

**"Know your power, believe in yourself and don't let anyone dim your light."**

—Leigh-Anne Pinnock

**The Shillong Times**

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**Holidaying banks**

A banana republic is one that is poor, corrupt and badly ruled. It is, also one that's having a government that "functions poorly for its citizens while disproportionately benefiting a corrupt elite group or individuals." It also refers to a nation where the system of democracy is in a state of decline. On the surface, in several respects, India is closer to being a banana republic other than for the fact that some systems retain their verve – the election process, for example. Yet, the decline is evident on multiple fronts. Governments bend before the organised might of vested interests. When men with feet of clay, who are interested in holding power and positions at any cost, run the affairs of a nation, it eventually transforms itself to the level of a banana republic and vested interests will rule the roost. Indian democracy is facing a serious threat to its very existence, over time, due to the gradual degradation of its fundamentals. Politicians in power are out to please every organised segment, be it the workforce, the caste outfits, or much else so as to please all and win maximum votes in successive elections. National interests are sacrificed at the altar of vested interests.

Take for instance the fact that banks across the country would remain closed for nearly 15 days this month, on account of holidays linked to religious festivals, week-end holidays and the like. Banking sector employees are led by powerful unions that keep making demands and getting these accepted by successive governments through the instrument of the RBI. They fought and got two-day weekend holiday twice every month and are seeking its extension to all weeks. Different government sectors have different holiday systems, and the unions that have the clout to demand more holidays get this done. If banks remain closed for half the month, the disruption to economic activity is beyond comprehension.

An argument is that money transactions can be done online or via ATMs. This is only one part of the banking sector business. Loans, for instance, involve paperwork and several visits to banks. What happens in a developed nation with too little population, like a weekly two-day holiday for banks, cannot suit a nation of 1.40 billion. Question is also, why one segment of the workforce should enjoy more holidays while the rest are made to work for six days a week, 26 days a month. Bank employees are among the best-paid workforce, and the additional benefits they fought and got runs into a long list. The tendency is, those who get more seek more. The crying child gets the milk. More so when unprincipled, uncouth men run the affairs of a nation or state. In democracy, this too is a fait accompli.

# Workers' Day and Right to Living Wage

By Kyrsoibor Pyrtuh

It has become a ritual for the Workers or Labor Union to observe International Workers' Day or May Day. Although it is important to commemorate this significant event in the History of Labour movements, mere celebration is not enough and will not ease the pressing issues and hardships which the workers across the Nation are encountering, especially the un-organized, contractual workers and those under a labor contractor. In the neoliberal economy, the workers are being subjugated to slavery with long working hours, no leave entitlements, no social safety nets and pathetic working conditions.

**The rights of workers**  
The Right to Work is not express as the fundamental right in Part III of the Constitution of India, rather it is incorporated in Part IV, which is the Directive Principles of State Policy which makes it unenforceable in Court. However, in 1986 wider judicial interpretation by the Supreme Court had turned it into a Fundamental Right. The wider interpretation of Article 21 made by the Supreme Court of India in its judgement in *Olga Tellis and Ors V Bombay Municipal Corporation and Ors*, the Right to work was perceived as a fundamental right inalienable in the Right to life under Article 21 of the Constitution.

On the other hand, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1966, recognizes the right to work as the fundamental human right. The covenant states that everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favorable conditions of work, and to protection against unemployment.

Nations, especially democratic countries, which are built on the founding principles of Justice, Equality, Liberty and the rule of law are expected to treat workers with respect, recognizing the latter's dignity and humanity. Despite having constitutional provisions and legal frameworks which aim to protect and promote the fundamental right to work, the workers in the largest democracy like India, are today subjected to harshest kinds of oppression and forced to toil under modern forms of slavery.

**Elections Season 2024:**  
This is the election season whereby tall promises and rhetoric about youths' development, employment and jobs creation take center stage. Therefore, it is also

imperative for the youths to pose hard questions on the political leaders across the political spectrum. What had been promised in the past ten years and what is the reality on the grounds? In fact, we can unequivocally state that there is a mismatch between what was promised and facts on the grounds.

According to reports from the ground entitled, "The Gruesome Betrayal" conducted and compiled by Eddelu Karnataka, the NDA Government led by the Bharatiya Janata Party had promised to create 2 (two) crores new jobs every year and this means that in 10 (ten) years it should have created 20 (twenty) crores jobs. However, today the unemployment rate in the Country has surged to 8.1%. Further, between 2014 and 2019, around 60 (sixty) lakhs Central Government positions were left vacant without being filled. Perhaps the number of vacancies has doubled by now.

The rights of the workers have been mostly removed and throttled. Since the liberalization of the economy, the enforcement and promotion of contractual labor has reached new heights and full scale. It must be remembered that contractual labor is slave labor in the 21st Century. It is pitiable that the average salary of contractual lecturers in the country is about ₹8000 (eight thousand) a month and not to mention the salaries of low-grade contractual workers which are really dehumanizing. There is a mismatch between employment opportunities and increasingly educated skilled workers. As a result, skilled and educated youths who are desperate to get a job are being exploited to the hilt.

It is reported that 50,000 (fifty thousand) Indian youths are recruited to the armed forces every year. But with the introduction of Agniveer scheme recruitment to armed forces is halting and more so 75% of those recruited via Agniveer scheme will become unemployed after four years.

**Meghalaya Scenario:**  
In Meghalaya the demand for review of reservation policy in Government jobs and employment is upfront in the socio-economic and political discourses. However, the fact remains that job opportunities in the Government sector are shrinking by the day and its share of the job market in the State is not more than 15% approximately.

Although as per the available data of 2023 Meghalaya stands at 2.6% in unemployment rate which is relatively low. It must also be noted that it is very difficult to get precise and accurate data in Meghalaya since no institution cares to conduct a scientific survey on crucial matters like employment and economic development. Secondly, it seems that the data on unemployment in Meghalaya does not reflect those people who no longer apply for jobs in the formal sector etc. And many youths in Meghalaya are now employed in the informal sector with low wages and long working hours. Meghalaya is also known as a low wage economy where the workers are underpaid and since the introduction of the gig economy in the State Capital many working youths are on two jobs to eke a living and fend for their families.

Meghalaya is facing not just unemployment but underemployment and the crisis of unemployment in the State can be summarized thus- A random survey of households in the Capital Shillong will give us a telling picture of this humongous problem which cannot be left to the so-called NGOs or leaders alone. In a household which has 3 (three) employable children, only one is employed and out of 10 (ten) households surveyed, between 5 (five) to 6 (six) households are telling the same tragic tale of unemployed sons or daughters sitting idle at home or doing odd jobs occasionally.

The cost of living in Shillong is skyrocketing and working families are struggling to provide better health care, education and decent housing for their children. And the Government is yet to resolve the demand of the SSA teachers to absorb them as regular teachers under the Education Department of the State, to increase the wages of Anganwadi workers, ASHA volunteers, Domestic workers, Private employees etc., to a living wage. There is no indication whatsoever that the Government is going to take steps to improve the living conditions of the toiling population of the State. At the same time no NGOs or "Seng Bhalang" or "Seng iei Jaitbriew" make sense when it comes to the problem of unemployment and underemployment in the State. However, let me reiterate that unemployment or underemployment is the biggest threat to the future of our youths and is a real issue.

Therefore, on this day the workers must together raise a huge cry and collectively make a strong demand for a living wage and equal pay for equal work for every worker in the State.

**Right to Living Wage and Equal Pay for Equal Work:**  
These are the two important and burning issues before the workers in the State. Any future employment or economic policy which affects the workers, the State must seriously consider these aspects and prioritize the needs of the working class. Economic policy as well as employment policy should be geared towards prosperity, hope and happiness of every citizen. Policies must be framed and measured by human welfare and not profit making. The State must have a policy that encourages the entrepreneurial spirit of the youths and should not be hampered by patronage networks and corruption. Such policies must be rooted in sustainable development and employment generation.

The right to a living wage and equal pay for equal work are fundamental principles that uphold fairness, social and economic justice. These rights ensure that every individual receives fair compensation for their work, allowing them to maintain a decent standard of living and contribute to the overall well-being of the community.

A living wage refers to the minimum income required for an individual or a family to meet their basic needs, such as food, housing, clothing, education, healthcare and leisure. This concept acknowledges that work should be a pathway out of poverty, and everyone deserves a fair opportunity to earn a decent living.

Equal pay for equal work means that individuals performing the same job, with the same level of responsibility and skill, should receive the same compensation, regardless of their gender, race and ethnicity. This principle is essential in addressing income disparities and promoting gender and racial equity in the workplace.

The two recent and important observations of the Supreme Court are another opportune moment for the workers to take forward the struggle for equal pay for equal work. The Apex court observed that (i) "Equal pay for equal work" is not a fundamental right vested in any employee, though it is a constitutional goal to be achieved by the Government and (ii) the doctrine of equal pay for equal work is not an abstract doctrine and is capable of being enforced in the court of law...."

## Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

Elections: The Before and After..!

In the elections that are taking place in our country, there's a before the election scenario, and an after the election scenario, right? In case you're not sure, let me present both the scenes, very much to do with our country, here goes:

I imagined that the doorbell rang at my home: I walked to the door, swung it open and found a grinning face outside with folded hands. "Namaste sir," said the grinning face as it tried to shake my hand then tried to walk past me into my house, "May I come in?"

"No!" I exclaimed, "You may not! I don't know you!"

"You do know me sir!" said the face with a wider grin and hands reaching out to embrace me.

"No I don't know you" I said looking at the face and wondering who it was.

"You do sir" said the man who had walked in.

"No I don't! Who are you?" I asked.

"We met five years back sir." Said the man now folding his hands in a namaste.

I stared at the man, "Where did I meet you?" I asked.

"Here only sir" said the man, "Don't you remember, I met you here only!"

"Here?" I asked, "But this is my home."

"Yes sir I came to your home only!"

and I envisioned myself a waiter in one of the resorts that our elected representatives will soon be bundled off to: "It must be quite traumatic for you all?" I asked, "First you are all spent after having fought and won the elections, and then you are herded into a resort, to keep you from being poached by a cash rich party?"

"It is all because of our leaders!" grumbled a newly elected MP, "If it wasn't for our leaders asking for our loyalty we would be comfortably staying in our own homes with our beloved families"

"Can't those poachers get across to you through your phones?" I asked.

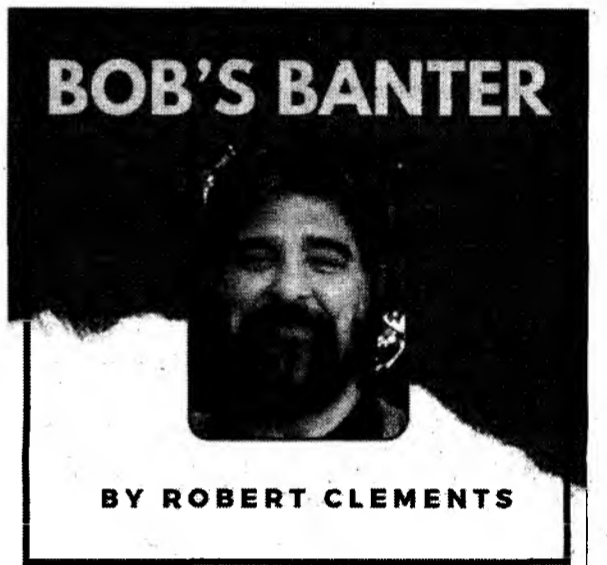
"Phones have all been confiscated by our leaders!" whispered the new MP, "I miss my phone!"

"You must be missing keeping in touch with your constituents!"

"No, I miss the video clips, especially hot ones sent on our group. It is very difficult to survive without my phone!"

I watched as suddenly all the MPs rushed to the windows of the resorts and looked out, then came back disappointed. "What are they looking for?" I asked, "Rain clouds?"

"No smoke signals!" said my new friend, also looking disappointed, "They have been told by the cash rich party that they will be in-



"And why did we meet here?" I asked, wondering why this man had come home.

"I came for your vote sir" said the man, and suddenly I identified the grinning face with hands saying namaste as the local politician. "Aha," I said, "you are...?"

"Your representative in the Lok Sabha sir! Now may I sit down sir?"

"No!" I said angrily. Please go away!"

"Why sir?"

"Do you know how many times I tried to contact you at your office?" I said.

"No sir?"

"I phoned dozens of times. You were always busy, too busy, your man made many excuses; I thought I'd visit you, but there were thugs and goons who stood outside your office door with smirks and sneers! They nearly roughed me up when I tried to insist on seeing you!" I said angrily. "And now you come here for my vote?"

"For what you came to meet me sir?" asked the man.

"I came to tell you of the ED going after the opposition, good MPs being expelled, and that you should do something, being from the opposition."

"If you vote for me this," said the politician, "I will do everything."

"How? I asked, "What will you do?"

"I will switch sides after the elections sir!"

"And now you want my vote as an opposition candidate? "What if you don't do all this?"

"Then come to my office after the elections sir!"

"But you won't have time to see me!" I tell him.

"Then I will come and see you sir," said the politician as he stepped out of my house and reached the gate.

"When?" I shouted.

"Before the next election sir! I will come for your vote again!"

And the next scene takes place immediately after our elections have taken place, and as soon as the results are out:

Political floor crossing and horse trading will start

formed about the amounts they will be paid if they cross over, through smoke signals!"

"But do you all know what each smoke signal means?" I asked surprised.

"It's the first thing we learn when we win the elections!" said my new friend.

I walked around with a jug of coffee in my hand, "Coffee?" I asked a group who were looking listlessly at the sky with their overnight bags nestling close to them.

"What's in your bags?" I asked, interested.

"Ropes!"

"For what?"

"To escape from this place, as soon as we receive the right smoke signal!"

"There's something else too in those bags! It seems quite bulky, what is it?"

"Saddles!"

"Whoa! Whoa!" I shouted, "You guys planning to learn horse riding in the resort?"

"Neigh!" whined the newly elected political leader, "That we already know, but as soon as we escape, we will put the saddle on ourselves and will be ridden off by the highest bidder, it's used after the results of the..."

"Horse trading!" I said, as my new friend nodded vigorously.

I suddenly saw all of them rushing to the window very agitated. "Smoke signal?" I asked.

"Rain clouds!" said my new politician friend looking disappointed.

"So?"

"No smoke signals, if it starts raining!"

"Then what will you do?" I asked.

"We'll do what we love doing!" said the leader.

"What?" I asked.

"Nothing!" said my new friend, "Now we will have time to practice what we plan to do for you, for the next five years; NOTHING...!"

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

Letters to the Editor

**Why are Meghalaya aspirants scoring zilch in UPSC exams**

The dry spell of our state in the All-India Civil Services Examination conducted by UPSC continues. The pattern is no different this year. After the success of Isawanda Laloo I.A.S. (RR 2013) & Terakchi K. Marak, IFS. (RR 2013), followed seven years later by Ankur Das, IAS (RR 2021) and Swapnil Bhattacharyya, I.A.S. (RR 2022), there has been none who qualified for the AICS examination from Meghalaya. It is not only a matter of concern but an issue which calls for tangible action plan by all concerned. This year there were 1143 vacancies in various services, including IAS, IPS, and IFS, and recommendation has been made for the appointment of 1016 candidates which includes 86 from the ST categories, among others. As far as the NE is concerned, nine successful candidates are from strife torn Manipur, four from Nagaland and 5 from Assam in the list of successful candidates in the batch of 2023, result of which was declared recently. Candidates from other NE states has

also been successful during the last decade.

Shillong has been the cradle of quality education for all NE states till mid-eighties or so. In our school days, students not only from the region but even beyond came here to study, both at school and college level. Today most of these states have established educational institutions of value based largely on our model. Many of such states are faring better than us. It is time for introspection and review of our education management. School and home are the most appropriate institutions where the seed of emancipation should be sown if we are to succeed in such examinations and others. The above average students confine themselves to the comfort zone of medicine, engineering, et al. There is minimal interest in All India Services and number of students appearing is low compared to other states. State Civil Service officers rarely venture out of their comfort zone to prepare and appear for the All-India Service. The environment sadly is till lacking and hence it is mostly students who study outside the state, in appropriate atmosphere, who usually prepare and crack such exams. It is imperative to create such an environment

in our state. The strike rate of the limited private and government institutes preparing students for the AICSE has not been up to the mark. The competition no doubt is very stiff and thus calls for total commitment without losing heart at initial failures.

In my humble opinion, the AICS officers posted in Meghalaya will do well to take the initiative, to start with by sensitizing students not only in Shillong but in all district HQs and sharing their saga of preparation and total single-minded involvement to achieve success. A classic example is D.P. Wahlang present Chief Secretary, who after his MBA was appointed in a lucrative job in the private sector. But he did not lose sight of his ultimate goal of qualifying for the UPSC. He did so without compromising on the profession he was pursuing. He is the most suitable individual to formulate an action plan with the advice of former AICS officers like P.J. Bazely, Toki Blah, Rudi Warjri, W.M.S. Pariat, P.S. Thangkhiw, Hector Marwein, Peter Ingty, B.K. Lyngwa, TTS Marak, C.P. Marak to name a few, among many others, together with the present ones to formulate a long- and short-term strategy and action plan. I am sure our

students are no less than any others in the country. What is needed is the right guidance and direction and to instil confidence in their capabilities to succeed with their experience and approach. Let us all contribute in our own limited and humble manner to encourage our student community to also pursue this career option.

Yours etc.,  
Naba Bhattacharjee,  
Shillong- 4

**Innovative and noble**

Editor,  
Recently the state education department had notified that all schools should have "bagless" days and we hope that all schools are adhering to this new norm - something that is a much needed relief to students. It is a pity that we are yet to bring in e-learning pads to replace textbooks that burden small children as well when they have to carry bags that weigh up to 3 to 6 kilograms and at times more. Medical studies have shown that heavy load of books on a student can cause gradual spinal problems and even strain on the upper part of the body towards the shoulders and the neck. Education needs to be innovative and interactive rather than just

"learning". Another news that went viral was the innovative and noble approach by Swapnil Tembe, the Director for School Education and Literacy who has taken a step further in bringing out guidelines to compete for the UPSC Civil Services examination for many young people who have limited means to undergo coaching. This is a laudable effort and a noble duty to help those in need. Why are we unable to churn out civil servants in an important point to note. Does the fault lie with our dreary and defective education system or the lack of awareness or perhaps both.

Yours etc.  
Dominic S. Wankhar,  
Via email

**Dissent the lifeblood of democracy**

Editor,  
Amartya Sen rightly said, "Under British rule, Indians were often arrested and imprisoned without trial, and some were kept in prison for a long time. As a young man, I had hoped that as India became independent, this unjust system, in use in colonial India, would stop. This has not, alas, happened, and the unsupportable prac-

tice of arresting and keeping accused human beings in prison without trying them has continued in free and democratic India".

Citing data from the National Crime Records Bureau, the People's Union of Civil Liberties in its draft report pointed out that out of 8,371 persons arrested under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) between 2015 and 2020, only 235 were convicted. The high rate of acquittal (97.2%) showed that prosecution under the UAPA did not have merit in the huge majority of cases.

Indeed, the data that out of 8371 persons arrested under the UAPA between 2015 and 2020, only 2.8 per cent were convicted, raises serious questions about whether this law should be pursued in an independent democratic country. A democracy cannot survive without dissent and free speech. It needs to be reviewed whether the UAPA tends to erase lines of demarcation between political dissent and criminal activity.

Yours etc.,  
Sujit De,  
Kolkata

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"It is never too late to be what you might have been."

— George Eliot

The Shillong Times

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Relocation of hawkers

THE State Government has stated that about 200 hawkers would be relocated in the MUDA complex to make the entire Police Bazar stretch a pedestrianised zone. This is much needed considering that pedestrians have been inhibited from walking in every part of the city even if they choose to walk rather than drive. Shillong city is pedestrian unfriendly because most footpaths have been taken over by hawkers. A classic case is that of the footpath alongside Civil Hospital, Shillong. Then we have Laitumkhrah which has made walking especially for the sight-impaired and the disabled extremely precarious. The question is whether the hawkers will agree to shift and if they don't, whether the Government has the will to use the force of law against them. This is city where people don't make a public issue of something as basic as the rights of a pedestrian. The problem is also that hawkers are multiplying by the day and they are coming from the rural outback where there are no livelihoods.

About 80% of Meghalaya's people live in her villages but with 76 % of these rural settlers becoming landless there is no incentive for them to stay back in the villages. With no farmland on which to grow vegetables and rice or other crops why would villagers want to stay in the villages? In Shillong these hawkers live in miserable conditions in one or two room homes in some of the slum areas where there are no toilets and no running water. Its not as if people want to leave their villages but there are compulsions. At times their children who pass out of Class 10 and have to shift to Shillong for Classes 11 and 12 and later for college. Most villages only have up to Class 10 and children have to migrate to Shillong and stay in rented accommodation. They are left to themselves. In some cases their mothers accompany them and they rent accommodation. This is expensive in Shillong. This forces the mother to find a livelihood of which hawking is the only option.

Poverty in Meghalaya is a reality and the economic divide is growing. A socio-economic study is needed to help the state understand the reasons for stark poverty and what could be the alleviating factors. The consultants employed by the Government should spend time in rural areas where the comforts of city life are out of reach. Power is available only on some days. If there is a squall it will take weeks for electricity to be restored. Water is not a luxury that comes through taps. Transportation is difficult for those relying on public transport. In short what is taken for granted in Shillong are luxuries for the rural folks. When and how can this divide be bridged? The hawkers represent the larger problems of the bulk of the population in Meghalaya.

Who was first? Does it matter?

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

For me, the genesis of this whole debate about the foreign origin of Hinduism came about when former Lok Sabha Speaker Kariya Munda stated that "those tribals who convert to Islam or Christianity must not get any benefits of reservation meant for the tribals." Basically, his argument was that Islam and Christianity are foreign religions, while tribal religions and Hinduism are indigenous to the subcontinent. Therefore those who follow the former religions must be deprived of their rights. With a large proportion of Khasis being Christians, I took it as an attack on our community and therefore decided to demonstrate that Hinduism itself is foreign to the subcontinent. However, there was no malice against any religion, and I wanted the discussion to be based on facts. In the process, I gained some interesting insights, which I am going to share. Please note that I am not trying to defame any religion, but I am going to discuss it based on published research.

In my opinion, there are three fundamental features of Hinduism that characterize the religion. These are Sanskrit (an Indo-European language), the Vedas (the earliest sacred texts of the Hindus), and the Varma system (today known as the caste system). Let's have a look at these three and find out if they have any antecedents outside the subcontinent. Not surprisingly, we find that all three had their origins in a proto-Indo-European culture practiced by a people whose homeland has been identified as a region north of the Black Sea and Caspian Sea in what is today Ukraine and southern Russia or the Pontic-Caspian Steppes. The case for this homeland was persuasively argued by David W. Anthony, an American anthropologist, in his 2007 book, 'The Horse, the Wheel, and Language: How Bronze-Age Riders from the Eurasian Steppes Shaped the Modern World'. This book won the Society for American Archaeology's 2010 Book Award. In April 2024, David W. Anthony was one of the 94 authors who published the paper 'The Genetic Origin of the Indo-Europeans' in which he built on the arguments that he had laid in the book about the proto-Indo-European language and its descendants, or what he calls its daughters.

Based on linguistic reconstruction and archaeological evidence, the earliest Indo-European language was an Archaic Proto-Indo-European (partly preserved only in Anatolian in present-day Turkey), probably spoken before 4000 BCE. Then there was early Proto-Indo-European (partly preserved in Tocharian, an extinct language from northwestern China) that was spoken between 4000 and 3500 BCE. Then we have the languages that we can identify today. These are the late Proto-Indo-European (the source of Italic and Celtic), which was probably spoken about 3500-3000 BCE, followed

by the Pre-Germanic splitting away from the western edge of late Proto-Indo-European dialects about 3300 BCE. Pre-Greek split away about 2500 BCE; Pre-Baltic split from Pre-Slavic and other northwestern dialects about 2500 BCE. Finally, the one most important for us Pre-Indo-Iranian (early Sanskrit) developed from a northeastern set of dialects between 2500 and 2200 BCE. This means that Sanskrit is the youngest of all the Indo-European languages and is around 4500 to 4200 years old. But even then, it had not reached South Asia. That happened only after 2000 BCE, when a branch of Indo-European-speaking people known as Indo-Aryans arrived on the subcontinent.

So, the history of Sanskrit on the subcontinent is a little over 3000 years old. But it was only after more than 1000 years that the language was put down in writing. For a long time, it was an oral language, and the Rig Veda (the first of the four Vedas), was composed orally in the Punjab, in northwestern India and Pakistan, probably between about 1500 and 1300 BCE. Noted scholars like Wendy Doniger, author of the book 'The Hindus: An Alternative History', gave the date of around 1500 and 1000 BCE. But oddly enough, the language (i.e., Sanskrit) was found in inscriptions a lot earlier in a different part of the world, northern Syria.

This happened during the reign of the Mitanni dynasty, which ruled over what is today northern Syria between 1500 and 1350 BCE. Around 1380 BCE, the Mitanni king Kurkiwaza explicitly named four deities to witness his treaty with the monarch of the Hittites (an Anatolian Indo-European people), three of whom—Indra, Varuna, and the Nasatya, or Divine Twins—were the three most important deities in the Rig Veda. Indra himself was the subject of 250 hymns, or a quarter of the Rig Veda. He was, however, not original but similar to Thor and Zeus, who were also important gods in their respective Norse and Greek mythologies. What this reveals is that though the Rig Veda was composed on the subcontinent, it took inspiration from an original religion that must have first emerged in its Eurasian Steppes homeland. The Indo-European speakers took it with them as they migrated west, east, and south and imposed it on their new destinations. But that was not the only practice that was imported into the subcontinent.

According to Georges Dumézil, a French philologist, linguist, and religious studies scholar who specialized in comparative linguistics and mythology, the most famous basic divisions in Proto-Indo-European society was the tripartite scheme between the ritual specialist or priest, the warrior, and the ordinary herder or cultivator. These groups were assigned

different colors based on their roles: white for the priest, red for the warrior, and black or blue for the herder or cultivator. As noted by Alf Hiltebeitel in his 2011 book 'Dharma: Its Early History in Law, Religion, and Narrative', Bhṛigu, one of the great sages of Hinduism, when describing Varma (which in the Rig Veda has been defined as color, outward appearance, exterior form, figure, or shape) in the Mahabharata, explains that "the Brahmins' varna was white, the Ksatriyas' was red, the Vaiśyas' varna was yellow, and the Śūdras' black". This clearly shows the varna system, which later became the caste system, was imported from a more older system found among the Proto-Indo-European society that first developed in the Steppes.

If one were to remove these three elements, viz., Sanskrit, Vedas, and Varma, from Hinduism, then we would come to what some people call folk Hinduism. That, of course, appears to have its origin in the subcontinent, from what we know today as tribal religions. With time, Vedic Hinduism must have incorporated the local religious practices, giving it a syncretic look, which is a distinctive feature of Hinduism. If one wants to understand more about this, one can watch the YouTube documentary by The Wire titled 'Indians: A Brief History of a Civilization'. Still, it does not take away the fact that the origin of Hinduism (a combination of Vedic and folk elements) is from outside the subcontinent, in the original homeland of the Indo-Aryan, the Eurasian Steppes.

While this was all going on, in their 2018 paper, 'Ancient Genomics Reveals Four Prehistoric Migration Waves into Southeast Asia' Hugh McColl and colleagues found that Southeast Asian Neolithic farmers having a distinct East Asian genomic ancestry related to present-day Austroasiatic-speaking populations were moving into mainland Southeast Asia, replacing an earlier hunter-gatherer population related to the Onge hunter-gatherers from the Andaman Islands. The majority of the people today in Southeast Asia are believed to be descendants of these rice and millet farmers who brought farming technology wherever they went. The Khasi and Munda people, today found in the North East and East India, belong to this group that kept moving east, finally reaching South Asia. Different scholars have given different dates for their arrival. According to Hugh McColl and colleagues, this happened around 4000 years ago, or 2000 BCE. Xiaoming Zhang and colleagues in their 2015 paper 'Y-chromosome diversity suggests southern origin and Paleolithic backwave migration of Austroasiatic speakers from eastern Asia to the Indian subcontinent' calculated that

this happened 10,000 years ago or 8000 BCE. Another paper 'A late Neolithic expansion of Y chromosomal haplogroup O2a1-M95 from east to west' published in the same year by Ganesh Prasad Arunkumar and colleagues, gave the date of arrival to be 5.2±0.6 thousand years ago for the North East (Khasi) and 4.3±0.2 thousand years ago for East India (Munda). I find this date to be more reasonable. What is also known is that for the Khasi, based on the 2013 paper 'A Lexicostatistical Study of the Khasian Languages: Khasi, Pnar, Lyngngam, and War' by K. S. Nagaraja, Paul Sidwell, and Simon Greenhill, when they first arrived, must have spoken a language that is similar to War Amwi, which is still being spoken today in Amlarem Civil Sub Division, West Jaintia Hills District, Meghalaya. It, in turn, must have diverged from a language very similar to Palaung, spoken today in Myanmar, around 4000 years ago.

So, let's recap here. Around 2500 BCE, Sanskrit emerged, from an earlier Indo-European language. Then, around 2000 to 1000 BCE, the speakers of early Sanskrit reached the subcontinent and composed the Rig Veda, which was written down only after the 1st century CE. In the meantime, in the east, Austroasiatic speakers today identified as Khasi had already reached the subcontinent around 5000 years ago, or 3000 BCE. At that time, they were speaking a language that resembled today's War Amwi, from which Lyngngam, Pnar, and Khasi later emerged. They had brought their own religion, which is still being practiced by a significant portion of the Khasi population. This means, based on the dates given above, that War-Amwi is older than Sanskrit and the Khasi religion is older than Hinduism.

Except for the Onge, all of us came to the subcontinent from somewhere in the recent past. Some came early, while others came much later. But that does not mean that a particular religion, culture, or people are more authentic or superior to another, be it Khasi, Hinduism, Christianity, or Islam. Instead, it's important to realize that no one has the right to impose their own culture or religion on other groups or deprive others of any rights that belong to them. Only those with ulterior motives will want to create animosity between people to produce disturbance in society. Instead, peaceful coexistence and respect for each other while allowing people to make their decisions without fear of harassment are paramount. That includes following any religion originating from anywhere in the world (Central Asia, Middle East, or East Asia) or rejecting all religions themselves. In the end, that is what I had always wanted to convey, and I hope I have not offended anyone in the process.

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

Justice for all

By Arun Mair

The Supreme Court is raising fundamental questions about the rule of law in a democracy. In a true democracy, every human being, whether she or he has a crore or none, or a formal, higher, education or not, has an equal vote with all others, and all voices must be heard while framing laws. In a good democracy, tribals who own no property, or even primary school education, must get justice when their rights, and the natural environment on which they depend for their livelihoods, and their lives, is trampled upon by corporations to improve economic efficiencies, their profits, and the country's GDP. Their well-being suffers while GDP grows.

The Supreme Court has re-ignited a debate about capitalism versus socialism. Its curative intervention reversing the decision of an arbitration tribunal in the dispute between the privately owned Delhi Airport Metro Express Pvt. Ltd (DMAEPL) and the public sector Delhi Metro Rail Corporation (DMRC), which was already reviewed by the Court before, has upset corporate lawyers. Meanwhile, a nine-bench of the Supreme Court is re-examining its 1978 interpretation of Constitutional rights to private versus public property.

In capitalist governance, each dollar gives an additional vote. In a democracy, every citizen, millionaire, or pauper, must have an equal vote. The conflict between capitalism and democracy is a conflict between two fundamental principles of governance: a conflict between property rights and human rights. The capitalist approach to PPPs (public-private partnerships) results in infrastructure which primarily serves the rich. It creates freeways, which common people riding on two-wheelers are forbidden to use, and which pedestrians cannot safely cross, to make travel quicker and safer for rich people. The rich resist tax increases to fund infrastructure for public use. They build gated communities for themselves, in which they pay for their own private services of security, and 24x7 power and water supply. They lose sight of the needs of people living outside their walls. It must be noted here that laws of inheritance of private property are founded on the primacy of property rights, rather than basic human rights.

**Property Rights or Natural Rights**  
The Court's recognition of a fundamental right of all citizens to be free from the adverse impacts of climate change (in a plea by environmentalists to protect the great Indian bustard from the encroachment of its natural habitat by companies building wind and solar farms for expanding India's capacity for renewable energy) is taking the law further into uncharted territory. Laws based on the primacy of private property rights are antithetical to human rights and to environmental sustainability.

In capitalist economies natural capital is the property of its owner. Kings and landlords owned the land, the water and forests, and all fish and animals within their private estates. They

also owed the produce of all huma beings who lived and worked on their land as their serf, or their slaves. Owners who stayed on their lands and interacted with the people on it could see their forest and watch their crops grow, and their workers sweat, and sense how the system worked. Absentee landlord; did not care. They wanted their profits regardless of the damage to their lands by droughts and floods and sufferings of their workers.

The development of commodity markets, in which animals, farm produce, timber, and minerals could be bought and sold with money and prices determined by trades, converted natural capital into financial capital. Financial markets created a new class of capitalists, even further removed from reality than absentee landlords, who gauge the condition of the world from charts of how prices move in commodity exchanges and stock markets. When labour went off the land into factories, workers were paid for the time they spent in factories and what they produced during that time. Their skills and labour became commodities purchasable for a price by owners of enterprises.

Property rights is an ancient principle of economics and jurisprudence. Human rights were recognised much later with political movements, often violent, to abolish slavery, and to pay fair wages and provide safe working conditions for their workers. Gig work is the 21st century way to convert labour into a commodity again: workers in demand, payment only for the work done, and no social security. Good for business owners, but bad for humans.

**The essence of democratic governance**  
Good governance cannot be only a government of the people (elected by them), or for the people (providing them welfare). It must be by the people too. The rule of law and speed justice makes countries attractive for financial investors and for common citizen. However, investors and citizens have different nets, and therefore different interpretations of law. Good governance and justice for all requires those who govern to continuously listen to the people. Moreover, citizens with diverse needs must listen to each other to come to a consensus about the type of society they want to create for themselves. Courts and experts within their narrow specialisations cannot do this for them. On top of the pyramid of democratic governance are constitutionally created institutions—judges, elected assemblies, and courts. At the bottom is the open public sphere of the social media, civil society, protests on the streets, and petitions for justice from below to the institutions above. The public sphere has become more noisy and more divided with social media and online journals. (Arun Mair is a former Member of the Planning Commission and author of several books, the latest is 'Shaping the Future: A Guide for System Leaders')  
(Syndicate: The Billion Press; Email: editor@thebillionpress.org)

Letters to the Editor

Teachers in politics

Editor,  
In the editorial "Teachers in active politics" (ST 30th April, 2024) the editor raised a pertinent point, "If the goal of education is to build minds that are questioning and capable of critical thinking and asking the right questions, would having a teacher with allegiance to a particular political party allow objective discussions in the classroom?". In the realm of education, the question of whether educators should express their political opinions in the classroom is a nuanced one. Administrators often emphasize the importance of neutrality when discussing politics in the classroom. They expect teachers to maintain a line of impartiality. However, students often advocate for teachers' right to express

their opinions. They argue that as high school students, they should be able to explore diverse viewpoints and form their own conclusions.  
The fear among teachers is that any political discussion might be perceived as an attempt to impose their views on students. This concern leads some educators to shy away from discussing current events or national politics. Yet, many educators recognize the necessity of addressing local and national political events. Key issues like race, gender equality, and LGBTQ rights are at the forefront of students' discussions outside the classroom. This discussion can sometimes lead to misinformation or insensitive discourse. Teachers feel a responsibility to ensure that students understand their rights and protections under the constitution. Engaging in civics-centred discussions can rectify misconceptions and

foster respectful dialogues.  
Having a teacher with an allegiance to a particular political party does not inherently prevent objective discussions. It depends how teachers navigate their role. Objective discussions can occur if the teacher differentiates between campaign talk (personal opinions) and classroom talk (facilitating learning). What's important is to design discussions with clear educational goals in mind and regulate the discourse to ensure respectful and constructive dialogues. Students should be empowered to explore diverse perspectives without imposing their own views. While teachers' political affiliations may exist, their commitment to fostering critical thinking and open dialogue remains paramount. Ultimately, educators must strike a balance between expressing their opinions and creating an environment where students can explore, question,

and think critically about complex issues. Educators can contribute to objective discussions even while acknowledging their political leanings, provided they approach classroom conversations with sensitivity.  
The 2012 ruling by the Bombay High Court indeed addressed an important issue regarding political association of government servants and individuals employed in government aided educational institutions. While the ruling specifically pertained to foreign lawyers, it highlights a broader principle: government servants and teachers of government aided educational institutions should avoid political associations during their service tenure. The court's reasoning likely stems from the need to maintain neutrality and impartiality in public service. Some arguments in favour of the judgement are that government servants and educators should remain

neutral to serve the public interest without bias. Active political involvement may lead to conflicts of interest, affecting their professional duties.  
For educators, political ideas could inadvertently influence their teaching, potentially compromising the quality of education. Political affiliations might create a perception of favouritism or partisanship. Some argue that individuals have the right to political expression and association. Striking a balance between personal rights and professional responsibilities is essential. Restriction could be relaxed post-retirement to allow engagement in political activities. While the judgement aims to maintain professionalism and impartiality, it is essential to strike a balance. Reasonableness depends on context, local norms, and the specific role of the individual. The Bombay High Court's ruling reflects an at-

tempt to ensure the integrity of public service.  
Yours etc;  
VK Lyngdoh  
Via email  
**Umiam bridge: Comedy of errors on April 30**  
Editor,  
Well, getting stuck in traffic can feel like being the star in a sitcom called "The Bridge Blockade Chronicles." Picture this: you're minding your own business, cruising along Umiam bridge, when suddenly, you're thrust into a real-life episode of "Car Wars: Traffic Edition."  
There you are, surrounded by a convoy of national heroes on a mission to turn ML 01 into the ultimate traffic-crushing machine. Meanwhile, the rest of us,

mere mortals are left scratching our heads, wondering if we missed the memo on the latest traffic rule: "Follow the leaders, even if they're paving the way to chaos!"  
And let's not forget our friends, the nonsensical drivers, who seem to think traffic rules are as optional as choosing toppings on a pizza. They're like the loyal minions, blindly following their villainous leaders and wreaking havoc wherever they go.  
But fear not, dear citizens! April 30th, 2024, shall forever be known as the day we were April fooled by the traffic police. Locked on the bridge from 5:20 pm to 6:20 pm, we became unwilling participants in the world's slowest game of "Red Light, Green Light."  
Now, it's time to play "Whodunnit: Traffic Edition." Who's responsible for this comedy of errors? Let the investigation begin! We

demand answers, and heads shall roll—figuratively, of course. After all, we're not barbarians; we just want to get home in time for dinner.  
So, dear traffic gods, if you're listening, heed our plea: Deploy more officers, because apparently, we need all the help we can get to prevent illegal overtakes from turning our highways into the Wild Wild West.  
And to all the social media warriors and newspaper pundits out there, fear not—I won't add to the pile. Instead, I'll sit back, relax, and enjoy the show because, let's face it, there's nothing funnier than a traffic jam... unless you're stuck in it.  
Yours etc.,  
R Sarki  
Shillong  
Articles and letters appearing on this page are the views of the writers/authors and not that of The Shillong Times

"The science of today is the technology of tomorrow."

—Edward Teller

## The Shillong Times

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### Tunes of caged bird

TRUTH is one thing, and arguments before courts are quite another. Arguments often have the capacity to turn truths into lies and lies into truths. Yet, truth must prevail; more so in the case of the nation's premier investigation agency the CBI—the "caged bird"—or the Enforcement Directorate. CBI's strange argument before the Supreme Court in a case filed against it by the West Bengal government is that this agency is, "not under the control of the Union of India." Fact is, any governmental entity that operates within the national boundaries is directly or indirectly under the control of the central government. What is special about the Indian system is that authority is intertwined and no entity can take the law into its hands; and yet, lawlessness is all pervasive due to the failure of weak leaderships to properly govern the nation.

The argument from the West Bengal government was that the CBI was proceeding with investigations and filing of FIRs in several cases in the state though West Bengal had, in November 2018, withdrawn its consent to the federal agency to operate within its jurisdiction. As per provisions of law, such consent is a requirement and Andhra Pradesh too had taken a similar decision against CBI-ED entry to the state. In both cases, the issue arose when the central agencies initiated investigations into the suspected acts of corruption on the part of the Chief Ministers of these states or of their associates. How the Supreme Court would handle the case filed by the West Bengal government is worth a wait and watch. The Modi government should, on its own, have attempted a legal remedy to such situations for the future.

Fact is, there is no India if there are no states; and there are no states if there is no India as a nation. The federal structure, as per the Constitution, grants sufficient freedom to states to operate though there are grey areas in this centre-state relationship. It is here that the apex court adjudicates. Questions could arise that, if the state governments are left to their free will, what would happen to the collective interests of the nation. It is natural for those in power to seek and get more power and feel free. More so for the governments of regional parties. This is an invitation to danger. On the other hand, it is also that the CBI, ED etc have been largely ineffective under the Modi dispensation due to multiple factors, including a huge growth in corruption in their ranks and exertion of political influence over their functioning. It was mostly that these agencies were used by the Modi establishment to target its political opponents. These agencies, in the process, failed to do their job of high-end professional investigations.

# The saga of unfettered violence

## May 3, 2023 : Day of Separation

By Dr. Jangkhohao Hangshing

May 3rd, 2023, stands out as a deeply harrowing and unforgettable day in the annals of Manipur's history. On this day, violent clashes erupted in Manipur following a 'Tribal Solidarity March' organized by the All Tribal Student Union Manipur (ATSUM) across the 10 hill districts of the state. The Kuki and Naga tribal communities in various hill districts protested against the Manipur High Court's recommendation to include Meiteis in the Scheduled Tribes (ST) category. This recommendation faced strong opposition from the tribal communities, fearing potential land and job losses due to perceived competition from the more developed Meitei community. There were concerns that the Manipur government, led by Meiteis, might exploit this order to acquire tribal lands in the hills, historically under tribal ownership. Concurrently, Meiteis conducted a counter-blockade in the valley against the Tribal Solidarity March on May 3rd.

The outbreak of violence occurred in the Torbung area of Manipur after some individuals, allegedly Meiteis, set fire to the Anglo-Kuki War Centenary Gate, provoking the Kuki protesters. The situation escalated in Imphal Valley when false information about Meitei women being raped in Churachandpur spread on social media. While both the Naga and Kuki communities protested against the Manipur High Court's directive, the Meitei community predominantly targeted the Kukis. By nightfall, radical Meitei mobs attacked Kuki colonies in Imphal, forcing Kuki residents to flee, leaving behind their homes and belongings. The ethnic violence between the Meitei and Kuki communities persisted for several days, both in the valley and peripheral areas, overwhelming central forces tasked with protecting and evacuating people from both communities. The situation deteriorated to the extent that even state forces aligned along ethnic lines. Unpleasant incidents such as looting arms from police academies, hate speech, killings, beatings, burnings, and instances of sexual violence occurred, leading to physical and demographic separation between the Meitei and Kuki communities by the end of May 2023.

In the current scenario of Manipur's ethnic division, the Meiteis primarily inhabit the valley around the state capital, while the Kuki community resides in the surrounding hill districts. A partition line has been established, and a buffer zone is now under the supervision of neutral central forces to prevent escalating communal violence. Volunteers from both communities guard these buffer zones, employing trenches for defense against potential attacks. Many individuals have volunteered to protect and defend their communities and land. Rumors suggest that the Meitei radical militia group 'Arambai Tenggol' boasts a personnel strength exceeding 65,000. Basic military training is provided

to village volunteers who take turns safeguarding the buffer zone. The Kuki volunteers accuse state forces, along with Meitei militias, of ongoing attacks on Kuki areas, leading them to arm themselves in defense. Despite the formal separation, clashes and violence persist between the Meiteis and Kuki communities in Manipur, with sporadic incidents of death and gunfights reported almost weekly. According to a report from the KSO Media & Documentation Cell dated April 30, 2024, the Kuki death toll has risen to 176 individuals, with 200 villages, over 7,000 houses, 360 churches burnt, and 41,425 people displaced.

### The confused Chief Minister

Chief Minister N. Biren Singh's performance in leading Manipur has been heavily criticized, with many pointing out his consistent inconsistency and biased behavior regarding the ongoing ethnic violence. Initially, after the violence erupted, Singh stated on May 4, 2023, that the conflict stemmed from misunderstandings between two communities in Manipur. However, his stance shifted on May 21 when he implied that the conflict was not between communities but between one community and the state government. He later altered his position again, claiming that the conflict was between armed groups under the Suspension of Operation (SoO) agreement and security forces. Towards the end of May, Singh asserted that the fight was between the state and central forces combating terrorists attempting to destabilize Manipur.

On June 15, 2023, Chief Minister Biren Singh attributed the ongoing unrest in Manipur to 'illegal infiltrators', emphasizing that the situation was not merely a law-and-order concern but a complex issue requiring careful review and resolution. However, by June 25, he had reversed his stance and alleged that the conflict was between two communities. In July 2023, he admitted his confusion about the reasons behind the violence. In a recent tweet (X), he accused illegal immigrants of encroaching on resources, job opportunities, land, and rights of indigenous people, announcing measures such as collecting biometric data and geotagging their settlements.

These statements highlight Singh's confusion and apparent helplessness in addressing the issue. His continued tenure is attributed to the federal government's double engine governance strategy, despite criticism of bias and deceitfulness towards his constituents. Singh's labeling of Kukis as 'illegal immigrants, drug peddlers, narco-terrorists' has further strained trust, particularly among Kukis who no longer recognize him as their leader. Many believe that peace is unattainable as long as he

remains in power.

### Independent forces

Meitei Leepun stands accused of fostering hostility and conflict between the two communities under the guise of preserving Meitei culture and tradition. During an interview with Karan Thapar for The Wire, Meitei Leepun, the head of Meitei Leepun, openly stated their intention to incite a civil war, asserting that the Kukis would be defenseless. He also discussed the idea of wiping out the entire Kuki population in Manipur. Despite a complaint filed by the Kuki Students Organisation regarding his radical remarks, Singh dismissed concerns in an interview with The Hindu, stating that he is 'not bothered' by it.

Arambai Tenggol, led by Manipuri King and Raja Sabha MP Leishamba Sanajaoba, is portrayed by Caravan magazine as a socio-cultural organization aiming to restore Sanamahism as Manipur's official religion, which was replaced by Hinduism in the 18th century. However, it functions as an armed militia deeply involved in the ongoing ethnic conflict. The group is accused of widespread harassment, extortion, and violence, targeting not only Kuki and Naga tribes but also Meitei Christians, Meitei Muslims, and even Meitei Hindus who oppose them. Biren Singh's close association with Arambai Tenggol grants them free rein to oppress anyone who challenges them. Article 14 highlighted their rise to prominence in January 2024 when they forced over 37 Meitei members of Manipur's legislative assembly and two MPs, from various parties, to swear allegiance to Sanamahism, an indigenous Meitei deity.

Manipur is experiencing a complete collapse of law and order, with armed radical groups wielding unchecked power in the state. Despite accusations of extortion and murder leveled against Arambai Tenggol by the police and other communities, the authorities have chosen to remain silent observers. These independent forces are permitted to move about openly with weapons and have effectively become an illegal extension of CM Biren Singh's authority. **Solution not within the control of Manipur Government**

The Manipur government under Biren Singh's leadership has lost control over the escalating violence in the state, marking May 3rd, 2024, as a grim milestone of one hundred days of unrest. Amidst the ethnic clashes, more than 6,000 FIRs have been filed. Reports indicate that 249 churches in the Valley and over 100 Hindu and Sanamahist temples in the hills were destroyed. Meitei Christians also faced attacks. The conflict has evolved into a civil war, resulting in numerous casualties and displacing over 60,000 people. This turmoil stems from the politics of hatred propagated by the Manipur government against the minority Kuki

community. The dominant Meiteis perceive the Kukis as a threat, possibly because many high-ranking positions in Manipur are held by Kuki officers. There's a suspicion that Kukis are seen as rivals to Meiteis across various domains. Kuki colonies in Imphal, housing influential Kuki figures, were dismantled as part of Biren's agenda, leading to a significant decline in Kuki social and economic standing. Additionally, important Kuki religious and social institutions were destroyed in the Imphal valley, making recovery challenging for the Kuki community. Exploiting this situation, the Manipur government advertised numerous recruitment opportunities across sectors, seemingly to marginalize Kukis. Most available jobs were filled by Meiteis, given that Kukis were unable to compete effectively in the job market. Government schemes and relief efforts have largely bypassed Kuki-dominated districts, leaving Kuki people reliant on aid from NGOs and philanthropic organizations across India. Considering these circumstances, the Kuki community's demand for separate administration appears legitimate as they struggle to rebuild and regain their footing amidst the ongoing crisis.

Prime Minister Modi finally spoke out about the Manipur violence following the viral video of two Kuki women being paraded naked by a Meitei mob. However, his statement lacked a comprehensive address of the wider issues surrounding the ethnic conflict in Manipur. While PM Modi verbally assured that peace would be restored soon in Manipur, the Kuki community has now positioned themselves beyond mere peace talks with the Manipur government led by CM Biren Singh. Despite the Central government's lack of attention to their demands, the Kuki community is unwilling to consider living under the rules of the Manipur government again. They have a significant trust deficit regarding the Manipur government and are open to accepting a solution only through negotiations involving Delhi.

The Kuki Inpi Manipur, through an executive resolution, designated May 3, 2024, as "KUKI-ZO AWAKENING DAY" after careful consideration of the repercussions of state-sponsored ethnic cleansing against the Kuki-Zo people. They also discussed the way forward for their community and encouraged their people to observe this day on May 3. Conversely, the Federation of Civil Societies Organisation (FOCS) and 13 other Meitei CSOs labeled May 3 as the 'Black Day of Manipuri History'. Rumours suggest that the Kuki Students' Organisation Delhi NCR and the Meitei Global Solidarity Committee have been granted permission to hold peaceful protests at Jantar Mantar on the same day (May 3, 2024), marking the one-year anniversary of the Manipur violence.

(The writer is Assistant Professor, USTM- Email: jhangshing13@gmail.com)

## Imprisoned by tradition, silenced by bullies

By Patricia Mukhim

An important and non-negotiable aspect that defines tribals or indigenous people as we would like to term them today is the collective ownership of the commons.

What are the commons or common property resources (CPR)? The 'Commons' include natural resources such as water, land, forests etc., that provide users with tangible benefits but which no single person has an exclusive claim to. What we have in Meghalaya today is a 'Tragedy of the Commons'—an economic problem where the individual consumes a resource at the expense of society. This has been happening in Meghalaya for a few decades now. When the Sixth Schedule was proposed to be added to the Constitution of India the argument by Rev JIM Nichol's Roy was that the Khasi, Jaintia tribals who were under the rule of the majority Assamese people might lose out on their customary practices and traditions and their rights over land and its resources. The Sixth Schedule sounded like a perfect solution at the time and the tribes were pictured as people who were governed by fair and equitable traditional institutions. At the time gender was a word that indicated only whether one was male or female. It wasn't a political term as it is today. So the traditional institutions were actually the hubs of patriarchy. They were male-centric institutions that saw no role for women in their scheme of things. Since 1949 when the Sixth Schedule was added to the Constitution of India till date, women are not allowed to have a say in the traditional institutions; much less to hold office there. So this aspect of tradition remained constant.

However there are other aspects such as the common rights of all tribals over land, water and forests have changed unilaterally. Today the very District Councils that are empowered by the Sixth Schedule to actually ensure that community rights over land, forests, water bodies, catchments etc., are secured so that individual rights cannot supersede community rights, have become the very institutions that are palming out tracts and tracts of forest land for boulders and sand to be extracted without any environmental regulation. As a result what we have today are rivers that are gasping for breath and barely flowing. On Thursday a notification from the Public Health Engineering Department (PHED) warns that the water level in the Mawphlang Dam which is the main source of drinking water supply to residents of Shillong city has decreased considerably due to the dry weather conditions and the public are therefore cautioned to be judicious with their water use. Only people who go around with their eyes closed would not know that this was waiting to happen. Above the Wahniangleng river which flows to the Mawphlang dam, at Laitkroh village a huge quarry was operating for several years and the boulders were being transported to Bangladesh. When The Shillong Times followed up the investigations on this matter with the Khasi Hills District Council, the State Pollution Control Board and other agencies it was learnt that the quarry owner, a former Rangbhai Shngong never got permission from anyone but operated the quarry independently. Can we ask all the three District Councils as to the total number of quarries in Meghalaya and what is being done to offset the environmental consequences that we are facing today such as the silting of rivers; the rising day temperatures and the bald forests that greet us almost like they are smirking at the human capacity for self-destruction?

Meghalaya's economy has been extractive and there is no sustainable economic model in sight. From coal to limestone mining and now to at least 300 trucks daily carrying boulders to Bangladesh, what is the Khasi Hills District Council presiding

over if not the extinction of the very tribes that JIM Nichols Roy said would be protected by this constitutional provision; now a mere placebo?

It is uncanny how tradition is being viewed today. It is reduced to dances and songs that are pitched regularly to lull the people into a kind of trance so that they continue to believe that their culture and tradition is alive and kicking. But is culture not intrinsically linked to our relations with mother earth? We humans are part of the environment and not apart from it. What's the point of those songs and dances if all we are focussing on are the external aspects of that culture even while our natural environment—Ka Mei Ramew—is shrivelling and weeping silent tears that we callous humans have not learnt to decipher?

Relentless quarrying has resulted in heavy siltation of our rivers. But mind you even sand is being mined from our rivers at an unsustainable pace. Those who travel to West Khasi Hills will testify to the mindless timber farming that has turned the once verdant forests bald. God knows what we are thinking and whether the government we have elected is capable of ensuring that this state is not reduced to a dry desert someday. The MLAs we have elected are themselves the biggest exploiters of nature with some of them owning quarries that operate above the rivers that were once flowing with gusto. Now those rivers are at the verge of drying up. Does anyone have the gumption to tell these ministers that they should stop stone quarrying and coal mining? No, because they will turn back and tell us that they are creating livelihoods. But livelihoods at what cost? Who has allowed these ministers to violate all environmental laws? Or are they exempt from the environmental laws that govern this country?

If the people of Meghalaya do not wake up from this slumber; if they do not protest this environmental crime and if need be approach the courts to stop the insanity of irrepressible extraction of resources by a few at the cost of the many, they will soon face a dark, dry and horrific future ahead and hasten the consequences of climate change with all its destructive force.

Mark my words, the present set of ministers are not going to settle down here when the chips are down. They already have homes in the national capital and other metros. Some even have penthouses abroad. So they will shift to greener pastures. It is us poor citizens who cannot afford to migrate but must live and die here who will suffer the unspeakable revenge of nature. As a society we have become numb and silent. The bullies around us ensure that we don't speak too much because their capacity for making hay will diminish if we start taking responsibility for our own lives and stop outsourcing our problems to them.

This is the sad fate of a society that claims to be 'tribal' but has lost the very essence of 'tribalness' which is the use of shared resources and having a shared vision for how the commons are to be used for the larger common good.

