

“Corruption is just another form of tyranny.”

-- Joe Biden

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Trump jittery about November elections

PRESIDENT Donald Trump surprised all by tweeting on July 30 that the upcoming presidential election should be delayed because of the Covid-19 pandemic. Trump expressed his apprehensions about voting mail-in voting and said that people should be able to vote properly, securely and safely. Following the pandemic that has been afflicting the US and countries across the world since January this year, several states in the US have been considering mail-in voting to avoid in-person voting which might violate the social distancing norms. Since the time Trump sent out his tweet there have been relentless counter tweets telling him that he too mailed-in his vote in the last presidential election. Many intellectuals and academics in the US have spoken out. They include Steven G Calabresi, co-founder of the Federalist Society and a Professor at the Northwestern University's Pritzker School of Law, who was, until very recently, a staunch supporter of Trump.

Calabresi in an article in the New York Times wrote that he had taken as political hyperbole the assertion by Democrats that Donald Trump is a fascist but the latest tweet only confirmed what they said and is in itself grounds for the president's immediate impeachment again by the House of Representatives and his removal from office by the Senate.

The US has faced many grave challenges in the past but no presidential election was ever cancelled or delayed. It weathered the Great Depression (1929-1933) and World War II (1939-1945) and stuck to the election schedule. Trump's poor handling of the Covid-19 crisis and his flip-flop stances on treatment protocols; especially the violation of mask wearing protocol supposed to be the prime prevention against the spread of the virus has angered Americans, including those who earlier supported him. Increasingly, Americans believe that the mail-in voting will encourage many more to vote because of their fears of Covid-19 and its aftermath.

It will finally depend on the 50 states to decide whether they will allow universal mail-in voting. Article II of the US Constitution gives the states explicit powers over the selection of presidential electors. Election Day was fixed by a federal law passed in 1845, and the US Constitution in the 20th Amendment specifies that the newly elected Congress should meet on Jan. 3, 2021, and that the terms of the president and vice president end on Jan. 20, 2021. If no newly elected president is available, the speaker of the House of Representatives becomes the acting president. The faltering Republicans need to tell President Trump that he cannot postpone the federal election. Doing so would be illegal, unconstitutional and without precedent in American history. Anyone who says otherwise should never be elected to Congress again says Michael Beschloss, a historian of US presidential history.

Covid-19, landlessness and food insecurity in Meghalaya

By Bhogtoram Mawroh and Jakrimre Momin

In its 2019 'The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World: Safeguarding against Economic Slowdowns and Downturns' report, FAO stated that "Where inequality is greater, economic slowdowns and downturns have a disproportionate effect on food security and nutrition for lower-income populations." This is very relevant in a covid-19 world, particularly so for India whose economy has been predicted to contract because of the restrictions imposed by the partial/complete lockdowns. The reduction in the size of the economy will have grave consequences on food security, especially, of the poor in the country. Meghalaya, which in the 2013 Raghuram Rajan Committee Report, was categorised as being in the least developed category will face great challenges in this regard.

Currently, Meghalaya is a food importing State which makes it vulnerable to external shocks like the one being faced right now. If the disruptions continue for long it is not an exaggeration to state that the spectre of prolonged food insecurity looms large for the populace of the state. Absolute lack of food is not the only symptom of food insecurity but includes the lack of regular access to nutritious and sufficient food as well. Even before the Covid-19 disruption the population of Meghalaya was already suffering from varying levels of food insecurity. According to the District Level Health Survey of the International Institute for Population Sciences (2014), Meghalaya has high rates of childhood undernutrition with 31% underweight, 42% stunting, 17% wasting, and 71% of children under 5 with anaemia. These worrisome figures have to be understood in the context of another grave development underway in the state, increasing land alienation.

According to the Socio-Economic and Caste Survey (2011) more than 70% of the population in the state are landless. This poses two questions: How did landlessness emerge in a tribal society presumably egalitarian? And what are the implications in terms of food insecurity? Landlessness in Meghalaya can be attributed to the process of privatisation of community lands. This can be traced to the colonial period when the British entered the hills and began to create infrastructure for the purpose of administration. This resulted in land's exchange value being greatly enhanced at the expense of its use value, i.e., land began to be seen as a commodity. Driven by this valuation of land the clans who became the early residents of Shillong appropriated almost the entire 10 sq km spanning the city. The British entered into hundred year leases with these prominent clans and paid them annual revenue. Whenever viable, they made outright purchases. It was not long before this form of valuation permeated the entire society.

The distinction between Ri Kynti (private land) and Ri Raid (community land) appears to have a long antecedent. However in terms of pervasiveness it seems that the latter was more prevalent than the former. An indication of this is the

predominance of rep shyrti or shifting cultivation in the past. Being highly dependent on community labour this farming system was practised on community lands which must have been the main land use category. However in the first two decades of the 20th century, driven by the desire to acquire land to be traded as a commodity the more educated and well-off sections of the society began a scramble to grab waste land (fallow land or forested land on which shifting cultivation would have been practised) of Ri Raid to keep away the other members of the Raid from using them. This can be compared, albeit at a smaller scale to the 'Enclosure Movement' in England which led to the dispossession of the rural populace who later supplied the cheap labour for the factories in the cities. In Meghalaya there were no factories to absorb that surplus population. Instead a category of tenant farmers came into being.

After Independence, the process of privatisation intensified when the Government began acquiring lands for various projects paying compensation for them. The Autonomous District Councils, formed for protecting the interests of indigenous people, did not help matters when they started issuing



effort to wean people away from jhum (unfairly stigmatised) and improve their economic status has led to encouragement of cash cropping. An unexpected corollary has been the push for privatisation that accompanied such programs. This is something which was highlighted in a recent work "The Privatisation of Indigenous Community Lands in Meghalaya," done in Ri Bhoi by AK Nongkynrih. The introduction of cash crops was found to be leading to the permanent use and de facto privatization of community land. In order to cement their claim, the occupants of formerly held community lands had their land registered with the Land Revenue Department of the Government of Meghalaya. To avail development programs such as housing loans, cash crop plantation, and investment in trade and services, the applicants or the tribals of the state have to fulfil the criterion of having land registration documents as proof of ownership. This has also encouraged more people to register land as private property. It's not only personal greed and a breakdown of traditional land tenure system but the post-independence policies based on individual property rights which are driving the privatisation process in Meghalaya. As a consequence, landlessness

has reached alarming proportions in the State. Instances of individual landlessness in a community are not uncommon but in some cases the entire agricultural land of a particular village is found to be on lease from another village. With increasing population and declining land availability access is going to become difficult and prohibitive in the future. Food insecurity will become a major problem for such communities if they are not already facing it. For those that still have their own land the disruptions created by Covid-19 also spells danger. Crisis is the moment when dispossession (voluntary or involuntary) become widespread. Sale of land among the distressed has always been a major reason for landlessness. The deteriorating financial situation will force many to sell their land to stave off the crisis, food insecurity being one of them. After that happens they will join the rank of workers whose main source of income will be manual casual labour (according to Socio-Economic and Caste Survey 2011 this group already constitutes 34% of the landless population). In time they will become the surplus labour ripped for exploitation and trapped in a situation of low paying jobs, uncertain and exploitative working conditions. For many this is already a reality. Food insecurity is already a concern for many in the State. With an overwhelming majority of the state's population landless it is not difficult to surmise that the two are connected. Unless there are concerted efforts to arrest the trend of land alienation in the State the situation will only get worse. The downturn in the national economy portends tough times for all in the country. In the case of Meghalaya covid-19, landlessness and a declining economy will lead to enhanced and enduring food insecurity for many in the State, if it doesn't already exist.

(This article is based partly on a 'literature review on landlessness in Meghalaya' done by Jakrimre Momin which will be available on NESFAS website very soon.)

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Trump's call to delay elections signals the opening of a coup attempt Rightwing lobby wants president to stick to power even after defeat

By C T Atkins

Donald Trump's proposal to postpone the 2020 election is nothing less than the opening act of a coup. The aim is not to actually delay the vote, as only Congress has that authority. Rather, this move is aimed at undermining confidence in the legitimacy of the results should Trump lose on November 3rd and, further, to sabotage efforts to expand vote-by-mail. This is a full-frontal assault on American democracy which must be blocked by a landslide vote against the Republican Party on Election Day.

In a tweet riddled with lies and falsehoods Thursday morning, Trump floated the idea of postponing the election to some unspecified future date. Repeating his worn-out line that allowing to people send in their ballots via the U.S. Postal Service will lead to an "INACCURATE & FRAUDULENT" outcome, he questioned whether the election should be pushed back until everyone can "safely" vote in person (even as he continues to insist it's safe to force students and educators back into classrooms).

Extensive research has proven that there is no such thing as widespread vote-by-mail fraud. There's simply no evidence to support the president's claim. To use his own words, that's fake news. Like restrictive voter ID laws, voter roll purges, polling place closures, artificial voting machine shortages in minority districts, and other suppression tactics, the effort to sabotage vote-by-mail is another part of the GOP scheme to shrink the number of people casting ballots—especially among communities of colour, immigrants, and young people.

Trump timed his dictatorial trial balloon to distract attention from disastrous data released Thursday that showed the U.S. economy shrank by 32.9% in the April-June quarter. He took to Twitter to discuss supposed election fraud just 15 minutes after news broke of this worst-ever-recorded result was posted. Millions of workers are going to be jobless for a long time to come thanks to his administration's shameful management of the COVID-19 crisis, and there's nothing Trump can do to distract people from the crushing circumstances he's brought on them.

The president also

knows he can't actually postpone or cancel the election unless he's willing to engineer an actual armed takeover. Only Congress has the authority to alter the date of balloting, and the Constitution says that Trump and Pence's term ends on January 20, 2021, no matter what. So he's not really serious about moving the election date.

But there is another nefarious motivation at work here—one which goes beyond trash-talking vote-by-mail or even diverting attention from his failures on the COVID and economic fronts. His tweet is meant to plant seeds of doubt about the election's legitimacy into the public consciousness. He wants to inject the idea that the outcome (should he lose) will not be fair, reliable, or decisive. He is testing the waters now to assess how much people might resist should he later refuse to recognize the results.

It's a sure bet that Trump and his cabal are plotting out multiple scenarios for holding on to power, whether he wins or not. With an outright victory for Trump in both the popular vote and the electoral college looking unlikely according to current polling, they are cooking up a million ways to throw shade on a close race. If there is a small margin, whether in his or Biden's favour, expect Trump to declare himself the winner. The right-wing media machine will ratchet up the pressure on Biden to concede, and Republican governors and secretaries of state will try to pull off repeats of the vote-stealing that handed Florida to George W. Bush back in 2000.

This must be shut down now. Before we see the final acts of a Trump coup, it must be made clear that U.S. democracy will be defended and that the would-be dictator's days in the White House are numbered.

This means doing everything possible to get people registered to vote in places where there is still time, educating friends and neighbours on the rules around vote-by-mail or absentee ballots if they're available in your area, and preparing people to safely cast their ballots in-person if necessary. The get-out-the-vote effort cannot wait until the morning of November 3rd. With coronavirus making mobilization more difficult and dangerous than ever, there's no time to spare. (IPA Service)

TO THE EDITOR

We demand transparency from Govt

Editor,

Your column titled "We all make mistakes: It helps to accept this fact" (ST July 31, 2020) seems to suggest the "Let's kiss and forget all our mistakes and lapses," dictum. We can only be forgiving if the error is not grievous. But I am not too sure all mistakes should be condoned and forgotten. The messy handling of the marriage ceremony at Khanapara is one such case that neither deserves to be forgotten nor should the matter be buried under the carpet. From all accounts available, those ruling the roost today in Meghalaya, by their ostrich-like behaviour, have added much to the public trepidations over the spread of the Covid-19 virus. By refusing to make the magisterial enquiry report public, our Deputy Chief Minister has not covered himself with glory. According to press reports, he shot back when a reporter wanted to have details of the findings.

"Do you think government will share everything with public?" he was quoted as saying. Can a minister withhold information relating to urgent public matters?

My simple question to the Deputy CM is: Has the government turned into a private entity? How can anybody decline to share such vital information with the people in whose name basically the government runs? During the next Assembly session, if any MLA desires a copy of the enquiry report, can the government withhold the document? Everybody can see through the brazen attempt of the minister to hide a glaring official lapse which has led to the spread of Coronavirus infection in the state. By keeping it under wraps, the government has merely shielded those responsible for breaking the otherwise rigidly implemented SOPs.

The people of Meghalaya have the right to know the details of the case. Why was the transit pass granted? How may passes were issued? How many persons were entitled to cross the border? Was there any condition laid

down for their return? Were they screened? Were the vehicles used sanitised? Was there any dereliction of duty at Byrnihat check gate? Did the police on duty at Byrnihat check the transit pass and take a head count? I am sure the government has its own reasons for keeping all the above under wraps. Had this happened in any other state, many heads would have rolled by now.

But what's baffling is the strange silence of the Opposition MLAs. Why are they silent? If Assembly Committee on Empowerment of Women can take up the lapse of Ganesh Das Hospital so promptly and another MLA has taken it up with the Human Rights Commission, why they did not rake up this case? Don't they have any sense that this controversial marriage brought the virus to Shillong? Don't they know that people are scared for their lives? Can't they see that Government imposed more lockdowns and other restrictions which have severely affected the poor farmers and the daily wage earners?

I think in this regard both

the Ruling and Opposition are equally guilty of not discharging their duties in keeping the public lives safe. What a pity!

Yours etc.,
BR Nongkynrih,
Shillong-8

NEHU VC's action unfair

Editor,

The Department of English, NEHU, Shillong is one of the oldest departments in the University and has had a lasting academic as well as social impact since its inception. It has had and continues to have illustrious teachers which comprise of North East poets who are world-renowned, Padmashree awardees, Cambridge and Fulbright scholars. The department has also produced alumni who have gone on to have a deep impact on our society. The Department has always maintained very high standards throughout the years, hence it is truly shocking to have that history tarnished by the arbitrary removal of Prof. Mala Renganathan as head of the Department. Her removal

tarnishes the reputation of not only of Prof. Renganathan but also of the Department as a whole.

We, the Research Scholars (Alumni) of Prof. Mala Renganathan, Department of English express our deepest hurt and pain over the unethical and irrational manner of her removal as the head of the Department. This complete disregard for a teacher who has given 17 years of service to the students and University and one who served a total of 26 years as a dedicated teacher in two central universities was uncalled for. That over a reason so trivial and unreasonable! The action of the Vice Chancellor, NEHU is highly condemnable. The credibility, proficiency and efficiency of Prof. Renganathan has been simply disregarded by the University authorities. During our years in NEHU as Research Scholars of Prof. Renganathan, we have never ever once doubted her knowledge, her able guidance and her decades of experience. She had not only supervised our PhD thesis but was also a mother to her scholars. She moulded our lives not only academically

but professionally as well. Most importantly, Prof. Renganathan had taught us values and principles that are closely embedded in our hearts and lives.

We therefore condemn the high-handedness of the Vice Chancellor and demand that Prof. Renganathan be reinstated as the Head of the Department of English at the earliest.

Yours etc.,
Janet Dkhar, Bondina Elangbam, Evangeline L. Marbaniang, Jennieffer Dkhar, Longcha Naro. Rita D. Nameirakpam, & others
Research Scholars (Alumni) Department of English NEHU

Paranoid about quarantine

Editor,

It is human to shun "discomfort." Presently people fear the discomfort of "quarantine." Amid the rise in Covid cases many people want to "voluntarily" come forward for testing, particularly when they feel they have mingled with unknown crowds. But they hesitate to do so for many reasons, foremost being

that the medical authorities might issue them a chit and they might be asked to go for institutional quarantine even if their tests come out negative. Should a simple cold and cough be categorized as Covid -19, making quarantine mandatory as is reported? Such measures have "discouraged" people from putting up a fight against the virus.

Quarantine involves a lot of hassles, incidental expenditures and sacrifice. This is unsettling for the weaker sections of society. Moreover, why must one compulsorily remain in quarantine if he/she is tested negative? Who will feed the children when the father is thrust into the quarantine coop? One feels this is a case of "over-doing".

However, it is generally agreed that we should not protest the "instant order" for isolation even if a Covid -positive patient turns negative in a few days. In that case, he/she must completely follow all Covid protocols with utmost care. We still have a long way to go before we can bring Covid to its knees. So, why does the Government not try to win the "confidence"

of citizens from all walks of life? Each individual, regardless of stature, caste and creed is a potential carrier of the virus. So, the Government should be able to enlist the support of all without sounding alarm bells.

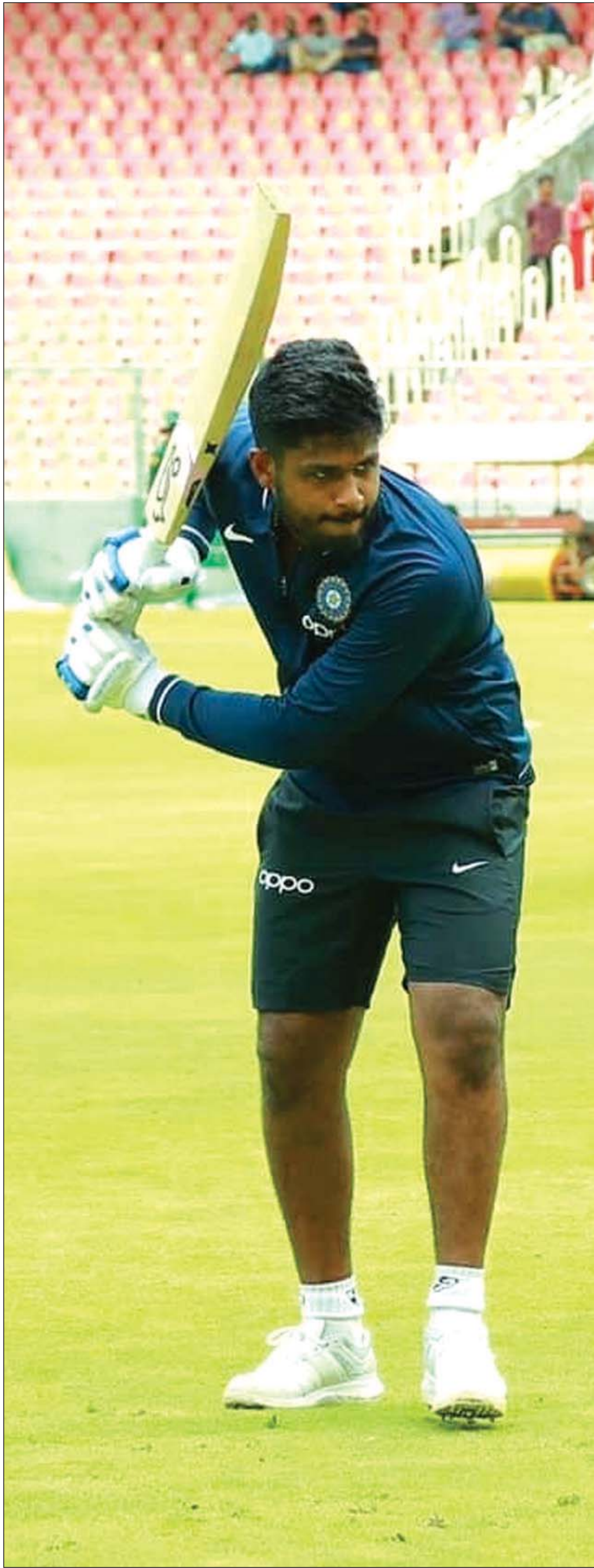
The best way forward would be if the authorities encourage people who are suspected of being infected with Covid-19 to self-declare their status. Here I agree with the suggestion of the KHNAM MLA Adelbert Nongrum to award those who openly declare that they have tested Covid-positive. (ST July 29, 2020).

While medical ethics demand that Covid status of patients be kept confidential due to fear of stigmatization, those that test negative must be allowed to carry on with their jobs. Let them also be awarded certificates because their coming out for voluntary testing itself matters a lot and serves a greater purpose.

Yours etc.,
Salil Gwal, Shillong -2

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

‘Accept the change & toughen the game’



SANJU VISWANATH SAMSON, the extremely gifted cricketer who needs no introduction today, had made his first-class debut at the age of 17. Capable of playing jaw-dropping strokes all around the ground, Samson had slowly graduated over the years into a stylish shotmaker who also keeps wickets. The young cricketer from Kerala who has made his way to the national team also represents Rajasthan Royals in IPL. **DR ANJANA VARMA** catches up with the talented cricketer during the lockdown. Excerpts:

When did you realise that you wanted to be a cricketer?

I had spent my first 10-11 years of childhood in Delhi as my father was in Delhi Police. Then we shifted to Kerala. I began playing cricket with my friends in the streets, initially with tennis balls and slowly with cricket balls. Then my father took me to an academy for coaching and lots of school cricket followed in Delhi. Thus cricket happened automatically to me... I feel lucky about it.

How has the COVID situation affected you?

The whole world has been affected badly, but if we look at it in a positive way, there are a lot of good things you can reflect upon your life. It is said life is too short but it has to go on. We have all been stuck for almost 4-5 months now and maybe many more to come. It's a great moment to reflect back on your life and understand the path you have chosen, the things you have wanted in life, what is your right perspective and what is the purpose of life - looking at the negative to positive situation, you can make use of all these things. So I am also trying to do something like this.

Who are the people who have influenced you?

There are lots of wonderful people who I look up to. My first hero is my father, I learned everything from him. Then I started watching Sachin sir, Rahul sir and Saurav sir on television. Then it was Mahi bhai, now it has changed to Virat bhai and Rohit Sharma. I actually like to learn a lot of different things from different people. I really love watching AB de Villiers, Mike Hussey and Brian Lara. I love learning from all the great cricketers who have played this game.

What about your social life? Do you miss privacy in life?

Yes, I do go to theatres and public places with my wife and friends. I do not try to restrict myself too much from going out. Of course the crowd recognises me but I take selfies with them and try to give them a happy time. I think I am lucky to be able to bring smiles on other people's faces and I am happy about it.

Who are you closest with in the Indian cricket fraternity?

My best friends are from my own Kerala team, we started playing together from Under-13 Kerala side, being genuinely good friends who have stuck together till now. My besties — Iqbal Naha, Rahul Raghavan and Fabid Farooq —

are the guys whom I played with at Under-13 level for state team, so they are the best guys who have always supported me.

When I entered the Indian team, I tried to be friendly with everyone. I was a newcomer in the Indian team, but I knew most of them. I like to be friendly with each and everyone. That led to being really good friends with everyone.

What is the future of cricket given the situation of the pandemic?

It is definitely going to affect our normal way of playing, so I think we need to accept the change, and toughen the game. A lot of people are talking about playing on free grounds or without crowds. I definitely agree that once the safety of the players and management has been taken care of, we can certainly play cricket again. We should also take care of the security and health issues of the people, so I think it will be a little different, but we can slowly and slightly come back to normal ways.

How do you see the changes in life?

As in everyone's life, there have been several changes in my life too from childhood and I have accepted it happily. Change does happen, but how we accept it and move on is what matters.

What is the relation between your fitness and diet?

Diet restrictions are definitely there, but I look at my diet as a fuel to perform on the ground. I definitely take care of my diet like eating the best quality foods

it. But I find it very hard to resist chicken, so I try to go home once or twice every month to have whatever my mom cooks.

How do you plan your practice regime?

I like to really hit the ball almost every day of the week. I like to train for 2 hours a day and then practice for 3 hours. On a normal day, I think I give around 5-6 hours for my cricket. My days are mostly spent to prepare for my practice sessions and after preparing, I spend time repairing from it.

Any gadgets or vehicles you are crazy about?

I used to have a bit of interest in wearing different types of caps, so I had a lot of caps. Like at one time when I was playing in the Under-19 team, I used to carry three caps in my bag whenever I went out. But now, to be very honest, I don't find myself attracted to many things. I have a very small liking towards superbikes, but I said no to myself until I stop playing cricket. I feel bikes are a bit dangerous and cricket is more important, so I have kept that away for now.

How do you define success?

In this short period of life, observing and learning things, I have understood that if your mind and body is in your control, then you are having a successful life. Success does not mean you have to be famous, have a huge bank balance, a big house or vehicles, but you have to be happy. Even with the material possessions don't

pened in my life is definitely a great blessing. I have seen a lot of people work hard, I also work hard and do my thing, everyone does it, but I have always felt that the luck I have got in my life or the blessings I have got in my life is through God.

What are the sacrifices to become a player?

My father has always taught me that if you want to be a sportsman, you need to be like a 'yogi'. Almost every second or every minute of your day is spent to understand what you need to do. After I wake up, I need to be fully fit and ready for the day. I have to have a really good sleep and then I have to do my meditation to keep my mind and body free and relaxed, after which I need to have a good breakfast to stay energised. Almost every minute of your day has to be monitored by yourself, you cannot really be free and just hang out with people whenever you feel like it. You cannot just go anywhere you like and if someone has called you to be somewhere, you may not be able to be there because your whole day is very well-planned.

I've spent almost every day of my life like that, so it has become a habit for me to wake up and do all those things. It has become a really good habit in my life, so it doesn't feel like it's a sacrifice or something. If I don't do it, I feel bad about it, so I have to keep on putting myself into the zone of working hard and doing all these things, then only I believe there is a purpose in my life. Some days if I don't do all these things, then I feel very blank and cold. I always like to keep myself busy as a sportsman and I love doing it.

Does your wife complain about your busy schedule?

Haha, no... she understands the importance of cricket in our lives, so she really respects whatever I do, on and off the field for cricket. I'm really happy that I have a partner who understands the importance of cricket in my life and she's the one who is really taking care of my things so nicely after coming into my life. I think I have been able to give more time to cricket after our marriage than before our marriage, so I feel very lucky for having her.

Do you have a particular dressing style?

I do have my own style which I have created on my own. I like wearing a lot of plain clothes like plain loose T-shirts and I like to be very comfortable than stylish. So I try to be comfortable first, I think that's what my style is all about.

Have you felt hurt due to favouritism at some point?

Yeah, everyone faces that in life. No one is always at the top of his life. I've faced a lot of different situations in my life which were important for me to give me motivation and to overcome bad times. I have definitely come through a lot of difficult situations, and I'm proud that I have been able to come back strongly from those.

(The author is chairperson of CSA, director of TGL, editor of The International Journal and senior director at FWO)

TALKING POINT

SANJU V SAMSON

I like to really hit the ball almost every day of the week. I like to train for 2 hours a day and then practice for 3 hours. On a normal day, I think I give around 5-6 hours

which I can eat. They really play a big role in fitness which is vital to play a lot of continuous high-intensity games. So it's important to take care of yourself and fitness starts from diet.

I do follow a diet plan because diet plays a very big role in training... I'm very lucky to have Arun as my chef. He takes care of my diet, is well aware of what a sportsman needs. He does a lot of research, makes healthy, tasty dishes which I always enjoy. I have been following this for the past seven months.

What would you not exclude from your menu?

I love whatever my mom cooks in her kitchen but nowadays I try to stay away from it because my body tends to get heavier as soon as I eat non-vegetarian because maybe the Kerala-style cooking is a bit spicy with a lot of carbs, so I think I like to stay away from

have peace or happiness in life. We all strive for different things, but ultimately we should be happy and peaceful. I may be right or wrong, but sitting down happily with yourself, having great relationships with family and friends, that is when people are successful, according to me.

The positive quality that has helped you move forward...

The most positive part luckily in me is that I keep forgetting negative things. There are a lot of positive and negative things, luckily I have an ability to keep forgetting the negative incidents and negative people that I have come across. So that helps me to keep on having a positive mindset as well as positive thoughts about myself and others.

Are you a God-fearing person?

I am a very big God-fearing person. I think whatever has hap-

Super mushroom for immunity & livelihood

By Sandeep Das

Mushrooms contain protein, vitamins, minerals and antioxidants. These can have various health benefits and high nutritional value. Cordyceps is a parasitic fungus that includes over 400 different species which are found all over the world and are mainly parasitic on insects and other arthropods and a few are parasitic on other fungi.

There are several benefits of Cordyceps. It is used to treat coughs, chronic bronchitis, respiratory disorders, kidney disorders, night-time urination, male sexual problems, anaemia, irregular heartbeat, high cholesterol, liver disorders, dizziness, weakness, ringing in the ears, unwanted weight loss and opium addiction.

It is also used for strengthening the immune system, improving athletic performance, reducing the effects of aging, promoting longer life and improving liver function in people with Hepatitis B.

Of the more than 400 species of Cordyceps discovered, two have become the focus of health research — Cordyceps sinensis and Cordyceps

militaris. Natural cordyceps is hard to get and may be expensive which promoted for its cultivation at laboratories.

Cordyceps is a super mushroom well known for its immuno-modulating effect, anti-ageing, antiviral as well as energy booster effect and it is experimentally well-established. This mushroom is as expensive as Rs 8 lakh per kg dry weight.

Fortunately, DBT-Gol Technology Incubation Centre on Mushroom, Bodoland University, is in a capacity to grow this mushroom in laboratory conditions since 2017 in mass scale and almost a pioneer in the field.

The lab standardisation and its related research got initiated in the laboratory in 2012. It needs 60 days for a crop cycle. It requires specific photoperiod, enriched media and an encapsulated environment with all the parameters at optimum to mimic the natural habitat with optimum gaseous exchange.

Mostly found in Nepal, China, Bhutan, Japan and south-east Asian countries, these mushrooms thrive in humid climates and dense tropical forests. But due to over-collection, the International Union for Conservation of Nature has listed this

species as threatened.

The mode of cultivation may be vegetative, egg and dead pupa, only egg and live pupa (natural host). An average human can consume up to 0.5-3gm on dry weight basis, though 150 mg Cordyceps powder is a decent amount to initiate feeding mass population regularly for immediate immune boosting.

Mushroom commercialisation

Since the mushroom is full of medicinal virtues, there is a wide possibility of mass commercialisation. Even the used substrate of the mushroom can be commercialised. Depending on the level of Cordyceps, the international price varies. Also, the international price varies with the mode of production like vegetative or egg and dead pupa or only egg or live pupa.

The price varies from few lakhs to Rs 8-9 lakh depending on the level of cordyceps.

How it will help

Due to COVID-19, the local communities have been facing various issues in earning their livelihood as

the collection of seeds and leaves was restricted. It eventually caused loss to those groups who are totally depending on the forest for their day to day lives. They may be able to earn better living with mushroom cultivation as it is easy to do so by providing some optimum condition. Also, there is no major requirement of specific environmental condition and can be grown with some specific efforts. It is not very difficult but can be proven as an efficient way to earn living with a minimum land requirement.

The research team has closely worked with 48 farmers in Kokrajhar and 25 self-help groups.

This write-up has been prepared to initiate mushroom cultivation programme as a mode of livelihood among local communities of Meghalaya.

We are willing to establish such study in various parts of the country and ready to facilitate training for cultivation of super mushrooms in vivo and its commercialisation.

(The author is Dean of Faculty of Science & Technology, Bodoland University, and is the pioneer in this study)



Anti-pandemic force for success

By Dilip Mukerjee

The Triple Pandemic — biological, psychological, financial — has struck the planet with intimidatory intent. The menacing chain reaction comprises a transition from an Economic Cyclone to a Financial Tsunami to a Worldwide Economic Meltdown.

Yet, with resilience and resurgence, and a collective will to win, we can come together not to make a difference, but to create an impact! All of us have within us a radiance that cradles our birthright: to be joyous, brilliant, compassionate, successful. What are we going to do about it? In these perilous, gyrating times, the cost of confusion is escalating exponentially. The value of clarity has become ever more precious, yet daily, we find victims in our midst. Those who have become attuned to being too casual, are becoming casualties! What is to be done to tap into our force for success...when there is no replacement for a dismembered spirit?



We have to remain in the mainstream of life: doing, feeling, relating, connecting ... to the strongest drive within the human personality ... the need to remain consistent with how we define ourselves. The qualities of your being are the raw materials of your force for success; they are your most distinctive attributes. Your infinite inner energies carry within them a tidal power that wells and swells inside you. It is a cosmic urge! How do you use these strengths that are screaming to find expression? There

is a leader within you ... did you know that? It is a core component of your embedded destiny. With gentility and givingness, your qualities of self-leadership can carve for you a sure path to success in life.

When should you begin? The time to move ahead is *before* you think it is time to move ahead. Leadership develops daily, not in a day. Know that the smallest shift in thinking can transform your life. Start now! Don't wait till it's too late. You CAN heal yourself. Shift, Learn, Transform! Begin with truth! Sincerity is not a test of truth; it's possible to be sincere, and untruthful. Truth and love are the twin, twined, twinklings that illuminate your being. They are your 'sparklings'.

Love! Only the intention and expression of love has the power to transform perception from condemnation to compassion, and then generate behaviour that may help others to transform themselves. Begin with yourself, and let your wisdom heal the wounded, broken, spirits crying out for help.



(The author is L.I.F.E. coach, author, consultant, presenter and learning guide)
Illustration & design by Dilip Mukerjee

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambhani

Sunday, August 2, 2020

Moon sextile Neptune on your solar return chart and it will bring extraordinary results for you. Everything that was stuck up till now will gather momentum. New plans will be initiated. You may enter into new business venture in partnership, association or collaboration. Those who are planning to take new jobs will be able to do so. Your bosses and colleagues will keep encouraging you. Your enemies and conspirators might try to overwhelm you, some of your work will be criticized. But you will not get affected by it. And will keep doing your work with all sincerity. You will spend some time with them despite your busy schedule at work. Auspicious functions will keep taking place. You will fulfill all your tasks with ease.

Aries: (March 21 - April 20)

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

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21)

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

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21)

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

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22)

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

Leo: (July 23 - August 23)

The present planetary configuration increases confidence in personal relations; courage and efforts at work place. It is a great time to do something entirely new and pioneering. Discussions and ideas about finances and material security figure strongly. You may find yourself in a position in which there is a blending of the financial with social or public affairs. Although you like the good things in life and may spend quite a bit on clothes, furniture, and entertainment, your innate sense of security will not permit you to go overboard to the point of extravagance. You will have the ability to build up financial reserves and resources, for this placement can bring a good deal of success in all monetary pursuits.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22)

This is a period that brings love and understanding in personal and professional relations. Friends and loved ones take priority. People at work might be surprised by your

ability to assert yourself and your needs. You do not find yourself lacking in opportunities to socialize. You are likely to enjoy a strong feeling of happiness and solidarity in friendship, or with groups of like-minded individuals. You are more peace loving than usual and slightly detached on a personal level and feelings towards religion are enhanced this week.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23)

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

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22)

This phase is good for money, family, status and happiness. Money matters come into focus for you. You would adopt a serious approach to business because you are in the spotlight. Career and vocational issues may benefit from the increased clarity you possess. Much of your energy will be applied to vocational achievement, professional success, and leadership. Being part of a community or circle of friends and building your social network is important to you at this time. Your love life is more attractive and charming. Public relations work, promotion, and other such endeavors are favored now. You give attention on fitness and health related programs.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21)

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

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20)

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

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18)

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

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20)

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

Lessons interrupted



Many students are staring at an uncertain future

By Vanshika Lohia

Keshar Saraf, 19, was happy studying Fashion Designing in a college in Mumbai. She was there for a year when the COVID-19 pandemic hit. Her parents feared for her safety and persuaded her to leave college and look for a new institution closer to home.

"Nothing could be more important than the threat to one's health and the mental health of close ones during this crisis. For fashion designing students, the degree does not matter but experience does; so I have agreed," says Keshar.

Outstation students face one of the worst scenarios in this pandemic. On the brink of their careers, they have been compelled to take a step back. With jobs and enterprises disappearing, young student are struggling to find their feet.

Take 25-year-old Aman Jain, for example. He is at the final phase of his classes in the London Business School. Trying to make sense of the new normal, he rues, "Networking, socialising and experiencing the ambience of the industry first hand are important elements in our career but these things seem to be off now. Job opportunities look scarce too."

The closure of the educational institutions has had both social and economic impact in cities in UK and the US which earn considerable revenue from the inflow of international students. Even the social integration of a variety of people from different backgrounds, old and young, has been hindered due to COVID-19, more so for the young generation than the adults.

About 60 per cent of people in the education field are now being affected globally. More than a hundred million are facing a setback in India too. Online education has become the new trend. Experience in the field is no longer a viable option.

Following this, apps like Zoom, Houseparty and Discord have risen in value as learners are crowding over these mediums in order to complete their education.

However, Sanjana Agarwal, from the OP Jindal Global University, Sonapat, Haryana comments that online classes are deteriorating the standard of the teaching. There is no way for the authorities to ensure the attendance of their students and many students do take it lightly or are restless and thus have reduced the overall motivation regarding learning.

Bunty Shangevi, who is pursuing his Diploma in Family Business Manage-

ment, agrees. He says that he is unable to assess the value of online classes when compared to the classroom teaching. However, he remains positive too saying, "Changes will come" and quotes Jack Ma, co-founder of Alibaba, "Just make sure you stay alive. If you stay alive, then you would have made a profit already."

Meanwhile, a large number of students want a share of their fees to be reimbursed by their respective colleges since they are utilising only half of the resources of their institutions but the financial burden remains with them.

The undergraduate and graduates hoping to make ends meet after completion of their studies now have to rely on their parents for an unknown duration of time. That plays on their minds too.

Prakhar Goyal, who has taken a second drop year due to the pandemic, confides that he feels helpless as he cannot do anything about it but has to accept the situation. He also had to defer his admission to the Singapore Management University this year due to the improbability of jobs and exposure.

Vartika Mohta from the Institute of Hotel Management, Kolkata tells a completely different story. She says she was stuck in IHM for a month where the stu-

dents were quarantined to be tested but by the time the test results came forward, a lockdown was imposed all over India.

It was only in April, more than a month after the lockdown, she was able to return home after having travelled for four days by bus in hazardous conditions.

"I sat in a bus for two days straight with continuous temperature check-ups by highway authorities in the hot weather, it was a mess and we were not sure of when we would reach Kolkata," she says.

Many students have hardly a year or two left before the completion of their studies and according to most experts, the situation might not change for another several months.

The lifestyle of work-from-home and online education have led to the advent of numerous online courses, internships, part-time work, blogging and digital marketing in the hope to stay productive and utilise this period for many learners. However, for many others, it is regarded as a time of procrastination and a break from the regular routine.

Irrespective of the differences, the student community as a whole refuses to lose hope and is keeping its fingers crossed for a better time next year. (TWF)

This industry has growth potential

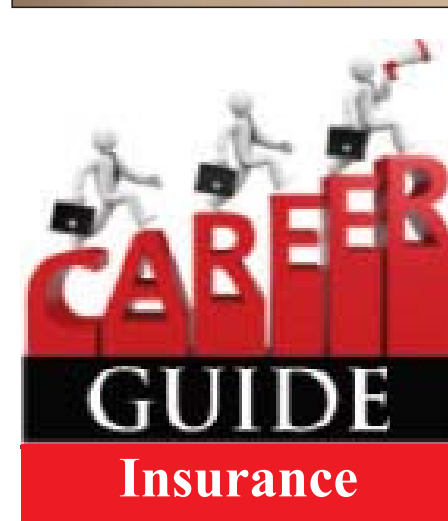
By Ranjan K Baruah

At the time of crisis and when COVID-19 has impacted employment, there is one service that has been listed as one of the essential services by the government and this sector brings scope for millions in the country. The irony is that this profession is like an irritating issue for many as people associated with this are not being able to showcase the real importance of the profession. But in spite of everything, the industry is booming in the country and this will certainly boom in the years to come.

India is a country of a large proportion of persons being in employable age. One of the premium sectors showing upward growth is insurance, which is a \$41-billion industry in India. India is the fifth largest life insurance market in the emerging insurance economies globally and is growing at 32-34 per cent annually. Foreign direct investment up to 26 per cent is permitted under the automatic route subject to obtain a licence from the official regulator, Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority (IRDA).

Insurance, within the financial sector, plays a vibrant role in the economy. In simple terms, insurance is a mechanism of sharing the losses of a few by many. Though the pooling mechanism exists in society since ages in various forms, the modern form of insurance can be traced to Europe, starting with marine expeditions in pursuit of business. Subsequently, the concept extended to development of life insurance and other forms of property insurance.

This diversity of various classes of insurance business requires human resources of different levels of education, technical knowhow and expertise. After the advent of



Banks provide immense employment opportunities. There is Postal Life Insurance, Corporate Agents, Insurance Brokers, Individual Agents or Advisors who have been working in the insurance sector for decades. Micro Insurance Agents, RAP (Rural Authorised Persons) or VLE (Village Level Entrepreneurs) to market insurance products, Referral Companies, Web Aggregators etc.

Professional terms or designation associated with insurance includes actuaries, chartered accountants and finance professionals, risk managers, capital market professionals, back office personnel, risk assessment and underwriting, policy preparation and delivery.

Insurance sector in India has been through a lot of changes and this shall bring more opportunities for millions in the country. At the present time of crisis people are also realising the importance of insurance like health or life though we do motor insurance as that is compulsory. We shall publish more options in this sector in our next edition and till then stay safe and keep fighting the pandemic.

(The author is a career mentor and can be reached at 8473943734 or bkranjian@gmail.com for any career related queries)

“Life is like a coin. You can spend it any way you wish, but you only spend it once.”

— Lillian Dickson

The Shillong Times

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Ladakh and beyond

LADAKH is far from having settled down to peace. Chinese PLA is massing up troops in sensitive areas in the region, and India is in a state of preparedness in the event of a fresh face-off. Clearly, the problems in the region are far from being solved or even being in a state of freeze. The arrival of five Rafale fighter jets have obviously raised the confidence levels of the Indian military, but much work remains to be done before the security levels along the northern border are raised to satisfactory levels. India has stated that the Chinese military has pulled out of Galwan Valley, the scene of killing of 20 Indian soldiers on May 5, but Chinese pullout from the sensitive ‘fingers’ area has not taken place. India is insistent and rightly so, that a complete disengagement and withdrawal from areas the PLA crept into in the past couple of months are a pre-requisite to restoration of normalcy. The Chinese are dilly-dallying on the issue of troops withdrawal – after it made a promise to do so on July 6 at the NSA level talks, also involving Pangong Tso and Depsang areas.

It is important that peace is given a chance and it’s also important for India not to lose an inch of land to the Chinese. The original bilateral talks on the issues in Ladakh and beyond started on June 6. It’s going to be two full months now, and the issues are dragging. This Sunday’s talks between military top brass – the fifth round -- too were high on promises, but low in terms of confidence-building. It’s three months since the Galwan Valley killings took place. China might boast of a superior military, as India vacillated on its military requirements right from the turn of the century. This gave a clean two decades’ time for China to unilaterally raise its might in a frenzied build-up. India failed to take note. Today, even in the confused state of Covid spread, China is seen itching for a fight. The scenario suits China inasmuch as the fact that India’s isolation is worsening within the region. Close ally Nepal is alienated; and Afghanistan might sing a different tune sooner or later. China’s economic might is what attracts nations in the region to the red dragon. China is wooing Bangladesh through economic cooperation pacts, while Pakistan is already in its pocket. It’s now wooing Iran, where India took a beating of late. India’s failure to set its house in order in the last 20 years is proving to be a major handicap.

TO THE EDITOR

Stress on Grammar in sign language

Editor,

The recent inclusion of sign language and the recognition of the deaf community and other disabled individuals in the National Education Policy, 2020 is definitely a welcome move. This move has included the perpetually polarized disability sector into the mainstream discourse. However, I would also like to point out that not only sign language standardization among other things should be done. There should also be tremendous thrust to improve the written English Language skills of the deaf community.

Sign Language is a form of language where hand gestures and facial expressions are used and not proper attention is paid to English grammar. There is no proper English language structure in sign language commonly found and used in everyday spoken and written English language. Therefore, a deaf person with sign language as his first language fails to grasp the essential grammar skills employed in the written and spoken English language.

This becomes cumbersome to them and acts as

obstacles toward pursuing higher studies and also in applying for jobs in the government and non-government sectors. Therefore, it is my earnest hope that the government would do something to remedy this.

Yours etc.,
Lalboi Paite,
Masters in Social Work,
Assam Don Bosco University.

Containment zones and residents' plight

Editor,

If only we were rich and could afford t stay at home would things be better? With the onslaught of Covid-19 the authorities have started demarcating areas as containment zones. But the gravity of the hardships faced by people within the containment zones are difficult to assess unless we put ourselves in their shoes. Many feel they have been treated inhumanely and neglected when it came to the supply of food items even while movement has been totally restricted. Imagine the plight of residents who are not allowed to go out to buy their day-to-day essential food-items for nearly a week at a stretch?

While agreeing that in the current pandemic, all interventions are needed to

Niamtre, Hinduism and Ram Temple in Ayodhya

The report in the press about the Daloi of eleka Jowai, Puramon Kynjing handing over a fistful of soil and a small amount of water to a functionary of the RSS in Jowai has caused quite a stir both in the virtual and the real world. The element which was taken from the section of river Myntdu which is known as Syntu Ksiar is to be used in the foundation of the Ram temple which will be laid in the presence of PM Narendra Modi. Similarly some soil and water is to be handed over to the organiser from the Daloi of eleka Nartiang, Hed Singh Dhar sources informed. The incident may be symbolic but has raised many serious questions.

The first question is: how much influence does Hinduism have on the indigenous Niamtre religion? This writer has done a study on this subject and it was found that Hinduism’s influence on the Niamtre religion in both the Jaintia and War Jaintia region is of a dual nature. Subtle influences can be observed in the different segments of the indigenous faith and this varies from one raid to another and second aspect of the influence is in the case of Nartiang which even celebrates Puja and worships Devi and Shiva.

On a closer study one can see that elements of Hindu worship and deities are found in worship and tradition of the indigenous people. For example Ram, Lakhon, Durka and Kongka are traditional names given whenever parents give birth to twin sons or daughters. Shib Thakur is one important deity not only in the Niamtynrai of Nongtalang but even in other raids to. Pastieh Kopati of the eleka Raliang which is also known as puja kopati has some similarities with Hindu tradition. It is a taboo in all traditional religions irrespective of the raids to consume beef. This is another possible influence of Hindu traditions on a tribal religion. These are only some examples of the influences of Hindu practices in the Pnar indigenous religion, the study has one full chapter on this subject alone.

Nartiang is not the only place where there are two Hindu temples one dedicated to Durga and another to Shiva but it is believed to be one of the

By HH Mohrmen

fifty one shakti peeth (power centre) found in the entire subcontinent. In Nartiang Hinduism blends with traditional Niamtre religion and people worship both tribal deities as well celebrate Durga puja and worship Shiva. One may ask how these influences happened. It is has to do with the history of the kingdom when the Hima Sutnga extended its Kingdom to the plains and shifted the capital to Jaintiapur. The kingdom was then known as Jaintia kingdom and at some point of time the royal family entered into matrimonies with other Hindu royal families in the region. The king adopted Saivite sect as well as keeping the Pnar culture and tradition because the kings also kept Nartiang as their summer capital and paid regular visits to the place. Hence certain sects of Hinduism blended with Niamtre in Nartiang.

Jaintiapur was not only the seat of the Jaintia kings but in the past it is also one of the major trade centres. The Pnar and the War Jaintia still have folk stories which are evidence of the flourishing trade between the highlanders and the plains people. The next question and the most important question that is being asked is the link between the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangha and Niamtre. What does the RSS have to do with the Niamtre religion is another popular question? But the most intelligent question was by a friend on a certain Facebook page and I quote him, ‘I am rather intrigued with one thing. While the Hinduism practiced by either the Jaintia kings or even some Jaintias themselves and even some Khasis from Shella, is a form of Shaktism, and associated with the worship of Durga or Kali, which again is part of the Saivite (worshippers of Shiva) sect, how does this have any connection with Ram. Ram is considered to be the incarnation of Vishnu and these two sects differ vastly in their beliefs, views and ideas and they don't see eye to eye with each other.’

It must be clear that it is only in the Niamtre in Nartiang that the worship of Devi and Shiva is practiced and there are also two temples dedicated to the two deities. Although there is a

temple in ruins in Syndai; another in Muktapur on the India-Bangladesh border and the third one in Borkhat, the Niamtre in other raids do not have the concept of having a common place of worship. Rather the ancestral home of the family ‘iung blai/kmai iung’ is considered to be sacred space where all the rites and passages of the members of the family are performed. They also worship tribal deities and follow tribal culture and traditions. Niamtre and Niamtynrai continue with their indigenous practices and with very little influence of the plain people’s culture, traditions and religion.

The Niamtre RSS bonhomie is not so much about the belief system. In fact, except for the Niamtre in Nartiang, the indigenous religion in other raids has very little or nothing in common with Hinduism. It is even doubtful if they care about the difference between the various Hindu sects. But Niamtre and RSS have one common ground where the two organisations are in agreement and that is the fight against conversion of its members to different Christian denominations.

The answer is in the national census register. After every ten years the population of the adherents of Niamtre or even Seng Khasi in the state dwindles rapidly. This does not come as a surprise if one considers the fact that the main goal of all Christian denominations is to convert the unbelievers to their fold. Almost all churches set up their missions or send missionaries/evangelists to the villages where there is still a large population of people who still follow the indigenous religion to convert them. This is the story of the indigenous religion except in some places where they still have a strong influence. The sad state of affairs was aptly described by Albert Thyrniang in the article in the Shillong Times titled, ‘Is it possible to turn back the clock’ (ST July 4, 2020). In the write up, the writer reminisces about his childhood in the village where he grew up, while also gave us the some idea how demography of a village changes as a result of conversion.

He said in the article that till late 1970s and early 90s, there were still about 20

percent of population in the village who still follow the Niam Tynrai faith and he recalled that they used to celebrate a festival they called ‘ka shad riew pyrthei’ or the dance of the people of the world. It was so called because the followers of the indigenous religion call themselves ‘riew pyrthei’. Now the residents in the entire village have converted to Christianity and Thyrniang made another very important and heart-rending observation in the article which should put us all in shame. As the indigenous religion disappeared from the village, not only the festivals vanished, but the significance of the drums and traditional instruments is lost and even the monoliths were removed from the entire village.

Thyrniang also stated that now the population of the followers of indigenous faith in the state is about 8.70 percent only. The question is whether ‘ka Jaidbynriew’ (the indigenous people) are going to lose anything if the indigenous faith disappears from the face of the earth? Albert Thyrniang in the same article revealed the truth that if indigenous faith disappears then not only will our traditional festivals disappear, but the traditions, the stories and even the monoliths which are the symbols of our culture will also vanish. One wonders how many such festivals, traditions and monoliths have met with such a fate.

The answer to the many questions asked after the news about soil and water was collected from Jowai and sent to Ayodhya is simple. It is because of our own attitude towards the religion of our ancestors. Conversion carries on unabatedly while more than 75 percent of the state remains silent spectators and the only support the followers of Niamtre get is from the RSS. It is therefore not surprising that the Niamtre has developed greater affinity with RSS. We were made to look down on our traditional religion and to brand the practitioners as pagans and non-believers instead of trying to value the wisdom of our ancestors and to understand that we are what we are today because of them. This is what makes adherents of indigenous faith look for support from outside and they found one in the RSS.

(hhmohrmen67@gmail.com)

NEP2020: India-centric Policy

By Anil Singh Roka

The Education Commission is considered to be an important institution as it adopts a comprehensive approach to reconstruct and develop a blueprint for a National System of Education. Post independence, various Education Commissions were appointed to frame policies that were best suited for the time. We had the Radhakrishnan Commission in 1948 which was specific to University Education, Mudaliar Commission of 1952 for Secondary Education, Kothari Commission of 1964 which was later considered for policy formulation and we had National Policy of Education 1968.

As education was on the State list in 1968, many of the recommendations were not implemented by a number of states. Education was a state responsibility until 1976 and was later brought into the concurrent list with far reaching implications with regards to financial and administrative issues. No further review of this Commission took place until the early 1980’s, perhaps due to political instability at the Centre and economic obligations. When the next National Policy of Education 1986 was pronounced it was based on access, equity, equality, affordability and accountability of education. The need for revision of NPE 1986 was felt by the then government and resulted in a modified NPE 1992. Till then all the policies were mere modifications of the previous ones. The third National Policy of Education or the first National Policy of Education of the 21st Century is the New National Education Policy 2020.

Dr. K Kasturirangan, former chairman ISRO and currently Chancellor of Central University of Rajasthan and his team must be congratulated for preparing the final draft of NEP 2020 which has been passed by the Cabinet. This policy is a complete overhaul of the education system of India right from Aganwadi/pre-primary level to University level. There are numerous striking recommendations out of I would like to highlight a few of them.

1) The 10+2 pattern of the previous Policy where students from standard one onwards were covered under the policy have been replaced by 5+3+3+4 pattern in NEP 2020 in which due importance is given to students from Aganwadi/pre-primary level between the age group 3-6 years as this is the most important stage of a child’s life where 85% of mental and physical development takes place. So keeping this into consideration, Government has included this age group in this policy and also extended midday meal scheme for the students of pre-primary and primary levels so the nutritional requirements of the child can be met at this age.

2) The foundation Stage (pre primary till class 2 up to 5 years) will be based on play/ activity learning where not much knowledge of books will be involved. Only in standard land 2 students will be taught some language and numerals. In the Preparatory stage (Class 3 to 5 for 3 years) children will be taught in their mother tongue/ regional language where interactive learning will take place. In middle stage (Class 6 to 8 for 3 years) vocational course can be opted by the children and internship will also be allowed from the school for those students having interest in any vocational training. Computer coding will be taught from class 6 onwards. In the Secondary stage (Class 9 up to Class 12) multi-disciplinary study ,greater critical thinking, flexibility of choosing subjects by the children will be allowed based on semester system.

