

Culinary trends 2023!

A new trend beholds the culinary landscape - ingredient-based diversity. Mix and mingle different ingredients, spread across different parts of the world. Or use different parts of the same, local ingredient and create a different dish altogether - now that's an exciting bandwagon everyone can climb onto. And enjoy.

"With a multitude of backgrounds and experiences, each member brings something valuable to the table. This activity fosters a sense of teamwork and allows everyone to contribute to the menu", explained Chef Akash Deshpande, Chef de Cuisine, Nava.

Nava, translating to 'newly, recently-created, invented, innovative' is a restaurant founded by Anushka Pathak in Mumbai which pays homage to a variety of ingredients sourced from various regions within India.

But the key differentiator still remains the diverse range of ingredients. Historically speaking, India has been the land of diversity. However, with the ever-changing demands of consumers, these diverse ingredients are being tried and tested decades later, in 2023.

But before diving into some ingredient-centric trends of 2023, here are recent instances of ingredients becoming the hero:

Cauliflower key ingredient in vegan ice cream

Two New Zealand-based entrepreneurs named Jenni Matheson and Mrinali Kumar, currently run a startup called EatKinda, wherein they have invented a technique to use unsuitable (or otherwise, thrown-away) pieces of Cauliflower as the alternative of milk to make ice cream. This not only reduces wastage but also removes the weird aftertaste that customers complain about, with ice cream NOT made from cow's milk.

On observing EatKinda's ice cream contents, cauliflower is listed as the second ingredient, at 12-13% concentration. The remaining components are just flavours or stabilisers. The products are marketed as vegan

with the explanation, "...our perfectly delicious ice cream is made from cosmetically imperfect cauliflower which would otherwise go to waste certified by Perfectly Imperfect."

Thus, the highlight is 'cauliflower' - not the flavour. Indeed, a smart and direct way of making the ingredient the 'hero'.

Breaking down a sausage

A staple ingredient within several European cuisines, there is nothing groundbreaking about using sausages. But what if it's made into a hero through different techniques?

Now that seems to be a winner, according to a report, which quoted LUPA Chef Manu Chandra explaining, "Think of a sausage. We want people to taste it for what it is, and then subsequently use the sausage with other applications - the same sausage could be grilled, served on a cold plate, or folded into a risotto, which would enhance the risotto's flavour. The fact of the matter remains that the hero will continue to be the sausage, and people will take notice of it."

Now that ingredients are gradually taking centre-stage, here are two crucial culinary trends of 2023, proving that what "goes into a dish" is more important than mere presentation:

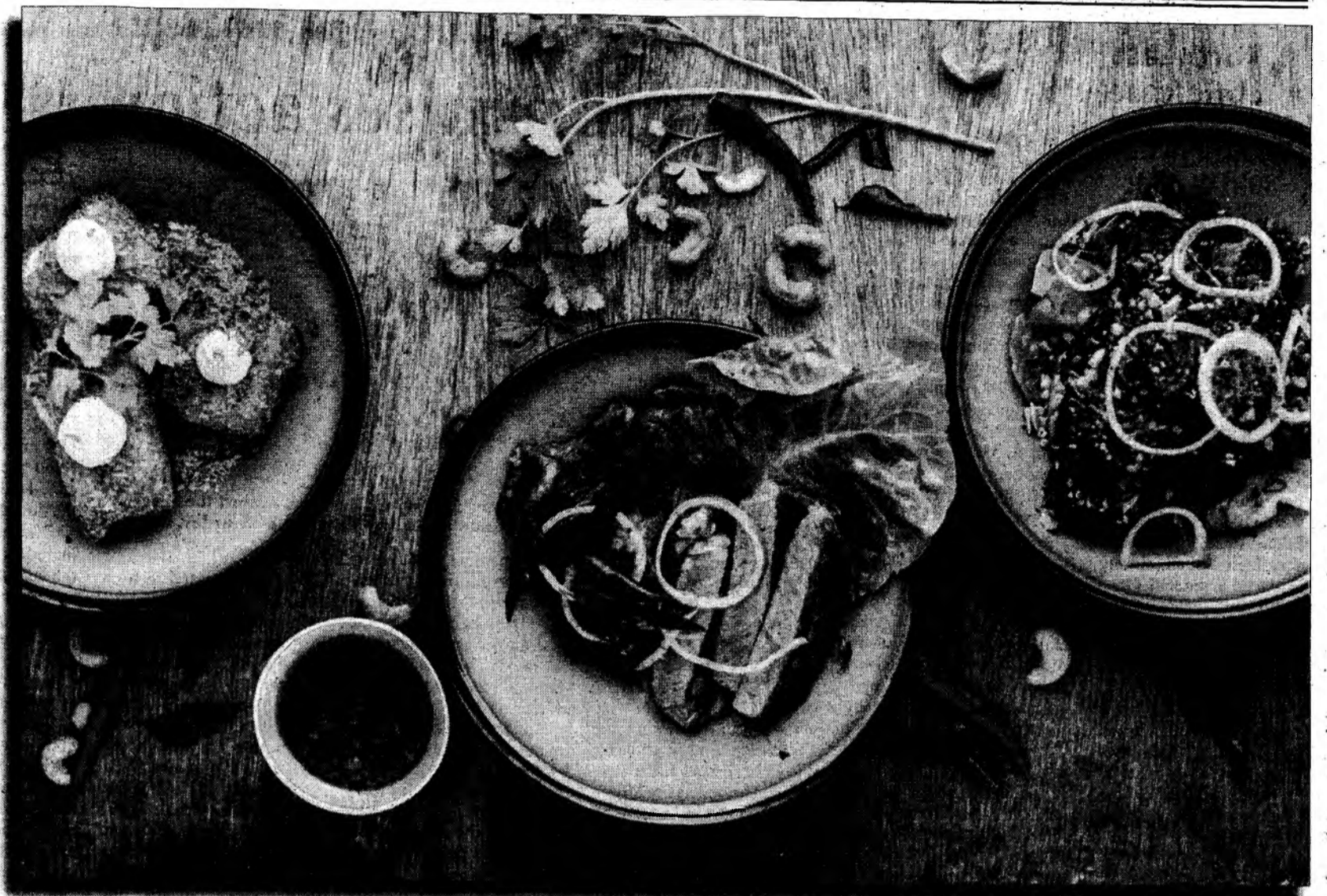
TREND 1:

Vocal for the season local!

One of the trends named "Wild & Pure" mentioned in Unilever's recent report titled "Future Menu 2023 - Top 8 Global Menu Trends" explained how 2023 would witness seasonal dishes using unique ingredients found in nature.

"Edible flowers, wild berries, and seaweed give diners a sense of connection to their local yet diverse environment. It's about moving away from mainstream fare and leaning into what nature provides to create simple, sustainable dishes with ingredients closest to home", explained the report.

Interestingly, this coincides with the ethos of Nava. "We source ingredients from chefs across different local regions



in India because our kitchen team is incredibly diverse, with members from various parts of the country...Bengal, Uttarakhnad, Assam, and Kerala - each with their unique culinary backgrounds", described Chef Deshpande.

TREND 2: Cuisine agnosticism

As per Unilever's report, cuisine agnosticism is an up-and-coming trend likely to dominate 2023. Describing it as "flavour contrast", the report explained, "Unexpected combinations of flavours, colours, and textures that highlight the most talented chefs' creativity."

Given the rich ingredient diversity in the subcontinent, have Indians already ventured into this trend? Moreover, is this a trend or a collaborative effort within the kitchen space?

"India is home not only to an ingredient but cultural diversity too. Each person brings something to the table. Rather, it is a collaborative effort within our diverse kitchen team. With a multitude of backgrounds and experiences, each member brings something valuable to

the table. This activity fosters a sense of teamwork and allows everyone to contribute to the menu. As the Head Chef, I cannot personally gather ingredients from every region, making it a fun and engaging exercise for the entire team, including the recreation and front-of-house departments", explained Chef Deshpande.

Trend or a mere teamwork exercise, ingredient-centric cooking has all the potential to turn into a phenomenon. Not only to celebrate the diversity present in India but also to provide a gastronomic adventure to enthusiastic eaters, without digressing from the roots.

After all, as Anushka Pathak, the founder of Nava stated, "Although we wanted to be innovative, we did not want our menu to be intimidating. Therefore, nothing on our menu is hauntingly unfamiliar."

On similar lines speaks Chef Ajay Rawat, chef de cuisine at Le Meridien, Amritsar, while discussing the sumptuous appeal of the famed spinach Dolma. A regional lost recipe from India that garners special praise from foodies, Rawat adds that this innovative approach is, in fact,

a tribute to his mentor who used to make lamb with the same gravy.

TREND 3: Plant-based alternatives instead of mock meats

Instead of relying solely on soy-based options, the market now embraces diverse plant-based proteins like pea protein, corn protein, and various grains. At The Leela Palace, the Executive Chef, Chef Simran Singh Thapar, seamlessly incorporated these plant-based alternatives into their menus, emphasising their purely plant-derived sources and complete protein profiles.

Avoiding the term "mock meats," these products come in dried and frozen forms, offering incredible versatility for culinary creations spanning Indian kebabs and curries, Asian stir-fries, Thai curries, and Western-style dishes. "It's a win-win situation - our guests are happy, and we're contributing to a growing and noteworthy trend in the culinary world," adds Thapar. This culinary evolution reflects the increasing demand for vegan-friendly options, aligning with

the 2023 trend of ingredients taking centre stage.

TREND 4: One ingredient rules all

In line with the culinary trend of 2023, Tokyo Matcha Bar champions the idea of ingredients taking centre stage in dishes and beverages. In contrast to the days of elaborate presentations and complex ingredient combinations, today's F&B consumers prioritise quality, clean foods, and sustainable sourcing over flashy labels.

Tokyo Matcha Bar, founded by Chef Rahul and Meher, introduces organic, ceremonial grade Japanese Tea from Tokyo to Mumbai, aiming to educate consumers about matcha and its proper preparation. Meher further states, "At Tokyo Matcha Bar, we limit ingredients to those listed in a product's name, a Maple Matcha Latte only consists of maple-matcha and milk; or the flavour notes in a Wild Berry Matcha Tea will be blueberry, matcha tea and water." This approach allows only the premium ingredients to shine without the interference of any additives. (IANSLife)

Top destinations in India to observe Gandhi Jayanti

Gandhi Jayanti is a day set aside to celebrate and remember Mahatma Gandhi's life and teachings. On this day, people across the country pay tribute to Gandhi's message of non-violence, simplicity, and sacrifice. Some of the best places to visit in India on Gandhi Jayanti are listed below:



Sabarmati Ashram, Ahmedabad
The Sabarmati Ashram, a tranquil retreat by the river, is located in the center of Ahmedabad. It was Mahatma Gandhi's home before becoming a museum and educational retreat. One cannot help but feel a strong connection to the spirit of

the Indian freedom movement when visiting the ashram on Gandhi Jayanti.

Mani Bhavan, Mumbai

Mani Bhavan, which is situated amidst Mumbai's busy streets, acts as a silent observer of Gandhi's influential tactics and movements. His time in Mumbai is best encapsulated by the residence that has been turned into a museum. You should go there if you want to grasp the intricacies of the Mahatma's life in an urban environment.

Gandhi Memorial Museum, Madurai

Traveling south to Madurai, you can visit the Gandhi Memorial Museum, which presents a thorough account of India's struggle for freedom. The dhoti on display, which is marked with the Mahatma's blood from his murder, serves as a solemn reminder of the price paid for freedom.

Raj Ghat, Delhi

Gandhi's cremation took place at the Raj Ghat, which is now a national shrine. People congregate here during Gandhi Jayanti to pay their respects, present flowers and give prayers. On this day, the President and Prime Minister of India also go to Raj Ghat to honor the Father of the Nation.

Dandi, Gujarat

Gandhi's legendary 'Salt March' took place in the seaside village of Dandi, and it is because of this event that Dandi will always be remembered. When one comes here, one can almost imagine the march of steadfast opponents of the British salt tax.

Gandhi Teerth, Jalgaon

Gandhi Teerth in Jalgaon is the place to go if you're interested in learning more about Mahatma Gandhi's life in-depth and academically. It acts as a hub for philosophical inquiry and discussion on a global scale. (IANSLife)

Childhood mental health may affect quality of life in teenage

Children with mental health problems are more likely to have poor mental and physical health in their late teens and early 20s, a new study has revealed.

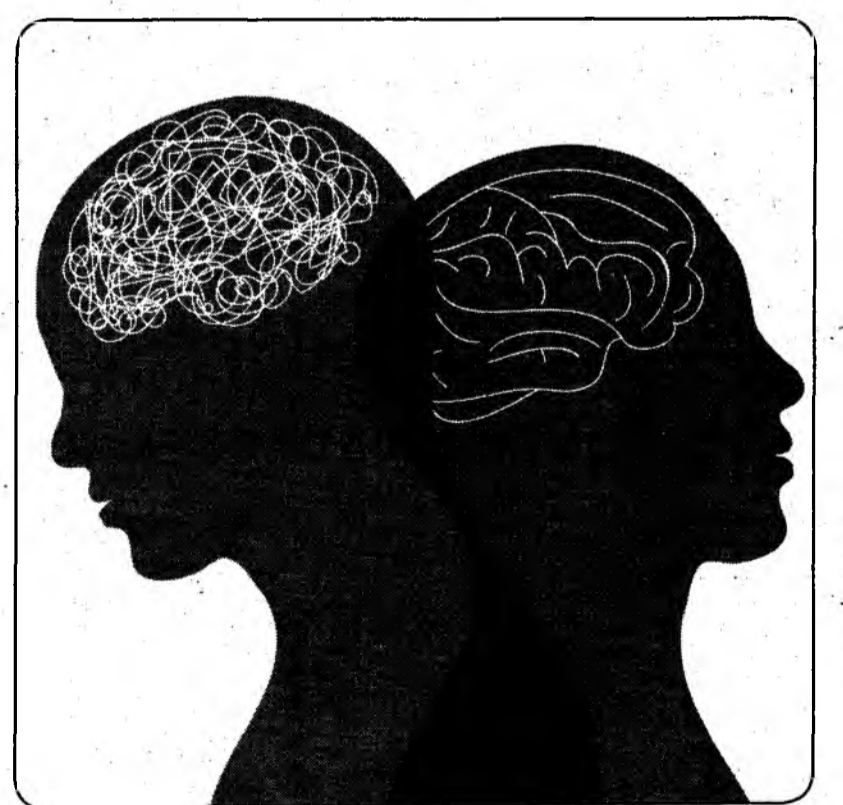
They may have problems like social isolation, low educational attainment, financial difficulties and heavy substance use.

The study led by the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI) showed that those who had mental health issues in childhood were as likely to encounter educational/economic difficulties in young adulthood as they were to face further mental health problems.

"Mental health symptoms often come and go throughout childhood and adolescence, so we do not want to over-rely on symptom levels at one point in time. We decided to investigate children who had persistent reports of mental health symptoms, regardless of whether they met the criteria for an official diagnosis," said Dr Niamh Dooley, study lead author from the RCSI Department of Psychiatry.

For the study, researchers examined data of over 5,000 children and young adults and found that the vast majority 72.5 per cent of participants reported no mental health difficulties, but more than 1,400 individuals appeared to have some type of mental health or behavioural issue across childhood.

The study, published in the JAMA Network Open journal, took a broad approach to life outcomes, examining aspects such as Leaving Certificate results, social isolation, physical health issues and heavy sub-



stance use.

Along with this, the researchers also took different types of childhood symptoms into account, such as whether a child tended to internalise their symptoms (as in depression and anxiety), externalise their symptoms (as in hyperactivity and behavioural problems), or both and found that children with externalising symptoms are at increased risk of heavy substance use as young adults.

But, children with internalising symptoms are at the highest risk of poor physical health in their late teens and early 20s.

"Over 50 per cent of children with mental health issues had at least one educational or economic difficulty by young adulthood, compared to around 30 per cent of those without mental health issues in childhood," Dooley said.

"Our study shows that mental health symptoms in childhood can cast a shadow on adult life and if we understand more about which children are at greatest risk of poor outcomes, it will help to inform and improve early screening and approaches to support those children," he added. (IANS)

Google: Driving pace of tech change in India since 2004

Google India started with five employees in 2004 and since then, it has grown to be among the largest Google employee bases outside of the US.

As smartphones have brought millions more online, Indians have become some of the most enthusiastic Google users. Using products like Gmail, Translate and Android, India is second only to the US in total number of mobile 'Search' queries.

Search in 2003 started in English but the company quickly added Hindi, Bengali, Telugu, Marathi, Tamil and many other languages going forward.

India's digital transformation is at a tipping point and millions of connected Indians, affordable smartphones and data, record highs in digital payments, the digitisation of citizen services, and a vibrant startup ecosystem have put the technology sector on track to become the single largest contributor to the national economy.

With this in mind, Google introduced India-first innovations, worked to lower barriers to access, and invested in strengthening the strategic pillars of India's digital economy through its \$10 billion (approximately Rs 75,000 crore) India Digitisation Fund that was announced in 2020.

The company is investing the money in the country via a mix of equity investments, partnerships, and operational, infrastructure and ecosystem investments.

According to Alphabet and Google CEO Sundar Pichai, the pace of technological change in India has been extraordinary, and there's so much opportunity still ahead.

"We're helping to advance India's digital future. That includes our efforts to build a single, unified AI model that will be capable of handling over 100 Indian languages across speech and text - part of our global effort to bring the world's 1,000 most-spoken languages



online, and to help people access knowledge and information in their preferred language," Pichai said in December last year.

Google Pay has completed more than five years in India. At Google Pay, the company used advanced methods in our safety engine that analyze aggregate transaction patterns of millions of users, relating this to a graph of a billion nodes.

The company also introduced a useful new feature in Google Pay that makes it easier than ever to access transaction history.

In June, Google partnered with the National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI) to enable Aadhaar-based authentication for UPI activation to further ease the user onboarding process on Google Pay.

The unified payments interface (UPI)-based transactions reached 9.3 billion in June 2023 from 151 million in January



2018, primarily driven by the growth in Person-to-Merchant (P2M) transactions, according to Worldline's 'India Digital Payments Report for H1 2023'.

Three UPI apps were dominant in terms of volume and value; PhonePe, Google Pay and

Paytm. In terms of transaction volume in June, the three apps accounted for 95.68 per cent of all transactions compared to 94.55 per cent a year before.

The technology giant this month launched an earthquake alert system in India that can

help people with Android smartphones run to safety when the quake begins.

The system, introduced in consultation with the National Disaster Management Authority and the National Seismology Center in India, uses sensors in Android smartphones to detect and estimate earthquakes.

Each Android smartphone is equipped with tiny accelerometers that can act as mini seismometers. When a phone is plugged in and charged, it can detect the very beginnings of earthquakes. Google will send two types of alerts: Be Aware and Take Action.

Google in August expanded its generative AI search experience in India and Japan, the first countries outside the US.

The new AI-powered search feature, dubbed SGE (Search Generative Experience), will be available through Google Search Labs in these markets

and will introduce a new feature aimed at making it easier to find information in its AI-powered overviews.

In India, users will also find a language toggle to help multilingual speakers easily switch back and forth between English and Hindi, and they can also listen to the responses, which is a popular preference. In both countries, Search ads will continue to appear in dedicated ad slots throughout the page, the tech giant said.

In June this year, Pichai announced the company will open its global fintech operation centre at GIFT City in Gujarat.

After meeting Prime Minister Narendra Modi in the US, Pichai said the company will continue to invest in India through its \$10 billion digitisation fund.

In December last year, Pichai visited India and pledged support for India's G20 Presidency. (IANS)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambhani

Sunday, OCTOBER 1, 2023

'Birthday Forecast'

Moon sextile Saturn on your solar return chart denotes a good year. Improving your skills will be a focus and some of you will do so formally, benefiting greatly from it. There is a growing need to buckle down with your education or to learn more specific skills rather than broad topics now. This is an excellent period for skills development no matter what your age, and you'll want to prepare for the cycle that begins at the tail end of the year. The Stars urge you to discipline yourself in your professional life and reminds you of the importance of structure, responsibility, and reputation. A career peak of sorts is on its way.

'This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) People and friends look to you with more respect, tolerance, and acceptance. You don't feel the need to prove yourself. You have the chance to shine because you project yourself with self efforts and modesty. Some of your most natural talents and hobbies would meet with reward and acceptance. Work done behind the scenes may be revealed or incorporated into your career or public life. Past efforts pay off now. Some of you may find that your career is moving towards a more service-oriented direction. You have more faith in general regarding your career and the direction in which you are working.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) You would move towards a more positive and objective approach to your professional and personal life. You would have a great desire to expand your work and knowledge. Your ideas are higher as teaching may be part of the picture, and your cultural and spiritual awareness increases. You might further your education and it's a fabulous time to do so, or you could broaden your knowledge in a more informal manner. Close friends and family members notice you for your more tolerant and broadminded nature. Confidence is the key of success and faith in the universe and your ability to do the right thing will get you everywhere now.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) Your idealistic nature is stimulated, and you are likely to be more spiritual. You are sober and serious in professional and personal relationships. You are getting serious about loved ones, family relationships and children. You are likely to take your hobbies more sincerely. In fact, this is an excellent time for monetizing any personal hobby and turning it into a profession. You would be more practical in romantic relations with a loved one. For many, a romantic relationship stabilizes and becomes more serious. Opportunities—both personal and professional—are likely to present themselves. You would combine your inner and outer strengths to achieve success and happiness in professional aspects.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) You may travel or make contact with people of different cultural backgrounds than your own. You are more determined to achieve your personal goals, and are more strategic in the manner that you go about doing so. Pouring your heart and soul into your efforts comes naturally now. Happiness and fulfillment through the expansion of your mind, widening your social circle, travel, and connections to people of a different cultural background than you is indicated. You connect with well known personalities, fun loving people, artists and entertainers. You would be able to complete work assignments and personal business with good energy and support. Emotional attachments and relationships are rewarded with reciprocation.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) You would be involved in lectures, debates, and discussions. You can convey your ideas powerfully to others, and you may be invited to speak in front of many people and this would enhance your image. You are quick to take the initiative and to put your thoughts into action. You would have a tendency to work on many projects. You are more determined and hard-working and this brings fulfillment of all desires. This is an excellent period in your life in which to get organized and to stick with projects through to the end. A new project or goal begun at this time has a good chance of being successful and long-lasting. It's an excellent time in which you make a lifestyle change, as your ability to concentrate on what really matters to you is enhanced. A short vacation allows you to enjoy natural surroundings with a loved one.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22) There is perfection and beauty in emotional and personal relationships. You are frank, outspoken and can be outrageous or undiplomatic on occasions. This is altogether a happy and relaxed period for you. Remember to be thankful. Mental pursuits, new learning, and all forms of intellectual activity are favored. Your ability to concentrate and focus helps you

to achieve what you set out to do. You are more inclined to put your ideas into action than usual. Your position of power and authority is maintained despite many changes all around. You should maintain a positive attitude and face life in a positive way otherwise you will become frustrated and dull. Good luck in finances and opportunities is encouraging. Health problems are resolved and your energy is restored.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) A business partnership is lucrative and supportive. Good planning and management leads to more progressive and productive professional ventures. Good luck in financial opportunities is encouraging. You are restless and move into varied activities and pay visits to friends. You are also likely to form relationships with people based on a deep level of mutual appreciation and understanding for each other. You are in touch with your more sensitive and spiritual qualities. You may be divided about business and professional matters and finally come to terms with compromise which might be the best thing to do at this time.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) You are able to express a greater level of sensitivity and sensibility. Your personal charm and attractiveness has a positive effect on your personal and professional relationships. People see you as a loving and lovable person and they would help and cooperate with your goals and ambitions. It's a very favorable time for developing your relationships with parents and other relatives. Responsibilities and commitments may take up more time than usual, so set a target and make a proper schedule so meet the desired goal. Personal relations are precious and need to be treated with tender, love and care.

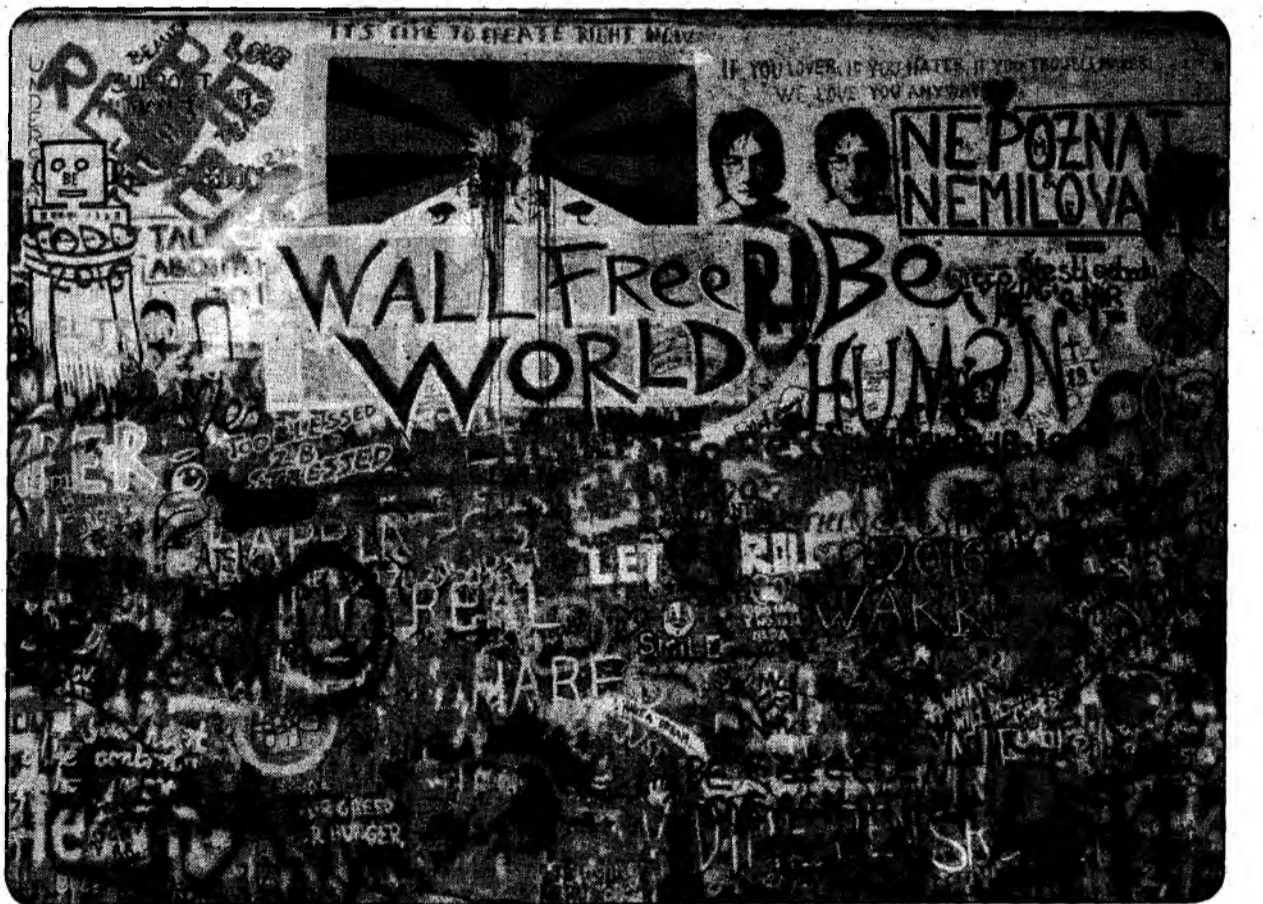
Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) Family is supportive, children are loving and friends share hospitality and love at this time. It would be in your favor to make new beginnings and forget all old wounds and past patterns. It is best to let go negative feelings about relationships and situations gone by. You may be divided about business and professional matters and finally come to terms with compromise which might be the best thing to do at this time. You may disagree mentally with your partner but the love between you allows peace and acceptance. Your social life is expansive and a variety of people connect with you. You are stronger and wiser after having gone through trouble and difficulty. It is time to come back to your inner center to regain physical strength, mental balance, emotional harmony and spiritual awareness.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) Issues of sharing of power and authority with others in personal and professional relationships come to the fore. You are likely to experience events that highlight the necessity to share and trust. Events and circumstances are such that you learn about your own personal strength. You may have to deal with willfulness and issues of power and competition. You would have a tendency to control your life through some form of manipulation. You may discover a new direction in your career. You may also experience tangles in your close personal relationships. Watch for jealousies and manipulative behavior of people around.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) You are in touch with dynamic, forceful and assertive energy to make new beginnings. Professional power and authority is vested in you to organize and achieve important targets and goals. You bring stability and order in business and professional projects with a dynamic and assertive approach. You come up with original and creative ideas that surprise others in the professional area. You most successfully perform tasks that involve cooperation and team harmony. Different people from different environments may attract you. Your warrior like qualities of energy, action, swiftness, strength and pride come to the fore.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) It is time to break through restrictions, additions and emotional patterns as you are ripe and ready for major professional changes. Do not forget about long term commitments while you are dealing with short term contracts. Opportunities and invitations from overseas take you on an unplanned journey. Visitors, friends and family make this a happy time as an event is celebrated. You are appreciative and caring as you give total support to loved ones through a difficult time. It is time to concentrate on your career prospects and professional skills as a promotion or lucrative business opportunity is likely to present itself. You are physically fit and it is important to keep a handle on and maintain balance in relationships, finances and new business ventures.

The vibrant canvas of Czechia!



In the bustling cities and quaint towns of Czechia, an extraordinary form of artistic expression unfolds on the very streets we walk. Street art, an ever-evolving dialogue between creativity and public space, has found a vibrant home within the nation's urban landscapes. Venture into the world of street art in Czechia, where walls become canvases, and passersby become part of the art.

The streets of Czechia serve as an open-air gallery, inviting both locals and visitors to experience art in an unconventional setting. From the cobbled alleys of Prague's Old Town to the industrial backstreets of Brno, street art punctuates the urban scenery with bursts of colour and thought-provoking messages. Street art in Czechia is rooted in a history of resistance and self-expression. Themes of freedom, democracy, and unity are often woven into the art, serving as a reminder of the nation's journey.

In today's Prague, the street art scene thrives, and this creative optimism permeates the narrow lanes and paths. Look out for sculptures, installations, and murals that infuse the city. Among the treasures is one of Prague's few legal graffiti walls, Tesnov. Just a 15-minute stroll from the city centre, Tesnov offers a fitting conclusion to your street art exploration, allowing you to craft cherished memories along the way.

Drawing inspiration from Michelangelo's

iconic Sistine Chapel fresco, Pasta Oner crafted his interpretation of the "divine touch" on Vítězné náměstí. This pop-art mural portrays the "hand of God," directing attention to the words "Choose to Be Happy." This uplifting artwork emerged through Prague's Stuck in the City initiative.

Last of all not to forget the renowned John Lennon Wall. Despite its frequent cleanings, the Lennon-inspired graffiti has graced this wall since the 1980s, never disappearing for more than a few hours. Nestled in the heart of Old Town, this vibrant wall is adorned with uplifting quotes, Beatles' lyrics, and personal expressions through notes, musings, and artwork.

Czechia's street art scene embraces a diverse range of styles and techniques. Stencils, graffiti, murals, and installations intermingle to create a visually striking and multi-dimensional tapestry.

The Czechia streets have become an ever-evolving canvas where art and the urban landscape merge to create a dynamic and captivating narrative. From political statements to cultural celebrations, the vibrant street art scene is a reflection of the nation's identity, history, and boundless creative spirit. As you navigate the streets of Czechia, take a moment to appreciate the stories told by the walls around you - for they are not just art; they are windows into the soul of the nation. (IANSLife)

"If one sticks too rigidly to one's principles, one would hardly see anybody."

—Agatha Christie

The Shillong Times

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Afghan under Taliban

A strange diplomatic situation has developed with the Afghanistan Embassy "ceasing" its operations in New Delhi. This was after the Taliban put its own man at the embassy's head. The staff appointed by the previous, democratically elected government had continued to remain in positions there so far despite the change of government in Kabul two years ago. The embassy's contention that there was lack of "timely support" to it from the Indian government is seen in the background of a likely strengthening of contacts between New Delhi and Taliban in recent months, after a period of frozen relations. Notably, India as also other nations have not recognised the Taliban rule and keep saying that Afghanistan requires an inclusive government and that Taliban's encouragement to terrorist activities should stop. The US also adopts a similar line towards the Taliban. Having driven the Americans out after their stay there for two decades, in August 2021, and exit of the democratically elected government, the Taliban is governing the nation on fundamentalist styles.

The nine-nation Moscow Format meeting held in Kazan, Russia, on Saturday is a case in point. It made little progress vis-à-vis the calls for formation of an inclusive government, grant of jobs to women, and restarting girls' education. The Taliban representative refused to give any commitment on these at the meeting attended by envoys from India and other regional powers. Several ethnic groups have no representation in the Taliban rule. While no nation has recognized the Taliban rule, several countries have their diplomatic missions in Kabul. India maintained a "technical mission" there since June last year. At the same time, India sees a window of opportunity for future cooperation on condition that Kabul does not maintain unholy ties with Pakistan. The Taliban representative has expressed the regime's willingness to engage with the world on the basis of their mutual/common "legitimate" interests and sought global support and assistance to the Taliban to reshape the destiny of the landlocked nation in peril for over four decades now.

Afghanistan's woes started with the Russian invasion, followed by the involvement and later arrival of the Americans, first to drive out the Russians and then to unseat the former Taliban rule. Afghanistan's economy is in shambles, projecting an economic growth of 1.3 per cent this year. It survives on humanitarian assistance from the UN, which gave \$ 5 billion in grants for poverty alleviation and developmental aid last year and \$1 billion this year. Promised support from Americans is pending due to Taliban's failure to meet conditions like restoration of the representative governance system and grant of freedom and rights to the people, including women. Religious fundamentalism is no panacea for the ills of a poverty-stricken nation.

Letters to the Editor

India's priorities should be to tackle hunger & poverty

Editor,
Anirban Bhattacharyya in his article, "Wearing patriotism on our sleeves" (ST, September 23, 2023) has asked a pertinent question, "Has anything really changed in India since we got over our space euphoria?" The 20th century witnessed a fight over the moon between the United States of America and the Soviet Union. It was an offshoot of the cold war. The noble pursuit of science became a pawn in the power play of superpowers. John Stewart's poignant lyrics in his renowned song "Armstrong" vividly captured the grim reality that the common people did not get any benefit from it.

Now let us recall the first stanza of the song, "Black boy in Chicago/ Playing in the street/ Not near enough to eat/ Not near enough to wear/ Not near enough to eat/ Don't you know he saw it/ On a July afternoon/ He saw a man named Armstrong/ Walk upon the moon".

India has fallen to an abysmal 107th position out of 121 countries in the Global Hunger Index. Just like that black boy in Chi-

cago in the song Armstrong, millions of hungry children of our country must have heard the deafening cheers of the crowd on the day of Chandrayaan-3's successful soft-landing on the moon. On that day, perhaps the most forwarded post on social media is the one where under the flags of ten countries, it is written that these countries have a moon on their flags. Then under the flags of the USA, Russia, China and India, it is said that these countries have flags on the moon.

But should we forget that the first fifteen countries in the Human Development Index do not have their flags on the moon? Why? Because they want to use their resources for the benefit of the citizens of their country. Those states consider it as their duty to ensure food, health care and quality education for the people even for the refugees and visitors. On the other hand the citizens of those countries believe that it is their right to get welfare measures from a welfare state. In those countries no one says these are Rewari.

It is indeed necessary to send rockets for weather predictions, for exploring oil, natural gas and minerals and for strengthening com-

munication networks. But Chandrayaan-3 cannot even act like a soothing lullaby of chandamama for millions of hungry children in India.

India is now at a disheartening 132nd position in the Human Development Index. India needs to give her full attention to education, health care, food and employment. Spending public money on moon missions amidst poor conditions in these sectors, seems like putting on a costly coat over a pair of tattered trousers. If parents go to a foreign country on a holiday trip after cutting expenditure on their children's food and education, can we call them wise?

The argument of bolstering national prestige among our neighbours may surface. But the harsh reality is that while India has fallen to 107th position in the Global Hunger Index, Nepal (81), Bangladesh (84) and Pakistan (99) coming from behind have gone ahead of us. Also, Bhutan (127) and Bangladesh (129) have overtaken India (132) in the Human Development Index. What would be more fruitful? To ensure the health and education of our children or the vanity of the sun, moon and planet missions? A nation's true strength lies in the well-being and

education of their citizens. It is time for India to decisively shift her focus from the surreal glory of the cosmos to the pressing challenges on the ground.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

My experience at the Sohra International Half Marathon

Editor,
Dusk took over on September 29. The 2nd Edition of the Sohra International Half Marathon was upon us. I got done with my work and went to bed early. These kinds of nights invite excitement and a thousand thoughts. How would the morning turn out to be?

One bat of the eye and it was 3 AM. I got ready and left home by 4 AM. Buses were arranged meticulously for all of the runners for their journey from Shillong to Sohra. A few new friends, some delightful conversations accompanied with healthy packed refreshments didn't make me realise when the black sky gave way to a blue one and the sun peeked out. We had arrived for the

much awaited run!

Scores of people had turned up, more were arriving every minute. Positive and motivational songs at the arena just increased the enthusiasm of all the participants. Shoe laces tight, thirst quenched, I was ready. At the stroke of 7AM, the 21KM Half Marathon was called open.

I started my run with a brisk jog, knowing very well how I had to give my best and at the same time understand my body. You don't want to go at your fastest and end up crash stopping at some point and thus jeopardize your run. You want to go at a pace which will ensure that you are optimally using energy to finish at the best possible time. I gave my best every minute of the run. I paced up once I knew I was "in my zone", I slowed down when I knew my body needed some breathing space. I paused to sip some water when my body's tank was empty.

Like every other run, this time too my mind wanted me to give up multiple times but I didn't. I just carried on and on and soon, I reached the finishing line. The beautiful scenery of Sohra - the picturesque terrain, fluffy clouds and the calm weather all pushed me to run at my best and feel privileged in doing

so. And and and the sweet, kind locals of Sohra coming out of their houses and motivating us to "Run...C'mon you can". I could have run another 21 Kms in this kind of an ambience.

The organizers and the team worked very hard to ensure the smooth conduct of the whole event. The commute to and fro Sohra was well planned and executed, proper breakfast and lunch were arranged. During the run, the volunteers happily handed us water and juices at every 2-3 KM intervals and at the same time, ambulances were placed for any mishaps. For last year's 7000 to increase to more than 3000 this year in terms of participants speaks volumes of the event's growth in just its 2nd year. All of the 21K, 10K and 5K runs were executed with impeccable. It was a pleasure to witness young school children running with much joy. I was also very motivated to see veterans running with zeal, including my own mother. They didn't just run, they made us realise that anything and everything is possible.

Thank you for the pleasant and memorable experience to everyone involved!

Yours etc.,
Karan Sharma,
Via email

Swacch Bharat Mission on Gandhi Jayanti

By H H Mohrmen

The Department of Drinking Water and Sanitation of the Ministry of Jal Shakti Swachhata Hi Seva (SHS) campaign is being celebrated from September 15 to October 2. The theme of SHS is "garbage-free India." One of the topics for discussion in the observation of Swachhata Hi Seva is "a small step" by every citizen will make the dream of a garbage-free India a reality. The implementation of the Swachh Bharat Mission has no doubt caught the attention of the masses in the country, but the question is whether the Mission has achieved the goal it had hoped for.

The Prime Minister of India launched the Swachh Bharat Mission on 2nd Oc-

tober 2014 to accelerate the efforts to achieve universal sanitation coverage and to put the focus on sanitation, in the whole country. The government has left no stone unturned to bring the much-needed change to make the villages across the country clean.

Under the mission, all villages, Gram Panchayats, Districts, States and Union Territories in India declared themselves "open-defecation free" (ODF) by 2 October 2019, the 150th birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi. The expectation is that by constructing over 100 million toilets in rural and urban India, the country will be able to make all the towns and villages in the country, open defecation free. The question remains if by merely constructing toilets we have achieved the ODF goal.

Constructing toilet vis-à-vis ODF
The government may have achieved its goal of constructing millions of toilets in all the villages in the country, but are all villages ODF in the real sense of the term? The challenge of having enough water supplies to use in the bathroom, especially during the lean season was found to be a stumbling block to people making hundred percent use of the toilets in the villages. Before the end of 2018, one saw that signboards at like visibility points to show that each village in the country is clean or has attained ODF status. The issue of toilets was one of the campaign points of the BJP in the last election, but it would

weekends these trucks have to stay on the road for hours together and with no place to ease themselves. Where else would they go for their natural call, but nature? Neither the government, the Export groups, nor the limestone producers have made the effort to construct toilets for the drivers and their assistants to ease themselves.

ODF and the Roads and Highways
The other places where one witnesses people engaging in open defecation are the roads in the state and even the highways. Indeed, all petrol pumps or petrol stations are supposed to have good toilets with running water, but the oil companies need to do a proper audit to see if these toilets at the different petrol pumps serve their purposes. Neither has the government provided public toilets for travelers on any of the roads or highways, hence travelers are compelled to openly defecate on backwoods near the roadside.

To ensure that open defecation-free behaviours are sustained, and no one is left behind, the government is launching a new phase of SBM. The mission also aspires to find ways and means on making solid and liquid waste management facilities accessible to the general public in the entire country. The Mission is moving towards the next Phase II of SBM i.e. ODF-Plus. ODF Plus activities under Phase II of Swachh Bharat Mission (Grameen) which will reinforce ODF behaviours and more importantly focus

on providing interventions for the safe management of solid and liquid waste in villages.

Solid and Liquid Waste management

Waste is going to be or already is the major problem in both the urban and rural areas the world over. Waste is not only a menace that governments in the entire world have encountered, but the much more serious problem is, that it looks like the world does not seem to have a solution to the problem till date. The challenge of managing solid waste is not only a problem in the town but now in the villages too. If

Loss of opportunity to dispose of plastic waste

Plastic waste including chip packets, biscuit, sweet pouch, and other packets are the most common wastes that one can see in the town and even in the villages. Plastic waste are common eyesore both in the town and the villages and this plastic waste is often the culprit that chokes the drains in the human settlements. There is an alternative on how to dispose of plastic waste but the opportunity was not used by the government, the public, and even the industries.

As per Waste Management Rules 2016, the plastics can be used as Refuse-derived fuel (RDF) by the industries and in the case of Meghalaya



we are yet to have a solution for managing solid waste, managing liquid waste will be a herculean task for the hill regions in particular.

Mawlynnong and Shangpung story

During the recording of the program for Akashwani (All India Radio) on the SBM week, a member of the panelist Sajeki Passah who is also the Editor of the popular Pnar Webzine or online news outlet Wyrta shared about an incident he encountered at Shangpung village. Shangpung was selected as a model village and one of the achievements was to maintain cleanliness in the village. He was covering a program in the village and unconsciously dropped a betel nut or pan leaf pouch and to his embarrassment a young girl near him picked the wrapper. Villages like Mawlynnong, Shangpung, and many other villages have indeed been successful in making their village clean, but the million-dollar question is how they dispose of their waste. One wonders how even a village like Mawlynnong disposes its waste because making one's village clean is one thing but managing or disposing of the waste generated is another question.

The tradition of managing bio-degradable by converting it to animal feed or compost is still being practiced today and this is fine because in the past the waste people generated was not as complex as it is now. But the question is what they do with non-bio-degradable waste as burning waste is illegal?

the cement plants in particular. The truth is the cement plants are not taking the plastic waste as RDF seriously. The cement companies too should understand that it is their moral obligation to work with the community and use the plastics waste as RDF.

The goal is zero waste to landfill

What do we do with our waste? In many cases, members of the public or even the administrators still look at landfills as the end of the last destination of the waste we generate. Even though the government has introduced the concept of a waste recovery centre (WRC) in the state, the project is not as popular as it should be. WRC is planning to be a centre at the local level, but the project does not find many takers now. The objective is to segregate waste at the source and the waste generated is then recovered and made or converted to resources.

My waste my responsibility

At the radio discussion, Sajeki Passah suggested that in the villages the service of the Self Help Groups (SHGs) which are very active in the villages and the village organizations (VOs) can be used. They can be trained in waste segregation and making compost from biodegradable waste with some support from MSRLS.

Behavioral change is the need of the hour

The lasting solution to managing waste in both the urban a rural areas is behavioural change.

Emergence of Class System Among the Khasis

By Barnes Mawrie

We are all aware that the Indian Hindu society has been classified according to castes since times immemorial. The Varna system which the Aryans started as a division of labour, ultimately ended up being a caste system which has become more of a curse than a blessing to society. However, having been sanctioned by religion itself, it has sunk into the deep consciousness of the Hindus and it is next to impossible to be rid of it. Perhaps the greatest negative impact of the caste system is the dehumanization of the low castes and the non-caste (a-varna). The marginalization and oppression of the Dalits in India is the outcome of this caste mentality. There had been attempts in Northeast India by some Hindu scholars to integrate the tribal people into the caste system. Of course, the tribals would definitely fall into the category of the low caste. Somehow, this attempt never succeeded on account of the tribals' resistance to the very concept of caste. Fortunately, the tribal communities have never had such a social classification because by nature of their social structure, tribals are governed by the ethics of equality and solidarity.

Of late however, another evil has crept into tribal society and that is the class system. Almost as in feudal Europe of the Middle Ages, the tribal society today is becoming more feudalistic in structure. Let me turn my attention to the Khasi community as a concrete example of such a developing

phenomenon. From history and tradition, we know that tribal societies used to be egalitarian and communitarian in nature. This meant that the sense of equality among all was being upheld as an important value and equity was being practiced as a principle of relationship. The traditional practice of having community land which took place at three levels, namely, Khyndew Raid (land owned by a conglomeration of few villages under one sordar and his council), Khyndew shngong (land owned by a particular village under a village headman and his council) and Khyndew Kur (land-owned by a particular clan). Thus for all practical purposes, land among the Khasis used to be a real "republic" (common property). These plots of land used to be allotted to members of the Raid, village or Kur, as per their required needs. Usually when a new family is being constituted, a plot is assigned to it for construction of a house and also for cultivation. But such a plot could by no means, be sold or mortgaged by the family. If they desire to migrate to another place, the plot of land goes back to the Raid/village or Kur accordingly.

Such practices are still in existence in some parts of Khasi-Jaintia Hills, but in many other areas it has already become defunct. In most cases, the corruption on the part of the sordar, the headman or the head of the kur, has been responsible for the loss of community land. These individuals led by greed, have often circumvented the laws and openly flouted the tradition. In places where this tradition is still being upheld, there is no landless family and a sort of equitable system is being established. This system has

prevented the Khasi community from becoming a feudal society while at the same time it has ensured justice for all.

The Khasi society of today has been plagued by a class system wherein the community is split into two sections along economic lines. There are those few who own thousands of acres of land, have big mansions, own many expensive vehicles and live in luxury. These constitute the so-called "high level" or "rich" class and of course there are the majority of the community who own very little or no land at all, who live in shanty homes and struggle to make both ends meet. These constitute what we call the "low" or "poor" class of Khasis. This sort of disparity is shamelessly evident in the urban settings.

In Shillong city one is accustomed to see palatial mansions, expensive cars and elite class lifestyle of the rich section of the Khasi people, and simultaneously one witnesses extremely poor Khasis who sit on road-sides and street corners with only a small makeshift table, trying to sell betel nut and cigarettes. Most of these poor Khasis either live in small rented houses or in slum-like conditions.

What is more appalling is the fact that this economic divide is having a negative influence on relationships within the clan (Kur), within the village and within the community at large. The poor members of a clan are often

"The usual practice of visiting members of the kur is waning away especially, when it is a visit to the homes of poorer members. This class feeling inevitably leads to individualism which does away with any form of altruism. Even in significant events like weddings of the rich class, the poor members of the kur are often forgotten."

looked down upon by their rich kur members. The usual practice of visiting members of the kur is waning away especially when it is a visit to the homes of poorer members. This class feeling inevitably leads to individualism which does away with any form of altruism. Even in significant events like weddings of the rich class, the poor members of the kur are often forgotten. There are times as well, when the poor kur members, although invited, shy away from such grand celebrations on account of their poverty. They feel ashamed being unable to offer expensive presents. Perhaps only in cases of death do the poor clan members dare to visit such families.

The fact that today there are already Khasi beggars, abandoned Khasi street urchins and elderly persons ending up in old-age homes, are clear indications that the traditional kinship bond and the sense of community and solidarity are fast disappearing. Among all the tribal communities of Northeast India, the Khasis perhaps are the ones who are most affected by this class system. The Khasi society today has assumed a feudal character where there are rich landlords and a large section of poor tenants, of have's and have-not's. As the old saying goes "from the frying pan into the fire" so too it would appear that the Khasi community has escaped the caste system but it has succumbed to the "class system." While it is next to impossible to get rid of the caste system from our country, yet class system can be eliminated from our Khasi society provided as a community we free ourselves of individualism and revisit our age-old valuable traditions and customs and decide to live by them.

"Life was always a matter of waiting for the right moment to act."

— Paulo Coelho

The Shillong Times

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KHADC's Tokenism

IT was recently announced by the recently appointed CEM of the Khasi Hills District Council, Pyniaid Syiem that two women will be included in the executive committee of the Dorbar Shnong. This is at best tokenism and Khasi women should not be pleased with these carrots being dangled before them, nor should they readily accept the patronage of being "included" in the executive committee of the Dorbar. Khasi women are quite capable of heading a Dorbar Shnong if need be. This is not a position cast in stone. This arrangement is attributed to an oral tradition that was touted at a time when the male was considered one that possesses twelve times the strength of a woman. All this is now debunked by science. Intellect and the ability to govern is not a purely male attribute. In all other spheres of governance especially in the bureaucracy women are excelling. They are occupying leadership positions as technocrats and medical practitioners. Are they any less than the Khasi male in the way they discharge their duties? No, they aren't!

Meghalaya has had women ministers who have done well and discharged their responsibilities in the same capacity as men. But whether Khasi society accepts this or doesn't, the fact remains that this is a society that discriminates on the basis of gender. And the alibi trotted out is that women already carry the lineage and that is a great favour bestowed by the ancestors on women. The reality is that this is an overstated privilege. How does lineage matter when a woman is abandoned after she has given birth to a child or more children and is left to fend for them and for herself? These women are today seen plying their wares as vendors selling everything from fruits and vegetables to second hand clothes and what have you just to keep body and soul together. That the state has not done enough research on the plight of such women is also because women's voices in the Assembly are muted on these issues or because those who do get elected come from the upper strata of society and do not understand the pain and agony of a large section of poor and down-trodden women.

The Dorbar Shnong is the first court of appeal in Khasi society. If the Dorbar Shnong is male-centric and does not have the gender perspective that is needed to understand the travails of a Khasi woman then it is futile to expect that Dorbar to address women-centric issues such as their reproductive rights and health. The Dorbars have created the Seng Kynthei (women's wing) which is like an accessory, in their attempt to make the Dorbar appear gender sensitive and equitable. But it does not address the constitutional rights of women to hold office in the Dorbar including that of heading it. The Sixth Schedule and tradition are subservient to the Constitution. This cannot be lost sight of!

Letters to the Editor

Justice is finally served!

Editor,
As the High Court of Meghalaya closes the curtain on the seventeen year-long "Good Samaritan" drama played by two skillful murderers viz. Bernard Lyngdoh Phawa and Bonnie Lyngdoh Phawa of Pynthor Umkhrah, by awarding them both with life imprisonment, family and friends of 21 year old mass communication student of St. Anthony's college, Biplab Das, hailed the conviction as a momentous victory for justice.

Welcoming the recent conviction by the HC, well-wishers of Biplab Das had also expressed that the verdict is a strong warning to perpetrators of such crimes that no one can escape justice, even if they have influential personalities/politicians behind them to delay the judgement or cover-up for their crimes. Even though

conviction will not return victims of such crimes to their families or erase the past, such verdicts can help counter the voices of those who either deny these horrific crimes or glorify those who committed them.

The Court has both the power and responsibility to bring justice to such victims and demonstrate the value of a human life. We urge the judges to use that power and not let such cases fall into the pattern of no action. With every death of an innocent human being at the hands of criminal masterminds like the uncle-nephew duo Bernard and Bonnie, there are two real tragedies: the death itself, and the inaction and delays that follow it. The time has come to end that pattern.

Through the pages of your esteemed paper, we would also like to express our shock, anger and disappointment at learning that the lower court had previously in 2019 (under the influence

Whenever it appears that the situation in Manipur could be improving, a provocation or revelation throws the state back into turmoil. The recent upsurge of violence began with the news that the two Meitei students, 17-year-old Hijam Linthongambi and 20-year-old Phujam Hemjit, missing since July 6, had been killed. The revelation, though heart-breaking, is not totally unexpected. The Meitei have blamed the Kuki for the killing, and there is a strong basis for that. Members of the Kuki community have been raped, paraded naked, beheaded, and burned alive. Is it difficult to believe that there will be some elements within the community who are looking for payback? And as always, in the end, it is the innocents who pay the price. What is worrying is that dozens of people are still missing. It is very likely that they are also already dead. One can hope that it is not the case. But hope has become such a scarce commodity in Manipur right now. This means that the moment there is some semblance of calmness, a new revelation might throw everything into turmoil once again. The important question then becomes: how will all this affect the long-term prospects of peace in the state? How will this conflict eventually end?

The genesis of this conflict lies with the judgement passed by a single-judge bench of the Manipur High Court directing the state government to consider the request of the Meiteis for inclusion in the Scheduled Tribes (ST). This prompted the organisation of the 'Tribal Solidarity March' to oppose the demand for inclusion of the Meitei community in the ST category. Violence started soon thereafter. Although the decision of the Manipur High Court was later criticised by the Supreme Court, the damage had already been done. The question is what will happen to that demand now? Is there any possibility of the Meitei getting ST status?

Though not spelled out in the Indian Constitution, Scheduled Tribes have been identified to have the following features: (i) indications of primitive traits; (ii) distinctive cultures; (iii) geographical isolation; (iv) shyness of contact with the community at large; and (v) backwardness. Do the Meiteis fulfill any of these criteria? The mention of primitive traits is highly problematic, irrespective of to whom it is applied. But Meiteis do have a distinctive culture that has been influenced a great deal by the Hindu culture and the Bengali language, which was the official script for the kingdom. It is only recently that the Meitei script has been revived. Still, what is clear is that they did not suffer from geographical isolation and were definitely not shy

of some political players) delayed the judgement and covered-up the heinous crime by completely overlooking crucial evidence/statements and giving the two accused murderers a clean chit. It is about time that the Court also initiates legal proceedings against such corrupt judges. Take swift and decisive action in charging such people as justice delayed is always justice denied!

Yours etc.,
Dr. Pooja Sharma,
Dr. Roshni Das Gupta &
Prof. Jason Lyngdoh
(Ex-students of
St. Anthony's College Currently working at
New Delhi; originally from
Laban, Shillong)
Via email

Women in the Dorbar Shnong

Editor,
A Khasi woman is the

What's The End Game in Manipur

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

about having contact with the community at large. Now, regarding backwardness, there could be an argument. However, Meiteis control the statement machinery in Manipur and have achieved great success in the national mainstream as well. This gives them an edge over the existing tribal communities, not just in their own state but in other states as well. So, by what parameters are they going to be judged to be backward? Maybe the Mandal Commission's methodology of identifying socially and educationally backward classes will be used for this purpose. Based on the 2021 North Eastern Region District SDG Index Report and Dashboard for 2021-22, it is clear that the hill districts are lacking behind the valley in many social, educational, and economic indicators. So, even if the Mandal Commission methodology is used, the Meitei will definitely be found to be more advanced than the existing tribes. So, it begs the question: on what basis will the ST status be given to them? And if they don't get it, will the deaths of all the people be a colossal waste over something that was never possible in the first place? That will be a really frustrating outcome for the Meiteis.

Quite a few Meitei themselves do not agree with the demand for ST status for the community. According to them, and this is generally accepted by others as well, the whole demand is about land and not the ST status itself. The Indian Constitution has given many protections to the tribals, which include, among others, the prevention of alienation from their land. This takes the form of not allowing non-tribals to own land in tribal areas. On the other hand, since Meitei are not categorised as tribals, no such provisions exist in the valley. Their own growing population and an increasing migration of Indians (and alleged illegal immigrants) have them worried that while the tribals can come down to the valley and buy land, they cannot relieve the pressure on their own land. Certain important questions thus emerge: how much of the land in the valley has passed on to the hands of the tribals and the outsiders? Is it at a scale that is threatening the dispossession of the Meitei in the valley? If not, is that a fear for the future that has not arrived yet? In that case, how can anyone be sure that such a future will actually come to pass now that people are aware of it? So does this mean that all this violence has been perpetuated by an unfounded fear? Is this, not unlike the ST demand, a case of another colossal loss of lives for a spurious issue? But even assuming that the

perception of the Meitei that they are losing their land is genuine, what could have been the possible solutions?

If the Meiteis do not get ST status, they would need another kind of constitutional provision that prevents outsiders from buying land in the valley. Outside the tribal areas, it is only in the Himalayan states like Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand that restrictions exist on the buying of agricultural land by people from outside the state. Jammu and Kashmir, in fact, had more stringent provisions, with a complete ban on the transfer of land to outsiders. However, with the abrogation of Article 370, that provision is also gone. In fact, Indians from other parts of the country not being able to buy land in the state was used as one of the arguments for the removal of the constitutional provision. Unless Article 370 is reinstated, it is difficult to imagine that a government that believes in uniformity will actually concede to creating a similar 'special' provision for Manipur. For all its implications in terms of national security, Manipur is not Kashmir. Is it then not surprising why the situation has been allowed to fester for this long?

Now let's assume that the Meiteis do get ST status. Two things can happen. The first is the most obvious: outsiders will be barred from buying land in the valley. That might work for a while, but sooner or later, that will not be enough to accommodate the growing Meitei population. As it is, they constitute more than half of the state's population but are limited to just 10% of the state's area. Unless they start practicing family planning, their numbers will rise above the carrying capacity of the valley itself. Then they will look for land outside the valley to accommodate their growing numbers. Now that they are ST, they will become eligible to buy land in the hills. However, even if that facility is available, will they be able to make use of it?

One thing is certain: as long as Kukis continue to be demonised and attacked, the Meiteis will not be safe in the hills. In an area where arms proliferate, the only way Meiteis can stay in Kuki areas is if they wish to be ghettoised, with their movement restricted to only within their area of habitation. The moment a Meitei in Kuki areas is harmed, the cycle of violence will start once again. What about the Nagas though? Will they allow Meiteis to settle in their areas? Even before the Kukis started demanding a separate administration, the Naga had already started fighting for a separate Nagalim. The Meiteis opposed it since they believe the entire Manipur,

including the hills (though they don't stay there), belongs to the Meitei. In other words, the Nagas have no right to demand separation since it is the Meiteis, not the Nagas, who can decide that. So, will the Nagas allow the Meiteis to buy land and settle in the hills, which will legitimise that claim? Instead of having an ethnic cleansing in the future to delegitimise the claim of other people on what a group perceives as their ancestral land, is it better not to allow any form of legitimization from the very beginning? Before allowing the Meitei to buy land in the hills, the Naga will look back at their experience with the Kuki, whom they claimed had encroached on their lands. Will they risk that with another group?

There are some Meitei commentators who claim Meiteis are not actually going to go to the hills since they are valley people. It seems that the memo did not reach the people on the ground, who are using the inability to buy land in the hills as angst against the tribals. But what is not stated is that it is not the poor, land-starved Meitei who will buy land in the hills but it will be the elites who will then engage in speculation or lease it to extraction industries for large sums of money. Does this mean that ordinary Meiteis are being used as cannon fodder for the benefit of the rich? That would, if true, be a very cruel joke played on the people of Manipur.

The underlying reasons for the violence may be much deeper, but, from the perspective of the Meitei, on the surface, the demand for ST status, which is linked with land, has been the flashpoint. The drug trade is just an added layer meant to demonise a warring community. In one of her interviews, apart from accusing the Meitei Chief Minister of the State, Biren Singh, of being part of the drug trade, former cop Thounaojam Brinda also revealed that poppy is cultivated up to Arunachal Pradesh. Last time I checked, there were no Kuki in that state, but there are Naga tribes who stay there.

So, what is the endgame here? What is going to be ultimately achieved by the violence continuing except for making the situation even more intractable and reconciliation impossible? How is that not going to strengthen the case for a separate administration for the Kuki? I know it is difficult to reason right now, but there will come a time when cooler heads will look back at what happened. Then they will ask what it was all about. What did they gain, and what did they lose? Hopefully, it is not too late by then.

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

don't seem to understand why. This is because it takes a woman to understand the plight of another woman. As I have stated in my introduction, Khasi women are the preservers and guardians of the family goods. They protect what is meant to be theirs, yet when it comes to politics women are seen as lesser beings as most seem to think that lineage and the passing of last names are enough rights for a woman to have in our "matrilineal society".

If we as a people of the Khasi society do not include women into the conversation into the big discussions, that too in the 21st century, then when will we?

Yours etc.,
Deiphishisha Lyngdoh
Talang,
Via email

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

Majority of Indians are Anaemic. Lack adequate nutrition NFHS survey reveals deterioration under NDA rule

By Dr Gyan Pathak

It is a fact, which even Prime Minister Narendra Modi can't deny, that majority of Indians, especially women aged 15-49 years (57 per cent) and children aged 6 months - 5 years (67 per cent), and also men aged 15-49 years (25 per cent), don't even have enough blood in their bodies, which in medical terms is called anaemia, because the data is given by an official survey called the National Family Health Survey (NFHS)5 (2019-21). The condition has been worsening since NFHS 4 (2015-16), under Modi Raj.

Is it the right model of economic growth in the country, which is being celebrated by RSS-BJP clan and the PM Narendra Modi himself boasting of the country becoming the fifth biggest economy of the world, the fastest growing? Can we, the majority, who don't have even enough blood in our body, ask where PM Modi is channelling all the money, while the majority cannot even afford healthy food?

NITI Aayog, the government think tank, is now working on to proposed rationalization of food and kitchen fuel (LPG) subsidy programme. As we have

handful of people are enjoying channelization of wealth towards them, which may be either intentionally or due to faulty reasoning of the ruling people.

Then again comes the question of enough blood in majority of the people of the country. NFHS 5 revealed that anaemia had a huge jump between 2015-16 and 2019-21 in almost all sections with the most dramatic increase from 59 per cent to 67 per cent among children aged six months to five years. Among women aged 15-49, NFHS statistics show, the prevalence of anaemia has risen from 53 per cent in 2015-16 to 57 per cent in 2019-21. Even among men aged 15-49, prevalence of anaemia is as high as 25 per cent according to NFHS 5.

There can be many causes of anaemia, chief among them is unavailability of healthy food, and for all these the government is more responsible even while the Government claims that India's economy is growing faster than any country in the world. If the claim is correct, why hasn't enough money not been channelized for the needy to at least maintain the necessary blood level in

The Modi government has tried to wash their "blood stained" hands simply by dropping anaemia from the future NFHS survey itself from July 1, 2023 which had stirred great controversy.

seen in the last three decades, "rationalization" is only a government euphemism for either increasing the cost or reducing the subsidy. NITI Aayog has said that foodgrains distributed under the National Food Security Act (NFSA) 2013 and LPG subsidies put a burden of Rs4 lakh crore on the national exchequer, and there is a need to rationalize them. Does it mean that in case of PM Narendra Modi's returning to power after 2024 election will bring elimination of subsidy on food and LPG of the common people to increase channelization of the funds thus saved to the people where the maximum funds are going even now? We cannot forget that PM Modi wants to lead the country to make it developed one by 2047, at the cost of the common people's blood.

Yes, there is no mistake. One can call PM Modi's model of economic growth and development coming at the "cost of common people's blood", because the already wealthy corporates becoming fatter by every day as it passes, while the scarcity of blood in more and more persons has been recorded since 2015-16, as the official NFHS 5 and NFSH 4 data comparison shows. Under the NFSA 2013, up to 75 per cent of the rural population and 50 per cent of the urban population receive subsidized foodgrains under Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS). India has one third of the global hunger burden right now, and the latest World Bank atlas shows that 97.3 crore out of 142 crore population of the country are not even able to afford healthy food.

So, from where the enough blood will come without food? The other data is equally shocking that only 20 big corporate companies in India earn 60 per cent of the entire earning of all people in the country, and 70 per cent profit of all profits earned by all enterprises, and among these companies are also PM Modi's friends. Can we call such accumulation of wealth to be indirectly "blood money" which prevents the majority of Indian people to have enough blood in their body, which is only because they are at receiving end of PM Modi's policies while the

their body to survive in good health?

The Modi government has tried to wash their "blood stained" hands simply by dropping anaemia from the future NFHS survey itself from July 1, 2023 which had stirred great controversy. Government's real intention behind this was suspect, and it was alleged that they did not want people to know how many people don't even have enough blood in their bodies which may facilitate the false narrative of economic growth and development of PM Modi and his RSS-BJP clan.

The fault of PM Modi's policies of economic development does not end here. Large numbers of children, due to lack of enough nutrition and food, become progressively weaker and part of their body is damaged, and more emaciated, which we call wasting. Modi's claim and election narrative of economic growth and development contradicts the fact that about half of all children (49 per cent) with wasting in the world live in India. In 2022, an estimated 45 million children under five were affected by wasting globally. The overall prevalence of wasting in India was 18.7 per cent, a very disturbing malnutrition indicator.

It is chiefly due to unavailability of enough nutritional food, our children have been suffering also from stunting, i.e. a low height for their age. In 2022, stunting in children under 5 years of age was as high as 31.7 per cent, and thus India's share of the global burden of stunting stands at unacceptably high at 25 per cent.

In Global Hunger Index (GHI) 2022, India ranked 107 out of 121 countries in the world. With a score of 29.1, India has a level of hunger that is serious. It belied PM Modi's growth narrative. The Government of India therefore had labelled the index "an erroneous measure of hunger". But then how can the government contradict its own data of anaemia, wasting, and stunting? PM Modi's narrative of growth and development of India conceals this frightening ground reality and hence amounts to hoodwinking the electorate. (IPA Service)

"The brighter you are, the more you have to learn."

— Don Herold

The Shillong Times

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Game of castes

THE buzz now is on caste census. With the Bihar government releasing its caste census report, the INDIA alliance is in a mood to use Backward Caste welfare as the main campaign plank for the upcoming parliamentary polls. This issue might have the potential to upstage the BJP and catch Prime Minister Narendra Modi on the wrong foot. Caught in a desert, the opposition is increasingly seeing a mirage. The tone was set by Congress leader Rahul Gandhi, who raised the point that out of the 90 secretaries in the Union Government, only three are from the backward communities. The BJP can be depended on to come up with a counter-strategy. A Modi image by itself will not help it retain power. The old 'India Shining' slogan did not help the BJP win the polls after the AB Vajpayee phase. For, in any election, the undercurrents influence the outcome.

