. However, the Supreme Court of India in the 1994 case of SR Bommai versus the Union of India firmly established the fact that India was secular since the formation of the Republic. That landmark judgment in fact established beyond reasonable doubt that there is a clear separation of state and religion. The Supreme Court had stated categorically, "In matters of State, religion has no place."

The Supreme Court ruling further says that any State Government pursuing a non-secular policy acts contrary to the constitutional mandate. Further, all state-owned educational institutions are prohibited from imparting religious instructions. In fact, Article 27 of the Constitution prohibits the use of tax-payers money for the promotion of any religion. Unfortunately, in recent times the Constitution has been violated time and again as far as the use of religion for political gains is concerned. This is a matter that requires extensive public debate as it erodes the spirit of diversity which is the hallmark of India. Giving importance to any single religion in a country with such diverse faiths is bound to lead to conflicts, more so when the state is involved. Ministers of the Government would do well to imbibe the spirit of the Constitution and stand by those principles at all times no matter what the provocation is. That is statesmanship and politicians need not be politicking all the time to score political points. There is a limit to seeking cheap popularity.

The growing divide: Inequality in Meghalaya

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

Recently, the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India, released the report on Household Consumption Expenditure Survey: 2023-24. The survey covered the period from August 2023 to July 2024. Collecting data on household income is notoriously difficult because individuals often under-report their income when self-reporting. Therefore, researchers use indirect methods for the purpose. One of the easiest and commonly used is the per capita distribution of the value of the GDP of a region. According to official statistics, the State Gross Domestic Product of Meghalaya during 2023-2024 was 53,057 Crore, which was the third lowest in the country among those for which data is available.

For Per Capita Net State Domestic Product, the state did a little better—they were the fifth lowest in the country at 11,412 rupees per month. This figure is a little higher than the prescribed minimum wage for an unskilled worker which is 9,174 rupees per month but lower than the minimum wage declared for a skilled worker, which is 12,826 rupees per month if a worker were to work for 22 days a month. Inequality makes the figures look even worse. When a few groups (referred to as High Level peyoratively in the local context) capture a large share of the value (GDP) produced in the economy, the income received by most of the population will be even lower.

Let's assume that there's a person in Meghalaya who has recently bought a BMW. I checked the price of the car within India and it ranges from Rs 43 lakhs to over crore. Even if we take the lower range, if someone were to buy a BMW, obviously their total assets are over 43 lakhs, maybe double or triple. But still assuming that someone has bought this car by using up their entire wealth, this still amounts to the average monthly income of over 335 people. If you triple the assets of the BMW owner, i.e., 129 lakhs, it means that their total wealth is more than the average monthly income of over 1000 people.

The Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) has recently claimed that the Chief Minister Conrad K Sangma is officially the 10th richest Chief Minister in the country with total assets worth Rs 14,06,83,315 or 14.06 crore. If we do the same analysis, the total wealth of the Chief Minister

is equal to the monthly income of over 10,962 people. In the last election, the richest candidate was Metbah Lyngdoh who had declared assets worth 146.31 crore, so his wealth is equal to the monthly income of over 11,40,73 or over 1 lakh people. These figures are absolutely mind-blowing. Basically, Meghalaya is a state with a few filthy rich people surrounded by a sea of very poor people.

However, this approach can be criticized on the grounds that GDP measures

the total monetary value of all final goods and services produced within a territory, excluding items that are not produced or manufactured for the market. For example, even today, many farmers consume a significant portion of what they produce within the household. Except for those growing cash crops like broom and areca nut, farmers in Meghalaya typically consume at least half, or more, of what they grow, with only the surplus reaching the market. Basically, the calculation for the GDP leaves out non-market transactions. Thus, people can consider the official figures an under-estimation, and make the argument that the disparity is actually much lesser."

"Except for those growing cash crops like broom and areca nut, farmers in Meghalaya typically consume at least half, or more, of what they grow, with only the surplus reaching the market. Basically, the calculation for the GDP leaves out non-market transactions. Thus, people can consider the official figures an under-estimation, and make the argument that the disparity is actually much lesser."

the state's population is living under highly vulnerable conditions. At the same time, it has to be acknowledged that the present figures are higher than the previous assessment period, i.e., 2022-2023. During this period, the MPCE for rural areas was 3,514 rupees and for urban areas, was 6,433 rupees. This is an increase of almost 10% for rural areas and over 21% for urban areas. However, determining whether actual improvement has occurred requires factoring the inflation rate in the calculations. The annual inflation rate in India has been between 5-6%. Thus, urban areas have seen an expenditure increase of over 15% above the inflation rate (which can be roughly likened to a rise in income), while rural areas have merely matched inflation. A lower than 5% increase in expenditure would have meant that expenditure has actually decreased in real terms (people are actually spending less because of a fall in income). So, the situation of the people in the rural areas is very precarious.

To make matters worse, the study revealed that in rural areas, the proportion of expenditure allocated to food was 47%, indicating that out of every 100 rupees spent, 47 rupees were used for food. As mentioned earlier, in rural areas farmers consume

the state's population is living under highly vulnerable conditions.

At the same time, it has to be acknowledged that the present figures are higher than the previous assessment period, i.e., 2022-2023. During this period, the MPCE for rural areas was 3,514 rupees and for urban areas, was 6,433 rupees. This is an increase of almost 10% for rural areas and over 21% for urban areas. However, determining whether actual improvement has occurred requires factoring the inflation rate in the calculations. The annual inflation rate in India has been between 5-6%. Thus, urban areas have seen an expenditure increase of over 15% above the inflation rate (which can be roughly likened to a rise in income), while rural areas have merely matched inflation. A lower than 5% increase in expenditure would have meant that expenditure has actually decreased in real terms (people are actually spending less because of a fall in income). So, the situation of the people in the rural areas is very precarious.

To make matters worse, the study revealed that in rural areas, the proportion of expenditure allocated to food was 47%, indicating that out of every 100 rupees spent, 47 rupees were used for food. As mentioned earlier, in rural areas farmers consume

the state's population is living under highly vulnerable conditions.

a lot of the produce which they grow with only surplus being sold in the market. If the farmers were not to grow their own food, the expenditure on food would be much higher (would easily cross 50% and more of the total expenditure). So, self-production is saving the rural population from falling into an even worse situation by avoiding a large part of the expenditure. This suggests that inequality is higher than what the official figures indicate. Therefore, regardless of the perspective, GDP, i.e., total income or total expenditure, the overall condition of the people in the state, particularly the rural population, is quite poor. What is very concerning is that it could get worse in the future given the widening inequality that is growing.

The upcoming district council election is therefore very important. We need to see if the parties looking to form the government have any plans to solve the actual problems afflicting the society. Most probably, the parties looking to govern will use two issues to appeal to the voters: protection of the jaidbynriew and anti-corruption. The first of course is nothing but a diversionary tactic to create a feeling of false victimhood among the people so that they don't really pay attention to the genuine problems and instead blame the non-existent illegal immigration problem. The second is more relevant considering the financial irregularities that are emerging from the CAG (Comptroller and Auditor General) reports. But it was the anti-corruption movement that brought the BJP to power for the first time. Over ten years after that, we have the Hindu Jaidbynriew/Hindutva politics being used to divert from the fact that over 80 crore people or over 60% of the country's population are surviving on free food grains. This occurs when there is no clear plan in place to improve the standard of living of the people, and political rhetoric is used merely to win elections. We will have to wait and see what would be the manifesto of the different political parties for the district council election and how they intend to improve the lives of the common people. Or we are going to be fooled by jaidbynriew politics under the garb of the anti-corruption slogan. We will find out soon enough.

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

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

Dr Manmohan Singh – A personal account

By Manas Chaudhuri

Between 2004 and 2014, I had the great fortune of meeting, interacting and even sharing the dais with late Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh at least on ten occasions. On seven official foreign tours (Pakistan, USA twice, Russia, UK, Brazil and Philippines), I was invited by the Government of India as one of the 25-member media entourage.

As per convention, the Prime Minister is required to address the media team twice—once after embarking and before disembarking. That's the only time we would come face to face with him.

The Prime Minister's aircraft is specially crafted to fit the bill. On the upper deck, the PM would have his bedroom, kitchenette, an office and a living room. The forefront of the lower deck is earmarked for all top officers, and the remaining compartments, second one is for media entourage; the third for a crack team of SPG personnel and at the rear end, all the other support staff are seated.

In the media compartment, there's a protocol. The senior ones occupy the front seats at a hand shaking distance from the PM. I was extremely privileged to be allotted a front seat along with all noted senior Editors. Naturally, he developed a familiarity with my name and face.

His pressers would be only on the mission at hand. Dr Singh always expressed himself in measured tones, seldom going beyond the official line. The rule is that while on foreign tour, the media is debarred from raising national issues.

I recall my first trip to Pakistan in September 2004. He was very enthusiastic about making a paradigm shift in our relationship with Pakistan. But defying his expectations, the then President, Pervez Musharraf refused to play ball. The K-Word remained a stumbling block. Dr Singh returned visibly disappointed. His face betrayed his feelings at the media interaction before disembarking in Delhi. Being an eternal optimist, he pinned his hopes on the "good sense" of Pakistan for the elusive thaw.

In the White House while dealing with George Bush on the nuclear deal, Dr Singh exhibited patience and tenacity. Overcoming stiff US reservations and after some tough prolonged negotiations, he managed to strike a deal. A beaming Dr Singh addressed a press conference for the waiting media. The US media, those days, didn't show much interest in him or India. His tour didn't find any mention in the mainstream media.

At Cebu in the Philippines, where he addressed the ASEAN countries, he showed immense stamina of holding crucial parleys with different leaders for safeguarding India's own and member countries' mutual interests.

With visible signs of fatigue due to lack of sleep and also paucity of time for personal comfort, when a media person asked him if he had rested well, he quipped in Hindi: "Sher bhi kabhi dant saaf karta hai?" (Does a tiger ever brush his teeth?).

Well, Dr Singh never roared like a tiger but he was a lion hearted visionary, enough to initiate Economic Liberalisation—a step that is paying dividends today.

When Dr Manmohan Singh came to Guwahati to address the Diamond Jubilee of The Shillong Times, I had my first opportunity to share with him the dais, and interact with him on a one on one to brief him on matters raised by him.

It was after hearing my speech on the role of the ST since 1945 in espousing the aspirations of the vulnerable fringe tribes, that the PM was highly impressed and made a mention of it in his address.

It was after this function

that he recommended my name for the Padma Award. (By the way, the PM can recommend six names every year).

In 2005, we met again at Rashtrapati Bhavan at the Padma award presentation ceremony. Later in the evening we met again at the PM's official residence for the customary tea and photo session with the awardees hosted by him. I recall with amazement how Dr Manmohan Singh, ignoring his Constitutional status, played the perfect host shuffling from one table to another in the lawns of 10 JanPath, exchanging pleasantries with almost everyone.

In 2008, he was in Shillong to address the All India Science Congress at NEHU. Whenever the PM is on a State visit, it is part of protocol for the State Cabinet to meet the PM. At the time I was the Education Minister and the entire cabinet waited for him at the NEHU campus. He entered the designated room without any aide. I could see delight in his eyes when found me in the most unlikely place! Renewing our contact Dr Singh turned to me and said, "So, you have become a minister" and enquired about my portfolios. He encouraged me by saying "Serve the State well".

As I look back, in my view Dr Singh was a scholarly person who believed in plain living and high thinking. Humility and sobriety are two other qualities that define Dr Singh. Imagine, a Sardar sticking to one familiar blue turban all his life! At one point in time, some bureaucrats had pleaded with him to take care of his sartorial needs and suggested he change the colour of his turbans. Dr Singh not only turned down that suggestion but also told them that he should be judged by his actions and not by the dress or the colour of his turban.

His sense of hospitality knew no bounds. On a flight to New York, we had an overnight stop-over at Frankfurt. We were at a loose end as the PM would relax in the hotel with no official engagement. Before deplaning, he wanted to know if we had any plans for the evening. When told that we had no plan, he promptly instructed senior MEA officials to take good care of us. I must admit that the evening was well spent at Heidelberg with continental cuisine washed down with choicest German beer (not at government expense of course!).

Incidentally, the media entourage is allowed a free air passage in the PM's aircraft, but all other expenses like boarding and lodging are personal.

In 2009, I forwarded copy of the printed booklet that I had published furnishing the full financial accounts of the MLA Funds allotted to me. To my utter delight, I received a prompt D.O. letter from the PM eulogizing the need for transparency and accountability of our elected representatives. He commended that everybody should emulate the same.

In fine, personally speaking, the decade from 2004 to 2014 was the most eventful, if not the best, in my life. What can be more notable than getting an opportunity to come personally close to the PM of the country. Dr Singh was a venerable soul, an acknowledged statesman who had no airs about himself, always treated everyone with due respect and maintained the dignity and sobriety of the high offices he held.

In his death the nation has lost a rare gem and me a great patriarch who showered his generous blessings on a nondescript lesser mortal like me.

He may have become history today but history will remember him as long as India lives.

Long live Dr Manmohan Singh!

Letters to the Editor

Secularism: A Heritage to Preserve

Editor,
The Preamble to the Constitution of India specifically states that India is a secular Socialist State. The Supreme Court of India has held that "Secularism" is the basic feature of our Constitution hence any State Government which fails in upholding this basic feature has no right to continue. Secularism, as per the Constitution, does not signify being anti-religion. Secularism signifies giving equal dignity and respect to all religions. Of course, it goes without saying that the Indian state has no religion of its own, nor for that matter can any religion claim superiority over another religion.

Jawaharlal Nehru once said, "The alliance of religion and politics in the shape of communalism is a most dangerous alliance, and it yields the most abnormal kind of illegitimate brood... the combination of politics and of religion in the narrowest sense of the word, resulting in communal politics is there can be no doubt—a most dangerous combination is harmful to the country as a whole".

Independent India has miserably failed to put an end to the most dangerous combination of politics and religion—the communal politics and 'the most abnormal kind of illegitimate brood' continues to wreak havoc in the nation. We have never stopped killing and raping people in the name of caste and religion; we have not conquered the evil of social and economic inequalities even after 78 years of Independence. Anyway, within months of independence, bullets pierced the very heart of our secularism and tolerance—the Mahatma.

On February 12, 1948, in a speech delivered to a crowd of over a million people gathered on the banks of the Ganges to witness the immersion of the Mahatma's ashes, Nehru said, "Our country gave birth to a mighty soul and he shone like a beacon not only for India but for the whole world. And yet he was done to death by one of our own brothers and compatriots. How did this happen? You might think that it was an act of madness, but that does not explain this tragedy. It could only occur because the seed for it was sown in the poison of hatred and enmity that spread throughout the country and affected so many of our people. Out of that seed

grew this poisonous plant. It is the duty of all of us to fight this poison of hatred and ill will."

Have we fought this poison of hatred and could we eliminate the poisonous plant from the country? We have witnessed the disastrous effects of this poisonous plant. Seventy-eight years after independence, it seems that this poisonous plant has spread its roots deep down in the collective psyche of the nation dismantling our secular democracy which has been laboriously built on the foundation of plurality and diversity.

If every State in India has to march towards progress and all-around development, it can ill afford to endure social and communal hatred any longer. This is the least we can do to protect the image of Dr B.R. Ambedkar, the architect of the document embodying our Constitution. There is no state religion in India since secularism means there is no state or favoured religion. The state will have to follow the Constitution as a religion that gives equal status to all the religions. In society secularism shows that there is no priority for any particular religion. And that would be the best way to observe the Republic Day this year. In short, if political parties or those in

government for that matter attend the services of only a particular religion then it signifies a negative view as it goes against secularism. Thus, unity and secularism should be the motto of a government.

Yours etc.,
Dr Omarlin Kyndiah
Via email

In need of a stray free Meghalaya

Editor,
If you could wipe out anyone's jobs, what would it be? Would it be those of politicians and policy makers? Judges or bureaucrats? No? How about those of the police? As for me, I would definitely target those of dog rescuers. Not because I want to push people out of doing "meaningful work" but because I feel that type of work shouldn't even have to exist.

Many may disagree since rabies infested mutts are crawling all over the city especially in localities like Pynthor Umkhrah, Mawkhrah and Rynjah. But seriously! Would you believe such jobs don't even exist in the Netherlands? Considering how widespread the stray dog problem around the world is,

it's difficult to imagine that one country has been able to get its poop together and eradicate the issue. No, the Netherlands didn't execute a stray dog cull like what Kerala had done. No! They simply exercised plain old common sense and compassion. It's actually a bit baffling that our loud-mouth and over-opinionated Bharat has not caught on. So, how did the Netherlands eliminate stray dogs? When you hear how simple the solution was you'll definitely shake your head.

The Netherlands government tackled the issue head on and enforced a massive tax on store-bought (puppy milled) dogs. This hefty tax compelled potential dog owners to adopt from shelters instead. They initiated the CNVR program: Collect, Neuter, Vaccinate and Return. This is a government funded initiative that carries out neutering, spaying, and vaccinating of stray dogs and it makes total sense. If you cut the issue off at the root there's no issue. And lastly, they launched a pet-police force that actually follows through on substantial fines and jail time for animal abuse and neglect. These pet-cops also assist in animal rescue. Imagine if this were the same here in India and Meghalaya?

While we're on the topic of how the Dutch care for animals, perhaps the coolest thing I've learned is that they have a whole political party representing animals. It's literally called the Party for the Animals which was elected to the House of Representatives in 2006. Can't get more pro-dog than that, can it? If any of this comes as a surprise to you, it shouldn't. The Dutch also treat their humans with dignity and respect. Since 2014, they've closed 23 prisons, choosing rehabilitation over incarceration. And here we're constructing bigger jails.

So there we have it! A clear-cut solution. When you look at the way the Netherlands takes care of their own, it makes one wonder why other countries haven't taken note. Wouldn't it be the start of a perfect world if all the heroes who currently work in shelters and rescue organizations like Shillong Happy Tails could switch jobs and obtain pup-cop badges and political seats?

Yours etc.,
Rappor Nongsteng
(A concerned parent and animal lover)
Shillong - 2

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

As LA burns, 2024 declared Earth's hottest on record

The year 2024 was the world's warmest on record globally, and the first calendar year in which global temperatures exceeded 1.5°C above its pre-industrial levels.

The official declaration was made on Friday by the Copernicus Climate Change Service, the European Union's Earth observation program. It comes as wildfires continue to tear through Los Angeles, California - a disaster scientists say was made worse by climate change.

This record-breaking global heat is primarily driven by humanity's ongoing greenhouse gas emissions, caused by the burning of fossil fuels. The warming won't stop until we reach net-zero emissions.

Clearly, the need for humanity to rapidly reduce its greenhouse gas emissions has never been more urgent.

An exceptional year

The Copernicus findings are consistent with other leading global temperature datasets indicating 2024 was the hottest year since records began in 1850.

The global average temperature in 2024 was about 1.6°C above the average temperatures in the late-19th century (which is used to represent pre-industrial levels).

On July 22 last year, the daily global average temperature reached 17.16°C. This was a new record high.

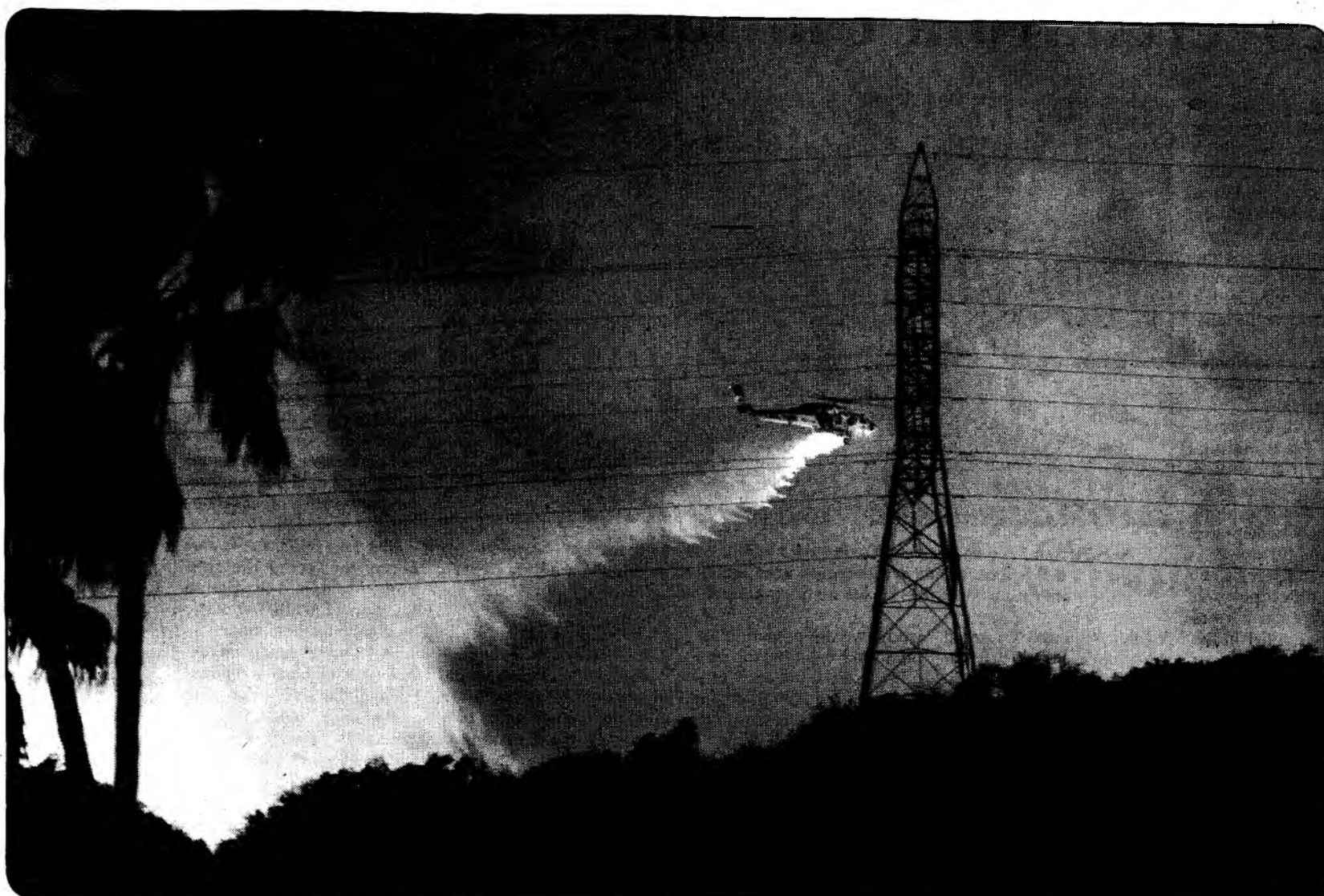
Copernicus also found that each year in the last decade was one of the ten warmest on record. According to Copernicus director Carlo Buontempo: We are now teetering on the edge of passing the 1.5°C level defined in the Paris Agreement and the average of the last two years is already above this level.

These high global temperatures, coupled with record global atmospheric water vapour levels in 2024, meant unprecedented heatwaves and heavy rainfall events, causing misery for millions of people.

How they take Earth's temperature

Estimating the global average surface temperature is no mean feat. The methods vary between organisations, but the overall picture is the same: 2024 was the world's hottest year on record.

The high global average temperature of 2024 wouldn't have been possible without humanity's greenhouse gas emissions.



A helicopter drops water on the Palisades Fire in Mandeville Canyon in Los Angeles, on Friday. (PTI)

The El Niño climate driver also played a role in the first part of the year. It warmed Earth's surface - particularly over a large swathe of the central and eastern Pacific - and increased global average surface temperature by up to 0.2°C.

What about Australia?

Copernicus found 2024 was the warmest year for all continental regions except Antarctica and Australasia. But Australia is feeling the shift into a hotter, less hospitable climate, too. Last year was Australia's second-hottest year on record, according to a declaration last week by the Bureau of Meteorology.

The hottest was 2019, when a blisteringly hot and dry spring led to the widespread bushfires of the Black Summer. Unlike 2019, Australia had a wetter than normal year in 2024.

However, 2024 was the hottest year on record for the southwest of Australia and parts of the centre and east of the continent.

Apart from April, Australia saw unusual warmth through all of 2024. August was the standout month for record-breaking heat.

In general, temperature records are broken more easily at the global scale than in individual regions. That's because weather is more variable at the local level than on a global average. A period of, say, very cold weather

in one part of a continent can bring down annual average temperatures there, preventing records from being broken.

That's why Australia's annual average temperatures have reached record highs three times since 2000 - in 2005, 2013 and 2019 - whereas the global average temperature set six new records in that period.

Does this mean the Paris Agreement has failed? The global Paris Agreement aims to limit global warming to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels. So, if 2024 was about 1.6°C above pre-industrial levels, you might think the world has failed to meet this goal. But it hasn't, yet.

The success of the Paris Agreement

will be measured against longer temperature periods than one year. That approach eliminates natural climate variability and factors such as El Niño and La Niña, to build a clearer picture of climate change.

However, the statistics for 2024 are certainly a bad sign. It shows humanity has its work cut out to keep global warming well below 2°C, let alone 1.5°C.

More heat guaranteed

There's one very important thing to understand about climate change: the amount of greenhouse gases that humans emit over time is roughly proportional to the increase in global temperatures over that same period.

This near-linear relationship means every tonne of greenhouse gas emissions from human activity causes about the same amount of global warming. So, the faster we decarbonise the global economy, the sooner we can halt global warming and reduce its harms.

This year is unlikely to be quite as hot as 2024 because the El Niño has passed. But unfortunately, Earth will continue to experience record hot global temperatures for at least the next few decades.

This is all the more reason for humanity to move faster in decarbonising our society and economy. It's not too late to shift the long-term trajectory of Earth's climate.

How Santa Ana winds fuelled deadly fires in Southern Calif

Powerful Santa Ana winds, with gusts reaching hurricane strength, swept down the mountains outside Los Angeles and spread wildfires into several neighborhoods starting Jan. 7, 2025, creating a terrifying scene.

Thousands of homes and other structures, including several schools, had burned by Jan. 10, and at least 10 people had died.

Officials urged more than 180,000 residents to evacuate at the height of the fires. With the winds so strong, there was little firefighters could do to control the flames.

Jon Keeley, a research ecologist in California with the U.S. Geological Survey and adjunct professor at UCLA, explains what causes extreme winds like this in Southern California, and why they create such a dangerous fire risk.

The Santa Ana winds are dry, powerful winds that blow down the mountains toward the Southern California coast. The region sees about 10 Santa Ana wind events a year on average, typically occurring from fall into January.

When conditions are dry, as they are right now, these winds can become a severe fire hazard.

The Santa Ana winds occur when there is high pressure to the east, in the Great Basin, and a low-pressure system off the coast.

Air masses move from high pressure to low pressure, and the more extreme the difference in the pressure, the faster the winds blow. (The Conversation)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambhani

Sunday, JANUARY 12, 2025

'Birthday Forecast'

Moon square Rahu on your solar return chart. It will bring mixed results for you. You will have some problems at your workplace with your bosses and colleagues. And can have some arguments leading to confrontations. This you need to avoid. Take any job change decision carefully. You will also not enter into any new business without taking expert advice. Financial position will remain normal. You could also face sudden break up in romantic relations and will not be lucky in love matters. But those who are single will get good marriage proposals. But you will not rush and will take decisions after thoughtful consideration. You will also develop religious inclinations and could be drawn to a spiritual guru. You will also do lot of charity and good work.

'This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) This is a mixed period for you. You are compassionate and generous with family, friends and relatives. Work wise there will be some obstacles that you would face. It is best to accept challenges that life offers you and keep going through ups and downs realizing that this too shall pass. It is time to express your feelings and ideas and share what you have learned through a variety of experience in this life. There could be an interaction, which on the face of it looks difficult to resolve but you reach out and get to the root of the problem.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) There is a deeper understanding in professional associations and personal relationships. You are patient, laborious and clever with material aspects and manage finances and business ventures with ingenuity. You are likely to meet well known people in authority and share ideas and spend a fair bit of time in their association. A stimulating project should be taken as a challenge that would further and promote your business prospects. You are in touch with innocence that comes from life lived fully, which also has a quality of wisdom and the acceptance of the ever-changing wonders of life. Health will take a turn for the better.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) You would be able to integrate forces, resources and professional aspects to achieve success in important ventures. You are individualistic in professional aspects. You boldly express your views and comments without being afraid. It would be good to say what you feel that you would be appreciated for being honest. There could be alteration in ideas or plans, increase and decrease in finances and fluctuation in business. On the personal front you go all out to make the special people in your life feel wanted and special. This is a time for you to renew your energy.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) This is altogether a happy and relaxed time for you. There is perfection and beauty in emotional relationships as you come from a deep and spiritual space within to relate in a new way with your loved ones. Communications and business associates from overseas bear good news and offer lucrative opportunities. Marriage, business partnership and collaboration would be strengthened through understanding and commitment. You may handle more than one project at the same time with expertise and success. End of this period brings fresh energy, love and romance in important relationships.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) This phase brings pleasant results in your professional life with rewards and recognition. You would also work hard and would get ready to express yourself and take charge and responsibilities. Personal projects are on an upswing. Income from foreign sources could also figure during this time. You would be able to complete work assignments and personal business with good energy and support. Emotional attachments and relationships are rewarded with reciprocity. Some interesting people are drawn to you and invite you to work with them. Health problems are resolved and your energy is restored.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22) There could be an exciting job offer, reward, recognition, or promotion. An opportunity to expand on a global level arrives now. You would have more energy for work and your daily work tends to speed up now. Perhaps you have a

larger workload than usual. This is a very significant period of the year, when you are inspired creatively and emotionally. You can draw correct conclusions from prior knowledge of people you meet. A new cycle begins with the old order finishing as inner and outer changes are on the cards. You feel on top of things as you are blessed with good health and energy.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) This period is marked with fun, entertaining and happiness. Your hobbies, leisure time, moments spent with family and children, are highlighted. There is youthful energy and verve in your life. You are generous, kind and preserving in family and personal relationships. You are diligent and pedantic at work as you exhibit your knowledge in your field of activity. Though you are assiduous and hard-working you do not relish being tied down to your laptop or cell phone and would like to spend quality time on the personal front.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) There is good-luck in love and romance and personal relationships. You are on the threshold of a creative and inventive assignment that brings you name, and exposure, as your desire for some form of recognition will be fulfilled. You are more receptive and gentle on a romantic level, and tend to be sentimental. Business expansion and new professional opportunities are worth considering as you have to positively use your talents and efficiency. A pleasant surprise awaits you. Yoga and meditation put you in touch with inner bliss.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) You would handle your profession sincerely and creatively and devote your time to children and family members. A personal involvement has the qualities of love, balance and freedom that you desire. On the other hand, you are frank, outspoken and can be outrageous or undiplomatic on occasions. Learning important lessons from life could be the beginning of spiritual growth and understanding. Spiritual pursuits and meditation can be rewarding. You grow and transform as you pass through a touching emotional experience. Health needs to be maintained with a planned diet and fitness schedules.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) As you improve personal and professional relations with patience, love and care you avoid long drawn discussions, criticism and arguments. You are blessed with divine wisdom and inspired to take up a professional challenge. You are original and ambitious instilling a personal style in whatever you do. You give and receive affection and love from friends and relatives. You connect with old friends and business associates. Being open and receptive, you attract prestigious opportunities and interesting people. You are happy as there is balance and harmony at home and synergy in the work area.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) Pay close attention to performance and continuity and your efforts would be visible to senior colleagues and people in authority. You resolve an important issue that has been the cause of anxious moments for some time as you start a new business project while adding zest to an old one. Express your views and conditions clearly when it comes to business and financial dealings. Sharing your philosophical interests with a romantic partner may be especially appealing to you. A new person or influence leads to renewed interest in creative fields. Fresh attitudes and a new perspective are needed.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) You would effectively handle difficult projects at work. Your idealistic nature is stimulated, and you are likely to yearn for a connection to more spiritual or idealistic pursuits. A sense of belonging through connection to something larger than yourself is something that is entering your life now. You look to community service and lend a helping hand as you want to make a difference. Be ready to make quick decisions at work and act spontaneously in personal situations. You would achieve success at work and complete projects through interplay of ideas and correlation of subjects since communication is your forte. You could be restless and pay impromptu visits to friends and relatives.

Canada, the 51st state?

Donald Trump is threatening to use "economic force" to make Canada the 51st American state. While his comments may be reckless, they are in part due to Canada's over-reliance on the United States market in terms of trade.

The benefits of international trade are undoubtedly positive. It's well-established that when countries can produce a product or service more cheaply than others, giving them what's known as a "comparative advantage," all other nations engaged will gain from that trade. There are additional gains that come from economies of scale as companies get access to much larger markets than are available domestically. These include improvements in efficiency that arise through enhanced market competition, resulting in lower costs of production and reduced prices for consumers, and increases in the variety of goods and services available.

Canada has outgrown many of its protectionist roots and is now a trading nation. Despite having only 0.5 per cent of the world's population, Canada has 2.2 per cent of the total of world trade. Exports of goods support one out of every six Canadian jobs.

While the Canada-United States-Mexico Agreement (CUSMA) and its predecessor, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), garner most of the headlines, Canada has a total of 15 free-trade agreements covering 61 per cent of world GDP, providing Canadian companies with access to 1.5 billion consumers worldwide. And Canada is seeking even more free-trade agreements, given their demonstrated benefits.

Made-in-Canada solution?

But the key challenge Canadian policymakers face is an over-reliance on the U.S. as Canada's primary market, with 75 per cent of all Canadian exports headed south.

One of the first lessons in business is not to put "all of your eggs in one basket." Canada clearly needs to diversify its trading partners, which is no easy feat. But there is a "made-in-Canada" solution to potential clouds on the international trade horizon.

The U.S. makes for a natural trading partner, given its large market and close proximity to Canada. The two countries share similar cultural norms and legal systems, and the same time zones and existing infrastructure, including ports, railways and bridges. There's also new infrastructure



planned, including the Gordie Howe International Bridge connecting Windsor and Detroit that will facilitate cross-border trade when it opens later this year.

But the over-reliance of Canadian exports to the U.S. exposes Canada to significant risks that can result from unilateral American trade policies.

Canada's preferential access to the U.S. market can no longer be assured, as shown by the protectionism that came with Donald Trump's first term in office. In his book *The Retreat of Western Liberalism*, Edward Luce, an editor with the Financial Times, argued there would be no "snap back," meaning a return to the status quo before the first Trump presidency.

When Joe Biden became U.S. president in 2020, American protectionism not only remained, but intensified with aggressive new tariffs. With the return of Trump, who is promising even more tariffs on Canada, it seems Luce was right. There will be no snap back, and Canada can no longer take easy access to the U.S. market for granted.

Provincial trade obstacles

One of the ironies in Canada's quest for more free-trade deals around the world are interprovincial trade barriers that exist within Canada. A Canadian Senate report on Canada's free-trade agreement with Europe notes that "European companies have easier access to some Canadian markets than Canadian companies from another province."

The Canadian Federation of Independent Business (CFIB) has said "it's easier to do business in the U.S. than in another part of Canada."

Bringing down inter-provincial trade barriers could result in countless benefits. One study estimates that the existence of such barriers have resulted in the price of consumer goods and services in Canada being

higher on average by eight to 15 per cent than they would be in the absence of those barriers.

The study argues if interprovincial trade barriers were removed, there would be an improvement in Canadian productivity of between three and seven per cent. In dollar terms, that would add \$50-\$130 billion dollars to Canada's economy. The CFIB findings put the figure at \$200 billion, or \$5,100 per person. There are further benefits. Bringing down barriers to trade across Canadian provinces would create conditions that could enable Canadian companies to be more competitive internationally, and beyond the U.S. market in particular.

Canada's abysmal productivity

Walid Hejazi (Author of this article), Professor of International Business, Rotman School of Management, University of Toronto, who is currently conducting research with colleagues employed by the Government of Canada — Jianmin Tang of Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada and Weimin Wang from Statistics Canada, says they are finding that the best way for Canadian companies to compete in markets further away — that are different culturally, institutionally and in other ways — is to enhance their own productivity.

Companies with higher productivity rates are able to more successfully penetrate markets in Latin America, Europe, Africa and the Middle East — markets that would help Canada decrease its reliance on the U.S. market. But Canada has a major productivity problem. Economic productivity is a measure of the rate at which the output of goods and services are produced per unit of input (for example, labour, capital and raw materials). Simply put, Canada's productivity levels are atrocious. The senior deputy governor of the Bank of Canada described these challenges as an "emergency," which is generally not the kind of language used by conservative central bankers.

What does poor productivity performance mean for the average Canadian? Incomes and purchasing power suffer significantly.

There are many policy changes that are needed to reverse Canada's poor productivity performance. Dismantling inter-provincial trade barriers is a great place to start, and would help "trump" the rising obstacles to international trade. (The Conversation)

"To the living we owe respect, but to the dead we owe only the truth."

—Voltaire

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No. 152 SHILLONG, MONDAY, JANUARY 13, 2025

Vision, leadership

WHAT looks unbelievable can happen if the leadership of a nation is in the hands of leaders with grit and determination. The idea of unification of the United States and adjoining Canada, which together form the bulk of the Americas, is now a subject of public debate after President-elect Donald Trump spoke out in its favour, days before his assumption of office. Canadians cannot ignore this bit of American history where in one treaty, the U.S. annexed the present-day states of California, Nevada, Utah, New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, Oklahoma, Kansas and Wyoming. It subsequently illegally invaded Indigenous territory in the west. Canada could be the next target perhaps not as the 51st state but possibly as a US territory that would deny Canadians any voting rights for Congress or the presidency and allow only some autonomy, thereby making questions of citizenship ambiguous. The constitutional architecture exists in the U.S. to make it happen.

Donald Trump who will be assuming office as President of the US for the second time on January 20 is known to make outrageous statements. Political observers feel that what Trump says vis a vis Canada is both unthinkable and impossible and dismiss his statements as bellicose rhetoric. Americans have voted Donald Trump despite his past acts of commission and his bluster. But what Trump has just stated about annexing Canada is to be found in the US Constitution. There have been past precedents where the US has acquired territory through cession or subjugation. Further, Trump has also 'refused to reject' the possibility of the US annexing mineral-rich Greenland now controlled by Denmark and taking control of the strategically important Panama Canal. Republicans are known for their hard-edged actions while Democrats are doves of peace. A four-year-term of Republicans under Trump could mean action on many fronts. Canada, after 10 years of Justin Trudeau, is already feeling the impact of a Trump re-election after the president-elect threatened to impose higher taxes on imports from there to the US. This, if Canada fails to change its liberal immigration policies. Trudeau's resignation as PM in itself will not help mend fences between the two nations. Action on the ground by way of checks on a spillover of the immigrants from Canada to the US is what Trump is stressing on.

Donald Trump, who strayed into politics at an advanced age after proving his might as a business tycoon has always confronted his rivals with gusto and his slogan Make America Great Again (MAGA) appears to have paid dividends. Talking about nations coming together and boundaries collapsing, the Berlin Wall was impregnable for many years until winds of change in Europe led to its demolition. This led to the unification of capitalist West Germany and the socialist East Germany in 1989. The integration of Canada and the US might be possible also as the former does not have a strong military that was further weakened under Justin Trudeau.

From Megalith to Monoliths, Microliths, and Sculptures

By H H. Mohrmen

In the last article, I wrote about the megalithic bridges in Jaintia Hills, which were part of the ancient royal paths. This time, we will discuss the other stone structures in the area, which include microliths, sculptures, and carvings. Let us start with a carving on the river banks. On the banks of the Lukha River near Shymplong village, there is an image of a palanquin sculpted on a stone, believed to have been commissioned by the Jaintia king during the heydays of the Jaintiapur kingdom.

The Microlith

We no longer have evidence of weapons made of stone, but there are stone tools that are being used today. The many stone implements that people use today can be classified as microliths. One such stone tool still popular are the two pieces of stones, *maw jingshoh* or *moo tyndang*, used for grinding paste and spices. The stones were selected from very unique hard rocks that do not produce sand even if the pieces hit against each other. These are also used for grinding herbs and roots used in traditional medicine. Traditionally, at every fire-place, there are three stones that are used to place pots for cooking. The three pieces of stones used for supporting pots over the fire are known as *mookhuri* or *mawbyrsiew* in Khasi.

In places where millet cultivation is still popular, one will find two round stones used for grinding millet (*moo tylliat kre*). It is made of granite stones, and there are two holes on the stone on the top — one for placing a stick to move the cover, and the other, a bigger hole, is for putting the millet for grinding. At Umlathur old village, there is a huge rock in the middle of the settlement, which has a hole in it. Millet was put inside the hole in the rock, and then a stick was used to grind the millet into powder. The stone was used by the entire community, and its location in the middle of the village was very convenient.

People also use stones collected from riverbeds for rubbing dirt from one's body during a bath, called *moo kyrehul doh*. There are also *moo choh kba* (stones used to separate the rice from the hay) and *moo-chut-wei* (special stones used for sharpening knives). These are some examples of microliths still used by the Pnar and the War people of Jaintia Hills district.

People's skill with stones is evident in the retaining walls (*kynroh moo*) built without using cement or any adhesive. These walls showcase excellent stone masonry. Such walls, built

using only stones and soil, can still be seen in villages of the district. Their height varies between ten to fifteen feet. These walls are made using nicely cut flat stones placed on top of one another without any cement.

Stones Used in the Games People Play

Stones are also used by children for playing games, such as *moo kyndok*, a game involving five small pebbles, where kids compete against each other. The game includes throwing one pebble up and, at the same time, collecting the four stones from the ground. The next round involves throwing the stones up in the air and then collecting the same on the back of one's palm. The game is popular among girls.

Another popular game for both boys and girls is the *moo ialeh seiitaiñ*, a traditional game similar to hop, skip, and jump. The only difference is that the competitors have to throw the flat stone in the box drawn on the ground and kick it out while hopping on only one leg. Another popular traditional game is called *dat-moo-poiñ*. The players are divided into two groups, and while one group tries to stack the flat stones on top of one another, the opposite team tries to get the players out by hitting them with a ball.

Mookhras are round, finely shaped stones used in a traditional game known as *kyntiñ* or *rah mookhras*. The stones vary in size and weight, and the competition is to carry the stone to the farthest point.

In Nartiang, there is also a pattern carved on a stone used for playing the *Korkatia* game. The carving of the game can be seen on the monolith in the garden at the back of the Jayante Devi Temple. The Khasi-Pnar also use small stones (*moo-siatim*) as pellets for their catapults. These stones have smooth surfaces and are the size of marbles.

Sculpture and Carving

Carvings on stones and sculptures on rocks can also be found along the stone path from Jaintiapur to Nartiang. The most important carvings are those found on the stone bridge on the river Umiaknieh near Krangshuri waterfall.

Other significant megalithic structures

Other significant megalithic structures in the region are the two thaw sum syiem or bathing ghats or pools carved out of a single rock near two stone bridges. These two pools are *ka Rupasor* and *ka thaw sum Mahadei* (the queen's pool). In the pool, one can see many images of

elephant heads sculpted on the stones. Near Rupasor, there are images of the sun and the moon. The limbless baby elephant can be found on the river Ampubon. These are some of the prominent stone images in the Syndai area.

Late D.R. Michael Buam (2017), a writer and filmmaker from Jaintia Hills, in his blog entry about the stone monuments in the region, made an important observation about the numerous sculptures and engravings in the southern part of Jaintia Hills. Most of these engravings are related to Hindu culture and faith, such as the Trishul engraved on rocks on the banks of Tisang (as locals call the downstream Myntdu River) near Psadwar village.

The region is earthquake-prone, and people must have experienced major earthquakes in the past, which led to the weaving of stories about this natural phenomenon. One such image, associated with a popular Jaintia folk story, is about u khmi (the earthquake). The image, engraved on a huge rock on the banks of the Tisang River, depicts the folk belief that u khmi was a giant whose movements underground caused tremors.

Legend has it that his mother, realizing his destructive power, cut off all the fingers on both his hands to prevent further damage. She left only his forefinger finger so he could use it to rub lime when chewing areca nut and betel leaf. It is believed that this act rendered him powerless, ensuring no major earthquakes would occur in the area. That is the reason that the locals believe that the region will not experience major earthquakes anymore.

Michael Buam also noted other engravings in the region, such as representations of Lord Rama and Lakshman, and another carving of a woman and a tiger in the same area, adjacent to each other. In Khanduli, on the northern border of Jaintia Hills adjoining Karbi Anglong, Assam, engravings on rocks depict a soldier or a king. Unfortunately, in the name of development, some of these engravings were destroyed during road construction.

Buam (2017), in his blog, referred to the book in Khasi by late Shining Star Laloo titled *Ka Syiem Latympang* (Queen Latympang), a famous queen of the Pnar. The story mentions some stone engravings and sculptures that can be found in Latuba near Thangraih village in West Jaintia Hills. The images include the elephant of

u Syiem Slieng, a neighboring king who fought against ka Latympang, the bullocks of u Miat Rynsut (Latympang's beloved), and his plough. Oral tradition has it that u Miat Rynsut, while ploughing his field, left his two bullocks to help Queen Latympang. The bullocks and his plough turned to stone while waiting for his return, which never happened.

On the way from Barato to Mukroh, there is another collection of rocks that resemble a herd of animals. The images are believed to be of animals belonging to ka Syiem Latympang, which turned to stone.

Some engravings have also been found on a monolith at Tamu, another village near Khanduli, and another rock carving has also been reported from the same region at Sait-sama village. An engraving of a rooster and an elephant on one of the monoliths in Jawmusiang at Nangbah village has been highlighted later (using black paint) by someone yet unknown. At Tihwieh near the river Myntang is an image of u Thlen, which looks like a serpent.

At Shangpung village near the road, there is another stone the locals call moosyiem, and the locality is also known by the same name. There is also a monolith at the market and the remnants of the sacred grove in the village.

On the way to Khanduli from Nartiang, Buam noted that there is another sculpture located at a place known as *Ksehrychang*, which is believed to be an image of a man and a woman. The image can still be seen today, and the story has it that the wife of the man cursed the two when she found that her husband betrayed her with another woman. As a result the couple turned to stone.

In Nongtalang, a few houses still have hujoi, which are square basins carved out of stone. The hujoi are used for collecting water during the rainy season, and the water is used for washing the feet before entering the house. Sometimes, hujoi are also used for feeding pigs in the pig shed.

The most intriguing rock sculpture in Jaintia Hills is an image of the female genitalia near Lum Lakhiat village, resembling the carvings at the Kamakhya temple in Guwahati, Assam.

Conclusion: This article is a small effort to document the monoliths, megalithic structures, sculptures, and engravings in Jaintia Hills. The area is blessed with such man-made stone structures, and while mapping and documenting them all would be a herculean task, it is certainly not impossible.

China In 2025 Strategy & Challenges

By Dr. Maciej Gaca

(Centre For Intl Relations, Poland)

In 2025, China will be balancing between strengthening its role as a superpower and escalating tensions. From Beijing's point of view, South China Sea, Taiwan and North Korea as flashpoints have one thing in common: they are valuable and at the same time risky. The logic of China's actions is classic offensive realism, i.e. striving for dominance, which increases its security but at the same time provokes rivals to react.