3) Keeping in mind the diversity of students from various quarters like ST/SC/ OBC/ minorities/girl child/ Transgender equal opportunities are being framed. Though Sarva Siksha Abhiyan has been able to bring more enrollments in elementary schools but by the

time children reach the secondary stage the retention capacity reduces, especially for the girl child. So in this regard the Commission suggests proper infrastructure and facilities to be provided to the deprived lot. Children facing learning difficulties are given due importance. In fact migrant groups are also covered under this Commis-sion by adopting various care-taking measures so that no one is kept out of education. It aims for 100% enrollment for all by 2030

4) Multi-entry and exit in Higher education is now allowed. Earlier in the Undergraduate level, if some students leave the course halfway due to some unavoidable circumstances, they had no degree and wasted their time. But in NEP 2020 there is a provision where, if a student had to leave his/her study at any point of time, then his/her learning till that period of time will not be wasted. In fact, on completion of one year, student gets certificate, two years diploma, three years degree and four years research degree.

5) Report cards will reflect 360 degree assessment where student will have self-assessment, peer-assessment and teacher assessment.

The NEP 2020 envisions an education system rooted in Indian ethos. Along with education, children will be connected with life skills. Arts, music, sports etc were earlier considered extra-curricular activities; now they are part of the curriculum. World class institutions of ancient India such as Takshashila, Nalanda etc, had set high standards of multidisciplinary teaching and research and have produced scholars who have contributed in diverse fields such as mathematics, philosophy, astronomy, yoga ,fine arts etc. So the NEP 2020 is based on this principle and aims to transform India into a vibrant knowledge society by providing high quality education to all, and thereby making India a global Knowledge super-power.

On paper, the NEP 2020 seems to be perfect, student friendly, flexible and covers all aspects of holistic education where importance is given to Affective and Psychomotor domain of learning apart from Cognitive domain. It goes in toto with the statement of Swami Vivekanand, " We want that education, by which character is formed, strength of mind is increased, the intellect is expanded and by which one can stand on one's feet".

But how the objectives can be achieved or how much of the NEP 2020 can be implemented in the states is a big question. Since Education is under the concurrent list, so the respective states may not implement NEP 2020 in toto. As with all previous policies which were not fully implemented in all the states of our country this Policy too may meet a similar fate. There are recommendations in the NEP 2020 which replicate the recommendations of previous policies. For instance the NEP 1968 also proposed 6% of country's GDP for Education but till date it could achieve only 4.34%. Similarly, implementation of various schemes under the previous policies have failed miserably without being reviewed for decades.

In a country as vast and diverse as India, no policy formulated at the central level can be adapted or relevant to the entire country based on the political structure, infrastructure, geographical location, languages and isolation of schools in different states. Looking at the education sector of our state, Meghalaya, the implementation of NEP 2020 will be a mammoth task for the stakeholders as there are many education institutions which lack basic infrastructure, faculty for vocational courses, multi-disciplinary teaching institutes and more. But for the greater interest of the children, if the NEP 2020 is seriously implemented by the various stakeholders of the Education Department in the State then it could be a game changer in the education scenario of our country.

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*“A smile abroad is often a
scowl at home.”*

– Alfred Lord Tennyson

The Shillong Times

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Doctors must educate the public

MAJOR television news channels have a question and answer session with senior medical professionals from different parts of the country almost every day since Covid-19 hit us. These medical experts who are experienced in their respective fields for a long time answer queries from the public who raise questions through the news channels. This is a very informative platform and it is what we need to know about a virus that is as enigmatic as it is contagious. In Meghalaya there is no such platform. The format is that the Deputy Chief Minister/Health Minister/DHS brief the media every evening on a prescribed agenda. Media persons are not expected to be intrusive and to ferret out information on behalf of the public. It is assumed that whatever Government considers as adequately tailored information, is enough.

But this is not how it should be. Firstly, Meghalaya is the only State where you don't see any medical specialist (not necessarily a Government doctor), giving out any information on Covid 19 in a question-answer format. It's almost as if they are afraid to speak up and inform the public. Does Meghalaya not have epidemiologists, virologists, microbiologists, medical specialists, pulmonologists, public health experts, cardiologists, endocrinologists et al? Why do we hear only one voice – that of the Government! The reason why we have a state-owned Doordarshan is to allow an interface between the audience and the doctors at this critical time when we are faced with an unknown factor – Covid-19.

Let's face it, Covid-19 is a disease – with far reaching consequences and even now scientists and health experts are still finding out which drugs will help allay the various infections caused by the virus internally. Because of the ignorance surrounding the disease, the reaction of communities beyond Shillong is often hyper-ventilated. People are not allowed to attend to their work because one person tested positive in their locality. This propensity to turn an entire locality of several hundred households into a containment zone reeks of a needless overdrive. But fear has turned people irrational and unwilling to take chances without considering the economic consequences of such an action.

This is the time we need to hear the voices of doctors to assuage our fears but also to list down and reiterate important behavioural changes that we need to adapt to, to combat Covid-19. The Government is just one of the stakeholders in our fight against the virus. People are confused about the different tests they are subjected to. They wonder why they test positive one day and negative the next day. This fear is compounded by the fact that a city hospital put out a notification that a certain doctor who works in the hospital tested positive one day and negative the next day. The Hospital certifies that the doctor 'recovered in a day.' What is this supposed to mean? It is precisely to counter such misinformation that doctors need to come forward and inform the public. But why are doctors afraid to speak?

Why Bangladesh has befriended India's foes

By Shilajit Kar Bhowmik

Bangladesh's will to establish a strong rapport with Pakistan has definitely sent tremors in Delhi. India feels deserted by the country known to be one of its closest allies, for it can never forget the brutal wave of repression Pakistan unleashed on Bangladesh in 1971. The former perpetrated unspeakable atrocities on the latter since 1947. When Bangladesh was known as East Pakistan, it was exploited as a supplier of raw materials for West Pakistan and a market for its finished products. The East was scorned down by the West as a 'feeble underling'.

As the voice of the East was getting quashed with each passing day and as the masses began to feel deprived of their basic human rights, their leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman strongly felt the need for autonomy. Pakistan wished to stifle the brewing dissent which soon evolved into a crusade. And thus, on the fateful day of March 25, 1971, the people of Bangladesh aspiring for freedom from bondage were horrendously led to death. The manner in which Pakistan chose to suppress the revolt clearly out-Heroded Herod. At that baleful moment, India stood by Bangladesh with all its might like a true friend. And now Bangladesh perceived to be our most trusted ally chooses to side with the nation which took sadistic pleasure in tormenting her people.

To be precise, on July 1, 2020 Pakistan's High Commissioner in Dhaka, Imran Ahmad Siddiqui, had an audience with Bangladesh Foreign Minister A K Abdul Momen. The meeting may be described as a 'courtesy call' by the people of Bangladesh but there is more than meets the eye in that rendezvous.

Bangladesh and Pakistan have been at daggers drawn when the former decided to hang the war criminals of 1971. This move was opposed by the latter because those criminals collaborated with them. Pakistan's national and provincial assemblies in the recent past passed several resolutions decrying the trial of the top 1971 collaborators (known as Razakars in Bangladeshi parlance) of Pakistani troops in Bangladesh. The row reached a flashpoint in May 2019, when the Bangladesh High Commission in Islamabad stopped issuing visas to Pakistani nationals.

The Bangla-Pak bilateral relations deteriorated in 2016 when Bangladesh

forced Pakistan to take back three of its officials, including a woman diplomat, alleging their link to Islamist militants. In 2018, Bangladesh opposed the nomination of Saqlain Syedah as the new Pakistani High Commissioner.

Interestingly, in January 2020, Bangladesh approved the nomination of Imran Ahmed Siddiqui to fill up the Pakistani High Commissioner's post which was lying vacant for 20 months. It would be in order to note that in Dec 2019, the Indian Parliament enacted the Citizenship (Amendment) Act. This legislation infuriated Bangladesh as it sought to grant citizenship to Hindus and other people belonging to the minority community of her country. The BJP has been consistent in referring to the people of Bangladesh as 'termites' and 'illegal infiltrators'. These descriptions naturally touched a raw nerve.

According to a friend of this writer from Bangladesh, seeking anonymity, the Hindus began to assert themselves as soon as Modi grew from strength to strength. They felt that India under Modi's leadership would rescue them in case they were persecuted. This factor became a sore point with the Muslims and they began to consider India as a threat. On the other hand, the NRC update was also seen as adding insult to injury.

Apart from this, Bangladesh PM Sheikh Hasina's failure to wring the Teesta water-sharing deal has antagonized her before her people. Her opponents have been crying foul over this issue by daubing her as a puppet of India.

The Teesta water-sharing issue needs to be elaborated in explicit terms and should leave no room for doubt. Former PM Manmohan Singh was going ahead with the deal. But at the last moment, West Bengal CM Mamata Banerjee acted as a supervening force. The PM dignified to placate Mamata, then a crucial ally in his government.

Obviously, the incumbent PM Modi could've made headway with the deal which gained prominence in every India-Bangladesh summit for the past many years. But he could not live up to those expectations. And as a matter of fact, the Indian PM can easily bypass the West Bengal M if

he was serious about inking an international treaty. As per the Seventh Schedule of the Indian Constitution water is definitely a State subject. But international treaties are the subjects of the Union. For further clarification, as per Entry 17, List II of the Seventh Schedule, water supplies, irrigation and canals, drainage and embankments, water storage and water power are State subjects. But as per Entry 14 of List I entering into treaties and agreements with foreign countries and implementing of treaties, conventions and agreements with foreign countries are subjects of the Union.

Adding to this, Article 253 of the Indian Constitution states, "Notwithstanding anything in the foregoing provisions of this Chapter (Legislative Relations), Parliament has power to make any law for the whole or any part of the territory of India for implementing any treaty, agreement or convention with any other country or countries or any decision made at any international conference, association or other body."

Obviously, an equitable share of water with Bangladesh might detrimentally affect the districts of North Bengal. And Modi does not wish to incense the districts as he has stakes in the 2021 West Bengal Legislative Assembly polls. By and large, these issues have strengthened the pro-Pakistani lobby in Bangladesh. Hasina would definitely like to satiate their ire for the sake of power.

Apart from Pakistan, Bangladesh is strengthening its ties with China. It would be germane to note that China recognized Bangladesh as a sovereign nation on Aug 31, 1975. This was days after the latter's founding father Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was assassinated on Aug 15, 1975. Thereafter, a government inimical to India was enthroned in Bangladesh.

Meanwhile, a Chinese company, Beijing Urban Construction Group (BUCG) has been awarded a contract for construction of a new terminal at Osmani International Airport in Sylhet. The airport is adjacent to the border between Bangladesh and Assam.

A prominent Bangladeshi daily commented, "Despite India's concerns, Bangladesh has given the contract of building an airport termi-

nal in Sylhet to a Chinese company. Indian High Commissioner Riva Ganguly Das tried for four months to get an appointment with the Prime Minister but failed."

"Bangladesh has not even sent a note of appreciation to India in response to Indian assistance for the Covid-19 pandemic," the newspaper further commented.

These statements do make sense as the animus between India and China is snowballing.

China became the top trading partner of Bangladesh in 2015. This clearly evinced the latter's willingness to lessen its dependence on India. In 2016, the two aforesaid countries signed 27 agreements when Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Bangladesh. The investments were worth around \$24 billion. This was also a token of the support Dhaka received from Beijing as part of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Along with an earlier \$13.6 billion investment in joint ventures, those agreements resulted in Chinese investment in Bangladesh totalling \$38 billion. And that was the largest sum pledged to Bangladesh by no other country, except China. As Covid-19 has taken a toll over the lives of Bangladeshi civilians, China has provided the country all sorts of assistance. In May, 2020 China-backed Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) also approved a \$250 million loan to Bangladesh. The project is co-financed by Asian Development Bank intending to help the country with budget support for combating the pandemic. Apart from this, the project has the intention of mitigating the ill-effects of job losses in small and medium-sized companies of the country.

In June, 2020 Bangladesh urged China to send an expert team comprising doctors, nurses and technicians for handling the pandemic effectively and train its own health professionals. The Chinese Foreign Minister was reported to have responded positively.

By and large, Pakistan and China have become femme fatales for Bangladesh. Modi should be alive to the gathering storm. Otherwise, our adversaries shall steal the march over us and India will be facing the rough end of the stick.

Resign to the Covid-19 life

By Benjamin Lyngdoh

Two friends were having tea at a workplace canteen. One looks at the other angrily and with fear. The reason – one of them had a sneeze and to make it worse followed with a statement that he has been suffering from a sore throat for the last two days! Two customers at social distancing were standing at a gadgets outlet in Police Bazaar with the intention to buy smart phones. Suddenly, a group of people in camouflage fatigues assembled behind the two with no social distancing. To make it worse, some were having their masks at chin level. With anger and fear, one of the customers' shouted at the outlet manager saying, "If you do not chase these BSF people away (although it was not specifically possible to ascertain if it were indeed BSF or otherwise) we are going to leave your shop without buying anything." The reason – a number of BSF personnel have been infected with covid-19.

These two examples are only the tip of the iceberg as far as behaviour of people is concerned in response to the covid-19 pandemic. We are getting jittery, chronically suspicious, anxious, angry and downright pessimistic. As negative as these emotional responses are; they are expected, understood and accepted by all. Just think for a minute; the negative emotional responses are accepted en masse without question. Now this is something that none of us would have comprehended until 2019. Well, let us resign ourselves to this. This is the new normal and we cannot run and hide. However, do we resign with a negative perspective of things? Or is there a way out of this doom and gloom? The last few months have been a rough roller coaster ride with no end in sight. As such, the only way out is to come to grips with the issue, understand it, mitigate it and get on with life. By and by, through being positive we resign to the covid-19 life. This can only be achieved if and only if we factor in a number of critical elements.

To start with, over the last few days there has been a spike of covid-19 cases in Meghalaya, particularly in East Khasi Hills. Yes this is a concern for all. However, this cannot overwhelm us. In fact, it is good that we are tracing and tracking the infection right now. Imagine a situation where we fail to do our duties currently and as a result all of a sudden there shall be an explosion of cases. Then there will be no hiding and no protection for anyone. Our health infrastructure will collapse and that would be the end of us all. As such, there is a need to resign to the fact that detection of cases and contact tracing and tracking is very much a part of our lives now. As per estimates of the India situation, there shall be a continued presence of covid-19 cases at least till the end of this year. It is a dire situation but there is a way out. All we need do is to stay calm and map out the containment areas (extremely important) and carry on with our activities to the extent possible. Overall, there is no point on stressing over it. Rather, be prepared and press on!

As we move on, lockdowns have become a part of our lives. In general, people agree that we have not seen its last. On hindsight and ever since the 21 day lockdown was announced by PM Modi on March 24, people have been debating if lockdowns work in fighting covid-19? The results are mostly to the contrary.

This is because a number of analyses (in the Indian context) have shown that lockdowns do not really work. Lockdown cannot eradicate the virus; at best they just slow down the incidence of the pandemic. Moreover, when we trade-off lockdowns with the socio-economic costs, the lockdown strategy is a big no-no. We all know that lockdowns cause immense hardship to the unorganized sector and the gig economy. It throws our local economy into a spiral of uncertainty. It is like bringing down the entire house in the process of killing a rat. Clearly, it is not worth it. Hence, the best weapon to fight covid-19 is not a lockdown; rather masks, distancing and hand washing are better options.

However, in the worst of situations; containment areas are the solution. Do a surgical strike on covid-19! In the midst of it all, it is worth mentioning that initially most people in Shillong did not give too much weight to covid-19. Many did genuinely think that it would naturally taper and die down; while some saw it as some nasty dream that would just blow away like bubbles in the air. Alas, none of that has happened! If anything, covid-19 has shown us that living in denial never helps. What helps is the acceptance of the danger and being aware about it.

Hence let us move beyond awareness and focus on mindfulness. Being mindful of things is better. It is the state of mind where people are prepared for anything and thrive on dealing with the danger and not denying it. Covid-19 is part of our lives now and it will continue to be so in the foreseeable future. Let us not live in denial and not fret or have wishful thoughts. The way forward is to care for oneself and to others. Follow protocols and if up one does contact the virus then inform the authorities and assist them in contact tracing. If only more people would do this voluntarily it would be a reverse psychology on covid-19 stigmatization!

Amidst this pandemic and all the hardships it has brought, we must never forget the innumerable vocations (some forced) that the people have developed. The most common of these is the motivation into culinary arts and adoption of trial and error method towards attempting new food and beverages and gastronomy. Amongst these, the baking of cakes and pastries has taken most by storm. Factoring this in the equation of things, it will be interesting to observe the vibrancy of the cake and pastries market in Shillong this Christmas.

In addition, these are days when we must have a '14 day cooling strategy'. This is because at any time our localities may be declared as a containment area. As such, we will need things to do so as to keep ourselves active and humored. This will help us to not complain/stress over restrictions on movements and maintain our good spirits.

In the end, this article is not about trivializing the pandemic. Too many people have suffered and died. It is not about demeaning the potency of the virus or proposing that we behave irresponsibly. Far from it; it is about accepting scientific facts as they are and it is about people facing and alleviating covid-19 mindfully. We must remember that behaving responsibly is the only way out. That way, we resign to the covid-19 life with knowledge and wisdom; all in a positive sense!

(E m a i l : benjamin21in@yahoo.co.in)

TO THE EDITOR

Please don't stigmatise

Editor,
To stigmatise, is to unfairly disapprove of, or discriminate against people based on perceivable social characteristics that serve to distinguish them from other members of a society. Why do people stigmatise? Stigma stems out of ignorance or lack of awareness. People are afraid of what they don't understand. People assume that because someone has an illness he or she is different in a certain way and has to be avoided. Stigma may affect the behavior of those who are stigmatised. Those who are stereotyped often start to act in ways that their stigmatisers expect of them. It not only changes their behavior, but it also shapes their emotions and beliefs. Those stigmatised, often face prejudice that leads to low self-esteem, can cause depression and sometimes even lead to ending one's life.

Stigmatisation is a major hindrance and the reason why most people who are suffering from a particular ailment or disease, shy away and don't come out with it in the open and seek help. These people quietly

suffer and the disease progresses, ultimately leading to the person's death.

In fact any disease or medical condition, that falls under the category of "stigma", be it Mental illness, Physical illness or Psychological illness leading to substance abuse like alcoholism and drug addiction etc can be checked, arrested and even cured if detected at the initial stages and timely help is sought. However, the sufferer is afraid to talk about his or her problem and to come out in the open for the fear of being stigmatised. Even the families of such people refrain from seeking help for the person who is suffering and try to keep the whole thing under wraps.

Most recently, during this Covid19 pandemic those unfortunates who have been infected by the virus and their family members have become victims of stigmatisation. It is true that this is an unknown virus which is highly contagious and no cure has been found yet. However, as society has begun to stigmatize those infected to the extent of even stigmatising people from the locality of those infected, people are afraid to get themselves checked or tested, even when they feel they may

have the symptoms. This could lead to further spread of the virus and reach proportions that may at a stage become difficult to curtail.

The society needs to be educated and made aware of the safety protocols that need to be followed and the precautions to be taken. As with so many other so-called fatal diseases, even this can be cured if the symptoms are detected and the patient is treated early as is proven, from official records that show the recovery rate is steadily increasing. This fear of stigmatisation, however, can cause a person to refrain from seeking help until it is too late, and in the process inflict other people.

We as a society need to show compassion and understanding towards those infected or suspected to be infected, take necessary precautions as per the guidelines issued by the Government, but not treat those infected as outcasts. Instead we should try to help them and their families during the period of treatment or quarantine, any which way we can. Remember today it's happening to them... tomorrow (God forbid) this could happen to us too.

Yours etc.,
Vicky Vadera,
Shillong -3

Media must apologise

Editor,
As part of an effort to refute the recent 'paranormal activity' video at Umtrew village aired by Meghalaya-based news channels viz. Batesi TV, Ri Bhoi News, Iti Khmih and RiKhasi Channel, I write concerning the misleading story apropos the letter 'The Fake News Contagion', (ST July 31, 2020). Demand is hereby made that editors and publishers of the above-mentioned news channels/media outlets, immediately and prominently correct and apologise for the aforementioned false and misleading story. Failure to do so will leave viewers and audiences with no alternative but to consider legal options which could include immediate legal proceedings against all the above channels. This is one of the reasons that a majority of Meghalayans have lost trust in the media. Instead of applying ethics and standards to their reporting, journalists have used it to mislead the people with little or no regard for the Cable Television Network Rules, 1994. Even if tempered with an 'if true' caution, there still needs to be a solid basis for believ-

ing it is true. Otherwise, pure speculation takes the place of news reporting.

Meghalaya-based news channels have a long history of running with unverified claims. Such an apology is due not only to Meghalayans, but also to the vast majority of viewers across the country, who — amid a pandemic — have expressed support for the demand on social media.

Yours etc,
Wandashisha Laloo
Shillong - 6

On containment zones in Malki localities

Editor,
Apropos the news report "Containment zones in Malki locality" (ST July 29, 2020), I am pained to see the names of 13 residents of Malki who had been categorized as "detection of positive COVID-19 cases/high risk contacts". My question here to those who revealed the names is, "Have the 13 people been tested COVID-19 positive?" To my understanding, since this pandemic is a global issue, revealing the names of people, infected streets and lanes in Malki by representatives from the locality through the newspaper without seeking proper consent and confirmation or obtaining test report proofs of

all 13 residents is an act of bringing dishonour, tarnishing the image of families, hurting sentiments of residents, stigmatizing and creating a fear-psychosis in the neighbourhood. To cause further mental and physical harm to somebody who is already suffering is a grievous sin. The need of the hour for the Dorbar Dong, Dorbar Shnong or representatives in these times of distress is to help the weaker sections who are the poor and the needy, to facilitate immediate testing drives, set up of quarantine centres to instill a sense of courage, love, hope (Covid-19 is curable disease), and to make people aware so that they strictly follow protocols as laid down by the Government to safeguard against the spread of this disease. Sealing of houses and lanes of the so called infected zones/containment zones without seeking proper instructions and directions from authorities of the Health Department will create further confusion in the minds of the people.

As the entire human race is passing through tough times where the pandemic is spreading like wildfire, let people stand united, be supportive of one another, be more empathetic and let the sense of brotherhood prevail.

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request

"Character is the basis of happiness and happiness the sanction of character."

--- Charles H. Parkhurst

The Shillong Times

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Temple after a long push

THE BJP-led governments at the Centre and in Uttar Pradesh are in a jubilant mood -- despite the Covid-linked depression that the nation is facing. The jubilation is on account of the Shilanyas scheduled for Wednesday for the Ram Temple that will be built on what was a disputed land. The area where the ancient Babri Masjid stood will now see the rise of a temple in the name of Lord Ram, reinforcing the belief that it was here that the mythical Hindu deity was born. The campaign for the Ram Temple will culminate in the grand event with the presence of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat et al on the dais. Obviously, the event might not witness a huge presence in view of the Covid-linked restrictions. Yet, this is a moment when the ruling party has fulfilled its long-held promise of constructing the Ram Temple. The December 1992 demolition led by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad was also a dark moment in the history of India. The riots that swept through several north-Indian states killed nearly 2,500 people and its shadow is still evident in India’s social and religious lives. The cases are still ongoing on this issue.

Notably, August 5 is also the day, last year, when the BJP-led government at the Centre did away with the Special Status for Jammu and Kashmir and turned it into three Union Territories. Life has not returned to normal in the Valley so far, but the government has been better able to handle civil strife in the Valley and beyond, while pro-Pakistani militants or terrorists have been largely neutralized. While J&K and Ayodhya were the two major achievements of the Modi government in its second term, the communal overtones of these cannot be lost sight of. As the Shilanyas event takes place, credit is due to the Supreme Court for having effectively settled the long-pending Ayodhya dispute last year. Muslims who have been given a plot of land for construction of a mosque in Ayodhya, in return for what went into the hands of Hindus, are not fully satisfied but have opted for peace in the best interests of the nation. This is time too to thank the Muslim community for having shown the broadmindedness to accept the SC-mediated settlement. Alongside, a helping hand to them from all sides including the two governments for the construction of the mosque is called for and will be well-appreciated.

Ram Temple Edifice

Deep Political Undercurrent

By Dhurjati Mukherjee

The temple town of Ayodhya is all decked up. The Prime Minister performing the bhoomi pujan ceremony for construction of the Ram temple today gives political overtones to the ‘religious’ ceremony. The Ram Janmabhoomi Teertha Kshetra trust has issued 175 invites, but there will be more people to partake the celebrations in the midst of the pandemic. Such fanfare when 3 lakh cases have been recorder in just 12 days raises many an eyebrow. Moreover, in a country like India, committed to secular principles, any show of majoritarianism in respect of religion and through actions is definitely not welcome.

The understanding of ‘Hinduism’ of our present



political leaders, who use the term ‘Hindutva’ is quite different from the interpretations of religious scholars, mostly wedded to Swami Vivekananda’s line of thinking. As is well known and has been repeated often, Swamiji talked of religious unity and in line with the thinking of his guru, Ramakrishna, who observed that there are various ways to reach the divine, who is one and the same.

These religious thinkers and also their followers, like Swami Ranganathananda, wanted religion to unite people and motivate them to engage in social and communitarian work for the welfare of the oppressed and deprived sections of society. The present Secretary of Ramakrishna Math and Mission at Bhubaneswar had told the undersigned that working for the community and helping the poor, in whatever way possible, is also an important religious activity. But it seems the current genre of politicians want to use religion, not

something to be followed in letter and spirit, to divide the population for political ends to remain in power.

A journalist-turned-BJP parliamentarian wrote sometime around 2017-end that the government is “proud to flaunt Hindu inheritance”. While there are several interpretations of Hinduism, the article did not elaborate which aspect of it his party is proud of, but justify its pro-Hindutva stand. Obviously, his party is not in consonance with those who affirm that Hinduism is not a religion, in the narrow sense of the term, but a way of life.

The present trend to raise a false sense of nationalism based on Hindu religion would not take the country

the massive Ram temple. Rather, it’s all just a show of how deeply the party in power is committed to religious principles. However, this too is not the case in reality as gradually over a period of time the politicians’ principles and integrity stand to be questioned. This is demonstrated by the alleged ‘horse trading’ we are witnessing in the power games recently played out in States like Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh and now Rajasthan, not to speak of Goa and some States in the North East.

According to reports, the going price for a State legislator in Rajasthan to switch parties is alleged to range between Rs 15 and Rs

to the downtrodden.

However, this is not what the ruling establishment has on its mind at present. A section of political scientists point out, and quite rightly, that the timing of the bhoomi pujan coincides with the ensuing Bihar Assembly elections, which are to be followed by those in West Bengal and Tamil Nadu. It is also projected that a part of the temple would be ready by 2022-end, a few months before the next Lok Sabha elections in 2023. Does this all not suggest that the timing of the temple construction is to whip up passions by showcasing the government’s adherence to Hindu religion and its ultimate agenda of a ‘Hindu Rashtra’?

One can easily discern the poor judgment power of our politicians in deciding

forward. Being a nation, where education levels and quality standards are low, people do not completely understand or foresee the government’s actions, such as the foundation-laying ceremony, as a means to divert the attention of the masses from pressing social, economic and health issues affecting the nation today.

The devastation caused by COVID-19 to the national economy, triggering massive job losses and affecting vital sectors, has been so deep and profound that experts cannot predict when normalcy would return. Aware of the present critical scenario, the government prefers to play with people’s sentiments by injecting a false sense of nationalism based on religious lines. Honestly, these are extraneous to the grim reality today, with unemployment and hunger staring lakhs in the face.

It is wrong to believe that ethics, morality or adherence to religious principles is the motive behind the construction of

25 crore, a staggering sum if compared with the country’s annual per capita income of \$2100. ‘Judgment and conscience’, are forgotten or totally lost. A voter, who opted for his local representative and a set of ideas, is not surprised anymore to see his MLA switch to another party, which stands for opposite principles!

Another aspect during these difficult times which begs attention is the huge expenditure to be incurred for the construction of the temple, which will have five domes and a height of 161 feet. So far it remains in wraps. It’s quite obvious small donations of a few hundreds of rupees as projected by devotees would not be sufficient. Already the silver brick (weighing 22.6 kg) to be used for laying the foundation of the temple has cost over Rs 14 lakh at current market prices. Come to think of it, the resources could have instead been gainfully used for much-needed social development work, specially related to the pandemic and reaching out

priorities before them and more so at such a critical phase in human history. No other country in the world would have ventured to take such an irrational decision of constructing a temple complex when the country is faced with acute financial crisis and also when most States are clamouring for funds from the Centre to meet the huge health expenditure due to the increasing nature of the pandemic.

Religion used constructively has definitely a role in society -- that of unifying the masses and extending them a helping hand -- but it should not be used for political gains, particularly when the Constitution’s Preamble clearly speaks of a secular State. It is no secret that civil society activists are pretty much unanimous in their opinion of the present government i.e. it’s bent on destroying the secular and democratic fabric of the nation. The politicisation of the foundation laying ceremony of the Ram temple is one such step, among others. ---INFA

The colour of a conquest

By Jagdish Rattanani

A 22-kilogram silver brick marks the symbolic laying of the foundations of what we are promised will be a grand temple to Lord Ram at the spot in Ayodhya where the disputed Babri Masjid once stood. Some will see it as the culmination of a long battle to reclaim the site or to protect it, depending on the point of view. One side lost, the other won. There are many who will say that both sides, and all those in between lost; such have been the wages of using religion to divide the people. The honours from the winning side are today led by the Prime Minister in Ayodhya. But is it the end of a battle or merely a milestone, albeit an important one, in a battle that continues to rage in the hearts and minds of many citizens?

“Since man is a moment in astronomic time, a transient guest of the earth...a composite of body, character and mind...,” as the historians Will and Ariel Durant wrote, we must ask not only of the celebrations or frustrations of today but equally of how the act of today might stand in the light of a latter-day assessment. That will of course depend on who makes that latter-day assessment, or when it is made, and that may well depend on which way India goes from here. This is significant because the events of today carry the colour of a conquest, not the mark of conciliation or cooperation. It is not insignificant (though it may well be a coincidence) that Aug. 05 also marks the first

mixed with a generous amount of naked political self-interest and a lot of prejudice, be the exact kind of attack that will undermine this heritage?

It is well said that “no civilization anywhere in the world, with the probable exception of China, has been as continuous as that of India. While the civilisations of Egypt, Babylonia and Assyria have disappeared, in India the ideas emanating from the Vedic times continue to be a living force.” That comes from the official Indian Gazetteer recordings on Hinduism, which also notes: “Receptivity and all-comprehensiveness, it has been aptly stated, are the main characteristics of Hinduism. Since it has no difficulty in bringing diverse faiths within its ever-widening fold, it has something to offer to almost all minds.”

The strength of Hinduism, said Monier-Williams, lies in its “infinite adaptability to the infinite diversity of human character and human tendencies.” He wrote: “It has its highly spiritual and abstract side suited to the philosopher, it’s practical and concrete side congenial to the man of the world; its aesthetic and ceremonial side attuned to the man of poetic feeling and imagination; and its quiescent, contemplative aspect that has its appeal for the man of peace and the lover of seclusion.” There is peace, not violence; poetry, not militancy. That is the way the story has often been told, and offers a sense of pride, and is celebrated.



anniversary of the writing down of Art. 370 in the troubled state of J&K. There are barricades across J&K and a curfew for two days. There are laddus being distributed in Ayodhya. The imagery is just too stark to be missed. But what we do tend to miss is that in the midst of all this China has crossed the line.

The Prime Minister’s party can now say they met the electoral promise as outlined in the 2019 manifesto: “We reiterate our stand to explore all possibilities within the framework of the Constitution to facilitate the construction of a Ram Temple in Ayodhya.” Now that the electorate gave the BJP a mandate, and a robust one to boot for a second time running, the story had to be drawn to a close. The long running serial had to end. And for the BJP, it’s a good time as well. This is as close to the important Assembly elections in Bihar as it could get. The inauguration of the temple itself is set for a time that will be close to the next national elections.

In the longer term, the dynamic that the colour of a conquest unleashes cannot be easily fathomed. To understand this, we can look back to ask how and why is it that the Indian cultural ethos, the belief systems, the philosophical base of the most fundamental of inquiries into the nature of the universe – all of this has taken birth, grown root, flowered, survived, even thrived through millennia without any hint of a conquest from the side generating this mighty body of knowledge? This is the knowledge that has informed generations on the path to good living. So, do we now need militant Hindutva to “protect” what the most violent of invaders could not destroy? Or will this variety of “protection”,

That is also the secret of long-haul survival and growth in an everlasting inquiry into the human condition.

Who should understand this better than the RSS, not only at the top but across the line with some of the acclaimed professionals and high achievers who are among its ranks – officially as members or the many who offer unofficial support from the outside? A Story helps illustrate this well. This is from the time the RSS was banned by the P V Narasimha Rao government after the 1992 demolition of the Babri Masjid. In Nagpur, in an interview around those days with this writer, a functionary of the RSS was completely unperturbed. He said it did not matter that the RSS was banned; the organisation could well take another name and continue with its work. What he understood quite correctly was that an organisation is not about outward structures and forms, which can be banned, but about the thought that cannot be banned. It is the thinking that will continue to exert and generate its own energy and action.

The question therefore is what are we thinking today? How do we look at the rich heritage of Indian thought that has enlightened the path for so many for so long? Will militant Hindutva, marked as it is by violence, pushed by power, and driven as an agenda at the cost of goodwill and togetherness, make for a nation that modern day Indians would want?

Some will say that today is probably not the best day to ask these questions. Or maybe it is! And if we do ask them, the answers might tell us that Aug. 05 may not be the greatest day in the history of India.

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

TO THE EDITOR

Senior citizens deserve respect

Editor,

I wish to share my experience as a senior citizen during this difficult time. On Tuesday I went out to get medicines and other essentials and my car was stopped on the way back by a young policeman, evidently an officer, judging from his khaki uniform. Since my car was odd numbered, he asked me for my pass. I told him that I'm a senior citizen, to which he demanded to know my age. I told him that I'm 66. Then the gentleman firmly told me that I may go, but that I should not be going out. The whole interaction was not exactly pleasant and it left me a little perturbed.

We senior citizens are old enough to know what's good and not good for us. The government has been kind enough to understand the problems we may face so these concessions are given to us. We all appreciate the great service rendered by the police force at this time and they deserve our praise and respect. But it would be highly appreciated if senior citizens are not spoken to as if they have violated some

law just by going out. I can confidently say that all of us go out only when it is essential to do so.

Kindness and civility are much needed from all, especially at a time like this. I think this is not asking for much.

Yours etc.,
R I Donn.
Shillong - 21

Undue criticism of Health Dept

Editor,

I would like to commend the Health Department for their tireless effort in fighting the covid-19 pandemic. The frontline workers like doctors, nurses and others are attending to their duty faithfully, risking their lives in order to save the lives of others. There are no words left to praise them for their dedication and selflessness. The leadership showed by Dr Aman Warr DHS (MI) is highly commendable since he heads a Department which lacks many basic facilities but he had to make do with available resources at hand. Therefore criticism against the Health Department is uncalled for.

The MLA's who criticise the Department for its shortcomings should instead encourage them to continually work selflessly since what they really need at this moment is encouragement, inspiration and motivation. By criticising the department the MLAs showed their immaturity and lack of respect for the frontline workers. Instead of working together they are busy pointing fingers at others. But really what the pandemic has done is to expose the Health Department as one of the most neglected departments of the state and of which all the previous governments should take responsibility. This just proves that no matter which government rules the state, their style of functioning is more or less the same and it will not change by changing from one political party to the other.

Therefore I urge my fellow citizens to work together and to take care of ourselves by following health protocols and setting aside our selfish attitudes. Experience has taught us that we cannot fully trust our government

since one way or the other it will let us down.

Yours etc.,
Khamniar Thangkhiew.
Shillong-1

Congress criticism unwarranted

Editor,

It's very disheartening to read in your esteemed daily the allegations that the Health Department is inefficient in handling the Covid-19 situation in Meghalaya (ST Aug 3, 2020). In spite of all the efforts and sacrifices made by our doctors, nurses and staff of the Health Department during these past few months to contain the spread of Covid-19, it is unfortunate that they are subject to such criticism. These frontline workers have risked their lives, spent sleepless nights away from their families. Does anyone ever think about these sacrifices made by the frontline workers?

Undoubtedly there may be lapses here and there which the Department has to look into. But we are humans and not perfect. But to say that the DHS

and the Government has failed is unacceptable. My observation is also with regards to the opposition MLAs. With the exception of Messrs Process T. Sawmkie, Mayralborn Syiem and Hima Shangpliang, the rests are quiet and have no other agenda except to criticize the Government. An example is Zenith Sangma. This is not the time to politicize matters concerning the well being of the people of the State.

As concerned citizens our only request from the Government is that it should make public the names of the 41 marriage attendees at Greenwood Resort, Khanapara even if it does not reveal the names of all the 874 Covid patients.

To Dr Aman Warr and his team we wish to convey our best wishes and prayer support so that they can carry on with their good works for the people of our State.

Yours etc
Y Dkhar & Others
Shillong-2

In gratitude

Editor,

I take this opportunity to extend my heartfelt gratitude towards the Government of

Meghalaya, the volunteers, all the tourist vehicle drivers, all the front-liners who are working hard day and night to ensure that all the people who are returning to Meghalaya are safe and sound. I had traveled from Dubai to India on the July 3, 2020. From the time I reached Shillong, the way all the front-line workers treated us was amazing. I was quarantined at the NEHU Tirot Singh complex for 14 days and all the volunteers, the supervisor and the doctor treated us like family members. They made us feel at home. After completing 14 days at NEHU I went for another 14 days quarantine at La Castle Residency at Madan Laban. I want to thank all the volunteers as well as the LA castle residency especially those who have been preparing food for all of us. The food was amazing! Thank you to all the media as well for the news they have been delivering to each one of us. Lastly, I want to ask for God's blessings on each one of you. Thank you all once again.

Yours etc.,
Sandeep Chhetri,
Via email

“The fact I’m the third female Prime Minister, I never grew up believing my gender would stand in the way of doing anything I wanted.”

— Jacinda Ardern

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SHILLONG, THURSDAY, AUGUST 6, 2020

Political opportunism versus Covid-19

COLLECTIVE political will is the need of the hour at a time when the State is dealing with Covid-19. Politicians, however never spare an opportunity to score political points even amidst a disaster that is disrupting lives and livelihoods. Bipartisanship and a collective political spirit have been missing at a time when there is a stark need to take steps to deal with the crisis at hand. At this time the Opposition and ruling party/parties have to engage in regular dialogues to think of urgent policy interventions. This is more important than simply landing verbal blows on the Government. This is not to say that everything the Government is doing is right. It would be naïve to believe that every Government in power thinks of the larger public good at all times, but, these are unprecedented times and the Congress would be better appreciated if it were to show some of its public activities in combating Covid-19 instead of simply finding fault with the Government.

The Congress actually needs to push for an Assembly session where economic distress due to Covid-19 would be discussed and mitigating factors would be suggested and put in place. Assembly sessions are where issues that impinge on the public, such as difficulties faced by many in getting admitted to private and public hospitals in the state are concerned; treatment protocols for Covid-19; amount spent so far in combating Covid by way of providing quarantine facilities. So far, many availing institutional quarantine have reported that they were well looked after. This is due in no small measure to the commitment of the health workers and volunteers at the various quarantine centres.

The Assembly session would have revealed steps taken by Government to ramp up testing centres so that those being tested are not put through the pangs of a long wait for their results. This also reduces the quarantine time at Government centres. The people would like to know how the Government is involving the private sector in strengthening testing facilities. Today these questions are all being asked by the media since the Opposition and Government are not meeting on a regular basis to try and work out a model of political synthesis, at least where dealing with Covid-19 is concerned. The Opposition should have given feedback to the Government as to how whole-sale containment of shnongs and localities is affecting the livelihoods of many. A collective political will and greater cooperation between the Government and Opposition is needed to deal with what is seen as a critical stage in the transmission of the virus. At this juncture the last thing we need is political opportunism.

Everywhere one looks, it is women who bear the most responsibility for holding societies together, at home, in health care, in schools, or in caring for the elderly. In many countries, women perform many of these tasks without pay. But while the spotlight of the Covid pandemic has been on health, and secondary attention is being paid to the effect of the pandemic on the economic landscape, the gender cost has hardly received even lip sympathy.

Political leadership during the pandemic, while purportedly propelled by public health necessity, has been typified by power plays and in many countries the entrenchment of authoritarianism. When political autocracy grows and the economy declines, these twin factors militate against women. The hard-fought gains of gender slide back into the darkness of patriarchy.

So many of the stories of Covid casualties are about women in distress. Women who deliver on the road, or at the hospital gate, a woman in labour denied admission because she is from a containment zone, a 14-year-old girl raped in a quarantine centre, a woman's newborn baby sold by a desperate labourer husband, homeless elderly women living on the footpath. Such heartbreaking stories multiply daily.

In pandemics, the physical, social and economic fallout is felt more acutely by women. In these Covid times, while we see pictorial and graphic statistics on every page, very little is about women. Recent data from the National Legal Services Authority (NALSA) show a rapid increase in cases of domestic violence. In 2020, between March 25-May 31, 1,477 complaints of domestic violence were made by women. This 68-day period recorded a 10-year high. From the National Family Health Survey data (2015-16) we know that one-third of women have experienced spousal violence. Only 14% of these women seek help, down from 24%, 15 years ago, 77% do not mention the incident to anyone. Meghalaya is on par with the national average, but twice as much as Mizoram and Nagaland. Domestic violence among Christians is not different than the national average. Patriarchy, matriliney, religion: none of these make any difference.

Global bodies express concern

The World Health Organization has called all member states to invest in gender-sensitive research in determining the impact of Covid-19. In a statement, underscored in bold letters

it said, “There is limited availability of sex- and age-disaggregated data, thus hampering analysis of the gendered implications of COVID-19 and the development of appropriate responses”.

Initial reports reaching the WHO and the United Nations indicate that domestic violence has increased by at least one-third during lockdowns, women being trapped at home with their abusers. Increased stress in the home, restriction of movement, difficulty in seeking help are exacerbating factors in the increase in sexual and gender-based violence. Women also face increased risk from men with rigid notions of masculinity who refuse to wear masks or adhere to distancing precautions.

Access to reproductive health services including contraception, menstrual hygiene products, and safe terminations of unintended pregnancy, has been curtailed. Most evident of all are restrictions to antenatal care, hospital deliveries, and infant care. Yet women make up 70% of the global health force and social services. They have increased exposure to Covid infection, around two-thirds of health workers infected with Covid are women.

Women with coronavirus symptoms are sometimes dismissed by doctors as having a psychological condition or stress. Past research shows such bias by health professionals. Women are less likely to be tested if they complain of cardiac symptoms, and more likely to die after a heart attack due to a lack of care.

The year 2020 marks the silver jubilee of the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, when the Beijing Declaration for Women was declared. The United Nations in a recent policy communique has remarked that even the limited gains made in the last few decades are at risk of being rolled back during the pandemic. Already women spend three times as many hours as men in unpaid care and domestic work. In many countries, women eat last and the least, rendering them even more vulnerable to anemia and malnutrition.

A World Bank paper has stressed the increased threat to housing, land ownership and property rights (HLP) by women during the pandemic especially in low and middle income countries. According to the World Bank, “Previous epidemics, and post-conflict or post-disaster situations,

have shown that women are likely to be further disenfranchised of their rights to HLP if their rights are not protected. During the AIDS epidemic, widows and orphans often lost property to other family members and were left homeless, even as they dealt with their own health emergencies. Women in traditional, customary, or informal marriages are further at risk, because legal rights to HLP are usually dependent on their being formally married (in relationships sanctioned by the state).”

Concerns in India

In Mumbai, 4.5 million people lack a household water connection, forcing them to line up at community water taps. In her 2012 award-winning book *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*, Katherine Boo writes: “She lost two hours of her morning standing in line for water at a dribbling tap...” The operative word here is she; this task almost always falls to women.

According to Sitaram Shelar of Pani Haq Samiti, an NGO focused on water access, “Under India’s strict COVID-19 lockdown, household water needs have swelled, owing to high summer temperatures, all family members being at home, and the emphasis on frequent hand-washing. The result: Women are spending more time queuing up. Shelar goes on to say that as women step out in the wee hours of the morning to get water, they often face sexual and verbal harassment.

Aparna Joshi, Project Director of iCall, a mental health helpline, called the current situation “a brewing pot”. Frustrated, unemployed, and struggling to access tobacco and alcohol, men are unloading their anger through physical, verbal and sexual assault. The surge of violence is affecting millions of women of all classes.

According to SEWA (Self Employed Women’s Association), in the sudden lockdown, women found themselves without any means of support. The remittances from their migrant menfolk in the cities stopped abruptly. At the same time, women’s own incomes collapsed. Women who grow vegetables could not take them to market; garment factories are closed, domestic labour curtailed. Among BPL families, 45% have not got free rations, 70% had not received money into their Jan Dhan accounts.

Even in higher paid jobs in the formal sector, job prospects for women have decreased. With reduced public transport, access to

the workplace is difficult.

Meghalaya

Like in many parts of the country, women in Meghalaya too have borne the brunt of the pandemic. The poorest families have suffered further deprivation, being denied even the subsistence existence they had earlier. Vegetable and kwai sellers have been hounded off pavements, daily labour is hard to find. Children who received the barest education in rural schools are now at home, forced dropouts who have no access to online education. Mothers who have little education themselves, cannot help with home schooling. Illiteracy, unemployment and starvation looms.

Already Meghalaya has the highest percentage of single-mother headed households. They fall at the lowest rung of the economic scale, with high dropouts among their children and poor access to health services. Women, the mainstay of these families, have to call on their last reserves of resilience.

Middle class mothers have turned into private tutors now. Most urban schools have been giving continuous assignments from the start of the lockdown in March. Home school has to be integrated into the schedule of household chores. Help from domestic workers and family members is limited because of restricted movement and increase in transportation costs. Mothers with office jobs struggle to keep up with online work.

In pandemic decision making at all levels, women are underrepresented. The UN has advised that national and regional strategic plans must be grounded in gender differentiation, with special provisions for women and girls in policy making and implementation, with their full participation in all levels. A recommendation of the World Bank is that cash relief must be placed in the hands of women. Are the men in power listening to these recommendations?

Yet there are tales of heroism. Mansi Bariha, a 19-year old tribal girl’s brave actions led to the release of six thousand migrant workers, virtually held captive, in brick kilns in Tamilnadu. Another teenage girl, 15-year-old Jyoti Kumari cycled 1200 km to Bihar from Gurugram, carrying her ailing father back home. The resilience of our response to Covid lies in the hands of women.

(glenchristo@yahoo.com, jenniferwar80@gmail.com)

Being mindful of our mental health

By Anniesha Lyngdoh and Jochanan Diengdoh

The Covid 19 pandemic has left us with feelings of uncertainty and apprehensiveness about the future. Such precariousness intensifies the risk of experiencing stress. Our body is equipped to deal with stressful situations and activates the fight or flight response to tackle it. However there is a downside to it as well. Stress can drain our physical and mental energy. Our physical health deteriorates making us more susceptible to bacteria and viruses as our immune system is compromised. Stress also hampers our mental capacity to think rationally, to learn something novel, to plan and execute a task effectively and to stay focused. It can impair the way we regulate our emotions and increase the risk of experiencing an array of negative emotions such as anger, fear, sadness, anxiety, and jealousy.

According to a recent study by The Mavericks, 61% of their respondents in India felt their mental health was somehow impacted during this crisis and this is what many are experiencing first hand. Another study by the Indian Psychiatric Society suggests a 20% rise in cases related to mental illness many of which had to do with the uncertainty this crisis has led us to. This unravels the importance and the need to value mental health in the same degree as we value physical health. Mental health encompasses thoughts, feelings and behaviour. Any disruption can affect various facets in life whether it’s the interpersonal or social domain. Psychologists have found effective benefits of being mindful which is awareness of the present and what’s in front of us. It’s about acceptance, acknowledgement and contentment. When we step towards these elements, even if we cannot eliminate the problems, we can maintain calmness and mental clarity to deal with the new challenges we encounter. It is therefore imperative to optimize our mental health with the resources available within us so we can readjust our lives to adapt to the new challenges and cope with them in an effective manner. Hence despite the 2020 rollercoaster ride, there’s always a way to make it worthwhile.

Re-organizing our lifestyles:

We may be physically restricted from pursuing our daily activities and that can result in restlessness and frustration but not everything is restricted. Mentally, we still have the freedom to make choices to cope with the current scenario. Reorganizing our lifestyles help us to direct our behaviour effectively and be committed to achieving our goals. Once we make independent decisions we will feel responsible about achieving our goals. The sense of satisfaction after accomplishing the goals will in turn motivate us to create and achieve other goals. This is an area that makes an individual take control of his/her own life decisions

Working from home:

You or your child taking online classes, extra added home chores and duties, change in timings and routines can trigger the stress of re-adjusting and multi-tasking. Add to that the loss of motivation and the technicalities of technology and it’s another crisis indoors. All these require major re-organizing, and add to both physical and mental well-being. So it is vital to prioritize our needs and tasks to find the balance. It is essential to maintain a healthy diet, build a routine and plan ahead on things that we have control over, allowing some time and space for ourselves to take a breather, seek help from others to lighten the weight of multi-tasking.

Communicate:

With the new norm of social distancing and stay-ins, recent studies report a sense of disconnect from friends and colleagues. Yet one of the

greatest boons this pandemic has given us is to spend quality time with our loved ones. Those unable to connect in real life can take advantage of virtual forums to stay in touch. Despite this there can be loneliness and quietness as this pandemic has made us weary and worried about the future. Hence, sharing our views and lending a listening ear can ease the burden in our minds. Communication can act as a catharsis to deal with pent up emotions. Listening and understanding will teach us the art of being kind and empathetic. Therefore communicating and connecting in a non-judgmental manner regardless of the social platform used, is the need of the hour.

Emotional Self Regulation:

We should take time out to navigate the emotions and observe how they’re affecting our behaviour. Have we become increasingly impatient? Anxious? Short tempered? Do we lash out at others frequently? Negative emotions can drain us out and hinder our ability to function effectively in mind and body. Being aware of experiencing such emotions is the first step. Addressing it is the next step. We need to address them with an open mind and take time to get to the source of the emotion. Then we accept their detrimental effects on our lives and finally equip ourselves with techniques that can help manage our emotions and be more in control them. They can range from breathing exercises to yoga, meditation and mindfulness. We can resist reacting impulsively which can worsen the situation. Instead let us cultivate positive emotions and improve our level of resilience as well as our relationship with others.

Creativity:

“Creativity is not competition”. Autumn Sky Hall. We can be creative in our own ways. Most of us are busy with our responsibilities and duties and have no outlet for genuine creativity. But creativity does not require one to be a professional. It’s about bringing to life the ideas of our minds and expressing them in any form. They can range from creating music to writing, photography and other forms of art. Being focused on doing something we love brings about a sense of calmness and reduces the stress level. It can foster self growth and help realise one’s own potential and maximize it to the fullest. The bright side is that creativity also enhances positivity which is a much needed dose at the moment.

So while in the midst of this pandemic we need to be mindful of our mental health and that of others as we go through the process of acquiring a healthy mind. The resources we have within us are limitless. This pandemic has opened doors to re-examine our capabilities and to challenge us to deal with something we have never dealt with before. Every situation teaches us something. One of the lessons we can learn from the pandemic is how integral mental health is to our lives and to value this because mental health can equip us to deal with adversities effectively. We may not be able to change the circumstances of our lives but we can definitely change how we appraise the situation. As humans we have the ability to overcome any situation if we have the strength of mind to do so. Ryder Carroll said, “No matter how bleak or menacing a situation may appear, it does not entirely own us. It can’t take away our freedom to respond, our power to take action.”

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TO THE EDITOR

Gambling can never be justified

Editor,

The reflex response to Avner Pariat’s writing, “Should Meghalaya Have a Casino?” (ST July 22, 2020.) by S K Sharma has clearly raised a lot of eyebrows. Mr. Sharma’s instantaneous reply only bares his desperate attempt to defend the building of a casino here in Khasi hills for reasons best known to him. Perhaps, he has a big role to play in the casino building but having said that, his outrageous ridiculing and mocking of Avner Pariat’s article was totally uncalled for. Mr. Sharma’s narration was disgusting and unpleasant. The statements he made were insulting and contemptuous and done with an intention to humiliate Mr Pariat. He pokes fun and makes mockery of the whole article but pity nobody enjoyed the joke. He thinks

that he knows how to combine his sarcasm and insults with humour but sadly, a downside of humour is that it doesn’t always go down well in other cultures even if they speak the same language.

S.K. Sharma says that “thoh tim” generates income for our people. He did not do his research well. He should have used Google to find out as to how many unemployed locals have been given employment by “thoh tim”. Oh! the curse and sins, the dreams and promises of “thoh tim”. Songs have been sung, poems have been written, jokes have been shared but always about misfortunes and poverty because of beer. Every family here in our land has borne the brunt of this “thoh tim” at one time or the other but will anyone talk about their misfortune and loss because of beer? Nobody will and why? Because it is a shame!