Certain aspects must be noted in the present context. When Rahul Gandhi expresses his indignation at the sidelining of the backward communities — who form over 60 per cent of the population — as also Muslims and other minorities in the governmental apparatuses, this must be taken with a pinch of salt. It was his party, the Congress, which ruled India for much of the past and shaped the bureaucracy on these lines. The BJP too ruled this country for repeated terms. The credit for the gains and the blame for the ills of the nation must be shared handsomely between these two parties.

If the BJP government is hesitating to go for a caste-census at the national level, fact is also that such aspects of the 2011 Census report had not been made public by the Congress-led UPA government and the BJP-led Modi government also avoided it like a hot potato. The Mandal Commission report was kept locked in government shelves by the Congress governments while it was the VP Singh-led opposition government that finally implemented its recommendations to help the BCs. The Congress is now changing the tune as it badly wants to outwit the BJP and win the polls. The Indian society is deeply fragmented on caste, religious, racial, regional and linguistic lines. Justice is a far cry in most respects even as governance is apologetic. The North-East, or the East as a whole, lay neglected for many decades. The South overcame such neglect after Narasimha Rao became Prime Minister. Even today, the BJP is focusing its infra development push largely in the Hindi belt. Equitable distribution of opportunities remains a dream. Muscle-flexers manage to grab more while the weak are left to fend for themselves. Politics here is a game of crooks. Fooling the people is the name of the game.

Mindset is the elephant in the room

By Benjamin Lyngdoh

to keep on moving and being active in line with the innate nature of a dynamic mindset. This individual growth mindset when multiplied to include others then becomes the mindset and culture of a group of people which then has larger ramifications.

Mindset is contagious

A good example of a contagious mindset can be seen in sports. One player can impact upon the outlook, belief and performance of others. Defeat turns to victory. Since mindset is contagious, it basically works in two ways. Either it will inspire to achieve or it will work to deceive. The achievement factor is positive. Let us take the case of students. They look up to teachers, elders, church leaders, etc to inspire them. As they grow older and become more aware of the ways of the world they then look to the political leadership as the ones who would carve a future for them. Politicians are supposed to create opportunities through their regulations and policies that touch upon the masses. The failure to do so will prove them as being inept to inspire achievement amongst the youth.

The second factor deception is more severe. For example, Tourism Minister Paul Lyngdoh stated that in the last edition of cherry blossom festival the total attendees were 45,000 out of which 10,000 were tourists. The point to be noted is that even without festivals Meghalaya gets on average 3,300 tourists per day going by pre-Covid 19 figure of 12 lakh tourist inflows per annum. By today's estimate (13 lakh per annum) the average inflow is 4,000 tourists per day. So, the answer given by him was not actually defending the rationale for festivals, rather it was to the contrary. Further, to claim that Meghalaya has had more

foreign tourist arrivals than domestic in recent years is total deception. The statistics of the Ministry of Tourism, GOI records only a few thousand foreign arrivals. When the political class has this mindset then all hope is lost.

The elephant in the room

When Ardent Basaiamoit says that there is a difference in the mindset of a tribal and others, it raises a question on the consistent calls for the Khasi community to fight and change. The culture, traditions, practices, etc of a tribal is different from the others, but to bring mindset into the mix is questionable. Mindset is either fixed or growth orientated. So, when Ardent says that there is a difference does he mean the mindset of a tribal is fixed? If that be so then it is gigantically problematic for the Khasi community. Again, CM Conrad Sangma might have taken the high ground by claiming others to be microscopic. But, MDA 2.0 needs to look at the mirror on account of education and health indices, inflation, etc while consistently selling the feel-good factor of governance by claiming that all is well. What does this say about the government's mindset?

However, the biggest elephant in the room concerns the students. Their mindset towards career development is bleak. Wherever they turn they see only limitations and challenges. Right from school days they have inferred that politics rules the roost and that it is unfair at most times. Now, wonder many of them have a fixed mindset. They have already pictured that only those who have backing and are at the helm of affairs will benefit while the majority will suffer. We talk of a growth mindset. But, it is impossible to have it in the current scheme of

things.

Dealing with the elephant

It has been the norm for homes, teachers, elders, churches, etc to shape the mindset of the young. Although this is alright it is at the same time flawed. Mindset cannot be nurtured and built in the absence of an engaging and vibrant environment. Parents and teachers can mould the mindset to the hilt. However, once these students move out and find that the environment is not conducive and enabling due to lack of opportunities, they regress from a growth mindset to a fixed mindset. As stated earlier, a prolonged stay in a fixed mindset is a problem.

It can be argued that the meaning of a growth mindset is to fight and overcome. But, this theory only works when there are levers to assist in the fight. For example, a poor unemployed youth can be asked to practice self-employment, but this is only possible if he/she can avail of free training and development on a certain trade/skill. The crux of the matter is that an ideal political leadership is one that focuses on transformation of the environment. It entails a change in the nature and shape of Meghalaya which would be encompassing for the young minds. What is needed is bold governance which would make brave decisions on infrastructure development and focussing on strategic sectors like agriculture (where 65% of the population depend for their livelihoods) and the rest will follow.

In the end, how we run the economy is like how we run our homes. Parents get monthly income and it is spent first on food, education, health, bills, etc. Money is spent first on the building blocks of human capital. If excess income is there, then only it is spent on luxuries. It is about getting the priorities right. Do we have the mindset for that?

(Email - benjamin@nehu.ac.in)

Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

A Cleanliness Drive of Ourselves...!

"Our greatest ability as humans is not to change the world, but change ourselves," Mahatma Gandhi.

And as the nation went on a cleaning spree on Gandhiji's birthday, with most everyone taking a broom and sweeping beaches, grounds, and everywhere where the lens of the camera could reach, I imagined I saw a small man with horn rimmed glasses, covered with just a khadi cloth, watching everybody. "Looks like a cleanliness drive on my birthday," he said.

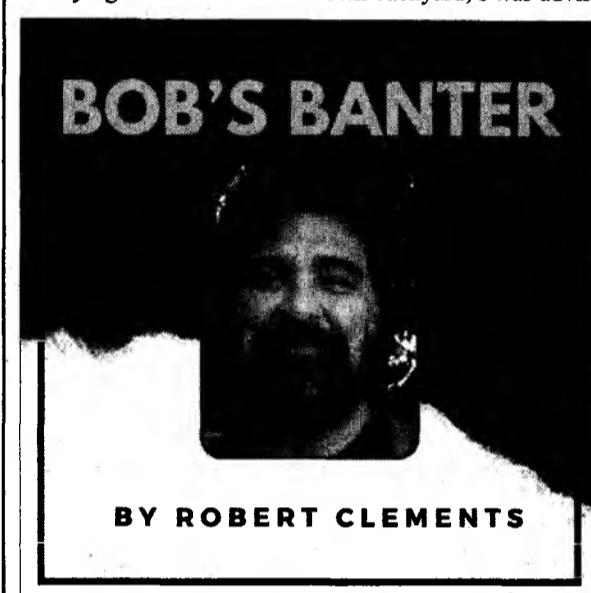
"Yes," I said, as I watched a road filled with garbage being broomed, and immediately housewives emptying more garbage on the same spot just cleaned. "Yes, we are trying to clean the na-

sing. "I have spent thousands putting him through law college," he cried. "And now this is what he wants to do Bob?" I looked at the lawyer, quietly took him to a coffee shop, and reasoned with him, telling him that he had worked hard so his children could make choices in what they wanted to do. The lawyer seemed quite convinced with my clever arguments, and then just as we were about to part he asked me, "How's your daughter doing?"

"She's doing well," I said. "Though she seems to spend more time learning to dance than study!"

"Then why don't you allow her to choose?" said the lawyer, and slowly, very slowly I nodded my head.

I had just lost to him, because without cleaning my own backyard, I was advis-



BY ROBERT CLEMENTS

tion!" "It's not working," said the birthday celebrant, as a scooterist dumped his household garbage on the same road and sped away.

"It's a symbolic act!" I said in defence.

"A meaningless one, unless you clean the right spot!" said the Father of the Nation emphatically to me.

"Right spot?" I asked, looking at brooms, brushes, garbage cleaners and also the ones, dirtying the places, "What right spot sir?"

"The spot within yourself," said the Mahatma patiently, "because what you people are trying with a broom and brush is to

change the outside world, whereas what you need to change is the muck that resides inside you!"

"You once said," I said, "That our greatest ability as humans is,"

"Yes, yes," I know what I once said," said the great Mahatma, "But let me put it even better, in context with this great cleaning spree the nation is doing."

"Yes," I said, pulling out a pen and paper.

"Our greatest ability as humans is not to clean or broom the country, but to start cleaning ourselves!"

I wrote the great words down, as the birthday boy continued, "When we clean our hearts and minds, when we can make our violent minds non-violent..."

"Like you taught the nation and the world and got our freedom," I interrupted eagerly.

"Yes," said the Mahatma simply, "When we can change ourselves inwardly, from playing politics with people's lives, from using the way a man worships God to make him or her the focus of hate, when we can be at peace within ourselves, and stop creating division between citizens, then and then only should we take broom and brush and start doing these 'outside ourselves' activities!" Yes dear reader, mine, may be a fictitious conversation, but the words are not those from my imagination, but those the Father of the Nation actually uttered. Even as we do these symbolic acts of broom and hugs, let's first begin purging the hate and anger inside ourselves, so that the brooming and hugging spring out from our 'greatest ability' as Gandhiji said, to change ourselves!"

Let me move from cleaning the country's mess to that of cleaning our own individual messy backyards, or our own lives:

A few years ago, I was speaking with a lawyer, who told me his young son wanted to get into a career in

ing him to clean his. Many of us do this every day.

A president to be, of a social club, I know, talked big of projects worth crores which he could help finance and get started, till somebody asked him, about the club's own little project of cleaning a garbage dump, "We are finding it difficult to raise money to pay the sweeper!" he said.

How easy it is to talk about cleaning the whole city, and raising money for dream projects when you were not putting effort in your own backyard!

And this trend is in all our lives.

A preacher, I know very well, whose sermons I used to think were some of the best I'd heard, screamed one day from the pulpit about forgiveness. Many in his congregation were impressed by his sermon, "How's your brother?" somebody asked him, and then watched him put his eyes down.

He, and his brother were not on talking terms and the preacher had never had the compulsion to pick up the phone and make amends, though he could preach on the subject!

How is your backyard? Are you telling others how to clean theirs?

An uncle of mine I remember was quite good at advising all his relatives not to stand in the way of their children and who they wanted to marry. Then one day, his son decided to get married to a girl of his own choosing. "No!" shouted his father, the same amicable uncle, "You will not marry her!"

Again, a dirty backyard. What's the dirt lying in your backyard about? You know better than I, so get the mop out now, and get the cleaning done!

Clean it, and people seeing your own backyard clean, will clean theirs too, even before you tell them to!

The most powerful piece of advice you can show others is a clean backyard!

How well Gandhiji knew people, how well he understood that to change people, one needed to first change oneself, and yet we have leaders in our nation who wax eloquent and also spend photo-op time showing how they are cleaning everything other than themselves. Maybe what they and we need is a giant mirror that reflects our messy insides and shows us that we first need to change ourselves before we try to change the world...!

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

Letters to the Editor

Nexus Between Tourism and Plastic Pollution

Editor,

The tourism industry in our state has been steadily growing, drawing visitors from across the globe with its captivating blend of nature, culture, and adventure which offers a unique and enriching travel experience, whether one is seeking serenity, exploration, or cultural immersion. As tourism evolved in our State as per reports it is expected that the annual tourist footfall will cross 15 lakhs by 2024. This steadily increasing tourism footfall has undoubtedly brought about several positive economic impacts, but it has also posed great environmental challenges as increased tourism often brings with it pollution, including littering and improper waste disposal.

The news report published in November 2018 have highlighted baseline data on the amount of garbage produced in tourist areas of Shillong and its potential to turn into an unmanageable threat if effective waste management systems are not implemented at the earliest. Although the tourism industry in our state is a significant source of employment and accounts for roughly 4.1% of the State's GDP according to data published by the Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Government of Meghalaya 2019-20, however, this also results in a significant volume of waste and pollution, placing immense pressure on the capacities of local waste disposal and management systems. Another major issue is the improper disposal of single-use plastics into

the streams which has transformed once-pure water bodies such as Umshyrpi, Umkhrah and Umiam lake into nothing more than big sewage drains.

Irresponsible tourism has furthermore compounded the issue, with popular tourist spots bearing the negative impacts of unruly behaviour exhibited by visitors making destinations less attractive and have a significant adverse impact on the environment. When the Committee on Environment from the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly conducted their inspection of Umiam Lake, they were confronted with a distressing sight. The extent of plastic pollution in the lake and the surrounding streams in this had reached alarming levels. In their report, the committee articulated their astonishment at the extraordinary quantity of garbage visibly floating on the lake's surface. They emphasized that, although a substantial portion of the waste had already settled at the lake's bottom, a lot was floating at the top.

While tourism contributes to our waste problem, this sector can also be part of the solution by raising awareness about plastic pollution and contribute to its reduction by encouraging tourists to adopt responsible practices to preserve the beauty of our state by taking action to reduce the amount of plastic waste generated and especially to practice proper disposal. Therefore adequate waste collection and disposal systems should be in place in tourist hotspots. A concerted effort from the government, communities, and individuals are required to ensure a sustainable and enjoyable travel experience for current and future generations which in turn can make tourism one of a larger number of ways

to help meet conservation goals, while also addressing people's livelihood needs to mitigate the negative environmental impacts through responsible and sustainable tourism practices.

Thus, it is essential to balance between reaping the benefits of tourism and ensuring its sustainability for future generations while addressing any associated challenges, such as environmental conservation and responsible tourism management.

Yours etc.,
Ripalei Lyngdoh
Mawphlang
Via email

Horrific noise pollution

Editor,

It is absolutely maddening to witness the complete disregard for the well-being of the citizens in the face of escalating noise pollution in our beloved city. I implore the relevant authorities to cease all vehicular movement through Police Bazar, especially now that the festive season is upon us. The bustling market area is overrun with a sea of people, and the incessant vehicular honking has transformed this otherwise vibrant place into a deafening nightmare. It's evident that the government's ill-conceived notion of ridding the area of hawkers has not only failed miserably but has exacerbated the problem. The road leading from Jhalupara to Barapathar is yet another battleground for noise pollution, where reckless drivers maneuver vehicles larger than the road itself with impunity. The administration's apathy towards improving our city's services is nothing short of infuriating. If they cannot remedy this traffic nightmare, they should swallow

their pride and seek expertise from outside. We demand accountability; after all, where is the hard-earned money of taxpayers going if our government can't even provide basic facilities?

Yours etc.,
R Sarki
Shillong

Gandhi's idealism

Editor,

The Birth anniversary of M.K Gandhi is observed in our country ritualistically mainly through programmes hosted by Governments barring a few national political parties who try to portray themselves as followers of Gandhi's ideals. However, it is surprising that hardly any regional political party of Meghalaya had ever organized any function to commemorate Gandhi's birth anniversary. It can thus be construed that Gandhi or his ideals have no appeal to such political outfits today. It is high time to dispassionately review and analyze Gandhi's political views, social theory, relation between different faiths and his relevance in present day world and put those in the right perspective. Although a section of people still consider Gandhi and his principles as sacrosanct and beyond any criticism, the partition of India leading to millions of deaths is testimony of the monumental failure of his theory of non-violence. The partition of India had inflicted stupendous human sufferings and deaths of unarmed civilians (without any war) and are comparable only to Hitler's extermination of Jews during the Second World War. Hitler, however, was not a votary of peace but Gandhi was. His famous quote "India's partition will be over my dead body," was

nothing but rhetoric.

Similarly, Gandhi's views on Mooplah massacre that "Hindus should not harbour anger against Muslims even if the latter want to destroy and kill us all. We should face death bravely. If Muslims established their rule after killing all Hindus we would be ushering in a new India. None should fear death. Birth and death are inevitable for every human being. Why should we then rejoice or grieve? If we die with a smile we shall enter into a new life, we shall be ushering in a new India." (April, 6, 1945) drew B.R. Ambedkar's ire and he wrote in his book, 'Pakistan or Partition of India', how Gandhi's so-called dream of 'Hindu-Muslim unity' led to Hindu genocide in the southern part of the country. According to Ambedkar, the genocide in Mooplah was nothing more than Jihad. However, as per Gandhi, it was the Mooplah rebellion, that was part of the Indian freedom struggle.

Yours etc.,
N.K. Kehar
Shillong-3

Stringent action for dumping garbage in drains & rivers

Editor,

It is indeed heartening to witness people coming out on October 1st and 2nd equipped with brooms, dustpans, hoes, and shovels. This collective endeavor reflects a great sense of shared responsibility, resonating with the spirit of Mahatma Gandhi. A cleaner, healthier environment has long been a cause that Gandhi has championed. Thus, the Bharat Swachhta Abhiyan of the national gov-

ernment is certainly a fitting tribute to his legacy.

However, amid this enthusiastic display of community participation in cleanliness, a disheartening reality has completely marred this whole exercise. It has often been noticed that many individuals thoughtlessly dump their garbage in drains and along riverbanks. Piles of garbage, often packed in sacks or plastic carry bags, are just thrown in drains and water bodies. What is worse is that items such as hard wood, tin, shoes, and broken furniture also end up in these drains and rivulets.

Such reckless behaviour not only obstructs the normal flow of drainage systems but also poses a grave threat to the environment and ecosystem. If I am not mistaken, the authorities concerned have enacted laws for the punitive penalties for such offenses. But, I wonder, how many have been penalized so far? I think none. Therefore, people continue to throw debris into drains and waterways with impunity.

The reluctance of authorities to enforce these penalties effectively is no less an offense. It is important that they adopt a more resolute stance, taking swift and stringent measures to check such acts of irresponsibility. Only through the determinedly committed posture of the authorities and the collective support of each individual citizen can we hope to honor the legacy of Mahatma Gandhi and secure a cleaner, greener future for our communities.

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

"Adopt the pace of nature: her secret is patience."

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

The Shillong Times

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Media Under Trial

THE media, particularly what is termed as the 'national' media in India is gasping for breath. The latest is the arrest of NewsClick owner and editor Prabir Purkayastha who was earlier also booked under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) for accepting funds from a person with Left leaning ideology from the US but currently living in Shanghai, to run the news portal. The case pending before the Delhi High Court includes charges of overvaluing of shares, diversion of funds and violation of foreign direct investment (FDI) regulations. Prabir Purkayastha had secured bail from the Delhi High Court and an order restraining the Enforcement Directorate from 'coercive action' against them. But in August this year, the Enforcement Directorate (ED) moved the High Court to vacate its earlier order offering protection to Purkayastha. The Court is yet to pronounce its verdict on NewsClick's plea to quash an Economic Offences Wing criminal case against the portal. But the government has now slapped terrorism charges under the Unlawful Activities Prevent Act (UAPA) against not only the organisation but its functionaries as well.

The Delhi High Court's observations are that the facts demonstrated that the ED 'failed to discharge its functions and exercise its powers.' "The ED is not expected to be vindictive in its conduct and must be seen to be acting with utmost probity and with the highest degree of dispassion and fairness," the judges had observed. Merely because the accused could not satisfy the ED's questioning is not sufficient grounds for arrest, the Court stated. The judges further observed that ED had to specifically find reason to believe that the accused are guilty of an offence under the PMLA but mere non-cooperation in response to the summons does not merit arrest. "It is not open to the ED to expect an admission of guilt from the person summoned for interrogation," the court asserted.

It is to circumvent the case which is sub-judice that the authorities used the UAPA to arrest Purkayastha and question all the journalists working for NewsClick and others associated with it. The allegations are that the news portal is being used as a propaganda machinery for the Chinese. The general view of the journalist fraternity is that there are several leading Indian businesspersons that accept Chinese investments and that Chinese goods have not stopped entering the country despite the much-touted "Make in India," slogan that is being waylaid by the bureaucratic red tape. Clearly, Prime Minister Modi has no patience for any media that questions his governance model and acts of omission and commission under his regime. His disdain for the media is loud and clear when he refused to give a single press conference since he assumed office in 2014. It's a different matter that the Indian media, barring a few brave-hearts, has normalised this assault on democracy and chosen to remain pliable and to join the bandwagon of cheerleaders of the government. No wonder press freedom ranking in India is falling every year.

Letters to the Editor

Alarming rise of crime in our city

Editor,
I am writing to express my concerns regarding the alarming increase of crime rates in our city. It is with a heavy heart that I witness the growing sense of fear and uncertainty that has gripped our community.

Over the past few months, the city has experienced various forms of crimes, including theft, and violent incidents. Our once-safe neighbourhoods are becoming dangerous, leaving residents anxious and afraid for their safety. People are afraid to walk alone, more so during the night. Shillong having multiple routes to reach one area makes it easier and faster for people to get somewhere. However, these shortcuts can sometimes be deserted and it can be very dangerous for people, especially children who have to take that route. Shopkeepers run the risk of getting looted and attacked if they open their shops past 10 pm. People do not feel a sense of security and safety even in their own homes. The danger of encountering a thief in our homes has increased immensely. Several cases have popped up where people who stay home alone have been targeted and attacked. Being mindful of our surroundings is a must now with people having the confidence to steal from one's pockets and bags, even in broad daylight.

The rise of unemployment in the city has led to an increase in theft. Substance abuse is also rapidly increasing. The rise in cases of drugs being found in the city is

alarming. This may be one of the reasons as to why the crime rate is so high. While thefts are rising exponentially these days, cases of missing people and killings have also increased.

This rise in crime has begun to tarnish the city's reputation and hinder its potential for growth and prosperity. It is the duty of each citizen to remain alert and report these crimes in order to ensure safety. It is crucial that our government, law enforcement, community organizations, and concerned citizens work together to fight this rising surge of crime. As a resident who has the privilege to call this city home, I believe it is crucial that we address this issue head-on and work together to find effective solutions. Let us all come together and take action so as to ensure that our city remains a place where families can thrive and residents can live without fear.

Yours etc.,
Saphiyri Aziel Mukhim
Via email

Monoculture the enemy of biodiversity

Editor,
The article written by Mohd Imtiyaz Khan on issues concerning Palm oil cultivation (ST Sept 30, 2023) deserves much appreciation. The writer had presented facts about the demand and supply of palm oil in the market and more specifically in the Indian context. However, the most important content of the article was his analysis pertaining to environmental concerns, socio-economic issues and scientific matters.

Bishops and the Church

By Albert Thyrniang

On October 1 all roads led to Ummulog, West Jaintia Hills. The episcopal ordination of Bishop Ferdinand Dkhar, new bishop of Jowai diocese took place in the town 15 km from the ecclesiastical seat. Appointed on July 8 last the prelate's consecration and installation was impressive. At least 15 bishops were present. Priests, religious and thousands of the faithful flocked to the venue by the thousands. Modern technology of live telecasts, giant screens and drones enhanced the ceremony. Had it not been for the heavy showers the day would have been more remarkable.

The 61 year old takes charge of the diocese that had been lying vacant since December 28, 2020. Comprising of the two districts, East and West Jaintia Hills, with an area of 3,819 square km, the Longkalah born clergy is now head of the 1,20,275 Catholics in 23 parishes. He will oversee the efforts of the church in education, healthcare, social works among others.

While travelling to and from the function this writer passed through Khanduli which is under dispute with Assam. The day after the ordination I had plans to visit Narpur, the cement plants and Khliehriat, the hub of coal mining. However, the pathetic highway forced the cancellation. This brings us to the issues of Jaintia hills vis-a-vis the church's response.

First of all, the border dispute! In Jaintia Hills the row is in Block 2. The unresolved differences ever since Meghalaya was carved out from Assam have come up again and again. The most recent incident was in Lapangap. Social media shows the September 26 clash between the Karbi and Pnar villagers using arrows and bows and catapults against each other. Prior to it was the tension in Khanduli where agricultural sheds and huts were torched. This was met with retaliatory trade boycott by the other community. Provocative utterances were also made with one threatening of a 'Manipur like situation.' Less than a year ago, in Mukroh, six persons were killed in police firing. People in the border areas see a political hand in the on and off skirmishes. They are clear that the clashes are instigated by politicians who take credit and political gain for 'solving the border dispute.' They observe that devoid of political interests different communities live peacefully along the border. A few days ago a

video of a person went viral when he said that he hates the two chief ministers of the two states for turning the two communities into enemies.

The Church may not take active part in the efforts to resolve the long pending thorny issue. Its leaders may not express which villages should fall where. But certainly the leadership can stand for the people wherever they are. It is not necessary that all Khasi and Garo settlements should be in Meghalaya. Similarly all Karbis need not be in Karbi Anglong. In fact many Karbi villages are in Ri Bhoi district. This writer has attended functions at Marmain, Ri Bhoi and Mynser, West Karbi Anglong. The inhabitants (Karbis) in Marmain speak impeccable Khasi. The language in Church and in schools is Khasi. On the other hand, the Mynser residents (Pnar) speak the lingua franca of Karbi Anglong. The songs and prayers are in Karbi. The Church should equally work for all ethnic minorities and boldly speak for their rights. In Karbi Anglong the Khasi community has been demanding for nomination of a member of their community to the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC). They feel that they are large enough (about 12,000 voters) to be considered but so far there has been a 'no' reply. As a result a feeling of neglect and alienation prevails. The Karbis in Meghalaya too should not be made to feel the same.

The coal and limestone mining, the cement and coke factories have damaged Jaintia Hills. The Church has hardly spoken against rat hole mining (legal and illegal) and the grave dangers of rampant mining of coal and limestone and the polluting factories. Coke factories were demolished because of the activism of concerned citizens. So too with rat hole mining! Even when illegal mining continues unabated the Church voiced no concern. Pleasing to the ears of illegal miners, the chief minister, Conrad Sangma has said that illegal activities cannot be completely stopped. If we read between the lines he actually means, 'we will not make an all-out effort to stop illegal mining.' The Church will not join issues with the CM because he and all ministers and politicians are friends of the institution. When the CM posts on his media handles with photographs, 'Pleased to receive blessing from the

new bishop,' we know the limits that Church leaders operate under.

One can clearly see an imbalance between West and East Jaintia Hills. The West is more developed though all the minerals are in the East. The highway in East Jaintia Hills has turned into 'paddy fields and fish ponds.' But since the highway is the centre's responsibility perhaps the blame cannot be attributed to the State Government. However, the state's roads, schools, colleges, medical facilities, water supply, electricity, etc., are better in the older district. The church has never been outspoken against denial of the basic amenities to ordinary citizens particular in more neglected and remote sectors.

Recently there was (still persisting) the Sanatana Dharma controversy in Tamil Nadu and the whole country. DMK's Udhayanidhi Stalin called for the abolition of Sanatana Dharma. For Stalin and the 'vast majority' in the state Sanatana Dharma merely means 'a caste hierarchical society' and hence it is justified to call for its annihilation. The Church too is highly hierarchical. No one is asking for its demolition. Even Pope Francis declared that the Synodal Church (participative Church) should be within the hierarchical structure. So the hierarchy in the Church will be there but at least the mentality can be changed. Bishops can be more simple, more approachable and more 'one' with the faithful. The theme for the Synod 2020-24 says that faithful and bishops journey together. The bishops don't go before the faithful.

The titles given to Church officials are contrary to the above concept. 'Holiness', 'Excellency', 'Eminence', 'Grace', 'Most Reverend', 'Lordship', 'Very Reverend', 'Reverend' are titles that convey that Church leaders are higher, mightier and better than the ordinary folks. Did Jesus institute these titles? Is He for such honours? Common Christians are holier than the Church leaders.

Bishops also don costumes like the mitre, the skullcap, the slash and hold the staff. The Eastern Orthodox, the Byzantine, the Syro-Malankara and other traditions have even more elaborate vestments for their bishops. These gears and vestments portray the kingly status of bishops. A late archbishop was never fond of these deco-

orative and functional vestments. He used to tell those who liked and disliked his simple lifestyle, "When I am in a cassock people wish me 'Khublei bishop', when I am in shirt and pants they greet me 'Khublei bishop' and when I am with the mitre on my head and the staff in my hand people also wish me 'Khublei bishop'. There is no difference. He also explained that the symbols are drawn from other cultures and traditions. "Nothing is ours," he stated. We may also add that the architecture of churches is mainly from abroad or elsewhere. Inculturation still has a long way to go.

Quite a few parents have expressed to this writer that their sons are denied recommendation letters by the parish priests when they desire to join religious orders. They would endorse only if boys wish to join a diocese. In Ummulog itself a lady informed me that her son had to go to a religious house without the mandatory letter. A religious priest narrated that the maximum number of boys who came for 'vocation camp' was from a parish where the parish priest refused to issue recommendation letters. If this is done then the very meaning of 'vocation' is not understood.

It is disheartening to hear that the girl and the boy from Marbisu who went missing a fortnight ago have been found dead. Parenting is the most difficult thing. The Church too has to be sensitive to young people. A policy on mobiles has to evolve. Both the boy and girl were students in a Church's school. Schools have identical rules. Most rules are 'don't's' One of them is 'no mobile in the school campus'. Rules are needed but the rationale behind the rules should be explained to the students. The authorities, teachers and parents should appeal to reason. Reason is what makes humans different from animals. The blind imposition of rules is not helpful. School authorities and teachers now suddenly command 'no mobile' but a few months ago the gadget was a must. Students are confused. Sex education and relationships too have to be given importance. This subject is barely taught at school and rarely talked about at home. So boys and girls learn about them either from peers or elsewhere.

The Church can play a much better role in all spheres.

Additionally, the proposal to introduce cold storage facilities for perishable items signalled a commitment to safeguarding the health and well-being of market-goers by ensuring fresh and safe products.

Fast forward to October 05, 2023, and we find ourselves in a different reality. Lewduh, once a symbol of eco-conscious progress, now grapples with a resurgence of plastic usage. Plastic waste is back with a vengeance, posing not only environmental threats but also jeopardizing the health and cleanliness of the market.

The authorities' commitment to a plastic-free Lewduh seems to have waned. The potential for substantial revenue generation through anti-plastic measures remains untapped, while plastic use remains unchecked.

Today, I urge the KHADC, the state government, and all stakeholders to rekindle the flame of Lewduh's plastic-free dream. Rigorous inspections and stringent penalties are essential to curbing plastic use within the market. Collaboration is key to success.

Lewduh stands as a cultural and historical gem—the "rice place of the people." We cannot let plastic pollution tarnish its legacy. The time has come for authorities to awaken, fulfil their promises, and restore Lewduh's dream of a clean, sustainable market for all.

I implore upon the relevant authorities to act swiftly, reinvigorate the spirit of the 2019 declaration, and enforce a plastic-free Lewduh. Together, let's make Lewduh a shining example of responsible, sustainable living.

Yours etc.,
R Sarki
Shillong

PM Modi's cup of woes full as INDIA starts campaign for national caste census

For Sangh Parivar, challenge is real in Poll-bound Hindi speaking states

By Sushil Kutty

Overnight a couple of planks for the 2024 General Elections has been laid—with Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar releasing the Bihar Caste Census and Prime Minister Narendra Modi raking up the Kanhaiyalal 'sar tan se juda' in pollbound Rajasthan, both the politicians ready to do whatever is needed to get the upper hand by resorting to whatever it takes. So, in caste-ridden India making use of caste divisions is the same as playing the communal card, which is what the Prime Minister has fallen back on in the face of INDIA's masterstroke, the 'Caste Census'.

One entails consolidation of Hindu votes into a

need for infusion of degrees of "Kamalnath Hindutva" in Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh also.

That being said, the Caste Census has opened up a Pandora Box. The "Jitni Aabaadi Utini Haq" is a clear gateway to "majoritarianism", the bane of democracy gone crazy. And if that gateway opens to "Hindu majoritarianism", what then? Prime Minister Narendra Modi spoke of democracy gone crazy to "what gateway opens to the nightmarish - what if the "majority Hindus" asked for the "majority share" and he sounded like he enjoyed

Friends of INDIA are calling the Bihar Caste Census a masterstroke. Perhaps knowing beforehand of the masterstroke, and its impact on the NDA's poll prospects, Prime Minister Narendra Modi chose the time-tested communal card as a counterweight to offset the gains to the INDIA bloc from the caste census. And because Rajasthan is all set for assembly elections along with elections in Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh, there's no time to waste.

single bloc. The other seeks to bag victory with the isolation of particular caste-combinations, which calls for a caste census to begin with. Of course, that is what has been taking place even in the absence of a caste census. But a caste census helps create perception. And perception is half the battle won. Therefore, Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar's call for a meeting of the INDIA Alliance to discuss the Bihar caste census and its implications?

Friends of INDIA are calling the Bihar Caste Census a masterstroke. Perhaps knowing beforehand of the masterstroke, and its impact on the NDA's poll prospects, Prime Minister Narendra Modi chose the time-tested communal card as a counterweight to offset the gains to the INDIA bloc from the caste census. And because Rajasthan is all set for assembly elections along with elections in Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh, there's no time to waste. As it was, the

teasing the prospect of "what if?"

Bihar's caste-based census was released on Gandhi Jayanti. The findings aren't startling. The census coming ahead of the assembly elections in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh and the 2024 general elections disclosed that the Other Backward Castes and EBCs account for 63 percent of Bihar's 13 crore population with 18 percent Muslim population. Similar caste census may be carried out in other INDIA-run states. It is believed caste census will help INDIA consolidate certain castes to vote for secular parties and INDIA alliance as a whole.

The Modi alliance is aware of the danger to its vote-bank. The BJP's entire focus from even before the 2014 mandate was to consolidate Hindu votes by removing the notion of caste from the general population. This is a model approved by the RSS and the VHP. The BJP was simultaneously dividing

The Modi alliance is aware of the danger to its vote-bank. The BJP's entire focus from even before the 2014 mandate was to consolidate Hindu votes by removing the notion of caste from the general population. This is a model approved by the RSS and the VHP. The BJP was simultaneously dividing the Muslim vote and hoping to benefit from the intra-Muslim polarization. Prime Minister Narendra Modi famously told BJP cadre to "reach out to Muslims even if they do not vote BJP".

Congress was already a step ahead with Kamal Nath's version of "Hindutva" in Madhya Pradesh.

The BJP will be defending in Madhya Pradesh and is the challenger in Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh. Another state going to polls, Telangana has the Congress surging and the BJP losing ground. The fact is permutations and combinations are changing fast in these poll bound states, the results of which will impact the outcome of General Elections 2024. And with every passing day, the urgency is maddening.

The Prime Minister hasn't forgotten the panic-stricken couple of weeks of electioneering in Karnataka, when he had to resort to frenzied "Jai Bajrang Bali", but still failed. And he isn't sure if he will succeed in Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh. But the INDIA alliance is not far behind in uncertainty. While the Bihar caste census has bolstered INDIA's confidence in the Hindi heartland, there will be

the Muslim vote and hoping to benefit from the intra-Muslim polarization. Prime Minister Narendra Modi famously told BJP cadre to "reach out to Muslims even if they do not vote BJP".

From the looks of it, after Karnataka and the BJP's own internal surveys, the Prime Minister is convinced the Pasmada Muslims will not change their opinion of him for the few welfare schemes he directed towards them. The Hindu votes may also not gel in his favour unlike in 2014 and in 2019. The caste census may lay bare the changing perception about the Modi brand and the "Hindu vote-bank". The Prime Minister is raking up "tailor's throat" and "Jitni Aabaadi Utini Haq" either out of realization striking him this could be the end of the road or he's not ready to quit. For many in the realm, it is impossible to think of Prime Minister Narendra Modi as an "ex-Prime Minister". (IPA Service)

According to the writer, one of the reasons for conflict in our neighbouring state can be attributed to the drastic push by the government for palm oil cultivation by clearing the forests and using temporarily uncultivated jhum lands. This would partially or wholly affect the tribal communities who depend on natural forests for their sustenance and livelihood. Additionally, it would cause changes in weather conditions which may hamper their agricultural and allied activities in terms of production and income. Therefore, we must carry out sufficient research studies and environmental impact assessments before rushing to increase any cash crop and commercial crop plantations in the North Eastern parts of the country.

Yours etc.,
E.R. Sangma,
Shillong-1

India a caste ridden country

Editor,
The editorial, "Game of Castes" (ST October 4, 2023) made interesting reading. Bihar State caste census has pressed the reset button of politics. Now political parties will be forced to rework their strategy. Next there will be greater share in allotments of party tickets. The pressure is mounting on the BJP as it depends for votes on the upper castes. According to the data of Loknit-CSDS National Election Studies in 1996, 35% of the upper castes voted for BJP, 38% in 1998, 40% in 1999, 35% in 2004 and 29% in 2009. In 2014, 47% of the upper caste voted BJP and 61% voted in 2019. The percentage of upper castes voting Congress was 25, 22, 21, 23, 26, 13 and 12% respectively for the periods referred to above. The share of the BJP from OBC for the period was 19, 26, 23, 22, 34 and 44% while that of the Congress was 25, 21, 25, 24, 24, 15 and 15% respectively. The share of regional parties amongst the OBC was 49, 44, 41, 43, 42, 43 and 27% percent for the period stated above. These numbers indicate that the caste system which Ambedkar told Gandhi should be abolished but which Gandhi was reluctant to do indicate that this is division of labour

amongst the Hindus. Therefore for whoever comes up with any strategy to win the 2024 Lok Sabha Elections the caste system matters even in fetching votes in a country like India which is caste ridden. The editorial rightly pinpointed "The North East or East as a whole, lay neglected for many decades. The South overcame such neglect after Narasimha Rao became Prime Minister. Even today the BJP is focusing its infrastructure development push largely in the Hindi belt. Equitable distribution of opportunities remains a dream." This is inevitable given the number of Members of Parliament that the region sends to the Lok Sabha. So, isn't it time that we have a Prime Minister from Eastern India in 2024. The probable candidates are Naveen Patnaik, Nitish Kumar and Mamata Banerjee.

Yours etc.,
V K Lyngdoh,
Via email

Inner cleansing more important

Editor,
Mahatma Gandhi must not be reduced only to outer Swachhata (cleansing). We need Gandhi more for our inner Swachhata in order to clean from within all ugly stubborn stains of untouchability and religious hatred that have been lurking in the dark corners of our minds. Let us recall a highly relevant Urdu couplet by Imran Pratapgarhi in the present hour of crisis. He says, "Who told you that I am swept up in the storm, I stand by Gandhi in the time of Godse" ("Ye kisne kahaa aapse aandhi ke saath hum, main Godse ke daur me Gandhi ke

saath hum"). We need to clean castes and racist apartheid from within to realise why it is necessary to stand by Gandhi in the time of Godse.
Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

lewduh's battle against plastic pollution: A dream deferred

Editor,
In August 2019, a dream was born in the heart of Lewduh (Bara Bazar). The Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council (KHADC) declared Lewduh a "no-plastic zone," sparking hope for a greener, more sustainable future. The vision was clear: embrace eco-friendly alternatives like sla (leaves for wrapping eatables), organic, and paper bags. It was a noble cause that drew the support of key community figures, including the Syiem of Hima Myliem.

"Modesty should be typical of the success of a champion."

— Major Taylor

The Shillong Times

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Performance as yardstick

PRIME Minister Narendra Modi, at the fag end of his two terms in power, has begun scouting around the states where assembly polls are shortly due. On Thursday, he launched projects worth Rs 5,000 crore in Rajasthan. Two days ago, he was in Nizamabad, Telangana, another poll-bound state, to declare his developmental support of over Rs 8,000 crore for the state. Modi would present himself in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Mizoram too -- days before the EC releases the election schedule -- and make similar announcements as is his wont before every election. The Parliament polls are also a call away, where Modi would lead the BJP for the third time in a row to seek the people's mandate. This would look ludicrous. Questions arise as to why he waited so long to initiate these projects and why at the end of the term(s), and should he rather not be seeking votes on the basis of his and others' performance in the past 10 years.

The Prime Minister, admittedly, is the strongest in the political spectrum when it comes to oratory. He demonstrated it in ample measure in 2014 and ousted the Congress-led UPA from power by flying around the country. Neither Sonia Gandhi nor Rahul Gandhi nor the other discredited heavyweights in the form of regional satraps could stage a matching performance. In the 2019 polls too, even as Modi failed to implement several of his promises of 2014, he raised the anti-Pakistan feelings via Balakot and won the polls again. There was neither a wave in favour of Modi and the BJP nor against them at that time. As of now, a similar scenario persists. While the Modi government did well on certain fronts and brought development of the highways in several states, it failed to act on multiple fronts to set right the persistent wrongs. Modi played safe in several matters, evident also in the failed farm reform initiatives and in checking the large-scale corruption across the country though no one accused Modi personally of being corrupt. Not yet at least. At the same time, recent reports suggested huge corruption in the massive spend for highway development across the country.

Modi might hesitate to lead the assembly poll campaign from the front this time in the five poll-bound states. He and home minister Amit Shah learnt a bitter lesson in the last West Bengal assembly polls. No Modi magic worked there despite the repeated rounds of campaigning by Modi and Shah, who were seen by the electorate as "outsiders" while their own Didi won the polls hands down. This was repeated in Karnataka too. Big talks alone will no longer help the BJP win elections. What they did or did not do is more important.

Letters to the Editor

Our lives imperilled

Editor,
I am writing to express my frustration and disappointment with the recent events on the Umiam-Mawiong road, which clearly illustrate the complete lack of accountability and responsibility on the part of the concerned authorities. I had written on this issue in the past too but it appears that those in charge of removing the impediments that create so much distress for commuters have turned a blind eye and a deaf ear to our daily concerns.

On October 4, the commute from Umiam to Mawiong turned into a nightmare as traffic ground to a halt due to a fallen tree blocking the road as a consequence of heavy rainfall. The incompetence of the Forest and PWD departments in addressing such issues is nothing short of astonishing. A 14-kilometer journey that should have taken minutes stretched to an excruciating four hours, and all we have to thank is the inaction of these government departments for causing misery to the state's citizens.

It seems that the concerned departments are content with allowing the roads to deteriorate and the trees to dangle perilously over them. There appears to be no backup plan or proactive measures in place to handle emergencies like the one we faced yesterday. It's as if they're actively conspir-

ing to make life miserable for the people who rely on these routes for their daily commute.

The disregard for the safety and convenience of the citizens is alarming and unacceptable. It's high time that the concerned authorities take immediate action to address the deplorable state of our roads and the looming threat from hazardously perched trees. Neglecting these issues not only inconveniences commuters but also endangers lives.

We the citizens must hold the authorities accountable for their negligence; demand action, and work together to ensure that our roads are safe, efficient, and reliable.

Yours etc.,
R Sarki
Shillong

Change or Perish

Editor,
The news item "HC lambasts govt., calls explanation specious." (ST, October 4, 2023) conjures up images of an overly considerate parent who instead of giving his obstinately disobedient children a well-deserved whipping, is yet again trying to guide them on the good path although they have on numerous occasions cocked a snook at his attempts. In the context above, the Hon'ble High Court's observation which states: "The attempt at deceit on the part of the state continues obviously for extraneous considerations of

The life of the average citizen in Shillong is one of desperation, frustration, anger, worry and what have you. I am sure that if anything should shorten our life spans it would be the stress levels that rise like a thermometer inside a glass of hot water. Yet we citizens will not come out to the streets to protest the denial of our basic services which means clear roads on which to drive on, basic safety from thefts and muggings; the fear of being run over by speeding two-wheelers, if not a four-wheeler; the right to have lighted roads at night. Above all our right to drink clean, pure water!

Indeed, what is shocking is the recent survey of the safety and potability of our water systems. We have to thank the FKJGP for taking upon themselves the onus of getting the water from 44 localities tested for purity and safety. The results of the tests are frightening. The water we drink has Coliform and E. coli organisms, low pH, high turbidity, and excessive iron content in the unsafe localities. This certification comes from the State Food Testing Laboratory, Commissionerate of Food Safety. Only two localities were drinking relatively safe water. They are Demthring and Mawblei. It would be educative to understand why the above two localities have better drinking water. One reason could be that they are not dependent on the Greater Shillong Water Supply System that comes from Mawphlang. The River Umiew at Smit which is used for washing clothes, vehicles and what have you actually flows all the way to Mawphlang and the same water is being supplied to Shillong residents. So it's no surprise that the water even has faecal matter in it.

We are reaching a dangerous stage in our ecological journey even as our water systems, rivers, streams are dying up essentially because sand mining is happening on a grand scale. The Khri river flowing towards Patharkhmah was once a pristine river. Now it is muddy and sluggish. All the rivers in Meghalaya are today in this same state. Unregulated quarrying has resulted in the destruction of our aquifers and even swift flowing rivers like the Umkhen are now reduced to a large drain carrying the sludge and septic tank discharge right from

those who run the administration and to have no regard for either the rule of law or the welfare of the citizens or the need to protect the environment" is very serious indeed and must have been based on solid foundations.

This statement relates to the case of the Government defying a court order not to allow a Cafe to be set up at Mawiong Rim near the Umiam Lake. One recalls that this is not the only instance of the Government trying to circumvent or defy court orders. In this regard, I wonder how these acts of omissions and commissions have not as yet attracted punishment from the Hon'ble High Court. However, the Court knows best, I think. But like most common folks, I think that corruption has gone on unchecked and unpunished in our state for far too long. I also think that punishment of at least a few wrongdoers in high places would start to set things right. This is happening in our neighbouring states of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. But if things stay as they are, our race to the bottom will continue.

Yours etc.,
Samuel Swett,
Shillong-2

Unsafe water

Editor,
If true, it's shocking to read about the inferior quality water being supplied by the PHE Department to certain zones of Shillong.

the military cantonments -- Assam Regiment Centre, Gorkha Regiment and the local villages. The Elephant Falls so frequented by tourists carries the septic tank discharge of the Headquarters Eastern Air Command. Much has been spoken about these challenges but they remain unaddressed.

The reason why the problems in our state persist is because of the culture of silence. After the FKJGP report was published by all news media one expected a public outcry; a protest in front of the State Secretariat or gheraoing the Minister for PHE to take immediate action and ensure that the Department finds ways and means to deal with all the impurities that are being forced down our human systems. But other than discussing this horrific state of affairs at every gathering there is no public mobilisation. As usual we are experts at pass-

"We are hardly citizens of a democracy because if we genuinely understand that real power rests with us and not with the Government that rules over us then we would have used that power to hold the government accountable."

ing the buck and we will now depend on the FKJGP to organise a rally on this issue too. That's how lazy and pathetic we have become as citizens.

We are hardly citizens of a democracy because if we genuinely understand that real power rests with us and not with the Government that rules over us then we would have used that power to hold the government accountable. After the report on the ugly state of our water system was published, the Government would not have been allowed to go about its duty with complete nonchalance in a 'business as usual' attitude. Chief Minister Conrad Sangma would not have attended a song and dance function at the City Centre because that's dispensable. The CM would have been under pressure to call an urgent meeting on a matter of life and death for millions of citizens -- the deprivation of their right to clean drinking water. But no, none of us felt

us democracy. Democratic politics is designed to be the politics of voice. While there is a certain value to silence it does not work in a milieu where politicians are half deaf and fully blind to their duties and the citizens largely uninformed. Participatory democracy means deliberative democracy which requires that we voice our concerns with the expectation that they will be addressed. It is Voice that organises us and binds us as a force to reckon with. Voice is a tool of empowerment and Speech is the paradigm of political agency.

Our democracy unfortunately is put on its head. In meeting after meeting and in every conceivable gathering it is the powerful elite that get to lecture and talk down to us. Aren't these platforms meant to empower citizens to speak their hearts out and for the self-styled democratic monarchs to listen? Why must these servants of the people be allowed to spout

Why is it that nothing in our state is done correctly or in an appropriate way. Reasons will not be hard to find we are told.

It is apparent that nothing was done to reduce the acidity and to remove minerals or bacteria from the water. How or why this was not done should be thoroughly investigated. Bacteria in the water can cause all sorts of problems and this matter must be taken very seriously by the Government as the health of hundreds of thousands of people is at stake.

Here in Wales and in other parts of the U.K. we drink our water straight off the tap fully assured that the water is safe. When will we ever reach that stage? Only God knows!

Yours etc.,
D.M.Pariat,
Aberystwyth, Wales

Wanted transparency in ADCs

Editor,
In this age of technological advancements many institutions, agencies, organizations have hopped onto the internet making their functioning more transparent across various services. A case in point here is for the KHADC and JHADC that wield constitutional authority under the Sixth Schedule of our nation's Constitution empowering them with the power to make laws that are accessible to all

the need to protest. We have become inured even at the prospect of being slowly poisoned by unclean drinking water. Those who can afford an Aquaguard or some other water filter would know that they cannot really filter out the iron content in the water. But what about large sections of the population that cannot afford a water filter and whose kids must be drinking this polluted water and getting sick with dysentery and diarrhoea all the time and perhaps even typhoid. Sometimes you wonder if the Government is trying to tell us "If you can't drink tap water, buy bottled water." But seriously we have come to the lowest point in our governance system and there is a total unconcern from the political class, knowing they can bribe their way back to their respective chairs once every five years.

It is disconcerting that education doesn't really teach

their rhetoric and inanities to us day after day? Why are the voices of the masters of democracy -- the people -- invariably muted?

Today what we need is vocal citizenship. We need to voice out the things that steal our sleep and our peace of mind. When we gather together for a protest we realise we are not alone and that unity indeed is strength and that's the only way to push the lethargic political and bureaucratic system into action. The ruling dispensation uses certain ploys to maintain power and that is by creating a dominant discourse where the views of those that think like the government are amplified while dissident views are excluded. This is how the MDA Government through its doles to a certain section of society has been able to silence those with the power to speak. Now it is the ordinary citizens that are excluded from this elite club that have to organise themselves into an entity that can no longer be taken for granted.

A protest is aimed at altering the status quo; to redefine the agenda and start a new debate. Initially the power holders will ignore the protestors but if the protest grows louder they will first create the narrative that the protestors are a needless public nuisance but finally they will be drawn into the debate and to listen to what the protestors are demanding.

Above all, in an electoral democracy protest provides an important platform for the minority groups too. Too often in an electoral system it is possible that the party/parties forming the government can become tyrannical and override the rights of minorities. Protests are one way of correcting this tyranny of the majority. In Meghalaya, we have never ever had a platform that brings citizens together irrespective of community. A public protest need not depend on an organisational call. Any citizen can and should be able to mobilise a protest on a genuine cause and expect other citizens to respond. The dependence on an organisational banner runs counter to democratic norms. It implies that those that don't belong to an organisation cannot be part of the protest. It's time to try out new methods of protest for our right to live with dignity in this State and in this hyper-pluralistic city of Shillong.

Yours etc.,
Dominic Stadlin Wankhar
Via email

BJP is anti-Christian

Editor,
This is an open appeal to the Chief Minister, his cabi-

net colleagues and each and every person who respects the Christian faith and especially the Christian community to please stand up now. The BJP-led NDA Government is totally against the Christian community when it directs every state to participate in the cleaning drive on Sunday i.e. on October 1, 2023 as a mark of respect for Mahatma Gandhi's birthday which falls on October 02, 2023 which falls on Monday. In Meghalaya in particular, we respect Sunday and every year the cleaning drive is done on the 2nd October and if it falls on Sunday it is shifted to another day.

Every Christian and those who respect the Christian faith should have risen up and boycotted this call given by the BJP Government. In fact the true colours of the BJP and its anti-Christian attitude is exposed through such disrespect for Sundays.

I request Chief Minister, Conrad Sangma and his cabinet colleagues to rise up against this imposition and discrimination if they are true Christians because it is obvious that the BJP Government does not respect the faith and sentiments of Christians.

Your etc.,
PSR Kharkongor,
Via email

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

A reflection on inadequate nutrition and unsupervised child care

By Teresa Khyriem

"If we could have but one generation of properly born, trained, educated and healthy children, a thousand other problems of government would vanish" Herbert Hoover

In my experience as a public health nurse, I have come across countless numbers of young children who are deprived of adequate nutrition and care that would enable them to be healthy in every sense. This concerns me greatly because a child's growth and overall development is of utmost importance and largely depends on the child's parents and caregivers.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, says every infant and child has the right to good nutrition. WHO states that undernutrition is estimated to be associated with 2.7 million child deaths annually or 45 percent of all child deaths globally. Optimal breastfeeding is so critical it could save the lives of 8,200,000 children under the age of 5 years each year.

WHO and UNICEF recommend exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of life and introduction of nutritionally adequate and safe complementary (solid) foods at 6 months together with continued breastfeeding up to 2 years of age or beyond.

As per National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), 42.7 percent of infants in Meghalaya were exclusively breast-fed and 66.8 percent introduced timely complementary feeding (6-8 months). As per NFHS-5, timely introduction of complementary feeding at 6-8 months and diet adequacy are important indicators of young child feeding practices.

From my experiences of serving in rural areas, and having interacted with mothers from time to time in my daily practice, I learnt that a vast majority of mothers don't follow exclusive breastfeeding. They feed rice or rice gruel to their infants as early as two months. The reason they cite is that breastmilk alone cannot satiate the baby's hunger. Their complementary feeding mostly includes rice and boiled vegetables. Meat, eggs or milk are rarely fed to their child as a complementary feeding. Instead, infants and young children are given rice gruel or red tea, two to three times a day in place of milk. This is due to poor socio-economic status.

On a recent visit to a child clinic, I met an elderly woman who hails from a village in Ri-bhoi district. She was carrying a 9-month-old baby on her back. We chatted for a while and she narrated that the child she is carrying is her grandchild whose mother died a few months back leaving behind her 9-month-old into her care. Out of concern, I asked her what she feeds her grandchild as she appeared sick and under-nourished. She replied "I feed her only rice with a pinch of salt everyday". This moved me and the least I could do at that time was a little bit of counselling on healthier food choices she can add to the child's diet.

A study conducted in 2019 reported many deficiencies in the diet of primary children in Meghalaya like deficiency in vitamins (vitamin B, C and D) and minerals like iron. This study also reported that non-inclusion of milk and milk products has resulted in nutrient deficiency in tribal primary children of Meghalaya.

Most rural mothers work hard and don't receive as much pampering or support as other modern, privileged women. A mother of seven children says her day starts by going to a nearby river to wash clothes and then she goes to the field and toils there tirelessly all day. Sometimes she takes her infant along with her on her back to work. Her tiresome duty makes her less available to provide quality time to her children. In rural areas, what is commonly seen is that

the family size is large (6-8 children per household) and income is low, thus resulting in poor health condition.

Most rural parents in Meghalaya are farmers, so when they set out to their fields to work, their infant is left to be cared for by an older sibling who is a child himself/herself. Children as young as 9 years old are left alone with no adult supervision in the house since parents need to earn their daily bread. In such circumstances, children accidentally play with sharp objects like knives and daggers which are unintentionally kept within their reach and they succumb to injuries. I've seen many such instances of injured children being brought to the health centers where I used to work. Apart from this, unsupervised children are more likely to fall prey to many anti-social behaviours like stealing, bullying and sexual assault/abuse. This is indeed a sad reality that is happening in this day and age.

Several studies have reported on the dangers of leaving children unsupervised at home. One such study by Monica et al, 2018 reports that lack of quality supervision is linked to unintentional childhood injuries and negative outcomes. Children are too young to be doing child-care. The study also reports that in many countries, young children from the poorest households are likely to experience non-adult supervision.

I have also come across instances of poor feeding practices and poor child-care during my long-term work experience in the rural areas.

In urban areas, the child feeding practices and care are slightly better among educated parents and those with higher family incomes. They can also afford better facilities for their child. Educated parents feed their children the right food values including exclusive breast-feeding.

However, the case with urban poor is different from the rich and educated as problems of inadequate nutrition and poor child care are highly prevalent. In fact, Singh and Sandhu cited in their study (2014) that the nutritional status of urban slum children is worst among all groups and even worse than those of rural poor.

A study by a team of doctors of a tertiary hospital in Meghalaya (2022) states that the staple food of people in Meghalaya is mostly rice with a portion of meat or fish. There is poor protein intake in their diet which leads to stunting and poor cognitive development.

Proteins are the building blocks that also repair tissues in our bodies. Deficiency in protein can result in stunting, decreased muscle mass, and weakened immunity. Local foods that are rich in protein include: 'rymbai ja' (soybean seed), 'shana jhieh neiong' (black chickpea with black sesame seeds), dai nei-iong (pulse with black sesame seeds). Ja neiilieh (rice and perilla seeds pulao) and ja neiiong (rice and black sesame seeds pulao) are rich in iron and calcium. Tubers such as sweet potatoes and 'shriew' (yam) are rich in calories and calcium. The traditional snacks like putharo, pumaloi, pukklein are rice-based snacks and have a high carbohydrate and calorie content. Meghalaya is home to many other wild edibles which are rich in vitamins and minerals. (Study by Blah and Joshi 2013)

The extent of nutrient deficiency in children in Meghalaya is distressing given the fact that there is a wealth of both cultivated and wild food resources. Good nutrition for a child should start from pregnancy through lactation and so forth. Effective communication and education to mothers since pregnancy is important for better outcomes (study by Chyne 2018). (The writer is with IIPH, Shillong)

"Branding is deliberate differentiation."

— Debbie Millman

The Shillong Times

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High Court's upbraiding ignored

THE Meghalaya High Court has been the vanguard of civil rights. From rapping the State Government on the knuckles for illegal mining and transportation of coal to pulling up the National Highways Authority of India (NHAI) for the decrepit road condition from East Jaintia Hills to Silchar in Assam and beyond to Mizoram. The High Court has called out the State Government for ignoring its directives vis a vis the construction of eateries adjoining the Umiam River. Judging by the cases of public interest coming before the High Court it would appear that there is no oversight institution to decide on the validity of the clearances given to individuals that seek environmental clearances for their construction projects.

The State Environment and Forest Department and the Meghalaya Pollution Control Board have both been found wanting in the discharge of their duties. The former does not seem overly concerned about either the Environment or the Forest or even the ecological destruction caused by relentless sand mining from every river worth its name. Indeed, the long term impacts of such actions appear to be of no concern to the Department which is intended to safeguard our environment before more drastic climate changes overwhelm this State and its people. The only task of the Meghalaya State Pollution Control Board (MSPCB) would appear to be to organise public hearings before granting clearances to projects when they should instead be exercising a supervisory role. The faulty paradigm of Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) is that consultants are engaged and paid for by the company requiring clearances. This therefore takes away the ombudsman role from the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests & Climate Change (MoEFCC). It has very little say in the matter since the EIA is tailored to pass through the State Environment Impact Assessment Authorities (SEIAAs).

The Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) Notification, 2006, is the governing legal instrument to grant green clearance for establishment or expansion of an industry on the basis of the expected environmental impact of the project. Introduced in 1994, the EIA protocol has gone through several amendments and revised in 2006. Instead of ensuring stricter implementation of the provisions, governments, over the years, have made concerted efforts to dilute the processes and norms to ease establishment and expansion of industries and to even accommodate industries that generate pollution. Records of the Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) show that in the last five years, some 110 changes have been introduced in the 2006 EIA notification vide office memorandums. This faulty compliance module has resulted in forests being cleared with alacrity much to the detriment of the environment. The question is whether the ambit of the National Green Tribunal (NGT) has also been diluted and hence it is unable to stop rampant environmental destruction in Meghalaya. Who then is the custodian of the environment?

Women's Reservation: Modi government's post-dated cheque

By Rajdeep Sardesai

Competitive credit-taking is part of the cut and thrust of politics. The BJP boasts that the passage of the long pending 'historic' 33% women's reservation bill in parliament is because 'Modi hai to mumkin hai' (if Modi is there, it is possible). Sonia Gandhi asserts, 'Bill hamara hai' (the bill is ours) and harks back to Rajiv Gandhi's contribution. While the two chief protagonists slug it out, the truth is the only reason that the women's reservation bill is finally becoming law is because the woman voter has come of age: the 'mahila' vote bank is arguably the most prized for any leader or party.

Armed with a full majority in Lok Sabha, the Modi government had nine years to push ahead with women's reservation. Yet, it chose to prioritise its core ideological issues, be it Ram Mandir or Article 370. Now, with just months to go for the general election, the prime minister is keen to be seen as a flag-bearer of 'nari-shakti' (woman power). So what if the Modi government is conspicuously silent on the grave sexual harassment charges made by India's Olympic medal-winning wrestlers against its Uttar Pradesh strongman and MP, Brij Bhushan Saran Singh. The aim is to seize the narrative and encash the women's vote bank ahead of the crucial 2024 elections.

The Congress too was in power for ten years at the Centre as part of a coalition government. In 2010, the Congress-led government passed the women's reservation bill in Rajya Sabha but failed to pilot it through the Lok Sabha where intransigent allies, mainly from Hindi heartland parties, refused to budge. Now, severely downsized in parliament, the Congress needs the woman voter more desperately than ever.

Take also K Kavitha, Bharat Rashtri Samiti (BRS) leader and daughter of Telangana chief minister, K Chandrashekhar Rao, who has been projecting herself at the vanguard of women's reservation by agitating over the issue. The BRS has released its first list of 115 candidates for the Telangana elections that are due this

winter; only seven of them are women. If Kavitha and the BRS were committed to women's reservation, why didn't they ensure more party tickets for women?

In fact, except for the Biju Janata Dal (BJD) and the Trinamool Congress (TMC), no other party has walked the talk on women's reservation. The BJD gave a third of Odisha's 21 Lok Sabha seats in 2019 to women in keeping with the 33% target. The TMC fielded 17 women in West Bengal's 42 Lok Sabha seats in 2019, an impressive 41 per cent, and gave as many as 50 women tickets in the 294 member Bengal assembly in the 2021 state polls. That Mamata Banerjee is India's only woman chief minister has perhaps made it easier for TMC to break the

political spectrum is hollow posturing, a cynical attempt to exploit the woman voter for instant political benefit. The significant rise in women voter percentage — from 46% in 1952 to a record 67% in 2019 — is perhaps the most striking demographic shift in Indian electoral politics. A woman with an independent voter identity, detached from her domineering husband, has forced political parties to re-formulate their election strategies. From toilets to bank accounts to gas cylinders, women have been prime 'labhartis' or beneficiaries of government welfare programmes, both at the Centre and in the states. Almost every party, be it the BJP in Madhya Pradesh, the Congress in Karnataka or the Aam Aadmi Party in Pun-

equality in society.

So will the carrot of reservations transform a male-dominated political milieu? One of the reasons why the women's reservation bill leaves the date of implementation unclear by linking it to future census and delimitation exercises is to buy time for the political leadership to convince male politicians that their careers aren't being jeopardized in the race to woo women voters. The idea of rotating one-third seats every five years makes most men politicians anxious that their well-nursed constituencies could be lost to women candidates who might emerge as potential competitors in the future. This anxiety when women reservations were first implemented in local bodies and panchayats has led to the phenomenon of 'sarpanch pati' where male relatives (often husbands) of elected women run the office in place of them.

This sense of unease hasn't disappeared amongst well-entrenched patriarchal political hierarchies which is why the parliamentary consensus cannot be guaranteed to hold over an extended period. Which is also why the real challenge for party leaders lies ahead: the present legislation is drafted like a post-dated cheque which the BJP hopes to encash electorally right away while the opposition has few options apart from demanding a sub-quota for OBC groups. Once the celebratory din dies down, gender-based turf wars may erupt once again, exposing more political fault-lines.

Post-script: Amongst the list of stalwart women leaders who spearheaded the women's reservation movement, a standout name is of Communist Party of India MP, the late Geeta Mukherjee. As a tireless crusader for women's rights, Mukherjee was chairperson of the Joint Select Committee of parliament on women's reservation. It is the legacy of doctored left-wing activists like her which has been cemented forever, ironically by a right wing government.

(The writer is senior journalist and author. mail: rajdeep@sardesai52@gmail.com)

"Ironically, while the woman voter is being wooed more aggressively than ever before, recent data suggests that women's participation in the labour force is declining. According to a 2023 International Labour Organisation report, the employability gender gap in India is over 50% with only 19.2% women in the labour force compared to 70.1% men. Cash hand-outs to women by ruling parties cannot be a substitute for creating genuine gender equality in society."

glass ceiling for women.

Contrast this with the BJP which in the prime minister's home state of Gujarat gave just 18 women tickets out of 182 constituencies in the state elections last year. While the Congress might have coined the 'Ladki hoon, Lad sakti hoon' (I am a woman, I can fight) around Priyanka Gandhi Vadra's leadership by reserving 40% tickets for women in Uttar Pradesh's elections last year, the party gave just 11 women tickets in the 224 member Karnataka assembly this year, one less than the BJP. Clearly, caste and winnability took precedence over gender when the stakes were higher.

Which is why the 'nari-shakti' sloganeering across

job is providing direct cash benefits to women voters. A woman-centric political strategy that was pioneered by the likes of Jayalalitha in Tamil Nadu is now practiced in every corner of the country.

Ironically, while the woman voter is being wooed more aggressively than ever before, recent data suggests that women's participation in the labour force is declining. According to a 2023 International Labour Organisation report, the employability gender gap in India is over 50% with only 19.2% women in the labour force compared to 70.1% men. Cash hand-outs to women by ruling parties cannot be a substitute for creating genuine gender

NewsClick raid: A fit case for SC intervention

By Nitya Chakraborty

Indian Democracy is currently under severe attack by the ruling Government at the centre. The raids by Delhi police on the staff of the NewsClick news portal and subsequent arrest of the founder editor Prabir Purkayastha and HR head Amit Chakraborty on October 3 signal the arrival of an era when all norms of democracy and press freedom are violated to achieve the objective of the ruling establishment to curb dissent.

The NewsClick case shows how the central government agencies can convert a pending case in Delhi High Court on money laundering under PMLA rule into a case of conspiracy and terrorism under the draconian UAPA once it appeared that the allegations under PMLA might not be proved in the Court. This conversion is a dangerous development and this hurts at the very root of the current judicial system.

The fact is that the enforcement directorate (ED) has made allegations of money laundering under PMLA rules against the

moment of truth for independent media is now.