As Royal United Services Institute notes: "China in Indo-Pacific is a player that must calculate every move in the context of global reactions - from the US to its closest neighbours." 2025 will be a key test of whether Beijing is ready not only to consolidate its internal power, but also to boldly shape international order. This is the moment when Xi Jinping's vision - coherent, yet marked by tensions between ambition and reality - will be confronted with the most difficult challenges of modernity. Xi Jinping speaks of "a nation that has risen, grown rich and grown strong". Today, the Chairman of the Communist Party of China single-handedly defines the key directions of the country's actions. "We must focus on a long-term vision, while flexibly responding to challenges that the world brings us. Our goal is to build a modern socialist state that is both an economic and technological powerhouse, and an unwavering pillar of stability in the international arena," he said during CPC's 20th Congress, 2022.

2025 looms as a moment of truth for the Chinese economy, which must balance long-term reforms with pressing crises. China must address challenges of income inequality, changing consumer habits, and demographic decline, which are increasingly limiting its growth potential. Yet Beijing continues to pursue global technological dominance, investing in artificial intelligence and green technologies. The coming months will be a test of its adaptability.

The real estate sector, which used to account for up to 25% of China's GDP, is now a symbol of deep structural problems. The debt of giant companies which exceeded 2 trillion yuan in 2024, has led to a domino effect, threatening financial stability of local governments, which have largely relied on land transactions for their revenues. China National Bureau of Statistics says 30% of their revenues came from this source.

With housing prices falling by 12% and demand falling among younger generations, many local budgets are on brink of crisis. Beijing is facing a difficult choice. On one hand, government cannot allow further bankruptcies in this sector, which could destabilize the entire economy. On the other - further financial support programmes, although necessary, only increase the market's dependence on state intervention. For years, China has been trying to reduce its dependence on exports and infrastructure investment, focusing on developing domestic market. However, income inequality, deepening because of the pandemic, has significantly limited society's consumption potential. Only 30% of Chinese households saw their disposable income increase in 2024, while cost of living, including education and healthcare, is steadily rising. China treats development of artificial intelligence as a strategic priority, with plans to achieve global leadership by 2030. According to Stanford AI Index 2024, Chinese investment in AI research currently accounts for 40% of global spending. Key areas include facial recognition technologies, natural language processing, and industrial process automation. However, these pose serious ethical and social challenges. Human Rights Watch points out that AI technologies are used for mass surveillance, especially in regions inhabited by indigenous ethnic groups of Uyghurs and Tibetans.

In the face of US sanctions restricting access to advanced semiconductors, China has accelerated development of its domestic technology industry, particularly in the field of integrated circuits. Potential for Chinese companies to become more competitive in global technology supply chain is not ruled out. It's expected that by 2025-end, China could reduce dependence on imports of advanced integrated circuits by 15%. In the lithium-ion battery sector, China is set to double its production capacity, becoming a key supplier for the global electric vehicle market.

In 2025, relations with North Korea will be shaped by closer cooperation between Pyongyang and Moscow. North Korea's arms deliveries to Russia, which began in 2024, have undermined Beijing's traditional dominance in relations with Kim Jong-un's regime. Russia's growing influence in relations with Pyongyang puts China in a difficult position, forcing it to revise its regional policies to avoid marginalisation in the region. In sum, 2025 will be a time of difficult choices and even more difficult reforms for China.---INFA

tions restricting access to advanced semiconductors, China has accelerated development of its domestic technology industry, particularly in the field of integrated circuits. Potential for Chinese companies to become more competitive in global technology supply chain is not ruled out. It's expected that by 2025-end, China could reduce dependence on imports of advanced integrated circuits by 15%. In the lithium-ion battery sector, China is set to double its production capacity, becoming a key supplier for the global electric vehicle market.

In 2025, relations with North Korea will be shaped by closer cooperation between Pyongyang and Moscow. North Korea's arms deliveries to Russia, which began in 2024, have undermined Beijing's traditional dominance in relations with Kim Jong-un's regime. Russia's growing influence in relations with Pyongyang puts China in a difficult position, forcing it to revise its regional policies to avoid marginalisation in the region. In sum, 2025 will be a time of difficult choices and even more difficult reforms for China.---INFA

In 2025, China will try to combine the role of a mediator in key global conflicts with continuing its policy of competition with the West. In Russian-Ukrainian conflict, "Beijing will avoid actions that could weaken Russia as an ally in the fight against the West." For Beijing, the war remains both a threat and an opportunity. China will continue to attempt mediation, which allows it to present itself as a global leader responsible for international stability.

Moscow's success in maintaining annexed territories could strengthen China's narrative of Taiwan as its integral part, while Russia's defeat could weaken Sino-Russian strategic partnership. However, China's attempts at mediation may have limited success, as its interests are seen as one-sided and focused on increasing its own influence rather than achieving international stability.

In relations with the US, inauguration of Trump as US President will open a new stage of tension in Sino-American relations. The expected tightening of trade and technology policies will force Beijing to seek alternative markets and intensify cooperation with countries of global South, including in Africa and Latin America. This is already being noticed in the case of relations with India, despite unresolved border disputes and rivalry in virtually all areas.

The Indo-Pacific region, and especially South China Sea and Taiwan, will be a key area of Chinese geopolitical rivalry in 2025. Beijing's actions fit perfectly into the framework of American political scientist John Mearsheimer's theory of offensive realism: "In an anarchic world, every power seeks to maximize its strength, because only dominance ensures relative security." China is intensifying its military and political presence in the region.

Taiwan is not only a historical issue for China, but also strategic. Control of the island would mean gaining a key position in Indo-Pacific and a significant technological advantage, given Taiwan's dominance in semiconductor production. Beijing is pursuing a hybrid strategy, including cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, and diplomatic isolation of Taipei, while also intensifying military maneuvers around it. However, Beijing is likely to avoid open conflict, knowing that intervention by the US and its allies would be almost certain.

In 2025, relations with North Korea will be shaped by closer cooperation between Pyongyang and Moscow. North Korea's arms deliveries to Russia, which began in 2024, have undermined Beijing's traditional dominance in relations with Kim Jong-un's regime. Russia's growing influence in relations with Pyongyang puts China in a difficult position, forcing it to revise its regional policies to avoid marginalisation in the region. In sum, 2025 will be a time of difficult choices and even more difficult reforms for China.---INFA

Letters to the Editor

Rejoinder to claims of KJCLF for religious appeasement

Editor,
Secularism is enshrined in the Article 28 of the Indian Constitution and we highly appreciate the Khasi-Jaintia Church Leaders' Forum (KJCLF) for acknowledging and reminding us about the existence of this principle in the Constitution. However, the manner in which the statement was made by the Forum in the media is highly questionable. The use of words like "ostentatious", "garish" while also criticizing the Government for hosting festivals is totally irrelevant to the current issue (secularism). This statement clearly translates to a politically charged collusion on this matter. Meghalaya is and has always been a Christian dominated state and incorporating Christian traditions and ceremonies can be seen as a way to honour the majority Christian community of the state but at the same time respecting and honouring other religions and denominations present in the state as well. The new building of the Parliament of India which is the highest seat of government and legislative activity and also a Government property under the BJP was inaugurated

with Hindu traditions so how is it a problem if Christian traditions are used to mark this particular occasion? We don't see the KJCLF leaders talk about atrocities being committed on our Christian brothers all over India. In fact we are yet to see any statement made by the KJCLF on the incident at a Church in Mawlynnong in which some Hindu fanatic made a mockery of the Church, so the big question now is what is the motive behind this statement made by the Forum to de-emphasize this good gesture of the Government.
Yours etc.,
W. Tariang,
Via email

Rising climate crisis

Editor,
India is one of the signatories to COP 2029 and other subsequent global agreements to reduce carbon emissions. The theme of 2024 was, "Addressing Climate Issues and Challenges", with a focus on soil conservation, land restoration and proper waste management. However, the primary responsibilities also lie with the state governments in being equal partners in addressing climate change and how to mitigate climate disasters from affecting our fragile eco-system. In our State forest

cover has been reduced in a systematic way and is fuelled by various factors like housing, mining, quarrying and industrial requirements. The India State of Forest Report (ISFR) reported that Meghalaya lost 84.07 sq km of forest cover between 2021 and 2023. This has to set alarm bells ringing in the State Forest Department as well as in other partner organizations working in the field of environmental conservation and climate crisis. Reduced forest cover has led to reduction in catchment areas as well and leading to human-animal conflict where human settlements have encroached into animal habitats. The need of the hour is a comprehensive action plan to mitigate and address dwindling forest cover, enhancing more plantation in existing forests and protection of catchment areas through community collaboration.
Yours etc.,
Dominic S. Wankhar,
Shillong: 3

Govt schemes are funded by taxpayers' money, not privy purses

Editor,
If someone starts a business with a 60/40 partnership with another person, can the partner holding the 60 percent

share name the company after him and ignore the 40 percent shareholder? Certainly not, because in that case, it would mean that the former is the sole owner of the company. Needless to say, in no way can the former appropriate 100 percent profit.

The Centre and the states fund various welfare schemes, like Gramin Awaas Yojana, Gram Sadak Yojana, Ujjwala Yojana, Midday Meal scheme etc., jointly on a 60:40 ratio except in the Northeast and the Himalayan states where the ratio is 90:10.

Of the many welfare schemes, the Centre has named or renamed as many as fifteen with a prefix of either 'Pradhan Mantri' or 'Prime Minister'. Naturally, non-BJP states are unhappy with these names. Advertisements in newspapers and billboards of such schemes are necessary to make the people aware of those welfare benefits. But the prefix in the name of the schemes misleads the voters to believe that the schemes are being fully funded by the Centre.

The monetary gains in a partnership company are distributed in accordance with the investment. Therefore, more or less the 60:40 ratio is maintained while distributing profits between two owners of such partnership enterprise. It is true that ruling parties do not get any direct monetary gains from welfare schemes.

However, they certainly get electoral profits with a benefit transfer to electoral voting machines.

First of all, it is totally unacceptable to create any controversy over naming a welfare scheme. Why should welfare schemes be associated with a specific politician or a party as the objective of these schemes are to fulfil citizen's basic rights? If a welfare scheme, like Gramin Awaas Yojana, has to carry a political prefix, then its name should be PM and CM Gramin Awaas Yojana or something to that effect.

Given that the Centre bears 60 percent of the expenditure, the prefix 'PM' can only precede 'CM' to give the beneficiaries a clear picture. The beneficiaries must not be misled into believing that the state has not spent any money on these schemes. It is inappropriate to milk entire electoral dividends out of these schemes ignoring the contributions by the states.

West Bengal, a non-BJP state, renamed some schemes with a valid argument that as the state has to pay more than 40 percent of the cost, there is no reason why the Centre should get all the credit. Bengal has not replaced the prefix 'Prime Minister' with 'Chief Minister' but with some neutral words. It is really bizarre that the Union government instead of admit-

ting the logic, withheld funds for those schemes to Bengal by saying states should not change the names of schemes sponsored by the Centre.

Citizens are considered to be the stakeholders of the nation and are thus entitled to certain benefits in a modern welfare state. It is the duty of the state to ensure equitable distribution of resources. Therefore, welfare schemes for the people in a welfare state are regarded as the basic rights of citizens. Such schemes are considered as a charity in a monarchy. The idea behind naming and renaming welfare schemes beginning with 'prime minister' or 'chief minister', tagging those who are getting welfare benefits as 'labharthi', and what they are getting as 'freebies' and 'rewdis' is absolutely monarchical where the king gives alms to his subjects in his name as if from his own pocket.

Given that India is a welfare state as per the Indian Constitution, such a name game shows disregard for the people of our country and our Constitution.

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

"Frustration is fuel that can lead to the development of an innovative and useful idea."

— Marley Dias

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No: 154 SHILLONG, TUESDAY, JANUARY 14, 2025

Of Traffic Violations

IN recent times the Shillong Traffic Police have beefed up their checks on vehicles that violate the Motor Vehicles Act. Those who observe the rules find it extremely difficult to negotiate the roads particularly at night when vehicles and two wheelers attack all kinds of LED lights that emit a strong glare and make it difficult for upcoming vehicles to see what's ahead of them. Some vehicles, particularly trucks that more often than not are violating the carriage capacity, hide their number plates so that they are not immediately visible by policemen along the highway. Others don't adhere to the norm of fitting high security registration plates (HSRP) as required by government regulations.

Parents with two wheelers often don the helmet themselves but don't consider it necessary to make their children wear the same protective gear even while the child/children are seated in the front and would be the first casualties in case of an accident. Drunken driving is common but there are far too few traffic cops to detect such violations. It is fellow drivers who see the person in front of them or who is headed towards them that is swerving dangerously and so they drive to the side to avoid hitting the vehicle or being hit by it. Let's face it, in Meghalaya breaking traffic rules is also a sport. These days two wheelers overtake from the right and left side of the road making it difficult for four wheeler drivers to anticipate which side they need to drive on to avoid the two wheeler. This is a common occurrence especially during school hours. Major violations such as driving without a license and drunken driving especially in the evenings are frequent. Minor violations such as not wearing a helmet while riding a two-wheeler, jumping a signal, driving on the wrong side of the road, parking in a no-parking zone, etc., are punishable by a fine of a mere Rs 500. Major violations which include driving without a license, drunk driving, speeding, dangerous driving, overloading, etc., are punishable by a fine of up to Rs. 1000; in some cases, the offender's license can be suspended.

The problem also is that the Meghalaya Home Guards are now being extensively used to manage traffic within Shillong City but they are not empowered to collect fines and give out challans. The worst traffic violations however, happen along the Shillong-Guwahati highway where hordes of bikers perform stunts in the middle of the road thereby placing other drivers in a precarious situation. There is need for a special traffic police contingent to man this highway which has now become a racing ground for two wheeler owning hotheads. This happens particularly on Sundays when nearly every two-wheeler owner's destination seems to be the Shillong-Guwahati highway or the Sohra track. What has made driving more dangerous today are the speeding tourist taxis and private vehicles from Assam whose drivers seem to be in a perpetual hurry. The car that turned turtle at Mawkdok recently with the injured being assisted by the Chief Minister's entourage is a case in point. Meghalaya needs more traffic police to man the highways and perhaps the penalty needs to match the violations, especially repeated ones. Human lives cannot be imperilled by reckless drivers.

Why Meghalaya Must Say 'Big No' to Another State University Now

By Napoleon S Mawphniang

Meghalaya frequently breaks its promises. When the cameras are not filming, these revelations are less captivating. The Meghalaya Biological Park in Umtrew Ri Bhoi District is a long-awaited project that took over 24 years to create and cost Rs 35 crore. As quickly as they were accomplished, great achievements can be undone. The project started in 2001 and was shut down a few weeks after its November 27, 2024, debut. The same degree of under-performance and obscurity has befallen the National Law University (NLU), Meghalaya. The people of Meghalaya will not like another state university. New institutions die without growth, accountability, and transparency.

The claims made in this article can be thoroughly investigated. The evidence needs to be increased through collaboration. We can get together and create additional RTI applications if further problems arise. This process may reveal more - similar to discovering a skeleton. Who can say for sure? You might be able to locate Dantès's treasure trove.

Development Illusion

Many saw the Meghalaya Biological Park opened in Umtrew, Ri Bhoi District, by the Chief Minister. It temporarily garnered attention as a milestone. Unfortunately, the park closed a month after opening, demonstrating the state's weak growth. The inaugural seemed like propaganda without a long-term plan. If it can't manage a biological park, how can the state protect a research-intensive University with unfulfilled political commitments?

This calamity symbolizes the NLU Meghalaya's difficult path to excellence. NLU Meghalaya's website claims "excellence in legal education" and "transformative research," but students, citizens, and RTI activists disagree. NLU Meghalaya, like the Biological Park, shuttered after a grand opening due to bureaucracy, funds, and infrastructure.

Overpending on infra
Some government projects have huge expenses. Journalism legend Kong Patricia Mukhim questioned public project cost overruns. Inflated funds are devolved towards a continuous building process and "inauguration ceremonies" are overshadowed by deception and inefficiency.

These allegations target NLU Meghalaya's Mayurbhanj Complex campus in Nongthymmai, Shillong. Costs can surpass expectations despite "world-class infrastructure." Where does the additional funding go? Why is so little help given to students, especially PWDs, who often lack accommodations despite the stated dedication to inclusive education?

NLU Accountability
Disorganized Staff and Faculty Appointments: Transparent recruiting guarantees a healthy university where the best are hired as

permanent instructors to attract and support students. NLU Meghalaya insiders say only 2% of the staff are permanent or "regular" while the rest are contractual or on lien. If true, the Vice Chancellor's personal travel to Delhi and other Indian cities with university funding implies an accountability breach. This spending is not publicly disclosed despite RTI efforts.

Academic and administrative priorities may be compromised if an institution cannot reveal its administration's travel expenses. If a National Law University's money for library expansions, academic exchange programs, and student amenities is diverted to superfluous travel or other expenses, it fails to produce top level lawyers. As Courtney Lynch famously observed, "Leaders inspire accountability through their ability to accept responsibility before they place blame." NLU Meghalaya's leadership has not stated its duties.

The RTI Problem

Despite its claims of "Excellence in Legal Education" and "Transforming Future Legal Professionals," NLU Meghalaya's RTI response is concerning. The university concealed crucial operations, financial, and academic data. A legal school should value transparency and responsibility, therefore this lack of information is troubling.

What is more concerning is that NLU Meghalaya appears to be "running away" from the Right to Information Act. Law University applications are not accepted by Meghalaya's RTI online filing platform, and some offline submissions have been refused or not generated receipts. This is ironic. All legal schools should respect transparency laws. Indian public accountability rests on the RTI Act. And mind you the RTI is not just an irritant. How can a law and human rights university fail to meet citizens' right to information?

Student and PWD Facilities Gap

Meghalaya claims the National Law University accommodates PWDs under the State Reservation Policy. But no data is supplied, and PWD students use the same facilities as able-bodied pupils, according to anecdotes and RTI reports. Ramps, elevators, and assistance gadgets don't help people learn equally. Statements are empty without proof. Lack of a fully working, inclusive atmosphere promotes the perception that beyond glossy brochures, there is no real commitment to accommodate all learners.

Public Information Gaps
"Visiting the university's website contradicts the RTI response. The website promises "exceptionally bright academic minds" and a "futuristic educational experience," yet the RTI response lacks data. Does the univer-

sity's "futuristic education" hide larger issues?

External Data Storage, No Local Systems

RTI investigations show NLU Meghalaya's data on IIT Kharagpur's servers for unknown reasons. Why not put data in Shillong under NLU Meghalaya's own portals? It denotes unclear or negligent academic data organization. If the local authority lacks the technological expertise or desire to handle data, how can citizens trust that personal records, financial transactions, and other sensitive information are protected?

State Government's Failure

The Meghalaya Government's education policy is performance-based, say RTI campaigners. Education receives huge budgets annually. Denied RTI requests, bureaucratic slowness, and unexplained cost escalations make the tracking of such cash use difficult. Introducing a State University at this juncture is silly. Before beginning a new law university, the Government should have fixed serious faults with the current one.

Biopark Metaphor

Political capital and media excitement don't equal progress, as the Meghalaya Biological Park's fast closure reveals. Institutions need care, oversight, and accountability after inauguration.

Currently, creating a new State University could be another "biological park fiasco"—a quick ribbon-cutting, tremendous press interest, and quiet collapse or poor functioning. If the Government doesn't learn from its mistakes, invest in sustainability, and be transparent, a new entity will waste resources.

Call for Accountability

"People, student NGOs, legal fraternities, and Bar Associations prohibit arbitrary governance in a democracy. Because accountability voices face government disinterest, these groups must plead loudly. The Shillong Bar Association and High Court of Meghalaya Bar Association must seek swift and extensive institutional reforms at NLU Meghalaya and challenge the need for a new State University.

NLU Governance Transparency: The National Law University, Meghalaya needs impartial evaluation. Financial records, administrative recruitment, professor appointments, and reservation policy compliance should be audited. Civil society groups should review administration based on timelines.

Full Disclosure Under RTI

The RTI Act endures. The National Law University must accept online and offline RTI petitions, give timely receipts, and satisfy response timelines. The University must engage with open inquiry to win public trust.

Support for Students with Disabilities

Universities are societal microcosms. If NLU Meghalaya cannot treat students with disabilities with dignity and provide physical accessibility or other adaptations, it has failed as a modern educational institution. Universal design must be built into any expansion or new construction project by law or advocacy.

Wanted a probe

Examine the Vice Chancellor's travel costs and low staffing. This probe must not be symbolic. Misbehavior requires legal or disciplinary punishment. Otherwise, we risk normalizing public money theft and exploitation without consequence.

Hold New State University proposals

Put an end to establishing universities. The public must say "no" until the government resolves the significant problems with NLU Meghalaya and other institutions, schools, and colleges regarding transparency and the ability to use the annual budget for education. We want to know how the funds were used, not just how much money was spent in direct and indirect taxes. Repeated government failures shouldn't harm disillusioned law university graduates.

Fighting False Claims

If the government celebrates each new institution and departmental building with a bang but has no future strategy, we must say a big "Enough." A new State University like the Biological Park or troubled NLU Meghalaya is unnecessary. In these situations, "quality education" is pointless. Call to fix issues first. Run a transparent, effective NLU Meghalaya with good legal education. Only then should we open another institution of higher learning. Anything less is pointless.

NEHU, a Central University with government backing, excellent facilities, and academics that transcend state institutions, accepts colleges. Central government financing gives NEHU resources that a state university cannot match. Instead of building another state agency, the government should improve NEHU and cut costs. The Meghalaya government must not sacrifice student and youth prospects for education.

How can the Government of Meghalaya blame NEHU for needing to create a state university? If media reports say the state has little influence over NEHU, why doesn't it ask the central government to alter its Act and statutes to improve operations? Accounting determines whether universities serve the public or are political figments. Get back to our roots and demand accountability. After overcoming failures and recurrent delusions, Meghalaya may inspire future students.

(The writer is an Advocate, Trade Unionist and Humanist)

Questions for L&T and other CMDs

By Lekha Rattanani

SNS, as the 60-year-old L&T Chairman & Managing Director S. N. Subrahmanyam is known within the company, has raised quite a firestorm. He is not known to be the headline-seeking CEO living the high life, as some upstart CEOs tend to be. Here's a head honcho who chairs a conglomerate with a glorious history of some 80 years, with more than 50,000 people operating across 50 countries and with an annual turnover of over Rs. 2.2 lakh crore in 2024. It is almost unbelievable that such a senior leader would make the remarks of the kind he indeed has in a video that has now leaked - that if he had his way, he would make employees work on Sundays since the other option, in his words, is to sit at home and stare at your wife.

Who would want to do that? Never mind that many women are a proud part of the L&T success story, so that SNS comes across very poorly in more ways than one. Deepika Padukone is right in pointing out that the attempted recovery from this sorry mess only made it worse. Instead of making light of the remarks, which included a prescription of putting in 90 hours a week, the later attempt at explaining it as a call to nation building points to the insidiousness of the remarks. Was SNS hiding behind or doing one better than the obnoxious call of IT leaders like N R Narayana Murthy ("satanic" in the words of The Centre of Indian Trade Unions) in all seriousness seeking 70-hour weeks? The L&T explanation only makes it more likely for people to conclude that the remarks could not have been banter that misfired.

Even if we allow for the view that SNS is known for these kinds of detours and doesn't really mean it, there are larger issues that come to the spotlight on what CEOs in India can get away with. The cases that come to light now and then offer but a tiny peek into a lot more that is wrong at India Inc. This is not how the strength of "India's Yuva Shakti will make India a developed nation", to quote the Prime Minister Narendra Modi speaking just this weekend at the 'Viksit Bharat Young Leaders Dialogue 2025'. These CEOs may want the political leadership to think they are singing the tune of the day but it's in the interest of the political leadership to be wary of such pretence. The disdain for Murthy and now SNS among employees and in general Gen Z is to be heard and seen (who will measure this important variable?) to be believed.

To the other issues that must be discussed so that all CXOs, not just SNS, are appropriately held to account and where required restrained by strong regulatory measures. Consider that SNS was paid a total remuneration of Rs.51.05 crore for FY 2023-24, which is 534.57 times the median remuneration at L&T. It represents growth of 43.11% over what was paid to him last year. The remuneration is the highest of all employees, some 40% higher than the second highest paid employee at

L&T, who is the President & CFO R. Shankar Raman. How are employees who on average get one-five-hundredth of this meant to react to the comments of SNS?

In this context, the first issue on the agenda for a "developed" India should be to put a ceiling on the amount that CXOs pay themselves, never mind the guardrails or formalities that they don't decide their salaries and that the Board does. In the Indian context, these formalities have not worked well enough, partly because our company Boards in themselves are often pliant and work as birds of a feather flocking together, a chosen few keeping themselves in the seat. Note that in the developed economy of Denmark, the home country of the L & T founders, the late Henning Holck-Larsen and Soren Toubro, the variable remuneration of executive directors comprises on average 37% of the fixed, according to a Deloitte report. In the case of the L&T CMD, it is 980% (salary of Rs. 3.6 crore, commission of Rs. 35.28 crore, as reported by L&T for 2024). Without grudging these packages, can it be fairly claimed that the performance of the group (the basis on which commission is usually calculated) is because of the leadership being provided? And how does L&T calculate the losses on account of SNS's remarks, given that many talented candidates will now think twice about joining the company.

The next significant question that comes up is the complete absence of dissent in India's corporates. The language of sustainability, the appeal to innovativeness and the claim of DEI (Diversity, Equity and Inclusion) policies all ring hollow when it becomes clear that no one in Indian corporations, including in the biggest and the so-called best, challenges the boss. Why? The simple answer is that questions are not asked because questions are not encouraged, building a culture where hierarchy rules, the boss is to be always deemed right, and creativity almost by definition cannot thrive. The inner collapse of L&T is seen from the fact that no one challenged SNS in the undated video that has now become the cause of his misery. The problem is not that the video leaked. The problem is that SNS was not asked how he could even make such a statement. He got away for the moment, as our CEOs often do, only for the world outside to pull him down.

For India to harness the power and thinking of a new generation of leaders, the older lot will have to learn to live with more questions, with less judgement and some deeper realisation that they are not quite as extraordinary as they may imagine themselves to be. Since there is no evidence that is likely to happen anytime soon, the Indian establishment must act with a new set of regulations to bring the house to order.

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

Letters to the Editor

Time to take action

Editor,
The Meghalaya Government recently in its first cabinet sitting of the year that was held in Sohra as part of its avant garde meeting has announced various laudable decisions pertaining to workers' welfare, farmer-centric initiatives amongst others. But the most noteworthy decision of all is the issue pertaining to ad-hoc employees and their regularisation that has been a long vexed topic and the 850 employees that were inadvertently left out along with the 3000 ad-hoc employees that were regularised in the 2022 finally got their dues. This was done as a one-time measure as mandated by the directives of the apex court of the country in one of its verdicts relating to this issue and the cut off year being 2007.

Now this issue is crystal clear to the general public and the State administration

in particular that no ad-hoc employees or temporary employees should be appointed henceforth in sanctioned posts and such vacant sanctioned posts should be immediately intimated to mandated recruitment authorities viz MPSC, DSC for advertisement and recruitment of candidates through competitive exams. Those employees that were appointed post 2007 should be shown the door and their posts should be advertised promptly. This will promote the spirit of fairness and transparency in public institutions that has been overshadowed by nepotism and mediocrity which is unconstitutional and invalid. I hope the Government is sincere on this matter and let no ad-hoc nor temporary employees further be employed in the future. The NGOs and the public at large must be sentinels in this regard for the brighter future of our youths.

Yours etc.,
Krensimon lawiniang
Via email

Gruesome murder of a journalist

Editor,
There have been extensive discussions on the Constitution and freedom of speech in parliament. Members of the Opposition in Parliament reminded of the emergency and how newspapers refrained from writing the editorials then. Today attacks on journalists continue. The gruesome and cold-blooded murder of freelance journalist, Mukesh Chandrakar, in Bijnapur, Chhattisgarh is another stark reminder that journalism has become a dangerous profession in India, especially when journalists take on the corrupt mafia. In such circumstances journalists should be provided full security. Silencing journalists or threatening them violates the constitutional right to the freedom of speech and expression and the democratic principle

of press freedom. The Supreme Court has also come in support of journalists in Manipur where they are engaged in reporting the true picture in the state. Assaults on the fourth pillar of democracy is an indication that the country might be losing its democratic character which is not acceptable. India is the largest democracy in the world with the US being the oldest. Freedom of speech is guaranteed in the US and it will take several decades before India comes up to the level of the US. India is doing badly on the press freedom index, rising two places from 161 in 2023 to 159 in 2024 among 180 countries and it is well known that freedom press index is low due to the events in Jammu and Kashmir where journalists are under tremendous pressure not to be critical of the government. The same is the case with Manipur, and due this reason India's ranking in press freedom index is worse than Pakistan and Palestine.

Journalists are targeted both by State and non-State political actors and anti-social elements as well as criminals. Almost every murder or harassment is related to one or more reports of the journalists in question, particularly if they are investigating government accounts or exposes. In 2023, for example, five journalists were killed and 226 subjected to various pressures. Of these 148 were targeted by the State. They were arrested or detained; some were summoned for questioning; some had first information reports (FIRs) registered against them, while others were asked to reveal their sources, or had their passports taken away or houses raided. A number of them were physically attacked or threatened by the police or public officials.

Clearly, the Constitutional right to freedom of speech is no longer a shield for journalists. They deserve a Bill of Rights. This will be more effective as a shield, especially if events lead to the courts'

support for it, and it could be a useful counter to the recent laws that may be used to constrain the media to project reports and messages favoured by the government. In an environment hostile to journalists in general, those representing small-budget media organisations and those who do freelance work, such as Chandrakar did, are the most vulnerable. A Bill of Rights would be most helpful for them since they have little or no protection.

The repeated attacks on and murders of journalists inevitably have a chilling effect on everyone in the profession, which is no doubt the intended effect. Journalism is a profession of courage; in the present scene, of extraordinary courage. It may be ironic, but it is up to the government to see that journalists are protected and press freedom is restored in India.

It is the responsibility of stakeholders to ensure that the press freedom index is improved as the country is

the largest democracy in the world.

Yours etc.,
Yash Pal Ralhan,
Via email

Economic inequality on the rise in India

Editor,
Indian economist and political commentator, Prabhakar Parakala has said, "In today's India, it becomes easy for someone who tolerates the majoritarian polity to be tolerant of economic inequality." It happens because the ground for this has been prepared by casteism.

Casteism is based on inequality. It blurs the vision of seeing anything wrong in the celebration of becoming the third highest country in the number of billionaires in India, amid rising unemployment, inflation, inequality, and

poor performance in human development and hunger alleviation.

While the culture of casteism has always given moral strength to inequality, the child of casteism, untouchability, takes the game of "othering", which is the root of majoritarianism, taking it to new heights. As per the India Human Development Survey (IHDS-2) in 2011-12, 27 per cent of the respondents across India said that they had been following the practice of untouchability.

Untouchability is like a silent form of terrorism and the worst form of "othering". It makes fun of India's eternal message of "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam" (the world is one family).

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

"In the world of diplomacy, some things are better left unsaid."

— Lincoln Chafee

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No.155 SHILLONG, WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 15, 2025

Yunus facing odds

PREDICTABLY, Bangladesh is courting more trouble than its new rulers can handle. In the months following the forced resignation and exit of Sheikh Hasina from the long-held Prime Ministerial post and from the country to a safe haven in India in August last, the scenario in Bangladesh is steadily deteriorating on multiple fronts. The new set of 'leaders' running the interim administration under Nobel-Laureate Muhammad Yunus has not been able to restore normalcy in the country while Hasina's large swarm of Awami League followers are simply biding their time. To add to this, reports are that internal revolts in the Army are likely. Multiple power centres, each with its own command in the form of generals, are seen to be working at cross purposes. This was only to be expected as Hasina retained strong support from major segments of the military.

Yunus' expectation of getting American protection has proven to be a mirage. This, even as the US may have its own interests to protect and promote in Bangladesh and the geographical region spanning the subcontinent. Yet, the Americans are understandably hesitant to go beyond a point to support the illegitimate power arrangement there. There has been no serious attempt on the part of the interim government to call elections and arrange a transfer of power to the people's representatives. Its lack of legitimacy will, in the long run, cause multiple problems for it in terms of international cooperation. Yunus has proven to be unfit to lead the government and this is evident from his vacillation on many fronts. He lacks the guts and political experience to lead a government. As a result, segments of the administration have already begun disobeying the central authority. Its manifestation is evident now in the army as well.

Bangladesh is not Pakistan when it comes to military might. Dhaka cannot expect India to provide its security cover as New Delhi had done at the time of separation of East Pakistan from Islamabad's control and establishment of Bangladesh as a new nation in the first lap of the 1970s. China cannot step in with military support for Bangladesh, as it could lead to direct intervention from the US and the West to counter such a move. Nor can Pakistan afford to help Bangladesh beyond a point in terms of military support. The Indian government is mindful of the fact that it must protect its regional interests and its own security from a future alliance of China and Pakistan vis-à-vis Bangladesh. The large mass base for Sheikh Hasina, even now, cannot be lost sight of. The Yunus-led interim government is mindful of this even as it keeps demanding her extradition from India to Bangladesh. India would not respond to such a demand as it comes from a regime that lacks legitimacy.

Strategic Diplomacy and Trade Resilience: India's Economic Leverage in Trump's 2.0 Era

By Prof D Mukherjee

The global trade landscape is on the brink of significant recalibration as Donald Trump prepares to re-assume the presidency of the United States. His well-documented protectionist stance, encapsulated in the "They Tax Us, We Tax Them" policy, heralds a new era of reciprocal tariffs and strategic economic manoeuvres. For India, this development presents a dual-edged opportunity. With a burgeoning economy and strategic geopolitical positioning, India must chart a path that not only safeguards her economic interests but also amplifies her role as a pivotal trade partner for the United States. This write up examines how India's diplomacy and economic resilience can transform challenges into opportunities during Trump's second term. Leveraging lessons from Biden's tenure, which saw bilateral trade exceed \$191 billion in 2022, India stands poised to deepen her economic ties through proactive reforms, supply chain realignments, and strengthened alliances. This moment demands reflective action, where India recalibrates her tariff structures, showcases openness, and solidifies her indispensability in U.S. economic and geopolitical strategies. This narrative aims at sketching a blueprint for India to not just survive but thrive, ensuring her economic narrative aligns with global power dynamics in an increasingly protectionist world order. As Donald Trump is historically scheduled to assume the U.S. presidency for a second term on January 20, 2025, India faces a critical juncture in her economic and trade relations with the United States. Trump's emphasis on "reciprocal tariffs" and his critique of India's trade practices necessitate a strategic response to safeguard and enhance India's economic interests.

Trump's earlier presidency saw the implementation of strong protectionist trade policies, reshaping international trade relationships. India, a key trading partner, was notably affected by these measures. In 2019, heightened tariffs were imposed on Indian exports of steel and aluminium to the U.S., prompting India to retaliate with tariffs on American goods. Further strain came with the U.S. decision to revoke India's benefits under the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP), impacting approximately \$6 billion worth of Indian exports. Recent statements by President-elect Trump indicate a continued focus on reciprocal tariffs, with concerns about India's high duties on American goods suggesting the possibility of renewed trade frictions.

Amidst these challenges, India retains considerable economic leverage, rooted in its market size, strategic importance, and emerging role in global supply chains. With a population exceeding 1.4 billion and a rapidly growing middle class, India offers an expansive consumer base for American businesses

in sectors like technology, pharmaceuticals, and consumer goods. Beyond her eye-catching market potential, India's strategic alignment with the United States, particularly in countering China's regional dominance, underscores her importance in the scenario of international trade. Collaboration in areas such as defence, technology, and energy has significantly strengthened bilateral ties. India's increasing attractiveness as a global manufacturing hub further bolsters her leverage. As companies worldwide seek alternatives to China for supply chain diversification, India's proactive initiatives, such as the Production Linked Incentive (PLI) schemes, is likely to position her as a competitive and reliable strategic international trade partner for investment and manufacturing as well.

Trump's historic comeback to the White House brings renewed focus to his "reciprocal tariffs" policy, which targets perceived trade imbalances by imposing equivalent duties on countries with high tariffs on U.S. goods. India, with her significant trade ties to the U.S., faces potential challenges under this policy and must adopt a strategic approach to protect its economic interests.

India's response should prioritize strengthening bilateral negotiations with the U.S. Proactive discussions with the new administration can address tariff disparities and advocate for more balanced terms, potentially reducing retaliatory measures. Offering selective tariff reductions on specific U.S. goods, such as agricultural products or automobiles, could encourage reciprocity. Additionally, showcasing ongoing economic reforms to improve market accessibility can bolster India's position as a fair and reliable trading partner. India's geopolitical significance as a counterbalance to China enhances its value to the U.S., providing leverage in trade negotiations. Engaging in multilateral forums and advocating for fair trade practices can help mitigate risks from unilateral U.S. actions. Diversifying export markets to regions like the European Union (EU), Southeast Asia, and Africa will reduce reliance on the U.S., enhancing India's trade resilience and global economic standing.

India stands at a pivotal moment as it evaluates her trade dynamics with the U.S. amid Donald J. Trump's return to the presidency. The trade tensions during Trump's previous tenure, particularly the tariffs and retaliatory measures between the U.S. and China, disrupted global trade and imposed significant costs on both economies. India can learn from this scenario by avoiding an escalatory approach, focusing on diplomatic solutions, and adopting strategic economic measures to maintain stability and create mutually beneficial outcomes in the face of

shifting global trade dynamics. Further, as India is well acknowledged as a peace-loving nation in the planet, she can derive enormous geopolitical pivotal strength to establishing international trade relations and deriving dividends in due course.

In 2022, under President Joe Biden, U.S.-India bilateral trade grew to \$191.8 billion, with U.S. exports to India totalling \$73 billion and imports from India reaching \$118.8 billion, resulting in a trade deficit of \$45.7 billion. By 2023, U.S. exports to India had risen to \$40.12 billion. Projections from the U.S.-India Strategic Partnership Forum (USISPF) suggest that bilateral trade could rise to \$238 billion by 2025, with accelerated growth pushing this figure to \$283-\$327 billion at a growth rate of 10%-12.5%.

Trump's renewed focus on "reciprocal tariffs," designed to address perceived trade imbalances, could place pressure on India to reevaluate its tariff policies. This provides India with an opportunity to engage in proactive negotiations, offering selective tariff reductions to foster goodwill and secure preferential treatment in its trade relations with the U.S. Additionally, global supply chain realignments, particularly due to tensions between the U.S. and China, position India as an attractive alternative for American companies seeking diversification. With her large consumer base, skilled workforce, and ongoing economic reforms, India can attract U.S. investments further by strengthening bilateral trade.

Strategic collaboration in defence, advanced technology, and critical minerals offers another vital avenue for enhancing U.S.-India ties. For example, proposed agreements in critical minerals could facilitate mutual growth and secure both nations' interests in essential sectors for future industries. To effectively navigate the complexities of U.S. trade policy under Trump's second term, India must adopt a well-rounded, proactive strategy. Diplomatic engagement with the new administration should focus on resolving trade concerns and showcasing the mutual benefits of a strengthened relationship. India must also reassess its tariff structures, reducing duties on select American goods to demonstrate goodwill and encourage reciprocal actions. This strategy not only reduces the risk of retaliatory tariffs but also fosters a favourable environment for increased trade. Improving India's domestic investment climate by streamlining business processes, investing in infrastructure, and addressing regulatory bottlenecks will position India as an attractive destination for U.S. investments. These efforts can make India a key player in global supply chains, especially as the U.S. looks to reduce dependence on Chinese manufacturing.

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

Furthermore, diversifying India's export markets and expanding its export portfolio will reduce dependency on specific sectors, enhancing resilience against the volatility of protectionist policies. India's geopolitical significance in counterbalancing China's influence in the Indo-Pacific region also serves as a strong foundation for deeper collaboration in defence, technology, and critical minerals, offering substantial economic benefits to both nations. India's trade strategy under Trump's second term must embrace diplomacy, economic reforms, and strategic partnerships to ensure the growth and resilience of her trade relationship with the U.S. By transforming potential trade tensions into opportunities for collaboration, India can secure its position as an indispensable partner to the United States.

As India looks ahead to the challenges and opportunities in the Trump 2.0 era, she must adopt a strategic, multifaceted approach. First, proactive diplomatic engagement with the new administration is crucial to address trade concerns and build a collaborative relationship. Emphasizing India's recent economic reforms and openness to foreign investment will foster trust and goodwill. She could also pursue a bilateral trade agreement with the U.S., addressing key issues like tariffs, intellectual property, and market access. A well-negotiated deal could offer structured solutions to trade disputes and pave the way for favourable terms, including selective tariff reductions on U.S. goods like automobiles and agricultural products. In return, India could gain better access for its exports and professionals in the U.S. market.

Domestically, India must focus on enhancing its economic competitiveness by investing in infrastructure, skill development, and business reforms. These measures would help Indian industries adapt to global pressures and capitalize on emerging trade opportunities. Diversifying export markets beyond the U.S. is also critical. Strengthening trade relationships with regions such as the EU, Southeast Asia, and Africa will reduce reliance on any single market and improve resilience. India should also utilize multilateral platforms, like the WTO, to challenge unfair trade practices and advocate for equitable treatment. By leveraging international support, India can buffer against unilateral actions by the U.S. or other countries. By aligning her strategy with global trade norms, leveraging geopolitical significance, and taking proactive steps to enhance trade resilience, India can mitigate risks and seize opportunities, ensuring long-term sustainable growth and a stronger U.S. partnership.

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

Trumpeting US annexation of Canada.

Greenland may not be wishful thinking

Many countries have forcibly annexed foreign territories

By Nantoo Banerjee

There seems to exist a method in US President-elect Donald Trump's madness when he talks about his desire to annex Canada and Greenland, and renaming the Gulf of Mexico among others. A US annexation of Canada is possible through a treaty between the two countries involving the British Monarch, or a referendum by Canadian citizens in favour of joining the US, or through the use of force. Canada's economy is highly dependent on the United States of America. Forcible occupation of countries is nothing new even in the post-colonial era. The US has been interested in grabbing the vast territory of Canada ever since its creation under the British North America Act of 1867. Canada is a bijural (existence of two legal systems within a single state) country. The legal concepts are expressed in both English and French. The British Monarch, King Charles III, is the constitutional head of Canada. Although he does not rule the country, the British King is a fundamental part of Canada's government and identity.

However, the US is yet to make a serious attempt to take over Canada, the world's second largest country by geographical area of over 9.98 million square kilometres. A US annexation of Canada will make it the world's largest country, ahead of Russia, with a total area of 17,098,242 sq.km. The territorial expansion of the US is nothing new. It is provided by the US constitution. Trump knows it. So are the other political leaders of the US, both Republicans and Democrats. Few have dismissed Trump's latest bellicose rhetoric. There is no serious political debate in the US on Trump's suggestion to annex Canada and acquire Greenland through a treaty with Denmark.

A continuous territorial expansion and acquisition form a part of the US geo-political history. World historians know how the US annexed the present-day states of California, Nevada, Utah, New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, Oklahoma, Kansas and Wyoming. Canada and Greenland could be the next. A constitutional architecture exists in the US to make it happen. There is both potential and precedent for the US to acquire territory through cession or subjugation. Even a forcible annexation of Canada is most unlikely to be opposed militarily by any other power. In the past, many militarily strong countries, including the UK, Russia, China, India, the UK, France and Israel, have forcibly occupied or retained territories with little opposition from third parties.

China's invasion of Tibet in 1950 was the quietest of all foreign territorial annexations. The news of Chinese military occupation of Tibet, known as the 'roof of the world', travelled so slowly that most Tibetans were even unaware of it until 1952. China has occupied several territories, including Xinjiang, Hainan, and Zhoushan. Tibet is about one-eighth of China's

total land mass. The Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) is the second-largest province-level division of China by area after Xinjiang. Nonconformist Communist China annexed the Islamic state of Xinjiang and the Buddhist territory of Tibet to become the world's third largest country by total land area, after Russia and Canada. China, which wants more, has territorial disputes with many countries, including India, Japan, Vietnam, Bhutan, and the Philippines. It claims territory of Taiwan, and the South China Sea. China administers Aksai Chin, known to be an Indian territory.

One may say that India itself annexed Hyderabad, Goa, Daman and Diu and Sikkim - all independent territories within the state of India at the time of its freedom from British rule. India annexed Goa from Portuguese control in 1961 after occupying it. Indonesia annexed Western New Guinea in 1963. North Vietnam occupied South Vietnam after a prolonged war with the US armed forces. Israel annexed the Western Golan Heights in 1967. Northern Cyprus has remained under Turkey's occupation since 1974.

Among the 14 foreign territories still controlled by the UK are: Anguilla; Bermuda; British Antarctic Territory (BAT); British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT); British Virgin Islands; Cayman Islands; Falkland Islands; Gibraltar; Montserrat; Pitcairn, Henderson, Ducie and Oeno Islands; Saint Helena, Ascension and Tristan da Cunha; and South Georgia. Overseas France consists of as many as 13 foreign territories outside Europe. Russia controls parts of Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk, and Zaporizhzhia Oblasts of Kharkiv and Mykolaiiv. Ukraine controls parts of Kursk Oblast.

Thus, Trump's openly marketing the idea of acquiring Canada and Greenland seems to be nothing new or unusual. Earlier, Canada was under the British occupation. Greenland is an autonomous territory of the Kingdom of Denmark. Unlike the US interest in Canada, the American government has been trying to annex Greenland for a long time. During the Second World War, the US invoked its Monroe Doctrine to militarily occupy Greenland to prevent itself from a possible attack by Hitler after Denmark's surrender to the German forces. A 1951 treaty with the Danish government gave the US significant responsibility over Greenland's defence, including "exclusive jurisdiction" over militarily sensitive areas.

To what extent the US perceives its objective to acquire Canada and Greenland will be seen in the coming years. The international law does not allow forcible occupation of a country through military force. Under international law, annexation violates the prohibition of using threatening force and it should be recognised as illegal. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

Inspiring tale of a thirteen-year-old writer

Editor,
Adarsh Singh, a 13-year-old prodigy, has accomplished what many adults only dream of: authoring six books. This amazing feat was brought to light by Esha Chaudhari's touching Sunday feature article in The Shillong Times, titled "Adarsh Singh, the child writer of Shillong," published on January 12. The piece has undoubtedly inspired numerous young minds as well as their parents.

It was Adarsh's simple passion for reading that led him to pursue creative writing. This young boy, perhaps encouraged by his parents, must have read a great number of books, allowing his imagination to take flight. With each book he has published, Adarsh has proved that creativity is not limited by age.

What makes Adarsh's story truly inspiring is the dedication and perseverance it takes to be a writer at such a young age. And yet, Adarsh manages it all with a smile and joy! You could

say he's become a master juggler - balancing chapters, homework, and maybe even kicking a football!

As we celebrate Adarsh Singh's incredible journey, let us also reflect on how we can foster such creativity and imagination in our "own children". With consistent encouragement, guidance, and love from parents and teachers, young minds can achieve remarkable things. Adarsh isn't just writing stories; he's rewriting the rulebook of what's possible when one never stops trying.

Yours etc.,
Salil Gecwal,
Shillong

Hazardous hazard lights

Editor,
The Meghalaya Traffic Police should make more effort in informing their policemen on road rules and vehicle directional signals or hazard lights. Earlier today while running some errands, I encountered a traffic policeman at an intersection near DHS office in Laitumkhray where he had stopped me for not turning my hazard lights (Double Signal) on because I

was going straight. Little did he know that hazard lights are by no means a directional signal. According to Rule 121 of the Central Motor Vehicles Rules (CMVR), 1989, hazard lights (or emergency lights) are to be used specifically when a vehicle is stationary or moving in an abnormal or dangerous way by being a hazard to other motorists. The hazard lights should not be used to signal turning or lane changes, as this function is specifically assigned to directional indicators. Section 177 of the Motor Vehicles Act, 1988, emphasises on the proper usage of directional or turn signals.