Hence the perception of

Sharma about the locals generating income through beer is laughable and ridiculous. Yes, it is true that beer gambling was legalized like he says, some forty years or so ago in the guise of Khasi culture and tradition which in fact it is not so. Arrow shooting is a Khasi traditional sport. It is a game of skills where sportsmen compete by shooting on a target of one ft. in length and four inches in diameter, fastened on a small pole whereas beer gambling in the beer ground is conducted by shooting arrows on a very huge target solely for gambling purpose.

Gambling is taboo in Khasi culture. The ill-gotten money and the spoils of beer gambling by duping the common man is shared in crores daily only by the very few who control the monopoly in the shooting ground. What Government receives as revenue is hogwash.

When beer gambling has already proven to impover-

ish the local people, the setting up of a casino goes beyond our imagination. Sharma talks about Goa Casinos. Doesn’t he know that the Goa Government had to ban locals from gambling due to the rise in gambling addiction and to save the “local culture.” Here in our state, once there is a casino, all laws, rules and regulations saying that no locals will be allowed will just be babbles. Yes, it is a fact that we do not pay income tax but what about the likes of Sharma? Will he pay income tax on the money from the casino? Does he submit his returns to the income tax dept. for the money he wins from beer? I wonder what document he shows to the Tax Dept to prove that he has won the money from beer? No wonder he advocates all kinds of gambling here in our State.

Recommendations, guidance from ruthless opportunists who are there only to make hay while the sun shines, may not go

down well in a society of people belonging to a different culture. Therefore, thank you but no thank you, Mr Sharma, we do not need the likes of you to enlighten and encourage our people to open up gambling places and generate income for the State.

Yours etc.,
Jennifer Lyngdoh,
Via email

Urgent need for judicial reforms

Editor,

The well-known proverb, “justice delayed is justice denied,” reflects the reality of the judicial system in India. Vice President M. Venkaiah Naidu has expressed his concern on the pendency of cases from the Supreme Court to the lower courts while addressing students at the Platinum Jubilee meet of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar College of Law, Andhra University on the

occasion of its 76th Foundation Day. People have faith in the judiciary, but they want timely justice. The number of undertrial prisoners awaiting justice for long periods of time in different courts are far too many. Land and property-related disputes take many decades to settle. The need of the hour is to make the delivery of justice speedier and affordable. Fast track courts, timely police investigation without any political pressure, and online hearing will help the disposal of cases. India currently needs comprehensive judicial reforms.

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

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“Life isn't about finding yourself.
Life is about creating yourself”
--- Katherine Mansfield

The Shillong Times

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Game of maps

IT’s a measure of the further worsening of regional tensions that Pakistan came up with a new map this week. The new map released by Prime Minister, Imran Khan shows not just Jammu and Kashmir as part of Pakistan, but also Ladakh and even the border district of Junagadh in Gujarat and Sir Creek in the vicinity as the Islamic nation’s very own. Notably, a similar re-drawing of map was done by Nepal recently, to claim a part of the Indian land along its border. China makes a lot of claims about Indian land being its own, including Arunachal Pradesh and large swathes along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Ladakh and beyond. China has a problem with every nation in its neighbourhood vis-à-vis land. A new entrant to the game was Nepal; and now Pakistan is doing the same. This must be seen also as part of the Chinese games against India. Making a claim for someone’s land means little. India has made claims too. New Delhi made it clear repeatedly about its claims over some Pakistan provinces like Gilgit Baltistan -- and not just Occupied Kashmir, or PoK for that matter. No one hands over land to a neighbour on a platter, and the way forward is, principally, war or taking up the matter with the UN – where matters drag on for years.

Huge swathes of Indian land are with China, some 45,000 sq km, which it usurped in the 1992 War. India had left the matter aside and decided to break bread with China on the basis on an understanding that the two sides will explore the positives rather than wasting time on the negatives. That was the basis on which India engages in trade etc with China. Now China is raking up the issue of Kashmir at the UN; it did so for the third time, at the Security Council this week, also referring to the abrogation of Article 370 by the Centre. China keeps giving repeated pin-pricks to India at the UN, in support of Pakistan. Significantly, Imran Khan released the map a day before the first anniversary of the August 5 abrogation of Article 370 and re-classification of the state as three Union Territories. Khan’s offensive came also the day before the Shilanyas of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya. Khan on his own might not want a confrontation, but might be acting at the behest of the military brass and China. Nepal’s new map might also be China’s idea to put India on the defensive.

TO THE EDITOR

The environment deserves our attention

Editor,
Lack of awareness is one of the major causes why modern problems tend to escalate themselves. If we are not warned that an action or an event is hazardous, or even a threat to our very existence we will not pay attention until it becomes a political matter or an agenda. Recently, I came to realise the lack of awareness about environmental crisis in our own state.
In a world where our careers or our future are our main priorities, students work hard to achieve their goals. As a matter of fact, most of the careers that students opt for were first sown in the minds by their parents. As a student myself I face the same situation but I am passionate about the environment and it's biodiversity, and I want to pursue learning and discovering ways to sustain it. When I brought this up to the adults they were disappointed that I wasted two years studying science, scoring good aggregate marks and then picked this course. What they want to say is that I should I have opted for other courses rather than be an environmentalist which

is not a good career option. Hearing all their opinions made me realise that environmental studies in our state is taken very lightly. But I don't blame the elders for the lack of awareness and lack of concern. Environmental studies/ Environmental education was never considered a major subject in school. Most people are aware of the impact of climate change, our loss of biodiversity, species extinction, and our very delicate ecosystem, but they believe that healing and restoring our earth is someone else's responsibility. Why isn't such an important subject, not given equal importance as other subjects? Planting of saplings and caring for our earth is embedded in the minds of students only on World Environment Day. How do these saplings turn out to be? We really don't know!
We come across ads and promos about climate change; we can see the situation around the world and about our polar regions but we brush the thought off because running around to make our careers and manipulating our earth through urbanization and industrialization to make our lives easier and livelihoods aplenty is what society believes is important.
The government should make more effort to spread awareness about conservation, preservation and protection of the

Governments across the world are grappling with the dilemma of whether to open up now; what sectors of the economy should reopen and why a lockdown is not exactly the way to deal with Covid-19. After nearly five months of lockdown, the jury is still out as to whether it has helped contain the virus or whether the lockdown was primarily to give governments across the world some breathing space to buck up their health care systems. This has been fully exposed in states like Bihar and Maharashtra where Covid patients are left to fend for themselves; some falling off their beds in delirium and lying there unattended. These pathetic sights make us wonder if India should not have invested more in health care and education than in the myriad temples, churches, mosques et al. Of what use are these places of worship when they cannot be used to give relief to suffering humanity at the most critical juncture of their lives? Just think how useful it would have been if the crore of rupees spent on building these beautiful structures, used once a week was to have been invested in state of the art hospitals.

Another thought also flit through my mind while writing this. For decades the coal mine owners have made their megabucks, much of which they regularly use to buy votes to ensure they are elected. It is uncanny that when the state and its people are reeling from a health cum economic crisis of unimagined proportions they are not heard or seen. What have these coal merchants contributed to the people of Meghalaya by way of corporate social responsibility (CSR)? Have they built one good hospital? Or a school to cater to the population around the coal mines? No. They have contributed nothing at all for the larger public good. Have the cement companies spent their CSR in anything productive? In recent times when there is a need to invest in testing kits and equipment why can't the cement companies and coal merchants together shell out funds to start more testing facilities? We know that it takes almost a week

the handicaps faced by microbiologists that we don't know of? Last heard was that the NEIGRIHMS lab was closed for two days last week for complete cleaning and sanitising because the laboratory has been running non-stop for nearly five months. It was also to give the faculty, who have been working round the clock, a much needed break before they too are affected by fatigue. But after the two-day rest the NEIGRIHMS lab was functioning to the optimum. According to NEIGRIHMS the result of an RT-PCR test should not take more than a day. Since the samples are taken by Civil Hospital the test results usually go to the State Government which then gives the results to individual patients. In the case of this particular patient he was only told verbally that he is Covid positive but he was not given the test result. What do you think this does to a person? There may be others who face a similar plight as this person.



take them too far. People need to find work and the strategic sectors of the economy have to open up for that to happen. Those who returned home from distant locations need to either find work at home or travel back to the manufacturing hubs. Fear cannot be allowed to immobilise us. Those who propose lockdowns sitting in the comfort of their homes because they are themselves well looked after do not even know if their next door neighbours have had a decent meal in months. It is easy to spread fear and paranoia when you don't have to think of the next meal but try walking in the shoes of the poor to know that they really have no choice between being infected by the virus and facing starvation or bankruptcy if they have taken a loan and own a start-up that has gone kaput because it has had to be shut down. The home-stays and other tourism projects across Meghalaya are just one

personal experience with the EPFO Department of Shillong, have been bitter. I had put forward my grievances to the concerned authorities through various platforms of EPFO, Shillong many times but they failed to address the issue every time. I had even written a letter to the editor in this newspaper on September 21, 2018 but that too could not draw the attention of the concerned authority to my problem.
I was enrolled in EPFO service in 2010 and due to change of my workplace, I had to quit in May 2016. I was told by the officer from EPFO that I can place my claim only after the completion of two months from the day of my quitting the job. As per instructions, I visited the office two months later to put forward my claim but they told me that due to some technical problems my claim could not be processed. I was told to fill some forms and submit them in the office, which I did. After a few more months I again visited the EPFO office to enquire about the claim but was told that prior to 2012 the entry was done manually but after 2012 it had gone online so the Department is having a tough time to compile the same. Moreover the EPFO office Shillong cannot do the updating on their own if they do not get any notice from the Head Office. As per the instructions of the officer in EPFO office Shillong, I was

example.
Another group that is economically vulnerable are the cultivators. The uncertainty of the situation such as the odd-even transport arrangement puts them at risk of either not being able to take their products to the market or paying a higher price because of the shortage of commercial vehicles. And when the farmers reach the markets they are further exploited by the whole-sellers and middle-men/ women. This is one area that needs close scrutiny. We need functioning and robust farmers' cooperatives. Last heard is that GHP Raju the no-nonsense cop who has taken on many a militant is now Principal Secretary, Co-operation Department which looks at forming viable co-operative societies. Farmer's co-operatives would give the farmers a better bargaining power and put an end to the exploitation that they have suffered for decades.
These days Police Bazar looks like a ghost town because people generally shun going out and because most shops are still closed or open alternately. Some shops are open only once a week. What happens to the incomes of such people? What happens to their staff? Can they still pay their staff or have they been let off? Is anyone doing any survey yet about the economic onslaught of Covid-19 or are we waiting until the economy reaches rock bottom? We know better now that a Lockdown is not the solution to combating Covid-19 but wearing masks, maintaining strict hand hygiene and physical distancing are better adaptation strategies. It's time to get real and set aside our fears! Most of those who tested Covid positive have recovered. Those with co-morbidities need to take precautions but the large section of the population that needs to earn their livelihoods must be allowed to do so. If not, then someone should pay them weekly wages with which they can feed their families. If Government cannot guarantee that then it also has no right to prevent people from working.
(Views expressed in these columns are personal and are not necessarily that of The Shillong Times)

again told to put in my claim which I did so in October 2017 but it got rejected with the explanation that my name did not tally with the one in the office and also my KYC was not updated. After getting that message, I updated my KYC but again when I checked my e-passbook it did not reflect my contribution prior to March 2012.
It is very disappointing for me not to get back my hard earned money at the right time in spite of running from pillar to post for the same. From May 2016 till date my grievances with EPFO office Shillong are still not being addressed. Through this letter I request the concerned Department and the Head Office of EPFO to kindly expedite such matters. As per the statement given by Regional Provident Fund Commissioner, K K Srivastava, the claims of EPFO members regarding provident fund, pensions, EDLI and other advances are settled within 20 days but in my case it has taken more than four years and my claim is still pending. The Nidhi Aapke Nikat Programme for redressal of grievances of employees and employers is held on the 10th of each month or the next working day but surprisingly my grievance listed in the grievance portal of EPFO Office, Shillong is lying unattended for years.
Yours etc.,
Anil Singh Roka
Shillong -2

Ram Temple and the future of Indian secularism

By Dr. Nsungbemo Ezung

The much awaited ‘bhoomi poojan’ or ground breaking ceremony and the foundation stone laying ceremony for the construction of Ram Temple passed off successfully and peacefully on August 5, 2020 in Ayodhya. This comes following the Supreme Court verdict in November last year for handing over the disputed land in Ayodhya for the construction of Ram Temple. The ground breaking ceremony, taking place with much religious fanfare, sent waves of excitement to the Hindu faithfuls across the country as they see this as setting the stage for turning their lifelong dreams of seeing a Ram temple in the birth place of Lord Ram into a “glorious” reality. However, this causes anxieties and apprehensions in the minds of millions of Indians belonging to minority religious groups of the possible impact on the status of India as secular nation as a fallout of this event.
It is the presence of the nation's prime minister, who is under a constitutional oath and under obligation to preserve and protect the secular credentials of the country, in such an exclusive religious activity that raises questions in the minds of many as to how an elected leader of a secular country could be a party to such an affairs that has hitherto caused so much division and conflict among different religious communities in the country. A careful observation of the way the prime minister took part in the ‘bhoomi poojan’ shows that he is not there in his individual capacity as a faithful Hindu just to witness and participate in the said event. He was at the center stage of the ceremony joining the priests and the religious leaders in performing elaborate rites and rituals required for the ceremony. This event with prime minister at the center stage along with the RSS Chief and the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh has left us wonderstruck, and made us suspicious whether this could be a prelude towards making a theocratic Hindu state in India, and that on this similar pattern the country could witness the construction of many more temples across different parts of the country in the near future by destroying mosques, churches and other religious institutions belonging to minorities groups.
The successful ‘bhoomi poojan’ has set the stage for the construction of Ram Mandir in Ayodhya, which is considered as the birth place of Lord Ram. This event is also expected to culminate in the most controversial, divisive and violent socio-political movement in post-Independent India's history. The movement has redefined the nature of Indian politics, bringing right-wing nationalist party, the BJP, to the center stage of Indian politics and now a dominant political force in the country. The movement also cost India's secular image as it created suspicions and doubts in the minds of the world about India's ability to protect the rights and aspirations of the minority communities in the country.
LK Advani, the main architect of the movement, described Ram as “a unique symbol of India's national identity, unity and integration” (LK Advani: My Country, My Life. Rupa and Co., New Delhi, 2008). It is on this ground that the followers of Lord Ram argue that it is fitting for India to construct a grand temple at his birth place as a tribute to this deity and his followers. And if Ram embodied national identity and unity, it means Ram should represent a symbol of a nation which is constituted by different races, religions and ethnic and linguistic groups, and it should be the responsibility of the nation to protect the interest of all the groups.

While it may be reasonable on the part of the Hindu faithfuls to demand for the construction of temple in the birthplace of Ram, it is the failure on their part to build consensus and win the hearts of the Muslim community to hand over the land peacefully which was in the possession of the latter for more than four hundred years and tragically created communal conflict over the issue that had permanently damaged the secular fabric of the country. The Ram Janmabhoomi Trust may have won the right from the court for the construction of temple but the fact remains that the temple will be built on the ruins of a Mosque that was destroyed by a violent mob way back in December 1992 leading to the outbreak of one of the worst communal violence in post-independent India, costing many lives. Would this same kind of violent and coercive method further permit the majority religious group to destroy some of the country's famous heritage sites built during medieval periods like the Red Fort, from where every year on independence day the country's prime minister hoists the national flag and addresses the nation? Or for that matter the Taj Mahal and Rashtrapati Bhavan, and replace these buildings with Hindu temples on the grounds that all these heritage sites were built during that last five hundred years on the ruins of the more than 2000 year old Hindu civilization. What kind of message has the successful foundation laying ceremony for Ram Temple is sending to diverse Indians? Does this mean that the presence of churches and mosques, side by side with temples/mandirs all over India would no longer be tolerated as it defames the image of the glorious Indian/ Hindu civilization?
The silver lining of the whole episode though is the response of the Sunni Muslim Community of Uttar Pradesh (UP). Right after the Supreme Court verdict on November 2019, the UP Sunni Central Waqf Board issued a statement accepting the verdict and promising to the nation that “they will not go for a review of the Apex Court's order”. This generous concession from the Muslim community of UP paved the way for the peaceful conduct of ‘bhoomi poojan’. For decades after Independence, the Hindu leaders were crying foul over the alleged mistreatment and suppressing of the rights of the majority religious group by the authorities on the pretext of secularism.
As the construction of the Ram Temple begins, thanks to the direction of the Apex Court and the acceptance of the verdict by the Muslim community of the country, this should appease the Hindu community, heal old wounds and make way for the restoration of peace and communal harmony among different religious communities of India. It's high time the Hindu community reciprocates in an equally positive tone to the generous concession of the Muslim community, and allow different minority religious communities to practice their faith without any fear and apprehensions. During the ‘bhoomi poojan’ RSS Chief Mohan Bhagwat said, “there is a wave of joy in the whole country... We believe in taking everyone along. Today is the new beginning of new India”.
One can only hope that this “joy” will be shared by billions of Indians who professes different religious faith, and that the leadership of the RSS, the Hindu community at large and the Government, which is the custodian of Indian secularism, ensures that the rights of every Indians, regardless of their religious affiliations, will be protected, and that they will be able to practice their religion freely in this diverse, democratic and secular India.
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“Dreams get you into the future and add excitement to the present.”
—Aeschylus

The Shillong Times

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Public life and transparency

PUBLIC figures, more particularly law makers are expected to conduct themselves with a certain degree of rectitude. They cannot violate the laws, rules and regulations that they have themselves legislated. The morality that public figures impose on themselves today is the morality that those who follow them will see. Hence they cannot be lackluster in how they conduct themselves. The absence of transparency, for lack of a better word, that existed yester-year has been replaced by the unobstructed sunlight that exists today. Above all, those that are closest to them should also be above reproach. It is said that a man is judged by the company he keeps. Those who manage the personal and intricate affairs of VIPs and VVIPs must be persons whose integrity is tested in times of adversities. Such people should not have made capital from their proximity to their bosses. Above all they must have both social and intellectual capital because that in turn enhances the stature of the VIP/ VVIP. Chief Ministers in Meghalaya have had officials assisting them that have the breadth of intellect, presence of mind and decorum on how to deal with the public. The conduct of the chief minister of a state and his cabinet colleagues is a matter of public scrutiny. The chief minister is the first among equals and is expected to lead the way when it comes to his own conduct and that of his team.

Another expectation from public figures is that they should know how to handle the media. After all, if they court the media when they want their actions publicised, then they should be equally willing to answer queries when media persons ask them questions that the public need to know – beyond those conventional headlines and press releases. William Cobbett the English pamphleteer who combined in himself the qualities of a journalist and politics having become a Member of Parliament in 17th century Britain says, “No man has the right to pry into his neighbour’s private concerns and the opinions of every man are his private concern, while he keeps them so. But when he makes those opinions public; when he attempts to make converts, whether it be in religion, politics or anything else; when he once comes forward as a candidate for public admiration, esteem or compassion, his opinions, his principles , his motives, every action of his life, public or private, becomes the fair subject of public discussion.” Hence a chief minister’s actions in the public space are a matter of public discussion. That’s what’s called transparency and no politician can avoid public scrutiny.

TO THE EDITOR

On Casinos in Meghalaya

Editor,
I am writing in response to the letter, ‘Misplaced Arguments Against Casino’ (ST July 24) simply because I was rather taken aback by the views expressed by NK Sharma.
Although I know little about the thoh tim economy I feel I know enough not to speak of Casinos and thoh tim in the same breath. I am sure many would agree that the two are not exactly in the same ‘league’ - for want of a better word – as I do not wish to suggest that gambling at Casinos is sport, while at least thoh tim does have its origin in archery which is a traditional sport.
Somehow it is difficult, maybe even ludicrous,to imagine that those who frequent casinos would even think of gambling on the skill of archers.We all know that gambling at a casino is for those who have money, and more to spare. How people choose to spend their money and how they obtain their adrenaline kicks is entirely up to them, but what does concern me about the possible introduction of casinos in Meghalaya is that it will only be another way of accentuating that divide between the rich and the poor. If they have not

seen and heard enough already, the have-nots will once again be told that certain pleasures, certain experiences are not for them. Although just staying alive may well leave them little time to ponder a change of scene. Perhaps those lower in the hierarchy of ‘haves’ will be the ones left restless. Either way the outlook is not good.
Then to pretend that gambling is not addictive or harmful is totally disingenuous. Sharma’s answer– ‘It can’t be more than a handful’ – to his own question: ‘How many local people have been financially ruined by their gambling instincts?’inspires little confidence. Even if only ‘a handful are financially ruined by their gambling instincts’, that is still a handful too many. Each one is a human life not just a nameless number in some study speculative or otherwise. Anyone who has observed or experienced addiction of any kind will testify to the emotional toll this takes on both the addict and the family. It is not as benign as Sharma would like us to believe.
Sharma meanwhile leaves us in no doubt as to which side he is on. The following sentence dripping with gleeful disdain says it all: ‘For all I know, the likes of Pariat I will not have the good fortune of trying their luck at the proposed casino!’ Anyone familiar with Pariat’s

work will know that ‘the likes of Pariat’ would not want to touch a casino with the longest of barge poles. So for Sharma to contemplate that Pariat would even want to visit a casino is pointless conjecture. However what is more surprising is that while Pariat is disparaged, Sharma glosses over the exploits of coal barons. I can’t see how an exemption from paying income tax would in any way deter them from using their ‘extra income’ in casinos. It is part of their flamboyant lifestyle.
Wherever you look the Covid19 crisis has exposed the deep divisions in society and devastated economies worldwide. At this point in time when the poor are struggling to get by, the idea of generating employment and income through a casino attracting the affluent and wealthy tourist (who now may or may not come), is insensitive. It can only encourage the mistaken belief that the pastimes of the rich always seem to take precedence over the welfare of the poor.
Yours etc.,
Janet Hujon,
Via email

Misleading report

Editor,
Apropos the report in your esteemed daily (ST Aug 5, 2020) regarding the

containment of certain houses located in Malki due to detection of Covid19 positive cases, I would like to clarify that the report is false and baseless. As a matter of fact, the containment was declared by the District Administration as a measure of precaution due to contact of a member of the said households with a potential high risk person. The erroneous report published in your paper has created unfounded fears and panic among the residents of Malki i and in Shillong as a whole. It has also adversely affected the reputation and livelihoods of those persons named in your report.
As a concerned and affected citizen, I therefore request your daily to henceforth check facts before naming people in your reports.
Yours etc.,
Dapda A Warjri
Shillong -I

(Editor replies: The notification was given to us by the Deputy Commissioner’s office and we reported accordingly. So did other newspapers).

India’s predicament

Editor,
As India struggles to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, revive the

flagging economy and solve Chinese incursions into its territory, it needs to deal with another issue - changing of political maps by Pakistan and Nepal. Borders have been a sensitive issue since India became independent in 1947. Successive governments avoided addressing the border issue. In spite of the challenges, India had managed to maintain good relations with the neighbouring countries. India, however, has lost that image today.
Close on the heels of Nepal’s issuance of a map showing Indian territory in Nepal, Pakistan has released a territorially misleading map that included the former princely states of Junagadh (Gujarat) and J&K. In May, Nepal had claimed about 335 sq.km of the entire Kalapani region as its own - a region recognised by both Kathmandu and New Delhi as “disputed”. Recently, Pakistan went a step further and claimed not just the areas that are disputed with India as their own, they also included Junagadh in Gujarat in their new map. Some may dismiss it as a trick played by the neighbouring countries. However, it must be acknowledged that such cartographic wars lead to conflicts between India and the neighbouring countries.

When India scrapped Article 370 and released a new political map showing J&K as two union territories-J&K and Ladakh, it was seen as a unilateral act by our neighbours.
India must tactfully deal with the issue by promoting some of the regional set-ups such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). India must not surrender its territories to China by neglecting regional alliance. Unless Modi government injects new life in SAARC, the government may look weak. Instead of prioritising SAARC and BIMSTEC, Modi government chose to prioritise Indo-Pacific and Quadri lateral security dialogue.
In fact, changing political maps has no significance unless it is recognised by the UN. However, it creates problems when Google Maps show altered areas on maps because it is followed by billions of users. India must establish a sustained dialogue with its neighbours. It must ensure that the next SAARC summit is held urgently. This will help thaw India’s relations with its neighbours.
Yours etc.,
Venu GS,
Via email

Possible challenge of COVID-19 vaccination

By Mattimi Passah

b) Influence of religious and traditional beliefs

In some cases, the mothers in their responses categorically stated they refused to get themselves administered the different doses of vaccination during their pregnancy and also refused to get their children immunized because of religious influence(s). Still many refuse to even take the interview. The few that were willing to talk said that they do not get their children vaccinated because they believe in the power of prayer. They said that only prayer can heal them when they fall ill. If the child is sick, they would not take them to the doctor or provide them any kind of medication. They also believe that it is not necessary to do so as only their trust in God and prayers through Jesus will heal the children.

In spite of the fact that they refused to get their children vaccinated, some would hide the truth because of their religious conviction and compulsion. They refused to divulge the truth why they refused to get their children vaccinated even if the community and the health workers confirmed the same. When reminded of the risk of not getting their children vaccinated; they instead refer to their holy scriptures and say, ‘what will happen because what was written has to be fulfilled.’ They said that what is destined to happen will happen no matter what.

c) Fear of adverse effects

There are few examples of mothers who refuse vaccination because of their concern about the adverse effects after immunization and they have evidence to justify their claims. Some examples of severe adverse effects include swelling of the thighs of the babies which last for several weeks and sometimes extend to months and cause difficulty in walking. There are two cases where the child found it difficult to walk and they still limp when they walk even two or three years after they have been vaccinated.

Some argue that they refuse to get their children vaccinated because their children continue to have high fever days and even months after the vaccination. Some parents refuse to get their children vaccinated on flimsy grounds that they don’t want to lose sleep which

could be the after-effect of immunization. Some complained that after getting their child vaccinated, the baby would fall sick which affects the productivity of the mother because she has to take care of the other siblings and sometimes even her parents. It also affects the daily routine of the members of the family particularly the mother and she would not be able to go to work the next day which will cause loss of wages. This according to our observation is one reason why in some cases the father of the child would force their wives not to get the child immunized.

d) Fear of vaccination

There are instances where the respondents informed that they refuse to get themselves and the children immunized out of fear of vaccination. One woman said that she had never had any needle piercing her body so she does not want her child to go through that ordeal too.

e) No difference between a child who is immunized and those who are not

Most of the respondents felt that there is no difference between children who had been immunized and those who were not while some said that there was a difference. A few refused to respond. Some mothers said they do not see any difference between the children who were administered vaccination and those who were not. In spite of getting their children administered the complete doses of vaccination yet, they still have to take their children to the doctor every time. They say the child still suffers from common diseases like colds etc. They consider getting their children vaccinated a futile exercise since the children still get sick after completing all the doses.

A section of the respondents said that they never get their child vaccinated because they themselves or their mothers have never been vaccinated. In cases where both the grandmother and the mother were present during the interview both justified that nothing had happened to them even if they have never got themselves vaccinated. ‘Look at us; we are no different from the other female members of the community, they also fall sick and we also fall sick so there is no difference,’ the

grandmother quipped.
f) Lack of confidence on immunization

There are also quite a big percentage of mothers who refused to get their child immunized because of the lack of confidence in the immunization process. There are mothers we interviewed who said that they had been vaccinated during pregnancy and also allowed their elder children to be immunized but stopped all of a sudden with the birth of the subsequent kids. For example, in a family where they have six children; the three elder siblings were administered vaccination (although not the complete dose), but the siblings born later were not vaccinated.

There is this one strange case of a young mother who when asked why she refused to get her baby immunized the response was that she was angry with the Government. She did not receive the financial support (JSY) provided to mothers for delivering the baby at the Government institution. She was sad because she did not get the grant while the other mothers (her contemporaries) in the villages received the benefits.

g) Lack of awareness

A major cause of concern is the community’s indifference towards vaccination. They would not ensure that their children received the complete doses of the immunization. In many cases mothers are not even aware of the different doses of vaccination that need to be administered to the child to complete the process. In such cases the mother unintentionally misses certain doses despite the fact that she genuinely wishes to provide complete immunization to her child.

In view of the above findings, it will be an immense challenge for the Government to get people vaccinated if and when vaccination for COID-19 is approved. Considering the fact that the Coronavirus is very contagious, the Government will have to ensure that all and no one is left without being given the COVID-19 vaccination.

(The writer is working at the Center for the Study of Complex Malaria in India, Indian Institute of Public Health Shillong and can be reached at mattimipassah@gmail.com)

Technology & Automation-Impact on Human Evolution

By Kaustav Kashyap

Technology-driven automation is omnipresent and pervading our lives like never before. From robots and chatbots to virtual/augmented reality, machine learning, artificial intelligence (AI) and beyond, the physical space is littered with digital influence. The impact of increased automation is already upon us and influencing our lives in all possible ways. Up till now technology adoption has never been so rapid, versatile and secular but the presence of connectivity has enabled this growth.The focus of this narrative will be to explore how exactly human life gets affected because of these inevitable technology trends. There are six such changes that look imminent.

The newer technologies are enabling embryonic assessments in early stages, hence alleviating the need for morphological assessments where a high degree of human skills was required. The issue is that morphological grading by humans leads to wide inter- and intra-operator variation. These long-standing difficulties may now be improved by using advances in AI. Thus, mathematical variables derived from time-lapse images of embryo development may now be used such that an algorithm can classify images of an embryo’s development automatically, and so remove the human variable from the crucial task of morphological assessment.

This was also highlighted in study presented on July 4, 2017 at the 33rd Annual Meeting of ESHRE in Geneva. Start-up Deep Genomics is leveraging AI to help decode the meaning of the genome and their learning software is developing the ability to try and predict the effects of a mutation based on its analyses of hundreds of thousands of examples of other mutations — even if there’s not already a record of what those mutations do. Another example is the case of actress Angelina Jolie where she had a one recessive gene in her genome that was predicted using deep learning algorithms on her DNA sequence using the data from past studies, which predicted that she is susceptible to breast cancer. She underwent pre-emptive mastectomy to prevent herself from cancer. The confluence of medicine and technology will bring unprecedented transformations in human life.

Another biological victim of the digital automation will be ubiquitous handwriting skills. Already most of the content that’s getting produced and published is digital. Handwriting skills have already suffered as most of the content gets digitally typed and then printed if at all needed in the physical format. Dematerialization has already inflicted the damage on the physical copy. It is now rare to write something on paper except when it’s your own signature, which is also digitally available now. Handwriting is almost nostalgic now. More and more people are digitally publishing the content online with handwritten notes becoming virtually non-existent. When was the last time you wrote a handwritten letter or note to your friends? The growth of virtual assistants like Apple Siri, Google Assistant or Cortana that can translate the verbal instructions into written words will further deteriorate the physical handwriting practice whatever is left so far. This may impact the anatomy of the hand including the fingers, which may become less flexible, and thinner to aid typing. Maybe in the future the meta-carpel and carpal joints undergo significant changes as they are no longer used for writing purposes.

The third biological influence will be on the eyes. The sheer amount of information flow that’s happening is coming from social media apps, devices, digital displays or the web, which is exerting enormous strain on the eyes. Reading has exponentially multiplied, as is typical of information age where status quo is consistently challenged. The knowledge bust that’s happening is fuelling the

information fire. With faster and better technology, development and evolution is becoming possible in every sphere of our life, be it medicine, law, science, engineering, education, hence necessitating the constant need to upgrade and update. The concomitant impact of it will be largely borne by eyes. With so much to read and ingest, the shape of our eyes may get adapted over a period; they may become enlarged or may be more bulged. In fact, the underlying neuron system powering the vision may undergo subtle changes as well because of the way the things will be perceived and seen in the VR, AR-infected world. Another impact is going to be on the neck and the backbone. With the advent of smartphone the average time we are spending on the device is about 180 minutes. Yes, that’s correct: three hours per day. We are continuously stretching our necks for longer periods of time, which is therefore bent most of the time. Now most of things can be actioned, can be monitored or searched on the phone, which is reducing physical movements all the time. For example, you can monitor your employees working remotely on your phone using the GPS and camera, thereby obviating the need for physically moving yourself. This is not only forcing your neck to constantly gobble up the data that’s being ejected on your smartphone screens but also increasing your seating time, making you more sedentary than ever. Seating continuously for longer periods of time puts pressure on the spinal cord and the vertebrae. Hence all these lifestyle changes will have an anatomical impact on our spinal cord and neck in the time to come. As a result, the spine may become more rounded and short. It may be so that in the future humans have few extra movements in the neck due to some extra cervical spine joints.

With the problem of plenty, memory will be worst affected. As more and more information is produced collaboratively and co-operatively on social platforms lesser and lesser will be retained. Also, with advanced search algorithms by our side, who needs to worry about remembering something? Learning by rote will be extinct in future. This will impact the memorability of human beings as lesser effort will be given to remember anything. The incentives that existed in the past to learn mathematical tables or capitals of the countries have ceased to exist. Society is now rewarding people who have application skills, who can combine expertise in multiple subjects to yield insights and solve layered business problems. The demand for people who can blurt out facts has completely evaporated. The processing that’s required to memorize things will weaken during time, leading to complete adaptation of the neurons and brain functions that govern memory.

With so much data floating around us and machine learning algorithms parsing them, AI is getting adaptive by the day. The rich data that’s getting ingested is only leading to more informed choices and better decisions. The role of luck, or the unknown is getting subsumed by intelligent analytics or processed data that was earlier not available. The traditional belief structures rooted in the religion of God are getting displaced by more data-centric approaches or ‘Dataism’, as Yuval Harari calls it. So much structured and unstructured data is getting generated—be it location data, emails, OCR processed reports, Facebook posts or likes, WhatsApp messages, tweets etc.—which enables algorithms to do the data analysis and decipher the subterranean trends, patterns and phenomena underlying these data sets, paving the way for better understanding of society and things around us. As more and more evidentiary proofs are available for our actions, the needle of our belief will keep swerving away from the universality of God.
(E m a i l : pragatigroup08@gmail.com)

What needs to be done to improve education system

By Rita Ghosh

Fifty per cent of students failed in SSLC examination this year and 10 schools had zero performance. No doubt it is deeply shocking for all of us. Out of 100 marks (whereas 20 marks are given for internal assessment), only 30 per cent is required to pass. Then why does a regular student fail? This is the biggest question today to be solved by the stakeholders or the concerned authorities.

If a student is not performing well in the term examinations due to lack of attention, teachers must adopt interesting methods to draw his or her attention. If the methods fail, then teachers need to sit face to face with such students for

a dialogue with utmost care, patience and sympathy.

In this process, the rootcauses identified till date are mainly poverty, family problem, broken family, influence of peer groups, lack of affection at home or in the school etc.

For the last few years, addiction to smart phones is also distracting students. Proper counselling by an expert is preferable to control this damage, of course in consultation with parents.

English is the medium of instruction in Meghalaya but rural students are weak in English. Mother tongue would have

helped them better in this connection. The quality of primary education is poor in the state, except in a handful of urban private schools. The government has introduced DELED course to train teachers but it will take a long time.

The scope of refresher courses is less. Poor infrastructure in rural schools is also a reason for the poor performance.

Most of the students rush to tuition classes, especially for Mathematics, Science and English subjects because most of them fail in these subjects. What remedial measures have

been taken so far to overcome this problem by stakeholders?

School curricula are framed with some aims and objectives to cater to the needs of individual student and the society as a whole. But in Meghalaya, the government machinery is slow in identifying social needs and fixing the aims and objectives; designing the curriculum in a proactive manner; and time-bound implementation of the curriculum.

Few years back, the term 'School Inspector' was replaced by 'District School Education Officer' but frankly speaking the term 'Inspector' had more weightage. School inspection created more pressure for performing better to both of the teacher and learner.

Now as the time is so crucial,

parents definitely will not agree to send their children to any educational institutions. The stakeholders seriously need to find out ways and means to keep our young minds engaged with constructive activities. The Education Department alone cannot shoulder this yeomen service. Other departments such as sports, arts and culture, health, social welfare, Information Technology and Broadcasting, have to play an important role.

Our children and youths are our invaluable resources. All of us must join hands, correlate, coordinate and prepare ourselves to face the 'New World Order'.

(The author is an educationist)



CAMPUS CALL

Building peace over pain

Peace museums show impact of atom bombs on victims through pictures & belongings

By Anu P James & Idikula Mathew

The names of Hiroshima and Nagasaki are synonymous with the Atomic Bomb Disaster. This manmade disaster from an atom bomb left a deep scar on the humanity and history for us to remember and think.

In the context of continued hostilities during the World War II, "Little Boy" and "Fat Man" devastated the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki respectively on August 6 morning at 08:15 AM and August 9 forenoon at 11:02 AM August 1945. Nagasaki was not the primary target for the plutonium -239 weapon but, cloud covers over the industrial center Kokura, diverted the B29 Bockscar bomber to proceed to the secondary target on list.

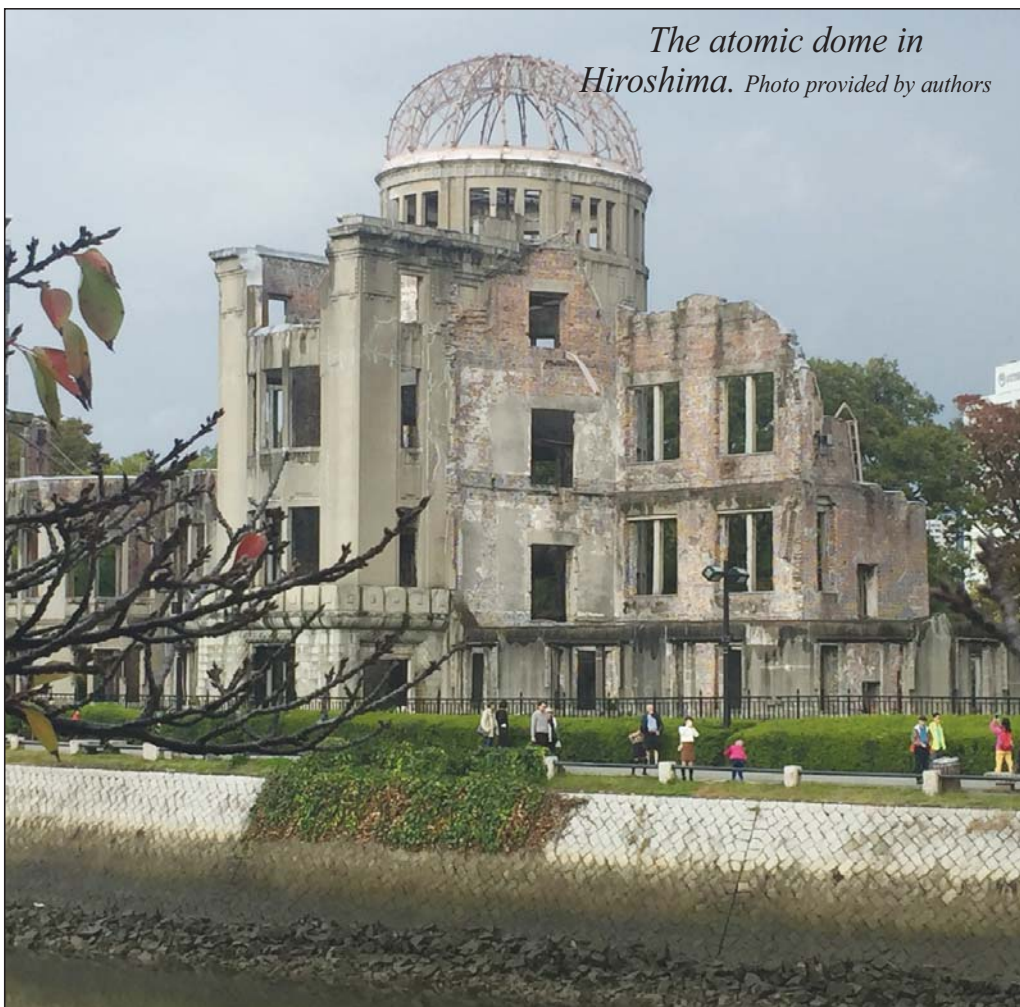
Detonation of the bombs about 600-500 m above the hypocenters on these cities released immense amounts of heat rays (3000-4000 degree Celsius) and radiation waves blasting away at about 440 meters per second. This ruined most portions of the city to shatters, charring many objects from the flash burn and killing many people and living creatures instantly. From August to December of 1945 itself, it is estimated about 2,20,000 lives were lost in these cities. Apart from the immediate effects, aftereffects such as keloid scars, leukemia and other forms of cancer have shortened several lives. Many more survivors started to live with the pain, trauma, loss and anxiety from these bombings.

However, today peace monuments stand tall at these locations, beaming hope, peace and love so that humanity can come together to prevent such tragedies from ever being repeated. From our experience at both these locations, we soon realised that when someone visits these monuments, certain images and deep messages they convey were preserved and kept open for all to see imbibing the need to choose wisely and act responsibly.

It is important for the people here in Hiroshima that the truth be told and conveyed in the spirit of the harmony and peaceful co-existence of future generations.

The peace museums display the impacts on victims through pictures and belongings. Charred rice from a schoolgirl's lunch box, helmets with embedded skull, hand and finger bones fused into molten glass etc. are just a few of the images and objects depicting the utter despair and grief. These show that death caught these subjects completely unaware at a time and way they least imagined. Life was siphoned out of them within seconds.

The illustrations and pictures on the walls represents a 'living hell' showing people fleeing almost naked with their burned skins hanging, walking in pitiful conditions with severe injuries, people lying on ground just waiting for their deaths. Cities are compared side by side with before and after panoramas and how the nuclear age has evolved over time and various parties



The atomic dome in Hiroshima. Photo provided by authors

on the global front with their views on nuclear power and weaponisations are also depicted here.

All these embody grief, anger, pain and several emotions while provoking thought, hope, needs and above all the ability to choose wisely towards world peace and cultural exchanges onto a harmonious world. Things have changed drastically as these cities are now rebuilt. Areas around, considered devoid of and unusable for vegetation for at least 75 years are now green and teeming with the music of birds symbolizing renewal and hope.

The atomic bomb dome, close to the hypocenter stands exactly as it was left standing after the explosion. Previously an industrial promotion hall of the prefecture, it is now a UNESCO World Heritage monument. Its survival as the only building left standing near the hypocenter is a representation towards the symbol of peace and hope. Right at the center of the Hiroshima peace park is the Cenotaph holding the names of the people who were lost to the bomb. The arch shape represents a shelter for the souls of the victims.

"No one else should ever suffer as we have" - This heart rendering message from hibakusha (a Japanese word that literally translates to "explosion-affected people") forged in a cauldron of suffering and sorrow transcends hatred and rejections. As a response to the hibakusha's appeal the epitaph on the Cenotaph for the Atomic bomb victims read: "Let all the souls here rest in peace, for we shall not repeat the evil".

Inspired by Sadako Sasaki's dreams and

hope before death at 12 years caused by the after effects of her exposure to radiation at the age of 2, the peace park includes a Children's peace monument for the memory of all the little ones whose childhood and lives were cut short by the atomic bombing. On top of this 9-meter monument is a bronze statue of a girl lifting a golden crane entrusting us with a dream for a peaceful future. The inscription read: "This is our cry. This is our prayer. For building peace in this world".

The story of Sadako Sasaki is touching at the same time inspirational. Do not miss a chance to see her collection and pictures at the Hiroshima Peace Museum.

At Nagasaki, the peace statue stands tall against the blue skies with the right hand pointing towards the threat from nuclear weapons and the left hand symbolizing the peace with closed eyes expressing prayers for the many victims of war.

Both at Hiroshima and Nagasaki as the heat wave from the blast raised surface temperatures to thousands of degrees, people suffered terrible burns and died seeking water. Several intense pictures show how humans and living beings crawled to the stream nearby and dead bodies were amassed and floating.

The fountains of peace is a place to pray for the victims who passed away begging for water. On the black stone plaque, it is carved from the lines of the poem from a girl named Sachiko Yamaguchi who was 9 years old at the time of bombing "I was thirsty beyond endurance. There was something oily on the surface of the water,

but I wanted water so badly that I drank it just as it was."

The ever-changing shape of water at these fountains evokes the beating wings of the dove of peace and the crane. The crane represents the Nagasaki port which is known as the crane port because of its shape. Also, in Japan cranes are considered mystical creature representing good fortune and longevity.

Flame from Mount Olympus in Greece taken in 1983 is kept burning until all nuclear weapons in the world will be abolished with a firm pledge that Nagasaki must be the last city to suffer from a nuclear bomb.

The scars left from the bombings were on body and mind of the people that many survivors feel guilty for surviving after going through various repeated surgeries and treatments. Grief of survivors and the stigma they have faced have been expressed through paintings and narratives. Various testimonies shared the profound magnitude of the horrors and pain.

As stated by Dr. Tatsuichiro Akizhuki, who was a survivor, "Concentric circle of death.. concentric circles of devil.. death seems literally fanning out in concentric circles with each passing day. The ripples of death that expanded from the hypocenter soon began to consume people who had suffered only mild injuries or who seems to have escaped unhurt".

Every August, the tragic memory is revisited on its anniversary with memorial events and prayers for the departed and world peace. Thousands visit the peace parks to pay respect and pray along side. Lantern ceremonies with prayers and peace messages are sent off floating for the souls in the evening.

The message these cities give out to the world loud and clear is unfolded in the recent Nagasaki Peace declaration "The atomic bombs were built by human hands and exploded over human heads. It follows that nuclear weapons can be eliminated by an act of human will and that the source of that will is without question the mind of each human being. Let us continue to discuss our experiences of war and the atomic bombings and pass the information to future generations. Knowledge of the horrors of war is an important first step to peace. Leaders of the world visit the atomic bombed cities and see, hear and feel what happened under the mushroom cloud. Imprint in your minds the inhumanity of the nuclear weapons".

Any visitor to these atomic bombed cities and these monuments come away with a strong message of nothing but peace and its importance. As we commemorate the 75th anniversary of the atomic bombings the salient prayer reverberates beyond borders 'Let there be peace'!

(Anu P James is DFO, East Khasi Hills. The article is based on the couple's recent trip to Japan)

A legend's adventures

By Parag Ranjan Dutta

All history must be treated geographically/and all geography must be treated historically. - Herodotus

Greece is known for its contribution to geographical thoughts and ideas. Greeks were the pioneers in many fields of geography and the period is known as the 'Golden Age of Greece'. The period had seen the contributions of many geographers in different fields, and interestingly students of Geography find an unusual name in this regard, Alexander the Great.

Alexander III of Macedon, commonly known as Alexander the Great, was born in July 356 BC in Pella, the administrative capital of Macedonia. His father King Philip II sent him to the Greek philosopher and thinker Aristotle.

Aristotle taught his pupils Homer's *Illiad*, which inspired Alexander so much that he wanted to be a warrior like Achilles, hero of the Trojan War.

After the assassination of his father, Alexander was in ascended to the throne of Macedonia at the tender age of 16. It is believed that before his father breathed his last he said to his son "create for yourself another kingdom because the one I leave for you is too small". Alexander had a strong desire to conquer the whole known world, which the Greeks thought ended with the Indian boundary.

Ed uc at ed by Aristotle's teachings, Alexander set foot on a long and arduous journey towards east with a well-trained army. First he destroyed Thebes in Central Greece before entering Asia to safeguard his northern borders in 335 BC. Thebes was a rival of ancient Athens who took side with the Persians.

Before entering Hellespont (Turkey) in Asia he defeated the barbarian tribes of Ister (Danube) basin. According to a legend, Hellespont was named after a girl 'Hella', who fell into the sea. Alexander's conquest helped spread the Greek culture, known as Hellenism across his Empire. His reign marked the beginning of a new age known as Hellenistic Age.

Alexander sent back most of the Macedonian army before entering India. His invasion of India began when he crossed the Indian border into Punjab in 326 BC. The region was then divided into a number of small states. During his expedition the tract between the Indus and Jhelum was ruled by King Ambhi (Greek: Omphis) whom Greeks called Taxiles (Greek : prince) after the name of his capital Taxila, near the city of Attock, Pakistan. Ambhi was believed to be a direct descen-

dent of Shakuni, the prince of Gandhara kingdom. The king of Taxila (Takshashila) welcomed him and showered him with gifts.

Alexander was unnerved by the sight of Ambhi's forces and formed an alliance with him. Ambhi accepted the offer to avenge Puru, his arch enemy. According to the Greeks, Ambhi and Puru were related matrimonially. Before launching an attack on Puru's kingdom, there was a great concern of crossing the Indus during monsoon.

Alexander's decision to cross the swollen Indus to catch Puru's army by surprise was regarded as a master-stroke. His assault into Punjab was halted by a powerful man, King Purushottam (Puru), a Vedic tribal King of the Paurava dynasty, who ruled the kingdom between Jhelum and Chenub rivers. In reality Puru or Porus was not a name but a gotra (sub-cast) of the Jats that belong to the Puru tribe mentioned in the Rigveda. Alexander's historian Arrian mentioned Jats to be the bravest people he had to fight in India.

Although victorious, the Battle of Hydaspas was possibly the battle of their life fought by the Macedonian

Alexander's assault into Punjab was halted by a powerful man, King Purushottam, a Vedic tribal King of the Paurava dynasty

army. Alexander was so impressed by his war techniques and bravery that Puru was allowed to govern his kingdom as a satrap (a provincial governor in the ancient Persian Empire). The battle was significantly very important which would have far reaching consequences in future because it opened up a new beginning for Indo- Greek trade.

With the help of Puru's army, it would not have been difficult to invade the Gangetic Valley. But when Alexander's army reached the Beas river, the soldiers refused to cross it.

Alexander's dream of reaching the end of the world came to an end possibly because of his poor geographical knowledge. We come to know about Alexander's expeditions through the writings of Greek philosopher Plutarch, Alexander's historian Arrian, Greek historian Siculus, Roman historian Curtius and Greek geographer Strabo. Anabasis (marching up or an advance into the interior of a country) of Arrian is the best source of Alexander's campaign, especially his conquest of the Persian Empire. It was Alexander who united the Greek states to establish Macedonian colonies in Persia and Babylon. The Great general died of malaria in Babylon on June 13, 323 BC.

(The author is former head of the Department of Geography, St Edmund's College)

Ode to the poetesses of North East

Renowned poet, author and academican K Satchidanandan, in his book *Positions: Essays on Indian Literature*, writes, "Only recently has women's writing begun to receive special attention among students and scholars in India and to be read from subaltern and gender points of view."

For women writers in the North East, the struggle is yet to be over and the rest of the country is yet to open up to the region's literature. The prolific female writers, authors and poets, have not got their due recognition as their counterparts in other states outside the region have. One of the reasons for this is lack of a strong platform for women writers, both amateurs and the experienced, in the region and the All India Poetess Forum, created by Monroe Gogoi Phukan, could be a possible bridge.

The first chapter of the forum was inaugurated through a webinar on August 2. Besides, India's first ever all-woman online publishing website, 'Ode to the Poetess', was also launched.

Launching the first chapter of All India Poetess Forum, Monroe conveyed her gratitude to guest poetesses from the North East as well as other states. Among the guests

were Streamlet Dkhar, Dr Rupinder Kaur Kaiche, Shipra Verma, Zarinah Wahid and Lovita Morang. Many young poetesses were also part of the event.

The website, www.odeapoetess.com, is a platform to publish and promote women's literature from the North East. Monroe said the website "will publish materials in all Indian languages and with no age bar".

Renowned author Streamlet Dkhar, Dean School of Humanities, NEHU-Shillong, congratulated the participants and laid stress on practice and honing the skills of literature functionaries from the beginning of their academic pursuit.

Sangeeta Suneja, author of *The First Few Minutes*, shared her experiences as an author and urged the budding poets and authors to "believe in their craft and master it with patience and practice".

Recipient of the Reuel International Prize for Poetry, Shaikh Md Sabah Al-Ahmed expressed his happiness at the launch of the All India Po-

etess Forum. Eminent cartoonist Champak Barbara was also present at the webinar.

The first chapter of the All India Poetess Forum was launched through a webinar on August 2

The esteemed poetesses joined in to discuss at length the launch from across the country.

"This is a long-due dream, to have an all-women portal for women from all walks of life. Women are innately private people and Ode to the Poetess will enable them to share their emotions in both prose and poetry," stated Famaaz Islam, a Guwahati-based painter and poet.

The All India Poetess Meet also had short story writer Prokritee Nazir, Eminent poet and author Dr Shikha Tejaswi, All India Poetess Conference Member and Social Worker Evanisha Pathaw, Creative writer and Translator Priyakshi Priyodarshini, Junior Research Assistant, Department of Archaeology Bidisha Bordoloi, Poet Shikha Pandey and Ina Sharma from Delhi.

The learning revolution

By Dilip Mukerjea

The Learning Era is upon us. In the grand scheme of human evolution, generally accepted learning procedures have been unable



to keep pace with the high-velocity transformations that most enterprises now face. Most prevailing learning systems are still rooted firmly in the industrial era, where capital was seen as financial and physical, not intellectual. The antiquity of our current learning systems is critical. These systems tend to perpetuate the status quo, within which, there is little status. Transforming and correcting this scenario calls for much individual resolve, and collective action. New dimensions of learning have unfolded with stunning speed ... either we move ahead, or stay dead! The preceding half-century has been defined by computer programmers, lawyers, and MBAs. Their time is passing. The world is waking up to the need for a fresh approach to the future. In this scenario, we will see the

emergence, prominence, and dominance of an invigorating, modern consciousness, where the players are meaning makers, their collective consciousness the very pith of brilliance.