For now, will the KHADC, the State Forest Department, Water Resources Department, the PHED and the State Pollution Control Board inform us (a) the total number of stone quarries in Meghalaya (b) the total number of limestone mines? Will the Forest Department inform us how many crores per month of royalty is collected from contractors' bills with another 10% added to the Meghalaya Minor Minerals Reclamation (MMMR) funds? Where is that money kept and how much of the forest cover has disappeared till date?

### Letters to the Editor

#### Lessons on personal liberty from Covid vaccination

April ended with viral news of Astra Zeneca admitting in a UK Court that their vaccine Covishield can lead to conditions associated with blood clot formation, heart attacks and brain haemorrhages. Since the start of 2020, even before all the shutdowns, there have been warnings against the loss of freedom and against forced vaccination. Many have warned their friends over WhatsApp groups and Facebook and in conversations too about the risk from the vaccine, but they were ridiculed with the label, "Whatsapp University."

Despite the fact that we can all read and make logical inferences, even when we are not experts, we were told to, "trust the science." All that the many conscientious people wanted was to uphold our individual rights and personal liberty as sacred. But they

were called covidiot. Moreover, the pandemic led some people to discover alternate theory of disease, i.e. Antoine Bechamp's terrain theory of disease, which challenges the allopathic German theory of disease, but any views that challenge the narrative were deemed as fake news punishable as crime, simply because people should trust the experts. So, voices were stifled.

Let this be a lesson to everyone to never support any government or expert programme that robs our fellow human beings and citizens of their personal freedom, their right to livelihood and their right to assemble peacefully, as well as free speech to challenge even the experts. Free speech means even the right to be wrong.

Ironically, those who said the Inner Line Permit was part of an archaic law and a colonial hangover, nevertheless waved the stick of the Epidemic Diseases Act, 1897, in everyone's faces, despite its tyrannical nature. Now that we have seen the admissions of Astra Zeneca, let us learn to never compromise on our

individual freedoms again. Yours etc., Kitor H. Blah, Shillong

#### Ignoring the voice of truth

Satyajit Ray was born on May 2, 1921 in Kolkata. Many film makers made films on real stories. But we will recall his two films that were made before two similar tragedies happened in larger magnitude.

Satyajit Ray's film Ganashatru and his experiments with truth in the film is an adaptation of Henrik Ibsen's play - 'The Enemy of the People'. In the film, an honest doctor, Dr Ashok Gupta found that the contaminated water in the Tripureswar temple was spreading jaundice at an alarming rate. The doctor asked for a temporary closure of the temple. But vested interests did not pay heed to his appeal as it would stop the business revolving around religious tourism for

a while. The doctor tried to publish an article in a newspaper to make people aware of the danger but vested interests did not let it get published. Thereafter, the doctor organised a public meeting to caution people about the reason for the outbreak of jaundice.

This made them very angry and they labelled the doctor as a biased fault-finder, an anti-Hindu and an enemy of the people. They were not ready to accept scientific evidence and instead said charanamrita could not be contaminated. They accused the doctor of hurting traditional practices, religious beliefs and the traditional culture.

This film showed us that reformers who always helped us move forward shedding the baggage of our superstitions and myths were tagged as, 'the enemy of the people', by vested interests. Those who have a vested interest, brainwash us into believing that the past was always very good - Satyayug (age of truth) and the present is very bad - Kaliyug (age of anarchy). So, we need to cling to our

past and march backwards. This makes us apprehensive about our evolutionary progress.

Satyajit Ray's Ganashatru was released on January 19, 1990. But was the film relevant? Yes, it was. Dr Dabholkar was an anti-superstition crusader like Dr Gupta in Ganashatru. Interestingly, 23 years after the release of the film, he was shot dead on August 20, 2013 when he was out on a morning walk in Pune. He was to address a press conference later in the day to advocate for an eco-friendly Ganesh festival.

Now recall Ray's film Mahapurush (The Holy Man). It was based on a short story Birinchi Baba by Rajshekhar Basu. An old man became restless after the death of his wife. He and his daughter, Buchki, became devotees of a self-styled god-man, Birinchi Baba who had many rich devotees. But ultimately Buchki's lover Satya and his friend Nibaran exposed Birinchi Baba. The devotees had learned a lesson after losing their time and money on the god-man. The film was released on May 7, 1965. Nearly ten years after the release of the

film, Asaram Babu came into the limelight. Whereas Birinchi Baba might have 4000 devotees, Asaram Babu had 40 million devotees. He had established 400 ashrams and 40 schools in India and abroad. The self-styled god-man was charged with illegal encroachment, rape and tampering of a witness. He was convicted by the special POSCO court at Jodhpur and sentenced to life imprisonment for raping a teenage girl in his ashram. He is now in the Central Jail, Jodhpur. A sessions court in Gandhinagar had also convicted Asaram in another rape case and sentenced him to life imprisonment in January 2023. Had audiences listened to Satyajit Ray and absorbed his ray of truth, it would have been a better world and we could have managed to avert two great disasters.

Yours etc., Sujit De, Kolkata

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**"Early childhood education is the key to the betterment of society."**

—Maria Montessori

## The Shillong Times

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### Journalism under siege

WORLD Press Freedom Day, observed on May 3, came and went without any noise. There was no visible observance of the day locally, nationally or even globally. The reason is because worldwide journalists are under attack for reporting from the ground. Iran, Afghanistan, Mexico, Pakistan are countries where journalists have been killed for doing their jobs. India has joined their ranks as one of the five most dangerous countries for journalists with 4 journalists being killed on duty in 2021. Press freedom in India today is under strain with most media channels and newspaper houses brazenly turning into cheerleaders of the Modi government. At no point in history has the media in India genuflected before the powers that be for survival. A report by Reporters Without Frontiers (RSF) states that journalists located in the Hindi Belt were more vulnerable. Journalists covering cases of corruption and mafia gangs are vulnerable anywhere but more so in some states than in others.

In an era where fake news is manufactured in a tech factories owned by political parties with the money to burn, it is but natural that the co-founder of a fact-checking website Alt News - Mohammed Zubair would be arrested for calling out fake news that have the potential to brainwash unquestioning minds and push them to make uninformed decisions. Zubair was arrested in 2022 for a tweet he had made in 2018. He was accused of hurting religious sentiments and being disrespectful of a Hindu god. It was not lost on anyone that Zubair was arrested for being a harsh critic of Prime Minister Modi. Alt News had in fact done exemplary work in countering disinformation campaigns which are worse than misinformation since disinformation is intentionally created to mislead people. In March this year the editor of a weekly Hindi newspaper, Jago Uttarakhand was arrested from his home in Pauni town which is 151 kilometres from capital DehraDun. Negi was pursuing the case of the death of Ankita Bhandari in 2022. Bhandari was a receptionist at a resort owned by the son of a former BJP official. Negi was reporting on the tardy investigation by the state police. Although later released on bail, Negi faces all kinds of charges under the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes law, based on a complaint from an unnamed individual and allegations of a scuffle with police officers during his arrest.

Immediately after Negi's arrest, Uttarakhand Director General of Police, Abhinav Kumar, issued a statement accusing the journalist of being "part of a conspiracy" to "sow anarchy and discord in society," through his reporting and activism around the police investigation into the killing of 19-year-old Ankita Bhandari in September 2022. Journalists like Prabir Purkayastha, of NewsClick have been jailed under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) - an Act that was aimed at countering terrorism but is now being freely used against journalists. What is unfortunate is the ability of the present government to fragment the journalistic fraternity and prevent it from taking a united stand on any issue.

### Letters to the Editor

#### May 3 - Day of Great Awakening for the Kukis

The Kuki Inpi Manipur (KIM) has recently made an announcement that it will observe May 3 as Kuki-Zo Awakening to mark the first anniversary of the Meitei Genocide Campaign against Kuki-Zo ethnic group which was launched on May 3, 2023. In fact, the day will remain as a day when Kukis were awakened from deep slumber in the comfort of their homes. Moreover, it becomes a day to reconsider the principles of coexistence, rewrite history, redirect priorities and reevaluate the strengths and weaknesses. Therefore, KIM finds it most appropriate to call the day Awakening Day.

To recall, on this day a year ago, Meiteis and their right-wing secessionist militant organizations launched a sudden and surprise attack against innocent Kukis. Rather than controlling the situation, the Manipur state government and its law enforcing agencies stood silent on what happened in the heart of Imphal city. Within days, hundreds of innocent Kukis were killed and thousands of homes were reduced to ashes. Within weeks, tens of thousands of Kukis were displaced from

their homes. Till date there is no relief in sight. The Manipur government and the far-right Meitei organizations continue targeting Kukis and their settlements on the pretext of performing the 'noblest causes' such as 'war on drugs', 'checking illegal immigration' and 'fighting militancy'.

There is a long list of stories that describe the pain and suffering of innocents in the hands of state-sponsored terror. For twelve months now, Kukis stood against the mighty state forces, resisted several thousand strong Meitei militants who constantly made inroads into Kuki areas and attacked innocent villagers. Kuki-Zo civil societies have urged Centre's intervention, but the pleas are left unheard. They are left without any option but defend with the least they have.

Now, as they continue to fight Meitei terror which is purely based on hate and greed, it gives invaluable lessons to all Kuki-Zo ethnic groups in Manipur and elsewhere. Meitei atrocities have taught that the only means of their survival is taking firm and united stance against any form of hatred and inhuman subjection. It also taught that victory lies not in numbers but in the fair spirit of defending one's life and territory against any external threat.

In general terms, 'Environment' means - the land we live on, the air we breathe, the water we drink, plants, trees and flowers, the animals, fishes, insects, micro-organisms that inhabit our planet earth including human beings. It also means the lifestyles of the people living in the four corners of this world including the inter-relationship with the earth's resources, animals, plants, etc.

Forests are the main source of our lives, giving fresh air - 'oxygen'. During the day green plants in the presence of sunlight absorb carbon-dioxide in the process known as photosynthesis. They manufacture their food, giving out oxygen as a waste product. This oxygen is the main source of life and is referred to as pure air. In this process, the poisonous air or carbon-dioxide which we breathe out in the process of respiration and also during burning of fossil fuels like coal, oil, etc., are absorbed by plants. If there were no forests and green plants, the atmosphere would be full of carbon-dioxide and other poisonous gases and all living beings would have perished a long time ago. The relationship between our survival and forests, trees and green plants is crucial. Hence wanton destruction of forests will bring destruction to us humans and other living beings.

In other relationships between forests and the survival of human beings, forests are the main source of manure for the soil which is the life support of all living beings on this earth. Without soil, plants cannot grow and without plants we will not survive. The leaves of trees act as umbrellas which protect the topsoil. Cutting down trees will leave the topsoil open to rain, snow and heat from the sun, etc. Rainfall slowly erodes and carries away the soil and humus from the forests to streams and rivers. In this process, the top soil which is rich with humus and manure is lost thereby making the land unfit for cultivation.

In our state, forests are cut and burnt for jhum cultivation, charcoal burning and commercial exploitation which destroy the soil even more. When the leaves and humus are burnt to ashes, the area is exposed and left to the mercy of the rains which wash away the ashes, the manure and seeds to nearby streams and rivers. That is why, in the first year, there are still some crops that can grow but in the following years the production diminishes to the point where people have to move from one place to another and resume cutting down other forest areas. We should understand that especially on steep slopes this process is very harmful

Meitei atrocities also taught that Kukis could no longer rely on the friendship their forefathers forged, as it has been proven treacherous. This year-long conflict has proven that the right to life, dignity and freedom depends on the supreme sacrifice of Kuki sons and daughters alone. They have also been reminded that their home lies not in the valley but deep in the mountains, the abode of their ancestors. They must ensure that these mountains shine bright and beautiful someday. Meitei greed and jealousy taught that Kukis should be independent from Meitei centric systems such as 'education and medical care. They are compelled to build their own hospitals, schools and universities. They have just realized the importance of maintaining an independent arterial road for transport and communication.

Meitei war crimes also taught that, at the end of the day Kukis would survive only if they firmly stand united or else will perish separately. Young Kukis in the battlefield and their daughters attending to the family have learnt how trivial it is to fight for names and dialectic variations. When there is an impending death waiting at the other bunker, it is the other who comes to the rescue risking one's own life. Meitei atrocities

to nature.

In Sohra due to heavy rainfall and continuous burning of grassland and the exposed nature of the land, the top soil has been washed away and the land can no longer support agricultural cultivation or tree cover except grasses. Even the grass is subjected to annual fires in which leaves and humus are washed away thus leaving the area in a continuous barren state. It can be observed in our homes when we keep sand in the open without covering it. The sand is washed away by rain water. In the same manner, top soil when left open is washed away. The soil and debris which are washed away in this manner are deposited in river beds which then makes the river shallow. To add to the injury, the increase in siltation of river beds and water bodies, dams etc. is due to the exposure of hills caused by mining, road construction and the haphazard dumping of debris which is washed away by the rain water to the streams, rivers and dams etc. Due to this shallowness, heavy rainfalls cause floods and lead to reduction of water storage capacity in dams. It also results in loss of lives, property and also renders agricultural land unfit for cultivation as the rains carry sand and pebbles which makes the land infertile.

Similarly the relationship between forests and the survival of human beings depends on sources of water. As discussed earlier, the presence of leaves and trees protect the soil from direct contact with rain water. Rain which falls with great velocity can erode the soil. The presence of leaves in the forests breaks that velocity and splits the raindrops into tiny droplets. These droplets fall slowly on the soil and are absorbed. The presence of dead leaves and humus also acts as a cushion. In this process, rain water enters the inner ground water reservoirs inside the soil and enables the springs and streams to flow continuously even in the dry seasons. However, without the presence of leaves and trees, the rain water erodes the top soil and runs off without penetrating the surface, leaving the streams and rivers to dry up during dry seasons.

In Sohra when the rains come, streams and rivers flow in torrents but after sometime there is no more water. The same can be seen when we water our gardens and use sprinklers where water comes out in droplets thus enabling the water to enter the soil, rather than throwing a bucket full of water in the garden bed which will wash away the soil instead of penetrating inside

# When the Rivers Run Dry

By PS Nongbri

the soil.

Inside the forest, the temperature, especially the moisture, is cooler. The sun rays cannot enter the earth's surface directly thereby reducing the temperature of the soil and reducing water evaporation. Due to reduced evaporation the streams and rivers have a continuous flow of water throughout the year. This is why water in the forest is colder and has a continuous flow, whereas in the open areas as the sunrays have direct contact with the land surface, water evaporation is higher thereby reducing water storage capacity.

In our state an alarming situation has arisen where small valleys used for cultivation are not getting enough water because the forests on the surrounding hills are not protected. We may have land for cultivation but may experience water scarcity. There are times when rains are delayed and farmers are unable to plough their fields.

The Umtyngar River, one of our drinking water sources of GSWSS has run dry during February, 2024. Another cause of reduction of water retention capacity on the hills and even the forest areas is due to the continuous burning of hills and forest land. Forest lands, especially pine forests are subjected to two or three cycles of burning. This happens every time the easily inflammable pine needles fall on the forest floor, especially during dry windy season. This continuous burning leads to hardening of the soil surface so that when the rain water falls in these areas it cannot penetrate into the soil. This increases runoff, while the underground water reservoir does not get recharged. So also the seedlings and saplings buried under the humus covering the floor are destroyed. In this manner, our drinking water sources; the streams, rivers, springs have started drying up. We may have dams but if there is no continuous flow from the streams and rivers, these will go dry especially if there is less rain, as these are now dependent only on rain water.

People are now concerned about the sources of drinking water. Even people living in remote villages are facing scarcity of clean water due to the above reasons. Another reason is that the sources are polluted due to haphazard dumping of wastes from the upstream habitations, rendering the downstream water source unfit for human consumption. Pumping of underground water also reduces the flow of our nearby springs, water tables and wells.

Let us take into consideration the recent discussions

in the Assembly regarding the Umiew River and Ganol River, which are the main water sources for Shillong and Tura town respectively. Both these sources are drying up. The Umtyngar River has already stopped flowing and is running dry. This is the sign that the sources are drying up. It is not only the Umtyngar River that is drying up but other sources supplying drinking water to villages are also drying up. If we look into the Mawphlang Reservoir, one should ponder on the volume of water retention capacity and the volume required for supplying to different localities. Taking a reference to the News: ST-March, 04, 2024, the daily requirement of water for those areas under the Greater Shillong Water Supply Scheme, Mawphlang is about 51.30 MLD and the drinking water supplied is only 26 MLD which is only half the requirement. Is the volume of water in the reservoir sufficient to cater to people's requirements?

An observation made by a fisherman is that the water retention capacity of the reservoir has decreased due to siltation. He also said that, "The fishing line earlier indicated that the depth of the reservoir is deeper; now the fishing line shows a parallel or a straight line." This shows that siltation has taken place, especially in the upstream of this reservoir. It is therefore high time for us to protect the catchments of all the drinking water sources by protecting and enriching the existing degraded forest through afforestation with indigenous species and strict protection from destruction and fire. Otherwise, if there is less rainfall, we will be facing the same problem like the city of Cape Town in South Africa, where even public toilets, car wash etc., have to be closed down. Cape Town is heading for a "Day Zero" where water will not be available by April this year. So also, Bengaluru is facing an acute water crisis as the main supply reservoirs are drying up due to less rain in 2023.

There is an old Khasi saying, "When the water from the plains will return to the hills..." I personally cannot imagine how this could be possible? How can water from the plains of Bangladesh or Assam come to the hills? But this saying has come true. Nowadays, we are drinking bottled water which comes from the plains. Fortunately, God has been kind to our land and we have enough rains to supplement the environmental needs of both plants and animals etc. But for how long if we assault the environment? We need to Act now!

(The writer is retired Indian Forest Service (IFS) officer)

#### Press freedom & democracy

Editor, To defend the media from attacks on their independence, World Press Freedom Day is observed on May 3 every year. Freedom of the press and democracy have a symbiotic relationship. One cannot live without the other.

In a political IPL match between the ruling and the opposition parties, the media should not assume the role of cheerleaders of any one team in a democracy. Opposition parties are like bowlers. An opposition bowler questions a batsman of the ruling party by sending her/his delivery. The media, like the third umpire, helps the voters (umpires on the field) to take a decision about whether the batsman should be out or whether it is a no ball in the first place. There will be no democracy if the third umpire becomes a cheerleader of the batting side.

On real issues revolving around people's lives, the YouTuber, Dhruv Rathee said, "But how will this reach you if the media doesn't talk about it?" Indeed, if the media fails the people, then democracy would be in danger. The print and electronic media must not engage themselves in playing with red herring (ignoratio elenchi) to

distract public attention from the real issues.

Recently, several journalists' collectives from across the country had written to the Chief Justice of India to take cognisance and check the "inherent malice" behind the raids at the homes of 46 journalists, editors, writers and professionals connected to NewsClick and the seizure of their electronic devices.

The collectives also observed, "Journalism cannot be prosecuted as terrorism." In their letter, they said that the invocation of the UAPA was "especially chilling." On Tuesday, the Supreme Court told Delhi Police that judicial orders remanding 74-year-old journalist and online portal NewsClick founder Prabir Purkayastha would crumble if his arrest turned out to be illegal.

India's ranking in the 2023 World Press Freedom Index has alarmingly slipped to 161 out of 180 countries. It is a matter of grave concern because democracy cannot survive without press freedom.

Yours etc.,  
Sujit De,  
Kolkata

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# This election is turning

By Lekha Rattanani

There is little doubt in the minds of many today that this election is turning. It will not be the cakewalk that the BJP imagined it would be for the party. Seeking a third straight term, which was only recently seen as a given, is no more an easy task. There are many numbers being tossed around, but almost all of them bring the BJP to and below the magic figure of 272. The only question that is being asked is how much can the party go down from that half-way mark required to form a government. All indicators point to the ruling party taking heavy losses this time. What looked like rock-solid confidence has evaporated almost overnight. One clear indicator is that there is no talk anywhere in the BJP circles of a "char sau paar" (past the 400-mark) that was the hallmark of the BJP campaign as it began this run. Yet, it is good to add a cautionary note. There are still five phases of voting left and a month to counting-day itself. Anything can happen. The election will need careful monitoring and is all set to becoming a thriller.

Voter turnout in the first two phases of the election has been lower than expected. There are many ways to read this. One is the view that since the BJP put in so much effort in declaring right at the beginning that there is virtually no contest, and the

exposed the Prime minister himself, given that it has emerged that the party was warned well in advance of Revanna's conduct and the allegations against him, and went ahead with endorsing his candidature.

On the other hand, bad news for the BJP also came from the failed attempt to stir up a controversy over allegations that the Congress wanted to re-distribute wealth, or take it from the middle class and give it, as the BJP alleged, to minorities. This blatant and desperate attempt to bring in religion into an issue that has more to do with rising inequality, which has been highlighted by Rahul Gandhi, backfired with a laughable protest march by a section of students from Galgotias University, which claims to be NAAC Grade A+ with more than 300 national and international awards. Students in the protest march could barely read the placards against the Congress and knew nothing about the issues they said they had gathered to protest against! This deplorable display has only highlighted the state of education in Uttar Pradesh, where Galgotias is situated, and the wages of a system under which fake news is fed and spread right from the very top of the political order, with students asking no questions and learning with

**"The odd mix of 'intruders' versus cadres is in part causing a mismatch of chemistry, and so building a sense of despondency within the committed workers who now feel excluded from the party they have worked in and for over a number of years. The last reason could be despondency among a broader section of the electorate, and if this is the cause, then the lower turnout could go any way in terms of influencing the results."**

message was sent out with the full force of its rather rich, well-funded campaign and machinery, the BJP voters were less than enthused and decided - what is the point in working since the end result is given? The other is the weather - the summer has been unusually hot this time. The third is that the BJP itself has not been able to move its cadres, one reason being that the election was declared as won before the first vote was cast, and the second and more important one being the influx of all kinds and varieties of non-BJP workers who have joined the ranks on their own accord or have been lured/forced to move to the BJP. The odd mix of "intruders" versus cadres is in part causing a mismatch of chemistry, and so building a sense of despondency within the committed workers who now feel excluded from the party they have worked in and for over a number of years. The last reason could be despondency among a broader section of the electorate, and if this is the cause, then the lower turnout could go any way in terms of influencing the results.

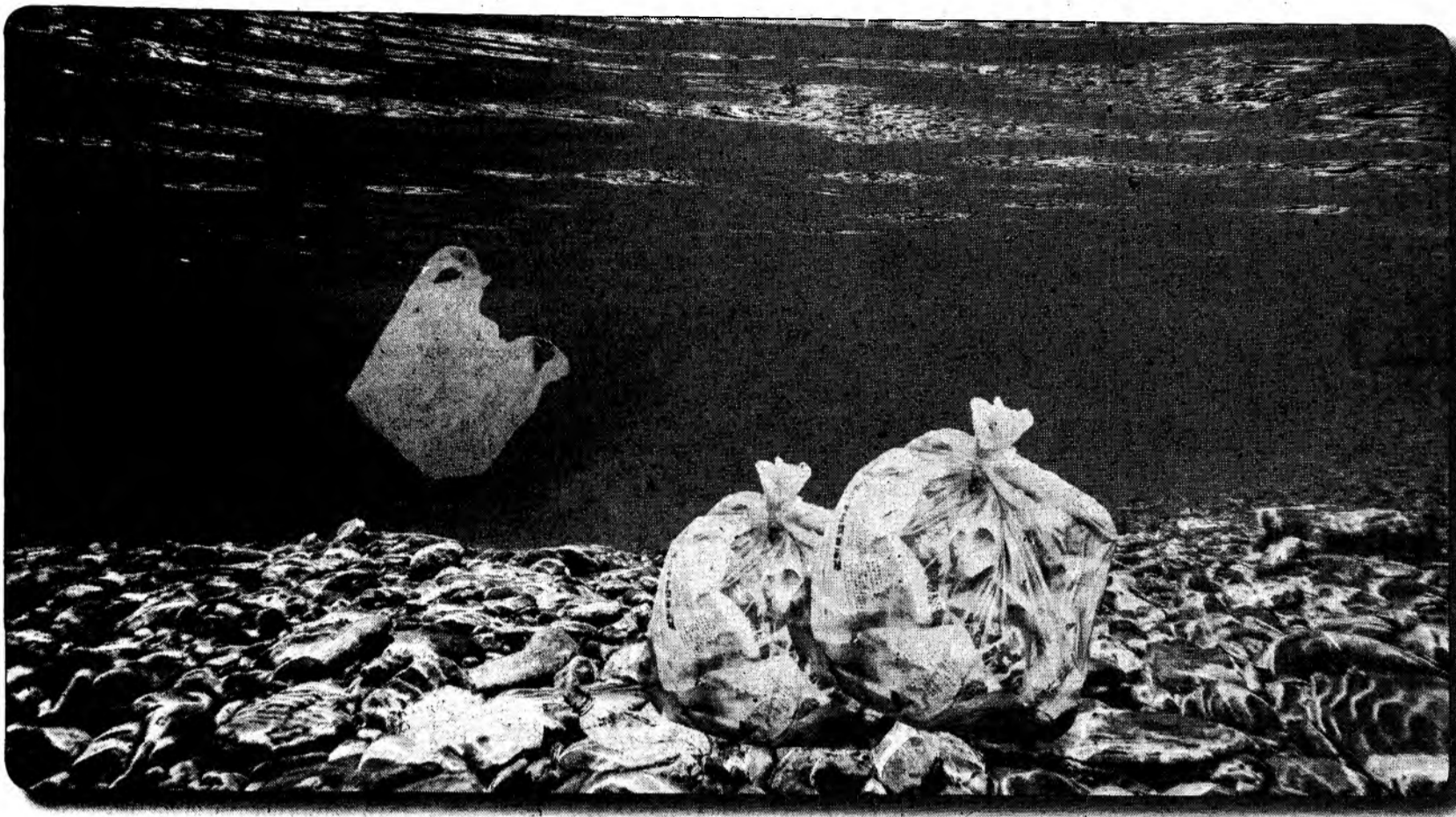
But as the week drew to a close, there was more bad news for the BJP. On one hand, Rahul Gandhi was virtually on fire, demanding that the Prime Minister Narendra Modi apologise to every girl and woman in the country for seeking votes for Prajwal Revanna, a "mass rapist", and further saying that votes for Revanna would strengthen Modi. That was at an election rally in support of the BJP's new ally, the JD(S), where the Prime Minister made as clear an appeal as he could in support of JD(S) candidates, including Revanna, who is the grandson of the former Prime Minister H D Deve Gowda. Revanna fled to Germany the day after polling ended in his constituency of Hassan in Karnataka on April 26, just as tapes of his advances and assaults against women were leaked. The BJP has not been able to respond to the questions on support for Revanna, which particularly

no interest or curiosity. The University website begins with this headline: "Excellence is what we strive to achieve".

In many ways, the BJP is suffering from the impact of its own over confidence, and its liberal use of communalism to get over the slide that it appears to be facing now. As the Prime Minister himself goes to the extreme in his attacks on the Congress (he claimed that the Congress manifesto "has the stamp of the Muslim League"), the party seems not to have calculated that there will be some price to pay for its role in the electoral bonds, the arrest of opposition leaders like Arvind Kejriwal and its attempt to get power at any cost, like it did in Maharashtra. Maharashtra is one State where the Opposition is getting huge traction. The story of how the BJP collected Rs.8,000 crores via the electoral bonds, revealed by the force of the Supreme Court, has led to the widespread view that the party is at its core corrupt. The "BJP washing machine" that cleans up the corrupt the moment they shift sides and join the BJP has also cost the party in terms of its image and standing, even among loyalists. The claim that it will get more than 400 seats has backfired because it has led to fears that this mandate would endanger the Constitution, with the BJP then in a position to trifle with some of the basic guarantees, like reservations. Further, there is also the huge fear of an impending dictatorial style being embedded into the nation's democratic fabric, should Modi get a third straight term. All in all, the issues on the agenda are very different from the issues that the BJP thought would be on the agenda. The finals could go down to the wire and there will be many lessons learned once the votes are counted and the results are declared.

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

# Global plastic treaty will only work if it caps production, modelling shows



An international agreement to end plastic pollution is due to be sealed this year in Busan, South Korea. At the penultimate round of negotiations, held in Ottawa, Canada, Rwanda and Peru proposed a target to cut the weight of primary plastics produced worldwide by 40% by 2040, compared with 2025.

This is the first time that a limit on the production of plastic has been considered at the UN talks aiming to develop an international legally binding instrument to end plastic pollution. Of the potential mechanisms for tackling plastic pollution, a cap on plastic production was the most hotly debated, but one has not made it into the draft text of the treaty - not yet, at least.

However, all efforts to scientifically model the extent of plastic pollution in the future assume that restricting how much plastic the world makes each year will be necessary (among other measures) to curb its harmful presence in the environment.

In a 2020 study, it was found that primary plastic production - the creation of new synthetic polymers, largely from fossil fuel - will need to be 47% lower in 2040 compared with the rate measured in 2016.

This scenario would involve plastic production falling by as much as the research team considered practicable. It would predominantly mean everyone using significantly less plastic and substituting it with paper and materials that are

compostable.

Cutting production almost in half and using all other strategies, such as ramping up recycling and disposing of plastic waste in landfills or via incineration plants, would still leave residual pollution in 2040. In fact, just under 50 million tonnes of plastic would still be flowing into the ocean and rivers each year or accumulating on land where it may be burned in the open and create even more pollution.

In a 2022 report, the OECD estimated that cutting demand for plastic by 33% relative to 2019 (and enhancing recycling alongside preventing plastic escaping the waste management process) would almost eliminate mismanaged plastic waste by 2060 - that is, plastic that end up

as pollution in the environment.

A combination of measures such as these is considered the most effective scenario in cutting pollution. Again though, the OECD model projects slightly over 50 million tonnes of plastic waste being mismanaged annually in 2040. For the accumulation and burning of plastic in the environment to stop, we would have to wait another two decades.

A simulation conducted in 2023 set an even more ambitious target for eliminating plastic pollution by 2040. In it, a cap on production was an essential element alongside 15 other global policy measures which could cut annual mismanaged plastic waste by 90% and virgin plastic use by 30% yearly by 2040,

compared with 2019. This would represent a 60% reduction relative to 2040 levels without restrictions on production.

The 40% reduction target floated in Ottawa is generally consistent with what these models suggest is necessary to substantially reduce plastic pollution in coming decades. Whether such a production cap is plausible however is still poorly understood. With plastic production still increasing, it is unclear what policies would reduce it so steeply in just 15 years - and what their side effects might be.

### What will it take?

Reducing plastic production would require marked shifts in our lives for which there is little precedent. It could involve massive changes in how we behave as consumers, how products are designed and delivered to us - and so on.

A 40% production cut would probably entail slashing the amount of packaging and single-use plastic made worldwide. These short-lived products account for around half of all plastic production and become waste quickly. Essentially, this would reverse the trend in material use since the mid-20th century.

Every year without production caps makes the necessary cut to plastic production in future steeper - and our need to use other measures to address the problem greater.

### Modelling the mess

The combination of policy and technical innovation necessary to eliminate plastic pollution is highly debated. But swingeing production cuts feature in all modelled scenarios.

A less dynamic pace of change is assumed to be necessary for "downstream" measures - those associated with when plastic becomes waste, such as during disposal and recycling. Some of the emphasis on production caps in models originates from the failure of existing waste management services to stop plastic from entering the environment or being burned outdoors.

Since between 1.7 and 2.5 billion people still lack waste collection, some form of reduction in the amount of new plastic made

each year might seem attractive - and consistent with the idea of a circular economy and the waste hierarchy, which prioritises waste prevention.

A recent research showed that a country's waste management performance is strongly linked to its socioeconomic development. The collection, recycling and disposal of plastic will only prevail as a solution to the extent that countries improve socioeconomically.

Clearly, without radical change, the pace of progress on this front would not solve plastic pollution by 2040.

What is ironic, and illustrative of how daunting the challenge is, is that deploying sound waste management to the under-served is one of the few solutions that we understand relatively well, based as it is on commercially and technically proven technologies and operational systems.

By contrast, the three models offer only generic insight into what would be necessary to scale down plastic production. Replacing plastic with paper and card would not fundamentally improve matters if this packaging still ended up as waste being burned in the open.

There are other options, though. It could be possible to massively simplify the types of polymers used in packaging so that just a few are in circulation. This would make recycling more effective, as one of the present complications is the huge variation in materials that leads to cross-contamination.

Likewise, countries could massively expand systems for reusing and refilling containers in shops.

No matter the degree, pathway and pace of plastic production cuts, a fundamental change in our relationship with plastic is necessary. As a target, 2040 seems impossibly close for a viable pathway to significantly lower production, but that should not stop us entertaining such a future. It should alert us to the scientific advances and innovation necessary to make it more plausible.

Let us think of it as a worthy investment of our resources and effort - one that we rely upon for a better future. *(The Conversation)*

## 'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, May 5, 2024

### 'Birthday Forecast'

Moon semi-sextile Sun on your solar return chart ensures an exceptionally bright year ahead. Your communications skills will be strong and you will be able to express yourself more with those people with whom you interact. You will think it wise to use your talent and strength in the best possible manner. You will make good progress at your work place. And will also get credit and recognition from colleagues and superiors. You will outshine everyone at your workplace. Your financial position will be extremely strong. A female friend will support you and could also help you professionally. You will fall in love with someone special. This will prove to be a turning point in your life. You might get married to this person. Your family will support you in all matters. Business related trips will keep you busy. These will help you develop contacts which will prove to be very beneficial for you.

### This week for you'

**Aries: (March 21 - April 20)** Positive new relationships are formed and you can look forward to good results. It is a friendly time, when it is easy to enjoy life and other people as you instinctively start a new phase in your life. It's time to give your life a makeover, a time of new beginnings and fresh energy. Focus is on personal freedom, reaching out to others, making new plans, and exploration. You are more enthusiastic and ready for adventure. A sudden job opportunity or money and property matters could be part of the financial gains. Your physical activities tend to be more intense, passionate, and focused.

**Taurus: (April 21 - May 21)** This phase highlights friendship, love, romance and children in your life. You are inspired and could even inspire others. You are thinking more creatively, and express yourself with more sensitivity, compassion, and warmth. You want your objectives to reflect what you are really about, and you are likely to rid yourself of unsatisfying goals. You benefit from being more decisive than usual, and your ability to concentrate and focus helps you achieve what you set out to do. It is the time to coordinate with your creations, love affair, children, and hobbies.

**Gemini: (May 22 - June 21)** You are in a position to inspire others through what you create highlighting communication, creativity and authority. Your attitude towards life would be changing, you are no longer willing to make compromises in the important areas of your life, particularly with regards to career and your life path. You would be able to find a way to strike a balance between self-gratification and the obligations of daily life. You are more determined, and it is an excellent time for getting rid of bad habits. Your mind often wanders to domestic concerns, and issues surrounding your home, family, and personal life.

**Cancer: (June 22 - July 22)** You give a new approach to communications projects, learning, or self-expression. Your most natural talents would meet with reward and acceptance. A new project or goal begun now has a good chance of being successful and long lasting. This is a good time for reflection, prayer, and meditation. A higher purpose to your life is what you seek, and you rely more heavily upon your intuition in order to achieve it. Your self-confidence and positive attitude will reward you. Positive connections with others can be made fairly easily. A comfortable level of personal popularity helps to keep conflict to a minimum.

**Leo: (July 23 - August 23)** This phase brings an exciting job offer, reward, recognition or a possible promotion. An opportunity to expand on a worldly level arrives now. A balanced approach to life, in terms of realistic expectations, is the best approach for maximizing success. People are bound to recognize your leadership skills and talents. You want your life path and your objectives to reflect what you're really about. You benefit from being more decisive than usual, and your ability to concentrate and focus help you to achieve what you set out to do in the coming weeks. You are more enthusiastic and ready for adventure. It's also a good time for expressing your creativity.

**Virgo: (August 24 - September 22)** This is a period of work and development. It's a time to deal with practical matters, and it's not a time to be lazy or especially gregarious. It can be a time that feels hard, monotonous and lonely. Try to get yourself organized, work to

build your resources, keep busy. You might find that you are very often encouraging and supportive of others. Certainly, you are more accepting and understanding of your friends and loved ones. Being content in love will figure and will attract positive circumstances into your life. It is likely to be a rather lighthearted time, when opportunities are greater than usual.

**Libra: (September 23 - October 23)** There will be a wave of good-luck in love and romance. You spend great time in long conversations, phone calls, short trips and enjoy the feeling of togetherness. You are more receptive and gentle on a romantic level, and tend to be sentimental about work commitments. Business expansion and new professional opportunities are worth considering. Financial success is stronger than earlier. You may explore new technology and improve office infrastructure as this brings more efficiency and creativity on your work in an unconventional way. Positive new relationships are formed.

**Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22)** 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. There are greater monetary gains too. You probably should be aware of a tendency to create your own financial stress due to extravagant spending habits. Your main focus is on personal freedom, reaching out to others, making new friends, and exploration. You are enthusiastic and ready for adventure. This is a time to do what you can to build trust in your family life and a strong foundation within yourself. You might spend a lot of time in short frequent trips, communicating and visiting religious places.

**Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21)** You might play attention to various ways to increase personal funds, resulting in more than one avenue for monetary gain. You are more friendly, optimistic, and big-hearted than usual. A cheerful and hopeful outlook increases your chances of gaining cooperation from others. This is a sociable, and perhaps self-indulgent, time when the pursuit of pleasure is one of your high priorities. Financial benefits may come your way. You may find that you have the right information at the right time. You could also have big ideas and plans. Work, especially in communications, goes well. If you are patient and open yourself up in a gentle manner, you will attract both things and people.

**Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20)** You enjoy decisions in your favour when it comes to legal affairs, education, and travel. Financial benefits may come your way. You may find that you have the right information at the right time. You could also have big ideas and plans. Work, especially in communications, goes well. Love matters, finances, and social relationships are especially pleasing and satisfying. You are generally more cooperative, although occasional willfulness could be a downfall, if you succumb to it. New friendships, or new spins on established connections, are in your forecast.

**Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18)** Your efforts would be rewarded and praised by people in authority as you resolve issues related to finances and budgets. You are bound to enjoy increased social opportunities as well as a boost in your personal popularity and magnetism. Others look on you favorably. You are more friendly, optimistic, and big-hearted than usual. A cheerful and hopeful outlook increases your chances of gaining cooperation from others. This is a sociable, and perhaps self-indulgent, time when the pursuit of pleasure is one of your high priorities. Security in love is likely to figure and to attract positive circumstances into your life.

**Pisces: (February 19 - March 20)** The planetary combination boosts your professional prospects as you communicate cleverly and interact in a more positive way with people. You express true feelings, ideas and plans without being afraid of the consequences and try to please your loved one. You enjoy every moment, whatever it brings and follow your truth and intuition to feel more integrated with your loved one. Married people should take care of family members as the health of a family member may suffer. You tend to get mentally stressed and anxious causing health problems, detach yourself from problems and view them from a different perspective.

## What are heart rate zones, and how can you incorporate them into your exercise routine?

If you spend a lot of time exploring fitness content online, you might have come across the concept of heart rate zones. Heart rate zone training has become more popular in recent years partly because of the boom in wearable technology which, among other functions, allows people to easily track their heart rates.

Heart rate zones reflect different levels of intensity during aerobic exercise. They're most often based on a percentage of your maximum heart rate, which is the highest number of beats your heart can achieve per minute.

But what are the different heart rate zones, and how can you use these zones to optimise your workout?

### The three-zone model

While there are several models used to describe heart rate zones, the most common model in the scientific literature is the three-zone model, where the zones may be categorised as follows: Zone 1: 55 per cent - 82 per cent of maximum heart rate Zone 2: 82 per cent - 87 per cent of maximum heart rate Zone 3: 87 per cent - 97 per cent of maximum heart rate.

If you're not sure what your maximum heart rate is, it can be calculated using this equation:  $208 - (0.7 \times \text{age in years})$ . For example, I'm 32 years old.  $208 - (0.7 \times 32) = 185.6$ , so my predicted maximum heart rate is around 186 beats per minute. There are also other models used to describe heart rate zones, such as the five-zone model (as its name implies, this one has five distinct zones). These models largely describe the same thing and can mostly be used interchangeably.

### What do the different zones involve?

The three zones are based around a person's lactate threshold, which describes the point at which exercise intensity moves from being predominantly aerobic, to predominantly anaerobic.

Aerobic exercise uses oxygen to help our muscles keep going,

ensuring we can continue for a long time without fatiguing. Anaerobic exercise, however, uses stored energy to fuel exercise. Anaerobic exercise also accrues metabolic byproducts (such as lactate) that increase fatigue, meaning we can only produce energy anaerobically for a short time.

On average your lactate threshold tends to sit around 85 per cent of your maximum heart rate, although this varies from person to person, and can be higher in athletes.

In the three-zone model, each zone loosely describes one of three types of training.

Zone 1 represents high-volume, low-intensity exercise, usually performed for long periods and at an easy pace, well below lactate threshold. Examples include jogging or cycling at a gentle pace.

Zone 2 is threshold training, also known as tempo training, a moderate intensity training method performed for moderate durations, at (or around) lactate threshold. This could be running, rowing or cycling at a speed where it's difficult to speak full sentences.

Zone 3 mostly describes methods of high-intensity interval training, which are performed for shorter durations and at intensities above lactate threshold. For example, any circuit style workout that has you exercising hard for 30 seconds then resting for 30 seconds would be zone 3.

### Striking a balance

To maximise endurance performance, you need to strike a balance between doing enough training to elicit positive changes, while avoiding over-training, injury and burnout.

While zone 3 is thought to produce the largest improvements in maximal oxygen uptake - one of the best predictors of endurance performance and overall health - it's also the most tiring. This means you can only perform so much of it before it becomes too much.

Training in different heart rate zones improves slightly different physiological qualities, and so by

spending time in each zone, you ensure a variety of benefits for performance and health.

### So how much time should you spend in each zone?

Most elite endurance athletes, including runners, rowers, and even cross-country skiers, tend to spend most of their training (around 80 per cent) in zone 1, with the rest split between zones 2 and 3.

Because elite endurance athletes train a lot, most of it needs to be in zone 1, otherwise they risk injury and burnout. For example, some runners accumulate more than 250 kilometres per week, which would be impossible to recover from if it was all performed in zone 2 or 3.

Of course, most people are not professional athletes. The World Health Organization recommends adults aim for 150-300 minutes of moderate intensity exercise per week, or 75-150 minutes of vigorous exercise per week.

If you look at this in the context of heart rate zones, you could consider zone 1 training as moderate intensity, and zones 2 and 3 as vigorous. Then, you can use heart rate zones to make sure you're exercising to meet these guidelines.

### What if I don't have a heart rate monitor?

If you don't have access to a heart rate tracker, that doesn't mean you can't use heart rate zones to guide your training.

The three heart rate zones discussed in this article can also be prescribed based on feel using a simple 10-point scale, where 0 indicates no effort, and 10 indicates the maximum amount of effort you can produce.

With this system, zone 1 aligns with a 4 or less out of 10, zone 2 with 4.5 to 6.5 out of 10, and zone 3 as a 7 or higher out of 10.

Heart rate zones are not a perfect measure of exercise intensity, but can be a useful tool. And if you don't want to worry about heart rate zones at all, that's also fine. The most important thing is to simply get moving. *(The Conversation)*

*"There is no respect for others without humility in one's self."*

—Henri Frederic Amiel

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVI No. 264 SHILLONG, MONDAY, MAY 6, 2024

Raj Bhavan scandals

WEST Bengal's Governor CV Ananda Bose is in an unenviable situation. A female staff member of the Raj Bhavan in Kolkata has accused him of sexual molestation. Bose says the allegation was politically motivated. His claim must be taken with a pinch of salt. Prima facie, no woman in such a service would dare 'invent' a nasty charge against the highest authority of the state. Notably, this is not the first time a governor has been accused of molestation in Raj Bhavan premises. Banwarilal Purohit as Tamil Nadu governor faced a similar allegation from a Raj Bhavan staff in Chennai, but the matter was finally hushed up. There are more such stories. Nothing goes to show the complaint against Bose would be taken to its logical conclusion. Those in authority laugh their way out of such scandalous situations.

Ananda Bose is a seasoned administrator. He was part of the Indian Civil Service for several decades as a senior officer. He is known to have earned the trust of Prime Minister Narendra Modi though he was never known to have had any political links with the BJP. Some say Bose was in Modi's inner circle in recent years, offering advice to the PM in certain matters. His posting as Bengal governor was a surprise to many. More surprisingly, he established a good rapport with Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee soon after his arrival in Kolkata as governor. This was despite the big fight that the CM was waging with the Modi government on multiple fronts. In recent months, there apparently was less of a bonhomie between the governor and the CM. Yet, no one suspected that the two were on a confrontation course. The present allegation against the governor came out of the blue. Bose, unlike his name suggests, is not a Bengali but a diehard Malayali. He is currently strengthening his defences by issuing a decree to the Raj Bhavan staff not to share any information with the West Bengal Police, which has started sniffing around the governor's seat. He cites a rule that the state police cannot investigate a governor under any circumstance.

Gone are the times when a minister or a governor or someone else in high authority would hang his head in shame and march out of office when faced with such huge embarrassments. The tendency today is to fight back and explore the legal loopholes to remain firmly in one's seat. The dignity that the society once accorded to top positions in governance is now a thing of the past. Even the courts are game with attempts to whitewash lies. Perceptions are that courts give the guilty a long rope and generally allow final exoneration from the crime those in authority are accused of. So, why worry!

# Water: Common Good vs Individual Interest

By HH Mohrmen

The Shillong Times, May 3rd edition, should be a wake-up call for the current government and future administrations. It is a sign of things to come and what the future holds for Shillong and the entire state concerning the most vital needs of life. Earlier, it was reported that based on testing conducted at various locations, the water supply to the city was found to be unfit for human consumption. The crucial question is: what does the future hold for the capital city when water supply is a challenge? Equally important is the question: what about the water security in the entire state?

**A frightening situation**  
The two reports published in the May 2nd edition of this paper depict a situation that merits immediate attention from everyone. The first lead report indicated that despite the sanctioning of Rs 344

crores for the protection of the catchment areas of two rivers, Umiew in East Khasi Hills, and Ganol in Garo Hills, the water sources and catchments providing water to Shillong residents are rapidly drying up. This is a major cause for concern, especially for the city residents, as river Umiew serves as the main source of the Greater Shillong Water Supply Scheme (GSWSS).

It was reported that the situation has reached such a critical point that the water stock at Mawphlang is expected to last only for 3 or 4 months, as the water level at the dam, the main source of drinking water supply to the residents of Shillong City, has drastically decreased. Perhaps for the first time in the city's history, a public notice has been issued, requesting the public to use water judiciously and adopt water-saving practices wherever possible.



**Jowai issue is of the Government's own making**  
Myntdu, which still supplies the maximum volume of water for the town's residents, is on the verge of facing a fate similar to Wah Umkhrak, and the credit for this goes to the MDA government. Myntdu is poised to meet the same fate as Wah Umkhrak because the government has allowed the construction of a road along the river to connect the Jowai-Amlarem-Dawki road with the Jowai-Shillong road, which runs along the banks of

the Myntdu river. This road, constructed to bypass Jowai, will be the final nail in the coffin for the Wah Myntdu, as construction of houses along the river will commence after the road is completed.

One wonders what happened to the High Court order, which bans construction along the river when the construction of a road along the river is permitted? Has special leave been granted by the Court to allow the PWD to construct the road, which is against the court order? If not, then it is clearly a violation of the court order. How can the Government allow this construction to even begin? In West Jaintia Hills, construction on the riverbank has occurred in other places too, but the Government is turning a blind eye to it.

**Helpless Minister!**  
In the May 5 issue of the same paper, the PHE Minister, Marcuse N Marak, admitted that the state was staring at an impending water crisis, a situation the state has never experienced before. Ironically, the minister stated that even the sources of the Jal Jeevan Mission have also dried up, proving that the money sanctioned for the JJM is going down the drain.

The state's rivers have been affected by pollution from mining, including coal and limestone mining, as well as from stone quarrying and sand mining. These activities have led to silting and a decrease in the water level of the rivers. The question arises: how has this happened despite the Government already having a Water Policy in place and even a court order?

In his statement, the Minister sounded helpless when he said that laws enacted to protect the catchment areas have not been helpful because traditional institutions and landowners are not implementing the law in letter and spirit. He also mentions encroachment onto the river, as if he is not aware of the court order. If the Minister is helpless, then who will save the State from the impending danger of insufficient water supply to every household?

**Pray to the Rain Gods and Monsoon**  
Another news report on the same May 3rd issue informed that localities in the capital city are facing an impending crisis with water supply down to the bare minimum. It was reported that water sources supplying

land tenure system, which gives individual landowners the right to do anything and everything with their land. But in tribal culture, can an individual's rights override the common good?

**Care for oneself and care for others**  
Caring and giving communities are where people care for each other, and this tradition should prevail in all the societies of the indigenous people of Meghalaya. The ultimate goal of the tribal community is to strive for the happiness of the masses. The general tenet of the indigenous way of life shared by all is, 'ka bhalang uba bun balang,' or 'ka bhalang ka imlang,' which translates to 'common good or well-being of all.' Now the question arises: in this case, why does the interest of an individual, which is detrimental to the community, take precedence? Despite the fact that activities were driven by selfish interests and harmful to the environment, they are still being allowed to continue by the Government.

The spirit of valuing the common good should not only manifest itself in times of societal bereavement but should prevail when common interests are at stake. Common interest is more important than individual interest. The pursuit of the common good or the welfare of all is the community's ultimate goal, and it should take precedence over anything else.

It is therefore a humble suggestion that Upland Road be made one way in the other direction, that is from Don Bosco Square towards DHS, so that cars heading towards NEEPCO are diverted and do not add to the traffic towards Laitumkhrak Police Point, Nongthymmai, extending up to Laitkor.

Yours etc.,  
A concerned educator, caregiver and citizen.  
Name withheld on request

**Individual rights override common good**

The Chief Minister may have convened a series of meetings to address the issues, but solutions are not forthcoming. In the past, there have been discussions to declare catchment areas as protected under the National Wetlands policy, but what is stopping the Government from doing so? The State Government also introduced a State Water Policy in 2019, which outlined issues such as the protection of catchment areas and prevention of river pollution, but there is a huge gap between policy and implementation.

Our rivers are dying because of pollution, silting, and loss of forest cover in the catchment areas. Due to the lack of forest cover, rainwater runoff flows to the plains and does not percolate into the ground. In other words, the main culprits are mining activities, sand and stone quarrying, and deforestation along the catchment areas. The blame also lies with the

**Gambling an addiction**

Editor,  
A Class XII student was found hanging in an abandoned building near his home in Kolkata in March this year. Police said that the 17-year-old boy was in "debt" and into "online gambling", a habit of his that his family and teachers were unaware of.

Online gambling has become a deathtrap, especially for those who are victims of poverty. The lives of many young persons who do not have a comfortable cushion of wealth to absorb the shock of addiction-driven expenses are being destroyed.

Parthiban was the sole breadwinner of his family. The 28-year-old autorickshaw driver had two young daughters. He died by suicide in Tamil Nadu in November 2022, allegedly because he lost money in online gambling.

In the same month, a woman migrant worker from Odisha, Pandhana Maji ended her life in Tamil Nadu after she allegedly suffered losses in online gambling. B. Sivanraj, a cab driver, died by suicide after losing over 15 lakh to online gambling in January 2023. Gunaseelan, a restaurant employee, died by suicide after telling his coworkers that he lost almost Rs 2 lakh in gambling.

## Smriti Irani loses VVIP tag with Rahul's Raebareli move King's Indian defence leaves Queen's gambit reeling

By Sushil Kutty

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi's move to shift battleground from Amethi to Raebareli is a King's defence. Chess great Garry Kasparov, however, didn't seem to agree. He cracked his "little joke" on the Gandhi family scion even while stating that Indian politics shouldn't take his "advocacy or expertise" seriously. Garry Kasparov, like so many others who walk upright, appeared surprised that Gandhi had it in him to think strategically.

For moving the constituency from Amethi to Raebareli was application of mind which is how top chess masters play the game. People, however, forget chess is an Indian invention and it was only later that the rest of the world discovered chess.

Today, a whole lot of nationalities play Chess but Russia and Russians somehow make us believe they make the best moves.

Garry Kasparov should take back his "little joke" and apologise to the Wayanad MP. Kasparov should have said, "First win Wayanad before challenging for the top." Garry forgot that the 54-year-old was around when the 61-year-old was playing serious chess at the turn of the millennium. Do not forget there is also Wayanad, apart from Amethi and the original Gandhi family pocket-borough Raebareli. By completely forgetting Wayanad, Garry willy-nilly showed Wayanad its place. Kerala's safe haven for Rahul Gandhi is yet to get its due, the Gandhi family "pocket-borough" tag, which is reserved only for Amethi and Raebareli.

But Kasparov can be forgiven for not knowing India and Indian elections like he would the face of a chessboard. "I very much hope my little joke does not pass for advocacy or expertise in Indian politics! But as an 'all-seeing monster with 1000 eyes,' as I was once described, I cannot fail to see a politician dabbling in my beloved game," the once-upon-a-time world chess champion responded in 'X'.

Chess became a topic when the Congress circulated a video-clip of Rahul making his chess moves while confessing that Kasparov was his favourite chess player. This before an X user wise-cracked: "Feel so relieved that @Kasparov63 and @vishy4theking retired early and didn't have to face the greatest chess genius of our times." The X-man was referring to Rahul Gandhi, not to Prime Minister Narendra Modi or Amethi MP Smriti Irani. Modi and Irani have been mocking Rahul Gandhi for ditching Amethi and choosing Raebareli. Prime Minister

ter Narendra Modi actually wasted precious time on the campaign circuit questioning Rahul Gandhi's "darr".

And Irani spent half an hour elaborating on how she was "humiliated for 10 long years" because she dared to take on the "mighty Gandhi family". For no reason at all, Irani played the victim and the TV guy kept giving her certificates of courage. It was an anachronism and it was quite clear Irani did not like Rahul Gandhi's move to Raebareli.

It robbed her of relevance. Rahul Gandhi was Irani's ticket to fame, her celebrity status. Suddenly, following Rahul Gandhi's move to Raebareli, Irani was just another BJP candidate. And minus Rahul Gandhi, Amethi too was reduced to one among 543 parliamentary constituencies. Is Amethi a VVIP constituency any longer? Ask Garry Kasparov and he would balk, pointing at Raebareli and commenting, "first win Raebareli..." Irani, left in Amethi, already misses the "giant killer" tag that she got when beating Rahul Gandhi. Will Prime Minister Narendra Modi give Smriti Irani the same pride of place by his side as he did after she defeated Rahul Gandhi?

Chances are dim. Smriti Irani now faces a familiar face in Amethi; somebody who has been a fixture in the Gandhi family constituency for decades. A sort of constituency caretaker for the Nehru-Gandhi family. By nominating this faceless personality to contest from Amethi, the Congress has reduced the Amethi contest into an ordinary race. Smriti Irani can't attack Rahul Gandhi, which has been her staple for a decade, any longer to garner brownie points.