The Constitution makers have talked of four pillars of our democracy — legislature, executive, judiciary and media. Media is the fourth pillar and all those who believe in democracy feel that each pillar will complement the others to make India a vibrant democracy. This is the time when certainly, the media can look to the other pillar — the judiciary to see whether the executive is functioning to strengthen democracy or to subvert that. The letter sent by 18 media organisations of the country to the Chief Justice of India Dr. D Y Chandrachud is very relevant in this context. The CJI has always been a supporter for strengthening the fourth pillar of the Constitution. It was the CJI who said, 'the press has a duty to speak truth to power and resent citizens with hard facts enabling them to make choices that propel democracy in the right direction and that India's freedom will be safe as long as journalists can play this role without



portal NewsClick and its founder editor Prabir Purkayastha and the case of ED is being heard in Delhi High Court since 2021. So far the hearings have not proved that NC violated the foreign funds laws. NC says that the RBI has found no violation and NC management has full faith in the judgment of the court. Without waiting for the judgement of the Delhi High Court, not ED, but Delhi police struck against the portal staff under a FIR lodged in August this year under UAPA. Nobody knew about this FIR till October 3. Now the case is not of money laundering, but under clauses of terrorism and conspiracy.

The ED has every right to take action under the PMLA rules against NC if they could prove in the court the violations of the official rules including the RBI guidelines, but they did not wait for the verdict since it was becoming apparent that the transactions were made as per existing laws of the country. The Government agencies could not therefore wait for the hearing to be completed, the task of teaching lessons to a prodigal portal was passed over to the Home Ministry from the Finance Ministry which controls ED officially.

This October 3 raids by the Delhi police following the locking of the office of the NC and the arrest of the editor are the culmination of the long list of attacks on the independence of the media which has been taking place in India during the last nine and half years of the rule of Narendra Modi. The muzzling of the independent voice of the media is expected to intensify as the Lok Sabha elections are nearing and the Prime Minister is determined to get his third consecutive term. The

being chilled by a threat of reprisal.

Yes, Dr Chandrachud, this is exactly what the ruling dispensation now is afraid of. They don't allow the press to speak truth to power as you want. They get panicky when the journalists play their role without being chilled by a threat of reprisal. The ruling government and the party BJP want embedded media which you do not want. The journalists under attack on October 3 and 4 have been following the same principles which the CJI has been advocating. That is why the entire media in this country, who are wedded to seeing the press growing as the fourth pillar of democracy, are looking to the CJI for intervention. The apex court should take up suo moto the letter of the journalists' bodies as a petition and discharge his role as the chief custodian of the Indian Constitution.

As the letter of the media bodies mentions, the World Press Freedom Index ranks India at 161, in the bottom twenty of the 180 countries whose status it assesses. The fall has been immense and sharp since 2015. India is also the global internet shutdown capital, with by far the highest number of internet closures per year amongst all democracies. India has displayed record democratic backsliding, and the state of the press is a vital component of the deterioration. Prime Minister Narendra Modi talks of India as a mother of democracy but in his rule of nearly a decade, the backsliding has accentuated. The Supreme Court under the CJI can rise to the occasion and play a historic role in reverting the present process and restore the vision on the press freedom which the Constitution makers held. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

Problem of damaged roads in Mawlai

Editor,

I am writing to express my concern about the condition of the road in Mawlai. The condition of the road is deplorable with countless potholes making the very purpose of making the road a futile one. Things get even worse during the rainy season when potholes are not visible due to the poor drainage system and the area becomes heavily accident prone. The residents are facing a lot of inconvenience due to the road condition. I have seen the road deteriorate over time. The potholes are getting bigger and more numerous and the cracks are getting wider. These have not been repaired for quite some time. The potholes on the road are a major cause of concern. This is not just an inconvenience but it is also dangerous.

We need safe roads for our drivers, our cyclists and our pedestrians. This is our fundamental right. I therefore urge the authorities to repair these roads at the earliest and not plead shortage of funds.

Yours etc.,
Haphisha Nongbri,
Mawlai (Mawtawar)

Unsafe water crisis in Shillong

Editor,

I write to bring to your attention a matter of utmost

concern for the residents of Shillong city. Recent findings by the Federation of Khasi Jaintia and Garo People (FKJGP) have revealed a shocking reality - residents of 44 localities within Shillong are consuming unsafe water, as per the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI). In a proactive move last month, FKJGP leaders collected water samples from 46 different localities in Shillong and had them tested at the State Food Testing Laboratory, Commissionerate of Food Safety at Pasture Hills. These actions were prompted by the public's growing concerns about the quality of drinking water in our city. The results of these tests are alarming. Out of the 46 localities tested, 44 were found to have 'Coliform and E. coli organisms' present in the water, in addition to 'low pH value, high turbidity, and iron content' exceeding prescribed limits.

According to FSSAI standards, this categorically labels the water in these 44 localities as 'unsafe water.' Continuous consumption of such water poses a severe risk to human health, as highlighted by FKJGP President Dundee Khongsit. The detection of a low pH value in these water samples indicates that the water is 'acidic' in nature, a condition that falls well below the recommended pH range of 6.5 to 8.5 for drinking water. Such acidic water can have detrimental health effects on those who consume it.

In light of these findings, FKJGP has taken a commendable step by urging the Meghalaya Chief Min-

ister, Conrad K Sangma, to intervene urgently. We, the residents of Shillong press upon the Government to take swift and resolute action to rectify this issue. Access to safe and clean drinking water is a fundamental right, and the current situation is untenable. We also call upon our government to ensure that every citizen in Shillong has access to safe drinking water that meets the necessary quality standards. This issue demands immediate attention, and we trust that our elected officials will prioritize the well-being of the people they serve.

Yours etc.,
Pinky Lodh
Shillong

Curse of the Caste System

Editor,

One of the immortal books in Bengali, Sukumar Roy's Abol Tabol has completed one hundred years. We need to understand the satire of those poems to banish prejudices that are still prevalent in our society. In the poem Sat Patro (The Suitable Groom), Gangaram was passed for a suitable bridegroom only because of his high caste in spite of having many negative qualities. This prejudice still prevents 95 percent Indians from going for inter-caste marriages as per the Indian Statistical Institute's survey in 2017.

We should study a century and two decades old history of Nobel prize to find that there were only a microscopic percentage of Nobel laureates whose parents on either side also won the same

honours. The same holds true among Olympics medal winners. Even with the help of nepotism and money power, the established class fails to establish the theory of their blood supremacy in any single field. The book remains as important today as it was a hundred years ago. Here lies the greatness of this book and its author Sukumar Roy.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

Concerns regarding poor performance of Schools in Shillong

Editor,

I write to express my deep concerns about the declining performance of schools in Shillong and the critical issue of the lack of qualified teachers in various subjects. As an individual who has been involved in tutoring students for the past 13 years, I have witnessed first-hand the detrimental effects of this situation on the education and future prospects of our children.

It is disheartening to note that a significant number of schools in Shillong are struggling with inadequate teaching resources. Many teachers are forced to teach subjects in which they lack specialization, which often leads to a compromised quality of education. As a result, students are finding it challenging to grasp important concepts, particularly

in subjects like Mathematics and Science, leading to a growing phobia for these crucial disciplines.

From my experience, it has become apparent that poor teaching strategies are largely to blame for the lack of interest among students in certain subjects. This not only hampers their academic growth but also undermines their confidence in pursuing these subjects further. It is alarming to observe that some reputed schools in our region are failing to address this issue, with instances of incomplete copies and a lack of proper guidance on upcoming examination chapters.

Equally concerning is the apathy displayed by some school administrations towards the overall progress of their students. A lack of attention to correcting students' assignments and copies is a reflection of this negligence. It is distressing to see the future of our children being jeopardized due to the disregard shown by certain educational institutions and their teachers.

Parents play a pivotal role in shaping the education and future of their children. However, the fear of retribution from schools often dissuades them from lodging complaints against such practices. It is essential that schools and educators create an environment where parents feel empowered to voice their concerns without fearing repercussions.

In order to rectify this situation, I urge schools to adopt several measures. First and foremost, schools should prioritize hiring qualified teachers who have exper-

tise in their respective subjects. Merit and competence should be the primary criteria for employment, rather than personal relationships, religious affiliations etc. Additionally, it is imperative for teachers to implement effective teaching strategies that engage students and foster genuine interest in subjects like Mathematics and Science.

Furthermore, schools must maintain a strong focus on the evaluation process. Timely correction of students' work and the provision of constructive feedback are essential for their academic growth. The selection of appropriate textbooks from reputable publishers is equally crucial to ensure that students receive accurate and reliable information.

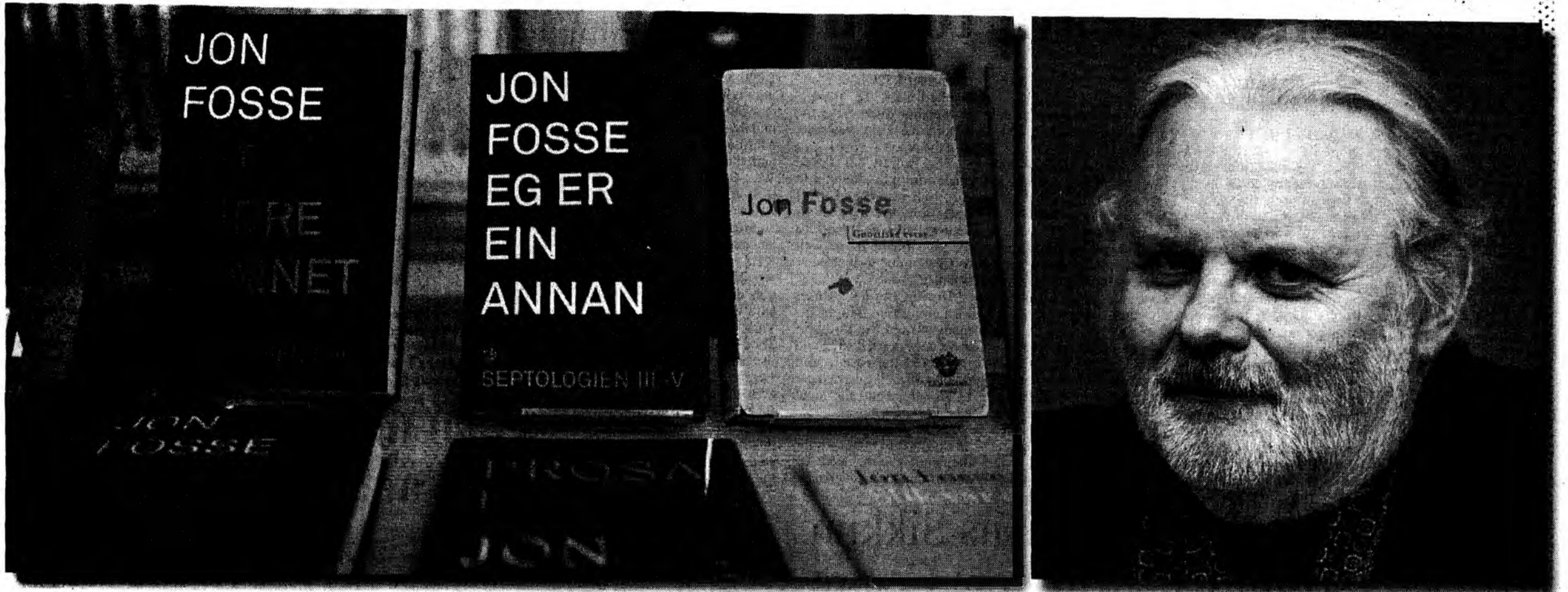
Education is the foundation of a strong and prosperous society. The future of our children relies on the quality of education they receive today. It is high time that both schools and parents collectively work towards creating an environment that nurtures a genuine passion for learning and equips our children with the skills they need to succeed in life.

I trust that by highlighting these concerns, we can inspire positive change within our education system and contribute to a brighter future for the next generation.

Yours etc.,
R K Sarki
Shillong

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

Jon Fosse: Nobel Prize for giving 'voice to the unsayable'



Jon Fosse has just been awarded the 2023 Nobel Prize in Literature for his "innovative plays and prose which give voice to the unsayable".

The worthy winner, aged 64, is a major figure in Norwegian literary and cultural circles and the fourth Norwegian to win the most prestigious award in world literature. He's also the second Nobel Prize for Literature winner in a row to be published (in English translation) by Fitzcarraldo Editions, following French writer Annie Ernaux's win last year.

Fosse, who the translator Damion Searles calls one of the "elder statesmen of Norwegian letters", works across multiple genres and mediums and writes using a language called "Nynorsk", or New Norwegian. (It's one of two current written forms of Norwegian - used by just 10% of the Norwegian population.) Some, though not the writer himself, have interpreted this as a quietly political gesture.

Anders Olsson, chairman of the Nobel Literature Committee, described Fosse as blending "a rootedness in the nature and language of his Norwegian background" with the artistic techniques of modernism.

Despite having been in the running for the award for a number of years, Fosse, as with several other 21st century European laureates like Elfriede Jelinek and the controversial Peter Handke, is still largely unknown in the English-speaking world.

"I have been among the favourites for ten years, and felt sure that I would never get the prize," Fosse said in a statement issued by his publisher. "I simply cannot believe it."

Septology - an experimental tour de force
With the receipt of the Nobel, however, his

profile will inevitably rise. This is surely a good thing. What, though, should readers who might be new to Fosse's body of work expect?

Fosse's massive literary oeuvre includes roughly 40 plays - the Nobel committee called him "one of the most recognised and widely performed playwrights of our time" - as well as novels, poetry collections, essays, children's books and translations.

His debut novel, *Red, Black* (originally published as *Raudt, svart*), was published in 1983. The first play he wrote that was performed, *And Never Shall We Part* (*Og aldri skal vi skiljast*) was staged in 1994.

"It was the first time I had ever tried my hand at this kind of work, and it was the biggest surprise of my life as a writer," he once said of writing his first play. "I knew, I felt, that this kind of writing was made for me."

One work in particular stands out, though: his monumental novel sequence, the near 800-page, one-sentence long *Septology* - written after Fosse converted to Catholicism in 2013. (Formerly an atheist, he had grown up in a strict Lutheran family.)

This experimental tour de force, which was nominated for the International Booker Prize in 2022 for its third volume, focuses on an ageing painter and widower, Asle, living on the southwest coast of Norway. He lives near another painter who shares his name, but is lonely and consumed by alcohol. (Incidentally, Fosse himself famously gave up drinking many years ago, after being treated in hospital for alcohol poisoning.) The *doppelgänger*s grapple with existential questions about death, love, light and shadow, faith and hopelessness.

In the *New York Times*, Randy Boyagoda aptly wrote:

Having read the Norwegian writer Jon Fosse's "Septology", an extraordinary seven-novel sequence about an old man's recursive reckoning with the braided realities of God, art, identity, family life and human life itself, I've come into awe and reverence myself for idiosyncratic forms of immense metaphysical fortitude.

'The Beckett of the 21st century'

While a touch gnomic, the Nobel committee's emphasis on the "unsayable" side of things offers a useful initial means for approaching certain of the more experimental aspects of Fosse's work, and *Septology* in particular.

For me, it aligns Fosse's aesthetic sensibility with that of a much earlier Nobel laureate, the Irish dramatist and novelist Samuel Beckett - who the Nobel committee also compared him to (along with other modernists like Georg Trakl).

Indeed, the French press has described him as the "Beckett of the 21st century".

In his 1983 late masterwork, *Worstword Ho*, Beckett wrote:

Ooze on back not to unsay but say again the vast apart. Say seen again. No worse again. The vast of void apart. Of all so far the missaid the worse missaid.

In it, Beckett looks to test the very possibilities of linguistic expression, in keeping with his broader existential project. (Suffice to say: the conclusion he comes to is characteristically downbeat.)

A dauntingly experimental work, in the reckoning of the critical theorist Pascale Cassanova, it "denounces the taken-for-granted realist as-

sumptions on which the whole literary edifice is based". This is worth keeping in mind when it comes to Fosse.

As the journalist Dani Garavelli notes, in what appears to be a clear nod in the direction of Beckett (who he admires), Fosse "reflects on the inadequacy of language in the struggle for intimacy" in his work.

Fosse has called Beckett "a painter for the theatre rather than an actual author".

In *I is Another*, published in English in 2020 (the second instalment of *Septology*), Fosse writes:

It's not something to put into words, because you can't put what a good picture says into words, and as for my pictures the closest he can get to is to say that there's an approaching distance, something far away that gets closer, in my pictures, it's as if something imperceptible becomes perceptible and yet still stays imperceptible, it's still hidden, it is something staying hidden, if you can say it that way [...]

Here, as in the pessimistic modernist monologues of Thomas Bernhard (another writer Fosse has been compared to), he touches on questions of artistic and written expression. And, too, on what appear to be the irreducible shortcomings of human communication.

Fosse, who began writing in Nynorsk - which he terms a "minority language" - at the age of 12, seems to have spent much of his life grappling with those questions and limits. Nearly ten years ago, he reflected: "Writing has been a way of surviving." It remains to be said whether the Nobel will change Fosse's feelings. Only time will tell. (*The Conversation*)

Upskilling for teachers manage 'burnout'

By Aarul Malaviya

Like most professions, teaching is a demanding job too. With new-age edtech catalysing a shift towards a blended learning environment, the need to navigate, adjust to, and manage the online as well as offline modes of teaching simultaneously has added to the workload of teachers.

This is aside from their pre-existing regular non-teaching responsibilities such as handling administrative tasks, coordinating extracurricular and other school events, tracking and maintaining student performance records, and attending important intra-school meetings including parent-teacher meets, among others.

And with government school teachers in India often being entrusted with out-of-school tasks such as election duties and census work, the workload tends to only become that much heavier for them. As a result, the likelihood of burnout and leaving or switching their teaching job - for both government and private teachers - prematurely increases even further. The landmark National Education Policy 2020 envisaging a complete overhaul of the education system has made the transition challenge more acute for school teachers.

What is burnout?

Burnout is essentially a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion stemming from

long-term involvement in work situations that are emotionally demanding and is accompanied by chronic stress, energy loss, and negativity and cynicism related to the job.

As such, the employee or teacher in this case feels both cognitively and emotionally increasingly disconnected from his job thereby leading to a decline in teaching efficacy.

Already, there is sufficient data to show that a large number of overworked school teachers in the country are facing increased burnout and diminished efficiency, therefore necessitating the addressing of overworking and burnout issues of school teachers.

In what ways can provision for upskilling and continuous professional development (CPD) programmes for teachers help them manage work burden, job strain, and burnout?

NEP 2020, a challenge and an opportunity for teachers

The introduction of the National Education Policy 2020 has sought to revamp the broader educational system envisaging restructuring of school curricula and pedagogy, flexibility to students in course choices, multilingualism and curricular integration of essential subjects, skills, and capacities such as sweeping and wide-ranging transitions can be further said to exacerbate the job-related burden of teachers.

However, even as the recency and the transitory nature of the

NEP 2020 have made it more challenging for teachers, it has also endeavoured to provide help and assistance to teachers by way of prescribing minimum duration of continuous professional development (CPD) programmes for teachers.

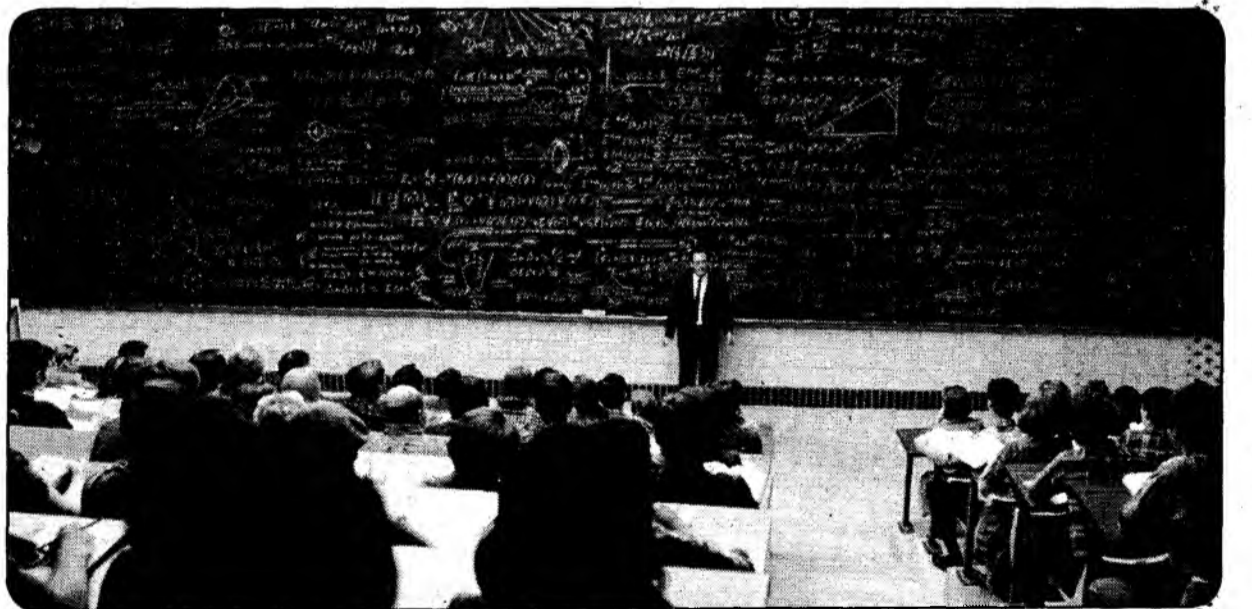
Upskilling imparts multi-dimensional impetus to teaching

It is important to note that any upskilling programme that teachers undergo is not merely confined to their subject domain and the skill and proficiency levels related to it, but also extends to new pedagogies vis-a-vis foundational literacy and numeracy; formative, adaptive, and summative assessment of learning outcomes; and competency-based learning.

As a result, an upskilling programme gives a multi-dimensional impetus to a teacher's proficiency which in turn lends an enormous psychological boost as an antidote to the feelings of stress and burnout. Indeed, the NEP 2020 has mandated that all teacher education institutions (TEIs) in the country have to convert to multi-disciplinary institutions by 2030 and offer an integrated teacher preparation programme that would include a grounding in psychology, among many other subjects.

Teaches psycho-social coping and adjustment strategies

Speaking of the psychological component and since psycho-social factors contribute to a



substantive part of teachers' feelings of burnout, an upskilling programme is often also designed to help them negotiate and deal better with their emotional demons.

In effect, they are taught different coping strategies that help them regulate and control their emotions more effectively. Those teachers who learn these skills can not only predict cognitive and emotional behaviour in students and other colleagues with a greater degree of precision and efficiency but also conduct better self-evaluation.

As a result, they can handle their own emotions in a much more constructive manner, a response that serves as a buffer against any simmering emotions of stress and burnout. This also improves their cognitive performance which in turn elevates their teaching efficiency in the classroom, all of which serve as anti-burnout impulses.

Stress management techniques deter feelings of burnout

Related to the above, the upskilling programme would also coach teachers on several stress management, meditation, and relaxation techniques. Certainly, these would serve as powerful deterrents to feelings of burnout and exhaustion among teachers.

Teachers would also be encouraged to adopt practices such as taking periodic breaks and participating in physical and other sporting activities. Effectively, the values of adopting a better work-life balance would be inculcated among them.

Development of ICT skills boosts self-confidence and energy levels

In an increasingly tech-driven learning landscape, any upskilling programme would necessarily include skilling and training with ICT and related tools, platforms, and processes. Research has shown that a large majority of teachers have experienced considerable stress due to the pressure to pivot to remote and online teaching tools and plat-

forms as quickly as possible, especially due to the immediate pandemic-induced mobility restrictions.

However, teachers who undergo adequate training in ICT would display enhanced self-confidence and high energy levels. Consequently, their susceptibility to burnout and the related stress would diminish.

Therefore, for a demanding as well as rewarding and fulfilling profession such as teaching, upskilling programmes can prove to be a great help for teachers in their battle with feelings of burnout and stress.

The National Foundation for Education Research has found that teachers experience more stress than any other professionals. So, if India is to truly realise its so-called demographic dividend, it is time that teachers are provided with periodic upskilling programmes that would prevent their early burnout. (*IANSLife*)

[The author is the founder of Zamit]

6 reasons why global temperatures are spiking

By Andrew King

The world is very warm right now. We're not only seeing record temperatures, but the records are being broken by record-wide margins.

Take the preliminary September global-average temperature anomaly of 1.7°C above pre-industrial levels, for example. It's an incredible 0.5°C above the previous record.

So why is the world so incredibly hot right now? And what does it mean for keeping our Paris Agreement targets?

Here are six contributing factors – with climate change the main reason temperatures are so high.

El Niño

One reason for the exceptional heat we are in a significant El Niño that is still strengthening. During El Niño we see warming of the surface ocean over much of the tropical Pacific. This warming, and the effects of El Niño in other parts of the world, raises global average temperatures by about 0.1 to 0.2°C.

Taking into account the fact we've just come out of a triple La Niña, which cools global average temperatures slightly, and the fact this is the first major El Niño in eight years, it's not too surprising we're seeing unusually high temperatures at the moment.

Still, El Niño alone isn't enough to explain the crazy high temperatures the world is experiencing.

Falling pollution

Air pollution from human activities cools the planet and has offset some of the warming caused by humanity's greenhouse gas emissions. There have been efforts to reduce this pollution – since 2020 there has been an international agreement to reduce sulphur dioxide emissions from the global shipping industry.

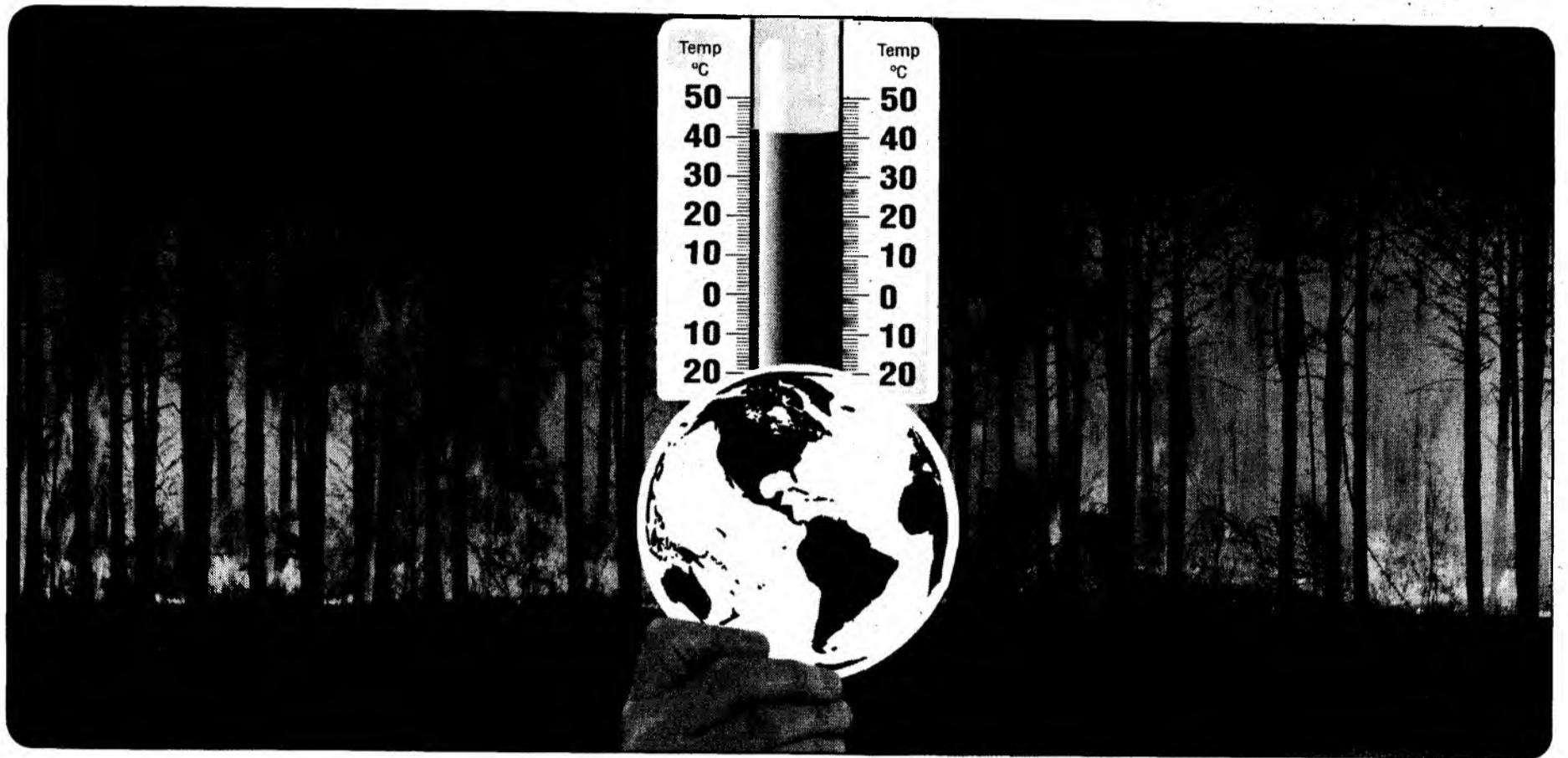
It has been speculated this cleaner air has contributed to the recent heat, particularly over the record-warm north Atlantic and Pacific regions with high shipping traffic.

It's likely this is contributing to the extreme high global temperatures – but only on the order of hundredths of a degree. Recent analysis suggests the effect of the 2020 shipping agreement is about an extra 0.05°C warming by 2050.

Increasing solar activity

While falling pollution levels mean more of the Sun's energy reaches Earth's surface, the amount of the energy the Sun emits is itself variable. There are different solar cycles, but an 11-year cycle is the most relevant one to today's climate.

The Sun is becoming more active from a



minimum in late 2019. This is also contributing a small amount to the spike in global temperatures. Overall, increasing solar activity is contributing only hundredths of a degree at most to the recent global heat.

Water vapour from Hunga Tonga eruption

On January 15 2022 the underwater Hunga Tonga-Hunga Haʻapai volcano erupted in the South Pacific Ocean, sending large amounts of water vapour high up into the upper atmosphere. Water vapour is a greenhouse gas, so increasing its concentration in the atmosphere in this way does intensify the greenhouse effect.

Even though the eruption happened almost two years ago, it's still having a small warming effect on the planet. However, as with the reduced pollution and increasing solar activity, we're talking about hundredths of a degree.

Bad luck

We see variability in global temperatures from one year to the next even without factors like El Niño or major changes in pollution. Part of the reason this September was so extreme was likely due to weather systems being in the right place to heat the land surface.

When we have persistent high-pressure systems over land regions, as seen recently over places like western Europe and Australia, we see local temperatures rise and the conditions for unseasonable heat.

As water requires more energy to warm and the ocean moves around, we don't see the same quick response in temperatures over the seas when we have high-pressure systems.

The positioning of weather systems warming up many land areas coupled with persistent ocean heat is likely a contributor to the global-average heat too.

Climate change

By far the biggest contributor to the overall +1.7°C global temperature anomaly is human-caused climate change. Overall, humanity's effect on the climate has been a global warming of about 1.2°C.

The record-high rate of greenhouse gas emissions means we should expect global warming to accelerate too.

While humanity's greenhouse gas emissions explain the trend seen in September temperatures over many decades, they don't really explain the big difference from last September (when the

greenhouse effect was almost as strong as it is today) and September 2023.

Much of the difference between this year and last comes back to the switch from La Niña to El Niño, and the right weather systems in the right place at the right time.

The upshot: we need to accelerate climate action

September 2023 shows that with a combination of climate change and other factors aligning we can see alarmingly high temperatures.

These anomalies may appear to be above the 1.5°C global warming level referred to in the Paris Agreement, but that's about keeping long-term global warming to low levels and not individual months of heat.

But we are seeing the effects of climate change unfolding more and more clearly.

The most vulnerable are suffering the biggest impacts as wealthier nations continue to emit the largest proportion of greenhouse gases. Humanity must accelerate the path to net zero to prevent more record-shattering global temperatures and damaging extreme events. (*The Conversation*)

[The author is Senior Lecturer in Climate Science at the University of Melbourne]

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, OCTOBER 8, 2023

'Birthday Forecast'

Moon is forming an angle of 150 degrees with Saturn on your solar return chart indicates a mixed year. Remember to keep those occasional moody moments and tiny tantrums under control. You will feel as if you're being tested, in strength and character, with different issues during the month, but a constant reinforcement of your innate positivity will help you sail through unscathed and possibly bring about some exciting new surprises for you throughout the rest of the year. You are likely to enjoy good professional opportunities.

'This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) You participate in conversations, seminars, meetings and express yourself more specifically about your views this week. This is an excellent time to make some financial investments and adopt new strategies in financial matters. A cheerful and hopeful outlook increases your chances of gaining cooperation business associates. You move on the path of success and betterment in terms of better financial stability, emotional and mental satisfaction and intellectual growth. It's time to expand your social circle and to make more contact with groups and friends. Students of Computer Hardware and Engineering achieve better results now. This is a time when you renew your energy and consider what things are important to you.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) Your self-confidence gets a boost and you meet difficult tasks and resolve work related issues confidently. Business expansion and new professional opportunities are worth considering. You would admire and adapt new circumstances, ideas, and unfamiliar situations. You are able to find creative solutions to problems now. You put in a lot of efforts and then find this has been establishing strong professional base and this brings in desired and even unexpected gains. It is good time to organize your workplace and make it more modernized and equipped with good infrastructure. This would help you to get a better perspective to achieve desired goals. Also, circumstances or your own reserve may prevent you from openly declaring or expressing your feelings. Avoid being lazy and laid back as temporary gain or success in business needs to be followed up with hard work and dedication.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) Your idealistic nature is stimulated, and you are likely to be more spiritual. You are sober and serious in professional and personal relationships. You are getting serious about loved ones, family relationships and children. You are likely to take your hobbies more seriously. In fact, this is an excellent time for monetizing any personal hobby and turning it into a profession. You would be more practical in romantic relations with a loved one. For many, a romantic relationship stabilizes and becomes more serious. Opportunities—both personal and professional—are likely to present themselves. You would combine your inner and outer strengths to achieve success and happiness in professional aspects.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) This can be a time of achievement, career advancement, and success in business. Work-related travel or the reaching of a wider society is possible during this week. You adopt new styles and spend on luxury items. Your thoughts turn to children, pleasure and romance during this week. You focus on having fun, enjoying sports and expressing yourself efficiently. You would maintain balance of the head and heart also in professional and personal matters. You turn things around in business dealings in your favor. You are noble and generous in family situations. Monetary transaction brings gains in property related issues.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) Your creativity will assist in your output at work and help you undertake new assignments. You may especially enjoy experiencing different cultures and ethnic styles. Your ideas are higher than usual, teaching may be part of the picture, and your cultural and spiritual awareness increases. Happiness and fulfillment through the expansion of your mind, widening your social circle, travel, and connections to people of a different cultural background than you indicated this week. Students in Journalism, law, management and related fields attain success and good results. You might also enjoy analyzing different health or nutrition programs. It's a great time to make improvements to your regular routines.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22) Your professional skills wisdom and craft is appreciated and fresh opportunities for expansion are made available to you. Personal relationships gain a romantic and exciting quality. Tackle sensitive subjects and difficult people and get your point across. Business projects and associa-

tions are opening up and widening your horizons so you need to think expansively from now onwards. This time takes some kind of pressure on professional and personal aspects. You may begin to take on more responsibilities on the job. Your job could become rather tedious or boring, or working conditions may be frustrating. You may have to draw some boundaries with friends and the demands of others.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) You would be emotional, loving and caring in personal relationships and family situations. You manage to communicate with moody and angry people with a sensitive approach and gentle manner. You would combine your inner and outer strengths to achieve success and happiness. Sometimes you would protest against domination by people at work. You may have to face egoistic people. Some associations would be competitive in business but you shine and work well in your field of activity. There would be some changes in your social circle, and you meet new and unusual people. Your hobbies, moments spent with family, all come into focus.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) New associations and beginnings in work areas as some unknown opportunities and changes may come. You would improve your romantic and love life by bringing more sincerity, cooperation and humanity as unusual attractions and dreams could feature this time. You may explore new infrastructure and improve office as this brings more efficiency and continuity on your work. Family members would be more supportive as this is the best time to bring more harmony and pleasant interactions to your relationships and feel more comfortable. You tend to entertain others with your conversation and your sense of humor.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) This period brings excellent opportunities for people in show business and related fields. You would work more creatively and express yourself with more sensitivity, compassion, and warmth. You have been more determined and hard-working and this brings fulfillment of all desires particularly on your personal and domestic life. Your personal charm and attractiveness would have a positive effect on your relationships. People see you as a loving and lovable person, and as someone who is aware of their needs and feelings, which can benefit you at this time. Others are willing to help and cooperate with your goals and ambitions. It would be better to go for long term investments and speculations for financial gains.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) A new work opportunity can change the way you work and relate with people professionally. You are bold and adventurous and you cannot tolerate delay that prevents you from behaving exactly you want. How willing you're prepared to experiment and explore new approaches will determine your success this time. You would achieve a lot in business and professional aspects by combining creativity and practicality. You play the role of the senior in the family and personal situations by taking on extra responsibility and giving direction. You can expect superiors to support you and stand up for you in tough situations at work.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) The planetary configuration brings more stability in relations and professional life. You have a tendency to compromise and adjust and take a soft approach while dealing with people at work and home. You give a new method to communications, projects, learning and self-expression. You may be especially focused on pleasing your family and fond of the life of the home and family. It's a passionate time, although you are unlikely to display a whole lot of self-discipline. You would work in association with senior colleagues and people in authority and learn many more things at the work place, which boosts your confidence.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) This phase brings excellent work opportunities for people in teaching, hotel, finance and in communication fields. People in marketing and sales would work hard to meet professional commitments. You would impress people from your communication skills as this brings positive results in matters related to love, family and professional relations. You would express yourself with charm and grace, whether it's through what you say or you write. Health remains good during this period. Excellent professional opportunities await those students who have completed their education in fine arts, drama, music and finance. Your romantic affair would give a big boost of confidence, and personal magnetism runs high to be appreciated and admired. Spending time in solitude among natural surroundings will be therapeutic.

Indian and Western Music: A perfect fusion for Sonam Kalra

By Sukant Deepak

Trained in both Hindustani classical and Western traditions of music including Gospel, Jazz, and Opera, Sonam Kalra, who is all set for HCL's Friday's *Sufi Magic* and *Songs of the Sacred* at the Nita Mukesh Ambani Cultural Centre (NMACC) on October 8, feels studying both traditions of music has been instrumental in 'opening' her mind and helping her approach music with a wider perspective.

"It has also allowed me to add the learnings from varied styles to what I present. The same gives me the freedom to use the different colours and projections of my voice, phrase a song to my personal liking or interpret a piece differently using influences of both traditions," she tells *IANS*.

For the HCL concert, she will present a more traditional Sufi set with the poetry of well-known poets like Bulleh Shah and Amir Khusrau in her own style and understanding of the kalaams.

The performance at NMACC will be a collection of well and lesser-known poetry of mystic poets as well as people who wrote about inclusion and finding faith, and God within.

"It is a prestigious venue and I am looking forward to performing there," she adds.

Someone who was invited in 2022 to join the US Grammy Recording Academy as a voting member and has performed in over 30 countries at festivals and venues across the world including Sydney Opera House and Pyramids of Giza, Kalra, she is known for constantly experimenting and incorporating elements from multiple genres in her music — like adding the recitation of Tagore's *Where the Mind is Without Fear* in her version of *Hum Dekhenge*.

Kalra smiles she would not have achieved in her journey what she has if she cared too much about what purists thought.

Stressing that art is a personal journey and the minute one lets voices from the outside colour personal judgment or tell what should or should not be done, one stops being true to yourself, she adds, "For me, the only way to create art is to be true to yourself. We have to push the boundaries, experiment, make mistakes, and face the struggle to get to an end — which feels right."

Admitting that despite multiple festivals and streaming platforms, things have not really improved for independent musicians, the musician feels what is really needed is an ecosystem that encourages artists, and that means involvement from both the private sector and governments.

"Of course, there are corporates like HCL that

have been giving consistent patronage to the arts for the past 25 years."

However, the singer, who has done theatre, worked in advertising, hosted car and travel shows on BBC to eventually come back to music adds that more corporates need to come forward to support the arts.

"Sadly, there is not as much support as is needed. They mostly want to go with the popular options of Bollywood or stand-up comedy. It is high time corporates widen their perspective



(sonamkalra.com)

and show support to theatre and music that is off the beaten path too. In fact, I have always found it quite easy to work with the government be it ICCR or other government organisations as they have their systems in place."

Known for the *Sufi Gospel Project* and *Partition: Stories of Separation* which witnessed music, installation, video, theatre, and performance, Sonam says her process is different for each piece.

"I obsess, deep-dive, live, eat, and breathe a piece or a performance to really create it well. Sometimes this happens quickly and sometimes a piece can take months, even years. 'Fine' is never enough for me. So, it is all immersive, exhausting but in the end exhilarating." (*IANS*)

"Most powerful is he who has himself in his own power."

—Lucius Annaeus Seneca

The Shillong Times

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War in West Asia

ANOTHER full-scale war has erupted all of a sudden. Saturday morning's lightning attack on Israelis by the pro-Palestinian Hamas militants has taken the form of a full-scale war, with over 300 Israelis and nearly as many Palestinians killed so far. Hamas got direct backing from Iran, while the US and the other Western powers and India as well came up with support for Israel. Arabs and Israelis are on a confrontation course for seven decades, but there was relative calm in recent times when Hamas militants' suicide attacks on Israelis were rare. India, under the Congress rule, was closer to the Arab world ever since the time of Jawaharlal Nehru. The BJP favours a different foreign policy under which it opts to side more with Israel, as is evident now in the instant backing that Prime Minister Modi extended to Israel on Saturday.

Militant Palestinian Islamist group Hamas, as a political establishment, governs the 2-million strong Palestinian population in the Gaza Strip. By virtue of its long-held offensives and bloodshed against neighbouring Israelis, this entity is designated as a "terrorist" group by the UN and the West. Hamas was formed in the 1980s in the backdrop of the Palestinian Intifada against the capture of their two territories—West Bank and Gaza Strip – during the 1967 Israeli-Arab War. It gained prominence after the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) of Yasser Arafat deviated from the basic tenets of Intifada. Arafat recognized Israel's right to exist and expressed a readiness for a negotiated settlement of the issues between Palestinians and Israelis. Proving him right, some Arab-Islamist nations have in recent years recognized Israel as a nation. Hamas wanted the armed fight to be carried forward through militant ways. It opposed the Oslo peace accord signed between PLO and Israel. In 2006, it won power through democratic elections in West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Suicide attacks were what Hamas specialized in. But, Israel, with its superior might, made Palestinians sitting ducks in the past. 2014 was the bloodiest year and proved to be a turning point. Over 2,000 Palestinians were killed, two-thirds of them civilians, while Israel lost less than a hundred lives. Another fight in 2021 caused over 200 deaths to Palestinians and a few deaths in Israel. The frequent fights between the two sides were rare in the past 10 years and there was relative calm in the region. The tiny nation of Israel has the capacity to withstand the collective pressure from the Islamic world by virtue of the wholesome support Tel Aviv gets from the US, where Jews are a dominant part of the power-club.

Hajom Kissor Singh: Man of the Prologues

By HH Mohrmen

This year marks the hundredth anniversary of U Hajom Kissor Singh Nongbri who died on November 13, 1923, at Puriang. Not much is known about him except that he was the founder of the Unitarian Church in the Khasi Jaintia and Karbi Anglong district of Assam. His contribution to the nascent Khasi literature then was not being appreciated. Hajom Kissor Singh's literary contribution to the emerging Khasi literature and the knowledge about the tribe can be found in almost all-important publications published then. He did not have much individual work but the contribution he made to other important publications was mentioned in the prefaces of these books.

The Khasis by PRT Gurdon

One cannot study the people who live in the Khasi and Jaintia areas without flipping through the pages of PRT Gurdon's book 'The Khasis.' This book is like the main entrance for outsiders who want to study the Khasis and Gurdon's book is like a bible for those who study Khasi culture and history. In the preface to the book, "The Khasis by PRT Gurdon", the author named Hajom Kissor Singh and his brother Nissor Singh on the preface of this book. Gurdon a foreigner relies on the natives who can speak English to help him in his work, and of the nine Khasi names mentioned in the preface as people who had helped Gurdon to come up with the book, the names of the brothers u Hajom Kissor and u Nissor Singh find mention.

His Contribution to LP and UP School Education

Born to Bor Singh Malngiang and ka Bida Nongbri on June 15, 1865 at Saitsope, Sohra, Hajom Kissor Singh studied up to Matriculation. His love for education was obvious when in his initiative and while still working in the DC's office in the late 1800's and 1900's he started an Upper Primary School in Jowai called Unitarian Free School which catered to the needs of the students in Jowai. Hajom Kissor Singh was also a signatory to the petition sent by the school administrators in Jaintia Hills in which they pleaded with the Government to allow Khasi Pnar students to appear for their Upper Primary School examination in their mother tongue. Unlike Assamese and Bengalis students, Khasi Pnar students had to appear for their examination in English language while the former wrote their exams in Assamese and Bengali respectively. Under the leadership of u Hajom Kissor Singh, a petition was sent to the government requesting that the Khasi Pnar be allowed to write their Upper Primary school exam in Khasi.

In a letter to the Director

of Public Instruction, Assam (Through the Sub Inspector of Schools, Jaintia Hills) dated Jowai, the 8th of February 1902 the administrators of the three schools in Jaintia Hills pleaded that the Khasi Pnar students be allowed to write their exams in Khasi. The application was signed by Hajom Kissor Singh Manager, Unitarian Free School, u Soso Tham Headmaster Shangpung U.P. School, and Samuel Challam officiating Headmaster Jowai. Before the three gentlemen intervened, the Khasi and Jaintia students appeared for their Upper Primary School Scholarship and Pass Examination in English as students of other communities were allowed to appear for their examination in their lingua franca.

In response to the petition

"The government in the early 1900s constituted a Textbook Committee and in this connection, U Khasi Mynta wrote that it was surprising that the Committee members only comprised the DPI of Schools, the Deputy Commissioner, and J.C. Evans. Earlier a Khasi, Babu Jeebon Roy was made a member of the Committee but after his demise, the government did not appoint any native to the Committee."

of the three heads of schools, the Director of Public Instruction, Assam W. Booth in his letter to the Sub-Inspector of Schools, Jaintia hills, Jowai number 7327 dated Shillong the 21st October wrote: 'About your Memo. No. 17, dated the 8th February 1902, from the manager, Unitarian Free School, Jowai, and the Headmaster of Jowai Middle English School and the Shangpung Upper Primary School, I have the honour to say that I agree with the applicants on all points stated in their application, the children must be taught in their vernacular to the end of the Upper Primary standard.'

His contribution to the Text Book Committee

The government in the early 1900s constituted a Textbook Committee and in this connection, U Khasi Mynta wrote that it was surprising that the Committee members only comprised the DPI of Schools, the Deputy Commissioner, and J.C. Evans. Earlier a Khasi, Babu Jeebon Roy was made a member of the Committee but after his demise, the government did not appoint any native to the Committee. The report in U Khasi Mynta requested the Governor to consider the request to appoint a member from the local community to the Committee. Later U Khasi

Mynta in its September 1903 edition reported that the DPI had made some corrections and nominated Hajom Kissor Singh as a member of the Textbook Committee along with Dr. Roberts. Hajom Kissor Singh not only replaced Babu Jeebon Roy and became the native member of the Textbook Committee which was responsible for selecting textbooks for use in the schools in the region, but he also played a very important role in the government's effort to bring out the first English Khasi dictionary.

In the Preface of the First English Khasi Dictionary

The first English Khasi Dictionary was published for the first time in the year 1920 and it took the Committee about 11 years to complete the arduous task. In the pre-

to Z was read by his brother Hajom Kissor Singh who not only completed the unfinished task that his brother had left, but he also wrote the keys to pronunciation and the list of abbreviations in the dictionary. Hajom Kissor Singh was therefore instrumental in bringing out the first English Khasi dictionary.

On the Preface of the Jingsneng Tymmen

Hajom Kissor Singh also contributed to the project of bringing out 'Ka Jingsneng Tymmen' and he along with Babu Jeebon Roy wrote the introduction to the book. The relationship between Hajom Kissor Singh and Radhon Sing Berry grew deeper and stronger and the latter ultimately converted to Unitarianism. Any study of Berry's work will remain incomplete if his contribution to the Unitarian Church is not taken into consideration. Berry composed 35 hymns in the Unitarian hymnal and has also written the chapter "Ki Kpieng Ksiar ban deng" which was once part of the Unitarian hymnbook.

His major literary contribution

Hajom Kissor Singh also composed 72 hymns for the Unitarian Church hymnal and he has also translated many hymns published in the hymn book. This is not a small feat by any means. When Hajom Kissor Singh sent the first Khasi Unitarian hymnal to U Khasi Mynta, the journal reported that it had nothing to say about the book, because it is already known that it is a book of worship but added that it appreciated the beauty of the Khasi language used in the book. Perhaps Hajom Kissor Singh's hymn should also be appreciated for the language and the grammar used therein. His translation of English hymns both by foreign and native composers is commendable.

The only prose that Hajom Kissor Singh wrote was a piece about his journey from Jowai to Jaintiapur and the sub-title of the write-up is 'The Journey, the Forest, and the People.' Again the journey was part of his assignment to address the grievances of the people in Jaintiapur. At that point, in time Jowai and Jaintiapur were part of the same subdivision under the then-British Empire. This piece was included as a chapter in the Mawpun Jintip which was one of the prescribed textbooks of the Meghalaya Board of School Education.

Hajom Kissor Singh may not have written a book as such but he had contributed immensely to the success of at least four main projects published then. They include 'Ka Jingsneng Tymmen', ka first English Khasi Dictionary, the Text book Committee and Gurdon's book The Khasis.

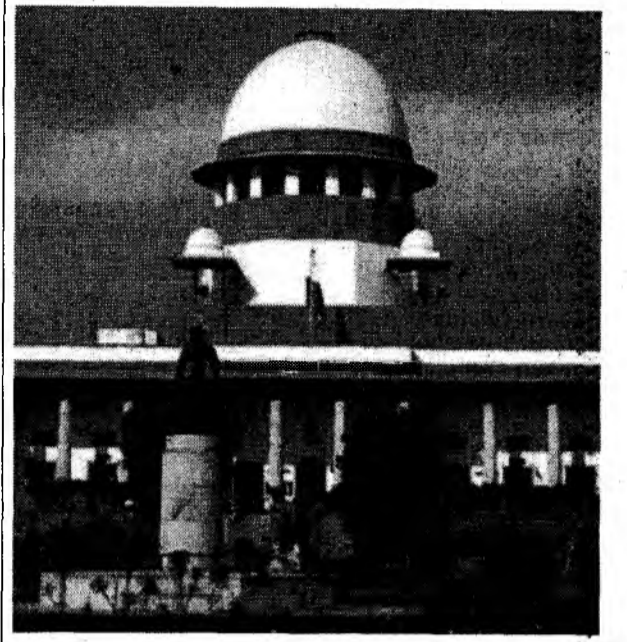
Courts start to question 'law taking its own course' rationale

By K Raveendran

The courts are making it increasingly clear that they are not impressed with the way the central agencies are proceeding with action against their victims. Going by the sharpness in the courts' remarks, it seems that the day may not be far off when the selective manner in which the law takes its course as claimed by the ruling party politicians, or allowed to take its course, is questioned by the courts.

The MP had declared assets of Rs 200 crore in his declaration for the 2019 Lok Sabha elections.

In West Bengal, food minister Rathin Ghosh's house has been raided in connection with the alleged job scam in which the CBI had registered an FIR in April this year, for suspected irregularities in the appointments to schools as well as various municipalities in



The other day the Supreme Court asked probe agencies to show proof of Delhi deputy chief minister Manish Sisodia's role in the alleged liquor policy scam, saying that the AAP leader didn't appear to be involved in the case. The court asked the agencies to show evidence against the jailed minister.

"Where is the proof? Where is the evidence? You have to establish a chain. The money has to flow from the liquor lobby to the person. Where are the proceeds of the crime?" the Supreme Court asked the Enforcement Di-

the state. Both Stalin's DMK and Mamata Banerjee's TMC have been complaining about the use of central agencies as a tool in the hands of the central government to intimidate the states and discredit them. Both parties are key components of the opposition INDIA bloc, making the reason for the stepped up action by the agencies very obvious.

Minister for information and broadcasting Anurag Thakur has been taking potshots at the opposition parties, claiming that the raids are a manifestation of the

"In the continuing drama over the alleged Delhi excise scam, AAP Rajya Sabha member Sanjay Singh has been arrested and sent to ED's custody until October 10, while three of his aides have been summoned for questioning as well. In down south, income tax officials swooped down on as many as 50 premises belonging to the DMK Member of Parliament K T Jagathrakshakan, alleging amassing of wealth disproportionate to his known sources of income. The MP had declared assets of Rs 200 crore in his declaration for the 2019 Lok Sabha elections."

rectorate (ED) and the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) while hearing a bail petition filed by Sisodia.

In almost the same fashion, the Delhi High Court on Friday asked the Delhi police why the grounds for the arrest of NewsClick founder Prabir Purkayastha and his HR manager Amit Chakravarty were not provided to the accused and cited Supreme Court decisions that those getting arrested have a right to know why they are being arrested.

The last couple of days have seen the central agencies getting into what appears to be "crash programme" of raids at multiple locations in several states ahead of the coming assembly and later parliamentary elections in which the ruling BJP is finding itself increasingly vulnerable due to what it fears as a consolidation of the anti-Modi parties and elements.

In the continuing drama over the alleged Delhi excise scam, AAP Rajya Sabha member Sanjay Singh has been arrested and sent to ED's custody until October 10, while three of his aides have been summoned for questioning as well. In down south, income tax officials swooped down on as many as 50 premises belonging to the DMK Member of Parliament K T Jagathrakshakan, alleging amassing of wealth disproportionate to his known

law taking its own course. But Congress general secretary Priyanka Gandhi is asking why the ED is not going to Madhya Pradesh, where corruption cases of the magnitude of Vyapam have escaped scrutiny.

While Thakur can keep repeating the law taking its own course ad nauseum, the actions of the central agencies give a lie to whatever is happening on the ground. Cases are dusted out from time to time and used against adversaries so as to suit the whims and fancies of the ruling party and its leaders, driving dispassionate observers to the conclusion that the law is selectively blind and does not see what is happening under its own nose. The law goddess statue with eyes covered in black cloth has become a misnomer.

This is not just conjecture; there is enough empirical evidence available as to how the central agencies have become a political tool in the hands of the ruling party. It has been established that 95 percent of the raids conducted by ED and CBI are against members belonging to opposition parties as well as activists of organisations perceived to be unfriendly to the ruling dispensation. The doctored blindness of the goddess of law cannot be a reassuring sight and the courts cannot be looking away for much longer. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

Supply of contaminated water unforgivable

Editor,
In a shocking revelation, it has been established now that the Public Health Engineering Department (PHED) and the Municipality of Shillong have been irresponsibly supplying the town's population with untreated water for so many years.

But wait, there's more! This water isn't just full of harmful bacteria; it comes with added features – it's muddy and sometimes awfully "smelly". The senior journalist Patricia Mukhim writes in her recent article, "Chilling Silence of the Urbanite": "The water we drink has coliform and E. coli organisms, low pH, high turbidity, and excessive iron content in the unsafe localities." She further laments: "It's no surprise that the water even has faecal matter in it because the river Umiew at Smit which

is used for washing clothes, vehicles and what have you actually flows all the way to Mawphlang and the same water is being supplied to Shillong residents." Is it not a direct blow to the Central Government's Jal Jeevan Mission?

What adds to the frustration is the fact that this messy issue was brought to the attention of the Shillong Municipality and the PHED repeatedly by this writer, over a year ago. The case was further corroborated by Michael Syiem, the Chairman of the Maitshaphrang movement, and many others. Sadly, all the public outcry just fell on the deaf ears of PHED and SMB then. It seems the concerned departments completely lack a sense of human ethics and values.

What if it weren't for the Federation of Khasi Jaintia and Garo People (FKJGP)? What if they hadn't taken it upon themselves to collect water samples from 46 locations and submit for laboratory tests? Without their intervention, the extent of the untreated water crisis may have gone unnoticed for much longer. Hats off

to members of the NGO for breaking the deafening silence of the urbanite! They have put irresponsible water supply departments to shame.

Now that the case has also been brought to the attention of the Chief Minister, there can be no room for complacency from the PHED and SMB. Hope the Departments will use all their technical wherewithal to come out of the quagmire of embarrassment as swiftly as possible. Until the issue is fully addressed, keep railing, keep writing. Making the public drink polluted water is unforgivable.

Yours etc.,
Salil Gwali,
Shillong

Media pulverized

Editor,
The editorial, "Media Under Trial" (ST, October 5, 2023) rightly says that "media in India is gasping for breath." The police raids on an online news portal NewsClick is yet another blow to fast evaporating press free-

dom in India. NewsClick has been known to be critical of the government at the Centre. A democratic country should welcome free press as a platform for dissent, debate and dialogue. No democracy can survive without a free press.

The Fourth Estate needs to play the role of a third umpire to help the umpires (voters) on the field in a political IPL match between the ruling and the opposition parties in a democratic country. It will be highly unfortunate if the media is forced to become cheerleaders of the batting (ruling) side. It is no wonder that India's ranking in the 2023 World Press Freedom Index has alarmingly slipped to 161 out of 180 countries (it was 133 in 2016). Even Pakistan has gone ahead of us by moving up to 150th rank.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Via email

Menace of street dogs!

Editor,
Recently a destitute girl who is engaged as a daily

wage-earner was bitten by one of the street dogs in one of the localities in Lower Mawprem, Shillong; whereupon, the victim had to post haste rush to one of the private hospitals for Rabies vaccinations and she was advised to report for several days for more doses of injection. And in this process she has to mandatorily expend more than a thousand rupees from her hard-earned savings! To rub salt to injury, she has suffered several man-days loss, thereby robbing her of daily wage-earnings. Such tragic episodes posed by wayside canines have exponentially become a regular feature all over the city and Lower Mawprem is no exception. Arguably, who shall be then held accountable for this poor girl for being an unfortunate victim? Many discerning citizens have articulated that for such appalling incidents of dogs' assault on human beings the blame must squarely be attributed to champions of animal rights like PETA (People for the ethical

treatment of animals), the local Rangbah Shnong, our political representatives for adopting a couldn't care less attitude against the unabated increased of stray dogs in their respective areas of responsibility. The latter, hence, must be held answerable and made to fully compensate the course of medication in respect of the destitute girl in question!

It freezes one's blood to note that in India 18,000 to 20,000 people die annually owing to dog bite and 30% to 60% being children below 15 years. These untimely casualties occurred mainly owing to negligence or ignorance to promptly resort to medical assistance. These glaring and avoidable fatalities should serve as a caveat to the citizenry of Shillong

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

"Some of the greatest moments in life come from moments that are incomplete."

— Nikki Reed

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXX No. 61 SHILLONG, TUESDAY, OCTOBER 10, 2023

World Mental Health Day

OCTOBER 10 is observed as World Mental Health Day. The theme for this year is, "Mental health is a universal human right." The idea is to improve knowledge, raise awareness and drive actions that promote and protect everyone's mental health as a universal human right. Mental health has become one of the biggest challenges of the present generation with more people dipping into depression and some even indulging in self-harm and suicide. Mental health comes stealthily and often unless families are sensitised it becomes difficult to understand if a member of the family is mentally ill and needs treatment such as psychiatric care and counselling. Social media seems to have aggravated mental health problems with individuals becoming more and more aloof and alone with only the mobile phone for company. The earlier bonhomie of sharing every little concern or something that brings joy with a friend, today young people are quick to share things about themselves with complete strangers they have met on the virtual world. A relationship is built and if that relationship breaks there is an emotional breakdown that builds into depression.

Covid 19 had brought in its wake mental health breakdown for millions across the world. Disruptions in human relationships and human contact created massive problems especially for young school children who missed their friends, their teachers and their offline lessons. Mental health is today considered a basic human right for all people and every person has a right to the highest attainable standard of mental health which includes the right to be protected from mental health risks, the right to available, accessible, acceptable, and good quality care, and the right to liberty, independence and inclusion in the community. In fact, a mentally healthy person is an asset to the community he/she is part of and can become a productive member of society. Mental health is key to the overall health of a person.

What is frightening is that one in eight people globally are living with mental health conditions, which can impact their physical health, their well-being, how they connect with others, and their livelihoods. Mental health conditions are also affecting an increasing number of adolescents and young people. In India there are too few psychiatrists/psychologists per capita to reach out to those in need of mental health treatment. The least that the state can do is to ensure that people with mental health problems are not discriminated against or excluded and that they have access to the best mental health care because today this has become a basic, universal human right. Sadly many with mental health problems are not diagnosed until it is too late. It is important therefore that family members are aware about the signs and symptoms of mental health problems.

Ha U Prah: A Re-imagined Dialogue on Freedom and Morality

By Kittor H Blah

It has been a good twenty two days since the Campus Talk was aired on 4frontMedia on the subject 'Freedom of Expression in Educational Institutions.' The talk centered on the event of a school principal being issued show cause notice by the government on account of students playing the Prah song on the occasion of Teachers' Day. I will take the liberty of reimagining that talk, having each panelist represent a certain character in the scene.

First, there is Prof. Myrboh, spokesman of the VPP, who represents the character of the Political Party. The Hon'ble MLA, Ampareen Lyngdoh, represents the character of the Government. Prof. Kharshing, Mass Media department, St. Anthony's College, represents the Patron of arts. Mr. Smiling Myllimngap represents the Artist. Prof. Lyngdoh, Music Dept., St. Anthony's College, represents the Institution of Music. Mr. Tarun Bhartiya represents the Provocateur. The student, Mr. Kharbani and the moderator, Ms. Marwein, represent the character of the Student and the Moderator in this scene too. I will also take the liberty of adding two more characters, the Moralist and the Critic.

The Moderator asks whether the event in question is protected under the Constitutional Right to Freedom of Expression. Enters the Party, which immediately distances itself from the song by showing how the Prah song is not the Party's anthem, as it has not submitted any claim of ownership over the song nor has the Party named it as its official song. The question of the school engaging in political activity becomes redundant if the song is not the Party's official song. The Patron of arts picks up on this, and quips that art is meant to inspire hope, and the song, as a work of art, inspires hope for change and better governance, as symbolized by the Prah or winning fan. The Government, either amused or annoyed, ridiculed the Patron's idealistic speech about the song, and says that the song is popular because of the music, and not the words, thus almost reducing the song to a jamming track and not an inspiring piece of art. The Government also picks up on the Party's remarks and suggested that the Artist cut up bits of the song to give it a more wider appeal and permanently dissociate it from the Party. The Government even suggested that the Artist should get paid for every instance that the song is played. The Moderator enthusiastically agreed and pushed this idea to the Artist. The Artist, who has long felt he deserved recognition for his work, gleamed at this suggestion, saying that when people and children dance to his song, he is rewarded with great joy, but he is not averse to the idea of monetary rewards too. The Patron of arts expressed agreement. The Government, by patronizing

the Artist, gained the genuine favour of the Patron, and the irony was lost on almost everybody.

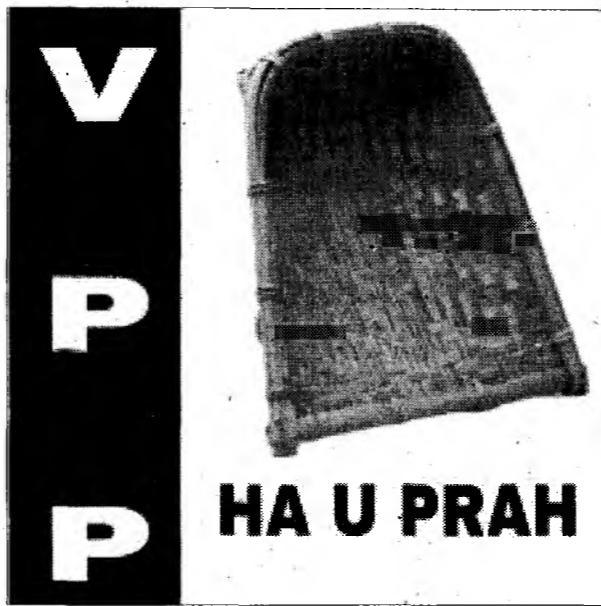
The Artist, who was not familiar with the ways of copyright and royalties, invited assistance from the Government and the Patron. The Institution of Music came in and informed that it is still studying up on it, and recent changes in the laws, and it will surely help protect the Artist's right to ownership. The Provocateur leaned in, and mirrored the Government's earlier portrayal of the song as a jamming track. But the Provocateur added that it is a jamming anthem that inspires hope. So, the panel seems to have converged in appreciation for the talent of the Artist, and they all seem to have come to an unexpected consensus - the song is an enjoyable piece of music, the Artist deserves

even satanic music in school, or be inconsistent and be stamped with 'Hypocrisy.' Satanic Music or Hypocrisy? A damning choice.

The Patron chose consistency, on the condition that playing satanic music can be allowed if it does not result in anarchy. The Party itself did not comment on this, having made its own case for political freedom, and perhaps because the Provocateur's stance was seen as provocation or extremism. The Government only opined that the subject itself is debatable. But no one chose to disallow satanic music outright. No one chose inconsistency outright. The verdict of the dialogue was not clearer than in its effects on the Student, who, having digested all that had been said, reflected the consensus that those who believe in Freedom of Expression cannot be inconsis-

ment. Freedom of expression means political freedom, and the Government should come clean on this. The Critic expressed dismay that the Government fails to see that Freedom of Expression is inherently linked to political expressions. The Critic was also disappointed with the Moderator for being too enthusiastic with the attempt by the Government to patronize the Artist. The Critic questioned the Artist himself, asking him if he really thought it was a good idea to monetize his song, as that is the surest way to kill it off. What the Government cannot stop by banning, monetization will, as it will disincite people from using the song. The Critic then tells the Party that the song is indelibly associated with it, even if not officially as the Party has rightly stated, but through its ideals, which represents the hope that the song talks about, which is the promise of clean politics. The Critic then questions the Patron's ready surrender of all that is hopeful and beautiful, for the sake of Freedom. Would the Patron, who had eloquently described art as something that gives hope, now accept satanic music in schools? The Critic pointed out that in order to be consistent about Freedom, the Patron had nonetheless embraced inconsistency in her appreciation of art that is hopeful and beautiful. The Critic then tells the Student that while it is admirable that he came without preconceived ideas, yet he would be wrong if he, like the Patron, were to allow his worldview to suffer inconsistency just so his idea of Freedom would not. But the Student would do well to also take into account what the Moralist had to say.