Using turn signals (directional indicators) is mandatory when changing lanes or turning at an intersection. Turn signals are specifically designed to show the driver's intention to turn or change lanes, while hazard lights should not be used for this purpose. If a driver uses hazard lights for directional signalling or lane changes, it could be considered improper use of vehicle signalling, and the driver may face penalties for violating traffic rules.

Again, hazard lights are to be used only during emergency situations or if your car is a hazard to other motorists by being stationary due to

breakdown or the like. This further proves that there is incompetence in the Meghalaya Traffic Police as the hazard lights are a Universal Signal and quite frankly anyone with common sense will be able to understand this. By not being well informed and giving misleading information, this creates nuisance to the lakhs of motorists in our city and further creates an unsafe traffic environment. I also urge the public to also be educated and well informed if ever a similar situation happens.

Yours etc.,
Al Kyndiah
Via email

Tura through the lens of change

Editor,
Returning to Tura after two decades felt like stepping into a cherished memory. I had the pleasure of visiting this enchanting place twice during my teenage years when my uncle served as a government official there. Back then, we navigated narrow roads, the population was modest, and the warmth of the locals left an indelible mark on my heart. This winter, however, Tura has transformed into a

vibrant hub, revealing delightful surprises I hadn't anticipated! Chandmari, in particular, has come alive, featuring a beautifully architected canopy stadium beside an artificial turf playground. The wider roads and bustling markets felt surreal; it was a joy to see shops still open at night, with families enjoying the playground—it was as if I was rediscovering a piece of home.

One of the highlights of my trip was visiting the PA Sangma Stadium, which evoked memories of the grand structures in Delhi. The picturesque stroll from Chandmari to the Tetenkol junction was a delight, with significantly wider roads marking a welcome departure from the narrow pathways without footpaths of the past. I savoured some delectable momos near the stadium, yet I found myself pondering the absence of local traditional delicacies. I noticed many fancy restaurants that didn't serve Garo cuisine, which was truly disappointing. Moreover, I was puzzled why the authorities allow small roadside stalls to clutter the already narrow streets; it poses a danger to both pedestrians and drivers. Imagine how splendid it would be if

those stalls were replaced by proper shops! Such a change would enhance Tura's aesthetic appeal and make it more inviting for everyone.

That said, I must candidly advise visitors to steer clear of the Main Bazar area. It felt overwhelmingly chaotic, and the Tura Super Market was so cramped that moving about felt almost claustrophobic. The town could certainly benefit from more open spaces where people could gather and converse! Crowding everyone into tight spots diminishes the charm of an area that once thrived on its community ambience.

The natural beauty of Gandrak Falls in the morning was another highlight that left me spellbound. Watching gibbons swing gracefully through the trees while their haunting cries echoed around me forged a profound connection to the wilderness. I can only hope the government is taking significant measures to safeguard these amiable creatures and their habitats.

I sought to bring home some souvenirs as keepsakes from my visit but was taken aback by the lack of official shops from the Municipality or Tourism department. I did manage to procure a lovely

dakmanda from the Tura market, a Garo traditional ladies' wrap-around, though it was a bit pricey for a gift. I sincerely hope my next visit will feature official shops offering a wider selection of beautiful souvenirs that truly encapsulate the essence of Tura.

There is an urgent need for more public toilets and dustbins along the roadsides, as well as improved street lighting. As for DC's Park—it's disheartening that its charm has faded. I wonder where the deer have been relocated; their presence once significantly enriched the landscape, reminding us of the tranquil hills. Furthermore, the rampant water leaks detract from the town's natural beauty.

I cannot forget the breathtaking views of Darechikgre, some distance away from Tura, a winter orange paradise—truly a gem! Pelga Falls, too, is an enchanting sight not to be overlooked. The Cenotaph, a tribute to the Garo labourers who journeyed into World War II, is in dire need of attention; it is currently marred by litter and discarded beer bottles. I pay my respects to those who sacrificed so much.

The stunning Baptist Church, nestled in the Mis-

sion Compound, is a sight to behold, particularly with the two banyan trees whose branches entwine together, providing an awe-inspiring view that leaves every tourist spellbound. This serene setting, with its tranquil ambience, continues to evoke a sense of peace and connection to nature. However, I cannot help but feel disheartened by the state of Tura Bazar, where unsightly plastic-lined stalls clutter the roads. I truly hope for a reorganization of these market spaces, allowing us to preserve the centuries-old banyan trees while better caring for our environment. Tura should also consider planting more flowers along the roadsides.

With all these transformations, it would be wonderful to witness Tura shine even brighter—a place where nature and community coexist harmoniously. The entwined banyan tree at the entrance to the Tura Baptist Church at the Mission Compound beautifully embodies that vision.

Yours etc.,
Bhavna Sharma,
Via email

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

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

—Boris Pasternak

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No. 155 SHILLONG, THURSDAY, JANUARY 16, 2025

Illegal coal mining

RAT hole mining was banned in 2014 by the National Green Tribunal (NGT) after it was found that miners are regularly trapped inside the mines when they are suddenly flooded and the coal mine owners quietly leave them inside the watery graves. However, the ban led to the entire coal mining operations going underground. Another mining tragedy inside an illegally operated coal mine in Dima Hasao area of Umrangshu, Assam recently has raised the temperature surrounding this inhuman activity. Nine coal miners were allegedly trapped inside a coal mine on January 6, a stark reminder of the 2018 Ksan mining tragedy in East Jaintia Hills in 2018. There too the navy divers were brought in but they could not retrieve all the dead bodies for the simple reason that by the time the dewatering process begins the miners are already dead inside the mines. Usually miners go down about 200 feet inside a mine and then begin to dig the coal seams sideways in a horizontal direction. Oftentimes they accidentally dig into an adjacent abandoned mine that is flooded and that is how water enters a mine and floods it. It is to prevent such hazards and human rights violations that the National Green Tribunal banned rat hole mining and directed the states to come up with a plan for scientific coal mining as per the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulations) Act 1957.

Illegal mining and transportation of coal is a continuing saga in Meghalaya. Vested interests with political backing continue to violate not just illegal mining but other laws as well since they are treated with kid gloves. Such people are normally members of political parties of the party/parties in power. The police are caught between the devil and the deep sea since orders from the top suggest that they should look the other way when such coal carrying trucks pass. The irony is that the discerning public is aware of all these goings-on so it is strange that the higher-ups in the police department have not seized any coal carrying trucks for a very long time. Anyone passing through the Shillong-Guwahati highway cannot miss the dust as they get closer to the Umpling toll gate. There is a weighbridge that is located inside a turn-off from the main road. Normally trucks coming from the Shillong side carry clinkers, cement and coal which is cleverly covered with tarpaulin. The same is the case with coal coming from the Garo Hills via West Khasi Hills. Now that Bangladesh is in a deep mess coal supply to Bangladesh through manipulated challans has temporarily stopped. The fact that challans can be forged to allow illegal transactions means that the Transport Department too is involved.

Since coal and coke are important raw materials in any cement company, as fuel or oil and natural gas work out more expensive, it is clear that coal and coke which continues to be produced in Lumshnong area of Jaintia Hills region sustain the 7-8 cement companies there. That all this is not taken cognizance of by the NGT shows just how lax the rule of law in Meghalaya and in this country is. Humans will continue to die inside mines while the institutions of the state look the other way with occasional reactions that hardly make a difference. For the impoverished miners life goes on until death inside the dark mines claims them.

Traditional Institutions: Are They living Up To Tradition?

By *Isaid Khongjee*

As a young man, I idolized the democratic administrative system of the Dorbars. Infinitesimal was my understanding of its real worth and progressive elements involved in it. In those days, I felt that losing this institution's image by the inclusion of women in it, would be an irreparable damage. Alas! This state of mindset is still dominant among commoners and even some intellectuals.

District Council and the States: Some years ago, in a conversation, an ex-member of KHADC spoke at length on the historicity of the traditional Dorbars and of the District Council; nothing substantial was mentioned. The event was at the funeral home in a village. Vexed by such a talk, I finally asked - "What existed for what - the states for the council, or the council for the states? As if stung by the question, the topic ended abruptly with the former MDC saying that the matter needs another separate discussion. On January 4, 2025, I met the previous Syiem of Hima Mylliem at an event, in Nongnah village. From a conversation, I learnt that he too, like many Syiems, met many challenges posed by the District Council. At the end of the conversation, I said the same thing - what exists for what, to which he affirmatively agreed was the crux of the matter. This question that persists in my mind, concerns not only the Council-States relationship in our hills; it also percolates down to the grassroots institutions, or the village Dorbars.

Its Evolution: The Dorbars didn't just come down from the skies. They were singularly designed by our ancestors to serve an ideal, a principle higher than themselves, the ones they worshipped with words and deeds. Everyone is carrying this institution in the being. These ideals are: sustaining and promoting the well-being of the people and seeing that everyone enjoys the basic rights of life such as peace, joy, harmony among fellow beings, equality among people irrespective of economic position, and other values associated with life. The justice system, human to human, and metaphysical, evolved from the above; to safeguard these human rights. The spiritual realm and co-existence understand the above reality.

I inquired from some elders about the source of the authority of the institution and the general answer pointed to this: every person is a

sacred institution in himself; as simple as that. It's from this sanctity of existence and the accompanying human rights that metaphysical justice system, and divine healing practices derive their validity as per sanctioned by the cosmic law known as God, or Creator, or Ka Blei Nongthaw-Nongbuh etc. Outside these fundamentals, exclusion of any responsible human person and gender discrimination are sheer superstition. The underlying progressiveness lies here:

Village Life: In my younger days I've seen how people while on their way to the fields stopped midway on seeing someone building a shelter - a house and went to help them. This phenomena happened way before the coming of government schemes. When one religious denomination has a big event, all lent a helping hand, and

superstition, or by personal whims, an act which dilutes the sanctity of the institution, and belittles the integrity of the speaker. That's the weight which a representative carries on his shoulder.

Who represents whom? There's a common belief that an elected member represents not only himself but also represent his clan. A wrong act, or an untrue statement made is not only a shame one brings unto the self, but also a dishonour to the clan one belongs to. What then does one represent? By virtue of being an integral unit of the community, a member owes a sacred duty to the whole community by strictly abiding by the cardinal principles of the well-being of all. Every aspect of the being of the speaker, mental, spiritual, morals are placed before the altar of the truth, and nothing but the truth. Thus, in the pro-

"The Dorbars didn't just come down from the skies. They were singularly designed by our ancestors to serve an ideal, a principle higher than themselves, the ones they worshipped with words and deeds. Everyone is carrying this institution in the being."

other forms of contributions.

Religion and the Dorbar: It's a ubiquitous reality that in early times every village and cluster of villages had a religion. At their centre lie the spirit known as "Ki Blei Ryngkew-Basa /Blai Ryngkaw-Wasa" invoked and propitiated to protect the inhabitants from diseases which are epidemic in nature, and also against the onslaught of more powerful villages. They knew full well that such religions have consequences if rites and rituals were not done according to the covenant with the gods; but for the sake of saving lives, they did them; and those religions are effective. Till date the villages that have the know-how of the effects, still preserve the religious tradition.

Inside the Dorbar: Every speaker is heard beginning a speech with - "Ia kaba dei, ia bat, ia kaba lait, ia bret" - meaning "let the truth be accepted, the untrue shall stand rejected, as unworthy to be listened to". This is no jargon; it is a prayer of the speaker to pre-emptively guard oneself against ill-effects of untrue statements made. At the same time, it means that one's speech is not driven by any

cess, they have to abnegate the ego, personal desires, and all irrelevant issues. It's an act of purging the self at the altar of the common well-being.

Authorities of the Dorbar: Besides the fundamental duties, the Dorbar also plays a role of warding off evils wrought by one /group on another, or a group of people against another. This tradition of using the Dorbar for warding off such evil effects is ubiquitous throughout our hills. Here comes what our wise ones say: "hangne ka aini brieu ka iakynduh lang bad ka aini Blei" (here the human laws interface with God-given laws). The westerners call it witchcraft, or voodoo. In our times we have witnessed vandalism, horrific killings based on suspicion of one being the practitioner of an act called "men ai ksuid"/"nong ai ksuid" (witchcraft). Chilling, isn't it? But in some villages, I'm familiar with, people say it is a natural justice mechanism, and nobody can do so without reasonable grounds.

What excludes women? From stories and folklores we know that ancestors transmit the knowledge in metaphors; nothing is direct, or literal. The twists and turns are but

the flavours that are a spice to their stories. It is because of such elements that many of our stories and legends still survive the test of times. Some of our stories, such as "ka ieu luri-lura" (a chaotic market), the cow having no teeth in the upper jaw, and many more are inferential in nature. Some, such as that of U Sier Lapalang, signify the universal love of the mother for the child. The Divine Council (Ka Dorbar Blei) essentially speaks about the mutual agreement of all creatures in Nature to coexist in rhythm with the design of the Cosmic Essence, or Cosmic Plan, which we call "Ka Aini Mariang" - the Law of Nature.

When it comes to who is to be barred from participating in the council, metaphors come into play here too. Men without beard, the lame, men without sisters (u duh jait) are the ones to be excluded from the council/Dorbar. Do all of us now have beards? Do we all have sisters? Are there no lame people around? What about a headman without the above conditions apart from also displaying emotional outbursts, and all acts not commensurate with the guiding Divine principles of looking into the common good, the basic human rights? These are what we must answer to the tradition that once prided itself on adhering to the basic values of life. This is where we all have gone wrong, because we blindly worship hearsay and forget the essence. In our ignorance of the essence we have become worshippers of the untruth. This is sheer Romanticism. Why do we romanticise tradition? The reason is known to all - that either we want to hang on to false pride or that we are mentally incapable of prioritizing the ideal from the puerile emotions. Loving the past for the sake of loving it, in a culture that prizes on the general good, are unworthy of us who proclaim ourselves as enlightened.

Now, look at our Dorbars: it's rare to find one untouched by corruption. Still our hearts bleed for what we least know of the practices, justice system, communication to the spiritual realm from which religions once sprang up! Yet we take pride in our "Khasi Democracy". Under the garb of modernity, we imitate the new developments overnight, yet we refuse to live up to what the rich ancestry offers. In spite of the enlightenment of modernity, we unwittingly get trapped in hypocrisy. We love nothing in the world, but ourselves!

Guarding facts in the digital age

By *CS Krishnamurthy*

The recent decision by Meta to abandon its fact-checking program in the United States has sparked a critical dialogue about the role of social media in shaping public discourse. Touted as a step to champion free speech, the move underscores a worrying surrender of responsibility by Big Tech, raising fundamental questions about truth, accountability, and the societal cost of misinformation. At its core, the debate reiterates the inviolable principle: facts are sacred and must remain so.

The argument put forth by Meta's CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, combining fact-checking with censorship, misses a vital point: facts are immutable and form the basis of meaningful discourse,

ensuring that their reporting adheres to journalistic ethics. This foundational principle distinguishes them from social media platforms, which have long resisted being categorised as publishers to evade scrutiny.

The erosion of fact-checking on social media highlights the importance of traditional media. Unlike the transient and often unverified content on social platforms, reputable news outlets provide context, depth, and reliability. Their rigorous standards act as a bulwark against the "post-truth" environment fostered by Big Tech.

Meta's decision reverberates far beyond U.S. borders. With billions of users worldwide, platforms like Face-



book wield immense influence, particularly in nations where social media serves as a primary news source. In regions with weaker regulatory frameworks, the absence of vigorous fact-checking mechanisms could deepen societal rifts and fuel unrest.

In Europe, for instance, stringent regulations on hate speech and misinformation may act as a counterbalance, but they are not a panacea. Governments in Asia and other regions must adopt proactive measures to hold social media platforms accountable. This includes instituting robust legal frameworks that promote transparency and prevent the dissemination of harmful content without stifling genuine free speech.

The challenges of the digital age demand a collective response. Citizens must develop a discerning eye, questioning the credibility of information seen online.

"The erosion of fact-checking on social media highlights the importance of traditional media. Unlike the transient and often unverified content on social platforms, reputable news outlets provide context, depth, and reliability."

users themselves can flag misleading content. This approach, similar to what X (formerly Twitter) does, relies on people's opinions to decide what is true or false. While this might sound democratic, it can easily be misused by groups pushing their own agendas.

We've already seen how this can go wrong. After Elon Musk took over X, reports showed a rise in hateful and abusive content. Even though X banned many accounts for breaking rules, the lack of strong moderation allowed harmful content to spread. This example shows that leaving responsibility to users can create chaos.

This surrender of responsibility is further compounded by the financial incentives tied to controversial content. Platforms that reward high engagement inadvertently promote sensationalism over truth. By aligning with populist demands for unfettered speech, Meta and X are creating a fertile ground for disinformation, undermining the very fabric of democratic societies.

Institutional media Unlike social media platforms, traditional news media remains relatively steadfast in its commitment to factual accuracy. They have exacting editorial processes and multiple layers of verification,

Governments should work towards creating regulatory environments that compel tech companies to prioritise truth over profit. Meanwhile, institutional media must continue to focus on accuracy, serving as a guide for people seeking trustworthy information.

Meta's retreat from fact-checking under the guise of promoting free speech is a wake-up call. In the words of Mahatma Gandhi, "Truth never damages a cause that is just." It is incumbent upon societies to uphold this principle in the face of challenges, ensuring that the truth remains unclouded by the fog of falsehoods.

It's high time for collective action - from citizens, governments, and institutional media alike - to reaffirm the sanctity of facts. Truth, after all, is not a casualty of the digital age but its cornerstone. Without it, our conversations and decisions become meaningless. Protecting facts is not just a duty - it is essential for a fair and informed society.

(The writer is a retired banker and freelance-writer, residing in Bangalore. He recently authored a book "Money does Matter.")

Letters to the Editor

A forgotten martyr - Oossa Marateang

Editor,
U Kiang Nangbah was executed by the British on December 30, 1862, yet the Jaintias persisted in their struggle even after his death. The patriots took a solemn oath to continue their fight, symbolically described as Hadooh Khatar Snem Luti, which translates to "till the end of a twelve-year journey," or metaphorically, "till the bitterest end." Leadership was assumed by U Mynlon Daloi of Mynso and Mon Lato, who valiantly continued the resistance until their last breath.

In January 1863, a renewed revolt emerged, with the populace constructing stockades and retreating to the dense forest to launch fresh assaults on British forces, resulting in significant casualties for the latter. Resistance was notably active in regions such as Rymbai, Padu, Nanggingi, Nongbareh, Umkiang, Jowai, Mynso, Nartiang, Lamin, Mukhla, and Nangbah. However, by February 1863, the resistance was quelled as many leaders were killed in confrontations with British troops, while others surrendered and were taken captive. Notably, Oossa Marateang of Rymbai, (name as recorded in the

Bengal Judicial Proceedings No. 214 on March 4, 1863), was tried by Capt. B.W.D. Morton and executed on January 16, 1863.

As we commemorate the profound sacrifices made by Oossa Marateang for the freedom of our nation, we must also honor the memory of those leaders who laid down their lives in service to the motherland. Among these distinguished figures are U Mynlon Mynso, U Mon Lato, U Kiri Daloi of Changpung, U Swar Sutinga, U Long Padu, U Mon Rymbai, U Chey Rangbah, U Bang Raliang, U Bukhiar Pator of Raliang, U Woh Riang, U Kiang Sule, and U Kat Changpung.

We pay tributes to the courageous patriots of Jaintia Hills, U Kiang Nangbah and Oossa Marateang, who were executed by British authorities. Despite their deaths at the hands of the British Raj, their ideals, patriotic sentiments, and sacrifices remain indelible in our collective memory.

As we honour these individuals whose endeavors to liberate us from colonial rule culminated in their ultimate sacrifice, it is perplexing that the Jaintia Resistance movement is often overlooked in the historical narratives of India's freedom struggle. More than 77 years post-independence, the contributions of countless martyrs

and freedom fighters from the region, who shed their blood and offered their lives for the nation, deserve rightful recognition in the annals of India's history.

Yours etc.,
Dr. Omarlin Kyndiah,
Via email

India's measured response to Hasina's extradition

Editor,
Apropos of the editorial "Yunus facing odds" (ST January 15, 2025) the legitimacy of the Yunus Interim Government in Bangladesh is a complex issue. While the interim government led by Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus has been recognized by the international community, it faces significant internal challenges and questions about its legitimacy.

The ousting of Sheikh Hasina and subsequent rise of the Mohammed Yunus have been marked by accusations of constitutional improprieties and procedural irregularities. The interim government has officially sought Sheikh Hasina's extradition from India. However, India has extended her visa and has not granted asylum, indicating a cautious approach. The extradition process involves complex legal and diplomatic consid-

erations, and India's decision will likely be influenced by its legal framework and international relations. While the Yunus Interim Government has international recognition, its internal legitimacy is still under scrutiny, and the extradition demand for Sheikh Hasina adds another layer of complexity to the situation. The Bangladesh Army is currently facing significant internal challenges. Reports from various sources indicate the emergence of multiple power centres within the army, each led by different generals. This situation has created tensions between factions aligned with the Awami League and those with Islamist leanings. While it is not yet a full-blown crisis, the internal power struggles could potentially lead to instability. The historical context of military coups in Bangladesh adds to the complexity of the situation.

Legitimacy of any government often stems from people's mandate. For Bangladesh, the path to a legitimate government could involve several steps, like conducting transparent elections under the supervision of an independent election commission which is crucial, else as remarked by the BNP General Secretary Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir, "The longer the elections are delayed, the deeper the political and economic crisis

will become."

Elections ensure that the people's voice is heard and respected. Addressing any constitutional issues that may have led to the current situation is essential. This could involve amending laws to prevent future political crises. Engaging all political parties and stakeholders in a constructive dialogue can help build consensus on the way forward. This would foster a sense of ownership and participation among the populace. There is a need to ensure that institutions like the judiciary, anti-corruption bodies, and human rights commissions are independent and robust and can help maintain checks and balances. The next step is seeking support and guidance from international bodies and neighbouring countries that can provide legitimacy and aid in the transition process. These steps, if implemented effectively, could pave the way for a more stable and legitimate government in Bangladesh.

India's regional interests and security are indeed influenced by the evolving geopolitical dynamics in South Asia, particularly with the potential alliance between China, Pakistan and Bangladesh. The recent rapprochement between Bangladesh and Pakistan, coupled with China's growing influence in the region, poses signifi-

cant strategic challenges for India. India has historically maintained strong ties with Bangladesh, especially during Sheikh Hasina's tenure, which saw enhanced cooperation in border security, economic integration, and counter-terrorism efforts. However, the political shift in Bangladesh and the interim government's inclination towards Pakistan and China could alter this balance.

To protect its regional interests and security, India may need to: 1. Strengthen diplomatic engagement with Bangladesh to maintain influence and address mutual concerns. 2. Enhance border security measures to prevent infiltration and militant activities. 3. Foster economic and cultural ties to reinforce the historical and cultural bond between India and Bangladesh. 4. Monitor and counteract the strategic moves of China and Pakistan in the region through regional alliances and partnerships. India's approach will likely involve a combination of diplomatic, economic and security measures to navigate the complex geopolitical landscape and safeguard its interests.

Yours etc;
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

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

*"An investment in knowledge
pays the best interest."*

— Benjamin Franklin

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No. 156 SHILLONG, FRIDAY, JANUARY 17, 2025

Funds for railways

WITH another Budget around the corner, an increased allocation of up to 20 per cent in capital expenditure for the coming fiscal is hinted at by the Railway Ministry. The good news is also that the funds allocated on this count were mostly utilized during the fiscal 24-25 with projects in the PPP mode. A projection is that capital expenditure allocation for railways could increase to more than Rs 3 lakh crore from the present fiscal's '2.65 lakh crore. While appreciating such steps, the realities on the ground cannot be ignored. It must be emphasized that the government has not accorded due priority to the railways and for its development over the past several decades. What was once the largest profit-making government entity has, over the years, been degraded in multiple respects.

Notably, when Prime Minister Narendra Modi got into the central saddle in 2014, one of his first acts by way of reform was to do away with the separate Rail budget, which had been the practice all through. The hefty allocations were packed into the general budget. Looking back, this has not changed the fortunes of the railways significantly. Perhaps this was a wrong step. The promise of introducing bullet trains with high speed is yet to materialize but its work is ongoing as a pilot project between Mumbai and Ahmedabad.

Another promise was to increase the speed of the express trains, which linked most parts of the country on a daily basis. There have been only marginal improvements to rail speed overall; this remains at around 140 km per hour at best. Replacement of old tracks with new ones is a matter of first priority to increase the speed. This involves heavy costs. Since the railway sector was ignored by governments, this by itself would be a gargantuan task. As for new trains and comfort, the Vande Bharat came as an improvement but this is by no means a big change both in speed and comfort. No miracles in the railways sector need be expected in the coming four years of Modi, but the first bullet train project might come to fruition in the near future. When technology is developing rapidly the nation of 1.4 billion moves at snail's pace and is not able to catch up with others, including China, where the age of Maglev — magnetic levitation — trains promise a speed of up to 1000km per hour. Japan ran bullet trains with a speed of 300km per hour some 25 years ago. India, over the past quarter of a century since the time of Atal Behari Vajpayee, gave eminent emphasis on developing the national highways. Modi continued with this process and produced good results. This, however, should not be at the cost of the railways — the gift of the British Raj — which allowed mass transport over long distances at relatively cheap rates.

Letters to the Editor

Tribal Socio-economic development and land alienation

Editor,
India has the second largest concentration of tribal population in the world. As per the 2011 census the tribal population constitutes about 8.9% of the total population in India, with 705 ethnic groups recognised as Scheduled Tribes. The largest concentrations of Indigenous Peoples are found in the seven states of north-east India, and the "central tribal belt" stretching from Rajasthan to West Bengal. India has several laws and constitutional provisions, such as the Sixth Schedule for certain areas of north-east India, that recognize Indigenous Peoples' rights to land and self-governance. The Scheduled Tribes (STs) have been the most marginalised, isolated and deprived population. To protect and safeguard the land rights of STs and to address the issue of land acquisition and displacement of tribals, Constitutional and legal provisions have been put in place viz. The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006. Post independence, India continued with the colonial legislation, the Indian

Forest Act, 1927, which took away all forest rights of tribal dwellers.

However, most of the tribals today are facing growing challenges in the globalised world. Influence of mainstream society, economic development viz. industry, communication, mining etc. have made it impossible for tribals to remain oblivious and cut off from society. The challenge, therefore, for improvement of tribal socio-economic conditions is how to strike a balance between protection and preservation of tribal identity, culture, values and, most importantly, their land. Since, land is one of the most crucial and vital resources of tribals. Their economy is predominantly limited to land and forests.

Land development and land protection are both important for sustainable development and tribal upliftment. The concern for land alienation needs to be further addressed through stringent law; if at all socio-economic development has to take place.

Yours etc.,
Dr Omarlin Kyndiah,
Via email

Why the arbitrary barricading of the immersion ghat?

Editor,
Through your esteemed

It's time to face some home truths ... Education has never been an election agenda in Meghalaya. Politicians have never been told to fix education or people would not vote for them. The focus has always been to 'protect' the people from the ubiquitous outsider without ever defining who that 'outsider' is. But this has never failed to score political mileage every five years. Noted Sociologist, Durkheim has correctly observed that he was very sceptical of the power of unaided reason to penetrate the complexities of social and moral realities. This exactly is the problem with large sections of voters in Meghalaya. Their priorities during elections are picnics and freeloading — not asking questions from their candidates and putting out a set of pragmatic demands that would benefit people at large. About education as a poll issue, the less said the better. It never was and perhaps never will be a matter that supersedes all other issues even if that is what is the most crucial agenda. No wonder education is in such an abysmal state.

The other day while on a visit to Lawpyllun which is one of the 266 villages under the Umsning Block, Ri Bhoi district, I learned that the village has only one primary school and most children drop out since they have to travel some distance to reach the high school in Umsning. Also, the young adolescents there showed no enthusiasm about the whole idea of continuing with their education. The 10-12 year old young children were quite happy to stay at home and do housework. Why is it that education is not a priority for most rural households? Is it any surprise then that we have teenage pregnancies since there seems to be no other attraction for the young except sex. And since they have never been taught safe sex and condom use, the girls bear the burden of pregnancy and a series of childbirths. Few of these adolescent cohabitations last. The boy/man finds that sex was just a delusion of grandeur — a temporary enjoyment and he does not have the wherewithal to carry the burden of a family. So, he leaves the girl high and dry. This is the reason for such huge numbers of single-parent headed households in Meghalaya.

Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a former member of the United States Senate very

presciently observed that the rise of single parent households would make poverty more intractable. Moynihan couldn't have been more correct when he said, "A community that allows large numbers of young men to grow up in broken families — never acquiring any stable relationship to make authority, never acquiring any set of rational expectations about the future — that community asks for and gets chaos." Moynihan speaks from personal experience. He has himself grown up in a single mother household and worked as a shoe-shine boy at the corner of Broadway.

On January 13, 2025 when Chief Minister, Conrad Sang-

"Their priorities during elections are picnics and freeloading — not asking questions from their candidates and putting out a set of pragmatic demands that would benefit people at large. About education as a poll issue, the less said the better. It never was and perhaps never will be a matter that supersedes all other issues even if that is what is the most crucial agenda. No wonder education is in such an abysmal state."

ma inaugurated the Captain Sangma State University, he also made a powerpoint presentation about the dismal state of education in Meghalaya. Perhaps this is the first time that a sitting Chief Minister has decided to look at the problem from an objective set of lenses. His presentation highlights the humongous problems for education in Meghalaya where funds have been sunk into schools that did not exist or schools that were in dilapidated condition and have since closed.

We have heard of ghost schools operating for several years in Meghalaya but no government has had the gumption to shut down those schools and stop the revenue leakage. This is because all governments have allowed political pressure to override pragmatic action to arrest the decline in educational standards. When Chief Minister Conrad Sangma in his presentation showed the graphic figures one could see the discomfiture in the room. It's not as if this is

not known to the MLAs/ministers and bureaucrats present. The real problem was that no decision could be taken without calculating the political implications of such decisions.

So the facts as presented by the CM are stark and shocking. Out of the total of 14,582 schools in Meghalaya, 206 schools have zero students yet teachers are teaching ghost pupils and the government has been paying them. Over and above that there are 2,269 schools with single digit students. Yet no rationalisation has been attempted.

Of the Deficit and Ad-hoc schools — there are 18 schools with zero enrolment

and 1141 schools with single digit enrolment.

Compared to the other states Meghalaya with population of 29.66 lakhs has 14,582 schools and 55,160 teachers with 7783 government schools and 4172 aided ones. In Nagaland there are no aided schools and 1960 government schools with 31,402 teachers. Tripura with a much higher population at 36.73 lakhs has only 4,929 schools, 36,433 teachers and 43 aided schools. Manipur with 25.70 lakh population has 4,617 schools and 42,684 teachers with 583 aided schools.

Think of the huge amount of money, perhaps thousands of crores of rupees spent over 50 years or rather that has been leaked into a bottomless pit to pay non-existent teachers or so-called teachers who have enjoyed their salaries without teaching. Do we wonder then why education in Meghalaya is in a state of near collapse particularly in the rural areas and why the drop-out rate is escalating?

The reality is that we

have far too many people calling themselves teachers but very few tried and tested educators. One might ask what the difference between a teacher and an educator is since the two words are often used interchangeably as if they carry the same meaning when they don't.

A teacher is someone who imparts knowledge and instructs students in a specific subject or skill. Teachers focus on delivering information and ensuring that students understand and apply that information in their day to day lives, but without the commitment and drive to follow up on each student. An educator on the other hand does not just teach but also inspires and shapes a student's persona, his/her worldviews. An educator hand-holds the students and treats them like mentees. For an educator, teaching does not end in the classroom. Educators interact with students outside the classroom too, to grasp what they really feel about life and what they go through in their homes and families. Hence an educator has empathy which most teachers lack.

Above all, an educator fosters critical thinking, encourages creativity, and instils values and life skills. Teachers on the other hand limit themselves to a classroom setting. So while both the teacher and educator play their own roles in shaping the minds and future of students, I would like to believe that educators have a broader scope of influence. And students who are in the hands of an educator would not drop out of school. How many teachers visit the home of a student to find out why she/he has opted not to study anymore and engage with the student so as to be able to address the problem and perhaps find resources for the student to return to school.

Now that the Chief Minister himself has analysed the problem of education like no one else before him has done, he would also require the courage of conviction to deal with the farce of continuing to pay teachers who teach ghost pupils and also rationalise those schools with single digit students. Money saved can be put to use by finding the best sets of educators who will give their best to the cause of uplifting education. Let's all bear in mind one reality — appointing teachers based on reservation and religion is what has brought education to its nadir.

an employer needs 3 workers if each worker works for 8 hours daily (8x3). But if the employer forces each worker to work for 12 hours per day, he will employ just two of them (12x2). The latter and prevailing scenario causes unemployment for one in three workers.

According to a recent study, almost a third of app-based cab drivers work for 14 hours a day, while more than 83% work over 10 hours and 60% work over 12 hours. While 78% of app-based delivery persons spend over 10 hours each day at work, 34% earn less than Rs 10,000 per month.

Long work hours made drivers physically exhausted. This, plus the 10-minute delivery at the doorstep policy of certain e-commerce platforms are two of the reasons behind many road traffic accidents in our country.

India needs to formulate necessary labour laws and strictly implement the standard 40-hour work week. It would safeguard the physical and mental wellbeing of the workers, generate nearly 50 per cent more jobs than the existing ones, and reduce the number of accidents to a great extent.

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*

Coming to grips with the state of EDUCATION in Meghalaya

By Patricia Mukhim

Guarding facts in the digital age

By VK Lyngdoh

Guarding facts in the digital age is more crucial than ever, especially with Meta's recent decision to abandon its fact-checking programme. There is a need to educate the public on how to critically evaluate information sources. This includes understanding biases, recognising credible sources, and verifying facts before sharing. Encourage and support independent fact-checking organizations as they play a vital role in verifying information and debunking false claims. Here we have to leverage technology which means use AI and machine learning to detect and flag false information. These tools can help identify patterns of misinformation and alert users to potentially false content. Community can also be involved by encouraging community-driven fact-checking initiatives. Though this approach has its challenges, it can be effective if combined with proper oversight and guidelines.

As far regulatory measures are concerned, governments can implement regulations that hold social media platforms accountable for the spread of misinformation. This could include penalties for platforms that fail to address false information. Traditional media outlets, with their rigorous editorial standards, can serve as a reliable source of verified information. Collaboration between social media platforms and traditional media can help ensure the dissemination of accurate information. Social media platforms should be transparent about their content moderation policies and provide users with clear guidelines on how to report false information. By combining these strategies, we can create a more informed and resilient digital society.

Holding social media platforms accountable requires a multi-faceted approach. Some of the proactive measures that can be taken are: Governments can enact laws that require social media platforms to be transparent about their content moderation policies and hold them accountable for spread of misinformation. For example, the PACT Act in the United States aims to make platforms more accountable for content moderation. Similarly in the United Kingdom you have the On-line Safety Act, Digital Service Act in the EU, Sharing of Abhorrent Violent Material Act (2019) in Australia and NetzDG (Network Enforcement Act, 2017) in Germany. This law in Germany requires social media platforms to remove certain illegal content within 24 hours after it's reported or face fines. It's aimed at curbing hate speech and fake news. Online Harms Act a proposed legislation in Canada would allow the government to fine companies for not following orders from a new Digital Safety Commission regarding the removal of content deemed "legal but harmful." These acts and laws focus on different aspects of social media governance, from content to privacy, reflecting the complex landscape of regulating digital platforms. However, the effectiveness, enforcement, and balance with free speech rights continue to be debated globally.

In our country we have the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethic Code) Rules 2021 which mandates social media platforms to exercise greater diligence in content moderation. They require platforms to appoint a Chief Compliance Officer, a Nodal Contact Person and a Resident Grievance Officer in India to address user complaints and grievances. The rules have introduced important measures to regulate social

media content but their effectiveness largely depends on the commitment of platforms to adhere to these guidelines and government's ability to enforce them fairly. Despite these measures, there have been criticisms regarding implementation and enforcement of the rules. Some argue that the rules may lead to over-censorship and stifle freedom of expression. Additionally, there are concerns about the potential misuse of the rules for political purposes.

In fact, social media companies should regularly publish transparency reports detailing their content moderation efforts, including number of posts removed, the reasons for removal, and the appeals process. Conducting independent audits of social media platforms can help ensure that they are adhering to their content moderation policies and not promoting harmful content for engagement. The platforms should provide users with tools to report misinformation and harmful content easily. Additionally, they should educate users on how to identify and avoid misinformation. Social media platforms should be transparent about how their algorithms work and how they prioritize content. This includes providing users with options to customize their feed and reduce the impact of engagement-based algorithms that promote sensational content.

Social media companies should collaborate with independent fact-checking organizations to verify the accuracy of content and flag false information. Imposing financial penalties on platforms that fail to address misinformation and harmful content can incentivize them to take their responsibilities seriously. Last but not the least, governments and organizations can run public awareness campaigns to educate people about the dangers of misinformation and how to critically evaluate the information they encounter online. Implementing these measures can create a safer and more accountable digital environment.

CS Krishnamurthy in his article Guarding facts in the digital age (ST January, 2025) is absolutely correct that the absence of vigorous fact-checking mechanisms deepen societal rifts and fuel unrest. Without fact-checking, false information can spread rapidly, leading to misunderstanding and misconceptions. This can create divisions within communities and exacerbate existing tensions. Misinformation often reinforces existing biases and beliefs, leading to increased polarisation. People may become more entrenched in their views, making it harder to find common ground and engage in constructive dialogue.

When people are exposed to conflicting information, it can erode trust in institutions, media and even each other. This lack of trust can undermine social cohesion and make it difficult to address collective challenges. In extreme cases, misinformation can incite violence and unrest. False claims and conspiracy theories can provoke fear and anger, leading to protests, riots, and other forms of social unrest. A well-informed electorate is essential for a functioning democracy. Without reliable information, citizens cannot make informed decisions, which can undermine the democratic process and lead to the election of leaders who do not represent the best interests of the people. To mitigate these risks, it is crucial to promote media literacy, support independent fact-checkers, and hold social media platforms accountable for the content they host.

"Necessity is the mother of taking chances."

— Mark Twain

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No. 157 SHILLONG, SATURDAY, JANUARY 18, 2025

Government & Decision Making

ONE of the marks of good leadership is the ability to take crucial and timely decisions. Self-styled leaders which most politicians are, particularly those that win by bribing the electorate always vacillate when it comes to taking hard decisions because their objective primarily is not to disturb the status quo as it might disrupt their chances of being re-elected and holding on to power. It is also important for those in Government to engage with the opponents of particular policies and to ask them for a blueprint to an alternative policy. It is only fair that those who oppose a particular policy would also have a better policy to place before the Government. The Railways issue has occupied media space for five decades with no solution in sight, simply because successive governments have not had the spine to actualise the plan that had been a talking point of every government elected to govern Meghalaya. When Mizoram and Nagaland have no problem with bringing railways into the state for ease of transporting goods and passengers, why should there be resistance to trains coming to Meghalaya? Have the anti-railways brigade done a cost-benefit analysis of bringing in railways and depending only on road transport? Anyone can assume anything and the assumption that railways will bring in influx is not based on any ground research. So should the Government kowtow to such illogical demands at great cost to Meghalaya and its people.

Meghalaya has lacked strong leaders who would take decisions in the long term interests of the state and its people. Now the state has reached a now or never juncture where there is employment crunch and the cost of living is rising at a rapid pace. Unless some hard decisions are taken to help reduce transportation costs of essential commodities, prices will fly through the roof. Also in an age where ease of communication at affordable rates is the need of the hour, what is the logic in opposing railways? Political leadership and decision-making are not without their challenges and pitfalls. Leaders may face resistance and opposition from rival political factions, interest groups, and the public, making it difficult to enact their agenda. Additionally, leaders may be constrained by institutional barriers, bureaucratic inertia, and legal constraints that limit their ability to implement their desired policies. But given all these, visionary leaders will rise above the barriers and make things happen. Will Meghalaya ever produce leaders who will put public welfare above political gains?

Political leadership and decision-making are central components of the political process. Effective political leaders possess the vision, skills, and determination to navigate complex political landscapes, identify pressing issues, and make tough decisions that serve the interests of their constituents. If a public meeting can be held for less important reasons, why cannot a public meeting be held to allow the public to voice their views on railways? It's time for the MDA Government to demonstrate its leadership potential.

Letters to the Editor

Meghalaya needs educators, not teachers

Editor,
The article "Coming to grips with the state of EDUCATION in Meghalaya" By Patricia Mukhim (ST January 17, 2025) made very interesting reading. The author has raised many vital points and to substantiate her article the percentage of students who leave school before completing a particular level of education is the dropout rate. According to the Unified District Information System for Education (UDISE) 2023-24 the overall dropout rate in India at the Primary level (Grades 1-5) stands at 1.9. Among the North Eastern States, the dropout rate in Meghalaya is the highest at 7.5 and lowest in Tripura at 0.5. At the Upper Primary level (Grades 6-8) the All-India dropout rate stands at 5.2 and Meghalaya records the highest at 12.4 and the lowest in Manipur at 3.5. At the Secondary level (Grades 9-10) the All-India dropout rate

stands at 14.1 and Assam records the highest at 25.1 followed by Meghalaya at 22 while the lowest is in Tripura at 10.4. The percentage of students who move from one level of education to the next is the transition rate. The transition rate in India from Primary to Upper Primary is 88.8 and the highest is Mizoram at 93 while the lowest is Meghalaya at 74.2. From Upper Primary to Secondary the rate in India is 83.3 and the highest in Tripura at 88 while the lowest is in Meghalaya at 65.3. The percentage of students who remain enrolled in school from one year to the next is the retention rate. According to UDISE 2023-24 the retention rate in India at the Primary level (Grades 1-5) is 85.4. Among the North Eastern States, Tripura records the highest at 92.8 and the lowest recorded is 55 in Meghalaya. At the elementary level (Grades 1-8) India records 78. Sikkim the highest among the NE States at 87.2 and Meghalaya the lowest at 47.5. At the Secondary level (Grades 1-10) India's record is 63.8 while Sikkim records the highest

From Missed Chances to Future Glory: Football in Meghalaya

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

March 2025 will be a very important month for all football lovers in Meghalaya. Shillong will host two international matches: either on March 19 or 20 there will be an international friendly to be played between India and Maldives; and on March 25, there will be the very crucial AFC Cup 2027 qualifier between India and Bangladesh. While India will play these two crucial matches in Shillong, which is a hotbed of footballing talent, there may not be a Meghalayan player in the lineup. Over the last few tournaments, no player from the state has been called to the senior team, and it doesn't seem like this is going to change in the next two months.

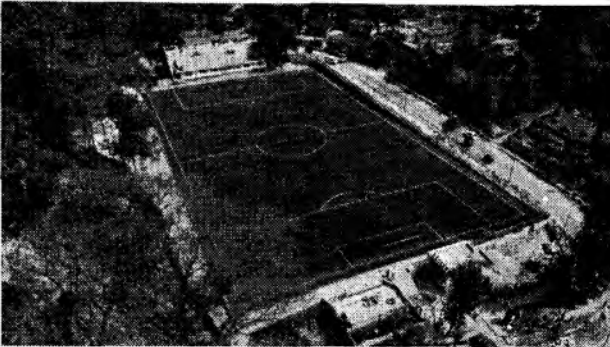
In the recent past, Meghalaya had players like Rocus Lamare, Aiborlang Khongjee and Euegenson Lyngdoh, representing the country. All these players, though supremely talented, never had the long career that they deserved. Rocus Lamare was first selected by Savio Medeira under whom he won the 2011 SAFF cup. He also played in the 2012 AFC Challenge Cup. But after Wim Koevermans replaced Savio Medeira, Rocus Lamare found games scarce and slowly faded out of the Indian team set-up.

The appointment of a new coach, however, was a blessing for Aiborlang Khongjee, who got his debut under Wim Koevermans. But there was a change in the coaching staff again, with Stephen Constantine coming back for a second stint as India's senior team coach. Like it was with Rocus Lamare, the change resulted in Aiborlang Khongjee getting sidelined. But the change was a blessing for Euegenson Lyngdoh, who got his break and became a very important member of the Indian team.

Such was the talent of Euegenson Lyngdoh that coaches and players remarked that if he was only younger, he could have played in the top leagues of Europe. A long and fruitful national and international career awaited him until a serious injury derailed the blossoming career. After that, he was never the same player and soon he was out of the Indian team as well. 'Wrong place at the wrong time' is the correct phrase to summarize the careers of these wonderful footballers. Since their career coincided, it is exciting to imagine the prospect of all three of them playing for the Indian team in the same match. Sadly, we never got to see that combination.

Meghalaya has got players who have been important players for India at the junior set-up. There is Halen Nongdu who was the captain of the India U20 team which won the SAFF U20 Championship. He also represented the country at the U20 AFC

Asian Cup Qualifiers in Kuwait. He then signed for Mumbai City, a club playing in the Indian Super League (introduced in 2013 as the men's highest level of the Indian football league system). However, in this year's ISL campaign he has not played even a single match and therefore it is highly unlikely that he will be selected for the Indian senior team. The lack of game time has also been an issue for other Meghalayan players signed with the other ISL clubs. The other players from the state currently in the league



include Redeem Tlang from NEUFC, Aiban Dohling from Kerala Blasters, Padam Chettri from Mohammedan SC, and Samuel Kynshi and Ricky Shabong from Punjab FC. Among them, only Padam Chettri and Ricky Shabong have featured in ten or more matches this season.

Ricky Shabong has been a regular India international since his days playing at the junior level. Recently, he captained Punjab FC during the Next Generation Cup 2024 held in England, which had the youth teams of clubs like Aston Villa and Tottenham Hotspur. After initially being loaned to Rajasthan United, he has now played in 14 of Punjab FC's 18 matches, becoming a mainstay on the side. A future captain, he could very well be the next player from Meghalaya who might break into the Indian senior team. A player who will give him great competition in achieving that feat is Padam Chettri.

For me, the best goalkeeper from Meghalaya for the last decade and continuing, Padam Chettri played for Rangdajied for a very long time. He represented Meghalaya in the Santosh trophy and then played for Kenkre FC in the I League. Although the team got relegated, Mohammedan SC signed Padam with whom he won the I League and with it the chance to play in the ISL. In his first campaign, he has already played ten matches (two-thirds of the team's matches). While he still has a long way to go in challenging a colossal player like Gurpreet Singh Sandhu, the current India number one, Padam Chettri has what it takes to go far. During the 2023/24 I League season, which Mohammedan

SC won, Padam Chettri won the Best Goalkeeper award. I was very disappointed to see that his name is not among the list of awardees for the U Kiang Nangbah Award for Sports. Kmoin Wahlang, the 73-year-old international marathoner from South West Khasi Hills, is a well-deserving winner and should have got the award a long time ago. But given his recent achievement, it was the right time to honour Padam Chettri. Maybe when he debuts for the Indian team, he will finally get the respect he deserves.