No wonder, Irani seemed lost in the woods. The man she will beat, if she beats, has no face or name recognition beyond the constituency boundary of Amethi. People have already lost interest in the Amethi contest with focus shifting to Raebareli. Will Garry Kasparov understand the importance of this relegation? Kasparov's move to Croatia from Russia saved his life. Will Rahul Gandhi's shift to Raebareli save the Gandhi family's standing in Indian politics?

Voters of Wayanad are waiting for June 4, when Rahul Gandhi will have to choose one from Wayanad and Raebareli if he wins both, in which case, chances are he will dump Wayanad for Raebareli. There is something about Raebareli which Wayanad will never have and there is something about a Gandhi family candidate that a Smriti Irani will never have. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

**Action against garbage dumping in the drains**

Editor,  
We are writing to express our grave concerns regarding the ongoing issue of indiscriminate garbage dumping in the drain that begins at Barapathar and runs down to the Gorkha Pathsala football ground and then flows towards the Kanya Pathsala School and the District Council office in Garikhana. This situation has worsened since many residents discharge their latrine waste directly into the uncovered drain, creating an unbearable smell that spreads across the area and poses serious health risks. Very regularly, huge piles of dumped garbage, including plastics packed with waste products, clothes, shoes, furniture items, and more, obstruct the normal flow of water.

writing several letters to the editorial column published in the Shillong Times, including one under the caption 'Dealing Firmly with River and Drain Polluters' on April 27, 2023. These letters by Salil Gewali, along with the photograph of the garbage dumping, were duly forwarded by us to the Deputy Commissioner, East Khasi Hills.

In response to our email, the Deputy Commissioner immediately replied through letter dated May 8, 2023, directing the Shillong Municipality to install CCTV cameras and take other necessary actions. But, although more than a year has passed, it is disheartening to report that no concrete action has been taken so far by the Shillong Municipality or the Cantonment Board. The continued absence of CCTV cameras at strategic junctions, uncovered drains, and the lack of signboards prohibiting dumping garbage are clear indicators of the negligence of our municipal authorities.

This ongoing negligence and inaction by the authorities, including the Shillong Cantonment Board, has severely affected both environmental and public health, exacerbating the pollution issue

and increasing health hazards in the neighbourhood.

We therefore urgently request the Deputy Commissioner to intervene in this matter of public concern and ensure prompt implementation of essential measures. It is highly recommended to completely cover the drain with slabs and install traps at strategic points to alleviate these problems. It is also requested that penalties should be imposed on individuals who discharge their latrine waste directly into the drain.

Our community deserves a clean and safe environment. It is crucial that our local authorities fulfill their responsibilities to protect and improve our living conditions.

Yours etc.,  
Hardeep Rynthiang (General Secretary) & D. Wahlang (Rongbah Dong) Dorbar Shnong, Nongsophoh Upper Mawprem, Shillong-2

**All roads lead to one gridlock**

Editor,  
This past week, I have had to care for a loved one by taking her to the hospital to have the mandatory injections after a surgery. Living in the heart of Laitumkhrak

and rushing between work, home and the hospital and finding the best time to do it has been a challenge, to say the least.

All routes heading towards Laitumkhrak, whether it is (1) from MES taking the road from Goraline towards Laitumkhrak Police Point (2) from Dhankheti to Don Bosco Square, towards Laitumkhrak Police Point (3) from Shillong Commerce College to Don Bosco Square towards Laitumkhrak Police Point (4) from NEEPCO towards Laitumkhrak Police Point, these routes are usually in gridlock for most parts of school and working hours and would remain so, if not for the able traffic personnel managing the junctions.

Hence, it is a commendable trial by the Superintendent of Police, East Khasi Hills District, Shillong in its press release dated May 2, 2024 for a "one way trial run to ease traffic on NEEPCO-Laitumkhrak road."

However, with this arrangement and with the MES road leading towards Nongrim Hills/ Rynjah also closed, the pressure on the road leading towards Don Bosco Square from St. Mary's School will be multiplied.

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

"The best things in life are often waiting for you at the exit ramp of your comfort zone."

— Karen Salmansohn

## The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXV No. 265 SHILLONG, TUESDAY, APRIL 7, 2024

### Congress's default position

IT is no surprise that a Congress Party acolyte speaking on condition of anonymity would decry the present leadership and consider it responsible for the lackluster campaign during the Lok Sabha election. The default position of the Congress is to pick individuals to head the Party in the states instead of allowing free and fair elections to happen. It is almost as if the Party does not trust its ground level workers to do the right thing and elect the right leader to head the Party. Also, there existed an open rift between Vincent Pala, the present State Congress Chief and outgoing Chief Minister, Mukul Sangma. It is no surprise then that Mukul Sangma walked away from the Congress with 11 other MLAs and joined the Trinamool Congress (TMC).

The other default position of the Congress is to believe that no one outside the Nehru-Gandhi family is capable of leading the Party. There is no denying that Rahul Gandhi has led a successful nationwide campaign for justice but he lacks the cutting-edge leadership skills to take on someone like Narendra Modi who projects himself as someone born outside the charmed circles of privilege and having come up the hard way and therefore of understanding the downtrodden of this country better than Rahul Gandhi does. It's a different matter that Modi has not completely discarded the privileges accorded to him as the Prime Minister of this country. In fact, it would not be wrong to say that these privileges are addictive thereby making anyone who has held a position of power and authority unwilling to lose those perquisites.

That aside, Narendra Modi belongs to a Party that has strong grassroots presence, particularly at the booth level. Moreover, the BJP has its alter ego the Rashtriya Sevak Sangh (RSS) with silent workers that plod along to convince people of their Hindutva ideology, including recruiting children and adolescents from underprivileged families and putting them in boarding schools in Pune and other cities. Whether this is good or bad is a matter of debate since the children could only have gone with the blessings of their parents. Does the Congress Party have a social service wing at the level of the units? Not much is heard of Congress Party workers undertaking socially relevant activities. Many opportunists have joined the National Peoples' Party (NPP). This is no surprise because it has also been the default position of Congress workers to work only if there is some incentive. Without money the Congress wheels don't turn. This is a reality that the Party has to accept and work at if it wishes to turn the political tide in its favour. The Congress must be seen to be with those that are struggling to live their lives beyond the limelight of Shillong. With all the problems that Meghalaya is passing through, the Congress Party has been a silent observer, not saying much and certainly not seen to be with those most affected by poverty and the lack of access to state resources.

# Far from Chaar Sau Paar

By H. Srikanth

Prior to the first phase of the polls, most people, including those who were critical of Modi's regime, believed that the BJP was going to be back with a decisive victory. It was assumed that Modi's charisma is still intact, and that BJP, aided by media, ED, IT, and EC, is headed for a third term, as voters in India are swayed by the Ram sentiment than rational spirit. Scholars like Parakala Prabhakar, who asserted that it would be difficult for BJP to secure over 250 seats, did not have many takers. However, after the initial two phases of elections, many started saying that the victory of the BJP is not going to be that easy. Of late, BJP leaders have themselves stopped talking about 'chaarsaupaar', and started focusing all their energies to spread fears about what would happen if the INDIA Alliance comes to power. Taking advantage of BJP's dilemmas, the INDIA alliance supporters have started a counter campaign as if the NDA alliance is trailing in all states and there is a nation-wide undercurrent against Narendra Modi. As the post-opinion polls are prohibited, we really do not know the ground situation across the country. It is a different matter how far the opinion polls conducted by biased corporate media channels are able to comprehend what is going on in the minds of the masses. Hence, we need to wait till the evening of June 4, 2024.

While admitting the fact that the final tally of the two alliances are difficult to predict at this moment, based on the feedback, one can predict this much, that it will not be easy for the NDA to keep the number of seats that it gained in 2019. There is no nationwide wave for any party alliance. Modi is definitely not as popular as he was in 2014 and 2019. The people do not have any illusions today about any 'Acche Din' that Modi promised. This time, there is no situation like the Pulwama terrorist attack, which galvanized the entire nation behind Modi. Inauguration of Ram temple at Ayodhya no doubt evoked admiration for Modi in some Hindi speaking states, but it had little or no impact in other parts of India. After seeing the manner in which BJP welcomed corrupt leaders from opposition parties and the revelations of the electoral bond scheme, no one thinks

Modi is a force that can fight corruption and black money in the country. Further, BJP's rhetoric of 'char saupaar' has created fears among the minorities that BJP intends to change the secular character of the Indian constitution and meddle with reservations. Issues like price-rise, MSP for the farmers and growing unemployment in the country have dented the popularity of Modi's regime and are likely to influence the election results in different states.

The opposition parties in the country have not yet

Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Uttarakhand and, to a considerable extent, even UP. It appears to have some edge, even in other northern states like Haryana and Himachal Pradesh, where Ram and Modi sentiments are still strong. Total number of seats in these northern states is much more compared to all the southern states put together. Overall, the NDA has an advantage in these northern states. In northeastern states, the NDA may lose some seats, but BJP may still hold on to most LS seats,

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taken full advantage of the failures of the ruling regime. Still, there are bickerings and differences among the INDIA partners. However, the INDIA alliance could arrive at some understanding in some key states like Bihar, UP, Delhi and Maharashtra. In Bihar, Delhi and UP, BJP won almost all LS seats in 2019. But this time, BJP is bound to lose some seats. In south India, the INDIA alliance continues its domination in Kerala and Tamilnadu, and is likely to gain in Karnataka and Telangana. Although Modi invested considerable efforts and resources for the southern push, it is unlikely that BJP will get over fifteen seats in all the southern states put together. In Kashmir, BJP is likely to win the LS seats in Jammu, but it has fielded no candidates from the party for the LS seats in Kashmir valley. Similarly, in the northeast, it has not fielded candidates in the hill states of Meghalaya, Nagaland and Mizoram, and also in the hill constituency of Manipur. It appears the NDA may lose the LS seats in Meghalaya, Manipur and Mizoram.

However, BJP still has full control over states like

especially in Assam, thanks to its pragmatic alliance, electoral strategy and the weakness of the Congress in the state.

Despite these advantages, BJP still finds it hard to reach the 270+ mark on its strength, unless it makes further inroads in states like Maharashtra, Bengal, Bihar and Rajasthan. But in all these states, BJP faces resistance this time. In Maharashtra, a substantial number of people are aggrieved over the manner in which BJP engineered split in Shiv Sena and NCP. The rise of Tejashwi Yadav in Bihar poses a challenge to BJP-JDU's aspirations. Rajasthan has witnessed Ashok Gehlot and Sachin Pilot patching up their differences for the time being and working together. Considering the fact that the NDA won all 25 LS seats in Rajasthan in 2019, any inroads by Congress would reduce the NDA's national tally. Modi's desperate speech in Rajasthan invoking the Muslim threats and 'mangalsutra' shows that not everything is going fine for BJP in Rajasthan. In Bengal, although seat sharing failed among the INDIA partners, Mamata

## Sharp pro-poor agenda of Congress signals big change

By Jagdish Rattanani

As the long-winded election campaign plods on, a lot has already changed on the Indian political scene. For one, the Congress party for the first time in more than a decade is able to clearly and in sharp relief articulate its political position before the electorate. This is the Indian National Congress firmly to the Left of Centre, less a question of degree and more a question of direction and position and the quadrant in which the party sits in the current political landscape. What is emerging from the party of liberalisation and privatisation is now no more a tentativeness with the agenda of social justice, wealth/income inequality or workers' rights; it is a clear placing of the flag, a sharp turn to the Left never before as clear as it was during the era of bank nationalisation under Indira Gandhi. The response of the electorate, just anecdotal at this stage, shows that the party is finding resonance and is in sync with the mood of the nation.

A commitment to this sharp ideological positioning is critical to the revival of the Congress, and while some will say the position has been forced by circumstance, it nevertheless appears to have been embraced wholeheartedly by the rank and file and the top leadership. This is one significant election outcome long before the announcement of the poll results on June 4. Do note that the BJP because of its own sloganeering and expectation-setting has to cross its previous mark of

to power. The deplorable role played by Anna Hazare, who led the India Against Corruption movement but has stayed silent since then, even in the face of emerging monumental corruption scandals from the BJP stable, has already been exposed.

In this frame, GDP growth at any cost became the talking point of the Indian elite looking to cash in on the coming business boom. The BJP in power took it to its extreme by hand-picking its favourite business houses for special honours while others were asked to settle disputes via the Enforcement Directorate. The rest of India was left to wallow in the failed ideas of trickle-down economics and food coupons that feed 80 crore Indians today, more than half of India, under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana.

Adding further strength to the Congress today is a leadership that is looking ready and robust, willing to take on the challenges before the nation. Rahul Gandhi has bloomed in the leadership role, and is looking good in the seat, sending out the right messages and signals as he mixes stories and experiences from the Nyay Yatra to create exciting political narratives that are bold, grounded and refreshing. It is remarkable that Rahul Gandhi has been able to do that with a campaign that has stayed away from any bitterness in the face of innumerable odds, and a bitter and hateful BJP campaign that has focused a large amount of its



303 to be seen as victorious; the INDIA alliance has to pull the BJP below 272 to claim victory. Barring the possibility, extremely remote at this time, of the Congress and/or the INDIA alliance faring very poorly at these polls, what we have is a party that will shape the direction of policy in India in the days ahead. This is a role that the Congress had abdicated, sliding into irrelevance and ceding ground to the BJP in the absence of a clear political direction tied into a cogent positioning of the 'what', 'how' and 'why' of the party. Without that, what we had was a plain and toothless attack on the communalism and corruption of the BJP that did not carry conviction and did not work with the electorate. The story has now changed.

The decade-long slide of the Congress, and its quieter slide even while it held power at the Centre, was the inevitable consequence of a party noted for leading a neo-liberal agenda, given that its only accomplishment in recent times was the 1991 economic reforms. The reforms, too, were forced by circumstance. They attempted an unleashing of "animal spirits" on the one hand but also led to curbing of workers' rights and the fuelling of widespread corruption on the other hand, this corruption moving from public sector hegemony to private sector brazenness in the absence of strong governance and weak or non-existent policing or collusion. Broadly speaking, these developments unsurprisingly fuelled the rise of the pro-BJP moneyed classes, who in alignment with the other assorted gentry in terms of class, caste and status, cited the cases of high corruption under the Congress to work for bringing the BJP

resources to denigrate him and his family. Rahul Gandhi's emergence also proves that there is a limit to reliance on 'pundits', some of them giving questionable advice and one even questioning the timing and wisdom of the hugely successful Nyay Yatra.

What this resurgence of the Congress has also done is to derail in part the BJP campaign, which led from the very top by the Prime Minister himself has tended to focus on what the Congress is doing or its perceived ills rather than what the BJP has done and what it promises for the next five years. This marks an internal collapse for the BJP, and if the party is not careful to pull back that slide, it will be walking into a trap of talking more about the opponent than about itself.

Lastly, it is important to note that the Congress has rejected Manmohan Singh and all that he brought to the table, whether it says so explicitly or not. This is a necessary condition for the new Congress to build credibility. In the end, Manmohan Singh was a bureaucrat who may have succeeded in the sub-set of economics but failed miserably in the super set of politics. The former is a tool; the latter is a philosophy. Efficient use of any tool is dangerous in the absence of an understanding of why it is being used and where it will lead. This should be a warning to today's Congress to stay away from retired bureaucrats. It will have to keep a sharp eye on corruption. And the Congress will need more young blood and people of commitment to build a team so that the party can remain vibrant, whether it is in power or not.

(The writer is a journalist and faculty member at SPJIMR. Views are personal)

### Letters to the Editor

## Governor's immunity from prosecution

Editor,

The editorial "Raj Bhavan scandals" (ST May 6, 2024) made interesting reading. If the allegation is true why should the Governor of West Bengal worry because Article 361 unequivocally says that the President, the Governor or the Rajpramukh of any State, "shall not be answerable to any court for the exercise and performance of the powers and duties of his office or for any act done or purporting to be done by him in the exercise and performance of those powers and duties." The provision also goes on to bar institution or continuation of any criminal proceedings against the President or the Governor in any court, during his term of office. Sub-Clause 3 of Article 361 adds "No process for the arrest or imprisonment of the President, or the Governor of a State, shall issue from any court during his term of office".

In a landmark judgment in 2006, the Supreme Court had clarified that while Article 361 grants a Governor "complete immunity," there are exceptions. "In terms of Article 361, the Governor enjoys complete immunity. Governor is not answerable to any Court for exercise and performance of powers and

duties of his office or for any act done or purporting to be done by him in the exercise of those powers and duties. However, such immunity does not take away the powers of the Court to examine the validity of the action including on the ground of mala fides," the court had ruled.

One recalls that in 2017, Article 361 came to the rescue of then Rajasthan governor Kalyan Singh in the criminal conspiracy case related to demolition of Babri Masjid, when the Supreme Court revived the charges against L K Advani, Vinay Katiar, Uma Bharati, Sadhvi Rithambara, Murli Manohar Joshi and Vishnu Hari Dalmia. The apex court had asked the Court of Sessions in Lucknow to frame the additional charge of criminal conspiracy against them. However, with respect to Kalyan Singh, the Supreme Court had asserted, "Mr. Kalyan Singh, being the Governor of Rajasthan, is entitled to immunity under Article 361 of the Constitution as long as he remains Governor of Rajasthan. The Court of Sessions will frame charges and move against him as soon as he ceases to be Governor." In 2017, Meghalaya Governor V. Shanmuganathan resigned after facing sexual harassment charges. Constitutional expert and former Secretary General of Lok Sabha P.D.T Achary says that the immunity under Article 361 is not

lifelong. "It is only during the tenure of a Governor or the President tenure that the immunity applies. It is not lifelong immunity."

Yours etc;  
VK Lyngdoh,  
Via email

## Governor immune to criminality under Section 361

Editor,

Founders of the Constitution had incorporated section 361 in the Constitution and Governors were made immune to any criminal act because it was considered that Governors were beyond such acts. Now that the Governor of West Bengal is alleged to have sexually abused a woman member of his staff it is important to probe the matter, otherwise this will tarnish the image of this country. The complaint lodged by a female contract staffer of the Kolkata Raj Bhavan has come at a most sensitive time in the affairs of West Bengal when the state is going through a multi-phase Lok Sabha election and the person against whom the allegations have been made is the Governor of the State. It is not as if governors have not been caught in compromising situations. Although they have legal immunity but moral immunity

is in their hands.

Hence in the past only persons with high moral integrity were appointed to such posts. Given the peculiar nature of West Bengal politics which is an extreme case of bristling Centre-State relations, there is no knowing whether it is a motivated complaint or whether Governor CV Ananda Bose represents the patriarchal side of the general misogyny that rules the country because in case of another Governor also who is now chairman of Rajya Sabha there were frequent unnecessary news of tussles between Chief Minister, Mamata Banerjee and the Governor. It would be in the fitness of things to say that anyone occupying high constitutional office should, like Caesar's wife, be above suspicion and his/her behaviour must be so impeccable as to be way above the casting of the least aspersion in terms of sexual behaviour. There should be no iota of doubt in their behaviour. Regarding any such allegations we have the example of Lal Krishna Advani who submitted his resignation within minutes of allegations being levelled against him on the basis of the Jain hawala diary.

Some Governors are politically active as is the trend these days particularly in Opposition-ruled states such as Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Punjab where problems are being created by Governors so much so, the Supreme

Court had to reprimand the Governor of Tamil Nadu to discharge his constitutional duties. In the present case of the West Bengal Governor there is little room for anyone to say there cannot be smoke without fire when a woman comes forward with a police complaint of sexual harassment.

People in power appear to be cavalier when it comes to their dealings with women. The recent case of sexual harassment against women wrestlers by a BJP leader and that of a Chief Minister who had to adopt his biological child are ugly examples. Presently the case of the Hassan MP Prajwal Revanna, grandson of former Prime Minister, HD Deva Gowda acutely reflects how authority tends to prevaricate when it comes to acting by the book against those wielding political power and how the image of the country is tarnished when the grandson of a former Prime Minister is involved in a sex scandal.

The #MeToo movement of the 2010s that sprang up in the US taught us that any complaint of sexual harassment of a person of any sex must be thoroughly investigated, no matter how high his or her place in society or in the rungs of authority is. In India also many reputed persons have had to face the music and even an MP had to lose his ministership. A big attitudinal change must come about in men, who are more often accused of being

perpetrators of sexual harassment, with those accused of such deviant behaviour forced to face probes and clear their names if they are innocent. It is not so much the law as the test of morality that must be passed to show that men can control the beast in them.

Article 361 of the Constitution says the President and Governors have certain immunities as mentioned in the following clauses: (1) They cannot be held accountable in court for their actions or decisions while in office, "for the exercise and performance of the powers and duties of the office or for any act done or purporting to be done in the exercise and performance of those powers and duties." (2) No criminal cases can be filed against them in any court" during their term. (3) They cannot be arrested or imprisoned during their term. (4) Civil proceedings against them for personal actions, whether before or after they entered office, can only be initiated after a two-month notice, specifying the nature of the proceedings and relief sought.

Yours etc.,  
Yash Pal Ralhan,  
Via email

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

*"Time flies over us, but leaves  
its shadow behind."*

—Nathaniel Hawthorne

## The Shillong Times

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### Powerful Putin

VLADIMIR Putin has been sworn into office for the fifth term in succession for another six years, a feat that no leader of any major nation could ever achieve. An autocrat of the first order, the spy chief-turned ruler of Russia remains a shy person outwardly, but is steered by a willpower that demolishes internal dissent at all levels with a rare, crude resolve. The point to note is that his tough interior helped Russia to remain intact but he miserably failed to raise the status of his nation into a super power that the USSR once was.

When Putin succeeded the then President Boris Yeltsin in 1999, his promise was to make Russia, the core of the erstwhile USSR, more powerful. When he took charge for the fourth consecutive term in 2018, he said he would make his nation the world's fifth largest economy, by virtue principally of its oil wealth and assertive administration. In 2022, he waded into Ukraine to annex it, but, with support from the West, the breakaway nation with a Jewish head stood its ground and fought back valiantly. The war is still on, casualties in their thousands on both sides, and Russia was badly bruised as well. Putin was rumoured to be losing his senses, facing ill health and even a nervous breakdown, but none of his weak spots showed up as he was installed at the Kremlin for the fifth term in office. He is resolute in his decision to continue the war and use Ukraine as a buffer zone under Russian control against future attacks from the West on Russia. Starkly, Putin resolved to protect the Russian Constitution even as he violated every tenet, put down dissent with brute force and retained his authority over all sectors of Russian life. To his credit, he uprooted the Chechen and other separatist, Islamist and terrorist modules from the very start and ensured peace in Russia. He refused to budge to western pressure and held his head high. He changed the Constitution at will, functioned as PM for some time by way of a show, but never ever conceded power to any other authority.

Power was where Putin was for the last quarter of a century and it would remain so for more years. At age 71 and known for his ill health, Putin might or might not survive the present term. Expectations among the western nations are that Russia is set for a change of leadership sooner than later. For all practical purposes, a quarter of a century is an unduly long term in power for any ruler other than in well-heeled monarchies as in the Islamic world. There too, with the change of generations, rulers change. So too with China as well.

# What UPSC examinations demand from the aspirants

By Benjamin Lyngdoh

Meghalaya's reaction to the poor showing in UPSC examinations is mostly emotional with no substantive thinking. The atmosphere here is always quick to heat up and equally quick to cool down. Every year when the results for IAS, IPS, etc are declared, there is a flurry of chatter and concern over why 'no one' and/or 'very few' are able to scale India's toughest and most prestigious examination. Then in a matter of few days the chatter and concern dies a natural death. No worries, Meghalaya will wake up to its concerns again in April/May, 2025. It is a

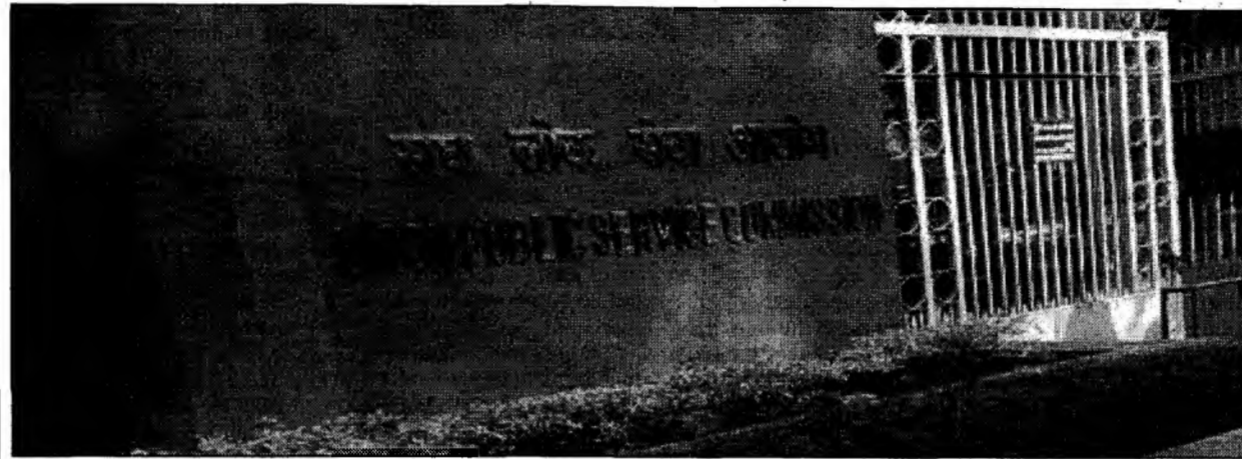
ferent matter. The point is that continuous talking and chatting on such examinations can help the young to conquer their fears and motivate them to take that all important leap into experiencing it.

Educational institutions focus a lot on teaching about concepts, subjects, practice, etc. One area which has been left unattended for so long is 'work ethic.' This is the missing ingredient which when present would produce a rich workforce of responsible workers. The

answers is the real test. It requires the aspirants to be able to write paragraphs on a plethora of issues related to a particular subject. Writing is an art that can be honed and perfected. These days this art is dying due to the advent of many online tools that has made writing a rudimentary task. Mistakes are auto-corrected and sentences are auto-suggested. While this is a good development, it does not help those who are on the try-out for old-school hardcore UPSC examinations

hard work, etc. Together with work ethic, a quantum of grit is thus an absolute necessity. The soft skills and capacity programmes these days focus only on communication, presentation skills, facing interviews, etc. It is time to add a module on toughness, grit and tenacity so as to make the youth flexible and tough and not give-in to pressure easily. There was a time when the saying was 'knowledge and skills for success,' now it is time to add grit too to the list of determinants of success.

UPSC examinations for IFS, IAS, IPS, etc are indeed the mother of all examina-



perfect case of 'out of sight, out of mind'. The common reasons given are lack of hard work, dedication, determination, etc. However, the systemic problem area is a lot deeper and alarming.

Values and culture are the most important elements for progress and success. It is time for society at large and individual households in particular to do some soul searching on the values and culture that they nurture and uphold. Talks and discussions on subject-matters like the UPSC examinations are not really of interest for the majority of families. Even if the talk on it happens, it is more on the lines of its difficulty and complexity. To break it all down, families hardly have time to at least even dine together with their children and discuss on career paths and ambitions. Career-based goal setting is still a missing element for most youth. In fact, now a new trend is evolving. If one tries to chat with the youth on their future careers and current studies, there is a tendency of many to dodge the talk or divert to something else and even just snub and leave altogether. Something is not happening right in households when it comes to motivating the young to try for higher and harder things. Well, at least try, success or failure is a dif-

ference between a university education system has to play a major role here. In today's era of learning and extensive scope for self-learning through various free IT solutions, the students have the opportunity to learn and train a lot even before they come to bachelor's education. Colleges then become the breeding grounds for nurturing a mindset for hard work and drive to succeed in life. This is true for universities that administer masters and professional education. At such a level, mundane and rote teaching-learning should be less and more focus laid on interventions and directions that the students would take as they make a final dash for their careers.

For example, in today's business management scenario almost everything is done using software and mobile applications - from finance to marketing to human resources to operations, etc. Unless a work ethic is there to match such developments, education would continue to lose its market relevance. This type of dedicated work ethic is of the highest demand in UPSC examinations. For such aspirants, this is the first and last demand.

One unique feature of UPSC examinations is that it requires a lot of analytical and writing skills. The capability to write descriptive

that require and demand a lot of non-verbal and writing skills.

The main reason for the gradual demise of creative writing is the excess use of social media platforms. Numerous studies have shown that its frequent use leads to a degradation of face-to-face communication skills, decreases the ability to generate meaningful non-verbal and written content, decreases attentiveness and concentration, increases the use of abbreviations, etc. The more serious impacts are increased risk of anxiety, loneliness, depression, etc. Looking at how social media is detrimental to knowledge value addition, it is better to shun it altogether while preparing for examinations.

In a recent students' interaction programme at NEHU, Manuel Badwar (Secretary, Meghalaya Pradesh Congress Committee) narrated on how the students of today have knowledge and skills but somehow they are 'fluffy'. His point was on the nature of most youth being timid and showing a lack of courage to face problems and obstacles. He opined this tendency as the 'lack of grit'. The point is tenable as in today's age of rat-race competition grit and tenacity is all that matters at times. This is what defines drive; motive, dedication,

It is also not everyone's cup of tea. But, just imagine slaying dragons. It is better to try slaying big and scary dragons as even if one fails at it, the experience would be invaluable. Then the challenge to slay smaller dragons would become easier and with a far greater chance of success.

There are many encouraging examples of those who could not clear UPSC, but, to them all other examinations and endeavours become a cakewalk. Whichever way one looks at it, trying for UPSC will ultimately result in one success or the other. This is how UPSC examinations are to be viewed - as a preparatory step for all other types of challenges. In actuality, it is just not an examination, but a training ground for building confident personalities. Hence, give it a go as the experience and the toughness that comes from preparing for it will surely add to the shaping of a successful career path.

Amidst all this, the bitter truth is that performance in UPSC examinations is one of the main parameters to gauge the progress of a society. The more the UPSC officers, the better becomes the image and reputation of a society. Like it or not, that is how it is!

(The writer teaches at NEHU; email: blyngdoh@gmail.com)

## Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

Karnataka Rapes and Bold Women..!

This is not about one woman shouting 'rape' but hundreds coming out and screaming at the atrocities by the Deva Gowda family!

Ever wondered where it started?

Well, not in the politician's home or through his upbringing but in our collective, national feeling about women. Instead of empowering women, by making them stronger, we weaken them by shouting, 'love jihad' and other similar phrases. And this comes from a mindset that wants women to remain weak and powerless. 'Love jihad' states that my woman and yours are unsafe in the outside world, and so needs to go back to the protective interiors of her house which finally is the kitchen.

And why do these men love to see their women back in the kitchen? Because they feel threatened with women anywhere else. Women in the workplace, women as bosses, is a threat to the traditional Indian male who's grown up, seeing his mother, sister and now his daughter, going through the motions of education, just to place her higher in the marriage market.

"I'm a doctor let me work in a hospital!" shouts the newly married medical student to her husband.

"What? And be exposed to other men, who will try and have an affair with you?" whispers the insecure husband, and from such insecure men stem terms that reek of

secure men, what begs the question is - should women wait for men to become confident, before they can walk into spaces which traditionally men have occupied?

"We can't wait anymore for our insecure men to become confident!" say some determined women, even as millions of their sisters, mothers, and daughters are afraid to step out.

No, you needn't wait anymore. Stop waiting and step out with a new slogan, 'Be bold with faith!'

Which means having the courage to step out, with faith that someone other than their men supports them.

Two women who did so, a judge and a queen come to my mind:

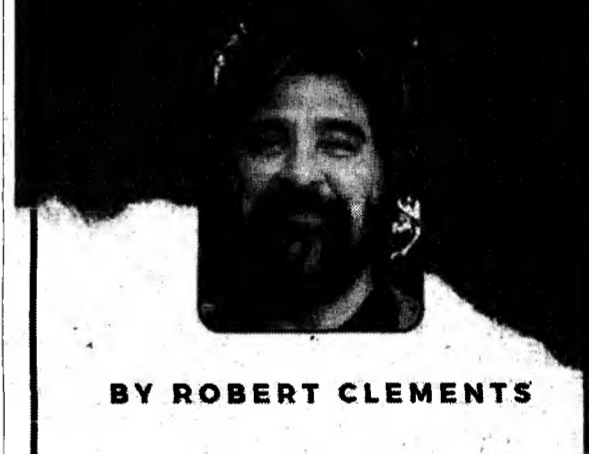
Judge Deborah was not only a judge but also a military leader in Israel. Her leadership was characterized by wisdom, courage, and faith in God. During a war, she sent for Barak son of Abinoam from Kadesh in Naphtali and said to him, "The Lord, the God of Israel, commands you: 'Go, take with you ten thousand men of Naphtali and Zebulun, going through the motions of education, just to place her higher in the marriage market."

General Barak said to her, "If you go with me, I will go; but if you don't go with me, I won't go."

"Certainly I will go with you," said Judge Deborah. "But because of the course you are taking, the honour will not be yours, for the Lord will deliver Sisera into the hands of a woman."

Deborah's decisive victory over the Canaanite gen-

## BOB'S BANTER



BY ROBERT CLEMENTS

being protective, but actually from, an inherent fear that they are not good enough.

If we are strong, confident men, let our women go out, make our public spaces safe for them. Strengthen our wives and daughters to handle a man's sneers and jeers at the workplace, and help them build muscle to become a force to be reckoned with.

When we don't, we show how weak we are.

'Love jihad!' and there's a Christian bishop who has voiced this phrase too, actually means, 'Help! He might steal my woman, because I know I am not as good as him!'

So become as good. Become as confident.

When slavery existed in America, the white man, owner of his black slaves, was quite often scared about his woman being attracted to the muscular black and many a lynching took place with no evidence that a crime by a black had been committed. And here in our country we are equally scared. Scared of an emancipated woman, scared, she will choose who she wants to be with, and because of feeling inadequate, under the guise of protection we cast them back into chimney dungeons.

Ask the Deva Gowda family, if they believe in 'love jihad,' and they will tell you yes, not realising they are the real culprits.

Empower our women, let them walk on roads, ride on trains that are safe not from those that their men like to make you think are predators, but from Member of Parliament, Prajwal Revanna, the very ones who predate and make laws, under the guise of being protectors!

Even as we discuss the Karnataka rapes and how women are being made to look weak because of in-

eral Sisera, demonstrates her strength and strategic prowess. She inspired the Israelites to trust in God and take action against their oppressors, showcasing her ability to lead both spiritually and militarily.

Now take a look at a bold queen. Queen Esther's story is one of bravery and selflessness. Despite being in a position of privilege as the queen of Persia, she risked her life to intercede on behalf of her people, the Jews, who were facing annihilation at the hands of the evil Haman. Queen Esther's courage in approaching King Xerxes without being summoned, as well as her shrewd handling of the situation, highlights her strength of character and deep faith in God's providence. Her actions ultimately led to the salvation of her people and serve as a powerful example of how a bold woman can make a difference, even in the face of great danger.

Both Deborah and Esther were bold and courageous. But where did they get their boldness from? From their men? No! Barak was scared to go to war, and said he would go only if Judge Deborah led the troops, and Esther's husband, the King of Persia killed anyone who approached him without permission.

They both got their boldness from God. And that's a message we need to learn today, that if you want to be a bold and courageous woman in today's India, your faith should be like that of Judge Deborah and Queen Esther, who living in a man's world still stepped out victorious.!

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

### Letters to the Editor

## Lavish Finance Minister of poor Meghalaya

Editor,  
Meghalaya extended its sluggish pace of development in the last 6 years plus since we have a Lavish Finance Minister in an otherwise poor State. I am stunned by the terribly bad economics of the MDA-2 Government of Meghalaya. The misplaced priorities and expansionist agenda of its main coalition partner has added to the poor state of affairs in the development front. In a poor State like Meghalaya, MDA-2 could spend Rs 9 crores in Cherry Blossom Festival of 3 days, few crores of rupees in Shillong Literary Festival of 3 days, Rs 23 crores in Meghalaya Games of 5 days; not sure how many crores are sunk in the repair of Umiyam dam and now, if reports are true, Rs 150 crores for 300 CCTVs at a cost of Rs. 50 lakhs per CCTV camera. If this report is true, it is an blatant and gross misuse of public money and friends don't be surprised if it becomes another scam in the kitty of the MDA government.

We can only wish that if Modi ji through the ED, IT department and CBI could have focused on its main coalition partners in Meghalaya in the last 10 years

rather than only on the Mamtas, Kejriwals and Sorens, we could have been saved from wastage of limited public money and some of our ministers would also have been in jail by now, perhaps on substantiated charges. But then, a party that has received Rs. 8251.8 crores from corporate houses through an opaque funding tool, itself has a lot to answer to the public of India. As disclosed by the Election Commission of India on March 17, 2024, this quantum of fund was received by the BJP through electoral bonds, since the inception of the scheme in March 2018, until the Supreme Court deemed it unconstitutional in February 2024. Naturally, the BJP cannot be expected to act like a party of saints and yet it continues to indulge in selective targeting wherever it suits them politically. Meghalaya is truly caught between the devil and the deep sea.

Yours etc.  
Prof. Lakhon Kma  
Shillong-4

## Of inner-party democracy

Editor,  
The editorial "Congress's default position" (ST May 7, 2024) made interesting reading. The editor has rightly pointed out the default position of the INC. Inner-party democracy refers to the democratic functioning within

political parties, including processes like internal elections, decision-making, and transparency. The Indian Constitution does not explicitly outline rules for controlling the behaviour of political parties. Only Section 29A (5) of the Representation of the People Act 1951 (RPA) requires political parties to be registered with the Election Commission of India (ECI). This registration is based on their performance in polls, and the ECI recognizes them as national or state parties for electoral purposes. Neither Article 324 of the Constitution nor Section 29A of the RPA explicitly empowers the ECI to control the internal organizations, structures, or election of political parties. Consequently, very little information regarding internal elections is provided to the ECI by the parties or We the people at large.

Challenges and trends within the INC.  
The Indian National Congress, like many other parties, faces the challenge of dynastic politics. Family members of top party officials often contest elections, leading to "family" constituencies. This phenomenon has resulted in the lack of internal party democracy. The distribution of election tickets sometimes reflect nepotism, resulting in many Members of Parliament (MPs) coming from political families, especially those under the age of 35. The INC's internal workings are not

always transparent, and the candidate selection process may lack clarity. The Indian National Congress has a long history of ruling this country for more than 54 years and has played a significant role in India's politics but the extent of inner-party democracy within the party remains a subject of debate.

Challenges and trends within the BJP.  
The BJP conducts internal elections, as do the Left parties which allows party members to participate in electing leaders and office bearers. However, the extent of inner-party democracy within the BJP can vary. Some argue that it is more centralized, with strong leadership influence, while others highlight its democratic processes. Like many other parties, the BJP also faces the challenge of dynastic politics. Family members of top party officials often contest elections, leading to "family" constituencies. The distribution of election tickets sometimes reflects nepotism, resulting in MPs coming from political families, especially those under the age of 35. The BJP's internal workings are not always transparent, and decision-making processes are not fully disclosed. The BJP has a brief history of ruling this country for more than 16 years and does hold internal elections but the overall level of inner-party democracy remains a subject of debate.

Inner-party democracy is crucial for promoting inclusivity, participation, and effective decision-making within political parties. It ensures that power is distributed among party functionaries, allowing diverse voices to be heard. Inner-party democracy is essential and must coexist with effective leadership. Checks and balances are designed to prevent hasty decisions but ensure broad support. In order to ensure that there is inner-party democracy, perhaps, the time has come to amend Article 324 of the Constitution and Section 29A (9) of the Representation of People Act, 1951 so that it empowers the ECI to seek information regarding transparent internal elections of political parties in India that indicate the nature of elections whether they are closed ballots or unanimous nomination and election; how many delegates voted for which position and who were these delegates. Only then can we truly call India a democracy and celebrate the dance of democracy or else we remain a flawed democracy.

Yours etc;  
VK Lyngdoh,  
Via email

## Staring at climate crisis

Editor,  
Climatologists and environmental experts have

predicted the potent danger of the gradual loss of the ozone layer that protects and acts as a layer from the ultra violet rays of the sun. They have also come up with calculative projections of environmental dangers created by human interventions like deforestation, unscientific mining of ground resources, high utilization of fossil fuels and rampant ground water extraction, leading to drinking water crisis. The rise in temperatures across the country should come as no surprise. Even in the North Eastern region which is a biodiversity hotspot, if no proper long-term efforts are pursued to put in place mechanisms for effective control against all sorts of man-made destruction of water sources through rampant mining and quarrying; high levels of air pollution and the cutting down of forests we are staring at a dangerous scenario. Perhaps the Government should go back to basics and rethink or re-ignite the Water Policy and take a pledge to reduce the anthropogenic activities that hasten climate change, before it's too late.

Yours etc..  
Dominic S. Wankhar,  
Via email

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

"Without knowledge action is useless  
and knowledge without action is futile."

— Abu Bakr

## The Shillong Times

Vol No: LKV No. 267

SHILLONG, THURSDAY, MAY 9, 2024

### Mob violence and the law

THE report that two men from Nongthliew in Eastern West Khasi Hills district who tried to rape a 17-year old girl were lynched by a mob and only later were the police informed of the incident is a wake-up call for society. The alleged rapists later died due of their wounds. This is not the first instance of mob violence in Meghalaya. People have been lynched on the accusation that they are 'nongshohnoh' (worshippers of a python (thlen) that allegedly enriches the person/family that rears it, provided it is regularly fed human blood). The above is a Khasi belief that persists even today in the rural outback. In the city people have learnt to look at the "Thlen" and "Nongshohnoh" portent with scepticism.

The question here is why a mob should take the law into their hands. What pushes a group to be so enraged as to attack the 'alleged' rapists to the point where they succumbed to their injuries. In law the dictum is that a person is innocent until proven guilty. For a mindless mob led by emotions of anger and disgust at the actions of the alleged rapists, the two men are deemed guilty because no woman would allege attempted rape unless she has been a victim of those circumstances. The other aspect is also that there are far too many such incidents involving even little girls being raped by their male family members which evokes disgust and anger. People know that the law moves at snail's pace and rapists even if arrested and face trial would at some point be released and perhaps repeat their crimes. This is why instant punishment is preferred to the long arduous route of the law.

A mob moreover is a crowd acting under strong emotional conditions that often lead to violence or illegal acts. The primary distinction between a crowd and a mob is the level of shared emotion, as well as destructive expressions of emotion. Mob violence serves a need for immediate gratification often because there is distrust of the keepers of the law. There are far too many examples of failure of the law to rise to the occasion. When the law is seen to favour those with privilege and those in power particularly those with political clout, they lose confidence in it and it frustrates them. It pushes common citizens to assume the role of judge, jury and executioner, all in one. This is why the law must be seen to be effective and impartial no matter what the stature of the law breaker. But what people see is a class of elite who get away with impunity by throwing their weight around. When this reaches a point of intolerance, mob violence is the natural corollary.

## Exploring Constructivism as effective Pedagogy in Inclusive Education

By Duggirala Sesi

The National Curriculum Framework-2005 emphasized that there is a 'need to recognize the child as a natural learner, and knowledge as the outcome of the child's own activity.' Learning for construction of knowledge is the basic presumption of constructivism which is a paradigm contrary to traditional objectivist approach. Even Noam Chomsky in his Structural Learning Theory, has emphasized the existence of innate capacity for knowledge and language learning. This emphasis is on such learning environment where children can construct their own knowledge, develop their capacities and remain an active learner. Using this understanding as pedagogy, given the increasing diversity of the student body, teachers are called to appropriately address students' various learning needs by means of differentiated instruction (DI) with the diverse group of learners in an inclusive education set up.

The NEP 2020, in its Para's, namely, Para 4.4, Para 9.3 (d), Para 11.6, Para 12.1, Para 12.2 and Para 12.6, envisions innovative pedagogical approaches and their role in higher education. The policy emphasizes the holistic development of the learners, which requires using innovative pedagogical approaches such as experiential learning, cutting edge pedagogy, art integrated learning, flipped classroom etc. The NEP 2020 is learner centric in its approach, and teachers play a pivotal role in its implementation. The policy gives teachers more autonomy in choosing aspects of pedagogy so that they may plan teaching-learning in the manner they find most effective for the students in their classrooms. However, the meaningful exercise of this autonomy and flexibility depends on the teacher's understanding of the different pedagogical approaches.

This concept of using constructivism as Instructional strategy in an Inclusive learning Environment can bridge the gap between theoretical and practical implementation of learning outcomes in addressing diversity in the classrooms. A meaning combination of different practices, methods, techniques and strategies can then help in the mastery of learning, assessment and monitoring. But the effective implementation will depend on the learner's characteristics, their specific learning pre-requisites and/or teacher's characteristics, instructional mindset and

constructivist beliefs. Constructivist models of learning are ones where children are seen as active participants in the processes of seeking out knowledge, making sense of their experiences and gaining intrinsic satisfaction from learning and solving problems. This is seen to be a transformative experience which opens up opportunities for further learning as children gain greater depth of understanding and increasingly flexible ways of representing their knowledge and dealing with new information. Related to this approach is social constructivism or socio-cultural theory. Here children's active role in learning is set in the context of their membership of social groups and communities (such as classrooms and schools) which jointly create knowledge through their engagement in purposeful and valued activities.

The inclusive pedagogical approach, then, favours classroom practices which encourage collaboration between children in learning activities which builds a sense of an inclusive community learning together. However, it is also important to be mindful what each individual brings to and gains from the complex interaction of the classroom. Hence it is not a slavish adherence to group work at all costs, but instead asks that teachers draw on their professional judgement to choose the most appropriate approach to teaching and learning in any particular context, being ever mindful about how those choices will impact on the opportunities for all children in the class. By refusing to categorize children according to perceptions of 'ability', inclusive pedagogy also calls for a reconceptualisation of professional partnership in the field of learning support. Classroom teachers and other specialists are urged to view children's difficulties in learning as professional dilemmas, and to constantly work together to seek new approaches to support children, to avoid stigmatising. By placing responsibility for all learners on classroom teachers, specialists are now seen as partners with whom to explore new ways of working with children (rather than parallel workers to whom problems can be referred). In replacing older notions of consultation and advice, this model provides opportunities for professionals to

co-construct knowledge by working with others.

A careful and discerning perusal of these innovative paradigms postulated by the NEP 2020, would redefine the already existing Constructivist approaches in the teaching-learning process. Then concept of self-learning also becomes the essence of teaching-learning strategies for all diverse group of learners who may currently be seen as promising in certain contexts include: developing thinking skills, responding to learning styles and multiple intelligences, using ICT to support learning, listening and responding to pupils' views, developing peer tutoring and group work, enhancing motivation and self-esteem, enhancing the role of the creative arts, incorporating so-called 'authentic' learning experiences, linking learning in school with learning outside school and the re-establishing the role of extra-curricular activities such as sport, clubs and outdoor activities. While innovative strategies for certain groups of pupils with SEN might include: specific planning and teaching for pupils with special needs, and more specific uses of ICT.

Hence in our new approach to using Constructivism for Diverse group of learners, we would infuse the methods of Heutagogy, Andragogy alongside Pedagogy depending on the purpose and roles, but fulfil the learning outcomes. Where - Pedagogy: The institution and teacher decide what the student will learn and how they will learn it. Heutagogy: The student decides what to learn and how and is supported by outside resources, including the teacher and Andragogy: The teaching of adults (which can be pedagogical, heutagogical, or a blend of both).

The incorporation of technology into educational contexts has catalyzed a proliferation of research initiatives and benchmarks. These endeavors have not only facilitated the structuring of academic endeavors but have also provided frameworks for the effective deployment of technological innovations in the domain of education. Through this iterative process, it has become apparent that both pedagogical strategies and instructional resources exert substantial impact on student learning outcomes. This realization highlights the criticality of

adopting a holistic vantage point encompassing teaching and learning models, while recognizing the intrinsic interdependencies among concepts and methodologies. In certain instances, the guidance of formative behaviors necessitates the provision of contextual support, which can be effectively facilitated through the adoption of a conceptual framework that encompasses multiple dimensions of mobile learning.

Integrating constructivism with universal design and culturally sustaining pedagogy provides a coherent lens for viewing students holistically as social, cultural, emotional learners and creating space in the educational setting to attend to students' social, cultural, and emotional needs. Intentionally creating spaces where students can bring their whole selves to learning across disciplines. We agree that sustaining pedagogy can broaden and deepen conversations about inclusion and access within constructivist design. Moreover, constructivist approaches to teaching and learning provide educators with a broad avenue for integrating theory and practice in the classroom. Integrating theory and practice, strategies for co-creating and sharing the space with students, facilitating authentic dialogue, and engaging in assessment. Highlighting the importance of the emotional landscape of learning and assessing classroom dynamics, we can also discuss strategies for attending to silence and voice in the multi diverse classroom. For us, access and inclusion are about developing classroom environments and curricula that welcome and validate students across a range of diverse identities including race, class, gender, ethnicity, disability, religion, and sexual orientation, and we hope that our work inspires others toward advancing a more inclusive pedagogy. The curriculum must take into consideration the various needs of the pupils to ensure "access for all". Together with flexible curricula, flexible teaching-learning methodology should be introduced. Making this a reality involves other changes in policy including shifting away from long, theoretical, general teaching and training, aspects to assisted, modified, improved and improvised subject-matters and working methods linked to appropriate teaching and training.

The contributor can be contacted at - duggiralasesi@gmail.com

## We are far removed from the principles of Rabindranath Tagore

By Uma Purkayastha

Rabindranath Tagore, the great Nobel Laureate was not only a world famous poet-philosopher but a multi-faceted genius. He was an educationist, psychiatrist, a social and educational reformer, a revolutionary patriot; and over and above all he was a great ambassador of peace and harmony. He established Shantiniketan (Abode of Peace), an ideal educational institute with a view to bring peace and harmony among diversities through education.

He started the 'Visva-Bharati' University in the town of Shantiniketan to be

emotion of the song, 'Alas! These days ear-splitting music accompanies the artists' performances everywhere, hampering the gravity of melodious Rabindra sangeet.

When 'Rabindra Jayanti' is observed on many occasions people don't even mention the name of the great poet. The new progeny takes 'Rabindra Jayanti' as an annual ritual only, but have no idea about the vast contribution of the great poet. In many places where this celebration is observed there is no provision for short speeches on Tagore and for his noble thoughts in



a place where students and teachers from the East and the West would sit together and learn from each other in a common pursuit of truth. His motto was, give and take i.e. reciprocal exchange of thought and feelings. In ev-

the programme. The opinion of the organisers is that the audience prefer the cultural programmes more, than the time-consuming speeches. As a result, the children are deprived of the opportunity to know the great personal-

He preached the message of peace and patience through his poems in 'Gitanjali' which was highly appreciated by the then well versed philosophers of Swedish society.

ery step of his life Tagore preached peace and harmony through his writings and activities.

He travelled the world with his message of love and friendship and earned huge popularity and applause, which he gratefully acknowledged in his poem:-

"Thou hast made known to me friends/whom I know not/ Thou hast given me seats in homes not my own/ Thou hast brought the distant near and made brother of the stranger"

[Translated by Tagore himself] Ref: 'Gitanjali' facsimile of the original manuscript]

He could make friends with people anywhere and they in turn loved him dearly. He was the poet who first gained for modern India a place on the world literary scene. He preached the message of peace and patience through his poems in 'Gitanjali' which was highly appreciated by the then well versed philosophers of Swedish society. It is worth mentioning that Tagore composed his 'Gitanjali' after the death of his beloved wife, a daughter, father and his youngest son. So, Gitanjali is the harvest of his extreme mental agonies from severe pain of eternal separation. As much as sorrow and sufferings were heaped upon him, he accepted them ungrudgingly; and prayed to the Almighty to give him the courage and strength to bear the pain. He expressed his emotions in the following verses:-

"Let me not pray to be Sheltered from danger/But to be fearless in facing them"

Tagore was a man of principles. He could not compromise with any sort of indiscipline in any of his work and advised his students and followers to lead a life of discipline. Unfortunately these days it is observed that to honour Tagore's memory, celebrations of 'Rabindra Jayanti' are performed in innumerable places with much fanfare but discipline is totally lacking.

Tagore did not like any loud musical accompaniment with his song. In his language, 'It murders the melody and

ity to whom they are paying tribute.

Peace and unity, concord and harmony are vanishing day by day from the society where violence and heinous activities are the daily fare of miscreants. Hence we cannot deny that we have moved away from Tagore's principle of peace, harmony, discipline and decency.

The poet welcomed people of India irrespective of caste, creed, religion and tribe to be united on the shores of the Ocean of great Humanity. The English Translation goes like this:-

"Come Ye Aryans, come non Aryans/ Hindu, Muslim, come all/ Come ye English, come ye Christian/ Come Brahmin, come one and all/ Let all unite on the shore of/ Vast Humanity, that is India"

Where is that concord and harmony in India today? The poet dreamt of an India,

"Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high/ Where knowledge is free/ Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls/ Where words come out from the depth of truth/ Into that heaven of freedom, my Father/Let my country awake."

Could we achieve that freedom? Sweetymon Rynjah, Former Deputy Registrar of North Eastern Hill University, and member of Khasi Authors' Society, wrote in her article, 'Tagore's Ideas And Their Impact On Khasi Thought', "On reading Tagore's works through English translations, it is a surprise and wonder to me why even after so many years why they have not been translated in all the languages, especially in Khasi? The present society needs such writings to read and ponder upon. Our politicians need the same for firmly establishing the spirit of integrity, solidarity and nationalism in our motherland."

Hence it is a painful fact that though we pay tribute to the great poet Tagore in a befitting manner, we are far away from his principles and morals.

### Letters to the Editor

#### Ill-mannered VIP

Editor,

I am a regular commuter through the Umiam bridge and hence had to face the notorious traffic jam at this bridge for some time now. Last week I was waiting in traffic here as always when I heard a wailing ambulance moving towards the Guwahati road. On the other hand there was another loud siren of some VIP (Very Irritating Person) overtaking the long queue and driving on the wrong side towards Shillong. Gunmen in a large jeep were ominously waving their guns and asking the ambulance to remain painfully trapped in traffic. As each precious second ticked by, I thought of the person in the ambulance whose life was being held hostage by an uncaring ill-mannered cheap-VIP that refused to make way for what was a life-threatening emergency.

The person in the ambulance could well have been my father or mother and that hit me really hard.

But VIPs don't care about a life-threatening situation or a medical emergency. The arrogant VIP's attitude of entitlement left me reflecting on the callousness of ordinary citizens and the fundamental disconnect between the public and the servants. The VIP culture in Meghalaya is omnipresent. Over the years, the numbers of VIPs have grown so large, that even the driver of elected representatives have become VIPs. Elected officials, senior bureaucrats, high ranking police, friends and relatives of elected representatives and members of political parties of the ruling dispensation all wave flags and blow loud sirens in a race for privilege. Getting roads blocked to get priority passage, having armed guards wave guns and blow loud sirens have become everyday status symbols of VIP power in our state. It is ironic that those elected to serve the people deny the very people they serve access to themselves.