The Critic then tells the Moralist that he had spoken rightly, for to be free from God is to be chained to the devil, and to be free from the devil is to be chained to God, just as to be free from disease is to be chained to health, and to be chained to sickness is to be free from health. It must therefore also be true, says the critic, that to be absolutely free is to be free from all shackles, including the shackles of freedom itself. Lastly, the Critic turns to the Provocateur and warns him that if Freedom were to be removed from all grounds of morality, Freedom would die under its own weight. A moral ground ensures that Freedom is a moral right. Why would it still be moral to have Freedom, if Freedom itself has been freed from all grounds of morality? Freedom must be grounded on morality, and morality cannot be neutral. It is either God or Satan. The Critic asks, "When your children are hungry, do you give them snakes and scorpions? Even so, when the people want Freedom, why are you giving them Satanism? The worldview that divorces Freedom from morality, is the worldview that will have the power to kill it."



recognition, all who play the song do it for pleasure or hope and thus, playing the song is not necessarily a political activity. If the panel was a jury, the verdict would be that the school principal was not engaging in political activity, and the show cause was not justified, having no basis on rule of law. At this point, the Moderator invited the Student to weigh in, but the Student said that he did not come with opinions on the issue, but that he came to listen, absorb and learn. So, the Student may have taken it all in and agreed with the verdict, since the panel all seemed to converge at this point. But this convergence is to be challenged by the Provocateur.

The Provocateur then fires a shot at the hypocrisy of society, including the panelists, accusing all of only believing in freedom of expression for what they agree with, and not for the things they do not, and posited a challenge that those who say that playing the Prah song in school is freedom of expression, would not say the same about students playing satanic music. Having come to a consensus, the Provocateur has pulled the rug of blissful convergence from under the panelists, and forced them to either be consistent and endorse

the freedom to play satanic music in schools.

At this point, I introduce the ninth character, namely, the Moralist. The Moralist shuddered at the idea of unrestrained freedom as proposed by the Provocateur and how it might be hijacked by the goddess and the amoral. He submitted that in the name of all that is good and holy, Freedom of Expression cannot mean that schools should allow even the playing of satanic music. Freedom, says the Moralist, cannot be extended to what is evil, and what can be more evil than the direct opposition to God? Surely, freedom cannot mean to be free of all order, or morality, or good? The Moralist concludes by saying that Freedom was fought for and realized by men who saw it as the right to do what you ought, not merely what you wish. It is the Moralist who has now pulled the rug of merry consensus from under the panelists. The Moralist has now forced the panel to choose between grounding Freedom on Morality, or to divorce it from all Morality. At this point, I introduce the last character, namely the Critic. The Critic starts by saying that Freedom of Expression exists to protect the people from the Govern-

Hamas-Israel war: The Middle East may never be the same again Spectre of a wider regional conflict is a real possibility

By James M Dorsey

Hamas, the Islamist militia that controls Gaza, will likely emerge a victor regardless of how the latest round of Israeli-Palestinian fighting ends. Hamas' unprecedented attack on Israel, described by some analysts as the Jewish state's 9/11, changes the dynamics of Middle Eastern geopolitics.

The brutal attack involved prolonged fighting with the Israeli military in Israeli towns and cities, the firing of thousands of rockets at Israeli population centres, the random killing of innocent civilians in Israeli homes, and the kidnapping of scores of Israeli soldiers and civilians.

Like the Turkish assault on Kurdish positions in Syria and Iraq in the wake of the October 1 suicide bombing in Ankara, the Hamas attack and Israel's retaliatory pounding of Gaza call into question the sustainability of a regional de-escalation that freezes rather than tackles perennial conflicts. Similarly, the attack pours cold water on the notion of Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and his ultra-nationalist and ultra-conservative coalition partners that Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands can be sustained indefinitely.

On Hamas' tailcoat, Iran, long opposed to Arab normalisation of relations with Israel, sees the Palestinian offensive as vindication of its position. Only days before the hostilities, Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei cautioned that normalisation of relations with Israel amounted to "gambling" that was "doomed to failure." He warned that countries establishing relations with the Jewish state would be "in harm's way."

Raising the spectre of a wider regional conflict, Hamas spokesman Ghazi Hamad told the BBC that the group had direct backing for the attack from Iran. Hamad did not specify what support entailed. Even if suggestions prove correct that Iran helped Hamas plan and prepare for the attack, the group would have launched its assault because it served its purposes rather than serving Iranian interests.

Hezbollah, the Iranian-backed Lebanese Shiite militia, bolstered the threat of a regional conflagration by firing rockets at the Israeli-occupied Shebaa Farms in southern Lebanon. Israel retaliated with armed drones. The Hezbollah attack came after Israeli soldiers opened fire on pro-Hamas demonstrators carrying the group's flag on the Lebanese side of the border. There were no reported casualties.

Meanwhile, a Saudi statement suggested that the Hamas attack had complicated US-led efforts to engineer Saudi recognition of Israel. The Saudi foreign ministry recalled the kingdom's "repeated warning of the dangers of the explosion of the situation as a result of the occupation, the deprivation of the Palestinian people of their legitimate rights, and the repetition of systematic provocations against its sanctities."

The statement indicated that the fighting reinforced Saudi conditioning of diplomatic relations with Israel on viable steps toward resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Already, the fighting will stop Environmental Protection Minister Idit Silman from becoming the third Cabinet-level Israeli official to visit Saudi Arabia in less than two weeks.

In what diplomats described as an indication of the United Arab Emirates' predicament, Emirati officials insisted that Sunday's United Nations Security Council discussion of the fighting would be a closed session rather than a private meeting. The UAE called for the meeting alongside Malta. Unlike a private meeting, the closed session excluded

Israeli and Palestinian representatives. It ended without a Council statement. The UAE was one of four Arab states to recognize Israel in 2020. At the same time, UAE officials describe Hamas as a terrorist organisation.

Had there been a Palestinian representation, the Palestinian voice would have been President Mahmoud Abbas' Palestine Authority, dominated by Al Fatah, Hamas' archrival, further marginalized by the fighting. This weekend, Abbas was reduced to issuing a statement insisting that Palestinians had the right to defend themselves against the "terror of settlers and occupation troops."

With the perennial potential collapse of the Palestine Authority, Hamas' attack strengthens the group in a likely struggle to succeed 87-year-old Abbas, who has lost public support. While the Israeli-Palestinian fighting was likely to boost popular Arab rejection of relations with Israel, social media responses in Turkey indicated a different sentiment among one segment of Turkish public opinion.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan hosted Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in July and has allowed the group to operate. However, unlike Arab statements that blamed Israel for the violence, Erdogan offered to mediate between Israel and Hamas.

The fighting risks, at least in the short-term, stiffening Israel's refusal to entertain steps that would enable the creation of an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel or a viable one-state solution, even if the Netanyahu government, the most ultra-conservative and ultra-nationalist in Israeli history, becomes a victim of renewed violence. Israeli reticence will be further reinforced by likely increased violence on the West Bank, where Palestinian militants resisting Israeli occupation are certain to be emboldened. Militants called this weekend on Palestinians to fight Israelis in their West Bank towns.

Some Israeli sources suggested that Israel's focus in the last year on Palestinian resistance in the West Bank had led Israel to pay less attention to Gaza. More than 50 years after initial Egyptian-Syrian advances in the early days of the 1973 Middle East caught Israel by surprise, the Hamas attack has put a dent in Israel's image of military superiority and prowess. In addition, perceptions of Israeli weakness may be reinforced once the guns fall silent, with the country likely to be wracked by assertions that the Hamas attack was an intelligence and operational failure.

Nevertheless, Israel would likely benefit from an international community breathing a sigh of relief should the Netanyahu government, too, pay a high price with its possible demise. No Israeli government has survived longer than six months in the aftermath of a major war like the 1973 war or the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Even so, the Hamas attack is likely to impact Israeli public opinion. On the one hand, it is expected to harden attitudes towards Palestinians, reinforced by Hamas' brutal attacks on innocent civilians and abuse of soldiers.

On the other hand, Israelis will probably have less confidence in Israeli security. The rocket attacks and fighting in Israeli towns and settlements close to Gaza ended, at least temporarily, nine months of mass protests against Netanyahu's judicial changes. It also halted protests by military reservists, including fighter jet pilots currently striking Gaza, who had earlier refused to report for duty because of the judicial changes.

(IPA Arrange)
By arrangement with the Arabian Post

Letters to the Editor

Sounds of silence

Editor
I think I am a sentimental fool! I was forced to pause, reflect, introspect and ruminate time and again while reading, 'Chilling Silence of the Urbanite,' by Patricia Mukhim. (ST Friday, October 6, 2023). Many have commented in The Shillong Times on 'The Sound of Silence' through articles, including letters, and I too wonder why we are 'invariably muted'?

So many emotions filled me, visualising, nay feeling, the hurt, pain, sorrow, anguish, agony and sadness as I took my time reading through the article. What has happened to the ethos and caring nature of our leaders and people? How have we become so hard-hearted, indifferent, even callous towards one another, especially when we are all affected? Why hasn't the

voices of NGOs, chipped in to expose the 'Care a Hang' attitude of the government? (Only HYC & HNYM I've read about in the daily now and then).

It is through this observation I have deliberately highlighted "DUTY OF CARE" in a few of my letters to the editor. We were brought up to care for one another, for nature, the less privileged, the physically and mentally challenged and so on. This was the 'Unlearned' or the 'Untaught' part of our learning in school. We had activities that brought about this caring nature.

I grew up in Dr Graham's, Kalimpong, as an orphan and our Principal, a man from Scotland, would always remind us, 'To walk this world with dignity' and our Pastor, he too from Scotland, who was also the farm manager, would talk to us, even preach from the pulpit about our duty of care.

Going back to the late 70's this caring nature was so palpable in Shillong.

People were always giving a helping hand. I recall the localities would band together on many issues. One day in Riatsamthiah, we spent the day looking for a lad who had gone missing!

And in closing, I subscribe to the possibility where dangers of the government becoming "tyrannical" where our rights will be overridden as stated are real.

Yours etc.,
Kevin Phillips
Shillong - 19

Seasonal self-proclaimed environmentalists

Editor,
Each year, with the advent of autumn, the festive season sets in and Shillong's seasonal "environmentalists", individuals and organizations alike, suddenly wake up. In the last few years, whenever Durga Puja preparations begin, certain

organizations start complaining about pollution resulting from the immersion of the idols of Goddess Durga in a tiny stretch of Wah-Umkhrah in the Polo area. From the statements of these organizations, one would seem to think that idol immersion is the sole major cause of pollution in this otherwise pristine river. However, they conveniently seem to neglect the fact that the idols are composed mainly of clay, hay, and bamboo/wood, adorned with some colours. In addition, the auxiliary items that are immersed along with the idol as per tradition are also natural and biodegradable items like flowers and leaves. Further, the wooden/bamboo items are retrieved from the river immediately after immersion by volunteers under the supervision of the district administration. As such, it is evident that the hue and cry being raised every year on the eve of Durga Puja festival is malicious.

The various puja organizers are fully aware of the

dangers of pollution and they always take adequate measures to ensure that the festival-associated rituals have a minimal environmental impact. The fact that these complaints being raised are facetious is further illustrated by the fact that these "environmentalists" never bother about the actually polluting human activities such as construction, vehicular movement, mining, etc. Pollution can only be combated through a holistic approach; any genuine "environmentalist" would certainly raise awareness about all of these degrading activities. Real reasons for the present wretched condition of the river are illegal encroachment on river banks, unauthorised construction, discharge of domestic sewage, throwing of non-biodegradable items like plastic and other synthetic materials, effluents from motor repairing garages and car wash shops, discharges from hotels and restaurants, cement and other

hardware materials from godown/shops functioning in the stretch of river bank. It may further be noted that Pujas have been going on in the city for over a century, and residents can attest that the Wah-Umkhrah water was so clean as to be potable even through decades of idol immersions. The decline in the Wah-Umkhrah's water quality has actually mirrored the uncontrolled rise of Shillong's population and the increased mismanagement of local authorities.

Perhaps these self-proclaimed environmentalists would be better served by calling out the real causes of pollution instead of using such a frail veneer to mask their prejudiced views.

D Bhattacharjee,
Shillong-1

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"Patience is the best remedy for every trouble."

— Plautus

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXV No. 62 SHILLONG, WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 11, 2023

Diminishing returns of extortion

AT last someone has had the courage to call out the extortion in this state that has been rising exponentially. From a few so-called pressure groups now the numbers have only grown and every group survives on extortion. No one really knows what these pressure groups do or what pressure they put on the government. The reason why some of the contractors taking up the national highway projects have packed up and left is because of the demand from sundry groups each stating that they are working for public welfare. With a plethora of "do gooders" around, why is Meghalaya dipping lower into the human development indices year after year?

The fact is that extortion has been around for a long time in this state and particularly in the city of Shillong. This rose phenomenally when underground outfits like HNLC and GNLA made it their trade mark and sent out demand notes with the ultimatum of "pay the money or pay with your life." Most traders and business persons, both tribal and non-tribal, acquiesced to these demands right from 1992-93 onwards when these groups started their insurgent activities. Some businesspersons negotiated with the militant outfits to bring down the demand from say Rs 50,000 to 20,000. But all were paying for fear of their lives, more so when some business persons were gunned down in broad daylight. It was only in the year 2000 when RG Lyngdoh as Home Minister, filed an FIR against all those business houses and individuals that were suspected to be paying the militant organisations. This brought down extortion to a large extent. Today, the militant outfits are in peace talks although there are sources which claim that they are still on an extortion spree. With so many groups claiming to work for public interest but with each of them subsisting on extortion, businesses in Meghalaya from the smallest to the larger ones, including contracting firms are facing undue harassment.

The prices of essential commodities have sky-rocketed mainly because all the trucks coming to Meghalaya are taxed. Fruits, vegetables and fish are taxed; clothes merchants are taxed; even small and marginal businesses have to pay their share to keep themselves going. This has become a standard operating procedure with the administration looking the other way. It is only now when extortion has become rampant and business persons have revealed to the media their woes that police have said they will deal with the extortionists. Did the police not know this was happening all along? It is true that businesspersons have chosen the easy way out by not filing FIRs for fear of retribution but that's not how crime is tackled. Crime that is not addressed timely will turn cancerous and eat into the vitals of society. Fighting back is the only survival mode.

Letters to the Editor

Animal welfare versus human lives

Editor, Kudos to the unknown author of the letter, "Menace of street dogs!" (ST, October 9, 2023) for asking the champions of animal rights why they should not be held accountable for the plight of a daily wage-earner, destitute girl who was bitten by a street dog in Lower Mawprem, Shillong and had to spend already more than a thousand rupees from her hard-earned money for rabies vaccination and ongoing treatments.

Interestingly, commercial action films are all about man-animal conflicts. But the reel world fails to highlight man-animal conflicts of the real world. The real struggle of the villagers who have been trying to survive amid frequent attacks of elephants and other wild animals does not find a place in popular movies.

Even a man-eater tiger enjoys higher status than poor people in our society! When a man-eater tiger gets killed, public outcry against its killing looms large. But the victims of the tiger attacks do not get as much sympathy. Just a year ago, Norwegian authorities faced criticism for their move to kill a walrus. But what the Director General of Norwegian Directorate of Fisheries, Frank Bakke-Jensen said in response needs to be followed in India. He said, "We have great regard for animal welfare, but human life and safety must take precedence." This attitude is definitely one of the reasons why Norway remains either at first or second position in the Human Development Index year after year.

All the street dogs must immediately be sterilized and kept in an enclosed area to minimise a colossal loss of human lives. Also, adequate measures need to be taken to protect the lives of the ordinary citizens that walk the streets or are living close to the forests from the attack of wild animals.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

Man-animal conflict on the rise

Editor,
I have been reading about

Drug addiction: Aberration or the norm today?

By Aiborlang Nongsiej

The increase in the number of drug addicts in the state is one of the major concerns of all good citizens. It is very unfortunate to hear that boys and girls below the age of eighteen years are already addicted to it. What has happened to our families? Why has parenting become so difficult? What are the causes that boys and girls at an early age are already in danger of this substance? Are all our children motivated towards a future of hope and progress? Why is it no longer safe to walk alone, especially in the evening? The above questions are often asked by many individuals who are

prefer chatting with a friend on social media rather than a friend who is physically present by their side. Physical socializing has become secondary and there's very little or no verbal conversation even among siblings at home. Mobile addiction is one of the major issues affecting young people at present. Perhaps, this loneliness and withdrawal from society with only social media for company and with lots of information pouring in from it has affected the young people. They now search

make sure the children were at home at the proper time (usually before dark). Definitely, this precious time of gathering the children is no longer a practice in most of the families. Every family member is in their own world and their own room with the mobile in hand.

It is perhaps this absence of ethical teaching which is one of the main causes of young people falling into drugs. On the other hand, in the state we have so many NGOs (called Sengbhalang) who often come up to protest

have to close their shops at dusk which is usually the prime time for business. There are instances where individuals (drug addicts) appear at the shop and demand money openly. Why do such incidents happen in society? Drug addicts have created lots of fear and inconveniences for citizens? Several individuals have complained of being unsafe due to the increase in drug addicts. Often there is a complaint that even police are fed up in dealing with them. As a result they keep on increasing. Moreover several drug addicts, are below the age of eighteen and they are the



concerned about the current situation.

The case of the two students of St Paul's School, Marbisu, who went missing for a few days and were later found dead was a big shock to many parents and the society as a whole. Many are questioning as to the cause of this incident. Is it because of poor parenting? Is it because they have not understood the value of life? Were they killed or did they die by suicide? Why was such a drastic decision taken to run away from home? These are the questions in the minds of every individual.

As an educator, this writer encounters different situations among students and young people of the current time. Social media is one of the most influential forms of entertainment for young people at present. They would sacrifice even food to sit in the corner along with the mobile phone. Despite many restrictions and rules they would find ways and means to carry the mobiles inside the classrooms to play games and to click photos while the teachers are dealing with the lessons. They mostly prefer to be with the mobiles than to join their peer groups in socializing; in fact they

for pleasure and then end up with drugs.

In the past few years, it was very rare to see young girls smoking in public, however, at present it has become a trend and they have no problem in doing so. Just within a span of a few years, the trend of young people has changed a lot and westernization has become part of the culture of young people. Being a local and a Khasi, we have lots of ethical teachings to follow. Ka akor ka burom, ka tip brieu, ka tip Blei, ka tip kur ka tip kha, and kamai la ka hok are often the most popular khasi ethical teachings. Sadly, many young people have no respect for these basic ethical teachings of their ancestors.

Nevertheless, it is not to blame the young people completely but it is the duty of each individual to help these young people to live a moral life. How many parents spend sufficient time with their children at home? Do parents educate their children on an ethical life by personal examples? In the past parents would set aside time every evening and gather the children for a conversation of ethics. This is the most important part of parenting. Parents would

against the government for certain issues and to make sure that justice is done to the society. But how many NGOs are protesting against the increased use of drugs and the rise in the number of drug addicts and the supply chain of drugs. NGOs can be the strong organizations to help the society return to normalcy. District towns like Mawkyrwat are no longer safe in the evening; this substance has entered into every nook and corner of the state and not only in the city. If the shopkeepers and the people running small businesses are covering in fear because of many incidents caused by drug addicts, why are the NGOs not coming up to prevent such incidents and to hold a protest against this evil substance? Are they interested only in beneficiaries' issues? Often we see only police seizing the drugs and arresting the dealers but the public has no information what police do with those drugs. If the government and the police department are doing their jobs faithfully, drugs can be easily eradicated and citizens will not be living in fear.

It is very unfortunate to hear that shopkeepers are unsafe in the evening. They

ones creating inconveniences and fear for the public.

This is a social problem in which the state government should develop a law and strong steps to prevent young people from falling prey to this evil substance. Parenting is the first step in each family. Parents have a responsibility to groom their kids in a proper manner. Young people are living in a complex world with strong influence of social media. Easy money and an easy lifestyle is often the dictum for several young people at present. For this reason, they have no guilt and no fear even to steal because no ethics have been imparted to them at the very early age.

The issue of drugs is a huge concern in our society at present. It is also very unfortunate to hear that certain places are no longer safe and citizens are living in fear as the sun sets. Therefore, the government, the police department and the NGOs must do their duties to ensure safety to all citizens and to reach out to young people on the dangers of becoming drug dependent.

(The writer is Vice Principal St Anthony's Hr. Sec School, Shillong)

Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

Build Bridges not Walls..!

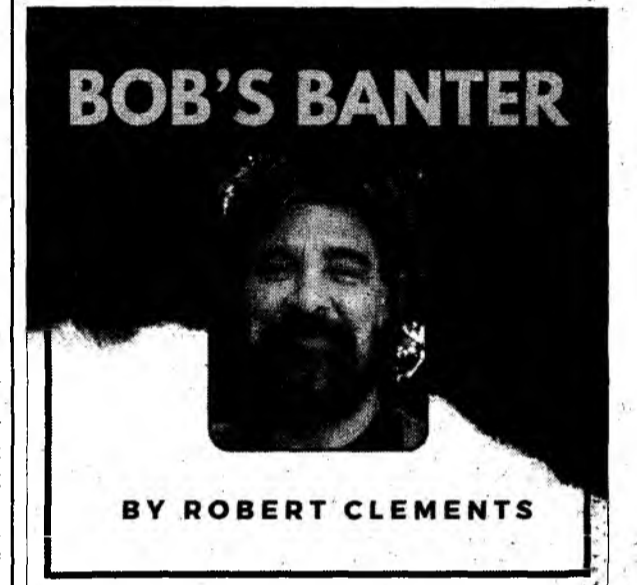
And as the Hamas terrorise Israel and Israel retaliates with unparalleled fury, one knows that those laughing their way to the bank are the weapon manufacturers. To keep a war going, a country has to spend heavily and as England found out after the Second World War, she never really recovered, and from being a nation that ruled the world, she now trails far, far behind. Which brings me to the point I'd like to make and that is, why don't we start investing as heavily in peace as we do in weapons of war and upkeep of armies?

Most of us believe that peace is inherent within us, that we are really peaceful at heart, and driven to battle only when no other means are available. But if we really look at ourselves, and the amount of books sold every day on bringing peace and calmness to the mind, we will begin to realize that we are more warlike than peace driven. If given bricks, we will rather throw it at each other, build walls

and lent a helping hand to one another in times of need. The fight began over a small misunderstanding, but the dispute dragged on and became an angry exchange of words, followed by weeks of silence.

One day, there was a knock on the older brother's door. When he opened it, he was facing an old, bearded carpenter, holding a toolbox. "Do you need any repairs in your farm?" asked the stranger. "Yes", replied the brother, "I've got a job for you. Across the creek, there's a farm that happens to belong to my younger brother. Until recently, the whole area between our homes was green, but then he changed the creek's path, making it into a border between us. I'm sure he did that for spite, but I'll show him..." said the older brother. "You see those trees by the barn? I want you to turn them into a 10-foot tall wooden wall. I never want to see his face again."

The old carpenter thought quietly to himself for a few minutes and eventually said: "I see".



BY ROBERT CLEMENTS

to safeguard ourselves than build bridges!

What we need to do is to invest in peace!

A year or two ago, I was contacted by someone in Australia, and commissioned to write a play on solving the Israeli-Palestinian skirmishes through a plan of peace. It took me three months to write the play, and it will soon be enacted and hopefully made into a TV serial. It will also be put up in Bangalore by an Indian director and Indian cast.

What is the play on peace about? It's about a lady American president, who grows up in Colaba, Bombay, and sees how a diverse country like India, has different communal groups living side by side, without going at each other's throats every day. She grows up to become a journalist, whose writings become known, goes back to America, joins politics and finally becomes president of the United States.

She decides to build bridges instead of walls, and starts investing in peace measures in a big way in Israel.

I'm not going to reveal any more of the plot because I'd like you to see the play when it's either staged or appears on screen, but the gist of it is that the president puts in billions of dollars into building bridges of peace.

Unfortunately, politicians are so focused on coming to power that they are using the message of communal hate and violence and winning votes through this. As Israel pays for doing the same, we also as a nation need to watch out because our politicians are the same method. Finally the small fires of hatred they light become a bonfire, atomic, nuclear and beyond control.

Learn to build bridges of peace instead.

Here's a small story of two brothers who lived side by side in their own farms for many years, until one day, a foolish argument caused a rift between them. This was the first serious disagreement the brothers had in all of their 50 years. Up until that day, they always worked their fields together, shared knowledge and produce,

The farmer helped the carpenter carry his tools and the wood, and then drove off to the city on some errands. When he came back in the evening, the old carpenter had finished. Upon arriving at the creek, the older brother was stunned. His eyes were bulging out, and he couldn't utter a single word.

Where a wooden wall should have been standing, a bridge now stood. A quaint and special bridge, truly a work of art, with an intricately carved banister. At the same time, the younger brother happened to come to the same spot. He rushed over the bridge and embraced his older brother, and said: "You're something special... Building a bridge, after all I've said and done!" While both brothers were hugging, the old carpenter collected his tools and started walking away. The brothers turned to him and said "Please, stay for a few more days - we have more things that need fixing!"

"I would have loved to stay, kind sirs," said the carpenter, "But I have many more bridges to build and things to fix, especially here in this country!"

What a beautiful story, isn't it? So here's some work for us; as leaders in our country and also in the world, let us not build walls and polarize people, let's instead start building bridges, with the same emotional material, but instead of binding with hate, use love!

As my play reveals, finally the tears generated on both sides are not Muslim tears or Jewish tears, not Christian or Hindu, but tears of grief.

The dead in Israel, numbering several hundreds are gone forever, so also those who are dead, dying, and going to die in the Gaza.

Why should these tears be shed?

If only the money spent on weapons, spent on hate, could be used to teach peace, if only stones are used to build bridges and not walls, there would be less weeping and wailing, and more exclamations of joy..!

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

Mental health concerns

Editor, The editorial "World Mental Health Day," (ST Oct 10, 2023) is a timely reminder that more and more people across all age groups are being sucked into the abyss of mental health illness. This is something that grows insidiously and is often not detected by immediate family members until the person takes a drastic step like suicide. It is important for all educational institutions to create awareness about mental health and also space where those who feel they are dragged into depression can get counselled before it is too late.

There is no doubt that social media has created a culture of loneliness amidst a crowd. Most young people today prefer to engage with virtual persons on their mobile phones rather than speak to a real person. Perhaps they feel safer with someone they can disconnect at will rather than having to deal with a real person who might seek for lasting friendship or a long term commitment. Meghalaya is also now a hub of drugs where every single day police are apprehending drug traffickers. This means that Meghalaya is both a transit route for drugs and also has a significant number of drug-consumers. Many families are today trying to cope with

at least one drug addict or alcoholic in the family. It is a tough situation they face because while other members of the family are pursuing their livelihoods, one member is simply a burden. Attempts to send such members for rehabilitation which in turn requires money often proves futile. They return home only to get back into the same old practice. Families are desperate and they too need counselling on how to deal with such situations. Clearly, the Meghalaya Government needs to come up with strategies for families engulfed by the problem of drug addiction of a family member, instead of just arresting the drug peddlers.

One question that bothers me is what happens to the large quantities that escape the eye of the law and are sold in different parts of Meghalaya. Surely the police cannot be detecting every vehicle that comes into the state. At this rate the future of our younger generation is at stake. Society too should take responsibility for this proliferation of drug users. Are we failing our younger generation?

Yours etc.,
Cynthia Lyngdoh Tron,
Via email

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"Collecting more taxes than is absolutely necessary is legalized robbery."

— Calvin Coolidge

The Shillong Times

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Dress-rehearsal for 2024

THE assembly elections in five states would, overall, be a dress rehearsal for the Parliament polls next year. The announcement sets at rest speculations over the holding of simultaneous polls to assemblies and parliament. It is clear to all by now that there are practical difficulties for holding all the polls in one go even as such a thought is well-appreciated and it can reduce the costs involved. Yet, the ruling party can be at a disadvantage in the sense that each voter would, likely, opt to distribute his votes between parties rather than putting all his/her eggs in one basket. The BJP realizes this. Over a period of time, however, assembly and parliament elections can be configured by a conscious effort on the part of the Election Commission.

Unlike the Parliament polls, the issues before the voters in assembly polls would centre round, most importantly, the performance of the outgoing government and the offers, this time, from each party or even candidate. The caste census issue by itself might not cause a consolidation of votes. The Congress and the regional parties are bound to woo the public with a bounty in the form of doles, which helped the Congress in Karnataka. The Congress has said it would come up with a similar manifesto in Madhya Pradesh. The BRS in Telangana too is coming up with new offers of welfare kits to women and disadvantaged groups. Fact is also that several state governments are already facing hard times in terms of funding for development purposes or even to pay salaries to their employees, as huge sums have been diverted for welfare kits with a view to wooing various sections of the society to the ruling parties' side. Such governments are being irresponsible, but politicians seem hell bent in adopting this strategy for future elections.

All the same, the BJP is ruling only one of the five states up for polls, namely Madhya Pradesh, while the Congress runs Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh, the BRS Telangana and the MNF Mizoram. Long-time chief minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan could not retain power for himself and the party in the last polls, but managed to stage a come-back. But the BJP does not appear to be in a mood to give him one more chance. Chances are also that the Congress will have the last laugh in MP. The main fight in Telangana will be between the ruling BRS and the Congress. Ashok Gehlot retains mass support in Rajasthan, but Sachin Pilot will not want to be his deputy. Therein lies the rub. The opposition has been weak in Mizoram. How the results would pan out in these five states is hard to predict.

Culture of 'Donation' in Meghalaya

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

If you are a resident of Shillong, the news item "Donations' sucking shop keepers dry in city" would not have come as a surprise. It is common knowledge that for the last two decades, non-indigenous shopkeepers have been paying informal taxes for doing business in the city. These taxes are politely termed 'donation' but in reality they are pure and simple extortion, which, based on the little law that I know is still an illegal activity. In fact, the Voice of Peoples' Party (VPP) legislator from Nongkrem, Ardent Miller Basaiawmoit, raised the issue of extortion in the recently concluded Meghalaya Assembly session, blaming it for the price rise of essential commodities in the state. The Minister in Charge of Food, Civil Supplies, and Consumer Affairs, Comingone Ymbon, countered him by stating that it is actually insufficient food production, an increase in fuel prices, climate change, insufficient rain, and other factors that have contributed to the price rise and inflation. While the Minister was not entirely wrong in his diagnoses of the factors influencing the general rate of inflation, Ardent Miller Basaiawmoit's claim that extortion also has a role to play in price rises in the city cannot be dismissed.

A few years ago, a friend of mine who is now working in the Manipur Civil Services came to Shillong as part of his training. He was given a tour of the various departments and allowed to check the files to learn about the workings of the bureaucracy. One day when I met him, he told me that he was surprised to discover that the receipt for a light bulb recorded in the files was much higher than the actual cost in the market. Initially, we were not very sure about the reasons for the discrepancy regarding the actual prices and the prices paid by the government to the supplier. Then it became apparent that the supplier had raised the prices because a portion of the amount had to be 'donated' to the officers and the politicians in charge of the department. There is a certain percentage that is earmarked for this purpose. And since the supplier has to make some profits so as to continue in the business, raising the prices was the only option. In this case, normal consumers were not directly affected as they were not paying the inflated prices. But in the long run, the impact on the general public is enormous.

The inflated amount that the government is paying to accommodate the 'donations' to the officers and the ministers comes from funds that have been collected from

the common public through direct and indirect taxes. Examples of direct taxes include income tax, real property tax, personal property tax, and taxes on assets, all of which are paid by an individual taxpayer directly to the government. Indirect taxes, on the other hand, are not levied directly on the common public but are included in goods and services in the form of service tax, central excise and customs duty, value-added tax (VAT), and now the GST.

Since this money belongs to the public, it is expected that it will be spent on creating public goods like infrastructure, education, health, and other services. Now that the funds collected from the public have gone to pay for items at inflated prices, there are fewer funds available for public spending. For a poor state like Meghalaya, this becomes a serious issue as it can generate only limited funds from its internal revenue. This forces it to increase its dependence on central funds and, more recently, on borrowings from external sources. In the last few years, the rate of borrowing has increased manifold,

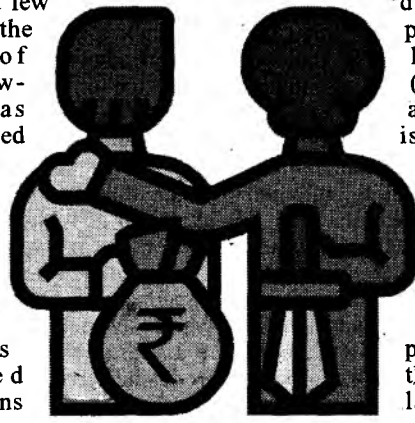
which has raised concerns regarding the capacity of the state to repay the loans in the future. The Chief Minister of the state, Conrad Sangma, tried to downplay the fear by stating that 90% of the loans will be repaid by the Central Government. The state needs to pay only 10%. However, it is not the proportion but the absolute amount and the trend that will determine the repayment capacity of the state. In this context, a look at some of the fiscal indicators does not inspire much confidence.

The dissertation 'A Study of Trend and Magnitude of Public Debt in Meghalaya: (2010-2022)' by Rimiki Phadong, submitted to the School of Economics, Commerce, and Management at Martin Luther Christian University in 2023, is very instructive in this regard. In the dissertation, Rimiki reported that the average growth rate of public debt for all the North-Eastern States from 2011-12 to 2021-22 was 11.66%. The growth

rate in Meghalaya during the same period was 12.51%, which means public debt in the state has been increasing at a faster rate compared to the other states. Then there's the debt-to-gross state GDP ratio, which is an important indicator that shows the capacity of a state to repay its debt. Generally, a low debt-to-GSDP ratio is a sign of a healthy economy that is able to produce goods and services without accumulating future debts. The dissertation mentions that Meghalaya's average debt-to-GSDP ratio of 36.40% was lower than the average ratio for the NE. But what is important to notice is that until 2016-2017, the ratio was less than 40%. Since then, it has increased to 54.59% in 2020-2021. This means that the debt burden of the state has been rapidly increasing over the last few years. In such a situation, repayment will become a big burden for the state unless the state's GDP expands exponentially to generate revenue not only to repay the debt but also to provide good-quality public goods—a very tough balancing act. So

'donations' paid to public servants (officers and ministers) can have a very big impact on the lives of the common people, though the latter may not realise it immediately.

The same logic applies to the shopkeepers in Shillong as well. To compensate for the loss they have incurred from paying 'donations' to the different groups, shopkeepers will undoubtedly be forced to raise the prices of essential commodities. In fact, there was an incident narrated to me by a friend that happened a few weeks ago, which demonstrates how this takes place. A person from one of the groups came to a particular shop to collect 'donations'. An amount of Rs. 10,000 was demanded. The shopkeeper pleaded that he had already given 'donations' to a few other groups and had no more money left to pay. He showed the receipts from the different groups as proof. The person was unmoved and pretended to talk to his superiors, on the phone regarding the situation. He told the shopkeeper that he didn't care who was already paid. He needed his 'donation'. Fi-



Engineering students' suicides not a medical problem in India alone

Need for deep introspection to identify remedial measures

By Dr Arun Mitra

News of suicides by the students from Kota, a dream destination for the aspirants to get coaching for entry into higher education courses like the Engineering and Medicine, are highly disturbing. These students are the next generation who are to shape the future of our country. End of their life at this tender age is heart breaking for the parents who have nurtured their children with love and affection. They are shattered by this irreparable loss. Parents and other family members are likely to develop significant psychological and physical comorbidities under such circumstances. These incidents are also a warning for the society to introspect deep into the whole issue and find out causes and remedial measures.

According to the National Crime Report Bureau data the number of students committing suicides has grown by 70 per cent over the past decade as per a report published in the Money control. The number of students who committed suicides in India rose from 5.7 per cent to 8 per cent of total suicidal deaths in 10 years; that is 7696 in 2011 to 13089 in 2021. This is nearly 70 per cent increase in the decade.

In the present day cut throat competition, there is a mad race for getting better score and higher merit. MCQ type of examinations, have become the routine to check one's knowledge. Purpose of education is to prepare good citizens with ethical values and social concerns. In the growing consumerist culture this has changed and success of a person is measured by entry into prestigious institutions and a career which ensures huge profits. This concept has diminished the trend to join the humanities.

As a result large number of present day generation is devoid of information about history, civics, political science and economics. There is too much of inflow of information on the social media which the young people consider as gospel truth. This affects the analytical capabilities. Too much involvement in the online/virtual working has reduced their interaction with the fellow beings. This has adverse impact on personality development and reduces decision making though collective discussion. Mushrooming coaching enters and their glittering advertisements leave powerful impact even though such centers charge exorbitant amount.

There was a time when the students would discuss several issues in groups and make a collective wisdom. Now there is hardly any student movement compared to 40 years back when student organisations would react to increase in tuition fees, bus & train fares and travel passes for students. They would also agitate for improvement of infrastructure in their school or college. There was a trend to organise debates on the education policy, job opportunities, social harmony, gender equality etc. These things are little to be seen.

Lack of physical activity has worsened the situation. Most of the students in the middle and upper middle classes are pampered at home and are unable to bear the stress of cut throat competition once they move out. Undue pressure and expectations from parents puts them under tremendous stress and a feeling of shame in case of non-fulfilment of their desires. When they find that they are unable to satisfy and have lost all hopes, they resort to such drastic steps to end their life.

Whereas there is need for continuous counselling of the teachers, students, families, parents, there is a real need to look at the system of education. "Just giving counselling to a student will not matter much, because society defines a 'successful' student as someone who clears IITs or such competitive exams by defeating lakhs of other students. We need a society where a kid's worth is tied to talent or extra-curricular activities or hobbies they enjoy, not marks," points out Itisha Nagar, an assistant professor of psychology at Delhi University while talking to The Wire. Societal factors must be addressed in tandem with providing counselling to students according to her.

Albert Einstein had said way back in 1949 that "This crippling of individuals is considered the worst evil of capitalism. Our whole educational system suffers from this evil. An exaggerated competitive attitude is inculcated into the student, who is trained to worship acquisitive success as a preparation for his future career." "If you want your children to be intelligent, read them fairy tales. If you want them to be more intelligent, read them more fairy tales." "A human being is a part of the whole called by us universe, a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feeling as something separated from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty." "Try not to become a man of success. Rather become a man of value."

We have forgotten the fairy tales era when our grandmother used to tell us stories while going to the bed or gather a few children to narrate events of her past experience. That was preparing a person with a wider vision.

Technological revolution would go on. But we have to make corrective methods to develop a youth of moral values and full of compassion and empathy. This is possible through rationalising education for all with equity as envisaged by the Kothari Commission in 1968. The commission had recommended common school and neighbourhood school system. This would have meant mixing of students from different classes and socio economic groups.

However the whole concept has been thrown into dustbin with the neo-liberal economic policies. Education has gone under the control of elite. This has become a global phenomenon points out Michael Apple, Professor of Curriculum and instruction and educational policy, University of Wisconsin USA. Under the Neo liberal economic policy, education is only for those who have resources while a large section is marginalized and alienated.

It is important that students' aptitude is taken into account while deciding the future education plans instead of pressure of market forces. In this work facilitators and psychological counsellors can do useful job. The students should be continuously counselled on health and encouraged to involve in recreational and extracurricular activities. This will help their physical and mental growth. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

Time for Govt to seriously address Shillong's traffic woes

Editor,

With the ever-increasing traffic problems in Shillong, it is important to analyze whether some of the policies followed by the government so far, as the management of traffic in Shillong is concerned, are helping in easing traffic problems. Operation of the Shillong Public Transport (SPT) commonly called red buses is a case in point. 120 such buses were procured in 2011 and another 240 buses in 2013 under the GOI-funded JN-NURM. Although a lesser number of buses would have sufficed the requirement for Shillong in the second phase, we insisted on 240 more buses as a sign of pride rather than practicality. All these 360 buses were meant for Shillong city. The idea at that time was that with efficient public transportation, people would opt for the system and

consequently the number of private taxis would come down and ease traffic movement in the city. At the end of the day, it seems the opposite has happened.

A Special Purpose Vehicle (SPV) was created with top bureaucrats as members to manage the entire operation and with MUDA as the nodal agency. In the initial years, MTC was selected for the operation of the buses on a net revenue-sharing model on a 70:30 basis, but the marriage did not last long. Later on, on the advice of the Ministry Private-Public Partnership (PPP) route was adopted. Tenders were floated, and SHGs and NGOs with next to zero experience in public transport operation were identified for running the system. A good number of buses were handed over to each operator to run the public transport system for Shillong on a net revenue sharing model on a 50:50 basis with operational etiquette, fixed routes, number of trips, frequency and operational costs fixed by the government. It was expected that these operators would take up the maintenance of the vehicles out of the gross

revenue earned. Many of the operators were practically hand-picked with zero experience in the field. Electronic ticketing machines were also issued to the operators.

By around 2015, work also started for an Intelligent Tracking System and a Central Control Room for real-time monitoring and supervision of these buses. Funding for the purpose was provided by GOI. In the beginning, the plan was to develop multiple bus terminals in the outskirts where the buses would be parked, and buses would ply through the identified routes in the city with no long-time stoppage allowed within the city limits. Land for the terminals was identified/provided in Mawblei, Mawlai, Upper Shillong, Pynthorukrah and New Shillong. Sadly, instead of becoming terminals, many of these sites have become graveyards for these buses. Parallely, maxi cabs were introduced as Subsidiary Shillong Public Transport (SSPT) primarily to serve the interior areas of the city not covered by the SPT buses. Shillong Municipal Board was made the nodal agency. The operation of SSPT was

also on a net revenue-sharing basis.

What is the state of the Shillong Public Transport today and what is the purpose they are serving is the question in every citizen's mind. As one enters the city one is greeted with crumbling skeletons of these buses, the few that still ply are a disrespect to a government-owned public utility with a complete lack of repairs and maintenance. The majority of buses are already dead and buried; there was no discipline or professionalism on the part of the operators; there was lack of punctuality with no sense of timing and the only certificate to operate being the ML01 tag.

It is not uncommon to see 10 to 20 buses being parked at a time along any stretch of the city road. In today's traffic scenario in Shillong, the SPT buses have turned out to be more of a hurdle than a traffic solution for Shillong. Where on earth would you find 10-20 buses parked along the road, empty of passengers and oblivious to the chaos that they are creating? Drivers are busy on their mobile phones. Even the traffic police look

on helplessly and any suggestion is met with strong political opposition.

The thought that comes to mind with the current performance, is how the system is sustaining itself. To top it all, even other private buses are competing alongside the SPT buses and seem to be doing well. Is the government now providing the operators with the operational costs? Is any revenue being shared with MUDA as earlier envisaged and the agreement signed? God alone knows whether there is any monitoring being done by MUDA, the nodal agency. It is high time now that the performance of SPT is reviewed keeping in view the deteriorating traffic situation in the city. There are possibilities of refurbishing and rerouting these buses to serve the outskirts of the city and bring in discipline among the operators. The central part of the city could be covered by the SSPT maxi cabs which appears to be more suitable to our road and traffic conditions.

Even if small changes are made, it can have a profound impact on the city traffic. In fine, lack of experience on the part of the operators

and lack of monitoring and enforcement by the nodal agency appears to be the main reason for the failure of the SPT buses. Blaming the Shillong Traffic Police is useless so long as we keep their hands tied. While we as citizens debate endlessly on the traffic scenario in the city and blame flies thick and fast, it is high time that the State Government sits down and reviews this aspect of the transportation system of the city and brings about changes keeping in view the deterioration happening every day in the city roads. Only smart roads, new commercial centres and multi-storied office complexes will not make life easier for citizens of Shillong but changes have to be made in all the public utilities in the city.

Yours etc,
B. Dutta,
Shillong-1

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"Those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities."

— Voltaire

The Shillong Times

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Truth as casualty

WHEN crooks run a government, truth will be the first casualty. From this basis, they build the rest in their nasty scheme of things. It is premature to blame the Modi government for some controversial transfers effected in the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) establishment that scrutinizes government spending. But, there is every chance that mischief has been played at the highest level in these transfers -- among others -- of three senior officials who produced some sensational audit reports. The three were transferred this week -- exactly a month after these reports caused a furore in Parliament. The audit exposed chances of huge corruption in the Dwarka Expressway Project and the Ayushman Bharat. One officer, in particular was involved in the audit report on the Bharatmala Pariyojana Phase-I.

In the Dwarka project, the cost escalation was mind-boggling -- from the initial estimate of Rs 18 crore to Rs 250 crore per kilometre. Notably, this hike was done with approval from the political bosses -- the Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs. This rekindles old memories. The UPA-II had an inglorious exit from power in 2014, mainly on the back of the CAG reports that cited huge corruption in the 2G Spectrum allocations and the award of coal mine contracts. Now, in the run-up to the 2024 parliament polls, we are back to square one. The halo of Modi being incorruptible could fade if the Opposition pursued these issues to their logical conclusion.

India is getting increasingly corrupt at the political and bureaucratic levels. The clever among these join hands and loot the exchequer right and left. Leaders who come to power for a term of no more than five years are not serious about setting such wrongs right. The weaklings rather build on the shaky foundations left behind by the previous government. Many leaders wielding power do not necessarily govern. They effect cosmetic improvements, play safe, avoid live wires, and start concentrating on ways to retain their power for the next term too by wooing the people via kits and the like. Prime Minister Narendra Modi is no exception. Overall, he avoided creating awkward situations, showed a sense of maturity and effected improvements in some areas. But, a lot of work is left undone. He tackled only a fraction of India's pressing problems. Putting a lot of money in highway development was a good idea. The Vande Bharat trains are certainly an improvement on the jaded and rusted rail system. Yet, the speed of Indian Railways as a whole is ludicrously low even nearly ten years after Modi promised to take the nation to the Bullet age. And add to these the new corruption scandals. Corruption is clearly embedded in the vitals of governance in this country.

Manipur: A saga of distress, disruption and despair

By Patricia Mukhim

A visit to Kangpokpi district of Manipur, one of the worst affected by the recent violence that started on May 3 this year is heart-breaking. There are 57 relief camps across the district and distraught families whose homes have been burnt down have spent the last six months in these camps with the bare minimum needs met. The Shillong-based Martin Luther Christian University which has a good number of Kuki-Zo students on its roll has been extending relief assistance to meet the immediate needs of the inmates in relief camps. It was a rare blessing to be able to accompany the University Chancellor, Dr Glen Kharkongor and Dr Rennie Lakadong, Dean of Educational Outreach on this visit to better understand the situation on the ground, much of which remains unreported.

Once the violence abates, it is normal for the media to focus its eyeballs on another theatre of action where the current Israel versus Palestine conflict is raging. Manipur is too distant to matter for those ruling this country. It is our own bare-

crucial time or the privacy, the silence and the sleep needed to recover from the trauma of childbirth at a time when their lives have been completely disrupted and the only home they have known has gone up in flames. Over and above all the trauma that has visited them is the spectre of uncertainty that haunts these families because they have to start life afresh. And they don't know when and how! The very thought makes one's heart bleed. We will never really fathom the depths of despair; the wretchedness and sense of utter helplessness of people whose lives are wrecked forever.

The mobile phone which otherwise is an instrument of distraction has unwittingly become a blessing in disguise as little children spend their time playing video games and perhaps some children's films. Without that temporary distraction it would have been difficult for parents to keep their sanity in these crowded, enclosed spaces where families spread their

not visited those in Imphal.

In the five relief camps visited, one of which is in the Industrial Training Institute (ITI) we witnessed a community kitchen where the only food available is rice, dal (which looks watery) and fried potatoes. What nutrition will this food provide especially to children in their growing up years? On rare occasions some do-gooders send money and then eggs are purchased and served to the inmates. It's unimaginable that India with its rich resources and the tribal fraternity across the region that should have bonded at this moment of crisis to extend help to the 40,000 plus people in different relief camps has been found wanting. Clearly, we seem to have lost our humanity.

When I asked the people of Kangpokpi where the classes for the ITI students are being held temporarily while the main building is used as a relief camp, they said the Institution was barely functioning. There were neither teachers nor the

On our visit to what is called the "frontline" which is the area demarcating the boundary between Kangpokpi and Imphal a huge contingent of CRPF personnel were guarding a place called Gampiphai in what looked like a border between two countries with bunkers all around as a self-defence mechanism. Further away in the forest around the Nepali village and Liangmei Naga villages were young Kuki-Zo volunteers dressed in battle fatigues and carrying guns. These young men, nay boys who should be attending schools and colleges but are now duty bound to stand guard round the clock lest there are attacks or attempts to set houses on fire by miscreants coming from beyond the well-set boundaries. These young men do shift duties and follow a strict regimen of exercise and football to keep fit. There are families that volunteer to cook their food for them. It's an existential crisis of unprecedented proportions.

What is most distressing about the Manipur situation is the complete breakdown of governance and civilians being armed to the teeth --



facial idealism that makes us turn to Delhi to resolve our problems big and small as if we have lost the capacity to think for ourselves. Let's accept the fact that Delhi doesn't care if we disappear from the face of this earth. This region is just a hotbed of problems that takes up a lot of the Delhi Durbar's precious time when they have better things to attend to such as the upcoming state elections. But let me not digress.

The first relief camp we visited was called Mandap Relief Camp housed inside a community hall. There were over 280 inmates of which 60 are children. The camp has disabled persons and some who are mentally ill. The inmates that were ailing were allowed to stay in rooms that were meant to be used for other purposes during peace times. Three women had given birth to babies in the last six months. Only a woman can understand the pain and agony of not having the basic medical care needed at this

bedding on the floor, of the large hall in the evening and fold up these makeshift beddings in the daytime. Now that winter is approaching, families are already worried about how to keep themselves warm.

After Covid struck in 2020 and there were two solid years of loss of normal schooling for kids, no one thought that a similar yet more cruel disruption would up-end lives like this. Rev K Sithlou, the Spokesperson, Committee on Tribal Unity (CoTU) an organisation formed after the conflict broke out on May 3, last narrated the tales of woe faced by the Kuki-Zo community in accessing basic necessities. The Government of Manipur seems to have abandoned the people in the hills. The Chief Minister has not visited a single relief camp even as a gesture of humanity. In his interview to a section of the media the Chief Minister says he has not visited the relief camps in the hills because he has also

necessary equipment needed for an ITI. A general sense of futility is what one senses on seeing the governance vacuum in this hill district and the others inhabited by the Kuki-Zo people.

Listening to the academicians and officers who are now displaced from their positions at Manipur University and at the Regional Institute of Medical Sciences (RIMS) and how they managed to escape by a hair's breadth sends shivers up the spine. They were hunted down and got away through sheer luck, by hiding in drains and the thick bushes around the University campus and thankfully under cover of darkness. They left behind all their belongings and just ran for their lives. That's how the targeted attacks on the Kuki-Zo people in Imphal happened. Even in a war there is enough warning given to civilians by security forces to flee to safety but in this case no such warning was sounded. The Kuki-Zo people were caught unawares.

the valley extremists -- in the main using weapons stolen from police armoury. Till date 200 Kuki villages were burnt down which include 7000 plus homes and about 360 churches and a death toll of 143. Clearly the aggressors were prepared and the victims caught by surprise. There is uncertainty and a sense of futility writ large on parents' eyes when their children ask them when they will return home to prepare for Christmas. How do parents give false hopes to their children? And who will mend the damage to young minds that are disturbed beyond measure. In Kangpokpi there is a ramshackle Mission Hospital where doctors displaced from Imphal are rendering yeomen's service. But they admit that the Hospital is deficient on so many counts.

We speak of the need to nurture hope just to survive the daily ordeal. Right now that hope is like a candle in the wind... flickering to remain alive...

Let's strive for something new

By Riwanki Suchiang

On September 30, 2023, I attended the Motivational Talk of Prof Of Eminence, (Dr.) Sanjeev P. Sahani at Shillong Commerce College. Prof. Sahani is one of the most renowned figures across India and globally. He is the Founder & Principal Director of the Jindal Institute of Behavioural Sciences (JIBS) at the Jindal Global University, Sonapat. He is also the Director for "Centre for Innovative Leadership and Change", "Centre for Victimology and Psychological studies", "Centre for Community Mental Health", "Centre for Criminology and Forensic Studies", Member of the Governing Body and Advisor to the Vice Chancellor at the Jindal Global University.

At the end of his motivational talk, during the question hour, a student asked him whether it is possible for citizens of Meghalaya to work in the State and become successful when the economy and employment rate are both low. Surprisingly, the answer of Prof. Sahani was positive.

Prof Sahani explained that Meghalaya has a very rich heritage of sources and resources to start up any new business with and the only thing needed is to work hard and be innovative. In short, we have to have big dreams and start realizing and executing our dreams.

This answer makes a lot of sense. Having grown up in Meghalaya and also have visited and lived in a

same areas. A great example of that is Woodland Extension (hospital) at Sabahmang West Jaithia Hills and setting up of Bethany Extension (hospital) at Nongpoh. We all know that they are of great service to the people living in those areas. In terms of educational institutions the Don Bosco College, Byndihati in East Jaithia Hills, the Loyola College at Williamnagar in East Garo Hills are a great service to the society as a whole. These are all run by private parties and we are sure the people will benefit from them and similarly the owners of those institutions. They will not end there. They can also pass on their businesses and institutions to their kith and kin in the next generation.

Let me come back to our State. Meghalaya has very high hopes for the future generations in many aspects such as in education, health, sports, economy etc. However, if we are not careful all our dreams will go in vain. Those possessions will be reaped by outsiders. We don't have to blame them. In fact it's not right and just to do that. Let us instead introspect on what it is that we are lacking. One common thing that we lack is "work-culture." Many of us don't work hard. We only want money. The majority of us want quick money. We work today and want to draw the wages tomorrow. The quality of our work is very poor. We cannot deny the fact that

The saddest thing is that many of the families here in Meghalaya who are well to do and are financially well equipped to start any business have become bankrupt today. Many such families cannot even educate their children properly. Such families have children that have dropped out of school. I have a friend who told me, "If the Government Of Meghalaya had not banned coal-mining I would not have completed my B.Sc and I would have been a coal-mining business-man now."

few states in India I believe that Meghalaya offers those that can work hard the opportunity to make it big. An analysis of our state informs us that there are many entrepreneurs and successful business persons here -- both locals and non-locals. Most of the business is around coal mining, tourism, timber export, marketing, etc. However there are a large number of people in our state who are living below the poverty line. The irony is that some of our citizens have lifestyles that are akin to that of celebrities but right in front of their courtyards, there are families who can't afford three meals a day. It appears that the phrase, "the rich are becoming richer and the poor are becoming poorer," has been proved true in our State. Now, our state is heading towards what is called, the "survival of the fittest."

Our natural wealth has been destroyed; forests have been cleared for timber export and charcoal production. Many of the benefits that come from there go to our neighbouring states. We, instead receive the unpredictable natural calamities that were unheard of in the past. It seems to me that these happen due to the clearing down of forests and the use of unscientific methods in extracting our natural resources. The saddest part is that those rich individuals in our State do not contribute anything by way of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and neither do they invest their wealth for the well being of the poor and the society. They could have built health centers in remote villages or even in the sub-divisional headquarters. This would have benefited society a great deal. They can also set up good colleges and educational centres in those

our labourers waste their time in consuming betel-nut (bam kwai) and smoking (dih-duma). We start work only at around 9:00 - 10:00 am and end up by 4:30 pm. Our overall productivity is very low.

The saddest thing is that many of the families here in Meghalaya who are well to do and are financially well equipped to start any business have become bankrupt today. Many such families cannot even educate their children properly. Such families have children that have dropped out of school. I have a friend who told me, "If the Government Of Meghalaya had not banned coal-mining I would not have completed my B.Sc and I would have been a coal-mining business-man now." Here we can understand that we lack the skills on how to utilize our wealth. Instead of investing on something that will bring lifetime income/benefits, we waste money on extravagance. Let's ask ourselves where is all the money that we got from coal-mining?

I want to conclude by saying that we need to do a reality check and start doing something new and not be stuck with unrealistic expectations. Expectation is something we hope to get but we have to work towards that goal. For instance, I may want to become rich, but the reality is that I need to struggle over many years to get there. I also have to follow a trajectory so that I can reach my goal. We cannot achieve our goals if we shun hard work. Let us be reminded of what Gandhiji said, "In India we don't lack good people but we have so many good people who have not done anything." This is very much applicable to our state of Meghalaya.

Let's be aspirants who want to do something new.

Letters to the Editor

Menace of extortion

Editor,
The news item "Donations sucking shopkeepers dry in city" (ST-October 9, 2023) and article "Culture of Donation in Meghalaya" (ST-October 12, 2023) had exposed the illegal culture of 'extortion' in the name of donation by many organizations that is prevailing in Meghalaya. The brunt of such illegal collection borne by non-tribal businessmen, both established as well as marginal ones is undeniable. Although the issue is an open secret, none of the victims dare to lodge any formal complaint before the Police for obvious fear of reprisal such as vandalism of the business establishment or physical assault by the cadres of those organizations.

There is no reason to believe that the administration is unaware of the menace but inaction on their part seems nothing but tacit support to the culture of 'donation'. It

may be construed that Government considers such large scale donation collection as indirect employment to large sections of drop outs who are otherwise unfit for any gainful profession.

Yours etc.,
NK Kehar,
Shillong-3

Plight of junior lawyers in Meghalaya

Editor,
The legal profession is often regarded as a noble one. In our current generation, it's evident that Meghalaya boasts of a significant number of legal graduates, despite having fewer law colleges compared to Assam. However, the situation for most junior advocates in our state is far from ideal, as they struggle to earn a dignified living. Many junior lawyers are essentially treated as subordinates, lacking the ability to demand a minimum wage in a profession where they

possess a deep understanding of the law.

Moreover, the issue extends beyond low wages. Junior lawyers in Meghalaya often find themselves grappling with excessive workload, leading to severe mental stress. They are frequently required to work long hours, attend to a multitude of cases, and meet tight deadlines. This relentless workload can result in burnout, jeopardizing both their well-being and the quality of legal services they can provide.

In this challenging landscape, the time has come for junior advocates to unite and demand their rights. It's crucial for these aspiring legal professionals to come together, form associations, and advocate for fair wages, reasonable working hours, and access to mental health support. By joining forces, junior lawyers can create a powerful voice that compels the legal community and authorities to take action.

Despite the presence of legislation such as the Minimum Wages Act, 1948,

which prescribes minimum compensation for employees, junior lawyers continue to face financial hardship. The added burden of overworking and the associated mental stress further compounds their challenges. It's only through collective action that they can hope to bring about the necessary changes in the legal profession, ensuring not only a brighter future for themselves but also upholding the principles of justice and fairness that the legal profession represents.

Yours etc.,
Max Lyngdoh,
Via email

Wake up MDA Government

Editor,
As I read through the recent CAG report, a profound sense of disappointment and concern engulfs me. The report sheds light on the inner workings of our government, and it pains me to see how the MDA government seems more intent on appeasing

other political parties to maintain their grip on power than on serving the needs of the people.

It is evident from my personal observations that the administration is struggling to manage various departments effectively. It appears that, in a desperate bid to retain coalition partners, ministerial chairs are offered without careful consideration of competence or dedication to public service.

The heartbreaking reality is that we are gradually sinking into a quagmire of debt, while development remains a distant dream confined only to official documents. Ordinary taxpayers like myself bear the brunt of this mismanagement, and it is disheartening to witness the litany of scandals that pervade our newspapers, further eroding our faith in the government's ability to deliver on its promises.

The MDA government must take a long, hard look at its priorities. The citizens of our state deserve more than just empty rhetoric and political maneuvering. We

yearn for the fulfilment of basic necessities, such as reliable bus services, efficient traffic management, consistent water supply, effective waste management, well-maintained roads, quality education, and employment opportunities.

It is not enough to merely hold onto power; the true measure of a government's success lies in its ability to enhance the lives of its citizens. I implore the MDA government to set aside political considerations and work earnestly to address the pressing needs of our people. The time for action is now, and our collective future depends on the decisions made today.

In the spirit of hope and longing for a better tomorrow.

Yours etc.,
R Sarki,
Shillong

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"Happiness is an attitude of mind, born of the simple determination to be happy under all outward circumstances."

— J. Donald Walters

The Shillong Times

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Unending political churning

WITH 2024 parliamentary elections approaching it is not surprising to hear of candidates desirous of contesting for the two Lok Sabha seats – Shillong and Tura gearing themselves up for the battle royale. Those who had hastily migrated to the Trinamool Congress in 2021-22 now find themselves out in the cold after being rejected by their constituents. It is not easy to switch parties and expect voters to also swing with the tide. Much has got into making them accept a particular political ideology, so for them to change into a new one, particularly one that they can hardly identify with since it has no tribal features is to expect too much. Besides, the TMC is now all but dissipated. Not much is heard of its activities and other than in West Bengal which is its origin it appears to have lost steam. Hence politically astute players like Mukul Sangma and George Lyngdoh who have many years to go before they retire from active politics have to look for viable options.

Mukul Sangma has repeatedly denied making overtures to the BJP in the past and it is untenable for him to be in that Party for obvious reasons – one of which is that as long as Himanta Biswa Sarma rules the roost in the BJP and is head of the North East Democratic Alliance (NEDA), he will ensure that no one rivals him. Mukul Sangma is a tough opponent and not a pushover like the other state chief ministers in the region. It is therefore not surprising that he is toying with the idea of returning to the Congress which he had left in a huff. True Mukul Sangma has set conditions for his return and it would appear that he is the only leader of stature who could give the present MP, Agatha Sangma (if she still decides to contest the Lok Sabha seat), a run for her money. Now that Bernard Marak is likely to be a contender for the Tura seat, Mukul Sangma would have a better chance at winning the seat with the votes split between the BJP and NPP.

As far as the Shillong Lok Sabha seat is concerned there is a problem of plenty. News that George Lyngdoh former MLA or Umroi who had lost his seat to NPP candidate Damanbait Lamare is likely to join the NPP and contest the Shillong seat is rather surprising considering that Lyngdoh had a rather unsavoury encounter with his rival's supporters during the election campaign period. But politics is a fair game and politicians need survival techniques else they will be pushed to the margins and forgotten. The VPP has set up a candidate who could upset the political fortunes of many going by the manner in which the VPP anthem is gaining acceptance. But parliamentary elections are a different ball game. So it's a game of wait and watch!

Beleaguered Hell

Israel, The Art of Crying Wolf & Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine

By Kelsang Trinlay

This is a callout to your editorial of October 9, 2023 on the horrific war, accompanied by death and destruction, in the Middle East between Israel and the besieged Palestinians. It would be a gross understatement to define the editorial as breathtakingly biased both in tenor and in nomenclature, not to speak of historiography. These in turn lead the reader to a dark tunnel of hypocrisy and falsified narratives. The reference to Hamas as "Militant Palestinian Islamist group Hamas" smacks of parroting the clichéd narrative of western media and their social-intellectual-political circles, due mainly to the massive campaign of the Jewish lobby operating in the US and EU.

Hamas - to its own people and to progressive liberal narratives, are defined as the Palestinian Resistance Movement. That is exactly what they are to the Palestinian people of Gaza and the Occupied West Bank. They won the popular democratic mandate in an election monitored and certified by the UN. One of the few in the Middle East, as opposed to the dictatorships sponsored by the West.

"Hamas got direct backing from Iran" - I am assuming that this preposterous axiom is an opinion because no citation was provided. The Shia Republic of Iran supports the resistance and liberation movement of the Palestinian people but whether or not it directly participated in the attack on Israel is a matter of serious geo-political and strategic analysis not a fantasy allegation.

A few days after Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu delivered a boastful speech at the United Nations, announcing the establishment of a new Middle East centred around Israel and its new Arab "partners", the Palestinians, whom he totally omitted from his fantasy regional map devoid of all of Gaza, all of Occupied West Bank, entire Jerusalem and all of Golan Heights, dealt him and Israel a fatal blow, politically and strategically.

The Palestinian resistance movement, which by the way, includes not just Hamas, but other groups fighting for the freedom of Palestinians, launched a meticulously planned, well-executed lightning incursion from Gaza into Israel, by air, sea and land. In tandem with thousands of missiles fired towards Israeli targets, hundreds of Palestinian fighters attacked Israeli military and

civilian areas in the southern part of the country. The latest figures are still pouring in subject to the genocide calls by the Israeli Establishment inside Gaza.

The editorial states, "By virtue of its long-held offensives and bloodshed against neighbouring Israelis, this entity is designated as a "terrorist" group by the UN and the West." This duplicitous contention, in tune with the standard deceptive depiction of the history of Palestine by Israeli sources, Zionist writers and their media, is that of turn-speak.

"Turn-speak - the cynical inverting or distorting of facts, which, for example, makes the victim appear as culprit." Joan Peters, *Time Immemorial*, p 173... Professor Finkelstein is of Jewish origin and is a descendant of Holocaust survivors and is considered an authority of Israel-Palestine scholarship including the Holocaust. To quote him... "On 15th May 1948 the last British soldier left Palestine. The stage was set, the timing was perfect and the plan was working to a tune. When I asked Eshkol: "what are we going to do with a million Arabs?" he said: I get it. You want it the dowry, but you don't like the bride!"

Exchange between LEVI ESHKOL and GOLDA MEIR during a Mapai Party meeting September 1967 says, the ethnic cleansing of Palestine had now begun. By the time the British left in end May 1948 one third of the Palestinians had already been evicted."

Israeli and Palestinian international human rights groups has compiled and archived over 60 major massacres from pre-1948 up to 2014 by the Israeli government or by Zionist terror groups. (www.occupiedpalestine.wordpress.com). After their ethnic cleansing from their own traditional land, evicted and made refugees in neighbouring countries, about two million Palestinians have been caged in a 256 sq.km land mass making it the largest open-air prison

in the world.

Professor Ilan Pappé, senior professor of Haifa University in Israel and scholar of Middle East Studies documents each massacre of the Palestinians by the Zionist forces. I quote him - "Thus, when winter was over and spring of 1949 ushered in the, Palestine of 250 years had changed beyond recognition. The rural heart of Palestine of undulating hills and picturesque villages was ruined. Burnt and bulldozed for new Jewish settlements and for cultivation with their names acquiring Hebrewized versions of their original Arab names".

The catastrophe that befell the Palestinians would be remembered in their collective memory as The Naqba.

Hamas's objectives in the operation are no secret: First, retaliate and punish Israel for its fifty six years of brutal occupation, massacres repeated ad nauseum, oppression, encouraging and protecting illegal settlements, and desecration of Palestinian religious symbols, especially Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem; second, take aim at Arab "normalisation" with Israel that embraces its apartheid regime in the region; and lastly, secure another prisoner exchange in order to get as many Palestinian political prisoners released from Israeli jails as possible the Nakbah, the catastrophe.