The limited game time for other players from the state is clear in the I-League as well. Aside from Shillong Lajong, only Sreenidi Deccan (Emboklang Nongkhaw) and Dempo SC (Knerkitalang Buam) feature players from the state. Lajong has a significant number of local players, and since their return to the I-League last year, several of them have showcased their talent for the team. The most prominent ones are Hardy Cliff Nongbri, Kynsailang Khongsit, Damaitphang Lyngdoh, Phrangki Buam and Kenstar Kharshong. These players share extensive experience, having played for Lajong in their previous I League campaign and subsequently for other teams. Damaitphang Lyngdoh is different in that he is a Bengaluru FC product having played for the youth team.

I feel players like Hardy Cliff Nongbri have been unfortunate, both with injuries and being overlooked by the Lajong management in previous campaigns. A consistently hard-working and creative player who always gives his all, he still has the potential to reach his destined heights. Kynsailang Khongsit has proven to be a very steady defender combining defence and attack with great aplomb. Damaitphang Lyngdoh has been dynamic while Kenstar Kharshong has quietly done his duty with little fuss. Phrangki Buam was once the top Indian scorer of the I League during the 2018-2019 season, and his pace and incisiveness is proving quite a handful for many defenders. The other players also played admirably, with Aman Ahlawat improving after a shaky start and Ronney Willson Kharbudon excelling in his

opportunities. Lajong seems well-positioned for another season in the I-League next year, and if they can perform well in the upcoming away matches, who knows what rewards might await the team.

There are other players who I feel should have played at a higher level, I league and ISL. Among them, Brolington Warlapih and Kitboklang Pale are top class players who could have walked into any club team in the country. The way Brolington Warlapih reads the danger and leads the defence is an example for any aspiring defender to emulate, while Kitboklang Pale's pure class and talent is out of this world. Both are still playing, but their career at the top is almost over. Brolington Warlapih recently retired from the state team while Kitboklang Pale is no longer the same player. If only they had left Meghalaya to pursue opportunities elsewhere and persisted, we might have had the pleasure of watching them play at the highest level.

This is something that I feel that top players and clubs from Meghalaya have to aspire for. They need to play with the best and against the best. The recent Santosh Trophy campaign where the state lost in Quarters gave a glimpse of the immense talent that exists in Meghalaya. Quite a few of the players playing in the present Mawlai team were in the state team and showed that, given the right opportunity, they have what it takes to succeed at the highest level. Since it's looking like they might win the Shillong Premier League and the Meghalaya State League, I hope they will try to enter the I League with Bah Herring Shangpliang as the coach. People may not know it, but he was one of the first AFC Professional Coaching Diploma Coaches in the country.

Football has been the number one game in Meghalaya, but the love for the game has not translated to deserved success at the national and international level. Teams like Manipur and Mizoram have surpassed us in that regard. It is high time that the state gets its due recognition and the upcoming international matches are a missed opportunity. However, with the foundations already laid, the players, clubs, and state association must now showcase Meghalaya's talent. I dream of the day when a player from our state captains India's senior football team. Hopefully, that day comes sooner rather than later.

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

A withering and sloppy INDIA Alliance: Windfall for the Congress?

By Chiranjib Haldar

In the prelude to the 1989 general elections, Congress-sponsored billboards started pedestrians with a query: How many prime ministers will a country have? The nation went berserk with the Bofors controversy, with V P Singh's Janata Dal spearheading the anti-Congress front and an ebullient Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) cobbling in tandem to defeat the Rajiv Gandhi regime. More than three decades later, the wheel has come full circle. Only the crusaders have changed. The once hyped supplicant to power, the morose multi-party coalition that called itself INDIA has been hidden quite unlamented. No one is shedding tears on its probable demise in a solitary rite. As Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Mehbooba Mufti put up a sombre note 'Wind it up. It has no leader, it has no meetings and it doesn't seem to be working, let's call it off and move on.'

Instead of a shot in the arm for an anti-BJP front in the offing, this alliance may have been a blessing in disguise. It has actually strengthened the BJP-led NDA regime with a seeming coalition of regional satraps having bloated further. A shrinking INDIA front is actually a boon for the saffron brigade. For the grand old dame of Indian polity, the Congress, actively nurturing the opposition jamboree seems to be of remote concern. In the aftermath of the recent assembly poll reverses and the palpable reluctance of the Congress to even convene a course correction dialogue, the INDIA grouping has been rendered an untenable prospect. The more fractured the opposition becomes at a pan-India level with multiple aspirants for the coveted top slot often at loggerheads, the easier it will be for the BJP to beat anti-incumbency and stride back to power.

Despite all its camaraderie on display intermittently in front of television cameras at every file photo, the alliance resembles a cabal of warring chieftains, each of whom controls their regional fiefdoms. Even if this bandwagon has a downcast Congress leadership in it, the party needs to be the fulcrum for any ouster of the BJP dispensation from power and not just be a constituent in the coalition. As history has shown, any formation without the Congress at its helm may be disastrous and temporary. And the concept of a non-Congress, non-BJP Third Front has been a mirage for long, as past experiments with the United Front

have proven. The Congress has chosen to play hardball and in the process opened up the fissures within the INDIA alliance.

Rashtriya Janata Dal supremo Tejashwi Yadav's death knell on the INDIA bloc has widened faultlines in the opposition alliance. Nothing could be more cryptic than the RJD leader's retort: 'INDIA was formed just for the Lok Sabha elections and to stop the victory chariot of the BJP. It has no significance now. This is why the bickering between the Congress and the Aam Aadmi Party ahead of the Delhi Assembly date polls is not unexpected'. It is as if the coalition was formed with an expiry date. Politically diverse parties stuck by ideological glue to topple any BJP formation are now tottering on the verge of disintegration. The nomadic state of the alliance, the Congress's aversion to billeting its allies in the Haryana assembly polls and its position as a contender to AAP in Delhi, highlight the intrinsic flaws within this arrangement. Indian politics is on an implosive path and the INDIA alliance has reached an inflection point as is visible. The Trinamool Congress has been pitching for Mamata Banerjee to take over reins of the INDIA alliance. Aam Aadmi Party chief Arvind Kejriwal has given a clarion call to oust the Congress party from the INDIA bloc. AAP has got a shot in the arm with the unflinching support of the TMC, Samajwadi Party and Uddhav Thackeray's Shiv Sena. The INDIA allies may rally behind the once anti-corruption crusader Arvind Kejriwal but Congress leaders deny ambiguity within the party on how far to go against AAP. The moot question remains. If the INDIA political conglomerate is disintegrating, will Congress take the blame for this debacle? Most Congress watchers feel there has hardly been any introspection in the party. Maybe it is time for the diehard party apparatchiks and the coterie to step back and let the next generation of leaders flower within the party. Keeping the mantle intact in a sledgehammer manner does not augur well for the Congress party. For the nation's political future, the party mandarins and the first family have to ensure that the deep rooted notion of India's constitutionalism marches forward.

(The writer is a commentator on politics and society and has been contributing to premier publications for decades.)

saved could be put to use by finding the best sets of educators who will give their best to the cause of uplifting education."

Yours etc;
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

Traffic jams and arbitrary placement of traffic personnel

Editor,
As a concerned citizen, parent and a frequent commuter, I am writing to draw your attention to the traffic congestion at Malki Point especially on school days. The area is already congested and the addition of parked taxis, taxi scooters, private two wheelers and illegal shops have narrowed down the road, making it nearly impossible to navigate particularly during peak hours. This issue has been causing traffic congestion, especially on school days and is a growing concern

for many as it poses a risk to the safety of pedestrians especially children.

The road from Pine Mount School, Phan Nonglait Park (Lady Hydari Park) to Malki point is a critical route used by numerous commuters including parents who drop their children at Pine Mount School and Seven Set School both being prominent schools in this area and their presence especially the latter greatly contributing to the economic activities of big and small business establishments in this area especially on school days. Many others use this route as a diversion to avoid traffic along the main road and as a shortcut to St Edmunds-Fire Brigade.

The local administration should ensure that the area is kept free of encroachments and that illegal shops are removed. I urge the authorities to take immediate action before schools reopen. Designated parking areas for taxis and two wheelers should be created to prevent haphazard parking. It is also suggested that it is high time the Shnong builds a new and cleaner market with park-

ing facilities to ease traffic congestion along this main route. I also wish to draw your attention to the stark contrast in the presence of traffic personnel at these two prominent school points where one would witness at least three personnel deployed at Pine Mount point and a complete absence at Seven Set point. I fail to understand the logic behind this deployment as both school points are equally important and require traffic management to ensure safety of all pedestrians.

It is also imperative that flyovers be immediately constructed to solve the traffic problem from Dhankheto to Laitumkhrah and Nongthymmai and from Rilbong point to Upper Shillong and Garikhana to keep up with the tag of being a 'Smart City' (which unfortunately is a far-fetched dream).

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request,
Via email

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

Do aliens exist? Here's what scientists really think

News stories about the likely existence of extraterrestrial life, and our chances of detecting it, tend to be positive. We are often told that we might discover it any time now. Finding life beyond Earth is "only a matter of time", we were told in September 2023. "We are close" was a headline from September 2024.

It's easy to see why. Headlines such as "We're probably not alone" or "Nobody knows" aren't very clickable. But what does the relevant community of experts actually think when considered as a whole? Are optimistic predictions common or rare? Is there even a consensus? In our new paper, published in *Nature Astronomy*, we've found out.

During February to June 2024, we carried out four surveys regarding the likely existence of basic, complex and intelligent extraterrestrial life. We sent emails to astrobiologists (scientists who study extraterrestrial life), as well as to scientists in other areas, including biologists and physicists.

In total, 521 astrobiologists responded, and we received 534 non-astrobiologist responses. The results reveal that 86.6% of the surveyed astrobiologists responded either "agree" or "strongly agree" that it's likely that extraterrestrial life (of at least a basic kind) exists somewhere in the universe.

Less than 2% disagreed, with 12% staying neutral. So, based on this, we might say that there's a solid consensus that extraterrestrial life, of some form, exists somewhere out there.

Scientists who weren't astrobiologists essentially concurred, with an overall agreement score of 88.4%. In other words, one cannot say that astrobiologists are biased toward believing in extraterrestrial life, compared with other scientists.

When we turn to "complex" extraterrestrial life or "intelligent" aliens, our results were 67.4% agreement, and 58.2% agreement, respectively for astrobiologists and other scientists.

So, scientists tend to think that alien life exists, even in more ad-

vanced forms. These results are made even more significant by the fact that disagreement for all categories was low. For example, only 10.2% of astrobiologists disagreed with the claim that intelligent aliens likely exist.

Optimists and pessimists

Are scientists merely speculating? Usually, we should only take notice of a scientific consensus when it is based on evidence (and lots of it). As there is no proper evidence, scientists may be guessing. However, scientists did have the option of voting "neutral", an option that was chosen by some scientists who felt that they would be speculating.

Only 12% chose this option. There is actually a lot of "indirect" or "theoretical" evidence that alien life exists. For example, we do now know that habitable environments are very common in the universe.

We have several in our own solar system, including the sub-surface oceans of the moons Europa and Enceladus, and arguably also the environment a few kilometres below the surface of Mars. It also seems relevant that Mars used to be highly habitable, with lakes and rivers of liquid water on its surface and a substantial atmosphere.

It is reasonable to generalise from here to a truly gargantuan number of habitable environments across the galaxy, and wider universe. We also know (since we're here) that life can get started from non-life - it happened on Earth, after all.

Although the origin of the first, simple forms of life is poorly understood, there is no compelling reason to think that it requires astronomically rare conditions.

And even if it does, the probability of life getting started (abiogenesis) is clearly non-zero.

This can help us to see the 86.6% agreement in a new light. Perhaps it is not, actually, a surprisingly strong consensus.

Perhaps it is a surprisingly weak consensus. Consider the numbers: there are more than 100 billion gal-

axies. And we know that habitable environments are everywhere.

Let's say there are 100 billion billion habitable worlds (planets or moons) in the universe. Suppose we are such pessimists that we think life's chances of getting started on any given habitable world is one in a billion billion. In that case, we would still answer "agree" to the statement that it is likely that alien life exists in the universe.

Thus, optimists and pessimists should all have answered "agree" or "strongly agree" to our survey, with only the most radical pessimists about the origin of life disagreeing.

Bearing this in mind, we could present our data another way. Suppose we discount the 60 neutral votes we received. Perhaps these scientists felt that they would be speculating, and didn't want to take a stance. In which case, it makes sense to ignore their votes.

This leaves 461 votes in total, of which 451 were for agree or strongly agree. Now, we have an overall agreement percentage of 97.8%.

This move is not as illegitimate as it looks. Scientists know that if they choose "neutral" they can't possibly be wrong. Thus, this is the "safe" choice. In research, it is often called "satisficing".

As the geophysicist Edward Bullard wrote back in 1975 while debating whether all continents were once joined together, instead of making a choice "it is more prudent to keep quiet, sit on the fence, and wait in statesmanlike ambiguity for more data". Not only is keeping quiet a safe choice for scientists, it means the scientist doesn't need to think too hard - it is the easy choice.

Getting the balance right

What we probably want is balance. On one side, we have the lack of direct empirical evidence and the reluctance of responsible scientists to speculate.

On the other side, we have evidence of other kinds, including the truly gargantuan number of habitable environments in the universe.

We know that the probability of life



getting started is non-zero. Perhaps 86.6% agreement, with 12% neutral and less than 2% disagreement, is a sensible compromise, all things considered.

Perhaps - given the problem of satisficing - whenever we present such results, we should present two results for overall agreement: one with neutral votes included (86.6%), and one with neutral votes disregarded (97.8%). Neither result is the single, correct result.

Each perspective speaks to different analytical needs and helps prevent oversimplification of the data.

Ultimately, reporting both numbers - and being transparent about their contexts - is the most honest way to represent the true complexity of responses. (*The Conversation*)

(The author of this article is Peter Vickers, Durham University; Henry Taylor, University of Birmingham and Sean McMahon, University of Edinburgh)

Daily glass of milk is likely to reduce bowel cancer risk

A glass of milk a day could help keep bowel cancer away - so finds a study by Oxford University and Cancer Research UK. The research suggests that increasing daily milk intake by as little as one glass could have a significant impact on lowering the likelihood of developing bowel cancer.

There are nearly 45,000 cases of bowel cancer every year in the UK, making it the nation's fourth most common cancer - and third worldwide - but many of these are preventable.

According to Cancer Research UK data, 54% of all bowel cancers could be prevented by having a healthier lifestyle. Smoking, lack of exercise, alcohol, eating processed meat, and poor diet are all significant factors in the development of bowel cancer.

As an oncologist, I advise my patients about how diet and lifestyle can influence health, including the risk of developing cancer. But this research - one of the largest studies into diet and disease so far - has shed new light on how easy, cheap diet changes can help everyone to reduce their cancer risk.

For example, as well as drinking an extra glass of milk per day, reducing consumption of alcohol and red and processed meat could also help protect against cancer. The study found that drinking an additional 20g of alcohol a day, equivalent to a large glass of wine, increased bowel cancer risk by 15%. Consuming more than 30g of red and processed meat daily was linked to an 8% increase in bowel cancer risk.

Researchers took a novel, two-pronged approach to examine the association between milk consumption and bowel cancer risk. First, they analysed genetic data from over 542,000 women and focused on variants - tiny changes in DNA - associated with lactase persistence, the ability to digest lactose in adulthood.

Second, the team collected detailed dietary information from participants, including their daily milk intake. By combining these two data sets, the researchers were able to better estimate

the causal effect of milk consumption on bowel cancer risk.

Striking results

The analysis revealed that participants who consumed an additional 244g of milk per day - roughly equivalent to one large glass containing 300mg of calcium - had a 17% lower risk of developing bowel cancer. This reduction in risk applied to various types of milk, including whole, semi-skimmed and skimmed.

Researchers found that the protective effect of milk consumption was independent of other dietary factors and lifestyle habits. This suggests that the benefits of milk in reducing bowel cancer risk are not because milk replaces unhealthy food choices or is consumed as part of an overall healthier lifestyle.

The reasons why milk consumption may reduce bowel cancer risk are not fully understood, but the researchers propose several potential explanations. First, milk is a rich source of calcium, which has been linked previously to a reduced risk of bowel cancer. Calcium may help protect against cancer by binding to potentially harmful substances in the gut and promoting the death of abnormal cells.

Next, many milk products are fortified with vitamin D, which has been shown to have anti-cancer properties and may help regulate cell growth and division. Also, the lactose in milk can promote the growth of beneficial gut bacteria that produce butyrate, a short-chain fatty acid with anti-inflammatory and anti-cancer effects. Finally, milk contains conjugated linoleic acid, a fatty acid found in meat and dairy products, which, according to a 2021 laboratory study, could also have anti-cancer properties.

Crucially, milk consumption may not be suitable or beneficial for everyone. Those with lactose intolerance, milk allergies, or other dietary restrictions should consult with healthcare professionals before making significant changes to their dairy intake. (*The Conversation*)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambhani

Sunday, JANUARY 19, 2025

'Birthday Forecast'

Moon trine Sun on your solar return chart which will bring exceptional results for you. It is going to be an ideal time for growth and expansion in your job/business. You will take challenges with confidence. And will remain in a positive frame of mind. New job offers will come. Even your government related work will get completed. You will get good business offers but will think carefully before arriving at a decision. Your name and fame will increase. You will also come in contact with influential persons. It will open the doors of opportunity for you. Those in politics, media and social activities will make good progress. You could also enter into a blissful period of romance with a person of refined tastes. There will be no major financial worries. Family and friends will support you fully. You will get involved in religious and charitable activities.

'This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) This period brings mixed results. Concentrate on truly listening to those close to you, and on playing a supportive role. Perhaps it's a time to make a presentation or to face the world boldly. Economy in the home and management of manpower and finances at work keep you ahead and in control of situations. You are drawn to objects and material comforts - possessions that give a boost to your status. Your creative abilities are reflected in your outlook on life and love and romance are life experiences you strongly identify with. Children may be a stronger focus as well.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) This week brings harmonious relations in friendship, love, family and children. You are thinking more creatively, and express yourself with more sensitivity, compassion, and warmth. You will be able to make good use of your talents, work experience and would use your creativity into your work and projects in hand. Your social life too is stimulated, and plenty of opportunities to express yourself uniquely and creatively will present themselves. Pleasure-seeking activities, recreation, and amusement are more. You are far less inhibited when it comes to expressing yourself creatively, and you are a lot more fun to be around.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) Good fortune, spirituality, trips, and communications are the highlights of this week. Your communication skills are stronger than usual. You would participate in discussions and share views, ideas and feelings with people around, this also opens up opportunities and enhances monetary gains. This is a rather happy and goal-oriented time. A lively agenda is promised, you're attracting quite a bit of interest and your energy for making contact with others is strong. You get more organized and use your resources to aim high.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) You are more attractive when you show your responsible, managerial, and dependable side in your personal and professional relations. New beginnings are in store, whether this means a fresh start in existing relationships or new ones altogether. You work in association and with experienced professionals and motivated people and this enhances your confidence and talent to attract business opportunities. Moreover you are well organized and keep alternate plans handy. The flowing, expressive, and spontaneous energy surrounding you attracts like-minded people. This is an especially spiritual time for you - a time when you renew your energy and consider what things are important to you.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) The planetary configuration boosts your morale and self-confidence and you meet difficult tasks head on and resolve work related issues. You enjoy collaboration and participation at work and at home, as synergy and cooperation are available to you. Study business offers and professional opportunities in detail before taking a decision. Your boss or superior might seek impossible goals and you need to apprise him of the real picture. Money matters take priority, as some unexpected expenditures have to be met. Friendships are something you can rely upon as you encounter a dilemma. It is easier than usual to be sensible about your diet, health, and fitness needs.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22) Commercial transactions and business deals could be conducted effectively. This is altogether a happy and relaxed period for you. You are frank, outspoken and can be outrageous or undiplomatic on occasions. Be

guarded especially when you make important decisions. Looking within at your values and beliefs gives you insight and direction that would help. There is beauty in emotional and family relationships. It is best to accept challenges that life offers you and keep going through ups and downs realizing that this too shall pass. Brisk walk and timely eating would be helpful.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) Love, romance and excitement in personal relations are foretold. Personal relations and business partnerships are likely to get closer and on the other hand limited relationships are likely to fall apart. You are likely to spend time in different places and work closely in new associations as you combine ideas and good management. Your contribution stands out. You are loving and caring in personal relationships and family situations. You might also spend a lot of time in physical activities like sports and games.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) The planetary configuration brings mastery in your field of activities. Some associations can be competitive in business as you shine and work well in your field of activity. You may also build your image in keeping with your work with novel communications, presentations and styles, and grooming. People at work could swing from one mood to another. Personal relations are difficult and sensitive at times as both partners seek freedom, independence and space. Listen to your intuition and guard against over indulgence in food, drink or work. It is time to reject old habits and patterns.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) Professional situations and matters come to the fore and there would no element of illusion about these matters. This is the time for professional stability and good financial returns too as you impress people with your talent and charisma. Physical energy and good health enable you to balance a busy schedule and work commitments. A personal meeting will lead to romance, love and a long lasting relationship. Give yourself a fitness routine and healthy diet program. It is time to heal old friendships with tender, love, care and move into new relationships with love and sensitivity.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) The planetary configuration enables you to restructure and reorganize activities at work and analyze the situations at home. Your daily routine and business dealings need to be restructured for better gains and productivity. You tend to be a perfectionist while completing business projects and campaigns. You are ambitious and ready to achieve professional goals and targets at any cost. Your heart tends to over react emotionally in personal relationships, look at things from a balanced and positive perspective. Your perceptions are sometimes clouded by your emotions and you create hazy images of people and situations that present you from seeing reality or the truth. It is here that your analytical powers take over and help in seeing through the haze.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) As mixed results come you would maintain balance, strength at your place of work but go through a rather emotional time in personal relationships. Restructuring business schedules and dealings would be productive and favorable. Personal relations are difficult and sensitive at times there are a number of emotions to be dealt with here. Rather than control others, take time to transform and heal yourself. You would initiate a current of forceful energy to achieve success in an important venture. Yoga and meditation are recommended.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) There is cooperation and harmony professionally as you organize and marshal your emotions and thoughts. A professional collaboration comes together when you give up all the hopes of it. Creative and professional plans are set to actualize and it is best to work towards them persistently. Your business plans have a quality of perfection and completion. You attempt difficult tasks, resolve complicated issues and successfully interact with seniors. This is a good time to build on your skills, and to attend to your health and well being. You have to pay attention to your image and process your emotions and avoid conflicts.

How smaller and more affordable EVs can expedite green transition

Norway is set to make history by becoming the first nation to sell only zero emission (electric- or hydrogen-powered) vehicles by the end of 2025. While this doesn't mean that fossil fuel-powered cars already on the road will suddenly disappear there, it marks a decisive shift towards their eventual obsolescence.

Imagine a world where petrol and diesel vehicles are no longer an option - a bold step towards a greener future. Norway is strikingly close to this goal.

If it succeeds, this will redefine what's possible in the green transition. Consider this: in 2024, fully electric cars accounted for a staggering 88.9% of all new vehicle sales in Norway.

Every year, this number draws nearer to the elusive 100% target (the zero emission category includes a small fraction of hydrogen-powered vehicles, most are electric).

Could Norway reach 100% by this year's end? It's a gripping challenge - but there is a barrier that it needs to address to achieve this. Among Norway's top ten zero emission cars sold last year, there are no small non-SUV vehicles. Can Norway, and other countries, reach their targets selling only large cars?

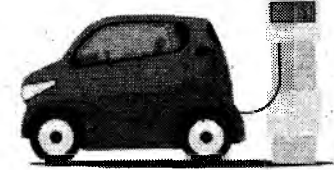
Our recent research shows that affordability is a tool to get everyone on board. When lower-income households face affordability barriers, it's not just their problem - it's the missing link to achieving 100%. Smaller, more affordable electric cars could be the game changer needed to bridge this gap.

For every 100 cars sold in Norway, nearly 90 are electric. In Denmark, the runner-up in this global ranking, it's just over 50. Elsewhere, few countries have reached or are even approaching a one-third market share for electric vehicles (EVs). Most of these are in Europe, with China also nearing that benchmark. The UK sits at just 19.6%, falling short of the top ten.

Why is Norway so far ahead?

A mix of policies, cultural attitudes and the sheer availability of EVs play a role. But one factor stands out: subsidies. Generous, comprehensive subsidies are driving this change.

In Norway, buying an electric car isn't just a green choice - it's an affordable one. Subsidies and incentives



of the green transition is neither fair nor effective.

The UK faces similar challenges. Slow adoption rates suggest cost is a barrier.

The lack of strong leadership and a roadmap to 2035 only adds to the problem. It becomes clear that more targeted support is needed.

Smaller, more affordable vehicles could play a crucial role in meeting climate targets.

Even in a wealthy country like Ireland, 77% of households cannot afford medium-sized electric cars, while 38% cannot afford smaller EVs when factoring in car loans. Without price cuts or higher subsidies, larger EVs will stay out of reach and fail to drive the transition forward.

So do we even need big, luxury EVs? The trend towards larger vehicles, particularly SUVs, isn't new - but it's growing rapidly. In Europe, sales of electric SUVs have jumped from one-tenth to half of all EVs sold in just five years.

Larger cars are more expensive, more resource-intensive, and more wasteful.

Smaller vehicles, by contrast, are lighter, require fewer materials and emit fewer harmful particles from tyre and road wear. They're also safer for pedestrians and cyclists.

Smaller vehicles play a crucial role in clean and inclusive mobility. Achieving climate goals hinges on their adoption.

Without them, meeting emissions targets - at least in Ireland - becomes far less likely. And if electric vehicles fail to deliver significant emissions reductions, their entire purpose in the transition to a greener future comes into question.

Smaller vehicles aren't just practical; they are essential for meaningful progress. But electric cars - even the smaller ones - remain burdened by the cost pressures of private car ownership.

Ultimately, though, we also need fewer cars on our roads. A successful green transition must involve more car share schemes, improved access to public transport, and active travel such as walking and cycling. (*The Conversation*)

(Authors are Agnieszka Stefaniec and Keyvan Hosseini, University of Southampton)

“Positive anything is better than negative nothing.”
—Elbert Hubbard
The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No. 159 SHILLONG, MONDAY, JANUARY 20, 2025

Trump back in the saddle

THE 78-year-old Donald Trump strolls into office as the 47th President of the United States tonight, marking a power transition from the Democrats to the Republicans. The two political establishments that ran the world’s most powerful and wealthy nation in iterations, depending on electoral verdicts every four years, have kept the core of the Americas in good stead. The Republicans are the favourites of the rich and the elite; and the Democrats are more mass-based with a more humanitarian approach in their dealings with the wider world. Wars are fought often under Republican rule, and they show a tendency to prove their nation’s might through tough global engagements. Democrats are, by comparison, doves of peace. Yet, between them, seasons change.

Donald Trump, his image fortified by his business acumen and impressive but often crude presence on television debates, rode to victory and to the White House as President for the first time in 2017 for a four-year-term. He won back the presidency in the December 2024 polls under the Republican banner, and raised the banner of Make America Great Again (MAGA) and America First. A controversial figure, he blows hot and cold. His first term had not seen high action matching with his bombast. This time too, he hints at annexing some islands and ending the war in Ukraine, in which the West is indirectly involved against Russian aggressiveness. Visa regulations are likely to be tightened, affecting the interests of techies from India. There would, yet again, be more controls against illegal immigrants from Mexico, Canada etc. Trump has already put Canada on notice.

Notably, despite the tough talk, American presidents generally function on the basis of the policies set by their party leadership. Yet, they exercise their authority in good measure. Movie-idol Ronald Reagan entered the White House at the height of the hostage crisis involving Americans in Iran. The fundamentalist regime in Teheran that flexed its muscles against Jimmy Carter for months suddenly shifted gears and released the US hostages -- even before tough-talking Reagan settled down into his presidential chair. George Bush Junior, who led the war against Iraq and ousted dictator Saddam Hussein, also ensured the overthrow of more dictatorial regimes in the Middle East-West Asia region. Barack Obama, who rode into office with perceived high energy, adopted soft lines. But, his visit to Cuba in 2016 as US President, ending 90 years of hostilities between the two nations, was a historic step. He, however, failed in his efforts at ending the fight between Jews and Muslims in the Middle East region. Another landmark event was the pullout of the US troops from Afghanistan in the 2020-21 period, decided by Trump and implemented by Joe Biden. This ended two decades of US military engagement in Afghanistan, which was started by George Bush Jr following the lethal Al Qaeda attack on the US. A second Trump presidency is unlikely to take the world by storm.

Preparations for the ensuing elections to the ADCs

By H H Mohrmen

The trumpets have not even been blown, and yet the war cry has reverberated through the rolling hills of the Khasi and Jaintia regions of the state. But what is the noise all about? What do people or even the candidates contesting in the election debates about? If the crux of the matter is not debated by the candidates and even the public does not try to understand the Sixth Schedule, what is the debate all about? If the candidates do try to understand the reason why the Sixth Schedule was incorporated in the Constitution, isn't it a case where the debate becomes just a noise of cacophony everywhere? Have we heard any insightful or well-meaning debates as such, or is all that has been debated so far just empty rhetoric like the sounds of the cymbals?

The depth of the matter

What have the candidates discussed so far? We have heard that some even talked about development, which is fine, but is the District Council meant for development only? Do they really understand what the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution is all about? If we have not heard them debate about the Sixth Schedule, then can we expect them to discuss the debate in the Constituent Assembly? How many candidates are even aware of the debate when they discuss the need to have a provision in the Constitution to protect the tribes of Northeast India? Initially I thought that Gopinath Bordoloi was only interested in the development of Assam as we know it now. My reading of the proceedings makes me realise that the tribals of North East owe so much to this man, and he deserves our respect.

The ADC election debate

Now the campaign has already begun, but we are yet to hear candidates discussing the significance of the Autonomous District Councils in contemporary Indian democracy. Why are ADCs important for the tribals? As Jaipal Singh Munda remarked more than seventy five years ago in the debate in the constituent assembly, “The tribals have a distinct way of life. They have been isolated for centuries. They need autonomy to manage their own affairs while being part of the larger Indian framework.” Is it too much to expect the wannabe councilors who wish to contest the election to study the debate in the constituent assembly and update themselves about the important discussions that took place before the Sixth Schedule was incorporated into the Constitution?

The discussions in the Constituent Assembly regarding the need to protect

the tribal communities of Northeast India were rooted in the recognition of their unique socio-cultural practices, geographical isolation, and historical marginalisation. Members of the Assembly debated these issues extensively, resulting in special provisions such as the Sixth Schedule in the Indian Constitution. These provisions were designed to safeguard tribal identities, customs, and autonomy.

Cultural diversity and concerns about exploitation

Many members highlighted the cultural distinctiveness of the tribal communities in Northeast India. They emphasised that their way of life, governance systems, and traditions were vastly different from the rest of the country. Leaders like Gopinath Bordoloi (Assam) and Jaipal Singh Munda (Jharkhand, an Adivasi leader) stressed the importance of preserving the tribal cultures while integrating them into the Indian Union.

The Assembly acknowledged that tribal communities were vulnerable to exploitation, particularly in land ownership and economic matters, due to their limited interaction with mainstream systems. There was a fear that without safeguards, the influx of non-tribal into tribal areas could lead to the alienation of tribal lands, resources, and identity.

The need for administrative arrangements

The Northeast’s geographical isolation was seen as a significant factor in having the special provision. In the assembly. The members discussed how the region’s terrain and historical neglect had left the tribal areas underdeveloped and disconnected. This necessitated special provisions to ensure decentralised governance and development in the region.

Gopinath Bordoloi, who chaired the Advisory Committee on the Northeast Frontier (Assam) Tribal and Excluded Areas, advocated for an autonomous governance model. He proposed district councils to provide self-governance to the tribes while ensuring unity with the Indian state. Bordoloi and other members argued that these councils would allow tribal communities to govern themselves based on their customs and traditions.

Balancing autonomy and national integration

The Constituent Assembly faced the challenge of ensuring that the tribal regions remained integrated with India while granting sufficient autonomy to protect their identity. There was a consensus that a blanket ap-

plication of uniform laws or systems might alienate tribal populations. Instead, tailored provisions like the Sixth Schedule were introduced to respect their uniqueness.

The Assembly acknowledged the need to assimilate tribal communities into the Indian polity but rejected forced assimilation. It is called assimilation without assimilation, which means integrating the tribal into the national mainstream without them having to lose their ethnic identity. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, in particular, supported the idea of giving tribal areas special status to allow their gradual development without disrupting their traditional systems.

Outcome of the debate in the constituent assembly

The discussions culminated in the inclusion of the Sixth Schedule in the Indian Constitution, which provided for the constitution of the Autonomous District and Regional Councils. The role of the ADCs or the RCs is to protect the land rights of the tribal, their customary practices, and local governance. The debates in the Constituent Assembly reflect the nuanced understanding of the complexities of tribal life in Northeast India and India’s commitment to ensuring their protection, autonomy, and equitable development. This effort was seen as vital for the unity and integrity of the newly independent nation.

The Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution is a special provision that provides for the administration and governance of certain tribal areas in the northeastern states of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, and Mizoram. It aims to protect the rights, culture, and autonomy of indigenous communities in these regions.

Key features of the Sixth Schedule

The main feature of the Sixth Schedule is the establishment of the Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) in tribal-dominated areas. These councils are semi-autonomous bodies with legislative, judicial, and executive powers over certain subjects. The ADCs can make laws related to land, forests, water, agriculture, and customs, among others, with the approval of the governor. The ADCs are constituted with each ADC consisting of up to 30 members, with a mix of elected and nominated representatives. The term of office of the ADC is that the members serve for a term of five years. The Schedule also provided a provision for the creation of the Autonomous Regions, which means that within an Autonomous Dis-

trict, Autonomous Regions may be created to further accommodate smaller tribal groups.

Powers of the ADCs

The ADC has legislative powers, which means that the councils can legislate on matters such as land use and management, forest resources, village administration, marriage, and inheritance. However, laws passed by the council require the Governor’s assent. The judicial powers of ADCs mean that they have the authority to establish courts to resolve disputes among tribal communities as per their customs and traditions. The executive powers of the ADCs are to oversee local governance, manage resources, and regulate the development process in their jurisdiction.

Role of the Governor

The Sixth Schedule also provides a special role for the governor in safeguarding tribal interests. To strike a balance between tribal autonomy and state oversight, members discussed granting special powers to the governor. These powers included the authority to review laws passed by tribal councils and to intervene in case of conflict. The Governor has discretionary powers over the ADCs, which include approving or disallowing laws passed by the councils. It also includes reorganising districts or regions within the Schedule’s purview and allocating additional funds or resources for development.

Purpose of the Sixth Schedule

The main objective of the ADC is to ensure special protections for tribes. These objectives include protection, ownership, and transfer of land in these areas. The aim is to ensure that such activities are regulated to prevent exploitation of tribal populations by non-tribal.

It ensures decentralised governance to empower tribal communities and preserve tribal identities, traditions, and customs. It also ensures protection of the economic and cultural rights of the tribal people within the district council.

The states covered under the Sixth Schedule are Assam (e.g., Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao districts), Meghalaya (e.g., Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo Hills districts), Tripura, and Mizoram.

The Sixth Schedule represents India’s commitment to recognising the unique socio-cultural landscape of its northeastern tribal regions and ensuring their self-governance within the constitutional framework. The question that begs the answer is, have the ADC been able to serve the purpose that they were instituted?

Lofty promises by political parties on eve of elections ominous for Indian democracy

Election Commission silent on this unholy competition on guaranteeing freebies

By Sushil Kutty

People fought kings and queens, sultans and maharajas, for exercising their right to vote. Those were days when democracy was nascent and voting was limited to where the magna carta prevailed and where immigrants took over part of a continent and called it ‘New World’.

Then, when they corralled native Indians in reservations, the New World prospered, democracy got a foothold and couldn’t be erased. Then, when women were still not allowed to vote, another struggle got going. Today, with the spread of electoral democracy, there is no stopping women from exercising their precious right to vote.

But all that is now in the marketplace of democracy, where votes are sold to the highest bidder, gifted away to carriers of bundles of currency, democracy be damned. Everybody is in the game, the women at the forefront. Willing partners greedy for the proceeds of crime.

No religious head speaks against the pernicious practice. In fact, some religious people actually give sermons on selling votes to the highest bidder. Some call for ‘Vote Jihad’, others ask for votes in the name of ‘Hindutva’. Any day of the week is good for the sermon.

Also political parties have turned ‘bribes for votes’ into a family affair. Everyone, who is of the voting age adult in the family, votes except the kids and everybody ostensibly votes for change and not for small-change!

Notes for votes. Others refer to it as ‘cash for votes’. It doesn’t matter what the moniker is, it is the same fraud. What stands out is, the voters themselves are guilty of driving democracy into the ground. Indian voters, especially, are easily swayed not just by slogans but also by the money on offer from political parties of all hues: Bribes in cash and in kind for votes.

The majority of India’s voters live in scarcity. Quite a big segment of them will sell their mothers-in-law for a few thousand rupees. Political parties are vying with each other to get the votes of everybody in the household, including the otherwise hard to sway mother-in-law!

Votes are priced at rates that range from Rs 1600 per vote to Rs 2500 per vote. The Congress flaunts its poll-eve promises. The BJP outdoes the Congress with its election-promises. And aiming to become Delhi Chief Minister again, Arvind Kejriwal has his fixed ‘rate-card’ for Delhi’s voters who have a guileless faith in Kejriwal, which has only strengthened after the couple of stints Kejriwal spent in jail.

That being said, all political parties and their star politicians are in the game. Nobody is there to blow the whistle on the fraud played with impunity. The other day, the BJP joined the gang in Delhi, strengthening the growing belief that Prime Minister Narendra Modi can no longer fool with ‘telly-talk’. The BJP’s slew of election-eve promises, announced by party President JP Nadda, who apparently is irreplaceable, proves all over again that two/three can play the game. AAP’s poll promises pales in front of the BJP’s bribes for votes. There is a cash component for women voters and those in kind take the cake!

The Election Commission has no policy to contain or put to a stop the practice. Political parties and voters, and bodies responsible to hold free and fair elections, minus the ‘shero-shayari’ and other garnishments, are all partners in this crime with the proceeds of the crime spread across the spectrum. The prevailing description is ‘promises’, i.e., political parties can promise anything under the sun to bribe the voter for his/her vote.

There is no bar on the voter to ‘accept bribes’ from as many political parties as are in the fray. Bribes are paid beforehand and for the voter nothing beats ‘bribes’ for their votes. ‘Promises’, on the other hand, carry the risk of not being fulfilled. The Congress promise Rs 8500 per vote wasn’t kept. When the time came for ‘Kata-kat-kata-kat’, there was no sign of the Congress ‘hand’. The BJP has now taken the cue and has made its own promises. The Aam Aadmi Party has also taken note and rolled out its own set of promises.

Promises are considered ‘kosher’ and standard practice. The Election Commission acts like everything is above board and “checking helicopters” ferrying candidates from one rally to another is all that has to be done. It doesn’t matter that voters are being bribed, induced and lured to vote for this or that political party.

Voters can be persuaded to “sell their votes” for as little as a couple of 1000 bucks. That it carries the stigma of “free cash” shouldn’t matter to the good-for-nothing honest people who don’t look askance at those who “sell” their votes to the highest bidder.

Entire households are in it for currency notes. The Bharatiya Janata Party has promised to give Rs 2,500 every month to every woman of Delhi and Rs 26000 to women who get in the family way. The BJP might as well set up a ‘Semen Bank’ c/o party president JP Nadda, with branches like the ‘Mohalla Clinic’ of the AAP!

Entire households, from father to mother and son to daughter, are committing the same crime: Selling their votes to political parties for cash, kind and spirit! The practice is pernicious and entrenched. Take away this right and there will be suicides!

And if you think the ‘South’ is free of the scourge, take a break. Tamil Nadu, for example, is a hub for frauds of such kind, full of merchants of votes. Tamil Nadu voters are spoiled for “gifts” – from TV sets men and women, laptops to boys and bicycles for schoolgirls.

Cash mounts matched the inebriation component in the ‘bribes for votes’ racket. Cash changed hands as easily as sweat leap from one damp palm to another. There was no need to look behind and over the shoulder. Everybody in the queue was complicit and had the back of the one ahead and the one behind.

South-based political parties, such as the DMK, and the AIADMK, pioneered the ‘Cash for Votes’ start-up. In families with three, four, five and six votes, imagine the loot! Everybody went home after voting smiling. Nobody cared and the object called ‘shame’ was in short supply. Feelings of remorse never crosses the minds of vote-sellers and vote-buyers. It never occurs to any of the members of the same family that each one of them is corrupt to the core. The Gods themselves couldn’t have stopped the daylight robbery. Nowadays, this brand of democracy-related corruption has spread to all corners of the nation.

Election after election, political parties make “promises” and voters willingly and eagerly fall into the “trap.” Today, with Delhi elections round the corner, the AAP, the BJP, and the Congress, have announced their electoral promises and includes so-called ‘welfare schemes’ for women and children, senior citizens and special sections of society.

A comparison of the schemes is mind-boggling. Election-eve promises and “note for votes” and “cash for votes” have flooded the electoral market and it is an ugly noise they’re making. What really is unforgiving is that everybody is in it together. Everybody with the halo of holier than thou! From the Prime Minister to the Leader of the Opposition, from the erstwhile ‘jaillbird’ to the voter with a vote to sell! (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

On ghost schools

Editor,
In continuation to my letter “Meghalaya needs educators, not teachers” which appeared in ST on 18th January 2025. A school with zero enrolment refers to an educational institution that currently has no students enrolled. These schools, often termed “ghost schools,” exist on paper but do not have any active students attending

This can divert resources away from schools with an actual student population, exacerbating inequalities in access to quality education. According to the Unified District Information System for Education 2023-24 there are 13000 such schools in the country. The highest numbers being in West Bengal and Rajasthan. A peak into such schools in the Himalayan States is given below.

Schools with Zero enrolment and teachers in Himalayan States

States	School with zero enrolment		Teachers in school having zero enrolment		In percent to total	
	School	Teachers	School	Teachers	School	Teachers
Himalayan States						
Arunachal Prd.	240	58	32.60	5.15		
Assam	0	0	0	0		
Mizoram	83	354	11.28	31.47		
Meghalaya	146	277	19.84	24.62		
Mizoram	39	73	5.30	6.48		
Nagaland	12	24	1.63	2.13		
Sikkim	1	1	0.13	0.08		
Tripura	10	12	1.36	1.07		
Eastern Himalayas	531	799	72.15	71.02		
Himachal Pradesh	6	10	0.81	0.89		
Jammu & Kashmir	119	438	16.17	41.15		
Ladakh	35	21	4.75	1.87		
Uttarakhand	45	57	6.11	5.07		
Northern Himalayas	205	326	27.85	28.98		
TOTAL	736	1125	100.00	100.00		

Source: UDISE+ 2023-24, Ministry of Education, GOI

Yours etc,
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

Maiden cabinet retreat of MDA government

Editor,
Recently, Chief Minister Conrad K Sangma led a team of his cabinet ministers, government functionaries, heads of departments and DCs from across the state to Sohra for a two day retreat to chalk out the nuances of strategies for uplifting the effective implementation of various relevant vital schemes and how to bring about actionable results that would percolate to the grassroot levels and thereby usher in inclusive developments in Meghalaya. The pre-eminent motive of this retreat was perceptively to achieve the goal of the much vaunted vision of 2032, when Meghalaya shall attain six decades of its creation! Hence, hats off to the Chief Minister.

Coincidentally, such official retreat was perhaps the brainchild of Dr. OC Rangad, the dynamic ex-Director of Horticulture, Meghalaya, who initiated this sort of retreat nearly twenty years ago! This Director crafted a noble orientation, at convenient interval of times, by leading his key departmental

officers from across the State to each district for a few days to hold a brainstorming retreat meeting to focus on the pros and cons of the manifold horticultural schemes hitherto implemented plus the future course of holistic actions. In such a platform, under the chairmanship of the said ex-Director, each officer who was shouldered with the execution of the assigned schemes was invited to come forward to face the audience to present his/her status reports contributed accordingly, so officers had to be on their toes regarding their respective assigned performances.

In the end, well-meaning or sane advice was suggested to the attending officers and how to effectively deal the field challenges they encountered, thereby precipitating an overarching development of the State in the domain of horticulture. The aforesaid ex-Director was perhaps passionately aware that Meghalaya possesses immense potentiality in the field of horticulture prospects premised on the agro-climatic feasibility and the latter may have taken into cognizance that if apple can constitute as an economic mainstay of Himachal Pradesh, then

Meghalaya too, he may have visualized, based on its horticulture topography can in no uncertain terms make our State achieve an extra mile in terms of economic prosperity

No wonder then that today we are witnessing how horticulture productivity in Meghalaya, be it fruits, vegetables or floriculture have developed by leaps and bounds, which is also why an orange variety christened Khasi mandarin has carved a niche in far off countries and earned compliments. In fine, I hope other Heads of Departments would take a leaf out of the legacy pioneered by the former Director of Horticulture! Good practices need to be replicated.

Yours etc.,
Jerome K Diengdoh,
Shillong-2

National flag must be respected at all times!

Editor,
I am writing to express my concern about the national flag hoisted at the P.W.D. complex. In my previous letter to your esteemed newspaper, I had brought to light the damaged state of the

national flag at the complex. I am pleased to note that the authorities took prompt action and replaced the damaged flag. However, I am dismayed to see that the new flag has again been damaged due to strong winds. This raises serious questions about the quality of the flag. It is surprising to note that other states have huge national flags hoisted in public spaces that have withstood the elements for decades, whereas our flags seem to get damaged within months.

What sort of quality are we settling for? As a citizen, it is disheartening to see our national flag, a symbol of our pride and unity, being treated with such lack of care. I urge the Government to take immediate action to hoist a national flag of good quality that can withstand the elements and do justice to the symbol of our nation.

I hope that the authorities will take my suggestion seriously and take prompt action.

Yours etc.,
Sudarshan Dasgupta,
Shillong-4.

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

"Life is one long process
of getting tired."

— Samuel Butler

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No.160 SHILLONG, TUESDAY, JANUARY 21, 2025

ADCs & Village Administration

THE mega gathering of clans organised by the KHADC on January 18 is laudable. However, all three ADCs need to take stock of the real issues facing people in the rural hinterlands of the state. It is in rural Meghalaya that poverty thrives; landlessness is growing exponentially and there is environmental degradation on a massive scale. Mining and quarrying are the two activities that threaten to turn the water sources of Meghalaya dry. Already 749 water sources are in a critical state. How can those be rejuvenated unless there are massive eco-restoration projects across the state. The ADCs need to come to grips with such issues and work in tandem with the State Forest & Environment Department to take action. The ADCs have not had serious brainstorming on how to make the local Dorbar Shnong true managers of local governance complete with an accountability framework and to demonstrate to them that tradition cannot be an excuse to debar women from being important office bearers of the Dorbar and even to occupy the seat of the Rangbah Shnong.