Contrast this with developed democracies where equality before the law governs the demeanour of public servants. The former Governor of Massachusetts, Michael Dukakis, was famous for regularly taking public transportation even while he was Governor. Former

Prime Minister of UK Boris Johnson and Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte cycle to office every day. Imagine our Chief Minister taking public transportation or riding a cycle to work. A fundamental precept of democratic governance is equality of all citizens before the law; the rule of law applies equally to all citizens. No public servant, not even the President or Prime Minister, is above the law.

Once there was an incident where a publicly elected official in the UK was pulled aside for speeding. In Meghalaya, the police officer would have bowed in deference once he recognised the public servant. In the UK, the police officer strictly reprimanded the public servant and told him that as an elected official he had a higher duty to uphold the law to set an example for the public. The elected official apologised and quietly paid his speeding ticket. In Meghalaya, the police officer would have been abused and transferred/suspended. If our public servants could learn from their colleagues abroad, they would not be so prone to seeking privileges. Dismantling their privileged fortresses would force them to experience how democracy is undermined when VVIPs break all rules and

traffic laws. Few weeks before the Lok Sabha elections an aspiring candidate wearing jain kysrbah was seen serving tea to the public; also our Chief Minister was standing in a long queue with the general public to cast his vote. If you can show your pro-people attitude, good manners and patience before elections, why can't you do the same even when you are in power. But once elected and in power you suddenly take a 360 degree turn and blow your car sirens to your heart's content and push the common man off the road as if the road belongs to your great grandfather. Hypocrite! Absolute hypocrite. The Voice of the People Party President has once brought a notice in the state assembly about too many people behaving as VIPs in our state. My humble request to him is that if his Party ever comes to power, he should dismantle this nauseous culture because we've had enough of this boorish VIP culture in Meghalaya.

Yours etc.,  
M C Lymba,  
Shillong 08

#### Dictators don't live forever

Editor,  
The editorial "Powerful

Putin" (ST May 8, 2024) rightly pointed out that, "Putin might or might not survive the present term. Expectation among the western nations is that Russia is set for a change of leadership sooner than later." Before Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, President Vladimir Putin seemed poised to remain in power indefinitely. However, recent events have introduced uncertainty into Russia's political landscape. Under the constitutional amendments passed in 2020, Putin can potentially stay in office until 2036, when he would be 83 years old. Despite economic challenges and international tensions, Putin remains popular within Russia though approval ratings in an autocratic society may not fully reflect public sentiments.

The war has tested Russia's leadership and regime stability. The Kremlin has stabilized the political system after the mutiny of Yevgeny Prigozhin, the deceased leader of the private military company Wagner Group. However, internal elite politics and competition remain opaque and could lead to unexpected outcomes. Leadership change in Russia need

not hinge on a decisive loss in the war against Ukraine. The relationship between the two events is complex and intertwined. Putin's successor is likely to emerge from within the current system given the omnipresence of the state and the weakness of civil society. While Putin has forgone opportunities to appoint a successor in the past, elite power struggle may trigger a top-down process of change. The United States and its allies should anticipate the possibility of leadership change in Moscow. Preparing for both harmful consequences and potential opportunities is crucial. The Russian economy's strain and ongoing elite power struggles make leadership change probable. While Putin's grip on power remains strong, the dynamics within Russia suggest that leadership change is not out of the realm of possibility. The world must be ready to navigate this complex scenario.

Yours etc;  
VK Lyngdoh,  
Via email

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

"The human voice can never reach  
the distance that is covered by the still  
small voice of conscience."

— Mahatma Gandhi

## The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXV No. 268 SHILLONG, FRIDAY, MAY 10, 2024

### Politics and Pitroda

IN election time, any stick would suffice for a party or leader to beat another with. This is the time to divide the people and take advantage in terms of electoral success. Prime Minister Narendra Modi during his present campaign for the BJP was repeatedly seen picking up extraneous issues to target the opposition. The latest was the way he condemned a comment from technocrat Sam Pitroda about the mix of races among the Indian population. Prima facie, the statement by Pitroda at an event abroad as head of the Indian Overseas Congress, an adjunct to the INC, did not mean to hurt any segment of the society. But, the PM described it as an "insult" to many.

Indian society is a mosaic of various races, cultures, religions, castes and communities. This is well-understood and appreciated by one and all. In normal course, such a statement is taken in the right spirit. Migrations, invasions, resultant mix of blood etc are believed to have added to the beauty of this mosaic. Pitroda's statement was that those in the eastern states have features similar to the Chinese, those in the south have shades of Africans, those in the western region have looks similar to Arabs, etc. Each community in this country has its own charm in appearance and in their cultures that are built around them, and this is universally accepted. Stating as much is not to hurt any community or race. Pitroda added, obviously in good taste, that all these segments of the population live in harmony. Yet, the PM apparently projected the comparison of the people of the south, specifically, to Africans as an "insult". Modi's obvious intent was to electorally "hurt" the Congress. Sensing its likely lethality on the election arena, the Congress leadership went into hyper action and "accepted" Pitroda's resignation from the IOC chief post. Without doubt, the Indian society is mature enough to see through the games of politicians; and Pitroda's statement is unlikely to cause any hurt to any other than the vicious minds of the political class.

Sam Pitroda, with his eminent US exposure, came in during the 1980s as technology adviser to then PM Rajiv Gandhi. He dumped the antiquated telecommunication network and updated the sector with the latest technology. This revolutionized the field. But for this leap, India would have missed the Information Technology revolution. Today, millions of Indian youths are employed in this sector within and abroad and this country holds a high reputation in global IT. After the Rajiv Gandhi era, this technocrat had been humiliated and hounded out by the political class. Pitroda may have his idiosyncrasies, but his services would have been helpful to this nation even today.

### Letters to the Editor

#### High Level Committee or Confused Committee

Editor,  
The Committee set up by the Government of Meghalaya for relocation of families residing in Harijan Colony, has really confused the public. For example, it took more than 6 years to count from 1 to 194. I would like to thank the Hynniewtrep Youth Council (HYC) who corrected these figures through RTI. Secondly, this issue is not against any minority, but against illegal settlers/encroachers no matter what religion, tribe or caste they belong to. Immediate action should also be taken in other places like Lum Survey and Laitumkhrab, etc. Let us hope that relocation of legal settlers can be done soon, and a G+3 parking floor is constructed to ease traffic congestion/jam and poor street vendors can be provided a decent place to earn their livelihoods. We don't need shopping malls, but roads to drive freely and footpaths to walk safely on.

Yours etc.,  
D Pakyntein,  
Via email

#### Mazhabi Sikhs served an important purpose

Editor,  
Some organizations have

recently allayed apprehension that Lum Survey locality of Shillong might become another Punjabi Lane (The New Mawlong) and urged the Government to take immediate necessary action to prevent such a situation in future. Such comparison of Punjabi Lane with illegal settlers in Lum Survey exposes the lack of knowledge about the history of settlement of Sikh brethren in Shillong particularly in New Mawlong area. They had definitely not come here to illegally settle and grab land in the mid-19th century, rather, they have been brought by the British Government, allotted land for their stay and in return they have provided the greatest and invaluable service to the society - that is to keep the then non-descript hamlet, which ultimately became Shillong town, habitable and clean. As a natural consequence, their numbers had increased over the period of time and some of their offsprings have rightly engaged in other jobs as their domain of work had undergone a sea change with the advent of new technologies as well as change in law. Thus, terming the residents of Punjabi Lane who are bonafide Indian citizens as illegal settlers is nothing but a false propaganda with an eye on the land which by now has become commercially lucrative. Considering the service rendered by the community spanning over generations and centuries, the entire society should express their indebtedness and the Government should extend all possible help for their welfare and wellbeing.

# Social Media; Fleeting Attention; Issues Discussed & Abandoned

By Patricia Mukhim

If there was no social media there would have been very little discussion on why Meghalaya has had a dry run as far as tribal aspirants getting through the UPSC is concerned. As Benjamin Lyngdoh stated in his article on the same topic, even the most serious issue suffers from the short attention span that has become our lot post the invasion of social media. I have to admit that I am a social media buff too and enjoy posting stuff on Facebook essentially to create a conversation around a topic. Needless to say not many join the conversation unless one writes on Manipur where one is then certain to be trolled relentlessly with the choices of abuses. But social media also teaches you to develop a thick skin and move on to another day and another topic.

Some issues merit public discussion so that they gather traction and push the government to act. We have all seen how the government is unlikely to take pro-active steps on any issue related for instance to the environment. True, Chief Minister Conrad Sangma took pains to trek to the water catchments around Shillong but those are nothing compared to the areas where the earth has been left gaping through ruthless extraction and the reservoirs below them are left to dry out. Those are the areas that the Chief Minister and his PHE Minister should visit. In fact, some of us would love to accompany the CM to the quarries owned by his Deputy very close to the city. I had raised the question in my article last week as to who or which department gives permission for quarrying? The Mining and Geology Department? Forest Department? Pollution Control Board? District Council? Or all of them through a single window process? This is an answer sought and one hopes the Government deigns to answer this question without making us take the RTI route.

The environment is not a sexy topic hence discussion on social media on this topic gets short shrift. The problem with us today is that we sift through the information we get and only engage on hot-potato issues. But guess what those issues are. They are

mostly related to the 'jaitbyrniew' and its existential crisis. This is a topic that every Tom, Dick and Mary will dig into because rage today is a luxurious sentiment. Discussions on social media on this topic then descend to rage which in turn makes us self-righteous. More often than not this self-righteous fury consumes us and turns us into cruel authoritarian zeitgeist reliving the history of our own cruelty towards the "other." This attitude says - the enemy is out to exploit us; to take away our resources so the ends justify the means. The activism by some groups here has been performative and has seldom resulted in positive change. An issue is kick-started mainly to raise the political temperatures and then abandoned for another more sexy issue because to remain consistent on any issue means to go through a process. Processes are boring. Protests require theatrics and therefore the actors/protestors must find a new issue to ignite public interest and for the media to keep following the story and the face behind the story. That's what the leader of every pressure group wants. With YouTube journalism having proliferated and every mobile phone turning into a television screen turning a hero overnight is what everyone strives for. The next stop of course is politics... that has been the normal route of all aspiring politicians.

But what Meghalaya needs today are career politicians who don't need to don the façade of an activist - a protector and guardian of the 'jaitbyrniew' which has been painted to be so incompetent to save itself from itself that it regularly needs to throw up these avant-garde of our future. We have seen many such leaders being catapulted to power but we have also seen them being consumed by the very power play that they warned us against. Perhaps we have never spent enough time to analyse the fatal flaw of placing our trust in actors that have appeared on our political stage from time to time and promised to 'heal our world' and rid it of corruption and all the

ails afflicting us because of bad politics. Those leaders who have been catapulted from activism into politics and were on a quest to heal our world were actually on a quest for personal catharsis - not a societal liberation that they promised us. And because as a society we have moved from crisis to crisis we needed that drama. It is uncertain if we will ever be free of this existential crisis. Vincent Bevin a journalist in his book "If we burn," investigated ten protest movements between 2010-2020 in places like Egypt, Turkey, Brazil, Ukraine and Hong Kong and reached the conclusion that in seven out of the ten movements the results were worse after the protests than before and the reason is because of the flaws in the manner in which protestors organize themselves. Too often people see the leader of the organisation but don't know the character of those in the group and their reasons for joining the protest. We have seen how quickly a crowd can be summoned on an emotive issue and how the crowd has acted in such situations because a crowd is faceless.

In this sort of tumultuous society where the space for reasoned debates and discussions are receding where do our young people draw their ideas from? As it is too few read books; all consume news, including fake news from the internet and are quick to forward them. How on earth can such a batch of youth starved of enlightened discussions and debates at home, in schools, colleges and universities ever gather enough stamina to prepare themselves for the UPSC which requires a wide range of exposure to all kinds of philosophies and the ability to discuss those with spunk and a fearless demeanour. For that's what the interviewers look for in a future civil servant. The ability to defend a belief or a thought fearlessly and with reason is not encouraged in our homes and educational institutions. Such students would be shouted down by teachers because they challenge the rigid and embedded prejudices and political

stances of the latter.

Those who have prepared for the UPSC and have sailed through confide that they have had to first struggle to wean themselves away from social media. They find it disrupts their thought processes and diverts their attention from topic to topic without them gaining anything at the end of it all. Most who have qualified confess that they spend not less than 14 hours of uninterrupted study. Think about it! How many of our youth have the attention span of even one hour? We know that with the internet and social media our attention span has dropped to 8.25 seconds which is down by 4.25 seconds since 2000. We also don't know what happens to our brains with social media controlling our thoughts, behaviours and responses.

At one time the Khasi Jaintia Welfare Association used to provide free coaching for young people interested in writing the UPSC exams. There were stalwarts in that organisation. Now one does not hear of this organisation. The State Government conducts regular coaching at the Meghalaya Administrative Training Institute (MATI) but is yet to produce a single successful candidate because there is so much personal grooming and confidence building that is needed. Above all, young people need exposure to a more cruel world outside the comfort zones of their home state. Without struggle there can be no success. Those who have succeeded to crack the UPSC exams have sweated and toiled and lost sleep. They had sacrificed all their comforts and have just one solitary goal - to pass the UPSC. And they have done it! That's the kind of dedication needed.

It's a different matter though that some youth who have the potential to sail through the UPSC have said they don't wish to pursue that course. Their contention is - "What's the point of slogg to pass the UPSC if one is constantly being dictated to by politicians some of whom are uneducated and whose decisions veer around self-gratification?" This is a reality and those who stick on under such circumstances deserve a salute.

Sam Pitroda was not wrong, only his presentation was defective

## Tagore said the same - mingling of all races and colours in Bharat Tirtha

By Anjan Roy

If the noblest could be compared with the plebeian, the infinite with the infinitesimal, the dignified with the crass, then the underlying sentiments expressed by Sam Pitroda were in the same veins as Rabindranath Tagore's great poem "Bharat Tirtha". All this hyper reaction by the BJP leaders including the Prime Minister calling Pitroda as 'racist' ignores the very basis of what he actually said. He was correct in his sense of history, but the presentation was a bit defective.

In the midst of the freedom struggle, Tagore wrote a rousing poem on the inherent greatness of his country which evolved out of centuries of intermingling of streams of Humanity which had poured into the Ocean that was Bharat.

Sam Pitroda's crude comments on racial parallels of people from various parts of the country are to say the least offensive. But Tagore in his poem had referred to the confluence of Humanity in creating the Indian identity, taking the entire reference to a high philosophical vision.

Poet Rabindranath Tagore had made similar references to different races mingling into one whole that is India, as Sam had put in his silly ways. Tagore referred to the millennial comingling of religions, races and ideas for creating the nation that is Bharat.

Rabindranath wrote in his famous poem "Bharat-tirtha" how waves of races from different corners of the earth had reached India only to lose their separate identity into the great Indian narrative. Let me give a free translation of a few lines, but not the cadence or the beauty of the language:

"No one knows at whose invitation/Unstoppable flows of people/

Arrived into the Ocean that is India/ Here the Aryan, the non-Aryan,

The Dravidian, the Chinese/ The Sakas, the Huns/ The Pathans and the Mughals/ Merged into the Whole"

No one took exception to the poem and its references to different races and identities of people arriving into the sub-continent to melt into the Indian idea. But then why now?

And if Sam Pitroda can be condemned for his racist views, the reaction to his comments about divergent profiles of Indians is equally damning. This also reflects a racist stance. Greatest umbrage was expressed about some comparisons rather than to the other comparans."

To be honest, there is underlying racism within India. Pitroda has compared people from the eastern and more specifically north-eastern regions resembling the Chinese in their features.

This is nothing new. In Delhi, there have been ump-teen number of incidents when boys and girls from the north east have been intimidated and sometimes rudely evicted from their rented residences. Violence is not unknown. To the people from north eastern states for having a different look compared to the north Indians.

Pitroda has compared the west Indians to Arabs. As a matter of fact, India's historical links with the Arabs, Central Asians and the Iranians could not have been repudiated by any stretch of imagination. In the late Mughal period, Afghanistan was often ruled by Rajasthani princes.

Throughout the medieval period, scores of fortune seekers and even brigands from Central Asia, Persia, and the broad areas now known as the Middle East had come into India. They had often ended up as raiders and usurpers to power.

By the time of the late Mughal period, India's nobility, those who occupied high positions of state, were sharply ranged between Hindustani or Indo-Moslem party, that is those who were sons of the soil or domiciled for long in

the sub-continent. "To this group belonged the Afghan nobles, the Sayids of Barha, and Khan-i-Dauran whose ancestors had come from Badkshan." They comprised the Hindustani party. These Indian Muslim nobles depended for their survival on the help and support of Hindus.

The foreign nobles were of diverse origin, generally opposed to the Hindustani party. They had their own divisions. Those who came from "Transoxiana" and other parts of Central Asia, formed the Turani party. They were mostly Sunnis.

The Irani party, on the other hand, were those from the Persian territories and were of Shia dispensation. Under different Mughal emperors, competing factions were more powerful in their turn. The competing groups had in their times, controlled the key positions of state.

I had once the opportunity to meet one of the key chief secretaries of Rajasthan, a highly well-read person who boasted of a library at his home running into over 40,000 volumes. He had claimed his ancestry from the nobles of Iraq. One can hardly differentiate him from any other Indian.

These numerous descendants of the migrants from centuries before, now comprise the Indian population. It will not be incorrect to say that people from different parts do still carry their original traits.

Of all the offending parts of Pitroda's comments were those linking the south Indians to Africans based on skin colours. BJP leaders of South took up the issue with Pitroda by saying yes 'We are dark coloured, but we are proud Indians'. As such, there is a 'delusional attitude about the colour of the skin among us Indians. Anyone conversant with ancient Indian history knows that the Africans were the first lot of humans who came to India. A good section crossed the Vindhya and settled in South India. Who can deny this history? No other country, to be honest, is as apartheid as India and fair skin is always extolled.

In fact, no other country, to be honest, is as racist as some of the Indians are, including the ruling party leaders. Once again, I had a very improbable insight into this while speaking to one of the sales and marketing gurus of the Indian corporate world. Shunu Sen. He then was the marketing and sales director of Hindustan Lever.

Levers had a beauty treatment product, "Fair and Lovely" created for ladies. The company was severely criticised for selling false dreams to gullible Indians. The skin creams did not lighten the colours. So, the board of directors tasked Shunu Sen to devise a strategy for withdrawing the product from the market.

Sen embarked on a sales trip across the country to ascertain the use of the product. In that search, Shunu Sen had reached a remote village in Uttar Pradesh where he went to the local groceries shop. Prominently displayed on the dusty shelf, were a couple of packets of "Fair and Lovely" cream.

Curious, Shunu Sen asked the rustic shop-owner why he was keeping that fancy cream. Promptly, the shop-owners replied, Fair and Lovely was the most fast-moving item in the shop. Every week, fathers of marriageable daughters would buy the cream for their daughters. A little lightened skin could save them a hefty part of the cash dowry claims. Shunu Sen had advised the board of directors of Hindustan Levers not to withdraw the product. That was India three decades ago and the same attitude remains even now in the year 2024. The only fault of Pitroda was that he could not package his words properly. (IPA Service)

This way we can at least repay a minuscule portion of our debt, which we owe to them.

Yours etc.,  
D. Bhattacharjee  
Shillong-1

#### Urban apathy towards polling

Editor,  
Three phases of polling are completed and the poll percentage indicates that this time on an average there is less polling which may be due to various reasons but one factor is definitely clear. There is urban apathy for polling which is a matter of concern despite the Election Commission having made elaborate arrangements to minimise the problems for the voters such as hundred percent polling stations are being established at ground floor so that even the disabled, can cast their votes from their residence. Signs of low participation in elections is a cause of concern for Indian democracy.

With the polling for the third of the seven phase elections for 93 seats in 11 states the electoral process to form the next Lok Sabha is halfway through but till now polling is not encouraging although polling is being held in a peaceful manner leaving aside some sporadic incidents. Belated turnout figures in the first two phases released by the EC had shown that this time it was lower than that recorded in the 2019 general elections. It may take a few days before

official figures for the third phase are known but preliminary reports reaching the EC headquarters indicated that the voter turnout is unlikely to be higher in the third phase too. Poll watchers are divided on what the fall in voter participation means for electoral outcomes.

India's general election is usually held every five years in April and May, and voters and polling officials are used to dealing with the harsh summer heat. But this year, India is experiencing one of its hottest summers on record. Last month, at least nine people died due to heat-related issues as searing temperatures hit the country. While addressing a campaign rally in Maharashtra, Union minister Nitin Gadkari fainted. He later explained that the crowded venue and high temperature had made him feel uneasy. Days before that, in Kolkata where temperatures soared above 43 degree Celsius, a television anchor passed out while presenting weather updates. Extreme heat conditions may have been one of the factor's contributing to the dip in voter turnout. The extended period of the electoral process by the EC the longest since the first general election in 1951 made things more difficult.

The disquieting feature of the ongoing elections is the pronounced and sharp lowering of standards of political discourse witnessed during the election campaign. The model code of conduct prescribed for parties and candidates for unethical practices was once a potent weapon that was used by the

EC during the T N Seshan era. Despite its repeated violations during the ongoing elections, it has been reduced to a toothless forum for issuing notices. There is growing perception among opposition parties that the election watchdog is being controlled by the ruling establishment to serve its political ends. The absence of a neutral umpire seems to have resulted in loss of voters interest in the game. The low turnout is a symptom of a deeper malaise.

While exercising his voting right Modi was vocal about India's exemplary democratic process on the global stage and due to this reason many countries had adopted the election process of our country but due to the complexity of Indian elections, given India's vastness and its divided electorate, makes their execution a challenging feat and is a difficult task for the Election Commission to accomplish under so many stresses and strains.

Notably, the BJP secured victory in the Surat constituency in Gujarat uncontested. With voting in 283 Lok Sabha seats (52 per cent of total Lok Sabha seats) complete, the election is less than a month away from its logical conclusion. After four more phases, the results would be out on June 4 which the entire world is curiously watching.

As the Lok Sabha election unfolds, discernible trends and dynamics offer insights into the nation's pulse. Despite facing formidable challenges, the BJP leverages its organisational strength,

robust campaign machinery, and Modi's charismatic leadership to maintain its competitive edge. However, navigating through economic concerns, social tensions, and regional disparities presents formidable challenges.

There is low turnout in the elections and for that, fake narratives being engineered by Opposition parties and the worst among those trending narratives is that the ruling Modi government is on a downward spiral, thanks to the low percentage of polling in most parts of the country.

This narrative is outright fake (which one would realise after analysing facts properly) and is aimed at confusing the common, unsuspecting voters that they are being taken for a ride. For, there is no evidence to suggest that a low polling percentage indicates a loss of appeal for Prime Minister Mr. Narendra Modi and his Government and his Bharatiya Janata Party.

While lower polling percentage can be a matter of national concern, it may not daunt the political brains. For, as they insist, lowered polling may at the worst mean lesser popular participation in elections. This time issues taken by the Opposition parties are very tricky and only the results will show its performance.

Yours etc.,  
Yash Pal Ralhan,  
Via email

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"Thinking will not overcome fear but action will."

— W. Clement Stone

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Despicable Political Discourse

NEVER before has an election campaign played with emotions of hate and othering as this one. While analysts and election watchers have stated that with each election in this country the discourse has dropped a few rungs and personal attacks and insinuations of the opposing parties has been the hallmark. But nothing can be worse than igniting fear and hatred against a particular religion and its adherents as is happening currently. Its almost as if each political party is waiting to pounce on any salacious piece of the news about its opponents. In all of this the real issues besetting the country such as the disturbing state of the country's economy, the burden of inflation which has made life difficult for the common person outside of government's payroll. The burgeoning unemployment figures are sought to be buried by manufactured figures just as the government's achievements are blown out of proportion without any evidence of such claims. Since large swathes of the media today have turned cheerleaders of the ruling party and most media today are owned by two major corporate honchos – Ambani and Adani – both beneficiaries of government largesse it is futile to even expect anything better.

The media is supposed to inform and educate citizens about the true state of affairs prevailing in the country but since most media is compromised and the Prime Minister himself refuses to hold a press conference and be held publicly accountable for the government's performance, the public is now left to deduce about the state of the nation from whatever it is able to consume from the internet and the proliferating social media content that can, at best mislead since there is no knowing if one is being misinformed or disinforming. In a situation where the government refuses to divulge the facts and berates institutions that bring out data which are disconcerting. If data on India comes from international agencies they are labelled as being antagonistic to this country and of wanting to paint an ugly picture of India instead of prompting an introspection into the facts and figures being thrown up by organisations that are globally reputed.

The fact that no census survey was carried out in 2021 means that India today does not know exactly what its population is. Is this not a matter of concern? How do health and educational institutions work if they don't have this basic statistic? There are in fact many issues that demand serious debates during elections but they have been bypassed and substituted by hateful rhetoric. Each day the bar gets lower and election speeches have turned abusive. Is this the reason why there is a sense of fatigue among voters and consequently the low turnout rate? There is a limit to how much abuse the human mind can tolerate and while the acolytes of political parties may believe differently, the fact is that hate speeches can impact negatively on the political party adopting it as a strategy.

Letters to the Editor

Improving attention span

Editor,  
The special article "Social Media; Fleeting Attention; Issues Discussed and Abandoned" (ST May 10 2024) by Patricia Mukhim made interesting reading. There is evidence to suggest that attention spans have been affected by internet use and social media. But it is essential to recognize that this topic is complex, and the internet can vary among individuals. Studies have indeed linked social media usage to reduced attention spans. People often check their phones frequently throughout the day with estimates ranging from 49 to 80 times daily. Mobile phones, in particular, contribute to distraction. Many individuals struggle to stop checking their phones even when they should be focusing on other tasks. Platforms like TikTok and Instagram, designed for short-form content, may further contribute to shorter attention spans among high school students.

While there is a widespread perception that attention spans are shrinking due to digital distractions, long-term studies are still lacking. We do not have conclusive evidence that definitively links social media to this phenomenon. Microsoft Corporation reported that the average attention span dropped from 12 seconds to 8 seconds since the year 2000, coinciding with the surge in mobile technology. Contrary to stereotypes, all age groups struggle with phone-related distractions. Middle-aged individuals also find it challenging to focus when faced with mobile notifications. The emergence of "goldfish generation" which refers to a group of people who grew up with smartphones and other digital technology has only complicated matters. The implication is that this exposure to technology results in a shorter attention span and poorer memory that our collective ability to concentrate has diminished due to digital distractions. While there is evidence suggesting a connection between social media and attention spans, it is essential to approach this topic with nuance. Factors like individual differences, technology use patterns, and other environmental influences play a role. As we navigate the digital age, understanding these dynamics can help us find a balance between connectivity and maintaining focus. Strategies that can help attention span: Improving attention span involves a combination of lifestyle adjustments and cognitive practices. Some strategies to enhance focus and concentration like mindfulness techniques, such as meditation and deep breathing exercises, can help improve attention. Regular practice enhances self-awareness and reduces mental clutter. Using mindfulness apps like Headspace or Calm can help to an extent. Chunking information or tasks into smaller segments makes them more manageable. Focusing on one chunk at a time prevents overwhelm and improves attention. For example, if a person is studying it helps to break down the material into smaller sections and tackling them sequentially. Adequate

Structural Violence Fuels Ethnic Clashes in Manipur

By Michael KC Thanga and Suanmuanlian Tonsing

MAY 3, 2023 - the date would strike a chord in our collective memory as a black-letter day as two communities were pulled apart, neighbours who lived together for years separated, and friends turned into enemies. It has been more than a year since violent clashes erupted sporadically in the state of Manipur. In a fateful turn of events, a 'Tribal Solidarity March' held in the hill districts of our northeastern state escalated into violent clashes between the Meitei and Zo-Kuki communities. The catalyst? Substantial amount of people in the Meitei community's fervent demand for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status.

Historically, the three primary ethnic groups—Meiteis, Zo-Kukis, and Nagas—have coexisted, each finding their niche within the state's diverse geography. The Meiteis predominantly inhabit the valley, the Zo-Kukis the southern hills, and the Nagas the northern hills. However, until last May, these communities had never experienced such absolute and hostile segregation. As we confront the aftermath, a question lingers in hindsight: What simmering tensions lay beneath the surface? This article attempts to probe into the structure of violence as such retrospectively. We felt the need to address such structures that persist in the periphery that accompanies violence.

Violence transcends isolated acts and hints at a more complex and troubling reality. It is a cyclical phenomenon rooted in history and fueled by constant tension. In the context of the Manipur conflict, the persistent anticipation of violence from the opposing group may have played a significant role in the outbreak of unrest. The imminent threat of death was already embedded in the movement of bodies propelled into flight - bodies succumbing to panic, bodies ensnared by the physics of terror, bodies that were forced to actualize that threat.

To quote Townsend, Insecurity can take many forms, but nothing else plays quite so sharply on our sense of vulnerability... we found ourselves in an apparently

open-ended and permanent state of emergency.

Terrorism

It might be tempting to reduce the nature of conflict aggression as just another mindless instance of radical terrorism or mere aspirations for getting more power. But that's an oversimplification. We need to probe further. What are the underlying political, educational, and societal conditions that foster an environment where hate, racism, and bigotry become the prevailing narrative of a society or worldview? How

A peculiar feature of the Ethnocide model is to deny the Other's differences simply by reducing them to the identical, preferably fitting the model they propose on the Other's identity, thereby negating it. The horizon upon which the ethnocidal identification is founded is based upon at least one hypothesis. That is hierarchical: there are superior and inferior cultures, and the yardstick of the majority (of the Meiteis) is that they are superior. This identification is operative in the present

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do politicians, with their racially charged and combative rhetoric, contribute to these emerging landscapes of violence? How has violence been normalised overtime against the Other group, which is significantly akin to Gramsci's model of hegemony, where some aspects of aggression appear natural and normal after the secured consent of the social order?

Structural Violence  
Closer examination reveals that a particular structural determination hitherto animates this violence whose nature goes beyond (although not isolated to) a supposedly universal understanding that focuses on specificities of history, topography, population and case studies. This structural determination touches upon the conditions of one's existence, manufacturing and changing it over time. It signals not only the physical destruction of a particular racial minority (genocide) but also the destruction of their culture. It is an Ethnocide which aims at the destitution of the vision of the Other, a supposed outsider.

conflict in Manipur; thereby, the minorities got spitefully rebranded in slanderous labels as refugees, primitive, nomads, insurgents, terrorists and so on.

The radical play of subtraction and addition of the Other's identity is part and parcel of the attempted hegemonic inscription upon the Zo-Kuki tribes. One must not overlook the violence that these labels insinuate. For instance, the iteration of the word refugee—refugee signifies being stripped of one's 'inalienable' rights and humanity and is often easily demonized. Moreover, refugees are frequently perceived as a risk to the human rights of local populations rather than being recognized and treated as a vulnerable group seeking to reclaim the rights they have been forcefully deprived of. Labelling is an operation that demonises and negates the Other's identity—to dehumanise the enemy—to carry out effective executions of killing by minimising the sense of guilt.

It is crucial to acknowledge that acts of violence often occur with the inten-

tion of promoting specific lifestyles rather than being driven by a senseless desire for destruction. The individuals involved in such acts frequently perceive themselves as champions of life, striving to maximize their own interpretation of existence. They view themselves as the 'true humanists', combating a 'culture of death' (in this instance, the Zo-Kuki tribes) in the pursuit of upholding 'the value of life'. These reflections expose that the wickedness of domination arises not solely from a desire for annihilation and death, as traditionally insinuated, but also from an aspiration to 'maximize life'.

The Spectacle and Violence of Victimhood

In today's world, numerous groups strategically position themselves as the indisputable victims of violence and hardship, aiming to establish their moral rights. In history, the label of a war or genocide victim was once a mark of shame, symbolizing an inability to resist aggression. However, the narrative has dramatically shifted in recent decades. The victim status now commands respect and has even become a subject of competition, leading to debates about who the real victims are and who suffers the most.

Victims are often deemed sacred and are imbued with symbolic significance to endorse further violence and devastation. In other words, the spectacle of a truly unbearable moment is politically exploited to authorize additional violence in the victims' names, setting up a scenario where a violent reaction becomes unavoidable. The victim identity can yield political advantages, and, more importantly, it can foster a sense of moral superiority and innocence.

It's crucial to acknowledge that victims and perpetrators do exist, and responsibility and abuse vary in degrees because not all actors bear equal guilt. As Primo Levi reminds us, being a victim does not automatically grant a certificate of innocence. We bear responsibility for our actions and inactions, our wrongs and indifference, and our denials and dismissals, both before and after we become victims.

Election commission abdicating constitutional responsibility to hold impartial polls

It is imperative that Supreme Court steps in to restore integrity of the institution

By P. Sudhir

Elections to half the seats in the Lok Sabha have been completed with the third phase of polling being over on May 7. This has provided enough experience and time to assess how the Election Commission (EC) has gone about superintending the conduct of a free and fair poll. The verdict in this matter can only be that it has failed badly.

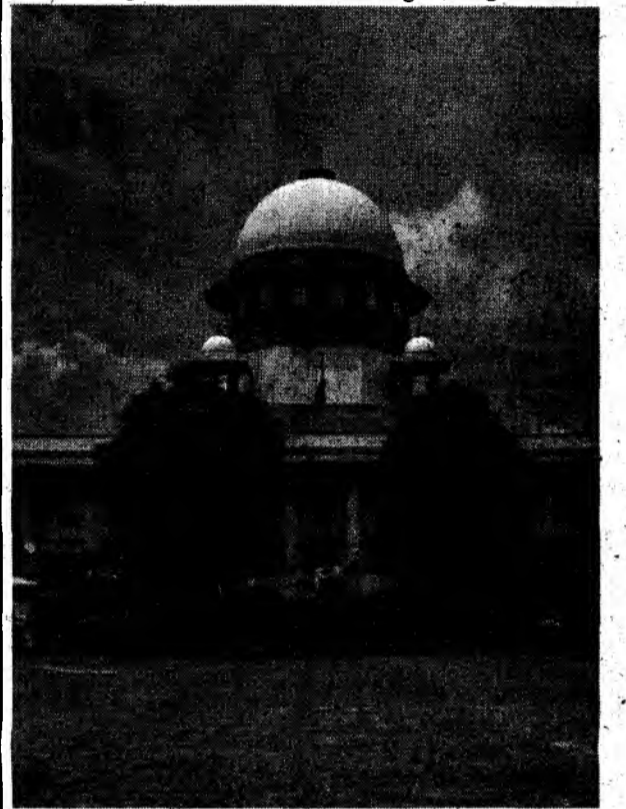
All the apprehensions about the work of the EC, two of whose commissioners were appointed just three days before the announcement of the election schedule, are proving to be true.

The EC has not discharged its elementary responsibility of enforcement of the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) and ensuring a level playing field for all parties. Contrary to the self-satisfactory statement issued by the EC about its record on enforcement of MCC during the first month

In the latest instance, when the Karnataka BJP state unit brought out objectionable videos targeting Muslims which were posted on the social media platform X, based on a complaint, the EC directed the X platform to takedown the video. However, by the time this direction was given the final phase of polling in Karnataka was over and the video has not yet been taken down.

The EC seems more prompt in taking action on complaints about personal attacks on candidates or making false allegations against parties, but does not want to take any action against hate speeches and Hindutva propaganda to create communal polarisation.

There is also a marked deterioration in the efficiency and technical expertise of the Commission. The EC, till a decade ago had a good record



since the announcement of elections on March 16, the period saw the EC abdicating its responsibilities.

First of all, the EC was a silent spectator to the State sponsored repression of opposition leaders. The national convener of Aam Aadmi Party and chief minister of Delhi, Arvind Kejriwal, was arrested on March 21, five days after the announcement of the elections and the MCC coming into force. The EC should have issued an advisory to all the central agencies not to take any coercive action against leaders of political parties during the period of elections. But this was not done. The income tax department froze the national bank account of the Congress party and later the CPI(M) Thiruvananthapuram district committee's bank account. The aim was to financially cripple the parties concerned during the election campaign.

The most glaring lapse as far as the enforcement of the MCC is concerned, is the refusal to take any action against the rabidly communal speeches being made by prime minister Narendra Modi. The complaint lodged by the CPI(M) general secretary against the speeches made by Modi in Ajmer on April 6 and Pilibhit on April 9 accusing opposition parties of being against Lord Ram, "insulting Lord Ram" and "harbouring hatred of Ram Temple" was totally ignored.

After that when Modi made a bigoted speech demonising Muslims in Banswara on April 21, complaints were lodged by various parties and prominent citizens. The response of the EC was not to issue notice to the person who made these speeches, instead notice was issued to the BJP president JP Nadra. Till now, that is nearly two weeks after, there has been no response from the BJP president, except to ask for extension of time twice to reply. In the meantime, Modi has continuously kept up a barrage of speeches filled with communal content and inciting passions against the opposition.

in conducting and managing the mechanics of polling and its statistical compilation. This solid reputation has been eroding over the last few years. After the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, the final figures of polling in absolute numbers, constituency-wise, state-wise and all India-wide were provided only after two years. This time too, after the first and second phase of polling, it took eleven days after the first phase polling for the final voting percentages to be announced. The second phase final percentage of polling was given four days after and there was a nearly six percentage point increase. The EC has not given any explanation for this unusual increase. Moreover, the absolute number of votes polled either at the constituency level, state or all India level has not been provided. These numbers must be available with the EC, since only then can the percentages be worked out. If there is any discrepancy, it can be found only by comparing it with the absolute numbers polled. The EC has not come forward to give any explanation for not providing the full data.

A 'tame' Election Commission which cannot stand up to the executive or the ruling party can never discharge the constitutional duty assigned to it which is "superintendence, direction and control of elections". The shadow of what happened to Ashok Lavasa who was an election commissioner at the time of the 2019 Lok Sabha elections must be haunting the present commissioners. The EC is the vital institution which can safeguard the conduct of a free and fair poll. After these elections it will be essential to take all the necessary steps required to restore the independence and integrity of the commission. The first step, in that, would be to amend the law on appointment of election commissioners passed by the Modi government in 2023. The Supreme Court, which had suggested a different procedure, should step in to ensure that this is done. (IPA Service)

Wanted a scientific temper

Editor,

A boy asked an idol maker whether Durga riding on a lion and fighting with Mahisasur was true, in Satyajit Ray's film "Joy Baba Felunath" ("The Elephant God"). The idol maker told the boy how he could even ask such a question since it was written by the sages. This made the boy conclude that every character, be it Mahisasur or Hanuman or Tarzan or Phantom, was real!

An unscientific temper tends to erase the line between real and fictional characters. It is a matter of grave concern that some politicians and academics are trying to erase that line when they say the Puspak Vimaan, mentioned in the Ramayana, were modern aeroplanes, Rama's arrows were present-day missiles, the Kauravas were test-tube babies, or Rayana had 24 types of present-day aircraft and guided missile technology.

There is a need to challenge our brains by engaging in activities that require mental effort, such as puzzles, crosswords, or learning a new language. Novel experiences stimulate neural pathways and improve attention. Improving attention span is a gradual process. We can experiment with these strategies and find what works best for us.

Yours etc;  
VK Lyngdoh,  
Via email

which is used for transportation, as a new scientific discovery! While the author of Harry Potter, JK Rowling thought outside the box and wrote about some fictional gadgets and machines that captivated the readers of her books, it would be ludicrous to say that now Britons use broomsticks for transport.

JK Rowling can get a Nobel Prize in literature for her Harry Potter books that captivate the imagination of children across the globe. But imagine how funny it would be to recommend her for a Nobel Prize in Physics for inventing broomstick vehicles!

According to American psychologist Stanley Milgram, obedience is one of the prerequisites for a social organisation. But it can also come to a sticky end making humans vulnerable to tyranny. Indeed, mass obedience is fertile ground for tyranny. So, our obedience must be combined with a spirit of inquiry for the survival of democracy. In fact a spirit of inquiry is an antidote to tyranny. The king in Satyajit Ray's HIRAK RAJAR DESHE rightly said, "The more they learn, the less they obey."

The Constitution of India says that it is a fundamental duty of every citizen of our country to develop a spirit of inquiry. According to Article 51A (h), "It shall be the duty of every citizen of India to develop the scientific temper, humanism and the spirit of inquiry and reform."

It is reported that the Ayush ministry is sponsoring a workshop on "garbh sanskar", hosted by the University of Patanjali on May 9. The college said in a note on the workshop, "This is

evident from the mythological stories of Abhimanyu and Prahlad on how garbh sanskar had a positive effect on the foetus."

Medical experts, including a section of ayurveda physicians, described it as an attempt to mix mythology with science. It may not be out of place to mention that Ramdev and Balakrishna had last month apologised in the Supreme Court for publishing misleading advertisements promoting specific products from Patanjali Ayurveda for certain health disorders.

In the Mahabharata, Abhimanyu learned how to break through the chakrayuha formation while he was in the womb. G. L. Krishna, an ayurveda physician and scholar at the National Centre for Biological Sciences, Bangalore, rightly said, "Myths shouldn't be summoned as proof of ancient medical achievements or knowledge."

He further clarified, "Understanding and interpretation of sounds requires cognitive processes that develop in infancy and childhood. To believe that a foetus can understand complex war details is a fantasy that neither ayurveda nor science endorses. It's much like the Prime Minister's suggestion some years ago that Ganesha's elephant head implied that ancient India had plastic surgery."

Yours etc.,  
Sujit De,  
Kolkata

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

# Can organ transplant change someone's personality?

Changes in personality following a heart transplant have been noted pretty much ever since transplants began. In one case, a person who hated classical music developed a passion for the genre after receiving a musician's heart. The recipient later died holding a violin case.

In another case, a 45-year-old man remarked how, since receiving the heart of a 17-year-old boy, he loves to put on headphones and listen to loud music - something he had never done before the transplant.

A recent study suggests that heart transplant recipients may not be unique in experiencing personality changes. These changes can occur following the transplantation of any organ.

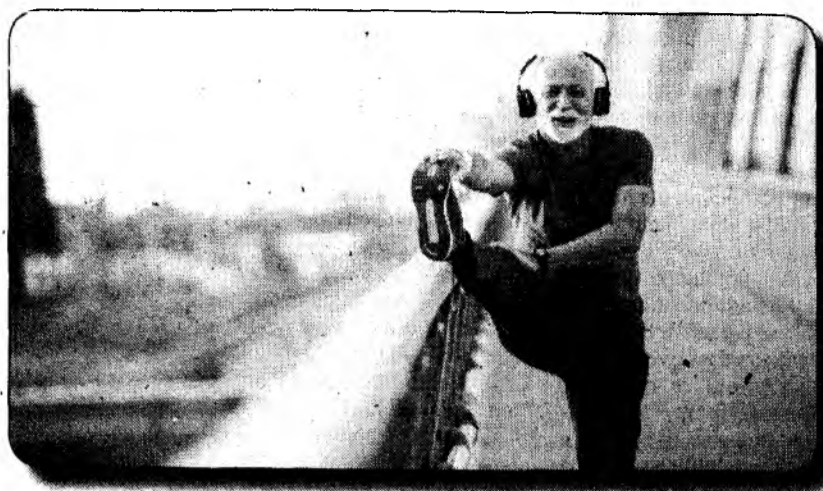
## What might explain this?

One suggestion could be that this is a placebo effect where the overwhelming joy of receiving a new lease on life gives the person a sunnier disposition. Other transplant recipients suffer from guilt and bouts of depression and other psychological issues that might also be seen as personality changes.

However, there is some evidence to suggest that these personality changes aren't all psychological. Biology may play a role, too.

The cells of the transplanted organ will perform their expected function - heart cells will beat, kidney cells will filter and liver cells will metabolise - but they also play a role elsewhere in the body. Many organs and their cells release hormones or signalling molecules that have an effect locally and elsewhere in the body.

The heart seems to be most commonly associated with personality changes. The chambers release peptide hormones, including "atrial natriuretic peptide" and "brain natriuretic peptide", which help regulate the balance of fluid in the body by affecting the kidneys.



They also play a role in electrolyte balance and inhibiting the activity of the part of our nervous system responsible for the fight-or-flight response. The cells in charge of this are in the hypothalamus - a part of the brain that plays a role in everything from homeostasis (balancing biological systems) to mood.

So the donor organ, which may have a different base level of hormones and peptide production from the original organ, could change the recipient's mood and personality through the substances it releases.

It has been shown that natriuretic peptide levels are higher following transplantation - and never return to normal. Although some of the elevation is probably a response to the trauma of surgery, it may not account for everything.

## Memories stored outside the brain

The body stores memories in the brain. We access them when thinking or they can be triggered by sight or smell. But memories are basically neurochemical processes where nerves convey impulses to each other and exchange specialised chemicals (neurotransmitters) at the interface between them.

While in transplant surgery, many of the nerves that govern the function of the organ are cut

and are not able to be reattached, this doesn't mean that the nerves within the organ do not still function. In fact, there is evidence that they may be partially restored a year after surgery.

These neurochemical actions and interactions could feed into the nervous system of the recipient, enacting a physiological response that then affects the recipient's personality according to memories from the donor.

We know that cells from the donor are found circulating in the recipient's body and donor DNA is seen in the recipient's body two years after the transplant. This again poses the question of where the DNA goes and what actions it may have.

One thing it does is stimulate immune responses. These immune responses may be enough to trigger personality changes as long-term, low-level inflammation is known to be able to change personality traits, such as extroversion and conscientiousness.

Whichever mechanism, or combination of mechanisms, is responsible, this area of research warrants further investigation so that recipients can understand the physical and psychological changes that could occur following surgery. *(The Conversation)*

# Doing a job you find meaningful is great - until it consumes your life

Securing a job that you find meaningful - work that you think is significant and value positively - may be one of your most important career goals.

But there can be a negative side to doing work that you're passionate about. It can lead to placing too much of your sense of self in your work - and strain on your mental health and relationships.

People who derive a strong sense of meaningfulness from their work may overidentify with their professional roles. This means that their work becomes their primary, and sometimes only, source of self-definition and self-worth: they see their identity only as someone who does that job, and that their value comes only from work.

This can result in high work commitment and dedication with porous boundaries between personal and work domains. If this is the case for you, you may find that work consumes a significant portion of your time, attention and energy. You may find yourself working long or erratic hours, and perhaps struggling to mentally disconnect from work even when not working.

You might end up sacrificing sleep, hobbies and relationships. And this can have compounding effects over time. Prioritising your work over yourself and going without time for recovery can result in exhaustion, chronic stress and burnout.

Meaningful work can also lead to people neglecting their relationships. Doing work you consider meaningful that becomes a high priority can leave little room for nurturing connections with family, friends and communities outside employment. This can lead to missed social gatherings and forgotten relationship milestones. It may also mean giving lower priority to the everyday interactions with loved ones that make up the core of your relationships with them.

Prioritising work over people can also undermine the trust essential for close personal relationships. The loved ones of people who attach such high value to their work may feel they cannot rely on their presence or emotional availability.

Organisations may knowingly or unknowingly exploit the dedication of people who experience their work as meaningful. Your employer might take advantage of your commitment by expecting you to work long hours, take on additional responsibilities or accept lower pay compared to market standards. Meaningful work can be used as an excuse for strategic decisions from companies to invest inadequately in people and working conditions.

Employees themselves may be willing to make

sacrifices. If you work in a career you find deeply meaningful, you may find yourself tolerating poor working conditions or unreasonable demands. You might voluntarily take on extra work.

For example, a passionate teacher might voluntarily take on extra unpaid duties, such as organising after-school programmes or mentoring struggling students, to compensate for systemic issues at the expense of their personal life. While these sacrifices may initially seem worthwhile, they are a recipe for burnout, resentment and a sense of being taken for granted.

It might also make changing jobs difficult. You might put off leaving a role or organisation, or find the very prospect of changing jobs emotionally daunting. If you get a strong sense of purpose and identity from your work, it can be challenging to envisage yourself in a different context. But this could mean missing out on career and pay opportunities elsewhere.

## Sense of self

Doing meaningful work is an opportunity to be authentic to your values and beliefs. Over time, though, it can lead to an erosion of your sense of authentic self.

For instance, the pursuit of meaningful work can lead to moral dilemmas when workplace expectations or practices conflict with ethical principles, particularly in commercial settings.

For example, a sustainability consultant may find that the only measure a client is willing to work with them on are greenwashing campaigns to make the company look better. Accepting this contract pits the consultant's dedication to sustainability against the realities of working in a commercial setting.

In situations like this, people may feel torn between their dedication and working conditions. Suppressing your values can lead to feelings of guilt, shame and disillusionment, eroding the very sense of meaning and authenticity that your work brings you.

And if work is your primary source of validation and identification, setbacks and failures can trigger questioning - not only of your professional capabilities but also of your very purpose and self-worth.

Meaningful work can be a double-edged sword. It requires careful management of its all-consuming nature. But maintaining this delicate balance between the power and pitfalls of meaningful work is not just a task for individuals. Organisations need to develop a foundation of working conditions that centre respect, care and fairness to avoid exploiting people and harming their wellbeing. *(The Conversation)*

# Sleep wrinkles are real; here's how they leave their mark



You wake up, stagger to the bathroom and gaze into the mirror. No, you're not imagining it. You've developed face wrinkles overnight. They're sleep wrinkles.

Sleep wrinkles are temporary. But as your skin loses its elasticity as you age, they can set in. Here's what you can do to minimise the chance of them forming in the first place.

## How side-sleeping affects your face

Your skin wrinkles for a number of reasons, including ageing, sun damage, smoking, poor hydration, habitual facial expressions (such as grinning, pouting, frowning, squinting) and sleeping positions.

When you sleep on your side or stomach, your face skin is squeezed and crushed a lot more than if you sleep on your back. When you sleep on your side or stomach, gravity presses your face against the pillow. Your face skin is distorted as your skin is stretched, compressed and pulled in all directions as you move about in your sleep.

You can reduce these external forces acting on the face by sleeping on your back or changing positions frequently.

Doctors can tell which side you sleep on by looking at your face

In a young face, sleep wrinkles are transient and disappear after

waking. Temporary sleep wrinkles can become persistent with time and repetition. As we age, our skin loses elasticity (recoil) and extensibility (stretch), creating ideal conditions for sleep wrinkles or lines to set in and last longer.

The time spent in each sleeping position, the magnitude of external forces applied to each area of the face, as well as the surface area of contact with the pillow surface, also affects the pattern and rate of sleep wrinkle formation.

Skin specialists can often recognise this. People who favour sleeping on one side of their body tend to have a flatter face on their sleeping side and more visible sleep lines.

## Can a night skincare routine avoid sleep wrinkles?

Collagen and elastin are two primary components of the dermis (inner layer) of skin. They form the skin structure and maintain the elasticity of skin.

Supplementing collagen through skincare routines to enhance skin elasticity can help reduce wrinkle formation.

Hyaluronic acid is a naturally occurring molecule in human bodies. It holds our skin's collagen and elastin in a proper configuration, stimulates the production of collagen and adds hydration, which can help slow down wrinkle formation. Hyaluronic acid is one of the most

common active ingredients in skincare creams, gels and lotions.

Moisturisers can hydrate the skin in different ways. "Occlusive" substances produce a thin layer of oil on the skin that prevents water loss due to evaporation. "Humectants" attract and hold water in the skin, and they can differ in their capacity to bind with water, which influences the degree of skin hydration.

## Do silk pillowcases actually make a difference?

Silk pillowcases can make a difference in wrinkle formation, if they let your skin glide and move, rather than adding friction and pressure on a single spot. If you can, use silk sheets and silk pillows.

Studies have also shown pillows designed to reduce mechanical stress during sleep can prevent skin deformations. Such a pillow could be useful in slowing down and preventing the formation of certain facial wrinkles.

Sleeping on your back can reduce the risk of sleep lines, as can a nighttime routine of moisturising before sleep.

Otherwise, lifestyle choices and habits, such as quitting smoking, drinking plenty of water, a healthy diet (eating enough vegetables, fruits, nuts, seeds, healthy fats, yogurt and other fermented foods) and regular use of sunscreens can help improve the appearance of the skin on our face. *(The Conversation)*

## 'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, May 12, 2024

### 'Birthday Forecast'

Moon square Rahu on your solar return chart ensures an eventual year that will bring mix results. You would be looking for new avenues in your job but will find things a bit tough. You will have to really slog hard to get the desired results. You may get a good job but it will be not up to your expectations. Somehow you will be able to maintain normal relations with your colleagues and superiors. Your financial position will be average. Yet you will keep on making efforts to make the life better. However, you will be blessed with a very fruitful and satisfying family life. Achievements of children will give you immense joy. You will also visit exotic locations with your family for fun and relaxation.

### This week for you'

**Aries: (March 21 - April 20)** Your endeavors, confidence and courage bring success in monetary gains and your energy increases for work projects and your job environment is lively. This is a time for self-expression when you have lots of energy, but not necessarily the self-discipline to match. You express yourself creatively, through activities with children, romantic hobbies, or sports, short trips, and other forms of communication and making connections, appeal strongly. It is easier than usual to be sensible about your diet, health, hygiene, and fitness needs.

**Taurus: (April 21 - May 21)** This phase brings love, harmony and entertainment in professional and personal relations. Your mind is often distracted, particularly when required to stick to a routine. You might spend a lot of time in traveling and visiting friends and relatives. You are slightly more defensive and certainly more protective than usual. You might engage in arguments with, or on behalf of, those closest to you. Focus and a centering of thoughts is called for to achieve a balance. Your attention to the logical world of reason is a focus.

**Gemini: (May 22 - June 21)** 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. This enables you to make headway on the professional front. You will be considerably more productive, healthy, and focused. Extra care should be exercised when it comes to writing letters, emails, making phone calls i.e. with communications in general. It would also be wise to double-check your communications before sending them off. Your mind is especially inquisitive, when learning, short trips, and other forms of communication and making connections, appeal strongly.

**Cancer: (June 22 - July 22)** This is favorable week for hobbies, sports and competitive exams. You display great skills that win you appreciation and bring about an opportunity to travel. Beware of a covetous and suspicious person around you who could cause misunderstanding in your personal relationships. You would be able to maintain peace and harmony at home. You try to be just and fair when making decisions, as you do your best to see both sides of an issue and be objective. Artistic self-expression is important, possibly through music, fashion and writing. People notice and admire you for your pleasant and cheerful personality.

**Leo: (July 23 - August 23)** There will be an increase in confidence, courage and efforts at the work place. It's a great time to do something entirely new and pioneering. Discussions and ideas about finances and material security figure strongly. You may spend extra money on things that will make your life more comfortable and pleasant. Work that needs to be done in and around the home becomes a priority. You may seek opportunities to boost your feeling of security and comfort. Although you like the good things of life and may spend quite a bit 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)** There will be cordial relations among family and relatives. Friends and loved ones take priority. People at work might be surprised by your ability to assert yourself and your needs. You don't find yourself lacking in opportunities to socialize. You are likely to enjoy a strong feeling of happiness and solidarity in friendship, or with groups of like-minded

individuals. You are more peace loving than usual and slightly detached on a personal level and feeling towards religion is enhanced. This is a good time for research and meditation; but do avoid being dragged down by issues that have outgrown their worth and purpose.

**Libra: (September 23 - October 23)** This period brings success, responsibility and maturity. Loyalty and sensitivity in your relationships are more important to you. You are especially fond of domestic life and look to the home and family. You are more receptive and gentle on a romantic level, and tend to be sentimental or nostalgic now. You may particularly value the aesthetics in and around your home during this period. If things are chaotic on the home front, you will do whatever you can to create a peaceful and stable atmosphere. You might explore various ways to increase personal funds, resulting in more than one avenue for monetary gain this week.

**Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22)** This phase is good for money, family, status and happiness. More loving relationships with your children may also figure now. Your magnetism skyrockets. Yet, you are not aggressive in your approach to love. Instead, you attract more if you allow yourself to be pursued. Creative self-expression of any kind is favored. At this time, you instinctively know how to place yourself in the best light in order to make a good impression on others. Any love affair begun now will be characterized by good cheer, having fun, and a fair share of emotions.

**Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21)** Public relations work, promotion and other such endeavors are highlighted. You are looking to expand your activities, and you may find that you have a lot of energy for travel, or brand new subjects to broaden your mind. Diplomacy, correctness in manner, finesse, and charm will be a big plus in aiding financial gains, especially in areas requiring public contact. You feel attracted to intelligent people with whom you can communicate well and exchange ideas during the week. You know how to relate to others and you do it in a natural and warm manner. Your mind is especially inquisitive, when learning or establishing communications. You use information and data, and the weight of knowledge and experience and utilize it judiciously.

**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. Spending time with someone special is a focus. Smoothing out your close personal relationships and creating stronger bonds is what makes you happy now. You pour more energy into self-promotion or business activities. 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. Foreign places may particularly appeal now. You tend to be expansive and generous when it comes to love.

**Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18)** Conflicts with a partner over values or personal possessions are likely to occur. There may be the need to revisit old, pending issues regarding personal finances. Take this time to re-budget instead of making premature purchases. Hold off on decision-making regarding money; instead, take the time to re-think your sources of income and how you spend your cash during this period. Put off finalizing anything important for the time being. In fact, some money-making ideas or ventures may be put on hold due to circumstances beyond your control.

**Pisces: (February 19 - March 20)** It's a generous, pleasantly emotional and creative time. You will enjoy artistic, musical, or cultural events and activities. This is a good time to promote harmony and good will on the job. 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. You have an increased interest in your own possessions. You are more attracted to objects and possessions that give you a sense of comfort, status and luxury.

*"Adversity causes some men to break;  
others to break records."*

—William Arthur Ward

## The Shillong Times

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SHILLONG, MONDAY, MAY 13, 2024

### Bluff and bluster

NARENDRA Modi might not meet with his Waterloo in the present parliament polls; but it is also clear by now that he's going to be far down from his aim of 400 plus seats. As the nation crossed three of the seven phases of the general elections and heads for the fourth today, the mood of the electorate is bordering on boredom. To blame it on the high heat of the summer is one way of justifying the fall in the voter-turnout in successive phases; but another temptation is to guess that Modi's performance so far and his Guarantees for this election failed to enthrone the electorate.

Out of jail, Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal sought to catch the bull by its horns by saying Modi's present aim is to win the polls and then hand over the reins to Amit Shah. True, Modi would cross age 75 by September this year, and by his own law, this is time for those in public life to hang up their boots. He craftily got this done in the case of LK Advani, MM Joshi etc, virtually wiping out the top layer of the BJP in one sweet go in 2014. Modi cannot be arguing that this law does not apply to him. Worse, Kejriwal sought to nail Modi on another front too, by saying that the PM was trying to sideline Yogi Adityanath, another claimant for the PM post after the Modi era. That Kejriwal hit the BJP where it hurts was evident from the immediate rebuttal of these charges by Amit Shah himself. Such issues are bound to exercise the voters' mind even as about half of the polling is already over. These, or the promise by way of the 10 guarantees from Kejriwal that the army would be given the full freedom to take back the land that China took from India since 1962 might enthrone many. This has a whiff of fresh air.

Modi, on the other hand, repeatedly targeted Muslims in the current campaigning for no special reason other than that he seemed to run out of ideas to whip up the mood of the electorate. The BJP's election manifesto itself was seen as a damp squib, it having failed to come up with any imaginative attempts to reassure the people that good days are ahead. Yet, it should require gumption on the part of Modi to say, at the end of his 10 years of governance, that what he provided the nation so far was only a "trailer" of what he would do in the next term. When he started in 2014, what he sought was two terms, which however failed to energize the nation.

# Looking South: Our Neighbour and Friend

By H H Mohrmen

Former Prime Minister AB Vajpayee said: "You can change friends but not your neighbours." On a similar note, martial artist Jackie Chan also said: "You can choose your friends but not your neighbours," but what one learns from visits and interactions with the people who live at the border is that, "you can't change your neighbour, so you technically cannot avoid them, but you can choose how to engage with them."

### Unpleasant situation at the border

In the recent past, two precious lives were lost at the border, both related to alleged smuggling businesses. There were reports of skirmishes between the Border Security Force (BSF) and local people in certain sections of the border. Media reported a bridge collapse with overloaded trucks heading towards the border, carrying sugar. The Shillong Times also carried a detailed report on sugar smuggling to Bangladesh. Cattle, and now buffaloes, are smuggled from the border to Bangladesh. At one point, there was a press report that the BSF was compelled to become cow herders at the border because there was no one to take care of the cows seized while being smuggled across.

Smuggling is rampant not only in this sector of the border but everywhere, with everything smuggled to and from neighboring countries. In Meghalaya, the border is like a proverbial "Then, it eats anything," as locals once told this writer.

### Historical Connection

The plain areas, closer to the hills, have a very interesting history. They were ruled by petty kings, then during the British era, they were under the crown and after Independence, they became East Pakistan and finally Bangladesh. The highlanders who live in the hills belong to a different race from those on the plains, but their paths crossed at some point. The two regions, the hills, and the plains, once became one kingdom known as the Jaintia/Jayantia Kingdom. Jaintia is perhaps the only hill kingdom whose dominion extends to the plains.

The Jaintia kingdom is the merger of two kingdoms:

Jayanti, believed to be an ancient kingdom, and Sutnga, which originated in the hills. According to Jayantia Buranji, the last ruler of the Jayanti kingdom was a female queen who banished her husband. With the help of her favorite deity, a woman was turned into a fish from her shadow, swimming upstream to where her expelled husband lived. Her husband, Landabor, caught a fish from the nearby river, which later turned into a woman, and the two married.

Interestingly, both the hill kingdom of Sutnga and the plain kingdom known as Jayanti kingdom share the same origin story. The Jayantia kingdom story is well-documented in the Jayantia Buranji, a story about the ancient female kingdom mentioned in ancient scriptures. The Pnar of the hills people also share a similar story with the Jayanti story, albeit with a tribal twist, connected to many natural phenomena still existing today. The river Waikhyrwi, where Loh Ryndi caught the fish, still exists, as does the river Thlumuwi, where she disappeared.

According to Hamlet Bareh Ngapkynta, the two kingdoms became one when the Sutnga kings invaded the Jayanti kingdom in the plains and extended his territory. The glorious reign of the Jaintia came to an end in 1885 when the kingdom was annexed by the British. Whatever it was the reason for the two kingdoms to merge, the fact remains, that the two regions, the plains and the hills, were once part of one political entity.

### The Royal Path

The structure standing to testify to the glorious reign of the Jayantia kingdom, which ruled over both the hills and the plains, is the footpath. It is a remnant of the long-cherished history of the Jaintia Kingdom, which connected the hills to the plains. The stone path, dotted with monoliths and stone bridges, later became a trade route linking the hills and the plains of the Jayantia kingdom. The remnants of this path, including monoliths and a few megalithic bridges, still exist today, documented

by the History Department of Thomas Jones College, Jowai.

### Markets in the Plain

Since trade flourished in the area, the hills and plains people were not strangers to each other. The markets located in the plains and frequented by the hills people in the past, were Jaintiapur, Thubang, Iaplem, Borkhat, and Malakur. A case testifying to the existence of trade is the use of brass utensils. In the traditional Niamtre religion, the use of brass utensils, especially for rituals and sacrifices, indicates that trade between the two regions has existed since time immemorial.

Currently, there are border Haats, but it is not known how these markets help in improving the economy of people on both sides of the border. The government needs to do more to help strengthen trade links between the two countries.

### Illegal Trade at the International Border

Like any international border all over the world, the border here is also a hub of smuggling activity. In the past, at the height of Japan's electronic production, all our electronic goods came from Bangladesh. Even second hand or used clothes first came to Meghalaya from Bangladesh (Sula Bangla). Now the activities continue, but the products are different, puffed rice, biscuits, chips and even gram is illegally smuggled from Bangladesh to India.

### Cattle Smuggling

Of late, the most sought-after goods from the hills to the plains are cattle and buffaloes, becoming a thriving business for people on both sides of the border. Smugglers pay two thousand rupees just to herd a cow across the border to Bangladesh. Additionally, they also have to pay the landowner from whose land the cattle have to be herded. Cattle smuggling on the India-Bangladesh border is a recent occurrence, but the pertinent question is what drives this sudden surge in demand for cattle from across the border. There could be just two answers: after 2014, when meat industries were banned in certain states in

India, Bangladesh became a major exporter of halal meat to the Gulf countries. The second reason could be that the country's economy has grown, and people can afford to buy a cow despite it being very expensive.

What's in it for Meghalaya? Since rearing cattle is a tradition in the state, Meghalaya can benefit if the government can convince the central government to make cattle trade to Bangladesh legal.

### Making the border more open

There was a Facebook post which said we should thank the MDA government for allowing smuggling to flourish on the India-Bangladesh border. But the question is, isn't it the duty of the government to stop illegal activities? If the government is far-sighted enough, it should lobby with the central government to legalize the export of such commodities. The need of the hour is how this trade, which was once a flourishing illegal business, can be done legally. Hundreds and thousands of people earn their livelihoods from the activity. The question is why the government is not taking steps to make this trade legal. Making the border more open would also open wide vistas of trade between the two countries, including tourism.

### Tourism

It was FR Kharkongor who, as the DC of Jaintia hills, pioneered tourism in the district and said that the Jaintia hills is the nearest hill station for the people in the north of Bangladesh. Shillong is perhaps the closest hill station to Sylhet or even to Dhaka. Both countries can benefit from tourism if the border is made friendlier. Jaintiapur is one important link that can connect the two countries, and the two governments have neglected the connection that the place can make between the two countries.

### The land port at Dawki

Dawki land port is now in operation, but if we are only going to export minerals to Bangladesh, what is the point of having a land port? There is a huge potential for export between the two countries and tourism will also grow on both sides of the divide if only the border is much friendlier.

## The changing climate of Meghalaya

By Reeta Ghosh

Today, the whole world is facing global warming and unexpected weather changes. Shillong, once known for its natural beauty and cool weather is no exception to these changes. As Shillongites suffer from the scorching heat, one recalls Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore's famous poem, Shillong Chithi (letter from Shillong). He composed this poem while staying at Jitbhum Bungalow at Rilbong, Shillong in 1923. This poem has been translated by Uma Purkayastha as follows;

When the burning heat of scorching summer/ Couldn't be ebb'd by cold-drinks and fan-air.

Exhausted, I rushed to the Shillong hills/ To be soothed with pleasant chill!// The hills, covered with cluster of clouds/ Green dense forests and shadowy mounds/Warmly calls the weary passers-by/ 'Come to my lap, and be relaxed'

Now we are experiencing the opposite scenario here at Shillong. Patricia Mukhim's article, 'Environment: No one's baby-Meghalaya stares at a bleak future' (ST April 26, 2024) has focused on reasons behind the deterioration of the environment not only in Shillong but in Meghalaya as a whole with the rampant cutting of trees, cleansing of forest cover, quarrying, pollution of rivers, streams and air etc. The trend of rise in weather temperature continues till date. The average temperature trend showed an increase of 0.031 °C/year in the period from 1981-2012,

present deteriorating condition of our environment.

Today if anyone watches the city of Shillong from the view point of Shillong Peak, the greenery is only visible around the Cantonment areas; the rest of the city has been transformed into a jungle of bricks and cement. I wonder if the State Government which instructs people to, 'Grow two trees if you cut one, to recover the loss'.

The suggestion of the group 'Operation Clean Up' to place wire meshes across the rivers at the point where one locality ends and another begins' will be fruitful, provided locality wise people and NGOs supported by the government jointly shoulder the responsibility to monitor the outcome and take necessary waste management measures. In absence of such proactive initiatives by all stakeholders of good environment the river cleaning projects at some specific areas of the rivers will be useless. As a NSS Program Officer the writer experienced the same while trying to clean Umshyrypi river at a particular area in Laban with her students a few years back. The pursuit for a sustainable tomorrow can be developed with climate action behaviour that is practiced every day and not only discussed in the boardrooms and classrooms.

India is committed to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's), that has 17 ob-

**"The collapse of a good environment will lead to a series of problems like delayed monsoon, insufficient drinking water and electricity, reduced supply of food, increased health issues, reduced livelihood opportunities, desertification, high price of everyday commodities, and social unrest among others. In fact, these negative changes have already started raising their ugly heads."**

indicating the warming of the region as reported by the Meghalaya Climate Change Centre, 2017. In fact, many research papers have shown the trend of rise in temperatures in many cooler high altitude northeastern states of India. Based on the Composite Forest Vulnerability Index (CFVI), it was found that the forests of the following districts of Meghalaya namely, West Garo Hills, Ribhoi, Jaintia Hills, East Garo Hills and East Khasi Hills had high vulnerability and would be highly impacted by climate change.

Shillong in the East Khasi Hills District was a gift of nature with the grandeur of its beautiful green hills, forests, meadows, trees, water falls, streams, rivers, orchids, pitcher plants and pines etc. This beauty accompanied with the cool atmosphere was the real wealth of its inhabitants. Tourism industry flourishes in the district because of these natural resources and also provides the means to curb the burning issue of youth unemployment.

Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore, in one of his letters to Hitendranath Nandi wrote on October 18, 1919 about his first stay in Shillong at Brookside Bungalow of Rilbong. He wrote 'I am very happy after reaching Shillong Hill, it is far better than Darjeeling. .... the place where we are staying is a serene one, the quiet roads are covered with Deodar (Cedrus deodara) trees and surrounded by a small brook (Umshyrypi)'. The mentioned serenity and the gurgling of the clear waters of the brook are both missing in present day Shillong and may not make tourists as happy again.

Ms. Mukhim has rightly pointed out that the lack of Environmental Governance and irresponsible human activities are responsible for the

jectives such as reducing poverty, hunger, inequality and disease. It aims to improve health, education, sanitation and address climate change among others. Meghalaya should be at the forefront of this campaign for a sustainable state by creating a framework for addressing the various ecological and social issues to maintain the pristine natural beauty of the state and stand true to the meaning of its name. The collapse of a good environment will lead to a series of problems like delayed monsoon, insufficient drinking water and electricity, reduced supply of food, increased health issues, reduced livelihood opportunities, desertification, high price of everyday commodities, and social unrest among others. In fact, these negative changes have already started raising their ugly heads.

Why should the environment be a no one's baby and be treated as an orphan? It's high time that the concerned departments awake from their slumber and activate their clean environment agenda. After all nature is our Mother, without her nourishment we can't survive. So, let us all be extremely careful before it is too late.

**(The author is a National Awardee Teacher, Meghalaya; Chairperson, Tagore International Society of Culture, Education and Environment, Kolkata; District Resource Person, CCRT, Delhi)**

**Citations:** Source: Nil Sonalir Bani (2010) by Dr. Usharanjan Bhattacharjee: Pg 84; Tagore and Pineland Shillong (2015) by Smt Uma Purkayastha: pg 152. Identification of Climate Vulnerability Hot-Spots in Meghalaya (2017). Meghalaya Climate Change Centre.

### Letters to the Editor

#### Ailing apathy: A diagnosis of Meghalaya's medical malaise

Shillong, the jewel in Meghalaya's crown, is a city steeped in history and blessed with natural beauty. Yet, beneath this picturesque facade lies a festering wound – the state of its healthcare system. This isn't a mere critique; it's a desperate plea for a course correction, a call to awaken the slumbering conscience of the medical fraternity.

As a lifelong resident of Shillong, I, like countless others, have borne witness to a medical landscape marred by a chilling apathy. Doctors, both in private and government institutions, seem to have forgotten the sacred oath they took. Gone is the empathy, replaced instead by a cold indifference that leaves patients feeling like mere commodities on a conveyor belt.

Reaching a doctor, a seemingly basic necessity, transforms into a herculean task. Phone calls go unanswered, messages languish in the abyss of inboxes. This isn't a minor inconvenience; it's a symptom of a deeper malaise – a lack of commitment to the very core of the profession – patient care.

Diagnoses, often the cornerstone of treatment, become a gamble. Stories abound of misdiagnoses, leaving patients bewildered and their health hanging in the balance. The trust, the bedrock of the doctor-patient relationship, crumbles under the weight of such failings. One shudders to imag-

ine the justification for this behaviour. Is it an inflated sense of self-importance, a misplaced belief in being some unapproachable "hot-shot"? The irony is stark. Doctors elsewhere, even the most renowned, readily lend an ear, understanding that a timely response can be the difference between life and death. This isn't about professional hierarchy; it's about the fundamental tenets of the medical profession. It's about remembering the Hippocratic Oath, the pledge to "first, do no harm." It's about understanding that a patient's life is not a statistic, but a story waiting to be written, a story the doctor has a profound role in shaping.

The erosion of empathy isn't limited to consultations. Hospital corridors echo with tales of neglect and dismissive attitudes. The human touch, the cornerstone of healing, seems to have been replaced by a sterile, bureaucratic approach.

The consequence of this apathy is a healthcare system in a state of disarray. Patients, already burdened by illness, are left feeling helpless and hopeless. The trust they place in the medical profession is shattered, replaced by a gnawing sense of disillusionment.

This isn't just about individual experiences; it's about a systemic failure. Perhaps it's a shortage of qualified personnel, overworked and under-resourced. Maybe it's a training system that prioritizes technical expertise over bedside manners. Whatever the root cause, the impact is undeniable – a healthcare system failing its very purpose.

The path to recovery requires a multi-pronged

approach. Addressing the infrastructural deficiencies, ensuring adequate staffing with qualified professionals, and implementing training programs that emphasize the importance of communication and empathy are crucial first steps.

But beyond these, a fundamental shift in mindset is imperative. Doctors need to rediscover the essence of their calling – the privilege of serving humanity at its most vulnerable. The arrogance needs to be replaced by humility, the dismissiveness by genuine concern.

This isn't a blame game; it's a call to action. To the medical fraternity of Meghalaya, let this be a stark reminder of the Hippocratic Oath. Let compassion be your guiding light, for it is not just lives you hold in your hands, but the very future of Meghalaya's healthcare system.

The people of Meghalaya deserve better. They deserve a healthcare system that prioritizes their well-being, a system where doctors are not aloof figures, but partners in their journey towards healing. It's time to rewrite the narrative, to transform the ailing apathy into a beacon of empathy and care.

Yours etc.,  
Alex Kurbah  
Shillong - 19

#### Muddy water, shame on Shillong Municipality and PHED

Editor,  
With each downpour, the water supplied by the Shillong Municipality and

the Public Health Engineering Department (PHED) in Shillong town becomes alarmingly muddy. This water is so contaminated that it is "unfit" not only for drinking but also for basic household tasks like washing clothes and utensils. Can we wash our shirts and tops, or rinse our shampooed hair, in such murky water? Absolutely not!

Many households have reported damage to their water filters, including Aqua Guard units. Sadly, they don't speak out. The plight of the economically disadvantaged is even worse, they have no choice but to use cloth to filter the cloudy water. Moreover, these individuals cannot afford the additional cost of boiling water for further purification.

It seems the Municipality and PHED have completely brushed aside last year's shocking reports, which confirmed the presence of various toxic substances and bacteria in Shillong's water supply—a fact brought to light by the FKJGP and consistent uproar in the media. Even non-muddy water is full of harmful bacteria. Despite this outrageous disclosure, the responsible departments appear to have done nothing. Isn't that shameful?

A vice principal from one of the town's colleges remarked, "The repeated supply of untreated and muddy water is not merely an oversight—it is a total violation of residents' fundamental rights. In the 21st century, access to clean, potable water should be a non-negotiable standard, not a privilege. The situation in Shillong is deeply shameful." Another resident from the town, who is nearing the completion of an MBBS

exam in Bangalore, burst out in frustration, "Please go and check how hotels in the town are preparing their tea, or puri-sabji, singara that we consume. They are cooking with the same muddy water because they literally lack proper filtration systems. Who is to blame if not the Municipality and PHED?"

Yes, this raises the question: Why has public uproar fallen on the deaf ears of the concerned department? It seems their sense of responsibility and prudence has been literally "washed away" with the deluge of the downpours.

Anyway, until the authorities ensure clean, potable water in Shillong, it is wise on our part to advise against inviting tourists eager to experience the rainfall in Sohra. We must ensure that our visiting tourists should not take away a negative impression of the Abode of Clouds.

Yours etc.,  
Salil Gwali,  
Shillong

#### Vibrant Villages Programme (VVP)

Editor,  
The Government of India had approved the "Vibrant Villages Programme (VVP)" covering 2967 villages in 46 border blocks of 19 districts in 4 States and 1 Union Territory. 662 villages have been identified for coverage on priority basis i.e. 455 in Arunachal Pradesh, 75 in Himachal Pradesh, 35 in Ladakh, 46 in Sikkim and 51 in Uttarakhand. The main aim of this programme is to develop villages to on these points - (a) Economic Growth - Livelihood generation (b)

Road Connectivity (c) Housing & Village Infrastructure (d) Energy including renewable energy through Solar and Wind power (e) Television & Telecom Connectivity including setting up of IT-enabled Common Service Centres in the village (f) Regeneration of ecosystem (g) Promotion of tourism & culture (h) Financial inclusion (i) Skill development & entrepreneurship (j) Development of co-operative societies for managing livelihood opportunities including agriculture/horticulture, cultivation of medicinal plants/herbs etc.

Are we in Meghalaya missing this bus of development, which can take us to the right place, when our poor State which shares a 443 km long international border with Bangladesh is left out? Perhaps our Government did not try to ask for inclusion of the border villages in our state when this programme was launched, by the Prime Minister. Or we did not even try hard, in Parliament when an unstarred question no. 3251 was placed and answered on March 29, 2023, by the Minister of State in Ministry of Home Affairs. It will take only a few minutes to ask but we are wasting our time for weeks by commenting/asking "what this lone, desolate, forlorn, lonely, lonesome and solitary MP will or can do in Parliament?"

Yours etc.,  
D Pakyntein,  
Via email

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

"Come forth into the light of things,  
let nature be your teacher."

—William Wordsworth

## The Shillong Times

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SHILLONG, TUESDAY, MAY 14, 2024

### DGP purely on merit

MUCH has been made of the appointment of Idashisha Nongrang as the Director General Police (DGP), in 'matrilineal Meghalaya' as some mainstream media has termed it. The fact is that Nongrang, a 1992 batch Indian Police Service officer has reached the top post through sheer merit. She has vast experience of policing in Meghalaya and has been an operations person during those ugly days when militancy had raised it's ugly head in the state. She has also served in the Intelligence Bureau (IB) thereby giving her a rounded view of intelligence and operations both. Nongrang shunned the limelight in all her postings but worked diligently and discharged her duties without fear or favour. Her colleagues and former seniors in the IB speak highly of her professional approach to policing which is what is highly recommended in this profession.

The other candidates proposed by the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) are RP Meena of the 1993 batch and Deepak Kumar, 1994 batch, both of whom are junior to Nongrang in terms of service. In fact Nongrang had a brief stint as acting DGP in 2021. She has been in charge of Civil Defence and Home Guards since 2021 till date. Much has been made of the fact that Idashisha Nongrang is a tribal and a woman — the first woman DGP in Meghalaya. Not much is spoken of the fact that she has earned this position and is the DGP today not because she is a tribal and a woman but because she is a senior IPS officer who has earned her spurs. She has not been catapulted to the top post because politicians and political parties have been pushing for her appointment. In fact, observers have said that it is in bad taste for politicians and political parties to be rooting for any candidate for the post of the top cop in the state. In all fairness, Ms Nongrang should feel confident that, based on her merit and performance she will continue to discharge her duties without fear or favour and without needing to be patronised by any political party merely because she is a Khasi tribal and a woman.

It is common to make it appear that a woman making it to any top post does so because of her gender and in this case because she is a 'tribal.' These are unflattering attributes that downplay the capability of the person which is tried and tested and her overall performance which is what matters. In the police force gender is of the least concern but performance and track records are what matter and it is Ms Nongrang's professionalism that should be highlighted; not her gender and community.

## Supreme Court takes a 'political' decision as response to a political wrongdoing Interim bail to Kejriwal a classic case of judiciary adopting a holistic approach

By K Raveendran

In granting interim relief to Kejriwal, the Supreme Court has shown the willingness to go beyond technicalities and take a 'political' stand against what has been widely seen as a political arrest by the Modi government. The decision by the bench comprising Justices Sanjiv Khanna and Dipankar Datta will be remembered for long as a landmark for a holistic approach and being guided by the spirit of the law rather than its letter.

Kejriwal's arrest on March 21, 2024, by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) in connection with a money laundering case tied to the Delhi liquor

despite strong opposition from the ED, which argued that the right to campaign was neither a fundamental nor a constitutional right, suggests a recognition of the political implications of Kejriwal's continued detention.

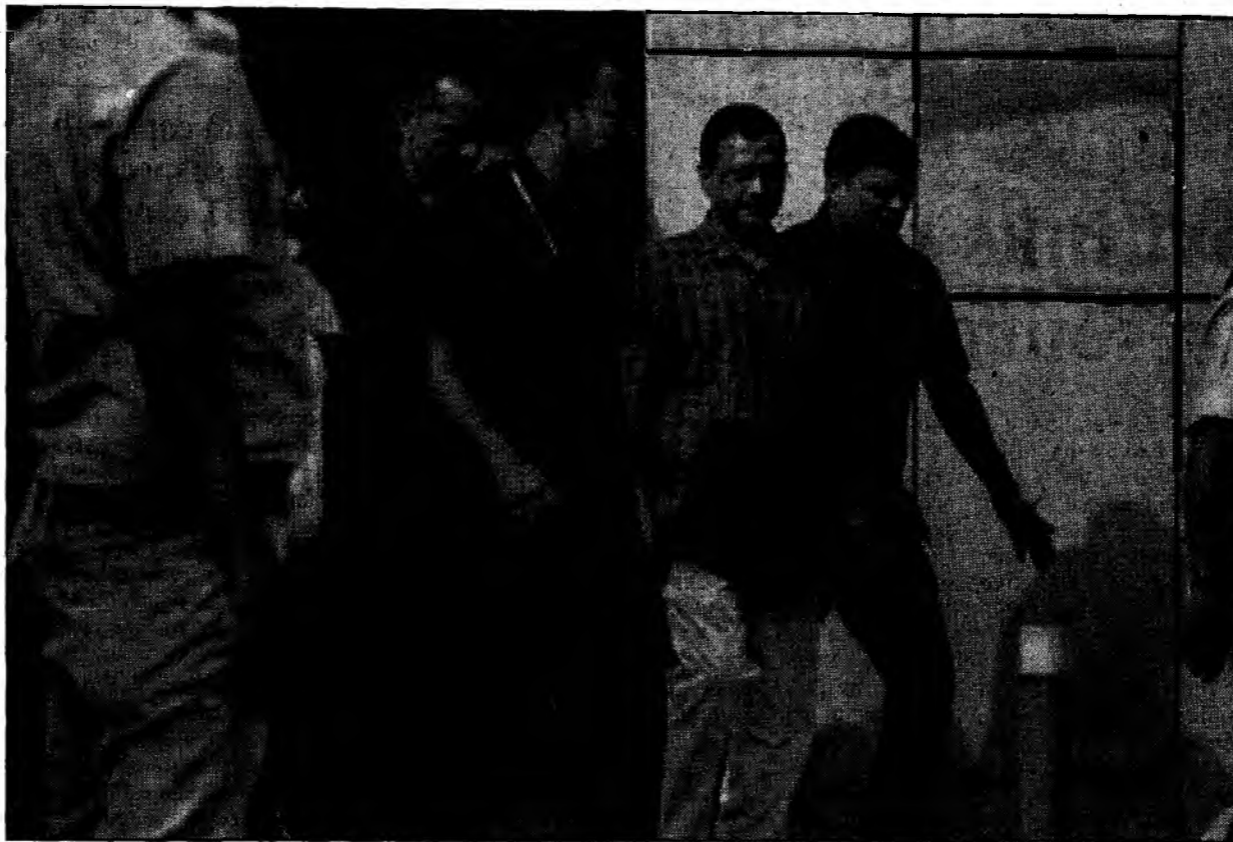
"Given the prodigious importance (of general elections), we reject the argument raised on behalf of the prosecution that grant of interim bail/release on this account would be giving premium of placing the politicians in a beneficial position compared to ordinary citizens of this

included several points that could be seen as taking into account the political landscape. The court noted that Kejriwal had no criminal antecedents, was not a threat to society, and that the accusations, while serious, had not led to a conviction. Additionally, the court observed that the gap between the initiation of proceedings in the alleged Delhi excise scam case and Kejriwal's arrest was concerning, questioning why the arrest was made right before the Lok Sabha polls.

Critics might argue that

victory for democracy, suggesting that the judiciary had acted to correct a perceived political wrong. On the other hand, the ED's opposition to the bail, citing the continuous nature of elections in India and the potential precedent it would set, has failed to impress the court, despite an expressed concern that the judiciary must avoid stepping into the political arena.

The Supreme Court's decision can be analysed from multiple angles. Legally, it upholds the principle of bail being the norm and jail the exception, especially when the accused has not been convicted. Politically, it raises



policy, came at a critical juncture just ahead of the Lok Sabha elections. This timing raised eyebrows and led to allegations of political motivations behind his arrest. The Supreme Court's decision to grant him interim bail until June 1, 2024, is therefore seen as a befitting response from the court to a political move by the ruling party.

The judiciary is expected to function independently of political influence, ensuring that justice is served without bias. However, the circumstances surrounding Kejriwal's arrest and the subsequent bail reveal that the Supreme Court's decision was influenced by the political context rather than purely legal considerations. The court's decision to grant bail,

country. While examining the question of grant of interim bail/release, the courts always take into consideration the peculiarities associated with the person in question and the surrounding circumstances. In fact, to ignore the same would be iniquitous and wrong," the judges observed. The court also raised doubts about the timing of the arrest, which happened to be the run-up to the elections and wondered why the arrest took place at that juncture despite the fact that the case has been going on since August 2022. So, it didn't take much effort for the court to see the 'political' angle of the arrest, prompting it to respond the way it has.

The Supreme Court's rationale for granting bail

reflects a broader trend of judicial actions being perceived through a political lens. The court's acknowledgment of the ongoing Lok Sabha elections and the importance of Kejriwal's role in it could be seen as an indication that the judiciary does not consider itself to be immune to the political climate. This perception is further reinforced by the court's statement that while examining the question of grant of interim bail, the peculiarities associated with the person in question and the surrounding circumstances must be considered.

Supporters of Kejriwal and the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) as well as the constituents of opposition INDIA Bloc have hailed the decision as a

questions about the extent to which the political narrative can influence the court. The decision also has implications for the electoral process, as it allows a key political figure to participate in the elections, potentially affecting the outcome.

Bail to Kejriwal has been seen as a morale booster for the opposition bloc, whose constituents had rallied round his arrest to put up joint resistance, despite the political differences that persisted among themselves over electoral adjustments in individual states. Just as the arrest served as a rallying point, the bail is expected to provide new impetus to the fight against blatantly authoritarian traits of the Modi government. (IPA Service)

## India's arms industry witnessing big market boom Time to raise domestic weapons production, cut imports

By Nantoo Banerjee

It is good to note that India's defence manufacturing industry is fast emerging as a major contributor to the country's economy and quietly supporting the latest stock market surge. Defence manufacturers have never had it so good. The private sector defence manufacturing enterprises are doing extremely well alongside the traditional government-run publicly held armament manufacturers. The country's 10 defence stocks surged up to 446 percent in the last one year. Among the top performers are: HAL, Mazagon Dock, Bharat Forge, Bharat Dynamics, Paras Defence and Space, Bharat Electronics, IdeaForge, MTAR Technologies, Data Patterns, Solar Industries, Goa Shipyard and Taneja Aerospace.

In fact, India's defence stocks are witnessing a bull run. The Nifty India Defence Index has, as per ACE Equity database, surged 142 percent in the 12-month period, outperforming the benchmark Nifty 50 which gave 26 percent return in the same period. Out of the total 15 stocks of the Nifty India Defence Index, as many as 14 had given positive returns to the investors. And, 10 stocks gained over 100 percent. The size of the country's armament manufacturing market is estimated at US\$17.40 billion in 2024. This is expected to reach \$23.05 billion by 2029. India's demand for arms and weapons far exceeds their domestic supply as the country continues to be the world's top defence products importer. It is likely

of Africa and South America under its Belt and Road Initiative, and the weakened status to the United Nations' to deal with the contentious issues of the world peace and security, the global demands for weapons and supplies are projected to vastly increase in the coming years.

According to a recent Bloomberg report, the world rush to rearm could cost the G7 countries alone some \$10 trillion over the next decade. Its listed security challenges include Russia, a volatile West Asia, and the Chinese military tagging the US attention toward the Pacific. It noted that a new era of global rearmament is gathering pace at a huge cost and some tough decisions for western governments already struggling with shaky public finances. The world defence spending reached a record \$2.2 trillion last year.

Can India afford to ignore the global security concerns and continue to remain import happy to meet its requirement of advanced munitions to contain Chinese military aggression? Interestingly, China had cut down its arms imports over the past five years. China replaced foreign-built weapons with its own, manufactured with its 'own' technology. Chinese manufacturers remain deeply embedded within US military infrastructure. France is investigating suspected smuggling to China and Russia of advanced chip technology.

Russia still accounts for



to remain so until the domestic defence industry is able to catch up with some of those in the world's top armament manufacturing countries such as the US, Russia, China, the UK, Germany, France and Israel.

Until now, India's military budget has been considerably small to feed its army, the world's second largest after China. On paper, India's defence budget is the fourth largest at \$74 billion compared to the US (\$832 billion), China (\$227 billion) and Russia (\$109 billion). In effect, much of India's defence budget is spent on salaries and pensions of military personnel. Ironically, the annual defence spending of India, the world's most populous country with 1.4 billion citizens, is close to Saudi Arabia's military budget of \$72 billion. Saudi Arabia's total population is less than 37 million.

Considering the security scenario across India's borders, including land, sea and aerospace, and increasing strategic expansion of China, the country's main military detractor, in the region, its defence budget is expected to rise substantially in the coming years. The domestic defence manufacturers need to gear up strongly to meet the growing demands from the armed forces. However, high-end technologies to manufacture lethal weapons are not easily accessible. India's Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) has to work hard to provide the necessary support to the weapons manufacturers.

Thanks to the US-backed Ukraine-Russia war, Israel-Hamas battle, North Korea's anti-Washington and anti-Seoul rhetoric and China's constant military expansion in the Pacific and Indo-Pacific regions and the continents

the bulk of China's overseas arms purchase. According to the Stockholm International Peace Institute, China's arms imports in 2019-23 dropped by 44 percent from the previous five years, putting it 10th on the list of the world's biggest buyers of foreign weapons. Russia supplied 77 percent of China's military purchases, including aircraft engines and helicopter systems, followed by France with 13 percent. While India remains the world's top arms importer.

Indian investors are ready to provide support to the country's arms manufacturing industry. The government and its DRDO need to work together to boost the domestic defence industry. The country has done reasonably well to build its own missile systems. Indigenously developed armoured vehicles, supersonic missile Brahmos, air defence system Akash, fourth generation fighter aircraft LCA Tejas are among the Indian weapon systems that have attracted interest from several foreign buyers.

India needs to do a lot more to drastically cut down arms import by building a strong and vibrant defence manufacturing industry. Consequently, defence shares in India will see a significant rise in demand, leading to potential increase in their stock prices in the coming years. The nature of the defence industry demands substantial upfront investment in high-cost machinery and R&D facilities, making it a capital-intensive endeavour. It is time that deep-pocket big industrial houses enter the defence manufacturing sector by promoting separate companies with specific product focus. The market is ready to lap up such enterprises. (IPA Service)

### Letters to the Editor

#### Kudos Meghalaya police!

Editor,  
Lately, an innocent non-tribal laborer was killed in one of the outskirts of Shillong by unknown people who had their faces well-covered, hence unrecognizable. I, for one, would like to pat on the back to the Meghalaya police in arresting, in a jiffy, the alleged offenders and they are booked under stringent penal codes. This yeoman's service of the intelligence wing of the police must have hugely let our non-tribals brethren to heave a huge sigh of relief at that.

Coincidentally, it may bear to recall that a few years ago in a riot at Ichamati village of East Khasi Hills District, bordering Bangladesh when one of the NGOs was holding a meeting opposing CCA, if I am not mistaken, we saw through the social media platforms that non-tribals, in hordes, came out wielding sticks, iron rods etc., in hands to attack the NGO and in that fatal commotion a Khasi youth was unfortunately bludgeoned to death. And in sequel to that incident a few non-tribals have reportedly been brought to book but many more had literally vanished into thin air. Oddly, the arrested accused's names have not been disclosed, perhaps for security reasons?  
Now, while analyzing the two foregoing incidents, I

have been reportedly given to understand that in the first case the victim's family received a sum of five lakhs as compensation, and, contrastingly, in the second instance the victim's family could collect only two lakh rupees. Hence, why such a glaring discrimination between tribals vis-a-vis non-tribals. Additionally, why names of those arrested non-tribals were not exposed while that of Hynfiewtrep youths were published in the media. I thought what's sauce for goose is sauce for the gander!

Yours etc.,  
Jerome K Diengdoh,  
Shillong-2

#### Need to revisit stamp duty for registration of Gift Deed

Editor,  
The Indian Registration Act, 1908 regulates the registration of deeds and documents throughout India. Section 17 of the Act provides compulsory registration of certain documents. The Government of Meghalaya vide Notification No. ERT (T) 62/81/11 Dated 22nd July 1982 had made the Indian Registration Act, 1908 applicable in the whole of Meghalaya on and from the 1st day of September, 1982. Hence, after 01-09-1982 in Meghalaya it is mandatory to register deeds and documents which are required by law to be registered.

To register any deed or documents inter alia one needs to pay the requisite stamp duty and registration fees. These charges keep getting revised from time to time, depending upon the land rates and various other factors. The rate of stamp duty and registration fee varies in different states. In case of sale, mortgage, lease and other mode of transfer of property, the requirement to pay stamp duty at the prescribed rate on the market value of the property seems to be justified, but not in case of a gift deed.

Registration is compulsory for a gift deed of immovable property. Gift of immovable property are generally made among the family members or within blood relations and it is made out of natural love and affection without involving any monetary consideration unlike sale and other mode of transfer. In case of an execution of gift deed, the donor is not earning any monetary benefit hence payment of stamp duty at the specified rate on the market value of the property seems to be very unjust. This causes huge financial burden on the donor for the reason that in case of gift deed the donor pays the requisite stamp duty and the registration fees.

In rural areas, there are many people who may own big plots of land but financially they may not be sound. In our Khasi society there are instances where the individuals had inherited property by customary practice. Such individuals, if they intend

to gift out a portion of the property to their respective children for their use, find it extremely difficult to get the gift deed registered because of their inability to pay the stamp duty based on the existing market value of the property. Hence, such individuals prefer to execute unregistered gift deed and sometimes such gift deeds are executed in the presence of family members. But in most of the cases, such gift deeds are executed before the members of the Dorbar Shnong under a misconception that execution of gift deed before the members of the Dorbar Shnong holds good and valid for all purposes. However, such unregistered gift deeds have no legal value and the same are unacceptable for availing loans from banking institutions, sale, mortgage etc.

To encourage the public to register gift deeds among family members several state governments in India had reduced the stamp duty and in some states the stamp duty for gift deed is as low as 0.5% of the market value of the property; in some states the stamp duty is fixed below Rs 10,000.

Meghalaya Government needs to ponder on the above issue and do the needful to waive the stamp duty on registration of gift deed within family members or blood relations by fixing a minimum fee for registration of such deeds. This will perhaps go a long way to redress the issue of registration of gift deeds of immovable prop-

erty which has large public ramifications

Yours etc.,  
Aneeta Synrem  
Shillong-1

#### Appointment of DGP

Editor,  
With reference to the news, "The best candidate will be appointed DGP: Deputy Chief Minister" (ST May 11, 2024) it may be recalled that in the Prakash Singh Case 2006, the Supreme Court issued seven directives to drive police reforms in India, acknowledging widespread issues such as politicization, lack of accountability, and systemic weaknesses impacting overall police performance. The seven directives are:

1. Constitute a State Security Commission.
2. Fixed two-years tenure for DGP.
3. Two-year term for SPs and SHOs
4. Separate investigation and L&O functions.
5. Set up Police Establishment Board
6. Set up Police Complaints Authorities at State and District levels.
7. Set up National Security Commission at Centre level.

As far as the second directive is concerned it is to ensure the appointment of DGP through a transparent, merit-based process, ensuring a minimum tenure of two years. The Committee to appoint the State DGP is headed by the Chairman, Union Public Service Commission

(UPSC) and includes the Union Home Secretary, the State's Chief Secretary and Director General of Police, and one of the heads of the Central Armed Police Forces nominated by the Ministry of Home Affairs who is not from the same State cadre.

As far as the procedure of selection is concerned, the State governments concerned have to send to UPSC the names of the probable candidates three months before the incumbent DGP is to retire. The UPSC will prepare a panel of three officers to be DGP and send it back. The State, in turn, shall appoint one of the persons shortlisted by the Union Public Service Commission. The names of three IPS officers have been shortlisted by the UPSC for Meghalaya. It is now for the State government to do its part as per government procedures keeping in view what the Model Code of Conduct stipulates as far as the "continuation of regular processes" is concerned, so that we have a DGP for Meghalaya very soon once the incumbent DGP superannuates or demits office on May 19. It is heartening that the Deputy Chief minister assured the people that the government will select the best officer as the Director General of Police, Meghalaya.

Yours etc;  
VK Lyngdoh,  
Via email

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

"Gratitude makes sense of our past, brings peace for today, and creates a vision for tomorrow."

—Melody Beattie

## The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVI No. 273 SHILLONG, WEDNESDAY, MAY 15, 2024

### Women rendered powerless

WHILE at one level, leaders keep shouting from rooftops that they are helping to empower women, the ground situation is quite the reverse. Women are easy prey to the carnal desires and muscle power of those who wield power. That, at the receiving end of this aggressiveness was also an AAP Member of Parliament and former chief of the Delhi Women's Commission, Swati Maliwal, is proof of how even women in highly placed positions are attacked or assaulted even in the power circuits. This happened right in the official residence of Chief Minister, Arvind Kejriwal. From the Prime Minister down, politicians of all hues act as saviours of women, more so in election campaigns because they believe that women are easy to be influenced and herded to polling booths to cast their votes in their favour. In reality, the plight of Indian women on multiple fronts remains worse as ever, even as sections of them managed to receive education and hold high positions.

Incidents of attacks keep happening in any society, mostly at the hands of men, and more against women by virtue of the males' muscle power. But, in 'civilized' societies, how seriously the authorities look at such assaults, sexual or otherwise, makes all the difference. Many such cases here are stuck in a rut. Even in the case of the Swati Maliwal, the police was seen to be dragging its feet and not showing the nerve to file an FIR against the accused, Kejriwal's aide Bibhav Kumar, though the first thing the victim did was to call the police. That the attack was serious is evident from a statement from AAP senior leader Sanjay Singh that the party condemned the incident and action would be taken against the assailant. Kumar is a former PA to Kejriwal, who had been removed from the post by the Vigilance Department after an inquiry into a 2007 attack case.

The maniacal sexual assaults of former prime minister Deve Gowda's grandson and sitting MP from Hassan in Karnataka, Prajwal Revanna, hogged the headlines in recent days. The arms of the law are yet to catch up with him though weeks have passed since his notoriety got wide media exposure. Similarly, even as Prime Minister Narendra Modi air-dashed to Kolkata as part of his election campaign and shared precious moments with West Bengal's tainted governor Anand Bose, no word came from the PM for an investigation into the alleged sexual assault on a young female contract worker at Raj Bhavan. The incidents in Manipur were nerve-chilling. The fact of the matter is that after a few weeks' of chest-beating, such cases are consigned to the back-burner. While high-profile cases get wide media attention, millions of poor women remain harassed and tortured sans any publicity.

# Do indigenous peoples exist in India?

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

Recently, there was a video that went viral, at least in indigenous people's (IPs) circles, of India's position at the 23rd session of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, where India's representative claimed that the concept of IPs is not applicable to India. It was done by referring to the definition of Indigenous Peoples (IPs) given under ILO, 169. This particular convention, known as the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention of 1989, is the major binding international convention concerning IPs and a forerunner of the 2007 Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). India has not ratified the Convention. This means that India is arguing against the definition by referring to the very definition given in the Convention it doesn't agree with, a highly paradoxical situation. This confusion is made all the more intriguing by the fact that India has ratified UNDRIP, for which ILO 169 was an important milestone. So, it would seem that India's position that the concept of IPs does not apply to India is a little convoluted. For the UN bodies, there is no such confusion.

In the FAO-UN (Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations) website, on the page that gives information about India, Schedule Tribes (STs) are mentioned under IPs. The page also states that the Indian Constitution has given explicit recognition to indigenous peoples under Part X, Art. 244-244A, Article 341, and Article 342. Various national legislations, like the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, were also cited, which exist for the protection and promotion of the rights of IPs in the country. Furthermore, official institutions like the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India were also highlighted. Similarly, in the IFAD (International Fund for Agricultural Development) website, the India: Country Technical Note on Indigenous Peoples' Issues, mentions that while the Government of India rejects equating STs with IPs, it still abides by the operational directives of bilateral and multilateral agencies with regard to IPs while operationalizing projects with their financial aid. This is reflected in IFAD's Report to the IX Session of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII), where it mentions grants given to projects in India, which include the ones implemented by the North Eastern Region Community Resource Management Project (NERCoRMP) in areas inhabited by the Khasi, Garo, Karbi, etc. A look at the advance list of nominations to the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues 2023-2025 for the United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs Indigenous Peoples mentions Gam Shimray (a Thangkul Naga from Manipur) from the Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact (AIPP) as one of the two members nominated by the regional organization for the

seats in Asia. Streamlet Dkhar (a Khasi from Meghalaya) from the Indigenous Women India Network (IWIN) was also among the nominees in another category which included STs from central India, like the Munda.

So, it is clear that while India's official position that the concept of IPs does not apply in India, STs have been recognized by relevant UN bodies as IPs. Grassroots organizations in the country are also cognizant of their identity as IPs. In that context, the provisions in the Constitution and the various legislations and agencies working for the benefit of IPs suggest that the difference between the terms STs and IPs is just a matter of academic debate and has no bearing on the actual work being done on the ground. That position is not accurate. The rights given to the IPs in India are predicated on how they are defined, i.e., STs, which itself is very problematic and has long-term implications for their rights, especially their right to the territories.

Though not spelled out in the Indian Constitution, Scheduled Tribes have been identified to have the following features: (i) indications of primitive traits; (ii) distinctive culture; (iii) geographical isolation; (iv) shyness of contact with the community at large; and (v) backwardness. One can already see that there are a lot of problems with these criteria.

Do primitive traits mean a mode of economy that is not advanced, for example, hunting and gathering, while advanced groups are those that practice agriculture? Recent research has shown the Khasi and other IPs in the North East (NE) arrived in the region as farmers. In fact, they brought a lot of new crops, of which rice, in particular the *Oryza sativa japonica* brought by these farmers, hybridized with *Oryza sativa indica*, unleashing productivity gains that made the subcontinent one of the most densely populated parts of the planet. Therefore, instead of exhibiting primitive traits, groups like the Khasi actually brought valuable farming technology, which was instrumental in the rise of later Indic kingdoms that flourished in the subcontinent. Every community has its own distinctive culture, so this particular criteria is weak unless distinctive culture is equated with exoticness, which itself has very colonial overtones. As for geographical isolation and shyness of contact with the community at large, these criteria are from the point of view of the mainland, for which the NE is a frontier. In reality, the NE (including Meghalaya) wasn't really a frontier but a vibrant and bustling zone of interaction that had global consequences: For example, all the citrus species in the world can trace their origins to Nokrek in Garo Hills, where the Indian wild orange (*Citrus indica*) is found, which is considered to be the progenitor of all citrus species

in the world. Also, during the pre-colonial period, oranges from Khasi Hills were carried by Arab traders into Syria. From there, the Crusaders helped to propagate them throughout southern Europe. For the last criteria of backwardness, one can take recourse to the Mandal Commission methodology for identifying social and educational backwardness, which has been accepted by the highly influential Indira Sawhney and etc. v. Govt. of India judgment of 1992. That seems to be the only strong criteria that can be used for identifying STs at the moment. The question that arises is: what happens when a particular group, for example, the Khasi, improves in terms of social and educational backwardness? Does it mean that they will no longer be entitled to the benefits as given in the Constitution, like reservation and Sixth Schedule status?

Reservation of seats in Indian parliaments and state assemblies, or for jobs and education, are about representation, which, unless propelled by legislation, will be highly inadequate considering not just the social and educational backwardness of IPs but also their very low population size (less than 9% of the country's population). In a country where the caste system has led to the hoarding of social and economic benefits for at least a couple of thousands of years, reservation is the only way minorities, indigenous and non-indigenous, can be made part of the national discourse. Protection of land rights, however, is a little different, and among other political factors, it is linked to a group being tribal. This is the reason the Ladakhis have been demanding Sixth Schedule status so that their land rights can be protected. So, while reservations may still continue, land rights are a little uncertain. This is the reason why there are ongoing attempts to divide indigenous peoples on the basis of religion so that those rights can be weakened and taken away. But does the ILO 169 and UNDRIP acknowledge the land rights of IPs, and are the IPs in the country, including the Khasi, eligible to be considered under it?

The International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention 169 puts forward two criteria for identifying indigenous peoples: subjective and objective. The subjective criterion is self-identification at the individual level and being accepted by the community as being their member. The objective criterion is descent from populations who inhabited the country or geographical region at the time of conquest, colonization, or establishment of present state boundaries and/or retention of some social, economic, cultural, and political institutions, irrespective of their legal status. The objective criterion is the one that is most important here because it talks about long-term settlement, which can

be simplified to denote the first settlers, which is actually used colloquially to refer to groups as indigenous. The reason why Native Americans are considered IPs is because, though they arrived in the Americas at around 13,000 years ago, they were the first settlers compared to the Europeans who came later. Recent research has shown that groups today identified as IPs, viz., Austroasiatic (to which Khasi belong) and Tibeto-Burman (Kok-Borok, Tani-Mishmi, Kuki-Chin-Mizo), arrived in the subcontinent before or around 2000 BCE. The Khasi appeared to have arrived a little earlier, around 3000 BCE. As far as present evidence shows, though there were some earlier hunter-gatherer populations (part of the first Out-of-Africa migrants) in the region, they no longer exist, and the Khasi and other IPs are today the oldest and earliest settlers of the NE. They were here much before the arrival of the Indo-Aryan-speaking group, which led to massive population replacement, whose evidence can still be found in the genetic makeup of the subcontinent, especially in North India. So, under the objective criterion, Khasi and other IPs do fall under the definition of indigenous based on ILO 169. Once they do, they qualify for the various commitments made under UNDRIP. One of the main concerns of UNDRIP was to address the dispossession of IPs from their lands, and many of the articles in the Declaration explicitly deal with it. Article 10 clearly states that "Indigenous peoples shall not be forcibly removed from their lands or territories." Furthermore, Article 26 goes into more detail about the rights of IPs to their land. So, both ILO 169 and UNDRIP are applicable to the IPs in India, which include the Khasi.

The Indian Constitution is a very progressive document, and it has many provisions for the protection and promotion of the rights of IPs, though it doesn't accept the concept. But for the political future of the IPs, especially in terms of land rights, the concept of tribe does not provide a guarantee. It is only the concept of IPs, internationally accepted and recognized, that can give that assurance. So while the Government of India does not accept the concept, following the subjective criteria, groups can use self-identification to identify themselves as IPs. A beginning can be made by IPs by substituting the word Indigenous Peoples for tribals while referring to themselves in formal and informal settings and build partnerships with other IPs in India and elsewhere. For that, we need to accept a more inclusive politics, and the biggest roadblock to it, apart from the official narrative for Meghalaya, is the Jaidynriew politics, which is exclusionary and antagonistic. It is only then we can be truly safe.

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

## Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

Worker Ants of India..! This happened in San Francisco!

"Take a picture of me, next to the statue!" I shouted, pointing excitedly to a statue of Gandhiji.

"But you've got hundreds of his statues all over India," said my American friend, "Why take one with him here?"

"Because, I'm proud to see him honoured here in the USA!" I said simply.

Yes, it gave me immense pride! Similar statues of the Father of our Nation are all over the world, and many of them, not put up by Indian communities, but by locals, in honour of what he exported to the whole world: The idea and practice of Non-Violence!

If there's one product that is 'Make in India,' and has been used effectively the world over, it's the one Gandhiji spun in the spinning wheel of his mind, right here in our country.

With non-violence he beat the victorious British who had just beaten the mighty Germans!

With non-violence, he made the fierce Winston Churchill tremble as he disembarked in England wearing nothing but a homespun loin cloth.

non-violence that as I've just mentioned was taught by Gandhiji and that won us our freedom. Otherwise, the very concept of making something that foreign powers have innovated just makes us worker ants.

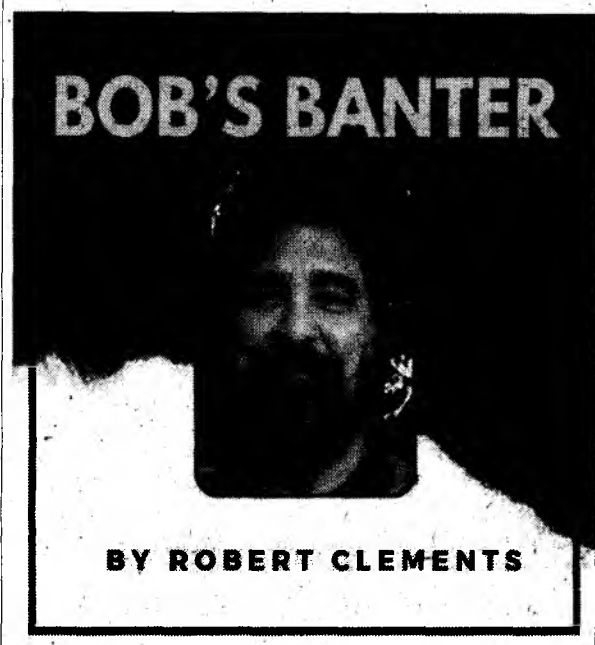
And why would they want to make something in our country instead of doing it on their own, except that our labour is cheaper than what they pay their workers. Which makes us a sort of old colonial slave labour force.

Yes, think about it. We as a people have the brains to create and innovate as good or even better than those who live abroad, and to be told, "Here, this is the design, just produce!" is an insult.

For many years I drove a Tata Estate car. It was the costliest car in the market, but not the best car in the country, but even as I drove it, I was proud the design was Indian. One day, while in Spain, I saw the Tata Safari, and shouted, "That car is Indian!"