Hubris has finally caught up with Israel and its arrogant leaders, who long thought themselves invincible and repeatedly underestimated their enemies. Since the "surprise" Arab attack of October 1973, successive Israeli leaders have been shocked and awed, again and again, by what the people they oppressed have been capable of.

Again quoting your editorial - "Arafat recognized Israel's right to exist and expressed a readiness for a negotiated settlement of the issues between Palestinians and Israelis. It opposed the Oslo peace accord signed between PLO and Israel."

Yes Hamas did not recognize Israel but the PLO and the PA did, and what did they get in return? Absolutely nothing vindicating them. The Oslo Agreement signed between the PA and Israel was an exercise in useless futility. Israel openly violated the Agreement continuing the 56 years of illegal occupation of Palestinian land which in turn transformed

into an Apartheid regime worse than that of South Africa, thereby prompting the Nobel Peace Prize winner Desmond Tutu to say, "I know first-hand that Israel has created an apartheid reality within its borders and through its occupation. The parallels to my own beloved South Africa are painfully stark indeed..."

In these 56 years, Israel massacred civilians and children, smashed residential apartments, killed journalists point blank, the most famous being that of US citizen Shirin Abu Akleh causing international outrage, bombed out entire villages, schools, hospitals, power and water supply lines to name a few. They violated UN Resolutions and committed International War Crimes.

The editorial which states that the tiny nation of Israel has the capacity to withstand the collective pressure from the Islamic world by virtue of the wholesome support Tel Aviv gets from the US, where Jews are a dominant part of the power-club" is both an understatement as well as distortion. Here is a rogue nation formed by the Machiavellian lobbying of the British and the Americans half a century ago and now funded by them with the most highly advanced military hardware and let's not forget in possession of nuclear weapons, committing war crimes on what remains of the Palestinian people caged and enslaved in a narrow sliver of land with international impunity.

All this with the icing on the hypocrisy cake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine where the Russians are invaders and occupiers but in the Middle East Israel is the angelic entity and the Palestinians do not exist.

What is then expected from this humungous hypocrisy and a crime against humanity of epic proportion, other than armed struggle, may I ask?

It reminds one of Malcolm X - "If you stick a knife in my back 9 inches and pull it out 6 inches there is no progress. If you pull it out all the way, that's not progress. Progress is healing the wound. And they wouldn't even admit that the knife is there." Healing the wound is to terminate the illegal occupation and live in peace as neighbours. The Palestinians have made it clear today that they would rather fight on their feet for justice and freedom than die on their knees in humiliation. It is high time the Israelis heed the lessons of history.

Need to enrich and promote Khasi literature

By Louis Pyngrope

At the outset I want to make the readers aware as to why this article is published in English when its contents are clearly concerned with the Khasi community. The reason is because the vernacular newspapers cannot accommodate the Khasi version in their publications.

The reason we are unable to enrich our own literature is because of our inclination to use English both as our written and spoken language because of a false pride and because there is no societal imperative to make us value our own language. Hence our propensity to use English instead of Khasi in both spoken and written form becomes automatic. Further, our society and government does not make it compulsory for the Khasi students to opt for Khasi as one of their optional subjects till they pass Class XII standard examination.

As a race, we should also

are very melodious and the melody changes with the change in altitude of the places we live in. For example, as we descend from a place of high altitude viz. Smit towards lower altitude areas like Riwar, we can observe the change in the melody of the dialects. Whereas in Smit, the our dialect is rather crude, it becomes more melodious and sonorous as we enter the areas of Riwar. The change in melody not only happens in Khasi and Jaintia Hills; it appears to be a global phenomenon where the dialects becomes more or less like a song in the areas of lower altitude.

Again, as we move from Smit towards Guwahati, we observe more or less the same change. I believe all these can be considered as our new findings with proper documentation. Similarly, we can also document our matrilineal system, customs

There are still many facts needed to be unearthed. The most important part that we need to research is to discover our original script and alphabets as the existing Roman alphabets cannot do justice to the spellings of many Khasi words in the different Khasi dialects (especially the words used by the Pnars).

remember not to encourage our children to speak in any language other than Khasi when they are conversing among themselves or in their own community gatherings. If the mentioned restrictions are in place and followed strictly by all, then there will not be anything like the Rynsan Iathir: Balei ym pat lah ban ithuh ia ka ktien Khasi and success of whatever we planned will favour our community.

There are still many facts needed to be unearthed. The most important part that we need to research is to discover our original script and alphabets as the existing Roman alphabets cannot do justice to the spellings of many Khasi words in the different Khasi dialects (especially the words used by the Pnars). We cannot simply rule out the fact that we do not know anything from the past that our forefathers/uncles left for us to research or were they so careless that they have not left anything for us to explore so that we can find our own alphabets? The memory stones (in Khasi called Mot) erected in all parts of Khasi and Jaintia hills may give information about any individual who might have contributed a great deal to the clan, community, etc.

From the maw bri, erected to demarcate the boundaries between the different Hima under the governance of the Syiems/ Dalois, are also indicated the extension of the kingdom of the 30 syiems/himas. We can therefore gain information about the extent of the area which was under the kingdom ruled by the Syiems/ Dalois. All these were left untouched till date and are still available for study and research. There is no information yet that could be extracted from them. Again, many Ossurries (Maw shieng) that are found especially in Riwar areas can provide information of the clan such as the bones of a particular clan which were interred there; the place where they grew up, and their contributions if any; the total no of males, females, children, and causes of their death like epidemic, etc. So far, from these memory stones we have not tried to extract information and hence no accurate statistics on clans or people living in a particular kingdom at a particular decade/time could be obtained.

Further, it is a general observation that our dialects

and blood relationships between different clans as it seems to have been supported by scientific frameworks. Again, we can find similar links on behaviour and food habits of people within our state who also have a somewhat similar behaviour.

In the near future, I am sure this article will be considered so precious as to wake up the Khasi Authors' Society so that they will remember this for life. Let this be the wake up call to all respectable members associated with the researchers of some departments of NEHU viz. Khasi, Sociology, Anthropology, etc. The mentioned departments can jointly formulate a Research Scheme for which they may get funding when approved and passed by the Academic Council and Executive Council of the University. The concerned departments can open up the scope for our students to do their research on the above-mentioned topics or on any other relevant topics.

As reported in newspapers, the Chief Minister of Meghalaya had assured the Khasi Hills District Council to give funding for doing research on any issue pertaining to culture, traditions, custom and practices of the Khasi community etc. The District Council should take advantage of this so that it can offer scholarship/fellowship to research scholars of some departments of NEHU viz Khasi, Sociology, Anthropology, etc., so they can pursue their research on the above-mentioned topics. This may help in enriching Khasi literature which we are still lagging behind in.

Prestigious associations like the Khasi Authors' Society should encourage good write-ups from knowledgeable people to enrich our literature. We still lack books that provide us information on blood relationships like pyrxa, pyrxa ksiew, etc. as they do not seem to have any existence in our modern society. These types of books are essential for our school students.

Another general observation is the wrong usage of the Khasi words 'ialade' or 'ialajong' as seen and heard on social media, film, plays, etc. There is a lot of work to be done to refine Khasi language and literature.

(The writer is Retired HOD Department of Physics, Lady Keane College)

Letters to the Editor

Combating extortion through transparency

Editor,
I am writing in reference to the enlightening editorial, "Diminishing returns of extortion," (ST October 11, 2023), which brought to light a matter of utmost importance that has long been buried under the shroud of silence - the insidious issue of extortion and the undisclosed source of funds that sustain various pressure groups in our state, Meghalaya.

For too long, this topic has been taboo, and the fear of repercussions from self-styled custodians of the "Jaithynriew" has deterred open discourse. However, it is heartening to see that your esteemed paper has finally mustered the courage to call out the extortion that has been plaguing our State. As the editorial rightly points out, these pressure groups seem to operate with mysterious sources of funding that enable them to make donations, organize events, and exert pressure on the government. It is only natural to wonder where these funds originate, and whether they should be subjected to scrutiny under the purview of the Right to Information Act.

Moreover, the possible link between opposition to the implementation of railway lines and such extortion is a point worth pondering. The extortion issue has been

festering in our state for a considerable period, particularly in Shillong. Traders and businesspersons, regardless of their tribal or non-tribal backgrounds, had no choice but to yield to these demands, often at the risk of their lives. The scenario only began to change in the year 2000, when then Home Minister (late) R G Lyngdoh filed FIRs against suspected contributors to militant organizations, which subsequently reduced extortion activities to a significant extent.

However, the problem of extortion has persisted, with various groups now claiming to work in the name of public welfare but surviving on extortion. This has led to undue harassment, particularly for businesses, from the smallest to the largest, including contracting firms. The adverse effects of extortion are not limited to businesses but have also contributed to the skyrocketing prices of essential commodities, as every truck entering Meghalaya is taxed, and various sectors face this burden, from fruits, vegetables, and fish to clothes merchants.

The silence of the administration and the inaction of the police are particularly concerning. The fact that extortion has been prevalent for so long and businesses have suffered greatly due to it begs the question: Did the authorities not know about this ongoing issue? In order to combat crime effectively, timely and proactive measures are essential. As the editorial rightly points out, crime left unaddressed will fester and deteriorate society's foundations.

Transparency in the funding sources of these pressure groups is necessary to restore faith in their actions and intentions. By bringing such transactions within the purview of the Right to Information Act, we can ensure accountability and, in turn, potentially reduce extortion. The recent acknowledgment by the police to deal with extortionists is welcome news, but it is crucial that they do so effectively, with the support and cooperation of those affected. Reporting and filing FIRs should not be a perilous task, and victims should have confidence in the ability of law enforcement to protect them.

It is high time that we confront these issues openly and transparently, as only through collective action can we hope to eliminate the menace of extortion and rebuild our state, bringing it to new heights of progress and development.

Yours etc.,
Kynrem Lyndan
Shillong-3

Clean Options for Potable Water

Editor
During the last few weeks a number of letters to the editor on supply of untreated water and serious concerns from the citizens have been published in your esteemed paper. A number of writers such as Salil Gwal, Krishna Chetri, Pinky Lodh, and others have expressed their concerns through these letters.

The residents of Shillong are thankful to the Federation of Khasi Jaintia and Garo People (FKJGP) who have revealed the fact that 44 localities within Shillong are consuming unsafe water, as per the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India. Detection of Coliform and E.coli organisms, lower pH value, high turbidity and iron content all are a severe risk for our health.

A few years back (Shillong Times dated August 2, 2019), I had suggested a few measures which can solve these problems. I have suggested that 'Dissolved Air Flootation' treatment is generally used for the primary stage removal of suspended particles in water which is distinctly different from the conventional methods of reducing turbidity since the conventional methods involve chemical coagulation to group particles into floc sand giving them time to settle down. In the Dissolved Air Flootation system tiny air bubbles are injected to the water. Particles adhere to the bubbles and float to the surface forming a layer of froth that is removed intermittently. The conventional method is not able to take advantage of the low turbidity in the water because coagulants are necessary for flocculation of suspended particles.

By adopting this Dissolved Air Flootation technology, turbidity in the raw water remains well under control, that is, under 10 NTU (Nephelometric Turbidity Units). This will make it possible for the plant to run

in what is called direct filtration mode, where water is taken directly to the filtration tank by-passing the clarifiers thereby reducing chemical and electrical consumption. This will also reduce costs. This technology would require less civil work and therefore lower the cost. This particular technology is now acceptable in many Indian cities since it also tackles the problem of algae which is common in our water. Again, I suggest that our PHE department as well as SMB should contact the Bengaluru Water Supply and Sewerage Board to get the whole technology in order to provide potable drinking water for the Shillong residents.

Another water purification device developed by the scientists at the Mumbai based Bhabha Atomic Research Centre (BARC) could provide safe drinking water at a low cost even in remote, non-electrified parts of the country. The device requires sunlight and a cheap, abundantly available material - titanium dioxide - used as a photo-catalyst. In the presence of ultraviolet rays of the sun, this titanium dioxide becomes chemically active and kills bacteria such as E coli (Escherichia coli) which causes diarrhea and is being considered as the toughest of disease-causing microbes found in raw water.

During the year 2005-2006 a water treatment powder 'PUR' was developed by Procter and Gamble (P&G) USA and promoted and popularized by International Federation of Red Cross

and UNICEF, throughout our country as well as other poor countries such as Haiti, Uganda and Pakistan. This powder purifier of water, 'PUR' enables point-of-use water treatment through flocculation, sedimentation and disinfection; the same processes that conventional water treatment is based on. Since its introduction PUR has provided safe, clean water in many countries including the Tsunami-ravaged region of South Asia. It was available in sachets (pouch) and was easily available in medical shops. Procter and Gamble (P&G) company is working at producing many medicines in our country as well as other countries. Our government can promote this PUR for large-scale use by citizens.

Governance systems will determine and decide who has the right to water and related services. Mismanagement, corruption, lack of appropriate institutions, bureaucratic inertia and a paucity of investments in human and physical resources mar our water management today. I hope our government will work on all these methods and systems to overcome the present water problems and provide our citizens their right to water which is fundamental.

Yours etc.,
Kamakhya Bhattacharjee,
Shillong - 1

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

Centenarian blood tests give hints of secrets to longevity



Centenarians, once considered rare, have become commonplace. Indeed, they are the fastest-growing demographic group of the world's population, with numbers roughly doubling every ten years since the 1970s.

How long humans can live, and what determines a long and healthy life, have been of interest for as long as we know. Plato and Aristotle discussed and wrote about the ageing process over 2,300 years ago.

The pursuit of understanding the secrets behind exceptional longevity isn't easy, however. It involves unravelling the complex interplay of genetic predisposition and lifestyle factors and how they interact throughout a person's life. Now a recent study, published in *GeroScience*, has unveiled some common

biomarkers, including levels of cholesterol and glucose, in people who live past 90.

Nonagenarians and centenarians have long been of intense interest to scientists as they may help us understand how to live longer, and perhaps also how to age in better health. So far, studies of centenarians have often been small scale and focused on a selected group, for example, excluding centenarians who live in care homes.

Huge dataset

This is the largest study comparing biomarker profiles measured throughout life among exceptionally long-lived people and their shorter-lived peers to date.

The researchers compared the biomarker profiles of people who

went on to live past the age of 100, and their shorter-lived peers, and investigated the link between the profiles and the chance of becoming a centenarian.

The research included data from 44,000 Swedes who underwent health assessments at ages 64-99 - they were a sample of the so-called Amoris cohort. These participants were then followed through Swedish register data for up to 35 years. Of these people, 1,224, or 2.7%, lived to be 100 years old. The vast majority (85%) of the centenarians were female.

Twelve blood-based biomarkers related to inflammation, metabolism, liver and kidney function, as well as potential malnutrition and anaemia, were included. All of these have been associated with ageing or

mortality in previous studies.

The biomarker related to inflammation was uric acid - a waste product in the body caused by the digestion of certain foods. The researcher team also looked at markers linked to metabolic status and function including total cholesterol and glucose, and ones related to liver function, such as alanine aminotransferase (Alat), aspartate aminotransferase (Asat), albumin, gamma-glutamyl transferase (GGT), alkaline phosphatase (Alp) and lactate dehydrogenase (LD).

The researchers also looked at creatinine, which is linked to kidney function, and iron and total iron-binding capacity (TIBC), which is linked to anaemia. Finally, the research team also investigated albumin, a biomarker associated with nutrition.

Findings

It was found that, on the whole, those who made it to their hundredth birthday tended to have lower levels of glucose, creatinine and uric acid from their sixties onwards. Although the median values didn't differ significantly between centenarians and non-centenarians for most biomarkers, centenarians seldom displayed extremely high or low values.

For example, very few of the centenarians had a glucose level above 6.5 earlier in life, or a creatinine level above 125.

For many of the biomarkers, both centenarians and non-centenarians had values outside of the range considered normal in clinical guidelines. This is probably because these guidelines are set based on a younger and healthier population. When exploring which biomark-

ers were linked to the likelihood of reaching 100, we found that all but two (alat and albumin) of the 12 biomarkers showed a connection to the likelihood of turning 100. This was even after accounting for age, sex and disease burden.

The people in the lowest out of five groups for levels of total cholesterol and iron had a lower chance of reaching 100 years as compared to those with higher levels. Meanwhile, people with higher levels of glucose, creatinine, uric acid and markers for liver function also decreased the chance of becoming a centenarian.

In absolute terms, the differences were rather small for some of the biomarkers, while for others the differences were somewhat more substantial.

For uric acid, for instance, the absolute difference was 2.5 percentage points. This means that people in the group with the lowest uric acid had a 4% chance of turning 100

while in the group with the highest uric acid levels only .1.5% made it to age 100.

Even if the differences discovered were overall rather small, they suggest a potential link between metabolic health, nutrition and exceptional longevity.

The study, however, does not allow any conclusions about which lifestyle factors or genes are responsible for the biomarker values. However, it is reasonable to think that factors such as nutrition and alcohol intake play a role. Keeping track of your kidney and liver values, as well as glucose and uric acid as you get older, is probably not a bad idea.

That said, chance probably plays a role at some point in reaching an exceptional age. But the fact that differences in biomarkers could be observed a long time before death suggests that genes and lifestyle may also play a role. (*The Conversation*)



A mural in Villagrande Strisaili. Villagrande Strisaili in the Ogliastra Province of Sardinia, Italy, has the world's highest population of centenarian men

Food represents profound connection between us and the land upon which we reside: Chef Titti

For her, food represents a profound connection between us and the land upon which we reside, and each meal consumed is not just a physical necessity, but a tangible link between ourselves and the environment. "Every time I sit down to eat, I feel like I am becoming a part of the very land that sustains us," smiles Swedish chef Titti Qvarnström, the first woman in Scandinavia to be awarded a Michelin star for her culinary skills in 2015.

Stressing that the significance of food in her life extends beyond mere sustenance and is a conscious act of acknowledging our relationship with the planet, she says that every ingredient she chooses and every recipe she prepares, carries the weight of this connection. "I am not just eating for myself, but for the land, the ecosystem, and the people who are involved in its production," she tells *IANS*.

And this awareness shapes her food choices and cooking practices. Qvarnström places great importance on understanding where the food comes from, how it is grown or raised, and the impact it has on the environment. "This means supporting sustainable farming practices, reducing food waste, and opting for locally sourced produce whenever possible," adds the chef under whose leadership 'Bloom in the Park Restaurant' in Malmö was awarded 'Best Restaurant in Sweden'.

For this chef, whose signature dish is the traditional pea soup, it is extremely important to be mindful of the impact food has on the body - it is in fact about nourishing ourselves in a way that respects the intricate relationship between human bodies and the earth.

Admitting that being the first woman in the Nordic edition of the guide to win a star is a source of immense pride, she feels it is a validation of the hard work, dedication, and passion she has poured into her culinary journey.

"Receiving that star is like a big, warm pat on the shoulder, assuring me that I have been doing something right, that my cooking has resonated with people, and that it's been appreciated at the highest level. It is not just a personal achievement; it's a testament to the talented team that I work with and the support of my loyal customers who have been with me on this gastronomic adventure.

As the first woman to earn a Michelin star in the Nordic edition



of the guide, I also feel a sense of responsibility. I hope my achievement inspires and paves the way for more talented female chefs to break barriers and achieve their culinary dreams. It is a reminder that the culinary world is diverse and that talent knows no gender," says Qvarnström, who recently held a Masterclass dedicated to the 'International Year of Millets', with focus on Indian ingredient millets and sustainability at the Embassy of Sweden in the national capital.

Believe it or not, for this internationally renowned chef, the initial path was actually leading toward academia. Pursuing a more traditional education, focusing on theoretical knowledge and research, everything changed for one summer when she stumbled into a job at a restaurant. While she had no culinary training or experience to speak of, that job turned out to be a life-altering experience.

"It was like a sudden epiphany. Working in that restaurant opened

my eyes to a world where I could be creative, work with my hands, and craft something tangible and meaningful. I discovered the joy of creating dishes that not only satisfied people's hunger, but also brought them genuine pleasure."

Looking back, she says it might have taken her a little longer to realize her true calling, but that serendipitous summer job was the turning point that set her on the path to becoming a chef.

She feels one of the most exciting aspects of her journey has been the opportunity to travel and work in various parts of the world. That being a chef, one can 'pack' her/his skills and passion and take them to virtually any corner of the globe.

"It has allowed me to meet incredible people, learn about their food cultures, and exchange ideas with fellow chefs from all over. But perhaps one of the most rewarding aspects of my journey as a chef is the joy of serving good food to others. Food has a unique ability to connect people."

This may be her first trip to India but she has decided on her favourite dish here - 'Chole Bhature'. Bowled over by the flavours, spices, and the sheer variety of vegetarian options here has been a revelation.

"It is remarkable how a significant portion of the population here follows a vegetarian or vegan diet, and seems to be thriving. This is quite different from the perceptions in Sweden, where a vegetarian diet was often met with skepticism not too long ago. It is eye-opening to witness how millions of people in India have been following these dietary practices for generations, and it is something that we can definitely learn from back home. I am eager to explore more of this incredible nation and delve deeper into its cultural and culinary treasures."

While kitchens may be dominated by male chefs the world over, she feels working alongside a majority of male colleagues has not been a significant issue and the gender dynamics of the kitchen have not really bothered her much. "Like many other professions, succeeding in the culinary field does require a certain level of determination and assertiveness. It is essential to have what I like to call 'pointy elbows' - the ability to assert yourself and stand your ground when necessary. The kitchen can be a demanding and intense place, and you need to develop a tough exterior to excel in your occupation." (*IANS*)

Protein therapy can be a safe approach to treat peanut-allergic toddlers



A tiny bit of protein therapy under the tongue could be a safe and effective approach in treating peanut-allergic children ranging from 1 to 4 years of age, a new study has shown.

According to the study published in the *Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology*, the Peanut Sublingual Immunotherapy (Peanut SLIT) is safe in peanut-allergic toddlers, with a greater likelihood of desensitisation and remission the earlier the treatment began.

This is the first randomised controlled experiment to look into the efficacy and feasibility of SLIT, which involves a tiny bit of peanut protein absorbed under the tongue, in this young age group.

The study included peanut-allergic children randomised to receive 4 mg peanut SLIT versus placebo. A total of 50 participants were enrolled.

The findings showed that peanut SLIT can be highly effective in treating peanut-allergic toddlers, with almost 80 per cent tolerating 15 peanuts without allergic symptoms after completing the treatment.

In addition, researchers showed that remission of the peanut allergy may be possible after peanut SLIT,

with 63 per cent of the toddlers maintaining their protection three months after stopping the treatment.

"The desensitisation levels we saw were higher than expected and on par with levels we normally would only expect with oral immunotherapy. Just as important, rather than wearing off quickly, we were excited to see that over 60 per cent stayed protected three months after stopping the treatment," said Edwin Kim, corresponding author of the study, MD, associate professor of paediatrics at the UNC School of Medicine in the US.

One of the presumed strengths of the SLIT approach, when compared to OIT (oral immunotherapy) has been its overall safety and simple administration, the study mentioned.

Compared to OIT, the SLIT approach is likely to be a safer option, with the most common side effect consisting of oral itching. Treatments that can protect children from allergic reactions while still being safe and practical for busy families can be life-changing, and researchers are hopeful that peanut SLIT can be one of those options, according to Kim. (*IANS*)

Lakme Fashion Week x FDCI puts spotlight on sustainable fashion

Day 2 of Lakme Fashion Week x FDCI, acknowledged the importance of a sustainable future and showcased those designers who contribute towards a greener fashion through their work of art. The show's runway was ornamented with a diverse range of sustainable styles from leading fashion designers.

Here are some of the highlights from the designers who presented during the day:

Amita Gupta Sustainable brought the beauty of urban reforestation with diverse collections

The beauty of the Amita Gupta

Sustainable brand has always been its deep affection for nature and its care for the environment. Keeping in mind the inspiration, "The Age of Urban Reforestation" the brand was focused and unveiled sustainable fashion that not only projected the latest trends and styles but was committed to the environment at Lakme Fashion Week in partnership with FDCI.

Swati Kapoor unveiled "Sahaara" collection inspired by the vast expanse of the largest, hot desert in the world situated on the African continent, had a marked bohemian appeal. The design directions and inspirations aimed at the global nomad were taken from the glorious desert rose or adenium obesum for the intricate motifs that created the wooden block printing.

With the expanse of the grand Sahaara stretching through countries like Egypt, Sudan, Libya, Mali, and Morocco, the collection obviously reflected the beauty and grandeur of those regions. Keeping the focus on sustainability, the line ensured that the fabrics matched the vision of the designer.

Kaveri unveiled an ethereal "The Romance of the Rose" collection. When a collection is called "The Romance of the Rose" - An Affair to Remember, it will undoubtedly be an ethereal look at fashion for the coming season.

The collection had the finest hand-crafted finesse that Kaveri is known for, as the sculpted linen along with luxurious silk was turned into a feminine line of ensembles embossed with the imprints of the beautiful rose. Using the blank, linen canvas as the base, the Kaveri brand wove its creative magic on each garment, as the colours moved languidly from pretty pastels to warm hues that will appeal to fashion aficionados.

Playing with colours that matched the ethereal quality of the collection, Kaveri chose light and dark sage, natural blush, and then added mauve and off-white. The fine linen and silk ensembles were splashed with beautiful surface techniques to add a delicate aura to the sculpted, resplendent fabrics that offered wearable art.

Swati Vijayivargie brought her collection 'Gulaal' inspired by the splendour of the Pink City

Swati Vijayivargie's "Gulaal" was inspired by the pink hues of Jaipur architecture and the shimmer of Jaisalmer, the Golden City.

The lovely Parul Gulati, star of several Punjabi films walked down



the runway to open the show, in a colourful, panelled lehenga, choli and dupatta trio all heavily embellished with ornate work.

Colours of India were visible as fuchsia moved in coordination with orange, while the marigold tones danced with shades of blue. The red, vermilion, emerald, gulaabi, turquoise, and purple hues mirrored the gorgeous colours of the country and completed the "Gulaal" story. Fabrics that brought the collection to life, were the luxurious silks, Mashru, cotton silk, silk organza, and Chanderi. The designing skills of Swati were evident in the layered

silhouettes and the free-flowing images of the ensembles.

There were hints of nostalgia and amazing creativity, as the collection offered a variety of timeless garments that will move effortlessly through varying festive occasions. There was also a great amalgamation of colours, styles, and patterns that will delight buyers of luxurious, well-crafted apparel.

Payal Pratap brought a modern adaptation of craft on sustainable fashion day

"The Soft Parade" collection by Payal Pratap on Sustainable Fashion Day was an ode to the glorious and abundant craft of Kutch with contemporary accents.

The fabric base was a melange of handloom linen, woven stripes, and chambray weaves, while the luxe silks, Chanderis as well and Bandhani prints on silk complemented the presentation. Keeping the inspiration intact, the myriad stitches inspired by ancient Kedis were reworked into detailed asymmetric patterns that featured some geometry as well as floral motifs and a dollop of shine.

Payal also extensively explored the intricate beauty of patchwork in modern and abstract motifs of nature. It was a great festival of craft as the collection brought together the old with the new of Bandhani, applique, multiple hand-stitched techniques along with abstract rose motifs that were juxtaposed to create a carpet of patterns. Adding more excitement to the embellishments, Payal created designs of bird chintz, flowers, and Tree of Life patterns.

The colours of Kutch brought to life the apparel, as a tinge of red was merged with varying shades of blue, neutral ivories, and blacks to form a palette of multicolour hues. The silhouettes were characteristic of Gujarat and appeared in perfect unison on the runway. Asymmetric wrap skirts, swirling long and short kedia-inspired jackets, relaxed dresses, and comfy lungi pants created a fashionable tapestry for the line.

Ensuring that the collection offered a comprehensive fashion look that moved from head-to-toe wardrobe solutions from day to night, Payal designed handmade footwear, which featured Bandhani brogue patterns, while the semi-precious stone jewellery gave the ensembles the added glitter.

11.11/eleven eleven celebrated 15 years of sustainable fashion at Lakme Fashion Week x FDCI



Designers Mia Morikawa and Shani Himanshu, the driving forces behind the '11.11/eleven eleven' pret label from the parent company CellIDSGN Pvt Ltd celebrated 15 years of presenting India's indigenous crafts and practices at Lakme Fashion Week in partnership with FDCI.

Spring Summer 2024 collection is an ode to handspun textiles, the handspun yarn is a realisation of time, where every millimeter of yarn records every second of time as a memory. The beauty of the handspun yarn lies in its low twist breathability and its irregularity which is imparted by human hands, and in how it becomes second skin to the body.

The Ka-Sha label unveiled a balanced line of different elements at Lakme Fashion Week x FDCI

The brand 'Ka-sha's' inspiration was a connection that brought the coming together of different elements to create an absolute synergy of fashion.

The brand founded by Karishma Shahani Khan in 2012 unveiled the "Milan" collection, which was inspired by Khalil Gibran's work. The inspiration is based on the lines from Khalil Gibran's "Poem on Marriage" - "You were born together and together you shall be forevermore. But let there be spaces in your togetherness and let the winds of the heavens dance between you."

Referencing these words, the collection "Milan" enquired into the foundations built on individuality, through different elements that come together to play their part in total synergy, thereby creating an effect greater than the sum of its parts. (IANSLife)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambhani

Sunday, OCTOBER 15, 2023

'Birthday Forecast'

As Moon opposite Rahu on your solar return chart you will have tremendous courage and confidence to pursue goals convincingly. A lot of excitement will also be there as passion for sharing, learning and developing your communication skills overflows in many areas of your life. You may have to undertake many meetings, journeys within as well as out of the country. Professionals will find the going smooth and aqueable. You may go on a pilgrimage with your family members. Benefits can accrue by selling or buying property and/or assets. You may have to undertake frequent travels during this period and these journeys will prove quite useful. These travels will also make you feel vibrant and alive and bring in spontaneity.

'This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) This phase brings glory, gains and success in professional and personal relations. You would express yourself with charm and grace as you are exceptionally articulate and your writing takes on a poetic quality about it. You are emotional, loving and caring in personal relationships and family situations. You manage to communicate with moody and angry people with a sensitive approach and gentle manner. Looking within at your values and beliefs gives you insight and direction. You are physically energetic and enjoy the feeling of well being and confidence. Beware of over indulgence of any kind by maintaining a balance in all areas of life.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) Commercial transactions and business deals could be conducted successfully. You are unlikely to be display a whole lot of self-discipline. It's a great time to exert your personal influence, as you come across as especially cooperative. 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 one. You are frank, outspoken and can be outrageous or undiplomatic on occasions. Money matters take priority as some unexpected expenditures have to be met. Avoid being lazy and laid back as temporary gain or success in business needs to be followed up with hard work and dedication.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) You would improve your professional and personal relations, as you express yourself in a gracious and exalted manner. There could be alterations in ideas or plans, increase and decrease in finances and fluctuation in business. You can be lead away by enthusiasm unless careful inner balance is maintained. Marriage, business partnership and collaboration are strengthened through understanding and commitment. You are just, fair and generous in family and professional situations. Your sense of humor helps you out of difficult situations. Beware of a covetous and suspicious person around you who could cause misunderstanding in your personal relationships.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) A cheerful and hopeful outlook increases your chances of gaining cooperation with overseas contacts. You are likely to get business and work opportunities from overseas and engage in a variety of activities and meet new people. Financial benefits also may come your way through investments and insurance. The ability to express and communicate your ideas is extremely important to you. At this time your heart is where the home is. You may be tempted to spend lavishly on things that make your life more comfortable and pleasant. You are physically energetic and enjoy the feeling of well being and confidence. Beware of over indulgence of any kind by maintaining balance in all areas of life.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) You are frank, outspoken and can be undiplomatic on occasions. Political correctness and diplomacy are the call of the hour. You are more willing to adapt to new circumstances, ideas, and unfamiliar situations this week. You put in a lot of efforts and then find that this has established a strong professional base and this brings in desired and even unexpected gains. It is good time to organize your workplace. This would help you to get a better perspective to achieve goals. It's time to expand your social circle and to make more contact with groups and friends. Romantic notions start to take on a realistic shape.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 23) It's a great time to exert your personal influence where it can prove to be beneficial with the larger picture in view. You exhibit individualism and brilliance in handling business ventures and collaborations. This helps you build your self-confidence and strengthen your financial position. You may take up assignments and projects and this would end on

a winning note for you during the week. Your efforts to reach out to new people will be accepted and welcomed as you get success in foreign matters too. You extend your hospitality to family and expenses rise this week on purchase of luxurious household items. Health and energy need to be conserved through a busy time at work.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) This phase brings joy, understanding and harmony in personal and professional relations. You wield power and authority most effectively as you bring perspective and order in chaotic situations at work and home. You gain money and influence through business ventures. Success brings rank and respect as you dominate the professional scene. You win appreciation of people in senior position and this opens the doors of new opportunities. You carry yourself with confidence and style that attracts much attention and draw attention of interesting people around you. You would express yourself with charm and grace in professional life and this brings financial gains and new contracts. You feel full of energy and indulge in sports, physical activities and a structured exercise routine.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 23) This brings success, glory and cordial relations with family and loved ones. Cooperation and focus on harmony and understanding benefits you professionally and enhances your reputation and public relations. You are patient, laborious and clever with material aspects and manage finances and business ventures with ingenuity this week. You are more rational when it comes to financial matters. You need to drop comparisons and rivalry in personal relations and competition in professional aspects as they lead to a feeling of inadequacy and stress. You would regroup your energy and thoughts and focus on the basics.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) You extend hospitality to family and friends as you entertain and organize meetings and get-togethers. You would perform tasks that involve cooperation and team harmony. A cheerful and hopeful outlook increases your chances of gaining cooperation and favor from seniors. Financial benefits also may come your way through investments and insurance. You would have a positive feel towards spiritualism. You are passionate in what you do, although you display self-discipline with people around you. It's also a good time to break bad habits.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) Confidence, pleasure, and a deeper involvement in personal and professional relations comes to the fore. This enhances work opportunities for people in the creative line, marketing, arts, show business and related fields. A romantic affair would give a big boost of confidence and personal magnetism runs high to be appreciated and admired. This is a time where you bring more harmony and pleasant interactions to your relationships in family and loved ones. Socializing and making new contacts could help to boost your career. A healthy lifestyle and fitness remain on your agenda.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) You would face new circumstances, changes and unfamiliar situations. A positive approach and well chosen words would benefit. You may take up new assignments and projects that would incorporate and utilize your ideas. Your inner hopes and desires come to the fore even as you tackle your job with a realistic and practical purpose of mind. You incorporate and utilize your ideas. You would be loving and appreciative of the love you receive especially from children. Romance heightens your personal magnetism.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) You feel the fragile bond of friendship, romance and love in personal relations. You curb your natural reaction to situation and focus and gather information and take care not to hurt any relationship. You will be needed to provide inputs and your presence may also be required at home and work and you will have to divide your attention according to priorities. It is time to heal friendships with tender, love and care. You may also display more responsibility towards your family and take them for outings. Your thoughts turn to philosophy and worship during this time. The fine arts are inviting and involving as you channel your creative energy into it. This is a good time to organize yourself and your thoughts and attend your health and well-being.

9 must-visit Indian cities to experience Navratri



India observes Navratri, a colourful and important Hindu festival, over the course of nine nights. It entails numerous rituals, age-old music, dance (Garba), and vibrant decorations. Navratri is a diverse and fascinating experience for everyone saying to take part in the celebrations because each region of India celebrates it in a special way.

The following list curated by Thomas Cook and SOTC Travel consists of nine Indian cities that are a must-see for Navratri:

Ahmedabad, Gujarat: Gujarat's capital city Ahmedabad is well known for its lavish Navratri celebrations, especially the Garba and Dandiya Raas dances. Dancers in exquisite attire, traditional music, and magnificently adorned venues bring the city to life.

Kolkata, West Bengal: Durga Puja, a significant festival commemorating the goddess Durga, is held in Kolkata during Navratri. The city is renowned for its extravagant, creative Durga Puja pandals, which feature brimming artwork and cultural events.

Vadodara, Gujarat: Gujarat's

Vadodara, formerly known as Baroda, holds one of the state's most enduring and genuine Navratri celebrations. The city is well-known for its energetic Garba participants and customary performances.

Surat, Gujarat: The Navratri celebrations in Surat are renowned for their excitement and devotion. Large-scale Garba celebrations are held in the city, frequently with well-known artists and performers.

Mumbai, Maharashtra: There are several activities and dances happening all across the city during Mumbai's passionate and ferocious Navratri celebrations. Here, the well-liked dancing style "Garba" commands attention and draws both locals and visitors.

Delhi: The nation's capital also celebrates Navratri with a variety of cultural activities, Garba nights, and Dandiya Raas dances. The festive mood combines classic and contemporary elements.

Indore, Madhya Pradesh: Madhya Pradesh's Indore has become known for its enthusiastic Navratri celebrations. The city holds a number of events that use music, dance,

and artwork to highlight Madhya Pradesh's rich cultural legacy.

Jaipur, Rajasthan: Navratri is enthusiastically observed in Jaipur, with a focus on the local folk dance traditions. The festivities take on a special flavor thanks to the city's royal past.

Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh: The city's religious and cultural traditions are heavily woven into Varanasi's Navratri celebrations. Throughout these nine evenings, spiritual music and dance performances fill the Ganges ghats.

The Navratri celebrations in each of these cities have a unique taste that combines custom with local cultural influences.

These locations offer a remarkable Navratri experience that highlights the cultural richness of India, whether you're looking for the energetic Garba and Dandiya dances or the serene environment of ancient ceremonies.

Always confirm the precise dates for the year you intend to travel because Navratri dates might vary from year to year depending on the Hindu lunar calendar. (IANSLife)

"We won't have a society if we destroy the environment."

—Margaret Mead

The Shillong Times

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Hope for Congress

WITHIN days after the Election Commission announced the schedules for assembly polls in five states, it would appear that the nation's reigning political establishment has received a knockout punch below its belt. The Congress is obviously in a mood to revitalize itself. A credible opinion survey in two principal states – Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh – has said the Congress and the BJP are running neck to neck. Several ground situations show the BJP might not be able to retain Madhya Pradesh and there is no more than a fifty-fifty chance of it grabbing power in Rajasthan. There is resentment against chief minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan in Madhya Pradesh within the BJP rank and file itself, and so too with Ashok Gehlot, though the latter does not seem to face an anti-incumbency sentiment in Rajasthan. The new generation of leaders in both MP and Rajasthan – principally Sachin Pilot and Jyotiraditya Sinha – are hoping against hope that they get a chance to edge out Gehlot and Chouhan.

If the Congress wins MP, the first priority for CM's post would be for seasoned Kamal Nath fielded by the party from Chhindwara. Chouhan meets with his match in television actor Vikram Mastal as Congress nominee in Budhni. Mastal had played the role of Hanuman in the famous Ramayana serial and remains popular. What the Congress seeks to project is a fight between Good and the Evil in Budhni to upset the BJP appecart there in the November 17 polls. Yet, the 58,000-margin that Chouhan got in his traditional turf last time would not be easy to erase. In Rajasthan, the BJP is yet to hint who its warhorse would be, or the likely chief minister.

If the BJP loses Madhya Pradesh and fails to win Rajasthan, a question is: with what face can PM Modi and the BJP approach the all-too-important 2024 Parliament polls. The Congress has already wrested Karnataka from the BJP, virtually uprooting the saffron establishment from the entire South in this year's assembly polls there. If the Congress wins both MP and Rajasthan, there would be no looking back for the tricolour political establishment. This would end a season of total rout for the party and win it the wherewithal to fight the parliament polls. Money by the tonnes is the prime requisite to fight the parliament polls. But, without states or the Centre in its kitty, the Congress would find it difficult to oil its campaign machinery. If the big guns in business must fund it liberally, that can happen only if there is hope the Congress would seize power in Delhi. It is here that the five-state assembly polls assume additional significance.

ITM and Tourism in Meghalaya

By H.H. Mohrmen

ment should ask is: what is the percentage of people in the state who are benefiting from the sector? How much has it helped those who are engaged in the activity to enhance their income?

Waste Management
Although waste management is one aspect of the tourism policy of the state, in reality, this issue is not being addressed, and it only looks good on paper. We have yet to see any initiative to begin waste management in the tourist spots of the state. The roads are presently an eyesore to many because our roads are littered with waste. We have no control over the taxi drivers who ferry tourists to the different destinations to ensure there is no littering on the road. In fact, this should not be a problem because all the tourist taxis are under the control and supervision of the state transport department. But due to the lack of a proper policy, the roads in the state, particularly those to the tourist spots, are littered with garbage. The need of the hour for the State is to have a mechanism in place for waste management. Training the drivers who ferry tourists to and from the tourist spots on the importance of not littering on the road is another exercise that the government should explore, which may help address the waste problem.

The most important question that needs to be asked is whether Meghalaya's tourism model is sustainable. Are the tourism products the state promotes sustainable? This question is more relevant because tourism in Meghalaya is more nature-based, where nature is the USP of the place of attraction.

Tourism and Green Investment
The faculty and the students of Tourism and Hotel Management of the North Eastern Hills University (NEHU) invited me as part of the Department's observation of World Tourism Day to share my thoughts on the theme, "Tourism and Green Investment." We discussed green investment and the challenges it involves. I also shared my opinion on green investment. We also spent time discussing the Meghalaya Tourism policy and evaluated it in relation to the realities at the ground level. We also looked at ways forward to develop Meghalaya tourism vis-à-vis green

succeed in protecting and conserving the environment in the first place. At times, we even neglect the Indigenous agriculture system, which has not only survived the test of time but is supposed to be the answer to the global food problem now.

Tourism Model the State Needs to Promote
In promoting tourism where international agencies' funds are used, Indigenous People's rights should take precedence over anything else. The interests of corporations or any foreign entities should not take precedence, and the rights of indigenous people should not be compromised. The government should say that mass tourism, which is just sightseeing and picnicking with not much benefit for the locals, is not what the state needs. The government needs to stick to the core guiding principle of its policy, which is sustainable and responsible, and promoting high-value, low-volume tourism in Meghalaya. The government should also have a mechanism in place where it can not only manage the waste that tourism generates but, more importantly, manage the carrying capacity of the spots.

Definition of Green Investments
Generally, the term green investments refer to the allocation of financial resources to projects or companies that focus on sustainable practices, environmentally friendly technologies, and the conservation of natural resources. The goal of green investments is to support businesses that contribute positively to the environment while generating financial returns for investors. How are green investments important for the Environment and Economy? Green investments play a crucial role in the transition to a low-carbon economy, helping combat climate change and promoting sustainable development. These investments also have the potential to create new jobs, drive innovation, and foster long-term economic growth (Zach Stein Carbon Collective).

One Perspective on Green Investment
Green investment is still at a nascent stage; there are grey areas, and people are still not clear on how it operates. There are some who are of the opinion that the West has destroyed their nature and the environment, and how they are paying other countries for protecting and conserving the environment. They are of the opinion that green investment is like an opportunity for sinners to wash their sins. It is also alleged that it is just another top-down approach where the funders push their plans or projects on the beneficiaries that they think need to be done. Afforestation, solar energy, and other initiatives that they think will help combat climate change are popular subjects on their agendas. In such a situation, we even forget the indigenous knowledge system that has made the people

Agar: Neglected Green Gold

By H. C. Chaudhary, IFS

Agarwood is a resin-infused fragrant wood derived from tropical evergreen trees of genera Aquilaria, Gynirops, Aetoxylon, and Gynostylis belonging to the family Thymelaeaceae. It is also known as aguru, aloeswood, eaglewood, gaharu, oud, chén xiāng, and jinkoh. Aquilaria species have been the primary source for agarwood. Except for the Shillong plateau, agar trees grow naturally across Meghalaya. Apart from the Aquilaria malaccensis, which is the primary source of agarwood in India, Aquilaria khasiana, a rare species of agar, is also found in Meghalaya.

The resin-embedded agarwood is valued for its distinctive fragrance and healing properties. Agarwood has been used for over 2,000 years for medicinal, aromatic and religious purposes. The resin is widely used for production of incense, perfume, cosmetics and medicines. The resin develops and accumulates in stems and branches of agar tree as an immune response to biological, physical and chemical stress. Natural formation of resin, as an immune response to fungal infection or borer attack occurs in 10-15 percent trees in wild populations. Resin formation can also be triggered by artificial injury, microbial infection, and chemical treatment. Most common among these is artificial inoculation of some fungal inoculants. Development of cost-effective techniques to ensure assured formation of resin is still in progress.

Agarwood can retain its fragrance over very long period when handled appropriately. Longevity of agarwood fragrance permits its storage and long-distance trade as a high-value commodity, much in the same way as precious stones and metals. Fine grade agarwood is one of the most expensive natural raw materials in the world. Price of good quality agarwood chip varies from Rs. 80,000 to Rs. 1.00 lakh per kg. Price of agar oil varies from Rs. 6 lakh to Rs. 2 crore per kg. In 2001 a single large size agar tree extensively infused with resin in Hojai district in Assam was sold at more than Rs. 1 crore. Several trees having value between Rs. 15 to 30 lakh still exist in Northeast India. A 10 to 15 year old agar tree may fetch about Rs. 10,000. One hectare good quality agar plantation containing 10,000 trees has the potential to earn as high as Rs. 10 crore in 10 to 15 years. No other crop can provide such high returns. With increasing wealth in Gulf countries, which are the major consumers of agar chips, demand for agar has substantially increased in recent decades. Current size of the global agar trade is about US\$ 30 Bn. Demand of agar products exceeds supply. This has resulted in increased price, unsustainable harvesting, over-exploitation, natural resource decline, reduction in product quality and increased interest in cultivation. Due to limited resource base and high demand, Aquilaria malaccensis, the primary source of agarwood in India, has been listed in Appendix II of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and

Flora (CITES) as a 'potentially threatened species' to ensure that the legal trade does not become a direct cause of its extinction. Export of agarwood requires an Export Permit from designated CITES Authorities in the Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change. Such permit can be issued only on the basis of a Legal Procurement Certificate issued by an officer not below the rank of an Assistant Conservator of Forests in the State Forest Department.

Other than the high altitude Shillong plateau and low lying waterlogged areas near the Brahmaputra, agar trees naturally grow in all parts of Meghalaya. Agar tree however, prefers areas having less than 1,000 m elevation above mean sea level. A major part of the State, especially low elevation moderately undulating hills and flat plains having deep fertile soil, free from water logging, are suitable for cultivation of agar trees. Agar trees having relatively small canopy can be raised in any vacant space, including vacant places in homesteads, schools, hospitals and other public offices. Apart from providing aesthetic beauty, shade and protection from strong wind, agar trees can yield substantial income to growers.

Other than block plantations, agar trees can also be planted along bunds and boundaries of homesteads, agriculture fields, forests, wasteland and other land parcels at close spacing as low as one feet.

No adverse allelopathy effect of agar trees on agricultural and horticultural crops and forestry species commonly grown in Meghalaya has been reported. Stem of a two to three year old agar tree is strong enough to hold and support barbed wire or wire mesh fencing. Closely spaced agar trees planted along bunds and boundary of agriculture fields, forests, wasteland and other land parcels can therefore double as live fencing posts. Injury caused by nails, wire and staples used to tie the barbed wire or wire mesh to agar trees induces resin production. Agar trees being non-palatable are not susceptible to browsing and grazing by livestock. They can withstand variety of edaphic, climatic and topographic conditions. Agar trees are therefore suitable to afforest blank non-forested hill slopes, river banks and non-forest wasteland too. Low gestation period along with no adverse allelopathy effect makes the agar one of the preferred agro-forestry species. Processing of agarwood, especially extraction of resin imbedded wood as agarwood chips is very labour intensive. Raising of agar plants in nurseries and creation and maintenance of agar plantations also generate large wage-employment for tribal residents in rural areas of the State. Plantation, maintenance, harvesting, value addition, marketing and trade of agarwood and agarwood products therefore has huge potential to generate income and employment for residents of the State. Agar sector can therefore play an important role in realising the aspiration to make the State US\$ 10 Bn economy by 2028.

Harvesting of the economic potential of the agar requires a three-pronged strategy involving mapping and inventory of agar resource, augmentation and expansion of agar resource and agar enterprise development. For mapping of the agar resource, a mobile application along with a linked back-end database is being developed. The application will have facility to capture, record, store and retrieve details, including geo-coordinates and photographs of agar and details of their respective owners, in a credible, transparent, cost effective and systematic manner.

Initial phase of the augmentation and expansion of agar may focus on planting of agar trees in homesteads, schools, hospitals, roadside and other public and private offices and institutions for greater awareness about agar and its economic potential. Once adequate awareness is generated, planting of agar trees along bunds and boundary of agriculture fields, forests, wasteland and other land parcels to demarcate and fence their boundary and creation of block plantations to afforest blank non-forested hill slopes, river banks and non-forest wasteland may be considered. For ecological and food security, care needs to be taken to prevent felling and diversion of natural forests and use of fertile agriculture land for agar plantations. Establishment of agar enterprises may be synchronised with the progressive availability of agar resources on maturity of agar plantations and market demand. Promotion of agar enterprise will involve financial, institutional and technical support to willing entrepreneurs and overhauling of the existing regulatory framework governing establishment and operation of agar based industrial units and harvest and transportation of agar trees and agarwood products, while ensuring that the same is in conformity with the relevant provisions of the CITES and other laws.

The states of Tripura and Assam have already recognised the importance of the agar sector and have initiated several measures to encash its huge economic potential. Meghalaya can ignore the agar sector only at its own peril.

(Author is currently holding the post of Principal Chief Conservator of Forests, Working Plan, Research and Training and District Council Affairs, Meghalaya. Views expressed are personal)

Letters to the Editor

No justification for brutalizing innocent civilians

Editor
This letter is in response to the article, "Israel, The Art of Crying Wolf & Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine," by Kelsang Trinlay. While breathtakingly articulate and remarkable in its defence of the Palestinian people, this article, it seems to me, is biased in the opposite direction. Surely the truth lies somewhere in the middle? While Israel's misdeeds (apartheid) against the Palestinian people are well documented and Israel's military response to recent attacks by Hamas is a disproportionate, brutal, and unjust collective punishment of Gaza's Palestinian people -- free-will matters. History should never be used to gloss over the misdeeds of those who are violent. The author, it seems to me, has completely overlooked Hamas' self-chosen (an exercise of free-will) recent crimes against perfectly innocent Israeli civilians through brutal actions of torture, rape, and murder of even children and the elderly. Nothing justifies such dastardly deeds, quite as nothing justifies Israel's blood-stained, heavy handed hi-tech military response. Once again, we are dealing here with a David-Goliath, where both are evil. Moreover, Hamas has been known to be violent even towards the Palestinian people.

No historical excuse can ever justify brutalizing innocent civilians, whether Israeli or Palestinian. Besides, revenge is always wrong. For, an ocean of difference distinguishes just war and righteous self-defence -- from revenge. In the immortal words of Gandhi, "An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind." Indeed, as a rabbi said recently, the main enmity is not between Palestinians and Israelis, but between those who subscribe to violence and those who do not.

Yours etc.,
Deepa Majumdar,
Via email

Institutions must end ragging culture

Editor,
Through this letter in your esteemed daily, I would like to voice my opinion about the recent incident of ragging in North Eastern Hill University (NEHU), Tura Campus, which is abhorrent and uncalled for. I condemn this act of pushing a student to perform for the fun of the senior even though stringent laws are imposed by the Supreme Court of India as well as the UGC (University Grants Commission). The Supreme Court of India has defined ragging as, "Any disorderly conduct whether by words spoken, or written or by an act which adversely affects the physique or psyche of a fresher or a junior student is an act of ragging." But if through ragging the decency and mor-

als are violated, one's body gets injured, if any wrongful restraint and criminal intimidation is involved then ragging becomes a legal offence. For such cases, there are certain punishments in UGC's anti-ragging guidelines which includes a fine up to RS 25,000, cancellation of admission, withholding scholarship, debarment from appearing for exams, suspension or expulsion from hostel and rustication for a period of one to four semesters...

Ragging not only devastates the student's self-respect and self-esteem but many students don't understand the serious consequences of ragging. Rather most of them still dismiss it as fun and games and a part of entertainment. They fail to understand how severely ragging impacts the affected students.

Quoting from events in the recent past, students go through long periods of severe anxiety after being a victim of ragging. This anxiety can eventually result in insomnia and other physical problems which have a direct impact on studies. This causes acute stress in the student physically and takes a heavy toll on their mental health, resulting in PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder), Depression and sad to say, even suicide.

Even bright students are unable to deal with the trauma of ragging and sometimes have to quit college or eventually have poor academic results due to this heinous crime.

This ragging culture, nay this crime needs to be dealt with very sternly and the transgressors involved should be meted out severe punishment as per law established under the Anti-Ragging Act. There is an urgency to put an end to the rise of this ugly crime called "Ragging"! Period.

Yours etc.,
Chanmiki Laloo,
Via Email

Peace talks imperative to end Israel-Palestine violence

Editor,
This is with reference to Kelsang Trinlay's article, "Israel, The Art of Crying Wolf & Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine" (ST, October 14, 2023). While the brutal attack on Israel by Hamas should be condemned, at the same time Israel's occupation of Gaza, the West Bank, Sinai, East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights cannot be supported. The recent order by Israel's military to some 1 million Palestinians to evacuate northern Gaza cannot be supported either. The world has failed 15 million Palestinians who have been suffering for decades from Israel's oppression.

When I read Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice my heart bled for Shylock because of the way he had been publicly abused by Antonio. Yet I could not support his cold calculated attempt to have his revenge by taking a pound of flesh from the body of Antonio.

My heart goes out to the Jews because of the way they

had to suffer from religious and racial hatred from the time of Shakespeare to the Holocaust. Yet that cannot justify their unlawful occupation in those areas. Israel must vacate their occupation in accordance with the two-state solution of the 1993 Oslo Accord. There must be peace talks for a lasting solution and peaceful co-existence of the two states.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

Petrol pumps must be open 24x7

Editor,
I write to express my utter disbelief and frustration at a shocking revelation that has taken me completely by surprise. Living in a state that aspires to become a smart city with advanced amenities for its residents, I expected that basic facilities, such as 24x7 access to petrol pumps, would be a given. However, recent events have shattered this expectation, revealing a deeply concerning issue in the "Scotland of the East."

On a recent evening, around 10 PM, I found myself in dire need of refuelling my vehicle. Unfortunately, every petrol pump I approached in Polo was shuttered, leaving me stranded and astonished. By 10:20 PM, I made my way to Dhankehi, only to find the petrol pumps there had also closed their doors.

This situation is nothing short of a disgrace. It is beyond comprehension that in our state, petrol pumps do

not operate 24x7, especially when places like Polo can sell alcohol round the clock. This incongruity highlights a fundamental problem in our priorities.

While this may seem like a minor inconvenience to some, it can have dire consequences for citizens. What if a medical emergency arises, and an ambulance needs petrol after 10 PM? What if individuals, traveling late at night, are left stranded because they cannot find an open petrol pump? Lives are at stake here!

To the concerned government department, I implore you to take immediate action. This is not just a matter of convenience; it is a matter of life and death. It is unacceptable that the people of our state should be left without access to this essential service after 10 PM. I urge you to rectify this situation promptly and ensure that petrol pumps in our state extend their operating hours to provide 24x7 service for the people. The well-being and safety of our citizens should be a paramount concern, and this issue cannot be taken lightly.

If the concerned department officials happen to read this letter, I beseech you to address this issue urgently. The people of our state deserve better, and it is high time we prioritize their needs over trivial matters.

Yours etc.,
R Sarki
Shillong

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

"You cannot escape the responsibility of tomorrow by evading it today."

— Abraham Lincoln

The Shillong Times

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Case of Disaster Mismanagement

THE reality about the State of Meghalaya is that neither the public nor the Government ever learn lessons after the first flush of public anger, disappointment, loss and despair quickly fade from memory. In November 2019 a 117 year old church at Qualapatty was gutted leaving an elderly couple living in the adjacent house dead due to asphyxiation. On Saturday October 14 a fire raged at Police Bazar. The fire could not be fully doused even after 48 hours. It was the alacrity of the Army and Air Force fire-fighters that succeeded in taming the flames to some extent. The state fire tenders with their bulky bodies could not enter the Police Bazar area via Bijou Cinema and onwards because the entire road has been taken up by hawkers who will not budge from their predetermined positions.

In the 2019 incident the prime reason for the fire not being contained fast enough was because the fire tenders could not maneuver their way into the locality with its narrow lanes. If that was not bad enough, vehicles parked on one side of the lane made matters worse. Much was discussed then about the impediments to disaster management but no concrete action was taken thereafter. That's the history of governance in Meghalaya. It does not work for the ordinary citizen. However, this is not to say that the problems are of recent vintage. Key decisions on the larger public good are left to hang fire because of a few powerful voices that hold the government to ransom. Meghalaya is one state that has no zoning system hence buildings in residential areas also have shops on the ground floor. Some of those shops sell combustible items like wooden furniture or have godowns storing easily inflammable items. This was what happened in the Saturday fire. A godown housing wooden furniture was gutted and the fire quickly spread to residential buildings upstairs and around the godown. That houses are now being constructed without adhering to the by-laws of the Meghalaya Urban Development Authority (MUDA) to leave at least six feet space between two neighbouring houses speaks volumes about the MUDA's own oversight if any. People who violate the MUDA by-laws are hardly penalised because they pay their way through. This is the reality of Meghalaya. Corruption has eaten into the vitals of the governance system and it would take a government with a tough spine to undo the decades of wrongdoing.

It's time the State Fire Service too upgrades itself and obtains water tankers that are less bulky. The state of preparedness of officials manning the Fire Service too needs to be assessed. They cannot be let off the hook all the time for failing to carry out their primary duties. Finally, it's time the MDA-02 Government dealt with a firm hand and with pragmatism the problem of hawkers encroaching into public roads. They are mainly responsible for the delayed arrivals of the fire tenders. The public can no longer be held to ransom by hawkers. That's why they elected a Government!

What foundation are we laying for our children?

By Melari Shisha Nongrum

In the past few weeks, issues related to education have been the highlight of our local newspapers; from the ongoing stir of the Meghalaya College Teachers Association against the hasty implementation of the National Education Policy (NEP) to the woes of primary and secondary schools having no subject-specific teachers for science and mathematics for many months. The Education Minister stated that there are 168 primary schools having enrolment of less than 10 and another 101 upper primary school having equally poor enrolment which was a cause of concern even for the Ministry of Education. A headline states 'Two out of three months pending teachers salary will be released' which seems to have become common parlance. This is

to Education, 2009, India has moved to a rights-based framework that casts a legal obligation on the Central and State Governments to implement this fundamental child right.

The public education system in Meghalaya has failed and parents in urban and rural areas understand this fact. If the faith-based schools were not there, where would the children go? I am more concerned of the larger majority of children in rural areas who have little choice. Those who can afford are sending their children to the urban schools. But this is not the solution. The Ministry of Education, Government of India's website, states that Article 21-A, in the Constitution of India

tuted the State Education Commission since July 2023 but we are yet to hear of any reforms that have been recommended. Yes, I agree, that it has been a mere three months, but in the crisis that we are in, I would urge the State Education Commission to take big strides to salvage what we have left before a whole generation of eager learners are lost in the cracks and get labelled as 'dropout', 'unemployable', 'unskilled' or even 'anti-social'.

As the public, we demand the government's accountability with respect to school education. This is because School Education is a Fundamental Right and almost 15% of the state's budgetary resources are being spent

a solid foundation if you're going to have a strong superstructure". The same applies to our children. How can we expect our children to take on the reins of various sectors of the state, when they do not have a strong foundation.

The Meghalaya Board for Secondary Education (MBOSE) is celebrating its Golden Jubilee to mark 50 years of its existence where one of its programmes is to highlight the milestones of MBOSE. I'm sorry for being a pessimist here, but what celebration are we talking about when school education is in a crisis and the pass percentage of Secondary School Leaving Certificate is just 51.93%? Is it not time to instead introspect and learn from past mistakes, imple-



the condition of school education.

Who wants to put the future of their children in a government school where learning is questionable? I remember my conversation with Kong Mem (name changed), a resident of a village in Lynggam area of West Khasi Hills. She told me she had six children and she sends her children to a convent school in Umdang. I asked her, why she did not send her children to the primary school in her village, she said, "It is not functional; it has one old teacher and three to four students." She said that she will work hard so that she can send her children to the convent school. Thank God for faith-based institutions. But why do we have to depend on the private sector? Why do we have to spend so much of our resources on education when it is a fundamental right of every child? With the Right

means that every child has a right to full time elementary education of satisfactory and equitable quality in a formal school which satisfies certain essential norms and standards. The words 'satisfactory' and 'equitable quality' are not in the 'Meghalayans' dictionary anymore. Satisfaction and equitable quality can be gauged from the quality of learning in government schools in comparison to private schools in rural Meghalaya which is documented in the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) facilitated by Pratham. Excerpts from Meghalaya ASER 2022 states, the percentage of Std III children who can do division is 15.3% and 20.5% in government and private schools respectively and percentage of Std V children who can read English sentences is 39.4% and 52.8% in government and private schools respectively. Meghalaya has consti-

on this sector. But more importantly, numerous studies have found that completion of 10 years of school can bring about a drastic change in health variables such as better health and lifespan compared to their less-educated peers and positively influences infant mortality, life expectancy, child vaccination, and enrolment rates. Meghalaya will not be able to improve the rankings in the multi-dimensional poverty index if we do not tackle the real problem i.e. poor education. All initiatives in sectors of tourism or livelihood or agriculture or health will not achieve their intended success, if we do not provide a strong educational foundation to our children who will become the youth and future of our state. I recall of a quote by Gordon B. Hineckley which says "You can't build a great building on a weak foundation. You must have

ment the National Education Policy in schools in its true spirit, take drastic steps to clean the mess with various categories of teachers and most importantly build an accountability system with checks and balances.

Dear Education Minister, you and a few 'haves' can afford to send your children to study in the best schools in Shillong or in the metropolitan cities and even abroad. But what about the rest of us? No one should be left behind. Yes, the problem is multi-faceted but things can change for the better, if there is political will. You have had the chance to be well educated; you have the power to change the wheel. We need revolutionary changes in the education sector to make 'satisfactory' and 'equitable quality' school education a reality for all in Meghalaya.

Religious Radicalism the Enemy of Humanity

By Barnes Mawrie

As they say, "religion is thicker than blood" so too it appears from time to time that this is a proven reality. What we are witnessing today in Israel and Gaza is the outcome of a religious radicalism which has resulted in the gruesome murder of innocent people including women, elderly persons and even babies. The Hamas as has been revealed, is a terrorist group led not by a political ideology but rather by a radical Islamic ideology centred on violence. All over the world, radical religious groups are posing a threat to peace and security in human societies. What a ludicrous irony that we human beings are killing each other in the name of "God" whom we consider as our creator and father. Probably it is in the name of the same God who is known by different names in different religions (Yahweh for Jews and Christians, Allah for Muslims, Brahma for Hindus etc.) that we are fighting and killing each other.

Theologically, we cannot conceive of the existence of many gods or else we would have witnessed the "wars of the gods" or felt their impacts. The fact that there is perfect harmony in the universe and perfect order in creation, shows that there is only one God who has control over everything. Polytheism could be simply explained as the varied manifestations of the one God just as the Khasis believe in the presence of different spirits as the manifestation of the omnipresence of the one God. So logically speaking, we seem to be fighting among ourselves in the name of the same God. Perhaps when we go to the afterlife, we will regretfully realize how stupid we have been in doing so.

History has shown how religious radicalism has been responsible for the many bloody wars and genocides. It started with the Jews persecuting the Christians in the first century AD, because they wanted to protect Judaism from this new offshoot religion. Then during the Roman rule for over four centuries the Christians were again persecuted because they refused to adhere to the idolatrous practice of the Emperor Cult. When Christianity became a dominant religion in Europe in the middle ages, Christian radicalism led to the institution of the crusades which were responsible for the abominable crimes against non-Christians, all done in the name of defending their religion. During the reign of the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East, thousands of Christians were killed by the Muslims again in the name of religion. But in spite of all the pogroms resulting from such religious radicalism, humans don't seem to have learnt a

lesson. As they say "human behaviour is predictable" and this is proven by the events throughout history. Thus, when we say "history repeats itself" it is actually a manner of saying that, "given a similar situation, humans behave in a similar way." Therefore, looking at our present 21st Century, once again we see religious radicalism emerging forcefully. A few years back, the ISIS overran almost the entire Middle East with their radical Islamic ideology of creating a global Caliphate. During that time, we witnessed heinous crimes being committed by the group against Christians and other non-Muslims. Although the ISIS has been dismantled by the US and other forces, yet remnants of it still exist and the Hamas in Palestine adheres to its ideology. Radical Islam like the one practiced in Iran and Afghanistan, has gone to the extent of even committing crimes against the Muslims themselves. We are aware of the plight of moderate Muslims and Muslim women in these countries who are being murdered and deprived of all their rights as human beings.

When it comes to our country, India, we are witnessing the rise of radical Hinduism which does not tolerate religious diversity at any cost. Today Christians and Muslims in India are being targeted by the Hindu rightwing groups. Many of them have been killed and churches and mosques have been demolished unceremoniously. Christian educational institutions have not been spared either and with the implementation of the Anti-Conversion Law in many states, these Hindu radical groups are becoming bolder and more empowered by the state authorities. Thus, the India we live in today is no longer a country of the past where Christians and Muslims used to live in peace and harmony and with a great sense of security. I am afraid that if the BJP comes to power again in 2024, things are going to get worse for the non-Hindus. Is this the country that Gandhiji fought for? A country where citizens live in constant fear, not able to express themselves; where freedom of expression is being curtailed, where much of the media has been bought off to be advocates of the government? History has taught us that when religious radicalism takes the upper hand, persecution of minorities will take place and chaos is bound to follow. I hope and pray that our fellow Indians who desire to see our country as the abode of peace and prosperity, will do their utmost best to purge our country of every form of radicalism.

Letters to the Editor

NPP probable winner in Shillong Parliamentary polls

Editor, The editorial "Unending political churning" (ST 14th October 2023) made very interesting reading. Politics churns on and in the case of 1 Shillong Parliamentary Constituency given the shifting of votes between 2014 and 2019 Lok Sabha elections. The position of UDP has gone up by 148 percent in 2019 when compared with 2014 Lok Sabha polls while its position in 2023 has increased marginally by 1.33 percent when compared with 2019. The position of the Indian National Congress went up by 97.41% in 2019 over 2014 but in 2023 given the poor performance in the State Assembly the strength of INC has come down by 62.67% when compared with the election in 2019.