The Dorbar Shnong are still run in an arbitrary manner with each shnong following its own sets of rules of governance. Despite the fact that building by-laws beyond the Municipal areas are now the mandate of the Councils, ground level implementation of those building bye-laws leave much to be desired. The Dorbar Shnong of respective areas need to ensure that those who build houses follow the rules in letter and spirit. The practice of building houses and institutions, including churches right on the river continues, when rules clearly lay down that construction has to be at least 4-6 feet away from rivers and roads. Despite the blatant violation of building rules no punitive action is taken on the law breakers. The State Pollution Control Board is a toothless body and this only adds to the problem of rivers becoming garbage dumps and septic tanks without any of the institutions of governance from the Dorbar Shnong, the District Councils and the State Government being able to rein in the violators. At this rate Meghalaya will find itself vulnerable to weather conditions with the onslaught of climate change already changing our weather patterns drastically.

The need of the hour for the KHADC is to get the Village Administration Bill passed by the Governor. It has been kept in cold storage since 2014. It is learnt that the Bill was sent to the Union Home Ministry and certain queries were raised by the Ministry which went unanswered till date. Hence the Bill is lying dormant. Meanwhile every Dorbar Shnong is functioning as it pleases. This is especially evident in the sale and purchase of land where each shnong arbitrarily charges a certain percentage from the buyer and seller of land. This is especially the case with Ri Bhoi where most townspeople have now bought large tracts of land for commercial cultivation. The Dorbar Shnong has to be regulated and to follow a set of guidelines that embody the spirit of the Constitution. This is imperative and the present Governor needs to take a hard look at the Village Administration Bill lying in his office.

Meghalaya, the 'Abode of Clouds', has emerged as a state with commendable economic growth and developmental initiatives. As the year 2025 begins, it is both timely and appropriate to reflect on the progress made and address the challenges that remain. This is also a moment to renew our commitment to the principles of 'Think Globally, Act Locally,' to align global best practices with the state's unique needs. This article is informed by observations, research, and my experiences from diverse regions across the globe, providing a critical yet constructive perspective to ensure Meghalaya rises as a model of inclusive and sustainable development.

The recent Cabinet Retreat held in Sohra, under the leadership of Chief Minister Conrad K. Sangma, marked a milestone in the state's development. This visionary gathering, involving cabinet ministers, senior government officials, and Deputy Commissioners, aimed to create a roadmap for Meghalaya's growth through its Vision 2032 initiative. Institutionalizing such retreats as annual or bi-annual events is a commendable step towards fostering inter-departmental efficiency and collaboration. Several key projects, focusing on urban planning, transportation, public utilities, and sports infrastructure, are slated for completion in 2025, collectively enhancing quality of life and economic prospects for residents.

In an even more notable achievement, Meghalaya has, after 53 years of statehood, established its first state-owned university, showcasing the government's commitment to strengthening the education sector. While these initiatives are laudable, their true success will be measured by their tangible outcomes and their impact on the lives of citizens.

Economic Growth and Aspirations
Over the past decade, Meghalaya has shown resilience and growth in infrastructure, health, education, and economic development. The 2023-24 budget outlined ambitious goals to double the state's GSDP to Rs 80,000 crore by 2027-28, achieve near-zero maternal and infant mortality, and generate five lakh employment opportunities. However, critical gaps in implementation, accountability, and equitable resource distribution continue to challenge these aspirations. These gaps must be addressed which calls for a more accountable and collaborative approach from all stakeholders, if Meghalaya is to achieve its full potential.

The state's economy is projected to grow at an annual rate of 11.4%, with a GSDP of Rs 52,973 crore (\$6.6 billion) for 2024-25. Government expenditure has more than doubled from Rs 12,159 crore in 2018-19 to Rs 27,072 crore in 2024-25, reflecting improved governance and increased funding support from external agencies. Yet, Meghalaya's reliance on central transfers, which amount to Rs 18,168 crore for FY 2024-25, underscores its limited internal revenue generation, with the state's own tax revenue projected at only Rs 4,041 crore.

To reduce fiscal dependence, Meghalaya must emulate successful models from countries like Germany and Denmark, which have enhanced sub-national fiscal self-reliance through local industries, innovative taxation, and sustainable tourism. By nurturing high-value local sectors such as organic agriculture, renewable

Meghalaya at the Crossroads

Progress, Challenges and a Call for Responsible Governance

By Bijoy A. Sangma

energy, and eco-tourism, the state can create robust revenue streams.

Fiscal dependence on the Union Government raises a concern. Enhancing state tax revenue and self-sufficiency through innovative policies, like promoting entrepreneurship and sustainable tourism, is critical.

Infrastructure Development

The government's allocation of Rs 2,709 crore for roads and buildings in 2024-25 demonstrates its commitment to connectivity and urban transformation. Projects like the Shillong-Dawki-Tamabil highway, New Shillong Administrative City, and Knowledge City at Mawkhanu promise significant economic growth.

However, execution delays and poor quality in certain rural infrastructure projects dilute their impact. Guided by Japan's principles of Quality Infrastructure Investment (QII), Meghalaya must prioritize durable, climate-resilient infrastructure that meets both current and future needs.

Healthcare

Meghalaya's healthcare sector has made significant strides, with programs like the MOTHER initiative reducing maternal mortality by 50% and infant mortality by 30% over two years. The government has allocated Rs 1,970 crore for healthcare in FY 2024-25, including Rs 500 crore for upgrading health facilities and Rs 100 crore for expanding health insurance coverage.

My first hand experience at the Mawiong Community Health Centre (CHC) in East Khasi Hills, Meghalaya where medicines are provided free of cost to the patient is praiseworthy. I was pleasantly surprised to see the good quality medicines and decent maintenance of the beds and facilities in a CHC.

Despite these advancements, healthcare infrastructure in rural areas remains inadequate, and specialist medical services are often inaccessible to the underserved population. The Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR) has been reduced by 50% over two years, but achieving zero infant and maternal mortality remains an ambitious goal. Bridging the urban-rural divide healthcare delivery remains an urgent need. Localized healthcare hubs with effective delivery mechanism are critical in the health sector.

Learning from Cuba's healthcare model, which emphasizes community-based preventive care and localized healthcare hubs, Meghalaya can ensure transformative healthcare delivery across rural and urban areas.

Education

The progress in education over the past few years has been noteworthy. The state's allocation of Rs 3,539 crore for FY 2024-25 aims to enhance school infrastructure, teacher training, and digital learning facilities. Initiatives like the MPOWER program for adolescents and the establishment of new polytechnics are encouraging developments that have contributed to increased enrolment rates.

Despite these improvements, dropout rates in higher secondary education, especially in rural areas, remain a concern. Targeted programs to reduce dropouts in underserved areas are essential.

Without undermining the National Education Policy (NEP) 2024, drawing lessons from Finland's education model,

which emphasizes participatory learning and teacher training, Meghalaya can address these disparities and ensure quality education for all.

Agriculture and Rural Livelihoods

Mission-mode programs, such as PRIME Hubs and FOCUS, with an investment of Rs 427 crore for agriculture and horticulture in 2024-25, aim to improve farmers' incomes and promote organic farming. Initiatives like the Floriculture Mission and Lakadong Turmeric and Ginger Missions are positioning Meghalaya as a leader in niche agricultural markets.

However, farmers continue to face challenges such as inadequate cold storage, limited market linkages, and irrigation deficits. Implementing a hub-and-spoke model for rural markets and integrating agri-tech solutions could address these issues and double farmers' incomes by 2028 as envisioned.

Tourism Development

Meghalaya's natural beauty has made tourism a cornerstone of its economy. Projects such as the Shillong Peak Ropeway and cultural tourism circuits aim to enhance visitor experiences.

To ensure long-term sustainability, Meghalaya must adopt Costa Rica's eco-tourism model, which aligns economic growth with environmental preservation. Responsible tourism practices can protect the state's biodiversity while generating livelihoods.

Environmental Sustainability

The Rs 4,501 crore allocation for climate action in FY 2024-25 reflects the government's focus on conservation through programs like Green Meghalaya and MegARISE. These initiatives promote forest conservation, water catchment protection, and integration into global carbon markets.

However, illegal mining and deforestation continue to undermine environmental efforts. Stricter enforcement, combined with community-based forest management, is critical to preserving Meghalaya's ecological balance.

Costa Rica's carbon-neutral policies demonstrate how aligning ecological conservation with economic incentives can drive lasting environmental benefits. Costa Rica's success in achieving carbon neutrality while boosting eco-tourism offers valuable lessons for Meghalaya. By carefully promoting eco-friendly industries and sustainable tourism, Meghalaya can protect its rich biodiversity while generating livelihoods and be the leader in coming years.

From Vision to Reality - The Path Ahead

While initiatives such as the Cabinet Retreat and high-profile discussion in Sohra provide a platform for visionary policy-making, many of these efforts risk being performative and designed to appeal to external audiences unless they yield substantial ground-level transformation. The state's ambitious goals to become a \$10 billion economy by 2028 and a leader in Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2032 require a shift from rhetoric to action.

Transforming Meghalaya's vision into reality demands strengthening accountability through regular audits and public reporting, accelerating quality project implementation to minimize delays, and ensuring inclusivity by prioritizing mar-

ginalized communities.

A Framework for Collaborative Governance

Achieving Meghalaya's developmental aspirations necessitates collaboration among political leaders, bureaucrats, technocrats, civil society organizations (CSOs), and community-based organizations (CBOs).

Political leaders must advocate for inclusive policies and prioritize marginalized communities, and drive advocacy for state-specific needs at national and global forums, while ensuring transparency through annual performance reports and adopting transparent fund utilization mechanisms.

Bureaucrats should drive efficiency in project execution and streamline processes, inter-departmental coordination, using Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) to measure success and strengthen grievance redressal systems.

Technocrats can deploy innovative solutions for digital governance, urban planning, and healthcare delivery. They should monitor technological interventions and conduct cost-benefit analyses for public investments.

CSOs should mobilize and engage communities through awareness campaigns, advocate for equitable policies, and monitor policy implementation and service delivery in underserved regions, to ensure equity. As accountability, maintain transparent operations and engage constructively with government and private stakeholders.

CBOs must facilitate grassroots participation in governance, ensuring that local needs are addressed and development is inclusive. The CBOs too are accountable and need to ensure periodic report on activities, ensure equitable fund distribution, and collaborate with local authorities for maximum impact.

Drawing inspiration from successful governance models worldwide, Meghalaya can build a sturdy governance framework that is both efficient and inclusive. Such as Estonia's digital-first approach, Kerala's participatory development model and our own North Eastern Region Community Resources Management Project on the sustainable development model empowering rural communities to plan and implement their development projects with full community participation and transparency.

The Way Forward - Rising Above the Clouds

Meghalaya has laid a strong foundation for growth, but its journey forward requires sustained effort, innovation, and collaboration. As the state strives to achieve its Vision 2032 goals, it must focus on translating policies into measurable outcomes. The 'Abode of Clouds' has the potential to lead by example, showcasing a model of inclusive, sustainable development that other states can emulate. It is time for Meghalaya to rise above the clouds of complacency and shine as a trailblazer for the nation and the world.

(The author is Former Executive Director [ILC] of the BMS World Mission, United Kingdom, former National Executive Director [India] of Haggi Institute of Advanced Leadership, and Former Asst. Programme Coordinator of North East Region Community Resources Management Project [IFAD-GOI], a Lawyer and currently a PhD Scholar in Management studies.)

Conservation in question: When Anthropology meets 'nature'

By Anna Notsu

Today, conservation, regardless of its form, is and should be in everyone's interest. With the escalating threats to ecosystems worldwide, conservation has become a necessity in response to ongoing processes of degradation, decay and loss. Traditionally, the word 'conservation' has been synonymous with environmental management or, at best, nature protection. Yet, what 'nature' refers to is so far rarely scrutinised. Conservation too often assumes what needs to be sustained and how a future should look, based on pre-determined ideals of a productive society - economically and ecologically. This assumption is precisely what I want to question. At what point is conservation deemed successful? What exactly do we value? And who constitutes the 'we'?

Meghalaya is known for its abundance of sacred groves. This already shows that the value of 'nature' extends far beyond biodiversity. Here, 'nature' encompasses more than material resources, including nonhuman entities, like deities. Many hill sites double as jhum farms, reflecting a landscape shaped not only by ecological but also by human and spiritual interactions. Mountains, fields and water sources cannot be viewed merely in terms of ecological qualities. Human activities and spiritual engagements are deeply embedded in the making of these landscapes. In a way, the future of Meghalaya has always already been in the hands of its inhabitants, both human and nonhuman. This indicates that perhaps, the success of conservation hinges on a much broader understanding of human-nature relations. The cultural aspects of 'nature' - including communal land governance, religious perspectives and the roles of spiritual beings - highlight the need for recognising an intricate entanglement of human, spiritual and ecological dimensions.

In the Jaintia Hills, where my focus lies, the term community-led conservation has gained prominence amid growing concerns over climate change, mono-crop farming and resource extraction. While such conservation initiatives are essential, the concept of 'community' is quite far from straightforward. As I immerse myself in Meghalaya's undulating hills, I have observed a remarkable diversity of beliefs, perspectives and practices, raising questions about what defines a 'community', especially in terms of conservation. This diversity is not simply about ethnic or cultural backgrounds, but also how people relate to one another and to the essence of 'nature' that matters to them. Generations of knowledge, religious beliefs and daily practices can influence this relatedness. Conservation, then, must account for such diversity. A community becomes a crucial element in conservation because future pathways rely much on what binds people together in their actions, whether destructive or recuperative.

It was December 2023 when I first set foot in Meghalaya. Squeezed into a shared taxi from Guwahati Airport, I felt the temperature drop as the car crossed into the state from Assam, my sweat-soaked T-shirt growing chilly by the time I reached Shillong. During my two-week stay, I was struck by the vibrancy of Shillong and the great warmth of the people who welcomed me into their homes. From one contact to another, from their colleagues to in-laws, I followed a relational web of connections, building lasting relationships with those who opened their lives to me.

A Khasi friend once messaged me, "I told my schoolteacher about you, and she is very excited to meet you, also because she is concerned for your wellbeing and safety. This kind of compassion and welfare check is what makes Meghalaya so special." This community spirit is evident in various interactions, reflecting deeply ingrained social values. In

Meghalaya, interconnectedness is not merely a concept tied to clan organisation or familial ties; it is a lived experience.

Enchanted by the sincerity of the people and the familiar charm of the scrumptious meals, landscapes and cultural practices, I have returned for a third time - this time as a PhD researcher in anthropology, as part of the five-year project: 'Futuring Heritage: Conservation, Community and Contestation in the Eastern Himalayas'. This project examines conservation initiatives aimed at protecting forests, rivers and wildlife that hold cultural and environmental significance in the Eastern Himalayas. My research focuses on the Jaintia Hills and investigates how conservation narratives are shaped by relationships and social structures. Who participates or is excluded in sustaining value, and where people find meaning, are central to understanding conservation efforts in the region.

Environmental issues are interpreted differently by various 'communities'. For example, when a river in Meghalaya turned orange, some attributed it to an algae reaction, others saw it as a sign of divine anger, while some deemed it a temporary phenomenon to be eventually resolved by rainfall. Actions such as building houses along riverbanks, continuing resource extraction, performing rites and prayers for environmental healing, or creating fish sanctuaries - whether with deities, families, clans, localities, institutions or future generations.

Inspired by my own experiences in Meghalaya, my research seeks to broaden the narrative of conservation by highlighting diverse ways of relating to 'nature'. What does Jaintia's environmentalism look like if everyday practices of healing and negotiations with deities are placed in dialogue with emerging conservation initiatives? As issues like deforestation sound alarm urgently, it is high time to shift the current trajectory by more closely engaging with the perspectives of those - both human and nonhuman - that partake in processes of future-making.

For many, conservation is about having proper governance based on environmental science. Numerical value calculations are seen as the key to protecting threatened species and resources. When I landed in Delhi in December, looking at my PhD student visa, the immigration officer had only one question: 'Madam, why must anthropologists such as yourself research environmental concerns like climate change and deforestation? Aren't anthropologists interested in cultural heritage?' My answer to this question forms the backbone of my anthropological engagement with 'nature', where the boundaries between the natural and cultural worlds are crossed through everyday practices, beliefs, stories, dreams and also interactions with non-human others.

I hope that my research can contribute to new approaches for addressing Meghalaya's environmental challenges, often framed in terms of livelihood development. My work focuses on illuminating the heritage values and cultural practices embedded in everyday lives that have long shaped the unique human-nature dynamics in Meghalaya. In so doing, I aim to initiate a more nuanced and hopeful dialogue. This dialogue may acknowledge diverse and contingent connections between (and among) people and 'nature', fostering conservation efforts that are culturally sensitive and inclusive. Without considering cultural mechanisms of value attribution, conservation may risk becoming inefficient and disconnected from the very 'communities' it seeks to benefit.

(The author is a PhD scholar from Leiden University, The Netherlands currently doing research in Jaintia Hills)

Letters to the Editor

Sleep deprivation a major health hazard

Editor,
Political executives who glorify overwork and sleep deprivation by saying that they work all the time and sleep only for 3 to 4 hours are inflicting as much harm on the people as the celebrities who advertise for pan masala consumption. Overwork and lack of sleep are no less injurious to health than consumption of pan masala.

While pan masala is a leading cause of oral submucous fibrosis that often results in oral cancer, sleep deficiency and overwork lead to many chronic health problems, including heart

disease, kidney disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, stroke, obesity, and depression. Sleep deficiency is a major cause of injury, and sleepiness while driving is responsible for many accidents in our country.

A study by the World Health Organisation and the International Labour Organisation concludes "that working 55 or more hours per week is associated with an estimated 35% higher risk of a stroke and a 17% higher risk of dying from ischaemic heart disease, compared to working 35-40 hours a week".

Any promotion of unhealthy habits like overwork and sleep deprivation and unhealthy products like pan masala must be curbed.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

Action against hotels not maintaining strict hygienic standards

Editor,
It's a irony to be spending money and ending up with a stomach full of regret! Sadly, this could be the reality in some parts of our town, where the use of adulterated, low-quality, and repeatedly reused stale oil by hotels might turn tasty snacks into serious health hazards.

Let me share my ordeal. A couple of weeks ago, I purchased half a kilo of "bunias" from a hotel in Bara Bazar. Little did I know, I was also buying three days of misery. Within a few hours of consumption of

the snack our stomachs began to churn. That night, we suffered from vomiting and bloated stomachs. We couldn't help but curse the hotel!

Here's another unforgettable incident. About a year ago, my next-door neighbour's entire family, along with their guests, fell sick after eating hot "kachori" and "jalebi" bought from a reputed hotel in Jhalupara. Sadly, many others have their own bitter stories of consuming hotel snacks and ending up with nausea and dysentery.

What is most disappointing is that poor, hungry farmers and daily wage workers or vendors, after a long day of toil or journey from their villages to the town, usually walk into these market/roadside tea stalls with their kids for a quick snack of puri-sabji, samosas, kachauris, or jalebi. But if these items are

cooked in cheap, adulterated oil that has been reused multiple times, they might suffer from gastrointestinal problems, more particularly those with weak digestive systems. I sympathize with these poor people who do not know how to raise a complaint at all.

Some hotels and food stalls, (I am not saying all), in their attempt to cut costs, use substandard oil. It is medically established that when oil is heated repeatedly, it undergoes chemical changes, releasing harmful substances and free radicals that can adversely affect our body systems. Consuming food cooked in reused oil over a long period of time significantly increases the risk of heart disease, raises cholesterol levels, and contributes to certain cancers - a fact that many hoteliers remain unaware of. Furthermore,

in some hotel kitchens, leftover oil is left "uncovered" for days before being reused, creating a breeding ground for bacteria. This can lead to food poisoning and serious health complications. These hotels seem indifferent towards maintaining appropriate hygienic standards. A concerned shopkeeper from Mawkhur remarked that the kitchens of some hotels smell so bad that they are nauseating. Why don't the government authorities take strict action against them?

Incidentally, one cannot overlook the many types of pre-cooked, substandard snacks like "bhujia", "dalmuth", chips, sweets, chocolates, and biscuits that are poorly packed and sold in huge volumes. These snacks, typically consumed by our young children, are often sold many, many months after their

preparation. Aren't they likely to be heavy on the stomach? Does the government account for the sources of these label-less, cheap food items sold at Mawlonghat and Lewduh, both wholesale and retail? Fortunately, nature's gift of digestive fire in our kids is powerful enough to handle such low-grade items.

I believe it is time to take decisive action against those who sell products prepared solely with profit-making motives, without adhering to even the most basic standards of hygiene. I therefore urge the Health Minister, the concerned authorities at DHS, and the Deputy Commissioners to crack down on the unhealthy practices prevalent in street and bazaar tea stalls and hotels.

Strict guidelines and hygienic protocols for food preparation must be enforced. Regular "sur-

prise inspections" and stringent actions are essential to ensure that people are not exposed to these avoidable health hazards. Further, the government must pull up those traders who stock and sell adulterated and spurious food products.

Yes, we need to always bear in mind that not all that "glitters on our plate" is safe to eat. We need to choose wisely and enjoy mindfully, because our health is not worth compromising over a crispy kachori or jalebi that can wreak havoc on our alimentary canal!

Yours etc.,
Salil Gewali,
Shillong

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

"Toleration and liberty are the foundations of a great republic."

— Frank Lloyd Wright

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No. 161 SHILLONG, WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 22, 2025

Performing president

DONALD Trump is back on stage with a bang. His inaugural address aimed at fashioning a new America – and he has his tasks cut out with clarity and precision. Every sentence he spoke formed a policy statement. Not for him the 'blah-blah' that leaders of Third World countries excel in on such prime occasions. Yet, the bombasts and assertions of Making America Great and America First were there for effect; and of 'reclaiming' the sovereignty, 'restoration' of safety and 'balancing' of the scales of justice. His promise was also to create an America that's greater, stronger and more exceptional; a nation "proud, prosperous and free."

Matching with his image as a performer, Trump started his innings this time on a high note, signing several executive orders in the first hour of his presidency. While eyebrows might be raised over the US pullout from the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, his inauguration as the 47th president meant a season of significant changes for the United States. His new resolve to perform differently overwhelmed his first innings as the 45th president from 2016 until 2020. He's set to turn the US into a manufacturing nation from being a consumer base that drew products from all over the world, and more prominently from China. In fact, China was at the centre of his decisions on WHO -- his argument being that China is paying much less for its upkeep than the US -- and the decision to "take back" Panama Canal, which the US struggled to erect and then handed over to Panama, which however "gave it to China" for operational requirements. He also put China on notice with a threat to ban the money-spinning TikTok and alternatively seek a share in its profits. Trump's instant declaration of a national emergency on two counts aimed at ensuring the future security of the US – one on the Mexico border to check illegal immigration and the other being a national energy emergency to expand oil and gas drilling operations. His declaration to send troops to the southern border to discipline Mexico demonstrated a sense of urgency. Under Trump, in the next four years, censorship would end and freedom of speech restored. America, he asserted, will be a free nation.

The seriousness that a president attaches to his term in office, as exhibited by Trump, should be an example to leaders of nations like India. That he turned into action mode in the first hour itself with a vision for the future of his nation is markedly different from the monumental drag that is evident in governmental performances. Notably, Trump's vision for the future was also reflected in his decision to set up a department to ensure governmental efficiency. Finally, his promise to the wider world is that his legacy would be that of a peace-maker and unifier.

Letters to the Editor

Trump 2.0 an uncertain future

Editor,
Apropos of the editorial "Trump back in the saddle" (ST January 20, 2025) according to Newsweek and The Hill (an American news portal that covers Congress, politics, political campaign and Capitol Hill, a top US political website, read by the White House and more lawmakers than any other site) the relationship between political parties and socio-economic groups can be complex. Historically, the Republican Party has been associated with policies that favour lower taxes and fewer regulations, which have often appealed to wealthier individuals and businesses. However, recent trends show a shift, with wealthier Americans increasingly supporting the Democratic Party (Newsweek). This shift has led to a realignment of party dynamics, with Democrats gaining more support from affluent voters while Republicans appeal to a broader base, including working-class voters.

Hence while the Republican Party has traditionally been seen as the party of the rich and elite, this perception is evolving. Politics is always changing, and the lines between party support and socio-economic status are becoming more blurred. The editorial is right that the American President often aligns with their party's policies, but they also have significant autonomy in decision-making. While party leadership and platforms

provide a framework, the President can shape and implement policies based on their vision and priorities. This dynamic allows for a balance between party influence and presidential discretion. For example, a President might push for specific legislation that aligns with their party's goals, but they also have the power to issue executive orders and make decisions on foreign policy, national security, and other critical areas. It's a complex interplay between party loyalty and individual leadership.

In the United States of America wars are fought by both the Republican and Democrat presidency. Take for instance the American Civil War (1861-1865), Spanish-American War (1898), Gulf War (1990-1991), War in Afghanistan (2001 to present), Iraq War (2003-2011) and War on Terror (2001 to present) were started during the Republican presidency. War of 1812 (1812-15), Mexican-American War (1846-48), World War I (1914-18) under the presidency of Woodrow Wilson, World War II (1939-1945) under the presidency of Franklin D Roosevelt, the Korean War (1950-53), Vietnam War (1955-75) under the presidency of Lyndon B Johnson. These are the wars under the Democrat presidency.

Donald Trump's first term was marked by a mix of high-profile actions and controversies, but some argue that the results didn't always match his rhetoric. His second term, however, is shaping up to be quite different. Trump has promised a flurry of execu-

An important question that needs to be answered in the context of India's security calculus is why a country that is nearing 80 years has not been able to evolve a grand strategy which would guide its tactical manoeuvres. Almost all responses to non-state action have been stimulus driven. It is both ill-fated and ridiculous that the Indian state has neither felt the need for a "plan" or has failed to avail one. But in order to conceive a "plan", the first requirement is for a "vision." A "vision" should be about where the people who would construct a "plan" expects the country to be ten years from now. However, it wouldn't do to state that the "vision" is about a state of perpetual peace or rule of law. These aspects have to be clearly defined. Without a definition of what peace entails, a "plan" cannot be put into motion.

India is one of the most terror affected countries in the world. If Islam of the rabid kind is passing through a "transformative movement" and is, as a result, asserting its aggressive identity, then the hunting ground in which the scourge is manifesting itself is primarily India. Surrounded by inimical neighbours, India has been fire-fighting fanatical Islam ever since it has been balkanised. Tactical considerations had momentarily led it to tactfully sever a Hydra-headed monstrosity by way of Pakistan in 1971.

But the "triumph" could not be sustained, and the country is presently threatened by a plethora of ills from across the border which should have ideally been a successful staging ground for onward Indian forward engineering.

The insurgencies in the North East and the class struggles that are being waged by the Naxalites, too, have been no less virulent. The enchanted frontiers continue to burn and there is little or no let-up in Left-Wing extremism that characterises India's "heartland." In sum, the security issues that continue to vex and confound the Indian state are due to the lack of a "plan", and, as stated above a "vision" about how to go about constructing a "plan." After all, it is only an iron-clad objective that can set aright problems that are chronic in nature.

Furthermore, it is also an objective that would give rise

Envisioning Grand Strategy & Equilibrium

By Jaideep Saikia

to a time-tested methodology that would address a problem that comes to the fore with bewildering consistency. An objective would also propel counter action and if necessary, endure course correction from time to time. After all, all procedural mechanisms have to undergo recalibration once systemic anomalies are sighted or encountered. To that end, even as the grand strategy remains steadfast and resolute, waypoints that would invariably be encountered would have to be factored in and attuned to invisible circumstances. Security management of the serious sort has to be cognisant of the fact that the battles that are being waged across the length and breadth of India (and beyond!) are unrelenting in nature.

But why is it that India has not been able to construct a design that guides and governs strategy for robust security management? One of the aspects that this author has been able to unravel is the complete lack of comprehension of a security related dilemma.

Let the question of terrorism of the traditional sort be examined. It does not require rocket science to comprehend that terrorism that has been perpetrated in India is (a) systematic and sustained use of violence over time that is (b) always executed by an organisation that has a predetermined objective which is always political in nature and (c) has an external derivation despite the fact that internal dissonances are invariably manipulated to provide it ground for action. I have been ridiculed on many occasions for harping on the extraneous aspect. A simple gedankenexperiment will prove the point that I have been continually making in all my writings and lectures for the last three decades.

North East India is surrounded by five countries. If one were to hypothetically make all the five countries disappear from the "strategic encirclement" that the region is heir to, would not the non-state action that has been infuriating the expanse also disappear? The United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), notwithstanding the modicum of support it once enjoyed inside Assam, sustained itself from the state's

near-abroad. Its period of outward demonstration accompanied its forays into Bangladesh—during the Bangladesh Nationalist Party regime—and Pakistan. Later it had well laid out camps in Bhutan for almost a decade from where it carried out operations inside Assam without let and hindrance. Once ousted from the Himalayan kingdom by the Royal Bhutan Army (with logistical support from the Indian army) it shifted to Bangladesh. Although its 7 and 709 Battalions stationed in Sukhni (Samdrup Jongkhar) and Kalikhola were destroyed, the organisation continued to operate from its 109 Battalion in Bangladesh's Sherpur. Today, the remnants of the ULFA are billeted in Myanmar with its megalomaniac "chief of staff" attempting to run his motley band of ineffectual cadres from a Chinese prefecture (Ruili) in Yunnan.

The story of insurgency and terror is no different for other insurgent or terror groups. For instance, if there was no Muridke in Pakistan it would have been difficult for the Lashkar-e-Toiba or the Jaish-e-Mohammad to send its operatives into India.

It is true that non-state actors continually change their strategies. Pakistan based tanzems have been known to "disappear" in order to evade sanction by primarily the United States. But they surface with a new identity to continue what has come to be a relentless war against the Kafirs. There is also great rejoicing among state practitioners at the fact that the once dreaded National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) came overground hook, line and sinker. I don't wish to be contented as a "prophet of doom", but the prognosis that is being made is that a sinister phoenix could rise from the ashes of the NDFB, perhaps with a different motivation. But with an impetus that would disturb the state. It is this ability to crystal gaze that must become an integral slice of the grand strategy that India must begin to shape. Incidentally, it is not as if there is nothingness "out there". There are theoreticians of adroit practice and practitioners of sage theory. But for one reason or the other the security managers

have either been too preoccupied with self-projection or have not thought it wise to bring about a conglomeration of collective wisdom that could have cobbled out a plan that would translate into a real time definition of an end-state that the Indian state is groping for.

In conclusion a somewhat "ready-to-wear" formulation is being put forward for consideration.

The "battle-strategy" seems quite simple on paper. However, the manner in which it would have to be applied is pretty complex. As aforesaid, recalibration and course corrections would have to be engineered in order to perfect the stratagem. But be as it may, the schematic construction stems from the fact that a state has to (a) defend itself and its assets (in whatever form such assets may take) from a non-state actor. The latter would naturally be a well-honed organisation which is backed by a political ideology that seeks to counter the existing system. It has to then (b) destroy the organisation which is seeking to threaten and overthrow the state. The means by which this could be achieved are manifold, but it would primarily be a combination of Saam (reconciliation), Daam (monetary inducement), Dand (punitive action), Bhed (divide).

Once achieved, the ideology of the organisation has to be (c) defeated by cleverly disseminating a counter narrative that offsets the non-state organisation's one time appeal/support among the populace. It is here where the human face and the ability of the state to showcase its acceptability to the governed comes into play. Lastly the state, not content with the "temporary" destruction/defeat of the non-state organisation must ensure that the defeated organisation is (d) denied the opportunity or newfound space to resurrect itself.

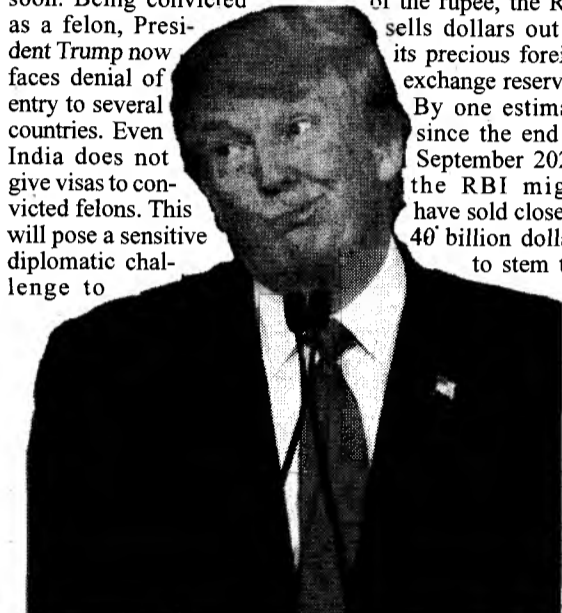
In integrating and sequentially allowing the four "ds" to permeate strategy, a grand strategy or a plan will emerge. But the "vision" is the most important starting point. It will regulate the "plan". And, it is such a plan that would usher forth the equilibrium that has been eluding the Indian state for closer to eight decades.

(Jaideep Saikia is a conflict theorist and bestselling author)

Economic Outlook Dimmed by Banking Crunch and Trump Effect

By Ajit Ranade

Donald Trump takes charge as the forty seventh president of the United States, a second time for him. He won a big electoral victory in his second attempt. But he is now the only former and incoming American president who has been convicted as a felon, which normally would have carried a sentence of a stiff fine or jail. But the judge who pronounced the sentencing declined to punish the incoming president and gave him an unconditional discharge. He also has three other criminal and felony cases which now may or may not go to trial anytime soon. Being convicted as a felon, President Trump now faces denial of entry to several countries. Even India does not give visas to convicted felons. This will pose a sensitive diplomatic challenge to



many countries, where President Trump might want to visit.

This is the beginning of an unprecedented presidency. The people have voted him in very decisively despite their knowledge of his pending criminal cases. The policies that Trump has announced which he plans to implement are even more popular. The policies enjoy an approval rating ten percent more than his electoral support. What are those policies? They include stiff measures against illegal aliens, restricting entry of legal aliens such as those who come on H1B visas, imposing high import duties especially on goods coming in from Mexico, Canada and China. His supporters and others too have come to believe the rhetoric that foreign producers "harvest" the American consumer market and steal American jobs. Hence free access to the American consumer is no longer going to be available to foreign suppliers, in this next Trump regime. As such during his previous term from 2016 till 2020, he had imposed high tariffs on nearly one trillion dollars' worth of goods being imported into America. That tariff will be even bigger now. He promises to set up an "External Revenue Services", a play on "Internal Revenue Service" which is the name of the American income tax department. Instead of pinching your pockets, I am going to pinch the pockets of those grubby foreigners who take unfair advantage of free market access, he tells his voters.

The impact of policies of Trump 2.0 are expected to be adverse for India. Firstly, higher tariffs on Chinese goods coming into America, will divert those to third countries. China is suffering from a slowdown and excess capacity. Which means that the Chinese will try to dump goods on other countries at very low cost, especially items like steel, non-ferrous metals, consumer electronics and chemicals. India already has a huge 100-billion-dollar bilateral trade deficit with China which is proving tough to reduce.

The other impact is via sanctions against buying cheaper Russian crude oil. India benefited from the cheap crude and exporting refined petrol and diesel to United States and Europe. That will be under closer scrutiny and become more difficult. A third impact is via the strong dollar which means a weakening rupee. This makes foreign investors nervous, and that has

been reflected in massive outflows. During this month of January alone, till 17 January, foreign institutional investors (FII) have pulled out 47,000 crore or nearly 6 billion dollars, and the stock market has taken a big beating. This January the outflow is the highest since 2008. As dollars are pulled out, the rupee has fallen to 87 and might fall further. In trying to defend the rupee strength, the Reserve Bank of India sells dollars. As FII's try to get out, there emerges a shortage of dollars, which would have made the rupee weak and dollar strong. To prevent drastic weakening of the rupee, the RBI sells dollars out of its precious foreign exchange reserves.

By one estimate since the end of September 2024, the RBI might have sold close to 40 billion dollars to stem the

tide. This depletes India's stock of forex and also reduces the liquidity in the banking system. And the net result is that the rupee, is still falling but banks are facing a liquidity crunch. As of end December the RBI is reporting a net liquidity deficit of 2.5 trillion rupees in the banking system. This liquidity crunch makes short term interest rates shoot up. That is not good news, since on the other hand there has been a demand for the RBI policy rate (the short-term repo rate) to be brought down. The demand for lower interest rates is coming from the government of India as well as from interest sensitive sectors like housing, real estate and personal finance. As such the real disposable income of households is moving very sluggishly, thanks to inflation eating into the household budget, and wages not rising fast enough. Hence consumer spending growth also has been muted, causing worries about GDP growth. As such GDP growth this year is lower at 6.4 percent compared to 8.2 last year. Next year also the growth rate, might be moderate at around 6.5 per cent

Thus, Trump's policies directly are affecting us via the Chinese dumping threat, the flight of foreign investors from stock markets, weakening rupee and consequent liquidity crunch, continuing high interest rates and inflationary tendency. Of course, it is incorrect to blame all our economic woes on Trump's policies. We are also facing fiscal limits, so that pumping up growth just by government spending will not work. Private investment spending also has to pick up. That depends on consumer confidence and demand revival, which in turn depends on employment and wage growth. It is all interconnected. And there is a big role for psychology and sentiment. The world is watching as the uncertainty unfolds, about how disruptive President Trump will be for the world economy. If he pushes for a ceasefire in Ukraine that would be a plus point. But if America hunkers down and becomes more protectionist, isolationist and mercantilist that is not good news for free trade. His curtailment of H1B visas can hurt India's software exports, the current bright spot, quite adversely. We are in for a bumpy ride this year tackling the Trump impact and domestic economic challenges.

(Dr. Ajit Ranade is a noted economist). (Syndicate: The Billion Press) (email: editor@thebillionpress.org)

So, while it might not take "the world by storm" in the traditional sense, it will certainly be a presidency to watch closely.

Yours etc;
VK Lyngdoh
Via email

India needs to tax the super-rich

Editor,

All talk of merit takes a back seat when a person inherits huge properties from his parents and that too without paying any tax in India. Merit should take a back seat for the sake of ensuring social justice and for equitable representation in government both for elected and selected personnel like caste reservation in government jobs and state and caste quota for Members of Parliament. This because it is a positive discrimination for a just society. But a tax free inheritance of a huge property not only negates merit but also snowballs into inequality by giving an unchecked filip to the concentration of wealth, thereby creating an unjust society.

Eminent economist Prabhakar Patnaik rightly said, "The argument of the defenders of capitalism cannot possibly justify income through inheritance; on the contrary, earning an income through inheritance negates their argument that profits are a reward for some special quality."

Thomas Piketty has aptly called progressive inheritance taxes the "second major fiscal innovation of the twentieth century" after

progressive income taxes. Inheritance tax is 55 per cent in Japan, 50 per cent in South Korea, 45 per cent in France, 40 per cent in the USA and the UK, 34 per cent in Spain, 33 per cent in Ireland, and 30 per cent in Belgium and Germany. Those countries spend the money to ensure that every citizen gets quality health care and quality education. But when a suggestion was made to introduce inheritance tax in India, the top leaders of the ruling party at the Centre vehemently opposed it.

It is unfortunate that the ideas of socialism and left ideology have been branded as dangerous whereas crony capitalism is nothing but turning the promise given to the majority of the electorate into a jumble. Also, serving the interests of a handful of billionaires means doing a disservice to the labour intensive MSMEs.

Rising inequality is the most pressing problem in India today. French economist, Thomas Piketty and others observed, "The Billionaire Raj headed by India's modern bourgeoisie is now more unequal than the British Raj headed by the colonialist forces." Remedial measures need to be taken without delay. Ironically, even a discussion on wealth distribution to cure inequality has become a dreaded topic.

All modern welfare states, including the United States of America, have accepted the ideas of socialism in their policy of giving social security to the people, like health care and handsome allowance for the unemployed. A welfare state is more inclined to socialism than far right

capitalism. A research study published by the IMF in June 2015 debunked the theory of trickle-down economics. As per the report, annual growth decreases by 0.1% within 5 years when there is a 1% rise in the income of the wealthiest 20%. But annual growth increases by 0.4% within 5 years when there is a 1% rise in the income of the poorest 20%. It reiterated the dangers of capitalism without effective state intervention.

Trickle-down cannot happen automatically in an economy. Poor children died young after working as chimney sweepers in capitalist countries before the emergence of welfare states. Modern welfare states realised that the trickle-down effects are not feasible without state intervention. Now, the welfare states have created channels through which some money can trickle-down. Income tax, super tax for the super-rich, and inheritance tax are examples of such channels.

India needs to ensure that super taxes for the super-rich and inheritance tax trickles down through the state machinery to the bottom to address the rising inequality. It would make a mega-wedding look not so glaringly ugly amid hunger and almost zero access to quality education and health care for the majority of the population.

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

"A soldier will fight long and hard for a bit of colored ribbon."

— Napoleon Bonaparte

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No.162 SHILLONG, THURSDAY, JANUARY 23, 2025

Definite timeless for project completion

MEGHALAYA is a laggard state when it comes to completion of major infrastructure projects particularly roads and highways. An example is the 38 Km long, Shillong-Western Bypass costing Rs Rs 2,205 crores which was sanctioned by the Union Ministry of Road Transport and Highways way back in November 2022. The project involves the construction of a 38 km-long two-lane highway from Lad Umsaw to Baniun in Upper Shillong. Needless to say the project includes construction of bridges, inter-sections, service roads and culverts. The State government has finalised the alignment for the Shillong Western Bypass and land acquisition proceedings for the road project had started in the two districts of Ri Bhoi and East Khasi Hills. Now suddenly there are section of the road where members of certain clans through whose land the road will be passing have put a spanner in the works by stopping the construction work on the plea that they have not received due compensation. The Government on the other hand says the compensation work is done.

The National Highways & Infrastructure Development Corporation Ltd (NHIDCL) face constant challenges in undertaking road projects in Meghalaya as they are made to change alignments by certain dorbar shnong. In December 2024 the work on a stretch of the project was stopped by local clan members between 13.465 km to 15.650 km at Umralleng village even though the land had been handed over to the agency by the Ri-Bhoi district administration on June 18, 2024. According to the NHIDCL official, the clan members claim that they have not received any compensation from the heads of the clan and hence they will not allow any construction work.

Since this particular stretch is the only access point to the project site of package-II it is impossible for the NHIDCL to go ahead with its work, thereby leading to unnecessary stalling of the project and extension of timelines. What is worrying is that Meghalaya has a very short dry season where major construction work can happen. Missing out on this window of opportunity results in delays and cost escalation. Recently the State Government published a tender notice in the local newspapers for construction, metalling and blacktopping of internal roads at Laitkor Lumheh near Woodlands Institute of Nursing. The road length is a mere 1.035 Km. The project cost is Rs 2.46 crores and the time of completion given to the bidders is 18 months or 1.5 years. Why should construction of a 1.8 km road take so long? What is the normal time taken especially today when much of the work is executed by machines? There is a serious lacuna in the farming of tenders in the PWD which perhaps is executed through the copy-paste method. Such long gestation periods for government construction works is a drain on scarce resources. The PWD Minister has to take note of such poor crafting of tenders. Meghalaya has to meet the challenge of sticking to timelines on all construction projects.

Why is U.S. President Donald Trump so keen now to take over Greenland? China and Russia are equally eyeing at the huge mineral deposits under Arctic

By Christine Schwöbel-Patel

Why is Donald Trump so obsessed with Greenland? During his first presidency, Trump surprised many by voicing his intention in 2019 to buy the Arctic island from Denmark as part of a real estate deal. At the time, he was mostly met with ridicule, spurred in no small part by Trump himself tweeting an image of his vulgar Trump Tower planted in the serene Greenlandic scene: "I promise not to do this to Greenland." After all, 80 percent of the country's surface area is covered in ice, and its GDP (US\$3.24 billion in 2021) is generated largely through fishing exports and subsidies from the Danish government.

It might have appeared as if Trump's megalomania was fixing its sights on a bizarre, even outlandish, object. Certainly, the US president did not take the wishes of the Indigenous Inuit population into consideration, while Denmark, which continues to retain certain privileges of a colonial master, brushed his remarks aside.

In the weeks leading up to his inauguration, however, Trump has doubled down on his desire for US control of Greenland. The United States needs Greenland "for national security purposes," he stated in a press conference. Rather than viewing this as a simple real estate deal with Denmark, this time around, the president-elect declined to rule out using military or economic force to take control.

In terms of US national security, the Arctic is of considerable strategic military importance as a staging area for nuclear-armed submarines that can hide beneath the ice. Indeed, the United States has a long and somewhat bizarre history of storing nuclear missiles in Greenlandic ice, including one particular Cold War military project called Project Iceworm and its highly publicized "cover project," Camp Century.

From Pituffik Space Base in northern Greenland, which the United States has commanded since the end of World War II, military personnel operate early warning systems. The base also facilitates space surveillance and the command of satellites. Of course, US missiles based here are in close proximity to Russia.

Yet in view of the fact that Washington already has this presence without needing direct ownership of Greenland, it seems curious that Trump would now, even against the backdrop of heightening tensions with Russia and China, want to go further still to control the whole country.

Most likely, this is because of the vast raw minerals that are believed to be hidden in the melting ice and Greenland's occasional reluctance to issue mining licenses for those minerals. Over the past forty years, the Arctic has warmed four times faster than the rest of the globe. Greenland's ice

sheets are particularly affected, prompting scientists to raise the alarm on rising sea levels, extreme weather events, and increased greenhouse gas emissions.

Where some see the greening of Greenland as cause for concern, others see an opportunity. The melting ice is making accessible shipping routes, land, minerals, and metals that have been inaccessible for thousands of years, including minerals designated "critical" for the so-called green transition. The hottest natural resources in an age of climate catastrophe are those required for electric vehicles, wind turbines, and solar panels. This includes rare earth elements.

We should note here a rather bold statement by one Australian mining company, Energy Transition Minerals (ETM), suggesting that Greenland has the potential to become the most significant Western world producer of critical rare earths. At present, China is the leading exporter of rare earths.

In terms of US national security, the Arctic is of considerable strategic military importance as a staging area for nuclear-armed submarines that can hide beneath the ice. Indeed, the United States has a long and somewhat bizarre history of storing nuclear missiles in Greenlandic ice, including one particular Cold War military project called Project Iceworm and its highly publicized

According to the International Energy Agency, China is dominant in rare earth ore extraction (60 percent of the market) and refinement (90 percent of the market). It has been exploiting this market dominance, including through recent bans on the export of technologies to extract, separate, and refine rare earths. Breaking this near monopoly has been a key objective for Western green industrial plans, which have been focusing on securing global value chains in what Thea Riofranco has called the "security-sustainability-nexus." ETM is currently embroiled in investment arbitration against Greenland to force either compensation amounting to an eye-watering US\$11.5 billion or an extraction license. In 2021, a new Greenlandic government, led by the left-wing anti-mining party Inuit Ataqatiguit and favoured by independence-seeking Indigenous Inuit, cancelled the licenses previously handed out to ETM due to uranium pollution risks.

ETM's arbitration claim is backed by capital from a London-based litigation financier. No doubt, such arbitration is the kind of legal-economic force that Trump was referring to. The potential of (coerced) rare earth exploitation is

also most likely the reason why the responses by other hegemonic powers of the green transition have been so much more forceful this time around. Greenland holds promise as the next extractivist frontier.