Can we shout the same way when we see an iPhone that was made in India? No, we can't because it was never designed by us.

What a huge nation we are, and why is it we still



What a product!

Today if the African-American is equal in his country, it's because Martin Luther King, imported this wonderful export from India, and put it to good use. It's a product that no one needs to sell, that no one needs to hop from one country to another peddling and hugging world leaders to buy. And yet, today, in his very land, we have men and women who dare honour the very assassin who killed the greatest man our country has ever known.

We have reached a point, when the very product which has won us renown, is being dismantled and put away, and instead, a new one called violence is being exalted!

The British were cruel masters, but not once did hate or anger temper Gandhiji's talks. Today, such talk is in every WhatsApp group, political speech or email, incited, encouraged and emboldened by present political leaders.

I can hear voices the world over asking, "Is this true? Can it really be happening in your country?"

"Yes, it's true, as the murderer of a Man of Peace is made a hero!"

I stand next to that statue in San Francisco and I hear crowds shouting from all around the world, by nations that have benefitted from our desi, homegrown, make in India product "There is no need," they shout, "for bear hugs, and your leader spending your nation's time and money on visits to our leaders. Just start respecting again the man who gave you the best 'Make in India' product, and we around the world will respect you!"

But coming to the phrase that is being banded around us becoming a 'Make in India' country, I come back with the fact that the only 'Make in India' product, we should be proud of sending abroad, and worth exporting is the product of peace and

can't make something that becomes a world beater? First, we need to stop thinking of ourselves as the world's cheap labour force. We need to stop being used as a slave plantation, and start thinking bigger.

Look at Japan, South Korea and China, all countries who are Asian, how is it, they are designing, producing, and exporting their products? Because they are able to innovate.

Something that is stopping us from innovating, is our weakness in imagining, questioning, and thinking. The British left us with an educational system that made us a country of clerks to serve them better, and our politicians after that have made us worse. They don't want thinkers, because just like the British felt, our politicians realise that a thinking Indian can't be fooled by them anymore. And fooled we have been year after year after year.

The same Indian, going abroad, and studying there, becomes a world beater. Not here.

Even as these elections draw to a close, and we elect a new set of representatives to sit in Parliament, let us shout ourselves hoarse to have a 'thinking' educational system for our children.

We have been worker ants too long. We have seen how a simple man in khadi cloth exported his idea throughout the world, and with him in mind, and knowing we can do it, we need to throw away our worker uniforms, and don the suits of those who create, design and innovate.

Stop being worker ants, and start being the boss..! (The Author conducts an Online Writers and Speakers Course. For more details send a thumbs up to him on WhatsApp 9892572883 or bobsbanter@gmail.com)

### Letters to the Editor

#### Need for police patrolling along highways

Editor,

The city of Shillong and its outskirts has been witnessing an increasing rise in road traffic accidents. In particular, accidents that happen very often along the Umroi bye-pass and on the Guwahati-Shillong highway. The rash driving by two wheelers as we know has often led to injuries and even untimely death of people. There is also this lack of proper driving skills, professionalism and etiquette amongst many car owners often leading to near-misses and accidents. With a new Director General of Police (DGP) in place one hopes to see some major actions being initiated to prevent needless accidents. It is prudent for the city police to initiate night patrolling across the length and breadth of Shillong and not

just symbolic patrolling in VIP areas while the common public continue to suffer from insecurity. With anti-social elements taking advantage of lackadaisical patrolling it is imperative that the state government walks the talk in securing the state capital earnestly for the safety and security of all.

Yours etc.,  
Dominic S Wankhar,  
Via email

#### Stop exploiting labourers!

Editor,

The workers fought for an eight-hour workday when they had to work 10 to 16 hours every day in the late nineteenth century. International Workers' Day is observed on May 1 to commemorate the eight-hour workday movement in Chicago in 1886. Australia got a 40-hour work-week by 1948, and Canada in the early 1960s. Most European

countries had implemented a standard 40-hour work-week by the 1970s.

The progressive 40-hour work-week is still not implemented in the unorganised sector in India. We need labour movements in India more than ever before as we are heading towards privatisation and the gig economy.

Working at a stretch for long hours causes exhaustion and health issues. It also triggers unemployment. To get 24 man-hours daily, an employer needs 3 workers if each worker works for 8 hours daily (8x3). But if the employer forces each worker to work for 12 hours per day, he will employ just two of them (12x2). So, the latter scenario causes unemployment for one in three workers.

Recently, a suggestion for introducing a 70-hour work-week has been floated. This is like taking us from the constitutional guarantee of becoming a welfare country to the days of brute capital-

ism in the nineteenth century when poor children had to die young after working as chimney sweepers.

Even government workers are victims of over work. Two freight trains collided and hit a third on April 19, 2023 in Singapur, Madhya Pradesh. A loco pilot was instantly killed. The loco pilot, Rajesh Prasad Gupta, had done 14 to 15 hours duty at a stretch when the accident took place. The Commissioner of Railway Safety Report observed that, most likely, the loco pilot became sleepy because of exhaustion, and as a result, the collision took place.

A study was conducted on 10,000 Indian cab drivers and gig workers by the People's Association in Grassroots Action and Movements and the Indian Federation of App-based Transport Workers, with technical support from the University of Pennsylvania and a German foundation. It was published in March this year.

According to the study,

almost a third of app-based cab drivers work for 14 hours a day, while more than 83% work over 10 hours and 60% work over 12 hours. According to the study, almost a third of app-based cab drivers work for 14 hours a day, while more than 83% work over 10 hours and 60% work over 12 hours. While 78% of app-based delivery persons spend over 10 hours each day at work, 34% earn less than Rs 10,000 per month.

This is nothing but the looting of the lifeblood of our youth. Long work hours make drivers physically exhausted. This, plus the 10-minute delivery at the doorstep policy of certain e-commerce platforms are two of the reasons behind many road traffic accidents in our country.

Given that workers can be fired at the drop of a hat, exploitation like withholding of wages, debt bondage, holiday hijacking and even physical and sexual torture have become rampant because it

is difficult for a worker in an unorganised sector to fight against the employer alone. Informal workers are highly vulnerable to exploitative practices as no record of contract has properly been maintained giving ample opportunity to the employers to adopt use and throw methodology. In this scenario, a worker is caught between the devil and the deep blue sea, or in other words, between exploitation and unemployment.

The Government needs to ensure that no worker has to work more than 8 hours daily to where she or he has been employed. It should safeguard the physical and mental wellbeing of the workers and check train and road accidents.

Yours etc.,  
Sujit De,  
Kolkata

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"Justice without force is powerless; force without justice is tyrannical."

— Blaise Pascal

The Shillong Times

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Breather for Media Freedom

NEWS that the Supreme Court on Wednesday ordered the release of NewsClick founder-editor Prabir Purkayastha, has been met with jubilation among sections of the media that has an abiding respect for the Right to Freedom of Speech and Expression as enunciated in Article 19(1) a of the Indian Constitution. The apex court stated that Purkayastha's arrest in the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) case was invalid as the grounds for his arrest were not supplied to him or his counsel in writing before he was remanded to judicial custody.

Although the bench of Justices B R Gavai and Sandeep Mehta directed that Purkayastha be released from custody after furnishing a bail bond to the satisfaction of the trial court, it also clarified that the order should not be read as 'comments on the case's merits.' This is fair as the due process of law has to be followed. What is unfair is the incarceration that Purkayastha and his HR head, Amit Chakraborty were subjected to since October 2023 after they were arrested by the Delhi Police Special Cell and sent to judicial custody in November. Purkayastha's arrest followed a report in The New York Times which alleged that NewsClick was funded by US billionaire Neville Singham who is accused of spreading Chinese propaganda in India and elsewhere. The Delhi Police had filed a chargesheet in the case in a Delhi court in March this year. Prabir Purkayastha and his associate were alleged to have funded Lashkar terrorists; inciting violence in Delhi's Shaheen Bagh and Chand Bagh protests and using reporters to distribute money during the farmers' stir at the national capital's borders. NewsClick has rubbished these allegations calling them "bogus, absurd, and concocted" and stated that they would contest these statements in court. The Delhi Court took cognisance of the chargesheet on April 29 and the case was listed for arguments on May 31. Meanwhile the petitioners appealed to the Supreme Court on grounds that they were not furnished the grounds for their arrest.

Under the Modi regime several journalists have been jailed using the UAPA - a draconian law meant to be used against terrorists but unleashed on journalists like Siddique Kappan for covering the Hathras gangrape case. The Delhi Police in particular has been used to arrest protestors against the Citizen Amendment Act (CAA). The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) recorded that 36 journalists have been arrested and jailed between 2014-2023. Justice Chandrachud had observed that criminal legislations including UAPA, should not be misused for quelling dissent or harassment of citizens. He further said that deprivation of liberty even for a single day is one day too many, and that the courts must always be mindful of the deeper systemic implications of their decisions. Indeed, the Supreme Court needs to take a hard look at the use of such draconian laws on citizens. Fr Stan Swamy was one of those accused under UAPA. He died in Taloja jail, Maharashtra on July 5, 2021. A democracy cannot also have such draconian laws to curb dissent.

# Knowledge and Learning: A Tribute to Jeebon Roy

By Bijoya Sawian

Knowledge is a never-ending story and learning an eternal journey of discovery. Schooling and examination results are just a minuscule part of this great adventure.

The results of the Board exams across India are out. The most crucial time and the most important focus for all educators should be on the mental health of the students, especially the senior students. Counselling is imperative. Year after year we have students who have breakdowns and die of suicide. We have to set an expiry date on this horrific phenomenon. Teachers have to learn to relearn. The word success must be redefined.

When I started The Anfield School over 25 years ago I read books by famous educators and also books from the MBA syllabus to know more about time and potential management among indispensable and very useful knowledge. The ethos of the iconic John Martyn of Doon School touched me deeply. He believed that if a school is meant to prepare a child for a life then the child must feel that "life is worth living." He knew then what we are grappling with now - the problems that arise from a child's confusion, anger, frustration and unhappiness. So it came easily to me when I had to coin the school motto: Instill the Joy of Learning.

The task ahead is an arduous one because for almost a century we have been subjected to the joyless, mind crippling form of education brought in by the British to suit their purpose. Thinking for oneself was totally out of the syllabus. Cram, learn by heart and regurgitate on paper was advocated. Learning was strictly for a purpose. It was not the adventure it was meant to be. Babu Jeebon Roy, the Father of Modern Khasis wrote to the children of these hills - I want to teach you not only how to read and write but also how to think when he established the Ri Khasi Press in 1896.

Let us also not ignore ethics. Ethics is knowing what is right and wrong. Parents and teachers must be aware that ethical illiteracy is rampant in all sections of society and across all ages. It is important because globally, society has plummeted into an almost an irredeemable abyss because of faulty education which no longer includes, Value Education. There are millions of young people in different fields doing brilliantly in their jobs who are totally unaware of our inextricable link to nature; that peace and progress go hand in hand; that basking in the sun, wading in a stream, walking through the woods and gaz-

ing at the stars are enriching and healing experiences.

Education is not merely gathering information and passing examinations; it is not only about books, results, degrees and careers. A person who is exposed only to this is literate but not educated. Education is a holistic experience which instils the right values and prepares an individual for life not merely for a living. Joining the maddening rat race is the first step on the highway to ethical and spiritual destruction. This is the cause of all the malaise of modern society.

Education begins at birth and stretches across a human being's lifetime. The child's first school is his home and the parents and elders around the child are the first teachers. Every gesture, every word, every movement is observed and felt by the child and all this is important for his/her emotional health and overall development. A child may be brilliant and talented but if he/she grows up to be a disturbed adult the consequences are, as we are all aware, tragic and aggravates the societal imbalances already present today. Nowadays a child joins school as early as three years of age. The teacher's role is, therefore, immense.

In ancient India we had the Gurukuls where education was imparted. Guru means teacher and Kuls means home/family. Children live in the gurukuls and are involved in the lives of their teachers. Besides a rigorous routine in learning, the students participate in domestic chores, gardening, tending the cattle and any other work which is part of the Gurukul. This enables the teacher to form a strong bond with the child and also observe his strengths and weaknesses. So, in the classroom, the interaction is comprehensive and this adds to the child's learning experience. The teacher thus becomes the mentor and guide of the student.

If we bond with children the teaching of values comes naturally. The child takes it as part of life and not a mere 'subject' to be learnt. The Gurukul concept is being revived to an extent and this will definitely bring a positive change in the years ahead. When a student leaves the Gurukul he is ready to become a good member of his family, a useful member of his community and a worthy citizen of his country because the correct values have been imparted by the teacher.

In ancient days, in the Khasi Hills, a child is handled with care right from infancy. The way they bathed

a child, held a child, fed a child was always with gentleness and love. The lullabies have soothing, calming tunes that soothe both mother and child. This was the first step towards establishing his/her emotional well-being and stability which are now believed to be important precursors to a child's intellectual growth. Good behaviour and etiquette were taught at special timings when an elder would instruct the young ones on etiquette and the rules and regulations that they must abide to. All these teachings were compiled into the book of ethics and etiquette, Ka Jingsneng Tymmen by Radhon Singh Berry Kharwanlang and first published in book form in 1901 in the Ri Khasi Press. The best way of teaching the contents of this book was, however, was by example and the elders in a family took this seriously.

Stories were told around the fire in long winter nights and endless days of rain when one was forced to keep indoors. The folktales, tales of the origins of the world and explanatory tales were akin to history books. The riddles were the quiz books, proverbs were the tight encapsulation of philosophy, the jokes and trickster tales were for humour and laughter but also educative in their own way. The environment the hills and forests, the streams and rivers were the Geography books and the men would take their children outdoors and instruct. Life has changed tremendously but the idea of bonding cannot be undermined. Teaching is only successful if the child feels good about the teacher. It is simple: you would not respond as you should to someone who you do not trust and feel connected to. The responsibility at home is for parents to spend quality time with their children for this is an important part of their mental well being which is an irreplaceable input for the realisation of their full potential.

The emotional well being of a child depends a lot on the environment, the atmosphere and the method of teaching. In my school I have a subject for Playgroup and Nursery - Good Manners and Good Values along with Spoken English. In the senior classes the specified syllabus does not have Value Education but the teachers are instructed to find opportunities in class to talk on Honesty and Integrity, Compassion and Diligence, Respect and Gratitude, among other qualities. We also have informal talks and share good karma

experiences - what good deed did I do yesterday? It could be a kind word that brought a smile to a sad face, or more weighty ones if they are able to. We encourage the children to share and we show our appreciation generously. We also impress upon the children the importance of knowing what is right and wrong and the greatness in doing little good deeds, impressing upon them that being a good human being is a huge achievement and success of the highest form.

In life what eventually remains, is one's reputation. In the Khasi literary masterpiece, 'Ka Jingsneng Tymmen', The Teachings of Elders, Radhon Singh Berry Kharwanlang wrote: Whatever you know whatever you gain/ It's useless if not by Truth sustained/ Even if very rich you become/ If no, one respects you what use is the pomp?

Even if you are grandly attired/ It's useless for it's only your shame camouflaged/ You may reach the top sit on horse, elephant/ If your reputation is sullied what use is it then?

As parents and teachers we have a long journey ahead on a road we have neglected for a long time - the road less travelled.

Jeebon Roy was a strong believer in education and the written word. He fought with great courage and fortitude for bringing in higher education to the Khasi Hills. He faced insurmountable challenges because the British believed that 'Khasis do not need education beyond Class 6'. After being refused several times he eventually, went ahead and established the Zilla High School in 1878, contributing nine hundred rupees from his own pocket. The school immediately registered fifty students. Seeing this development Reverend Jerman Jones, the Education Officer relented and the Mission School was amalgamated with the Zilla High School and the Government High School was established in Mawkhair in 1879. This was the doorway to higher education in the Khasi Hills and the realisation of Jeebon Roy's dream. He wanted his people to be educated and walk confidently shoulder to shoulder with the rest of the country and the world. He believed that knowledge gave one the power to gain wisdom and wisdom then leads to understanding.

Today, May 16 2024 we commemorate the 121st death anniversary of a stalwart who believed in the value of education for a progressive society. Let me conclude this tribute with his motto - 'Iai Minot' - Persevere with diligence.

# Three verdicts that uphold democracy in our land

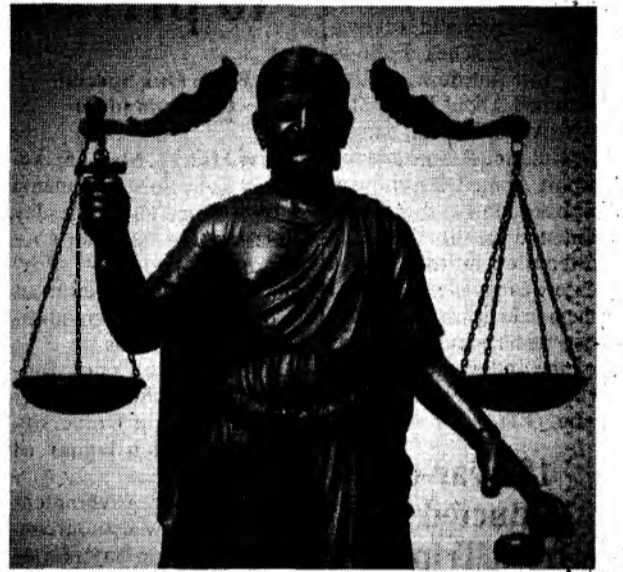
By Haresh Jagtiani

Will Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal gain electorally with his interim bail? Did Prime Minister Modi take the wrong step with the ill-timed arrest of Arvind Kejriwal? Did the Supreme Court do the right thing in temporarily releasing the Delhi Chief Minister? The first two questions will be answered on June 4, 2024, when the results of the Lok Sabha elections are out. So, that leaves the third question which is the issue of the Supreme Court order granting Arvind Kejriwal limited liberty to campaign for his party and poll partners till June 1, a decision that must be lauded.

This decision of the Supreme Court is a proud moment for the country, for the rule of law, and above all, for democracy. Here's why: prior to this ruling,

with contradictions, thus providing the accused with a probable defence at his trial. There's no straightjacket or formula that governs the exercise of a judge's discretion to grant or refuse bail. If this broad approach is kept in mind, then Arvind Kejriwal ought to have been granted bail earlier till his case was ready for trial, and not just as an interim measure. The charges against the Delhi CM have not yet been crystallised even though the 'investigation' has been in progress for two years. He's been arrested ostensibly on the 'confession' of a would-be approver of seriously dubious integrity who had given contradictory versions of his 'confession' previously.

Then again, Arvind Kejriwal is not a flight risk. He cannot possibly tamper with evidence already supposedly



the Supreme Court had in two watershed judgments, spoken stridently to uphold our most fundamental value, democracy. The first such ruling may not have been nationally consequential when it struck down and removed the illegally elected BJP mayor of Chandigarh and described the process by which he was surreptitiously elected as a "murder of democracy." This utterance by the Chief Justice of India must resonate in the hearts and minds of everyone who values freedom. And the next judgment by the full bench of the SC was to declare the Electoral Bond Scheme unconstitutional, again thereby upholding the democratic principles of our polity, the fundamental right of Indian citizens to receive information vital to the governance of the country. So why should the temporary bail given to Arvind Kejriwal be bracketed with the earlier two rulings. And have the same degree of significance and importance as the earlier two momentous rulings? It's simply because the foundation of the release order is the same, namely in the interest of 'fair and free' elections, a principle that's inalienable to our liberty.

Contextually, it's important to grasp the jurisprudence underlying bail. Every crime committed by a person is in theory, a crime against society. The community in which a crime is perpetrated must be protected from a person with such a propensity. But arresting someone suspected of a crime is not the same as proving that the crime has been committed. The accused, however strong the suspicion and however grave the crime, is nevertheless presumed to be innocent until proven guilty at a trial. It's keeping the presumption of his innocence in mind that the law allows him to be released on bail so that he's free to defend himself effectively. Denial of bail irrespective of the nature of the offence is to punish the accused without a trial. Thus, whether an accused is entitled to bail must necessarily depend on a variety of circumstances that the judge in his discretion evaluates to grant or deny bail.

Even in suspected murder cases, bail may be granted where the judge feels that the totality of the material or evidence produced by the prosecution is riddled

gathered by the Enforcement Directorate, or influence witnesses especially if his liberty is vigilantly monitored. All these circumstances are compelling for a judge to set Arvind Kejriwal free to function and discharge his duties as the Chief Minister of Delhi. But the Supreme Court didn't get into these mundane nitty gritty details and gave Arvind Kejriwal his rightful liberty on the solid foundation of democracy, the concomitant of which is ensuring a fair and free election. Arvind Kejriwal heads a national party, the Aam Aadmi Party. It is constitutionally recognised as such and is the ruling party in Delhi and Punjab. His absence will give the BJP an undisputed, unfair advantage and will deny the voters an informed choice of an alternative desirable candidate to vote for without an important spokesperson canvassing against the ruling party. Surely, that's at the heart of the matter. If democracy does survive in this sub-continent, posterity will certainly hail these recently pronounced three judgments as the primary reason for its preservation. We have a robust judiciary, at least at the higher levels, and an inspirational Supreme Court when the need demands. Has it always been that way? I don't think so. We've been let down on occasions in the past but as long as every judge must attain the age of retirement and demit office, the bad eggs must go. The institution has the inherent resilience and self-belief to bounce back and roar "we are a democracy". Simply stated, our ancient culture and civilisation are of the fragrance of democracy and uncompromisingly espouse freedom of thought and expression. Surely a judiciary which is a product of the same wholesome cultural influence cannot but be guided by these cherished values in writing their decisions. If ever our judges are momentarily afflicted by laryngitis when a vocal assertion of democracy is called for, have no fear, the Indian citizen has the best throat lozenges to give the judiciary back its voice.

(The writer is a senior advocate who practices in the Supreme Court and has espoused causes of public interest. He heads the Mumbai law firm Oasis Counsel and Advisory) (Syndicate: The Billion Press) (e-mail: editor@thebillionpress.org)

Letters to the Editor

## Converts to Christianity no longer indigenous

Editor, Recently, I have observed several letters and editorials touching upon the controversial issue of whether protections afforded to indigenous communities in the state should be availed by individuals who renounce the indigenous culture itself through conversion to a foreign faith (mainly Christianity). It is certainly an intriguing debate, but I think there is a clear answer to this divisive question.

Let us analyse the motivations behind these "protections" being granted in the first place. The Indian state has granted certain privileges (such as the exclusive right of land ownership and the district councils) to certain communities to ensure that the indigenous culture of these communities, which is unique and cannot be found anywhere else, is not lost or replaced by "outsider" cultures. The protections are not, however, meant as unconditional gifts to people of certain races. They are not meant to safeguard bloodlines, but cultures. As such, if an individual were to forsake this culture and adopt an alien one instead, he

should clearly not be entitled to the special protections. Of course, it is the absolute right of anyone to abandon their faith or culture if they so choose. However, if a person by doing so contributes to the decline of the culture that these protections were supposed to preserve, is it not a perverse irony if that same individual then enjoys the benefits of these same protections?

It is evident to all why some individuals argue otherwise: they obviously want to keep availing the advantages of these protections even though they do not contribute to cultural preservation. However, an objective glance at the matter makes it obvious that these special protections should remain exclusive to the indigenous and unique cultures in our land. After all, foreign faiths like Christianity are neither indigenous nor endangered, and while the rights of all who adopt other cultures should be upheld without fail, they simply should not enjoy privileges not meant for them. This is especially important in states like Meghalaya, where indigenous culture has dwindled as most of the populace has abandoned indigenous names, rituals and customs. It is important to safeguard what remains, and providing protections only to the right groups of people is a crucial step in achieving this.

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

## Dangers loom large along the Riat Mawdok - Sohra road

Editor The road from Duwan Sing Syiem Bridge to Sohra is one of the most beautiful roads in the State because of its beautiful scenery and landscape. Besides, the good, long and winding nature of the road adds to its beauty. It is a thrill and pleasure to travel through this road especially during clear weather. In our childhood days, this road was narrow and dangerous with so many accidents where most times vehicles fell off the road into the gorge below. But lately, trees have grown by the roadside and railings have been constructed on the sides thereby protecting the moving vehicles from falling down the cliff. Unfortunately, new kinds of dangers and spoilers of beauty of this road have emerged in recent times. The reckless driving by young riders in two wheelers and tourist vehicles has created a situation where the riders and drivers put themselves and other travellers in danger. These young, hot-blooded riders

should not treat this road as a racing track.

Some years ago a police patrol vehicle used to move around these areas but now we no longer see them. Secondly, many shops have cropped up along the sides of the road, blocking the view of the scenery and spoiling the beauty of the road. Who knows even trees might have been cut to make room for these shops. If so many more shops come up, and many hawkers will also join the show, the road will become a market that will end the very purpose of those shops. While the beauty of this road has drawn tourists and brought livelihoods to locals of nearby villages, the Tourism Department, PWD along with the village authorities should work out a proper plan for setting up shops along this road, without marring the beauty of the place. It is common knowledge that in our state, once people set up shops, it will not be easy to remove them even if they understand the problems created by their shops. (e.g. Khyndailad market, etc.). The Government authorities including the Police Department should wake up before the beauty of this road goes down the gorge and remains only in the dustbin of history.

Yours etc., Dr. M. Lyndem. St. Edmund's College, Shillong.

## Safeguarding Meghalaya's environment

Editor, I am writing to express my profound gratitude for Patricia Mukhim's article, "Environment: No one's baby - Meghalaya stares at a bleak future," (ST April 26, 2024 and Salil Gewali's letter, "From verdant to barren: Meghalaya's environmental horror," (ST April 30, 2024). Both writers have powerfully exposed the bitter truth about the escalating environmental degradation in Meghalaya.

Meghalaya, known for its lush hills and rich biodiversity, is now undergoing an alarming transformation. The deforestation and unregulated sand and stone quarries over the past two decades are not just altering the region's visual attraction but are also eroding its ecological balance. Unfortunately, there is a significant lack of public stand against this environmental degradation, including political leaders.

The deforestation and quarrying, driven by short-term economic gains, are greatly impacting the catchment areas crucial for maintaining the region's hydrological cycles. These catchment areas, once major sources of water, are now experiencing severe depletion. While the Chief Minister's recent visit to Um Jasai, a key catch-

ment area of Shillong, is commendable, the damage has already been extensive. Such visits and inspections should have happened much earlier.

There is a real risk that the state may face a severe water crisis in the future if the government does not adopt necessary measures to prioritize the protection and conservation of catchment areas. Rejuvenation of streams, springs, and rivers is equally important.

The efforts of the members of Operation Clean-Up (OCU) are commendable and serve as an inspiration. It is crucial that other organizations collaborate with OCU, and that every individual contributes to preserving the environment. The future of Meghalaya hangs in the balance; silence and inaction are no longer options I believe. If we do not address these issues now, Meghalaya risks losing its environmental assets for which we take pride in. Immediate, concerted action is necessary to avert the environmental crisis that the environmentalists are highlighting regularly.

Yours etc., Vijay Sharma, Shillong-2

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"Nothing is a waste of time if you use the experience wisely."

— Auguste Rodin

## The Shillong Times

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### Season of speculations

A teasing game is on as to the likely outcome of the present parliamentary polls. The BJP, which aims at a hat-trick victory, seemed to be losing its confidence to win the polls this time with a huge majority, evident from Prime Minister Narendra Modi's abrupt resort to the anti-Muslim rhetoric and the palpable disinterest among the voters. But, then came a statement from home minister Amit Shah, in West Bengal the other day, that, with polling over for more than half the seats in the Lok Sabha, the BJP has already "won a comfortable majority" to rule the nation for another five years – meaning some 270 out of the polled 380 seats were in the BJP's kitty by now. Shah had correctly predicted the results in 2019 by saying, "We would win some 300 seats." This still remained a mystery and led to suspicions that the EVMs were manipulated at the highest level. In this context, his present prediction assumed seriousness.

Yet, political pundits are not convinced about this sweep by the BJP this time. In view of the absence of a wave, and mindful of the low voter turnout for the LS polls overall this time, some analysts were bold enough to say Modi might struggle hard for a majority. In such an event, perceptions are also that the prime minister might turn into a laughing stock as he has aimed at a 400-plus seat-tally for the NDA. A loss of face for Modi might mean that even if the BJP manages to retain power, he loses his commanding position in the party and the RSS would step in to take "corrective steps." This would mean the projection of a new face for the PM post, sooner or later. It could be Amit Shah, Yogi Adityanath or Nagpur's very own Nitin Gadkari, or even a dark horse. It all depends on the whims of the RSS leadership, but it could be someone who can run the nation with a strong will. A change of face after two terms is not a bad idea. It could happen even if Modi manages to have a comfortable majority this time. The RSS thinks and acts from a long-term perspective, a rare quality it keeps displaying in recent times. Modi's age factor could only accentuate such a transformation. On the other hand, if the INDIA bloc manages to upstage the NDA, a long-term perspective for the nation could be the first casualty.

### Letters to the Editor

#### Of CUET and Meghalaya

Editor

An entrance exam intended to provide equal opportunities to all Indian students while eliminating subjective bias in evaluation processes has turned out to be a nightmare for Shillong students. I am writing to express my disgust and outrage at the service provided by the National Testing Agency (NTA) through North Eastern Hill University (NEHU) to aspiring students on May 15, 2024, at the NEHU Shillong campus. The viral videos, which showed aspiring students struggling to get through a single test, have probably, shocked everyone. The students had to wait for hours to take the test, and some fainted amid the chaos in the NEHU Shillong campus. Imagine the trauma they went through!

Now one is left to wonder why the testing centres lacked proper organisation and coordination. Is it due to utter apathy or outright incompetence on the part of the officials and personnel involved? It appears that the NEHU coordinators were not adequately prepared to deal with any unforeseen circumstances that could arise. The videos depicting what the students experienced today were painful to watch.

The incident at NEHU today demonstrates that the state machinery and the concerned agency were unprepared to hold and administer the Central University Entrance Test (CUET) within the state. Moreover, other Shillong centres, like Lady

Keane College and St. Anthony's College, successfully conducted the same CUET without any issues. Who will bear the responsibility for such failures? Will NEHU officials, as well as Rakkam A. Sangma, the Education Minister, take action to address this issue?

Such unjustified harassment of the student community must end once and for all.

Our students are not laboratory rats!

Yours etc.,  
Dr David Feral  
Marbaniang,  
Via email

#### Scrap the CUET

Editor,

In 2022 when NEHU recommended the CUET test for admission into the colleges in the state, I wrote an article in The Shillong Times titled, "Is the Common Test Necessary?" (ST, April 25, 2020), wherein I questioned the rationale of such an entrance test in a state like Meghalaya. Apart from raising concerns over the lack of infrastructure for conducting the test for thousands of students who have passed their Class 12 exams, I pointed out the senselessness of such an exercise, where most students prefer to study only in the state. Why don't we admit students based on marks they have obtained in the CBSE or MBOSE exams that they have completed? In what way are the CUET marks superior to the marks that they secured in their 12th standard in the state or cen-

# Pandemonium over CUET exams: Who's accountable?

By Patricia Mukhim

In the age of social media nothing remains an unrevealed secret for too long. The fiasco over the conduct of the Common University Entrance Test (CUET) by the North Eastern Hill University (NEHU) on May 15 is known to everyone across the country and NEHU is scarred for not being able to conduct the examination with due diligence. Is this an attempt by insidious forces to give NEHU a bad name by conducting the examination in such a pathetic manner that it has created a very poor impression of the University? Who is at the top of the administrative ladder who is responsible for the smooth conduct of the CUET? Is it not the Registrar? Did he constitute a team to aid and advise him on how to conduct this public examination? Why is it that the names of 3000 students and their designated classrooms were posted only at one place? Isn't this asking for a stampede?

One of the things that the NDA Government should take credit for is "disruption." We understand that disruption is not always bad but what is needed in the case of CUET is non-disruptive creation. True that the purpose of CUET is to balance out the marks that students score in their Class 12 exams since some teachers have the propensity for over-marking and others for under-marking especially when it comes to subjective answers. The idea of CUET may not be bad but as always its implementation is the problem. The other city colleges that held the CUET had smooth sailing. So what was the problem with NEHU? Did the NEHU admin not know that it would have to accommodate 3000 students? If so, what was the reason for the melee? Who will be held accountable for this fiasco? Whoever bungled this must answer for it because the mayhem has caused enormous trauma for hundreds of students, many of them coming from rural areas and having to leave only after completing the first part of the exam. It's cruel; it's unforgivable; it's unjust and it's inequitable because it favours the city students but is harsh on those coming from a distance.

Now there are many things that are new to the students appearing for the CUET exams. They apparently had to leave their shoes outside the classroom (examination hall). Girl students wearing earrings had to remove them because of some disruptive technology that is sensitive to metals. It rained fire and brimstone on May 15 around the time of the exams, just as it did on May 16. The inclement weather meant that the temperatures had dipped. Students wearing jackets were told to leave it outside the examination hall. This reminds us of the David Copperfield sort of age when children of the labour class were treated as little less than animals. Some parents narrated their tales of woe and said that their son who had come from the village and was so exhausted by the experience of running from pillar to post to find his designated examination room that he barely wrote anything. Instead, he fell asleep and had to be awakened by a co-examinee sitting by his side. What a predicament this is.

Anyone who reads or hears of this CUET fiasco in NEHU would think that the University has never conducted examinations for students from outside in the past. But the professors claim that several competitive examinations have been held and flawlessly executed by the NEHU staff and teachers. So what's the problem with the CUET exam and who is going to pay for the mental and emotional trauma caused on that fateful day?

For now the CUET has taken the form of a nightmare for the many young students who were allotted NEHU as their centre. The NDA Government gave the National Testing Agency (NTA) its birth in 2017 to conduct a series of entrance exams and recruitments. But conducting exams in a country as large as India requires a foolproof system in place which also means the ability of the Agency to tie up seamlessly with the institutions it enlists to conduct these entrance exams. The NTA is an autonomous agency under the Department

of Higher Education of the Ministry of Education. But those who know the inside story say that the NTA does not have the requisite human resource needed to effectively discharge its onerous task. Recently the NTA made a mess of the NEET exam where medical aspirants in Jaintia Hills got the Hindi question papers whereas students in Rajasthan who write their exams in Hindi got the English question papers. The very fact that some students are able to write their answers in the vernacular while others have to write in English makes the examination inequitable. But this debate is for another day.

As knowledgeable professors of universities have stated, the CUET for Meghalaya is a futile experiment since the majority of students are going to study within the state. Those wishing to study outside the state can take the CUET exam but it should not be made mandatory across the board especially when an institution of repute like NEHU has bungled big in the conduct of this exam.

Now the debacle of May 15 has created rage across the Meghalaya spectrum. It is seen as a conspiracy to put our students on a slippery board from which they have slipped and slipped badly. It has pained the parents of those students who could not complete their exams. It adds to the grievances that are already piled up. This anger is directed at the State Government too for failing to negotiate with the Ministry of Education to do away with CUET for Meghalaya. Some state governments like Tamilnadu and Karnataka have put paid to the National Education Policy (NEP 2020) by refusing to implement it. These states are instead working on a New State Education Policy which is perhaps nuanced towards the culture and moorings of the people there.

There is a problem when everything is sought to be equated to nationalism. Also these common entrance exams have become a business model for coaching centres. Those who can afford to, send their children to these

coaching centres with the expectation that they will get through their NEET and other entrance exams. These coaching centres charge a hefty fee and parents are willing to part with it. Such is the competition to enter the medical and engineering fields and now even law studies and entrance into a university. Competition has become a daily fare but at what cost?

These are issues that need to be thrashed out at the level of the state and if states like Tamil Nadu can stand up to the central government why are states like Meghalaya so supine and ready to acquiesce with the agenda of the Central Government? We would also like to ask as to what sane advice the much-touted Education Commission of Meghalaya has come up with till date. Will the Government care to make public the outcomes of the discussions since they impinge on the student population of this state.

The stated objectives of CUET seem fair enough. It advertises itself as an essential step for students aiming to enrol in undergraduate programs across a range of disciplines in India. The test is designed to assess a wide array of skills including critical thinking, analytical capabilities, and subject-specific knowledge. These are necessary aptitudes for one entering college. But the problem is whether a student passing Class 12 in Meghalaya actually has that critical thinking capacity considering the inadequacies in our education system. But perhaps this too can be integrated into our school system early on.

Also the CUET evaluates proficiency across four main areas: English, Mathematics, General Knowledge, and Domain-specific subjects. Each section is crafted to test specific skills such as language proficiency and mathematical ability to general awareness and specialised knowledge according to the chosen field of study. This is fine. The problem with CUET this time in Meghalaya is not with the students but with the manner in which it was conducted by NEHU. Will those traumatized students get a second chance?

of the examination procedure. Worried statements buzzed through the state, doubting the Government's competence to manage an important exam such as the CUET.

The bedlam began with students rushing to a single spot where their room allotments were announced on an A4 size sheet, expected to be read by 3000 students. While the management and NEHU staff were seen walking around with tea and biscuits, the students were scurrying around the campus like confused mice. With unspecified building numbers, the students rushed through the campus in the pouring rain, and at 3 pm entered their allotted rooms, only to be faced by technical problems in the biometric gadgets which were needed to identify them and to officially mark their attendance. Soaking wet, and drenched in cold rain water, they were to sit in the rooms and await further instructions. The exam, supposed to start at 3:00 pm, started hours later at 5:15 pm, with frequent problems regarding the improper attendance procedures. As the first paper ended, with utmost struggle, students from the rural areas of Meghalaya were compelled to withdraw from the second examination with the onset of the night, leading to a large number of students missing the compulsory exam.

A teacher from NEHU stated that a number of teachers in charge of management were themselves new to the field, and that the organizing committee should have arranged a team of experienced teachers. NEHU has held

many competitive exams in its premises for years, but that day was the first time that such a mess happened. It points to the negligence of the organizing head, and the attention it pays to the importance of the CUET examinations in our State. What went wrong on the first day of the CUET examination, demands serious introspection with the organising committee learning the lesson of their lives. Teachers and parents who have shown empathy towards the distraught students, have requested the Government and its State leaders to consider this year's CUET exams as mock/practice exams, and to cautiously prepare better for next year's examinations instead.

At the moment the students are pleading that the colleges should accept admissions through the HSSLC results of students. If they strictly abide by the Central government, regarding this new education system which needs, at first, firm foundations and preparations in our State of Meghalaya, the youth would be doomed with an unclear future. Let this writup voice the silent struggles and anxiety of the thousands of youth, searching for a clear path to their hopefully clear future and appeal to the Government and institutions for considerate actions.

Yours etc.,  
Iaphilaniewkor Thangkiew  
Via email

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# Tale of two Telugu States

By Kingshuk Nag

Now that the votes have been cast there is a lot of speculation about the results in the first week of June from the two Telugu speaking States of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. Will the BJP move beyond a few urban parts of Telangana or will the Congress keep its new stronghold? How far will Chandrababu Naidu, now in alliance with the BJP, get with Jagan Reddy's YSRCP, the BJP's former ally? The questions surround the fate of 17 Lok Sabha seats in Telangana and 25 in Andhra after old alliances have made way for newly forged ties in a battleground that Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Jagan Mohan Reddy has described as his "Kurukshetra". The YSRCP is contesting all 25 Lok Sabha seats and is also battling to retain Andhra where assembly elections are being simultaneously held.

The State was bifurcated in 2014 to form Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. For the last ten years the Telangana Rashtra Samiti (TRS) under K Chandrasekhar Rao (KCR) has ruled Telangana. Originally an important member of the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) led by Chandrababu Naidu, KCR rebelled because of his career not advancing rapidly and propagated the Telangana cause. The demand for Telangana has been around since the early 70s. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi had doused the fire by making a Telangana man the chief minister of the integrated State of Andhra Pradesh. This was none other than P V Narasimha Rao who two decades later became the Prime Minister. But the old demand came up once again in the 1990s as locals were troubled by NT Rama Rao's ideas of 'Andhrification'.

This meant the import of Andhra culture into Telangana areas. The two areas were different in food habits and local cultures and even how they spoke Telugu.

KCR's plan for Telangana was successful because he was supported by the Congress party then the principal opposition in the State. The Congress allowed the creation of the new State and tied up with the TRS under KCR to consolidate their political position against Chandrababu Naidu who was part of the BJP led National Democratic Alliance (NDA). But KCR even as he made of a show of aligning with the Congress ditched the party in the elections that followed the creation of Telangana in 2014. Incidentally KCR had successfully lobbied with the public to show he was the sole creator of Telangana and champion of its cause as he had fought hard for this including a fast unto death. He took advantage of the sentiment, winning 63 seats of the total 119 seats. The Congress party came a poor second with 21 seats. He won again in 2019.

Once in power, KCR converted the Telangana government into his personal fiefdom ruling the State with son K T Rama Rao and nephew Harish Rao as important ministers. His daughter K Kavita became an MP and played a key role. Many of his ministers and important leaders were from his own Velama caste. A prosperous caste, the Velamas are not numerous. Even Velama businessmen were promoted. In his battle for Telangana, large sections of civil society had supported KCR. But once in power KCR cut himself off from these sections, losing his support base without realising it. Hyderabad State of the Nizams - part of which was taken over by Telangana state - was a feudal non democratic state in its heydays. Though independent India was a democratic State, the nature and work ethics of the people had not changed. It seems that KCR thought he could effectively rule the State by behaving like a prince, distant from the people. But the new State required huge resources.

How would Telangana get this? His son K T Rama Rao came up with the plan to intensify the commercialisation of Hyderabad. He stated

so in 2014 when asked how he would find resources for the newly created State. "We will expand Hyderabad so much that it - in a way - covers the entire State," he said.

This expansion plan was initiated by predecessor N Chandrababu Naidu who had created the Hi-tech city and a global scale airport and brought in new investments in the education and IT sector. The KCR regime went ahead with fancier real estate, buildings and a financial district that's coming up. All this led to land prices going up and brought in new investors from Bangalore and Mumbai among other places. A new metro rail by L & T covering large parts of the city was also initiated. Visitors from other metro cities were highly impressed. All this increased the revenues of the government and was spent in creating more roads, dams and irrigation works. But the government failed to keep effective control on the work of contractors. As a result, shoddy roads and irrigation lead to public angst which could show up in the election results.

Meanwhile Andhra Pradesh had been a bastion of the Congress from the beginning. So much so that when ousted from the north just after the Emergency, the party maintained its position in Andhra Pradesh. But the bifurcation demolished the Congress in the newly created State. The party drew a blank and many sitting union ministers lost the election. Chandrababu Naidu of the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) who was earlier chief minister of united Andhra Pradesh won the election. New Andhra Pradesh had no capital and earlier people migrated to Hyderabad. Now the new chief minister Chandrababu Naidu zeroed in on a green field area, Amaravati, to establish his capital. Amaravati, on the banks of the river Krishna, contains fertile land. Naidu was adamant on it against all arguments. The area was under the control of rich Kammis (Naidu's caste) who had migrated to the US and wanted to divest from it. Naidu's plan was to establish the new capital to attract investments from Singapore and Japan. Amaravati was a traditional Buddhist centre, so countries like Japan, Thailand would be attracted, Naidu has argued. Jagan Reddy has always opposed this, believing Amaravati was chosen to further Kamma business interests. The Kammis are a rival caste of the Reddys and the two groups are deeply opposed to each other. Jagan Reddy, son of the late Congress chief minister of integrated Andhra Pradesh Y S Rajasekhara Reddy, fell out with the Congress after the demise of his father.

In the 2019 elections Jagan Reddy swept the polls with his party YSR Congress capturing a whopping 151 of the 175 seats. Jagan Reddy planned to move the capital to a far more developed city Visakhapatnam and announced it as his new headquarters. But with assembly and high court buildings ready in Amaravati, the move can only be partial. Andhra Pradesh is caught in this position and people hope that after the results are announced, the State can move forward with the capital finalised. Jagan Reddy is hoping his policy of giving free or cheap grants to the people will also help him sweep the polls.

The BJP, making an effort to enter south India, has recently tied up with the TDP breaking its earlier unwritten alliance with the YSRCP. As they race to the finishing line in Telangana and Andhra, hopes are high. YSRCP wants to keep its space, the Congress which won the recent assembly elections in Telangana wants a greater share, while the BJP is hoping to make a dent.

(The writer is a senior journalist and author based in Hyderabad) (Syndicate: The Billion Press) (email: editor@thebillionpress.org)

"You have to be willing to go to war with yourself and create a whole new identity."

— David Goggins

## The Shillong Times

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### Elite capture of resources

ONE of the characteristics of a tribal community is that natural resources are community owned. They include forests, rivers, water-sources and land. How the tribals of Meghalaya have rapidly lost control of these resources and how such resources are now private property is perhaps a colonial left-over. It was the British that turned land into a purchasable commodity, in the places they chose to settle in namely Sohra and Shillong. The tribes relied heavily on the institutions of the Syiemship to look after their well-being which included the allocation of community land for each family to live and farm on. In the past community land (ri raj) was distributed to respective clans by the Syiems in Council. The clan heads (dorbar kur) in turn distributed land to their clan members. If the land was not used productively for three years it reverted to the community. This prevented land from being unduly appropriated. It was an equitable practice and ensured that every member of the clan that needs to branch out from the natal family after marriage was allotted space for a new home.

With time however, land became a prime asset. Those well-endowed financially used land as a stock in trade. They invested in land and sold it like they sell stocks and profited from this transaction. The history of how land is privatised is a subject of much research and land reforms committees had been formed; studies conducted and recommendations made to prevent elite capture of community land but such recommendations only gathered dust. Today a small section of tribal elite are exercising control over large stretches of forest lands that were hitherto community forests over which the community had access to non-timber forest products such as edible leaves, roots, nuts, seeds etc. Large swathes of such forests are being cleared to make way for stone quarries. It is ironic that both state and community institutions including the district councils empowered by the 6th Schedule to be the custodian of community resources have not been able to prevent this rapid exploitation of natural resources to the point that even catchments are not spared, leading to drying up of natural reservoirs that are sources of drinking water for the community.

What is happening in Meghalaya today is reminiscent of Garrett Hardin's article dating back to 1968, "Tragedy of the Commons," which speaks of over-exploitation of natural resources by the few at the cost of the environment and by depriving others of what is a shared resource. One wealthy individual buying large tracts of agricultural land in rural Meghalaya is depriving several small rural farmers from earning a livelihood. Another wealthy, political elite acquiring forest land for a stone quarry or for coal mining is affecting the environment. There is air pollution; water pollution and other intangible impacts. And all this is done without an eco-restoration plan. The community relied on traditional institutions. These institutions have failed the people. State institutions too have failed to conserve the environment. In fact, they have allowed unregulated extraction without assessing the cost to the environment! This over-exploitation has to stop. It's time for people to raise their collective voices.

# Is religion the basis of indigenous identity?

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

There's been some debate as to whether indigenous status is tied to cultural practices and that those who no longer follow them should lose the status. Culture, in this case, is thought to be synonymous with religion. However, this creates a complication because even if members of an indigenous community convert to a new religion they may still hold on to other cultural practices. The best example of this is the continued adherence to the matrilineal system by the Khasi, who have converted to Christianity. The Khasis take great pride in the fact that they are one of the few communities in the world that are still following a system that must have been quite widespread in the past. A very good book to understand the various kinds of matrilineal cultures in different parts of the world is "Matriarchal Societies: Studies on Indigenous Cultures across the Globe" by Heidi Goettner-Abendroth. Personally, I had the opportunity to meet the chief of an indigenous peoples group from the Solomon Islands, who informed me that they also follow a matrilineal system. The fact that Austroasiatic speakers (to which the Khasi belong) are the oldest group in Southeast Asia means that in their journeys both westward (to the subcontinent) and southward (to the islands of Southeast Asia), they must have carried the matrilineal culture with them. Some groups within the Munda, like the Bonda, in fact have some cultural practices that suggest that they must have followed a matrilineal system in the past. The indigenous peoples of the Solomon Islands, however, are not Austroasiatic but an Austronesian group. So, their matrilineal custom must be something that is either original to them or most probably they must have adopted it after coming into contact with Austroasiatic speakers. The latter is very much possible, considering the Garo are part of the Tibeto-Burman-Kok-Borok linguistic group (Bodo, Tripuri, Dimas, and related to Kachin and Konyak) but are the only matrilineal group among them. It appears that they must have originally been following a patrilineal system and switched to matrilineal after coming in contact with the Khasis, which must have happened at least 4000 years ago or a little later. The most fascinating feature of all is that the largest matrilineal community in the world is the Minangkabau, an indigenous group from West Sumatra, Indonesia (I happen to know someone from that community), and they are a Muslim community. So, matrilineal customs are not bound by religion or language, and for the Khasis, if anything, adherence to them should be the basis of their identity. In fact, matrilineal customs must have been the oldest cultural practice in SE Asia and the eastern part of Asia

sub-continent (today East and NE India). But let's assume, for the time being, that religion is the most important and the rest (like matrilineal customs) are secondary. Since Khasis are not special, this rationale should apply to all groups as well. So, let's accept this and see what kind of results we get.

Right now, nations in Southeast Asia are either Buddhist or Muslim-dominated. This religious identity, which is very strongly mixed with nationalism, has had some appalling results on the ground. The Rohingya Muslims are today one of the most discriminated groups in the world, and in Myanmar, their persecution has the backing of the dominant sections of the Buddhist clergy led by Ashin Wirathu, who is known for inciting violence against Muslims. He and others profess a Buddhist identity for the country and for all those who live in it. The same is the case in Sri Lanka.

But Buddhism is not indigenous to either Sri Lanka or Myanmar. The religion actually began with Siddhartha Gautama, most commonly referred to as the Buddha, who was born in Lumbini, in present Nepal, and must have lived during the 6th or 5th century BCE. So, the people in these countries are actually fighting in the name of a foreign religion, having forgotten their own true roots. Then we have the case of Bali in Indonesia, which is a Hindu-dominant region of Indonesia, and they are very devoted to this foreign belief system, which they have adopted by giving up their own original religion. So, all these people are not just fools but traitors to their own traditions (i.e., religion), and they don't have the right to claim themselves as Burmese, Sinhalese, or Balinese. I think someone should go tell them that and see how they react to it.

We also have the European nations, which not only colonized a large part of the world but fought two great wars over those colonies. Millions of people were killed, and some of the worst atrocities in human history, like the Jewish Holocaust, were perpetrated because of that. These European nations fought against each other, and their people made supreme sacrifices or committed horrific crimes in the name of their national identity. Christian faith was a very important component of that, and their justification for colonialism was to spread civilized values, which included imposing Christianity on the subjugated peoples. But Christianity had its origin in undivided Palestine, which is now under the occupation of illegal European and American immigrants who are now committing genocide against the indigenous population. So, all the wars and hardships the people of Europe faced or

inflicted on others were over a lie because they didn't do them in the name of Odin, Thor, Zeus, Jupiter, or Perun. Europeans are still largely Christian, which means they are still living a lie and their entire identity is a farce. I think someone should also go and tell them that and see how they react to it.

Coming back to India, almost 80% of the people in India today follow Hinduism, but it is confirmed that the basic features of the religion—the Sanskrit language, the Varna system, and the Vedas—have their origin outside the subcontinent. It arrived with the Indo-Aryans around 3500 years ago and co-opted what we now call tribal religions to create this eclectic faith we know today as Hinduism. If the Sanskrit language, the Varna system, and the Vedas are removed from Hinduism, then a lot of it can be termed indigenous. If these three are the fundamental foundations of the faith, then it is of foreign origin. So, how many people today who follow Hinduism are doing so after giving up their original faiths? That can be answered by looking at the castes and ethnic identities of the people.

In India, tribals (or more correctly, indigenous people) are mostly Austroasiatic (Khasi, Munda), Sino-Tibetan (Kok-Borok, Tani-Mishmi, Kuki-Chin-Mizo), or Dravidian (Gond). So any tribal who identifies as a Hindu has actually betrayed their own original religion to adopt a foreign religion. Then there's the SC (Schedule Caste) and the BC (Other Backward Class), who have a very low level of Steppe ancestry (0% to single digits), which is the group that brought the Sanskrit language, the Varna system, and the Vedas to the subcontinent. Only the upper castes, whose members have almost 70% Steppe ancestry, can be termed those whose original religion was Hinduism. When the number of people who have non-Steppe ancestry is combined, they make up 74.5% of the Indian population. This figure comes from Indira Sawhney and et al. v. Government of India, 1992, which reported in its judgment that "excluding Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes constitute nearly 52% of the Indian population." Therefore, they decided on the 50% ceiling because, by population logic, reservation will then have to be for 75.5% of the seats, and this violates the main basis of their judgment that adequate representation does not equate to proportionate representation. The Constitution provides for adequate, not proportional, representation. So now that VPP wants implementation of proportionate representation in the case of Meghalaya, and if done so, this will definitely

go to the courts, let's see what happens to the reservation policy of Meghalaya. Since Khasis are not special and the court will not reverse its judgment for them, I feel they are in for a big shock once the matter lands up in court.

But coming back to the question regarding who the original Hindus were, that number will be less than 30%. From this must also be excluded the Sikhs, Buddhists, Parsis, and Jains who were also following something else in the past. So, the identity of many groups who are today devout and proud of their religious identity is based on a lie. Worse, many are actually traitors to their own religion, which they have abandoned for a foreign one. This includes the Meitei, who, ostensibly are fighting an existential crisis. Most of them follow Vaishnavism (a subset of Hinduism), while some are still holding to their original faith, Sanamahism, which many have discarded for a foreign religion. I wonder, if someone goes and tells this to the Meitei, how they will react to it.

These complexities are well understood, and therefore, when internationally indigenous peoples are defined, it is not culture per se but their habitation over a region for a long period of time that is considered. This is what the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention 169 objective criteria for being considered indigenous means: descent from populations who inhabited the country or geographical region at the time of conquest, colonization, or establishment of present state boundaries and/or (emphasis on OR) descent of some social, economic, cultural, and political institutions, irrespective of their legal status. People, not culture, is given importance, which makes sense since culture is not independent of people. Otherwise, it would mean that culture is a supernatural entity that comes into existence on its own and is then adopted by a community, giving the latter its identity. The Indian Constitution is also well aware of this fact, and it gives the right to freedom of religion under Articles 25, 26, 27, and 28 of the Indian Constitution. So, constitutionally, the rights of a community, indigenous or non-indigenous, cannot be taken away in the name of religion. So, those who make the argument that indigenous peoples should lose their rights if they have converted to Christianity or some other religion are doing so in ignorance of international and national laws. Or perhaps they are aware, but their aim is to spread disunity among the indigenous communities. Why would they do that? That's the million-rupee question.

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

## KWAI: A difficult balance between cultural practices & public health concern

By Dr Firdaus Samad & Arindam Biswas

In Meghalaya, the tradition of chewing betel nut, locally known as Kwai, spans centuries, and is deeply embedded in the cultural fabric of the Khasi community. Offering Kwai to guests symbolizes respect and hospitality, transcending social and economic barriers, making it a universal gesture of goodwill. This practice not only fosters social bonds but also serves as a testament to the egalitarian nature of Khasi society, where Kwai is accessible to all, irrespective of one's financial standing.