If the recent State Legislative Assembly in 1 Shillong Parliamentary Constituency is any indicator, the main contender in the 2024 Lok Sabha Election to the 1 Shillong Parliamentary Constituency will naturally be the National People's Party versus the United Democratic Party. This is what the

data indicates. However, I am in sync with the editorial that "Parliamentary elections are a different ball game. So, it is a game of wait and watch!" It may be noted that any party contesting the 18th Lok Sabha elections from 1 Shillong Parliamentary Constituency would require 4 lakh votes to be declared a winner. And if there are more players one could sweep the poll with 3 lakh votes. Finally, much will depend on the political experience and stature of the candidate. After all it is an election to the Lok Sabha where the voters of Meghalaya have never sent any Tom, Dick or Harry.

Yours etc.,
V K Lyngdoh,
Via email

Sudden implementation of NEP may open up Pandora's box

Editor, While welcoming NEP 2020 mainly because it is an outcome of extensive brainstorming and deliberation, its implementation requires physical and mental preparation. NEP 2020 is exclusively intended to improve the education system in the

country. It aims to nurture every aspect of a student's intellectual ability, including their thinking, feelings, and physical well-being. It insists on teaching in a way that boosts critical thinking rather than "rote learning", which is highly commendable. Another unique feature of NEP is use of the mother tongue for teaching, which helps students grasp and remember concepts more clearly. Needless to say, learning in the mother tongue quickly lubricates the cerebral nerves of a tender child who can't afford to go to a private school. Very importantly, this policy also seeks to extend educational opportunities to everyone, bridging societal and financial disparities.

However, with the huge gap between what our students are being taught in schools now and what NEP proposes, the state's education administration should exercise all caution before its implementation. Is NEHU not under fire now with the Academic Council opposing the NEP?

At the school level the "sudden change" from the current MBOSE curriculum to the NEP curriculum might open up a Pandora's box. What if we force a person to climb the icy mountains without providing proper "training" and necessary equipment? The person may

die on the way. Pragmatically speaking, with October already upon us and February 2024 lurking around, the urgency of integrating the NEP at the school level might make us regret our haste. My view is that it is wise to have a "transition period" of at least one or two years. We need to ensure that all prerequisites and infrastructural needs are in place. Equally important is that the textbooks are suitably selected. All books published by NCERT may not resonate with the students and cultural heritage of the state. So, a certain number of books should be "customized and localized".

Please also recall MBOSE's turbulent history. Some curriculum revisions and text-book errors has raised a storm of criticism against the board in the past. Should the academic wings, MBOSE and DERT, be again singled out as scapegoats, receiving brickbats from the public? Should we not find better courses to avoid it? The battle-cry against NEP will only lead to academic confusion and administrative chaos at this juncture. Who will be at the receiving end? The student community and all teaching fraternity! So, why haste, if a year or two can help us to equip ourselves better to jell well with the NEP? With the sharp increase in school dropouts,

the academic catastrophe must be avoided. Nothing is worse than remorse.

Yours etc.,
Salil Gewal
Shillong

Unmasking the double standards: Israeli Zionist atrocities & the case for humanity

Editor, In the contemporary world, which places great importance on principles such as justice, equality, and human rights, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict presents a complex and paradoxical situation. This ongoing conflict has given rise to profound questions regarding justice, fairness, and the broader implications for humanity. At the heart of this debate lies the policies and practices of the Israeli Zionist regime, which have been labeled by some as apartheid and by others as legitimate security measures. It is crucial to approach this issue from a humanitarian perspective in order to comprehend the consequences of these actions on the Palestinian people and to recognize

the necessity of reevaluating our support for the Israeli regime.

The term "apartheid" carries significant historical weight, as it is closely associated with the system of racial segregation that existed in South Africa. When applied to the Israeli context, it raises concerns about the unequal treatment and discrimination faced by Palestinians. Critics of Israeli policies point to the construction of the separation wall, the restrictions on movement, and the disparities in resource allocation, which effectively divide the region into distinct zones, often leaving Palestinians at a significant disadvantage.

From a humanitarian standpoint, the impact on ordinary Palestinians is particularly distressing. Families are torn apart, homes are demolished, and access to basic services become a luxury. The blockade of Gaza has transformed it into an open-air prison, with residents enduring daily hardships, including limited access to clean water, food, and medical supplies. Humanitarian organizations have meticulously documented the suffering experienced by Palestinian civilians, and these accounts paint a somber picture of the collective trauma endured by an entire population.

It is of utmost impor-

tance to address the double standards that surround the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and to reconsider our support for the Israeli regime. The ongoing violations of human rights and the immense suffering endured by the Palestinian people necessitate a response from the international community. As a global society, we must remain steadfast in our commitment to justice, equality, and human rights for all individuals, regardless of their nationality or ethnicity.

Yours etc.,
Wasim Siddiqui,
Shillong-2

Elusive peace in the Middle East

Editor A lingering image comes to mind of the White House lawn on September 13, 1993 showing the handshake between Israeli PM Yitzhak Rabin and Palestinian Liberation Organization, Chairman, Yasser Arafat. Fast forward to 2023 and the image has no meaning except that of a photo-ops to capture the headlines. Israel and Palestine have nose-dived into conflict many times since the time of Abraham and a critical piece of the puzzle is the 'Dome of Rock' which two brothers have been fight-

ing over. Indeed, the Israeli security services such as the Mossad and Shin Bet failed in their operational objectives to thwart the attacks but to understand the Hamas we have to revisit the annals of history within Hezbollah and how the Iranians can play a proxy role ever since the death of Qasem Soleimani, a commander of Quds Force. Coming to the role of the UN Security Council, it has never been able to develop a spine of its own to bring peace and the 2003 Iraq war became a festering wound giving birth to the Islamic State (ISIS) today. The role of the international community today from India to the United States or any country for that matter should be to lay stress on negotiation as the prime driver in order to counter the forces of lobbyists or the military industrial complexes. As for now the elusive peace of the Middle East seems distant and the book, Footnotes in Gaza by Joe Sacco shows how war can destroy the very fabric of humanity.

Yours etc.,
Christopher Gatphoh,
Shillong-10

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"The return we reap from generous actions is not always evident."

— Francesco Guicciardini

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Same-sex marriages

THE Supreme Court has, in its wisdom, acknowledged the changing social mores vis-à-vis the people's inclinations and mindsets linked to sexual relationships. The pronouncements of a five-judge bench in relation to the case by LGBTQ+ rights activists seeking legal sanction for same-sex marriages are noteworthy. The bench did not frown upon same-sex marriages as such but has made it clear that the court, as an institution, does not have the jurisdiction to declare this as acceptable. It agreed with the government's stand that it is up to the Parliament to consider this subject and legislate as per its wisdom, as this is a matter of national policy.

The first law granting the right to same-sex marriage was passed in the Netherlands in 2000. By now, some 34 countries around the world, including the US and the UK, have given legal sanction to same-sex marriages. The US, through law, has granted this right across its provinces since 2015. In recorded history, such marriages took place even in the first Century AD. Islamic nations are strictly against same-sex marriage. Communist nations like China too have restrictions in place. To an extent, this is understandable. Wider acceptance of same-sex marriage could lead to a steep fall in child birth. Several western nations such as Japan are faced with a steady shrinking of their populations. On the positive side, however, western societies are keen on ensuring individual freedom. While Islam and Christianity are rigid in their outlook in many respects, Hinduism does not dictate in any manner about the way a society should live. However, entities like the RSS and its adjuncts that have a larger say in the present central and state dispensations, are showing a fancy to take the society backward – not forward – while glorifying Bharat, or India's past and its pastoral life. While the Supreme Court has passed the buck to the government, it must be noted that the central government has in recent times acknowledged and accepted some of the LGBTQ rights.

A nation cannot exist without laws. Laws are meant to safeguard individual and collective interests and the interests of the nation – all of which are guaranteed under the Constitution. While steadfastly adhering to laws and amending them to suit emerging situations, it is also incumbent on governments to ensure that law, by itself, does not suffocate the citizens. A clear understanding of human sentiments, relationships and functioning of various institutions is a prerequisite to law-makers, who in the Indian context are people's representatives. Their collective wisdom should guide the nation and its people on the right lines.

Letters to the Editor

Joe Biden's Israel not the aggressor

Editor, Let us not be dragged into a protracted argument by Wasim Siddiqui's letter, 'Unmasking the double standards: Israeli Zionist atrocities and the case of humanity'. (ST Oct. 12, 2023). The write-up of Barnes Mawrie, on the same page, 'Religious Radicalism the Enemy of Humanity', should give us a wonderful perspective of reality!

The opposing nations voicing their opinions to the mayhem taking place between Hamas (not Palestinians, if you can make that distinction) should be viewed with a scholarly and guarded response. Let me submit that the Israelis are not in the habit of starting any conflict whatsoever. They have always been targeted. Studies and research will corroborate this truth! And what began the current war must be seen through the eyes of what Hamas has perpetuated on the innocent families without warning. It is this first deadly strike by Hamas that has drawn ire from across the globe!

Ironically, Jewish home, businesses, synagogues, etc. in India are lovingly cared for by the Muslim community. And when quizzed about serving the 'Israeli Zionist' you get beautiful

answers, even condemning nations, that want to wipe out Israel! And mind you they are uneducated humble workers!

Yours etc., Kevin Phillips Shillong – 19

Middle-ground fallacy

Editor This is a rejoinder to Deepa Majumder's response dated October 16th 2023 to my article on the Israel-Palestinian conflict. Before anything else I would like to point out that nowhere in my article is there any insinuation of condoning the killing of civilians inside the kibbutz in Ashkelon by the Quds Brigade, who, by the way led the attack, not Hamas. Any civilian and children casualty is inexcusable by which ever party. However, an analysis is not the equivalent of condoning. But killing of civilians did not start a week ago in that part of the world.

Now, with regard to the allusion that my article "is biased in the opposite direction," I would be interested to know what exactly is the definition of "opposite direction" and therefore what consequently is the mainline or mainstream direction? Is the latter the overwhelming coverage of the majority of media both international and domestic or the support

What if Umiam Bridge Collapses

By Albert Thyriang

'Umiam Bridge Collapses-50 dead', 'Out-dated Umiam Bridge gives way, leaves a trail of destruction,' 'Expired Meghalaya bridge collapses; downstream villages adversely affected.' These could be the headlines if and when the Umiam Bridge collapses. We move from the hypothetical (or many prophetic) headlines to the actual current stories.

In the last few days we read that 27 Meghalaya pilgrims safely crossed over to Egypt and '26 Meghalaya residents brought back from Sikkim.' The former is due to the sudden conflict between Hamas and Israel where already more than 2000 people have fallen victims to fierce battles. The latter is because of the natural calamity in the 8th sister of North East where the death toll has crossed 80. We chose to talk about the Sikkim tragedy due to the implications back home.

The devastating flood that began on October 4, due to a cloudburst led to overflow of water in the Lhonak Lake that feeds the Teesta river. The embankments of the bullet-shaped Himalayan glacial lake burst while the icy water furiously flowed down the river smashing down houses and structures, pummeling through roads and bridges and dams along the river basin burying people alive and carrying dead bodies miles away with the slushy debris. The number of deaths will climb up as rescuers dig through the rocks and sand and mud. The number of displaced people is up to 22,000.

The water from the ever-expanding moraine ridden lake of more than 167.4 hectares located at 17,100 feet above sea level rushed into the Chungthang Dam known as Teesta 3 dam easily washing it away devastating four districts on the way. The combination of the Lhonak Lake and the Teesta dam was deadly.

The killer flood was not unexpected. The Lhonak Lake was always susceptible to glacial outburst say environmentalists and scientists. They have been waving the red flag for a long time. One of the most rapidly growing lakes in the 'roof top of the world' the lake has been a concern because of the global trend of melting glaciers and the more frequent and intense rain. Obviously both the centre and the state governments did not pay heed to 'soothsayers'. Disaster Management Authorities have been predicting the likelihood

of glacial lake outbursts that would "cause huge devastation downstream," resulting in the "loss of life and property." Only pipelines to siphon off the water were installed as a short-term solution. Scientific studies have time and again warned of the high risk for potential glacial outbursts from the lake.

The burst was so massive that 60% of the water in the lake was drained out say satellite image analysts. ISRO says that on October 4 images showed the volume of water in the lake reduced by more than half which is equivalent to about 105 hectares area. When such a quantity of water rushes downstream it is bound to be dramatic and destructive.

The ecologically-sensitive Himalayan region that is prone to flash floods and landslides does not seem to be a deterrent for the government. The Himalayas are not recognised as too dangerous to construct big dams. When the 6-year-old Teesta 3 was to be built the 'faulty design and placement' of the largest dam in Sikkim was criticised. It was pointed out that the "highly vulnerable" Lhonak Lake would pose a danger not only to the dam but to human lives. Activists argued that the dam did not have sufficient safety measures. Studies found that Teesta 3 dam was one of the many risky dams built close to Himalayan glaciers. For the sake of national ambition for clean energy much human suffering was brought about. For the suffering of this man-made catastrophe the 1,200 megawatt project capable of supplying to power 1.5 million homes will never be a consolation. Is it justified to sacrifice a few lives to attain sufficiency in power?

No wonder now the same environmentalists and scientists are saying, "We knew that this was coming." They are right in questioning, 'why on earth the biggest project in the state did not have early warning systems?' The need for such a system was sounded as 'urgent' by the Sikkim's Department of Science and Technology last May. Not even the lessons from the 2021 dam breach in another Himalayan state, Uttarakhand that killed 81 people were learned by the authorities. Having ignored the well-known and documented warnings we are left with ruining at the unpardonable loss. The victims don't

even hear our mourning. For the grief-stricken survivors it is hardly a solace.

Just last month the whole world watched the horrific double dam collapse in Libya that swallowed more than 11,300 people. The catastrophic deluge has only worsened the chaotic North African country. Though a NATO-backed uprising toppled dictator Moammar Gaddafi in 2011 the country continues to be divided between rival administrations, one in the east, the other in the west.

Even as the country was/is in a politically shaky state, following the Mediterranean storm, Daniel caused heavy rainfall across eastern Libya leading to floods that overwhelmed the two dams. The water from the dams sent a wall of water several meters high over the 90,000 populated coastal Derna city wiping a quarter of the city and sweeping people to the sea.

Parallel to the Sikkim tragedy there was no warning about the dams, which collapsed at dawn when most residents were asleep. The long neglect coupled with corruption is cited as an aiding cause to the floods. Allegations have emerged that the \$2 million (allotted in 2012 and 2013) for the maintenance of dams built in the 1970s was diverted elsewhere. Shockingly the firm assigned for the work gave the completion report on its website in November 2012. Investigation for criminal negligence is being done. The investigation will certainly be met with challenges as local political rulers record historic lack of accountability. Here too climate change that results in extreme weather alteration more frequent and severely is blamed.

Regarding the collapsed uphill dams in the northeast of the nation, warnings of the dangers by experts went unheeded. The repeated call for immediate maintenance of the dams built from clay, rocks and earth went into deaf ears of successive governments until it was too late as in the early hours of September 11 thousands perished in just seconds besides the immeasurable destruction. Fears of a similar catastrophe await the Umiam bridges in Meghalaya, just about 15 km from Shillong. Reports of cracks on the footpath of the

bridge started appearing in 2017. Of particular concern is the main bridge that hosts the national highway from Guwahati to Shillong. Built in the 1960s the dam is close to 60 years old. Its life span is over. But it is business as usual. The reports of cracks were dismissed to have been caused by an accident. Concerned citizens have expressed their opinion in articles and letters to the editor in newspapers, including The Shillong Times. They voiced their worry at the pathetic condition of the bridge. They warned of a catastrophe in case the bridge gives way. Example of the collapse of a bridge in Dimapur where five to six vehicles were on it was quoted. The incident killed 4.

In March this year the matter was discussed in the Assembly session. Power Minister, AT Mondal informed that measures like limiting vehicular weights on the bridge were taken and efforts to find an alternative route were on. Plans for an alternative bridge had to be shelved following observation from the Geological Survey of India (GSI) that the project was too close to the main dam. Drilling and blasting would affect the bridge. It was learned from the minister that reports from the agencies which were engaged to assess the bridge said that the vibration level was under permissible limit.

We are also informed that the government has roped in two more agencies to ensure the safety of the Umiam Dam. In the meantime, the government insists that the required safety standards are maintained.

The government's virtual safety certificate does not mean that there is no danger. The Sikkim government might have said the same of the Lhonak Lake and the Teesta dams. The Libyan government saw no imminent danger to the ruined dams. In case of a similar disaster (due to flood or earthquake or obsolescence) to the Umiam Dam will we be left asking the same questions as in Sikkim and Libya? Our dam is older than Libya's. Why has no maintenance been done so far? Why are the warnings right from 2017 been ignored? Do we have early warning systems with the latest technology for the people living downstream? Will we too be caught off guard? Besides the possible deaths and large-scale destruction will the water at the dam be drained out thus leaving the state in darkness?

Such a picture is realistic rather than alarmist!

aided schools throughout the country.

Yours etc., Sujit De, Kolka

Landmark Verdict

Editor, I want to express my heartfelt appreciation for the recent landmark decision by the Supreme Court of India to strike down the Central Adoption Resource Authority's (CARA) regulation, which restricted unmarried couples from adopting children. This ruling, announced by Chief Justice DY Chandrachud, emphasizes that parenthood should not be limited to only "heterosexual married couples." It upholds the principle that the best interests of the child should be the primary consideration in adoption decisions.

This decision is a step forward towards a more inclusive and compassionate society, and it sets a precedent for recognizing diverse forms of family and love. It is indeed a triumph for human rights and a victory for the cause of equal rights and acceptance.

Yours etc., Abdul Natin, Via email

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Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

Are We Responding or Reacting?

As I heard about the very rude and crass speech by a member of Parliament, hurling abuses on another member because of his different faith I realised what's missing is the ability to respond and not to react about someone's speech or somebody! And so, at this time when we as a nation have become intolerant with each other, with politicians reacting to one another, with barbs, scorn and crass words, we should hear a story of how Gandhiji responded and did not react.

The story goes that when Gandhi was studying law at the University College of London, there was a professor, whose last name was Peters, who felt a certain animosity for Gandhi, and because Gandhi never lowered his head towards him, their "arguments" were very common.

One day, Mr. Peters was having lunch at the dining room of the University and Gandhi came along with his tray and sat next to the professor. The professor, in his arrogance, said, "Mr Gandhi, you do not understand... a pig and a bird do not sit together to eat", to which Gandhi replies, "You do not worry professor, I'll fly away", and he went and sat at another table.

Mr. Peters, green with rage, decided to take revenge on the next test, but Gandhi responded brilliantly to all the questions. Then, Mr. Peters asked him the following

that I actually experienced; This happened years ago when my dog Jeff was alive. A moth, one of those huge ones with big eyes, flew from somewhere and sat on my wife's side of our bed, a little away from me.

She screamed out of fear and with a panic stricken face jumped towards my side of the bed. Her reaction was contagious, and my daughters also started doing the same thing. My wife finally managed to push the moth to another corner of the room.

Now, it was the turn of my daughter to continue the drama. Then Jeff rushed to the rescue.

But the moth inadvertently landed on him.

I watched as he stood firm, composed himself and observed the behaviour of the moth on his body, then very confidently he moved his huge mouth to it, picked it up and brought it to me, and I threw it out of the window.

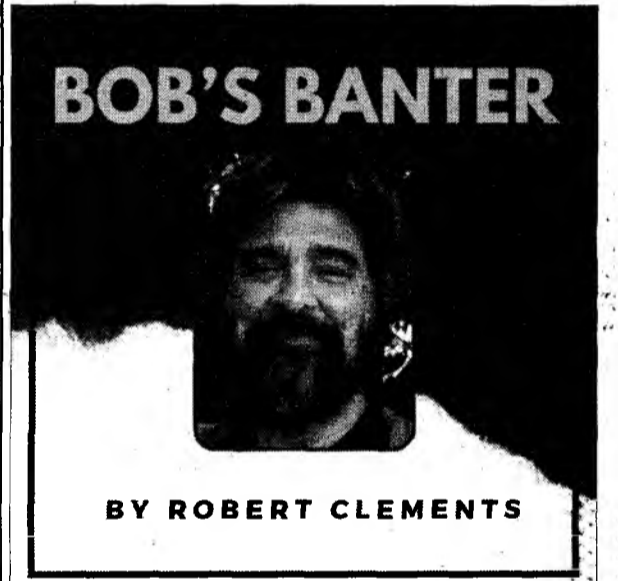
As I watched the full scenario unfolding before my eyes, my mind picked up, a few thoughts and started me wondering:

Was the moth responsible for my family's 'histrionic behaviour'?

If so, then why was the dog not disturbed? He handled it near to perfection - without any chaos or drama.

So, it was not the moth, but the inability of the family to handle the disturbance caused by the moth that disturbed them.

I also realized it is not the



question, "Mr Gandhi, if you are walking down the street and find a package, and within it there is a bag of wisdom and another bag with a lot of money; which one will you take?"

Without hesitating, Gandhi responded, "the one with the money, of course".

Mr. Peters, smiling, said, "I, in your place, would have taken the wisdom, don't you think?"

"Each one takes what one doesn't have", responded Gandhi indifferently.

Mr. Peters, already hysterical, wrote on the exam sheet the word "idiot" and gave it to Gandhi. Gandhi took the exam sheet and sat down. A few minutes later, Gandhi went to the professor and said, "Mr. Peters, you signed the sheet, but you did not give me the grade!"

What Gandhiji did was to use quick thinking. He did not wrestle or box or hit the other person with his fists or use crass words but instead used the action of his opponent to break him.

We should all learn how to do this.

Watch the English Parliament at work: No mikes are used but with wit and intelligence, surgical cuts are made that leave a lasting impression. Learn to use debates and subtlety, use good language instead of slurs and derogatory statements. If you are proud of your humble beginnings, show that you have lifted yourself up from where you were and are now a polished diamond, not an uncut, crude, stone pulled out of a dirty mine or badly kept tea shop!

Stop being savages by reacting and learn to be gentlemen by responding!

Let me move from Gandhiji and others and give you a simple example of something

shouting of a father or scolding of a boss that disturbs someone, but his or her inability to handle the disturbances caused by their shouting that disturbs them.

Similarly, it's not the traffic jams on the road that disturbs me, but my inability to handle the disturbance caused in my mind by the traffic jam that disturbs me.

More than the problem, it's my own reaction to the problem that hurts me!

My diagnosis of the whole issue:

My family reacted but the dog responded.

We must not react in life; we should always respond...

Reactions are instinctive; responses are intellectual.

How often this happens to us, doesn't it? Many years ago, my little one, who was just two years old, tottered up to me, and gave my cheek a resounding slap. My hand flew up and without thinking I slapped her back, to her astonishment and shock and also to that of everyone in the room.

I had reacted.

But what if I had used my mind and responded instead? If I had, then my daughter would not have gone through the traumatic experience of a slap, which I'm sure her little mind must have wondered what she did to deserve it. Remember, she was only two.

Which brings me to another thought as I see hundreds of civilians killed in the Israeli Palestinian war: Are they reacting or responding?

Politicians in India; are they reacting or responding?

We need to learn to respond, not react..!

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

bobsbanter@gmail.com

"Knowledge is the most democratic source of power."

—Alvin Toffler

The Shillong Times

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Education needs major shake-up

THE Meghalaya Board of School Education (MBOSE) is observing its 50th milestone with much fanfare but some honest introspection is called for. The rate of failure in the SSLC exams is very high compared to other Boards. Here, the Government Education Department ought to have exerted itself and questioned the high rate of failure year after year and of schools that have zero pass percentage; some of them in Garo Hills where the Board is headquartered. The responsibilities of the MBOSE include policy-making and recommending necessary text books after a critical examination of such text books to ensure they meet the educational needs of students and provide a more nuanced learning atmosphere. From time to time the MBOSE officials need to make surprise visits to schools that are under-performing in their senior school leaving certificate examinations (SSLC) to find out reasons for the same. Leaving this supervisory task to the Education Department alone is not enough. The MBOSE should actually do a fact-finding exercise as to the high percentage of failures and arrive at some remedial measures. To move from year to year without examining what ails the system is to be apathetic to the state of education in Meghalaya. It is the Board's onus to investigate the high rate of failures. Is it to do with the curriculum and its non-resonance with students' in rural Meghalaya? Is the curriculum too attuned to urban learning conditions? What about the teachers and their communication forte? Who measures the outcomes of teachers once they are appointed especially in Government run schools and those under the Deficit System of grant-in-aid?

Much has been spoken about the 'joy of leaning' but do students look forward to come to school or do they drag their feet and prefer to stay out? What about experiential learning? How much of what happens in rural Meghalaya is captured in the curriculum? Without those real-life experiences becoming part of the marking system how does experiential learning happen? Experiential learning includes field work and short internships so students learn by doing, but these are not part of the MBOSE framework. Everything is restricted to classroom learning. Another important research question is to assess the numeracy skills of local tribal students and find out whether the problem is that of not having teachers with the required pedagogy skills or whether it's something else. The fact that only about 12% of students opt for the Sciences in Class 11 and 12 is a subject matter of great concern. But that concern is not visible in the MBOSE establishment.

Does MBOSE enable an investigation-based, application-oriented learning where students develop critical thinking and research skills. Why is the curiosity level and inquiry lacking? MBOSE's focus should be on how to gather knowledge and apply it rather than on the amount of knowledge gained. Learning ought to be relatively stress-free with continuous evaluations in every subject. But is MBOSE up for this?

Letters to the Editor

Generations destroyed by substance addiction

Editor,
Addiction to narcotic substance like drug, marijuana or even alcohol, nicotine continue to cause havoc in our society. Physicians describe drug addiction as a disease (substance use disorder) whereby a person's brain or behavior changes and he or she becomes unable to control the use of the substance despite the harm it causes. Because of historical and cultural traditions, geography, underdevelopment etc., use of narcotic substances like opium, cannabis, nicotine etc. has been fairly common in the populations of northeastern India. Four of the north-eastern states share international boundary with Myanmar which is one of the most prolific opium producing countries in the world. It ensures endless supply of opium and its newer iteration heroin for consumption by the populace and also for transit to other parts of the country. It need not be mentioned how illicit supply and consumption of drugs has increased in recent times throughout the region including our State, Meghalaya. Since young people are most vulnerable, drug abuse has the potential to paralyze a society by maiming the most productive section of the society. We all are

witness to or have heard of cases whereby families were destroyed by this menace.

Recently, I had been to the southern part of Mizoram for my field work and could realize firsthand the extent of the problem the state is grappling with. No doubt, Mizoram is a beautiful state with charming people. The tranquil environment and peaceful law and order situation makes this a perfect oasis in the "troubled" north east. However, as I witnessed, the monster of drug abuse taking a heavy toll on the state. In spite of all the efforts Government is putting in through various programmes (Mizoram has more street signage urging people to avoid drug use and making the state drug free and also practice safe sex than any other Indian states I have been to), rampant abuse of substance is very evident especially in the part of the state I visited. I have encountered many people on the roadside, in the market or in village households who are addicted to drugs or alcohol.

These are areas with poor road connectivity, where agriculture productivity is low and there are not many job or business opportunities either. It pains one to see how a generation of young people are being wasted, who could have immensely contributed to their societies in productive ways. This is in stark contrast to numerous young bright Mizos shining in many facets of professional life. The young chap we hired as a field guide for few days was smart and active, but was

MBOSE at 50: Performance and Challenges

By Sumarbin Umdor

The Meghalaya Board of School Education has reached a significant milestone as it completes 50 years of dedicated service in the development of K-12 school education in the State. Since its establishment in 1973, the number of schools affiliated to the Board has steadily increased to more than 900 schools in 2023 and the number of students appearing in Classes X and XII examinations has reached 84,000. As we celebrate MBOSE's achievements and acknowledge its role in shaping the lives of the young people of Meghalaya, the occasion also calls for an assessment of the functioning of the Board and reflect on the challenges it faces to align the curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment with the changing educational landscape and global trends.

As per the MBOSE Principal Act of 1973 and the amended Act of 2006, the Board is responsible for prescribing the curriculum to be followed by affiliated schools; conducting and certifying Board examinations; granting affiliation to schools; organising training programme for teachers; undertaking study on issues related to school education; and the administration of Board's fund, assets and functionaries. Over the years, MBOSE has faced scrutiny and criticism over errors in prescribed textbooks, delays in the revision and updating of syllabi and textbooks, and making mathematics and science optional subjects in the Class X examination.

This write-up attempts to provide an objective assessment of the functioning of MBOSE in recent years by reviewing the minutes of the Governing Board (GB) meetings from 2014 to 2022 (131st to 140th Board meetings). The GB is the apex body which decides on all the programmes and activities of MBOSE and to formulate policies and strategies as laid down in the aforementioned Act. As such, the minutes of the GB meetings provide insightful accounts of the working of MBOSE and it is supplemented by the writer's own experience as a member of the GB from 2021 to date.

(i) Board's meetings and membership: Although the MBOSE Act mandates that the GB must meet at least three times a year, during 2014 to 2022 it has been convened only once in a year, except in 2017 and 2018 when it met twice. When it comes to membership, the Act offers ample

scope for appointment and co-opting of educationists and academicians other than those representing schools (principals and teachers). However, in practice, the GB meetings are mostly confined to MBOSE officials, government representatives and academicians representing schools. The deliberations of the GB would certainly be more enriching if it includes accomplished academicians and educationists from outside the State.

(ii) Board's agenda and deliberations: Matters related to examination centers and fees, and affiliation of schools dominates the agenda of the last ten MBOSE's GB meetings. Appointment of staff and purchase of vehicles also figure regularly in the agenda. The academic agenda includes the formation of textbook experts, approval of prescribed books, and the introduction of a few vocational courses. Other notable decisions taken by the GB during this period are the adoption of the Central Board of School Education syllabi for the science and commerce stream; special questions papers for low vision students and other measures for students with special needs; revision of textbook; and the introduction of general knowledge, value education and vocational courses. The GB meetings in 2017 and 2018 saw many new recommendations such as the creation of a research and development cell, making training mandatory for Board officials, designing questions using Bloom's taxonomy and making them available to students.

In almost all cases, proposals put up to the GB are approved. However, agenda proposed by non-official members, even when sent to the Board well in advance, are not included for discussion. This writer has on two separate occasions proposed a detailed report to be presented to the GB on the following issues (i) analysis of the results of SSLC and HSSLC examinations over last few years (ii) coverage of CUET UG syllabus in the MBOSE syllabus (iii) analysis of question paper patterns of past examinations (iv) district/area level analysis of school affiliation (v) academic programme conducted by the Board. However, none of the above were included and reported in the subsequent GB meetings.

There is also very little involvement of MBOSE with

other professional bodies in terms of collaborations in the development of skill courses, competency-based assessment, and training of educators and administrators. For example, CBSE and other state school boards are partnering and collaborating with national and international agencies in different areas to strengthen and improve their performance and activities.

(iii) Presentation of budget and outlays: One of the important functions of the GB is to approve the budget of MBOSE which is presented to it after approval by the Finance department of the State government. The own revenue receipts of the Board at Rs. 28 crores in the financial year (FY) 2021-22 have steadily increased by 115 percent in the last 10 years. Opening balance as cash in the bank and receipts from examinations account for about 50 and 44 percent of the own revenue of MBOSE. Besides its revenue, the Board also received grants-in-aid from the state government for paying salaries of staff. This amount which was Rs. 5.50 crore in FY 2013-14 increased to Rs. 15.50 crore in FY 2020-21 driven by an increase in staff salaries after the implementation of the Fifth Pay commission.

On the expenditure side, the main expenses are salary and pension contributions which account for 50 percent of the total expenditure, followed by examination expenses at about 20 percent. Capital expenditure is another item which fluctuates from year to year depending upon the nature of expenses such as the purchase of vehicles and construction works being taken up in a particular year. A notable feature of the income and expenditure statement of MBOSE is the rising positive balance which has increased from about Rs. 2 crore in the FY 2013-14 to Rs. 15 crore in the FY 2021-22.

Only a small percentage of the MBOSE's budget is being spent on activities such as capacity building of officials, training of teachers and school administrators, organizing workshops and seminars, collaboration with other professional bodies and other programmes that support academic development and professional capacity of Board's officials, school administrators and educators. The Board is yet to earmark sufficient funds towards building an effective IT plat-

form along with digital infrastructure that can support and integrate all its activities. The GB in 2021 has suggested that the Board adopt leasing or hiring of vehicles to contain the capital expenditure on the purchase of new vehicles and their maintenance as well as judicious review of new construction proposals.

(iv) Challenges ahead: A major challenge faced by MBOSE is to improve the poor learning outcomes of students, particularly among the rural students. Another priority is the adoption of new and innovative teaching strategies and the regular update of curricula and assessment methods as per the needs and standards of the present times. School education in the State has to move away from rote learning to competency-based learning and assessment. The norms for granting affiliation to schools must be reviewed to ensure that educational institutions have the critical minimum physical and digital infrastructure as per the need for the present times. Given the lack of expertise within the State, MBOSE also needs to collaborate with the central government agencies and other reputed national and international agencies to plan and implement much-needed reforms in content, teaching and learning strategies and evaluation.

Another important issue that MBOSE must address is the widening rural-urban education gap for which a reputed research institution should be assigned to study this problem and recommend measures to address it. The Board must also include activities in schools that address social issues. A case in point is the high teenage pregnancy in Meghalaya which can be addressed through a school-based teenage pregnancy prevention programme. Similarly, given the lack of employment opportunities, innovative programmes like the Entrepreneurial Mindset Development Program (and others) may be included in our school curriculum to transform aspiring students from being job seekers to job creators. Finally, MBOSE must gear itself to implement the dynamic changes under the New Education Policy including the introduction of a new flexible school curriculum structure, vocational subjects, and activities for holistic and all-round development of learners with a focus on critical thinking and experiential learning.

(Dr Sumarbin Umdor is Governing Board Member, MBOSE, 2021-2024)

Barking dogs in Mahua Moitra's life; only one a true friend BJP in the doghouse barking up wrong tree to hound Moitra

By Sushil Kutty

All those who watch Sansad TV know Trinamool MP Mahua Moitra. Even Rajya Sabha Members of Parliament do. But Lok Sabha MPs get to see her in action first-hand, which is like watching the Gaza Strip skyline at night. Sparks fly every other minute and then the fiery blast. Moitra doesn't hold back artillery. Not when enemies are dogging her life. One of them even took off with her Rotweiler "Henry".

There are other dogs of war hounding Mahua Moitra apart from the Supreme Court lawyer, who like every "jilted ex" allegedly bitches about her. Moitra's "ex" is so pissed at Mahua for dropping him out of her life, he took off with "Henry", whose dark glossy coat could give apex court's robed lawyers a severe case of envy compounded by jealousy.

Mahua's ex-took off with Henry and Mahua told the cops. The ex-, a certain Jai Dehadrai, graciously returned Henry but then lied,

whose keen sense of sniffing out issues to turn into controversies is his vaunted importance to the BJP. Those barking at the TMC MP include "jilted ex" and this "Fake Degree MP" who, Mahua says, has questions regarding his educational qualifications.

Maybe, but both, alleged dog-catcher and "Fake Degree MP", are not friendly next door pet-types. Dubey has authenticity questions dogging him but it is Mahua's alleged cash-for-queries that has been sent to the Ethics Committee. Double standards? Mahua Moitra is right in raising Cain, for neither Dubey nor Dehadrai fit the honest-Abel label.

Mahua Moitra has clarified on 'X' that Jai Anant Dehadrai was an estranged partner and, therefore, with motive. Also, the abduction of Rotweiler Henry; Moitra says both Dubey and Dehadrai have a dog in the fight. So neither of them can be trusted. And because of the BJP's alleged links with



alleging she had been taking cash for queries in the Lok Sabha to nail business tycoon Gautam Adani at the behest of billionaire Darshan Hiranandani of the Hiranandani Group, a business rival of the Adani Group.

Mahua Moitra because of her fine English diction and even finer disposition was allegedly bribed with expensive gifts, including fancy imported handbags and high-end jewellery, to ask pointed questions in the Lok Sabha that would give Hiranandani an edge over the Adani Group.

Mahua has rubbished the bitching at her expense, saying the "jilted ex" was barking up the wrong tree. Only 'Henry' would understand, but the row erupted when BJP MP Nishikant Dubey, the saffron party's red-hot attack-D with a bite keener than that of 'Henry'. If the intention was to cook the Trinamool MP's goose, it only led to more people questioning the dogs of war let loose on Mahua Moitra by the BJP.

For example, what's Moitra's ex- doing mixed in the BJP's mess? Supreme Court lawyer and Mahua Moitra's ex- Jai Anant Dehadrai had taken off with 'Henry' after she broke off with him and then returned 'Henry' after Mahua brought in the police. He should be happy, 'Henry' didn't take a bite off his lawyer behind. As it is, the Rotweiler breed has a bad reputation.

But it was Anant Dehadrai who walked away with the notoriety. This, when Moitra was having a serious go at the BJP's Nishikant Dubey,

Adani, the outspoken Moitra is being hounded.

The controversy started after Dubey wrote to Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla asking for the setting up of an inquiry committee to probe Mahua Moitra. He alleged that Moitra asked questions in Parliament in exchange for cash and gifts. The Speaker sent Dubey's request to the Ethics Committee of the Lok Sabha even as the Adani Group issued a statement.

Also, Jai Anant Dehadrai submitted a sworn affidavit to the CBI outlining "the commission of an elaborate criminal conspiracy" and that the conspiracy involved the Trinamool Congress MP and Darshan Hiranandani, who for his defence flatly denied the accusation and said he was "not involved in the business of politics".

Now, Nishikant Dubey has to prove the allegation. Of course, the CBI, which is the Government's caged parrot and one of its most used attack-dogs, will help with all the resources at its command. True, Mahua Moitra likes the good life, but who doesn't? What's wrong with handbags and jewellery, which are every woman's friend. Linking Gucci and Vuitton with questions asked in Parliament is so flimsy even for a joke. Nishikant Dubey is chasing wild dogs and wasting Parliament time. As for the 'jilted ex', it would be better for him to forget the past and instead of barking up wrong trees, let sleeping dogs lie. Otherwise, he runs the risk of ending up in the doghouse. (IPA Service)

Yours etc.,
Dr. Uttam Saikia,
(Zoological Survey of India),
Via email

NEHU puts pressure on smaller colleges

Editor,
In a concerning revelation, we uncover a pervasive issue that has long been plaguing the world of education. It's a story of how North-Eastern Hill University's (NEHU) inspection teams, responsible for granting affiliations to libraries, are pushing smaller educational institutions to the brink. The crux of the problem lies in the inspections, where libraries are scrutinized for automation. If they're found lacking in automation, some inspection team members advocate for library automation, but it's what happens next that's truly shocking.

The issue is particularly pronounced for smaller colleges like ours, which are already struggling with limited financial resources. The insurmountable cost of full-scale library automation is pushing us to the brink. It's not just our college; other libraries affiliated with NEHU are facing similar hardships.

The crux of the problem is that certain inspection team members appear to have dubious ties with various vendors, particularly from Guwahati and Kolkata. These

vendors, handpicked by the inspectors, offer seemingly "free" software solutions but burden the colleges with hefty hidden expenses. After providing the software contact details, colleges are required to pay a substantial amount ranging from 40,000 to 50,000 rupees for the software and training. In addition to the software, the vendors aggressively market cloud space services, which colleges are obliged to pay for annually. This places a crippling financial burden on smaller institutions.

The unfortunate reality is that some of these inspection team members appear to be driven by personal financial gains. Their affiliations with vendors, and the subsequent commissions they receive, overshadow the interests of the smaller libraries they are meant to support. This unethical nexus is undermining the very essence of education.

In light of these unethical practices, we urgently call upon NEHU to address this issue with the utmost seriousness. These unscrupulous practices not only jeopardize the financial health of smaller colleges but also tarnish the reputation and integrity of NEHU itself. This is a betrayal of trust, and it's high time for NEHU to stand up for ethics, integrity, and transparency.

NEHU must take immediate action to rectify this grave injustice. Inspection team members should be selected based on their integrity, dedication to education,

and commitment to fairness. They should not be allowed to exploit their positions for personal gain. The university should take strict action against those who have abused their authority and affiliations with vendors to the detriment of smaller colleges.

For years, these practices have continued, with many smaller colleges silenced by fear or lack of resources to challenge the status quo. Through this medium, we seek to convey a message to the concerned authorities. NEHU's reputation as a beacon of education and integrity is on the line, and immediate corrective measures are imperative.

The alleged involvement of NEHU's inspection team members in a profit-driven scheme is not just a breach of trust, but an affront to education itself. It is essential for NEHU to investigate and put an end to these unethical practices. Smaller colleges should be able to focus on their primary mission: providing knowledge to library users without being burdened by an unjust financial strain. It's time for NEHU to live up to its legacy of integrity, ethics, and the preservation of educational sanctity. The future of education depends on it.

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

"Experience is simply the name we give our mistakes."

— Oscar Wilde

The Shillong Times

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Institutions under pressure

KASHMIRI journalist Safina Nabi was going to be honoured by the Maharashtra Institute of Technology-World Peace University for a story captioned "The half widows of Kashmir." The story had won her the award after being adjudged as the best story by a 7-member jury. The University invited her to attend the award ceremony in Pune on October 18. A day before she was about to travel, she was informed by University officials that she need not to come as they had "cancelled" her award, allegedly due to political pressure. When the members of the jury that had decided on the winners heard this they too refused to attend the event in protest. Nabi is an independent journalist who writes on gender, health and human rights. She never applied for the award but was chosen by a well constituted jury of seven eminent persons. Basically, these seven members of a jury chosen by the University individually take up pieces they have liked in the year and select the winners in three categories.

Nabi received an email on October 10 from the MIT University informing that she was chosen as the winner of the award and arrangements for her travel etc., were made. But on October 16, she was informed that the University was cancelling her award as there is a lot of political pressure and it might not be safe for her to travel to Pune. The Director of the University's media department, Dhiraj Singh told her that there are people who have different ideas about Article 370 and because she is Kashmiri the University was concerned about her security. That was a lame excuse for cancelling an award. Interestingly, the media department of the University called Safina again to tell her that she would be invited to speak at the University's youth parliament. Needless to say, Safina refused outright knowing this to be a poor attempt at pacifying her.

The above is the state of the media in India today. No one can write anything that is even slightly critical of the state. The Modi Government takes affront at anything that shows it in a bad light. Recently, the director of the Indian Institute for Population Studies (IIPS) was first suspended and pushed to the corner to submit his resignation, all because the figures did not make the government look good. Sadly, the institutions of this country too are giving in one by one instead of fighting back and reclaiming the fundamental right of freedom of speech and expression around which media freedom revolves. The Safina Nabi incident is one among many where media freedom is sought to be curtailed.

Lest we forget Meghalaya is still part of India

By Patricia Mukhim

There has been a lot of bad-mouthing against IAS officers serving the state. In fact, it veered on the unparliamentary to hear an MLA naming certain officers (the Kumars) as being the rulers of Meghalaya perhaps because these officers are inconvenient to their scheme of things. Later the Education Minister, Rakkam Sangma while speaking at Sngap Sing College, Mawkyrwat reiterated what the VPP leader, Ardent Basaiawmoit spouted out in the Assembly. He went a step further and asked if there is any alternative to the Kumars and Bhattacharjees today in the bureaucracy. Sangma was of course exhorting the students to excel in their studies and claim their space in the civil services.

When tribal chauvinism goes overboard its stinks. The reality is that Meghalaya is still a part of India lest some forget this fact. We may think no end of ourselves but the fact remains that it is the Indian taxpayer's money that our government subsists on. States like Meghalaya have little revenue generation and sometimes cannot even invest a tenth of what they are supposed to do for projects funded by the Centre on a shared basis. So dependent states cannot also be talking big. We have seen how important it is for any government in Meghalaya to be with the ruling side in Delhi. It's a fact of life we cannot get out of. Meghalaya, like all the six other states in the region, is not economically viable. It's a state created for political expediency.

The all-India services is a reality we must accept too. The second reality is that the 'Kumars' who were mentioned by name in the Assembly as if they are some kind of imperfection in an otherwise perfect world, are the ones that struggle well past midnight sometimes when everyone, including the large army of local tribal officers are warmly tucked up in bed, to ensure that the broken health system that was not addressed for decades begins to be more responsive. One Kumar has worked tirelessly to make agriculture more viable for Meghalaya although he has had to struggle against po-

litical populism which pulls the other way. I once was at Mawlangbna when the water canal was inaugurated by Chief Secretary, WMS Pariat and KN Kumar was then a senior bureaucrat. Later while walking around the village, he seemed to know all the villagers. Some of the elderly women of the village showered so much affection on him. This can only happen because of a bureaucrat's connect with the 'grassroots.'



Similarly, when Sampath Kumar was DC, West Garo Hills, he actually revolutionised people's ability to work through self-help groups and also helped reduce the incidence of malaria in the district. We have another officer - Swapnil Tembe who is currently the director of school education. As DC, East Garo Hills he donated his salary of two months to help renovate the schools in the district. In his present position he does something innovative which is to do a podcast with school administrators, students and teachers to find out what their vision for education is. These officers have come here to serve and they are doing just that. It is unfair to think that they do not have the best interests of our people at heart.

The idea that a tribal IAS officer from the state would work more energetically; be more honest; more people-friendly and would double the outcomes of an officer from outside the state is not borne out by any evidence-based study. So, MLAs should be more circumspect. Within the Assembly their words should carry meaning and substance. It is wrong to

reduce everything to gutter politics. The problem with Meghalaya is that people put politics at the centre of their psychological, emotional and even spiritual life. This is asking too much of politics. Once politics becomes our ethnic and moral identity then it becomes impossible to compromise because compromise becomes dishonour. The Voice of Peoples' Party (VPP) is too entrenched in a politics that sees every other party as not being pure

enough; good enough and all tried and tested and found wanting. This sense of superiority can alienate rather than embrace. Just recently, Dr Manjunatha C, Indian Forest Service (IFS), 2007 batch who was attached to the State Government and was Secretary, Animal Husbandry and Veterinary passed away very suddenly due to a heart attack. He was only 45 years of age and had a 4-month old child. Earlier Manjunatha was also looking after Environment & Forests and also the State Pollution Control Board and hence was under great stress as he was the point person having to represent the Government at the High Court in all cases related to the Department. In fact, quite a few of the senior level officers do suffer from a great deal of stress also because often they have to pander to the dictates of their political masters who live by the dictum of, "do the work now or be transferred." It is not easy for a bureaucrat to be working with a corrupt politician because he has to live with the knowledge that he could not prevent that corruption. He also knows that administrative procedures are

compromised in some cases. And should things backfire it's the bureaucrat who will have to take the rap! In all these years I have yet to come across a non-local civil servant who has not given his/her best to the state. From Nari Rustomji to Ms PP Trivedi they never considered their jobs any less important because they were attached to smaller states like Meghalaya. They worked tirelessly and with no stench of corruption. In fact, we should recall their services and also those who came in later such as Mr KS Kropha who were honest to the core. It is easy to blame - blame the system, blame bureaucrats, blame the government, blame everyone but ourselves. However, verbal attacks, fair or unfair, are stock in trade of politicians and they will use that tactic to the hilt. But what of the impact of those words on bureaucrats that have been singled out? Do we expect them to be robots with no feelings and emotions? Also, it is good to remember that it is the political class that makes and implements policies. Bureaucrats are the cogs in the wheels. The problem with Meghalaya is that there are very few policies whether we talk of economics, education, transportation, dealing with hawkers et al. True the bureaucrats have to craft those policies but finally they have to be passed by the Assembly after due deliberations. And for a long time we haven't seen a policy being discussed and debated in the Meghalaya Assembly. It is pointless therefore to blame the bureaucrats. Name one politician who in recent times came up with a white paper on any sector. There's not a single one. Politicians can't think long term. They live for the day and that day extends for 5 years only. All the schemes that are being dished out are essentially populist in nature. They are not intended to serve the long-term interests of the people of Meghalaya. And for this we cannot blame the bureaucracy. Take on the politicians if we dare to! To take the battle to the bureaucrats is to shoot at the wrong target.

US is in full complicity with Israel in its war crimes against palestinians President Biden's visit to Tel Aviv only formalised their joint partnership

By P Sudhir

If President Biden's visit to Tel Aviv for a day demonstrated anything, it is the unremitting and blind support for the Israeli settler-colonial State. The visit underlined what has been the unchanging reality since 1948 - the United States has nurtured and cultivated Israel as its outpost in West Asia. The United States has poured billions of dollars of aid and sophisticated arms and equipment into making Israel a military-garrison State. In doing so, the United States has overlooked the oppression of the Palestinian people, the atrocities they have suffered and the ethnic cleansing which is going on in occupied territories like the West Bank. It has backed the

evening of October 12 and the Al-Ahli hospital was hit by rocket fire on October 15. Israel now claims that they are not responsible for the bombing of the hospital and that it was caused by a failed rocket fired by the Islamic Jihad. Military experts and many media commentators have noted that the Gaza militants do not possess rockets with such powerful explosives. It is only the Israeli military which has powerful bombs. Nonetheless, President Biden shamelessly supported the Israeli version and said that it was done "by the other team". Thus, Biden became complicit in the war crimes committed by Israel. President Biden was snubbed by the



inhuman blockade of Gaza, which is home to 2.3 million Palestinian people over the past sixteen years. In recent years, when the Israeli State has been actively undermining the two-State formula by expanding the Jewish settlements in the West Bank and imposing an apartheid-like system, the United States and its western

cancellation of his meeting with the leaders of Jordan, Egypt and the Palestinian Authority which was to be held in Amman. No Arab leader, even allies of the US, could be seen meeting with the US president at a time when Israel had perpetrated this terrible crime. That the United States would go to any extent to

"At the United Nations' Security Council, a resolution moved by Brazil, which called for "humanitarian pauses" to allow lifesaving supplies to go into Gaza was vetoed by the United States. This veto of a proposal for humanitarian supplies into Gaza shows the complicity of the United States in starving the people of Gaza of food and medicines."

allies have connived in this diabolical plan, while still paying lip service to the two-State solution.

Prior to Biden's visit, his secretary of state, Antony Blinken, had shuttled around Israel and five other Arab countries to try and get the neighbouring states like Egypt and Jordan to cooperate while Israel prepared to launch its ground invasion of Gaza. Blinken failed to convince the Egyptian president to allow Palestinians from Gaza to move into Egypt through the Rafah crossing. As President Sisi declared, once the Palestinians were pushed into Egypt, they would not be allowed to return to Gaza, making them permanent refugees in Egypt. Jordan also refused to consider any movement of people into Jordan.

After having fully endorsed Israel's right to act in self-defence in invading Gaza, the United States was frantically trying to ward off the impending human catastrophe.

The night before Biden arrived in Tel Aviv, there was the horrific massacre caused by the bombing of the Al-Ahli Anglican hospital in southern Gaza, which has led to the death of 471 people so far. This gruesome attack took place in the background of the Israeli military ordering 22 hospitals in northern Gaza to evacuate their patients and staff members within 24 hours or be responsible for the consequences. The evacuation order was issued on the

shield Israel became clear on the very day Biden was in Israel. At the United Nations' Security Council, a resolution moved by Brazil, which called for "humanitarian pauses" to allow lifesaving supplies to go into Gaza was vetoed by the United States. This veto of a proposal for humanitarian supplies into Gaza shows the complicity of the United States in starving the people of Gaza of food and medicines.

Instead, Biden announced after his visit that he had asked the Israeli war cabinet to allow lifesaving supplies to Gaza through the Rafah crossing. As a result, 20 trucks carrying supplies would be allowed to cross possibly on October 20. This too would happen, if Egypt could repair the roads at the crossing which had been bombed by Israel. The United Nations' relief agency has said that at least 100 trucks of aid would have to go through daily if some minimum relief has to be provided.

Israel's ground invasion of Gaza will widen the conflict in the region. Already the Hezbollah in Lebanon has announced that they will not keep quiet if such an attack takes place. All over the Arab world and West Asia, people are out in the streets protesting against Israel's brutal assault in Gaza which, on the eleventh day, has left more than 3,000 dead including over 1,100 children. The United States by backing Israel through political and military support has condemned itself in the eyes of the world. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

Rainy season done; road repairs?

Editor, The deplorable condition of roads in Shillong has been spoken about for a long time now. Despite promises made by the Government that repair work would commence after the rainy season, there has been no indication of any progress or even the initiation of repair work long after the rains have subsided now. This becomes especially problematic as some of these roads are near schools - and even government offices - which become the cause of frustration and add to the ever-increasing problem of congestion.

For a state which relies on tourism, having proper roads for smooth commuting is the least one can ask for. The potholes, cracks, and uneven surfaces have turned daily commute into a nightmare. This not only results in damage to vehicles but also poses significant safety risks to pedestrians and motorists alike.

While the government marketed before the 2023 elections that it has built more roads in 5 years than any government has in 18 years, it needs to examine with utmost seriousness the kind and quality of roads that it has built.

As of now, delaying repairs any further not only worsens the state of our roads but also reflects poorly on the Government's commitment to its citizens. The

people deserve to know when they can expect to see tangible improvements in the road conditions. Yours etc., Patrick Kurbah, Via Email

Traffic in Shillong

Editor, The traffic situation in the city of Shillong is getting worse by the day and it is very disappointing to see that there seems to be no proactive action taken by the concerned authorities. There are many things that can be done to help ease traffic congestion. The problem is not only because of the increased number of vehicles or the narrow roads that exist in Shillong today. The problem is compounded with the lack of discipline among drivers. I would like to submit here in your esteemed paper my suggestions as a concerned citizen of Shillong and undoubtedly if implemented will go a long way to help ease the turmoil of traffic we encounter every day, which results in wastage of our valuable time and energy. One cannot imagine the loss of precious time which is wasted just sitting in the car especially in a fast-paced world of today. Waste of time is a waste of life.

Firstly, we see that if there is a blockade on one side of the road, the other side will eventually also be affected. Overtaking should be strictly prohibited especially when there is a blockade. Besides, we see that

in Shillong people do not follow their own lane be it the four or the two wheelers. This crossing from one lane to the other side should not be allowed because it also affects the vehicles coming from opposite direction and more so, because of this encroachment, it endangers the pedestrian also since the vehicles in order to avoid collision, will have to go to the corners and footpaths.

Secondly, drivers here in Shillong do not follow traffic rules and are also selfish, arrogant and indisciplined. They will stop the car anywhere, park everywhere, take a U-turn anywhere, taking dangerous and abrupt overtaking and not allowing other vehicles to proceed in places where there are intersections and uphill. So, drivers need to be sensitized and educated on ethics for traffic safety and comfort. Thirdly, heavy and overloaded vehicles should not be allowed to ply in the city during the day. Many times we see JCB'S, heavy vehicles moving at a snail pace thus creating traffic obstruction everywhere.

The public transport system needs to be revamped in terms of capacity in buses and taxis, interconnectivity in different locations, frequency and timing need to be structured. Buses, taxi two wheelers should be passenger friendly. For example the entrance to the bus should be from the front and exit from behind so as to avoid overcrowding. Also tokens or coupons can be introduced. Bus and taxi Stops should be earmarked and desig-

nated properly so that these buses and taxis will not stop anywhere. As of today these buses and taxis stop even in the middle of the road. These are some of the reasons that lead to traffic congestion and if traffic rules are strictly adhered to by one and all, it will bring a lot of changes in the traffic scenario.

Finally, flyovers are much needed especially in many junctions where they are feasible. This is possible if there is a will. We need to look at our neighbouring state Assam, where there are no dearth of flyovers and rapid development in terms of road infrastructure etc. If we want to see change then some concrete steps need to be taken. As the saying goes "if you really want to do something, you'll find a way, if you don't, you'll find an excuse"

Yours etc., N.Lyngdoh, Via email

Umiam bridge endangered

Editor, The Umiam Bridge is indeed a cause of concern for no one knows when it will give up and collapse. This is a reality that is known to all - the government and the general public alike. Yet this lackadaisical attitude towards such a serious matter is very troubling considering that this bridge is the lifeline between Shillong and Guwahati. Albert Thyrmiang's write-up, "What if Umiam bridge collapses," describes the catastrophe that may

befall people who need to use this bridge on a regular basis. It gives one a chill to the bones to even imagine the catastrophe as you and I will continue to use this bridge because we have no other alternative. What is bewildering is the manner in which the Government is handling this matter. Everybody knows that the bridge has outlived its longevity and the Government owes it to the people and the State to do something. Or do we have to wait for the bridge to give up and eventually cause death and cut us off from the rest of the country? This is no time to slumber. Wake up before it is too late!

Yours etc., Jennieffer Dkhar, Via email

Concerns regarding 'Jaintia's Got Talent' voting system

Editor, I wish to express my deep concern about a recent experience I had with the "Jaintia's Got Talent" show, organized by Chirup u Kreh Lang I Society. This event is meant to showcase and celebrate the talent of our community members, but a disconcerting aspect of the show came to my attention while I was out shopping.

While at a local market, I encountered a young participant selling what they referred to as "coupons" for

votes. Each coupon, priced at Rs 10, was presented as a means to cast a vote for the competing talent. What surprised me was that the more coupons these young participants sold, the more votes they received, thus influencing the outcome of the talent competition.

It appears that the entire revenue generated from the sale of these coupons goes directly to the organizers. This set-up essentially transforms a talent show, which should be primarily based on the participants' skills and abilities, into a business endeavour for the organizers, with the participants compelled to sell coupons to increase their chances of winning.

I believe that such a practice undermines the very essence of a talent show and shifts the focus away from the true talent and abilities of the participants. It raises ethical concerns about fairness and transparency in the competition.

I urge the Chirup u Kreh Lang I Society to reconsider this system and return to a more traditional, unbiased judging process that truly reflects the participants' skills and hard work. Talent should shine on its own merit and the success of such an event should be based on talent, not the number of coupons sold.

Yours etc., Dariti Passah, Jowai

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

"There's no bias when it comes to facts, and there's no bias when it comes to decency."

— Jake Tapper

The Shillong Times

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Of Illegal toll gates

MEGHALAYA is known for a number of illegalities, toll/check gates being one of many such improprieties. Illegal toll gates means that the collection is not accruing to the Council's coffers. That the District Councils which are a creation of the Sixth Schedule with the express purpose of empowering the tribes and their institutions should now stoop so low just to fill up private coffers is distasteful to the extreme. There has been a war of words between the National Peoples' Party (NPP) and the United Democratic Party (UDP) on this issue for a while now. According to the Sixth Schedule, the District Councils for an autonomous district shall have the power to levy and collect all or any of the following taxes, namely (1) taxes on professions, trades, callings and employments (2) taxes on animals, vehicles and boats (3) taxes on entry of goods into a market for sale therein and tolls on passengers and goods carried in ferries (4) taxes for the maintenance of schools, dispensaries or roads.

Evidently the Councils were mandated to collect the above taxes and to use the proceeds thereof for the purposes underlined above. The ADCs in Meghalaya fell short on many of their mandated responsibilities. They failed to run the primary schools and after a wide protest by teachers who were not paid their salaries for months and years, the State Government took over that responsibility in 1988. The Councils also don't run dispensaries which could have raised from tax collections. The Councils don't maintain roads which are the brief of the State Government. So how are the Councils really using the revenue generated from the various taxes except to pay salaries to their ever growing numbers of employees many of whom are political appointees.

Since the ADCs have been defaulting in the maintenance of their revenue and expenditure accounts as pointed out by the Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG) in their reports repeatedly, there is no knowing as to how much revenue is generated from royalties via extraction of limestone, boulders, sand etc. The legal extraction of coal has been banned since 2014, hence revenue collection by the State Government has gone underground and into personal coffers. This is the danger of a shadow economy that is not reflected in any books of accounts. While collection of tolls on good entering and leaving the jurisdiction of the Councils is legitimate it can only be so if such collections are reflected in their books of accounts, which does not seem to be the case here. Election to the ADCs is fast approaching and money is the driving force here. Illegal collection of toll means the money is going to the Party heading the Councils today. That perhaps is the key to the ongoing quarrel between the UDP and NPP.

Private or public? This government must decide what they will support

By Avner Pariat

I believe it is time to be clear about what sort of Future we want. There is a very palpable fog of confusion about this and for the purpose of this article I will simplify it further by asking the question: What sort of Future does Conrad Inc imagine for the state? Further we can ask: Is this Future about promoting the Public Good or is it about Private/Individual Interests? In order to understand this pertinent question, let us look at it from the perspective of three crucial sectors — Transportation, Healthcare and Education.

Transportation
In our car-centric world, it's easy to overlook the many advantages that buses offer as a mode of transportation. While cars provide convenience and personal space, buses shine in several crucial aspects that make them a superior choice in many situations:

1. **Environmental Friendliness:**

A single bus can carry dozens of passengers, significantly reducing the number of vehicles on the road and cutting down on emissions. This contributes to cleaner air and a reduced carbon footprint, addressing the growing concerns of climate change and air pollution. As cities strive to become more sustainable, Public Transportation will play a crucial role in achieving these goals.

2. **Cost-Efficiency:**

Owning and maintaining a car can be expensive, with costs ranging from fuel and insurance to maintenance and parking fees. Additionally, taxis are unregulated and can be exploitative. A student from Malki studying in IHM, Mawdiangiang, will end up having to spend the following every single day.

From Malki Point to Police Point, Laitumkhrah - Rs 30. From Police Point to NEEPCO (all uphill) - Rs 30. From NEEPCO to Nongmynsong - Rs 50! From Nongmynsong to IHM - Rs 50

Hence, to pay Rs 320 per day (Malki to IHM and back) is not possible for most daily wage earners. This accounts for approx. Rs 9000 per month! Hence the imperative for a Public Transportation system which is professionally run and managed.

3. **Reduced Traffic Congestion:**

Buses help alleviate traffic congestion by reducing the number of cars on the road. When more people opt for buses, there are fewer vehicles jostling for limited road space, leading to smoother traffic flow and reduced travel times for everyone. This makes bus transportation a practical solution for cities grappling with traffic gridlock.

The Lies:

There have always been numerous crappy excuses regarding why Public Transportation cannot be implemented. None of them hold water. Excuses such as

Shillong having a narrow hilly terrain (Japan and Italy have good public transportation and they are often times hillier and narrower) or that it is the people who won't use the services (not true because the majority of people I have interacted with want cheaper travel options) are all symptomatic of SPINELESS leadership. The only reason why Public Transportation has been killed off in Meghalaya is because it conflicts with the PRIVATE INTERESTS of the MLAs and Ministers. Do you think the political leadership want buses to succeed? Then who will buy Metbah's cars? Who will buy Pala's Toyotas? Who will buy Renikton's Fords? Most of all, it is the banks who are to be blamed. I might want a cheap loan for a business but I will never get it. Instead, they will offer me a cheap car loan which will continue to perpetuate the current situation. Citizens have to understand and accept how invaluable Public Transportation is. Then they must band together to fight for it. If the government is serious about alleviating traffic jams, they ought to look into Public Transportation seriously in addition to hiring real experts like IIT Delhi who have a specialised Traffic Studies department called the TRIP centre (https://trip.iitd.ac.in/).

KPMG, E&Y, Deloitte are not technical experts, they're management consultants. And no! Police Department cannot solve traffic jams because it is not their job to study them. So, the MDA should save the public time, anxiety and resources and hire the real experts and then, finally, Conrad Inc needs to grow a spine and to implement what they recommended.

Healthcare
In the ongoing debate between government hospitals and private hospitals, there are compelling arguments to be made in favour of the former. While private healthcare facilities have their merits, government hospitals offer unique advantages that make them a crucial component of any healthcare system.

1. **Accessibility and Affordability:**

Government hospitals prioritize accessibility for all citizens, regardless of their socio-economic background. They offer healthcare services at subsidized rates or even for free, ensuring that even the most vulnerable individuals can access essential medical care. In contrast, private hospitals may prioritize profit, potentially making that healthcare prohibitively expensive for many.

2. **Equitable Distribution:**

Government hospitals help bridge the urban-rural healthcare divide, ensuring that people in remote areas receive the same quality of care as those in urban cen-

ters. Private hospitals often cluster in cities, leaving rural populations underserved.

3. **Reduced Profit Motive:**

Government hospitals are not driven by profit, allowing them to focus on patient care rather than financial gains. This can lead to a more patient-centric approach, where decisions prioritize the well-being of patients over financial interests. In private hospitals, profit motives may influence treatment choices and pricing.

4. **Public Accountability:**

Government hospitals are accountable to the public, with transparency in their operations and decision-making processes. This accountability helps maintain high standards of care and reduces the likelihood of unethical practices. Private hospitals, while subject to regulations, may have less transparency and accountability.

I am aware of the idealistic assumptions I have made above with regards to Public Healthcare facilities. Most are bad and ailing, they are not accessible, they are not equitable and many healthcare professionals working within them actively engage in profiteering day-in and day-out. But here again, I wish to remind the readers that these flaws are ours to correct. On April 21 of this year, I had a clavicle fracture on account of an accident at Keatinge Road. Despite being just 2 minutes away from Civil Hospital, I could not bring myself to enter that facility because of the bad experiences I have endured in the past. I opted to go (in that painful state) to NEIGRIHMS instead. I did not go to Woodland nor Nazareth nor Bethany because I did not want to spend a lot of money on such a simple injury. It was that night that I said out loud - Thank god for NEIGRIHMS! Yes, one has to wait in line. Yes, the service is not great. Yes, the rooms are small. But we can correct these flaws. It belongs to us and we must speak out to improve it and other public facilities as well.

2. **Focus on Education, Not Profit**

Government schools are primarily focused on providing quality education rather than generating profits. Private schools, while often delivering high-quality education, are businesses that must generate revenue to sustain themselves. This can sometimes lead to prioritizing financial considerations over educational ones, potentially compromising the quality of education.

The provision of accessible, high-quality education to all children, regardless of their socio-economic status, is not just a moral imperative but also a cornerstone of a democratic and equitable society. This very fact alone must compel Mr Rakkam Sangma (Education Minister) and others to address the serious issues facing Public Education in Meghalaya. This means bold overhaul of the MBOSE system. Simply setting up an Education Commission will mean nothing for our State's future. Rather than PhD holders and former bureaucrats, it would be better to bring in experienced practitioners and radical creatives who can envision something new.

These are just three sectors that I feel must never be given up on by any government. We cannot afford to let our people down in that way. Private interests can be promoted in other fields but for Education, Healthcare and Transportation, Government options must be King!

Teenage pregnancy - Can a child raise a child?

By Arindam Biswas

There is a time and place for everything. And teenage is not the time to get pregnant or be a parent. According to the National Family Health Survey 5 (NFHS 5), 7.2% of all women between the ages of 15-19 years in Meghalaya were pregnant during the survey period of 2019-2020. However, rural Meghalaya had 8.4% and urban areas had 3.2% of teenage pregnancies. Compared to that, the average teenage pregnancy rate in India stood at 6.8%.