In this inter-imperial dance around Greenland, Denmark plays the central role. "Greenland belongs to the Greenlanders," stated Danish prime minister Mette Frederiksen in response to Trump's remarks. Yet this is not quite true. Greenland is not in fact an independent nation-state but a so-called autonomous province of the Danish Realm. It has had some form of devolved power since the 1950s, but the relationship with Denmark remains strained. There is a history of settler colonialism by the Danish, involuntary birth control for Indigenous women and girls, and taking of Indigenous children to be educated as "role models" in Denmark. Danish rather than Greenlandic remains the language of political, administrative, and cultural

elites. A key area where Denmark retains colonial-style power over Greenland is in the field of foreign and security policy, which accounts for Trump wanting to purchase Greenland from Denmark. International lawyers call this retention of power the denial of the right to self-determination. This is not the first time that the United States has tried to purchase Greenland from Denmark; the Danish state declined a previous offer in 1946. In a symbolic gesture, Donald Trump Jr posted a picture on X of himself standing in front of the statue of Hans Egede on his recent "day trip" to Nuuk, the capital of Greenland. Seemingly to recognize a kindred soul of imperial violence, Trump Jr recorded a video beside the statue, referring to the Norwegian missionary and colonialist as the "founder" of Greenland.

This same statue was daubed with red paint and marked with the word "decolonize" in 2021 — the year in which celebrations to mark three hundred years since Egede's arrival on Greenlandic shores were subsequently cancelled. Under international law, it would not be legal for Denmark to "sell" Greenland. But as brutal acts of occupation and an-

expected to take part in the forum's event through video conferencing on Thursday. He has long championed wealth accumulation — including his own — and counts multibillionaire Elon Musk as a top adviser. Like Biden's call for making billionaires, "begin to pay their fair share," through the U.S. tax code, Oxfam — a global advocacy group — called on governments to tax the richest to reduce inequality and extreme wealth, and to "dismantle the new aristocracy." The group called for steps like the break-up of monopolies, capping CEO pay, and regulation of corporations to ensure they pay "living wages" to workers.

Yours etc.,
Yash Pal Ralhan,
Via email

nexation in the contemporary world show us, from Gaza to Ukraine, the denial of the right to self-determination is a common practice by imperial states. Such denial regularly goes hand in hand with the racialization and dehumanization of the Indigenous population.

If Denmark is the principal imperial dancer, then the European Union (EU), Russia, China, and various billionaires are further soloists. In 2024, European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen travelled to Nuuk to open an EU office, intended to mark "greater cooperation" between Greenland and the EU. The cooperation agreement promises investment in education and skills on the island in exchange for securing critical raw materials for the EU. This may explain why Germany and France were quick to issue warnings to Trump about the inviolability of borders.

To further illustrate the jostling over Greenland, a Danish intelligence report published in December 2024 stated that Russia is moving more aggressively in the Arctic. The report also suggested that Moscow is willing to grant China greater access to the region, albeit reluctantly. Indeed, the status of Sino-Russian cooperation over a Polar Silk Road initiative, intended to provide investments for transportation infrastructure in the Arctic, remains a concern for Western interests in the region.

And then there are the billionaires. In 2022, Jeff Bezos, Michael Bloomberg, and Bill Gates hit the headlines by investing in a "massive Arctic treasure hunt" in Greenland. These actors are all wrangling for control of resources, while the wishes of the Greenlanders are drowned out or cancelled through legal means.

Meanwhile, the Greenlandic prime minister has again expressed the desire to pursue independence. There is enormous pressure on Greenlanders to achieve greater economic independence from Denmark. The Danish state continues to present itself as a benevolent benefactor to Greenland, evidenced through its subsidies. Whether Greenlanders should exploit the mineral deposits is a major topic of political contention. Here, it is worth recalling that the "rare" in rare earths is a misnomer. Rare earths are not in fact unusually scarce.

What is rare is the willingness of peoples and communities to have rare earth deposits exploited, as this is almost always connected to uranium pollution and poisoning of human and nonhuman nature. In this sense, a drive for economic independence in an imperial and nationalist framework may well lead to Greenland becoming a new energy sacrifice zone emerging at the extractivist frontier of the green transition. (IPA Service)

Courtesy: Jacobin

Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

Discover Your Purpose..!

The other day while speaking at a function on why we need to find a purpose in life, I noticed a young lady putting her head down most of the time.

I met her afterwards during the tea break: "You don't seem to be interested in the topic?" I asked her as she smiled sheepishly, "You are different Bob," she said, "you're a writer, I'm only a banker!"

"If you'll permit me," I told the audience, after the tea break and as I gave the same young lady a smile, "I'd like to repeat a small story! A cop story, told by a cop."

"It was some years ago that I stopped a man about thirty years old for speeding down a country road. As I approached his car, I could tell he was upset with me, with life, or with whatever. As a rule I have always tried to treat the public as I would want my family treated. I admit I haven't always succeeded, but I've tried, and I

Identify your strengths: What are your natural talents and skills?

Explore your values: What matters most to you in life?

Consider your impact: How do you want to make a difference in the world?

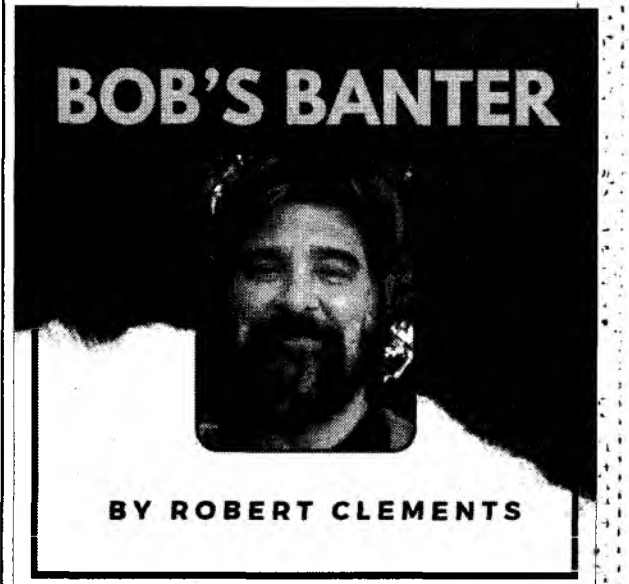
And why should we have a purpose in life I continued and found the young lady leaning forward eager to learn, because, there's Power in Purpose, having a clear sense of purpose can bring numerous benefits, including:

Direction and focus: Purpose gives you a sense of direction, helping you prioritize and make decisions.

Motivation and drive: Knowing your purpose can ignite a sense of passion and motivation, driving you to pursue your goals.

Fulfillment and satisfaction: Living a purpose-driven life can bring a deep sense of fulfillment and satisfaction.

Resilience and perseverance: Purpose can help you navigate challenges and setbacks, giving you the



tried to do so with the young man!"

"I told him life was too good to blow it up with havin' an accident while speeding. A few weeks later I was called to my Captain's office before the start of my shift. He had in front of him a letter from the man I had stopped and another addressed to me."

"I thought to myself, 'Oh boy, here we go. Now I have to defend myself for doing my job. But to my amazement I was so completely wrong. In the Captain's letter he thanked me for my professional conduct and for writing him a ticket. In my letter he thanked me for my conduct and for the advice I'd given him and the concern I had for him.'"

"He went on to say I'd saved his life: It seemed his life that day was spinning out of control, and he'd made up his mind to end his life by crashing into something at a high speed. He was stopped by me, and what changed his mind were my kind words to him, he was surprised someone cared enough to talk him out of speeding!"

"Of all the letters and cards I have ever received in my life, I cherish this the most; whenever I feel down and wonder about my job, my life and future, I look at it and know I've been put here by my Lord and I'll always be in the right place at the right time, even if I'm only a cop!"

There were tears in the same young lady's eyes as I finished, and as I continued my talk I saw new enthusiasm in her face as she realized there was a divine purpose in her being a banker!

I continued my talk and now she listened.

Finding one's purpose can be a lifelong journey, filled with twists and turns. It requires introspection, self-awareness, and a willingness to explore and learn. Here are some key aspects to consider when searching for your purpose:

Reflect on your passions: What activities bring you joy and make you feel alive?

strength to persevere.

I then gave them some inspiring stories of modern people who had a sense of purpose and told them that throughout history, individuals have discovered their purpose and made a profound impact on the world. Consider the stories of: Malala Yousafzai: A young Pakistani activist who fought for girls' education, surviving a Taliban assassination attempt and becoming a Nobel Peace Prize laureate. She could have easily decided that living in a country which hardly gives women a voice, hers was a life of silence, but no, she found purpose.

Jane Goodall: A British primatologist and conservationist who dedicated her life to protecting chimpanzees and the environment. Why would she do that? She could have just loved her pet dog or cat, but no, she decided to spread that net of love far and wide.

I ended with Nelson Mandela: A South African anti-apartheid revolutionary who spent twenty seven years in prison, only to emerge and become the country's first black president, advocating for reconciliation and forgiveness. He could have come out and spent the rest of his years at a beach resort, no, he came out with a blazing sense of purpose and preached through living it out the ability to build a nation through forgiveness!

Yes, dear reader, there's a purpose in life for all of us, waiting to be discovered and fulfilled. By exploring our passions, strengths, values, and impact, we can uncover our purpose and live a life that truly matters.

So don't think of yourself as "I'm just a... whatever." Discover your purpose wherever you've been placed and maybe like the cop, save lives..!

The Author conducts an online, eight session Writers and Speakers Course. If you'd like to join, do send a thumbs-up to WhatsApp number 9892572883 or send a message to bobbanter@gmail.com

Letters to the Editor

Crisis of rising inequality

Editor,
The world's wealthiest people have gathered at Davos for the annual World Economic Forum where the latest version of the Oxfam report titled "Takers, Not Makers," is under discussion. This shows the truth before the world and while the billionaire wealth is increasing by leaps and bounds, poverty is driven largely by steep inequality and it remains a pestering problem the world over. This needs to be seriously considered. In 2024 alone the billionaires grew richer by USD 2 trillion-amassing an astonishing USD 5.7 billion a day whereas millions struggle to survive on less than USD 6.85 a day. This is a grim reality that has been a constant since the early 1990s. It bears mention that India also is afflicted by the

scourge of inequality and to an alarming extent. Oxfam's findings challenge the myth of the self-made billionaire where the report reveals that 60 percent of billionaire wealth isn't earned through innovation or hard work but inherited, monopolised or secured through crony connections.

It must also be mentioned here that every billionaire under 30 today inherited their fortune from their parents. Moreover, the trend of wealth passing from one privileged generation to the next is only growing stronger. It is an interesting fact that much of the world's extreme wealth is taken, not made. Mahatma Gandhi once aptly remarked, "There is enough for everyone's need but not for everyone's greed. This growing concentration of wealth comes at a heavy cost. Public services in many countries are deteriorating as governments lose revenue due to tax avoidance by cor-

porations and the ultra-rich and to make up for these losses regressive taxes on goods and services are imposed which ultimately hit the poorest the hardest.

Although billionaires have expanded their fortunes but ordinary people are facing shrinking access to healthcare, education and other basic needs. This in a way makes governments complicit in furtherance of inequality. Oxfam also highlights the continuing exploitation of the Global South by the Global North. Billionaires and corporations extract wealth from poorer nations which is often through unfair financial systems or exploitative supply chains. The report aptly calls this modern-day colonialism—a system where resources and labour are taken from the world's poorest to fuel the lifestyles of the richest. Women and marginalised communities remain the worst sufferers in this

unequal system. In informal economies, women often work under exploitative conditions, and migrant workers in wealthy nations are paid significantly less than their local counterparts. Climate change further worsens their plight, with those who contribute the least to global emissions facing the harshest consequences.

US President, Donald Trump is not setting foot in Davos this week but the head of the World Economic Forum says the new president has brought renewed interest in the annual gathering of business and political leaders. "It's true that everyone here is very interested to understand more what Trump 2.0 is all about," WEF President Borge Brende told AFP in an interview.

Trump is casting a long shadow over the Swiss Alpine resort, where corporate and political leaders will debate his policies on conflicts, trade, taxes, immigration and

climate change, to name a few. Oxfam international also predicted that at least five trillionaires will crop up over the next decade. A year ago the group forecast that only one trillionaire would appear during that period. Oxfam's research adds weight to a warning by outgoing President Joe Biden last week of a "dangerous concentration of power in the hands of very few ultra-wealthy people." The group's sharp-edged report, titled "Takers Not Makers," also says the number of people in poverty has barely budged since 1990. The World Economic Forum expects to host some 3,000 attendees, including business executives, academics, government officials, and civic group leaders at its annual meeting in the Alpine village of Davos. President-elect Donald Trump, who visited Davos twice during his first term and was set to take the oath of office on Monday, is

expected to take part in the forum's event through video conferencing on Thursday. He has long championed wealth accumulation — including his own — and counts multibillionaire Elon Musk as a top adviser.

Like Biden's call for making billionaires, "begin to pay their fair share," through the U.S. tax code, Oxfam — a global advocacy group — called on governments to tax the richest to reduce inequality and extreme wealth, and to "dismantle the new aristocracy." The group called for steps like the break-up of monopolies, capping CEO pay, and regulation of corporations to ensure they pay "living wages" to workers.

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

"Conformity is the jailer of freedom and the enemy of growth."

— John F. Kennedy

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No. 163 SHILLONG, FRIDAY, JANUARY 24, 2025

Ailing Railways, mishaps

THE train mishap in Jalgaon, Maharashtra, that killed 13 persons and injured over 15 more came as another shock on the rails. Considering the abrupt manner and sequence of events, this was perhaps a fait accompli. Yet, this is symptomatic of the chaos that reigns Indian Railways on several counts. Successive governments have neglected the railways and even the basic amenities are not being provided on the trains. For instance, in this age of electronics revolution, communication between the loco pilot, TTEs and even passengers in their seats/berths should be possible without any expense other than the little that is needed for installation of the sound/video system inside every compartment. The result is, when a station approaches, there is no internal announcement. When an abrupt stop takes place in between the journey and a train is halted for minutes or even hours, the actual reason for the halt is one of conjecture. The sudden halt of the Lucknow-Mumbai Pushpak Express in Jalgaon apparently caused confusion among the passengers, who might have alighted not only because of the now-publicised "false rumour by a tea-seller," but also as they thought the train would halt for a longer time. This happens in the case of every abrupt or prolonged halt. The tea-seller story in itself might be a motivated plant by the railway authorities. Had there been a system for instant communication between TTEs, loco pilot and the passengers, this tragedy could have been avoided or the number of deaths due to over-run by another train in the adjoining track reduced.

When Narendra Modi took charge of the central government in 2014, he had raised the expectations of the people. He promised bullet trains and more. These are yet to materialize. Then, word came that the government would be concentrating on safety aspects. Yet, major rail mishaps occurred due to human or system error, as in the case of the horrendous collision between three trains in Odisha's Balasore district in 2023, which killed around 300 passengers. Those who travel by trains know full well that there has been only marginal improvement in the railway services in the past 10 years; and so with speed. The ticket reservation system, including the online mode, is subjected to massive manipulations. While this had been the case in the past too, the point to stress is that the Modi dispensation has not changed the scenario for the better. Outdated tracks, rusted rakes, slow speed, poor pantry services etc continue to be the curse of India's railway system. The abolition of the system of having a separate budget for the railways by Modi since 2014 perhaps worsened the scenario. There is no clarity about the number of new trains introduced every year, the fund allotments for each sector etc., due to a lack of dissemination of information since 2014. The plight of the passengers remains worse.

India's Fundamental Law @75

By Kyrsoibor Pyrtuh

We the People:

We the people believe that the Constitution is the Fundamental Law which governs this vast and diverse Nation known as India. We the people/citizens had given to ourselves this Law which is above reproach, but yet amenable to the diverse contexts and situations or circumstances, thereby accommodating the aspirations and assertions of ethnic, religious, non-religious, language, caste, socio-economic and political groups of different hues and inclinations.

The Shillong Records Collection Centre, had observed the 75 years of the adoption of the Constitution on November 26, 2024 by launching the book entitled, India: From 1915 to 1950. The Shillong Records Collection Centre was created with the definitive philosophy to fulfil the political aspirations of the Hynniewtrep people in accordance with the treaties or agreements negotiated and signed between the Dominion of India and Hynniewtrep people of various Hima or States via their Syiem (Khasi Traditional Head) or representatives. To quote from the preface of the book, "In so far as India is concerned the period from August 15, 1947 to January 25, 1950 is a period of transition. Under great stress and strain...the Constitution of India was framed by the Constituent Assembly of India... and it was adopted on the November 26, 1949 which secures to all the citizens Fraternity assuring the dignity of individual and unity of the Nation...the words "Unity of the Nation" were substituted by the words "Unity and Integrity of the Nation" by virtue of the Forty-Second Constitution Amendment Act 1976."

In the light of the present day politics of hate and bigotry which is being perpetrated with such impunity, we the people must stand up to the majoritarian politics of intolerance and oppression. The members of the Drafting Committee was prophetic when they penned down in the draft the necessity to add to the preamble, the clause about fraternity- "The Committee felt that the need for fraternal concord and goodwill in India was never greater than now and that this particular aim of the new constitution should be emphasised by special mention in the preamble." (The Draft Constitution Dated February 21, 1948).

Historical Constitutional Aspect of the Hynniewtrep People:

This will give us a sense how this region became part of Dominion of India. The historical claims of the Hynniewtrep people within the Indian Constitution, particularly during the critical period between 1946 and 1949 was marked by significant political manoeuvring

between the two major political groups: the Federation of Khasi States and the Khasi-Jaintia Federated National Conference. The tension and negotiations between these groups reflected not just the struggles for political representation, autonomy and identity for the Hynniewtrep people within the emerging framework of Independent India, but also the political maturity of the people back then.

In the Hynniewtrep region, the movement for political autonomy and self-rule can be traced back to 1923. The reason for the formation of the Khasi National Dorbar was laid bare in the Letter and Notice dated July 27, 1923- "You are all aware that the people of India had started a great movement for self-rule and independence. Since 1921 the British rulers had initiated certain reforms to facilitate participation of native Indians in Government and many Indians have begun to occupy important positions including

(Sutnga) or Jaintia State and other British Areas under the Khasi & Jaintia Hills District to their former position under the Khasi State. This was done to bring together both the Khasi Native States and British areas of Khasi & Jaintia Hills as one administrative Unit within the purview of the new Constitution. This unification is made possible by virtue of the provision in the Annexed Agreement which was appended to the Instrument of Accession. According to para 4 of the Annexed Agreement, "... The Federation requests that all possible help should be given to facilitate the unification of all (Khasi) territory. All Khasi territories which decide to rejoin States of which they had formerly formed a part should be allowed to do so. Other parts of British India-Khasi Territory should, if they desire, be allowed to join the Federation as Units."

In an unpublished paper, Government and Politics in North East India, it is stated

"In the light of the present day politics of hate and bigotry which is being perpetrated with such impunity, we the people must stand up to the majoritarian politics of intolerance and oppression."

the bureaucracy...therefore it is imperative upon the native tribes of the Khasi Hills to wake up and to think for the good and future of the Khasi Nation in relation to the ensuing governmental and legislative reforms...to prepare ourselves to meet the imminent changes and to build the community in the sphere of education, self-rule and in every aspect of life..."

On the eve of Independence, there were twenty-five (25) Khasi Native States which had separate treaties with the British Crown, and they are entitled to regain their sovereignty. Unlike other Native/Princely States which had completely merged with the Dominion of India, the Khasi States signed the Instrument of Accession between 1947 and 1948, but they never ceded to the Dominion Government full and exclusive authority, jurisdiction and powers. However, it is opined that the Khasi States expressed their acceptance to be governed by the Constitution of India by their participation in the first general elections in 1952. Although the Sixth Schedule was appended to the Constitution to deal with the assertions of the Indigenous people of Assam, but no special provisions were granted to the Khasi States, regardless of the Instrument of Accession.

In fact, efforts were made to restore the Hima Jaintia

that, "The Khasi States at no point of time expressed their willingness to be within the framework of the Sixth Schedule. On the other hand they expressed their views to have a separate administration along with the Khasi and Jaintia Hills District under the framework of the Constitution as per the terms and conditions laid down in the Instrument of Accession. Moreover, the Resolution adopted by the Khasi States Constitution Making Dorbar on July 21, 1949 reflects the political aspiration of the Hynniewtrep people, but to a great surprise the Khasi States along with the Khasi and Jaintia Hills District were brought under the Sixth Schedule. Thus, the Sixth Schedule may have many shortcomings but with due regard to the political situation and circumstances that were prevailing in the post Independence period, we may perhaps safely conclude that the Sixth Schedule was good enough as a stop gap arrangement"

The debates within the Khasi ecosystem over the relegation of the Khasi States to the Sixth Schedule vis a vis the Instrument of Accession is very much vibrant and alive till date. Syed Mahamad Saadulla termed it as constitutional anomaly, while JIM Nichols Roy welcomed the scheme and the incorporation of the Khasi States in the Sixth schedule which in his opinion had en-

abled the same people of the district of Khasi and Jaintia Hills and the Khasi States to have one administration. However, Prof G. G Swell strongly put on record his objection and stated- "It was on this score that we opposed the coming of the Khasi States under the District Council which would then be under the aegis of the Government of Assam and therefore would mean their automatic merger with Assam. We thought that by keeping these States a separate entity it would quicker facilitate the creation of a separate State. Our efforts collapsed despite the fact that we had a majority in the Constitution Making Dorbar of the Khasi States..."

The Land of the Clouds Under the Constitution:

In January 1972, Meghalaya was granted full Statehood and is being governed by the Constitution. We had acceded to the Indian Union and accepted the Constitution, but yet there are unfulfilled dreams to be realized. In order to fulfill the objectives of self-rule and autonomy certain provisions as enshrined in the Annexed Agreement need to be incorporated in the Constitution. However, such act requires due consideration so as not to exclude and oppress the other tribal minority groups and non-tribal communities which have made the Land of the clouds their home for over a century.

For 75 years since the promulgation of the Constitution on January 26, 1950, we the people of the State have reaped the benefits and are still enjoying the rights, privileges and protection granted by the Constitution. The provisions, like the Sixth Schedule, Reservation, Minority status etc are enabling us to grow as individual citizens and community. Despite its democratic and welfare values, we are facing grave challenges in the form that the State's political elite has merely created enclaves for the rich surrounded by an ever growing swamp of hunger, disease, unemployment, drug addiction, crime and violence. The stark difference between the greed of the rulers (including socio-religious) and people's aspirations has kept on growing and the divide between the rich and poor ever widening. Ironically, the poor could not even have access to the "crumbs of development" that trickle down from the top and there is a complete leeching of people's resources and livelihood.

Recently, Meghalaya is also courting religious fanaticism. This will create a great discord amongst the various socio-religious groups and rip the Hynniewtrep community apart. We the people must work together to protect and defend the Constitutional values of freedom, equality and secularism.

Trump's announcement on withdrawal from WHO a major setback to global healthcare

Developing countries have to work on a system of their own to protect their interests

By Dr Arun Mitra

The inaugural ceremony of crowning of Mr Donald Trump as the 47th President of the USA was marked by the presence of superrich who have influence not only their governments but on the governments of other countries as well. Many of them are Techie giants who plan to control the minds of the people from a remote distance. Some of the prominent ones include Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg, Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos, Google CEO Sundar Pichai, Elon Musk, Apple CEO Tim Cook and TikTok CEO Shou Zi Chew. The politicians who attended include far right autocratic leaders such as Argentina's President Javier Milei, Italy's Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, Ecuador's President Daniel Noboa, former Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki.

Immediately after the swearing in, Trump did not lose time to sign several orders. An order of the foremost concern with long term impact, is the order to formally withdraw the US from Paris Climate agreement. This is so far the most important agreement which has taken cognizance of the manmade climate crises. It highlighted the importance of global cooperation to

regressive. That the genders are to be defined based on whether people are born with eggs or sperms, rather than on their chromosomes, according to details of the upcoming order. This will affect the rights of the transgender population.

Any policy about the immigrants should be designed based on the humanitarian values. His stand of the rights of immigrants has to be viewed with scepticism. Aggressive stances toward Latin America, especially Cuba, signal continued imperialist interventionism, threatening the self-determination of nations.

He has reiterated to take over control the Panama Canal by putting Naval Blockade. He has already changed the name of Gulf of Mexico to Gulf of America. There is an open move to purchase the green land.

In the name of "Make America Great Again he is unlikely to do away with aggressive policies of the US in world affairs. He has reiterated to continue arms supply to Israel. How long the ceasefire in Gaza will last is only to be seen. This is not a peace agreement but a temporary cessation of war which can be a step forward to discuss the last-



mitigate the climate change. We have already seen the effects of climate change in the form of rising temperature, floods, change in the crop patterns, crises of food security and the impact on the health of the poor vulnerable

ing solutions for peace. The world very well knows that the US has a lot at stake in the Middle East and Israel is their firm puppet in the region.

It is unlikely that he will go all out to please Putin

"Trump's decision does not hold ground because it has been pointed out that the WHO toes the line of multinational corporations in several matters."

people in the third world countries.

It is very unlikely that any of the above mentioned participants in the Trump's swearing in ceremony will challenge this order at any public forum. For them the meaning of growth is different from the concerns of the people for food, shelter, healthcare, education and basic minimum needs. They believe in super industrialisation utilising the fossil fuels or if need be replace it with nuclear energy in the name of false notion of clean energy source without realising its inherent dangers.

Trump has also passed the order to withdraw from the World Health Organisation (WHO). This amounts to abdicating the responsibility to participate in the global efforts to promote health of the people. Trump's decision does not hold ground because it has been pointed out that the WHO toes the line of multinational corporations in several matters. Most of these corporations belong to the United States of America. Whereas there have been shortcomings in handling the pandemic by the WHO, it should be noted that US based vaccine making corporations made huge profits, even blackmailed some of the developing countries particularly in Africa. Needless to say that the multinational health related corporations of the USA have made much more profit in the name of US governments contribution to the WHO.

Trump's order on having only two genders is highly

and pressurise Zelensky to stop fighting. Neither Putin nor the European countries who have been cheering the Ukrainian President to keep on fighting will easily listen to him even if he does so.

The US economy is based on the armament industry and they would continue to make profit by selling arms and promoting wars at the cost of people's lives. Donald Trump's inaugural speech marks a troubling shift in global politics. His policies reflect the colonial mindset of the 18th and 19th century. He denies global mutual cooperation and multilateralism. His threat to the BRICS shows complete contempt for the sovereignty of nations. This will threaten global stability. His orders have shown his mindset for unilateralism, against the mutual respect and dialogue among nations. Protectionist economic policies, like tariffs, aim to control trade against developing nations, exacerbating global inequality and systemic exploitation.

The global expenditure on arms race including the nuclear arms race is increasing continuously with maximum share of the US in it. Donald Trump has not uttered a word for global nuclear disarmament.

With his stance and the gathering of superrich around him one is but to guess the future of the world in time to come. The developing countries will have to design their strategies and organise to save their interests. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

Railways: Its now or never

Editor,
As an elderly citizen of this state I have been hearing about the proposed railways project to Bymihat in Meghalaya a couple of years after the state was born. The project never took off because of opposition from the Khasi Students' Union (KSU), then led by people like the present Tourism and Arts and Culture Minister, Paul Lyngdoh. One wonders if he has changed his mind after being in the Government and seeing things from close quarters and also the stark reality that Meghalaya is facing in terms of inflationary prices of essential commodities due to the very steep cost of transportation by road. For so long Meghalaya has been playing games with successive Governments in Delhi, in particular the Railways Ministry. In this respect our Garo brethren have been more astute in accepting the railways upto Mendipathar while here some pressure groups keep harping on influx as a result of the railways coming to the Khasi-Jaintia Hills.

This is ridiculous and should be taken head on by the present government which comprises a young set of ministers who have travelled extensively to different parts of the world and know what progress entails.

Also in recent times, MLAs have travelled to the USA ostensibly to learn about legislative procedures and to see how the US system is functioning. The Government has invested money on their travels and stay there. What learning have they brought back with them for the benefit of the state and the citizens here. Why are the legislators silent on the railway project? What is the reason for the opposition? The KSU has been saying that the Government of India should first implement the Inner Line Permit (ILP) before allowing the railways to come in. This is not the demand of the people of Garo Hills who have accepted the railways and its benefits. Can only the people of Khasi and Jaintia Hills decide the fate of Meghalaya every time and all the time? Should this issue of railways not become a subject of state level discussion and should the people of the whole state not be involved in matters

that affect Meghalaya? Why should there always be a division where Garos speak only on behalf of Garo Hills and the Khasi-Jaintia speak only for their people? When will Meghalaya be treated as a state where all three tribes have equal worth and equal responsibility?

Time has come for the people of Meghalaya to stand as one and think together for the welfare of the entire state and not be divided along ethnic lines. This division has already caused so much pain over the decades and left the state under-developed. There should be a common platform where the issues of the state are discussed by all citizens irrespective of their ethnicities. This has been a missing factor in Meghalaya for too long. Naturally the statehood day celebration over the years is just a farce with no real development taking place and as a result no jobs have been created. The youth are facing a desperate situation and are being pushed to drugs. Many are without hope for the future. Unless collective thinking starts and all the legislators sit together and deliberate over these critical issues, Meghalaya will remain the underdog

of the North East. Railways are a necessity in the present times. Let the MDA Government give a definite "Yes" or and emphatic "No" to the Union Railways Ministry and lets end the debate once and for all.

Yours etc.,
Aristobell Kharpran,
Via email

Mawkyntse violence

Editor,
It is unfortunate that there should be violence over the construction of a school by the Rama Krishna Mission (RKM) when the need of the hour for the rural areas of Meghalaya is for a good and efficient school that delivers education. Meghalaya is already a poor performer in education when compared to other states as far as educational outcomes are concerned. The recent revelation by the Chief Minister that over 2000 schools are under-performing, some with zero enrolment but with teachers being paid for by the Government. In such a situation, the RKM which has been around for over a century educating our people without

any attempt to proselytise any of the students has faced resistance from the villagers of Mawkyntse area. From newspaper reports the reason given for the resistance to building the school is that the ground on which it is being built is meant for a football ground. Considering that there is so much land available around the area for a football ground, the reason sounds implausible. There have to be other insidious reasons for the outburst in the village.

Never before has it happened that a village meeting would be called to stop the building of a school. The RKM is not going to lose anything if it withdraws from Mawkyntse and shifts to another village where people are willing to welcome them with open arms. Those who will lose out will be the students from Syntung and adjoining areas who would have to travel all the way to Jongksha which is several kilometers away and without a reliable public transport system, whereas all the RKM schools provide school buses. The matter as of now is sub-judice and it is wrong of the Dorbar Shnong Mawkyntse to force the issue unless there has been

some instigation from some quarters.

These days the MLA of Mawkyntse has been promising to provide football grounds across the constituency. Perhaps this is the reason for the Sordar Shnong Mawkyntse to be excited about getting the RKM to vacate the place so that a football field can replace an educational institution. In a state where the drop-out rate is so high I wonder what the qualification of the Sordar or Mawkyntse is and whether he knows the importance of education. This also brings to the fore the need for Meghalaya to have educated village leaders who understand the value of education over a football field.

It is our duty as concerned citizens to raise our voices against such arbitrary acts by a few village elders who tend to mislead the community.

Yours etc.,
GH Suting,
Shillong

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

"Freedom is never given; it is won."

— A. Philip Randolph

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No. 164 SHILLONG, SATURDAY, JANUARY 25, 2025

Desperate times; desperate measures

THE talking point today is about Meghalaya's ghost schools, respectfully termed as "too many schools" by no less than the respected "The Hindu" newspaper. This news which says 206 schools have zero enrolment while 2269 others have fewer than 10 students must shock the readers. With a population that hovers around 30 lakhs, Meghalaya has 14,582 schools. Manipur with a population close to that of Meghalaya has 4617 schools while Tripura with a population of nearly 37 lakh people has only 4629 schools. For Meghalaya this is not a new phenomenon. It was known since at least 25-30 years ago that schools were set up on political whims and not on the real needs of the respective constituencies. Any attempt to shut down such schools which have been a drain on the economy were met with stiff resistance from politicians who in turn instigated the village authorities to resist any move to shut down schools with zero enrolment.

In Meghalaya, moreover, 29% of schools are government aided while at the national level the figure stands at only 5%. However, the reason for such a bloated figure for the number of schools is also because there are too many categories of schools in Meghalaya ranging from Ad-hoc to Deficit, to Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan etc., and the same school might be availing one grant for the primary section and other grants for the High and Higher Secondary sections. Hence one school would figure on several lists. Attempts to rationalise the system have met with repeated failure.

Now that the Chief Minister has himself come to grips with the disturbing realities and the poor educational outcomes even in schools with proper student-teacher ratios, he will have to take strict measures to firstly hold to account those that have been running the ghost schools and permanently shut them down. The Government has to have the moral authority to let go of the teachers who have subsisted on salaries for decades without teaching. This might perhaps inject a new governance structure in the education department. What ails education today and in the past is the complete lack of government supervision firstly on schools wholly owned by the government and on those that receive government grants for paying teachers' salaries. There has to be an accountability system in place. Permanency of teachers' tenures is what kills educational enterprise. Once a teacher is employed by the government, that teacher continues in the job with an assured salary until retirement irrespective of the person's performance. In private colleges and universities, students are asked to evaluate their teachers' performances on several indicators. This is a pragmatic way of assessing a teacher. In fact, the practice in private schools and colleges currently is to employ teachers on contractual basis. Not every person with a BEd is necessarily an effective educator. The MDA Government has a challenging task at hand!

Kong Shop: A homely experience away from home

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

While returning to Meghalaya from a journey the first thing I do is look for a Kong shop where I can have food on the way home. Last December, while returning, my friend who would always pick me up from Guwahati took me to a Kong shop which I had frequented in the past. This shop is located just before the Umling toll gate when coming from Shillong and has been attracting a lot of customers. There were a couple of vehicles parked outside, with passengers eating inside the shop. We were worried that we wouldn't get a seat. Fortunately, the ones who were eating left and we got a seat at the back of the room. I ordered rice, pork, tungtap and a cup of tea for myself, but I don't exactly remember what my friend ordered. As we were eating, we saw the incumbent CEM of KHADC, Pyniaid Sing Syiem, entering the shop with his bodyguard. The bodyguard sat at the next table across from us while Pyniaid Syiem sat at the front. He seemed to know the people in the shop and they greeted each other while he ordered food for himself and his entourage. My friend told me that the Kong Shop is quite famous and gets a lot of customers, many of whom are well-known personalities. The food served was not exotic or unique but it had one quality which is the most defining feature of a Kong shop, clean, home cooked food with an amicable ambience. This is what I always miss when I am out of Meghalaya and something I look forward to first thing when I return.

Kong shops are local food establishments that are a common sight across the Khasi landscape. Whether you're in Nongstoin, Nongphoh, or Jowai, you'll find these shops in the marketplace or along major roads, serving food and tea to customers who visit them day and night. Once we have sampled their food we identify our favourites to which we would then religiously go. I have a few favourites of my own which I frequent all the time. In Nongphoh, my favorite spot is a shop that serves both Indian and Khasi food. I usually opt for the Khasi section, as I've found that Indian food tends to make me feel bloated. While I do enjoy Indian dishes from time to time, especially the mutton cooked with plenty of spices, the portion sizes are usually too large and the food too heavy, leaving me feeling uncomfortably full afterward. The Khasi plate is smaller and is just the right amount to satisfy my hunger, but not make me feel overly full. It is for this reason I am disappointed with some shops that are trying to serve Khasi food in a thali style

and charging a higher price. I think we should stick to our sizes, which are more authentic and less obesity inducing. There are a couple of other places in Nongphoh where I go, but in recent times, the one described above has become my favourite.

The Kong shop in Umsning is another one which I frequent while I am cycling or going down to Nongphoh or nearby villages. This shop is

shop along the Laitumkhrah main road. The food is fresh and quite affordable if you know what you want. There are days when I want to save some money. So I would order jadoh, dohjem (pork cooked with sesame seed), and tungtap. Initially, it cost me 50 rupees, but the price has now increased by 10 rupees. The other option is rice, dohkhleh (boiled diced pork, pig's brain mixed with finely



quite famous and runs out of food by late afternoon. I realised that a month ago when I went with some friends to have lunch there and found that it was already closed for the day. The specialty of this shop is that it has a vast variety of dishes, which include both vegetarian and non-vegetarian options. I especially like the pashor (mashed banana flower) and the fact that they give you local greens. The practise of giving local greens, like salad, jaymyrdoh, khliang-syiar along with the main course is becoming a trend in many places, and it's a very welcome one. People in the rural areas have knowledge about dozens of wild vegetables many of whom have the prefix-ja (meaning food) which distinguishes them from non-edible ones. Some examples are jaymyrdoh, jatria, jaraian, jail, jajew, jabuit, jasim and so many others. Initially derided as the poor man's food, these wild vegetables are not only readily available from the local landscape but are very rich in micro-nutrients, like iron, which is very essential for combating anaemia. The declining consumption of these wild edibles along with increasing dependence on market food, which includes highly processed food, and those grown with agro-chemicals, creates high health risk as evidenced by the increase in lifestyle diseases like diabetes, obesity, hypertension, etc. There is a need to make wild vegetables more mainstream, and the growing trend of serving wild vegetables along with the main course is a welcome change.

In Shillong there is another shop which I frequent sometimes which is managed by a Niam-tre family. A lot more options are available, particularly for those who are vegetarian, although still not enough. The lack of vegetarian options is one lacuna which our Kong shops suffer from. Whether it's fried or mashed, potato is not a vegetable. It's a carbohydrate rich food similar to rice, millet or wheat. Personally, I am a non-vegetarian, but I have felt a little disappointed that my vegetarian friends cannot taste foods grown and consumed by our community.

In Shillong there is another shop which I frequent sometimes which is managed by a Niam-tre family. A lot more options are available, particularly for those who are vegetarian, although still not enough. The lack of vegetarian options is one lacuna which our Kong shops suffer from. Whether it's fried or mashed, potato is not a vegetable. It's a carbohydrate rich food similar to rice, millet or wheat. Personally, I am a non-vegetarian, but I have felt a little disappointed that my vegetarian friends cannot taste foods grown and consumed by our community.

Research by NESFAS (North East Society for Agroecology Support) found that villages in Meghalaya have an average of 202 food plants. While people harvest many of these plants from the wild, they also cultivate a significant number. It's highly surprising that these food plants don't appear in the Kong shops, which would really help the vegetarian customers, particularly Indian tourists from the mainland.

Just a couple of weeks ago when I was cycling to Sohiong, I stopped for some food at a Kong shop in Ladmawreng. An Indian tourist also entered the shop with some local friends. She asked for some vegetables but had to settle with roti instead. For me, it was a significant loss for the shop, as offering vegetarian options would have brought them new customers and additional income. I am not advocating for Indian vegetarian dishes but our own local simple dishes made with tyro (mustard leaves), piskot (squash), kubi (cabbage), pathaw (pumpkin), phymgop (common beans) etc, along with the wild vegetables as side dishes. We can use kra (millet), phandieng (tapioca), shrew (taro), and many other food plants to prepare dishes Indian tourists might enjoy. Even if some Indian tourists may not want to enjoy it, foreign tourists (with vegetarianism becoming an increasingly popular lifestyle) will definitely enjoy both the vegetarian and non-vegetarian dishes.

Kong shops have been a lifesaver for me, especially when I am going for long rides. A year ago when I cycled to Jowai on a Sunday I was really worried that I would get no food. Luckily, there was a Kong shop in Jowai taxi stand where I could get some rice, meat and tungtap. At that moment, the dish tasted the best in the world.

Kong shops give me the taste of home food away from home and something I really miss whenever I am out of Meghalaya. I, however, also feel that improvements are possible, especially by offering more vegetarian options. I would always ask for pork, but a side vegetarian dish would not be a poor option. Things change with time, but I hope the Kong shops never lose what makes them so special—the experience of enjoying home-cooked food in a clean environment, surrounded by people from all walks of life. It embodies what our society should be based on—the principle of im lang, sah lang.

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

First past the post: A duty and responsibility

By Maitphang Syiem

Readers might wonder what 'First Past the Post' implies? Well, learned citizens will definitely understand the meaning, however on a general note, in a democratic process it's an important system which involves the eligible public to decide the fate of democracy and also the choice of governance. In simple words "First Past the Post" is one of the electoral systems practiced in the Indian electoral and democratic process. This system is also prominent in various democracies of the world. It signifies the simplest form of plurality or simple majority and in this context we the public are part and parcel of the process to exercise our constitutional rights - "The Right to Vote". Recalling the lines from the movie Spider-Man (1962) which says, "With great power comes great responsibility," the same resonates that voting itself has the greatest power to bring change in a democracy and indeed must be fulfilled with a great sense of responsibility. January 25 of every year is celebrated as National Voters' Day to mark the foundation day of the Election Commission of India (ECI), which was established in the year 1950. This year January 25, 2025 the same theme continues which is captioned, "Nothing Like Voting, I Vote for Sure" and having the largest democracy of the world there is nothing like it because it's a festive democratic event that has ever existed.

This 15th National Voters' Day is also a special day for the Election Commission of India as it is celebrating the 75th year of its dedicated service to the nation and as far as the current electoral database is concerned the total electorate stands at 99.1 crore, and counting. Hence we are approaching the 100-crore mark. We indeed have the largest democracy of the world and the largest democracy to exercise in an electoral process and the Election Commission of India is continuously engaged and relentlessly working on healthy enrolment of electors and as reported there are 21.7 crores young electors, in the 18-29 age group and an increase in Electoral Gender Ratio from 948 in 2024 to 954 in 2025.

The National Voters' Day was instituted by the Election Commission of India (ECI) in 2011, with an objective to promote awareness about voting, to encourage and mobilise participation of the eligible electors in the electoral process, to promote active participation among the youth, to increase electors registration, to promote inclusivity of electors with an emphasis on marginalized communities, women, and persons with disabilities to have equal access to the electoral process and to empower citizens to play an active role in a democracy.

This foundation day of the Election Commission of India also reminds us of the power of voting in sustaining and upholding the ideals of democracy. As concerned individuals of this great Nation we must emphasize the importance of participation in the electoral process and encourage ourselves and everyone to take pride in exercising the franchise which is an imperative duty and responsibility. Interestingly, going back to the history of Democracy it can be seen and was firstly introduced by the ancient Greek Society and historians regarded Cleisthenes, a Greek reformer, lawyer and philosopher as the man who introduced Democracy and later to be known as the "Father of Democracy". Surprisingly the word "Democracy" is derived from a Greek Word (Demokratia), "Demos" meaning people and "kratia" as Rule which translates to "Rule of the People". To our surprise even the word "Politics" has a Greek origin (Politikos) meaning "Of Citizens". Therefore, connecting the dots, we can understand that citizens have a pragmatic and imperative role to play in a Democracy through the process of voting and if one

would refer to ancient Greek society, voting was made compulsory. Furthermore, if we dig into ancient voting history, undoubtedly it was first seen in ancient Greece with its unique form of voting called Ostracism using pottery shards called ostraca, then later in Rome. Furthermore, in North America, the Iroquois confederacy practiced by the natives, in England the Magna Carta and Parliamentary Votes and during the American and French revolution the world witnessed a modern electoral system which laid the principles of universal suffrage and the representative system that we see today.

It is indeed practical to reflect upon the fact that Voting is an indispensable tool where we can deliberate rationally and discernibly. We talk about change, governance, policies etc; but many times we do land in contradictory thought processes which may perhaps deviate us from the essence and real depth of voting. As concerned citizens in a Democratic world we must realise that voting is the bedrock of Democracy and must affirm that voting is the only avenue in a democracy that enables us to express our will, our aspirations to shape the future course of governance, policies and many more that affects us. We must assert that when we Vote we are upholding the principles of justice, equality and development. The constitutional right to vote which is enshrined in the Constitution of India reminds us that democracy will sustain when every eligible elector takes part in exercising the franchise with a responsibility. The Right to Vote itself must never be undermined because it has the power of change, the power to safeguard, the power of collective responsibility, the power to uphold the ideals of Democracy.

Interestingly, Voting has become a subject of intense study it is not just a process as one would think of, but it has become a science, many scholars have come up with theories and models, to list a few "Calculus of Voting", "Rational Choice Theory", "Party Identification Theory", "Spatial Voting Theory" and many more which may not be feasible to discuss in this column, perhaps political scientists may share more insights. Furthermore, a special field of study on voting and elections also exists and is referred to as Psephology and professionals are called Psephologists perhaps if someone who's interested, may dive in deeper on the subject matter.

The ideal of voting has left no void, and amusingly seen seeping into the Bollywood movies as well, so it is not just an entertainment but an infotainment. Interestingly certain thought-provoking dialogues are spelled out on the rationality of voting which have garnered quite a lot of attention. The minute long monologue by Shah Rukh Khan in the ending scene from the movie Jawan (2023) is inspiring. Perhaps one should contemplate on the iconic lines which talk about fear, social-religious and financial inducement for votes, it is a series of questions that every individual should rationally ask with a sense of responsibility and duty because every vote has the power, the value of change to take our State our Nation forward, it's high time to overhaul our mindset and go beyond the conventional thought process by making ourselves aware of the value of every vote which will translate to all realms of development for the present and the future. Let us always go all out to make use of the constitutional right and always execute our vote, with a deep faith and belief that it can foster change. We must be reminded and should invoke the National Voters' Pledge which emphasizes on ethics of voting and the commitment to democratic traditions of this great nation and our collective duties and responsibilities. (The Writer is a Geospatial Technology Expert)

Letters to the Editor

Church must stand up for justice

Editor,

A fanatical right wing group from Assam the Kutumba Suraksha Parishad (KSP), led by an Assamese has been spreading the poison of right wing religious overreach which even his own compatriots from Assam find quite strange. This is the result of the overdrive by the saffron party in Assam led by its Chief Minister, Himanta Biswa Sarma to promote communal disharmony among citizens. The fact that churches are attacked in parts of Assam is not without reason. Those who attack religious sites and buildings are enemies of an India that stands for diversity and equal respect for all religions and cultures. The political leaders of Meghalaya should speak up and keep at bay such re-

ligious fanatics whose only intent is to spread communal disharmony. The KSP has been interfering in Meghalaya's affairs time and again. Unfortunately, the BJP in Meghalaya has been silent against organisations like the KSP. The BJP leadership should have been more vocal on such issues and not remain silent for silence is consent.

Meanwhile the Khasi-Jaintia Christian Leaders Forum (KJCLF) religious forum has given a statement condemning the KSP but the same Forum needs to get to the root of the matter as far as the case of the Ramakrishna Mission School in Mawkynew is concerned. The KJCLF ought to do more than just give out press releases from time to time. It should get more active and involved in issues afflicting Meghalaya. After all, what is the mandate of the Church if not to heal the wounds of society. The Forum has remained silent on

many key issues such as the rise in poverty levels in the state; the very high numbers of school drop outs and also the rise in teenage pregnancies which is the reason for the replication of poverty in Meghalaya. Perhaps the time has come for the Church to stand with those most in need of its embrace rather than simply holding services every Sunday without making an effort to look for the lost sheep who have become church drop-outs for various reasons.

There are church leaders in Mawkynew too but have they said anything on the recent violence or have the church leaders remained silent spectators because the school facing the violence is a non-Christian school. They forget that the Ramakrishna Mission as an institution does more missionary work than most religious institutions. The poor still turn to Ramakrishna Mission dispensaries and hospitals where they are given free

treatment and medicines and now have also equipped themselves with the necessary diagnostic facilities and also treatment. For this aspect at least we ought to be grateful to the Ramakrishna Mission instead of attacking its noble mission of setting up a school in rural areas.

The church must speak up boldly on all issues affecting the citizens of Meghalaya. The church cannot get away by saying that it does not wish to enter into the domain of politics because everything that humans do is political.