This realm will glisten with design outcomes, where creators of art and science, storytellers, caregivers, pattern recognisers, and big-picture envisioners, will become the architects of social evolution. In an ideal state, we will witness the marriage of beauty and utility, of an awareness that is sententious and masterful. At least, this is my hope in a world gone mad!

Solutions lie in creating what I call, a Learning Planet. We must dare to opt for a better world. Our species is the only one that can imagine the invisible, the impossible, and the inevitable. It is thus our moral responsibility to establish a learning consciousness. As perpetual learning organisms, we can undo the yarns of ignorance, and shift our focus from warring to caring. Or else, this will be our Last Millennium! And with it, our Lost Millennium!



"Your vision will become clear only when you can look into your own heart. Who looks outside, dreams; who looks inside, awakens." ~ Carl Gustav Jung



L.I.F.E. = Leadership, Innovation, Fellowship, Entrepreneurship

APPLICANT: 'I like the job you're offering, but the last place paid much more, and gave overtime bonuses, holidays with pay, and sabbaticals.'

EMPLOYER: 'So why did you leave?'

APPLICANT: 'The firm went broke.'

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(The author is L.I.F.E. coach, author, consultant, presenter and learning guide)
Illustration & design by Dilip Mukerjea

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, August 9, 2020

Moon square Jupiter on your solar return chart. And this combination will bring favorable results for you during the whole year. You will have many exciting moments. You will appear far more assured and wiser. The projects that you have been thinking getting completed would see the light of the day. You will have the midas touch. People will start taking notice of you. You will be able to convince them. You have the gift of the gab to make people listen to you. Your standing in social circle will increase. Your name and fame will spread far and wide. You would be invited at social gatherings and parties. New contacts would be developed. Business opportunities would also come your way. Some female person may be a source of comfort and may prove lucky for you. Your brothers / sisters would support you and will be a source of inspiration. Your financial position would be good.

Aries: (March 21 - April 20)

The planetary configuration brings mixed results for you. You are compassionate and generous with family, friends and relatives. You are likely to see benefits and improvements in the areas of work and health, as well as daily routines. Your ability to handle the details required to do a good job is significantly enhanced and others increasingly become more aware of your skills. Benefits may come through co-workers or employees during this period.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21)

You are patient, laborious and clever with material aspects and manage finances and business ventures with ingenuity and success. There would be cooperation and understanding in professional and relationships. You might pay attention to various ways to increase personal funds, resulting in more than one avenue for monetary gain. You would always be willing to work all the more harder to meet your new responsibilities. Your love life has been erratic for some time, and this trend continues. You could find that you invest in real estate. You would also bring a more playful environment to your home. There will be a fluctuation in energy levels.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21)

The planetary configuration of this phase brings good results. Any type of service that you may provide is likely to go well. You are more successful in hiring people to work for you and improvements in your working environment are likely. You find more enjoyment in the work you do, and it is easier than usual to find employment now. You may get a new job during this period. Others will derive more enjoyment from the current job. Work tends to be very easily accessible to you. This is a time when you renew your energy and consider what things are important to you.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22)

Your natural talents would meet with reward and acceptance. Practical matters are a large focus and are very strong. More security in your job is likely. You are more willing than usual to work diligently for money, and your natural talents are likely to be utilized more in the work you do and appreciated by others. You would enjoy some time in your family and there you find affection and love. This is altogether a happy and relaxed time for you. Take care of your health and adopt a routine of regular walk and exercise

Leo: (July 23 - August 23)

Communication, creativity and authority in professional matters are highlighted as an exciting job offer, reward, recognition, or promotion is possible. An opportunity to expand on a global level arrives now. You would have more energy for work and your daily routines tend to speed up now. Perhaps you have a larger workload than usual. You are ready to perform and express yourself and take charge and responsibilities on your shoulders. This is a very significant period when you are inspired creatively and emotionally. Romance could make you think along serious or practical lines and look to a more committed relationship.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22)

This is a phase that brings fun, entertaining events and happiness to the fore. Your effectiveness, self-worth and finances are also highlighted. This stage of your life may be

marked by hard work. Financial success may not be remarkable, yet it is generally steady, if slow to come by. Matters of personal courage, confidence and independence are emerging. Issues surrounding income from foreign sources could also figure at this time. You should be careful not to over-analyze your relationships. You feel on top of things with good health and positive energy.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23)

You would participate in current events and share views, ideas and feelings with people around you. You are in a position to inspire others through what you create. Turning a hobby or favorite pastime into a career could also figure. Partnership ups and downs continue to persist, as you struggle with matters of freedom and dependency. Children may require more discipline or attention. You may also bring more creativity into the work you do. Health is likely to prosper and medical procedures or programs, if necessary, are more apt to be successful.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22)

Good financial returns are on the cards. 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 may visit religious places and strong feelings towards religion are enhanced. You learn to look inside of yourself with a newfound clarity and realism and ideally draw up considerable strength from within. You are full of energy and indulge in sports and other physical activities or a structured exercise routine.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21)

The planetary combination opens new horizons in your romantic and love life. You would pay attention to various ways to increase personal funds. You are bound to experience your fair share of fun, and good times. Creative projects are likely to fare well, and could possibly even bring some type of recognition. Love and romance may enter your life or is enhanced with good humor and warmth, and social engagements abound. For singles, meeting a special person is highly likely. Health is likely to prosper and medical procedures or health programs, if necessary, are more apt to be successful.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20)

You would be more receptive and gentle on a romantic level, and tend to be sentimental about work commitments. Investments in stocks and other speculative matters could earn tidy profits, although care should be exercised with any dealings that tie you to other people and others' money. Your creativity and social life are stimulated, and plenty of opportunities to express yourself uniquely and creatively will present themselves. Relationships with your children may be especially fulfilling now. The desire for some form of recognition is going to be strong.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18)

This is a fabulous period in which to take the vacation you have always wanted to take. Those with artistic or athletic talent can be especially prolific and prosperous at this time. You may find great joy and reward in your creative projects and hobbies, and could discover a new hobby or creative talent you never knew you had. Healthy risks are likely to pay off, but be careful of overconfidence in speculative investments. Pleasure-seeking activities, recreation, and amusement are increased. Health is likely to prosper.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20)

This phase highlights friendship, love, romance and children in your life. You may visit and spend a lot of time in the company of your friends and loved ones. This is also a favorable time to go for higher learning and joining new courses to improve your professional skills and efficiency. Your family would be more supportive as this is the best time to bring more harmony and pleasant interactions to your relationships and feel more comfortable. These positive circumstances will not necessarily fall into your lap, and are unlikely to come all at once. You need to keep your eyes open for opportunities in these areas of life.

Forgotten legend

By Prasanta Talukdar

Gauripur of Dhubri district in western Assam is said to be the leading centre of music, drama and culture of Assam. The ruling zamindars of Gauripur Estate made impressive contributions to the development of music, drama, fine arts and indigenous culture of this region. Rai Bahadur Raja Prabhat Chandra Barua was a famous zamindar and the main patron of music, drama, fine arts, sports and indigenous culture of western Assam.

Raja Prabhat Chandra Barua himself was a patron of learning, promoter of music, drama, arts, sports and local culture and contributed a lot to the growth of Goalpariya Folk songs.

Pramathesh Chandra Barua, the pioneer of Indian cinema, was the eldest son of Raja Prabhat Chandra Barua. Born on October 24, 1903, Pramathesh was into drawing, singing, and photography and was especially attracted to drama and theatre from his childhood.

Prabhat Chandra had deep interest in drama and he provided his son all support to bloom as an artiste. Pramathesh directed a drama 'Fulshor' at Gauripur and his father was the music director. He encouraged and assisted Brother Union Dramatic Club by providing them a permanent stage and a drama hall. He even donated dresses and musical instruments to this club.

Being a member of the royal family, Pramathesh was elected twice as representative to Assam Legislative Council. But he opted for a cultural life and devoted himself to the development of the cinematography.

He did graduation in science from Presidency College, Kolkata, in 1924. He was also a member of Senate of Calcutta University. But nothing could attract him more than the cinema world.

Pramathesh started his film career as a member of



the 'British Dominion Film Company' in 1926. In 1929, he appeared for the first time on the silver screen through a film named 'Panchashar'. But as an actor his first film was 'Takay Ki Na Hay', which was released in 1931. Then, he went to Paris to study film technology. He gathered knowledge in cinematography in Paris. He learned a lot about lighting. When he returned home, he brought with him some important instruments for film-making.

Pramathesh founded his own unit of film production known as 'Barua Film Unit' and began production of film with his own direction and production. Under his own unit he produced films like 'Aparadhi' (1931) and 'Ekada' (1932).

However, his film unit did not last long and in 1933, he joined the 'New Theatre Limited'. Under this unit,

a series of great films, like 'Ruplekha' (1934), 'Devdas' (1935) and 'Grihadah' (1936), were produced.

His breakthrough came through Devdas. The film was first made in Bengali, with Pramathesh playing the title role. In 1936, he remade Devdas in Hindi with KL Saigal in the lead role.

The Hindi version became a craze all over India and cemented Pramathesh as a top-notch director. He reached the zenith in the film world and he popularly came to be known as 'Devdas Barua'.

Pramathesh introduced modern systems in Indian cinema and brought a revolutionary change to it. He first introduced artificial light in shooting of a film. Before that all the shooting were done in natural light. He was the inventor of the flash back system in cinema and introduced outdoor shooting in film.

In 'Mukti' (1937), he first applied outdoor shooting and most of the shooting were made in Gauripur Palace and its surrounding areas. Kabiguru Rabindra Nath Tagore named the film as 'Mukti'. Concerning filmmaking, Pramathesh observed strict discipline and did everything systematically. He emphasised more on songs in film for which he is said to be the pioneer of the new trend of films where songs are an important ingredient.

Pramathesh Chandra Barua was the first Assamese who occupied so high position in Hindi as well as Bengali cinema. None can deny the valuable contribution of Barua to the evolution of Indian cinema.

In most of his previous films, Pramathesh Barua had a tragic hero. But in 1939, he made a movie 'Rajajayanti' that made people burst out with laughter. This film is considered to be the first Indian comedy cinema. In 1940, Pramathesh made 'Shapmukti' which greatly appealed to viewers.

Pramathesh is remembered for his creative role in cinematography. He was a dramatist, writer, editor, recorder, photographer, cinematographer, director and producer all in one. It is to be mentioned here that the people of Assam had some grievances that being an Assamese by birth and spirit, Barua had not made a single film in Assamese. However, he was about to start making film in Assamese but before its completion, he died on November 29, 1951 at the age of 48.

Pramathesh Barua is not only the pride of undivided Assam but also his creativeness, sacrifice, love, affection and devotion to the Indian cinema conquered the hearts of film lovers. He is remembered for his own style in Hindi cinema that was called 'Barua style'. But in the wave of time, many may have forgotten this cultural legend from undivided Assam.

(The author works with Tattva Creations)

Fibre to fabric a lucrative way

By Ranjan K Baruah

Fibre to fabric is possible in many ways. The northeastern region is full of handlooms with unique indigenous designs. To make the finished goods we need raw materials which can be produced locally and this is an area where many of our people may get engaged.

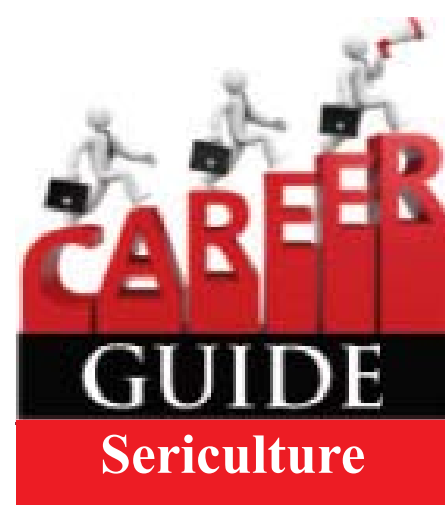
In today's edition, we will inform our readers about sericulture and how it can be an academic field of study as well as entrepreneurial choice. Sericulture is an agro-based industry and involves rearing of silkworms for the production of raw silk, which is the yarn obtained out of cocoons spun by certain species of insects.

In India, approximately 60 lakh persons are engaged in various sericulture activities. It can engage more number of people in rural areas and especially amongst communities which have been doing it for ages. The best part is it can be practised even with very low land holding.

The silk is acquired from both insect and non-insect fauna. The insect fauna mostly comprises mulberry and non-mulberry silkworms. In India, mulberry silk supply is about 75 per cent.

The Sericulture sector is unique in the sense that every stage involves art, science and technology. Sericulture education has gained thrust in the country during XII Five Year Plan period to cater to the needs of manpower in this sector. It is an upcoming higher education area to generate globally competent and professionally motivated technical human resources.

Assam Agriculture University has set of College of Sericulture at Titabot. The college, established in 1914, is about 25 km away from Jorhat (presently being run from Assam Agriculture University). The degree programme offered is B.Sc. (Hons) Sericulture of eight semesters. The departments offering undergraduate courses are: Agriculture and Allied Subjects, Basic Sciences and Humanities, Cocoon Crop Production, Host Plant Production, Sericulture Crop Improvement and Silk Product Science.



CSB: The Central Silk Board (CSB) is a Statutory Body, established during 1948, by an Act of Parliament (Act No. LXI of 1948). It functions under the administrative control of the Ministry of Textiles. The Board comprises 39 members appointed as per the powers and provisions conferred by Sub-Section 3 of Section 4 of the CSB Act 1948, for a period of 3 years.

CMERT: Central Muga Eri Research & Training Institute is an R&D institute in the field of muga and eri culture. It is under the control of Central Silk Board, Ministry of Textiles. The institute has been successfully undertaking entire gamut of R&D activities to cater to the needs of the on-farm and post-cocoon sector of Muga and Eri sericulture. Muga and eri culture is a rural industry in the country.

(The author is a career mentor and can be reached at bkranjan@gmail.com or 8473943734 for any career related queries)

"Ability may get you to the top, but it takes character to keep you there."
--- Oscar Wilde

The Shillong Times

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Lanka under Rajapaksas

SRI Lanka voted for stability and installed a government led by veteran Mahinda Rajapaksa on Sunday, after the Sri Lanka People’s Front led by him won a landslide win in parliamentary polls last week. Occupying the top executive post for the fourth time, Rajapaksa will have sweeping authority to effect even Constitutional changes in view of the two-thirds majority the alliance got in Parliament. This, as also the able backing from his brother Gotabaya Rajapaksa in the post of the Island nation’s president, would mean the government will be unassailable by all means. Political stability is a pre-requisite to take the nation forward. Mahinda Rajapaksa established his clout by decimating the LTTE separatist outfit led by Tamil provincial and militant leader Velupillai Prabhakaran during his 10-year term from 2005. The quarter of a century-old militancy, with some backing from pro-Tamil entities in Tamil Nadu as well, did no good to the people whose cause Prabhakaran and the LTTE sought to uphold. Successive governments in Sri Lanka were found wanting in facing up to the lethality of the LTTE. The security forces there had a penchant to cut and run, faced with aggressive offensives from the LTTE. Rajapaksa with able help from his brother in a senior government capacity put down the violence with a heavy hand, drawing support even from Pakistan’s battle-hardened military, and eventually eliminated Prabhakaran as also his second line of leaders.

Neither India nor Sri Lanka can allow separatist tendencies to sprout. Only weak leaderships allow such situations to worsen. Rajapaksa proved his worth and the family is now in the most commanding position, holding the post of both president and prime minister. The two have made it clear, repeatedly, that they wanted to maintain the fraternal ties with India even as they were close to the successive Chinese leaderships. China is endearing itself to Sri Lanka and extending infrastructural support as in the case of a port and extending financial support in other ways too. But Sri Lanka cannot afford to fall into the hands of the Chinese the way Pakistan has done. The line of credit facility India recently extended to Sri Lanka is a case in point. It is true that the LTTE stood in the way of better relations between the two countries in the past. That scenario is mostly history now. This is time for both nations to explore the positives to further strengthen ties. A stable political climate in Sri Lanka should be in India’s favour as well in terms of negotiations and diplomacy.

TO THE EDITOR

Volunteer instead of pointing fingers

Editor,
The suggestions and advisories in the letter to the editor, "On containment zones in Malki localities" (ST Aug 4, 2020) by an anonymous author, are well received. However, in spite of all the efforts made by the Executive Dorbar here at Malki, we admit that there are shortcomings simply, because we do not have the experience needed to tackle the issues/challenges arising on account of the prevailing CoViD-19 pandemic.

Standing on a hilltop and pointing fingers at the people down below who are fighting to help others in their community tide over the advancing calamity is easy, but a better thing that one can do is to come down and lend a helping hand to the Dorbar, instead.

The Dorbar invites the individual who wrote the letter to come forward and perform the duties as they have detailed in their letter. The Dorbar is pleased to welcome any social worker who would like to volunteer and render their services that the Dorbar could really use at this trying time.

Lastly, the information in question was not provided to the media by this Dorbar. It was, most likely, obtained

through copies of orders issued by government authorities and widely circulated via various social media platforms.

Yours etc.,
HP Oflyn Dohling
Rangbah Shnong
Dorbar Shnong, Malki
Shillong - 1

No VIP privileges please!

Editor,
This has a reference to the road accident involving the vehicle allegedly driven by an unnamed VVIP and the police cover up in the matter. Right to personal privacy should be respected, except when public figures are involved. Why didn't the police disclose the name of the offender? Did they feel that the act of the offender is more moral than their duty to uphold the law? The police by not disclosing the name and sweeping the incident under the carpet has acted in a more immoral manner than the offense of the VVIP. Did they act to shelter the VVIP out of fear? From the strict moralistic position, the police should have disclosed the name of the offender since the VVIP had clearly violated the law and he should have been subjected to the same sets of laws as every member of society.

When adversity turns to opportunity

By HH Mohrmen

places in the region. The streets were always littered with waste nearly every day and even on Sundays when much of the market is closed. The sweepers of Jowai Municipal Board find it difficult to ensure that the streets and the markets are kept clean even for an hour in a day. The condition of the market was a cause of embarrassment to the Dorbar Chnong under which ĩawmusiang is located and also to the people living in the area.

In their effort to keep the market clean, the erstwhile Jowai town committee and the district administration regularly organised cleaning drives to educate people about the importance of keeping the market clean. Awareness programmes at different points of time were organised to inculcate the habit of not littering the road and to keep the market clean.

Deputy Commissioners have come and gone and the many efforts to clean ĩawmusiang initiated by the Deputy Commissioner’s office in collaboration with the Dorbar Chnong Tympang ĩawmusiang and other stakeholders become a futile exercise. In fact it has become like a ritual that every October 2, the DC, the Jowai Municipal Board, the Dorbar Chnong would continue with the exercise which did not yield any satisfactory outcome.

Since a major part of the festival was also celebrated in the area, every year prior to every Behdienkhlam, the Seĩn Raid Jowai too, organises cleaning drives but the endeavour became a wasteful exercise because no sooner did the volunteers clean the area than waste started to collect everywhere all over again.

Last year there was an effort by the Jowai Clean Green campaign to help maintain cleanliness in the entire ĩawmusiang area. The campaign was the outcome of the meeting on October 9, at Orchid Inn initiated as part of the Platinum Jubilee celebration of The Shillong Times daily newspaper. As part of the celebration, The Shillong Times was working on a Clean Shillong Campaign rightly named ‘Operation Clean-Up’ which was intended to culminate at the end of the jubilee celebration on August 9

this year. Taking leave from this campaign, some residents of Jowai town who met Mr Manas Chaudhuri and Patricia Mukhim of the Shillong Times decided to launch a similar campaign in Jowai too. It was later called the ‘Clean Green Jowai Campaign’ and it has only two goals, - to make ĩawmusiang the main market area of Jowai clean and to ensure that river Myntdu is also clean.

To achieve these twin goals, the organisers of the campaign solicited the support of all stakeholders starting with the office the Deputy Commissioner West Jaintia Hills, the office of the Jowai Municipal Board, the Jaintia Hills Autonomous District Council, Jowai, the Police Department, the Dorbar Chnong Tympang ĩawmusiang, the management committees of different markets in the ĩawmusiang area and of course the shopkeepers, hawkers and vendors. It may be mentioned that although the place is called ĩawmusiang, the district council market has in fact been shifted to a new place called ĩawthymme near Dongmihnsngi, Ladthalaboh, Jowai. The District Council market is under construction and heaven knows when the new market will see the light of day.

After ĩawmusiang was shifted to ĩawthymme, the place saw the emergence of three more markets. All the three markets surfaced in the space owned by different faith groups in Jowai and this made matters more complex because there are many stakeholders involved in the issue.

Initially on October 18, the Clean Green Jowai Campaign organised a meeting at Thomas Jones College where all the stakeholders were present. The meeting was a platform where for the first time in the history of the market all the stakeholders which included the District Administration, the Jowai Municipal Board, the management of different markets which included Seĩn Raid Jowai, Presbyterian Church Jowai, Church of North India Jowai, the Jaintia Hills Autonomous District Council, the Police Department, and the Traders Associations met to discuss on this very important issue.

The meeting came up with many solutions which the stakeholders hoped would help bring change in the market area.

The first awareness campaign cum cleaning drive was organised by the Clean Green Jowai Campaign on October 9 and the second cleaning drive and awareness campaign was organised on the December 21. Both the campaigns were supported by the NSS volunteers from the Kiang Nanngbah Government College and Thomas Jones College. The Jowai Clean Green Campaign also paid for weekly cleaning of the area in which the members contributed to the cost.

Then lockdown due to the corona virus pandemic started and coincidentally the Dorbar Chnong Tympang ĩawmusiang has just elected a new Waheh Chnong and his komiti chnong. The young dynamic leader immediately took the task head on. When lockdown was gradually unlocked and the District Administration decided to open the biggest and the oldest market in Jaintia Hills, the Dorbar Chnong at the same time took the opportunity to maintain cleanliness in the market. As the traders were allowed to resume their trade and shop and commercial activities in the area opened up, maintaining cleanliness was made mandatory for all those engaged in doing business in the area.

The Waheh Chnong of Dorbar Chnong Tympang ĩawmusiang in collaboration with the JMB, the office of the DC, Jowai and particularly the management committees of the different private markets have been able to bring the much desired facelift to the ĩawmusiang market. It has been more than a month since the new arrangement was made and ĩawmusing now wears a different look. Encouraged by the success of the cleaning of the market, the Dorbar Chnong recently decided to ban the use of plastic carry bags in the market. Shoppers are now encouraged to bring their own bags when they do their shopping in the ĩawmusiang market.

In the near future when people recount the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the people of this state, this will be one positive story to recount, because it is a story of how adversity was turned into an opportunity. (hhmohrmen67@gmail.com)

women is almost the same but men accounted for almost 70% of the COVID 19 deaths. Then, it was opined that women, in the process of caring for their families through washing, cleaning and cooking, actually practiced more hygiene than men thus protecting them from viral infection. But then again this did not explain the high mortality rate among men in developed countries such as the USA where most domestic chores are automated and utilities such as water and necessities such as food are actually more sterilized.

Medical practitioners have acknowledged that co-morbidities, such as diabetes, cancer, and obesity are contributing factors in the COVID 19 mortality. However, these two factors can and have affected the worldwide general population irrespective of gender. Therefore, it does not explain why more men die of the virus than women do, even if both the man and woman have co-morbidities or are obese.

Therefore, the conclusion boils down to biological make up; genes and chromosomes. It was concluded that women had, and have, a stronger immune system because they are biological life givers, caregivers and nurturers. Their bodies are designed to build, nurture and protect life and thus they more prepared for viruses. Furthermore,

women as caregivers, professionally as health care providers and in the domestic front, are more exposed to viruses and thus their bodies have attained a stronger response to viruses.

What then does such data suggest? On the factual front, it is obvious that more men die of this virus than women do. On the economic and social front, the difficulties of such a finding are confounded. There are the dangers faced by the father/ husband/ brother/ male member of the family who, in the course of providing for the family, may be more susceptible to not only contracting and spreading the virus but also dying from it, leaving the family helpless and on their own. There is the psychological stress and uncertainty on the part of men as they go about their business knowing that a fatal viral infection lurks about them and can affect them more than their counterparts, even if they follow all the hygiene and physical distancing protocols. Men are vulnerable even if they are healthy and strong, simply because of their genes and chromosomes, elements they cannot change and thus they are left more vulnerable and helpless than others are.

Yours etc.,
Joshua Rynjah
Shillong- 14.

Why reservation within reservation for NE tribes make sense

By: T S Haokip

The just declared UPSC 2019 results have witnessed a particular ST community outside the North-Eastern region grabbing more than 40% of the total ST reserved seats. This is not the first instance and not the only type of examination dominated by the said community; SSC, IBPS, and Railways- the largest recruiter for Government and Public sector enterprises too have similar pictures. The founding fathers of our Constitution having felt the genuine need for an idea of equality in terms of employment opportunities apart from politics had envisaged in the constitution the provision for the state to reserve seats for certain sections of the society who were underprivileged, backward and cut out from social, political and economic development not just during the British Raj but for centuries altogether. While many argued that the idea of positive discrimination is against equality, it is in practice an initiative to ensure equality on a larger perspective.

The importance of representation in legislation has a geographically earmarked constituency and as such has met its intended purpose. However, in the case of job opportunities, there is a systemic flaw; it does not guarantee equitable opportunities to all as more backward communities in the STs are yet to taste the fruit of reservation.

Performance scene in 2019-2020

The number of successful ST candidates from North East India in the UPSC exam 2019 is just 4 candidates with three states having predominant tribal population securing nil - Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, and Mizoram. While Nagaland is contented with one successful candidate, ST candidates from Manipur who constitute 40 % of the state population and those from Tripura too scored zero. The sum of all the tribal communities from NE India clearing UPSC exam 2019 is less than 15% of those qualified candidates from a single Tribal community outside NE- the Meenas. Since long, the said community has occupied the majority share of tribal vacancies in various recruitment processes. Nevertheless, it is not the particular community’s fault; the system has inherent flaws, if we are to consider that the affirmative action in recruitment is intended in true spirit to uplift the tribal community as a whole.

Peculiar Concerns of NE Tribals

The promise for equality enshrined in Article 15 and 16 of the Indian constitution, which is the basis for Government to formulate a system that ensures that the socially, historically and currently underprivileged groups are represented well in politics, jobs, and education cannot be said to be successful without NE tribals being adequately represented in the system. The argument is all the more valid when one considers the criteria to which a community can be listed in ST and the instances where there have been periodical addition of communities in the scheduled list while the size of the piece of cake to be shared remains the same. Graver is the concern when one considers a situation where a more advantageous community is added to the Scheduled Tribe list; as then, many backward tribal communities will find it tougher to avail the opportunity, thereby defeating the whole purpose of reservation itself. That seems to be the case at present.

Already the people of North East India, especially the tribals have faced innumerable social stigma even after 70 years of Independence. Development is still a far cry in most areas where things as basic as education, housing, electricity, and all-weather roads are yet to make their

mark. While representation in legislation exists, the lack of NE tribals in the top executive echelon, where policies are drafted could be one factor for the region to be alienated from the showers of development India is supposedly drenched with.

Creamy-layer concept among tribals?

Some people have mooted the idea of introducing the creamy layer factor among the STs in the same manner and fashion as done among the OBCs. The move, while it may be feasible for mainland tribals, who have communities more advanced, uplifted and accessing development initiatives for generations, will not be feasible among NE tribals as most of those individuals to be categorized as creamy layers are first-generation achievers. For the first generation individuals of NE STs that could be classified as creamy layer, their responsibilities are huge and their dependents are vast-sometimes a whole village. If their ward(s) are excluded from the opportunity of availing ST reservation, the odds of that family returning to the same situation where their parents first began- all in a span of one generation, is imminently high. It is therefore not advisable to cream them out at least for now.

Argument of efforts

Amid the trending discussion on the performance of NE Tribals in UPSC exams, some voices opined that it is effort that matters and that it is the lack of effort among NE tribal candidates that has eventually resulted in their dismal performance. The argument might partially hold good for many non-serious contenders. However, that does not justify the underlying concerns why irrespective of rendering in their 100 percent, many people from the underprivileged ST communities will never match up when judged with the same yardstick as those in a better position since the past many generations. Arguments like this have failed to consider the condition of how tribals were subjugated for centuries; most importantly, it is an indirect justification to do away with reservation altogether, ignoring the fundamental cause and concerns which first necessitated an affirmative action of equality.

The percentage of opportunity

In the same way, 7.5 % of vacancies are reserved for the Scheduled Tribes, at least 20% of those ST seats should be reserved for the NE- STs. This will ensure at the least, that the benefits of reservation are not reaped by a single affluent community - all in the name of Scheduled Tribes, of which the NE tribal have been the marginalized lots. The intention here is not to be mistaken for advocating a rigid solution but rather exploring the possibilities to ensure that the whole purpose of reservation is not defeated as is possible in the present system.

Tatkal solution

Reservation within reservation seems to be the only ideal option to ensure that our goal of uplifting the tribal people is achieved in a holistic manner. The present system rather presents a picture of mere fulfillment of a statute i.e. the existence of a scheme for the upliftment of tribal people by way of providing special opportunity in jobs and recruitment. Serious concerns like the unmistakable disproportionate division of shares, where the majority of it is benefited by only a section or a particular community have been overlooked by our policy-makers as well as those implementing it. Reservation is a magnificent tool to draw the gap, which is only widening, between the tribal people and other general communities. If we truly believe in our commitment to uplift the tribal people, the reservation policy for STs with regards to NE tribals has to be relooked.

(The writer is a freelance writer and author of the book HILLY DREAMS. Email: 8winkipz@gmail.com)

“When the missionaries came to Africa they had the Bible and we had the land. They said ‘Let us pray.’ We closed our eyes. When we opened them we had the Bible and they had the land.”

— Desmond Tutu

The Shillong Times

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SHILLONG, TUESDAY, AUGUST 11, 2020

Railways : A public utility

THE pressure groups are at it again. For decades it was the Khasi Students’ Union (KSU) that opposed the railways on the plea that trains would cause influx and pose a threat to the indigenous people. Yet this group provides no alternative proposal for cheaper means of mass transportation. At one time it was believed that the truckers’ lobby was behind this opposition. That may not be far from the truth. The irony is that Meghalaya is dependent on other states for utility goods to essential food items; from pins to soaps to cooking oil. Railways would have made it cheaper for goods to be transported here and vice versa.

However the KSU are not the only ones afraid of the railways. The USA too had opposed railway lines in the beginning of the 18th century. They got over it when they realised the value of this transportation system. Jobs, contracts, supplies are out of bounds for local contractors at present, although the NorthEast Frontier Railways (NFR) is only a hundred kms away. People have to leverage the benefits of having railways in the state. Having a rail link up to Byrnihat can in no way endanger the identity of the tribes. If it didn't during the British regime, when there was no protection mechanism; if it remained undiluted during Assam days, how on earth can anybody think that tribes would become swamped by outsiders? This doesn't convince. It betrays a mindset that anything new must necessarily be opposed.

This time around it is the Federation of Khasi-Jaintia-Garo Peoples (FKJGP) that is opposing railways in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills while their counterparts in Garo Hills have benefitted from the coming of the railways to Mendipathar. Today the Mendipathar railway station is a hub of activity and has enabled people to transport their agricultural products from Garo Hills and in turn bring back essential food and other items from the rest of the country. It would therefore appear that the people of Garo Hills are far more progressive and understand the advantages of having railways. Hence they would not have allowed any opposition to the railways project. In the Khasi-Jaintia Hills, there have been no public discussions on the matter. Pressure groups have taken it for granted that the public of Khasi-Jaintia Hills also oppose the railways.

The Khasi-Jaintia region of Meghalaya, on the contrary, has been wrestling with the idea of railways for over four decades now. Meghalaya is turning fifty in 2022. The state must muster courage to make railways a Golden Jubilee project.

Status change of religious sites

Does worshiping in them please God?

By Albert Thyrniang

into churches.

Christianisation continued in the middle ages in France, Britain, Northern Europe and elsewhere. Old Roman pagan sites turned into churches. During the Portuguese and Spanish "re-conquests" in the Iberian Peninsula (Southwest corner of Europe) and the Balkan Peninsula (South Eastern Europe) mosques became churches. A similar case to that of Hagia Sophia is the Cathedral of Córdoba. Traditional accounts say, a Catholic basilica once stood on the site. In 784 Abd al-Rahman I, (founder of the Muslim dynasty that ruled the greater part of Iberian Peninsula) demolished the original structure after having purchased the other half used by Christians and built the grand mosque of Córdoba on its grounds. The accomplished architecture was reconverted into a Catholic cathedral in 1236.

The exploration and colonisation of the 16th and 17th centuries saw Native American temples turned into churches, notably the Mexico City Metropolitan cathedral was built on an Aztec temple. In Vietnam and India, Goa (French and Portuguese occupation respectively) many Buddhists and native temples made way for churches.

Islamised sites

Beginning with Prophet Muhammad himself, converting non-Islamic places of worship into mosques was prevalent throughout the Islamic conquests. The first one was of course the Ka'aba in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. Before the advent of Islam the sacred shrine was a common pilgrimage site that housed hundreds of idols of the Arabian tribes and others as well. Following the bloodless conquest of Mecca in 630 AD all idols were broken and the complex was transformed into a Muslim mosque, the most sacred Muslim pilgrimage centre today.

The subsequent conversion of mosques from non-Islamic places of worship is an endless list. They include Jewish temples and Christian sanctuaries in Jerusalem, Zoroastrian fire temples in Persia, churches in Albania, Bosnia and Hercegovina, Cyprus, Greece, Hungary, Lebanon, Morocco, Syria, France and Spain particularly by the Ottoman emperors. In the Indian subcontinent Hindu temples and Buddhist pagodas were converted into mosques by Mughal rulers and emperors.

In Turkey following the Ottoman conquest at least 20 (practically all) churches of the then Constantinople (now Istanbul) were desecrated and converted into mosques. Hagia Sophia is

the most prominent.

The trend carried on. In North Africa several cathedrals and churches were confiscated and/or forcibly converted into mosques in the mid-20th century. The dreaded Islamic State of Iraq and Syria have converted a number of Christian churches into mosques.

In United Kingdom, France and Germany many church buildings and other religious congregations that were dissolved have been converted into mosques following property sale.

"Hinduised" sites

In India there have been campaigns to reclaim mosques and churches allegedly build on demolished temples. The 15th century historic Babri Masjid was illegally razed to ground by Hindu zealots on December 6, 1992. In November last year the Supreme Court of India 'resolved' the 134 year old dispute by controversially handing over the entire 2.77 acres of dispute site to a Hindu trust to rebuild the Ram temple.

Though protected by law, other contested sites might meet the Ayodhya fate as the Babri Masjid's demolition proved. Gyanvapi mosque, Varanasi, Shahi Idgah mosque, Mathura, Kamal Maula mosque, Madhya Pradesh, Quwwatul-Islam mosque, Delhi and Nawab Ali mosque, Delhi are also in danger.

Does God dwell in 'tainted' sites?

Though largely peaceful, Christianisation of non-Christian sites were done with a spirit of triumphalism (triumph of the Christian God over pagan gods). Islamisation of non-Muslim sites were however less peaceful. Desecration and vandalism often followed the proclamation of the triumph of Allah over infidels through conversions.

Now, what does it feel when one worships in Hagia Sophia knowing fully well that it was a church? Will that worship please Allah when the structure was a Byzantine site for nearly 1000 years? Will Allah listen to those prostrating in prayer performed with a vindictive mind? Would Allah approve of converting the celebrated museum into a mosque

again? Similar questions could be directed to Ram devotees. Is it not disturbing to be praying in a venue with the images of the illegal destruction of Babri Masjid in mind? How would it be like to be praying in a temple when it is not established that beneath it was indeed a temple before Babri Masjid was erected? If the Cathedral of Córdoba in Spain was truly a mosque and churches in Goa and elsewhere were temples, is worship in these structures worthwhile? Is God even present in these tainted religious places?

Muslims in Turkey might say Hagia Sophia's mosque conversion is legal, Hindus in India will argue that the Ram temple will be built following due process of law, Christians in Spain may also contend that Córdoba was reconverted into a cathedral as per law. Well, religion is more than law. All that is legal is not moral and ethical. There is something called propriety. All religions teach virtues of love, peace, harmony and brotherhood. However, these conversions and reconversions of places of worship is done with vindictiveness and hatred. Hagia Sophia's supporters blame Córdoba, Ram temple's devotees cite Hagia Sophia; Córdoba enthusiasts point fingers at Hagia Sophia.

Religious mistrust is evident today. There is Islamophobia, harassment, discrimination and persecution of Muslims in Europe, America and in 'non-Muslim' countries like India, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, etc but in Muslim countries Christians and followers of other religions face discrimination from governments and violence from Islamist terrorists. In Saudi Arabia even display of religious signs, other than Islam, is punishable. In many Muslim countries religious freedom is non-existent or very limited.

At the heart of religious violence, discord and the change of status of religious sites is the belief that one religion is superior to all others. This supremacist conviction is the cause of religious expansion disrespecting other beliefs. You may have all the conviction that your religion is the best but respect others with a different belief. There is a need for tolerance because God is tolerant. There is no revelation to hate, despise and look down on other faiths. God belongs to no religion in particular. There is no fanatical, fundamentalist and radical God. He is the God of all.

(E m a i l : thalbert@rediffmail.com)

Our evil motives desecrate our religions

By Salil Gewali

Apropos the eye-opening article – “Niamtre, Hinduism and Ram Temple in Ayodhya” by HH Mohrmn (ST, 3rd Aug, 2020), I have some pertinent views to share. The writer has minced no words to suggest how the indigenous faiths and their treasured values and traditions are disappearing as their followers’ population is rapidly dwindling. I will not comment on the reasons for why that has happened. The writer has profusely quoted from a visionary article by a noted scholar Albert Thyrniang published under the caption ‘Is it possible to turn back the clock’ (ST July 4, 2020). Of course, both writers have expressed their viewpoints very logically. Both articles have struck a chord with many people who truly think and have vision and concerns for society at large. Of course, similar concerns and laments have time and again been expressed by several scholars and social activists belonging to various states in India and many countries/provinces abroad.

Yes, as humans first of all, we should not offend any believer or even non-believers/atheists living in this

cepts” of religion are encouraged to see fault with others’ values by doggedly claiming their religion as the only THE WAY TO GOD. It is infantile to say the least. It's like a baby claiming his/her “father” to be the best. Therefore, if we critically analyze the reasons for the deep-seated acrimony and antagonism among various existing religions on earth, it only makes us laugh. Is it not outrageously irreligious that the followers of a sacred path of spirituality are baying for the blood of those who do not worship their God(s)? I think an eye for an eye should not be the tenet of any religion. By teaching the “exclusivity” of one’s religion from the pulpit of religiosity, I believe, we have only brought out “satan” from deep inside us. Such unscientific and flawed practice has become a recipe for the disaster since ages. Even the pure discoveries of the rotation and revolution of science were resisted and countless “rational” thinkers were persecuted. It hardly occurred to the ardent believers of God that He always frowns on bigotry and hatred. God shuts the heavenly doors upon those



habitable earth. As fellow beings in the midst of diversity, we should learn to live together in perfect amity and harmony. The “effort” for peaceful co-existence and fostering love among all living creatures itself is no less than a pathway to God. This becomes possible only when we can foster mutual love and tolerance. But what is disgusting is that, it is often observed that due to the existence of many religions, people have grown abnormally intolerant. Very ironically, the more religious a person is, the more intolerant he is. Why does one have to carry the load of prejudice against the adherents of other faiths?

Is it not irreligious to disrespect other religions/traditions/customs -- be it Hindu or Christian or Muslim or tribal...? I am sharing these thoughts because I am concerned about the prevailing feeling of “open hatred” among various religions across the globe. We never hesitate to misinterpret Sati, Caste system, Triple Talaq, criminalization of LGBT... as if God or the Holy Scriptures have given us sanction to spread evil. We actively look for ways to malign other faiths/customs to further our individual missions.

One wonders, why people following the “holy pre-

who perpetuate hatred in the name of spiritualism.

It is my firm belief that for the sake of “humanity” and in order to restore peace in this world of chaos, why not we consider to have one “additional line” mandatorily inscribed on the front page of all holy books saying, “THERE ARE SEVERAL PATHS THAT LEADS TO GOD; LET US RESPECT EACH RELIGION”. As children of “one God”, to claim that “MY RELIGION ONLY” leads to the Almighty is unacceptable. This has literally taken a toll on “humanity”. For this wrong teaching and preaching of “exclusivity”, we have witnessed so much of hatred and bloodshed. Everything can be patented and copyrighted but not the path leading to God or self-realization. Moreover, God never loves those who lack humanity and morals while being filled with malice towards others. Nevertheless, those who still believe the fact that following the religion of bigotry and hatred will please God then he is wrong and that belief system is wrong. One need not follow any paths at all, but if he or she loves and serves all without discrimination and self-interest, God will surely shower blessings him or her.

(E m a i l : sgewali1@gmail.com)

TO THE EDITOR

Covidiots galore!

Editor,
With the rise in Covid cases everyday in our state, an atmosphere of fear and panic has set in the minds of the citizens of the state. The healthcare workers are overwhelmed and many of them have fallen prey to the virus. Therefore it's frustrating to see that in such a situation 'Covidiots' still abound in the state. The most recent case is that of the pharmacist in question who suddenly felt the need to discharge his 'husbandly' duties of dropping his wife to work whilst still under quarantine. That an educated man in the healthcare sector felt it was his birthright to flout norms without anyone noticing at the quarantine center speaks volumes of the lackadaisical attitude of those on duty there. He

had the audacity to drive out and then calmly drive back with not a care in the world as to the number of people he so casually infected, thereby putting them at risk.

This is akin to biological warfare and he should be given the most stringent of punishment. The government has gone on record that it would see to it that he is punished. It now remains to be seen what the outcome would be.

On the other hand, many of us would have been aware of the 'Jeep Incident' where another 'Idiot' flouted rules which led to an accident. However, when our Deputy CM was asked about it by a member of the press, he was nonchalant about it as if such incidents of flouting rules are an everyday affair thereby insinuating that if you are related to a high-up in the government, it's okay as rules of curfew

are not meant for them.

As citizens we understand that all have to work together especially in this scenario of the Pandemic. However the government needs to tighten the reins on erring officials and citizens so that the faith of the public is restored and thus we can all come out of this situation more resilient than ever.

Yours etc.,
Angela Lyngdoh,
Via email

Covid captives

Editor,
All those movies about invasion by aliens have come true. These aliens are not mechatronic robots or multi-eyed blobs, but invisible slivers of RNA from who knows where. They've closed our borders, shackled us to our homes, and preyed on our brains.

As the Editor has

pointed out (ST Aug 7, 2020), we are “Caught between the Devil and the Deep Sea”. The Devil is named Covid and the economy is drowning in the Deep Sea. Apart from a handful of small island countries, every other country, rich or poor, well-administered or chaotic, has seen spikes and surges, even with the most cautious unlocking.

The best leadership and the best brains seem baffled and bewildered. We are caught in a vicious cycle of lock and unlock, and their various versions. Punctuating this cycle with testing and treating seems to be a lost cause and we are only falling further behind. What looked like well-laid strategies in the beginning are now scattershot in the dark.

Hospital services are disintegrating. Yeoman front line workers are suc-

cumbing to fatigue and the virus itself has taken a toll of health workers. Shortage of supplies and expensive drugs mean that the poor are refused adequate treatment. Worse still, patients have died in hospital fires or by suicide in the wards, or found dead in the toilets.

All hopes now rest on a vaccine that's good enough to stem the invasion. When that comes and how effective it will be, remains to be seen. Rich countries and those that have a robust pharmaceutical industry will be at the front of the line. Till then, we will need to have a responsible citizenry that is mindful of everyone's welfare. But brash VIPs are above the law and party going youth imagine they are immortal. So no hopes of rowing together as one.

Perhaps attention can shift to the rural hinterland. Let local commerce and livelihoods go on, substi-

ence will enable survival. Rural schools can open, those children need education more. Rural healthcare should be made self-sufficient, with minimal referrals to the city. Cities are the most dangerous habitations now, where the virus breeds unhindered.

Yours etc.,
Glenn Kharkongor,
Via email

Hinduism is all-embracing

Editors,

As a new, young Indian I have some serious concerns about the write up on Niamtre, Hinduism and Ram Temple in Ayodhya (ST Aug 3, 2020) The writer claims to be a serious research scholar while writing a comparative thesis on the above topic, where he claims different sects don't see eye

to eye with each other and Ram has no connection with Shiva. I would like to remind the pseudo secularist that the Supreme Court ruled that Hinduism historically has had an "inclusive nature" and it may "broadly be described as a way of life and nothing more". I feel the writer precisely orchestrated symbolic/influence/similarities/blended/nothing in common etc., to craft a thin line between different sects/believers/faiths etc., which is divisive in nature because of which India had suffered for centuries. These are ideas implanted by the invaders/especially British. It is common knowledge that Hinduism embraces within itself many diverse forms of beliefs, faiths, practices and worship that it is difficult to define it. The ground breaking ceremony at Ayodhya has established the same, where 135 reli-

gious leaders from different sects/believers/faiths stood together under one roof 'New India'. We, the new, young Indians are sure of the fact that India will lead the 21st century new world order which is visible in Times Square, Germany, Russia, Africa and elsewhere in the world. So, the above thesis is invalid today, for me at least and I feel the so-called intelligentsias/sympathizers/fifth columnists need to revisit their research. It would be interesting to read his column on Hagia Sophia in the near future.

Yours etc.,
Pankaj Deka,
Via email

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

“In order to write about life first you must live it.”
--- Ernest Hemingway

The Shillong Times

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Finally, the vaccine

FINALLY, a vaccine has arrived, though from unlikely quarters. This time it is from Vladimir Putin’s fortress known as Russia, reputed more for its military hardware, oil and past space feats under the erstwhile USSR, and less with any major scientific breakthrough. As the adage goes, ‘where there’s a will, there’s a way.’ Putin, the evergreen dictator has an abundance of it, as he has demonstrated time and again, be it in dealing with terrorists at home or neutralizing and eliminating his political rivals. The process of development of a vaccine was rushed through for sure and several normal procedures could have been bypassed in the mad race for success. Two aspects must be noted. One, this is the world’s first authentic vaccine to treat Covid-19, the pandemic that took the world by storm in the past few months and killed millions of people worldwide and larger numbers in the world’s most advanced nations like the US, UK, Italy etc. Putin and Russia can rightly take the full credit for this breakthrough the world waited with bated breath for and is welcoming with awe.

The second aspect to note is about the vaccine’s authenticity. Putin’s team has had this administered on his daughter; another bold act, which also signifies his confidence about the safety of the prescription. Would any other world or regional or local leader have shown such courage and made guinea pigs of their own children is a big question; and the answer is obvious. In keeping with Russia’s past, and its record in space explorations – a field in which the USSR had made a big name in the past – the vaccine is named after Sputnik. It offers sustainable immunity, as Putin has announced to the world on Tuesday. The dictator has kept his word on the vaccine. He had stated a week ago that a vaccine was getting ready in a short while. He has also stated that his daughter had taken part in the experiment and that he is sure about its success. Millions of doses are to be produced in a jiffy, a time when the world would require much, much more of this. And, appreciably, other vaccines too are on the way, as similar trials are on, under WHO supervision in labs across the world; the US, Israel and India too being the leading figures among them. Notably, Putin’s Russia has also stolen a march over Donald Trump’s America and Xi Jinping’s China by announcing and introducing the world’s first vaccine against Covid-19 the virus that China’s contributed to the world. This indeed is Putin’s hour of triumph.

TO THE EDITOR

Apologies to Umtrew Dorbar

Editor,
Over the weekend social media was abuzz with chatter over the "paranormal activity" story at Umtrew village. While the atheist community in Meghalaya were busy mocking journalists for having succumbed to superstitious beliefs, residents of Umtrew were flummoxed. The story of the incident also made it to the front page of the local dailies, including The Shillong Times and Mawphor.
Let's face it! We live in a society comprising two types of people: superstitious and skeptics. One group says there is a supernatural power that runs our universe, while the other says it is the principles of science. As people stand torn between the two sides, the nongknia (the one who offers sacrifice) and the 'langknia (the sacrificial lamb) have a field day fooling believers and earning money. Throughout the ages, superstitions, irrationality and blind beliefs have always had an upper hand in the way society runs.
However, to come back to my letter 'The Fake News Contagion', (ST July 31, 2020) which has displeased the people of Umtrew village including house owner Lonti Jyrwa and Assistant Secretary

Shnong. Plasterland Lyngdoh, I wish to apologize for being too opinionated; although my letter strictly focused on the faults and flaws of the media, apropos the Cable Television Network (Regulation) Act, 1995. Provisions under this Act, and the Policy Guidelines for Uplinking of Television Channels from India, give the government the power to block the transmission of any channel in the country.
Section 20(3) of the Cable TV Act says: "Where the Central Government considers that any programme of any channel is not in conformity with the prescribed programme code referred to in section 5 or the prescribed advertisement code referred to in section 6, it may regulate or prohibit the transmission or re-transmission of such programme. The Information and Broadcasting Ministry should find that all the news channels that aired the story have clearly violated the provisions of the programme code, particularly Rules 6(1) (a), 6(1) (i) and 6(1) (o).
In the face of criticism, I have decided to forward a copy of my letter to the Union Information and Broadcasting Ministry and the Inter-Ministerial Committee. A reply to the show-cause notice to be issued later is mandatory for Batesi TV, Ri Bhoi News, Ri Khasi Channel and Iit Khmih.
Yours etc.,
Shalabas Syiemlieh
Shillong - 8

Hinduism an exclusive religion

Editor,
This is in response to Pankaj Deka's letter titled "Hinduism is all-embracing"(August 11, 2020). If Hinduism is so "embracing," why have Hindus tortured people of their own religious group on the basis of caste since centuries! Weren't people (including women) of "lower caste" groups prevented from covering upper bodies in Kerala which was the "sole privilege" of the "upper castes"! And village after village of "lower castes" got massacred when they revolted and asked their women to cover the upper part of their bodies!
How can we forget the dreaded practice of "untouchability" where Dalits couldn't use ponds, wells, temples used by Brahmins and other "upper caste" groups! And those who used to differ or commit the "sin" by mistake, got thrashed to pulp or even killed! As a matter of fact this barbaric assault upon humanity which is nothing but "centuries-old legacy of Hinduism" is still alive and thriving in various states of India especially in that "laboratory of Hindutva" named Gujarat! Yes in the last few years we have read how Dalits have got beaten up for sporting a

moustache, riding a horse, witnessing Dandiya show or sitting in a school chair --- all in that much-hyped "modern" Gujarat! While Punjab has seen how a Dalit groom can be assaulted for proceeding to his marriage by riding a horse, we have also read how in a Karnataka village, Dalits have to go to a far-off town just for a shave or haircut as local barbers have been directed by "upper castes" not to entertain them! And what about "honour killings" whereby Hindus kill their own child or sibling if he/she dares to enter into a romantic/matrimonial bond with a person from another caste!
Do the riots-igniting Ram Rath Yatra, Babri Masjid demolition, 2002 Gujarat pogrom, murder of Mohammad Akhlaques-Junaids-Pehlu Khans-Tabrez Ansaris in the name of "Gomata", threat of murdering intellectuals for their call for secularism and rationality, devilish joy in social media over the killing of Gouri Lankesh point to the "all-embracing" mindset of Hinduism?
What about the "glorious record" of Hinduism as far as treatment towards their women folk was concerned! Had Raja Rammohan Roy, Vidyasagar not entered the scene, many more women would have had to literally or psychologically burn in the hell of Sati, permanent widowhood or illiteracy. It is high time that instead of beating their own trumpet of "liberalism", Hindus should

take a hard look at themselves and introspect a bit.
As for the Ram Temple, no amount of rhetoric can hide the hard fact of 6th December 1992 when muscle-flexers had made a mockery of law, sanity and secular values enshrined in the Constitution marking the darkest episode in the history of independent India. Also instead of bragging "India will rule the world," true Indians should try to uplift billions of Indians from stark poverty, hunger, malnutrition, illiteracy and also improve the ranking of the nation from deep bottom in all International Indices which really matter like Human Rights, Corruption Perception, Press Freedom or in the scale of safety of women!
Yours etc.,
Kajal Chatterjee,
Via email

Unauthorised car passes

Editor,
With the recent outbreak of Covid19 we have seen the serious efforts of the Government machinery to curb the surge of the virus while at the same opening up the economy so people can work and earn their livelihoods. Government has authorized the controlling officers of the different departments to issue car passes to the office employees under their control in the odd and even situation in Shillong city.

But, there are some unscrupulous officers who issue car passes for their own vehicles without the signature of their Controlling Officers thereby fooling the police on duty and this has left the roads of Shillong crowded with vehicles nowadays.
It is high time for the police on duty to be more vigilant and punish such violators as per law to reduce the number of vehicles on the road, whose owners are seemingly undeterred by the cruelty of the virus and take undue advantage without being authorized by the Controlling Officers.
Yours etc.,
A.K.Lyngdoh,
Shillong-4

Praiseworthy move

Editor,
Prime Minister Narendra Modi dedicated the 2300 KM submarine Optical Fiber Cable (OFC) connecting Andaman & Nicobar Islands to the nation. This is a praiseworthy move towards Digital India. The OFC connectivity opens new opportunities for development, employment, and will boost our defense system. It indicates that the Government of India is giving priority to the progress of isolated union territories. Its welfare schemes and projects will strengthen them.
Yours etc.,
Amit Singh Kushwaha,
Satma (M.P.)

Welfare programmes

Hurried, but ineffective?