The ritual of consuming Kwai, typically wrapped in a betel leaf with lime, is a community activity that strengthens social ties. However, this tradition also introduces several health concerns, particularly when combined with tobacco and alcohol. Several studies highlight that excessive consumption of Kwai poses significant health risks, including oral health deterioration and a heightened risk of oral cancer. The arecoline alkaloid found in betel nuts, when consumed excessively, increases the risk of oral cancer, especially when paired with tobacco and alcohol. The habitual chewing of Kwai can also lead to mouth ulcers, which, though typically self-healing, can escalate the risk of cancer if recurrent in the same area.

Despite these health implications, Kwai continues to be sold near educational institutions, exposing adolescents and young adults to its risks. This paradox highlights the challenge of balancing cultural practices with public health concerns, emphasizing the need for awareness and intervention to mitigate the adverse health effects associated with Kwai consumption. While respecting its cultural significance in Meghalaya society, India, with its vast adolescent population of nearly 250 million, faces significant public health challenges, particularly in habit formation during these formative years. Adolescents, central to societal development, often adopt habits influenced by societal norms and accessibility to substances like Kwai. This betel nut, deeply ingrained in cultural practices, is readily available and affordable,

often sold near educational institutions, which may inadvertently promote early habituation among youth. The Cigarettes and Other Tobacco Products Act (COTPA) 2003, which prohibits the sale of tobacco products to individuals under the age of 18 and within 100 yards of educational institutions, aims to curb youth access to tobacco. Applying similar restrictions to Kwai could significantly reduce its consumption among adolescents without adversely affecting the livelihoods of local vendors, who could diversify their offerings. Moreover, integrating awareness campaigns about Kwai's harmful effects into the School Health Program under the National Health Mission could enhance education on this issue. Counselling for children and adolescents who consume Kwai should also be considered to support healthier lifestyle choices, thereby addressing this critical public health issue more effectively.

Meghalaya could leverage the essence of Cigarettes and Other Tobacco Products Act (COTPA) to reduce the prevalence of betel nut consumption among its youth. The school authorities could help in designing strategies to reduce sales of Kwai within 100 yards of their premises. Schools and parents, both, should actively report any betel nut sales within the vicinity of educational institutions. Additionally, implementing regular awareness campaigns is crucial to educate children about the detrimental health effects of betel nut consumption. For those children already showing signs of addiction, it's imperative to provide effective counselling and support for cessation. Parents play a critical role in addressing this issue, early on, preventing the escalation to associated habits like smoking and tobacco chewing. Encouragingly, a pilot study across six villages in the Ri-Bhoi district involving 140 households showed a reduction in Kwai consumption, from an average of 10-15 Kwais a day to just 2-3 Kwais to health issues related to the consumption of Kwai. This positive trend highlights the potential impact of a concerted, multi-stakeholder approach to health education and intervention. By fostering a community-wide effort to reduce Kwai intake, Meghalaya can safeguard its future generations from the health risks associated with betel nut consumption, ultimately leading to a healthier people and state.

(The authors are attached to the Indian Institute of Public Health (IIPH), Shillong)

### Letters to the Editor

#### Is Hindutva influencing the ST status vs. Christian Conversion debate?

Editor, This discussion in Meghalaya touches on sensitive questions about the intersection of identity and law. While some argue that conversion to Christianity might lead to a departure from traditional practices, others maintain that religious belief is a personal matter and may not necessarily erase one's cultural heritage or tribal identity. Now, why do non-indigenous people have an interest in this issue? The relationship between indigenous beliefs and other religious practices, such as Hinduism in Meghalaya—particularly in the Jaintia Hills—is a subject of historical and cultural significance. History suggests that there was an assimilation of Hinduism with the local tribal belief

systems. The influence of Hinduism on the cultural and religious practices of the Jaintia people is evident in various aspects of their lives, from festivals and rituals to dietary customs. While opinions on the extent of this influence may vary, historical and contemporary practices suggest a significant Hindu presence in the region.

The fundamental Hindu belief regarding the sanctity of the cow and the prohibition of beef consumption is deeply ingrained in the cultural fabric of Hindu society and has been historically influential in shaping dietary customs. The Jaintia's adherence to the non-consumption of beef (including many who have converted to Christianity), despite their meat-eating habits, is a testament to the enduring impact of Hinduism's core principles on their cultural identity. Additionally, the celebration of Hindu festivals like Durga Puja, and the presence of ancient Hindu temples and the Shakti Peeth temple in the area, are significant in Hindu belief.

However, the adoption of Hindu customs and traditions by the Pnar people

in the Jaintia Hills did not replace their indigenous practices but rather blended with them, creating a unique cultural synthesis. Niamtre and Hinduism are not the same since the latter focuses on importance of caste system, rebirth, purity and pollution (untouchables are considered impure and therefore justified to be exploited by upper castes) and highly patriarchal where women have a subordinate role. Pnar society is however completely opposite of that. So, while Niamtre has taken elements from Hinduism it is not Hinduism.

This blend and assimilation of certain fundamentals between Hindu belief and the traditional belief system of the people could potentially provide a ground for Hindutva elements to interplay between religious beliefs and identity politics, thus possibly involving them in the ST status vs. Christian conversion debate. If the ST status were to be affected by religious conversion in Meghalaya, it could lead to a broader discourse and possibly similar actions in other states, impacting the social and political rights of the

communities involved.

While the indigenous tribes are busy fighting over their minor differences, there are others who are ready to take advantage of one or two fundamental similarities to further add fire to the infighting over minor dissimilarities.

Yours etc., James D. Via email

#### Yes, scrap the CUET

Editor, I fully agree with the letter of Prof. H. Srikanth, "Scrap the CUET," (ST May 17, 2024). The Common University Entrance Test (CUET) has created a lot of problems and disturbances for the students. It is better to scrap it for local students who wish to study in colleges within the state of Meghalaya. It should be conducted only for those students who wish to study in colleges outside their home states. Entrance tests are good for admission into the professional courses. So, I hope one day the CUET will be done away with for students who wish to study

in local colleges.

Yours etc., Wallambiing Rani, Upper Shillong

#### Predicting election outcomes is fraught

Editor, Apropos of the editorial "Seasons of speculation" (ST May 17 2024), Narendra Modi will turn 73 during the 2024 Lok Sabha election. The BJP has an unwritten rule of retiring politicians from ministerial and organisational positions upon attaining 75 years of age. If the BJP wins the 2024 parliamentary election and Modi becomes Prime Minister for the third consecutive term, he may step down after September 17, 2025, as he will complete 75 years of age. But the BJP may treat Modi's case as an exception and allow him to continue beyond 75 years of age. One must not lose sight of the fact that the RSS remains the influential ground force, while Modi leads the government. Coaction between the two entities shapes the BJP's policies and strategies. Age and organisational norms may play a role but Modi's exceptional leadership and BJP's strategic considerations will determine the future face of the party. The potential successors to Narendra Modi within the BJP have been a topic of speculation. However, the leading candidates are Amit Shah and Yogi Adityanath. Amit Shah, Union Home Minister is a close confidante of Narendra Modi, who played a pivotal role in shaping the BJP's strategies and electoral victories. Yogi Adityanath, the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh (India's largest State) is another prominent contender. Known for his strong Hindu nationalist stance, he commands influence in a crucial electoral region. These leaders are vying to carry forward the BJP's legacy, but the ultimate decision lies with the party and its members though The Economist says that "a leadership struggle is brewing in India's ruling party". The emergence of the Indian National Develop-

mental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) consortium has challenged the long-standing dominance of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in India's political landscape. Looking at the numbers the NDA's vote share may drop to around 43% in 2024 from 45% in 2019. INDIA's vote share may climb from 27% to around 37% as parties change sides. As far as Lok Sabha seats are concerned, the NDA which had a staggering 352 seats in the 17th Lok Sabha in 2019, now has 335 seats. INDIA boasts of 144 MPs, up from 91 in 2019. As far as strategic alliances are concerned, NDA's coalition has almost doubled in size, indicating alignment with more regional parties. INDIA wields significant influence in several states, including Tamil Nadu and West Bengal. The stakes are high as new alliances form and old ones reconfigure, setting the stage for a potentially transformative election that could redefine India's political trajectory.

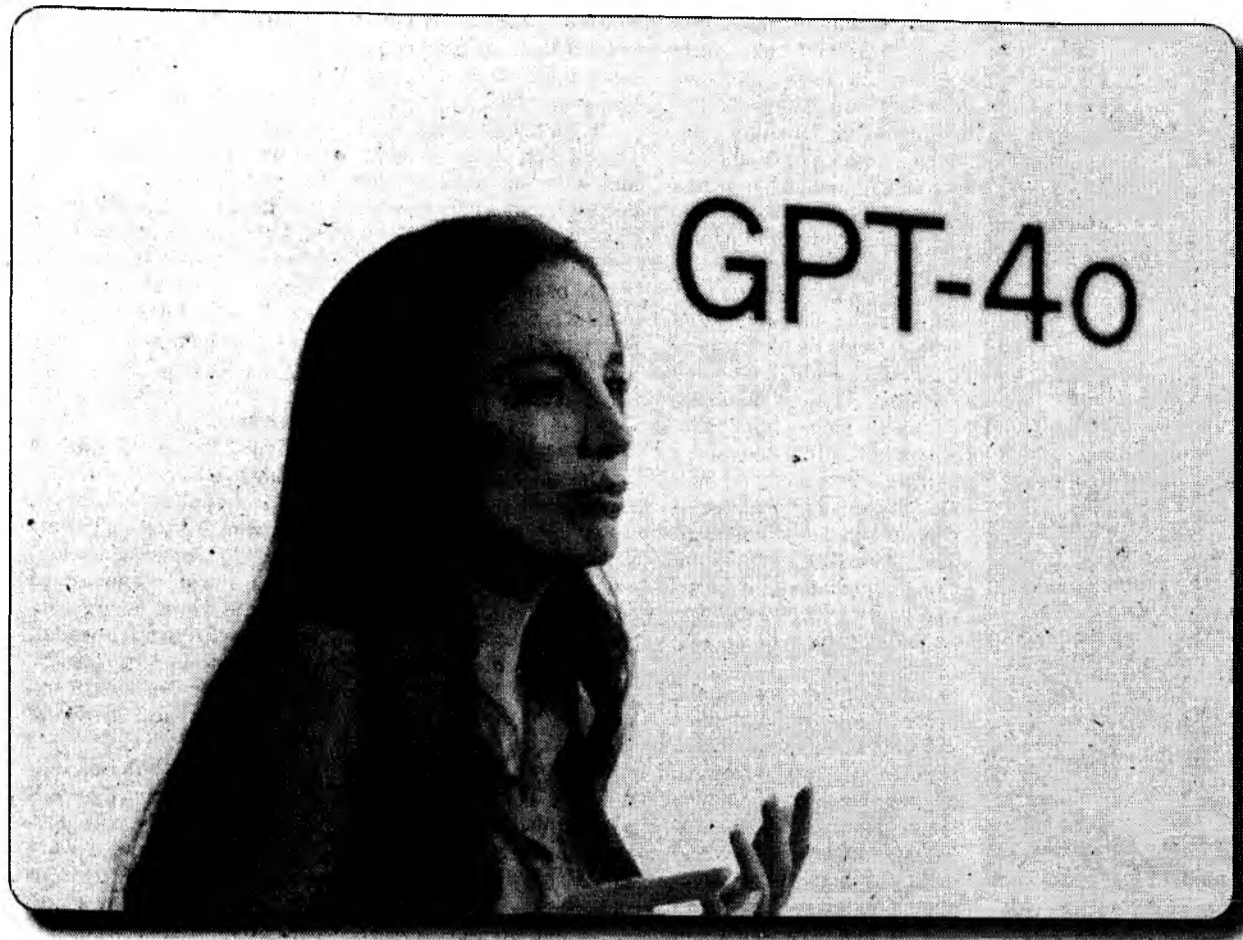
The war of wits among political parties continues after 380 seats have already been voted. The volatility and unpredictability of In-

dia's electoral landscape are evident, making this a crucial moment for the country's future. The editorial correctly concluded that "if the INDIA bloc manages to upstage the NDA, a long-term perspective for the nation could be the first casualty." A shift in power dynamics may lead to policy changes, altered governance priorities, and potential impacts on economic and social development. However, predicting specific outcomes is challenging, as it depends on various factors, including post-election alliances, regional dynamics and individual party strategies. While INDIA Bloc may cause setbacks for the NDA, the long-term consequences will depend on how the political landscape evolves after the elections. We have to keep in mind that these are complex dynamics, and outcomes are subject to multiple variables and negotiations etc.

Yours etc., VK Lyngdoh, Via email

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

# ChatGPT is now better than ever at faking human emotion, behaviour



OpenAI CTO Mira Murati during the launch of GPT-4o. (OpenAI)

Earlier this week OpenAI launched GPT-4o ("o" for "omni"), a new version of the artificial intelligence (AI) system powering the popular ChatGPT chatbot. GPT-4o is promoted as a step towards more natural engagement with AI.

According to the demonstration video, it can have voice conversations with users in near real-time, exhibiting human-like personality and behaviour.

This emphasis on personality is likely to be a point of contention. In OpenAI's demos, GPT-4o sounds friendly, empathetic and engaging. It tells "spontaneous" jokes, giggles, flirts and even sings.

The AI system also shows it can respond to users' body language and emotional tone.

Launched with a streamlined interface, OpenAI's new version of the ChatGPT chatbot appears designed to increase user engagement and facilitate the creation of new apps based on its text, image and audio capabilities.

GPT-4o is another leap forward for AI development.

However, the focus on engagement and personality raises important questions about whether it will truly serve the interests of users, and the ethical implications of creating AI that can simulate human emotions and behaviours.

## The personality factor

OpenAI envisions GPT-4o as a more enjoyable and engaging conversational AI. In principle, this could make interactions more effective and increase user satisfaction.

Studies show users are more likely to trust and cooperate with chatbots exhibiting social intelligence and personality traits. This could prove relevant in fields such as education, where studies have indicated AI chatbots can boost learning outcomes and motivation.

However, some commentators worry users may become overly attached to AI systems with human-like personalities or emotionally

harmful by the one-way nature of human-computer interaction.

## The Her effect

GPT-4o immediately inspired comparisons - including from OpenAI boss Sam Altman - to the 2013 science-fiction movie *Her*, which paints a vivid picture of the potential pitfalls of human-AI interaction.

In the movie, the protagonist, Theodore, becomes deeply fascinated and attached to Samantha, an AI system with a sophisticated and witty personality.

Their bond blurs the lines between the real and the virtual, raising questions about the nature of love and intimacy, and the value of human-AI connection.

While we should not seriously compare GPT-4o to Samantha, it raises similar concerns. AI companions are already here. As AI becomes more adept at mimicking human emotions and behaviours, the risk of users forming deep emotional attachments increases. This could lead to over-reliance, manipulation and even harm.

While OpenAI demonstrates concern with ensuring its AI tools behave safely and are deployed in a responsible way, we have yet to learn the broader implications of unleashing charismatic AIs onto the world. Current AI systems are not explicitly designed to meet human psychological needs - a goal that is hard to define and measure.

GPT-4o's impressive capabilities show how important it is that we have some system or framework for ensuring AI tools are developed and used in ways that are aligned with public values and priorities.

## Expanding capabilities

GPT-4o can also work with video (of the user and their surroundings, via a device camera, or pre-recorded videos), and respond conversationally. In OpenAI's demonstrations,



A still from the 2013 film *Her*. The film is about a man who develops an emotional attachment to an AI system. (AP)

GPT-4o comments on a user's environment and clothes, recognises objects, animals and text, and reacts to facial expressions.

Google's Project Astra AI assistant, unveiled just one day after GPT-4o, displays similar capabilities. It also appears to have visual memory: in one of Google's promotional videos, it helps a user find her glasses in a busy office, even though they are not currently visible to the AI.

GPT-4o and Astra continue the trend towards more "multimodal" models that can work with text, images, audio and video. GPT-4o's predecessor, GPT-4 Turbo, can process text and images together, but not audio and video. The original version of ChatGPT, released less than two years ago, was based only on text.

GPT-4o is also significantly faster than its predecessor.

The ability to work across audio, vision and text in real time is considered crucial to develop advanced AI systems that can understand the world and effectively achieve complex and meaningful goals.

But some critics argue that GPT-4o's text capabilities are only incrementally better than GPT-4 Turbo and competitors such as Google's Gemini Ultra and Anthropic's Claude 3 Opus.

Will major AI labs be able to sustain the recent rapid pace of improvement by continuing to build bigger and more sophisticated

models? This is a hot topic of debate among experts, and the outcome will determine the impact of the technology over the coming years.

## Wider access

A less flashy but significant aspect of GPT-4o's launch is that, unlike its GPT-4 family precursors, the new AI system is available to all users in the free version of ChatGPT, subject to usage limits.

This means millions of users worldwide just got an upgrade from GPT-3.5 to a more powerful AI system with more features. GPT-4o is significantly more useful than GPT-3.5 for various purposes, such as work and education.

The impact of this development will become more apparent over time.

## What's next?

OpenAI's unveiling of GPT-4o disappointed enthusiasts for ever more powerful AI systems, who hoped GPT-5's arrival was imminent after over a year since GPT-4's launch.

Instead, this week's unveiling of GPT-4o and Google's latest AI announcements emphasise the features being incorporated into their products. These new developments point to possibilities such as more sophisticated virtual assistants capable of performing complex tasks on behalf of users, involving richer interaction and planning. (*The Conversation*)

## 'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, May 19, 2024

### 'Birthday Forecast'

Sun conjunct Jupiter on your solar return chart thus resulting in an excellent time period ahead. An amazing year is in the offing for you. 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.

### This week for you'

**Aries: (March 21 - April 20)** The planetary configuration this week indicates that your efforts, confidence and courage bring success in monetary gains and your energy increases for projects at work. Your job environment is teeming with activity. You take small yet sure steps towards your financial goals. Domestic relationships and the home environment tend to be harmonious and peaceful. Children may need more discipline than they previously did. You may find your children at an age that requires more attention and or structure.

**Taurus: (April 21 - May 21)** Some of you may have to make some critical decisions due to situations in your life that force you to make definitive choices; they could even be between career and family goals. Some of you may be promoted or your career will take a new direction. The challenge is to find a healthy balance - to improve home life, while at the same time tending to your career needs. Romantic and personal relations would be more practical than fun. For some, a romantic relationship stabilizes and becomes more serious as you look at it with a long term perspective. Some of you will meet a new romantic interest who is perhaps more younger and energetic as compared to you.

**Gemini: (May 22 - June 21)** New friendships are likely to emerge during this time; supportive and easygoing ones. Happiness and fulfillment through the expansion of your mind, widening your social circle, travel, and connections to people of a different cultural background than you are indicated. Your position of power and authority is maintained despite many changes all around. Do not allow personal feelings to influence professional decisions. An opportunity or investment to make quick gains is on the cards but analyze data at hand before you invest. Energy is high and things happen swiftly and decisively.

**Cancer: (June 22 - July 22)** You would be blessed with good health, love in relationships and harmony at the work place. You give and receive affection and love from friends and relatives. You connect with old friends and business associates. Being open and receptive, you attract opportunities which hitherto seemed out of reach. You desire to learn and improve on your practical skills. Realistic levels of optimism and confidence are with you that enable you to quicken the pace at your workplace. Tension could run high and reach an emotional peak. Do not get carried away without first getting the facts. Yoga and walking would prove to be beneficial.

**Leo: (July 23 - August 23)** Your social life is likely to increase and bring you in contact with more influential, powerful people who could prove to be helpful as they extend a helping hand. Matters related to universities, higher education, organized religion, publishing, legal affairs, and foreign interests proceed smoothly. This is an excellent time to seek advanced training or to further your education. Happiness and fulfillment through close friendships and relationships is indicated. Your idealistic nature is stimulated, and you are likely to aim for a sense of belonging through connection to something larger than yourself.

**Virgo: (August 24 - September 22)** The planetary combination this week tends to change your outlook on life, perhaps stimulated by travel. Some changes in your social circle have been occurring and this brings about a new awareness. You are more determined to achieve your personal goals, and are more strategic in the

manner you go about doing so. New responsibilities are likely to present themselves and you would take them more seriously. New projects excite you but remember that bringing them to a completion is just as important. A little attention on fitness and health related programs would be helpful.

**Libra: (September 23 - October 23)** This phase brings money matters come into focus for you. You would adopt a realistic approach to business and finance. Career and vocational issues may benefit from the increased clarity you possess. Much of your energy will be applied to vocational achievement and professional activities. The desire for some form of recognition and financial success is more intense. Being part of a community or circle of friends and building your social network is important to you at this time. You look to networking to leverage your contacts. You may be quick to anger and could antagonize some whom you want to win over.

**Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22)** This phase is good for money, status and enhancing your standing this week. Your entire focus shifts in this direction. You take on new responsibilities, but enjoy the challenges it presents. Your belief systems and personal philosophies are especially important to you, but do not often coincide with your methods. This dichotomy will inculcate new attitudes towards finances, and social relationships before you strike a balance. It is an excellent time for travel, higher education and communications. The family is supportive and helps you look at the larger picture.

**Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21)** You may feel the need to be appreciated by family members and the need for togetherness with others this week. Events are such that you move towards a more objective approach towards your life and you cultivate true friendships. It is a time when you need to let go of things that no longer serve their purpose, and hold on to things that have a future. You would express your sympathetic and compassionate side. Others might find you less sociable, as you are busier than ever and you focus on your activities and your needs. You would stand alone, take action and start afresh during this week.

**Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20)** You would be able to express a greater level of sensitivity and sensibility in personal and professional relations this week. You encounter people who are very considerate and understanding and are also likely to form relationships with people based on a deep level of mutual appreciation and understanding for each other. You have to maintain a positive attitude and face life in a positive way. Communications from overseas are hopeful and exciting as business opportunities are extended to you. Financial transactions and professional projects go ahead smoothly with goodwill and profit this week.

**Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18)** You feel on top of things in domestic issues and spend quality time with people you care about and in activities that are rejuvenating. You tend to be traditional and restrictive in family matters and may have to face opposition from younger ones. It is time to expand your social circle and to make more contact with groups and friends. Your unselfishness and willingness to listen will help boost your magnetic appeal. Your professional skills, wisdom and craft are appreciated and fresh opportunities for expansion are made available to you. Overseas visitors and news are positive and inspiring. Personal relationships gain a romantic and exciting quality. You need to tackle sensitive subjects and difficult people and get your point across.

**Pisces: (February 19 - March 20)** Business projects and associations are opening up and widening your horizons so you need to think expansively this week. Your financial situation looks promising if you manage it well on your own rather than place trust upon others. You are generous with friends, and loving in family situations. You come across as especially smooth and your good nature is bound to attract some attention. A business venture could be gainful if you are willing to lend it some energy. You are involved in multiple tools of creativity that you possess. A gentle and softer approach can resolve an old conflict this week.

# Sunscreen will not stop you from making vitamin D

It's all kicking off on social media, again. This time it's about wearing sunscreen. The argument began when Tim Spector, a professor of genetic epidemiology at King's College London, raised concerns that daily sunscreen use could lead to vitamin D deficiency.

While Spector's post gained a lot of attention, it isn't the first time an argument against using sunscreen has been brought to social media - with countless posts discussing the matter.

Most of these concerns stem from the fact that sunscreen blocks ultraviolet (UV) radiation - which our body needs to synthesise vitamin D in the skin. Fortunately, research shows us that this is probably not an issue for most people.

Vitamin D is an essential nutrient. It helps regulate calcium absorption, which is important for bone health. A growing body of research also suggests vitamin D may be important for other aspects of health, too, including boosting immunity, reducing inflammation and keeping the heart healthy. However, more research is needed to confirm these findings.

While we can get vitamin D from certain foods - such as oily fish, egg yolks and fortified dairy products - our bodies mainly rely on sunlight to produce it in our skin.

When we're exposed to the sun's ultraviolet B radiation (UVB), a series of processes in our skin cells transform a cholesterol-like molecule into vitamin D3.

Since vitamin D production requires exposure to UVB radiation, it could be expected that sunscreen use inhibits vitamin D synthesis.

Sunscreen acts as a filter, absorbing or reflecting solar UV radiation. The higher a product's sun protection factor (SPF), the better it is at preventing sunburn (which is mainly caused by UVB radiation).

By preventing this radiation from reaching and mutating DNA in skin cells, sunscreens can lower skin cancer risk. Sunscreens have also been shown to reduce UV-radiation-

induced skin ageing.

However, sunscreens are not 100 per cent effective - mainly because most people don't use them as directed. People typically only apply around one-quarter to one-third of the required amount of sunscreen - and most don't reapply as instructed. This means some UVB is still able to reach the skin's surface.

## Sunscreen and vitamin D

Many studies have investigated the effect of sunscreen use on vitamin D levels.

Overall, findings indicate that with typical use, sunscreen still allows sufficient vitamin D production to happen.

In a study conducted, a research team performed a one-week experiment on 40 holidaymakers in Tenerife, Spain. Participants were taught to correctly apply an SPF 15 sunscreen to protect their skin.

Not only did the sunscreen protect participants from sunburn, their vitamin D levels improved. This showed us that even when sunscreen was used, a sufficient amount of UVB radiation still reached the skin, allowing vitamin D to be produced.

These findings align with two reviews that also examined real-world sunscreen use and vitamin D levels.

Most of the studies included in these reviews either reported that sunscreen use had no effect on vitamin D levels or that sunscreen use led to higher vitamin D levels. This was particularly true with field studies, which would have provided the best reflection of real-world sunscreen use and sun exposure.

However, these reviews also found several experimental studies (with more controlled conditions) that showed sunscreen use can prevent vitamin D synthesis.

However, these studies used UV sources that were not representative of solar UV radiation, which may limit their relevance for real-world conclusions. Another limitation of the studies evaluated in these

reviews were that most used low SPF sunscreens (around SPF 15 or lower). Public health advice recommends the use of at least SPF 30 sunscreen, which potentially could have a greater inhibitory effect on vitamin D production.

And most of these studies only used white participants. White skin has less melanin pigment, which acts as natural sunscreens - protecting against UV damage (including sunburn).

Melanin may also have a potentially small, inhibitory effect on vitamin D production. Observational studies have consistently shown that people with dark skin tend to have poorer vitamin D levels than people with lighter skin tones living at similar latitudes. This disparity becomes even more pronounced at higher latitudes, where levels of UVB radiation are lower.

One review also found that people with lighter skin types produced more vitamin D.

However, this discrepancy is probably due to differences in the way the studies included in the review were conducted. Some used artificial radiation sources, which do not represent solar UV radiation and may give unrepresentative results.

There's a clear need to conduct more studies that include people with darker skin tones and use higher SPF sunscreens. But based on the evidence we have available, typical sunscreen use does not inhibit vitamin D production. It also has the added benefit of preventing the damaging effects of UV exposure.

Given people with darker skin tones are at greater risk of having low vitamin D levels, spending more time in the sun may be of benefit.

But while people with dark skin have a 20-60 times lower skin cancer risk than people with lighter skin, it's still important to avoid the sun when it's at its most powerful and wear sunscreen or cover up if you are outside on sunny days. (*The Conversation*)

"Hope is tomorrow's veneer over today's disappointment."

—Evan Esar

## The Shillong Times

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### Vaccines and after

VACCINES were the only hope to save lives when the Covid pandemic erupted five years ago and terrorised the world. Today, however, reports about its side-effects are surfacing. In a way, this was only to be expected. The vaccines were developed in a hurry and injections delivered with hyper-speed because the situations warranted so. In the process, the usual time-line set for testing their safety was given short-shrift. Yet, the immediate purpose was served and life across continents came back to normalcy in two years. India administered over 2.2 billion doses, made mostly by some top pharmaceutical companies within the country. In a credit to India, this was exported to several nations as well by way of humanitarian assistance and commercial business. To have developed vaccines to face such a global surge in cases was in itself a remarkable feat for this nation. India earned a good name while China, from where the pandemic originated, was deeply hurt by the huge spread of the pandemic and its adverse global responses.

While these were things of the past, reports based on research into the after-effects of these vaccines confirm the health issues confronting a huge mass of people. A report says over 30 percent of those who took Covaxin — one of the two top vaccines developed by Indian pharmaceutical firms; the other being Covishield — suffered adverse events of special interest (AESI) after one year. Respiratory tract complaints were among the main symptoms, as per researchers from Banaras Hindu University, who interviewed nearly a thousand persons. One-third of them confirmed they faced such health problems. Covid19 by itself caused mild to severe respiratory illness, even death. India faced over half a million deaths.

Unofficially, several deaths these days are suspected to be caused by the after-effects of Covid19 or ill-effects of the vaccination. Those who took all three doses seemed to face increased risk as per some research findings. Sudden deaths are seen to be increasing even among the younger population, including those with no serious health complaints. At official levels, no serious study seemed to have been conducted as to the health-related after-effects of Covid19 or the administration of the vaccine. The central government must investigate this matter and if the adverse effects are confirmed, it must seek a remedy thereof too, just as it did to arrest the pandemic spread. Reports from Singapore spoke of a recurrence of the Covid19 spread there and of over 25,000 persons having been affected in the small island nation. This sends a warning signal to India too. The health of the people is the first priority. It is important to allay fears in this respect vis-a-vis the after-effects.

### Letters to the Editor

#### Ram Mohan Roy — a reformer-philosopher

Editor,  
Buddha taught the middle way, and Socrates told us to know "how to choose the mean and avoid extremes on either side, as far as possible." Raja Ram Mohan Roy was the embodiment of this golden middle way or golden mean.

When the Eastern extremes equated orthodox, prejudices, and superstitions with their identity and the Western extremes took liquor and licentiousness for liberty, Ram Mohan Roy followed the golden middle way. He was against blind clinging to India's own past or aping of the West. Ram Mohan, who first took India on the road to modernity, was born on 22 May 1772. He said that India should acquire all that was best in the East and the West. He had great respect for the traditional philosophic systems of the East and believed that the Western culture alone would regenerate Indian society.

He rightly said that the caste system was doubly evil as it created inequality and deprived people of patriotic feeling. Interestingly, he dis-appointed his many missionary friends who had hoped that his rational critique of Hinduism would ferry him to embrace Christianity. But they did not realise his golden mean.

He wrote 'Precepts of Jesus' in which he praised the moral and philosophic

message of the New Testament but criticised its miracle stories. This earned him the hostility of the missionaries. He had to face hostility from all orthodox quarters for his rational outlook. In fact, he had to fight with his relatives, rich zamindars, powerful missionaries, high officials, and foreign authorities all along. But he never gave up his crusade for guiding India in her darkest hour.

The orthodox condemned him and organised a social boycott against him. There is no wonder in it as Dabholkar, Pansare, Kalburgi, and Gauri Lankesh were killed in the 21st century for running with the torch which was lit by Ram Mohan.

This great social reformer and the maker of modern India had a life-long crusade for women's right to inheritance and property and against sati, polygamy, and casteism. The anti-colonial movement and the movement for social emancipation in India were like two intersecting circles whose common ground was liberation. There was hardly any aspect of nation-building that was left untouched by him.

He was the first propagator of modern education. But he fought for an education policy that followed the middle way. While he demanded English education, he did his best to make Bengali the intellectual vehicle in Bengal. Such was his balanced approach. He was a pioneer of Indian journalism and the initiator of public agitation on political questions in the country.

# Essence of the Jaidbynriew

By H H Mohrmen

The debate on what makes a genuine or true Khasi has resurfaced, thanks to the intervention from the Department of Social Welfare headed by Paul Lyngdoh. The million-dollar questions are: Who is a real or genuine Khasi? How do we define a real Khasi? Who has the authority to decide who is a real Khasi? Or what is the essence of the jaidbynriew?

**The MDA government is eating its own words**

A report carried by The Shillong Times on May 3, stated that the Social Welfare Department has revoked the administrative order issued on July 21, 2020, which permitted the issuance of Scheduled Tribe certificates to applicants adopting either the father's or mother's surname and to non-Khasi female applicants who wish to adopt their husband's surname after marriage. The report stated that the decision was made because of the conflict of the order with the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council (Khasi Social Custom of Lineage) Act, 1997.

The minister in charge said that the order issued at the level of the department's under-secretary was not necessary as the Lineage Act of 1997 "does not prohibit the issuance of ST certificates to the applicant adopting surnames of either the father or mother, and the practice of adopting husband's surnames by non-Khasi wives was also allowed." Paul further said that since the KHADC had passed the Bill on lineage and it had the Governor's assent; it had the (desired) power. Lyngdoh also said that it was necessary to withdraw the order because no officer of the state government can issue such an order. Lyngdoh mentioned that guidelines for issuing SC/ST certificates through an office memorandum dated March 19, 2014, issued by the Social Welfare Department, were amended by incorporating a "Tribe certificate from the competent authority for areas under KHADC jurisdiction" in the guidelines.

The minister even lambasted the officer who issued the order by terming it as a "basic lack of knowledge and non-application of mind on the part of the officer. It was a misinterpretation of not only the laws but an abuse of power by the officer who issued this order," Paul made it sound like the officer made the order on his/her own whims and fancy and not at the behest of the MDA

government. But the question is, can the officer issue the order without the advice of the political leader? The minister is obviously playing a blame game, which further shows the lack of wisdom in the MDA government, which had to revoke its own order in less than four years.

**The state government is Shillong-centric**

The issue has also brought to light the true nature of the government, that it is only concerned with what happens in Shillong. The saying that if it happens in Shillong, it will catch the attention of the government rings true. This time, the issue got much attention because it concerns only the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council. Why is the minister referring to the Scheduled Tribe issue related to the KHADC only? What about the Jaintia Hills Autonomous District Council and the Garo Hills Autonomous District Council? Are they not part of Meghalaya? How will they define who is a genuine Jaintia or a legitimate Garo? Who amongst the Jaintia or the Garo can avail Scheduled Tribe certificates? The minister is silent on the issues related to the two other ADCs. Is this Government only concerned with what happens in the State capital and forgets anything beyond it? Or is it true that the issue was brought to light because somebody is expecting to gain some brownie points from withdrawing the order?

**Is Khasi identity defined by lineage only?**

In 1989 and 1990, I was a student at the Unitarian College, Manchester, which is part of the Northern Federation for the training of ministers in Manchester. It is a conglomeration of institutions where ministerial students of the Baptist, the United Reform Church, the Methodist, and the Unitarian Church were trained. A Baptist student minister, who was doing her PhD, asked me, "How did your society, which follows matrilineal or matriarchal tradition, react to Christianity, which was founded and continues to patronize patriarchal traditions?" I had never thought of that question and was not able to answer her. Now, with the benefit of hindsight, I realize it was indeed a very profound question. I would rather reframe the question to, "What makes the Khasi lineage system survive the

test of time despite being surrounded by patriarchal systems all around?"

The Khyrniam and the Pnar must have interacted with the plains people in the past and later, and despite being ruled by the British, were able to maintain their culture and tradition. Even when a large section of the population converted to Christianity, which is a male-oriented tradition, they were able to keep their unique lineage system intact. They took the Bible and accepted Jesus but rejected the patriarchy in the book and teachings for almost two hundred years now.

The lineage through the mother has survived the test of time and it is what makes the tribe unique and stand out amidst others but is that all?

**What about the other attributes?**

The other pertinent question is can we define the tribe merely on lineage? What about language? What if a person takes the lineage from the mother but cannot speak any of the Khasi languages? Can we still consider them Khasi? What about culture and tradition? What if a person takes their lineage from the mother, speaks the language, but does not follow the culture and traditions of the tribe? And the most critical question is, what do we mean by culture? Does it mean following the three cardinal principles: "tip kur, tip kha, tip brieu, tip blei, kamai ia ka hok? Does it also mean keeping "ka bhalang u ba bun balang, or ka bhalang ka imlang sahang" striving for the common good or well-being of all as a paramount goal of everybody in the community? What about "ka tip hok, ka tip sot, ka shikyntien ka hok, u thylliej ksar thylliej rupa," which emphasizes doing the right thing and speaking the truth in one's daily life? Are these not important attributes of being a Khasi?

If we define a Khyrniam or a Pnar by tradition, then one need not only follow the lineage system but also follow the traditions. There is also an argument that only those who follow the traditional niam Khasi (niam meaning religion) are genuine Khyrniam or Pnar. Those who have converted to other religions are not considered authentic Khasi anymore. If this argument gains ground, one could say that Bah Paul is responsible for taking the community on a slippery

track. In some ways, this is also a codification of customary laws and practices. The question is, can we really codify customary practices? Is culture static and not dynamic? In fact, if the family system is codified, one would need to live in a joint family, not a nuclear family, because that is how our ancestors lived.

**The patrilineal Khasis**

I don't buy the argument that the matrilineal system does not serve us well and is not good for society. I believe every system has its own pros and cons that we sometimes overlook and generalize. Now, there is also a sizable population of the Jaidbynriew who already follow the patrilineal system, and this is going to complicate things. I was in the Saipung area a few days back, and when I asked a friend how he was related to another Biate friend, he responded by using Pnar terminology to describe his relationship, which is, of course, a patrilineal family system. In a patrilineal system, his brother would be his 'Kha,' and his cousin would be his brother in a matrilineal system. If we adopt a patrilineal system, then the concept of "tip kur tip kha" goes topsy-turvy because your 'kha' becomes your 'kur,' and there is no concept of 'kha' anymore.

It also becomes complicated because if my children take my title, then that will be my mother's 'kur,' not my father's, since my father belongs to the Pariat clan. Even that is not entirely correct because my grandfather on my father's side is Lamare, and my great-grandfather on my father's side is from the Paslein clan. It is true we cannot just ignore this section of the population but should take them into consideration, and see how this important issue is resolved.

**Authority to recognize who to include in the Kur?**

The other question is who has the authority to recognize that a person belongs to the Kur, which is important if identity is based on lineage alone. Is it the District Council, the State Government, or the Kur? If the tradition of 'tangjait' is considered, then the responsibility of recognizing a new Kur rests with the Kur, not even the District Council. The issue is complex, to say the least, so neither the Government nor the KHADC should jump the gun and come up with half-baked solutions which will only do more harm than good to the society.

## Poll related violence should cause serious concern to ECI

### Rising intolerance against Opposition view a dangerous trend

By Dr Gyan Pathak

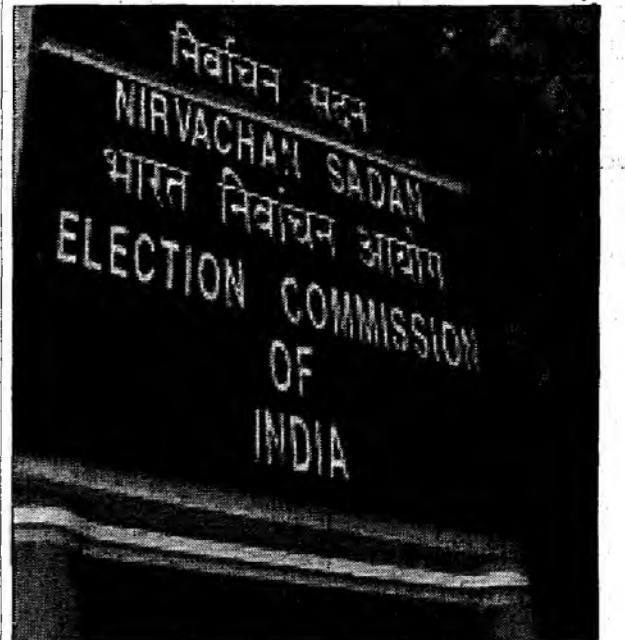
The Election Commission of India (ECI) had announced a "No Violence" stance in West Bengal on March 4, only 12 days before the announcement of the Lok Sabha general election 2024, on March 16. However, election related violence continued across the country in various shades with varied intensity. Now, to control post-poll violence in Andhra Pradesh, ECI has directed the Union Ministry of Home to retain 25 companies of Central forces even after counting of votes on June 4 for 15 days. It all reveals how political intolerance triggered not only pre-poll violence but also continued during polling and are very much likely to continue after the counting of votes.

As for Andhra Pradesh, the ECI had already conveyed its displeasure to the State Chief Secretary and the Director General of Police over post-poll violence in the state. In a statement the ECI without mincing any words directed the Chief Secretary and the DGP to ensure that such violence is not repeated and all SPs to be tasked with take pre-emptive measures to avoid such a situation in future. ECI have even sought "personal explanation" over the incidents of violence reported in parts of Andhra Pradesh on May 13 on the day of election and the next day. The leaders of

candidate. In the altercation, the BJP supporters killed the SP supporter.

BJP is ruling in the state, and the intolerance of the government for differing political views is a well-known fact which needs no further proof. Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath has been alleged to follow a bulldozer and encounter culture. Several times, even PM Narendra Modi had expressed intolerant views against opposing dissenters or political parties. All these have contributed in breeding political intolerance in the state. Now it has been alleged that even administration and police have been working for suppression of anti-BJP voters. It has been alleged that police even disrupted the process of voting in several constituencies in Sambhal, particularly in Muslim-majority villages that overwhelmingly voted for Samajwadi Party in the 2022 Assembly polls.

It has happened not only in Sambhal Lok Sabha constituency, but also in several other constituencies in Uttar Pradesh, the state which sends the largest number of BJP MPs in the Lok Sabha. Samajwadi party leader Akhilesh Yadav has alleged that the BJP workers were preparing to loot booths in Mainpuri constituency also. "They are detaining opposition people in police



the ruling YSRCP and opposition TDP have levelled allegations against each other for the incident, and also on the ECI for not functioning impartially.

Now back to West Bengal, the state which is known for poll related violence just before, during, and after the counting of votes. It may be recalled how in the past, the leaders of the losing political parties in the polls were hunted by the winners' groups in the state. ECI on March 4 had directed the state administration to pull up its socks on violence and said "no-violence & no bombing," will be tolerated in the forthcoming Lok Sabha polls.

The ECI bench even raised the issue of violence during the Panchayat elections. BJP, CPI-M, and Congress had raised serious concerns about the deteriorating law and order situation in Sandeshkhali. However, the state witnessed violence, especially between BJP and Trinamool Congress supporters, despite the ECI warning, deployment of Central forces, and alertness of the West Bengal police administration. Allegations have also been raised that police and armed forces and ECI officials are not working impartially.

Violence is not limited to only the opposition ruled states, but it has also spread in BJP ruled states such as Uttar Pradesh. It has been reported from a village in Kaushambi Lok Sabha constituency, that an old man was murdered only because he was of the opinion that they should vote for Samajwadi Party candidate. Several other villagers were insisting that they should vote for BJP

stations," he alleged. It is worth recalling here how violence is used as a tool in Indian elections to scare opposition voters by certain dominant political parties and even by police and administration. After the disturbances in polling stations, people avoid turning to cast votes, and the party that creates disturbance successfully arranges casting of votes for their supporters. First, they vote in large numbers and after a while create disturbance to achieve their ends. Life is more precious than casting a vote, believe many people.

Though there is a provision of re-polling in booths hit by violence, it is unable to stop violence altogether, since political parties and their supporters have been increasingly becoming tolerant of the opposition. Democracy is all about co-existence of all political views. Whoever preaches and indulges in toxic political campaigns for total destruction of opposing political views is clearly anti-democratic. People must not become politically intolerant, and that is the only panacea for eradication of political violence in the country.

ECI has a special role to play to prevent election related violence. It must put a stop to the toxic campaigns that breed intolerance, and must try to remain above suspicion of adopting a partisan approach and favouring the ruling establishment at the Centre. Incidences of violence have been reported from across all the states in the country, and hence time has come to act decisively. (IPA Service)

pressive practices of Bengal zamindars that had made the lives of peasants miserable and demanded that the rents paid by the actual cultivators of land should, permanently, be fixed so that they too could enjoy the fruits of the Permanent Settlement of 1793. Ram Mohan simultaneously demanded the abolition of the Company's trading rights and export duties on Indian goods. He raised his voice for the separation of the executive and the judiciary, trial by jury, and judicial equality between Indians and Europeans.

He founded the Brahma Samaj. Again, it was a middle way and a synthesis of reason, the Vedas, Upanishads, and the teachings of other religions. It believed in one God and laid emphasis on human dignity, opposed idolatry, and criticised social evils. He was a firm believer in internationalism. Tagore rightly said, "Ram Mohan was the only person in his time, in the whole world of man, to realise completely the significance of the Modern Age."

Sri Aurobindo said that when he was writing Yogic Sadhan, every time at the beginning, and at the end, the image of Ram Mohan Roy would appear before him.

Yours etc.,  
Sujit De,  
Kolkata

#### CAA operationalised

Editor,  
After several ifs and buts, ultimately the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) has

been operationalised as eligible persons got their CAA certificates before the election process for Parliamentary elections. The question arises whether it is coincidence or was it intended for political mileage. Union Home Secretary, Ajay Kumar Bhalla handed over the first set of citizenship certificates under the CAA in New Delhi and out of these were 300 persons many of whom have faced religious persecution in their country of domicile and so sought India as a haven.

The CAA that attracted so much opposition and kicked up a national controversy has finally been implemented — long after its rules were notified. The Government has started issuing certificates under the CAA to people found fit for Indian citizenship — of course from the neighbouring countries of Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan and belonging to Hindu, Sikh, Christian, Buddhist, Jain and Parsi communities. This should be considered as a major step forward in the domain of governance offering just protection to the harassed people from certain countries and communities on grounds of their caste or creed or religion.

It is also mentionable that it is not applicable for Sri Lankan Tamils even if they belong to any of the above religions and certainly not to Rohingyas. It does not snatch citizenship from Indian residents of any religion, and it has nothing to do with the proposed National Register of Citizens, according to the ruling party's major leaders

now. But the fear is that the two may be used in conjunction at some point of time in the future and put in peril the many illegal Muslim refugees who are in the country. The legal challenges to the CAA lies in hundreds of fresh petitions besides the 200 or so lying before the Supreme Court since December 2019. A basic and significant challenge is that the CAA discriminates against Muslims and so violates the right to equality under Article 14 and Article 25 as well. The opinions on the CAA, is that it is a benevolent legislation that takes into account religious discrimination against non-Muslims in some neighbouring countries.

The most vociferous point in the Opposition logic was that the Government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi was making a clear and open (read 'shameless') allegation that an undue favour was being bestowed on certain communities — including the majority Hindu community at the cost of the people from Muslim community. That is the reason why the CAA is now operational in the country and will serve a great purpose of assuring the minorities in neighbouring countries of protection in India not on asylum basis but on citizenship basis.

India wishes to communicate to the world that it is the homeland of certain people who will be protected both legally and constitutionally. This is positive governance and a major step forward to the greater idea of justice to

all on equal basis. It is a fact that minority communities in countries such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, have depleted in population to shocking levels in the past few decades in percentage and absolute numbers due to atrocities heaped on them by the Muslim majority community under official patronage. For such people who have nowhere to go, India must act as homeland and offer them shelter with full honour of constitutional sanction. Hence the CAA!

Meanwhile the Congressional Research Service (CRS) report of the USA has expressed concerns that, coupled with a planned National Register of Citizens (NRC), the CAA could jeopardise the rights of India's Muslim population. The CAA's key provisions — allowing immigrants of six religions from three countries a path to citizenship while excluding Muslims — may violate certain Articles of the Indian Constitution. The report states that those opposing the CAA are wary of the ruling BJP "pursuing a Hindu majoritarian, anti-Muslim agenda that threatens India's status as an officially secular republic and violates international human rights norms and obligations. India says this is its internal matter."

Yours etc.,  
Yash Pal Rathan,  
Via email

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

"There is so much that must be done  
in a civilized barbarism like war."

— Amelia Earhart

## The Shillong Times

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### Altruism at its best

THE story of Kampher-eiei Pala is a tear jerker but it also is a story of courage and grit. Here is someone who fights to achieve his desired goal. This is such a rare phenomenon in a situation where too many young people give up too easily citing poverty as a reason for dropping out of school and resorting to drugs as a panacea for their mental wounds. This is the general trend across Meghalaya today, so much so that even churches are looted and banks vandalised. Poverty is a stark reality and so is the single-parent syndrome that puts so many families at a grave disadvantage. A mother with three or more children having been abandoned by her husband must single-handedly cope with life and ensure that her children do not starve. This is the flip side of Khasi matriliney which is a much-glorified social system with its hidden pangs that few care to explore. A single mother with four or five kids finds it well-nigh impossible to see them through school. She contends that giving them two square meals is itself a tall order, forget the schooling. Hence children drop out of school and join the workforce. It is pointless talking about child labour in Meghalaya because nearly every family in the rural areas has at least one child or more working as cowherds at ages 10-12 but that is either not noticed or is normalised.

Kampher with four other siblings really stands out as a beacon of hope in a society that seems to grope around in a hopeless maze. This young man about to become a doctor needs to be set up as a role model for many others in an equally depressing situation. Society needs to hear how he overcame all the hurdles that life threw at him and rose to where he is today. How did he derive that mental strength and the character to push on and not give up? Many would have moaned their fates and given up to get into a rut and become part of the problem. It's easy to fall by the wayside and join that cycle of poverty but Kampher has broken the cycle and hopefully will his other siblings. To survive working in the dark dungeons of a coal mine which has claimed many lives is itself a miracle.

Kampher's story however would not have taken the trajectory it has without the benevolence of We Care Foundation a philanthropic organisation led by Dr Bishnu Medhi and his team. For years now this Foundation has assisted poor students with the potential for medical studies and also for other fields. They have not only assisted the students financially but have also mentored them and encouraged them to stay the course. This is an exceptional endeavour and We Care Foundation has done this silently without seeking publicity. Such organisations deserve the collective gratitude of society.

# Recent Primitive Incidents

By Albert Thyrniang

Lately three primitive incidents have brought shame to Meghalaya – the killing of two non-tribals at Ichamati, the murder of a labourer in Shillong and the mob lynching of two men at Umthlong, Eastern West Khasi Hills. We take pride in being modern citizens of the twenty first century but we still exhibit the faces of the early ages of existence and development. We have to acknowledge that we are still ruled by primeval passions and not reason. We better admit that often we are influenced by uncivilised behaviours. We should recognise that we still have to work on ourselves to stop the out-dated tendencies.

One of the defining characteristics of civilization is the advent of law - the rule of law to be precise. Before the origin of law humans were purely guided by survival instinct. It was a freestyle, uncivilised existence precisely because there was no law to govern human behaviour. With the advent of law, human actions are reined in by law. We have come a long way from the Code of Hammurabi of ancient Mesopotamia. We have advanced from Roman law of the 'Twelve Tables' and moved on from feudal laws of the Middle Ages. We have further refined the seventeenth century law of legal thinkers. We have accepted constitutional laws concretised in laws like the Indian Penal Code (IPC). The test of civilisation is the ability to abide by the rule of law. Everyone is subjected to the law and everybody is equal before law.

Ichamati, the village along the Indo-Bangla border flared up again, three years after a KSU member was killed there in February 2020 following the Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019 protest and the demand for implementation of the Inner Line Permit (ILP) in the state. The killing of the two limestone quarry employees in March appears to be a revenge act. The backdrop yet again was the anti-CAA rally. A tooth for a tooth and an eye for an eye is the rule of the past. It is discarded now. But is it?

Following the twin murders at Ichamati the police apprehended suspected KSU members. What was shocking is that the KSU members and family members stormed the Sohra police station pressuring the law enforcers to leave its members alone. When more arrests were made in Shillong the top KSU leaders sternly warned the police not to pour fuel into the fire. The student body thinks it is above the law.

A fortnight later, on April 10, a daily wager was brutally beaten to death in Mawroh, Mawlai in the capital city of Shillong. A third non-tribal death in 15 days! The 'fault' of the 52-year-old construction labourer was that he did

carry the work permit with him though he swore he had the necessary documents in his makeshift room. Mawlai, a ghetto according to many, is a locality non-tribals dread to tread. The only 'dkhar' who are safe there are 'religious men and women' for they do not affect and threaten the demographic composition of the vicinity.

In this case too at least one alleged KSU member has been picked up for his involvement in the broad daylight murder. The Union

is the lynching of two men by a mob of about 1500 in the interior village of Umthlong in Eastern West Khasi Hills on May 3. The initial allegation was that the duo were 'menschhoh' (witchcraft practitioners) but later the incident was actually an attempted rape. The 35 and 50 year old alleged rapists were caught and taken to the village hall where primitive justice was meted out. Two counter FIRs have been filed, one by the Umthlong village headman and the other by

*We implicitly vouched for 'tribal pride' at the expense of others. The surge in hate crimes has led many to observe that non-tribals continue to be victims of endless racial prejudices. Chauvinism is at play. There are individuals who think that the life of non-tribals is of less value or is of no value at all. This is quite a sick mentality. While we exert our rights as tribals under the constitutional, unreasonable hatred for others is unwarranted.*

has not taken kindly to the police action and issued a veiled threat to the law keepers for 'targeting' its members. A large section of the society too and more worrying the political leadership also are complicit with the crime. The Chief Minister, a social media enthusiast and the cabinet ministers (except one) were totally silent. None of the MP candidates who were in the thick of their campaigns to get the right

families of the deceased. The mob and particularly those who had a hand in the murder consider themselves to be better than their 'captive'. They all pointed their fingers at the men from Denthing and the fellow labourer from Shyrwang village. They mocked the shivering, frightened souls. They condemned the duo for attempting to kill a lady to feed the 'thlen' (a serpent in the Khasi mythology who

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to proceed to Delhi to enact laws, condemned the criminal incident. We implicitly vouched for 'tribal pride' at the expense of others. The surge in hate crimes has led many to observe that non-tribals continue to be victims of endless racial prejudices. Chauvinism is at play. There are individuals who think that the life of non-tribals is of less value or is of no value at all. This is quite a sick mentality. While we exert our rights as tribals under the constitutional, unreasonable hatred for others is unwarranted. The world is a village. Tribals from Meghalaya and the North East are all over the country as students and workers. Repercussion is a real possibility.

Another baffling incident

feeds on human blood) with her blood. They mocked them for attempting to force themselves on an 18 year old girl. The two pleaded innocence but no one listened. They begged for mercy but no one heard their pleas. The huge crowd blocked the police from accessing the community hall. The angry mob paid no heed to the pleas of the magistrate to permit the police to take the accused into custody. Eventually the crowd outside stormed the hall, slapped, kicked, beat the victims with bare hands and sticks and stones. The mob thought they were holier than their 'wicked' detainees. But let it be known, they are not. The crowd is worse than the ill-fated men. They are murderers. They are no

better than 'menschhoh'. According to information the majority in the crowd are Christians. They are regular church goers. There are churches in Umthlong and in the neighbouring villages. The assembled people are from these villages too. They are followers of Christ. They have heard Jesus' saying, "Let anyone without sin cast the first stone." countless times. But on May 3 the teaching of their 'Saviour' was neither in their head nor heart. Christ has absolutely no impact on their lives. The Gospel of Christ often fails when tested. At Umthlong too it failed miserably.

In church the sanctity of human life is often preached. The scripture teaches that life is God's gift and hence no one but He can take it away. Human life is the most precious gift. Then what happened at Umthlong? Is this teaching suspended in case of a menschhoh and rape accused? Is not the life of the lynched persons valuable? We know very well that Christians give and take bribes. We practice corruption and are involved in illegal activities. We know this is against Christianity. But there is no guilt in it. Now, against our religion, murders too are committed in the open. There is no prickle of conscience. What is the relevance of religion?