Yours etc.,
Manston Dohling,
Via email

Sub-standard Smart City Projects

Editor,
The recently installed LED screen have gone ka-

put as per the news item in your esteemed daily. The project under the smart city has raised many questions about the efficiency of the contractor who undertook the work worth Rs 220 crore. This project had high hopes if the operational part was to have been taken care of as it would have dealt with a number of problems that the State or Shillong in particular is facing. I need not mention the problems which could have been solved. But alas, like previous projects like traffic signal lights, CCTV cameras in the strategic locations and so on and so forth. The Govt only the other day had mentioned that the most prominent projects under the smart city will be completed within 2025. It is doubtful whether these projects will see the light of day. We have seen in the past many promises by the Government which never took shape or

are still in the pipeline waiting for completion.

How long will people be kept in dark by these false promises. Now even the major projects which were announced earlier like the sky-walk are put on hold. It appears that the Government is fickle-minded as it cannot guarantee any completion of the projects announced earlier. The Hon'ble Chief Minister says that there is no room for over-confidence. If it is so then why are the projects announced with great confidence but have gone kaput or will go the same way in future.

Yours etc.,
SL Singhania,
Via email

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

Spotlight back on the safety of our drinking water

Most of us are fortunate that, when we turn on the tap, clean, safe and high-quality water comes out.

But a senate inquiry into the presence of PFAS or "forever chemicals" is putting the safety of our drinking water back in the spotlight.

Lidia Thorpe, the independent senator leading the inquiry, says Elders in the Aboriginal community of Wreck Bay in New South Wales are "buying bottled water out of their aged care packages" due to concerns about the health impacts of PFAS in their drinking water.

So, how is water deemed safe to drink in Australia? And why does water quality differ in some areas? Here's what happens between a water catchment and your tap.

Human intervention in the water cycle

There is no "new" water on Earth. The water we drink can be up to 4.5 billion years old and is continuously recycled through the hydrological cycle. This transfers water from the ground to the atmosphere through evaporation and back again (for example, through rain).

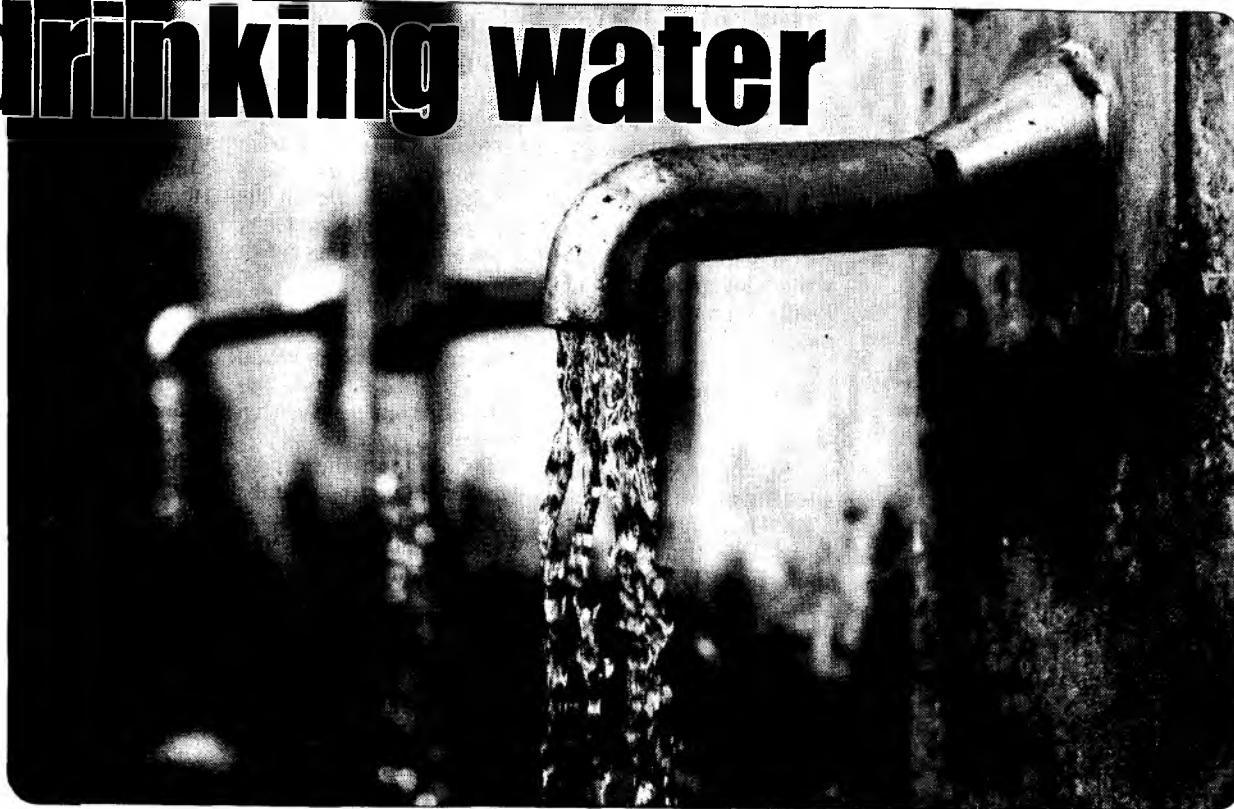
Humans interfere with this natural cycle by trapping and redirecting water from various sources to use. A lot happens before it reaches your home. The quality of the water when you turn on the tap depends on a range of factors, including the local geology, what kind of activities happen in catchment areas, and the different treatments used to process it.

How do we decide what's safe?

The Australian Drinking Water Guidelines define what is considered safe, good-quality drinking water.

The guidelines set acceptable water quality values for more than 250 physical, chemical and bacterial contaminants. They take into account any potential health impact of drinking the contaminant over a lifetime as well as aesthetics - the taste and colour of the water.

The guidelines are not mandatory but provide the basis for determining



if the quality of water to be supplied to consumers in all parts of Australia is safe to drink. The guidelines undergo rolling revision to ensure they represent the latest scientific evidence.

From water catchment to tap

Australians' drinking water mainly comes from natural catchments. Sources include surface water, groundwater and seawater (via desalination).

Public access to these areas is typically limited to preserve optimal water quality.

Filtration and purification of water occurs naturally in catchments as it passes through soil, sediments, rocks and vegetation. But catchment water is subject to further treatment via standard processes that typically focus on: removing particulates (for example, soil and sediment) filtration (to remove particles and their contaminants) disinfection (for example, using chlorine and chloramine to kill bacteria and viruses) adding fluoride to prevent tooth decay adjusting pH to balance the chemistry of the water and to aid filtration.

This water is delivered to our taps via a reticulated system - a network of underground reservoirs, pipes, pumps

and fittings.

In areas where there is no reticulated system, drinking water can also be sourced from rainwater tanks. This means the quality of drinking water can vary. Sources of contamination can come from roof catchments feeding rainwater tanks as well from the tap due to lead in plumbing fittings and materials.

So, does all water meet these standards?

Some rural and remote areas, especially First Nations communities, rely on poor-quality surface water and groundwater for their drinking water. Rural and regional water can exceed recommended guidelines for salt, microbial contaminants and trace elements, such as lead, manganese and arsenic. The federal government and other agencies are trying to address this.

There are many impacts of poor regional water quality. These include its implication in elevated rates of tooth decay in First Nations people. This occurs when access to chilled, sugary drinks is cheaper and easier than access to good quality water.

What about PFAS?

There is also renewed concern

about the presence of PFAS or "forever" chemicals in drinking water.

Recent research examining the toxicity of PFAS chemicals along with their presence in some drinking water catchments in Australia and overseas has prompted a recent assessment of water source contamination.

A review by the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) proposed lowering the limits for four PFAS chemicals in drinking water: PFOA, PFOS, PFHxS and PFBS.

The review used publicly available data and found most drinking water supplies are currently below the proposed new guideline values for PFAS.

However, "hotspots" of PFAS remain where drinking water catchments or other sources (for example, groundwater) have been impacted by activities where PFAS has been used in industrial applications. And some communities have voiced concerns about an association between elevated PFAS levels in their communities and cancer clusters. While some PFAS has been identified as carcinogenic, it's not certain that PFAS causes cancer. The link is still being debated. *(The Conversation)*

Some food, medicine can sometimes permanently change your skin colour

When an 84-year-old man in Hong Kong went to hospital with an enlarged prostate, doctors were startled to see that his skin - and even the whites of his eyes - had turned silver-grey. A deeper investigation revealed silver deposits permeating his tissues, turning him a hue more often reserved for science fiction.

Far from a one-off oddity, in 2007 press reports described Paul Karason as a "blue man" after he attempted to cure sinus and skin problems by ingesting a homemade silver chloride solution - and there are many other examples. These striking cases reveal a profound truth: our bodies can display the residue of what we consume. The adage "you are what you eat" usually refers to overall health and nutrition, but that phrase can be startlingly literal when our skin takes on unexpected colours. These cases illustrate dramatic instances of the condition known as argyria, in which silver particles accumulate in the body.

Silver was once a mainstay in medical treatments for its antimicrobial properties. But modern evidence shows that consuming or absorbing too much can transform one's skin in ways that seldom fade. In argyria, silver ions circulate through the bloodstream and become embedded in the dermis, a layer beneath the surface where the body cannot easily clear them. This is the layer that tattoo pigments reside in.

A similar phenomenon, albeit rarer, is chrysiasis, in which gold deposits infiltrate the skin. Historically, gold-based therapies were occasionally prescribed for inflammatory disorders, and in some cases, patients who received these treatments developed a distinctive slate-grey or grey-purple discoloration that, much like argyria, could not be easily undone.

Pigments from the plate

Orange, yellow and red pigments exert the most influence over skin, and orange seems to reign supreme. This shade, often associated with carrots, sweet potatoes and pumpkins, comes from carotenoids, a class of pigments naturally found in plants.

Carotenoid pigments are fat soluble. When consumed, they are absorbed in the small intestine and transported via lipoproteins in the bloodstream to be stored primarily in fat-rich tissues, including the subcutaneous layer of the skin. This storage gives the skin a characteristic golden hue, most notably when carotenoid-rich foods are consumed in high quantities.

Of the many carotenoids found in nature, beta-carotene is the star player: a strong orange tint and high "bioavailability" - the term used to describe drug absorption - make it particularly influential.

Humans metabolise (break down) carotenoids in a selective way. Enzymes in the intestines and liver turn beta-carotene into vitamin A, which is crucial for vision, a healthy immune system and healthy skin. However, not all ingested beta-carotene undergoes this transformation. Excess amounts remain in their pigment form and are deposited in the skin, particularly in areas like the palms of the hands and soles of the feet, where the thicker layer of skin highlights the pigment's presence. The reason the skin turns orange lies in the chemical structure of carotenoids. Beta-carotene's molecular makeup absorbs light in the blue spectrum, reflecting orange light back to our eyes. Other carotenoids, such as lutein and zeaxanthin (found in leafy green vegetables), which lean toward yellow, are less conspicuous, because they are either less abundant in the diet or not as prominently stored in the skin.

Research has shown that a carotenoid-rich diet, which can enhance a healthy golden glow, is often perceived as more attractive than sun-induced tanning. But moderation is key. The 90s juice brand Sunny Delight never really recovered from the controversy of orange-stained Sunny D kids. Naturally occurring dietary pigments such as anthocyanins, betalains and chlorophyll offer many health benefits, but rarely leave a mark. Anthocyanins, found in berries, red cabbage and purple carrots, provide the deep reds, purples and blues we associate with these foods. *(The Conversation)*

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, JANUARY 26, 2025

'Birthday Forecast'

Venus trine Mars on your solar return chart ensures an exceptional year ahead. You will be highly organized and disciplined. And leave no task left. Your colleagues and bosses will support you. Your financial position will be excellent. You will be able to make mark and impress people. You will remain in a positive frame of mind and will look forward to accomplish all major goals that you have envisaged. Your difficult task will get completed. New business/job offers will come. There could be some transfer/posting in your job. But you will get good salary and pay package. Financially you will be well off. New romantic ties leading to marriage is indicated. There will be joy and bonding in family relations. Auspicious functions like marriage ceremony or birth of a new baby is possible. You may undertake business journey that will prove to be beneficial.

'This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) Get involved in some good venture at your work place or in business. Professional gains are likely to be profitable. You will be in a position to attract a good response from colleagues and friends due to your magnetic personality. This week you may have some conflicts or uneasy circumstances so avoid the company of bad elements. This period is good for individuals and intellectuals engaged in education, research and study. Vitality and courage will take you towards new horizons. Solve family and other interrelationship problems politely and in a friendly way. Your personality and communication skills hold the key of progress of your success, utilize it to have better relations in public.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) The combination of stars will prove to be very favorable for you. Luck will favour you in material and professional related matters. You may find new prospects to boost your income. Sudden money gains could also be expected. You should take caution in family relations by having a more amenable behavior as children and friends need attention. Health of some elder person at home needs care. You may have sudden chances of increase of your business or career. Take care if someone is hurt by your spoken words or harsh attitude. Change your behavior and abstain from bad habits. It is in your favour to keep away from any conflict.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) Professional matters will be settled now in your favour. Being over courageous and hasty in dealing with people at work place and in family should be avoided to have amicable relations among them. This week you may invest in real estate or some other fixed assets which will turn to be beneficial in the long term. You may make up your mind for a foreign trip where you get better response. For stable thoughts and positive mood you may insist on meditation and elevate the environment around you. Take precautions in travel and be cautious about your belongings.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) Sudden gains in profession related matters are expected. There is a time when your wits will be helpful along with new opportunities to be successful in making new contacts which prove to be helpful. Happiness comes to your door by a new loving relationship and a harmonious atmosphere in your family. This is a good time for entertainment and romance for you. You can expect to look forward to joy and happiness this week. People will admire your positive approach in some matters and your decisions will be appreciated.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) Amidst some practical uneasiness this week brings mixed results for you. Insist upon slow gains in money matters. Construction work may be delayed process this week. Health of self or mother may be affected so care must be taken. To have a harmonious relationship with friends be more forthcoming. On the family front you should spend some more time with them. A property deal may get finalized which would prove to be profitable. Right now you need to take care and avoid indulgence in any type of negative relationship.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22) The week is good for your career and the stars are favorable in the field of education, research and related matters. You will enjoy some creative or educational travel or some activities in the publishing field. You are expected to get long term investment opportunities which will give you

profits and financial gains. You may get financial aid from some near relative or a friend. Avoid stress and take care of your health. Meditation will be helpful to have peace of mind. You may visit pay a visit to relatives or friends.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) This is a good time to improve interpersonal relations. You may think of finalizing a pending aspect in matters related to property. Undue expenditure is expected for travel and in domestic affairs. Avoid conflict with youngsters and friends. You may get sudden news or a message through phone which may affect your daily routine. You may feel some problems in family life and relations with spouse. This is a good time to invest in real estate. Sudden monetary profits may be expected. Health problems may be solved during this time. Utilize the priceless time for bringing your plans to reality.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) Some mixed results are predicted from the position of stars this week. Amongst your financial profits you will try to get early gains. You can expect to come across some persons who may bring about an increase in your social activities. You will be full of courage, understanding and glamour. Health of an elderly person may need attention. Think wisely which ought to win popularity in public and this may bring you new ventures in the field of finance. Your desire for love and romance may be fulfilled. To refresh yourself, spend time with family.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) As depicted from your stars position this week your progress in public relation will be improved. You will be expected to enhance your social contacts. Your progress may be slow at your work place and you may gain marginal profits. Regarding your career and material matters, you are likely to get engaged in matters of property but take care of all costs before you finalize a deal. Keep watch on your health and take care during travel to avoid injury. Good chances to go for a foreign tour may emerge now. Affection within the family and with friends and children is expected.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) There is a good possibility of progress in career, finance and public relations. Financial matters may be solved for now with good returns. You will enjoy an outstanding personality with wise decision making power and of which you are surely capable. Success and happiness come to your door with material gains. This is the time to go ahead in career matters. You may enjoy a good time in love and romance. Take advantage of this favorable time. Material profits will boost suddenly. Health will be good along with freshness and energy. Happiness and enjoyment are yours for the asking. With your good communication skills, you will have a fine image in public and this will be very useful in future in achieving your goal.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) According to the stars position this week you will have mixed results. Your progressive, decisive and focusing nature is going to prove beneficial for you. The impression you leave on people around you are remarkable. Now there may be matters related to money decided in your favour. Your old financial problems will be sorted out soon. Think positive and be polite while talking with children and family members. To maintain peace of mind and positive frame of mind take light exercises and make it a daily routine. Keep your presence of mind in dealing a problem related to property. You will have a good time with friends.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) New contacts will be helpful in your progress regarding career and financial matters. You may choose to have some relaxation at home. Your family environment needs some attention. Social image will be fine. You may face some sudden expenditure at home; spend wisely. If you give a new look to your work place you will gain more profits. Take care of your health. At present your focus will be on personal freedom and making good friends. It will be beneficial for you in long term. This week you will go for some compromise and will be able to solve a pending or disputed matter. You would plan for a brighter future.

You can train your nose!

Would you give up your sense of smell to keep your hair? What about your phone? A 2022 US study compared smell to other senses (sight and hearing) and personally prized commodities (including money, a pet or hair) to see what people valued more.

The researchers found smell was viewed as much less important than sight and hearing, and valued less than many commodities. For example, half the women surveyed said they'd choose to keep their hair over sense of smell.

Smell often goes under the radar as one of the least valued senses. But it is one of the first sensory systems vertebrates developed and is linked to your mental health, memory and more.

Here are five fascinating facts about your olfactory system.

1. Smell is linked to memory and emotion

Why can the waft of fresh baking trigger joyful childhood memories? And why might a certain perfume jolt you back to a painful breakup? Smell is directly linked to both your memory and emotions. This connection was first established by American psychologist Donald Laird in 1935 (although French novelist Marcel Proust had already made it famous in his reverie about the scent of madeleines baking.) Odours are first captured by special olfactory nerve cells inside your nose. These cells extend upwards from the roof of your nose towards the smell-processing centre of your brain, called the olfactory bulb.

From the olfactory bulb they form direct connection with the brain's limbic system. This includes the amygdala, where emotions are generated, and the hippocampus, where memories are created.

Other senses - such as sight and hearing - aren't directly connected to the limbic system.

One 2004 study used functional magnetic resonance imaging to demonstrate odours trigger a much stronger emotional and memory response in the brain than a visual cue.

2. Your sense of smell constantly regenerates

You can lose your ability to smell due to injury or infection - for example during and after a COVID infection. This is known as olfactory dysfunction. In most cases it's temporary, returning to normal within a few weeks.

This is because every few months your olfactory nerve cells die and are

replaced by new cells.

We're not entirely sure how this occurs, but it likely involves your nose's stem cells, the olfactory bulb and other cells in the olfactory nerves.

Other areas of your nervous system

include

your brain and spinal cord - cannot regenerate and repair after an injury.

Constant regeneration may be a protective mechanism, as the olfactory nerves are vulnerable to damage caused by the external environment, including toxins (such as cigarette smoke), chemicals and pathogens (such as the flu virus).

But following a COVID infection some people might continue to experience a loss of smell. Studies suggest the virus and a long-term immune response damages the cells that allow the olfactory system to regenerate.

3. Smell is linked to mental health

Around 5% of the global population suffer from anosmia - total loss of smell. An estimated 15-20% suffer partial loss, known as hyposmia. Given smell loss is often a primary and long-term symptom of COVID, these numbers are likely to be higher since the pandemic. Yet in Australia, the prevalence of olfactory dysfunction remains surprisingly understudied.

Losing your sense of smell is shown to impact your personal and social relationships. For example, it can mean you miss out on shared eating experiences, or cause changes in sexual desire and behaviour.

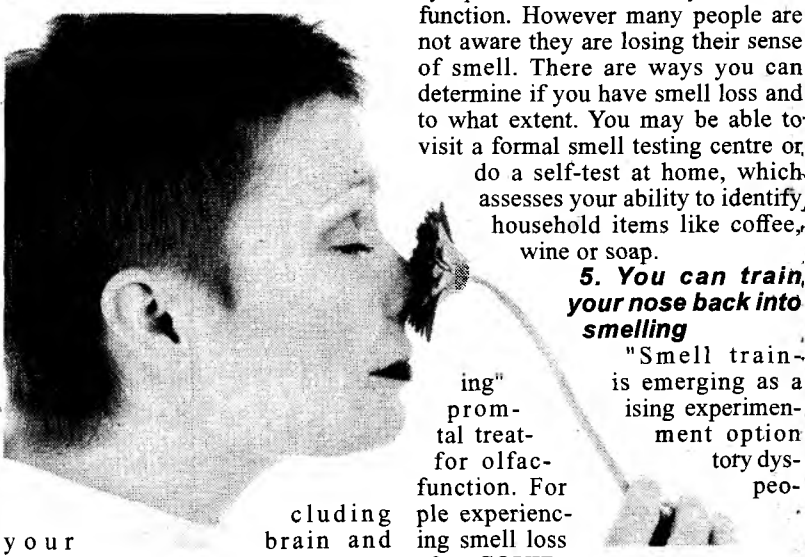
In older people, declining ability to smell is associated with a higher risk of depression and even death, although we still don't know why.

4. Loss of smell can help identify neurodegenerative diseases

Partial or full loss of smell is often an early indicator for a range of neurodegenerative diseases, including Alzheimer's and Parkinson's diseases. Patients frequently report losing their sense of smell years before any symptoms show in body or brain function. However many people are not aware they are losing their sense of smell. There are ways you can determine if you have smell loss and to what extent. You may be able to visit a formal smell testing centre or do a self-test at home, which assesses your ability to identify household items like coffee, wine or soap.

5. You can train your nose back into smelling

"Smell training is emerging as a promising experimental option for olfactory dysfunction. For people experiencing smell loss after COVID, it's been shown to improve the ability to detect and differentiate odours. Smell training (or "olfactory training") was first tested in 2009 in a German psychology study. It involves sniffing robust odours - such as floral, citrus, aromatic or fruity scents - at least twice a day for 10-20 seconds at a time, usually over a 3-6 month period. Participants are asked to focus on the memory of the smell while sniffing and recall information about the odour and its intensity. This is believed to help reorganise the nerve connections in the brain, although the exact mechanism behind it is unclear. Some studies recommend using a single set of scents, while others recommend switching to a new set of odours after a certain amount of time. However both methods show significant improvement in smelling. This training has also been shown to alleviate depressive symptoms and improve cognitive decline both in older adults and those suffering from dementia. Just like physiotherapy after a physical injury, olfactory training is thought to act like rehabilitation for your sense of smell. It retrains the nerves in your nose and the connections it forms within the brain, allowing you to correctly detect, process and interpret odours. *(The Conversation)*



"Order without liberty and liberty without order are equally destructive."

— Theodore Roosevelt

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No. 166 SHILLONG, TUESDAY, JANUARY 28, 2025

ADC election agenda

ELECTIONS come and go but electoral promises remain unfulfilled. Meghalaya is bracing itself for the next election to the autonomous district councils. Political parties are in an upbeat mode. Each party is trying to woo members from rival parties as if that in itself is an election agenda. No political party is looking at enrolment of new members. Parties that are able to fish from the Voice of Peoples' Party (VPP) flock feel as if they have already won the battle. Instead of looking at fresh faces political parties seem inclined to put up as candidates the tried and tested faces even though the voting public would prefer to give new candidates a chance to prove themselves.

Apart from the choice of candidates, political parties are not even exercising their minds on the key agenda for the forthcoming elections. What is each party's agenda this time that it had not brought up five years ago? Were all the promises made then fulfilled? The state of our forests actually bear testimony to the failure of the ADCs to discharge their major responsibilities. The second most important point is the blatant encroachment into rivers by builders who flout the ADC building rules and the Meghalaya High Court orders and get away with it. The question is whether the ADCs have the wherewithal, namely—the manpower and the political will to ensure compliance to the building laws that they have enacted or whether this important legislation that is now the brief of the Councils is merely another means of resource generation without the corresponding responsibility that comes along with it.

The recent encroachments into the Umkhrak River which had to be stopped by the State Pollution Control Board through strict legal action is a case in point. Environment conservation appears to be the last priority of the Councils, which however make claims that conserving rivers and forests are within their mandate. This is a troubling aspect about exercising powers without responsibility and without adequate means to enforce the rule of law. The Councils moreover are not part of the State's agenda for addressing climate change which is the new threat especially to rural communities dependent on agriculture and who are the first victims of climate change. In fact climate change has never been a point of discussion during the Council's internal deliberations. On a similar note, the issue of climate change will be brushed over even while culture and conservation will be the hot topics as if culture is separate from the environment. This tendency to raise the emotional pulse and make elections another round of noise without a definite set of goals being set for the next five years is being repeated over and over and people get caught in this continued web of deceit. The fact that ADCs have flouted the rules of financial accountability will all be forgotten while superficial issues such as the 'jaidbynriew' politics and which party will be most able to deliver that amorphous claim will be the talking points. Meanwhile there is no civil society to call this repeated bluff of the Councils.

Letters to the Editor

Important issues before the ADC elections

Editor,
Elections to the three autonomous district councils are approaching but have we understood the real meaning of elections? Can we still trust our politicians today? Is this MDC election important for our respective areas and regions. I stand as a citizen of Meghalaya and am humbled by the beauty of our land, our culture, and the strength of our democratic spirit. Meghalaya, with its rolling hills, vibrant traditions, and resilient people, is an integral part of our great Indian democracy. As we approach the MDC elections, a critical question confronts us: What is an election? And an equally important question—can we trust our present set of politicians?

Elections are more than just a process of casting votes. They are the heartbeat of democracy. Elections are the sacred bridge between the will of the people and the

power to govern. An election gives us, the common citizens, a voice in shaping our future. It is not just a right but a responsibility—a duty we owe to ourselves, our children, and the generations to come. The future of our state lies in the kind of people we elect. In a state like Meghalaya, where every village and community has its unique needs and aspirations, an election is an opportunity to ensure that our leaders understand and represent us. It is a moment when every Khasi, Garo, and Jaintia can come together, not just to vote, but to decide the future of their homes, schools, markets, and environment. But can we trust our politicians? This is a question we must ask not with cynicism but with wisdom. Trust is not given freely—it must be earned. And politicians, my friends, are not gods; they are human beings chosen to serve us. They should be measured by their actions, their integrity, and their commitment to the people and not by their promises alone.

Let's look around us. Have the politicians we have elected so far fulfilled the

Where Has the Forest Gone?

By H.H. Mohrmen

The India State of Forest Report (ISFR) stated that Meghalaya lost over 84 sq. km of forest cover between 2021 and 2023. This raises a very important question: what happened to our forests? With due apologies to Pete Seeger, the country song singer, and borrowing from his popular song, "Where Have All the Flowers Gone," the million-dollar question is: where have all the forests in the state gone? Why, does forest cover in the state keep disappearing in spite of all the government's efforts to protect forests owned by communities, clans and individuals to conserve the environment? Why, in spite of the government introducing numerous projects to plant trees to regenerate Meghalaya, yet the forests keep disappearing from the state?

Forest and PES

Everywhere the Chief Minister goes, he talks about this innovative scheme that the Meghalaya Democratic Alliance government has introduced. In a state like Meghalaya, where much of the land is owned either by individuals or the community, this indeed is a very innovative and not a run-of-the-mill scheme, and a very unique project at that. Again, because most of the land is owned by communities, clans, or even private individuals, it is a brilliant idea to encourage people to protect and preserve the forest.

The Chief Minister claimed that the Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES), which pays individuals or the community for conserving forests, is the only scheme of its kind in the entire country. The Chief Minister has also claimed that 54,000 hectares of land are now covered under PES Phase I and that the government has paid over Rs 42 crore to communities and individuals just to keep the forests.

The Government has now launched GREEN+ Meghalaya, said to be a grassroots-level response to Ecosystem Enhancement and Nurturing Meghalaya. Financial support of Rs 20,000 per hectare is going to be provided to villages, communities, clans, or individuals willing to conserve forests under the PES model. The most important question is: isn't it a fact that this project starts and ends with the government transferring money from the public exchequer to community bank accounts without the two having any other engagement at all? Does the village even have an active biodiversity management committee (BMC) and do we even have a biodiversity register (PBR) of the plot under PES?

The Government's effort needs to be lauded, but one

also needs to look at what the data says. As the saying goes, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. Contrary to the government's claim, the ISFR report says otherwise, and the government needs to ask itself the difficult question: in spite of the efforts, where have the forests disappeared?

The PES is, in fact, a one year old project introduced by the government to encourage the communities, clans and even individuals to protect the forests and conserve the environment. The Forest Department has implemented many schemes to plant forests across the entire state. The question that begs an answer is: what happened to the trees planted? We also need to ask ourselves: where have the trees gone?

Forest Departments and Tree Plantation

World Environment Day celebrations in the state are incomplete without a symbolic tree plantation program. At one point in time, the Government even claimed to have planted one million trees during the celebration. Not only during WED celebrations, but it has now become a fashion to plant trees to observe any event or celebrate an occasion.

Various government departments, like the Soil Conservation Department, are also engaged in different projects to conserve nature, and some components of these projects include tree plantation. One such project is the Watershed Project implemented by the Soil Conservation Department, and even now, as we write this column, the Department is working on a conservation project supported by the Asian Development Bank.

Thousands of trees were also planted by Village Employment Committees (VECs) of different communities in the state through the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS). The Government, through the Meghalaya Basin Management Agency (MBMA), has also implemented a project called the Community-Led Landscape Management Program (CLLAMP), which involves communities in planting trees and conserving the environment. The question is: has there been any audit conducted to find out what happened to all the trees that were planted?

Similar to PES, the state forestry department also implemented a scheme supported by the Central Government, which encourages communities to conserve the existing forests, called the Community Reserve

Forests, and many sacred groves are included in this project. The CR as the project is commonly called is one successful project of the government.

One successful story of the project is the case of Raid Chyrmang's sacred forest and it is one story that needs to be highlighted. Accompanying my daughter on her research for her Master's dissertation, we learned that the conservation was so successful that we now have animal-human conflict in the area. Deer have started to multiply, and in some cases, they have damaged the crops and plants of the local residents. The case is also successful because tradition is empowered by modern law. The headman said that before the implementation of the project, there was a gradual decrease in people's respect for tradition to protect the sacred forest, but the Community Reserve gives the community more power to preserve and conserve the forest. This is a classic case of how traditions and modern laws help improve the conservation of sacred forests.

Reasons the Government's Efforts Failed

The answer to the question "Where have all the forests gone?" is not blowing in the wind, but lies in the fact that the Government has never really taken the time to study, analyze, and understand the factors leading to the failure of these interventions. Many factors play a role in the disappearance of forests, and most government officials involved in implementing such projects know this very well.

Target-Oriented and Time-Bound Projects

Government projects are often target-oriented and time-bound, prioritizing completing tasks over ensuring long-term success. Reports focus on achieving targets within deadlines, leaving no room for follow-up or replacing saplings lost to mortality.

Another factor that led to the failure of these projects is the lack of community engagement. While implementing the project, the government departments only engaged the headman of the village and the Executive Committee of the shong, at best. There was little or no community engagement and the general public was not even aware of the project hence there is lack of ownership among the public which led to its failure. To ensure the success of the project, the need of the hour is for the Government to engage with communities at different levels.

Forest Fires (Thang Lum/Thang Khloo)

Forest fires are a significant cause of the failure of tree plantation projects. Despite efforts to create firebreaks and prepare plantations for the dry season, fires continue to destroy newly planted trees, standing forests, and biodiversity. Why do people start fires to burn the forest? Initially, the argument was that forest fires were a traditional practice, purposely started by people, particularly cow herders. The fire was supposedly started to help the grass leaves sprout and grow faster, providing new grass for the animals to feed on. However, this claim lacks scientific basis and instead depletes soil nutrients and kills beneficial microbes. Fires are also caused by irresponsible people who, for no rhyme or reason, light a fire, or by picnickers and smokers whose acts of negligence ignite the fire.

To address this, community-led conservation efforts should be expanded and community is engaged vigorously in the different activities. Protection of sacred groves, community forests under CR, and community fish sanctuaries promoted by the Fisheries Department offer valuable lessons. The Government should incentivize communities that prevent forest fires or illegal fishing while implementing strict penalties for such activities.

Cattle Grazing

Cattle's grazing is another significant factor undermining tree plantation efforts. Livelihood activities involving animal rearing often result in saplings being eaten. In the future any tree plantation plans must include strategies to address this issue.

Broom Grass Cultivation

Broom grass cultivation is another major contributor to deforestation. A recent trek to the canyon of the River Umngot near Samanong village revealed slopes once covered with thick forests, now replaced by broom grass. While this crop serves as an important livelihood for some, it has undeniably become a leading cause of loss of forest cover. The Government also needs to come up with an alternative to cultivation of broom grass to prevent further loss of forest cover.

Conclusion

The Government must re-evaluate its strategies for forest conservation, focusing on sustained community engagement and addressing critical issues such as forest fires, cattle grazing, and the spread of broom grass cultivation. Only by adopting a holistic approach can Meghalaya hope to reverse the trend of deforestation and restore its verdant landscape.

Constitution @ 75: Achievements & Priorities

By Satya Prakash Dash

We, the people of India, have adopted, enacted and given to ourselves this Constitution of India on the day of 26 November 1949, which came into effect on 26 January 1950. Seventy-five years of existence, and still continuing strong is not a mean achievement for India, considering its vastness and multitude, representing 'unity in diversity'. India today shines at the global level because it has upheld the Constitutional principles in letter and spirit, except the minor aberrations of national emergency.

The Constitution was drafted in a democratic manner by the Constituent Assembly formed on 9 December 1946. The Drafting Committee under the Chairmanship of Babasaheb Bhim Rao Ambedkar was set-up on 29 August 1947 by the Constituent Assembly. The Draft Constitution was presented to the Assembly on 4 November 1948, which after thorough deliberations and discussion was finally adopted by the Assembly on 26 November 1949. This process of making the Constitution of India brought in great minds from all over India and this wholesome contribution from every part of India has strengthened the continuation of the spirit of 'Bharatiyata' for all times to come. India, i.e. Bharat, is a culmination of varied cultures, traditions and customs that has seen its evolution and existence from times immemorial. It cannot be narrowed down to specificity as is the case with many other nations, but represents a shared and contributory role from each and every segment of the plural society that has been unified under the spirit of the Constitution of India.

The greatness of this nation would have been difficult to maintain without the binding force of the Constitution that has stood the test of time, and will stand forever. It is the Constitution that has made the people of India 'sovereign' and ultimate authority through the means of adult franchise in the democratic process. The nation has seen the trauma of partition, assassination of the Mahatma to the sustenance of democracy and its ascendancy in the global power competition. The foreign policy of the nation based on non-alignment to the global south solidarity and the G20 movement is a reflection of the resurgence of India founded on the basic Constitutional principles of liberty, equality, justice, and fraternity. The Constitution is the basic mechanism on which the driving force of the nation is based upon.

The nation has seen aberrations of the Constitution during the imposition of Emergency in 1975-77. However, it returned to the democratic process due to the popular leadership under Jayaprakash Narayan and his call of 'Sampoorna Kranti'. The experiment of a united opposition to counter the dictatorial mindset of the Emergency was successful at the initial stage, but it could not sustain the mandate of the people and failed. The 'single-party dominant system' of the Congress party, as remarked by the noted political scientist Rajni Kothari, again sprang back to popularity. Even the alliance of the Right-Centre-Left under the leadership of VP Singh could not hold together due to inherent contradictions within themselves. It so happened that in 1991, a minority Congress government under PV Narasimha Rao as Prime Minister managed to complete the full term of five years of governance. Not only did it manage, but it brought in major economic reforms in the form of LPG (liberalization, privatization, & globalization) under pressure from the IMF and World Bank, and ended the 'license-permit-quota' raj.

Critics have argued against the economic reforms, but the brilliance of the then Finance Minister Late Dr Manmohan Singh helped keep afloat the Indian economy at a critical juncture and for which today we are dreaming to be the third-largest economy in the near future. It was also the same minority government that brought in the 73rd and 74th Amendment Acts, whereby the rural and urban local bodies were given a compulsory status that brought in power to the people directly through the Panchayati Raj institutions and the Municipalities. This is the dynamism of the Constitution under which we are living and we are proud of it.

The present NDA government has given the call for Vikshit Bharat by 2047. The idea is definitely good, but the people should be prepared for it. We were under the strains of colonial rule and colonialism has drained all our resources. This poses a challenge towards the goal of Vikshit Bharat. Still today Bharat lies in its rural areas with an agricultural economy. The society needs to be re-oriented towards the goal of Vikshit Bharat. Our primary education has to be strengthened on a priority basis, as education is the foundation of any developed nation. If we observe the developed countries of today, like China, South East Asia, Europe, we can easily comprehend the type and quality of basic education these countries have. Skill-based education is another area that needs to be emphasized upon. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 speaks of strengthening the education system, but infrastructure and manpower have to be provided before we venture into the dynamics of the NEP.

Federalism is another significant area of concern under the Constitution. Previous regimes had indiscriminately imposed Art. 356 and dismissed democratically elected state governments. This was against the principles of federalism and the Constitution. However, the political maturity has now dawned and we do not observe the imposition of Art. 356 upon the elected state governments. Distribution of federal financial resources have been streamlined with the goods and services tax and the formation of the GST Council. Now even the opposition ruled states (non-NDA) are getting good financial grants under different programmes. As PM, Modi said in Parliament during the observance of 75 years of Indian Constitution, "Development of the country through development of the states should be our development mantra".

The Election Commission of India has a herculean task of completion of the periodic adult franchise under challenging situations. The EVMs aligned with VV-PAT have streamlined and facilitated the election process to a great extent, even though it is not free from criticism from the non-NDA political parties. It is note-worthy that even the Hon'ble Supreme Court has expressed confidence in the EVMs and vouch for its efficiency and neutrality. Recently, the Bhutan government electoral officers in a seminar in Delhi also praised the EVMs supplied by India that are being used in their elections. India also supplied EVMs to Nepal and some African countries. The recent debate of 'one-nation one-election' is another area of concern that is still under the scrutiny of the JPC (Joint Parliamentary Committee) after the Committee headed by former President Kovind gave its report. Hopefully the country will hold fast to its constitutional values.

(The writer is Professor, Political Science Department, NEHU, Shillong)

councils, let us take this moment to reflect on our dreams for this land. Let us choose leaders who will honour our trust, uplift our lives, and preserve our heritage. Let us rise as a people, united in our commitment to democracy and our love for our state. Together, let us ensure that the MDC elections are not just a process but a promise—a promise to build a Meghalaya that is prosperous, just, and true to its values.

Yours etc.,
Pynshaibha Latam
Via email

Rejoinder on the news item on Mawlai Town Dorbar

Editor,
Apropos of the news report on prohibiting public meetings and rallies in and around the Mawlai area to avoid disturbing the student community appearing for the coming board exams, the Mawlai Town Dorbar has clarified that all six candidates, including the

candidate of the VPP, have unanimously agreed to this decision so why is the VPP expressing strong opposition on this matter? Indeed, the question right now is why is the VPP against this decision of the Dorbar, which is, in fact, totally in favour of the student community? The VPP usually brags that its party hierarchy consists mainly of that academic community, but ironically, this opposition is primarily against the students of Mawlai and is therefore the height of hypocrisy. As a concerned citizen, I have witnessed this cheap political gimmick that the VPP indulges in from time to time or the sentimental manipulation of the innocent public. The VPP needs to stop this divisive and emotive politics before it polarises the Khasi, Jaintia community, where brothers of the same mother take up arms against each other for the sake of a political party.

Yours etc.,
W. Tariang,
Via email

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

"Victory is always possible for the person who refuses to stop fighting."

— Napoleon Hill

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No. 167 SHILLONG, WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 29, 2025

Pressure over pension

THE New Unified Pension Scheme, now notified by the Centre, will come into effect from the start of the 2025 fiscal on April 1. This would benefit over 30 lakh government employees who joined the service from the cut-off date of January 1, 2004. Among other things, the new contributory system promises a hike of the government's contribution to the corpus (total money invested in the scheme) to 18.5 per cent from the previous offer of 14 per cent, while the employees' contribution will remain at 10 per cent. It would be in everybody's interest that government employees – of state and central – are paid reasonably well and their interests protected. At the same time, it should also not appear that the employees browbeat governments into submission and extract undue benefits.

Employee pension reform was one field where the BJP dispensation, in its iterations, failed to stand its ground. The National Pension System (NPS) introduced during the AB Vajpayee term in 2004 had been cited as an "improvement" on the Old Pension Scheme (OPS). NPS was also known as the Contributory pension system, wherein those who joined the government service from January that year had to make a contribution matching with a government contribution to the pension corpus. The employees took objection, but finally agreed to it by extracting a set of additional pecuniary benefits to them from the government. After having won such benefits, momentum started building in some states against the contributory pension system. Some regional parties, followed by the Congress, promised in their election manifestos for assembly polls in states like Punjab, Chhattisgarh, Himachal Pradesh etc to revert to the old pension system; and they did so after winning the polls. This put additional pressure on the Modi-led central government to reconsider the National Pension System. Stories were spread that the BJP failed to garner sufficient seats for a majority in Parliament in the 2024 LS polls due, mainly, to the discontentment of government employees and their families. Sections of the media played this up. The Unified New Pension Scheme that will be rolled out from April next too might or might not satisfy the employees. They are bound to find "flaws" in it and eventually start applying pressure on future governments for further revisions to their advantage.

Every time a new government is formed, it is called upon to "do more" for the employees, who with their families, are projected to be an organised "vote bank" – a proposition which might or might not be true, and not based on ground realities in the election fray. The policy of any government worth its name should be to give every citizen what is his or her due; nothing less, nothing more. In the present case, the Congress and the regional parties helped create a mess out of the reforms in the pension system. They did so with ulterior motives; and with no regard to national interests.

Why always target Khasi women?

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

Last week a friend of mine sent me a very disturbing video from a recent VPP public meeting in which Aibandaplin F. Lyngdoh, the MDC candidate from Myllem, was addressing the rumour that she had got married to a non-Khasi man. She clarified that she was still single and was not looking to get married because she was busy with political work. She assured the audience that whenever she gets married, it will be with a Khasi man. Upon hearing this, the audience and the party leaders seated behind her erupted into applause and cheers. She also asked the people not to pay heed to unfounded rumours. This whole incident reminds us of chastity test that Sita had to pass through when she returned to Ayodhya after being abducted by Ravana.

When Rama finally emerged victorious after killing Ravana, he was hesitant to accept Sita because of her long confinement in Lanka. She had to go through a trial by fire to prove her chastity and survived. But even after returning home, there were rumours among the public and questioning her virtue despite having already passed the trial. Rama banished her to the forest, where she gave birth to two sons. Finally, Sita asked the earth to open up and take her back (Sita was supposed to be a child of Mother Earth). The earth opened up, swallowing her alive.

Aibandaplin was a VPP candidate from Myllem during the last MLA elections. She came very close to unseating Ronnie V Lyngdoh, a senior Congress leader who won by just 38 votes. For a first-time candidate, this was a significant achievement. This time around, she will look to better the outcome. But that she had to come out in public to prove her chastity was a very sad sight. It highlights the double standards that exist in the political sphere for women. I have never heard of anyone publicly demanding that a man defend his virtue, but women constantly face this pressure. This also shows the intrusion of anti-women patriarchal tendencies into the Khasi society. The VPP and its leadership have previously questioned women's dignity.

The Cherry Blossom festival of 2023 saw the controversy of a girl dancing on the stage with Ne-Yo. The video of the dance sparked outrage among those who demanded action against her for bringing shame to the community. Ardent Miller Basaiawmoit, VPP President, sided with these misogynistic men,

demanding that action be taken against her for indecency. When Aibandaplin was defending her chastity in front of the audience, he was sitting behind her clapping when she assured everyone that she would only marry a Khasi. What happens when the VPP organizes its internal meeting? Is Aibandaplin the one serving tea to the members present? I place great emphasis on this practice because, when I was teaching at the university, whenever I brought coffee for my students, I ensured it was the boys who served it. This slight gesture is meant to challenge gender roles. I only hope that Aibandaplin, or any woman, never has to defend her dignity in front of others again. It was an incredibly shameful incident.

The uproar of a Khasi woman marrying a non-Khasi man among those who practise jaidbynriew politics is not something new. There have been calls to have their Khasi status removed. Setting aside the fact that such an act would be highly illegal it also exposes the deeper issues plaguing those who claim to fight for the community. These individuals lack a proper understanding or appreciation of the community's history and culture, with their knowledge being superficial and riddled with inaccuracies. There is a popular slogan which says 'Khasi by blood and Indian by accident'. I agree we are Indian by historical accident, but there is nothing called a Khasi blood. Instead, there are genetic markers which are common across Austroasiatic populations – Y-chromosomal haplogroup O2a1-M95.

Researchers found that both Khasi and Munda speakers carry this genetic marker, distinguishing them from non-Austro-asiatic speakers. However, checking the proportion of Khasi male individuals carrying the genetic marker revealed it was only around 30%. This means that 70% or more of the Khasi males today had ancestry, which was non-Khasi or non-Austroasiatic. These are non-Khasi men married to Khasi women, adopting their culture and customs. What about maternal ancestry? To what extent can we trace our maternal lineage back to the original Khasis who settled in the Northeast around 5,000 years ago? I have found no specific mtDNA markers passed from mothers to their offspring that clearly distinguish between Austro-asiatic and non-Austro-asiatic maternal

lineages. If anyone knows, please share it with all of us. Instead, these are grouped together under lineages originating from Southeast Asia, accounting for around 40% of the Khasis. This implies that 60% of the Khasi females (although this marker can also be detected in males since mtDNA is passed to all offspring, the Y chromosome is passed exclusively to males) today do not belong to the original Austro-asiatic groups that migrated from Southeast Asia after initially arriving there from South China. These are females from non-Austro-asiatic groups that assimilated within the Khasi. If we classified only children of within-community marriages as Khasi, over 70% of those alive today would be non-Khasi. This actually explains a lot of other things as well.

There are some Khasi males, including those from the VPP, who have advocated for patrilineal customs and have repeatedly tried to raise the pitch for it in various forums. Now that we know that an overwhelming majority of the Khasi males trace their ancestry from a non-Khasi paternal lineage, could the ones making the demand actually be those with a non-Khasi heritage? Among the different indigenous groups in the North East before the coming of the Indo-Aryans, and their spread in the Brahmaputra valley (particularly the upper caste), there is no sign that any of them were matrilineal. There is a version given in Hamlet Barch Ngap Kynta's book 'The History And Culture Of The Khasi People' about how the Garos adopted matrilineal customs to honour the support provided by the Khasi during a difficult period of the community. There appears to be some truth in that claim. Japanese anthropologist Chie Nakane, in her monograph 'Garos and Khasis: A comparative study in matrilineal systems,' pointed out a similarity between the Garo social structure and that of patrilineal groups. But those of the Khasi are only found among matrilineal communities. So, those demanding the change of the lineage from matrilineal to patrilineal could very well be those whose origins are non-Khasi. This might sound like a scandalous suggestion, but there is a way to find out the truth.

We have already discussed that there is a genetic marker which distinguishes non-Austro-asiatic speaking people from other groups,

Y-chromosomal haplogroup O2a1-M95 for the paternal lineage. For the time being, the Southeast Asian lineage will suffice for the maternal lineage. We could have a more accurate genetic marker in the future. I propose that the political parties contesting the upcoming District Council elections state in their manifesto that they will do a DNA test of all those who presently claim to be Khasi. They could always tie up with some research institute who would be delighted to get hold on such a quantum of data. Only those individuals whose paternal and maternal ancestry shows they do not belong to the original Austro-asiatic groups that migrated from Southeast Asia after initially arriving there from South China. These are females from non-Austro-asiatic groups that assimilated within the Khasi. If we classified only children of within-community marriages as Khasi, over 70% of those alive today would be non-Khasi. This actually explains a lot of other things as well.