By Dhurjati Mukherjee

SAGY scheme has no budgetary allotment, each MP is expected to select a village in his constituency for development. The goal being to develop three model villages by each MP by March 2019 and five more by 2024, so far very few MPs were seen to be adopting villages under SAGY.
The CRM has also expressed concern over the quality of roads constructed under schemes of State governments and maintenance of rural roads under Centre's Pradhan Mantri Gramin Sadak Yojana (PMGSY) after the end of five-year warranty period. It is significant that the audit urged the Centre to frame a 'National Rural Roads Policy' to ensure uniform norms of construction and maintenance, irrespective of whether the road belongs to a State scheme or the PMGSY. However, there are grave doubts whether this would be earnestly followed up, as an indifferent administrative machinery, which is no secret, doesn't really shortlist the lapses to make amends.
Another example which the Central audit found even more intriguing is the work generated under MGNREGS. It remains half of the entitled 100 days per household annually despite a higher demand in States, urging the Centre to order a study in the mismatch. The audit termed the District Development Coordination & Monitoring Committee, which oversees the implementation of Central schemes in every district, unwieldy-- and non-functional!
As per the CRM 2019, work given under MGNREGS is much less than the demand. In 2019, the average work per household was 48 days. It was a bit higher at 50 in 2018 but lower at 45 in 2017. The report pointed out: "A study may be undertaken for reviewing the wage rate under MGNREGS and the reasons why number of days of work provided per household is less than half of the entitlement despite the fact that in several places visited by CRM, the demand for more work was articulated."

Though from recent reports it is quite discernible that in the current fiscal this will not happen, with States like Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat having already touched around 90% of man-days compared to the work done in 2019-20, there is need for giving additional resources of around 15 to 20% as most migrants don't want to venture out of their States and are facing acute financial crisis.
The examples are proof enough that the Government's crucial programmes aren't being properly monitored and are not reaching the intended beneficiaries. While this is one side of mis-governance, the other is the lack of direction and judicious planning. Not just the government but the ineffectiveness of the private sector, which plays a less pivotal role, is equally manifest.
Recently, the Adani Green Energy, the renewable energy arm of Adani Group, bagged the world's largest solar energy contract to build an 8000 MW capacity photovoltaic power plant and also set up 2000 MW capacity domestic solar panel manufacturing facility. But questions do arise as the group is reported to be facing massive debt burden and this dampens all hopes of the project becoming successful. Incidentally, the Adanis are said to have defaulted in taking over three government-run airports set for privatisation. State-run Airports Authority of India (AAI) was said to be ready to extend its contract with concessionaires at six airports until March 2021. It is feared that the government decision to delay airport privatisation will eventually benefit the group.
Thus, it's time to thoroughly examine awarding of vital projects to 'favoured' private sector partners, who may not be so successful. Earlier, two debt-ridden Indian private enterprises were awarded the task of large-scale manufacturing of semiconductors. This is despite the

fact that the semiconductor industry was estimated to grow from \$10.02 billion in 2013 to \$52.58 billion in 2020 at a compound annual growth rate of 26.72%. This inability led to imports rising and the country continuing to lose billions of dollars in this sector.
Further, at this time when the government is reeling under severe economic stress, it has taken loans from the Asian Development Bank worth \$1.5 billion to fight COVID-19 and \$1 billion from the World Bank to help protect livelihoods. Shockingly, amidst this, the Government proposes to execute its Central Vista project for New Delhi, costing a whopping Rs 20,000 crore and not shelve it!
The amount could have been used instead to aid the country's health infrastructure, which continues to be quite poor in the times of the pandemic, even in comparison to emerging economies. The country is struggling to provide hospital facilities, oxygen equipment and ventilators, among others and a sum of Rs 20,000 crore could according to estimates help buy 14 lakh ventilators, needed to save lives. There is a massive shortfall even in the number of basic hospital beds and other essential equipment as the pandemic gathers speed in some States. Instead of concentrating on these essential needs, pursuing grandiose vista plans does sound ridiculous.
Besides in the backdrop of migrants' struggling for sheer survival, job creation is vital for the economy. Additional allocation of funds for government welfare programmes is imperative. Reliance on the private sector hasn't been too encouraging as it normally invests for high returns and profits. Thus, the government needs to get its priorities right and ensure that its programmes and welfare schemes make an impact, especially where its most-needed i.e. rural India and the economically weaker sections. Only then can governance, through welfare programmes, usher in what is being termed as 'Ram Rajya'. --- INFA

Does religion makes us more “human”

By Marbianglang Rymbai

In the past a number of articles were published in your esteemed daily that dived on the issue of religious conversion. Recently, H H Mohrmen's and Albert Thyrniang's articles covered some pertinent questions on the issue. It is with deep concern that I am writing this article to convey the worry and concern on the part of the followers of the indigenous faith on marital conversion of the so-called 'unbelievers' to different Christian denominations. In the first place, it is considered offensive to describe the Niam Khasi and Niamtre as "unbelievers" just because they do not acknowledge the God of the Bible, Torah or Koran. John Hughes Morris in his book 'The Story of Our Foreign Mission', called the Khasi labourers as "heathen". Pagan or heathen is a derogatory term developed by the Christian community of Europe to describe any non-Abrahamic religion. The term has been extended by some writers or commentators to the indigenous faith groups of

However, we must remember that the biblical term "unbelievers" actually mean persons from a different nation- a foreigner. The people from the indigenous faith in Meghalaya belong to the same nation. That is why the policy followed by the member of different churches is unethical. But if this trend continues then we are afraid that the people belonging to the indigenous faith may prefer exogamy to escape this kind of 'mental and cultural torture,' because in this way they can preserve their cultural identity. No wonder the Church even prohibits marriages between different denominations of Christianity. A religion that is pluralistic in nature cannot have such conversion-based ideology.
We do not understand why it is happening! Is it, because the Church wants to increase the number of their followers? If it is so what a dangerous scheme to destroy the traditional faiths in Meghalaya! Or is it part of the larger international conspiracy?



Meghalaya.

In this context, we have to point out the dire straits in which the Niam Tynrai or Niamtre followers are now in. The present trend is that whenever a boy or a girl from these indigenous faiths falls in love with a Christian he or she is ultimately compelled to convert to that religion. On the basis of that, concern a boy or girl would be told that unless he or she gets converted the marriage would not be approved by the family. In this way he or she is compelled to convert and become a proselyte. The Bible is clear that a Christian is never to marry a non-Christian. But expecting an "unbeliever" to become Christian following marriage is unrealistic and will lead to years of frustration and conflict. We have noticed the growing incidences of such conversion. Every family following the indigenous faith is facing this crisis.
There is a growing instance where parents have been compelled by their proselyte children to change their religious faith or beliefs too on the plea that this would make them better believers in God. They were told that there will be no one to look after them if they continued with their faith (indigenous faith). There will be no one to perform their last rites (cremation), because they consider it a taboo to be engaged in any kind of rituals. These poor parents submit to the indirect pressure of their children. They even had to attend church regularly in order secure a place of burial. A number of families are facing this type of situation. If this continues the Khasi and Jaintia community are going to lose their historic traditions within a few decades. The State cannot claim its uniqueness before the world.
We are concerned when it is said that the approval of the Church was needed for marriages. Therefore, it works as propaganda for proselytisation. A religion that is pluralistic in nature cannot have such conversion-based ideology.

This propaganda for proselytisation must be put to an end because such activities have already reduced the people and families following indigenous faith to a minority in their own land (8.7 %). They are denied the various scholarships under the Central Sector Scheme for their children in spite of the verdict of the Supreme Court in a Christian majority State. It is time for the Church to realize that traditional values systems have not yet lost their relevance in today's world. Moreover, one should not forget that the balance in family life is important for social and political stability. This should be the philosophy of a multicultural society.
Social, ethnic and cultural differences contribute to a sense of distance. When people feel distant from others they can more easily treat others with less respect. Therefore, connectedness helps us to act with tolerance, generosity, compassion and fairness. All religions are akin and share common spiritual bond. Because all religious traditions share the same purpose, they must maintain respect and harmony among them. And let us remember that it is religion that makes us more "Human".
Although we can train ourselves to be less prejudiced and more accepting of others, we still harbour elements of an exclusivist mentality. In fact, we are biased towards others because we perceive our own beliefs as true.
We hope that the leaders of the various religious groups understand that 'religious assimilation' represents a slow destruction of the indigenous people of Meghalaya who are struggling to maintain their ethnicity and identity.
In conclusion I am reminded of the words of an Oxford University anthropologist and evolutionary psychologist, Robin Dunbar who said, "Somehow it's clear that religions, all these doctrinal religions, create the sense that we're all one family."

“Information is the oxygen of the modern age. It seeps through the walls topped by barbed wire, it wafts across the electrified borders.”

— Ronald Reagan

The Shillong Times

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MPSC needs revamping

THE Meghalaya Public Service Commission (MPSC) has come under flak times without number for acts of omission and commission ever since it was established. In the past, relatives of those with political connections have got through the Meghalaya Civil Services (MCS) examinations while some who have worked diligently found themselves jettisoned from the list of successful candidates. This is upsetting for the aspirational youth that have prepared for months, sometimes years to appear for this prestigious examination. The results for the MCS exams which took off with the preliminaries in August 2018, followed by the mains in January this year, are yet to be announced. Does this not create a crisis of confidence in the aspirants? What does this say of the Government of the day? That it does not take the MCS examinees and the examination seriously! The fact that every Chairperson to the Commission is not appointed after due process of search and selection by a distinguished panel is itself flawed. Chairpersons of State Public Service Commissions ought to be persons who have distinguished themselves in their respective professions and have a proven track record of integrity. This alone will restore the credibility of the Commissions.

It is a sad commentary on Meghalaya that every examination conducted, whether it be to recruit teachers in primary schools, or policemen or civil servants has never been free of controversy. The examination for selection of primary school teachers in 2009 ended up in a scam when it was revealed that the names of successful candidates was overwritten by names of those that did not qualify after having used white ink as a poor cover up. As many as 506 lower primary school teachers in Meghalaya have lost their jobs because of this scam. It's another matter that when the facts of the case point very clearly to the then Education Minister, she is yet to be penalized, whereas in other states, ministers involved in similar scams are serving jail term. This is the difference between how the law operates in Meghalaya and in other states. Punishment for wrongdoing is a very rare exception. That is why transgression even in a matter of selection of teachers who will mould impressionable minds has not been spared from manipulative tactics of politicians. How do we expect excellence in education in Meghalaya when the incompetent are selected over their meritorious peers? Apart from being disheartening it also turns young job seekers cynical.

The MPSC is now without a captain to steer it. The last incumbent retired in May this year. A successor should have been thought of a few months before so that there is no vacuum. However, there is yet hope that the Government will appoint a person worth the dignified position of Chairperson, MPSC.

TO THE EDITOR

MCS Examination quandary

Editor,

It was interesting to read the article “No Timeline for declaring MCS Results” (ST August 8, 2020. As an observer, one agrees completely with the contention that the MPSC's performance is out of sync with the Union Public Service Commission and other State Public Service Commissions. The Constitutional body has, more often than not, let down the thousands of educated and meritorious job-seeking youth of the state.

Therefore in accordance with this, as far as the declaration of the results of the Mains Examination of the Meghalaya Civil Service (Junior Grade), is concerned, it needs to be reminded that the matter is sub-judice and is at the moment pending in the High Court. Judging by news reports in this paper, it appears that the matter of results of the Preliminary Examinations of MCS (Junior Grade) would not have

gone to court had the MPSC followed their own notification for the said examination. It is thus understandable that changing the rules of a game (without even communication of the same) after the game has started will invite litigation.

Thus, given the situation, one feels that the bright, young minds of the state, especially the ones who have appeared for the MCS Mains Examination, should seek transparency and an objective process of recruitment not based on opaque and post-facto decision making. In relation to this, it is also worth mentioning for all genuine candidates of the MCS Mains Examination, that as part of Standard Operating Procedure (with the intention of preventing fraud and insertion of answer sheets post the actual examination), answer booklets of public examinations should carry the name of the concerned PSC/Board and unique serial numbers. However, during the MCS Mains Examinations conducted in January, 2020, the Answer Booklets were just plain paper sheets stapled together. The plain sheets did not have the

In a few days I will be entering my 90th year. And if these are to be my parting words to you, they should have the ring of truth and authenticity, rather than rhetoric or piety.

We live in such unusual times that comparisons fail us. The Covid threat is ever present, our homes are our shelters as well as our prisons, and any one we encounter outside may turn out to be our nemesis. Your family plans are disrupted. Your children's education, job placement, or marital plans are all on hold. And there is no armistice day in sight yet.

Naturally there is much discussion of the post pandemic scenario, with expectation as well as trepidation. As we look ahead, I am afraid things look no brighter. Three huge issues loom large before humanity in the next 25 years. The climate crisis is upon us, and will come to a head during this period. Secondly, the new economic dispensation will exacerbate the social and economic inequalities, which are already unacceptable. This could lead to widespread instability. And thirdly, the wave of democracy initiated by decolonisation and the end of the Cold War, seems to be giving way to a wave of autocratic regimes in many countries. Thus, now and in the days ahead, we are called to mobilise our inner resources to live meaningfully in times of much dislocation and decline.

I would like to address the idea of thankfulness in adversity, with truth and authenticity, and in a practicable way. And in a manner which will speak to you whatever your religious or spiritual persuasion may be.

The idea of thankfulness when faced with adversity seems a counter intuitive idea. It seems to be a contradiction. Life throws at us ‘the slings and arrows of importunate fate’. And we have the option of two responses. We could respond to them in negative ways in which case the harm is doubled, with the injury due to the arrows as well as the injury we inflict on ourselves by negative reactions of fear or defeat. We could also respond with resilience and a forward look, which can reduce the harm.

Thus, whatever our circumstances, to a certain extent we are the masters of our souls and the captains of our fate, and we do not need to be at the mercy of our circumstances. This is equally true of the blessings which come our way also. So my conclusion is that whether in the ordinary cir-

name of the MPSC and No Serial Numbers were assigned to the Answer Booklets including the extra sheets. All that was attached to the Answer Booklets was a small sheet where the candidates were required to enter their Roll Numbers and other details.

After the results of the Civil Services Examination 2019, conducted by the UPSC were declared on August 4, 2020, many concerned citizens had rightly lamented the fact that candidates from Meghalaya were not being able to pass the examination. Perhaps one of the reasons for this could be because the State PSC takes steps that are detrimental to the preparation of candidates from Meghalaya. In contrast to the syllabus for the MCS (Junior Grade) declared in 2017, the syllabus for the MPS (Junior Grade) declared in 2019 is modeled on the UPSC Civil Services Syllabus AND Pattern that is pre-2011. This means that serious candidates preparing for the State Civil Service examinations have to face a different syllabus and pattern for the Civil Service Examinations conducted by

circumstances of our life or whether we are facing the Covid pandemic, we would do well to consider ways of increasing our capacity for positive responses, irrespective of the circumstances. We need help with the capacity to remain wholesome in a broken world. I would like to suggest that thankfulness is one such resource for wholeness. What is thankfulness? It is more than particular acts of thanksgiving, though they are a necessary part of thankfulness. It is a quality of a person, which, of course, finds expression in his actions. It is a posture, the stance, we take against the experiences of life. Grateful people affirm that there are good things in the world. Not that life is mostly smooth and comfortable, but that with thankful-



ness we can identify the goodness in life. Martin Luther King Jr. said “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” So also a thankful person believes that life is a mixture of good and bad, but in totality it bends towards the good. To put it another way, his default position is thankfulness. The pendulum of life swings back and forth, but it will come to rest on the good side. So they feel free to celebrate the goodness of life.

Secondly, he or she recognises that the good things in his life is not entirely, or even mainly, our doing. It becomes possible because of a range of people and circumstances, or may be just good fortune. And so he/she tends to be socially conscious or socially responsible. It is out of the pool of the human predicament that we have received and into that pool we must make returns. Thus gratitude is a social emotion, a people centred emotion. Such people tend to have wider and richer interpersonal relationships.

Thirdly, thankfulness is a

social good. With grateful people in a team, the team gels better and performs better. With enough grateful people, families, and institutions, our communities will develop an atmosphere of positivity, so essential to facing adversity.

Lastly, and importantly in our present context, thankful people are more stress resistant. Behavioral scientists quote many studies where, in the face of serious trauma and adversity, grateful people recover more quickly and fully. They are less prone to post-traumatic stress and endless anxiety.

Apart from these positive attributes, thankfulness enables you to avoid or overcome many negative attributes. When we receive some recognition or achieve something outstanding, we are often in danger of be-

coming conceited or overconfident. But if you are a thankful person, you will remember all the people and all the circumstances which contributed to your success. Thus your moment of success can also become an opportunity for humility.

Thankful people do not focus on what others may have received more than them. And thus they can avoid the corrosive influence of envy or resentment. On the other hand, gratitude turns what you have into enough and you enjoy it with thankfulness. Thus grateful people are contented and do not need an accumulation of things to be happy. A culture of thankfulness is an antidote to the pressing issues of modern life, namely the culture of consumerism, materialism and acquisitiveness.

Thus whether we are facing formidable challenges in the outer world or whether we are struggling to be better people than we are, thankfulness seems to be an enabler and catalyst. Somehow, thankfulness is a virtue that does not come to us naturally. Even where it

seems most appropriate, it is hard work for us. So, thankfulness is a choice we have to make and stay with. We need to deliberately cultivate the attitude of thankfulness, like we do physiotherapy exercises, especially as we grow older.

Let me suggest a simple way of life that can help to cultivate thankfulness. In the morning before you set out on the day's life, take just two minutes to make a mental list of a few, perhaps three to five, things in the day's schedule which could be reasons for thankfulness. And at the end of the day, as we go to bed, review the things we can be thankful for. We may be surprised to find more than you expected. As we learn to frame our day in this way with an attitude of thankfulness, we may be surprised to find that as our day unfolds, we keep finding reasons for thankfulness.

Ultimately it is a matter of how thankfulness finds expression in the little and bigger things of every day existence. Let me mention three levels at which this could happen. The first is a matter of saying “thank you.” From our childhood, we are taught to say this at every opportunity, even in the many occasions when the other person is only doing his duty. As life goes on, thank you gets emptied of its meaning, like the expression, ‘How are you?’ So my first suggestion is that you put a little thought behind each you say thank you, and really look at the person and his situation and what all might lie behind his action, whether it be the lift operator, the sales girl, the post man, or the bus conductor.

Secondly, the many episodes of our life are peopled with persons who are taken for granted. One of the positive outcomes of the pandemic is that we have suddenly become conscious of the many people we take for granted. Thus every day now, there are ample opportunities for us to identify the ignored persons and enrich their life with our affirmation, by voice, or perhaps in more significant ways. And thirdly, in the really difficult circumstances of life like the present pandemic, we could make an effort to give thanks for the silver linings and little rainbows which life offers.

(Dr P. Zachariah is ex-professor of physiology at CMC, Vellore. This is a message to his former students. He may be reached at drpzac@yahoo.com)

Yours etc.
Name withheld on request
Via email

Covid protocol violators must be reined in

Editor,

It is stressful to have violators of Covid protocols repeatedly at a time when we can ill afford it. After the 40 plus people who attended the marriage party, now the pharmacist has joined the bandwagon. In spite of being one who knows the protocols yet he has not only put his wife but many more under great danger by violating the quarantine norms. Don't these people have any sense of responsibility and fear for their loved ones? What could have been the ridiculous urge to do things that would cause harm? In the press conference, Dr Aman War on being asked what sort of action would be taken against the pharmacist, said that action will be taken but for now the man has to first regain his health and be cured of the disease. Conscientious thinking indeed! A primary

concern is to apprehend the man, put him under strict vigilance and do contract tracing for he had not only dropped his wife to the PHC where she works but he had also visited a few places like the ATM. Imagine how many more may have visited the same ATM after him. We must all understand that this is not the time to be callous and casual about the deadly virus. We must remember that COVID 19 is a pandemic that has taken a toll on the mental and physical health of people. It's a pandemic that has brought people to their knees; physically, mentally, socially, economically. At the risk of sounding harsh one strongly feels that violators must be taken to task in order to deter others from doing the same. For the lack of sense in some, the majority cannot suffer.

Yours etc.,
Jennifer Dkhar,
Via email

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Assam applies Chinese tactics in Langpih

By BM Lanong

The well-conceived trip this time, discourteously organized by a mob from Assam, arrogantly riding on two wheelers to Langpih village of West Khasi Hills and escorted by Assam armed police personnel, was strongly condemned quarters. This action is not only provocative, but reeks of wild hooliganism, deliberately done in violation of official restrictions, especially during the ongoing corona virus pandemic. This is such a bizarre trip, reminiscent of the manner clandestine intrusion of Chinese soldiers in Galwan valley, Ladakh. This was never expected from the people of a neighboring state of the same country, which leaves behind another fresh wound in the age-old relationship between the Khasi-Garos and the Assamese people.

The sizeable Assamese population in Meghalaya, who have made this State their permanent abode through the ages and who have contributed richly in terms of varied educational, medical and cultural life, apart from peaceful and harmonious relationship have also been left asunder by such dastardly behavior, leaving a big question mark, ‘as if they cannot visit any part of the state in a normal way, during normal situations, and like sane and bonafide countrymen.’

To recapitulate a bit, such unpleasant visits to human settlements by outsiders from other states on frequent successions and with motives behind, is nothing less

once and for all.

The big Assam elder brother, should never underestimate a younger Meghalaya. Though Meghalaya might appear tiny compared to Assam, but this tiny hilly region, coveted by Assam is very tough. Go through the pre-independent Indian history, one will find the Khasi states that did not surrender even to the mighty Britishers. That was only part of history.

Chandrachud Boundary Committee

Come over to the historic Chandrachud Committee, which was constituted in 1985, by the then Chief Ministers of Assam and Meghalaya, Shri Hiteshwar Saikia and Capt W.A.Sangma respectively, a boundary committee headed by the former Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of India, Y.V.Chandrachud and assisted by former Chief Justice of Delhi High Court, V.S.Deshpande, took up a formal study and hearing from both the parties.

During the exercise to examine the historical boundaries of both the States, Assam came to know, or rather the present leadership should better know too, that many villages under Kamrup district were historically part of the Khasi States, now under Assam as disputed areas.

Moreover, about 356 villages of Jaintia Hills district, have been transferred to Karbi Anglong district of Assam in 1951 by a mere government notification.

ST File Photo



than trespass and the worst is that, Assam Police seems also to have a licence to kill like what they did while shooting down poor and innocent villagers in cold blood at Langpih 10 years ago. They can be sued easily for such offences, for taking real life as a film shooting. They better mark this as nothing, but prior notice.

In other words, such personnel should be rather posted to Ladakh areas to assist the army in training their guns at the country's enemies, rather than sending them to a rural village to shoot frail villagers, who could have been easily overcome only by bamboo lathis. People in West Khasi Hills have found an unforgettable joke against Assam police. Leave them at that and thanks for the joke, that everybody enjoys, prompting even some wanting to see the faces of those fake heroes.

During the corona pandemic, in these far flung villages, villagers had some entertainments of sorts, another one by the sudden appearance of a nondescript alien at Langpih, who it was later revealed is a lady MLA from across the Assam boundary who came to see and inspect Langpih and other surrounding villages, for which she only received some publicity later.

There is actually, no harm nor was it illegal to make a normal visit to any part of the country by persons of goodwill. For a responsible public leader, especially for a sitting lady MLA, she would have been gladly welcomed especially by women, had prior notice been given. But after such a visit, she should better pursue now this contentious issue, in a manner that will evoke fair response from governments of both the states of Assam and Meghalaya, which will also invite the attention of the Centre, to resume peaceful dialogue between the two states with assistance of the centre to resolve the issue

Assam on the other hand presented their own case, mostly based on constitutional aspects, as appears on records.

The Chandrachud Committee having gone deep into the historical data vis-à-vis the post constitutional records and after noting and appreciating the sentiments of both the parties, could not however make any recommendation, especially when both the states maintained their inability to concede. Lo and behold, the whole exercise came to an abrupt end in 1987.

Woefully it goes on record that the then Congress leadership, had miserably failed to follow up, to settle the boundary issue during the last century, when the all-Congress regime was there for long at the helm of affairs, both in the centre and in the states of Assam and Meghalaya, for the present generation to suffer and bite the dust.

Their beginning came to naught. Why didn't they follow up? They are answerable to the public.

The Last Option

For the irresponsible shelving of the unresolved issue to oblivion by the Congress, heaven did not come down. The ball rolls now in the court of whoever commands the responsibility.

Hence, the present non-Congress governments in both Assam and Meghalaya, with BJP led Assam and the pro-BJP led Meghalaya, should take up the challenge and create history with high sense of responsibility, discuss and work out the common principles as prevailing today across the table and resolve the entire state boundary dispute once and for all, which should include areas of Garo Hills, Block I & II of Jaintia Hills on the basis of records, maps, documents and adding also the spirit of give and take, wherever amicable settlement seems possible. Pending this possibility, status-quo ante should continue. (Email: bmlanong@gmail.com)

"A wise man learns more from his enemies than a fool from his friends."

--- Jeanette Winterson

The Shillong Times

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Pilot grounded

IT would now turn out that the 'rebellion' in the Rajasthan Congress party that took the Ashok Gehlot-led ministry to the brink was nothing more than a storm in a tea cup. This, on the premise that the BJP's no-confidence motion on Friday would fail. If it garners enough numbers in the 200-member state assembly to unseat the ministry, the story would be altogether different. However, considering the strength of various groups in the assembly, Gehlot is likely to have the last laugh, and the no-trust move is merely a formality. The Congress leadership has reasons for relief. Sachin Pilot who along with 18 other legislators led the rebellion against Gehlot, and by extension embarrassed the Congress party, obviously found the going tough. The fact of the matter is that his expectations that more Congress MLAs would side with him has been belied. What this proves is that Pilot, who held the deputy CM post, has no locus standi to seek the CM's post. Had he managed to get a larger share of the Congress MLAs to his side, he would have been a game changer.

In the present context, Pilot has proven that he is not a serious player. What offer Rahul Gandhi gave him by way of a patch-up and continuation of the young leader in the Congress is unclear. For now, Pilot would not get what he wanted. Having proven his relatively low esteem among the party legislators vis-a-vis Gehlot, There is nothing to show that Pilot will have the last laugh. Gehlot is a veteran of many a battle. He came up in politics the hard way, fighting his way up inch by inch. Pilot was a plant; the Congress giving him a leadership role in the party on a platter after his father Rajesh Pilot's demise. The BC tag kept the father and son on a high political pedestal. Gehlot too claims BC support. It would appear that Gehlot played his cards to perfection after Pilot rebelled against the government openly. The two were not on talking terms for a while, even as though they were colleagues in the Congress-led government. The way the Congress managed to effect a turnaround in Rajasthan by winning back Pilot will restore some credibility to the present Congress leadership at the top level – meaning a mix of Sonia Gandhi and her son and daughter. The script did not progress the way the Opposition BJP in the state wanted it to. But, the last word will be known only after the no-trust motion. Till then, the suspense continues.

EIA – What it means for Meghalaya and the region

By Patricia Mukhim

The latest notification by the NDA Government on Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) of projects requiring environmental clearance is a death warrant for the environment. It will undo all that environmentalists have been fighting for all these years. In fact, the EIA is a license to exploit our natural resources. Meghalaya is blessed with coal, limestone, uranium etc. These need to be used judiciously; not exploited. So far the people of Meghalaya have been able to resist mining of uranium, because the EIA process has always been truncated by pressure groups. Hence uranium mining in Meghalaya has remained at the experimental stage only, although there are allegations of covert uranium mining operations carried on by the Atomic Minerals Division, Government of India.

This time the NDA Government has tried to bypass these 'impediments' by allowing post facto EIA – meaning thereby that the environmental impacts of any project would be assessed after the project has started. In other words, the Centre will first grant mining rights or rights to create power projects, roads and railway projects and then assess the damage to the environment. This is nothing short of locking the stables after the horses have bolted. It is a ploy to overcome the strict norms of assessing the possible devastation to the environment on account of mining and other projects which earlier governments had strictly adhered to and because of which quite a few power projects and mining concessions in states of the North East are hanging fire. The new EIA proposal by the NDA Government is set to let loose a dangerous precedent of gagging people's voices which were earlier heard in public hearings by the Government appointed EIA agencies.

So why should Meghalaya be wary of the latest EIA proposed by the NDA Government. And what is the EIA in the first place? It is a vetting process before any project with the potential to hurt the environment (mining, quarrying, sand banking cutting down of forests, diverting rivers, among

others) is given clearance to by the Union Ministry of Environment, Forests & Climate Change (MOEFCC). The EIA is a meticulous study by environment experts about the effects of a proposed industrial/infrastructural project on the environment. It puts the brakes on a proposed activity/project from being approved without proper oversight or taking adverse consequences into account. Naturally India's new EIA draft has been widely criticized for the drastic change in rules. Experts aver that most of the provisions in the new draft of EIA are a regressive departure from the earlier version.

An EIA is a crucial report that objectively critiques the unintended impacts that a proposed project will have on the ecology of the site with robust action plans on mitigating the negative impacts with clear and practical points on enhancing the positive aspects. It is a critical step that mining and other companies ought to follow for getting governmental clearance before proceeding with a project. The intent of the EIA is that it be conducted, with fairness, equity and transparency, involving stakeholders that should include in the main, the affected people who more often than not are from the most marginalised sections of society. It is this rigorous step that can make projects more sustainable.

The proposed draft EIA on the contrary, allows for post facto approvals, thereby doing away with the exercise of making diligent assessments and seeking clearances. It shrinks public participation in the process by reducing the notice period for hearings, if not doing away with them altogether in many categories of projects. To be more precise the intent is to make impact assessment itself redundant in as many projects as possible. What is even more dangerous for areas like North East India that used to have about 60% of the forest cover of the country is that all these forests will be denuded with grim consequences because the new EIA says projects are allowed to secure land for long durations without being accountable for any construction on those

lands. This will increase mercenary land grabbing that is already happening in areas held by cement companies and coal mining agencies. Further, the EIA empowers the Centre to appoint State authorities to oversee this process, thereby diminishing the voices of real stakeholders, the indigenous people.

This is not to say that the earlier EIAs took into account peoples' views and that those views were even incorporated. Mining in the hill state of Meghalaya has happened within forest areas and that was done even by redefining forests. That act was executed by the State Forest Department in 2015. Earlier the District Councils had defined an area with 25 mature trees as a forest. In 2015 just after granting mining leases to cement companies, the Meghalaya Government diluted the definition of "forest". In December, 2015 the Forest Regulation Act of 1973 was amended by adding the phrase a "compact and continuous tract of minimum four hectares" will now be considered as forest in the state. The new definition specifies that an area should have more than 250 naturally growing trees with a girth size of 15 cm or more per hectare (ha) to be regarded as forest. In case of a bamboo dominant patch, more than 100 naturally growing clumps should be present per ha. In case of mixed vegetation, the number changes to 150 trees and over 40 bamboo clumps. Going by the above definition there would be no forest land in Meghalaya and indeed forest land has dwindled considerably. Even within reserved forests there are large scale encroachments.

The irony of it all is that In December 1996, the Supreme Court had passed a landmark judgment, reinterpreting the definition of forest under the Forest Conservation Act of 1980. The apex court said that it would go by the dictionary meaning of forests. The definition not only includes forests mentioned in government records but "all areas that are forests as per the dictionary meaning of the term irrespective of the nature of ownership and classification". According to Oxford English Dictionary

a forest is "a large area covered chiefly with trees and undergrowth". There is no demarcation in terms of area or number of trees in the dictionary meaning. Today climate change has affected Meghalaya as much as it has other states in this country. This hilly state has had summer temperatures in the range of 27-30 degrees centigrade in the last few years. The highest temperature that Meghalaya used to have 20 years ago at the height of summer was never more than 24 degrees centigrade.

Scientists have been warning us of the present and imminent dangers of climate change but governments across the world including our own have preferred to look the other way. One of the reasons for the proliferation of rare infectious diseases is because the environment is fighting back against the propensity of humans to appropriate everything within their sight. They want to conquer all and indulge in profiteering at all costs. This is the mantra today. It is wrong to surmise that the lessons left behind by Covid in these last five months have taught us humans the much needed lesson in adversity and humility. Now, it is those in Government that are possessed by a rapacity not seen before. They want to sell out this earth and its resources as if they own this planet. This shameful action must be stopped in its tracks ought to be condemned by all humans in India and not just by environmentalists. Covid affects everyone, rich and poor alike but the poor suffer much more because they do not own the resources to fight back the Covid disease or the economic impacts of the sudden halt on livelihoods.

So far, the only group to have taken up this issue with some seriousness is the Khasi Students' Union (KSU). They have submitted a memorandum to the State Government opposing the EIA. But can we leave it to the KSU alone to take up an issue that will affect us for generations to come? For once we need to come together and stand as one to oppose the EIA. We also need to build solidarities across the region. It's now or never!

(Views expressed in these columns are personal and are not necessarily that of The Shillong Times)

Mission education: A pending project

By Shalabas Syiemlieh

We live in challenging times... As of 2012, according to the Reserve Bank of India, about 22% of total state population is below the poverty line, with 12.5% from rural Meghalaya; and 9.3% from the urban area. This shocking reality paint a bleak picture in newspapers and on our television screens. It can be difficult to maintain a positive outlook on the future, to look past the urgent problems that we all face now towards a new horizon for the next generation...

Mission Education is our initiative to get every underprivileged child in the state of Meghalaya into school and learning. Run by the Meghalaya Atheists Society (MAS), Mission Education aims to mobilise thousands to help ensure Free Education is a lasting legacy. We continue to call on fellow atheists to make this project a reality for the thousands of underprivileged children in Meghalaya. Education is the key to giving us this vision. Children have a remarkable capacity for positivity and energy. They hold strong hopes and dreams that can, if nurtured and developed, play a huge role in forming both strong individuals and strong communities.

Good quality free education can deliver almost immeasurable positive results for wider society, helping to shape citizens who are healthier, more productive, and active within their communities. Education will not only give us tomorrow's doctors, nurses, teachers and leaders – but also healthy mothers, responsible fathers and engaged citizens.

For the Society members, there is no time to waste. This means considering innovative financing solutions to donate for the underprivileged children in the state to attend school. Members must focus their efforts on what works. What matters are the tools that can deliver right at the sharp end of education: teachers, books and a school. In a lagging state like Meghalaya, legislators must be absolutely clear that they recognize education as the cornerstone of development in the state.

Our Goal: A life without education is a life half-lived. When people cannot read or write, when they do not have the skills and abilities that a good quality education offers, they are condemned to a life of poverty, ill-health and social exclusion. This disadvantage gets handed down through generations.

The underprivileged children of illiterate parents are more vulnerable to a range of serious threats and problems that can scar their lives forever. And it is not only individuals who suffer – the state as a whole is also affected.

The other side of the story is that children who do go to school and learn are healthier, better-nourished, and live longer and more prosperous lives than those who are excluded. When children attend school they become aware of their own potential in the world, and are equipped with the life skills necessary to make informed choices and live well in society. Education also promotes tolerance and understanding between people – both individually and on a national level. Ultimately this leads to greater political participation, stability and transparency, strengthened democratic systems, and a reduction in corruption.

As per the 2011 Census, as many as 7.8 million children in India are forced to earn a livelihood even while attending school, while 84 million children don't go to school at all. Working in shops, as ragpickers or employed in petty jobs, these children usually belong to families that land up in big cities in search of a livelihood. And before they know, their childhood is lost in oblivion. Despite the Right to Education Act, such children face immense discrimination. We at Meghalaya Atheists Society through the All Meghalaya Atheists' and Humanists' Project are here to change this. And in the ongoing effort to achieve our goal, it is also vital that we supply reliable information regarding what the priority issues are to be targeted.

Misleading information in the media: Talk about a bad day: That's how you'd feel if a computer hacker managed to gain access to your personal computer and steal your confidential documents as it happened with me last year. Yes, it may seem that hackers primarily attack companies and corporations, but the truth is that they can also target your computer just as easily. Of course, they can't do anything until they get "inside" your computer, but there are plenty of ways they can make that happen.

On the January 5, 2019, several confidential documents relating to the project saved in password protected hard drives were stolen and manipulated. The hacker, who chats by the screen name of kupar_incognito, gained access to my personal computer by a program called "Sub7" (or SubSeven). The unfortunate happened when Sub7 got into my computer via my personal email. And on the 30th of March 2019, manipulated versions of the project proposal was published on several pages on Facebook and even landed on front pages of registered media outlets such as Rupang and Wyrta to mislead the people.

The whole hacking and leaking episode began after a minor argument that took place in a chatroom #ProjectExpose available at the Dark Web. The hacker, who is the moderator of a whistleblowing platform on Facebook (Thad Madan) threatened to leak a classified 26 minute video of the fake encounter of someone by the name of Fullmoon Dhar which he acquired by inappropriate means. The argument started when the hacker took the name of a police official (an honest and distantly related cousin) accusing him of being involved in the act in an attempt to defame and tarnish his reputation.

The misleading information that was circulated by Rupang and Wyrta showed the total strength of the Society to be 9,089; whereas the actual number (as of 12.08.2020) is just 500. Moreover, the newspapers had also displayed the budget to be a whopping Rs. 45,44,50,000 and the donation amount as Rs. 50,000 per member; while the actual budget till date is only 5 crore. Even the dates were manipulated to mislead and misinform the people of Meghalaya.

Mission Education - a distant dream: The responsibility for achieving our goal rests primarily with members. Indeed 100% of the funds that have been collected, have come from society members alone. This article reveals just how far we are from the distant dream of a full and life-enhancing education for all underprivileged children in Meghalaya. While the benefits of education could not be more apparent, it still receives too little political priority on the state development agenda.

Recently, education minister Lakhmen Rymbui said, "teacher training, infrastructure improvement and curriculum upgrade" are on the current government's agenda. But we all know that's easier said than done. In a state which needs investment and attention to education the most, Meghalaya government continues to neglect its obligations and fail to take the steps needed to secure quality education for its people. In other states of the country, governments have made remarkable efforts but have been left high and dry by corrupt politicians that have abandoned or sidelined their commitments.

Education in Meghalaya must take centre-stage in the effort to drive sustainable and equitable recovery from the financial and economic crises. A massive reinvigoration of effort, together with investment and innovation is needed to ensure that our state does not falter on the road to ensuring that every underprivileged child in the state of Meghalaya can benefit from the light and hope that education offers.

(The writer is a computer programmer and teacher. He can be reached at shalabas.syiemlieh@gmail.com)

TO THE EDITOR

Arrest nepotism in the MPSC

Editor,

Yes the timeline for MCS results seem to be blowing in the wind. We hope the results will come in sooner than later. All concerned, right from the Commission members, to those who examine papers right down to the officers and staff of the office should expeditiously do their part. As for appointing a Chairperson, it will necessarily require the consent of the Chief Minister. The MPSC may not be able to suggest or propose any name since convention has it that the appointment is purely a political decision. What happened with me stands out as a case study although I am not sure it will not be repeated. I may, for the sake of public interest point out things as recorded in my personal diary

The then Chairperson PJ Sangma died in harness at Nazareth Hospital. The Chairmanship fell on Oris Syiem Myriaw (Oris Lyngdoh) who retired on November 1, 2002, leaving me as the senior most

member. Traditionally I should have been appointed Chairperson without complications but Dr F Khonglam the then CM was unwilling to appoint me for reasons best known to him. Due to the delay in appointing a Chairperson, vague news floated around that the CM had his own candidate. Not relying on that, I ran from pillar to post to get authentic information on who would be notified as Chairperson. I tried to meet Dr Khonglam in person but to no avail. My chances of becoming Chairperson seemed bleak. However, I remember what late Mr PK Bhowmick my immediate boss as Commissioner of Transport said, "Nobody in the world can stop you from becoming Chairperson."

One winter morning I had a chance meeting with Mr RG Lyngdoh, then a senior cabinet minister. He stretched his hand for a lucky shake because apparently the CM had told him and a few senior ministers that I would be appointed Chairperson as I was the senior most member. On the last day of October 2002, I was summoned by the CM to his office. During the conversation he requested me to help two persons whose names he mentioned, to get through

the MPSC interviews. One was a known applicant and the other was his niece Felicia Khonglam. Now, I had been in all my career a subordinate officer – a DTO an ACT a DCT and JCT in which I could rarely take any decisions independently, except as DTO in day to day work. So I respected his request and said I would be discussing the matter with the then Chairperson. Later it was interesting to note how the CM denied saying that he tried to promote his own candidate. He said that it was agreed among senior ministers that PK Lakiang would be appointed Chairperson. But we all know what happened and who was appointed Chairperson. It was a relative of his!

Later, when Khonglam was no longer CM, I would meet him nearly every morning while walking to Laitumkhrah market to get The Shillong Times. I would nod my head at him but later I thought I should stop that too. A week or so later I heard that he had passed away. God have mercy on him!

Yours etc.,
PK Lakiang,
Former member MPSC,
Shillong-3

Religious conversion a bigger threat

Editor,

Apropos the article by Saili Gwali 'Our evil motives desecrate our religions' (ST Aug 11, 2020) I would like to congratulate the writer for exposing the agenda of some religious denominations. Though Mr Gwali has written the piece in the global perspective, I find the case very relevant to our tribal states of the northeast. Our simple-hearted forefathers were just cajoled into becoming Christians when the British entered India to fulfill their various motives. Some even learnt our native languages with the intention of converting us into their religion. Our ancestors were attracted by their fair skin and so they did not protest. Their English names also appealed to them which slowly become easier for us to lose our faith in our traditions and customs.

Since the people following the various tribal faiths were being rapidly converted to the foreign religion and they are now a big number, the mission

itself has been posing a greater threat to the indigenous culture. But I wish to thank this local daily and a handful of conscious writers from the bottom of my heart for doing a great job by exposing those Christian proselytizers under various churches.

Imagine this – a converted fiancée will not marry her partner unless he first gets converted. Is it not the problem that calls for a case study? This is, I believe, the situation prevailing across the length and breadth of Meghalaya. Why are our District Councils leaders not taking any steps in preserving our indigenous faiths and our rich culture? What is this District Council for? Is it because our leaders themselves have already embraced a foreign religion? It would have no problem if these proselytizers funded from abroad were not claiming themselves as an exclusive path leading to God. But they never give up the fanatic exclusivity of their respective Churches which they claim will take Meghalayans to heaven.

Yours etc.,
Easter Sohtun
Via email

MeECL needs to rein in adverse forces

Editor,

As a common person, I feel that the action taken by the MeECL Authorities against the officer and Resident Engineer of Myntdu-Leshka Hydro Electric Project who failed to execute his duty is a step in the right direction. It will also go a long way in rescuing the MeECL from drowning. The agitated MeECL Engineers' Association, the MeECL Accounts Association that protested against the Chairman cum Managing Director and the Management of the MeECL only lend credence to the old adage that the tree that bears fruit is always stoned. But may the tree bear better and sweeter fruits in times to come in the interest of the public at large.

Pray that our state's only power sector which has been ailing for the past many decades grows healthier under her able leadership, tireless effort and wisdom.

Yours etc.,
N Thabab,
Via email

*"Character is higher than intellect.
A great soul will be strong to live as
well as think."*

--- Abraham Lincoln

The Shillong Times

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Between Freedom and Independence

THIS time Independence Day sounds like a strange word. We have been held captive for nearly five months and are told to avoid contact with other humans so there is no Independence Day fanfare this year. This respite from celebration and ritual should provide the rulers of this country and the states an opportunity to reflect on whether the Independence we gained at the stroke of midnight in 1947 is synonymous with the freedom we enjoy today. True we are no longer slaves of a colonial power but as citizens can we access all the freedoms guaranteed to us by the Indian Constitution? Democracy or the Government of, by and for the people that is the gift of western political thought and promises equality for all was implanted in a country that was sharply divided by caste hierarchies. To expect this implant to work without a glitch and without addressing the social divisions that exist even today in this country, is perhaps an unfulfilled ideal. Besides, there is a difference between freedom and independence. Though both are compatible and even complementary the objectives that each seek to achieve are different. The seeds of freedom were sown in the Indian mind by MK Gandhi in 1921 during the non-cooperation movement when he mobilised the people to fight for independence through non-violent methods. This was something the British found difficult to handle, used as they were to the tools of subjugation.

When India became independent in 1947, freedom was already firmly implanted in their minds. The Indian Constitution, one of the longest documents was adopted on January 26, 1950. Interestingly, India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, moved the first amendment to the Indian Constitution on May 10, 1951, seeking changes to certain fundamental rights. Nehru's first intervention was to amend Article 19, which guarantees freedom of speech and expression. For some reason, Nehru believed that this freedom might lend itself to abuse. Hence Article 19 (1) (a) which essentially guides the behaviour of the media in India has now become the Sword of Damocles which threatens media freedom with libel on flimsy grounds. There are other freedoms which the Constitution guarantees but which the average citizen struggles to access. Access to justice remains a distant dream for many. Access to potable drinking water; to shelter, clothing and food are still not guaranteed. Many of our villages do not have basic infrastructure like roads. They lack basic healthcare and education. What can freedom mean to this category of citizens? This is something that the political class and those manning the three pillars of democracy ought to be exercising their minds on today.

Revisiting history:
Honouring our ancestors

By Pratap Chhetri

Today, besides being our Independence Day; it is also the 75th Anniversary of V-J Day or Victory over Japan Day. On this day in 1945, imperial Japan surrendered to the Allied forces bringing an end to the Second World War. With Germany's surrender on May 8, 1945, the War ended in Europe but history bears testimony that it would take the unleashing of the deadliest force known to mankind to bring the War to an end in the Eastern Front, just three months later.

In 1917 during the course of the First World War, our great grand-fathers from the different parts of the North East went all the way to France as non-combatants, a part of the wider Indian Labour Corps on a year's contract. These men were pioneers for they saw modern civilization at its height for the first time ever in their lives. Awed, must they have been to see ships and airplanes. But most of all, the horrors of the War and that of modern warfare must indeed have left a lasting impression in their minds. One perhaps they wished they would never have to set eyes upon again.

Yet, just twenty five years after the return of these men, when the Second World War spilled over into the backyards of the region, in the form of the famous Burma Campaign, many of our ancestors fought and died defending British India against the Japanese, some in our own soil - in Manipur and Nagaland. The Burma Campaign saw some of the bloodiest battles of the Second World War. The decisive battles fought in Imphal and Kohima from the spring of 1942 till the summer of that year, which in some ways altered the course of the War are often referred to, in popular writings as 'The Dunkirk of the East.' The award of 7 Victoria Crosses in these two battles, three to Europeans and four to Indian soldiers is proof that these battles were epic.

The North East Region has two important threads that connect it intricately to the Second World War. The first which has been elucidated briefly above and the second, which many of today's generation are not much aware of is that of the exodus of more than half a million Indians from Burma in 1942 through the North East to various parts of India. Within this harrowing narrative of refugees is also

embedded, the story of the humanitarian services rendered by porters and tea labour force of the region under the refugee operations launched by the Indian Tea Association to help the fleeing Indians. It is these two aspects of the Burma Exodus of 1942 that this article wishes to touch upon.

In December 1941, the British in Burma were caught unawares by the Japanese forces and by March 1942, Rangoon fell. As the Japanese forces advanced northwards, the British fled bag and baggage retreating into India over a five month period through the unforgiving terrain of Upper Burma. Alongside the retreating British forces, thousands of Indians walked on foot through the jungles and swamps of Burma to safety into the North East.

Of three main land routes used by the escaping Indians - two led into the North East. One was from Mandalay northwards towards Kalewa along the Chindwin Valley, after which a long dirt trail led to the Tamu Pass and then onwards to Imphal. With the fall of Southern Burma, the remainder of the Indian population, that could not manage to escape through the Taungup route which passed through the Arakan coast into Chittagong in today's Bangladesh had no option but flee to Mandalay on whatever transport was available - trains and boats or walk it up all the way to Mandalay.

Most Indians had to begin walking from Mandalay itself as there were very few vehicles available. The few motor convoys that were making the journey to Kalewa were reserved exclusively for the Anglo-Indians and Europeans, most of whom were employees of the Burma Oil Company. This discrimination is supposed to have even extended to the trails leading to the Tamu Pass with one route for Europeans and another for Indians. It is estimated that up to 250,000 Indians took this route which involved walking on foot for 2 to 3 weeks through mud trails, dense jungles and mountains for over 300 kilometres. By the beginning of May 1942 with the advancing Japanese forces, this route was untenable.

While the other more

treacherous route started in Myitkyina in upper Burma through then uncharted Hukawng Valley, via the Pangsau, Chaukan and Diphu Passes in today's Arunachal Pradesh into Ledo in Assam. Many in Mandalay who could not escape through the Tamu Pass carried northwards to Myitkina in upper Burma in the hope of being airlifted. About 5000 lucky ones were evacuated by air but when the air strip there was bombed in early May, all hopes of any further evacuations by air was dashed. The Governor of Burma Dorman Smith himself escaped on one of the last flights.

The only option was to trek through the route known as the Valley of Death braving the impossible. Groups of refugees trudged along this route from May 1942 up to September, braving the wrath of the monsoon and the unforgiving terrain and reached Ledo in Assam. Over 23,000 refugees crossed into India on this route and almost 7000 lost their lives. The harrowing ordeal of many months is captured very well in 'Forgotten Frontier' by Geoffrey Tyson. Just one of the many accounts is a reference to a young boy from whose head 350 maggots were pulled out! He was lucky to survive.

The association of British and local tea planters - Indian Tea Association played a pivotal role in the civilian evacuation from Burma. Between March and September 1942, they worked relentlessly mobilising porters and tea labour force for refugee operations. The daunting rescue operations that they launched at times on the treacherous treks through the Chindwin Valley and Hukawng Valley are no lesser heroic exploits than elsewhere during the Second World War. Had it not been for their operations, hundreds more would have perished. The Marwari Association of those days is reported to have helped set up refugee camps.

Over 200 porters which included 63 Garos, 59 Khasis, 52 Pnars, 13 Adis (known in British colonial times as Abors), 13 tea garden labourers and 2 government porters are recorded as having died in service on the routes from Hukawng Valley. The Adis (Abors) are reported to have

been the most resilient and disciplined of the porters. One of the their leaders, Tanong Tamuk was mentioned in Despatches while another Adi, Tanbuk Irang was awarded the Albert Medal, a British award given for saving lives. Today this Medal has been replaced by the George Cross.

On both these routes, Naga villagers are reported to have rendered invaluable service by guiding the refugees through the jungles as the vast swathes of the area was largely unmapped. Villagers also built temporary shelters for the refugees on the routes to offer a place of rest for the tired and the infirm.

Estimates of those who died on these exacting treks range from 50,000 to 100,000. The majority died of hunger, starvation and exhaustion and from cholera, malaria and dysentery.

The sufferings endured by thousands who marched walking hundreds of kilometres through the harshest of tropics both in terms of climate and topography amidst hunger, disease and death is a testament to the limits of human endurance. While we must commemorate and remember this tragic event we must also take pride in the services rendered by our tribesmen to those who fled Burma in 1942. Sadly, there is no record of any commemoration of their services in the North East. But it is never too late to remember these Samaritans. For, commemoration and remembrance is a legacy that they richly deserve.

In many ways, The Long Forgotten March of 1942 bears an uncanny resemblance to the Long March of the Migrants of 2020; one that has played out too many times on our television screens. For, history always leaves a lesson to be learnt.

(Pratap Chhetri is a civil servant working on media and public communication for the Government of Mizoram. Since 2014, he has been researching the various Labour Corps from North East India who served as a part of the Indian Labour Corps in France in 1917/18 and also the unknown facets of Gurkha participation in the Great War. His Gurkha relatives served in both the Wars as soldiers, in the Western Front in WWI and in the Burma Campaign in WWII. He can be reached at prachhetri@gmail.com)

Bengaluru riots

By Insaf

ROUND THE STATES

Politics at its worst

Riots and the aftermath give political parties a handle to settle scores, rather than heal the wounds. The country's digital capital, Bengaluru, is the latest example. Following mob violence in east Bengaluru, the police on Thursday last filed FIRs which include 16 accused as members of Social Democratic Party of India (SDPI), political arm of Popular Front of India. Denying it, the SDPI says it's being "dragged just to cover-up police inaction against blasphemy and failure of state's intelligence unit." On Tuesday last, 3 youth were killed in police firing and about a dozen cops injured after a mob attacked a police station and targeted Congress MLA Srinivas Murthy's house over a social media with derogatory references to Islam by his nephew. The ruling BJP has accused the Congress of not being 'vocal' against the rioters, saying 'appeasement' seemed to be its official policy; the Congress and JD(S) instead termed the incident as "a planned conspiracy" and would set up a fact finding committee; the Government says it's considering banning PFI and SDPI; the Congress has advised ban RSS and its affiliates too, as these are "two sides of the same coin." Such tu-tu-mein-mein has been heard before and will go on. Attempts to get communities together is nowhere on their agenda. They simply can't see the wood for the trees.

Rajasthan Truce



Forget, forgive and move on - the truce finally brokered in the fractured Rajasthan Congress. A month after all hell broke loose between Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot and his former Deputy Sachin Pilot, the Congress High Command finally doused the fire, which could have brought its House down. Sachin and his set of 18 MLAs are back in the fold. Interestingly, Gehlot termed it as a 'win of citizens', and not of the party. Perhaps sharp enough to realise that the trust deficit between the two camps is far from being bridged. While both leaders met on Thursday last, there is unease in the Gehlot camp as his 100-odd MLAs are not ecstatic about taking the rebels back and opposed it. Not to say that the Pilot camp isn't edgy either, as in an interview he said 'most of his MLAs were scared...we thought by going to Jaipur they will be harassed.' For the time being, the real patch-up can wait, as Gehlot and team prepare for the trust vote, with the BJP moving a no-confidence motion against their government. The crisis is now a "closed chapter", will a fresh one open? With details of the truce unknown, there could be many a slip between the cup and the lip.