According to ICRW (International Centre for Research on Women), there were approximately 119 million adolescent girls in India in 2019. That translates to about 8.6 million pregnant teenagers in that year in India. Several states in India are grappling with a high teenage pregnancy rate. According to NFHS-5, Tripura had the highest percentage of teenage pregnancy at 22%. The other states with high pregnancy rates included West Bengal 16%, Andhra Pradesh 13%, Assam 12%, Bihar 11%, and Jharkhand 10%. However, a percentage is only the proportion of the subgroup of interest in the total population. Instead to understand the magnitude of a health issue, we must consider the absolute number of individuals.

In 2011 (census 2011), Meghalaya had 350,605 females within the age bracket of 10-19 years. Hence, an average teenage pregnancy rate of 7.2% would translate to about 25,000 plus pregnant adolescents during the NFHS-5 survey. That's because the population of adolescent women would have grown by the time of the survey.

Teenage pregnancies lead to several life-threatening and lifelong issues for both the mother and the child. It also hampers the prospect of a female's livelihood and the chance to live her life to its full potential. Adolescence is a transformative state from childhood to adulthood. It encompasses multi-dimensional changes starting from biological, social, and psychological changes. That makes it crucial to design health interventions that have lifelong benefits. With teenage pregnancy, reaping these benefits becomes compromised.

Teenage pregnancy predisposes a girl to anaemia. According to NFHS-5, in Meghalaya, 52.5% of the women between 15-19 years were anaemic. It is a condition where there is less hemoglobin content in the blood. Babies born to teenage anaemic mothers suffer from many health complications.

Also, teenage mothers are at a higher risk of preterm birth. It leads to premature birth and low birth weight of babies and a higher risk of infant death. Many children born to teenage mothers develop impaired cognitive and motor movements. Several reports highlighted teenage pregnancies as a leading cause of death among girls (15-19 years), globally.

A study by the CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) has shown that teenage mothers suffer from depression after giving birth. That interferes with the upbringing and care of the newborn. Moreover, teenage mothers remain susceptible to a higher rate of depression in general.

According to Meghalaya Youth Policy 2021, the state's vision for the decade, 2020-2030 'is to become one of the Top Ten States in the country in terms of per capita income and achievement of Sustainable Development Goals.' To achieve its decadal goal, Me-

ghalaya would need healthy adolescents and a young cohort who can contribute to the growth of the state. Teenage pregnancy and poor nutritional profile (anaemic & micronutrient deficiencies) make them less productive. Moreover, several studies highlight that teenage pregnancies lead to school dropout. A study by Population Foundation India revealed that one year of additional education leads to a 7.02% increase in monthly income. Hence, teenage pregnancy impacts the quality of the workforce of a state. That is a key factor in determining the competitiveness of a state.

Like everything else in life, there is a time to be a girl and a time to be a woman. A girl becomes a woman through early marriage and pregnancy. That doesn't put society in a competitive spot. 'When girls are allowed to be girls, everybody wins.' UNICEF Reduction in teenage pregnancies requires a multifaceted approach. It includes education, access to contraception, and parental and societal involvement.

As per NFHS-5, in Meghalaya, 27.4% of people used some contraceptive during the survey. It is low compared to other states and India, where 66.7% of people used contraceptives. Having access to contraceptives is beneficial for health. It empowers a girl to remain protected from unwanted pregnancy and plan her pregnancy according to her choice. But,

having access may not be enough to encourage use of contraceptives. Having knowledge and awareness about the benefits and side effects of contraceptives is crucial. So are cultural norms and access to quality healthcare services.

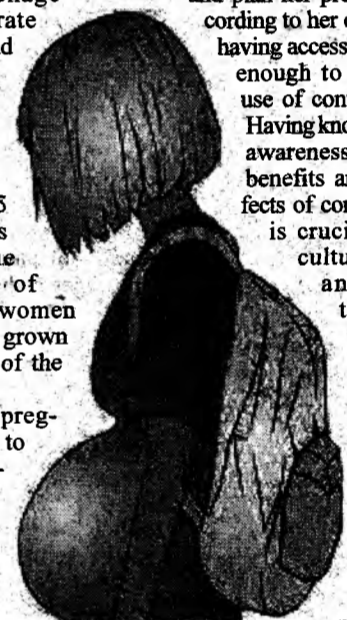
According to NFHS-5, 26.9% of the fecund women in Meghalaya needed contraceptives. That is one of the highest numbers of women among the Indian states. But as far as contraceptive use is concerned, only 27.8% of couples and individuals of reproductive age use contraceptives. That is one of the lowest in India. Hence, there is a lot of scope to increase the use of contraceptives in Meghalaya.

The Government of India launched the Rashtriya Kishor Swasthya Karyakram (RKSK) or National Adolescent Health Programme on January 7, 2014. In Meghalaya, the RKSK campaign was officially launched at the state and district level on January 14, 2019. The program aims to address several health issues among adolescents. That includes Sexual and Reproductive Health; Drug Abuse; HIV/STD; Mental Health; Non-communicable diseases; Gender Equality; Gender Violence; Injuries; and Nutrition.

During the NFHS-4 survey (2015-2016), Meghalaya had a teenage pregnancy rate of 8.6%. But within 4-5 years, that rate came down by about 17% (7.2%) by the time of the NFHS-5 survey (2019-2020).

Public Health Systems are complex. Factors like socio-political-economic policies and culture play crucial roles. That makes implementing public health programs and its outcome a slow process. Hence, despite a lot of effort, there remains a significant gap. However, there needs to be a continuous effort to address these challenges. That will reduce the incidence of teenage pregnancies in Meghalaya. Families in Meghalaya consider children as a 'gift of God.' But it may not be as good a gift if it arrives too early in teenage life.

(The writer is with Indian Institute of Public Health (IIPH) Shillong)



Letters to the Editor

'Dkhar' civil servants have served with dedication

Editor
Thank you for your two courageous editorials in TST, Oct 20, 2023 -- "Institutions under Pressure," and "Lest we forget Meghalaya is still part of India." Thank you for standing for the truth and for recognizing the hard work of "Dkhar" bureaucrats in Meghalaya -- trained professionals who serve the state, engaging in endless thankless tasks (for which they receive little to no gratitude), despite all the odds against them. One cannot help but wonder if they would be treated differently if they were of European origin and white.

In my parents' generation I saw hardworking and selfless bureaucrats, who served the destitute and disenfranchised, despite all odds (the prejudices they faced for being "Dkhars,"

and bullying threats of transfer from petty politicians). Their relationship with the indigenous communities of the Northeast was entirely one way. Although seen as foreigners, they never saw the local people as foreign.

It's high time we began seeing individuals for who they are, what they accomplish, and how they serve -- not for how they look, what languages they speak, or their ethnic identities.

Yours, etc.,
Deepa Majumdar,
Via email

Need to readjust our lenses

Editor,
The news report 'Groups warn of stir; Pauls small politics' and the special article 'Lest we forget Meghalaya is still part of India' (ST October 20, 2023) made interesting reading. Having gone through the news item I found that the argument of

the Tourism Minister, Paul Lyngdoh very rational on the purpose to hold the Cherry Blossom Festival. "Robibar" as a Khasi puts it, is the first day of the week for half of the world population in 67 countries with a population of 4 billion that includes countries like United States, Canada, Argentina, Brazil, Columbia, South Africa, Nigeria, Egypt, India, Pakistan, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Japan, South Korea, Israel, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates while 160 countries with a population of 3.3 billion considers Monday as the first day of the week. These 160 countries include Germany, France, United Kingdom, China, Thailand, Myanmar, Australia, New Zealand, Turkey, Iraq, Lebanon, Congo (DR), Kenya and Uganda to name a few. Almost all countries in North and South America start their week on Sunday, while countries in Europe and Oceania overwhelmingly start on Monday. The world's most populated continents are split: roughly half

the countries in Africa and Asia are on team Sunday, the other on team Monday. There are countries starting neither on Sunday nor on Monday: Countries like Afghanistan, Iran, and Somalia start their week on Saturday.

Discerners are aware that Sunday came about on March 7, A.D. 321, when Constantine the Great issued the first civil Sunday law, compelling all the people in the Roman Empire, except farmers, to rest on Sunday. This, with five other civil laws decreed by Constantine concerning Sunday, set the legal precedent for all civil Sunday legislation from that time to the present. Sunday worship is not commanded in the Bible. It is Constantine's edict. But wait here is what Astrology says about Sunday. "Sunday is ruled by the sun, which represents warmth, ego, and your personal truth. This is the perfect day to embrace your individual light, and what really makes you happy. Most people can get a bit anxious on Sunday, since it's

the day before Monday, but it's highly suggested to kick back and take it easy on this day. The solar energy of the sun is meant to recharge us for the week ahead, not deplete us. Ever heard the term "easy like Sunday morning"?

This is precisely why - It's a day to unwind and get centred for the upcoming week ahead.
The special article by Patricia Mukhim 'Lest we forget Meghalaya is still part of India' was excellent and factual. Those who think that Meghalaya is out of India are kidding themselves. Let it be known that according to the Reserve Bank of India out of every Rs 100 in the 2021 Accounts, the State's Own Tax Revenue is Rs 19.40 paise and Non-Tax Revenue is Rs 4.90 paise both these revenues add up to Rs 24.30 paise. While Rs 42.60 paise is Central Taxes and Rs 33.10 paise is Grants-in-aid from the Government of India both these add up to Rs 75.70 paise. In percentage State's revenue works out to 24.3 percent while the rest

75.7 percent comes from the Government of India. It is exactly for this reason that the Government of India has in place a 'steel frame' to administer India. The administrator may be Kumar or Lyngdoh it does not matter but they have to administer. Ms Mukhim has correctly said that it is advantageous to be on the ruling side. After all it is a win-win situation to be with those who are in power in New Delhi at a time when ideology no longer matters. After all, money is what money does. She has also rightly pointed out that policy is never debated in the Assembly and "it is pointless to blame the bureaucrats" when "politicians cannot think long term" in Meghalaya or even "come up with a white paper on any sector".
Yours etc.,
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

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How dangerous is insomnia?

How fear of what it's doing to your body can wreck your sleep

By Leon Lack and Nicole Lovato

I(Leon) have recently seen several patients who were concerned their insomnia symptoms would increase their risk for dementia. They were in their 70s and were awakening two or three times a night, which they took to be insomnia. But they were not impaired in the daytime in a way typical of insomnia.

Their brief awakenings are normal for most people and completely harmless. Brief awakenings emerge from the periodic phases of light sleep that occur naturally between the four or five 90-minute deep sleep cycles.

If you're unaware of this "roller-coaster" of 90-minute cycles, you might think such awakenings are a sign of disease. In fact, they are perfectly normal and experienced more as people age when sleep naturally becomes lighter and shorter - with no ill effect.

Therefore, I reassured them their sleep patterns were normal and they did not have insomnia. This requires daytime impairments - fatigue, cognitive problems, mild depression, irritability, distress or anxiety - in addition to night time symptoms.

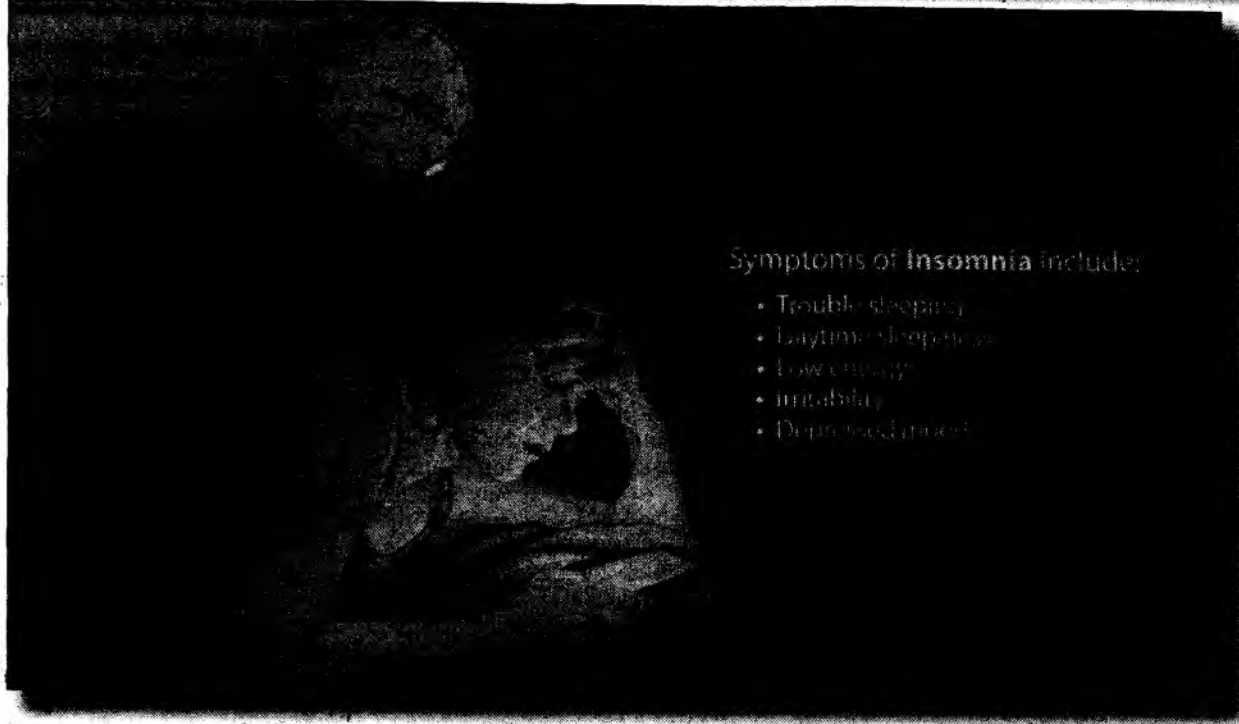
I trust they were reassured, and so they avoided the type of fear and worry that would have triggered a cascade of events leading to insomnia.

Is it really insomnia?

So where did my patients get the notion their sleep symptoms could lead to dementia? Let's pick apart this tsunami of alarming information.

It usually starts with very large surveys that find a statistically significant relationship between measures of sleep problems and subsequently developing dementia.

First, most of these studies ask participants to report how long they



Symptoms of insomnia include:

- Trouble sleeping
- Daytime sleepiness
- Low energy
- Irritability
- Depressed mood

typically sleep. Those reporting less than six hours a night show a small but statistically elevated risk of developing dementia.

These studies do not say if people have clinical insomnia diagnosed by a health professional. Instead they rely solely on participants guessing how long they've slept, which can be inaccurate.

The studies would have also included many people without insomnia who are not allowing themselves adequate opportunity for sleep. Perhaps they'd been in the habit of socialising or playing computer games late at night.

In other words, we don't know what proportion of these short-sleepers are simply over-estimating their sleep and experiencing chronic sleep loss rather than insomnia.

What do the numbers really mean?

A second problem is with interpreting the meaning of "statistically

significant".

This only means the results were unlikely to be due to pure chance. If a single study shows a 20% increased risk of a physical health problem associated with insomnia, how worried should we be? This single finding does not necessarily mean it's worth considering in our everyday lives.

Studies relating insomnia to health risks are also typically inconsistent. For example, although some studies have found small increases in dementia risk with having insomnia, a very large UK study did not find any relationship between the amount of sleep or sleeping difficulties and dementia risk.

What's the context?

A third problem is communicating a balanced perspective to the public about the potential dangers of insomnia. Some in the mainstream media, with the help of the researcher's institution, will report on studies showing a statistically significant

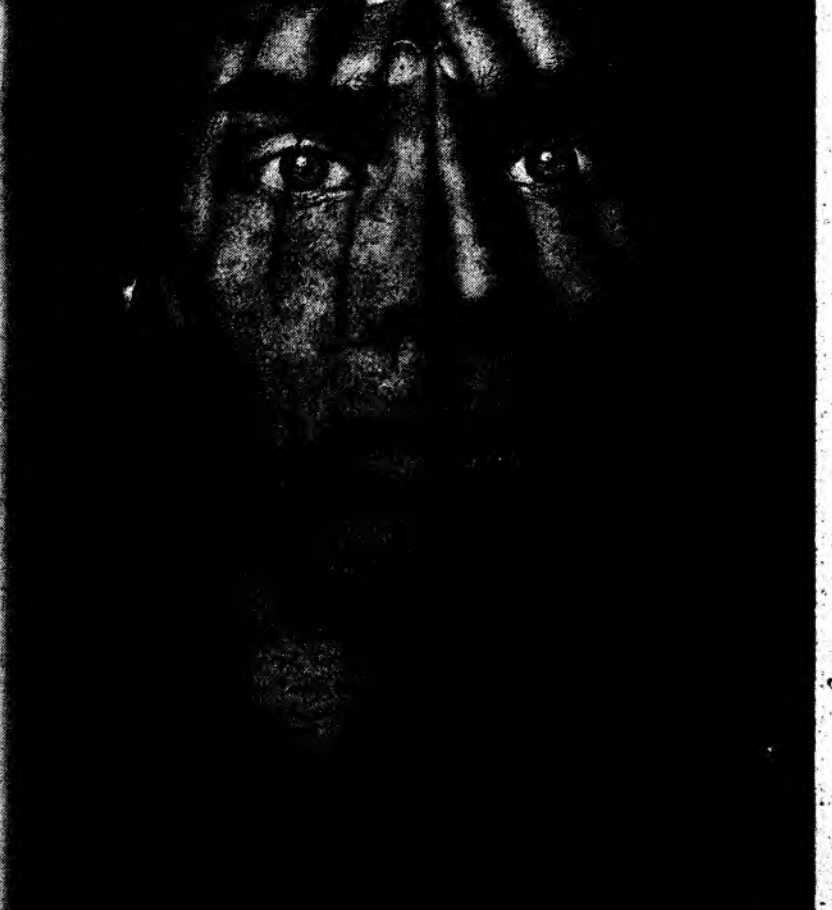
increase in the risk of a frightening disease, such as dementia.

But not all media reports ask about how clinically meaningful the risk is, whether there are alternative explanations, or how this result compares with what other researchers have found. So the public is left with no context to temper the scary, "increased risk" narrative. This narrative is then shared on social media, amplifying the scary finding.

Obesity, diabetes, high blood pressure

We've used dementia as one example of how fears about potential risks to physical health from insomnia arise and are magnified. But we could have used a potential increased risk of obesity, diabetes or high blood pressure. All have been associated with shorter sleep, but researchers are debating whether these links are real, meaningful or related to insomnia.

When we looked at the impact of sleep problems on life expectancy, we found no evidence sleep symp-



ptoms alone shorten your life. Only when daytime symptoms such as fatigue, memory problems and distress are included is there a small increased risk of dying prematurely. However, it's difficult to know if that excess mortality can be explained by undiagnosed heart, kidney, liver or brain disease causing those daytime symptoms.

We should be talking about mental health. However, there is stronger evidence of increased mental health problems, especially depression, with insomnia.

The typical daytime impairments of fatigue, distress, cognitive impairments and irritability certainly lower the quality of life. Life becomes more of a challenge and less

enjoyable. Over time, this can trigger hopelessness and depression in some people. This is enough reason to seek help to improve sleep and quality of life.

People with these problems should seek help from a health practitioner. The good news is there is an effective, long-term, non-drug treatment with no side effects - cognitive behavioural therapy for insomnia (CBTi). Even better, successful CBTi also decreases symptoms of depression and other mental distress.

What is not helpful is unnecessary fear triggered by reports suggesting serious physical health dangers of insomnia. This fear is only likely to increase insomnia rather than mitigate it.

Recipes that you can cook based on 'What's in your fridge'

Indian kitchens have a rich tradition of culinary ingenuity, where creating something delightful from meagre ingredients has been elevated to an art form. Each state, region, and community boasts unique leftover-based recipes born from resourcefulness. Yet, as urbanisation has pushed people into cities, these recipes have often taken a backseat, particularly for those living alone, turning to ordering in or eating out.

But the tides seem to be turning, there has been an increasing interest in cooking at home with the rising popularity of recipe and food content both online and on TV. Technology, like smart cooking devices powered by AI, is playing a pivotal role in this transformation. These appliances have breathed new life into leftovers, generating step-by-step recipes, allowing owners to craft gourmet worthy dishes from the remnants in their fridge.

Making Something Out Of Nothing

As per *Food Trends Report*, based on a comprehensive dataset featuring 3000 households and over 15,000 cooking sessions using delishUp across 11 cities, the revival of cooking with leftovers is an undeniable trend. Below are some of the easiest dishes you can whip up using leftover ingredients.

Steamed Vegetables: You can repurpose steamed vegetables into flavorful stir fries and snacks. Sauté them together with spices like pepper and red chilli flakes and a splash of honey for a quick snack. You can also add some protein to the stir fry to turn into a wholesome meal.

Uncooked Vegetables: You can transform your leftover vegetables into a tasty Pav Bhaji. A great recipe to clean out the fridge end of the week, it has been made easy to cook using smart cooking appliances. Automated chopping and stirring and one pot cooking can make home cooked Pav Bhaji part of your weekly menu.

Leftover Rice: South Indian



and Asian cuisines have a host of recipes that find new ways to use up any leftover rice. Lemon Rice (Chithrana) and Tamarind Rice (Puliyogare) are easy to make - a quick tadka and aromatics - making these great options for your lunch box. Asian style fried rice can be made really easily with a smart cooking assistant - mincing ginger and garlic with only a tap and turning on Wok mode to toss and fry the vegetables and rice.

Bread: Make the most of the last few slices by making 'Bread Poha'. You can make it with Paneer or toss in some sausages for a non-veg version. A quick tadka and some sautéed aromatics along with mint, peanuts and you will have a great

meal in under 30 minutes. A fusion and easy to make alternative to making puddings or croutons.

Households throughout India are embracing cooking so they can make healthier choices and not rely on ordering in to meet their needs. This transformation is largely driven by the convenience provided by AI-powered appliances and smart cooking assistants. It represents more than just a focus on food preservation; it signifies a fundamental change in how people engage with their own health and their family's nutritional needs. With technology as their cooking partner, the future of Indian home kitchens is poised to be both brighter and more inventive than ever. (IANSlife)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, OCTOBER 22, 2023

'Birthday Forecast'
A new cycle begins with the old order, finishing as finer and outer changes are on the cards as Moon square Sun on your solar return chart. Avoid haphazard decisions and don't let your guard down. Soon you will be reaping the rewards of a path well chosen. This also provides a new approach to communications projects, learning, or self-expression. Your own insights will be just as useful as outside information. Finances will be stable; think things through before investing. Family support will be invaluable. Love and romance should be going quite well now and some plans too will be finalized.

'This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) A more intense approach to relationships can be expected in this period. It is time to cut the fat by eliminating activities that aren't fulfilling your needs. Halfway measures will not be enough, so dig in and decide where you are going to invest your energy and where you need to pull back. When you concentrate your forces on one task or with one person, you can reach levels of fulfillment you haven't previously known. You would discuss issues objectively with those close to you. You would reach out and make new connections. You may visit and spend time in the company of your family and relatives. This is a favorable time to go for higher learning and join new courses to improve your professional skills and efficiency.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) You would realize that unsolved issues and puzzling situations are now becoming clear. All that is really needed is action, and you have plenty of energy to utilize. Your social life is likely to increase and bring you in contact with more influential, powerful and helpful people. This phase highlights friendship, love, romance and children in your life. Your emotional brilliance will shine through as long as you do not react too quickly. This is a good time to build your skills, to get organized, and to attend to your health and your well being. There are strong chances of a pilgrimage; you may visit places of worship and holy places. A sense of humor allows free expression without anger or wounded egos.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) Realistic levels of optimism and confidence are with you, and you are able to attract fortunate circumstances into your life. Making progress can be difficult but not impossible. You could even feel trapped by your daily routine with the emphasis on getting every task done right. You would rather be doing more exciting things. Someone enters your life on a whirlwind of emotional intensity. Take advantage of the stabilizing results you can obtain just by being extra helpful and caring. The pleasure is in the journey ahead of you, rather than merely in the conquest of the summit. You may feel as if you are running out of time in your quest to free yourself from a challenging situation, but you have more time than you think.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) New responsibilities are likely to present themselves and you would take them more seriously now. You would learn about your own personal strength. You may have to deal with willfulness and issues of power and competition - in others and in yourself. There are likely to be times when you feel on edge, volatile, or even threatened. You may be able to get in touch with your internal motivations. A tendency to want to control your life through some form of manipulation would be strong at this time. Meeting with obstacles in your path, however, can force you into the position of using all of your resources to fight back, and you can discover resources you never knew you had in the process.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) Matters related to higher education, religion, 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 would use your best talents and efficiency. Business expansion and new professional opportunities are worth considering. Financial benefits are stronger than any other time now. Duty and work commitment could come before pleasure, and a tendency to work more or harder is likely. As long as this doesn't reach workaholic levels, you will be just fine. You find yourself more accountable than ever when it comes to your work and output. Brisk walks and timely eating would be helpful.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 23) This phase sees your energy and confidence increase dramatically. Things will not go in your favor if you resort to tactics to get what you want. At times, you could have problems staying calm, cool, and collected. Buried resent-

ments come to the fore and demand to be dealt with. It would be favorable to have good team spirit and be more tactful and obliging with your co-workers as this brings harmony and team spirit at the work place. You spend time with your beloved and go on trips, shopping, fun or even a journey. Intimacy and warmth are powerful stimulants for you during this phase. This is a favorable time to invest in shares, fixed deposits and insurance.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) You would be able to see the world in practical terms and structure your life and ambitions accordingly. Opportunities to travel arise and adventure might be seeking you out. Some restlessness is likely, mainly because of a deep feeling of weariness. You are more able than ever to see the "big picture" and less inclined to sweat the small stuff. You may be asked to state your intentions or urged to get serious. A strong period for romance and fun is indicated. There would be new associations and beginnings as new opportunities and changes are on the cards. Your family would be more supportive and harmony and pleasant interactions in your relationships would make you feel comfortable.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) The planetary configuration brings more physical and laborious work. You could be stressed while meeting people's expectations and approval. Outdoor activities appeal more than ever, and an opportunity to travel somewhere exotic could drop into your lap. You have a greater desire to get away, expand your horizons, and broaden your life experiences. This influence often correlates with a time when you are more able to get away from the daily routine - more often open up, or you have more free time to do so. Do not bottle yourself when you're feeling down. People will support you at least listen, when you share your feelings.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) You are artistic, stylish and your judgment is sound and you would participate in glamorous events. You are more receptive and gentle on a romantic level, and tend to be sentimental and caring. Your domestic life is comfortable as you make the family relaxed and secure and devote time with them. You are full of energy and indulge in size and crafts. Try to compromise and adjust and take a soft approach when meeting people. You would be recognized and you would be praised and rewarded. Take advantage of the smooth and magnetic energy. Give yourself a new fitness routine and healthy diet program to build on your energy.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) You would maintain a balance between emotional feelings 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 comfort and status. You probably should be on the lookout for a tendency to create your own financial stress due to extravagant spending habits. You would insert your creativity in an artistic way into your work. A sense of humor allows free expression. Your cultural and spiritual awareness increases. Confidence is the key - faith in the universe and in your ability to do the right thing instinctively will take you places now.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) You may need to re-evaluate your plan of action. Errors in judgment made now are likely due to impulsiveness and in overlooking crucial details. You could have so many new ideas that you do not have time to implement all of them. Cooperation and a focus on harmony and understanding benefit you professionally and enhance your reputation and public standing. You would have the ability to work on financial and monetary pursuits. Good returns from overseas business are on cards. Your style of communication and efforts bring favorable results on your romantic life. You may feel restless at times but health food, yoga and meditation are recommended.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) You could seek distinction and strive towards perfection in your work. Efficiency should be your goal now. Relationships are dynamic and when a difference arises, you are quick to settle it, and have little patience for sweeping matters under the rug. Your close personal relationships are lively and full of conflicts and resolutions or reconciliation. You would express your sympathetic and compassionate side. The seeds you plant now, you will reap later. Surprises surrounding intimate matters, shared finances and resources and financial support may be in store. You could pay attention to various ways to increase personal funds, resulting in more than one avenue of monetary gain.

"Exercise is the chief source of improvement in our faculties."

—Hugh Blair

The Shillong Times

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Mood of the Nation

WITH just a few months left for the Parliament polls, the political scene is getting surcharged. But for the intervening set of assembly elections, the results of which are keenly awaited, the count-down for the parliament polls would have started by now. The assembly election scene — seen also as a dress-rehearsal for the big battle of 2024 — itself is providing the nation with a season of high suspense. The BJP that had started its rule at the Centre with the slogan of 'Congress-mukht Bharat' is nowhere near its goal; rather, the grand old party is seen to be in a revival mode after a key electoral win in Karnataka, that too by upsetting the BJP appellation.

By all hints, Prime Minister Narendra Modi would lead the charge for the 2024 parliament polls from the truncated BJP-NDA side. His leadership of the nation after the next polls could raise tricky questions. Modi had stated in 2014 saying he wanted two terms to make India great. Nothing of the sort has happened. Fact is also that the BJP is not equipped in a manner that would effect a leadership change at this critical hour for the party. Modi worked no wonders. He basks principally in the aura of what his government did in Kashmir, or in "settling" the Ram Janambhoomi dispute between Hindus and Muslims. He failed to positively shake India from its very roots or re-energize it. The nation has, in terms of economic growth, done a job. The economy is erect, faces no serious problems, and the nation claims to be the world's fifth largest economy. On the debit side, this growth was mostly sectarian. The rich became richer while the 80 per cent of the poor and the middle class remained mostly where they were. Wages/salaries — a barometer for the well-being of the burgeoning working class — failed to rise substantially. Modi failed to reach the fruits of the economic growth to the underlings. He failed to reform India. He refused to touch on any contentious topics and allowed vested interests to hold sway over the nation in more aggressive ways.

Under Modi's watch the bureaucracy has become more corrupt; and the corrupt regional satraps gained more clout across states. These leaders will now come round and hurl the biggest challenge to the Prime Minister and the BJP with matching support from the Congress. Put together, they are already a formidable force under the INDIA grouping. Note the fact that the BJP was humbled in 2004 when it bragged that India was "shining" by virtue of the AB Vajpayee-led NDA rule. The Congress-UPA grabbed power and sent the BJP and its allies packing. History could repeat itself. The mood of the nation is downbeat.

Letters to the Editor

India slips on press & academic freedom

The editorial, "Institutions under pressure" (ST, October 20, 2023), rightly describes the Safina Nabi incident as "one amongst many where media freedom is sought to be curtailed". The cancellation of Kashmiri journalist, Safina Nabi's journalism award by a University in Pune at the eleventh hour allegedly due to political pressure is yet another example of gagging press and academic institutions. It is little wonder that India's ranking in the 2023 World Press Freedom Index has alarmingly slipped to 161 out of 180 countries. Even Pakistan has gone ahead of us by moving up to 150th rank.

Just like press freedom the freedom for scholars to express their viewpoints is also under threat. According to the Academic Freedom Index (AFI) report 2023, India scored 0.38 on a scale of 0 (low) to 1 (high). The report says that India is among 22 countries (out of 179) where institutions and scholars enjoy significantly less freedom today than 10 years ago. Among our neighbours Nepal (0.86), Pakistan (0.45) and Bhutan (0.46) scored

higher whereas Bangladesh (0.25) and Myanmar (0.01) scored lower than India. India performed poorly in that report in campus integrity because of political interference. The situation has been deteriorating further since the publication of the report in February this year.

Sabyasachi Das, an assistant professor at Ashoka University, resigned as a result of the controversy over his research paper on India's democratic backsliding. Pulpur Balakrishnan, professor of economics, resigned in solidarity asking the administration to invite his colleague back. Recently, Unacademy, an online education platform, fired an instructor, Karan Sangwan, after a video of him talking to students about voting for educated candidates went viral. All these incidents will be evaluated in the next report of Academic Freedom Index which already described the autonomy of Indian institutions to express views on political issues as very poor.

But freedom will not come as manna from heaven. The people should strive for it and use all available peaceful means to protect it. For this we need to follow the advice of BR Ambedkar, "Be educated, be agitated, be organized, be confident, never give up, these are the five principles of our life."

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

Can CM Elevate the State?

By H H Mohrmen

Conrad K Sangma the Chief Minister of Meghalaya went gung-ho with the MDA government's new program called CM-ELEVATE. The importance of the program as such is that Sangma made it a point to personally launch this program at least in all three regions of the state. Recently he was in Jowai to launch the program. The CM Elevate is at least like a bouquet where all government schemes and projects are in one place. It is a convergence of all the government schemes that are intended to support the citizens of the state particularly the youths.

CM-Elevate is Partnering with Youths
The official document states that CM Elevate is a State-funded flagship program, aiming at making the youth partners in development by engaging and empowering them through entrepreneurship. At the launching of the program, the Chief Minister also mentioned the important statistic that every year about 70,000 young men and women enter the workforce in the state. However, the different schemes in the programs are not targeted at the youth only. Apart from supporting individual entrepreneurs, the schemes also aim at supporting the collectives, village organizations, and traditional institutions to partner with the government and take up the various businesses offered as part of the program. The success of these schemes also depends on the support of the banks and other financial institutions.

To financially assist such initiatives and ensure easy access and affordable credit to aspiring entities, the Government of Meghalaya has partnered with various public and private sector banks.

Loans and Credit support
The government cannot provide government jobs to all the youths of the state hence the objective of the program is to encourage entrepreneurship among youth by providing them with necessary access to capital in getting a business off the ground. To improve access to loans the government also understands the potential risks associated with credit flow such as financial instability, over-indebtedness, etc., and to minimize risks, the government provides necessary financial assistance ranging between 35% and 75% of the project cost in the form of capital subsidy and operational subsidy as EMI co-payment.

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Advocating for lower price of sanitary pads
Editor,
I am writing to express my concern and advocate for a crucial issue that affects the well-being of female individuals—the high cost of sanitary pads. Menstruation is a natural and inevitable part of life for many people, and access to affordable menstrual hygiene products is a matter of basic human rights.

It has come to my attention that the rising prices of sanitary pads are placing a significant financial burden on some individuals and families. Sanitary pads, an essential hygiene product primarily used by menstruating individuals, have been a subject of concern due to their cost and affordability. Sanitary pads are not a luxury; they are a basic necessity for those who menstruate. Yet, in many parts of the world, they are subject to taxation as luxury items, making them more expensive. In some regions, there is limited access to affordable sanitary pads, forcing individuals to opt for cheaper, less hygienic alternatives or even resort to unhygienic practices due to economic constraints.

We keep on hearing of dumping of trucks and trucks loads of expired medicines. Procurement of such unexpired medicines should have been diverted to pro-

curing sanitary napkins of both washable and one time use variety to be distributed at every government health centre across the state.
I urge the Meghalaya Health Department in particular the Women and Girl Child Welfare Department, to consider implementing measures such as tax reductions or subsidies on menstrual hygiene products. This will help lower the prices and ensure that sanitary pads are within reach of all women.
Yours etc.,
Linnette V Mawrie
Via email

For the sake of creating employment
Editor,
I have been in the teaching profession for every thirty years and in all those years there has never been any intervention from the Education Department to improve teaching-learning. We did it our way with the only supreme guide and monitoring body being the once-in-a-year matriculation results, and the syllabus. And the majority of schools have done well.
It was only in the last three years that we met the 'expert'; experts in every sense of the word. But this year was different since the government tried to leave its mark in the field of education. But whether it was done intelligently, or just to employ the

"The success of these schemes also depends on the support of the banks and other financial institutions. To financially assist such initiatives and ensure easy access and affordable credit to aspiring entities, the Government of Meghalaya has partnered with various public and private sector banks."

agriculture and Farmers' Welfare, the Animal Husbandry & Veterinary Department, the Tourism Department, and the Meghalaya Basin Management Agency.

Tourism receives the major thrust in the Program
The CM Elevate program lays major emphasis on the development of tourism since it is seen as the major employment creator in the state. One of the schemes under the tourism department is the PRIME Tourism Vehicle in which the government provides financial aid to entrepreneurs to buy any passenger vehicle with a 50% subsidy. The package also includes training in the basic etiquette of the drivers and owners of the vehicles. Another important tourism-related scheme under the program is Agro-Tourism villa which is a form of financial aid to entrepreneurs to build luxury villas to the tune of Rs 1 crore with 35% subsidy. The project under tourism with a bigger subsidy is the construction

again with a 75% subsidy.
Livestock and other businesses
Meghalaya Piggery development for establishing pig farms, Meghalaya Dairy development for establishment of cattle farms and a scheme to promote goat farming and poultry farming etc., are provided 50% subsidy support. Traditional cattle farming for meat production should also be promoted. The program also promotes the construction of a 200-seater Cinema Theatre with 35% or 1 crore or 35% or 50 lakhs for a 100-seater with MBMA as the implementing agency. This will perhaps help in promoting local talents who are engaged in making local films and also artists.
A support of Rs 1 crore or 35% of the project is also provided for the establishment of wellness centers. The program also promotes construction, maintenance, and running of Swimming Pools with value additions like indoor games, spas, and gyms. Any business venture

is another scheme in the program that gives 35% or up to 17.5 lakhs subsidy for the entrepreneur who wishes to establish any business venture. Businesses such as restaurants; food trucks; theatre and drama training centers; center for performing arts; music studios for recording and production; music & dance school comprising of Indian, and Western Classical forms; warehouse for packaging, branding, and storage; local handicraft and handloom units; and any other unit not listed fall in this category.

Support to those engaged in Agriculture
Support for those engaged in agriculture include the Prime Agriculture Response Vehicles, which is financial support in the form of a subsidy up to 50%, and for installing poly houses is also up to 50% financial support. There is also a scheme to construct a warehouse which gives a 75% subsidy. The scheme is implemented by MBMA. This is a much-needed intervention because right now farmers' produce like turmeric, ginger, and broomsticks are at the mercy of the traders because of the lack of such infrastructure. MBMA also provides financial support for establishing the Common Facility Centre

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The last thing is the Teachers' Information Management Systems (TIMS) which is to gather information about teachers in state run schools. In this we have to share our personal attendance on the Government's Internet platform. Some colleagues who complied said that after having gone through the process, which is very long, it failed as their phones have RAMs below 7GB.
Improvement and innovations in the sector are a must and we have already been lagging behind other states in the country. We are at the crossroads now and can no longer afford to waste time, energy, and resources on redundancy. So we need a better formula to play catch-up in the race.
Yours etc.,
Isaid Khongjee (A Teacher)
Via email

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A step in the right direction
In a nutshell, the program envisages accelerating and sustaining the economic development of the state through entrepreneurship development, job creation, infrastructure development, tourism promotion, and investing in businesses to increase capacity and expand potential. The initiative should be appreciated and hopefully, this will provide the much-needed impetus for business growth and benefit the state in terms of its economic, social, and overall well-being. But the million-dollar question is — can the state achieve the much talked about goal of a USD 10 billion economy by 2030?

The Challenge to the USD 10 Billion Economy
On the day the Chief Minister launched CM-ELEVATE at Jowai, he said that the program is envisioned at achieving the government's vision to achieve a USD 10 Billion economy by 2030. When I discussed the government's vision with a young Marwari friend who has lived in Shillong for several generations, he jokingly asked me if I knew how many zeros there are in a billion, to which I answered in the negative. He then added we have not even calculated it by the exchange rate of rupees to the US dollar which will be more than 80 times. It is true that for the economy of the state to grow, the government needs to ensure that there is security and ease of doing business for all sections of the society in the state. The question that the government needs to ask itself is if it is actually providing the much-needed environment for business to grow in the state.

The most important question is: Are we being realistic in setting our goal? Can the state achieve the goal by merely implementing the CM Elevate program? Obviously, the answer to the question is "No". Is the goal of reaching USD 10 billion achievable in just 7 years?
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Hamas-Israel war, if not contained, could damage global economy

India has resilience but impact depends on extent of price rise in oil

By Nilanjan Banik

Joseph Campbell, author of "The Hero with a Thousand Faces" and scholar on comparative religions, once recounted a Japanese story. A samurai hunted down his master's killer and was about to decapitate him when the assassin spat in the samurai's face. The enraged samurai immediately returned his sword to the sheath and walked away. The reason is that he was taught by his master never to act in a fit of blind anger, as retributions should be delivered from an objective, righteous distance. Too close to and too soon after any ghastly atrocity, blood feuds like what is unfolding in Israel and Gaza may make us believe that we are heading for a 'polycrisis'.

'Polycrisis' is a term used by the World Economic Forum's Global Risks Report 2023 to indicate that "present and future risks can interact with each other to form a 'polycrisis' — a cluster of related global risks with compounding effects, such that the overall impact exceeds the sum of each part". The Russia-Ukraine war, the post-COVID debt crisis, global warming, and now the war in the Middle East are all but different elements that constitute a polycrisis.

What will be the impact of a polycrisis on the Indian stock market and Indian economy in general? While the Ukraine and Russia war had arguably had a limited impact on the US stock market riding on AI stocks and India being a swing country (Saudi Arabia being the other

one) gained from the surge in its mid and small-cap stocks, the fallout of the Israel and Hamas conflict, if it is not contained swiftly, may have more catastrophic collateral damages to the global economy.

There is a fear of a growing risk that other countries will be drawn into this conflict. In particular, if Iran, Egypt, and Syria were to join this religious war — with the presumption that this war is affecting the sentiment of the Arab and Muslim world — the price of crude may spin out of control. The price of crude oil jumped 6% ever since the start of this crisis. The oil price has inched toward \$90 a barrel, and there is a likelihood of it crossing the symbolic danger mark of \$100 a barrel.

If the oil price crosses the \$ 100-a-barrel barrier, interest rates will stay up higher for longer, not just in the US but in India as well. That, of course, comes with a caveat — if there is no financial accident in the US like any more bank going belly up. Furthermore, the dollar index inching up doesn't bode well for India. If the fickle FI/ FPI money rushes out, the much-valored domestic retail money may hold up the market only for some time.

It is to be noted, that for India, crude has the largest share with 30% of the import bill. With a requirement exceeding more than 5 million barrels per day, a rise in crude price beyond the psychological \$100 mark will impact the exchange rate and the real economy. Every \$10 increase in crude oil price widens India's current account deficit by 0.5%.

How much more price of oil will rise will depend upon whether the war spills over to other countries. Although there is an exchange of fire between Lebanon and Israel, it is unlikely that Iran will join the fight directly on religious grounds. It is known that Iran is backing Hezbollah leaders in Lebanon. However, Iran

has already gained much from this ongoing crisis. For sure, as the military offensive in Gaza continues it is going to scuttle the normalization of the relationship between Israel and Saudi Arabia. And that by itself is a big win for Shia-dominated Iran, who otherwise may feel left out if Sunni-dominated Saudi Arabia joins hands with the Zionists. Iran also fears a normalization of US-mediated ties between Israel and the Saudis will enable the latter to develop a civilian nuclear energy program.

In this fast-changing scenario, the Arab world (except for Iran) so far has not supported the Hamas attack on Israel. They did condemn the Al-Maamadani hospital bombing in Gaza but are yet to take an active step.

Elsewhere, Iran is still supporting the Christian-dominated Armenians in their war against Azerbaijan which is a Muslim-dominated country. In fact, Armenia functions as a transit point for Iranians establishing a connection with Syria and Lebanon. The Assad regime in Syria is backed by Russia, which is again fighting a battle with Ukraine. Russia, Iran, and China, all of them stand to gain more by giving outside support than actively participating in the war.

The only plausibility is Egypt and Turkey. Egypt drawn into a war is a cause of concern as it plays a pivotal role in the global supply chain because of its control of the Suez Canal. The economy is further going to take

"The Russia-Ukraine war has pushed up the price of wheat, and Egypt is reeling under inflation touching 38% in September. With a weak economy and a high debt, Egypt could not afford to fight a war."

hit, with more than one million Palestinians waiting to enter Egypt. Egypt is the world's largest importer of wheat, the bulk of which used to come from Russia and Ukraine. The Russia-Ukraine war has pushed up the price of wheat, and Egypt is reeling under inflation touching 38% in September. With a weak economy and a high debt, Egypt could not afford to fight a war.

For Turkey which is still recovering from the impact of the deadly February earthquake, the more pressing need is to contain the Kurdish extremism. Moreover, the Sunni-dominated Arab world will certainly not welcome the aggressive stance of the once-dominant Ottoman Empire.

With President Biden's visit and the likely easing of the movement of aid and people across the Gaza-Egypt border, the flare-up can be contained. Also, the US and Venezuela agreed on a deal that will ease US sanctions on Venezuelan oil. With a slowing down demand in China and more oil hitting the world market, the price of oil may not cross the danger limit. The market is signalling this as well. Thanks to strong corporate earnings, both the US and the Indian stock markets are so far steadfast. The headline index Nifty fell only 0.7% on the day the market opened after the Hamas attack on 10th October, but ever since then the stock market has been resilient. The oil price has still not crossed the September high number. September wholesale price index (WPI) number shows it continued to fall for six straight months in a row in India. The Indian economy is still holding strong, and let us hope that the emergence of a polycrisis derail this. (IPA Service)

(Nilanjan Banik teaches at Mahindra University, Hyderabad.)

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

"Conflict cannot survive without your participation."

— Wayne Dyer

The Shillong Times

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Bickering over "Sunday"

TIMES without number overzealous Christians have referred to Meghalaya as a "Christian State" thereby eschewing the secular nature of this country as enunciated in the Preamble to the Indian Constitution. It is important to remind ourselves that India has survived for 75 years as a nation by upholding the tenets of secularism which is equal respect for all religions. In recent years the BJP has been trying to turn this country into a nation of Hindus by preaching the credo of Hindutva. It is important to understand that Hindutva is a political ideology encompassing the cultural justification of Hindu nationalism and the belief in establishing Hindu hegemony within India. Hindutva is far removed from Hinduism, the religion which has been most benign all these decades but which is now sought to be weaponized against minorities such as Christians and Muslims. This is being decried even by moderate Hindus who believe that the survival of India as a democratic and secular nation rests on the pillars of secularism else it will be no different from Pakistan or Bangladesh for that matter where Hindus who are a minority in those countries are persecuted. To do to the Muslims in India what is done to Hindus in Pakistan and Bangladesh is sheer revenge and will take the country downhill.

It is in this context that an assertion by Christians in Meghalaya that Sunday should be observed as "holy" and there should be no festivals observed on Sunday reeks of religious fundamentalism since Meghalaya is home to about 25% of non-Christians too who do not observe Sunday as a "holy" day. While Christians are free to observe their rituals on Sundays and to persuade their adherents to abstain from any merriment on a Sunday, that diktat cannot be imposed on the Government and its functionaries who are expected to maintain their secular nature at all times.

The warning by certain pressure groups to disrupt the Cherry Blossom Festival because it includes a Sunday is unwarranted, more so when church leaders have distanced themselves from the controversy. That certain political parties whose interests are inimical to the smooth conduct of the Cherry Blossom Festival in an attempt to woo a section of fanatic Christians, is not a good sign for a state that should learn to respect all religious groups and to treat all religions with a healthy respect. Otherwise there is no difference between Christians here and the Hindutva forces that wish to impose religious hegemony on non-Hindus. If Christians assert their superiority in a state where they are the majority, then they should have no legitimacy to call out the Hindutva forces that oppress Christians where they are a minority. Christianity is best demonstrated by examples than by dictums.

Letters to the Editor

Meghalaya Not A Christian State

Editor,
Meghalaya is not a religio-political state or Church-state. India is a secular country with no state religion. We have often maintained, both in private conversation and in our writings, that no one can claim for Meghalaya the name of a Christian state, in the legal sense of the words; which does not say that the whole people of the State might not, for all that, be Christians, or sectarians of an especial branch of Christianity. All the words mean to convey is, that Christianity does, as such, not enter into the polity of the government; and that the Constitution, the fundamental law, has no necessary connection with either the dogmas or precepts of Christianity. Nevertheless, it is not an atheistic State. At all events, it is foolish to pretend to assert that there is a state religion: Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Niamtre, Niam Khasi, or anything else.

Is Meghalaya a Christian State? No, it is not a Christian State; it never has been and should not be one. For the present, we must close the debate and deserve a society of all men who love truth, liberty, and religion.

All religions are equally valid ways of knowing God or truth. External differences between religions are only accidental, while their inner core lies in one thing - in the knowledge of the Divine or the Higher Reality.

Yours etc.,
Marbianglang Rymbai,
Via email

Much ado about Sunday

Editor,
The news 'Groups warn of stir; Pauls smell politics' and the special article 'Lest we forget Meghalaya is still part of India,' (ST October 20, 2023) made interesting reading. Having gone through the news item I found that the argument of the Hon'ble Minister Tourism, Paul Lyngdoh is very rational on the purpose of holding the Cherry Blossom Festival. "Robibar" as a Khasi puts it, is the first day of the week for half of the world population in 67 countries with a population of 4 billion that includes countries like United States, Canada, Argentina, Brazil, Columbia, South Africa, Nigeria, Egypt, India, Pakistan, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Japan, South Korea, Israel, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates while 160 countries with

NEHU's NEP conflict is hurting students

By Benjamin Lyngdoh

The one and only mandate of a university is to work for the development of the students. This is the only yardstick by which a university is to be viewed and evaluated. If the students benefit from a university, then it has justified its existence, otherwise not. In the conflict between NEHU authorities and the teachers over the implementation of NEP 2020, the students have become the collateral damage. This is unfortunate when in education 'students' development' should be the only parameter upon which all actions are predicated.

Due to the conflict the image of teachers has been tarnished in the last three months. It is important to recall that students do not look at teachers only as someone who would just deliver and complete a syllabus. Teachers are viewed as role models and leaders with a social responsibility. They are seen as someone who would encourage and inspire through their words and actions. The NEP conflict has made the future of the year 2023 first semester students uncertain especially with the examinations at under graduate level commencing from November, 2023. The conflict has resulted in a rift between NEHU and the teachers and amongst colleges. Some colleges are moving ahead with the implementation of NEP while some are not. While respecting the contributions of the part-time and contractual teachers, it is rather alarming that the majority of the first semester students in colleges are today learning without the services of the regular and experienced teachers.

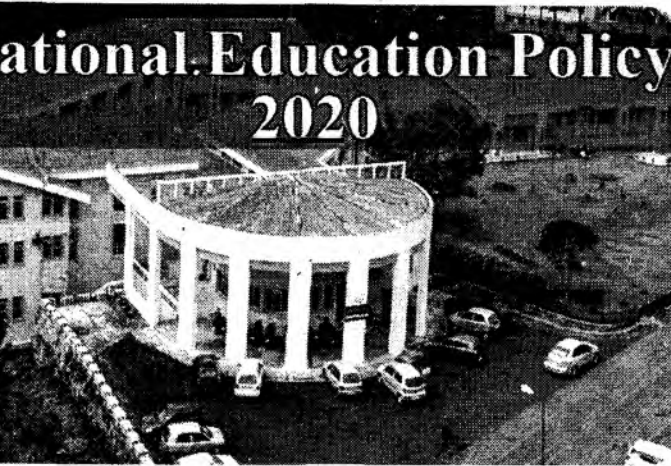
If ever there was a time for NEHU authorities, teachers and college principals to come together and brainstorm for solutions, that time is now! A common ground for such a deliberation to take place is 'in the interest of students.' There is no problem that cannot be solved when the major stakeholders work in tandem for solutions. It would be good if the teachers at large see their social worth which goes together with social responsibility towards progress and development and act accordingly.

It is important to note the difference in perspectives of teachers and students. Perhaps, this might just help us see and understand the conflict more objectively. Teachers are quoting rules, regulation and set procedures

to be followed in the implementation of NEP. No one can say for certain what will happen to this stance once the examinations start in November. In all likelihood the evaluation of answer scripts would suffer. Maybe even the validity of the results will be in question. Any which way we look at it what's sure is that education of the students has taken a back seat. This is the sort of negative/distorted environment that they are being exposed to. For students, rules and procedural conflicts are a non-issue. For them the matter is

disappointment that he has entered college education at this uncertain time. He fails to understand as to why the implementation of NEP has run into rough waters. While stating that he has learned little in the current semester, he even fears for the future semesters and the value of his results. He says 'no wonder Meghalaya's indices in education status are always very low.' In his considered view he thought this problem lies only at the elementary levels of education. But now, while in higher education he sadly quips that he is experi-

encing the same sorry state of affairs. Roselyn (name changed) pinpoints that she has paid her college fees as required with the intention of good and quality education. However, now she feels robbed in broad day light. While she acknowledges the



straight-forward and simple. If they see something new with a potential to provide better knowledge and skills, they would like to be a part of it. What the current conflict has done is that it has made them view teachers as being irresponsible and insensitive

encing the same sorry state of affairs. Roselyn (name changed) pinpoints that she has paid her college fees as required with the intention of good and quality education. However, now she feels robbed in broad day light. While she acknowledges the

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to their needs. The question to be asked is whether a delay of one year in NEP implementation would bring about any visible impact? In Meghalaya nothing much happens even in five years, let alone a year. Even if implemented after a year, the same challenges would remain. What do we do then? Ask for another year's grace? It is better to get on with it and fix efforts on solutions and not problems.

Here are two stories on the hurt of students. Ferdinand (name changed) expressed

contributions of all teachers, she says it is unfair for the experienced and regular teachers to go teach her seniors but not come to her class. She says, "What are we? Some sort of untouchables?" Brave and out-spoken Roselyn bemoans that the teachers are playing with their future and have turned them into literal guinea pigs while at the same time taking hefty monthly salaries back home. It can be said that these two stories reflect the opinions of many students. After all they are the ones at

that the Government of India has in place a 'steel frame' to administer India. The administrator may be Kumar or Lyngdoh it does not matter but they have to administer. Ms Mukhim has correctly said that it is advantageous to be on the ruling side. After all it is a win-win situation to be with those who are in power in New Delhi at a time when ideology no longer matters. After all, money is what money does. She has also rightly pointed out that policy is never debated in the Assembly and "it is pointless to blame the bureaucrats" when "politicians cannot think long term" in Meghalaya or even "come up with a white paper on any sector."

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

Festivities and the moral conscience

Editor,
A firestorm has been brewing over the past few days related to holding the concluding event of the Cherry Blossom Festival on a Sunday. Opposing groups are seen as zealous crusaders of a church going community. For proponents of the event this is seen as a one-time money churning oppor-

tunity for a state that is being starved of funds to even pay salaries to muster rolls and others down the line. The opponents should realise that religion or beliefs are purely a personal and independent choice and one cannot impose any norm on anybody, just as God created humans to choose between good and evil. The choice of people to either attend church or to enjoy themselves is none of anyone's business; nor can anyone impose their religion on everyone else. If a section of people who are practicing Christians feel it's okay to attend a festival or event on a Sunday because it's the only day possibly that affords them time to spend out, I personally see it as a non-issue just as Tourism Minister, Mr. Paul Lyngdoh stated that we cannot demonstrate our holiness on a Sunday while the entire week we become unholy. Therefore, a government that is secularly bonded by the Constitution cannot bend just because a majority feels aggrieved about events being held on a particular day based on their faith. Period.

Yours etc.,
Dominic S. Wankhar,
Via email

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Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

Winner or Whiner!
This happened last year in America, when I was visiting:

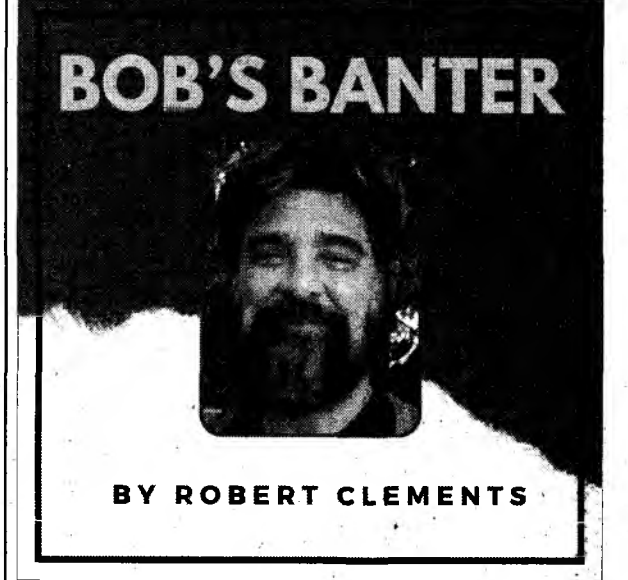
Even the kitchen looks unfamiliar in the early hours of the morning and with a scowl on my face I open the top drawer where I'm sure my daughter had said the mugs were kept, but a packet of coffee powder stares back at me, or is it chilly powder? But they don't keep chilly powder on shelves, do they in America? Let it be, I tell myself, not ready to solve the coffee and chilly powder problem right now, and open the drawer below and nearly have forks and spoons and all the rest of the cutlery fall on my toes. I quickly close the

coffee grins back at me!
But even as I sipped from the new cup from where I drank my coffee, and find it even better, I ask myself, "Am I a whiner or a winner?"

Had been to Goa for a businessmen's convention, where I'd been invited as a speaker. The flight was good, but the plane was delayed by over an hour and I reached the hotel that I was being put up by the hosts, quite late and found there was a mix up in the rooms.

"It's okay," I said, "I'll pay for my room, just see that I get a bed for tonight!"

"Is everything okay?" asked my hosts the next day, before I was going up to speak.



drawer on these murderous weapons and look into the shelves on top.
"Where's my coffee mug?" I ask myself even more grouchy.
Well, it's not mine. Nothing is mine here, it's not my home. My home is ten thousand miles away or somewhere near ten thousand in India, where my green coffee mug hangs neatly in its place, washed and wiped and wedged in its familiar setting with nobody else going to move it from there. Nobody would dare, I tell myself then look again for coffee mug in my daughter's home in New York, and suddenly the unfamiliar mocks me, "Who asked you to leave home and hearth?" ask the shelves and murderous forks and spoons, "Learn to stay where you belong!"

"Dad, what are you looking for?" asks my daughter, obviously awakened by the purposeful noise of the cutlery, betraying my furtive movements, "Nothing!" I say.
"Are you looking for a mug?"
"A mug?" I ask my scowl growing bigger, "Not, a mug, but my coffee mug, the red one!"
"I think hubby's using it!" says my daughter, "Take the cup!"
I take the cup, and measure only half of what I normally drink. When did I ever drink coffee in a teacup, I wonder.
"You should have stayed at home!" say all of the kitchen gleefully.

And suddenly I think of Columbus, and Magellan and Drake and all the explorers who left the comforts of home and hearth, searching the next morning, not just for a coffee mug, but for coffee! They left the familiar, and because they did, the world benefitted, they did too, with untold wealth and name, but first they had to leave their coffee mugs.
I look at the teacup as my son-in-law enters, "Dad! Use this, it keeps the coffee warm for hours!"
I take it from him, it's a mug which is actually a small flask, it's better than the green mug at home, and as I taste the coffee, I realize that yes indeed the coffee stays hot. I look at the kitchen cutlery, and with a friendly voice tell them, "You got to leave the familiar before you discover something better, and suddenly they grin and nod.

Somewhere at home, I know my green mug frowns at me for taking this bold step into the unfamiliar, but my hot

"All fine!" I said, but later explained to them about the mix up. "Why didn't you tell us immediately? You are our guest?"

"Didn't want to complain!" I said.

Of course, complaints in themselves are not bad things. I realize that something has to be addressed before it can be fixed, and I believe that there are times when dissatisfaction should be expressed. What's more, I realize that we all have different temperaments. Some people naturally see the glass half-full, some see it half-empty and some just see that they will probably end up washing it. Some people are naturally more accepting while others complain quickly.

But a tendency to constantly look at what is wrong can become a habit. And habits can take over. I just don't want to become a person who spends a lot of time just complaining.

I find that if I fill my mind with the little irritants of life, I have no room, or energy, left for anything that nurtures and feeds my spirit. No room for genuine appreciation. No room for understanding. No room for enjoyment. No room for fond memories. No room for storing a list of things that bring pleasure.

I actually believe there is much to feel good about. Like a humorist rightly said, "The next time you feel like complaining, remember that your garbage probably contains better leftovers which thirty percent of the people in this world would love to eat!" I want to leave room in my mind for a long gratitude list that I can readily recall when I need a boost. I want to notice what's good and right about the world. And I want to fill my heart and head with that which brings some joy so that I may go to bed each evening content. Attitudes are habits. Like television producer Barbara Gordon says, "While others may argue about whether the world ends with a bang or a whimper, I just want to make sure mine doesn't end with a whine." I can't put it any better than that.

As I drank my coffee that day in America from even a better coffee mug, I felt the mug grinning back at me and whispering, "What kind of person are you Bob, a whiner or a winner?"

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

Mahua in a mess

TRINAMOOL Congress member Mahua Moitra is in a soup. She is alleged to have accepted money from a businessman to ask questions in Parliament against the Adani group.

Prima facie, accepting money from private entities, to ask questions in Parliament, amounts to corruption. Parliament's "sanctity" could be called into question.

MPs are well-paid and well-serviced with a lot of amenities and allowances in multiple forms. Yet, their greed for more is spectacular.

Self-critiquing amid polarization

By Albert Thyriani

Israel and Palestine are in the spotlight right now. Everyone is agog with the conflict between Israel and Hamas after the terror group gunned down 13,000 people.

The 'Islamic Resistance Movement' that desires Israel to be erased from the face of the earth to establish a Palestinian state in its place, has a massive support in the Middle East and worldwide.

Now, Palestinians against the Palestinians, nay, Palestinian authorities! It is well known that many children of Hamas leaders and Palestinian politicians have become anti-Hamas and anti-Palestinian politicians.

The turmoil in the 'Holy land' has virtually split the world into two. It appears that all Jews and Christians are with Israel while all Muslims back Palestine.

outfit's violent activities inhuman. Others have told the world that the radical Hamas kill political opponents, jail journalists and throw LGBTs from high rise buildings.

These politicians do not want peace. They want the conflict to continue for their self-interests. They feed on anti-Israeli sentiments so that the violence goes on.

What about Palestinian Christians in Israel? In a vid-

eo Christians were amused at America and other 'Christian' countries for standing with Israel. They expressed that in reality they are not respected in the country.

It takes courage to voice dissent at times when polarisation is so marked. All Jews and Christians are morally demanded to explicitly stand with Israel and oppose the Arab Palestinians (Muslims).

urge the Israeli government to adhere to human rights. It should be a Zionist government. It cannot act to please the fundamentalist elements.

The anti-Hamas minority voice should become mainstream. Palestinians should reject extremists like Hamas. Had it not been for Hamas the Oslo treaty would have created the Palestinian state.

No establishment likes criticism from within. The anti-Hamas individuals have to flee to the US and other countries. The orthodox Jews and Palestinian Christians who are critical of the Israeli government are not taken kindly to by Zionists.

go to Pakistan. Many were arrested and jailed.

To be non-critical of the self is living in a comfort zone. It is sweet if Indians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Chinese or Russians, Germans, French, Italians, English, Americans have only positive thoughts about their country.

There is pressure to abide by the 'rules.' This is what is happening in Manipur where ethnicity is above all else. The former cop, Thounaojam Brinda was forced to retract her statement that blamed the Arambai Tengol and Meitei Leepun for the mayhem in the state.

The same applies to the Kukis. The Kuki National Organisation (KNO) spokesperson, Seilen Haokip's house in Churachandpur was torched because he favoured the lifting of the blockade of National Highway (NH-2).

In Meghalaya one has to think more than twice to be critical of the Jaitbynriew. Even extortion and corruption is overlooked because the crime is practised by the 'para-doh para-snam'. Against this background it is good that some have spoken up against the culture of 'donation'.

Shillongite's daily struggle with traffic congestion

By Alert Archie Rymbai

Peak hour traffic congestion has become a daily depression-inducing phenomenon which we all have to face due to the manner in which the current society operates.

Traffic is also caused due to the presence of too many cars on the road. India's population is growing, and traffic jams happen when there are more cars on the roadways than there are spaces for them to drive on.

Using V2I technology to make roads smarter is one of the best ways to reduce congestion in cities. Using connected video cameras and satellite imaging, drivers can be informed about accidents and weather-related alerts as they drive on particular roads and expressways.



avoided by other traffic.

Regular traffic patterns are the root cause of this form of congestion, which happens around specified periods of the day, during rush hours. This is a foreseeable problem and therefore manageable with the right traffic management techniques.

Shillong's traffic conundrum does not end with the rush hours; it continues through the day. Hence my suggestions are that there should be designated lanes marked for different types of vehicles, and this should be accompanied with a strict fine - a financial penalty which should be applied to force drivers to keep the lane discipline.

in larger cities, controlled parking zones are limited to certain main streets. There is usually an unbalanced mix of residents' parking, pay and display, and limited wait parking zones. The best way to tackle congestion is to extend parking controls away from the city centre and formulate smart parking zones, even in less crowded areas.

Using V2I technology to make roads smarter is one of the best ways to reduce congestion in cities. Using connected video cameras and satellite imaging, drivers can be informed about accidents and weather-related alerts as they drive on particular roads and expressways.

at in the next few miles. They can then decide to reroute from a congested road or slow down to avoid further crowding.

These innovative methods require minimal spending and are long-term solutions suitable for even the most heavily congested cities. Governments need to plan well, use IoT, AI, and digitization, and respond timely to a crisis, to make urban roads smooth for commuters at all hours of the day.

An Odd & Even Strategy will not be feasible to implement in the city but it's the Shillongites voluntary act that can help and contribute to reduce the traffic problems. While a complete solution to traffic congestion may not be possible, it can be managed by combining various tactics such as promoting alternate modes of transportation, enhancing public transportation, and putting traffic management strategies in place.

(The writer is Asst. Prof Department of Management, William Carey University)

Letters to the Editor

Sunday and a festival controversy

Editor, I find it absurd and irrational that a few groups and political parties, openly rant about the upcoming 'Shillong Cherry Blossom Festival' scheduled to be held from 17 to 19 November, 2023 of which 19th being a Sunday; a day that has always been considered sacred by a majority of Christian followers.

be celebrated on consecutive days of which one of them falls on a Sunday, when over the years we have seen a numbers of Melas and Trade Expos and even the then popular Autumn Festival being held on a Sunday? Do we Christians or more specific; Khasi Christians (except Seventh Day Adventist) have every right to claim this day (Sunday) solely and entirely to us, on the pretext of its sanctity, at the cost of the faiths and beliefs of other religion or their freedom of choice, when we live in a secular country enshrined clearly on the Preamble of the Constitution of India? How righteous are we that we blatantly conform to this notion when in several instances I see people with such mindsets, coming out doing the most hideous stuff? Or, perhaps they hardly even visit a church or are involved in any kind of worship, then saying that it's the heart that matters even if they don't go to church, but not conforming to the biblical notion of the importance of a congregational gathering?