This will clear up the matter once and for all. Any party that fails to create such a manifesto, regardless of whether they win or lose, is nothing but hypocritical if they speak of Khasi purity. They are merely fooling the people for their own personal gains.

This narrative of 'Khasi blood' and 'purity' has been going on for a long time driving the jaidbynriew politics in the state. I think it's time that we seek for a lasting solution. This is not the Dark Ages where there's no science and technology to help us figure out the truth. Just because some people claim something out of ignorance doesn't make it true. Will facts or fantasy rule us? Let's end this now so that no Aibandaplin should have to prove her chastity in front of the public. It happened to Sita, and that didn't end well for her. We don't want the same fate to befall any woman anymore.

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

Trump's Immigration Policy overreach

By VK Lyngdoh

As of January 2025, Donald Trump has signed over 80 executive orders since his return to the White House. These orders cover a wide range of topics, including immigration, energy and free speech. Let us examine the two orders which he signed 5 days ago. The order on free speech and immigration. The order on free speech signed on January 20, 2025, aims to restore freedom of speech and end federal censorship. The order emphasises the importance of the First Amendment, which protects the right of free speech without government interference. It criticises the previous administration for allegedly censoring Americans' speech on online platforms by pressuring social media companies to moderate or suppress content. The order outlines the policy of the United States to: Secure the right of Americans to engage in constitutionally protected speech, ensure that no federal government officer, employee, or agent unconstitutionally abridges free speech, prevent the use of taxpayer's resources to engage in or facilitate censorship and identify and correct the past misconduct related to censorship of protected speech.

The Attorney General, in consultation with other executive departments and agencies, is tasked with investigating federal government activities over the past four years that may have infringed on free speech and recommend appropriate remedial actions. This order has drawn criticism from those who argue that it is a public relations exercise and does not address the complexities of online misinformation and hate speech. Critics argue that the order is an oversimplification as it focuses on preventing government interference in free speech but does not tackle the nuanced issue of misinformation and hate speech, which can cause real world harm. The order does not provide clear guidelines on how to balance free speech with the need to combat harmful content online. Critics worry that the order could be used to protect harmful speech under the guise of free speech, making it harder to address issues like harassment, threats and false information. These concerns highlight the challenges of creating policies that protect free speech while also addressing the negative impacts of misinformation and hate speech.

The executive order on immigration, titled, "Protecting the American People Against Invasion," was signed on the same date. The order emphasizes the need to protect the United States from what it describes as an unprecedented surge of illegal immigration over the past four years. It highlights the threats posed by illegal aliens, including national security risks, public safety concerns, and economic burden on taxpayers. The order outlines the policy of the United States to (1) faithfully execute immigration laws against all inadmissible and removable aliens. (2) Achieve total and efficient enforcement of these laws through lawful incentives and detention capabilities. The order revokes several previous executive orders related to immigration enforcement and family reunification. It directs federal agencies to take all appropriate actions to secure the borders, including establishing physical barriers and other measures to prevent illegal entry; detaining and promptly removing aliens who violate federal or state laws; pursuing criminal charges against illegal aliens and those who facilitate their unlawful presence; cooperating with state

and local law enforcement officials to enforce federal immigration priorities. The order has sparked significant controversy and legal challenges, with critics arguing that it does not address the complexities of immigration and may lead to human rights violations.

The executive order on immigration, particularly the one ending birthright citizenship, has faced significant legal challenges. The order has been deemed "blatantly unconstitutional" by a federal judge in Seattle. The 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution July 9, 1868 guarantees citizenship to all children born on American soil, and this order contradicts that principle. A temporary restraining order has been issued, blocking the implementation of the policy for 14 days. Multiple lawsuits have been filed by states and civil rights organizations, arguing that the order would harm children born in the U.S. to non-citizen parents. The legal challenges are expected to be prolonged, with further hearings and potential appeals.

The economic impact of the executive order on immigration is multifaceted. Immigrants play a crucial role in the U.S. labour market, filling essential jobs and contributing to economic growth. Restricting immigration could lead to labour shortages in various industries, particularly those that rely heavily on immigrant workers. Immigrants are often at the forefront of innovation and entrepreneurship. Limiting immigration could stifle innovation and reduce the number of new businesses being created. Overall, immigration has a net positive effect on the U.S. economy. It boosts productivity, fills labour gaps, and contributes to federal, state and local budgets. Restricting immigrants could slow down economic growth and reduce the country's competitive edge. These legal and economic implications highlight the complexities and potential consequences of the executive order on immigration.

The economic impact of immigration on the United States' Gross Domestic Product is significant. Immigrants contribute to economic growth through their work, spending and tax payments. Some of the key points on immigrants is that they make up a substantial portion of the U.S. labour force. They fill essential jobs in various industries, including agriculture, construction, healthcare and technology. This helps to mitigate labour shortages and supports economic productivity. Immigrants increase consumer demand for goods and services, which stimulates economic activity. Their spending power boosts local economies and supports businesses. They contribute significantly to federal, state and local tax revenues. This helps fund public services and infrastructure. Overall, immigration has a net positive effect on the U.S. economy. It is estimated that increased immigration could reduce the U.S. federal budget deficit by nearly \$897 billion over the next decade. However, restrictive immigration policies, such as mass deportations, could have adverse effects. The Peterson Institute for International Economics estimates that the U.S. economy could shrink by 1.2% by 2028 if the government deport 1.3 million people. If all 8.3 million undocumented immigrants were deported, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) could fall by a whopping 7.4% over that time frame. At present 7.4% decrease in GDP would be around \$1.89 trillion that is 61 percent of the GDP of India.

Letters to the Editor

Concerns regarding bike racing on Umiam-Jorabat highway

Editor,
Apropos of a recent news report on the growing trend of bike racing on the Umiam-Jorabat four-lane highway, which has become a Sunday spectacle attracting bikers and onlookers alike, I would like to address the concerning statistics surrounding road accidents in India.

Union Minister for Road Transport and Highways, Nitin Gadkari, had pledged to reduce road accidents in India by 50%, but during the December 2024 parliament session, he acknowledged that his ministry has not achieved this goal. He also revealed that 59% of road accidents in India occur on National Highways.

As per the yearly publication by the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways, road accidents in India in 2022, totalled a staggering 4,61,312 as reported by States and Union Territories. These accidents resulted in 1,68,491 fatalities and

caused injuries to 4,43,366 individuals. Notably, the number of road accidents in 2022 increased by 11.9% compared to the previous year, 2021. This surge was accompanied by a 9.4% increase in fatalities and a 15.3% increase in injuries.

On average, there were approximately 1,264 road accidents and 462 fatalities daily in India, equating to 53 accidents and 19 deaths per hour. The majority of vehicles involved in accidents in India were two-wheelers. The all-India average mortality rate per 100 accidents was 36.5. Mizoram reported the highest mortality rate at 85.0 per 100 accidents, followed by Meghalaya at 6th position with an average mortality of 65.9 per 100 accidents.

According to National Crime Records Bureau report 2021, the major causes of accidents are

1. Over-speeding
2. Bad driving habits/ or for that matter lack of good driving habits
3. Driving under influence of alcohol or drugs
4. No use of helmets, seat-belts and child restraints
5. Distracted driving
6. Unsafe road infrastructure
7. Unsafe vehicles

8. Inadequate law enforcement of traffic laws.

The roads in the north-eastern region of India are undergoing upgrades from national highways to four-lane and even six-lane highways. If my memory serves me correctly, the maximum speed limit for two-wheeled vehicles on highways is 80 kilometers per hour. However, it is not uncommon to observe super bikes and even those with lower capacities exceeding 120 kilometers per hour on public roads in an uncontrolled environment. There is no question of responsible driving when these vehicles are traveling at breakneck speeds and engaging in reckless racing on roads that are not designed for such activities. Furthermore, the audacity of these bikers is evident in the fact that many of them have active social media channels where they openly flaunt their law-breaking actions for the amusement of their followers and to get 'likes.' A review of the comments on their social media channels reveal a concerning pattern of encouragement and support from the public. This behaviour is particularly concerning as it is influencing young children to engage in inappropriate actions, endangering their own lives

as well as the lives of others. The State of Punjab has established the Sadak Suraksha Force (SSF) to enhance road safety by deploying 5,000 personnel every 30 kilometers. This initiative provides first aid and has significantly reduced fatalities. The SSF has become a symbol of hope, making Punjab the first state in India to create a dedicated force solely focused on preventing road accidents and assisting injured individuals. Equipped with advanced vehicles and cutting-edge tools, these vehicles serve as ambulances capable of handling a wide range of emergencies, from accidents to providing assistance to those in distress on the roads. Since its inception, the SSF has successfully reduced the accident death rate in Punjab by 47%.

The Union Minister for Road and Transport openly expresses regret over India's poor road traffic accident record and shies away from attending the International Road Federation World Congress. The government can only do so much; we, as responsible citizens, must educate our children and youth against these hazardous practices. There is a need for stricter law enforcement and, most importantly, a change in human behav-

our. Individuals should take responsibility for driving safely because driving is not a right but a privilege.

Yours etc.,
Dr B Sangma,
Tura

Individuals should take responsibility for driving safely because driving is not a right but a privilege.

Yours etc.,
Dr B Sangma,
Tura

Parking lots are for parking not for hawkers

Editor,
The hawkers need designated vending zones in order to do their business and earn their livelihoods. However, they cannot set up shop on footpaths and just about anywhere. I, for one had been very vocal about the need for the government to find a space for them to trade and not inconvenience the rest of the citizens who are forced to rub shoulders with vehicles as the footpaths are occupied by hawkers. Having said that it is important however to identify proper vending zones for the hawkers and parking lots are not the most befitting spaces. Of the three designated zones, two are parking lots – basement of the MUDA Parking Lot and the parking lot opposite the SBI Main Branch. For a majority of us, common

citizens, besides having to deal with traffic jams, trying to find a space to park our vehicles is in itself a great challenge. The parking lots available at present in and around Police Bazar are still not sufficient. This is an ordeal that many of us go through and on this I think I share the feelings of my fellow citizens. For those in the helm of affairs, who face no traffic jams nor require proper space to park their vehicles, the best possible space to push the hawkers to, may be parking lots but certainly not for us.

As much as I sincerely feel that the hawkers must not take away the footpaths, sidewalks and even the roads, the Government must also understand that taking away parking lots will neither ease the problems of the hawkers nor vehicle owners. The government must be considerate and think about the wellbeing of all. If parking lots are to make way for hawkers, then surely there must be alternate parking spaces for the rest of us.

Yours etc.,
Jennifer Dkhar,
Via email

citizens, besides having to deal with traffic jams, trying to find a space to park our vehicles is in itself a great challenge. The parking lots available at present in and around Police Bazar are still not sufficient. This is an ordeal that many of us go through and on this I think I share the feelings of my fellow citizens. For those in the helm of affairs, who face no traffic jams nor require proper space to park their vehicles, the best possible space to push the hawkers to, may be parking lots but certainly not for us.

As much as I sincerely feel that the hawkers must not take away the footpaths, sidewalks and even the roads, the Government must also understand that taking away parking lots will neither ease the problems of the hawkers nor vehicle owners. The government must be considerate and think about the wellbeing of all. If parking lots are to make way for hawkers, then surely there must be alternate parking spaces for the rest of us.

Yours etc.,
Jennifer Dkhar,
Via email

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

"Nothing in life is so exhilarating as to be shot at without result."

— Winston Churchill

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No. 168 SHILLONG, THURSDAY, JANUARY 30, 2025

Students' Suicide & State Action

DEATH by suicide of a young student with a beckoning future ahead is a deep scar on society and reeks of an education system that is exploitative and uncaring and which misses the signs of mental health where the young are crying out silently but desperately for help. This works at several levels. Firstly, it reflects cogently on a society where marks alone are the yardsticks of success and nothing else matters. Parents as the first responders often miss the danger signs that their kids are facing in a desperate situation. Teachers are too busy dishing out facts to have the time for any emotional hand-holding that adolescents with a fragile state of mind are crying out for. The presence of counsellors in schools is not of much help as students don't want to be identified as those "needing emotional help and support," simply because they don't want to be judged.

The youth today walk the dangerous path of a life where empathy from parents and the educational system are both missing. So where do the young turn to in such desperate situations when neither family members nor teachers are able to read their silent cries for help; much less respond to such emotional roller coasters? Clearly our education system and society have both failed the youth who are emotionally drained yet are unable to articulate their need for robust emotional support because the system has not developed such a system. Without a crisis management centre in place students are unable to manage the stress of an educational system that fails to measure their other cognitive domains except those that test their ability to learn by rote. Our youth are not given the space to speak out against the very system that pushes them to take desperate steps such as taking away their own precious lives. Parents that have high expectations from their kids actually themselves need counselling and teachers should go through a crash course on identifying the signs of mental health in their students and of giving them the space to just unburden themselves. How many teachers actually have time to listen with empathy without lecturing to an already traumatised youth? Traumatized by the need to meet the rigorous expectations of a system that relies heavily on marks and misses out the other significant features of education such as the recognition of a young person's unique aptitudes and how to hone those for a life that presents challenges on multiple fronts and not just a cut and dried; tried and tested marking system.

The death of a young and aspiring youth should trigger a societal debate instead of it being just another media report that does not shake up the system. The Meghalaya Board of School Education (MBOSE) represents a system that has all but failed the students and drained their emotions, turning them into listless automatons who only really matter to their parents and teachers when they secure 'good' marks. This system is fraught and needs a complete overhaul after consulting educational and mental health experts. Parents must be part of this repairing process.

Meghalaya's Invisible Students and the Illusion of Inclusivity

By Napoleon S Mawphniang

I write this article in my personal capacity as an advocate and RTI activist, having navigated a bureaucratic system that often leads to delays or diversions, and am basing my claims on facts and information obtained from many government entities through detailed RTI requests. Meghalayan students and children with disabilities or special educational needs (SEN) and children with special needs (CWSN) have long been a source of concern for the state's administration, and this concern has only grown. Based on past experiences and comparisons, this research identifies government weaknesses and proposes remedies.

Our SEN and CWSN students are in a situation similar to that of King Trishanku from the old Indian folklore, who was imprisoned between heaven and earth. They are stuck between policy statements and the reality on the ground. The stated frameworks of the Government of Meghalaya guarantee inclusivity, but the real finances, stakeholder testimonies, and chronic shortages tell a completely different narrative.

DISE Enrolment - A Catch-22 situation

The District Information System for Education tracked enrolment, dropouts, and educational benefits. My research shows that many SEN and CWSN aren't on DISE, thus programs that could help them can't discover them. A powerful administration like Emperor Ashoka's empire should find and foster such infants early on. This yields a recursive pattern: Some SEN and CWSN never appear in official records, but those that do often face bureaucratic hoops that prevent them from receiving the promised support.

In contrast, Meghalaya's insufficient DISE enrolment encourages resource duplication and starvation for the most vulnerable. Full enrolment is required for SEN and CWSN improvement programs.

Underfunded transport & escort allowances

Several government circulars were released between 2015 and 2025 to clarify who can get transport or escort allowances, especially for people with mobility challenges or severe disabilities. These communications' sanitised distribution quantities are woefully inadequate. This budget can't cover the rising costs in wheelchair-accessible vehicles and school transport in Meghalaya's tough terrain. Ironically, this is similar to British India's salt tax controversy. Even though the British allowed a paltry amount, communities incurred a disproportionate expense for hauling salt. SEN and CWSN families are saddled with unacknowledged commitments,

just as Meghalaya's official 'allowances' fall short of real-world costs. This was more than a mistake. It is a grave irresponsibility to not evaluate or increase these tariffs annually to reflect inflation or transit costs.

Progressive frameworks include states like Kerala, which have significant scholarship programs and encourage bigger allowances for disabled children. Their strategy is more in line with needs, but not perfect. Due to Meghalaya's stagnant rates, indigenous parents are struggling to make ends meet.

Is World Disabled Day a ritual?

Annual government financing for World Disabled Day is poor. Lack of attention to empowering the disabled people is evident, with a deficit of Rs 6,000 per district or Rs 1,500 per block. Government documents from 2015 to 2025 repeat these figures without change.

On a day for inclusivity, creativity, and genuine support, children are reminded of their limited resources. Budget constraints limit events to symbolic gatherings with few SEN and CWSN. Previously, the Gupta court lavishly funded scholarship, capturing the national imagination through knowledge, success, and community welfare events. Meghalaya's lacklustre World Disabled Day commemoration shows its superficial policies.

Participation Selection: Financial limits on festivities

In addition to World Disabled Day limits, 2019-2024 government laws stated that only a few SEN and CWSN could be feted due to budget issues. Due to budget limits, World Disabled Day is exclusive, which contradicts India's communal celebrations of Diwali and Eid.

A day to recognise all students with impairments inexplicably excludes many disabled people who want to participate or display their abilities. A few receive government recognition, but most stay home due to low or no transit allowances. Basically its a token gesture.

Evaluation Centres - Machines, Not Medical Care

An average of Rs 5,000 per Block for an "assessment camp" (to be repeated in March 2025) was announced in early 2024 through sanctioned communications. These events usually prioritise hearing aids, crutches, and wheelchairs above a complete health evaluation. Children who need expert medical diagnosis or are visually handicapped are often disregarded. Regional statistics from 2021 show that neurological, cognitive, and

psychological issues are neither minor or negligible, but these camps ignore them.

The southern Indian Chola dynasty had a multifaceted approach to healthcare, education, and municipal management. Modern medical evaluations must include direct aid delivery. Meghalaya's administration is painting a broken cart without replacing its wheels. A child who could benefit from cognitive treatment or a neurological evaluation is ignored.

Exclusion for DISE non-enrolment

Government regulations repeatedly emphasise the importance of properly enrolling participants of state or centrally supported projects in DISE. Thus, many children who have not yet joined DISE are ineligible for allowances, equipment, or official help. This illustrates an administrative dilemma: It is usual to add people to the waiting list after they have shown up for help.

When families don't comprehend these subtleties, kids' educational futures are at risk, especially in rural Meghalaya. Some parents tried to enlist their children in DISE data, but their attempts were denied owing to arbitrary deadlines, according to RTI reports. Losing early intervention services for a child is the worst outcome.

Delaying Special Educator Regularisation

This failure is even more apparent in light of the Supreme Court's verdict in *Rajneesh Kumar Pandey & Ors. vs. Union of India & Ors.* (Writ Petition (Civil) No. 132/2016 & 876/2017), which stressed the right of special needs children to stable and competent special educators. The Meghalaya government has ignored multiple letters and demands for special educators. Many long-term state special educators are still on contract, without benefits or credit. They have not received an honorarium raise in nearly nine years, demotivated and financially unstable. This is even more puzzling since the state employs only seventeen special educators.

This reminds me of how some royal kingdoms treated their skilled artisans, who were honoured by the court but never improved their living conditions. State policy that doesn't identify special educators as normal employees hinders information transfer and inhibits SEN and CWSN from receiving constant professional help. Any inclusive education system should value special educators, not commodities.

The Meghalaya government appears compassionate but engages in Machiavellian oversight, making grandiose

promises while ignoring key facts, approving of insufficient funding, and leaving stakeholders confused until deficits become the norm.

Final scene

If excellent words and symbolic investment were enough, Meghalaya would demonstrate inclusive education. However, the framework seems unstable, like a play in a grand palace with wobbly scaffolding. From 2015 to 2025, narratives feature missed opportunities, disregarded demands, inadequate money, and a superficial policy climate. Hence a purposeful policy requires more than a few symbolic events.

1. To ensure no child is left behind, political leaders must integrate DISE with local outreach to enrol all SEN and CWSN. Field staff help families through the procedure.

2. The market pricing of transport and escort services must be used to adjust fund allocation quickly.

3. To promote true inclusion, World Disabled Day needs more financing.

4. Assess More Than Appliances at Assessment Camps: Include medical care for children's neuro-cognitive, psychological, and holistic needs.

5. The elementary school's district mission coordinator and secondary school's DSEOC must collaborate on SEN and CWSN to improve interdepartmental collaboration. This requires removing administrative hurdles.

6. Special Educator Celebration: According to the Supreme Court's Writ Petition (C) No. 132/2016 & 876/2017, recognise, compensate, and retain exceptional educators who have worked for years.

7. Keep Following Up: Hold local officials accountable for infractions, disclose audit results annually, and audit annually.

The sage Kautilya of ancient Indian literature said a ruler's legitimacy is based on welfare. Every child, regardless of aptitude, is part of the state's moral covenant, and inclusive education requires this. The many delays, which may have been caused by a lack of finance, sloppy record-keeping, or a refusal to regularise key educators, violate that commitment. If Meghalaya is to progress, the administration must stop making hollow promises and start making actual changes based on evidence. Legitimate improvements now can illuminate the future for many special education and cognitively impaired pupils, like a single bulb can illuminate a big room. We cannot spend another ten years of empty rhetoric. Justice and the morality of our state require immediate action.

(The writer is Advocate, Trade Unionist, Ethicist & The Humanist Architect)

Trump is dead wrong on deportations

By Jagdish Rattanani

The world watches aghast as Donald Trump, the 47th President of the United States, runs riot. From an Indian perspective, the immediate fall-outs stem from the evolving US immigration policy enforcement, given that an estimated four million Indians live and work in the United States. This makes Indian Americans the second largest immigrant group in the United States, after Mexico. But Indians are also said to be the third largest as a group among unauthorised immigrants in the US, behind

relationships with a mercurial Trump, who will likely fire away on multiple fronts, notably the threat of new tariffs and barriers and the scope and size of the H1-B visa programme where Indians are the top baggers. One response would be to lie low, to bide time and to allow Trump to settle. His bark may well be worse than his bite though the world and India must be prepared for nasty surprises. Do note that among recent Presidents, it was Barack Obama rather than Trump in his first term who deported the most peo-

"Immigrants move to the US for a better life, but this push will have no impact without the strong pull from the US market that accommodates workers for economic reasons."

Mexico and El Salvador, according to the Pew Research Centre. The number of such Indians is estimated to be between 725,000 (by Pew) and 375,000 (by the US-based Migration Policy Institute, MPI). The term being used for this category now is "illegal aliens," a derogatory and dehumanised framing that was banned under President Joe Biden but is now back in use under Trump. A statement of January 26 by the US Immigration & Customs Enforcement (ICE) spoke of raids to keep "potentially dangerous criminal aliens out of our communities."

Under Biden, the preferred usages were "undocumented non-citizen" or "undocumented non-U.S. citizen" or "undocumented individual," in line with US seeing itself as "a nation of opportunity and of welcome." All that is history as the ICE police acquires a new and nasty edge, raiding homes, schools, bars and places of worship. Any mass operation of this kind will tend to stigmatise all Indians as the license to question, search and detain people is interpreted and executed in a variety of ways that inevitably lead to racial profiling, reinforcing negative stereotypes with minority groups as targets. All Indians save those at or near the top of the socio-economic ladder may well be living under a shadow of suspicion already. This marks a remarkable fall for a land where Indians are among the most visible and most successful group of immigrants working often in mid and senior roles in corporate America and in the vast services sector.

Reports coming in at the beginning of the week about "raids" on gurudwaras across the US in the search of undocumented Indians only serve to underline the severity of the strain that Indo-US goodwill and diplomatic relations will soon come under, if the trend continues beyond its initial frenzy and zeal. Already, we have on hand the reported deportation of some 18,000 Indians who allegedly are illegal migrants, so declared before Trump took office. On a national scale, the number is insignificant, but this is just the beginning, and it speaks of the speed and efficiency with which the process of deportations will likely play out in the US. The manner and time span in which the 18,000 are deported can serve to embarrass the Narendra Modi government and hurt Indo-US ties. It will bring new questions for an image-sensitive government that projects India as a growth engine while an increasing number of Indians, as alleged by the US, look to settle in a foreign land.

For now, India is right in asserting that it will take back deportees after verifying that they indeed are Indian citizens. It'll need deft diplomacy to negotiate

ple. George W. Bush (2001-2009) deported a little over a million; Trump in his first term (2017-2021) deported just 3.25 lakhs whereas Barack Obama (2009-2017) had almost 1.25 million deportations under his watch, according to a 2021 report by the US-based think tank, Cato Institute. Thus, so far, Obama stands with the title of "Deporter-in-Chief", but this was achieved as part of a carefully laid out policy, rather than wildcat raids or arrests.

Modelling how Trump's push will play out or how many people will be deported has little value since the subject, i.e. Trump, remains tricky, unpredictable and fickle-minded. He may do irreparable damage, and yet, he may not really make much of a difference given that the flow of immigrants is essentially dictated by the market. Immigrants move to the US for a better life, but this push will have no impact without the strong pull from the US market that accommodates workers for economic reasons. They are (a) available for hire, (b) are cheaper to hire, (c) are diligent and dependable and (d) are willing to put in extra hours. At the mid and lower rungs, they are also exploited, bringing unparalleled benefits for hirers.

So for purely selfish reasons, business lobbies may not be supportive of the raids for long. Yet, there remains, the underlying risks of white-supremacists in powerful positions leading to deportation operations that will leave many scars for the Indian, American population -- the most successful and productive of immigrant groups. Reports coming in from the US have already raised concerns within that country on US citizens being detained, questioned without access to a lawyer and allowed to go after several hours of detention. As of now, raids continue to expand in response to demands from the new administration that more numbers should be rounded up. Yet, such blunt instruments rarely succeed.

In 1902, the United States' Commissioner General of Immigration, Terence Powderly, called for stricter health controls on immigrants at a time of peak migration and great of diseases; during, 1880-1924, 23.5 million immigrants came to the US, mostly through Ellis Island in the New York harbour -- a port of immigration that was busy and corrupt. President Theodore Roosevelt in 1902 appointed a young lawyer, whose job it became, "to root out dishonest inspectors who had been bilking immigrants of money in exchange for fraudulent naturalisation papers," writes Prof. Alan M. Kraut, a MPI fellow.

America has of course, come a long way since 1902, or has it?

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

Letters to the Editor

When education becomes a death sentence

Editor,
Why does a 16-year-old end their life when they should be exploring, learning, and laughing?
When news broke that a 16-year-old student from Government Girls' Higher Secondary School, Jail Road, took her own life inside her classroom after an examination, it sent shockwaves through our community. This tragedy forces us to ask some uncomfortable but necessary questions: How can families, schools, and the government better support students? Is there an urgent need to change our policies? Should we see this as a victory for a broken system or a collective failure of educators, legislators, and families? Or should we just dismiss it by saying she was weak and move on?

The reality is that every student faces immense pressure—whether it's academic stress, parental expectations, peer comparisons, or the burden of an uncertain future. Many struggle in silence, afraid to show that they are tired and overwhelmed. But should it be this way?

Role of families and schools:

Parents play a crucial role in shaping a child's mental well-being. While expect-

tations and discipline are necessary, is there enough room for open conversations, emotional support, and reassurance that failure is not the end? Many children grow up fearing disappointment more than failure itself, leading them to believe their worth is measured solely by their achievements.

Similarly, schools are supposed to be safe spaces for learning and growth. Yet, how many schools actually prioritise mental health? Counselling services are either non-existent or insufficient. Teachers, often burdened with administrative work, may not always recognize the warning signs of distress in students. The education system's relentless focus on marks rather than holistic development only adds to the pressure.

Are policies effective, or just on paper?

In 2022, 7.6% of suicides in India were by students, with 2,248 deaths directly linked to exam failure. The New Education Policy (NEP) and the National Suicide Prevention Strategy (NSPS) were introduced to reform the system and provide mental health support. Yet, their implementation remains weak. The stress of exams persists, and many policies remain theoretical rather than practical. While some states have introduced supplementary exams, the stigma of failure is still deeply ingrained.

The criminalization of attempted suicide under Sec-

tion 309 of the IPC further discourages students from seeking help. Rather than addressing the root causes, society often places blame on the victims, calling them weak. But is it weakness to struggle under a system designed to break them?

So what needs to change?

This tragedy should not become just another statistic. Schools must prioritize mental health education as much as academics. Every institution should have trained counsellors who can guide students through their struggles. Parents need to create an environment where failure is accepted as part of growth rather than a source of shame. The government must ensure that education policies focus on well-being and flexibility rather than rote learning and pressure.

Every student who takes their own life is a reminder that we are failing them—not the other way around. The time for change is now. How many more lives must be lost before we truly listen?

Yours etc.,
Krish Marwein,
Via mail

Of common election platforms: pros and cons

Editor,
Apropos of the news "UDP backs common platform concept to engage with

people" and "Common platform idea echoes in Jowai" (ST January 29, 2025), a common platform for political campaigns could offer several advantages, but it also comes with its own set of challenges. The advantages of a common platform are that they can help political parties present a unified message, making it easier for voters to understand their stance on various issues.

Such a platform is cost-effective as sharing resources and infrastructure can reduce campaign costs, making it more affordable for smaller parties to participate. As far as increased reach is concerned a common platform can leverage digital tools and social media to reach a wider audience, especially in remote areas. A centralised platform can promote transparency in campaign financing and spending, reducing the risk of corruption. However, there are challenges for a state with multiple political parties representing different regions, communities and ideologies. A common platform may struggle to accommodate these diverse interests. Coordinating efforts across multiple parties can be challenging and may lead to conflicts or inefficiencies. While digital platforms can enhance reach, not all voters have access to the internet or are comfortable using digital tools. So while a common platform for political campaigns has potential benefits, it also requires careful planning and coordination to

address the challenges. The success of such a platform would depend on its ability to balance diverse interests and ensure equitable access for all voters.

The landscape of election campaigning in India has evolved significantly over the years, with the rise of digital platforms, social media and data analytics playing a crucial role. Some key trends and factors shaping modern election campaigns in India are Digital Campaigning, Grassroots Mobilization and Media and Advertising. As far as Digital Campaigning is concerned Social Media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram have become essential tools for political parties to reach and engage with voters. They allow for targeted messaging and real-time interaction. WhatsApp is widely used for disseminating campaign messages, videos and updates to a large audience quickly and efficiently. Political parties are increasingly using data analytics to understand voter behaviour, preferences and trends. This helps in crafting personalized campaign strategies and messages. When it comes to Grassroots Mobilization political parties focus on mobilizing voters at the grassroots level through booth committees and local volunteers. This ensures a strong presence in every constituency.

Despite the rise of digital platforms, traditional door-to-door campaigning

remains an effective way to connect with voters on a personal level. As far as Media and Advertising is concerned, these traditional media channels continue to play a significant role in reaching a wide audience, especially in rural areas. Print media like newspapers and magazines are used for advertising and publishing opinion pieces to influence public perception.

The spread of fake news and misinformation on social media platforms poses a significant challenge to fair and transparent elections and ensuring compliance with election laws and regulations, especially in the digital space, is crucial for maintaining the integrity of the electoral process. In conclusion the evolving landscape of election campaigning in India reflects the dynamic nature of its democracy. While digital platforms offer new opportunities for engagement, traditional methods of campaigning continue to hold value. Balancing these approaches and addressing challenges like misinformation and regulation will be key to successful election campaigns in the future.

Yours etc;
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

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

"A bit of nervousness is essential as in a way it helps you deliver your best."

— Daisy Shah

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No. 169 SHILLONG, FRIDAY, JANUARY 31, 2025

Kejriwal versus others

THE national capital is warming up for the February 5 assembly polls, wherein the ruling Aam Aadmi Party faces the all-powerful BJP on the one side and the Congress on the other. While a three-cornered contest would make the fight a bit easy for the AAP to perhaps retain power in Delhi, the party is faced with several odds. The cases that party chief Arvind Kejriwal and his senior ministers face in courts may cast a shadow over the AAP's old image as the torch-bearer of the anti-corruption movement. Yet, what gives a perceptible shot of confidence to Kejriwal and his party is the strong backing the underlings in the national capital gave it all through the past several years. Kejriwal's repeated innings as chief minister saw the grant and extension of several benefits to the people, especially to the ordinary families. If he capped it with a free bus travel facility to women some time ago, his offer now is free bus travel for students, a `2,100 dole to women, and much more. The free water and electricity facility would continue too as per his party's manifesto released this week.

At the ground level, nothing goes to show yet that Kejriwal's popularity has dwindled in Delhi after the liquor scam surfaced or following his incarceration in Tihar Jail for five months to ultimately get conditional bail. This necessitated a change of chief minister and his confidant Atishi Marlena being put in the saddle. Kejriwal obviously does the backseat driving. The somewhat surprising victory for the AAP in the Punjab assembly polls two years ago added to the clout of Kejriwal and the AAP. No other regional entity runs governments in two states. Yet, mass discontentment is palpable against maverick chief minister Bhagwant Mann and by extension the AAP too. Though the AAP aspired to win power in Haryana, it could not make an impact there; and so was the case in Goa too.

While the BJP would again try its best to unseat the AAP and grab power in Delhi this time, the Congress party does not have an organisational heft. This has been the case after the end of the Sheila Dikshit era. The party could not come up with another credible leader to take on Kejriwal. On the other hand, the attempt at overkill from the Modi establishment's part appears to have spawned the opposite result: Kejriwal and AAP are seen by sections of the ordinary masses there as a victim of the BJP's political conspiracies. A BJP rule for Delhi could, in PM Modi's words, mean a "double-engine sircar" to speed up the capital's economic development. Kejriwal might still hold his ground on the claims of "good governance and a fair deal" for the ordinary people. The poll results on February 8 will be eagerly awaited by one and all.

Letters to the Editor

Politics of Marriage and Khasi Identity

Editor, I write to express my deep concern over the remarks made by Aibandaplin F. Lyngdoh at a recent VPP public meeting, where she felt compelled to clarify that she is unmarried and assured the crowd that, when the time comes, she will marry only a Khasi man. The thunderous applause that followed this statement is indicative of a larger, more troubling narrative—one that dangerously conflates personal life choices with political credibility.

Marriage is, first and foremost, a deeply personal decision, and no individual—let alone a political leader—should feel obligated to publicly affirm their commitment to communal expectations regarding whom they should marry. This sets a dangerous precedent, reinforcing the idea that a Khasi woman's worth is tied not to her intellect, leadership, or contributions to society, but to her adherence to rigid cultural prescriptions about marriage.

Furthermore, this rhetoric fuels an exclusionary mindset that isolates and alienates Khasi individuals who may choose to marry outside their community. Are we to believe that love and companionship should be dictated by bloodline rather

than shared values, respect, and mutual understanding? At a time when Meghalaya is grappling with pressing socio-economic and developmental challenges, is this truly the debate we wish to prioritize?

A progressive society does not thrive by enforcing cultural purity tests. Instead, it grows when individuals—especially those in leadership—are free to make personal choices without scrutiny or coercion. The emphasis should be on merit, governance, and community welfare, not on whom someone chooses as a life partner.

It is high time we challenge such regressive narratives and focus on the real issues that need our collective attention.

Yours etc., Bahunlang Pde, Via email

Some claims need further justification

Editor, As a regular reader of "The Shillong Times" for decades, I enjoyed reading the article, "Where has the forest gone?" by respected writer, HH Mohrmen and the other "Constitution @ 75: Achievements & Priorities," by Prof. Satya Prakash Dash both published on January 28, 2025. In my humble personal opinion, the above two articles are very good and

Patriarchy raises its ugly head in matrilineal Meghalaya

By Patricia Mukhim

In an earlier article Bhogtoram Mawroh had questioned why the onus for conserving culture is always with the Khasi woman. Mawroh was referring to the MLA candidate of the VPP from Myllem - Aibandaplin F Lyngdoh - who had come very close to winning that seat in the 2023 election. Aibandaplin lost by 38 votes to Ronnie V Lyngdoh of the Congress Party and that happened because the latter got more postal ballots than her. Without the postal ballots Aibandaplin would have won because she got 8689 votes from the EVM and 177 postal ballots while Ronnie Lyngdoh got 8616 EVM votes and 288 postal ballots. That's called losing by a whisker and perhaps her time had not arrived.

This time Aibandaplin is contesting the ADC election from the VPP. What is very disturbing however is that she had to publicly defend her personal life and who she is likely to marry and also to make a commitment that she would marry only a Khasi male. To have to make such a commitment to complete strangers and on a public platform informs us of the desperate need to win the present election to the Khasi Hills District Council. But is this what the electorate is demanding of her or is this a result of her fellow competitors making wild allegations about her personal choices, for which she is compelled to defend her virtuosity? The whole idea is sickening and it is a male conspiracy to put all women on the defensive so that even those with the ambition to contest elections in the years to come would have to fall into the straight and narrow confines of a societal diktat to marry a Khasi or not be trusted to deliver governance as per the Constitution. So much for freedom of choice granted by that very Constitution!

According to her affidavit, Aibandaplin F. Lyngdoh is 32 years of age and self-employed. She studied up to Class 12. She is not one of those affluent candidates and her total declared movable assets are only worth Rs 2.4 lakh while her liabilities stand at Rs 15 lakh. The VPP could not have found a more credible candidate than this one. Evidently, Aibandaplin will not be in a position to distribute anything to the voters except to work within the mandate of the Sixth Schedule.

In the general recommen-

dations given by the National Commission to Review the Working of the Constitution section (ii) it states thus: Traditional forms of governance must be associated with self-governance because of the present dissatisfaction. However, positive democratic elements like gender justice and adult franchise should be built into these institutions to make them broader based and capable of dealing with a changing world. This is an important recommendation and has to be paid attention to especially because the Autonomous District Councils in Meghalaya seem to be regressing instead of being progressive in their views. It is enlightening that the recommendation even then speaks about 'gender justice' - two words that the Councils have never used in their deliberations and which perhaps they don't consider important enough because of the illusion that Khasi society is a gender just society. That illusion needs to be

now? Can the Sixth Schedule be used as a weapon to curb women's rights to marry the men of their choice? Is this not unconstitutional? And then to hang the sword of Damocles over women's heads by threatening to disenfranchise them by taking away the tribal status of such women and their children is an injustice that women need to challenge. This is gender injustice of the most perverse kind.

Moving away from women related issues the Recommendations also suggest that careful steps should be taken to devolve political powers through the intermediate and local level traditional political organisations, provided that their traditional practices carried out in a modern world do not deny legitimate democratic rights to any section in their contemporary society. The details of state-wise steps to devolve such powers will have to be carefully considered in a proper representative meet-

"The District Councils should devolve the responsibility to the Shnongs to protect the rivers under their jurisdictions and to prevent the rivers from becoming garbage dumps."

seriously questioned.

The fact that Aibandaplin had to say what she did in that video which has gone viral reveals the Khasi male mindset which in turn is imbued also by some Khasi women of the "donburum" (respectable) class who prescribe a strict set of norms for their children and grandchildren to follow. One of those rules of course is that the girls should marry within the tribe no matter what. This is a matter of avid discussion among a number of young women studying and working outside Meghalaya. Most of them don't want to return to what they term as a very stifling ecosystem where their liberties are curtailed even when they earn sufficiently to manage their own lives. In Khasi society marriage has never been forced on women. They have chosen their marriage partners and married the man of their choice - irrespective of whether the man is a tribal, non-tribal or a non-Khasi tribal. So why have these societal prescriptions come in

ing of traditional leaders of each community, opinion builders of the respective communities and leaders of state and national stature from these very groups. The statement underlines that a hasty decision could have serious repercussions, unforeseen and unfortunate which could further complicate and worsen the situation.

One wonders if the elected councillors have read this excellent exposition in the book by Justice BL Hansaria. If they have not it just shows how ill-disposed they are to new ideas and the idea of inclusivity which is what is needed to take the State of Meghalaya forward.

This ever present fear that is embedded in the tribal mindset that we are victims of a cruel system that threatens to dispossess us when we are ourselves invading our forests at a rapid speed and mining away everything without a thought for the future as well as destroying our water sources because of the need to get rich quick are very troubling indeed. These

messages will be loudly sent out through social media that we have to elect MDCs who will protect us because we are completely defenceless citizens. Should we be taken up by such deceptive messages?

The KHNAM candidates have already stated that they would review the issues of trading licenses. The targets here are non-tribal traders including permanent residents. They are already facing needless delays while applying for renewal of their trade licenses because the online system which should work seamlessly simply does not work. The reason is because the physical presence of the applicant is needed for the simple reason that unless money changes hands the licenses will not be renewed. The ADCs are not known for transparency and they are unwilling to change their mode of functioning. This is what the Comptroller and Auditor General has been relentlessly pointing out. Now that the Councils have a Public Accounts Committee one hopes to see better accounting methods and a more robust reporting system. In fact there has to be a system of inbuilt safeguards in the Sixth Schedule so that demands for central funding for certain projects can be meaningfully considered.

What the District Councils need to do is streamline the governance system in the shnong and have a set of prescribed rules and regulations so that they do not become free for all institutions especially when it comes to the purchase and sale of land within their jurisdictions. The District Councils should devolve the responsibility to the Shnongs to protect the rivers under their jurisdictions and to prevent the rivers from becoming garbage dumps.

Tradition includes many positive actions such as conserving the ecosystem which in our case means protection of forests which are the green lungs that provide us clean air to breathe; protection of water sources and restricting rampant quarrying which have destroyed water sources. If the Councils have failed in these very basic functions they have no right to pretend to be protectors of the jaidbyrniew. In fact, the jaidbyrniew politics is intended to deceive! Enough of it. Now its time to discuss the real issues and filter out the noise.

Yours etc., Sujit De, Kolkata

ployment and less NPA-generating macro-credits. Moreover, the poor who are reeling from high inequality, rising inflation, and nagging unemployment must not be burdened with GST. GST should exist only on luxury and non-essential goods. But essential goods and services must be free from taxation. Instead, India should rely more on direct taxes.

First State University VC

Editor, The recent establishment of Captain Williamson Sangma State University was followed by the appointment of a non-tribal Vice Chancellor (VC) Vasanthi Vijayakumar. Whereas for many years the state government, like many NGOs and others, were fighting for the appointment of a tribal VC for NEHU, but when it comes to their own University they could not find a suitable tribal candidate for the post of VC which is laughable. Kindly decide what you want for this state. Where is this state heading to by the way?

Yours etc., D. Swer Shillong

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

Importance of Sports for our youth in Meghalaya

By Sr. Rose Mary Lyngdoh (FMA)

The 6th Meghalaya Games concluded on 25 January 2025. It showcased the talent and athleticism of the youth from various districts of the state. This event, and other sporting events organized in the state, speak of the importance of sports in the life of the youth. Sports have always been an essential part of humanity since the beginning. The ancient Greeks were pioneers in inventing various sports and games, and it is from them that we have inherited the Olympics. Today, there are many different types of sports and games, and in fact, sports personalities have become highly popular and successful in life. We can think of individuals like sprinter Jesse Owens or Usain Bolt, football stars like Lionel Messi or Cristiano Ronaldo, tennis legends like Roger Federer or Rafael Nadal, basketball icons like Magic Johnson or Kevin Durant, and cricket champions like Sachin Tendulkar or Virat Kohli, among others.

In the past decades, sports in the state were often viewed as a recreational activity rather than a viable career path. The focus was primarily on academics, leaving little room for extra-curricular development. Youth with potential in sports either gave up their dreams or moved to other states in search of better opportunities. In recent years, our state has witnessed a significant transformation in its approach to sports, shifting from limited engagement to becoming a hub of opportunities for young talent. The government has launched several initiatives to promote sports and youth development in Meghalaya:

1. Infrastructure Development: State-of-the-art sports complexes, stadiums, and training centers provide quality facilities for youth to train and compete at higher levels.
2. Talent Identification and Training: Programs to scout and nurture young athletes with professional coaching and development opportunities.
3. Financial Support: Scholarships, stipends, and sponsorships motivate athletes and offer exposure through competitions and tournaments.
4. Competitions and Events: Organizing sports at the district-level, state-level, and Meghalaya Games plays a crucial role in providing diverse career opportunities for youth. These events not only promote sportsmanship but also create a platform for young talents to showcase their skills and gain recognition.

These efforts aim to inspire youth to pursue athletics seriously and offer pathways to professional sports careers. It is in this context that I would like to bring forth some of the benefits that sports offer, including physical, psychological, economic, and social advantages.

Firstly, sports provide essential physical exercise for youth. The physical fitness of a nation's citizens contributes to the overall strength and health of the population. Therefore, sports is one of the most effective methods for promoting the physical development of citizens.

Secondly, sports contribute to the psychological development of youth. Sports can truly help shape a person's character. Billie Jean King stated, "Sports teach you character; it teaches you to play by the rules, it teaches you to know what it feels like to win and lose, and it teaches you about life." Additionally, sports can ease a person's mind and relieve the tensions of daily life. The mind becomes refreshed and reinvigorated, making a person more effective in any task. Thirdly, sports have become a viable career choice for young people who possess talent and ability. Many successful individuals today are athletes. Consider

figures like Cristiano Ronaldo, who earns around 80 million dollars a year, or our Indian cricketers, who have become financially well-off through sports. Therefore, youth with talent and passion for sports should be encouraged to pursue it as a potential career path.

Fourthly, sports have significant social value because they promote essential social qualities among youth. One key social value fostered in young people is "team spirit"—the ability to work together and cultivate a sense of solidarity. In the words of Kathleen Kennedy, "Sports teach you to understand the meaning of a team. You need to be able to work with everybody; you don't have to be their best friend. You can experience the fun of competition and strive toward a common goal without needing to bond in a major way with each individual on a project."

We can enumerate numerous other advantages and values of sports, but these points suffice to highlight their importance in the lives of our youth. In today's world, an increasing number of young people are drawn to the internet and smartphones. This trend poses a serious risk to the youth of our country, as it may lead to a generation that is physically weak, psychologically imbalanced, and socially ineffective. Drug menace in the state is alarmingly on the rise destroying hundreds of young people and their families. To counter this, young people need to recognize the importance of physical activity and the benefits of real-world engagement.

Of late, the Union Ministry of Sports and Youth Affairs has been placing increased emphasis on the importance of sports and youth activities. National programs like Khelo India, Premier Leagues, and National Games are being implemented more seriously. The results of this positive approach are evident in the improved performances of Indian athletes at both the national and international levels. However, there is still considerable room for improvement in this area as our country strives to compete with other nations like the USA, Germany, China, Japan, South Korea, and others that are already far more advanced in this field.

Considering that Meghalaya is a relatively young state, with the youth forming a significant part of the population, there is ample scope for excelling in the area of sports. We have a wealth of untapped talent, and there is an urgent need to harness this potential for the greater good of the state and the nation. The collective efforts of the government, community engagement, and educational institutions, sports can help the youth to build a strong, healthy, and prosperous society.

As both a religious person and a sportsperson, I've experienced the transformative power of sports in shaping not just physical and mental health but also character and spiritual growth. Sports have taught me discipline, perseverance, teamwork, and resilience—values that align with life's greater purpose. I encourage the youth to view sports not only as a potential career but as a lifelong practice that nurtures the body and soul. Through sports, we develop life skills like leadership, respect, and dedication, and build community. It's a journey of self-discovery and empowerment, offering unique opportunities for spiritual growth. Sports teach humility, gratitude, and the importance of facing challenges with courage. I urge everyone to embrace sports for both personal growth and to foster a culture of joy, resilience, and inspiration for future generations.

(The author is an Athletic Coach / Physical Training Instructor, Axialium Convent Nongthymmai Shillong)