Punjab Cong 'Revolt'

One door closes and another opens. Not of opportunity but trouble for the Grand old party! It's been over 10 days since senior Congress leaders Partap Singh Bajwa and Shamsheer Singh Dullu sounded the bugle of revolt against their Chief Minister, Captain Amarinder Singh, but the High Command maintains a stoic silence! Nagging tension is brewing among the elected MLAs as after Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, the rebellion bug has bitten their State. What next, is the big question as the drama comes amidst rumours of a new political formation in the State.

Amarinder camp suspects the BJP is behind SAD leader SS Dhindsa's attempt to form a new Akali Dal and that Bajwa's positioning is part of plans to join it, which he denies. The trouble began after Bajwa and Dullu, met Governor Badnore and demanding a CBI/ED probe into the spurious liquor tragedy. State Congress President Sunil Jakhar views it as crossing the 'laksham rekha' and has written to High Command seeking their expulsion. Bajwa instead wants Amarinder's ouster and warns if it doesn't happen Congress shall be wiped out in Punjab. He insists the MLAs be called to Delhi to express their views in private about CM's popularity. Will Delhi oblige and if so, when?

Devastating Landslide

God's own country has more on its hands than it can handle. If dealing with fresh cases of COVID-19 was not enough, the rain god is playing havoc in Kerala. In Pettimudi, hamlet of Idukki, an entire region was washed away in the devastating landslide with very few having survived. Following a visit, Chief Minister Vijayan on Thursday last, assured the State would identify alternate land and build homes for those who have lost their 'layams', other than the compensation of Rs 5 lakh to the victims' families. He also assured all educational expenses of some 12th standard students and few others pursuing degree course who survived in the initial hours would be borne by government. So far, 55

bodies were retrieved, 15 are still buried and only 12 persons were rescued. While the CM said the approach will be same as during the landslide in Kavalappara last year, claiming 59 lives, the moot question is why do these tragedies occur yearly? Serious introspection is vital as there are regions across the State vulnerable to slipping during heavy rain. Plus, it's not just Kerala, but other States wait for disasters to happen and forget the adage: A stitch in time saves nine.

No Opening of Temples

Engulfed by COVID-19, Maharashtra simply can't handle more. On Thursday last, the government informed the High Court its machinery is 'overburdened' and it can't give in to the demand to allow Jain temples in Mumbai Metropolitan Region and Pune to open for Paryushan, August 15 to 23. If allowed 'there is an imminent danger of coronavirus that may result in loss of life,' it pleaded. The two petitions, including that of Jain Gyanmandir Trust, sought 'if malls, marketplaces, barber shops, spas, saloons, beauty parlours and liquor shops could be operated with restrictions, then why couldn't the community offer prayers at its temples while observing social distancing norms.' Government countered saying 'if permission is granted for this, then there will be similar requests from other various religions, castes/communities and if allowed it shall result in spreading of the virus and open floodgates of coronavirus patients.' The court refused to grant relief but decided to keep the matter pending, pass order next month when the government issues new COVID-19 guidelines. 'Let us wait for a few days. God is with you and within you.....' the bench said. Justified alright.

TO THE EDITOR

Two lovers -
two faiths

Editor,
Marbianglang Rymbai while expressing deep concern on religious conversion which had led to the population of the indigenous faith dwindling, has also brought to light the prohibition of inter-denominational marriage between members of two Christian denominations. While writing this piece, I take the liberty of a Fundamental Human Right to assess my own religious belief.

Christian marriage was not invented by the Church. Holy matrimony is a sacrament given to the world by Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Marriage is a contract between two people. A man and woman accept each other as man and wife until one or other dies. It is beyond my comprehension as to why the various Churches have adopted a narrow-minded approach in discouraging mixed marriages or inter-denominational marriages. A wife and husband can belong to different political

parties. They don't necessarily like the same television programme. They disagree on certain issues and remain absolutely happy and united. They don't interfere with each other's religious beliefs. So why should religion make a difference to them?

The Catholic Church says that if you are not a Catholic you probably won't be happy if you marry a Catholic. So is the case with the Protestant Church. There are all sorts of reasons to justify why mixed marriages will go wrong and fail. A non-Catholic clergyman of London in his article said, "Every marriage involves risk. In a mixed marriage, there are particular snags that must be frankly faced. The difficulty arises whether or not the couples are devout in the practice of their religion. Those who have been reared in a certain religious faith cannot shake off its influence by discarding the intellectual belief." Period!

Marriage is built on the foundation of love and the foundation of love is trust. We live in a society that emphasizes individual

rights, personal freedom, and mobility. Mutual respect is the key principle of a solid marital foundation. With regards to the marital conversion of the followers of the indigenous faith, the point is the identity of the jaidbynriew hynniewtrep depends on the survival of the indigenous faith groups - Niam Tynrai and Niamtre. Any attempt to assimilate them into Christian, Hindu or Islam fold must be stopped. If need be, the State must enact Anti-Conversion Law to protect and safeguard the ethnicity and identity of the Hynniewtrep.

Yours etc.,
Rosa Mary Shadap
Shillong-14

Umpling roads
in worst
condition

Editor,
The condition of the road in Umpling from Dong Surok on the way to Rynjah is in a pathetic condition. There have been many accidents involving two Wheelers and some with serious injuries, it may be

mentioned that during the pandemic serious injuries requiring Hospitalization is highly avoidable. The authorities and the local legislator should take step to immediately repair the roads. People in Umpling dread the thought of travelling in this particular road. The people of Umpling deserves the better road than what the current condition is.

Yours etc.,
Albert Andrew
Nongrum & Felix Rani
Via email

Voters need a
change of heart

Editor,
The news report on Kongthong - a village in distant East Khasi Hills, in your Friday issue made interesting reading. It exposes the indifference of those in Government and politics to the sufferings of the rural population of Meghalaya. I come from one of the villages in that area and I know for a fact that travelling is extremely difficult and dangerous for pregnant women who need

to be taken to the Sohra CHC or to Shillong. Many women have delivered a child inside the ambulance and suffer in agony until they reach the nearest health centre. When will the government give us motorable roads at least. When will we be connected to the markets where we can take our agricultural and horticultural products? For how long have we to live like step-children of every government that comes to power? Before elections, the candidates promise roads, water supply and electricity. Very few speak of providing schools and health care. No wonder the results of the SSLC every year from Meghalaya's rural areas are dismal.

After the schools were closed since March this year, the children in villages have stopped looking at their books. Since most villages are poorly connected it is pointless to speak of online learning. In any case most parents cannot afford to buy mobile phones. They hardly earn enough to provide food for the family. It is high time that the Education Department thinks of using the teachers

within the villages to teach the children something at least so that they do not lose touch with their books completely.

I also blame myself and my people for not pushing our own cause. In the villages we are divided by politics. Politicians divide us and we fall for those tricks. Also many of us take money for voting for a particular candidate. I request all the Rangbah Shnong/Sordar Shnong to be very strict from the next election onwards and to make sure that every candidate is given a list of the demands from the village and that no money is used during elections. This is the only way to bring any change, otherwise we will never get good roads or schools/colleges and hospitals which we most need.

Yours etc.,
R Khongjee,
Via email

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

"Always forgive your enemies - nothing annoys them so much."

--- Martin Luther King

The Shillong Times

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Indian in US run

INDIAN-origin Kamala Harris has been named as vice-presidential nominee by Democrats for the upcoming polls in the United States. Her very nomination is a mark of the greatness of the Americans – an open-minded approach to matters, citizenship, leadership, and rights of individuals. In a land where the European-origin White population held sway for generations, no one is left behind today. Barack Obama who became president twice was half African and full Black. If Democratic Senator Kamala Harris wins the election, she could also follow the footsteps of Joe Biden to later stake claim for the president's post. The chance for an Indian-origin American to become the head of the nation is there in the distant horizon. The openness of America is its great strength. Also, even an Indian rising to that elevated position there will have his or her loyalty fully fixed on America, a nation made 'great' by the people with their love, commitment and adulation for the land they were born in. America is a land of settlers from around the world, who dared the seas, reached up there generations ago, and migrate to even today, to finally take full citizenship rights.

No other nation in the world is so open or accommodative about 'others'. Those who live and work in the Gulf, turn their blood into sweat to build the sultanates or emirates, will have to pack up and exit from the land the day their work/business visa expires. Russia, which was the epi-centre of the so-called all-encompassing Communist ideology, is 'racist' to the core and would keep others at a distance. China has its own nationalist streak to keep others at bay. A nation that comes nearer to the US in this respect is Singapore, where too, large sections of the people are of Chinese, Asian, Indian and wider Malay origin. Chinese settlers have the upper hand while an Indian had functioned as titular president. This openness and regard for merit are what make both the US and Singapore great nations of the world. This shows up in their growth in economic and other fields. Singapore is only the size of a district in India, but such is its well-being that no one from the island nation wants to go out or settle down elsewhere. Consider the scenario in India, the land that preached Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (World is One Family). How open-minded are we as individuals, and collectively in the political consciousness, is worth an examination. The slogans of globalization and 'unity' of mankind are mostly, deceitful, empty, or self-serving rhetoric.

Myntdu: The river of stories

By H H Mohrmen

Rivers no matter how big or small they are, have their own charm which fascinates people and that is why some describe rivers as majestic, magnificent, gorgeous and what have you. In the tribal culture rivers are not just rivers; they are held in high esteem and they are even worshipped as deities. But the other features of rivers which is unique only amongst the Khasi Pnar is that they have stories. The stories are not inert but people continue to make stories about their connections with the river. In every river that flows from the hills to the plains, it is not only water that flows in the river but stories too flow seamlessly along the river.

One of the very important rivers in Jaintia Hills is the river Myntdu. It starts from a village in the suburbs of Jowai town and even the name of the village is derived from the river. The place where the source of the river is located is considered sacred by the followers of Niamtre in the village known as Mihmyntdu or the source of the river Myntdu. From Mihmyntdu the river flows around Jowai almost encircling Jowai town. It is also worshipped as a deity by the people who live in Jowai town. Because it flows around Jowai almost encircling the town, it is also called 'ka tawiar ka takan' or that which encircles and protects the town. In many cases the river is being metaphysicised or considered as human by the people who live on the banks. Stories were woven around the river's personality.

There are many more stories which have a connection specific to the locals of the area along which the river flows, but these are only few that were collected by the writer. As the river flows south, a very prominent segment of the river near the bridge over the Jowai-Shillong road called Ka Lamench. A few hundred meters down the Chah-tngit and Ka Lamench is a popular site where followers of Niamtre perform various sacrifices.

Chka Jwai the confluence of the river

Myntdu and the river Myngkrem which is the first major tributary of the river Myntdu is another important part of the river. People who follow the indigenous faith avoid frequenting the river Myngkrem and it is a taboo to even go fishing in the river. This perhaps is because the upstream of the tributaries there is a part of the river which is called 'ka Riang Khangnoh' which according to folk stories is a place where 'ka Beipun Rangkit' died of suicide.

The segment of the river where the first bridge on the Jowai-Dawki is located is called Tre-yong riang. This perhaps also has connection with the story of the Beipun Rangki. Whether Riang Khangnoh or Tre-yong riang has any connection with the famous lady from the Sookpoh clan ka weipun Rangkit is still a question. Few meters down the river is another segment of the river known as Thwai u Diren. Recently the Jaintia Fishing and Environment Protection Association constructed a check dam on this portion of the river and called it 'ka dam ser' now because of an image of a deer was made near the dam.

As the river flows, the next part of the river is called Mupiah. It is a very important part of the river because till today, it is the only source of drinking water for the residents of the entire Jowai town. The next important part of the river Myntdu is 'ka Ram pyrhath' where one of the four important deities of 'ki soo dwar sooluti' known as Mutong is located. Mutong also has its own unique story as one of the deities which guards and protects Jowai.

This write-up stresses more on the stretches of the river Myntdu which are connected with two very important stories in Jowai. The part of the river where the fish sanctuary is located comprises of two important sections of the river, 'ka Syntu Ksiar' and 'ka Madih kmal Blai' and these two parts have their own stories. Ka Syntu Ksiar or the Golden flower is a heart wrenching story of a mother

whose name is ka Syntu Laloo from the Jawchibidi clan who lost her son in the misfortune that happened in this place a long time ago. It is said that while the mother was busy in the paddy field near the river, her son who was playing nearby disappeared. She was engrossed with her work so she completely forgot about her son. After sometimes when she looked towards the direction where she had left him, the boy had disappeared.

She left her tools and ran towards the place where she last saw him but her son was nowhere to be seen. He had drowned in the river. She was shocked beyond words. The grief-stricken mother was inconsolable at her loss. Heartbroken, a few days later the mother too jumped into the river and died and it is said that after a few days a beautiful golden coloured flower appeared in the middle of the river. Since then the place is called Golden flower from the unfortunate incident which had happened in this particular portion of the river. This story is told by Lammatoo Laloo one of the kñi (uncle) of the Laloo clan in Jowai.

The other part of the river is ka Madih kmal Blai and this is connected to the story of the great freedom fighter of the Pnars of Jaintia hills whose name is u Kiang Nangbah. U Kiang Nangbah was from the Soo Kpoh clan and led the rebellion against the British which ended in 1862. The story has it that in the beginning when the Pnars were under the dominion of the British rule they were fed up with the high-handedness of the British officers and the imposition of the illegal tax on the commoners. They finally decided to rebel against the British government but they were without a leader then, so the people from the twelve elekas or regions decided to meet on the banks of this river to choose a leader to lead the rebellion.

U Kiang Nangbah a young man from Jowai who is from the Sookpoh clan

was unanimously elected to be the leader, but before he could be accepted to lead the fight, he needed to come up with evidence that he has the blessing of the gods and the ancestors to be that leader. So to prove that he was divinely ordained, U Kiang Nangbah dived into the river and stayed there for quite some time and then came out with a twig with three branches.

U Kiang Nangbah explained that the twig and the three branches have their own unique messages. The main stem which supports the three branches stands for the land of the 12 dalois (the other name of the hilly part of the Jaintia kingdom), the first branch stands for 'unity' of the land, the second branch for the love for one's country, the third branch symbolised the trust that the people need to help one another. His fellow leaders believed that it was an indication that he had the blessings of the gods to lead the rebellion. Unfortunately, the British were able to suppress the rebellion and u Kiang Nangbah was hanged to death on the December 30, 1862 at lawmusiang market.

After ka Madih kmal blai there are other names by which the segment of the same river is known and these names also have stories of their own like 'ka Lynter' and others. The portion of the river near along which is known as 'ka Kaikso' is connected with the Dhar clan and it is also considered as the deity of the clan. 'Sahksaw, Sahpseñ and ka kchaid Rynji' are important sections of the river Myntdu which is located in the raid Tuber area. The famous Lechka hydro electric project is also on the river Myntdu. Downstream before it enters Bangladesh the river is known as Ka Tisang by the people on the India-Bangladesh border. Myntdu has a special connection with the people who live downstream as they lovingly call the river ka 'beipun' or grandmother.

Myntdu and other rivers in the Khasi Jaintia regions as they flow down to the plain also take their stories with them. Not only the water but the stories too flow along with the rivers. (hhmohrmen7@gmail.com)

The IAS topper will remain a suspect in the eyes of Kashmiris Shah Faesal's ghar wapsi is no major gain for Narendra Modi

By Sushil Kutty

The world has changed for the man with the emperor-esque name, Shah Faesal, the first Kashmiri to top the Indian Civil Services Exam; the man who broke into the ranks of the IAS with the proverbial bang, and was felicitated and lauded for being the role model, an apt example, to the youth of the terror-traumatized border state.

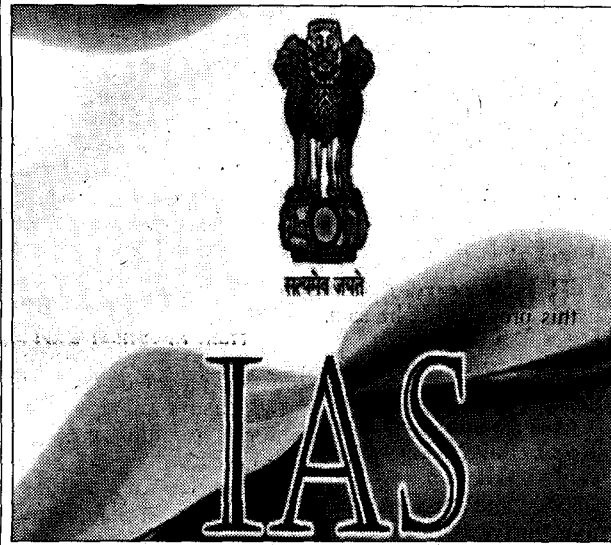
And for a spell, Faesal did play the role of the able administrator. Then, he broke ranks and "quit" the IAS, ostensibly mad at the Centre for its decision to scrap Article 370 and do away with Article 35, both articles of faith for the Kashmiri Muslim, the ones that tenuously bound him to India and the Constitution of India. Shah Faesal refused to be a "stooge" of the powers that be and he was placed under "arrest" for the harsh words he spoke to spell the state of his mind at that point in time.

Today, well over a year after the 'August 5, 2019 Abrogation', Shah Faesal is

Faesal has made "contact" with the Union government. And there's talk that he's convinced the Modi Government that he was ready to return to the IAS, and that the government is "game" to his "homecoming." The 37-year-old who topped the IAS exams in 2009 is said to have negotiated a return to "service," and may even land an "advisory" post.

The obvious question is: What's the Modi Government up to; how can Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah trust and agree to take on a man who had just a little over a year ago thrown all "allegiance to India" vows in the dustbin and walked out?

Is Shah Faesal such a big catch, and will his return IAS change the minds of Kashmiri youth who had lauded and cheered his decision to dump the IAS and India? Without doubt, as far as the Kashmiri youth of the Valley are concerned, the majority of them, Shah Faesal will from now on be a



once more a new man! With a new set of ideals, he's ripe for "Ghar Wapsi", one which could see him reinstated in the Indian Administrative Service! The bureaucrat-turned-politician is ready to become "politician-turned-bureaucrat." Don't be surprised, there are stranger things happening! But before he made his comeback, Faesal did some "cleaning of the slate," so to speak. He dumped the political party he had founded, the Jammu & Kashmir People's Movement (JKPM), and he bid adieu to party-men.

Now comes news that Shah Faesal did this only after clearing a well-demarcated path forward for himself in the larger world that he had quit well over a year ago. It emerges that Shah informed the JKPM of his change of mind only after he had a nice cozy talk with National Security Advisor, Ajit Doval. Of course, his erstwhile JKPM colleagues haven't taken umbrage at Shah's volte face. Shah's flip-flops are not something new. They had been established well before and henceforth they will follow him to the here-in-after, and beyond.

Shah Faesal's JKPM colleagues might be the forgiving sort, but that doesn't mean everybody in the Kashmir Valley, and the "masters" across the LoC, would look at him indulgently as the prodigal who chose to return home! The separatists and the militants, not to speak of the terrorists, home-grown or Pak-spawned, will not take kindly to Shah Faesal's "apostate." Our man will have to from now on keep his travel plans close to his chest, never take the same path twice, on successive days!

The big fact is Shah

traitor to the cause. And because the government at the Centre is the "Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party," he will be hated all the more. Shah Faesal will no more walk the tightrope, if that was what he was doing to date.

No matter what happens, for the hardline separatist, Shah Faesal has rejoined the ranks of the "enemy" and there he will remain! Faesal says it's "nothing strange" if he's "meeting and conversing" with people in the government. Oh, this man is either the trusting sort or naïve. He can't be both, or can he? Shah says that no matter what, he will have to "live and work here," and that it is "perfectly normal."

Again, miscalculation. Chances are that more than half of the Kashmir Valley will not agree with him, forget the denizens living in lands across the border, those who were banking on him to land Kashmir on their laps. And looking back, the fact that his resignation was kept on "hold" will make his "resignation" and "reinstatement" look and sound like a "drama" enacted by the Centre and him in cahoots. If Shah Faesal gets reinstated with full back pay and dearness allowance paid, his seniority intact, it will be a new harakiri practiced in the higher echelons of policy, at the core of which will be "you live to fight another day even with all the fight in you gone."

Shah Faesal skirts all such talk. His worldview has changed. The days locked up "inhouse" have transformed him. He thinks different now, and understands that the "mood of the nation" has also changed. Finally, Shah Faesal understands the saying "When in Rome..." (IPA Service)

TO THE EDITOR

Tribute to HS Shylla

Editor,

Mr. Hispreaching Son Shylla, who passed away on August 7 this month, has had a long innings of over 30 years in public service (1988-2020) during which he had held many public offices including that of Chief Executive Member of KHADC. In his political career, Bah Shylla had championed many public issues, the last being the contentious Khasi Social Custom of Lineage (Second Amendment) Bill, 2018 which was passed by the Council during his brief second stint as CEM of KHADC.

My association with Bah Shylla began when he was the CEM of KHADC during 2004-08. I remember our meetings in his office in 2005, during which he requested me to explore new avenues of funding for the council. Shylla was very keen that the Council take up more developmental activities such as development of market infrastructure which would directly benefit the rural farming community of the state. Given the precarious financial position of the Council and its large committed expenditure, Shylla wanted to tap other sources of funding apart

from the grants and shared revenue that the Council receives from the union and state governments. He wanted to find out whether it was possible for agencies such as NABARD to support rural development projects of the Council under the Rural Infrastructure Development Fund and other such schemes. I remember discussing with him the possibility of securing soft loans for projects which could generate revenue to repay the loans.

This vision that Bah Shylla had for an enlarged developmental role for KHADC and his understanding that the Council needs to look beyond the available sources of finance is something that I have not seen in other leaders of the Council. The action that Bah Shylla took subsequent to our meetings truly set him apart. Not satisfied with my offer to provide him and the Council with informal advice, Bah Shylla got the executive committee to offer me an official appointment as a consultant to the KHADC with clear deliverable goals. All this was happening way back in 2005-06 when such practice of appointing development consultant in governments was not very popular unlike what we find today. It is

another matter that I did not get the permission of my parent department to take up the offer of the Council, and the subsequent change of guard in the KHADC brought to an early end to this initiative of Bah Shylla. In all this, Bah Shylla was ahead of his time.

My association with KHADC did not end here. In 2013 I took a renowned Professor from IIT Mumbai to meet with an executive member of the council and discuss the possibility for initiation of a project on Preservation and Promotion of Khasi language through Language Technology involving the Center for Indian Language Technology, IITand KHADC. In spite of the keen interest of the Professor, who was doing all this because of his past connection with Shillong and his desire to contribute something to the people of the state, this project could not take off. I sometimes wonder whether this project would have had a positive outcome had someone like Bah Shylla been in office at that time as he would have definitely taken personal interest on something as unique as this.

On a Sunday in the month of May this year, when the state was under lockdown due to the Covid-

19, I received a call from Bah Shylla requesting me to arrange for some clothing and other necessities of daily use for two frontline workers who were under quarantine and needed the items urgently as it was difficult for them to get it from their homes located far away from Shillong. Looking back, I'm disappointed that the situation in 2005 did not allow both of us to work together but I'm glad that at least I was able to respond to the request of Bah Shylla which he had made on behalf of the two frontline workers.

May his soul rest in peace.

Yours etc.,
Sumarbin Umdor,
Via email

Education liberates

Editor,

Apropos the article 'Mission Education: A Pending Project' (ST Aug 14, 2020) by Shalabas Syiemlieh, there have been raging debates about the long-term benefits of education as a crime-prevention measure. Education, always has been, and always will be, the most effective way to combat adversity. Rather than making harsher laws to prevent children from

making mistakes, we should encourage them to become productive members of society by providing them with free education and life-skills training.

In our society, most of the time, when issues of crime prevention are brought up, the first line of defense and retaliation is a reactive measure to a crime or a series of crimes. For instance, when looking at the increasing numbers of substance abusers in Meghalaya, the first method of response is often finding a way to toughen punishments and penalties to discourage substance abuse. When not finding ways for stricter punishments, the next focus goes towards finding ways to restrict access to such substances, another preventive measure that focuses on preventing the action, not the motivation behind the action.

By putting more focus on education and early childhood development measures, children will hopefully be less interested and less prone to committing crimes as they get older. A focus on education helps provide a more permanent solution to this problem, as the mentality of the potential perpetrator of such crimes has completely shifted due to their education and upbringing. It's high time the

state government understands that keeping children off the streets matters more than improving their labour market prospects and as it could also prevent the birth of slain criminals such as Fullmoon Dhar.

The article has also shed light on the mysterious world of the "Dark Web". On the one hand, we see the rise in crime "on the streets" due to the many barriers children living in poverty face in accessing education, while on the other, we see educated, sharp and talented people misusing their skills in crime "off the streets" - on the internet. Although the original Sub7 has not been maintained since 2004, several similar hacking programs such as "Sub7Pro" and "Sub7Extended" are available for illegal sale on the Dark Web thereby posing a huge threat to governments, corporations and more so, the general public. As our country celebrates its 74th year of Independence, it's time to change our policies on these issues. It's now or never!

Yours etc.,
Malcolm Lyngdoh
Shillong - 14

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"My country is the world, and
my religion is to do good."

— Thomas Paine

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SHILLONG, TUESDAY, AUGUST 18, 2020

MDA coalition a farce

THE MDA Government is evidently operating in silos. Clearly, many important decisions are taken by the major partner in the Government – the National Peoples' Party (NPP), while the smaller parties that are part of the Government have little or no say, or their voices are stifled. Thirty six months after the MDA took over the reins of governance in Meghalaya we are yet to see a Common Minimum Programme that accommodates the electoral promises of coalitions partners – the UDP, BJP, PDF, HSPDP and Independents. The coalition partners too seem to have forgotten their election manifesto which, hopefully, will be reminded to them when they come back to the people for votes. Those who promised roads, schools and healthcare to their constituents have forgotten those promises. People who voted on payment of money realise they have lost the power to speak.

The disjointedness of the Government is visible in project implementation; to be more specific the Barik beautification project which was initially supposed to be driven by the Urban Affairs Department but which has now changed hands and in the process the vision as well. A smart city is not a city of malls. It is a city that can demonstrate its ecological vision which would mean more green areas within city limits. Shillong and its suburbs already resemble a concrete jungle with no laws in place to control crowding of buildings and encroachments into public spaces, roads and highways. There appears to be no political spine to correct this dysfunctional building spree.

The Barik Project which was earlier envisioned on the sound ecological premise of green park with provisions for artistic pursuits, and a generally a pleasant surrounding right in heart of the city, is now being hijacked by a proposed mall. The new proposal has raised the hackles of Shillong's opinion makers who feel cheated out of their right to breathe clean air. As it is the rapid dwindling of green spaces in and around Shillong and the encroachment even into forested catchments is posing a threat to ecological sustenance and water availability. A mall in the middle of the city not only sounds grotesque but will also signify the victory of a cabal of moneyed influencers who pull the strings in this government.

The common and oft repeated attributes of good governance include participation, rule of law, transparency, responsiveness, consensus based, equity concerns, effectiveness, accountable and strategic vision. Does the MDA government exhibit any of this? Governance is larger than government and envisages a role for civil society and citizens at large because people and civil society institutions themselves form an important link in the governance chain.

The MDA Government will do well to abandon the mall misadventure.

Is religion essentially exclusive?

By Albert Thyrniang

In the last few days, though in the midst of COVID-19, there have been write ups on religion indicating that creed holds sway over people's lives. Recent events like celebration of Eid and the groundbreaking ceremony in Ayodhya, defiling the scare of the highly contagious coronavirus and even risking one's and others' safety, point to how faith overrides everything else. My one article was referred to by more than one columnist and writer of letters to the editor. Therefore, one more piece on the theme may not be out of place and out of interest.

Before presenting my case let me argue that Christianity is not foreign here. Missionaries came and have gone. It is the local people who are living Christianity in these hills. The English language came from abroad. Railway, telephone, television, etc., came from Europe but they have become part and parcel of our lives. You can't limit yourselves only to what is indigenous. Islam too has spread all over the world. Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism have gone beyond India. They have become part of the culture of people who have embraced them. It's the same with Christianity!

One subject that came through is the question of exclusiveness of religions. Is this lack of inclusivity the very nature of all religions? Start with Christianity as it resonates with the local setting. People of Meghalaya are predominantly Christians. But there several Christian denominations in the state, the chief ones being the Roman Catholic Church, the Baptist Church, the Presbyterian Church, the Church of God, the Church of North India, the Seven Day Adventist Church and others. Globally the number of Christian denominations is about 50,000. These groups are quite exclusive without considering permitted casual visits. Members are baptised and enrolled in a church. Celebrations are practically meant for their members. In the Catholic Church, communion is exclusively for Catholics. There is also hate, dislike, and of course, competition among denominations.

Internal exclusivity, nay discrimination against sections within the church also exists. In some churches, for example, ordination to priesthood is excluded for women for no fault of theirs. Women comprise at least half of the population. In many churches the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT or GLBT) community is looked down upon. Church marriage

for them is forbidden. Scientific evidences show LGBTs are made so. They have no choice. So why the discrimination?

The predicament of indigenous religions in the 'Abode of Clouds' is part of a global reality. First, Christianity changed the landscape of Europe, the Middle East and the Americas completely and Asia and Africa partially. Later on Islam did the same in the Middle East, Eastern Europe, Western and Eastern Africa, South East Asia, etc. Meghalaya is transformed by Christianity. The landscape changeover is almost complete. Churches stand in every nook and corner of the state. Niamtre and Niam Khasi are marginalised and the Songsareks almost vanished. The scenario is so bleak that boys and girls of indigenous faiths are 'forced' to convert to find spouses. The provision for 'mixed marriages' and 'Disparity of Cult' practised by some denominations can be avoided. To conserve indigenous religions someone has called for a ban on conversion. But who will take up this cause as 'indigenous' public representatives are nil? So organisations like the RSS might be the saviour.

Islam's main sects are Sunni, Shia, Kharijite and Sufi orders but there are numerous schools, branches and movements within the second largest religion in the world. Internal differences among them are rife. In every country a minority sect is persecuted by the majority. Shias and other sects face prejudice, discrimination and even violence in Sunni dominated countries. As for internal exclusivity, in many countries women are denied entry in mosques. In India legal intervention was required for All India Muslim Personal Law Board (AIMPLB) to declare free entry of women in mosques. The practice of gender segregation is common in Islam. Muslim women are made to wear the burkha and the hijab.

Hinduism is considered the most inclusive religion. It may be so but the religiously sanctioned caste system is unfathomable. The four main categories – Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and the Shudras that branch themselves into more than 3,000 castes and 25,000 sub-castes is unpleasant enough, but what is worse is that Dalits or the untouchables were unworthy even to be assigned a caste. The 'outcasts' have been treated inhumanly for centuries. Women also

know whether what we believe in is true or not. Religion has a role in human life but religion is unable to state whether articles of faith are true or untrue. Religion is not able to even reveal who God really is, where heaven and hell are, where humans go after death. So faith has to be treated as such. It is personal. If this is accepted then we cannot but be pluralistic because faith is varied. I may believe in Jesus and the Bible, others may believe in Prophet Mohammed and the Koran, still others may believe in Ram and the Bhagavad Gita. It is fine. None can prove who is correct. We go on with our human interactions and can co-exist.

Religious violence has its roots in considering faith as truth. Faith can take fanatical shades and can even justify violence. The Bengaluru violence broke out early this month because thousands were willing to defend Prophet Mohammed. What is not absorbed is that while the anti-Prophet Facebook post is despicable, nothing can ever justify violence. Even if sentiments are hurt violence is no justification. Even if there are insults against the Prophet or the Koran, violence is completely inexcusable.

However, for rioters 'hurt' means they can go on a rampage to vandalise, assault policemen, damage properties, set vehicles ablaze, burn houses and even kill. Insulting Prophet Mohammed or Jesus Christ or Buddha or the holy books or any revered person is a lesser crime than violence. Violence is a much bigger crime than abusing a person or a sacred book or a structure. Prophet Mohammed or Jesus Christ or Buddha or Ram or any saint can never be insulted. They won't get offended. They are quite cool in their pure existence. So why let faith take control of or hijack our reason and logic? Offenders of other religions desire exclusiveness. The other is considered an enemy. Those who took to violence in Bengaluru want to promote enmity.

A multi religious and pluralistic world is a reality. At no point in history will there be a single religion. We can work towards inclusiveness while recognising the unique identity of other faiths. My sympathies to the marginalised indigenous faiths in Meghalaya who are victims of exclusivity from Christianity!

(E m a i l : thalbert@rediffmail.com)

Ethics during Covid times

By Ananya Guha

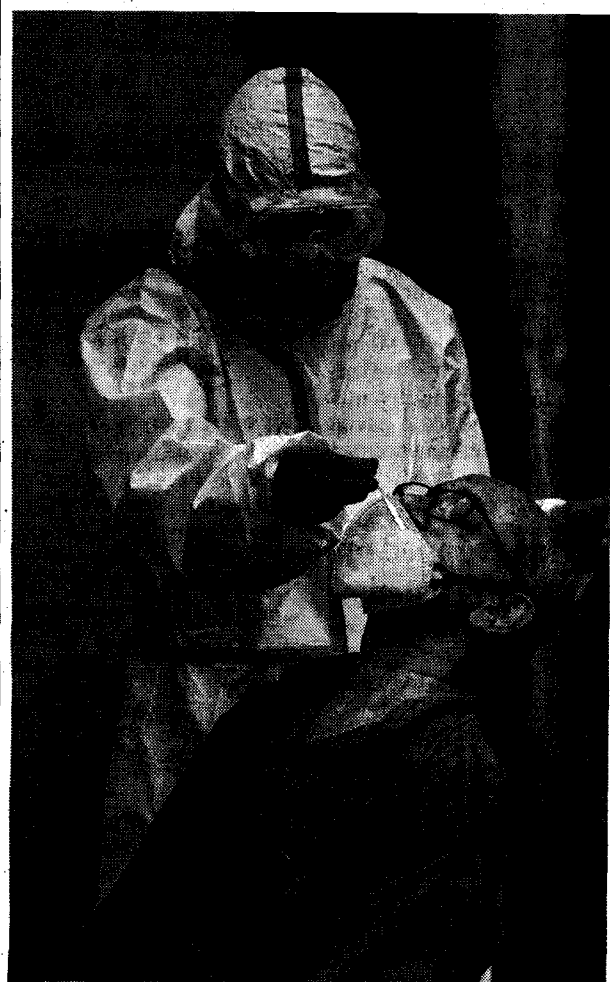
How times have changed. Last year this time life sailed on smoothly. Of course the problems and skirmishes were there and these snowballed into mass anti-CAA movements all over the country. But no one thought that life would be disrupted in the way that Covid has done and while people continue to die, fear is the dominant factor. Yes fear of death. But it has also played into our lives in an ethical manner. We know that if we are not preventive and not careful we will affect others starting perhaps with family members. We have to live scientifically and ethically.

Secondly the virulence of the disease is that it attacks the people who have comorbidities. The chain of the virus is vicious and that is why there is intense contact tracing. This is because it is a highly contagious disease. It is trenchantly ironic that man who has con-

terrelated we are; how one error can affect fatally another person. And there are no signs of the sickness abating. Scientists and epidemiologists are at a loss. Will social interaction never be the same again? Will travelling go back to old times? Will education be redefined and e-learning come to stay?

Man's teleological thinking is rudely interrupted. The ethics of behaviour has taken a new stand - keep a safe distance from everyone. But the question is how long. The novel corona virus has shown the puniness of our existence no matter how technologically advanced we are. There is no existential predicament. It is an existentialist absolutism and we may be gripped by its tentacles any time.

So what have I been trying to say? Am I stating the obvious? I am trying to state that we are in a moral dilemma of being and non-being, of existence and non-



quered so many things with the help of science has failed to conquer this. The infallibility of 21st century has become a myth. Yet man is unfettered. When meeting each other through conferences is ruled out, we are holding webinars and web conferences and talking to people virtually. This means that human civilisation has ways to fall back upon in inimical times. Yet the threat remains and the infection continues unabated.

The whole world is under a threat. Yet events like floods, earthquakes, polarisation between nations, riots continue. That is the new normal. In the midst of the pandemic the movement against the killing of a black man continued unfettered, in the US with people not wearing masks and this spread to other countries as well. The new normal is the continuity of events, happenings and the thought that Covid will bring life to a halt is again a myth. We have to demystify it all, so, violence in any manifestation continues. India's relations with her neighbours have soured. The feeling that Covid will silence nations is not true. The unity of the world at the time of Covid is also subverted by intransigent nations. In India's case it is Pakistan, China and Nepal. The point I am trying to make is that Covid has unravelled the mystery of living. Purists say this is the new normal. Things have been revamped from travelling by air to social interaction now called social distancing. But how can man distance himself from his fellow beings socially and interactively?

Man now is under a dark threat. A whisper, a cough or sneeze can be a problem. For the first time we realise and this is ironical - how in-

existence, of loving and distancing as individuals and nations. We consort with time to work out a solution, the elusive vaccine. Even if we get one when will we distribute it? No one is thinking of costs as our lives are costlier...

While I am not going into the philosophical tenor of ethics, Covid 19 has placed us in an ethical dilemma. How do we interact with our peers safely? What if one mistake leads to a disaster because of the chain reaction? But life must go on - the new normal; how long will it continue? Even nostalgia has taken a backseat. It is hard to believe or accept what in the past was normal.

Secondly it is reiterated that Covid or no Covid the human anxiety in other spheres will continue: tension within nations, tensions between nations. One hoped that this would be a prophylactic and web the world into a seamless unity to fight it but that doesn't seem to happen. Or has it? The ethical transitioning of a world which is fractious must work at individual levels. We are now tenfold conscious about cleanliness though we always held it as an axiomatic truth. We are compelled also to think about the other with empathy. Covid 19 has changed our lives ethically. We have to realise it. It is a great leveller in the comity of nations, super power or no super power. And individuals have been treated by it likewise. The underlying hope is that people in India have come out to feed the poor or to give them assistance for succour. This has cut across caste, religion and ethnicity. This is another ethical standpoint.

(E m a i l : nnyguha48@gmail.com)

TO THE EDITOR

Weed out nepotism in MPSC

Editor

As rightly expressed in a letter to the editor dated August 13, 2020, we cannot deny the fact that the political class has often influenced the recruitment process in the MPSC. This is an established, unsolicited reality for the people of the state. We are accustomed to allege that most of the people who get jobs through the MPSC have direct or indirect political connections. However, do we realise; that other officials have an equal or higher hand in the selection process of the MPSC. These people are none other than the MEMBERS of the Public Service Commission themselves.

For instance, the result of Assistant Soil and Water Conservation Officer (AS&WCO) in Soil and Water Conservation Department, declared by the MPSC on January 8, 2020, is a classic example of the

above-mentioned point. The candidate placed in the 1st Rank is a relative of one MPSC member who is a resident of Mission Compound, Jowai. Rank 2nd and Rank 6th candidates on the selected list are the immediate neighbours (Mission Compound, Jowai) and close family friends of the said Member; they are staying within 50 meters radius from the MPSC Member's house. Another one who was placed at Rank 7th is the daughter of a seasoned politician from Khimsumiang, Jowai. We dare the cynical one to check the results and conduct a probe to determine the veracity of these allegations. These are facts!

Now this is just due to one member engineering one recruitment to influence the results by hook or crook. What happens when all the members of the Commission along with the Chairman try to influence the outcome of a particular result together? No more vacant slot for a hardworking/meritorious

candidate, with no desire to pull any strings. He/she wouldn't get through the interview and in most cases even the rigged written examination (due to under the table deals).

Time and time again, these unscrupulous activities are happening under our noses. Clear as daylight. Why isn't a competent authority investigating this; with so many proofs lying around, to take necessary exemplary action? This is the only effective way to revamp MPSC in letter and spirit. Cut out the weeds!

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request

Iconic places are not built

Editor,

A news channel recently reported of the Government's intent to build an "iconic place" at the site of the old PWD campus. Firstly, an iconic place is not "built", it evolves into one and Shillong prides itself of having numerous such places. Don Bosco Square

is one such spot that evolved from the Italian prototype brought from Italy, into an educational and cultural centre and a popular hangout since the late 1970s.

Those of us who have watched with interest the evolution of the Jimi Hendrix Project initiated by Microsoft co-founder, Paul Allen, which led to the foundation and evolution of the Museum of Pop Culture in Seattle, will appreciate the fact that you don't just "build" an iconic place. The Experience Music Project which first opened in 2000 has since evolved into the Museum of Pop Culture - MoPOP for short - in 2016. It still retains its musical roots but now shares space with the Science Fiction and Fantasy Hall of Fame and is today recognised as iconic - emblematic, representational and in the words of Paul Allen, "...exuberant and fearless, like the man (Hendrix) who inspired it."

Yours etc.,
Ann Mylliem
Shillong-14

Mark Twain on Christianity

Editor,

Apropos the four write-ups published in The Shillong Times by Marbianglang Rymbai, Saifil Gewali, Easter Sohtum, and Rosa Mary Shadap, I wish to say that they all have touched my heart. I thank all four of them for exposing the sorry state of affairs of the tribal society which is fast alienating from its original roots and values as underlined by all the writers. After my unbiased study of the key religions of the world, I am of the belief that the majority of the followers of those religions, who think they are the best, have either been misled or are becoming more fanatic by the day. They preach among other less informed and innocent adherents the path of dogmatism and superstition, consequently taking them all away from the faculty of free-thinking and creativity. What is worse is that each religion or church proclaims that one religion alone takes us to God and the followers of the rest others

are heathens. Very absurd belief system! What I find most ridiculous is the lectures by some preachers in the remote areas which is more of dogmatism than self-inquiry and self-discovery. In many lectures, we hear them accusing other faiths. I fail to understand how God is so "weak" that he approves of the faith that preaches to disrespect and hate other religions and their followers and the ideas are pretty shallow.

This I find very difficult to digest, however, I will try to come to their terms. There are many unscientific facts which the holy book still holds true in spite of new discoveries of modern science. I would like to share a famous quote by a great American writer Mark Twain who once said that, 'If Christ were here there is one thing he would not be - a Christian.' This quote deeply resonates with my thinking process and inspires me to self-introspect instead of being a blind-follower and staying fanatical.

Yours etc.,
Sanwame War
Shillong-2

"Character is a by-product; it is produced in the great manufacture of daily duty."

— Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe

The Shillong Times

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Vocal for local

COINING an impressive slogan by itself means little. The Vocal for Local, for one, raised on Independence Day this past week by Prime Minister Narendra Modi does not translate to much unless it is demonstrated on ground zero. The fact, on the ground, is that there is hardly any noticeable momentum on this front in the past six years of the Modi government. The drift, started during the UPA period with a massive invasion of the Indian markets by the Chinese, continues unabated other than for some selective bans. Even these bans were imposed when pushed to the wall - in the aftermath of the Chinese aggression in Ladakh. Then came an exhortation from Defence Minister Rajnath Singh about plans for local production of some items meant for the defence services. It is worth a serious analysis as to why even consumer goods have to be produced in China and marketed in India. The marketing advantage for China is not just in the price factor but also in matters of finish and quality. Many Indian products are simply anachronisms. Even by shipping products to far-away locations in India, Chinese manage to sell them at rates cheaper than the price of the products in India. The question arises as to why local manufacturers are not able to compete with China. Labour charges are not high here. The manpower is abundant. Fact is, there is no effort on the part of the government to identify the reasons for this Chinese invasion.

Two aspects are prominently discussed. One is the cumbersome taxation structures in India. Two, the level of corruption pervading public life wherein those who start a business unit will have to pay through their noses to politicians and bureaucrats before they get the necessary sanctions. Crores are pocketed at many levels. This remains as a serious dampener and adds to the cost and price factors. When India embraced Liberalization in the early 1990s under PV Narasimha Rao, the understanding was that the Licence Raj will be a thing of the past. Twenty years later, in one instance to cite, the nation heard tales about a Union minister under UPA II insisting on a 10 or 15 per cent bribe for every government approval, on the total cost of every project proposal reaching the Urban Affairs ministry. PM Modi's Make-In-India project is limping. FDI flow to India remains moderate. Now, there are big talks about wooing multinationals from the West anchored in China to India. It will be worth a watch how many would be willing to come and set up shop in a land known for its chaos and 'noisy' democracy.

Immunity: Body's defence toolkit against invading pathogens

By Don Syiem

The immune system is very complicated and arguably the most complex structure of the human body outside the brain. It's an intricate network of cells and molecules which are mobilized to protect us from dangerous viruses, bacteria and other pathogens. The components of the immune system recognize, summon, amplify, engage, quieten, and transform one another according to need. In the context of the ongoing pandemic Covid-19 a few questions arise on the functioning of the immune system, such as, why some people become extremely ill while others don't? Can infected people be sickened by the same virus again? Will vaccination work? To answer these questions, we must first understand how the immune system works. The key player in the immune system is the white blood cells (WBC), which travel throughout the body using the blood and lymphatic vessels screening for invading microbes.

The immunity response acts in phases. The three phases involve detecting a threat, summoning help, and launching the counterattack. It begins as soon as a virus drifts into the airways, and infiltrates the cells that line them. Virus latches onto the host cell via specific structures on their surface which facilitate their entry. When host cells sense molecules uncommon to humans, they produce proteins called cytokines. Cytokines play a role in initiating inflammatory response and regulating host defense against pathogens. Other cells of the host act like alarms, activating a diverse squad of WBCs that attack the intruding viruses—swallowing and digesting them, bombarding them with destructive chemicals, and releasing yet more cytokines. Yet others, directly interfere with viral reproduction by secreting molecules called interferons which also heighten the anti-viral defenses of nearby cells. These aggressive acts lead to inflammation. Redness, heat, swelling, soreness are all signs of the immune system working.

The defense and counter measures outlined above involve the i) Innate immunity (ii) Adaptive immunity and (iii) Passive immunity. Innate immunity is a fast-immune response that provides the first line of immunological defense against infections. It comprises of different regiment of battle tanks (cells) with exotic names such as eosinophils,

monocytes, macrophages, natural killer cells and a series of soluble mediators (chemical weapons) with equally difficult names. Like battle tanks in a war, these cells spew bullets and shells on the enemy. The cell's battle tank (macrophages) engulfs the enemy, while the eosinophils and others spew chemicals that kills the viruses. Adaptive immunity on the other hand is a precise but slow immune response which can take several days for activation and is mediated by the T and B lymphocytes (classes of WBCs). These are ground troops soldiers capable of identifying and eliminating the enemy. Unlike the innate branch of the immune system, the adaptive one has memory which is used for future fights with the same enemy. Importantly, like in war, immune responses are inherently violent where cells are destroyed and harmful chemicals are unleashed.

The initial response is part of the innate immune system occurring within minutes of the virus's entry. It uses components that are shared among most animals and it is wide-ranging, attacking anything that seems both nonhuman and dangerous. However, the innate immune system lacks precision although it makes up for in speed. Its job is to shut down an infection as soon as possible. Failing that, it buys time for the second phase of the immune response: bringing in the specialists. As in war, you first bomb, send in the tanks (which kills indiscriminately) and finally the troops which can identify (because they wear different uniforms) and neutralize the enemy.

Amid all the fighting in your airways, specific cells grab small fragments of virus and carry these to the lymph nodes, where highly specialized WBC (T-cells) are waiting. The T-cells are selective and preprogrammed defenders. Each is built a little differently, and comes ready-made to attack the mountain of pathogens that has multiplied. For any new virus, you probably have a T-cell somewhere that could theoretically fight it. Your body just has to find and mobilize that cell. The lymph nodes contain an assortment of T-cell soldiers enclosed in a camp, each of which has just one type of target to fight. The messenger cell carrying fragments of the enemies like a picture, showing it to the camp to help in identifying so that the

wrong target is not shot down. When an enemy is found, the specific soldier arms up and multiplies itself into an entire battalion, which then marches off to confront the enemy.

Amongst the different types of T-cells, some are professional killer squads which blow up the infected respiratory cells in which viruses are hiding. Others are helpers, which boost the rest of the immune system. These helper T-cells activate the B-cells that produce antibodies (immunoglobulins). These are small molecules that can neutralize viruses by gluing up those structures that viruses use to latch on to their hosts. Roughly speaking antibodies mop up the viruses that are floating around outside our cells, while T-cells kill the ones that have already worked their way inside. T-cells do demolition; antibodies do the cleanup.

Antibodies are produced by different groups of B-cells. The first group is quick and short-lived, and swiftly unleashes a massive antibody tidal wave before fading off. The second group is slower but long-lasting, and produces calmer antibody waves that sweep over the body continuously. The body makes different antibodies to fight different infections. Immunoglobulin M (IgM): Found mainly in blood and lymph fluid is the first antibody the body makes when it fights a new infection. Immunoglobulin A (IgA) is found in the respiratory tract, digestive system, saliva, tears, and breast milk. Immunoglobulin G (IgG) is the most common antibody and found in blood and other body fluids. IgMs and IgAs can be detected early during the 1st week of symptom onset, whereas IgG can be detected at around 14 days after the initiation of symptoms. It is not known how long the protecting levels of these antibodies will remain active.

One of the most intriguing and less understood question is what happens after you're infected and whether you could be infected again. Coming back to Covid-19, researchers still don't know how much protection the leftover antibodies and memory cells might offer against the same virus if one is re-infected as there are reports of people losing these specific antibodies over a period of time. However, experts say that although you may not have measurable antibodies doesn't mean that you aren't immune. Your T-cells could continue to provide

adaptive immunity even if the antibodies fade out. Memory B-cells, if they persist, could quickly replenish antibody levels. Its not only antibody quantity that matters, but also the quality of the antibody is as important. Quality defines which part of the virus the antibodies bind to, or how well they stick.

Could the ghosts of your previous colds help protect you from Covid-19, even if you have never been infected by this new coronavirus? Information from other coronaviruses like SARS-CoV and MERS-CoV could help understand the complex interaction between SARS-CoV-2 (the virus causing Covid-19) and the host's immune system. This is still an evolving area of study. The complexity of the Covid-19 pathogenesis is highlighted in a recent report published in the journal Nature by scientists from the National University of Singapore (NUS). Their findings suggest that infection and exposure to any coronaviruses induce long-lasting memory T cells, which could help in the management of the current pandemic and in vaccine development against Covid-19. Importantly, the team showed that patients who recovered from SARS-CoV 17 years ago after the 2003 outbreak, still possess virus-specific memory T cells and displayed cross-immunity to SARS-CoV-2. One hypothesis is that these T cells might help give people a level of cross-immunity protection from Covid-19 because they remember previous infections by other viruses in the same family, four of which cause common colds. This could explain why some individuals are able to better control the infection, said Professor Antonio Bertoletti, from Duke-NUS, who is the corresponding author of this study.

Researchers tracking mutations in this virus have reported around 200 mutations till date. Scientists have warned that a mutation called D614G in the Spike protein region of the SARS-CoV-2 is of urgent concern, as it makes the virus more contagious. It may be pointed out that SARS-CoV-1 mutated and disappeared from the scene. Thus, a study of SARS-CoV-2 infection in different populations and at various times during the pandemic, would be an important way of understanding the dynamics of transmission and vaccine development.

(Professor, Department of Biochemistry, NEHU. Email: dsyiem@yahoo.com)

Niamtre upholds indigenous values

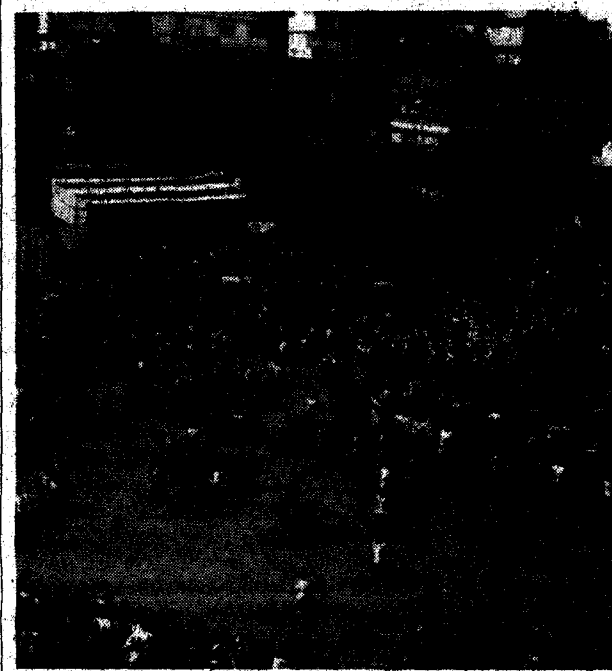
By OR Shallam

The article that appeared in The Shillong Times (ST August 3, 2020) captioned "Niamtre, Hinduism and Ram Temple in Ayodhya" by H H Mohrmen merits clarification. While perusing the article and the writer's views on the so called 'indigenous faith' or 'tribal religion' commonly known as "Niamtre", the manner in which the writer criticized our faith baffles me and makes me wonder if in a way he is not criticizing his own identity. He mentioned the influential aspects that Hinduism has on Niamtre in the Jaintia region specifically citing the example of Nartiang upholding puja as a mark of worship of Goddess Durga. If the writer is well versed with the tradition and heritage of the Nartiang village he would know how the Durga Mandir came into existence. But the writer seems unaware of its importance's towards the

immemorial had taught us this?