Also, while I have considerable respect for a certain regional political party here

for being vocal on local issues on numerous occasions. I was surprised to see the Party opposing the Shillong Cherry Blossom Festival to be held on a Sunday and demanding from the Government that it takes necessary action to withdraw the same. I was taken aback at this, given that the party has always stood on its core principles of transparency and fairness, but has kind of lost its way here when it has started mixing politics with religion in a milieu where religion and politics have had a respectable distance.

I believe that God has given us a free choice in our lives. God never forces us to either worship or follow the righteous path, but instead the Bible insists and advises us to follow its principles and teachings righteously.

Note that festivals or its organisers too never force us to attend the same or in

particular that we should attend it on a Sunday either. Nonetheless, our individual conviction is what matters and that is paramount. If we feel the need to worship as Christians on a Sunday, let us be firm with that otherwise we should abstain from creating petty and trivial issues just for vested interests of some groups and organisations.

Yours etc.; Mewam Pariat, Shillong -2

Where is the MCA vision?

Editor, As an ardent cricket fan and a fervent follower of the Meghalaya cricket team, I cannot help but feel aggrieved at the performance of our cricket team in both men and women domestic tournaments conducted by the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI). When the Meghalaya Cricket Association (MCA) was granted full membership by the BCCI in 2018, we the followers of cricket were overjoyed by the fact that eventually we

would be able to see a cricket team from our own state competing with other state teams from our region as well as with other state teams from mainland India. Then when on November 15, 2019 Meghalaya scripted history when they beat Mumbai in the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy, we the followers were hoping that this win will prove as the catalyst for the development of the game in our State and that this victory would make our players to strive and perform better in the seasons to come.

Alas! This did not happen! On the contrary we see the performance of our team going down to such an extent that at present we cannot even compete with teams from Mizoram, Manipur and other north eastern states. In this year's Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy, Meghalaya lost all the matches they played so far and they even lost to Mizoram which we had easily defeated in the last few years. In the under-19 category for the Vinoo Mankad Trophy, Meghalaya was thrashed by all the teams and in two or three matches they conceded more than 400 plus runs. If readers

have the time to check the facts, they can Google search and find out more about the performance of our team.

The question is whether our players are so bad. Or are the custodians of Meghalaya cricket to be blamed for such a shoddy performance? Or perhaps the players lack exposure or experience to compete with better teams? Both players and the MCA cannot give excuses for such a poor performance. Granted that the gulf between our team and other teams such as Mumbai, Delhi and others is huge in terms of cricket infrastructure and experience but now it seems that even among north eastern teams, Mizoram and Manipur are far ahead of Meghalaya. I watched the match between Meghalaya and Jammu and Kashmir in the T20 Syed Mushtaq Ali trophy and could not help but feel a sense of shame in the manner in which they played. It was as if they played day matches. All players seemed like they played for themselves or were thinking about their spot in the next tournament. Or they just don't care whether the team wins or loses as long as they

get their match fees.

It's an open secret that the BCCI sends money to the MCA annually for the development and improvement of cricket in our state. The question is where has all the money gone? How much of that money is used for the development of players? Are players or the team sent to play with better teams before the start of BCCI domestic tournaments? If the players lack match experience, the MCA should organize matches with better state teams so that our players can improve when they play against better teams. What about infrastructure development? After 2018 when MCA became a full member, it's only this year that they started the construction of the indoor facility for training and practicing of players in the off season. Before this year all infrastructure development was concentrated in Polo grounds where players are allowed to practice only at the whims and fancies of MCA officials. But let me remind the MCA that it is not only in Shillong that they need to concentrate but also other districts too. As far as my knowledge goes, apart

from Shillong and Tura, other districts have little or no league cricket at all. If they organize a league it was done half-heartedly, or just to show that they spent the funds sent by MCA for development of cricket.

Now why can the MCA not question the district associations for not organizing the league is beyond understanding. It seems that the MCA and the office bearers of these associations are hand in gloves in using the money for other means other than the development of cricket. If this is the case then it shows MCA in bad light and that it is without vision and that the goal of the members of the MCA is not for the development of cricket but just to get the funds from the BCCI and probably use it for other purposes.

Yours etc., Name withheld on request, An ardent Cricket fan Via email

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"Progress is measured by the degree of differentiation within a society."

— Herbert Read

The Shillong Times

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Loot as business

NEW skeletons are tumbling out of the Narendra Modi-led central government's cupboard. If the CAG's finding of huge financial mismanagement in the highways development sector sent shock waves a few weeks ago, another startling revelation is about the ongoing loot in the banking sector.

Banks that were nationalised by Indira Gandhi in 1969 are simply turning into sitting ducks for financial fraudsters. So much so, rather than entrepreneurs making money through their business units, several sharks have made an alternative 'enterprise' out of 'robbing' the banks by taking huge loans and refusing to repay even as they have the ways and means to do so.

Narendra Modi had, during his jet-set election campaign in 2014, used NPAs as his main campaign plank and promised the nation he would get back the money looted by businessmen from banks, bring back fugitives like Vijay Mallya who took shelter in foreign countries, and would distribute the money to the 'poor' here.

"Othering" narrative in today's Meghalaya and India

By Rudi V Warjri

Editorials and commentaries have been written about the targeting and naming of some non-tribal bureaucrats for their wielding power in running the Meghalaya State administration.

A notable anecdote: When Atal Behari Vajpayee was Prime Minister, among his closest confidants in the PMO (Prime Minister's Office) was an Assamese IAS Officer who had also grown up in Shillong named Ashok Saikia.

Is it true that non tribal bureaucrats wield more influence in the State administration in Meghalaya? If the answer is in the affirmative then the next question is why is it so?

points. In fact, a top ranker in a batch may not necessarily turn out to be the most outstanding officer in practice. It is the qualities developed in the job itself that matter.

At the same time the notoriety of the bureaucracy is well known. The bureaucracy is known among many other things for being self-perpetuating.

Is it true that non tribal bureaucrats wield more influence in the State administration in Meghalaya? If the answer is in the affirmative then the next question is why is it so?

fresh environment all the time etc., that count. Article 312 of the constitution of India is the basis of the All India Civil Services.

bureaucrat would always say Yes Minister. Using parochial language concerning non tribal bureaucrats is demeaning and smacks of an inferiority complex of the community which the political representative represents.

Lately, there has been some controversy about the Cherry Blossom festival concluding on a Sunday. And since Meghalaya is predominantly Christian there should be no festival on Sundays.

also means the service to the nation. Truth be told, every State Civil Service officer dreams of being nominated into the All India Services.

environment, rural development, etc. I am also amused when politicians and local pressure groups are wailing about their own tribal youth getting into civil services.

Letters to the Editor

India's stance vis-à-vis Israel & Russia disconcerting

Editor We are told that eight former Indian Navy personnel, who have been in custody in Qatar, since 2022, have been awarded the death sentence.

of the world. For example, India's blind official support of Israel and Mr Putin's Russia is disconcerting, to say the least.

Here is my question. Will India react with as much belligerence and sanctimonious self-defence towards Qatar, as it did towards Canada -- a far more humane nation with a far better record of human rights?

Killer potholes taking a toll on Shillongites

Editor, Many will agree that the

dilapidated condition of the roads in the town has taken a toll on many people in many ways. The growing depth of potholes on the town's roads are of great concern.

Yes, a video went viral on WhatsApp about two months ago, exposing the disgustingly unsettling reality. On a section of a freshly laid road, the local people were scooping up the asphalt and "unmixed raw sand" using mere fingers from the whole stretch of road!

I believe that just before the last G20 summit that Shillong town got a facelift, with major parts of the roads being repaired.

public wants to know why the unscrupulous contractors are so enduring to the departments. The citizens cannot see the state being wounded for so long by the corrupt few.

Yours etc., Salil Gewali, Shillong-2

Give people a free choice

Editor, The continued onslaught about the Cherry blossom festival ending on Sunday is getting over the top.

The "custom" of Christians not working, participating in business or any public act which are entertaining on Sundays arose in Victorian England -- no, it does not date back to the time of Christ!

servant classes. Of course, Sunday was still the only day the servants had "off", but now all they could do was go to church or maybe for a stroll in the park and then come back home and sit around doing sewing and other "Godly" activities.

I find the whole idea frustrating and irritating. And ridiculous, since so many people justify it, ALSO to do so by quoting a Jewish law (which Christians are supposed to be relieved from following), and the Jewish law refers to another day of the week entirely (Saturday)!

In Colossians 2:16-17 the apostle Paul declares, "Therefore do not let anyone JUDGE YOU by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day... the reality, however, is found in Christ."

Over the first couple of centuries as church gatherings became more formalized, Saturday and Sunday both became more official meeting days with special significance. Saturday, as the Sabbath wherein God rested from works. It was a common day of rest. Sunday took on a special meaning, especially for Gentile converts, as the day of the Resurrection -- not a day of rest, but a day for celebration.

CJI takes reservation debate to new level with call for empowerment. Emphatic no to suggestions that quotas have outlived their utility

By K Raveendran

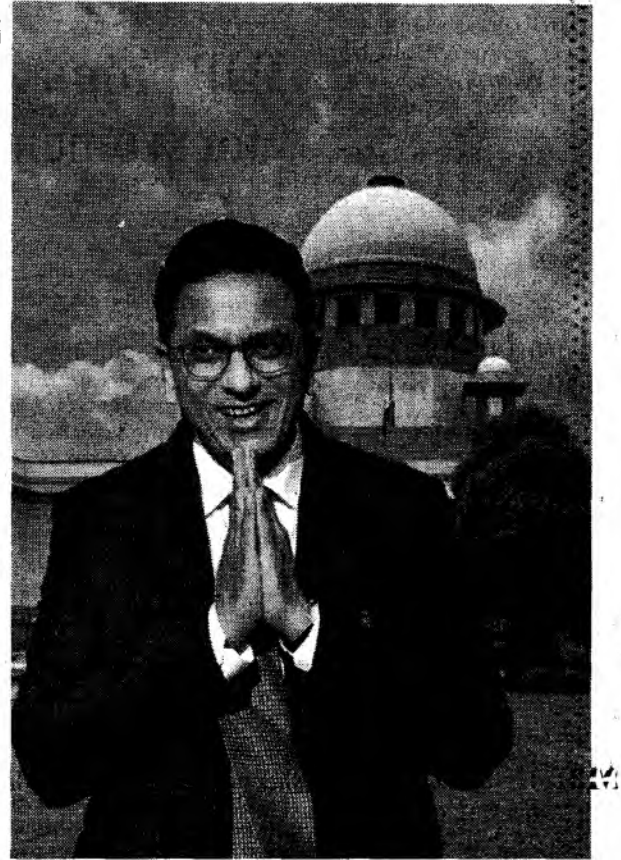
Chief Justice of India D Y Chandrachud has added a new dimension to the current debate on caste-based reservation by stressing the need to advance from the accommodative aspect of the reservation policy as it is practised today to one where reservation would be a tool for empowerment.

Justice Chandrachud did not seem to be inhibited a bit by the venue or his audience at the Georgetown University Law Centre, Washington, in acknowledging the 'pivotal role' played by the prevailing legal system in 'perpetuating historical wrongs against marginalised and oppressed communities'.

of the constitution because the reservation is based on economic criteria and the state has the right to do so. It considered reservation as an instrument of affirmative action to ensure an 'all-inclusive march towards the goals of an egalitarian society'.

The views are important also in the context of the issue of extension of quota for scheduled castes and tribes in parliament and state legislatures coming before a constitutional bench. The reservation was first provided under Article 334 of the Constitution that stated that the quota would end after 10 years -- in 1960.

The government has at-



communities'. Throughout history, marginalised social groups have been subjected to 'horrendous wrongs' and to address the historical wrongs done to the marginalised groups can only be atoned for by ensuring participation of these sections in decision-making, the CJI asserted.

gued that the quota must continue uninterrupted, maybe for another ten years. Since 1980, the quota has been extended through five amendments, with the latest extension of 10 years granted in 2019.

Yet another layer of complications has been introduced to the problem as the Modi government has declared its intention to table a new constitutional amendment bill

"The CJI's stand is also at variance with a view that is increasingly gaining ground, including in the judiciary, that the system of quota was designed for a certain period of time and cannot go on for ever because it violates the basic principles of equality before law."

court, has historically seen little representation for the marginalised societies.

At a time when caste has moved to the centre stage of national political debate, with the opposition parties piling pressure on Modi and the ruling party for a national caste census and the ruling dispensation shying away from even an engagement on the issue, the CJI's stress on reservation as a means of empowerment goes beyond the traditional approach towards reservation, which is to ensure representation of the vulnerable and oppressed people through quotas.

The CJI's stand is also at variance with a view that is increasingly gaining ground, including in the judiciary, that the system of quota was designed for a certain period of time and cannot go on for ever because it violates the basic principles of equality before law.

in the Lok Sabha to reserve one-third of seats for women in Parliament and state legislatures. The amendment is also believed to envisage one-third of the total number of seats reserved for SCs and STs to be earmarked for women of those categories in the Lok Sabha and legislative assemblies.

It is, however, certain that the women's quota won't be implemented immediately. The proposal envisages that the gender quotas will only begin after delimitation has been completed, based on numbers from the first census after the passage of the Act. The census was to be conducted in 2021 but has been delayed indefinitely, so the women's quota is not likely to become a reality until the 2029 general elections.

As of now, women hold only 15.2 percent of seats in the Lok Sabha and 13.9 percent in the Rajya Sabha. Representation in the state legislatures is even lower. For instance, in the Himachal Pradesh state assembly, only one out of sixty-eight members is a woman. According to one report, globally, the share of women in parliamentary office stands at 26.5 percent. (IPA Service)

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A green corner in every room

In the bustling chaos of modern life, finding a moment of tranquility and connection with nature is a precious escape. That's where the concept of 'green corners' comes in—a little oasis in every room that breathes life and serenity into your home. Whether you're a seasoned plant enthusiast or just looking to introduce some greenery.

Niraj Johri, Founder and CEO at Casa Decor shares some tips on how to create a green corner in every room.

Welcome Guests with a Green Entryway

The entryway is the first impression your home makes on visitors. Adding a touch of green here not only sets a welcoming tone but also purifies the air as guests step inside. Consider placing a hardy plant like a Snake Plant (Sansevieria) or a Peace Lily (Spathiphyllum) near the entrance. These resilient plants thrive in a variety of lighting conditions and are excellent air purifiers.

Switch Artificial Greens with Natural Flora in Living Room

The living room is often the heart of the home, and it deserves a lively, green touch. Opt for larger, statement plants like a Fiddle Leaf Fig (Ficus lyrata) or a Rubber Plant (Ficus elastica). These not only add a refreshing element but also create an appealing focal point in the room. Explore modern planters and plant stands to match your living room's aesthetic. These modern planters come in a variety of designer shapes, ensuring they can be displayed anywhere, while plant stands help ensure your plants get the proper light.

Keep Your Bedroom Fresh with Plants

A bedroom is a sanctuary for rest and rejuvenation, and plants can enhance this calming atmosphere. Consider a Snake Plant or a Lavender plant. The Snake Plant purifies the air, while Lavender's fragrance promotes relaxation and sleep. Placing these on bedside tables or hanging macrame planters can add

a soothing touch.

Grow Herbs in the Kitchen

What's better than having fresh herbs at your fingertips in your kitchen? Herbs like basil, rosemary, or mint thrive in indoor environments. You can grow them in small pots on the windowsill or create a vertical herb garden on a sunny wall. Enjoy the convenience of using fresh herbs while cooking, and relish the delightful aroma they bring to your kitchen.

Succulents in the Bathroom

Bathrooms often have limited natural light, making them perfect for low-light, low-maintenance



plants like succulents. These charming little plants add a touch of green without demanding too much attention. Aloe vera and Snake Plant varieties work well in bathrooms. Consider using wall floor planters or hanging pots to save precious counter space.

Garden Watering Cans

To keep your green corner thriving, don't forget the importance of proper hydration. A garden watering can is an essential tool for nurturing your plants. It allows you to water your plants gently and precisely, avoiding overwatering or creating a mess.

Plant Stands

Plant stands are an excellent

addition to any room, providing a platform for your plants to bask in the sunlight. They come in a variety of styles, from sleek and modern to rustic and traditional. Use them to lift your plants to the right height, ensuring they receive the proper light. In addition to their functional benefits, plant stands can be a decorative element themselves, adding a touch of elegance to your home.

Wall Planters

If you're dealing with limited floor space, wall planters are a smart choice. They allow you to create a vertical garden that adds a stunning visual element to your

home. Hang them in your living room, kitchen, or even your bathroom to maximise your green corner without sacrificing precious floor space.

In conclusion, creating a green corner in every room is a delightful way to connect with nature, purify your air, and enhance your home's ambiance.

From welcoming guests with greenery in the entryway to creating a lush living room, refreshing your bedroom, growing herbs in the kitchen, and adding succulents to the bathroom, there are numerous opportunities to bring the outdoors in. With these tips and tools, you can transform your home into a thriving, green sanctuary. (IANSlife)

Navigating festive season travel woes

The festive season in India is a time of joy, celebration, and reunion. Families come together, traditions are honoured, and the air is filled with excitement. It's also a time when many people take to the skies and roads to be with their loved ones. However, like any travel, especially during peak seasons, there can be challenges.

In this article, Harish Khatri, Founder, and MD, of India Assist - revolutionizing assistance for travellers tell IANSlife how to handle some of the most common travel woes during the festive season: lost luggage, flight delays, and medical emergencies.

Read on...

Lost Luggage Woes

One of the most disheartening experiences for any traveller is the loss of luggage. Imagine arriving at your destination, ready for the festivities, only to find that your bags have taken an unexpected detour. Here's how to handle this situation:

Preventative Measures: Before you travel, make sure your luggage is labelled with your contact information. This will make it easier for the airline to track you down if your bags go astray.

Immediate Reporting: If you discover your luggage is missing, report it to the airline immediately. They will create a report and initiate the search process.

Travel Insurance: Having travel insurance that covers lost luggage is a smart move. It can help you recover some of the expenses related to your lost belongings.

Flight Delays and Cancellations

During the festive season, airports can become congested, and weather-related issues can disrupt flight schedules. Here's how to manage flight delays and cancellations:

Stay Informed: Keep an eye on your flight's status. Most airlines provide real-time updates online or through their apps.

Customer Service: If your flight is delayed or canceled, visit the airline's customer service desk at the airport. They can often assist in rebooking or providing information on compensation.

Know Your Rights: Familiarise yourself with your rights as a passenger. In India, the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) has established guidelines for passenger rights.

Handling Medical Emergencies

Nobody wants to fall ill during the festive season, but it can happen. Here's how to manage medical emergencies while traveling:

Carry Medications: If you have a pre-existing medical condition, ensure you have

an adequate supply of necessary medications. Carry a copy of your prescription for reference.

Emergency Contacts: Have a list of emergency contacts, including local medical facilities and your doctor, handy. In case of a medical issue, quick access to help is crucial.

Travel Assistance Services: Consider enrolling in a travel assistance service. These services offer 24/7 access to medical professionals who can guide you in case of an emergency. They can also help you find nearby medical facilities.

The Role of Travel Assistance Services and How Travelers Can Avail Them

In all three scenarios, travel assistance services play a critical role in ensuring your festive season remains joyful and stress-free. These services provide support and guidance when you need it most. Travelers can avail of travel assistance services through their travel agents, tour operators, or hotel partners. Whether it's help with lost luggage, flight delays, or medical emergencies, these services are designed to make your travel experience smoother and more enjoyable.

Lost Luggage: Travel assistance can help you track your lost luggage, providing real-time updates and aiding in its return. Moreover, they can also help you file an FIR (First Information Report) with the nearest police station.

Flight Delays: Travel assistance providers can assist with rebooking or canceling flights, as well as liaise with airlines to ensure you have the information and support you need.

Medical Emergencies: When faced with a medical emergency, travel assistance services offer immediate access to medical professionals. They can help you locate nearby hospitals or clinics, connect you with doctors, and even assist with medical evacuations if required.

By enrolling in a travel assistance service, you're essentially arming yourself with a dedicated team of professionals ready to assist you during your festive travels. Travellers can opt for travel assistance services through their travel agents, tour operators, or hotel partners.

The festive season in India is a time of togetherness and celebration. While travel challenges like lost luggage, flight delays, and medical emergencies can be unnerving, preparation and access to travel assistance services can make all the difference. By following the tips mentioned and considering the role of travel assistance services, you can ensure a festive season that's not only filled with joy but also hassle-free and safe. (IANSlife)

Transform kitchen leftovers into gourmet delights with AI

Indian kitchens have always been the epicentres of ingenious culinary creations, where the art of making something out of nothing reigns supreme. In fact, each state, region, and community boasts its unique leftover-based recipes, nearly all of which are born from resourcefulness. However, as urbanisation leads to more and more people moving away from their homes

sessions on the delishUp across 11 cities, the resurgence of crafting meals from leftovers, is an unmistakable trend. Additionally, the survey also found that people are using AI to create innovative dishes like Pepsi Chicken and finding new ways to eat their old favourites like Tambuli. Overall, the kitchen has just become a safer place for culinary experimentation.



ROTLI NU SHAK: "Rotli Nu Shaak" is a delightful Gujarati dish that ingeniously transforms leftover roti into a flavourful curry or stir-fry. The dish typically involves tearing the roti into bite-sized pieces and cooking it with spices, vegetables, and dal.

FRIED RICE: Made from leftover rice is a popular and versatile dish in many Asian cuisines. It involves stir-frying cooked rice with various ingredients such as vegetables, meat, seafood, and seasonings. The key is using pre-cooked, preferably day-old, rice, which has had a chance to dry out slightly. Asian-style fried rice can be made easily with a smart cooking assistant -- mincing ginger and garlic with only a tap and turning on Wok mode to toss and fry the vegetables and rice.

IDLI UPMA: South Indian cuisines include several recipes to use up leftover rice, dals and even vegetables. For this recipe, crumbled or diced idlis are tossed with a simple tadka. The key is to get the tempering right for the whole spices like mustard and cumin and not burn the chillies and onions. Smart cooking assistants offer presets for most complex cooking instructions and ensure that meals are cooked consistently well.

KHEER: This is another classic Indian dessert that can be made from leftover rice. It involves simmering cooked rice in sweetened milk and adding flavourings like cardamom, saffron, and garnishes such as nuts and raisins. Traditionally, this recipe requires constant monitoring and stirring to get the consistency right. But today, people rely on their cooking appliances to do the tedious steps while they carry on with their day.

Households across India are eager to experiment with a wider variety of dishes right in their own kitchens. This shift is significantly influenced by the convenience offered by AI-powered devices and smart cooking assistants. It's not just about saving food; it's a transformative shift in the way people approach home cooking in India. With technology as their culinary companion, the future of Indian home kitchens is brighter and more inventive than ever. (IANSlife)

and into cities, these culinary gems often fade away, especially for those living alone and relying heavily on takeout.

But the tides seem to be turning, there has been an increasing interest in cooking at home with the rising popularity of recipe and food content both online and on TV. Technology, like smart cooking devices powered by AI, is playing a pivotal role in this transformation. These appliances have breathed new life into leftovers, generating step-by-step recipes, and allowing owners to craft gourmet-worthy dishes from the remnants in their fridges.

According to uplance.ai food trends report, which has findings from an extensive dataset of 3000 households and more than 15,000+ cooking

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, OCTOBER 29, 2023

'Birthday Forecast'

Full Moon on your solar return chart indicates a good year. You are practical in your choices (for the most part), keeping your feet on the ground and honoring tradition as well as tried-and-true methods. You have the power of practicality, realism, and caution on your side. Work you have done in the past begins to pay off this year—not necessarily in dramatic ways, but in small, measurable ways. You may be recognized or rewarded in some way for the efforts you put forth. Because you project a more responsible and credible "you," people in authority are more inclined to appreciate you and recognize your work.

'This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) This week highlights friendship, romance and love in your life. You would be successful in any field that requires a lot of imagination and vision. You would express your unique individuality, and if this involves changing careers or jobs, a new relationship, or a new hobby. Your domestic life takes on top priority. Making yourself feel comfortable and secure is paramount, and you have every chance to boost your feeling of stability and support with family. You attempt difficult tasks, resolve complicated issues and connect with unapproachable people in higher position.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) You meet difficult tasks and resolve work related issues confidently. Business expansion and new professional opportunities are worth considering. You would admire and adapt new circumstances, ideas, and unfamiliar situations. You are able to find novel solutions to problems now. Your efforts have been establishing strong professional base which brings in desired and even unexpected gains. It is good time to organize your workplace. This would help you to get better perspectives to achieve desired goals. It's time to expand your social and professional circle. Avoid being laid back as any gain or success in business needs to be followed up with hard work and dedication.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) Your ideas and goals are higher than usual, teaching may be part of the picture, and your cultural and spiritual awareness increases. Happiness and fulfillment through the expansion of your mind, widening your social circle, travel, and overseas connections is indicated during this phase. Those connected with the media, journalism and arts get an opportunity to showcase their talent. Students in fine arts and related fields attain success and good results. This is the right time to share your loving and personal relationships and share thoughts and ideas and spend good time in the association of your loved one. You are ready to make new beginnings and invest in new business and relationships.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) Travel, contact and communication are the keywords of this period. Opportunities and invitations from overseas take you on an unplanned journey. Visitors, friends and family make this a happy time as an event in family is celebrated. You are full of hope and enthusiasm as you make new beginnings at work and home. Business expansion and new professional opportunities are worth considering. You are appreciative and caring as you give total support to loved ones through a difficult time. Activities related to communication such as journalism, literature and fine arts are prominent. Short trips and other forms of communication appeal strongly.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) A cheerful and hopeful outlook increases your chances of gaining cooperation with outcasts and foreign people and this brings financial growth. You move on the path of success and betterment in terms of better financial stability, emotional and mental satisfaction and intellectual growth. It's time to expand your social circle and to make more contact with groups and friends. Students of Computer Hardware and Engineering achieve better results during this week. You handle conversations, seminars, meetings and express yourself more specifically about the subject. This is an excellent time to make some financial investments and adopt new strategies in financial matters. This is a time when you renew your energy and consider what things are important to you.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22) You would be successful in the fields of creativity, writing and entertainment industry or in any field that requires a lot of imagination and vision. You would be able to make an impact on important people. Your creativity will assist in your output at work and help you undertake redecorating your office. You may especially enjoy working with a cross section of people. Your ideas are higher than usual, teaching may be part of the picture, as your cultural and spiritual awareness increases. Happiness and fulfillment through the expansion of your mind, widening

your social circle, travel, and connections with new associates indicated during this phase. Students in journalism, law, management and related fields attain success and good results.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) A cheerful and hopeful outlook increases your chances of gaining cooperation of business associates and this brings financial growth. You move on the path of success and betterment in terms of better financial stability, emotional and mental satisfaction and intellectual growth. You expand your circle of influence and these new associates would prove to be beneficial in the long run. You handle conversations, seminars, meetings and express yourself more specifically about the subject. Financial investments yield good gains.

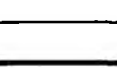
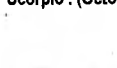
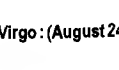
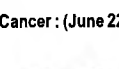
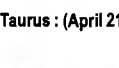
Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) This period highlights friendship, romance, love and children. You give a new approach to love, children and creative projects. A new set-up in existing love affair or a new love affair altogether may be formed. Your professional life brings rewards and recognition. You are working hard and inclined towards more detailed work. An exciting job offer, reward, recognition, or promotion is possible in this period. An opportunity to expand business arrives now. Increased connections and experienced come into picture. This is a period of growth as well as some form of blossoming. Your career, reputation and public life are influenced. This is a very fortunate time to arrange get-togethers, parties and fun. Increased public recognition and professional success characterizes this phase.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) You may begin to take on more responsibilities on the job or in another service-oriented capacity. Your job could become rather tedious or boring, or working conditions may be poor, tiring and frustrating. You would be sensible about your diet, health, hygiene, and fitness needs. You find yourself more accountable than ever when it comes to your work and output. You may have to draw some boundaries with friends and the demands of others. This is a good time to belong with a friend or a group who shares your own ideas and thoughts. You would attach yourself to unusual, more spiritual, friends.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) It would be wisest to face difficult people and situations rather than avoid them as there would be victory and success in professional ventures. Don't take the one you love granted but show your love and appreciation. Communications from overseas are hopeful and exciting as business opportunities are extended to you. Financial transactions and professional projects go ahead smoothly with goodwill and they would be profitable. Your professional skills, wisdom and craft is appreciated and fresh opportunities for expansion are made available to you. Personal relationships gain a romantic and exciting quality. Tackle sensitive subjects and difficult people and get your point across. Business projects and associations are opening up and widening your horizons so you need to think expansively from now onwards.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) You would achieve a lot in business and professional aspects by combining creativity and practicality. You play the role of the elderly in the family and personal situations by taking on extra responsibility and giving direction. You can expect superiors to support you and stand up for you in tough situations at work. You can trust your intuition about people and situations when called upon to mediate in conflicts and collaborations. A new work opportunity can change the way you work and relate with people professionally this week. You are bold and adventurous and you cannot tolerate delay that prevents you from behaving exactly you want. How willing you're prepared to experiment and explore new approaches will determine your success this time. You will be considerably more productive, healthy, and focused.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) This is a favorable period for people in sports, media and other related fields. It's a great time to exert your personal influence, as you are coming across as especially cooperative and graceful. You are more willing to adapt to new circumstances, ideas, and unfamiliar situations. It's a good time to join organizations and groups and to attend meetings or social events. This would be a right time to go for long term investments and speculations. This phase brings excellent opportunities for those in creative and related fields. You would work more creatively and express yourself with more sensitivity, compassion, and warmth. You have been more determined and hard-working and this brings fulfillment of desires particularly in your personal and domestic life.



"Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world."

—Nelson Mandela

The Shillong Times

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Work more, earn more

CHANGE of routine is anathema to the human psyche in general. A change involves adaptation to a new situation. It involves effort. So, most people are happy with a continuation on the beaten tracks. Those who have initiative and drive, though their numbers are less, seek change. Adaptation and re-adaptation to new scenarios give them a kick. All this is to say that the reported proposals from IT czar Narayana Murthy for a 70-hour work week for all sectors to speed up both governance and economic growth need careful consideration.

India is rich but its people are mostly poor. In other words, exploitation is at its highest conceivable level. Salaries of ordinary workforce rarely rise. They have a hand-to-mouth existence. The IT sector itself is a largely exploited field, where working hours are longer and salaries do not match with the hard work put in by the large army of its youths. At the same, the industry is thriving and giving jobs to millions of educated youths. Prima facie, it would look like Murthy is proposing an extension of this trend across the spectrum. But, fact is also that India is a nation of mostly lazy people. The British Empire was built on the hard work of its people. So with the US that rose like a phoenix after the Great Depression of 1929. China emerged as an economic super power in recent times by sheer dint of hard work its people were made to do. After the first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru, India did not have a leadership that had a strong vision for the future. Chairs in government offices are largely vacant for most parts of the day. If the bureaucracy works for 70 hours a week too, they might as well be productive only to the extent they are now; and, on this count, they might demand and get higher salaries and perquisites. Officials and politicians, who together hold the power edifice, know how to turn situations into their advantage. The nation suffers. The private sector as a whole can seek to be more productive in its output. But, making the same people work for more hours should not mean a lack of new job opportunities.

The richest one per cent owns nearly half of India's wealth while the bottom half together share only three per cent of the wealth. Murthy's proposal, in sum, is to make the nation stronger with larger efforts from the people. A prerequisite to this, or similar changes for the better, is the evolution of a new kind of leadership. It can do for the nation what Murthy and his likes did for the IT sector in positive ways.

Prospects of increasing fish production in Meghalaya

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

Fish has been in the news in Meghalaya in the last few months. In June, the Government of Meghalaya issued orders banning the sale of fish from outside the state after samples showed the presence of formalin, a chemical used in fish to prevent spoilage and extend storage life. There are serious health and safety concerns about the chemical, with the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) of the WHO (World Health Organisation) describing formaldehyde (a constituent of formalin) as a carcinogen. In fact, the Food Safety and Standards Regulations 2011 strictly prohibits the use of formaldehyde in food. But with local fish production being hugely insufficient, there is no option but to import fish from states like Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal, and Assam. This makes the use of formalin almost inevitable. So, unless local production catches up with the rising demand, it is unlikely that such issues will not crop up in the future as well.

That local production is unable to meet the demand was recently admitted by the Fisheries Director, AL Mawlong, during the 7th edition of the State Aqua Fest. There she pointed out that, as against the requirement of 32,000 metric tonnes, the current production is just 19,000 metric tonnes. This has risen from 2010-2011, when it was only 4,558 metric tonnes, as per figures provided in the Meghalaya State Aquaculture Mission 2.0 Document published by the Department of Fisheries, Government of Meghalaya. So there has been some improvement over the years. But based on the trend, it will be a long time before the state can attain self-sufficiency in fish production.

In the eight-year period for which data was shared in the document and adding another five years to it, i.e., 2018-2019 to 2022-2023 (assuming that the data reported by the Director is for the period 2022-2023), local production grew by 14,000 metric tonnes. At the same rate, it will take over a decade before local production can meet the current demands. But by then, demand would also have increased. So achieving self-sufficiency appears to be a futile exercise unless production increases by a factor greater than the rate of increase in demand. But is this a possible feat?

Under the Meghalaya State Aquaculture Mission, increasing fish production is predicated on two main activities, viz., creating ponds complemented by supporting infrastructure like hatcheries, fish feed mills, modern hygiene markets, retail (mobile/kiosks), transportation, aquatic laboratories, diagnostic tools and kits, and encouraging the adoption of paddy-cum-pisciculture. Cre-

ation of aqua parks and introducing ornamental fisheries are also part of the mission, but these are more geared towards aqua-tourism and not specifically for consumption. According to the Mission Document, during the 2018-2019 and 2022-2023 periods, an additional total area of 1500 ha will be brought under fish production, with a total outlay of almost Rs. 17,000 lakhs. Then there are the community ponds, 50 of which will be constructed in the same period with a total budget allocation of over Rs. 500 lakhs. The supporting infrastructure (described above) will incur a total cost of over Rs. 4000 lakhs. Further, additional financial implications of another Rs. 714 lakhs will be required for bringing 340 ha under paddy-cum-pisciculture.

Finally, there's the total budget for capacity building and human resources development, which amounts to more than Rs. 1200 lakhs. Combined with the costs under the components of convergence, administrative costs, and funds sanctioned under the Centrally Sponsored Scheme, the total cost of the Mission comes to more than 370 Crore. How much of the money has actually been spent and whether the projected deliverables have been achieved is not available from the Mission Document. But considering that the total fish production in 2017-2018 was around 12,000 metric tonnes, it means that more than Rs. 370 Crore must have been spent to, increase the production by 7,000 metric tonnes. So to meet current demand, an additional Rs. 740 Crore would be required during the next phase. But considering that demand would also have increased, an approximate figure of more than Rs. 1000 Crore would be realistically required to ensure that the supply matches the demand. The Meghalaya State Aquaculture Mission 2.0 is supposed to end by 2023. As far as I can recall, I have not heard of the third phase being announced. If it is done in the future, it will be interesting to check if adequate funds will be allocated for the Mission.

There is one component that has not been considered in the above calculation, which would have added another Rs. 600 lakhs to the total allocation. This is the conservation of 'Indigenous Fisheries Resources' through the construction of fish sanctuaries and ex-situ conservation measures. This component is a little different than the others in that it is more about conversations on existing resources rather than creating infrastructure (ponds, hatcheries) or introducing new technology (paddy-cum-pisciculture, new breeds). It has a landscape manage-

ment perspective since it is impossible to maintain a fish sanctuary in a healthy state if there are effluents flowing into it from households, agriculture fields, quarrying sites, or mining activities. So in effect, it is not just the water body that has to be managed, but the surrounding landscape as well. As such, if properly implemented, the initiative can have manifold benefits that go beyond the replenishment of fish stocks in the local river systems.

However, it appears that despite the urgency it is also one of the most neglected components of all the missions. The Meghalaya State Aquaculture Mission 2.0 had kept the target of establishing 50 fish sanctuaries by 2022-2023, with the total cost amounting to under 2% of the total budgetary allocation. This is also reflected in the total area being protected as against the total potential area that can be brought under conservation. According to the Department of Water Resources, Meghalaya Government there are 16 and 9 major rivers flowing into the Brahmaputra Basin (Assam) and Meghna Basin (Bangladesh), respectively. The lengths of these rivers vary widely, with Simsang and Umngot finding mention among the 111 officially notified Inland Waterways of India with a length of 62 km and 20 km, respectively. So there are potentially hundreds of kilometres of river sections that can be brought under the present mission. There are some that might be inaccessible, but since all the rivers are interconnected through their various tributaries, disturbances, especially in a few of the stretches, will affect the entire river system. Thus, from a landscape perspective, conservation will have to encompass the catchment area and the entire stretch of the river itself. But a look at the existing river sanctuaries gives the impression that very little is being achieved in this regard.

It is not known whether the 50 additional river sanctuaries have been constructed, but the website of the Meghalaya State Aquaculture Mission 2.0 currently highlights only five, four of which are in Garo Hills. But only in the lone sanctuary from the Khasi-Jaintia region has the length of the stream declared as a sanctuary been mentioned: 1.5 km of the Amlayee River in Nongbareh (West Jaintia Hills) for the Amlayee Mahaseer Fish Sanctuary. Even if we assume the same length for the other sanctuaries as well, the target of 50 fish sanctuaries amounts to just over 50 km, which is a very low number. However, in the long run, if fish production has to increase to match the rising demand, the replenishment of

fish stocks in the local streams and rivers is crucial. Based on the budgetary allocation, it will also be highly cost-effective.

Local communities are still highly dependent on local fish for household consumption, particularly during the rainy season. This includes not just fish but crustaceans and amphibians as well. The importance of the local aquatic resources was most evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, when many people in the Sohra region (shared during a friend's PhD field-work) reported going fishing and increasing the collection of wild foods to compensate for the unavailability of food from the market. This was a very important factor that explained the FAO (Food and Agricultural Organisation) findings that food security among the indigenous communities in the North East (which includes Meghalaya) during the COVID-19 pandemic was much better compared to their non-indigenous counterparts in the region (i.e., South Asia). This was reported in the 2022 FAO publication 'The Future of Food and Agriculture: Drivers and Triggers for Transformation'.

However, overharvesting has severely depleted fish stocks compared to the past. This is where the Meghalaya State Aquaculture Mission can play a very important role by providing financial support and training to construct and maintain these sanctuaries. While the Khasis do eat a variety of meat, according to the 1914 book 'The Khasis' by PRT Gurdon, the traditional staple food was mostly rice and dried fish. In fact, this continues to be so, with meat only available for a couple of days after the visit to the market or during the winter months. Hence, considering that the state has hundreds of kilometres of rivers and streams, an increase in fish production by supporting more sanctuaries and bringing more areas under them will help people not only achieve food security but also improve their livelihood outcomes.

The content of the Meghalaya State Aquaculture Mission 3.0, if announced, could be a very important intervention that will, in the long run, put the state on the path to achieving food sovereignty. However, what must be ensured is that wasteful expenditures like the Rs 1.44 Crore spent on the Nongpoh fish market should be avoided. Unless such needless spending is avoided, the whole Mission will turn into a waste of taxpayers' money.

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

How Hamas' militants hoodwinked Israelis by using hardwired phones IDF soldiers finding it extremely difficult to locate the Gaza Strip hideouts

By Girish Linganna

Intelligence shared with the United States indicates that a group of Hamas operatives, over a span of two years, used a network of hardwired phones integrated into the tunnel system beneath Gaza to plan the unexpected and deadly attack on Israel, two reliable sources have revealed. This sheds light on why Israel and the US were caught off guard by the Hamas attack. Hamas concealed the planning of the operation through traditional counter-intelligence methods, the intelligence shared by Israel with US officials reveals. This involved holding in-person planning meetings and avoiding digital communications, which could be tracked by the Israelis, in favour of using hardwired phones in the tunnels.

In the course of these two years of planning, they refrained from using computers or cell phones throughout the two-year planning period to avoid detection by the Israeli or US intelligence, the

perspective, the London Underground, which is mostly above ground, is approximately 400 kilometres long.

Tunnel construction in Gaza commenced before Israel withdrew its troops and settlers in 2005. However, it significantly escalated after Hamas assumed control of the Strip two years later, leading to increased security measures by Israel and Egypt, restricting the movement of goods and people in and out. After being kidnapped, Yocheved Lifshitz, an 85-year-old grandmother who was one of two hostages released by Hamas on Monday, was taken into a network of tunnels where she slept on a mattress placed on the tunnel floor.

According to sources familiar with the Hamas assault, the small, tightly knit cell held off on briefing a larger group of fighters above ground for the specific operation until just before the attack was launched. One of the sources men-



sources told a media house. The small, tightly knit cell operating within the tunnels utilized hardwired phone lines for communication and strategy development.

These phone lines within the tunnels enabled the operatives to maintain covert communication among themselves, ensuring that the Israeli intelligence authorities could not track their activities, the sources added. There was limited discussion, minimal exchange of information, and coordination beyond the immediate vicinity.

They maintained a low profile until the time came to activate and mobilize hundreds of Hamas fighters for the attack on October 7, when approximately 1,500 fighters crossed into Israel, resulting in at least 1,400 Israelis being killed. Despite receiving a series of strategic warnings from US and Israeli intelligence agencies, officials from both countries were not able to foresee the events of October 7.

The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) commonly refers to the tunnels constructed by Hamas over the past approximately fifteen years as the 'Gaza Metro'. These tunnels form an extensive labyrinth used for storing rockets and ammunition caches and serving as a covert means for militants to move undetected. Additionally, the IDF asserts that this network includes critical Hamas command and control centres.

Assessing the scope of the 'Gaza Metro' network in Israel is an extremely challenging task. This complexity arises from its presumed existence beneath a region where Gaza spans only 41 kilometres in length and 10 kilometres in width.

In the aftermath of the 2021 conflict, the IDF stated that it had obliterated over 100 kilometres of tunnels through airstrikes. In contrast, Hamas claimed that its tunnel network extended for 500 kilometres and only 5% of them were impacted. To put these numbers in

tioned that, even though ground unit commanders and fighters had undergone training for several months and were in a state of general preparedness, they were informed of the precise plans only in the days leading up to the operation.

"That's how you maintain strict compartmentalization," the sources added, emphasizing that a similar approach was employed in this situation. One of the sources mentioned that, while some of the training activities above ground were noticed, they did not raise significant concerns as it was thought to be routine training of individuals.

Iran has been assisting Hamas in refining their operational security tactics over time. However, according to a third source, US intelligence does not believe that Iran directly participated in planning the October 7 attack. Israel is thought to have had prior knowledge that Palestinian militants had been utilizing hardwired communication systems before the October attack, but did not give it sufficient credence to prevent the October 7 attack. During an Israeli military operation, called 'Operation Home and Garden', in the city of Jenin in the northern West Bank this summer, Israeli troops encountered what seemed to be a comparable communication system.

They found secure, hardwired communication lines and closed-circuit surveillance cameras that provided early notice of Israeli troop movements, an Israeli official described. The IDF then announced it had targeted a joint operational command centre in Jenin employed by militant cells that was utilized for "advanced observation and reconnaissance" and acted as a focal point for coordination and communication among the terrorists. (IPA Service)

(The author is a Defence, Aerospace & Political Analyst based in Bengaluru.)

Letters to the Editor

Tyranny of the majority

Editor,
The 3-day Meghalaya 2023 Cherry Blossom Festival scheduled to start on November 17 and culminating on November 19 (which happens to be a Sunday) has come under strong criticism from a certain section of Christian community who consider Sunday as the holiest day of the week. Undoubtedly Christians are a majority community in Meghalaya. But can a majority community impose their diktat on all and sundry?

Tyranny of the majority happens when a numerically larger group of people enact policies benefiting the majority alone with little or no concern for how these policies impact others. Across the globe we are witnessing majoritarianism in some form or the other. But what is more concerning is the imposition of laws, diktats by religious majority groups with no concern for the rights of the others. We

all know too well what is happening in Afghanistan where Taliban enforced the compulsory wearing of Hijab/Burqa by all Muslim women. The tyranny of the majority is progressively creeping into our country as well and of late in Meghalaya too. There have been attempts to impose milder forms of diktats based on the faith of the majority but nonetheless these milder diktats are still diktats. My humble request to all religious communities is to refrain from imposing their beliefs on all and sundry. The Constitution of India gives us the right to practice our own faith and beliefs freely, but it would be detrimental to society if they are imposed on others.

Yours etc.,
PD Nongrum,
Via email

Church or State? Food for thought

Editor,
As a reader of your es-

teemed newspaper, I have been reading about the 'Error' that has been committed by the government in observing a festival on a Sunday. Much has been written about this by many thinking citizens of our state and I would just like to add my take on it.

What is the hullabaloo all about? I know of many a Christian of our state who do not attend church services on a regular basis. I would like to add that I too am a Christian before finger pointing should happen. I'm sure they have free will and a mind of their own as to whether they'd go for a festival or go to church.

From the letters of the church forum, it looks as if the members of their congregation do not have birthdays or house warming parties and so on, on Sundays nor do they go for outdoor picnics or trips but rather, spend time only in prayer activities.

It would be a sham to think that these church el-

ders would think their faithful not have the discernment to know right from wrong. Is it politicking? I leave it up to the right thinking people of the society.

Let us not hide behind this facade of God for our own material benefits.

Yours etc.,
Angela Lyngdoh,
Shillong -14

Concern over loud music after Pujas

Editor,

I am deeply concerned about the functions that follow the Durga Puja festivities at the Meghalaya Hindu Mission in Lower Mawprem, Shillong. On October 27, 2023, I noticed this recurring issue. I wish to emphasize that I have no objection to music during the course of the puja itself but I have noticed that after the puja, there is a practice of playing exceptionally loud music at around 8 PM. This music has an intensity of nearly 80

dB, as I measured it using my smartphone from a distance of about 150 meters, while remaining inside my house.

While I understand and appreciate the importance of celebrating Durga Puja, I strongly recommend that we refrain from playing loud music in the name of post-puja functions. My concern is primarily rooted in the fact that the school in the vicinity has already resumed its activities, and many students are diligently trying to complete their homework and study during these same evening hours.

It's crucial to distinguish between the religious and cultural significance of Durga Puja and the continuation of loud music beyond puja hours. The noise level, with an intensity of nearly 80 dB, is disruptive for the densely populated surrounding areas, particularly for students who require a peaceful environment for their studies. These students cannot afford to wait until 10 PM for the music to cease.

I request the concerned authorities and Dorbar Shnong to reconsider and not grant permission for functions with loud music after 8 PM in such populated areas. We are part of a responsible and considerate society, and it's essential that we respect the needs and rights of all community members, including students who are trying to focus on their education.

It is my hope that we can strike a balance between celebrating our cultural heritage and ensuring a peaceful and conducive environment for the education of our students. The attention of the Dorbar on this matter will be greatly appreciated, and I trust that our community can work together to address this concern.

Yours etc.,
Rahul Mondal,
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.

Waste Management Crisis

WASTE management across Meghalaya has failed miserably. Earlier Jowai town was in the news for not having a garbage dumping ground and because of which waste was dumped anywhere and everywhere. The problem with tackling garbage disposal and subsequent reduction of garbage into biodegradable and non-biodegradable waste which can be recycled, is that it requires a common space where the garbage can be segregated by Municipal workers into the different categories. But the government is unable to find the space for a dump yard. Marten, the biggest dumping ground for garbage, had reached its shelf life about twenty years ago but every time the Government tries to acquire space elsewhere it comes up with an insurmountable problem – the problem of land. No village authority is willing to part with land for a landfill. Marten has become such a poor model owing to the pollution that emanates from the garbage incinerators that no locality/village is willing to take such risks in their vicinity.

So is there a solution? The entire Greater Shillong area has only one garbage dump – Marten. This is no longer tenable and that is more than evident at this solitary dump yard. Much of the garbage that now takes the shape of a mound actually overflows during the monsoons and finds its way in to the Uiam Lake. The solution is to democratise waste management. Let the Dorbar Shnong also exercise their minds on how to manage waste within their respective jurisdictions. Garbage cannot be the brief of only the Government. It requires that the citizens within the Dorbar Shnong also exercise their minds on this matter since the Government does not own land in this State. Interestingly although the District Councils are inextricably linked to the Dorbar Shnong the issue of waste management has never been a discussion point between the two entities. Fact is garbage management is not the sole duty of the Government. Other institutions too have responsibility. Its time the state government gets the ADCs also to engage with this critical agenda.

Coming back to democratisation of waste, all Dorbar Shnong must be told to address the problem at their own levels and find the dumping space for garbage within their boundaries. This of course is a bold decision and the bureaucracy has to implement it and not allow any political pressure to create roadblocks on this. Too often politicians are unable to take hard decisions and therefore prefer to leave things undecided. But that is no longer feasible since Marten is in a major crisis and solutions are needed which require hard decisions. Citizens too cannot wash their hands off their own garbage. They must be accountable for the garbage they generate. The earlier 3 Rs of garbage management - Reduce, Reuse and Recycle have four more 'Rs' added – Rethink, Refuse, Repurpose, Rot. The last word means that families ought to have enough space to turn biodegradable waste into manure after the garbage rots.

Lessons for India from Hamas' Assault on Israel

By Munmun Majumdar

The 7 October assault on Israel by Hamas has mired the Middle East into greater chaos, complicating the already complex and politically charged nature of the intractable Israeli-Palestinian issue. Besides underscoring the fragility of peace in the region the 7 October assault on Israel by Hamas is an eyeopener to the latter's advanced offensive capabilities. The unexpected attack on Israel by Hamas forces from the Gaza Strip has been unprecedented with devastating consequences. Israel has responded forcefully to this violence. No matter what one's political affiliation is, any deliberate attack on civilians for a political reason or cause cannot be made allowable for or justified. As the current conflict unfolds, it appears that death and destruction on both sides of the border unfortunately will increase in the days ahead.

India has its own share with terrorists' acts. Therefore, it is crucial for India to draw lessons. Firstly, does maintaining vigilance as peace a permanent situation? The answer is without a doubt no. Terrorist attacks anywhere in the world can be expected anytime in the future. Hamas' attack happened at a time when Israel had made peace with several Arab countries including Egypt, Jordan, United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Bahrain, while peace negotiations were going on with Saudi Arabia. The Palestinian issue had faded for a while as the world attention was engrossed on the larger US-China rivalry and the Russia-Ukraine war. Hence, what clearly emerges is that even when peace seemingly prevails the importance of constant vigilance even during times of peace must be emphasized and that peace must never be taken for granted.

Secondly, While the de-escalation of terrorism gives

immense respite it is important to continue to remain vigilant and prepared for sudden escalation. No Government can afford to play down the threat and take its eyes away from terrorism even if it is dormant. More so since peace has never been a permanent condition. Although of late in India terrorists have reduced their

nology, terrorist groups have been able to replace the need for suicide bombers. Terrorist groups have been able to take advantage of this new technology as drones have the ability to deliver payloads to their targets with precision and are highly adaptable to any last-second adjustment. It is these attributes and the ability of the user to control it

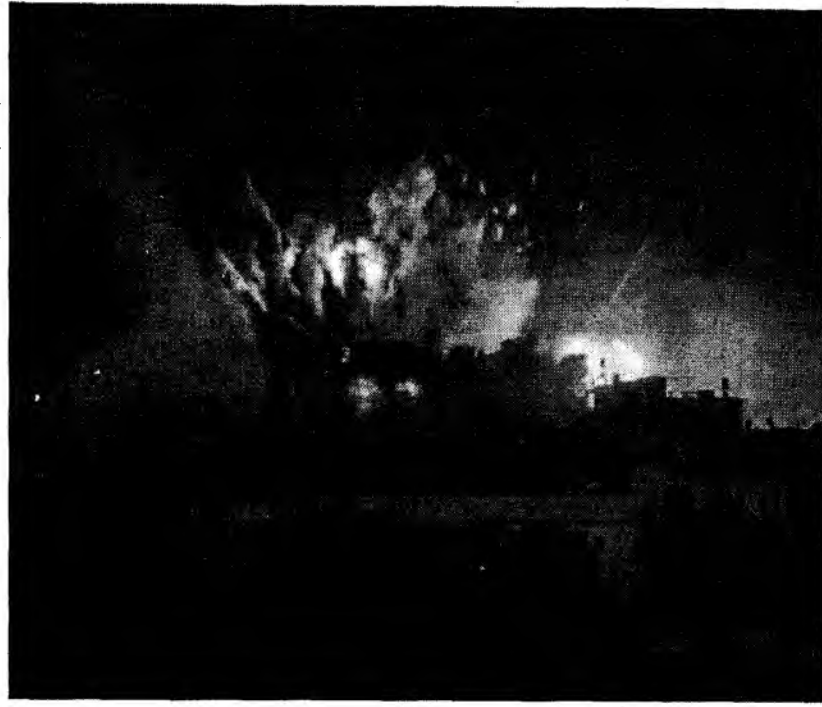
circumstances evolve. Just as with the use of AI against terrorism is increasingly bearing fruit, what must not be lost sight of is that it is the very same technology that terrorist also uses. Therefore, since it must ultimately be reinforced with manual review from trained experts India must ensure to train people in this direction.

Fourthly, the role of the media. Undoubtedly it has a prominent role to play.

The use of social media to shape global perception is not new. One saw how Ukraine had benefited greatly from its adroit use of the media and enabled it to garner international support. The world is now seeing Hamas broadcasting violent videos and graphic images of the group's attack on Israel on social media, particularly on Telegram and X designed to attack Israeli morale and buildup the deterrent leverage of the Israeli hostages the group is holding. The consequence will significantly impact not only on the real-world conflict but also while shaping future debates over social media regulations.

Therefore, significance and salience of the digital battlefield in modern day warfare and combat, cannot be undermined. The internet as a global civic space has facilitated the use of the internet for participation and mobilization and the creation of an environment conducive for circulation of different narratives. Hence, it is important to teach the students, public how to separate fact from fiction in the digital age. Just as the media must gear up to prevent dissemination of incorrect information as much as possible. In the end it is essential to read these indicators correctly and take deterrent measures to prevent and mitigate any development that takes international resources away from humanitarian needs.

(The writer teaches Political Science in North-Eastern Hill University Shillong)



terrorist activities one has to be prepared for any sudden escalation. No country should be lulled into a false sense of overconfidence and ultimately complacency. This incident is a lesson for all that one cannot afford to let your guard down ever.

The presence of long-entrenched terrorist groups will have to be recognized and multifaceted steps must be taken to tear down such networks without getting too caught up in retaliatory measures and blame games.

Thirdly, the use of paragliders by Hamas fighters on 7 October has potentially changed how terrorists exploit the aerial dimension to launch attacks. The aerial domain has always been appealing for the terrorist. Earlier the preferred modus operandi of many terrorist groups has been airplane hijackings. With the advent of aerial drones and new tech-

remotely, that drones of various forms are being extensively used. The successful use of paragliders by Hamas fighters on 7 October has potentially changed how terrorists are taking advantage of the aerial dimension, to launch attacks, cross over by air and to capture terrain as well. The use of paragliders is alarming because they are easy to produce, cheap, and easy to deploy. Therefore, the use of drones and paragliders to attack the 'outdoor music festival' of to destroy Israel's Merkava Mk4 tanks calls for an urgent review the rules of engagement for non-state parachuters. Given the nature of terror threat India faces it must take cognizance of the consequences of the aerial attacks, especially the use of power gliders and draw the lessons relevant for India. India must draw up counter-terrorism strategies that will need to be reoriented as

Khublei shibun Shillong

Ranee Kaur Banerjee

I begin another ending. My time here is neatly packed into anonymous brown cartons and will soon be transported elsewhere.

Over the years, I have visited numerous places and lived in a few. I carry many cities in my heart, but Shillong has branded a large chunk of me and made me unmistakably its own.

Of course, the city has its defects. Some deficiencies, like the traffic congestions, are nightmarishly debilitating. However, I will unashamedly wear my tunnel-visioned pink-

grace of the local dances, the calmness of the faces, the cadence of the language, the melodious voices, the sophistication of the jainsem and dhara, and the eye-catching solidity of the jewellery.

Compelling as these attributes are, they don't make my heart dance to Shillong's rhythms.

Shillong is special to me because of its particular brand of purity, its quiet and cultural simplicity. Shillong is a gentle and reticent smile reflected warmly in the kindest eyes I have ever seen. This city



glasses to write this love song to my home of two years.

What is it about Shillong that has so gripped my heart that it constricts in panic every time I think of leaving this city

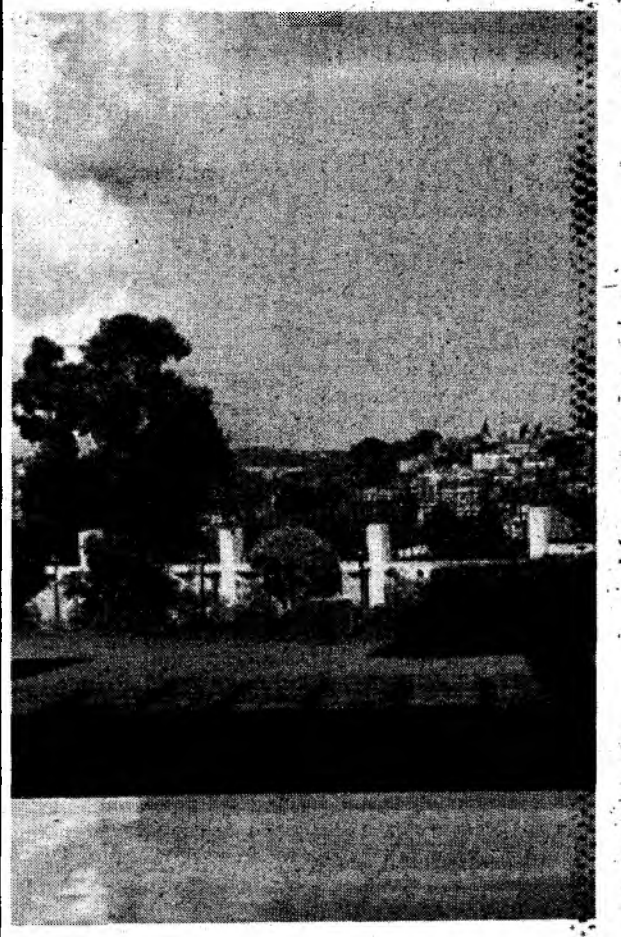
and its people embody an unassuming authenticity that pervades everything they say and do. It defines their foot, their lifestyles, their guileless honesty, their unapologetic



for good?

I will long for the pristine blue of the skies and the fresh wealth of water that appears in myriad forms, forces, and sizes. I will crave the crisp coolth, the daily weather-surprises, and the bracing breezes that lighten my soul. I will miss the soft,

pride, their unmoving loyalties, and their quiet assertiveness. This kind of simplicity cannot be taught; it is nurtured and cultivated through centuries of rootedness in family-centred traditions. It is imbibed through example by generations and perpetuated by being bonded to family,



constantly moving clouds that sometimes criss-cross the sky like a badly knitted jumper and embrace me with amorphous arms of intermittent shade. I will yearn for the beauty that enfolds me every hour of every day whichever way I gaze. I will pine for the riotous seasonal colours of the flora and the nightly heavy metal cicada-choruses that I am certain must have inspired Satyajit Ray's 'Bhootee Raja' song in Gupi Gayen Bagha Bayen. I will remember the

clan, tribe, and land. Decades ago, our beloved French instructor was called back to Paris after eight years at the Alliance Francaise in Calcutta. A group of us went with gifts to congratulate him. To our surprise, he was despondent. He told us, "Je quitte Calcutta sans plaisir" (I leave Calcutta unhappily). It has taken me forty-two years to understand what Monsieur Gimeno meant. Je quitte Shillong sans plaisir.

Letters to the Editor

Time to end Hindu-Muslim divide

Editor,

This is with reference to Rudi V Warjri's article, "Othering" narrative in today's Meghalaya and India" (ST, October 28, 2023). To foil the divisive design to brand Muslims as 'invaders', 'infiltrators' and the 'Other' in India, we need Swami Vivekananda to perform a surgery to remove the malignant tumour of Islamophobia. We need to understand his words, "The Mohammedan conquest of India came as a salvation to the downtrodden, to the poor." His action of worshipping a Muslim girl as Goddess Durga as he did in Kashmir in 1898. He requested a poor Muslim boatman to allow his four-year old daughter to be worshipped as Durga. The boatman was overwhelmed. He thought as if God was asking him through Swami Vivekananda and he readily agreed.

On the day of Mahasaptami of Durga puja, Swami Vivekananda knelt down to touch the feet of a poor Muslim girl. With this singular act, he defied divisions of religion, region, race, caste, class, creed, occupation, gender and generation to hoist the flag of universal humanhood. Actually, Swami Vivekananda did a Sri Ramkrishna who himself practiced Islam, Christianity and other religions to live his words - "many opinions, many paths." As a matter of fact, they lived secularism not just spoke about it. Secularism gives the people

unhindered freedom to practice any religion of their choice.

We need to adhere to Swami Vivekananda's prescription for a mixture, "of the two great systems, Hinduism and Islam — Vedanta brain and anti-Islam body" to thwart anti-Muslim, Hindu victimhood discourses and hate speeches.

When one in four Indians practices untouchability in his or her daily life (India Human Development Survey in 2011-12) and 95 among 100 Indians avoid inter-caste marriages (National Council of Applied Economic Research Study in 2016), we need Swami Vivekananda to remind us that, "Modern caste distinction is a barrier to India's progress. It narrows, restricts, separates. It will crumble before the advance of ideas." He rightly said that millions were oppressed in the name of religion in India and one of the chief causes of India's ruin was the monopoly of education by a few belonging to the privileged classes.

When a paradigm shift has taken place in political priority from people's welfare to temple politics and the sun and moon missions, our political leaders must listen to what Swami Vivekananda had said, "If you want to find God, serve man. To reach Narayana you must serve the Daridra Narayanas - the starving millions of India."

Our society is in urgent need of cutting itself free from the walls of prejudices, superstitions, hatred and falsehood and respond to Swami Vivekananda's clarion call to - "Arise, awake, let minor things, and quar-

rels over little details and fights over little doctrines be thrown aside, for here is the greatest of all works, here are the sinking millions."

At the time when both National Sample Survey report and Global Hunger Index report show a horrific picture of child wasting and child stunting in India, we need Swami Vivekananda's words, "I consider that the great national sin is the neglect of the masses, and that is one of the causes of our downfall. No amount of politics would be of any avail until the masses in India are once more well educated, well fed, and well cared for. They pay for our education, they build our temples, but in return they get kicks. They are practically our slaves. If we want to regenerate India, we must work for them."

When a Union minister of Women and Child Development made a joke of hunger which her elite group of audience shamelessly enjoyed, we need Swami Vivekananda to give them a piece of his mind with his words, "I will call every man a traitor who acquired education at the cost of poor but did not bother about them."

Yours etc., Sufit De, Kolkata

Impact of AI in the workspace

Editor,

I am writing to highlight the profound impact that Artificial Intelligence (AI) has had on our workplaces. In recent years, the integration of AI technologies in professional settings has been

nothing short of transformative. This innovation, now pervasive across various industries, has altered the dynamics of the workplace in terms of who it affects, what it entails, when it took hold, where it's implemented, why it's being adopted, and how it's influencing our work environments.

AI's reach extends to employees across the spectrum, from blue-collar workers in manufacturing to white-collar professionals in finance, healthcare, and more. It touches nearly every aspect of our work, from automating routine tasks to providing data-driven insights for informed decision-making. This technological revolution has been steadily unfolding, with notable advancements and implementations occurring across the globe, from corporate offices in busy cities to remote work settings in suburban homes. The "why" behind this surge in AI adoption is clear: it offers the promise of enhanced efficiency and productivity. The ability to handle repetitive tasks, process vast amounts of data, and even engage in natural language conversations sets AI apart as an invaluable tool for the modern workplace. Employers are drawn to the potential cost savings and improved performance that AI can bring. However, this shift towards greater AI integration also raises crucial questions and concerns. The "how" of AI in the workplace, particularly automation, prompts inquiries about the future of employment. As AI assumes certain job roles, what will be the implications for the workforce? Ensuring a harmonious coexistence

of AI and human workers becomes a paramount consideration. Additionally, ethical concerns surrounding data privacy, security, and transparency in AI decision-making processes require thoughtful attention.

In conclusion, the impact of AI in the workplace is a multifaceted issue, with far-reaching consequences. It is imperative that we, as a society, actively engage in dialogues and policy discussions to navigate these changes and strike a balance that harnesses the power of AI while safeguarding human interests.

Yours etc., Cassandra Rimaia Pajat Shillong

Public sector banks in trouble

The editorial "Loot as business" ST October 28, 2023 is interesting. The all-time high Non-Performing Loan ratio, which is a measure of the rate at which a bank's loans are not repaid, registered 14.7% in March 1999. This ratio was 3.82% in 2014. In 2015 it recorded 4.27%, in 2016 it was 7.48%, in 2017 it recorded 9.32% and was up to 11.18% in 2018 which is almost 12 times the ratio in 2014. In 2019 it recorded 9.07%, in 2020 it was 8.21% and in 2021 it was 7.32%. In 2022 it recorded 5.82%. The Minister of State for Finance informed Parliament on 7th August 2023 that banks have written off bad loans worth Rs 14.56 lakh crore in the last nine financial years, starting 2014-15. Of the total

Rs 14.56 lakh crore, written off loans of large industries and services stood at Rs 7,40,968 crore which is 51 percent of the bad loans. In a written reply to Lok Sabha, Minister of State for Finance Bhagwat Karad said that Scheduled Commercial Banks have recovered an aggregate amount of Rs 2,04,668 crore in written-off loans, including corporate loans, since April 2014 and up to March, 2023 which is just 14 percent of bad loans.

The editorial has rightly pointed out that "the failure on the part of the media to highlight the harm that the nation is faced with in terms of a likely collapse of the banking system and resultant devastation of the national economy itself is also a matter of serious worry." Non-Performing Assets pose a challenge to banks because they reduce the profitability as well as the liquidity of banks. Public Sector banks are famous for bad loans. According to Statista 2023, Public Sector Banks accounted for 79% of bad loans in 2019 while Private Sector Banks share was 20 percent. Foreign Banks 1 percent and Small Finance Banks were negligible. In 2022 Public Sector Banks accounted for 73 percent, Private Banks 24 percent, Foreign Banks 2 percent and Small Finance Banks 1 percent.

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

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