Niamtre doesn't have any deal or agreement or MoU of any sort or any kind with any external body or sources in protecting ourselves from falling prey/victims to Christian "Love and Convert policy" However, we are open to any form of association and coordination with any organisation from our very own Indian soil like the RSS, ABVP or Sewa Bharti for a common cause that would work towards strengthening and cementing our roots and faith as well as enabling the flourishing of our unique customs, tradition and heritage.

It is true that as per census data, the Niamtre adherents are a minority community in the State which the State Government failed to notice and thereby eliminated from all official benefits as true minorities. However, correct me if I am



Niamtre faithful in Nartiang. I am tempted to state here that Mohrmen must have probably done his research based on false references and therefore imprinting and portraying the Niamtre in Nartiang as Hindu prodigy. Even if by any chance there does occur an influence that could be traced as mentioned by the writer it has had a positive impact on nature as it strengthens the roots and originality of the religion. In no way can the influence be deteriorating nor can it eliminate the entire population that an influence by the Christian denomination through their conversion policy could trigger. Is Mr. Mohrmen even aware of that? Or perhaps it would be better if he carried an extensive research strictly on this issue.

The writer also mentioned the influence of Hindu Gods and Goddesses as he picked on Ram, Lakshon, Durka and Kongka and the significance they have on Niamtre religion. Does Mohrmen have any knowledge and understanding of the doctrine, perspective and teachings of Niamtre? We certainly do not need him to teach us our faith and religion, our beliefs and practices. Being a learned person does not his religion teach him to preach his own faith while respecting the faith of the others? Or is he shaken by the fact that we the followers and believers of Niamtre know well how to put ourselves together and uphold our roots while at the same time preserving our unique cultures, traditions and identity?

The writer further portrayed the believers of Niamtre as Hindus as we do not consume beef. Well let me inform that our culture has taught us not to consume our mother's flesh considering the fact that the cow provides us with milk and rice every day. Is it now an element of surprise that our culture and faith that had been there since time

wrong, but even Unitarianism does not have any proportion in the census rate. Before commenting on the Niamtre Mr Mohrmen should answer what influence the foreign delegates have on the Unitarian church? Is it not surprising that the Church is being supported by foreigners? Can anyone deny the fact that many foreigners visit the Unitarian church every year? Is the Church completely dependent on their support?

The writer must note that being a hypocrite and criticizing others is quite an easy game to play especially picking on a weaker community. But to pick holes on other's religious beliefs, practices and teachings in a multi religious community will do no good unless the intent is to create havoc and differences amongst ourselves in this peace loving society and country of ours.

The writer also brands Niamtre practitioners as pagans and non-believers. Is this merely because we don't believe in the God of the Bible? I personally find the statement very offensive and insulting. Why should we be perceived as non-believers if we cherish and keep our original ancestral religion intact?

Niamtre has been here since time immemorial and will always be here for the next thousands of years to come. We are proud of who we are, what we believe in and how we preserve our customs and tradition. I personally don't understand what issues Mr. Mohrmen has with Niamtre. But for reasons best known to him, he should understand one thing. Niamtre is not being dictated nor supported by any external source. We support ourselves and we will always be in the face of the earth practising and preserving what we have been taught since time immemorial. So please, spare us from your pity.

(Email: kerminghuloo@gmail.com)

TO THE EDITOR

Don't misrepresent, please

Editor, This has a reference to article "Niamtre, Hinduism and Ram Temple in Ayodhya" by H.H. Mohrmen (ST August 3, 2020). The letter raises doubts about the historicity of the Jaintia traditions, customs, and religion, and thinks that just because these are "somewhat flexible" as they can be easily amended and easily discarded, they are therefore imitation of Hindu practices due to the connections of the Jaintias with Sylhet. However, the writer perhaps does not know that all religious practices and social traditions and customs undergo changes through time. If the writer had taken pains to know the history of the major religious and social systems of the world such as the Hindu, Buddhist, Christian and Islamic, he would have known to what extent all of them had evolved to adjust

to the changing times. Can the writer explain why there were so many sects and cults within such systems? Secondly, all such systems had been influenced by one another mutually. Look at the Bhakti and Sufi movements in medieval India or at the socio-religious movements in modern India. Was there no interaction between the Brahmo Samaj and the Unitarian Church?

The experts have already shown that the three Judaic traditions - Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have had influenced one another. Christianity emerged in a society that was heavily influenced by Judaism and Greek myth. The Jewish Bible was originally written in Hebrew, whereas the books of the New Testament are generally thought to have been written in Greek. The Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek at an early point of Hellenistic Jews. Even the idea of Hell has a history. It developed steadily only after the death of Yeshua, an original name for Jesus of Nazareth. It is a product of misconception and irresponsible translated

scriptures. In the Bible, words like Hades, Gehenna, Tartarus and Sheol or Gehinnom - have been carelessly translated from the Greek and Hebrew.

I request the writer not to confound our understanding with his lack of knowledge of the indigenous belief. It appears that his article has a political and cultural agenda to mislead the Jaintias and to denigrate the belief of the others, be it indigenous or otherwise.

Yours etc.,
Sanwame War
Shillong-2

A flyover at Barik to ease congestion

Editor,

First of all, I would like to congratulate the entire staff of The Shillong Times on its Platinum Jubilee. As published in your esteemed of August 12, 2019 the State Govt's 'Smart City Project' intends to come up with the infrastructural development project such as Shopping Malls, Parking Lots, etc at

Barik Junction, which presently also houses the PWD Office. I wish to make known my views on the matter.

First, the question here is why not the Govt. of Meghalaya shows its seriousness by inviting a panel of expert engineers, urban planners, and architects from leading agencies to study the feasibility of constructing a 'fly-over' and to utilise the space at Barik Junction that currently houses the PWD office rather than proposing or announcing its intent of a 'Smart City Project' through the media for developing shopping malls, etc at the same site, which I believe will only add to an already congested city.

In place of such a proposal that the Govt is keen on by citing development initiatives in the guise of 'Smart City Project', I believe, a 'fly-over' at the proposed site itself will be of great help to ease the traffic congestion at Barik Point Junction and adjoining areas, given that Barik Junction today acts as an intermediary point that

connect many arterial roads, links roads connecting localities and even the main premises that house many offices of the Govt. of Meghalaya, and numerous other institutes, schools, colleges and even residence and localities are linked and inter-linked through Barik Point Junction.

Moreover, the steep rise in vehicular traffic at the same junction has made daily commute a pain and an eyesore. Less availability of space to widen the main arterial roads and link roads has only worsened the situation. Let's not forget the fact that Barik Point Junction witnesses traffic nightmare on a day-to-day basis.

Hence a 'fly-over' as part of the 'Smart City Project' at Barik Point Junction will greatly benefit Shillongites. If given a serious thought, such a proposal would come in handy and act as a great relief to the daily commuters, apart from providing the prospects and life-line for long-term measures to help decongest and tackle the traffic congestion within the heart of the city. This also has its up-side as far as

fulfilling the long-cherished dreams of Shillongites to have their very own 'fly-over' right at the heart of the city. Rather than focussing on the commercial aspect of shopping malls, a 'fly-over' is a much more do-able and practical project and comes as a welfare measure with long-term benefits, especially considering the fact that available space within the city area is already sparse.

It is therefore imperative that the Govt. should show its seriousness and intent to come up with a visionary planning methodology for urban development, rather than proposing something that is of commercial value and less of welfare, which will destroy the lifeline of Shillong city. Nothing can stop the Govt if it shows the will, intent, and seriousness on the matter, given the resources at its disposal. A proposal as such would only help contribute towards making our Shillong city a liveable place that we can take pride in.

Yours etc.,
Pynshai Shynret,
Shillong-4

"All interest in disease and death is only another expression of interest in life."
— Thomas Mann

The Shillong Times

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Community spread of Covid

WHAT we feared the most has happened. The Director, Health Services has said it in so many words. Covid has now all but attained the status of a community spread. Community transmission is when there is no clear source of origin of the infection in a new community. It happens when it can no longer be identified who became infected after being exposed to someone who interacted with people from the originally infected communities. For example, community spread in Meghalaya means that cases are occurring in people who did not have any known contact with others from known hotspots. This means the pandemic is no longer related only to travel.

In the month of May this year, President of Public Health Foundation of India, Prof. K Srinath Reddy had told the media that 'community spread' is a matter of definition. He pointed to the spread of Covid-19 among people without history of travel or history of contact but who were concentrated around the original points of entry of foreign travelers or the travel routes of their contacts. Dr Reddy stated that community transmission has occurred in virtually every country which experienced this pandemic in a major form and India should also be prepared for it and act as though it is happening and take all precautionary containment measures. Dr Reddy reiterated that there is not only risk but actually threat of community transmission.

Three primary social behaviours have been said to help control the spread of Covid19. One, is social distancing, second is wearing a mask, third, maintaining hand hygiene by way of using sanitizers or washing the hands with soap in running water. All three are new social behaviours. In a populous country like India, social distancing is a major behavioral change. Maintaining hand hygiene which means washing the hands frequently also entails that water must be available in plenty. But that again is not the case. In fact the Expert Committee on Health in Meghalaya had found that water scarcity in large parts of Shillong makes the frequent hand-washing exercise untenable. This aspect should not be lost sight of. In fact this should be a point of rectification of a problem that has been simmering for decades.

Now that community transmission is a reality what steps will Government take? Knee-jerk reactions will lead to greater stress. It is important that Government takes a long view of the matter. What will be the consequences of re-locking the city and state? The only way forward is for everyone to live as if they have the virus and take care not to be the super spreaders. It is important to change the intractably belligerent human behaviour through more innovative strategies.

TO THE EDITOR

No country for atheists

Editor,
The article 'Mission Education : A Pending Project' (ST Aug 14, 2020) by Shalabas Syiemlieh has hurt the believers in the Christian State and beyond. On social media, supporters of this "humanist society" are bizarrely vocal about their contempt for religion. They say "religion frustrate progress". They argue with great passion that we'd be better off if we just eradicated God once and for all. Such thinking is an ideology. Such "non-belief" has devastating consequences. Not believing in God is like not believing in seat belts. Or better yet: it's like not believing in the police, the judiciary, medicine or fire stations. You don't have to believe in them, but living in a world without them has consequences. Whether members of the Meghalaya Atheists Society believe it or not, but people of faith are responsible for a huge amount of good in our society. Atheists don't give credit for what the Church (or any religious organization for that matter) have done for civilisation: the creation of our notions of justice, the hospital system, the university, public schools, charity,

progress, truth and freedom itself. Who fought against and ultimately destroyed the evils of slavery? It's us Christians! Who were the only ones who fought against China's horrific "one child" policy? We Christians again!
A world centered around God has allowed us to pursue the great blessings of God - beauty, justice, truth and freedom. Such things mean nothing without God's presence. Atheists may enjoy such values, and even benefit from them, but they are only living off of what others have created. There is no real reason to pursue any of these values without a sense of purpose. Purpose itself is meaningless without God. Without God, there is no reason to have children, or to hope for the continuation of our family name or our values. There is no reason to die for our country, or for freedom. After all, what's the point? In a world without God, we need only do what the animals do: mate, eat, and make sure not to be eaten. We need only live for today.
This is contrary to the notion of "civilisation". By definition, civilisation contemplates a future that is better than our present, and we derive lessons from the past to do so. Civilisation does not mean we just have a good time on the planet

while we are here; civilisation means we seek a better vision for our collective future. We know this instinctively, but many never quite incorporate it into their worldview.
Members of this society rarely contemplate on these uncomfortable truths. But they need to. There are consequences to the atheistic mindset. And they are all horrific. I truly believe the ideology of atheism is deeply destructive and their so-called "Mission Education" is nothing but bait for fools. I urge believers of all faiths to stand against this terrorist organization. No country for atheists!

Yours etc.,
Wandashisha Laloo &
Darity Wahlang
Via email

Understanding religion

Editor,
What is religion? The Cambridge dictionary defines religion as "the belief in and worship of a god or gods or any such system of belief and worship". So basically, religion is the faith and conviction we have on an entity that we consider as sacred, holy, divine etc. If humankind has such a belief then no religion or faith will preach wrongly as all are equal in the eyes of

God. The teachings and principles of religion and God are righteousness and the goodness and purity of the heart, the soul and the mind as well. There is but one God but there are different routes to reach God. The routes are the many religions we have here on earth. Therefore we may take any route we wish or follow - a route that we are born in. The end is to reach the One above.
In this respect Marbianglang Rymbai's write-up, "Does Religion make us more Human" (ST August 12, 2020) is highly inspiring. The title is a question asked but one prefers to read it as an answer to all our dealings here on earth with one another. If each one of us read our scriptures closely, they would all be teaching us to live in harmony with each other. When we look at ourselves as creations of the One above who has made no distinctions and discriminations then does it benefit us humans to create differences and discrepancies amongst ourselves? Why should there be a reference and a calling out of names of people belonging to another faith, different from the faith and belief of those in the majority?
Here in our state, the believers of Ka Niam Khasi Niamtre are called "non-believers," heathens and pa-

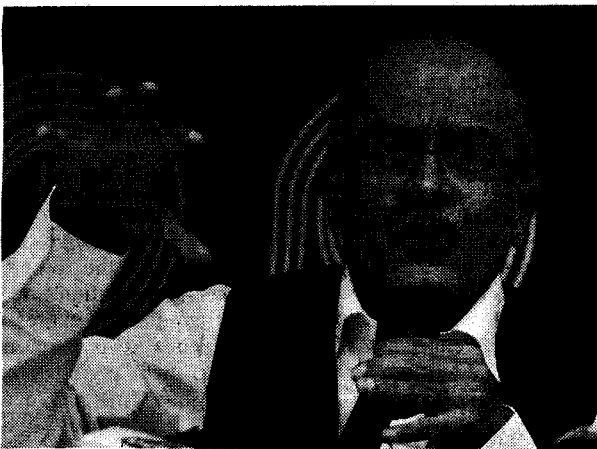
gans as we uphold the faith that has been given to us by our ancestors and we have not converted to another faith and belief. These are words that are not only harsh but derogatory and shameful. As such is it fair to simply brand us so? Is it fair that for this, we have been denied various scholarships under the Central Sector Scheme in a Christian majority state? This is a serious matter as it has subjected us to discrimination and is depriving us of our rights. The fight to rectify this lacunae is on and a positive outcome is awaited.
Rymbai presented a factual account of which I have personal experience of regarding the numerous conversions that had taken place for decades now. It may not be altogether wrong to say that there had been instances when such conversions have taken place in case of marriage or even forceful conversions of aged parents. Personally one feels that the believers and followers of the indigenous faith, Ka Niam Khasi Niamtre must not live in insecurity over the fear of facing conversion into another faith, especially Christianity. Rather one wishes to implore upon our believers that we must be strong and determined in our minds and spirit to forever keep our faith intact. We must be firmly rooted in our beliefs and will work hard to

instill in the minds of our children the teachings, values and principles of our faith and religion. Today, we are fortunate that we have the Seng Khasi and Sein Raji which has within its ambit the Seinlang, the Women's Wing, as well as Ka Skur Sikai Niamtre that imparts teaching and knowledge of our religion and belief, of U Blei Nongbuh Nongthaw, U Tre Kirod Kynrad and helps govern our ways and lives here on earth. Those of us who are firmly rooted in our beliefs must take it upon ourselves to uphold and sustain our religion for as long as we live on this earth.
Let me conclude from where I started, that all religions are mere routes to the One above. Can we then be more tolerant towards fellow human beings who are created by the One above and the colour of whose blood is red irrespective of where one comes from and which religion one follows? I am reminded here of the words of the Dalai Lama who says that "My religion is very simple. My religion is kindness." Can we sow the seeds of kindness in our hearts no matter what faith we belong to and what religion we follow?
Yours etc.,
Jennifer Dkhar,
Via email

Prashant Bhushan getting big support from bar and academics
Senior lawyers call judgment an attack on free speech

By Paras Nath Singh

Senior advocate of the Supreme Court and activist Prashant Bhushan is getting wide support from the leading figures of the civil society including lawyers and academics for his stand on the Indian judiciary. Senior lawyers of the country have expressed the view that the judgment of the apex court holding Bhushan guilty in the contempt petition, is an attack on free speech.
Senior Advocate Iqbal Chagla in his fierce criticism wrote in Indian Express that Supreme Court's judgment in Prashant Bhushan case spells out a chilling lesson that undermines the most valuable fundamental right — the freedom of speech.
Another Senior Advocate from Bombay Navroz Seervai opined that, the judgment is not only "an assault on free speech and expression in the name of upholding the "dignity and majesty" of the Court in the eyes of the public", but also appears to be a calculated attack on a certain section of the civil society.
Senior Advocate Raju Ramachandran said the court ought to have leaned on the side of freedom of speech. "Considering the contribution which Mr. Bhushan has made in public interest litigation, it is disheartening that the court acted on two tweets which in the very nature of the medium is not capable of nuance," he said.
Senior Advocate Indira



Jaising, in her opinion piece, published in BloombergQuint said "Is this even constitutional...being held guilty of a crime without a charge being framed, or the red herring on malintention to scandalise the court? This alone makes the judgment erroneous in law, anti-constitutional, and a great setback for the rights to life and free speech". Senior Advocate Sanjay Hegde noted that the court should also ensure its authority was not further undermined while exercising the power of contempt. "The judgment does not provide a cogent narrative as to how the authority of the court was undermined by just two tweets. Public trust and authority of the court rests on firmer foundation than that."
Senior Advocate Mihir Desai who mainly practices at Bombay High Court took to his Facebook to express his disappointment with the judgment. He said respect is something which cannot be forced. Respect in common English means deep admiration for someone or something elicited by their abilities, qualities or achievements.
He wrote "I want to ask the Present Supreme Court since it claims to have acted as a citadel of democracy (1) why has the issue of political bonds not been decided yet (2) why have habeas corpus petitions concerning Kashmiri detainees been put on back burner? (3) Why is the constitutionality of NRC CAA not been decided yet. (4) why does it take two months, many deaths and massive criticism for it to awaken to the plight of migrant workers. And I can go on and on. Supreme Court says that people approach Supreme Court because they have faith in it".
A statement, signed by leading lawyers such as Vrinda Grover, Dushyant Dave, Kamini Jaiswal, Karuna Nundy, Shyam Divan, Sanjay Hegde, Menaka Guruswamy and others, said that the SC's verdict against Bhushan said an independent judiciary does not mean that judges are "immune from scrutiny and comment".
Legal scholar Gautam Bhatia in his blog stated there was no legal reasoning in the judgment, and therefore nothing to analyse. He added Mr. Bhushan had filed an extensive reply to the contempt proceedings against him, contextualising and defending the two tweets for which these proceedings were initiated; among other things. The Supreme Court, however, refused entirely to engage with Mr. Bhushan's reply.
"There are some colourful — and somewhat confusing — references to the Supreme Court being the "epitome" (?) of the judiciary, the need to maintain "the comity of nations" (!), and an "iron hand" (!). There is, however, no legal reasoning, and no examination of the Reply", Bhatia said.
Academic Pritam Baruah in his piece published in article14 said that in convicting Prashant Bhushan of contempt, the Supreme Court partly relies on a 265-year-old British case, from an era of undue deference to authority. It used "dignity" 31 times and "authority" 50 times in a vague, murky formulation that is the province of sophistry rather than legal justification.
The Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) in its statement said that the Supreme Court verdict slamming senior lawyer and human rights advocate Prashant Bhushan's critical tweets of it is "a sign of the current deterioration in the state of free speech in the country." In a statement, the People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCIL) said it is "disappointed and disappointed" by the verdict.
"PUCIL feels that the finding of the SC is not only unfortunate but will also have the contrary effect of lending substance to the view that just like how other democratic institutions in India are criminalising dissenters, the SC too is unwilling to acknowledge serious issues about the way the judicial system is functioning," it said.
Historians Ramachandra Guha and S Irfan Habib also condemned the judgement against Bhushan. Economists Prabhat Patnaik and Jayati Ghosh came out strongly against the Supreme Court judgment.
Guha tweeted "Through this act, the Supreme Court has let itself down, and has let the Republic down too. A dark day for Indian democracy" whereas Habib wrote "SC found Bhushan guilty on the eve of our Independence Day. I don't think even the British ever punished dissenting or even critical voices of lawyers, poets, writers and intellectuals this way". (IPA Service)

*"Character must be kept bright
as well as clean."*
--- Booker T. Washington

The Shillong Times

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Facebook, bad apples

FACEBOOK is among the best things that the new generation has got on a platter to connect with each other; and youths have lapped it up with great enthusiasm. It revolutionized the way people communicated with each other, and there's a personal touch to it. However, Facebook lands in controversies often, as political games are played through it by interested groups, while fundamentalists and extremists too took to it like a duck to water. There have been checks and balances, of course, but there have also been accusations about the fairness of the social media set-up in regulating sensitive and controversial subjects. The latest issue centers round what was obviously a "hate speech" by T Raja Singh and some other Hindutva leaders. When Sanghis open their mouths, the obvious targets are Muslims; and this time too, this happened. The complaint is that those in charge of FB at the regional level ignored the matter, rather than blocking such content. The issue warmed up after Wall Street Journal reported that the regional Facebook team was keen on obliging the government of the time led by the BJP so as to not hurt the social media group's business and other interests.

Singh allegedly wanted Rohingya Muslim immigrants to be shot. He termed Muslims traitors and called for pulling down of mosques. The minority community is naturally incensed. Notably, Muslim youths form a large chunk of the social media activists across continents, and more so in the Asian and Middle Eastern regions. Pakistanis are rather in the forefront; and there have also been situations often of anti-India, anti-Hindu and anti-American "hate" content being circulated via social media. Controls from the part of Facebook in all such respects must be uniform, rather than allowing one influential segment or the other to be given a free hand. Every community, religion and society has a space to engage in this wider world, where co-existence is the central credo. In the age of social media, such platforms provide wholesome entertainment, disseminate a whole lot of information, and engage people in a whole lot of ways. It could be only for cynics to stray away from the mainstream of all these and engage in hate-mongering. Let us look at social media as a whole in positive ways, and keep the trouble-makers out of its sphere. Societies across the world cannot live without religious pursuits; and societies in democracies cannot do without politics either. The bad apples need be ejected from the mainframe of political parties and saner elements encouraged.

Let's face some truths. Governance is hardly visible beyond Shillong but even this city is a monstrous concrete jungle because no law prevails over how to build and what to build where. There is no specified space over which one can build or cannot build. You can violate all the rules if you pay money. This has been the history of the Meghalaya Urban Development Authority (MUDA). Those beyond city limits of course have a free run of the land. A person can build a house on 1000 sq ft of land without any care if there is space for a septic tank because all the faecal matter is released into drains and the two important rivers that flow through the city- the Umkhrah and Umshyrpi. That's how much we all care for Shillong.

In recent times the roads in the city look like they have been bombarded by people from outer space. The worst roads are perhaps those in Umpling through which vehicles pass to go to one of the leading health care centres of the region - NEIGRIHMS. A young public spirited citizen - Kiti Warji was so disappointed at the roads in Umpling-Lapalang area that have almost all been eaten up, that he decided he was going to fill the potholes with sand and stones. It's a strong statement to the powers that be especially the MLA/s of the area/s. The question to be asked is why do the roads need to be repaired every year? Why are contractors doing such a shoddy job never black-listed? Don't the Dorbar Shnong have responsibility to check the quality of the roads built? That said, I asked a leading light in the Government what quantum of funds are allocated for road building and how much is for repairing. He refused to give any answer. And that precisely is the problem here. If the Government is not hiding anything why does it shy away from answering questions directed at it? After all you in the government are using public money and the public have the right to know how that money is

Meghalaya's forgotten people

By Patricia Mukhim

being spent. The problem with Meghalaya is that every minister believes he owns all the money his department is being allocated. Now the alternative to not getting straight answers is to do an RTI. But I have tried doing RTI a few times and the answers are so obfuscated that one would have to employ another technician to decipher the meaning.

That being said, the purpose of this article is to draw the attention of the Government to the rural roads and how the absence of roads has reduced the capacity of villagers to earn a decent livelihood from farming because their products don't reach the markets. Secondly, the purpose of rural tourism which aims at bringing tourists not to some select destinations but to every village if possible, is being defeated by the absence of a road. Meghalaya will be completing 50 years very soon and it's time to take stock of our achievements or the lack of it in key sectors of the economy.

Roads are the backbone of the economy. The big budget for restarting the economy, should to my mind, not be lost in sectors that will only kick-start certain sectors with influential personalities driving it. Are the voices of the poor and impoverished being captured by those sitting in the high tables and discussing Meghalaya's economic regeneration? You actually don't only need members who speak English. You need to get the rustic village folks to speak up and have the humility to hear them out in humility. Otherwise the Government is responsible for creating an incestuous group with a mutual back-scratching agenda.

It was heartening to hear the Agriculture Minister, Banteidor Lyngdoh warning his own bureaucrats and police not to disturb the vehicles carrying agricultural produce from the villages to the markets beyond Shillong. If every minister were to stand with the people and connect to them, Meghalaya would be

a different place. The bureaucrats in the Secretariat will never understand what ails the people. The disconnect is too huge. A rare visit to the village once in a blue moon in an almost patronising manner is not how governance is meant to be delivered. The Food and Civil Supplies Department has its retinue of bureaucrats. Why, do they not check the quality of rice that is being distributed in the villages? How does the Department expect people to accept rice that's half rotten? Should such rice not be returned to the Food Corporation of India (FCI)? One only hopes that money is not being made in this Department too in the midst of Covid. That would be too disgusting to even contemplate.

For one thing, in Meghalaya, politicians once elected lose touch with the people. Or they connect only with those that vote for them. In villages, supporters of a political party or a politician are easily identifiable because they haven't learnt diplomacy. In village after village that I have visited, the story is the same. The MLA has his chosen disciples who he/she entrusts the work of distributing rations during these Covid times and other largesse at other times and above all to distribute money during election times. While the MLA may be well-intentioned, his disciples are the ones that look at people in the villages through the prism of their political loyalties alone. So those who will get help will be voters of the Party to which the MLA belongs. Many sitting MLAs have lost elections because their disciples have antagonised people by discriminating against those voting for another political party. These political loyalists forget that after an MLA has won an election he is the MLA of every constituent whether or not they voted for him. And what antagonises people most is that these party loyalists called "leaders" in the villages are also the ones awarded contract work for road construction and

repairs. They invariably do a bad job because only about 60% or less of the money allotted is actually used for road making. This is the reason why roads in the villages and the suburbs of Shillong are all eaten up. The reason is because very poor quality materials are used.

This reminds me of the Social Audit Cell created during Dr Mukul Sangma's time. Why is it that we have all forgotten about it, including some of the most vocal NGOs and personalities? Isn't this meant to help us audit every road, every water supply system, every electrical flaw because of which the power snaps every now and again, every single day and worse during windstorms? Can the Chief Secretary please answer what has happened to the Social Audit Cell and who is heading it? An Institution that has been created for public welfare cannot just be forgotten and buried alive. If the Institution is alive it would be able to audit the Meghalaya Public Service Commission and clean all the dirty secrets buried in that Commission and set it right once and for all. It's sickening how a Commission meant to get the most meritorious into government employment ends up getting undeserving brats who can pay their way through or have strong political connections. It actually stinks!

The more one sees Meghalaya's governance from close quarters the more one feels a sense of dystopia. Nothing's going right for those in the periphery - not the health system, not the education system, not the livelihoods. Those sitting in the Secretariat and drawing huge salaries need to feel ashamed of enjoying those perks when the delivery system has not improved an inch.

Exra Pound once said, "Columnists are village explainers." We need more columnists to shake the conscience of those holding the public purse. (Views expressed in these columns are personal and are not necessarily that of The Shillong Times)

Why no country for atheists

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

I was very much amused when I saw the letter 'No country for Atheist' by Wandashisha Laloo and Darity Wahlang describing the page 'Shillong Humanist' as a terrorist organisation. I hope that the authors of the letter understand what a terrorist organisation means. According to the United Nations General Assembly, 1994 terrorism means "Criminal acts intended or calculated to provoke a state of terror in the general public, a group of persons or particular persons for political purposes are in any circumstance unjustifiable, whatever the considerations of a political, philosophical, ideological, racial, ethnic, religious or any other nature that may be invoked to justify them." By extension a terrorist organisation is one

exercise is. For many in the group they start with the argument that religion is a stumbling block of human progress and therefore try to state facts or their reasoning as to why it is so. Therefore when someone says "religion frustrates progress" it is nothing but an extension of that attempt to prove their hypothesis. Now there are those who might disagree with it. There are two options for people like them: state your argument as to why it is not so or leave the group and join one where they feel more comfortable. It's a simple choice. But some, like the authors, are not satisfied with the choices. Instead they would like to throttle all those beliefs that are not in sync with their own. The letter 'No country for

HUMANISM IN A NUTSHELL

PUTTING HUMAN PRINCIPLES AND OTHER AT THE CENTRE OF YOUR MORAL OUTLOOK

SEEING THE WORLD AS A NATURAL PLACE AND LOOKING TO SCIENCE AND REASON TO MAKE SENSE OF IT

PROMOTING AND SUPPORTING HUMAN RIGHTS ACROSS ALL FRONTIERS, AND CHAMPIONING HUMAN RIGHTS FOR EVERYONE

AND THAT'S ABOUT IT

Humanists UK

which indulges in such activities. Nowhere in the letter has this definition been found to be suitable for describing the page 'Shillong Humanist' (it's not Humanist Society). They assume that non-belief and not giving credit to the Church as evidence of being a terrorist organisation and by extension its member's to be terrorists. Of course any rational reader will know that the authors were just ranting and did not know what the terms actually mean and what it implies. My request to the authors is that before using terms in a respectable platform please try to find out its meaning. If they are still confused better avoid using those terms.

But the biggest problem that the letter reveals is the self-righteous attitude of some section of the faithful who have taken it upon themselves to take offense. Here I would to point out a big difference between taking offense and giving offense. Facebook is like echo chambers where when you join a particular group you meet people who adhere to the same ideology. Shillong Humanist as it describes itself is "an eclectic group - theists and atheists, sceptics and contrarians but all committed to rational discussion, civil discourse and sometimes blasphemous humour". Pay attention to the words 'discussion', and 'discourse'. It is natural that in a page as described as such people who believe in the progress of society through science will try to find faults with any competing belief. This is what a hypothesis building

Atheist' is nothing but such an attempt. The authors have taken offense that there are others who don't subscribe to their belief, and have taken to name calling (Humanist Society). They which exactly proves the point of the members of 'Shillong Humanist'. Without discussion there can be no progress (I hope the authors agree to this at least) and since these individuals inspired by their beliefs have gone out of the way to stifle discussion, by extension "religion indeed frustrates progress". And without progress there would be no civilisation. After all, civilization is the pinnacle of human progress. The letter is nothing more than an incoherent rambling emerging from a self-righteous attitude to put down people or groups who disagree with certain beliefs. It's pathetic but it's also sad. I don't know if there is no country for Atheists but I do know that it's a free country. Lack of belief is also a belief and like all beliefs its adherents have the right to propagate their message. And I would like to invite all those who believe that the hallmarks of a progressive society are debate, openness, logic, rationality and humanism to come and join the 'Shillong Humanist' group. You are always welcome. For those who think otherwise don't join the group and if you see a post from the group there is a simple tool in Facebook which can help - scroll up or down. And still if you feel that you need to be offended, drink a glass of water, go and meet your loved ones and try to have a nice time with them. All the best!

TO THE EDITOR

Faulty and abrupt announcements

Editor,
It is astonishing to see that on Wednesday morning, (19th August, 2020), the areas of Police Bazar, Motphran, Stand Jeep and Garikhana came to a grinding halt following the announcement of the orders by the District Administration, East Khasi Hills. The reasons cited for the instant closure of activities in the aforementioned areas was that the protocols of physical distancing, wearing of masks and hand hygiene were flouted and which violated the prohibitory orders made by the DC's office. Given these protocol violations, which could pose a major threat for the health of all, the district administration saw it fit to close all shops and activities in these areas. I, however, see the imposition of the orders (No. DDMA.EKH/119/2020 / VOL-1/152&153) as knee-jerk reactions. These orders, dated August 18, 2020 came as a surprise for the shopkeepers in these areas on the morning of August 19, 2020. Among the shopkeepers in these areas, the ones most hard hit were restaurants, jadoh stalls, bakeries, butchers, and other sellers of perishable goods, as they have prepared their stock of sale for the day, but things turned the other way round, leaving these sellers

miserable and in a state of confusion, as to how or who they will sell their products to. My question is, if the orders were dated on the August 18, why were they released only on the morning of August 19? What is the rationale behind this? The administration could have released the orders well in advance on the night of August 18, to alert the people of these areas so they know whether or not to prepare for their next day's business. Will the Administration bear the day's loss of these shopkeepers or will it remain mum ignoring the importance of people's livelihoods amidst the raging pandemic? Such abrupt announcements are an infringement of the people's right to livelihood and are not based on astute understanding of ground realities. The Administration needs to introspect on this matter so as to not inconvenience the business activities of the people in future.

Yours etc;
Mewan P. Pariat,
Shillong-2.

Falling off the tightrope

Editor,
The letter "Understanding Religion" by Jennifer Dkhar (ST Aug 20, 2020), provides a balanced and humanistic frame to an inflammatory topic. When she talks about 'us', it is a plea for acceptance without discrimination. She makes

astute and credible observations, without any 'putdown' phrases. That's the ultimate criteria for human discourse, that while one asserts his or her viewpoint, the general appeal is for the good of all. The numerous articles and letters on religion that have appeared in this newspaper in the last few weeks have been largely evenhanded and constructive, and the elucidation of various viewpoints has been educational. In recent days, however, we have seen a more shrill and strident tone. I refer to the personal innuendo against one of your august contributors, Mr HH Mohrmen, whose erudite and informative articles over the years, have enlightened us about our own society.

In this vein, the letter "No country for atheists" (ST Aug 20, 2020) is particularly objectionable. The authors wear their religion like a badge on their sleeves, on prizes for guessing. It is true that religion, Christianity especially, has given the world many wonderful things, as is rightly pointed out in the letter, and it is true that atheists have not contributed much. But the shortcoming of such a debating position is that it cherry-picks facts of history to suit a particular line of reasoning.

Organised religion is also the source of history's worst cruelties and mankind's greatest failures. Religious wars, slavery, colonialism, and genocides, are traceable to religious

fervor. In these horrors, Christianity leads the way. Every religion, in spite of their noble and compassionate precepts, have failed to secure a just, equitable, and safe existence for all. Atheists have not contributed much, because it is more a personal thing, and not an organized movement on the same scale as religion. Which is good, I think.

Phrases like 'bait for fools' and accusations like 'terrorist organisation' without incontrovertible evidence, are unacceptable in dispassionate discourse and even amount to insult and defamation. Good arguments can get contaminated by immoderate language.

Presenting only one side of the coin is distortion and dishonest. It leads to polarization and communalism. In a recent FB post, the editor of this paper has herself decried this trend on TV channels. Sane discussions on religion, ideology, even gender and patriarchy, are akin to walking on a tightrope. I am surprised that the Shillong Times has permitted intemperate statements to permeate its respected pages. Even while Rome is burning or the Titanic is sinking, human kindness and decency must prevail.

Yours etc.,
Glenn C. Kharkongor
Via email

Editor replies: This paper allows all shades of opinions to be debated out so that the truth prevails and blather is driven out.

Essence of Hinduism

Editor,

I am provoked by Albert Thyrniang's supposition that caste system among the Hindus is "religiously sanctioned" (ST Aug 18). Whatever the merits or demerits of the caste system in the country, it is not exclusive to Hinduism only. Discrimination on various grounds have manifested in all religions from time to time. But that's a different story altogether. The purpose of this letter is to shed some light on the matter of casteism and Hinduism.

According to empirical evidence, a thousand years before Christ (BC), the society (then other religions did not exist at least in India) was divided into four categories: The Brahmins, the Kshatriyas, the Vaishyas, and the Sudras. Each category was meant to represent God's own body parts and symbolise various vocational callings. The Brahmins (God's head) are those who are priests and teachers; the Kshatriyas (symbolise God's arms) were the warriors and rulers; Vaishyas (represents God's thighs) they are farmers, traders and merchants; and the Sudras (symbolise God's feet) are the labour class. Therefore, the divisions were made based on an individual's trait and aptitude. Obviously, God never made all human beings equal and they all have various personal aptitudes and inclinations. The bottom line is that they are all inclusive and symbolise

different parts of the same God! And they were meant to work in tandem for the common good of all sections.

It is an admitted fact that for centuries the caste system was abused by the powerful and the tyrants. Out of these exploitations of the weak and the meek, emerged the fifth class--- Dalits---who were scavengers by calling. Let me also inform Thyrniang that Hinduism is not (repeat not) a religion per se. It is a way of life. Even our Supreme Court has ruled so. Some 5000 years ago, some anonymous author(s) had scripted the Vedas laying down eternal ethos for humankind. Nowhere do the Vedas talk of Hindus, and certainly not of any other religious belief system. It was the mantra or philosophy for human salvation. Further, Hindu is not a religion but a "dharma". The British equivalent for Dharma is "morality" and "virtue".

For Thyrniang's benefit, let me state that casteism is not rooted to Hindu scriptures. In Holy Gita, Lord Krishna who offers eternal wisdom for negotiating every situation in human lives, says: "a learned man will look upon all living beings as equal." It's a different matter, however, that the essence of Hindu Dharma has got lost in the multitude of religious rituals which have been acquired over the millennia. Unfortunately, these tend to pass off as Hinduism today.

Yours etc.,
B. Chattopadhyay,
Via email

"A man can't be too careful in the choice of his enemies."

--- Oscar Wilde

The Shillong Times

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SHILLONG, SATURDAY, AUGUST 22, 2020

Shillong's fall from grace

THE annual Swachh Survekshan undertaken by the Swachh Bharat Mission, published a day before, has listed the dirtiest cities according to their population. Shillong is ranked the sixth dirtiest city with a population of under ten lakh. The ugly truth is out now and people have to own up to their disgusting habit of littering at every conceivable place. Shillong is the world's window to Meghalaya. That single survey has gone viral and will now make people wonder if it's worth spending money on a dirty old city. Those unaware of how dirty Shillong has become should take a walk from the Raj Bhavan down to Polo Ground and see how garbage is dumped by the roadside in what is an elite locality. It's not always the people of a particular locality that are responsible for turning their habitat into a dump. People have been seen flinging bags of garbage out of their vehicle windows without a twinge of conscience. There's a limit to policing such arriviste. There are too many of them. CCTV cameras in Oakland have caught well-dressed people carrying a plastic bag of garbage and dumping them by the road side. Unless the Urban Affairs Department spends part of its meager budget on policing such delinquents chances are that such remorseless dumping of garbage anywhere and everywhere will only continue.

Many groups and institutions have tried to spread the message of cleanliness and have even physically cleared garbage every day or once a week at rivers and vantage points like the Shillong golf course. The team from Jiva/City Hut Dhaba led by its proprietor Jiwat Vaswani had been cleaning different parts of the city until the pandemic halted their efforts and that of other groups, on account of the social distancing protocol. The point of the Clean-up is also to create awareness and shame people so that they stop treating every corner of the city as their private garbage dump. However, what ails Shillong is the substantive issue of there being no elected Civic Body in Shillong and hence no accountability mechanism in place. The Dorbar Shnong cannot substitute for a democratically elected body with legal protocols in place and with direct funding from the central government. Meghalaya has not been able to access funds from the Urban Affairs Ministry due to the absence of the crucial elected body, complete with gender equity components in place. But it seems the traditionalists would rather forego the money for rescuing the city's collapsing civic management system than mend their ways. So Shillong is likely to see itself in a far worse situation in the days to come, unless a Government with a tough spine to tackle cacophonous status-quoists decides that what must be done has to be done.

TO THE EDITOR

Don't misrepresent atheism

Editor,

Apropos the letter "No Country for Atheists," (ST August 19, 2020), I wish to bring to your attention the factual errors and blatant misrepresentation of the humanist and atheist community of Meghalaya. I myself have been an atheist since the 6th grade. Now as a full grown adult I have still remained so. I wish to encourage the author of the particular letter and others who are interested to educate themselves on the beliefs and ideals of the great humanists or atheist thinkers like Voltaire, Nietzsche, B.R Ambedkar, Stephen Hawking, Richard Dawkins etc. Much progress in the fields of science, literature, medicine, philosophy, etc have been made by atheists and humanists. Many of their books are available online for free or in libraries. I also wish for the authors to understand that atheism and humanism are mutually exclusive. Something which would have been easily understood if one would spend time to research the topic instead on relying on hearsay.

Humanism is a rationalist outlook or system of thought attaching prime importance to human rather than divine or supernatural matters. Atheism on the other hand is the absence of belief in any divine entity or power. Not all atheists are humanists and not all humanists are atheists. In

fact you can follow a religion and be a humanist. As for the accusations that "atheism is destructive" there can be no denial that there have been some atheists who use their nihilism and depravity to justify their misdeeds just as there have been plenty of adherents of different faiths who commit atrocities in the name of their chosen gods. Beware of painting large groups of people with broad brushes.

It is always wise to research and read up on an issue before writing. Calling one particular community as "destructive" is callous. If the author had been writing about another religious or ethnic community in such a way she would be liable to face legal consequences. As such, most of the humanist and atheist community are rather mellow, level headed and compassionate individuals. They would rather their deeds speak for themselves rather than argue pointlessly in the legal system. The world today is shaped by humanist and atheist beliefs. Without the pursuit of scientific, political and social knowledge the world today would be trapped in the barbarism of the mediaeval ages where feudal lords commit atrocities in the name of their religion. The ideas of liberalism, democracy, human rights, etc originate from humanist ideals that placed human life over that of the divine.

In conclusion, I wish for everyone to read up on humanism and atheism even if they are faithful adherents of their religion. The pursuit of knowledge will broaden their horizons and perhaps

Three-judge bench looked helpless before defence lawyers Prashant Bhushan grows in stature after Supreme Court hearing

By Nitya Chakraborty

Senior Supreme Court advocate and activist Prashant Bhushan came out of the Supreme Court on Thursday taller after the hearing on the fixation of his sentence. His principled exposition of the purpose behind his two controversial tweets in the course of this crucial hearing, won the heart of the battle though the bench stuck to its position on holding him guilty for contempt and gave him two-three days to change his statement.

Bhushan however gave the indication that there was no possibility of any change in his position though he would consult his lawyers. It was apparent that the bench headed by Justice Arun Mishra was cornered in the course of the hearing by the two leading lawyers Dr. Rajeev Dhavan and Mr. Dushyant Dave on the constitutional issues and the freedom of speech.

Bhushan, held guilty of contempt for his tweets on Chief Justice of India SA Bobde and the Supreme Court, told the top court that he was "pained" at being "grossly misunderstood" and that he considered his tweets an attempt to discharge his highest duty. After a sharp back-and-forth over whether his tweets had crossed the line, the Supreme Court gave the 63-year-old lawyer two-three days "to reconsider" his statement. "There is no person on Earth who cannot commit a mistake. You may do hundreds of good things but that doesn't give you a license to do 10 crimes. Whatever has been done is done. But we want the person concerned to have a sense of remorse," said Justice Arun Mishra.

Prashant Bhushan's request to defer the hearing on his sentencing for contempt was rejected by the Supreme Court. "I am pained to hear that I am held guilty of contempt of court. I am pained not because of

the would-be sentencing, but because I am being grossly misunderstood. I believe that an open criticism is necessary to safeguard the democracy and its values," he said.

"My tweets need to be seen as an attempt for working for the betterment of the institution. My tweets, I consider, was discharge of my highest duty. Apologising would also be dereliction of my duty. I do not ask for mercy. I do not appeal for magnanimity. I cheerfully submit to any punishment that court may impose," he said.

As the top court asked him to reconsider his statement, he said: "I may reconsider it if my lordships want but there won't be any substantial change. I don't want to waste my lordships' time. I will consult my lawyer." Justice Arun Kumar Mishra then replied: "You better reconsider it... don't just apply legal brain here."

Justice Mishra said this was his first such contempt ruling. "There is a Lakshman Rekha (boundary) for everything. Why cross it? We welcome pursuing good cases in public interest but remember, this is a serious thing. I haven't convicted anyone of contempt in 24 years as a judge. This is my first such order," he said.

The judge noted: "Freedom of speech is not absolute to anyone... to me... to Press. There's no problem in being an activist but we have to say this is the line."

The court said "no punishment will be acted upon" until a decision on review. However, Mr Bhushan's request that another bench hear arguments on sentencing was rejected. "You are asking us to commit an act of impropriety that arguments on sentencing should be heard by other bench," the court said.

The Supreme Court's hearing took place in a surcharged atmosphere as

more and more lawyers and former justices including five chief justices extended support to Bhushan.

Ten social activists came out in support of the activist lawyer in the Supreme Court, contending that the contempt proceedings initiated against him appears to be an assault on freedom of speech and expression.

The activists have filed an application to intervene in the contempt plea filed by Attorney General K K Venugopal against Mr Bhushan for his tweets in which he had said that the government appeared to have misled the top court and perhaps submitted fabricated minutes of meeting of the high-powered selection committee headed by the prime minister, in the appointment of M Nageswara Rao as interim CBI director.

The activists, including Aruna Roy, Arundhati Roy and Shailesh Gandhi, have said in their application that they were "concerned" about initiation of the contempt proceeding against Mr Bhushan for exercising his "freedom of speech" without fear. Interestingly, Attorney General KK Venugopal pleaded to the bench during the hearing not to impose sentence on Bhushan.

Besides, a separate application has also been filed in the top court by five senior journalists, including former union minister Arun Shourie, seeking to intervene in the case.

Mr Shourie and four others have said in their application that the court, while issuing notice to Mr Bhushan on February 6 on the contempt plea, had said it would examine whether in sub-judice matters, advocates and litigants briefing the media would amount to an interference in course of administration of justice.

During the hearing earlier, the bench headed by

Justice Arun Mishra had said that court was not averse to media reporting of cases but lawyers appearing in sub-judice matters should restrain themselves from making public statements.

Besides Aruna Roy, Arundhati Roy and Shailesh Gandhi, the other applicants who have sought to intervene in the matter are Wajahat Habibullah, Harsh Mander, Jayati Ghosh, Prabhakar Patnaik, Indu Prakash Singh, Bezawada Wilson and Nikhil Dey.

In separate application seeking to intervene in the matter has been filed by Shourie and four other senior scribes - Mrinal Pande, Paranjay Guha Thakurta, Manoj Mitta and N Ram.

They have said in their application that any restraint on lawyers and litigants from commenting on matters pending in court would also amount to restraints on media from carrying those comments and any such order by the court would have "serious consequences on the freedom of the press, its rights under Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution and its ability to inform the people about important public interest issues pending in the courts."

Bhushan read out the written statement after the SC rejected his plea for deferment of hearing on the quantum of punishment for contempt.

"I believe that open criticism is necessary to safeguard democracy and its values. My tweets are attempts to discharge my duties, not else. My tweets need to be seen as an attempt for working for the betterment of the institution," Bhushan said.

"I am here, therefore, to cheerfully submit to any penalty that can lawfully be inflicted upon me for what the court has determined to be an offence, and what appears to me to be the highest duty of a citizen," he said. (IPA Service)

Why Shillong no longer panics at the word called atheism

By Tarun Bhartiya

I quaked with fear when I read Wandashisha Laloo and Darity Wahlang's letter (ST Aug 20) 'No Nation for Atheists' and their burning fear of Terrorists called Atheists. As an ageing atheist (I prefer Secular Humanist), who counts deeply religious people as friends and family, I was worried. I started looking for any terrorist weapon I may have accidentally forgotten in my closet. I found a slightly dog eared Christopher Hitchens, a turmeric stained Carvaka, heavily underlined text of Jaspers/Bultmann debate and my favourite, Why I am an Atheist by Bhagat Singh, a book he wrote while waiting to be hanged by the British. I was reassured. I even started looking for my passport fearing the imminent exile they were advocating for the Goddess like me. Then I realised that Laloo & Wahlang's letter is a panicked expression of a group who see their world and ideas moving into the dusty corner of historical irrelevance and their frustration at not being able to pray their insignificance away. I felt sorry for them because their letter acknowledged that Shillong is no longer the religion/god obsessed place it used to be. There are growing groups of Atheists, Agnostics, Secular Humanists, for whom churches, temples, mosques, Jesus etc. no longer make sense and they have the confidence to publicly raise questions about the theistic view of the world. So confident in fact that, one or two of them even build crazy educational castles in the air!

I talk to the terroristic godless/sceptical bunch (some of them just out of Sunday school) and they point me to almost hilariously deluded view of history and civilisation the authors of the letter seem to hold. If organised religiosity was the driving force of civilisational change, then we would be stuck believing the Geocentric notion of the solar system, immutability of caste hierarchies, second class status of women, and mass killings of LGBTQ people. If theists continued to run the world, we would have no democracy, judiciary, medicine and yes even Seat Belts. There would have been just sovereignty of the divine and beautifully sung hymns, qawwali and bhajans.

But we have cars, string theory, democracy, understanding of evolutionary processes, Korean pop, televangelism, online prayer requests etc. And all these came about not because god obsessed religious bhakts ran the affairs of the world but because people, both theists and atheists, questioned religious orthodoxy. These believing and non-believing heretics shared a healthy dose of scepticism towards the closed-minded fanaticism of orthodox theism. Many of these 'terroristic' people faced the wrath of the theists, Giordano Bruno was burnt, Galileo silenced, Kabir beaten up. If the Nation was without Atheists (or blasphemers and heretics) as Laloo & Wahlang earnestly wish, the civilisation would have been 'static' and 'unchanging'. You need blasphemers and heretics to drag the Civilisation forward.

Human history is not just a history of godly belief but a struggle between those who would have humanity constrained by godly fear and those who would rock the boat. Non-belief and scepticism is not a modern vice but an ancient human pursuit. Like Lokayata thinkers in India who questioned the divine origins of Vedas or the ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus who said:

"Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is not omnipotent.

Is he able, but not willing? Then he is

malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Then whence cometh evil?

Is he neither able nor willing? Then why call him God?"

But Laloo & Wahlang's panic is not just about the reality of the Creator or her actions in the world, the worldview of panic-stricken theist is also underpinned by the idea of the 'correct path' to that creator. The exclusivist view that sectarian religion inculcates in their followers, Jesus good, Muhammed bad, Vishnu powerful, Satan bad, has led to wars and genocide. Closer home the frothing Hindutva fanatics fantasising about the abolition of mlecchas or some Christians in Myliem stopping the cremation of the people of indigenous faith, the liturgical litany of the faithful is littered with the judgementalism of the faithful. The faithful will have you saved, have eternal life, or escape the eternal cycle of Karma only if you believe in their preferred idea of god. For them, their god is true God and all other gods are the false ones. Atheists just take the notion of false god, one god ahead. For the atheists, all Gods are false.

I wouldn't trouble Laloo & Wahlang with deep theological questioning of the mythological divine that Christian theologians like Bultmann have subjected the faith to or lead them onto the debates on the existentialist invention of God but point them to what Pope Francis said about the meaning of an honest life. He said that it is better to be an Atheist who intervenes in the course of history, a question consensus, alleviate pain and achieve justice rather than a religious person who leads a double life.

Growing up an atheist or a secular humanist in Shillong for us is no longer a lonely affair. So many young people are choosing secular reason and scepticism: Religion with its deadening rituals is becoming less and less important. As a member of a decade old Shillong Humanists (facebook.com/groups/shillonghumanists), it has been heartening to see that COVID19 has brought in more members per day than what we have ever had in the past. It is moving to see that there are people not jumping at irrationalism or prayers in this global crisis. Shillong Humanists are an eclectic group - theists and atheists, sceptics and contrarians but all committed to rational discussion, civil discourse and sometimes blasphemous humour. We welcome atheists, agnostics and religious people from Shillong who make sense of the world using reason, experience and shared human values. We take responsibility for our actions and base our ethics on the goals of human welfare, happiness and fulfillment. We seek to make the best of the one life we have by creating meaning and purpose for ourselves, individually and together. We defend a secular state and equal treatment in law and policy of everyone, regardless of religion or belief.

Unlike Wandashisha Laloo and Darity Wahlang, we would never say that there should be NO NATION FOR THEISTS. We would defend their right to irrelevant belief and their right to express it freely. And anyway my personal enjoyment of religious music and art would be thwarted if the Theists did not exist.

(Tarun Bhartiya makes films and photographs and writes Hindi poetry. He is a member of Shillong Humanists and enjoys Bach and Beethoven. The author would like to thank the members of Shillong Humanists on the first draft of this essay. Email: tarunbhartiya@gmail.com)

shame (I can't repeat the word enough) and ask for forgiveness on behalf of all decision makers these past decades. We cannot defend anything when the evidence clearly proves otherwise. We need to admit to our mistakes and failures if there is to be any hope for the future.

To the highly controversial subject of forceful conversion, I personally have never been a fan of numbers. How many followers each denomination has will not matter to God when I was taught (correct me if I am wrong) ever since I was a child that He is interested in the heart? People follow Christ because of how he lived; he did not have to force anyone. This is what our churches need to teach people now more than ever. Heaven and hell is not going to mean anything for people trying to survive an already very difficult and challenging world. Maybe then we can face greed and pride head on and compromises like the planned shopping mall will not happen. Only then can we all work together for a better solution to the unemployment problem that the government is saying justifies this course of action.

Yours etc,
R. Rynjah,
Via email

Religions and humanity

Editor,
It is interesting to read the opinions expressed by

several writers through your esteemed daily. Some of the letters/articles are very scholarly and they never fail to inspire us to think big. They broaden our outlook. They even push us to soar up into the higher truths. The light of knowledge can alone dispel the darkness of ignorance. So, that light coming from any source must be welcome. More importantly, the right knowledge helps us become saner and more compassionate towards our fellow beings regardless of what faiths or customs or traditions they practice. Mr. Sanwame War, in one of his letters, emphasizes that religion should encourage us in free-thinking, creativity, and self-inquiry. This really appeals to me. God is the supreme source of creativity. The realm of God is accessible to those who have come out of the narrow cocoon of dogmatism. Excessive dogmatism leads to hatred. Hatred spiritually drags us down -- weakening our thinking and intellectual capability. Free-thinking, of course within the boundaries of morality, can considerably help us shake off prejudices. Many of us continuously choose to carry a load of biased opinions against others, their faiths/customs without ever knowing that, at the end of the day, they are only going to pollute our mindset. Harboring malice corrodes our inner self, obstructing our pathway to divinity or, more precisely, self-realization.

I would like to further

add, that if religion is all about looking down on others and hurting them, then one needs to stand up and fight for "humanity first". Today's major crises, nay, senseless brutalities and bloodshed, are usually due to the flawed interpretation of words of our beloved prophets who otherwise "stood for humanity" and peace. Just look at the recent incident of Bengaluru, Delhi-riots, Gurdwara suicide bombing in Kabul... also many other places across the world, - which are in fact inspired by "hatred" for other faiths. If religions lead to such violence and killings, then we must have badly "misread" our holy scriptures. Lord Jesus, Lord Krishna, Prophet Mohammed, Buddha - are doubtlessly the embodiment of love and service, they never preached violence. Humanity and service to mankind are what they lived for till their last footsteps, let's first believe in service to mankind, and love one and all without "discrimination", being "kind and compassionate" - as aptly concluded by Jennifer Dkhar in her letter "Understanding religion" (ST, 20th Aug). It is our compassion towards His creatures that melts the heart of the almighty. He will then surely open His doorway to heaven for us. HE might cut us to size if we hurt humanity in the name of religion.

Yours etc.,
Salil Gewali,
Shillong,

“You can never have the comeback if you don’t have the retirement.”

-- Chael Sonnen

The Shillong Times

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Learning to live with Covid

IF 50 people in distant Andamans could contract the Covid19 virus then those in cities are definitely more vulnerable. If, as scientists predict, this virus will take about two years before taking leave then the present regime of containing Covid will need a complete revamp. The bottom-line is that humans have to learn to live with the virus. The only precautions to take are already well-known. Masking in public places, social distancing and strict hygiene protocols! With 3.31 million cases and over 60,000 deaths in India, using the word ‘combating’ to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic may have been wrong in the first place. You can fight a known enemy but not a contagion with unpredictable behaviour. Against the virus, epidemiologists have consistently agreed there is only one long-term defence: herd immunity. The dispute has been over whether this can be achieved without a viable vaccine.

India tried the lockdown in March this year with the hope of slowing down infection and, “flattening the curve.” That did not help much. The economy is now in a tailspin and states are telling the central government they can no longer run their governments under such economic constraints.

With as many as 25 Covid-19 vaccines around the world moving into clinical trials there is also a growing sense of optimism that a success story lurks somewhere in these laboratories and that a vaccine could emerge this year. But that is just a fond hope. However, developing a vaccine is not the only challenge. It must also be produced in sufficient quantities and distributed equitably. The US is already exercising its rights over certain drugs in what can be called “vaccine nationalism.” The US has monopolized stocks of remdesivir, an antiviral drug which can hasten recovery from the disease. The German government has wisely acquired a 23 per cent stake in Cure Vac, a national company working on a vaccine, possibly in order to forestall a foreign takeover attempt. Covid-19 has, once again, demonstrated the importance of national resilience and the perils of excessive foreign or -private ownership of essential national assets. India has to build this self reliance in drugs and vaccines since the country also has some of the best scientists and medical specialists and has so far been exporting them to the western world.

However, cross-border cooperation is also inevitable. The British-Swedish company AstraZeneca, which defied a hostile takeover bid by the US’s Pfizer in 2014, has committed to supplying up to 400 million doses of the Oxford University vaccine to European countries at no profit. Imperial College London has established a social enterprise to provide its vaccine at reduced cost to the UK and low- and middle-income countries. In the era of globalisation, splendid isolation is an illusion.

Media, government, Covid and the public

By Patricia Mukhim

Life in The Shillong Times went topsy-turvy on Saturday Aug 23 when four staff members earlier tested Covid positive and the rest who were direct and indirect contacts had to undertake their tests. It took over 10-12 hours for the staff who lined up at Polo Ground before their samples were taken for the test. Waiting for the results was another ordeal. Then the RT-PCR test had to be done too and another long wait for the results. Meanwhile the Shillong Times office was declared a containment zone. Those who inspected the work space and premises reported that it is congested and “unhygienic.”

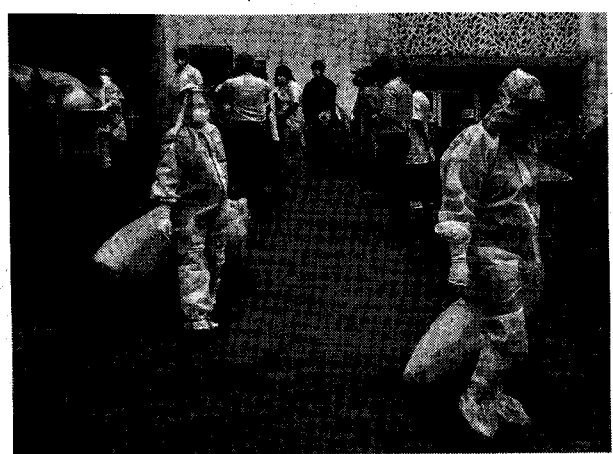
It may be mentioned that as the oldest newspaper of the State spanning 75 years, those who run this newspaper have repeatedly applied for land in the Industrial Area to construct a more modern office and upscale the machinery but that was never granted. One wonders why! Between Sunday and Wednesday, The Shillong Times could not be published. It’s the only newspaper in the whole Covid infected world that became victim to the virus.

To say that The Shillong Times is the oldest English Language daily of the State is not “glory seeking,” as some would like to allude to. And nor is this establishment seeking special favours from any quarters. We are only questioning why an ‘essential service’ listed by the Union Government, of which the media is one, was barred from coming up with its publication for four days because it was treated as an inessential item in Meghalaya and the premises suddenly shuttered even before alternative arrangements for printing etc could be made.

Why the media is important was succinctly brought out by The New York Times columnist, Charles Blow in his article, “Defending Free Press.” He says, “Expression and the Right to Publish is a human right. Media is not the enemy of the people – the enemy of the people is ignorance, obliviousness to truth, ignoring it or having incredulity about it.” But guess who the real enemies of the media are. They are people who hold power and want to exercise it arbitrarily. And there are many such in Meghalaya with its several layers of governance.

On Monday last, the Deputy Chief Minister of

Meghalaya, Prestone Tynsong while addressing the media said that some local Dorbar Shnong do not allow their members to enter the village if they have moved from their district to another, for any number of reasons but mainly for purposes of health and economic reasons. Tynsong said that this is not acceptable since inter-district movement is no longer restricted. But paranoia about Covid has turned the traditional institutions into strident upholders of Covid protocols according to their vagaries. Naturally this has put many at a disadvantage



but they are also powerless to fight these subjective and capricious diktats. In every case the Block Development Officer has to rush to clear the air and allow the residents of the village to re-enter it.

Although the Health Department has clearly laid down protocols and so too the District Administration but many who head these institutions in the villages are either not informed enough to understand the dimensions of the pandemic and that not everyone who visits Shillong, the state capital with the highest number of cases, will necessarily come back with the virus. But Covid seems to have turned people paranoid. And while one can understand the behaviour of the Dorbar Shnong in the interior villages of the State, how does one explain uninformed yet authoritative behaviour from a Dorbar in the city? To cite an example, the members of the Dorbar under whose jurisdiction, The Shillong Times is located had barred entry of the publisher and anyone else much before the official containment orders from the District Magistrate was made public which was late on Saturday night.

The chronological order

of the Covid related event in The Shillong Times is something like this. A machine section helper was detected positive in a particular day. The section’s entire staff was sent for a random test immediately. Although nobody was declared positive, they were instructed to remain under quarantine. We sought clarification and expert advice from top health officials, who considering the essential nature of print media, advised that if the workers had no difficulty they could perform their duties by adhering to health protocols.



When another machine man tested positive two days later by a subsequent test, it was 10-30 pm, Friday 21 August. Considering that a good number of colleagues were at work at that time, it was decided to quickly move him out of the campus so that the rest of the staff was not exposed. It was then that the management circulated a WhatsApp message to the entire ST staff to go for a random test next morning to “make doubly sure” that nobody else had been infected.

The following day, 71 persons were sent up for tests and on the same night the administration in a swift action declared lockdown of the entire building but not before the Dorbar volunteers had barred entry into the building much before the administrative orders. Meanwhile, after the lockdown of our establishment, we provided food and lodging to those who were unwilling to go back home pending test results.

In other states several media personnel have been tested Covid positive but none of the TV news studios and newspaper offices were asked to shut down. As far as I am aware none of the media offices were declared

containment zones. Hence it would appear that in every state Covid protocols work differently.

That this happened when the newspaper is observing its 75th anniversary is a satire on Covid. Having taken all due precautions such as disinfecting the premises thoroughly, what is it that pushed the district administration to take the harsh decision to lockdown the place for three full days, thereby preventing the newspaper from bringing out its publication for four days.

The irony is also that Covid19 has reduced the media to channels for government to pass its information to the public. We are not sure if critiquing anything related to the handling of Covid19 would land us in trouble under one of the two stringent laws that have been invoked to counter Covid – namely the colonial Epidemic Act which has just been tweaked to suit the times but still does not look at the Indian condition and certainly does not take into account the need to safeguard the migrant workers after the declaration of a lockdown. The second is the Disaster Management Act which empowers the Government to come down heavily on so-called Covid protocol violators – a term that is as subjective as it is imperious.

Last week Police Bazar in downtown Shillong was cavalierly shut down merely because some hawkers did not wear masks and some members of the public were roaming around without masks. The shop-owners all followed strict protocols. So why were the shop-owners punished just because the people walking or hawking outside violated protocols. The violators could have been fined. But to close an entire shopping area is a crazy idea but all justifiable under the pretext of combating Covid.

One wonders how long this rule of terror will continue and if democracy itself will finally come under the axe because of Covid. Considering the allegations that the virus was unleashed upon an unsuspecting world by the Chinese, it is possible that the virus aims at shaking the very pillars of democracy. With so many conspiracy theories floating around every single day, who really knows what the truth is. But Covid has certainly empowered the bureaucracy like never before.

New education policy negates the process of democratisation

Corporate interests getting priority over students real needs

By Krishna Jha

Are we pushed back to Macaulay days? Thomas Babington Macaulay was the person who wrote the script for British education policy, a legislative act, passed in 1835, by the British Parliament to educate the Indian masses. The ruling East India Company wanted to promote a slave culture, deprived of right to express, and assert against the injustices. Objective was to promote office assistants to look after their business for which was imperative some knowledge about European culture and language. There was also little knowledge of science, basically Newtonian, history was simply a chronology, divided on communal lines, thus a step to destroy our composite culture and also to deprive us of our past, present and thus, future.

In the decades after independence, based on the tenets of our Constitution, scientific approach was evolved. Institutions were founded to support and organize research in various fields. The objective was to

negative growth. Production units are either shut or functioning with minimum staff. The labour that had gone home, walking hundreds of miles looking for respite, has started coming back even more disappointed. Starving, unsheltered and under the constant threat of Covid-19, larger masses have yet to wake up to the realities of this World Bank initiative.

World Bank is primarily a financial institution catering to the needs of finance capital. In its blue print of New Education Policy, private agencies have their own role. The corporate sector has in its hands the entire school education system including teachers, their training, syllabus and the study material for the students. The policy stands for the high ideal like Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan, education for all. It is to run on the contributions from Centre, states and the Union territories, which stands for 98.6 percent of the entire endeavour, while the World Bank contributes mere 1.4



build a strong democratic republic. Challenges were there. During his rule, Atal Bihari Vajpayee had banned the books by eminent historians like Prof RS Sharma, Prof Romila Thapar, Prof D N Jha and many others just because they tried to promote scientific understanding of history, but he refrained from touching the education policy as such. This time, as the right has taken the leash in its hands, entire democratic system is facing the erosion.

Did we shift from our basics? Accepting a World Bank prescription to meet the corporate needs and thus supplying human input which is faceless? It was on June 25, while the country was in the grip of the pandemic, the human resource development ministry finalized the terms on which the World Bank was offered a decisive role in building up the entire school education system, inclusive of its content, management and governance, from pre-nursery to class 12, through its strengthening the Teaching-Learning and Results for States (STARs).

Just a month later, on July 30, media was informed that Central cabinet had passed the New Education Policy, 2020 with immediate effect. All this took place without any debate or consensus, as Parliament was closed due to Pandemic. Even the existing education system itself has been trying to adjust with lock down, organizing exams and classes online, and thus catering only partially as for thousands, mobiles and computers are only distant dreams. Vast masses have either no employment or have wages with severe cuts.

Economy in the country is facing crisis, with

percent, and yet it has been given the right to shape an entire generation to totally comply with the corporate market interests.

The courses are shaped to discourage critical approach, thus shutting off any possibility for opposition, and also independent thinking. It is based on total servility, even at the cost of their own identity. The learning institutions themselves have no autonomy, and hence, they have no right to assert or oppose. There is stress on centralization at every stage crushing the multiplicity in the process of education. It also denies the Constitutional rights of the Dalits and tribes since in the text of the policy these sections are hardly mentioned. For tribal population, there is to be Ashramshalas instead of popular, term of schools. For medium of teaching, Mother tongue has been preferred, singing praises for our languages as beautiful and scientific, but the examples to prove that have been cited from ancient and modern phases, medieval phase has been thrown into oblivion for obvious reasons.

In curricular integration, again it is contributions from ancient India that are to be imbibed by modern India. Also the school system is not the one that existed in the country. The universality of the syllabus is missing. All the children from both rural and urban areas, or from various backgrounds, had the same themes in their courses; which has been reversed. The NEP suggests ‘multiple pathways’ for knowledge and learning. There is compromise on ‘core essentials’ also to silence any analysis. Attempt is to quench any light ever entering. Darkness must be absolute. (IPA Service)

TO THE EDITOR

Wanted a critical look at conversion

Editor,

I must begin by thanking Albert Thyrniang for his interesting write-up “Is religion essentially exclusive” (ST Aug 18,2020). I am not aware of his background, but I can see that he has a fair knowledge of theology. The writer has woven his argument based largely on his knowledge and perception. However, his sweeping statement that smaller religious entities were assimilated into Hinduism needs to be rebutted.

Firstly, Thyrniang has not given even one example to buttress his argument. Perhaps, that’s more his perception than factual. No case will have legs without incontrovertible facts.

Let’s look at the most active Hindu missionary activities in the country. Rama Krishna Mission and Bharat Seva Ashram Sangha have been in operation for over a century and over 75 years respectively. Both these organisations have been serving the marginalised communities and in the remotest of areas. If we look at their areas of focus, we will find a common thread of Education, Health-care, Relief to those affected by natural disasters which make for their principal areas of focus. These organi-

sations have been serving in different parts of the country and abroad with great missionary zeal. But have we heard of any instance of these organisations assimilating smaller religious entities into Hinduism? The answer can only be in the negative.

If we simply turn our attention to Rama Krishna Mission’s presence in the Northeastern States like Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh etc, it will be seen that this mission has never deviated from its professed path of providing altruistic Service without being concerned about the religious identities of the beneficiaries. In Meghalaya alone, as far as my knowledge goes, RK Mission has been in operation for nearly 90 years or so but they have never “converted” anybody to Hinduism. True to Lord Rama Krishna’s teachings, the missionaries have been serving the people in need regardless of their caste, creed or religion. That’s why, today in Meghalaya, RK Mission schools have an enrolment of over 10,000 tribal boys and girls who obtain quality education through character building discipline and devotion, to duty, thus enabling them to become worthy citizens without having to sink their religious entity.

Even in Arunachal Pradesh, RK Mission has been in operation in the remotest areas where no other service organisations exist.

The Arunachalis have never had the occasion to surrender their indigenous religious belief of “Donyi Polo” to Hinduism. Today, if Donyi Polo is under the threat of diminishing drastically, the “fault” cannot be left at the doorsteps of the Hindu monks.

I would be curious to know from Thyrniang who is benefitting from the rapidly declining number of the followers of this indigenous faith? I think, he should also introspect how the indigenous faith of the Garo tribes—“Songsarek”—has gone into oblivion. Which religion has “assimilated” these “smaller entities”? Can he apportion the “blame” on Hinduism or would he be changing his perception about the philosophy and practice of the Hindus? In fine, drawing an analogy from what has currently been happening in Beirut where liberal Christians have been reduced to a minority and are being constantly persecuted by an aggressive religious group, I have to submit that any form of religious hegemony may bring short term gains, but it is bound to leave human beings fiercely divided over the battle for religious supremacy in complete disrespect to the basic tenets of all religions—God is one and we are all His children.

Yours etc.,

Ajit Prasad Singh, Via email

Tribal only on paper

Editor,

We the members of the Pariat Clan wish to express our appreciation to the KHNAM Youth Wing under the leadership of Mr. Thomas Passah. The KHNAM had petitioned the Khasi Hill Autonomous District Council (KHADC) on the adoption of Khasi surname by one Shri. Vinu Shishupal Rampal, the proprietor of Colonel Shishupal Security and Service(CSSC), Upper New Colony, Shillong. In its petition vide KHNAM(SYW)/2019-20/KHADC-LA-1997/MEMO dated 30.1.2020 and KHNAM(SYW)/2019-21/KHADC-LA-1997/MEMO dated 10.6.2020, the party had questioned the tribal status of Mr Rampal.

In response to the petition, the Registration Authority of KHADC had to summon Rampal to appear for statement and hearing along with documentary proof before the Authority on 3rd July 2020. We, the members of the Pariat clan are eagerly awaiting the outcome of the hearing which to date neither the KHADC nor the KHNAM have informed the general public.

How did Mr Rampal obtain the Schedule Tribe Certificate? Did he obtain the

ST status by declaring himself as tribal through affidavit? Did the Deputy Commissioner issue ST Certificate to Rampal based on the sworn affidavit? The practice of declaring oneself as Scheduled Tribe, through an affidavit, was found wanting as such practice threatens the very concept of identifying Schedule Tribes as listed in the Constitution of India. This practice is against the social and cultural norms of our tribal society. It is for the sole purpose of deriving benefits and depriving the indigenous tribal of the privileges due to them.

We request the KHADC and the ST Certificate issuing authority to take necessary action and rectify the lacunae in accordance with the tenets of natural justice. We also appeal to the KHNAM to take up the issue in an earnest manner.

Yours etc.,

Sasa I. Pariat & Korda O. Pariat Shillong

More questions than answers

Editor,

It is bewildering that the entire The Shillong Times media was shut down when some of its staff got infected with the coronavirus. By the same rules, the UK Parliament or the Prime Minister’s

Office should have been fully suspended when British Prime Minister Boris Johnson tested COVID positive. I don’t think the Ministry of Home Affairs ever stopped its administrative activities when Home Minister Amit Shah himself tested positive for coronavirus. Other alternative options should have been explored before calling a complete halt to media operations. This case has raised more questions than answers.

Yours etc.,

Salil Gewali, Shillong

Good wishes

Editor,

Greetings from Aibor! I saw the situation of your building(ST)being declared as a Containment Zone for Covid19. I hope and pray that your collaborators may recover soon. Thanks for the service and will deeply miss your paper for the time being. Being a Christian I pray to God for the speedy recovery of your collaborators so that you can resume the work soon.

Praying for you all.

Yours etc.,

Aiborlang Nongsiej Sacred Heart Theological College , Shillong-8

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

"An atheist may be simply one whose faith and love are concentrated on the impersonal aspects of God."

-- Simone Weil

The Shillong Times

Vol No. LXIII No. 15 SHILLONG, SATURDAY, AUGUST 29, 2020

Paranoia over Covid resumes

HEALTH Minister, AL Hek's public declaration that Covid19 will spike in the next two months of September-October has set alarm bells ringing. Hek also mentioned in passing that the observation was made by researchers and health experts. It would have been enlightening for the public if the Health Minister were to be more specific about these sources and the basis on which the prognosis has been made. That Covid has now spread rapidly is a fact. When the Health Department speaks of social distancing it is only mouthing the World Health Organisation directives. The realities on the ground are far from conducive to social distancing. There are residential areas in Shillong city which are heavily congested and where the door between one house and another is just 2-3 feet away. Residents of such places share toilets and their interface with one another is constant. Social distancing is an alien term. If one person should contract Covid, it goes without saying that the person will infect many more in that congested locality. Social distancing is possible for those with independent houses and enough private space, not for those that cannot afford such homes. These realities cannot be lost sight of while coming up with regulations to prevent Covid infection. There are several such slums in Shillong. These slums lack basic amenities such as sanitation and garbage disposal systems.

In such congested areas water supply is meagre and maintaining hygiene is a tough call. People fetch water from public taps and they hardly practice social distancing at such times. When the plague broke out in Surat some years ago it was attributed to the dirt and filth of that place. It took a strong district administration to give Surat a complete facelift post the plague. Covid19 has also exposed the underbelly of Shillong. There is need for stricter building regulations; for beefing up civic amenities; for preventing latrines from flowing directly into streams and rivers; and to decongest the capital city by following the examples of other townships. There is a limit to how much population Shillong can take. It is now rapidly inching towards the one million population figure with no adequate facilities.

If Covid peaks as warned by the Health Minister the first casualty will be the health care system which is woefully inadequate. This will be followed by more paranoia and stigmatisation which even now is rife even amongst those educated enough to know that a person that tests negative need not be quarantined and can go about her duties. These will be the challenges in the coming months if Covid peaks. Whether the State Government has the resources to tackle the resurgence of Covid is questionable.

There is space for atheists

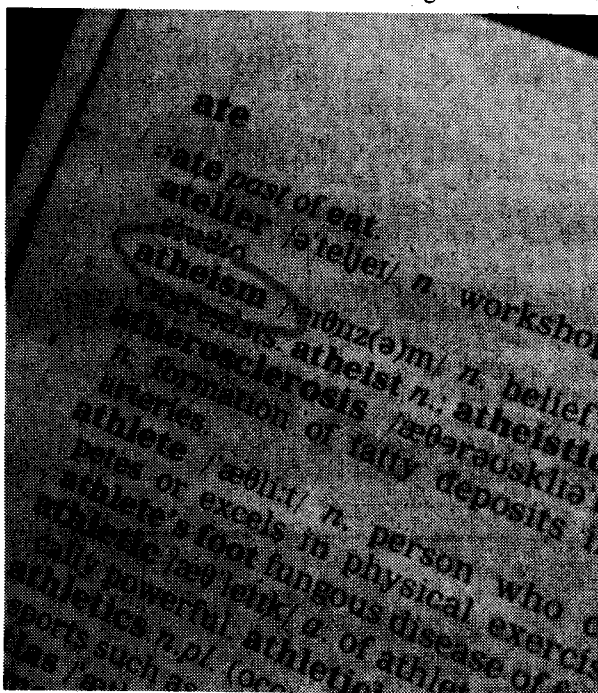
By Albert Thyrsiang

Even in Hinduism atheistic schools like the Samkhya and the Mimamsa schools rejected the idea of a creator God. Elements of atheism are also present in ancient religious texts.

On the global scale there are at least 23% who think they are not religious and 13% who call themselves convinced atheists. So why is there no country for atheists? Why should there be no space for non-believers in Meghalaya? Meghalaya is a free state (not a Christian state) like any other state in India.

Now, atheism is a very broad concept. It includes agnostics, rationalists and sceptics. An agnostic professes that the existence of

God and the supernatural is unknown. He/she does not deny God's existence per se. An agnostic merely states that he does not know. This is a fair position and we need not lose sleep if there are agnostics among us. We should be alarmed instead at those who claim they are too certain of things regarding faith. The dreaded Taliban, the ISIS, the Boko Haram, Al-Qaeda and other religious fundamentalist groups think they definitely know their mission comes from God and consider killing 'infidels' as God's will and are duty bound to carry out the assignment on behalf of God. The Church, through the secular arm executed heretics up to 18th century because it was sure that heresy was a certain deviation from the dogmas. Apostates were also condemned because the Church and other religions 'knew' for certain that abandonment of one's faith was against God's will. Even today heresy, apostasy and blasphemy are punishable crimes, including death in some Muslim countries. In India some Hindu fundamentalist elements are sure cow is divine. They resent against those who don't believe so and even lynch suspects of beef carriers.



Rationalists and sceptics appeal to reason and are against blind faith, superstition and certain religious and social practices that are deemed unreasonable. Thus witchcraft and black magic are irrational. The advent of Coronavirus saw superstitious frenzies of chanting 'go corona go', drum beating, lighting of candles and diyas and flashing of torchlights and mobile lights propagated not by the ignorant but by the PM himself. Now, with more than three millions cases we know COVID-19 will be beaten by vaccines and not by superstitions. Clearly rationalists and sceptics have a place in the society and can contribute to its progress.

Rationalism even made an intrusion into religion to be called religious rationalism.

Thanks to it, scientific and the philosophical advancement took place. The Galileos and Isaac Newtons were born. Church Fathers like Thomas Aquinas were, in a sense, rationalists as they argued that part of the 'revealed truth' is demonstrable by reason.

Sometime last year a politician on television declared that she became an atheist because 12 children were burnt alive in a fire that broke out in a residential area. She stated that if there was Jesus, or Buddha or Ram or any other god those children should not have died. So atheism is existential. Most religions believe that God is all powerful and all good. But there is much suffering, misery, poverty, calamities, sickness, violence, division, inequality, injustice, et al. Most of the sufferers are innocent. If God is good, sympathetic and kind why doesn't he remove these evils? If he wills he can because he is all powerful. Why God has to entrust human beings to try to remove these evils? Suffering was there 200,000 years ago, is still there now and it will be there forever.

The world, human beings and creation as a whole are imperfect. If God is perfect why doesn't he make everything perfect? Why humans and other species have to undergo the 'humiliating', painful and long process of evolution. Will

we ever achieve perfection? If atheists ask these questions shouldn't they be heard? Should their queries be anathema?

Theists turn to the 'cosmological' proof for the existence of God. There is nothing as mind boggling as attempting to comprehend the cosmos. Even by the latest ingenious physics the universe is immeasurable as it is ever expanding. The whole Universe is estimated to be 250 times larger than the observable Universe. There are at least two trillion observable galaxies each measuring between 1,000 to 100,000 parsecs in diameter (approximately 3,000 to 300,000 light years). Our galaxy alone, the Milky Way has more than 100 thousand million stars, the Sun the only one among them. The size and scale, splendours and marvels of the universe with all the heavenly bodies in perfect order makes it impossible to think that there is no creator, designer and 'sustainer'.

To add to the indescribable grandeur is the sheer beauty of nature and its complexity and variety of biology on the earth. With 391,000 plants species and counting and the incomplete list of 8.7 million animal species, the only known living planet is a miracle. The complexity of DNA makes scientists wonder struck. To say that accident is the author is unreasonable. If atheists are still unconvinced is up to them.

Theists and atheists are not poles apart. They share a common trait - faith. Theists need faith to believe in the existence of God though it is impossible to prove so. Similarly, atheists require faith to say there is no God because they cannot scientifically prove the non-existence of the entity they dislike. There are Youtube videos and literature to explain that it takes more faith to deny the existence of God than to believe in God. It takes more faith to be an atheist than to be a believer.

With all said and done atheists have space to live meaningfully and commit themselves to doing good. Good can be done just for its own sake and not necessarily for a higher cause. The Meghalaya Atheists Society (MAS) whose members are humanists can undertake the noble project of launching its 'Pending Project' by giving free education to poor children as eloquently, lucidly and articulately spelled out in their 'vision statement'. They are not to be deterred in their endeavour.

Atheists can consider religion an obstruction to progress, see God as unnecessary and perceive religious beliefs and practices superstitious. There is no need to be threatened for they do no harm. Instead be suspicious of fanatical believers who commit atrocities, violate human rights and are downright intolerant. Email: albert@rediffmail.com

Social media misinformation on efficacy of mask

By Dr Omarlin Kyndiah

The WhatsApp video circulation by a group that call themselves Freedom From Mask or #MaskSe Azaadi is going viral. The point put forward by the group is about the efficacy of mask filtration, and the impact of masks on re-breathing our exhaled carbon dioxide. Lack of understanding of the particle and particle size, both of the virus and the mask leads to confusion and misinformation. This claimed share on social media is not based on scientific evidence. A carbon dioxide molecule

Materials like chiffon and silk also have electro-static effects that result in charge transfer with nano-size aerosol particles, making them particularly effective at excluding particles in the nanoscale (<100 nm). There is a study that looked at the protective effect of a simple cloth mask for speech droplet source control that found that approximately 99% of the forward-facing droplets visible in a laser chamber were blocked. Overall, there is evidence that simple cloth face masks will generally pro-

"Small particles do not fly straight through materials, but instead follow Brownian motion, resulting in them coming in contact with material even when the material weave is larger than the particle. Many materials, such as Surgical Masks, the N95 Filtering face pieces (N95 FFs) or even the cloth mask have a complex weave which makes it very difficult for particles to fully penetrate."

is 0.33 nanometre diameter (nm is 1000 lesser than a micrometer). The molecule is smaller than the droplets containing coronavirus, which is approximately 100 nm or 0.1 micrometer. So, the first thing to note is that carbon dioxide is going to flow through any mask without any trouble. There is no known mask material that will filter 0.33nm molecules. If it did, you wouldn't be able to breathe at all!

The other argument of the Freedom From Mask or #MaskSe Azaadi is that viruses can easily go through the mask. This is also a false and misleading claim. Coronavirus SARS-CoV-2, named COVID 19 by the

vide good protection to those around the wearer. This is possible because droplets expelled during speech are much larger than the droplet nuclei that later turn into smaller droplets through evaporation. This supports the fact that while speaking, to cover the mouth with a mask helps to check the wearer from being infected, as well as can prevent those who have symptoms from spreading them, which will greatly help end the pandemic more quickly. Therefore, mandating the use of face masks in public especially when visiting busy, closed spaces, such as grocery stores, shopping centres, or



World Health Organisation, does not float freely in the air. When we speak we produce droplets between 20 and 2000 micrometers (µm) in diameter in which the larger droplets fall to the ground quickly, which is relative to humidity. At a relative humidity of 50%, droplets with initial radii larger than about 50 micrometers rapidly fall to the ground while smaller, potentially-virus containing droplets shrink (because the droplets evaporate) in size to around 1 micrometer and remain air borne for many minutes.

Small particles do not fly straight through materials, but instead follow Brownian motion, resulting in them coming in contact with material even when the material weave is larger than the particle. Many materials, such as Surgical Masks, the N95 Filtering face pieces (N95 FFs) or even the cloth mask have a complex weave which makes it very difficult for particles to fully penetrate.

when using public transport, etc may serve as a means of source control to reduce the spread of the infection in the community by minimising the excretion of droplets from infected individuals who have not yet developed symptoms or who remain asymptomatic.

So if Freedom From Mask or #MaskSe Azaadi or anyone claims that masks can't possibly stop COVID-19 because the virus is too small, now you know why they're totally wrong. The #MaskSe Azaadi group in their campaign for freedom from the mask by burning the mask in public places is the destruction of the symbol of global unity in the fight against the Covid 19 pandemic. Finally I will conclude with a quote from George Bernard Shaw, "Beware of false knowledge, it is more dangerous than ignorance."

(The writer teaches Biochemistry in St. Edmund's College, Shillong)

TO THE EDITOR

Personal attacks cannot hide the truth

Editor, I don't normally send clarifications to comments on my articles because I believe that opinions are open to criticism. I also believe that others too have their right to their own opinion. More importantly, I also believe in a healthy and constructive debate. However, I have taken exception to the recent rejoinders to my write-ups because they are personal attacks on me, where the writer has unnecessarily dragged into the controversy the organisation which I am affiliated to, into the debate.

The subject was why some leaders of the Niamtre took part in the ceremony to hand over water and soil for use in the construction of the

Ram temple at Ayodhya to the RSS functionary in Jowai. The writer took offence at my observations that there are some influences of Hinduism in the indigenous religion where I cited examples of the tradition of naming girl twins as Durka and Kongka and boy twins as Ram and Lakshon which are obviously Hindu names. Another point of objection was the taboo on consuming beef in a tribal society. I leave it to the wisdom of the readers to draw their own conclusions on this.

The writer also said that there is no Hindu influence on the indigenous religion in Nartiang which is not convincing at all. I will not repeat what I had written in my article but would like to ask, that if the two temples are not for worshipping Devi and Shiva then what are they for then? I have many times witnessed the celebration of Durga Puja in the temple and had

personally interviewed late Uttam Deshmukh the pandit who was then the priest of the two temples in Nartiang. I have also interviewed the elders of the raid Nartiang to understand the point of confluence of the two traditions.

The writer also questioned the credibility of my study and my understanding of the culture. I live in the culture and this is not the first time I have written on the subject. I have personally witnessed all the festivals that I have written about be they the different Behdienkhlam festivals, Rongkusi, festival in Bataw and others. I was lucky to witness one of the last two celebrations of Rongkhlai/Rongkhla festival and also witnessed the knia 'lei Shillong or knia Masi of the raid lalong which happens

once in two decades. I have personally witnessed the 'choh nia tradition' and the 'long hai' of the War Jaintia people which unfortunately is a dying tradition. It was an opportunity to also witness the 'chad lam syiem' of the Hadem people who live in Saitsama village.

I have visited most of the 'khloo blai' (sacred groves) of the different raids/kurs and have physically set foot on almost all the root-bridges in Jaintia Hills. I have promised myself long time ago to visit every nook and corner of Jaintia Hills and regret that the only region that I have not visited is the border areas where Huroi, Hingaria and Lejri villages are located. I have not only visited places where the Khasi Pnar live but also visited Saipung area and Khaddom where the Bates and tha Hmars live. I have even visited Jaintiapur in Bangladesh and interviewed

elders in the place to understand the history of the Jaintia kingdom. I rely on primary sources.

I do not wear my religion on my sleeve and have never abused any position or even this space to further the interests of my religion. In fact Unitarian Church is non-proselytising religion and OR Challam knows that very well. He himself has taken part at an interfaith service organised by the Unitarian church, Jowai. I was taught to respect all religions and I had never called the traditional religion pagan or questioned any organisation's right to affiliate with another. He would do himself a favour if he had read the articles between the lines. In fact it is this same upbringing which made it possible for a pastor of a church to visit Hindu temples, join in celebrations of different traditional festivals, learn and write about the

wisdom of our ancestors. My column in the Shillong Times is more than one decade now, and I have written hundreds of articles related to our culture.

I owe an apology to the members and the leaders of the Unitarian Church because the Church was unnecessarily dragged into the debate. I consider my positions in different organisations as hats that I wear only when the occasion requires that I do so, otherwise I am just an ordinary human being and my opinions in the articles are my own and I alone am responsible for them.

Yours etc.,
H H Mohmen
Riatsasim, lawmusiang
Jowai

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"In a time of domestic crisis, men of goodwill and generosity should be able to unite regardless of party or politics."

-- John F. Kennedy

The Shillong Times

Vol No. LXIII No. 17 SHILLONG, MONDAY, AUGUST 31, 2020

Worsening economic crisis

INDIA is presently faced with a deep economic crisis caused principally but not exclusively by the Covid-19 pandemic and nothing hints at an early improvement in the scenario. The shortfall in compensation cess this year is approximately Rs 2.35 lakh crore. As expected a note of caution was sounded by finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman on August 27 that an 'Act of God' meaning the pandemic has devastated the national economy.

Most sectors of the economy are suffering. Indications are that the farm sector might withstand the adverse impact of the pandemic spread, and might record a three-to-four per cent growth even in the face of the present odds. The cities suffered the worst, as the lockdown and social distancing norms resulted in job losses and a shrinkage of family earnings. Overall, GST collections have drastically come down this fiscal, starting from March when the lockdown of the nation was first effected. The months of March and April saw hardly any GST collection. As a result, the Centre is not able to meet its commitment of compensating the states for their loss in tax revenue, a system that was in force after the 2017 implementation of the GST as a unified taxation mechanism.

The finance minister's proposal to states is to go for hefty borrowings from RBI, which would mean payment of interest for a period of five years and return of the principal thereafter – from state coffers. States are given a week's time to respond.

There is no clarity as to how the GDP will show up in the present context. From an already fallen level of around five per cent in the last fiscal, a negative, below zero, growth is predicted for this fiscal, and how deep this can go further is anybody's guess. Leaving things to god, or putting the blame on the Almighty, will not serve any purpose. The government is well-advised to look for ways to reactivate the economy, at least from the next quarter.

The present uptick in the spread of the pandemic was only to be expected; as activities have largely resumed in most parts of the country, with major cities like Mumbai continuing to ail under the impact of Covid19. One or other vaccine might help restore public life and economic activities to near-normal.

Meanwhile, the assessment on Sunday that India will face the worst economic hit compared to G-20 nations, vis-à-vis GDP contraction, is only a reflection of the present state of weak economic activity. It lays a bigger responsibility on the government to act in meaningful and effective ways so that a turnaround is done.

The Jaintia kings and their stories

By HH Mohrmen

The history of Jaintia Hills is different from those of other chieftainships within the grand Hynniewtrep tribe and it begins right from the stories of the origin of the kingdoms. The Jaintia kingdom is also one of the few Khasi-Pnar kingdoms the dominion of which extended to the plains. Hence these kingdoms included plains people and non-tribals too as their subjects. The boundary of the Jaintia Kingdom extended from the rivers Gobha-Sonapur in the north up to the river Surma in the south. To the east lay the river Kupli and to the west the Brahmaputra (Bhattacharjee, J.B. Brahmanical myth, royal legalisation and the Jaintia state formation Journal of Social Science and Humanities NEHU). Not only did the territories extend to the plains but they also shifted the seat of the kingdom to Jaintiapur. Perhaps this is one of the few tribal royal who was mentioned extensively in the Ahom chronicles, which issued its own coins and a ruled over a kingdom which was also open to cultures other than their own. Prof S.K. Bhuyan collected all the information about the Jaintia kingdom and included that in the Ahom chronicles. He published the same in a separate book called the Jayantia Buranji.

It is from the Buranji and other sources that information about the Jaintia kingdom can be extracted, but very unfortunately the same is yet to be translated into English. The Jaintiapur kings are as much the kings of the plains as that of the highlanders or the tribals. This is obvious from the very fact that there are at least two versions of the story of the origin of the Jaintia kingdom. The version according to the Jayantia Buranji, was that king Jayanta Ray had no issue to succeed him. He prayed to the presiding goddess of the state to bless him with a son. The story has it that the goddess visited him in his sleep and in his dreams promised that she would give him a daughter instead. Later a daughter was born to him and the baby was named Jayanti.

Jayanti was later married to Landabbur the son of a royal priest and when Jayanta Ray became old he handed the kingdom over to Jayanti. Jayanti ascended the throne and took the name of Rane Singh. In a sad turn of events, Rane Singh suspected that her husband had committed some indecency and he was expelled and banished from

the Kingdom. In his walk in the wilderness Landabbur was given shelter by the Garo king who lived in a place called Suhtnga. Landabbur was adopted by the Chief of the region in the hills and on the demise of his adopted father, he succeeded the throne.

Meanwhile Rane Singh regretted at the way she treated her husband and prayed to the goddess to relieve her from her pain. The goddess appeared in her dream and promised that a female child would be born of her shadow and the child was to be thrown into the water to be devoured by a fish and would ultimately become the wife of Landabbur. The goddess also said that the

Jaintia kingdom. That was how the Kingdom was started according to the narrative of the plain subjects of the kingdom. This is also one of the narratives recorded in the Jayantia Buraji as found in Catherine Shadap-Sen's book.

The tribal in the hills too have their own stories of the origin of the Jaintia kingdom which started from Sutnga and was earlier known as 'Ka Hima Sutnga and extended its kingdom to the plains and shifted the capital of the kingdom to Jaintiapur. The story amongst the Pnar and the War Jaintias was a Lo Ryndi Tariatang from Thangbuli area who lived in the Sutnga area caught a fish from the river

origin of the kingdom are taken into consideration it is obvious that the two cultures both that of the plains and the hills people influenced each other.

Perhaps it is not wrong to say that the Jaintia kingdom was able to reach its glory because of its openness to other cultures. The Jaintia kings not only entered into matrimonial alliances with royal families of the neighbouring countries but have even adopted and practiced certain aspects of Hinduism in their court. Syed Murtaza Ali suggested that it was the daughter of a Koch king who introduced Hindu customs of worship in the royal family which continued till the fall of the kingdom.

Jaintiapur was also one of the major markets which catered to both the hills and the plains subjects of the kingdom and hence it was also a meeting place where ideas and cultures syncretised. The Pnar and the War still share many stories which are related with the market. The Pnar's penchant for brass utensils which are being used till today in some religious ceremonies is also borrowed from the plains culture. The turban maybe a universal head gear but the 'tuslien' dhoti is another item borrowed from the plains culture.

Jaintia is also by tradition home to other ethnic groups. It welcomes the five clans of Bates/Beates collective known as 'namnga kea dewan', who originally lived in the Saipung area. It also welcomes the Hadem which includes the Vaichei, the Vaiphei and the Motsun who live in the Saitama village. In fact this could be one interesting case study where intermarriage happens between two tribes following different family systems - a matrilineal and patrilineal system. Then there is the Hmar in Khaddum village and all these groups are from the Tibeto-Burman linguistic groups whereas the Khasi Pnar and the War are from Austro Asiatic, Mon Khmer language group.

The Jaintia kings are different from other tribal kings because others are mere tribal chiefs and did not attain the status of a king who ruled over a subject comprising of different races. The story of the Jaintias is the story of a society which is open to all cultures even while maintaining their tribal roots. It is a story of enterprising people who have traded with outsiders since time immemorial. (E m a i l : hhmohrmen67@gmail.com)



child would be named at Mutchorduree.

As prophesised in the dream a child was duly born, thrown into the water and devoured by a fish which swam upstream to the hills and was caught by Landabbur. The story has it that the fish turned into a beautiful lass and during the day in his absence, swept his house clean which baffled him. One day Landabbur caught the woman which turned from a fish into a human and married her. This narrative says that Landabbur son from Mutchorduree whose name is Bur Gohain/Bor Kuhain became the first king of the

Waikhyrwi. He kept the fish in a basket over the fire place and totally forgot about it until one day he found that when he returned home from work his house was cleaned and somebody had even cooked him his meal. He later found that the fish he caught from the river was in indeed a human and the two married and their offspring became the first king of the Sutnga kingdom.

It is interesting to note that though the two stories about the kingdom originated from two different cultures but surprisingly, the elements of the stories inter-mingled and even converged at different points. If the stories of the

not monitoring how these privately run institutions function.

One is left completely disillusioned by the injustices prevailing in privately run educational institutions and hope that justice will be done in the near future in remedying the plight of all the unfortunate teachers.

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request,
Via email

Support local businesses

Editor,
With the Corona Virus having turned life topsy-turvy, business and work is hugely affected. People are struggling to thrive and survive, hence it is very important for us as a community to be there for one another, especially when at such times we see so many local businesses being set up from home delivery for your daily groceries or even home delivery for your bakery items.

Some businesses have been forced to temporarily close, and many others have had to scale back or change their operations completely. While it's easy to feel powerless in a time like this, there are still a few things we can do to support our local businesses. We must remember that, there

are a lot of advantages in deciding to "shop local." By supporting local businesses, you are in turn supporting your local economy and significantly more money stays in a community when purchases are made at locally owned businesses. Local business owners don't have the funds to go big so when you buy local you are going to be respecting that they are getting out there every day and trying their best to make an honest living even against all of the competition and the uncertainty that the pandemic has brought along with it.

There's no question that the job market is tight these days especially with the pandemic going on unabated. Hence by shopping local, you are keeping a business open and giving people jobs within it so that you can help the local economy in more ways than one.

At the end of the day, it's totally free to give a business a shout-out on social media, leave them a kind review, or hype them up through word-of-mouth.

Yours etc.,
Manisha M Pala,
Via email

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75th Anniversary of The Shillong Times Celebration with a difference

By Larilin Kharpuri

For people in Meghalaya or those in the worldwide diaspora from Meghalaya, a normal day would start with reading the Shillong Times. Many of us do keep abreast of the happenings in the country and around the world by reading other newspapers. But in a small community like ours, a local newspaper has its own charm and place in our lives. It's more than just a paper that reports the happenings in the state. It gives us our own space and a sense of community. The Letters to The Editor and opinion pieces on local matters provide a forum for our thought leaders and activists, and even though many issues are fiercely debated, in the end these forge our collective identity and well-being.

Hence all readers, from across a wide spectrum, will happily celebrate this well-deserved anniversary of a special newspaper. The Shillong Times has completed 75 years of existence, which means 75 years of serving the people, 75 years of non-stop journalism and 75 years of reporting the good, the bad the ugly.

A platinum jubilee is a big deal. What comes to our mind when we hear the word celebration? A grand function, dinner party or both, well dressed people, announcement of competitions, and maybe fireworks. Well, all this didn't happen for ST. Instead ST took the road less travelled. They did have a half-day function for the launch of the 75th Anniversary year on August 9, 2019. But that was the only formal event. True to its commitment to social betterment, The Shillong Times decided to take up a unique anniversary celebration project, which came to be known as Operation Clean-Up (OCU). A detailed plan was set in place for the cleaning of the two rivers: Umkhrah and Umshyrypi. The project was to be executed in collaboration with schools, colleges and universities that are willing partners, and to work hand in hand with the district administration and Shillong Municipal Board (SMB).

The project was inaugurated on August 8, 2019 with cleaning the Umkhrah riverbed and banks at Nongmynsong. Afroz Shah, the well-known Mumbai-based environmentalist and United Nations Champion of the Earth awardee was present for the launch. So no fancy clothes, no decorations, definitely no fireworks. Present were dedicated individuals, helping hands, and concerned citizens.

The Umshyrypi and Umkhrah rivers, which flow through the city of Shillong, originate from the foothills of Shillong Peak. The Umshyrypi river flows in a south-north direction. The Umkhrah river runs in an east-west direction, and flows through a relatively flat bed in the Umkhrah area and this is where the early efforts were focused as a pilot project. The Umkhrah riverbed is clogged with all sorts of garbage: kitchen waste, clumps of old clothes, bottles and cans, used toiletries and diapers, you name it and you will find it here. A team of people with genuine concern for the environment and its resources was formed. With time more people joined in and we christened the effort as Operation Clean Up (OCU). This team comprised of individuals like Rudi Warji, Aiban Swer of MBDA, Avner Pariat, Derick Pariat, Larsing Ming Sawyan of Centre Point, Jiwat Vasvani and the Jiva team, Christine Beale, Jasbir Singh, Toki Blah, Adeetya Tiwari and his team, Nicholas of Radio Mirchi, St Edmund's 1979 Batch, institutions such as Jyoti Sroat School, Kiddies Corner Secondary School, Women's College, Martin Luther Christian University, St Anthony's HS School, St Anthony's College, KL Bajoria College, St Mary's

College, Seven Set HS School, NGOs such as Bethany Society Make Someone Smile, The Green Signal and others. The OCU army was led by Kong Patricia Mukhim, along with Bah Manas Chaudhuri of The Shillong Times, editor and managing director of the newspaper respectively.

The team met almost every Saturday starting with the first clean up on August 8, 2019 and continuing till the lockdown in March 2020. In total 17 clean up sessions were carried out. This included seven at the Umkhrah river, and also cleaning drives in Laban, Police Bazaar, Golf Links, Malki forest, Umiew River at Umphrup village, Ward's Lake and Botanical Garden. Some of the clean ups were initiated by Make Someone Smile and The Green Signal. Jiva and other sponsors provided, boots, cleaning tools, and snacks for the volunteers.

Now, why would we clean the same area several times? Because it gets filled with garbage again almost immediately. Every time we visited Umkhrah, it was like starting from scratch. So during a couple of the clean ups, some of the team members visited the houses and premises along the stretch of the river to generate awareness. On one such occasion, visually challenged students from Bethany Society joined the team not just to clean up but to talk to residents.

It was encouraging to see enthusiastic participation by youth, and especially young school students in these clean ups. It surely makes one optimistic about the future and that the world will be in safe hands; hands that would care for and clean the environment around them. Young voices from all over the world are leading the way. In October 2019, Suhani Ravi Tiwari joined OCU to visit few schools and colleges in Shillong advocating against the use of plastics. Suhani is a 12 year-old girl from Gurgaon who has taken an innovative approach to spread awareness on the menace of plastics, through poetry and Twitter.

So what did we learn? The first lesson was that it was not easy. It requires dedication, patience, courage and sacrifice of one's personal time. Secondly, it is not easy to change the mindset and habits of people, even those who are living in the midst of garbage. The "who cares" and "chalta hain" attitude prevails, and attitudinal and behavioral change is needed. That particular scene from the 2006 film Lage Raho Munna Bhai made more sense now...you clean and someone else pollutes it again, and then you keep on cleaning till that someone stops doing so. Thirdly, team spirit makes a difference. During some of the clean ups, there was heavy rain and stormy weather, but nothing could deter our commitment as a team. The sheer grit of the leaders and the willingness of the team members enabled the project to carry on. Another positive outcome is that individuals and groups in other parts of the state are initiating clean ups of public places and water bodies, with people taking ownership of local issues, and trying to find solutions collectively.

A collective approach will be a game changer, with people becoming more responsible in waste management, and in caring for the environment. But what if, just like ST, other institutions, organizations or even individuals celebrate their anniversaries, commemorations and birthdays by taking such initiatives? Do we dare to ask ourselves this question? Kudos to The Shillong Times and thank you for making a difference!

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TO THE EDITOR

Are we really Christians?

Editor,
In reply to a letter sent to the paper, "No Nation for atheists", firstly I'd like to remind the authors of that letter that under article 25-28 of the Constitution of India, freedom of religion in India is a fundamental right. Every citizen of India has the right to practice and promote their religion peacefully. So yes, India is a nation for atheists as well as Christians, Hindus, Muslims, Judaism and every religion under the sun. We have the right to believe in whatever we choose to and I am not too familiar with atheism but as far as my understanding goes it is an absence of the belief in god or gods and atheists have every right to do so. Freedom of speech does allow us to say what we think regarding other people's beliefs to some extent, unless it incites hate but no one has any right to tell people what to believe in. That's as far as I'll go into atheism and constitutional freedoms due to my lack of knowledge and understanding.

What I want to focus on is Christianity. I am a Christian myself, was born a Christian and now I can say that I am a practicing Christian, al-

beit not a very good one. I feel there's a difference between being born a Christian and actually practicing it. Based on my understanding and what I try to practice as a Christian, Christianity is supposed to be a religion rooted in love. The foundation of our belief is that God loved us so much that he sent his only son to save us and his two greatest commandments to us is to love God and love one another. And we are supposed to share that love with others who do not know about it. However I've seen in this particular instance and many more that we are far away from practicing what our God commanded us to do. Instead of talking about God's love, we Christians tend to stand on a pedestal, thinking we are better than everyone. That our God has made us better than everyone else, because of Him we can tell people how bad they are and how good we are. We are full of pride in our belief, however our own God says that pride comes before a fall. We want to talk to others about our God, however, instead of approaching those who do not believe in our God with love, we approach them in a judgmental manner, pointing out their wrongdoings, telling them of their shortcomings. This is a far cry from the teaching of our God. Remember just because we

believe in our God does not make us any less of a sinner. If we want to share our beliefs let us do so in a humble manner, not with condescension as this will only alienate us and make people less willing to listen.

I'd like to end by saying that I have many atheist friends and friends of other beliefs and I can say they act in a more Christian manner than many, myself included. As Christians let us remind ourselves to approach every situation not in a haughty manner but with love the way our God would want us to do.

Yours etc.,
Gavin Siangshai,
Via email

Injustice towards private school teachers

Editor,
I would like to bring to the notice of the concerned authorities the plight of teachers working in small, private schools especially those run by a single owner. After thorough research it has been found that in most of these schools, the teachers are being deprived of their salary on the pretext that "fees are not coming in," whereas, teachers working in government or

government aided schools are all drawing their full salary. Now, who is to be blamed for this? Should we blame the owners, who have lost all their professional ethics and are on the path of exploiting their teachers using the pandemic as an excuse? Don't they have a reserve fund that can be used at the time of the financial crisis? Should we blame the government which has given permission to open such educational institutions but have never thought of following up with routine check-ups on the working pattern of these schools, the infrastructure, and above all the salaries paid to teachers? Should we blame the Inspector of Schools or is this body meant to monitor only the government schools and not the private educational institutions?

Do teachers of private schools deserve such step-motherly treatment despite the fact that we are doing equal or more work compared to the government employed teachers? In this I would blame the Department of Education which has set rules on the criteria for a teacher whether serving in government or private schools but did not fix a minimum salary structure for the private school teachers who are, therefore, always left cheated. The Education Department is responsible for the mushrooming of schools but is keeping a distance from and