The village headman and the elders should be the first to be taken to task. They have blood in their hands. It is sure that they had seen and heard similar instances in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills where the crowd was uncontrollable. The headman should have immediately escorted the two to the nearest police station or outpost. He and the elders should have contacted the police without losing any time. It is informed that village authorities have been given legal inputs regarding such cases but those in Umthlong chose to disregard their responsibility. Village 'dorbar' (councils) have no legal authority to try people. Many a time Village 'dorbar' think they are a world unto themselves. They often exceed their limit. Umthlong was exactly the case.

Lynching merely on suspicion has been taking place in the state. It has occurred too often. Enough is enough. The government, the police, the NGOs, and churches have the responsibility to stop the trend. A Task Force should be set up to travel all over the state and educate students, men, women and common folk of all groups on the law that states 'no one should take law into his or her own hands'.

The police will investigate the alleged lapses on the part of the headman or headmen and others at Umthlong. Hope it will serve as a lesson for all Meghalayans in the effort to rid of the evil of lynching.

With the heat picking up in the election season, the Prime Minister has released a series of interviews to his chosen media houses, mostly in controlled environments. But even in these safe spaces, some unscripted words appear to have escaped, revealing an alarming lack of understanding of and engagement with some of the burning issues facing the nation today. For example, take the Prime Minister's comments on the Shakti scheme of Karnataka, which, since its was introduced in June last year, has enabled almost 200 crore women and girls travel on State transport buses at zero cost, with some 65 lakhs using the scheme on a daily basis. By

entire way of working is the lens of the financier, not the lens of the women and girls who are travelling where they clearly were not earlier. It harks back to Narendra Modi's equally remarkable lack of understanding shown before he became the Prime Minister when he said at a public meeting in Mumbai that the bullet train was meant to show the world that India is developed, even if no one would use it. Even if that could be dismissed as an immature comment in the heat of the moment, just as he was preparing to lead the campaign, the remarks now on the Shakti scheme (as also his remarks on another question on the rise in inequality in India) show

The government of India, even under the BJP government, runs a plethora of welfare schemes and if the same thinking were to be applied, then conceptually this has to be a government that rejects all welfare, and not just free transport in Karnataka, which actually is an ingenious way of giving freedom to women and is also a scheme in place in the non-BJP ruled States of Delhi, Tamil Nadu, Telangana and Punjab.

all accounts emerging from the State, the scheme has had dramatic effects that add up to one simple and clear message – the women feel free. They are travelling all over. In fact, this is the only welfare scheme that is overused, which is not surprising since the scheme is simple, clear, usable: show a resident card and travel.

Responding to this scheme in one interview, the Prime Minister offered the simplistic and particularly unenlightened analysis that free bus travel to women offered across the State of Karnataka by the Congress government would translate to less usage for the newly-minted metro services, and so the metro will run at a loss and no one would build metro services in the country. This very limited and narrow view completely flies in the face of any understanding of how welfare schemes work, how they can empower and become a force for liberation and can open new opportunities for the weaker sections of society, and particularly girls and women as in the case of Karnataka. It is amazing that after more than two decades in high office collectively, in the State of Gujarat as Chief Minister and now as Prime Minister, Narendra Modi appears not sensitised to the basics of development, or these are lessons he has heard and not paid heed to, or in this bitter election season, he is blinded in his hatred for the Congress which brought the Karnataka scheme. The government of India, even under the BJP government, runs a plethora of welfare schemes and if the same thinking were to be applied, then conceptually this has to be a government that rejects all welfare, and not just free transport in Karnataka, which actually is an ingenious way of giving freedom to women and is also a scheme in place in the non-BJP ruled States of Delhi, Tamil Nadu, Telangana and Punjab.

It will take time for the full impact of the Shakti scheme to flow and be documented. But the idea that the scheme takes ridership away from the metro beats all logic. At its core, the Prime Minister is saying this: get the poor to pay and make them ride the metro lines, where fares are much higher in general, so that the metro becomes viable and investment is recouped and thus development is taken to have occurred. This is a frightfully narrow vision of what development means for the government led by him, and without probably knowing it, the Prime Minister has accepted the charge of the Congress party that this is a government of the rich, by the rich and for the rich. The lens with which the

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## Free bus rides versus fancy bullet trains

By Jagdish Rattanani

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### Letters to the Editor

## Shillong's Shame: A Paradise Lost to Prostitution, Drugs, and Indifference

Editor,  
I write this not just as a concerned citizen of Shillong, but as a heartbroken one. Born and raised in this beautiful city, amidst the simplicity and God-fearing spirit of the Khasi community, I am witnessing its gradual decay. The stretch from Police Bazaar Point towards HDFC Bank and Pegasus Crown Hotel, all the way to Wards Lake and Oakland, has become a haven for prostitution and drugs. It's morphed into the new red-light area, staining the very fabric of our "so-called" beautiful city. Forget walking with your family or children – even driving through this area

has become an ordeal during evenings. And the most infuriating part? The whole system seems to be involved in this racket. Hotels, including the supposedly prestigious ones turn a blind eye and conveniently gives rooms to these people by the hour. The police? They take bribes and choose to look the other way.

This depravity unfolds right under the noses of a CRPF team stationed there every evening! As a responsible citizen, I did my digging being a freelance photographer and journalist. The police, it seems, are reluctant to arrest these girls, transgenders, or even their pimps. Why? Because the moment they do, a swarm of human rights groups and NGOs descend upon the police station, securing their immediate release. They say they are helpless as it becomes a matter of saving their jobs due to the pressure from above.

What kind of a world are we living in? Has our Khasi community, with its

cherished values of 'Hyniewtrep' and 'Jaidbyrniew', fallen to this level? Can't we, the concerned citizens, do something?

Our silence is deafening. And where are the NGOs who claim to fight for our well-being? The KSU, HYC, and FKJGP – are they blind to the dangers our children face? Why is there no outrage from them on this critical issue? I implore the leaders of these organizations to wake up and take immediate action to eradicate this prostitution menace from the heart of our city.

Let me also remind our esteemed Social Welfare Minister, Paul Lyngdoh, of his commendable initiative to remove hawkers from Police Bazaar. Surely, with the power he wields in the current Government, he can take stringent steps to dismantle this nuisance as well.

This is a call to action. Let us clean our streets of this filth. Those who profit from this – people and businesses alike – must be severely punished. Shillong, our pride,

deserves better. We, the citizens, deserve a city free from drugs, prostitution, and the indifference that allows them to flourish. Let us reclaim Shillong's lost glory!

Yours etc.,  
Donbok J Massar,  
Via email

## CUET & NEET should be conducted professionally

Editor,  
Through the columns of your newspaper, I would like to share the problems that have been faced by many students, myself included. Meghalaya was known as one of the states with the best education system in the country. As years passed, the system changed. The Education Department brought many changes in the field of education but whether these changes have helped us is another matter.

These past few months have been very hectic for us students. The sudden implementation of the 4 years bachelor's undergraduate course and the introduction of the Common University Entrance Test (CUET) have added to our trauma because it is also very poorly and unprofessionally conducted.

Just after a month after their Boards exams, students are bound to study even more in order to get admissions in the colleges/universities they seek admissions to. The hard work put in by a student in the Boards examination does not matter anymore because the admission is based on the CUET scores. However, that is not the only problem. The real problem is the lack of order and discipline in the examination centres across the state. It has not only brought tears and disappointment to the students but has also hit their morale.

The first and second day of the CUET have been very unpleasant for the students appearing for the examination. The centres did not

have proper utilities and the examinations could not be conducted on time due to the carelessness of the officials. This was a great reason for the upsetting situation.

As students we can only hope that in future this important national level entrance test is conducted with greater professionalism and with least harassment to students and their parents. I also hope that those sitting in the Education Department headed by the State Education Minister will read this letter and address the problems faced by us students. They need to act with empathy for the student community and also feel the pain experienced by students writing the CUET exams.

Yours etc.,  
Christina M. Sangma  
Via email

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

"The moment when you feel like giving up is right before your breakthrough."

— Victoria Arlen

The Shillong Times

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Iran after Shah

IRAN is in a state of mourning after the deadly crash of a helicopter that killed President Ebrahim Raisi and foreign minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian on Sunday. The crash in the Islamic nation's western mountain region was followed by hours of silence from the government even as speculations about an Israeli hand strengthened. In all probability, this was not so and as Iran itself admitted in so many words, it could be a case of adverse weather conditions and technical snag to the aircraft caught in atmospheric turbulence. Israel has denied its involvement, though it had in recent times warned Iran of serious consequences vis-a-vis the abrupt attacks on the Jewish nation by the Hamas and other Islamic militants that killed many since October 7 last. That fight, part of the decades-long West Asia fight between Palestinians and Jews, is continuing. Yet, Tehran has veered round to the view that there was no external plot behind the crash.

Iran itself is to blame for the way it is unable to replenish or even maintain its fleet of old aircraft, bought mainly in the 1970s under the rule of the Mohammad Reza Pahlavi or 'Shah of Iran' for short. The progressive, pro-West ruler's ouster from power was at the hands of the Revolutionary Guards in 1979. A line of fundamentalists, Ayatollahs, the latest by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, for nearly half a century has taken Iran back to the medieval times in terms of the nation's social and governance mindset. Shah's ouster was followed by house-arrest of US diplomats, which ended only after a tough-talking Ronald Reagan won the American Presidential polls and issued a stern warning to Tehran. But, the rule of the revolutionary guards continued in Iran, followed by seasons of American and Western sanctions. Today, Iran is neither able to buy new aircraft from the West nor get spare parts. This is only one of the many handicaps with which the Shia-prominent nation is carrying forward.

It's one thing to challenge the super powers and quite another to perform in a manner that would satisfy the requirements of the nation. The 8.86 crore population, despite Iran's huge oil wealth, is in distress but has not been able to raise its voice because of the fundamentalist overreach. Many see the change in Iran over the past 45 years as a journey from light to darkness. The Islamic world as a whole has transformed, some to better times as in the oil-rich Gulf and the rest to worse scenarios, during this period. Excessive adherence to, or interpretation of, religious tenets, and worse by semi-literate mullahs, has been the curse of the present times.

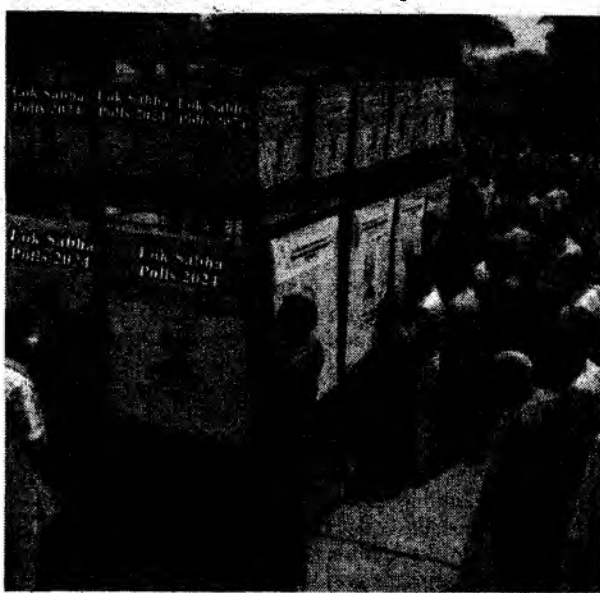
Lok Sabha Elections in North-Eastern States—Part I

By H. Srikanth

Elections to the Lok Sabha are completed in all north-eastern states. The northeast sends 25 MPs to the Lok Sabha (LS). Of them, 14 LS constituencies are in Assam. While states like Meghalaya, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh and Tripura send two MPs each, other north-eastern states, namely Nagaland, Manipur and Sikkim, send one each. The northeast was in the news in the first phase of 2024 elections when violence and rigging were reported in certain polling booths in Manipur valley. In some hill areas of Manipur which went to the polls on April 19, the Kukis abstained from voting. Voters in six districts of Eastern Nagaland boycotted the elections in response to the appeal of Eastern Nagaland People's Organization (ENPO). No such incidents were reported in the elections held in Assam and Manipur during the second and third phases. Barring the incidents mentioned above, the elections in the northeast were more or less peaceful. As expected, the voting percentage was very high in Assam. The northeastern states have to wait for a couple of weeks more to know the election results. Many poll pundits assume BJP is strong in the region and hence the BJP led NDA would sweep the elections. But the reality in the northeast is complex. Each state in the region has its own trajectory, and political dynamics in the country vary from one state to another. Hence, it is necessary to understand the specificity of the political situation in each of the states.

In the 2019 general elections, BJP won in nine out of fourteen LS constituencies in Assam. Congress party then won only in three constituencies, and United People's Party Liberal (UPPL) and United Democratic Front (AUIDF) got one each. In the 2024 general elections, BJP is contesting in 13 constituencies, leaving three for its allies - two for Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) and one for UPPL. In contrast, Congress, which identifies itself as part of the INDI Alliance, contested in 13 constituencies, leaving only Dibrugarh seat to Assam Jatiya Parishad (AJP). Congress did not arrive at any agreement with other INDIA partners in Assam. Despite the request from CPI (M) and other citizen groups, it did not withdraw its candidate from the Barpeta constituency. Other

parties, like Trinamool Congress (AITC), United Democratic Front (AUIDF) and Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) have fielded candidates in select constituencies. Many factors appear to go in favour of the BJP and the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in Assam for different reasons. Led by a pragmatic and shrewd Himanta Biswa Sarma, BJP stitched an effective electoral alliance in Assam. On the eve of the elections, Sarma, who is also the CM, has weakened the Congress leadership in the state and ensured defection of some key MLAs and ex-MLAs from Congress



to BJP. He could neutralize powerful Muslim leaders in Assam. The delimitation exercise changed the demography of the constituencies in the state, helping the BJP to a considerable extent. Sarma exploited the locals' fear of the illegal Bangladeshi migrants. By dividing the people on communal lines, he could neutralize the anti-CAA movement in Upper Assam, and win the confidence of Hindu refugees who had settled in the Barak valley. Some development and welfare activities that the state and central governments undertook also favour the BJP. The charisma of Narendra Modi is still intact in Assam. Although some BJP contestants are very weak, still they can pull off in the elections because of the popularity of the prime minister, Mr. Modi. Rahul Gandhi's Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra evoked support among some sections of people. There is considerable unrest among the people over price rise, unemployment

and corruption. But, the Congress party could not take advantage of the same as it lacks organizational strength to mobilize voters at the grassroots. The Congress should have appeased and won over the left activists by withdrawing its candidate from constituencies like Barpeta and Lakhimpur and leaving them to its left allies. Hence, despite the popular resentment, BJP is likely to hold on to most of the seats it won in 2019. Congress is likely to get around five seats in Assam. The other two states where BJP appears confident are Tripura and Arunachal

Pradesh. Tripura has two LS seats - Tripura East and Tripura West. BJP is contesting in both the seats. From the INDI Alliance, Congress is contesting in Tripura East and CPI (M) from Tripura West. BJP is likely to win two seats in Tripura, thanks to the pact it signed with Pradyot Debbarma's Tipra Motha Party (TIPRA) which is fighting for constitutional guarantees for the local tribes in Tripura. BJP defeated the left front in the last two assembly elections, but it still has some hold in pockets. But the Congress party, which depended on the tribal parties, has become weak in the state. TIPRA won 13 assembly seats in the 2023 assembly elections. Realising the importance of tribal votes, BJP came forward to appease Pradyot Debbarma. Internal sources say that BJP was simultaneously prying on the MLAs of TIPRA. It is rumored that Pradyot Debbarma joined the NDA government in Tripura to prevent his MLAs and cadre from

joining the BJP bandwagon for power and positions. On April 19, 2024, Arunachal Pradesh went for simultaneous elections for Lok Sabha and legislative assembly. Arunachal Pradesh has sixty assembly seats and two LS seats. The politics in the state are always volatile. The elected representatives have a tendency to support whichever party or alliance is in power at the center. Kiren Rijiju's elevation as a national leader and the NDA government's focus on infrastructural projects connecting the state to the rest of India made Arunachal Pradesh a bastion of BJP in the northeast. In the 2024 elections, BJP is contesting in all assembly seats and also for two MP seats in the state. Congress has also filed nominations for two LS seats. But it has fielded candidates for only 20 assembly seats in the state. As the NDA allies like the National People's Party of Conrad Sangma are also lending support to BJP, it is likely that the LS seats in Arunachal Pradesh will end up in the BJP's kitty. In Nagaland, BJP is in alliance with the Nationalist Democratic Progressive Party (NDPP) led by Neiphiu Rio. In the assembly elections held in 2023, the NDPP secured 21 seats and its ally BJP won 13 seats. The NDA alliance had a clear majority to form the government. But other leading opposition parties in the state also joined the government, turning Nagaland into an opposition-less government. In the elections for the lone Lok Sabha seat in 2024, BJP lent support to the NDPP candidate. Congress party has also put up its candidate for the LS seat. There has been resentment brewing against the BJP-NDPP government in recent months. However, the Congress party does not have a leader like S.C. Jamn to steer the fortunes of the party. The boycott of elections in Eastern Nagaland brings down the percentage of voting in Nagaland, but does not affect the outcome. The NDPP claims it has been fighting for peaceful and honorable settlement between the Government of India and the Naga militant groups. Irrespective of whether BJP supports it, the NDPP's victory is certain as it has enjoyed the support of almost all political parties in the state and also has the backing of the Naga militants. (To be concluded in Part II).

Bob's Banter

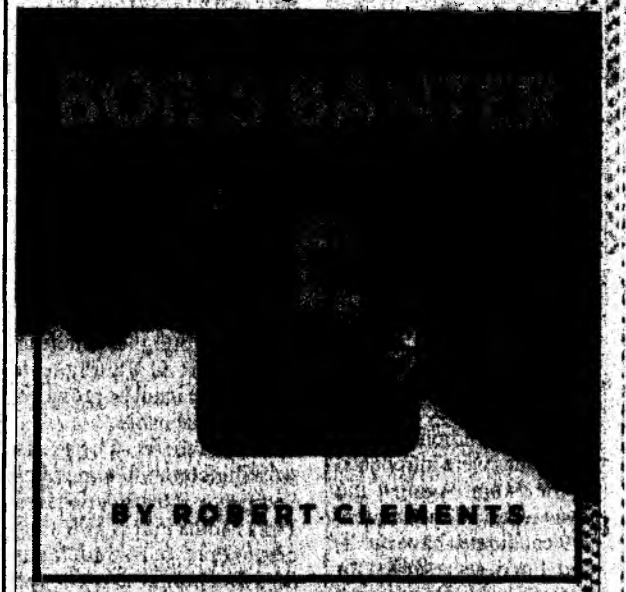
By Robert Clements

Withdrawal Symptoms and Cure..!

"Who's this?" I asked my friend as I entered his house and saw a dishevelled boy sitting in his living room. "My son!" said my friend. "Hi," I said and watched as the young fellow stared at me then looked around, ran around the room searching for something like a dog looking for his favourite bone and then sat down waving his arms at his father. "He's not well, is he?" I asked my friend. "Withdrawal symptoms," whispered my friend to me. "Drugs?" I whispered back. "No messaging," said my friend. "Messaging?" I asked. "On his phone all the time!" said my friend. "Ah," I said looking at my friend's son, who was staring with haunted eyes at his hands. "That's where his phone used to be," said my friend. "We've taken it away from him, so he can get used to life without messaging!" "Good," I said looking

need to be implemented immediately:

Rule One: The size of the mobile should be such that other people know when he has switched on talking into his mobile and when he is talking to them. Tiny instruments, which are invisible to the people around should be banned or confiscated and burnt or smashed to the ground or exploded. Rule Two: Restaurants should ask customers to deposit handsets at the entrance like they do with umbrellas, so that patrons can enjoy their food and also the company of each other. If the mobile rings while the guest is having his meal, a waiter will answer the phone and even tell the person at the other end the customer will have to pay a fine if he calls again in the next half hour. Rule Three: All cell phones should be fixed with an automatic device, which allows the user only one call and one message per hour. Any more calls or messages will have his phone connection temporarily suspended and



at my friend's son, who was suddenly staring at me with the same haunted eyes. Suddenly he looked at the end and started waving his hands. "It's ticklish," I giggled. "What's he doing?" "He's messaging," said my friend. "He's asking whether you have a phone?" "Yes," I giggled. "But I am not giving it to you!" "Just message him!" said my friend. "Without using the phone?" I asked. "Type a message on his knee." "I can't," I said. "I don't know how to type!" My friend's son withdrew his hand from my knee in a flash, looked at me with disdain and went back to his chair. He reached across and tapped something onto his father's knee. "What's he saying?" I asked. "He's saying you're a barbarian." "Tell him I know how to talk!" I said angrily. The boy looked at me with the same disgust and walked out of the room. "You have upset my son," said my friend. "I'm sorry" I said. "Is there something I can do to make up for it?" "You could learn to message him on his knees," said my friend. "Nah," I said, "I'm not too happy using someone else's knees to type." "Do it for me," said my friend. "No!" I said firmly. "What shall I do?" asked my despairing friend. "Maybe teach him public speaking!" "Public speaking," whispered my friend as he switched on the TV, and anchors, raising their voices and shouting guests on their show, a bearded politician calling people from his own country filthy names, and advertisers shouting false promises about highly suspicious looking products. "It is better he messages in silence than go for public speaking classes!" We both looked at the TV and agreed wholeheartedly to give him back his phone! Well, the whole story was written in jest, but people are not talking to each other but spend most of their time messaging or speaking on the phone, and just like cigarette smoking has restrictions, we need to have strict rules that

the user persists, his right to cell communication will be taken away. Rule Four: Starting with a warning to be introduced, all mobile ads, saying that mobile usage is addictive. Mobile companies should also donate money for rehab homes for addicts who want to kick the habit. Rule Five: 'Mobile Shelters' to be erected where people will be able to use their mobile phones, and other areas will be made 'silence zones' and mobile free. Rule Six: Vibrator mode to have a stronger electric charge, to shock people to such an extent that they have calls!" Rule Seven: Betrothed couples to reveal to each other their mobile addiction, if any before their wedding plans are finalized. Rule Eight: Taxation, such as imposed on liquor and cigarettes to be introduced on every word spoken or text written by cell users. This tax will be known as Talk and Write Tax and money collected from this tax will be used to finance old age homes for writers and columnists like me, who wield more of the pen and less their tongue. Rule Nine: Street plays, dramas and newspaper ads to be used to educate people the evils of cell talk with the HRD minister asked to give a series of broadcasts on a cell-less India. Rule Ten: That it be mandatory for cell users to pass a government test on mobile usage before being given permission to use a handset, where mobile etiquette forms part of the paper. I know despite all these laws I'm suggesting we will continue being mannerless and impolite in the use of the mobile but maybe pictures of the boy I portrayed at the beginning of this column and mental state he has reached could be circulated on WhatsApp! If all this is implemented I am sure psychiatrists and marriage counsellors will run out of business as couples and family members start talking to each other again..!

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Letters to the Editor

Has Khasi society lost its soul?

Editor, The gangrape and surrounding responses by the public on social media have left me terrified. I wish the survivor got the support and love needed for healing and recovering from this horrifying ordeal. At the same moment I also wonder when and how our society has stooped so low as to justify both the act of rape and the circulation of the video that the perpetrators uploaded online. From attempts at assassinating the survivor's character and victim blaming, we find it easier to look at the survivor and shame her instead of the perpetrators of this horrendous act. I also grew up with victim blaming and shaming. The narrative always focuses on the survivor and all kinds of useless questions about the state that she was in and her character is questioned. But what about rape? Can we all take a moment and see that it is a horrifying act? It is never okay to rape, never. It does not matter what and who the person is, rape is a crime against another human being. It is a violent, unwanted, and devastating act. It requires the perpetrator to disregard the humanity of the person they rape and to intentionally discard the different forms of protest, verbal, body language, show or fear or physical resistance.

In this specific case, the intention of the people to rape is even clearer through silencing the survivor with drugs. There can be no form of consent or mutual agreement to a physical, sexual act when the other person cannot express their consent, cannot say "yes" or "no" or "stop." Are we as a society going to accept that it is alright to rape? Are we going to teach our children that rape can be validated and justified? Or are we going to teach our children to respect others and to teach them that there is no situation whatsoever where rape is warranted or justified. I want my child to grow up knowing that rape is wrong and there is never and can never be any argument to make it alright. I want my child to stand up against such acts of horror. I want my child to never smear the survivor. Sex without the consent of the people involved is rape, regardless of what kind of people are involved. It does not matter if the person, the woman is out at night, in the day, at home, in a friend's house, out partying, travelling, whatever...rape is wrong. There is no excuse for rape. And if it happens to one of us it can happen to any of us. Why is it so hard to reject the excuses and reiterate that rape is a crime and an affront to a person's human rights and dignity? Our response to the survivor right now is shamefully wanting and downright disgusting. We as a society are

sending out a message that she deserved it, which really means that we justify rape. And the sad truth is that we do look for excuses to justify the crime. Social media is frothing with rabid hatred and violence in relation to this case. Our Christian souls are implicit in the judgement that we have made on this woman. Had Jesus been here, he would have surely silenced us with his wisdom on who deserves to cast the first stone on this woman. Our Khasi "Tip brieu, tip Blei" is apparently called to mind only when it is convenient for us. Is this the precedent that we want to set for future crimes such as this one? We will unfortunately have to bear witness and respond to such crimes again as a society. I and many others find it horrifying that a crime of this nature and magnitude was committed but we are also terrified by our societal response to it. There should be no room for voices that try and justify rape; there should be an outpouring of support and comforting for the survivor instead of the hate and vilifying that we have right now. While the law follows its due process, we should teach our children that rape is a crime and nothing justifies it.

Conflating rights with special privileges

Editor, It seems my previous letter managed to rile up some people through the points I raised. I have observed some amusing arguments which I would like to address. Of course, I came across the typical response of "non-indigenous should not comment on indigenous matters." This logic naturally never seems to extend in the opposite direction, as the individuals arguing this will themselves comment on everything concerning everyone, be they indigenous or not. And to top it off, the commenter also decided to, for some reason, start criticizing Hinduism, despite it having nothing to do with the matter at hand (perhaps they simply wanted to air their bigotry) and despite not being a Hindu themselves. The logic is frighteningly consistent: a Hindu (or any other outsider) knows nothing about Niamtre or indigeneity and thus should stay silent, but we know everything about Hinduism and can comment on it however we please. I am sure such solid reasoning needs no further response. Coming to the serious arguments, one of the points raised was that since many tribals retain a few traits of their unique culture (such as

matrilineality), they remain deserving of protections even if they have forsaken a dozen other traits (such as religion, names, attire, rituals, etc). Not only that, they supposedly remain equal stakeholders in the culture with those who have not forsaken any of their cultural traits. Not only does this reek of bias (because it is argued that one of the few traits left just so happens to be more important than the many traits abandoned), the fact that matrilineal societies do exist elsewhere while followers of Niamtre do not is enough to understand which trait is the more unique and defining feature of the culture. Another argument raised is that communities across the world such as the Europeans and other Indians no longer follow their original cultures either, so why should "we" be singled out? While many of the historical "facts" mentioned here are wrong, let us assume they are correct. Even then, neither Europeans nor most Indians enjoy any special protections due to them being "indigenous". Hence, going by this logic, it appears the commenter and I should reach the same conclusion: that many of Meghalaya's special protections are being fraudulently enjoyed by undeserving groups. A further point to note is the reference to the Meitei, as similarly indigenous people who have adopted a "foreign" faith. Yet again, I raise the same question: the Meitei also do not

enjoy any special protections due to their "indigeneity." So, what are these comparisons with Europeans and the Meitei doing other than highlighting strongly that these protections in Meghalaya are being appropriated by the undeserving through deceit? Finally, the last major response to my letter is a reiteration of the same false logic I had mentioned previously: the conflation of "rights" with "special privileges." The right to religion is a "right" because it applies to all. These "special privileges" are not rights, because they do not apply to all. They are meant for a very specific purpose, and if people are circumventing that purpose, they deserve none of these protections at all. Perhaps this misunderstanding is honest, but it is likely a product of the materialistic, practically selfish desire that births all these arguments: people do not want to lose privileges, even if they do not deserve them. Statements about "community unity" and "divisive forces" sound fancy but are nothing more than attempts at obfuscation to cloud the real deceitful motivations behind these arguments. Yours etc., N.K. Kehar Shillong-3

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

*"The truth will set you free, but first it will make you miserable."*

—James A. Garfield

The Shillong Times

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**Crime and Punishment**

ON May 11, last 38-year old Kyrmen Lyngdoh Nonglait was killed in a drunken brawl by one Raju Rajbhar, a non-tribal labourer in a hotel in that area. The murderer has since admitted to the crime. Every crime must be followed by just and adequate punishment. Section 302 of the Indian penal Code stipulates penalties for murder, ranging from death sentence to life imprisonment, along with the possibility of fines. This law applies to all Indian citizens, tribal and non-tribal. All are equal before the law. According to Section 299 of The Indian Penal Code, 1860, "whoever causes death by committing an act with the intention of causing death or with the intention of causing such bodily injury as is likely to cause death, or with the knowledge that he is likely to cause death by such act, commits the offence of culpable homicide. Section 302 of the IPC deals with murder cases, specifying the punishment for offenders. The court determines punishment based on the accused's intent and motive, making it essential to establish these aspects in such cases.

The report that the Dorbar Pyllun of Erpakon in Ri Bhoi district has ordered the eviction of all non-tribals residing or working within the village appears to be an arbitrary decision that violates the Indian Constitution. Just because one non-tribal person committed murder in a drunken brawl there is no law in this country which sanctions that all other non-tribals who are citizens of India and have valid work permits should be made to leave any place within the State of Meghalaya. This is another instance of a village dorbar taking the law in its hands and resorting to extraordinary measures to avenge the death of one of its members. In December 2014 there was an instance when eight individuals have challenged the decision of the Dorbar Shnong for excommunicating (beh shnong) them because they were married to non-tribals and were deprived of their right to government schemes because they could not get a no-objection certificate (NOC) from the village authorities. The single judge bench of the Meghalaya High Court had given a significant ruling that Dorbar Shnong cannot adopt archaic modes of penalising their constituents by violating the laws enshrined in the Indian Constitution. In fact, the High Court had said that parallel governments cannot be allowed to operate. It is the State Government, District Administration and the Police that are established by law to look after all matters and no assistance should be sought from headmen whose jurisdiction is to maintain social harmony and social development. The ruling also said the headmen have no authority to issue no-objection certificates. It is a different matter that this ruling is being blatantly violated even as the district councils have dragged their feet over implementing in letter and spirit the Village Administration Act.

**Lok Sabha Elections in Northeastern States—Part II**

By H. Srikanth

In Part I of the article published in the Shillong Times on May 22, 2024, I analyzed the election scenario in the northeastern states of Assam, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland, where BJP-NDA has an advantage over other parties. This concluding part of the article would focus on the election scenario in other northeastern states, where BJP-NDA will face some contest from the opposition parties.

In Meghalaya, there has been a fierce contest between the parties for the two LS seats. In the 2023 assembly elections, Conrad Sangma's National People's Party (NPP) formed the Meghalaya Democratic Alliance (MDA-2) with the help of the United Democratic Party (UDP) and other regional parties. During the assembly elections, BJP criticized the NPP and contested separately. But when it failed to improve its tally, BJP had no option but to lend support to and become part of the MDA 2 government. The NPP, on its part, remained part of the NDA government at the center. From the bitter experience of the assembly elections in 2023, BJP understood it has no chance of winning the LS seats in Meghalaya. Hence, in the LS elections 2024, BJP lent support to the NPP candidates. In return, the NPP offered support to the BJP's LS candidates in Arunachal Pradesh. But the BJP's decision to support the NPP seems to have damaged the prospects of the NPP candidates in Meghalaya as the move allowed the opposition parties to brand the NPP as the B team of BJP. Apart from the NPP, the UDP, which is also a partner in the MDA 2 government, has put up its candidate for Shillong LS seat. The Voice of People's Party (VPP), which won four assembly seats in 2023, is also contesting for the Shillong seat without joining any alliance.

Congress party in the state could have taken advantage of the anti-BJP sentiments among the voters, had it not suffered a split in 2021. Mukul Sangma, the ex-CM, left the Congress party and joined AITC. Although both Congress and AITC are part of the INDI Alliance, no seat

sharing agreement could take place in Meghalaya between the two because of the rivalry between Mukul Sangma and the state Congress chief, Vincent Pala. The weakness of Congress and AITC in Shillong parliamentary constituency has gone to the advantage of the VPP, which emerged as a potential alternative to both Congress and NPP contestants for the Shillong seat. Initially, the reelection of Agatha Sangma of the NPP in Tura constituency appeared certain. But the consolidation of anti-BJP votes and the last minute shift of the TMC candidate's votes to the Congress candidate Saleng Sangma made the contest for Tura seat even. One NPP minister admitted, its Tura candidate may win at best with a thin majority. Association with the NDA at the center appears to have gone against both the NPP and UDP candidates. BJP has little to gain in Meghalaya.

Manipur is another northeastern state, where the BJP-NDA's victory is not all that certain. The elections for the two LS seats—Inner Manipur and Outer Manipur—have taken place under the shadow of the ethnic clashes that took place last year, which left the people in Manipur virtually divided. BJP, which is presently the ruling party in Manipur, has fielded its candidate only for the Inner Manipur seat, and lent support to its ally, the National People's Front (NPF) candidate in the Outer Manipur constituency. In contrast, Congress fielded candidates both for the Inner and Outer Manipur constituencies. During the conflict, the state CM, Biren Singh, stood by the Meiteis and won the support of Aamcham Tengkol, an activist Meiteis cultural organization. Hence, it was assumed that BJP would easily win Inner Manipur constituency. However, not everyone in the valley is happy with the BJP government. A section of the Meiteis is disappointed with Modi's indifference and holds Biren Singh's government responsible for the continuing tensions in the state. Rahul Gandhi's Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra, which started from Manipur,

had some impact in the valley as well. A section of the Meiteis is lending support to the Congress candidate, Bimol Akoijam. On the eve of the elections held during the first phase, attempts were made by Arambai Tengkol to terrorise and rig the elections in favor of the BJP. But their attempts were resented and opposed by the Meiteis themselves. Congress party has put up a spirited resistance to the BJP in the valley.

In the outer Manipur constituency, where the majority voters are the Kukis or Nagas, the contest is between Congress and the Naga People's Front (NPF). The Kukis who suffered the most during the ethnic clashes were divided on the eve of the LS elections. While some Kuki groups wanted to boycott the LS elections, the others supported the Congress candidate. Not all Naga voters in Manipur are rallying behind the NPF as the Congress candidate, Alfred K Arthur, also happens to be a Naga. Not all Nagas are happy with the NPF's truck with the BJP. There is a possibility of the Naga votes getting split between the NPF and Congress. As most Kukis have voted en masse for the Congress candidate, the outcome of the contest between the NPF and Congress for the outer Manipur constituency can't be predicted in advance.

In the state of Mizoram, the contest appears to be between Mizo National Front (MNF) and Zoram People's Movement (ZPM). In the 2023 assembly elections, the newly formed ZPM defeated MNF and formed the government. MNF was earlier with the NDA, but it came out of the NDA on the eve of assembly elections. ZPM openly advocated secular values and chose not to align with the NDA. The Congress party has fielded its candidate, but it is not powerful enough. Realizing that it has no base, BJP did not field any candidates in Mizoram. The ethnic attacks against the Kukis in Manipur compelled all the parties to disassociate with the BJP. As the main contestants—MNF and ZPM—are anti-BJP,

whichever party wins as the MP, it may find it difficult to align with the NDA alliance at this juncture.

Sikkim is another northeastern state which had simultaneous elections for the state assembly and LS seats. In 2019, the lone LS seat in Sikkim was bagged by the Sikkim Krantikari Morcha (SKM) candidate. That year, the SKM defeated the Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF) and formed the government. After the formation of the government, the SKM joined the NDA. However, in the 2024 elections, SKM is going alone with no pre-poll alliance with the BJP. Although BJP did not win any assembly seats in 2019 elections, it engineered a defection of 10 MLAs from SDF, and later won two seats in the by-elections held in October 2019. Aspiring to be a kingmaker, BJP has filed nominations for 31 assembly seats and the lone LS seat. SDF, which suffered defection, is regrouping again. With the ex-football player, Baichung Bhutia, joining the party, SDF is again in the news. It is contesting all assembly seats and also the LS seat. Congress, which fielded candidates only for 11 assembly seats, also has a candidate for the LS seat. Although the two national parties—BJP and Congress—are contesting, the competition will be between SDF and SKF. In the state known for the aayaraams and gayaraams, it does not matter who among the two wins the lone LS seat. Whichever party secures the lone LS seat in Sikkim, it is likely to support the alliance that comes to power at the center.

The analysis presented here are based on my interactions with colleagues and social activists. It is my presumption that in Assam, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland, BJP/NDA may keep its dominance. But in other northeastern states, there is a contest. BJP/NDA may lose some seats in the northeast. It is a different matter that there may be a regrouping of alliances after the election results are out. We need to watch not just the election results, but also the politics that transpire in the states after the declaration of the results. (Concluded)

**Changing the paradigm of climate science**

By Arun Maira

Global climate change is running ahead of solutions to mitigate it. Climate scientists are fixated on reducing carbon emissions to prevent further densification of the atmosphere's carbon layer which is causing global warming. National governments have met 28 times since they first met in Berlin in 1995, most recently in the 28th COP in Dubai in 2023. Every time they meet, climate scientists raise further alarms. Solutions are not keeping pace.

Why? Because modern climate science is an incomplete science. Climate scientists are overly focused on the physical and chemical system in which they want to improve the circulation of energy and materials. Whereas changes must be made simultaneously in the economic and political system, to increase the circulation of wealth and power, which is presently concentrated with the richest countries and the richest people.

The physics and chemistry of climate change is driven by Einstein's formula,  $E=mc^2$ . Energy and materials in different forms can be converted into each other. Overall, the material and energy content of any closed system is in balance. In the last century economic productivity and growth, and improvement of living standards, have become increasingly dependent on the use of carbon and hydrocarbon sources of energy which take eons to renew. Therefore, other sources of energy must be found and ways of reducing hydrocarbon use.

Changes in lifestyles and production systems are essential to reduce carbon emissions. Also, substitution of non-renewable with renewable energy, especially solar which brings new energy into the Earth's system every day. Hydro and wind energy, which do not require any material to be converted into energy—only conversion of energy in one form to another—do not deplete the planet's material resources. Nuclear energy, which derives energy from material, has great risks associated with disposal of toxic wastes. Hydrocarbon energy makes the atmosphere toxic; nuclear energy may make the ground toxic for centuries.

Physicists are not concerned with the distribution of wealth and power in social systems. Changes in forms of energy used in products and production systems require changes in economic structures. There will be winners and losers amongst industries and amongst nations too. The largest and most profitable industries, who are the greatest beneficiaries of the present paradigm, have the greatest political power. Resistance from countries, like the US, whose citizens are the most dependent on hydrocarbon dependent lifestyles, and who also have the largest industries dependent on the production and use of hydrocarbons, resist change in the paradigm the most.

Within countries, the richest people, who have the most energy dependent lifestyles, and have the largest houses and cars and most appliances, and who travel the most by air for work and leisure, do not feel an urgency to live in harmony with Nature. They can afford to buy more gadgets to reduce pollution and keep their homes cooler. Those gadgets require energy to run and for their production too. Thus, rich people with higher per capita incomes exert more pressure per capita than the poor on the Earth and its atmosphere, which are common resources which should be shared equitably. With greater privatisation of all industries, including banking and financial services, those who have more money call the tunes in public policy. More decision-making power in choosing technologies for climate change is with rich investors, who are least affected personally by climate change, and are more

concerned with monetary returns on their investments. Products and solutions by the private sector for the poor require financial investors to extract profit from the bottom for returns on their investments. Thus, wealth continues to flow to the top of the pyramid. The rich get richer; inequalities in wealth and power increase; delaying further the discovery of equitable solutions for climate change.

The scientific paradigm of climate change has become too narrowly focused on carbon circulation, capping, and pricing. It must be broadened in at least four ways. Firstly, it must be expanded even on the materials and energy side. The circulation of water in various forms on the planet must become more central in the climate model. Water is fundamental for all forms of life. Billions of people have been suffering and dying from scarcity of water and water pollution long before carbon became the overriding concern of climate science and policy in this century.

Secondly, scientists and technologists must understand the planet's natural systems much better before proposing solutions for governments and investors to adopt. Nature's hydrological infrastructure has been destroyed with concrete and steel infrastructure: hills with natural runoff flattened and water channels and lakes covered to level land for urban development and highways; and big dams constructed for "scientifically" managing water storage and flow which have large and unintended consequences for environmental sustainability. GDP increases whenever natural infrastructure is replaced by man-made infrastructure. But the sustainability of life reduces.

Thirdly, the world needs local systems solutions cooperatively developed and implemented by communities to solve the global climate problem. Environmental problems are inter-linked with livelihood and economic problems everywhere. However, these problems take different shapes in different places. Therefore, "one size-fits all" climate solutions will not be applicable everywhere. Solutions must be congruent with local realities, and local communities must resolve the give-and-take amongst themselves that systemic solutions always require.

Fourthly, those who produce wealth by their work must accumulate financial wealth themselves and not have to pass it to external investors. Wealth has been flowing upwards in the last few decades increasing wealth inequalities. Moreover, with the excessive financial of economies, with investors investing mostly in other financial ventures, only 15% of the funds generated in the financial sector have been going to businesses in the non-financial sector according to Rana Foroohar in *Makers and Takers* (2016).

A paradigm change in the paradigm of political power is essential for sustainable solutions for humanity's existential problem of climate change. Climate solutions which may be technologically exciting and investor enriching will not change the paradigm of power. People at the bottom of the pyramid must accumulate more wealth and power. Cooperative forms of economic enterprises, in which local producers are also the owners, are required to ensure that wealth circulates locally and is reinvested for the community's gain.

(Arun Maira is a former Member of the Planning Commission and author of several books, the latest is "Shaping the Future: A Guide for System Leaders") (Syndicate: The Billion Press) (email: editor@thebillionpress.org)

Letters to the Editor

**Compromising humanity by picking sides**

Editor,  
In the chaos of our world, where lines between right and wrong blur, it is important to look back on a photograph called, "The boy standing by crematory" taken by Joe O'donnel in Nagasaki after the atomic bombings.

Joe O'donnel wrote... "I saw a boy about ten years old walking by. He was carrying a baby on his back. In those days in Japan, we often saw children playing with their little brothers or sisters on their backs, but this boy was clearly different. I could see that he had come to this place for a serious reason. He was wearing no shoes. His face was hard. The little head was tipped back as if the baby were fast asleep. The boy stood there for five or ten minutes. The man in white masks walked over to him and quietly began to take off the rope that was holding the baby. That is when I saw that the baby was already dead. The man held the body by the hands and feet and placed it on the fire. The boy stood there straight without moving, watching the flames. He was biting his lower lip so hard that it shone with blood. The flame burned low like the sun going down. The boy turned round and walked silently away."

As the Gaza conflict unfolds, humanity finds itself at a crossroads, torn between opinions and ideologies. When the world is busy debating who is right and who is wrong, we seem to over-

look United Nations reports. Death toll reached 34,735 out of which 4,959 were women and 7,797 were children. The war will also lead to starvation, trauma, displacement and orphanhood.

How can we justify such atrocities? How can we pick sides when people are suffering? The essence of our humanity is compromised when we turn a blind eye to the suffering of others, when we prioritise politics over people and ideologies over lives.

In the end, it was the innocent lives that suffered. Death did not care who was right and who was wrong. It never discriminated and never will. The sound of prayers buried under the lamenting smoke as war worships death.

Your etc.,  
Joseph Lachhuanawma  
Rokhum,  
Shillong- 21

**Iran's predicament**

Editor,  
Apropos of the editorial "Iran after Shah" (ST May 22nd 2024), Iran operates as an Islamic theocracy; a system where religious leaders hold significant power. Since the 1979 Iranian Islamic Revolution, the politicised Shi'i clergy has consolidated its control over levers of power. This allows for a limited degree of political pluralism, including presidential and parliamentary elections every four years. However, the clerical regime still faces weaknesses, particularly in addressing the economic and social problems that led to the revolution. The Supreme Leader, who exerts ideo-

logical and political control, remains the strongest power centre in Iran, while the President handles day-to-day governance.

Theocracy plays a significant role in Iran's political structure. Iran's theocracy grapples with several significant challenges. There are economic struggles, social unrest, youth discontentment, political factionalism, regional tensions, international isolation and environmental challenges. As far as the economy is concerned Iran faces economic hardships due to sanctions, mismanagement and corruption. These issues impact citizens' livelihoods and create discontent. Dissatisfaction with social restrictions, lack of personal freedoms, and human rights violations lead to protest and unrest. A young population seeks more opportunities, better education and a less restrictive environment.

Theocracy struggles to address their aspirations. Different factions within the theocratic establishment compete for influence, leading to internal divisions and policy inconsistencies. Iran's involvement in regional conflicts (e.g., Syria, Yemen) strains relations with other countries and affects stability. Sanctions and ideological differences isolate Iran from the global community, hindering economic growth and diplomatic ties. Environmentally water scarcity, pollution and climate change impact Iran's stability and exacerbate existing problems. Navigating these challenges while maintaining religious authority is a delicate balancing act for Iran's theocracy.

Lately the people celebrating Ebrahim Raisi's death

with fireworks, memes and jokes are likely satirical in nature. Raisi is a prominent figure in Iran's political landscape. He has held various positions, including serving as the Chief Justice of Iran and, more recently, being elected as the President of Iran in 2021. His tenure has been marked by controversy, particularly regarding human rights issues and political repression. Some of the reasons why people reacted in such a manner is because Raisi's policies and actions have faced criticism from various groups including those advocating for greater civil liberties and democratic reforms. Satirical responses could be a form of dissent. In today's digital age, memes and jokes spread rapidly on social media. People often use humour to express their opinions or frustrations about political figures. Fireworks and celebrations can symbolize the end of an era or a change in leadership. Some may view Raisi's presidency as a turning point.

Iranians have a long history of using satire and humour to cope with challenging political situations. This tradition continues even in serious matters. Public reactions can be diverse, and not everyone celebrates in the same way. Some may genuinely mourn, while others express their feelings through satire. Given the challenges and recent events of a theocratic Iran, the editorial rightly concluded that "Excessive adherence to, or interpretation of, religious tenets, and worse by semi-literate mullahs, has been the curse of present times".

Yours etc;  
VK Lyngdoh  
Via email

**Single mothers deserve empathy**

Editor  
Most parents encourage their sons to always marry or settle with a woman who is still single and does not carry any baggage. However, it sometimes happens that the son falls in love with a single mother/widow who happens to be a victim of circumstances. Sometimes such individuals find genuine love in each other and they become soulmates but most parents frown on such marriages. Parents consider a bachelor being akin to a single woman. This is a wrong mindset and parents need to be sensitized. The woman may have other human qualities, of honesty, loyalty and respect and might have been abandoned by her previous partner/husband. To say that a previously married woman is not a good life partner is a prejudice that must be discarded. Hence parents should consider the qualities of a woman not her former marital status. If parents encourage their sons to marry or settle down with single mothers/widows it will help women regain their self-respect in the society and enable them to live with dignity.

Yours etc.,  
Lionel Pynogrope,  
Via email

**Saipung afflicted by poor governance**

Editor,  
Your newspaper recently

published a report on the inadequacy in the functioning of Saipung Block in East Jaintia Hills district. As a community resource expert who has worked and associated myself for over 10 years with people in those villages, there have been community developmental projects in that area under the IFAD funded LIPH project and later under few interventions with NABARD as well. However it is the lack of proper road connectivity from Saipung towards far flung villages like Saibual, Mulhoi, Tuituk, Thuruk, Mulian and many more habitations where a mix of Pnar and Biate communities co-exist. Incassant rains make traveling very cumbersome and power supply is not constant. Some say it is due to the lack of power supply upgrade in the sub-stations that are spread in various parts of this area which are difficult to repair or overhaul. No one knows how successful the JIM scheme is and if it is being implemented effectively in that area. It is sad that (Late) Oliver Chyrmang the architect of bringing the administration closer to the rural community, will not see his vision being fulfilled and that progress and prosperity would be a distant dream for Saipung. The Chief Minister should pay due attention to this area of East Jaintia Hills.

Yours etc.,  
Dominic S. Wankhar,  
Via email

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

*"At the end of the day, we must go forward with hope and not backward by fear and division."*

— Jesse Jackson

**The Shillong Times**

Vol No: LXV No. 282 SHILLONG, FRIDAY, MAY 24, 2024

**Long silence of ECI**

THE Election Commission has belatedly sounded a note of caution to the BJP and the Congress party that they should follow the Model Code of Conduct and be mindful of their words on the election campaign front. It warned on Wednesday against "star campaigners' attempts to divide the society on communal lines." It has asked the Congress not to undermine the systems by raising fears that the Constitution could be "abolished or sold." The EC acted late, but better late than never. To start with, complaints had been sent to the Election Commission from various quarters that Prime Minister Narendra Modi was making statements with communal overtones at his largely attended election rallies. His indirect references to Muslims about their families having larger numbers of children and the statement that the Congress party, if elected to power, would give the wealth of Hindus to Muslims, were in bad taste. He also invoked religious matters at an election rally in Odisha, saying the Lord Jagannath Temple was not safe under the BJP rule and that the missing keys of the temple were in Tamil Nadu – a taunt to the CM, whose close governmental aide is a senior bureaucrat born in Tamil Nadu.

It is unimaginable that the Prime Minister of a country should seek votes in a parliament election by invoking silly or potentially harmful subjects. It could be argued that the PM is running out of ideas and has little to list before the public about the achievements of his 10-year rule of the nation. Curiously, at this juncture, he hardly spoke about his future plans for the nation and its people. Be that as it may, the EC was duty-bound to intervene immediately and cry a halt to unacceptable deviations and violation of the election code of conduct. Its silence for several days, and the issue of a warning at the last minute, speak poorly about its integrity. The EC is also drawing flak for its alleged "excesses" in Andhra Pradesh, where it abruptly transferred top officials midway through the polls on alleged "recommendations" from some political leaders. This allegedly created law and order problems on the polling day. Institutions gain respect and dignity by virtue of the way they conduct themselves. EC had better leadership in times of officials like TN Seshan at its head. He refused to be cowed down by the political leadership or governmental functionaries.

Now, the needle of suspicion is being pointed at the ECI. As an institution with an independent status conferred by the Constitution, EC must maintain its integrity and avoid creating controversies. The strength of democracy is also the strength that institutions like the Election Commission accord to it by virtue of its impartial stand and decisions.

**The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll: Setting Dylan's Song in the Shillong Context**

By Kyrsoibor Pyrtuh

Prelude:

May 24 is the red-letter day for music lovers of Shillong, especially followers of Bob Dylan who belief in his musical thought. In Shillong, credit must be given to Lou Majaw who is consistent in his commitment and makes these hills alive with Dylan's songs and music. This year will mark the 53rd year of Dylan's concert under the theme, "Celebration of Poetry and Songs". The highlights of the day include discussions on the musical career of our very own Lou Majaw, which has spanned over five decades, and the evolution of music in the State. This will be followed by a musical tribute to the living music icon (Dylan).

The Music Scene in Shillong:

One never subscribes to the touristic idea that Shillong is the "Rock Capital". In fact, Shillong has a unique cultural landscape that has given birth to a distinctive musical identity. Also, the indigenous folk music and cultural heritage of the State has contributed to the development of a unique sound.

Moreover, Shillong has no dearth of songwriters, performing artistes etc. And we owe it to the unwavering efforts and commitment of individual artistes who have constantly built the music industry in the city. It is interesting to note that the people of Shillong have so far embraced every genre of Western as well as Bollywood music, from the classical of Mozart, Beethoven to Rock 'n Roll to Pop to Country to head banging Metal and to underground Rap.

In the profile about the Pop singers of Shillong, Martin Narayan Majaw wrote, "...the Khasi Hills have always been an enigma, a living contradiction, not only in culture and ways of life, but even in musical tastes. In a land where green, sun-kissed hills still reverberate on festive occasion to ancient tribal drums and high-pitched village harps, the curious visitor will be amazed to see thousands of eager happy youths thronging the music hall of Shillong to feed ravenously upon the free, rhythmic electronic sounds dished out by the local tribal beat group."

The Sitz im Leben of "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll" and Shillong

Context:

Recently, three non-tribal

construction workers were brutally attacked in which a 52 year old Arjun Ray was killed in broad daylight in Mawroh, Shillong. Any Bob Dylan's fan worth his/her salt would have treated his song to address the systemic and targeted violence and societal inequalities that lead to such tragic events and thus pen down a line or two—"In the hills of Shillong, where the workers come to toil with a dream to find a better life. They worked from dawn to dusk, for a wage that was meager. But on the day, Arjun Ray died, his fate was sealed forever... In the dark alleys of Shillong, where shadows do play, his spirit whispers secrets of a life that went astray... His story is... but a reminder of the pain of innocent life lost in the city's cruel game... Oh, Lonesome Death of Arjun Ray in Shillong's locality... Your story is one of violence, of migrant labour's cruel defeats. A tale of struggle, of strength and of might. But in the end, it was just a brutal, lonely day..."

The racist killings of Hattie Carroll and many others occurred during the heights of Civil Rights Movement in America. Hattie Carroll was a working-class woman who lived in Cherry Hill, a Black Baltimore. She was beloved, sang in the choir and a peaceful woman who loved and nurtured her children. At the time when she was beaten and killed, she was serving drinks at the Spinster's Ball, an annual event attended by the Maryland (deep South) old white family elites. During the revelry, William Zanzinger accused her of being disrespectful and called her racial epithet then struck her with the cane. Carroll died the next day at Baltimore's Mercy Hospital, from a stroke caused by the attack and after her death, her family struggled to survive. Hattie Carroll could have been anyone's mother or sister murdered at the hands of a tobacco plantation owner from southern Maryland.

The song "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll" is a poignant and haunting tale that indeed reflects the prejudice and oppression against the African American community of America during the 1960s. The lyrics of the song are a powerful indictment of the racist attitudes and societal norms

that perpetuated inequality and violence against African Americans. The song's protagonist, Hattie Carroll, is a symbol of the countless African American women who suffered at the hands of racist brutality and oppression.

The song transcends the American continent and to this day it continues to speak truth to power and new generations of singers across the globe continue to adapt to the song to talk about injustice in each socio-political context. There are two instances in which Dylan's "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll" had been adapted into different settings. According to Erika Lundahl, "In 2006, British musician and activist Billy Bragg gave the Hattie Carroll treatment to Rachel Corrie, an American peace activist, who was killed by an Israeli bulldozer in Gaza in 2003. Like Dylan before him, Bragg uses the verses to weave together sharply reported details of Corrie's case with commentary on the political context..." In her article on 50 years of Dylan's "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll", Erika further wrote that "Massachusetts songwriter Jonah Mantranga became the latest singer to borrow Dylan's melody and chorus, this time applying it to the case of Trayvon Martin. His song puts George Zimmerman in the role of William Zanzinger, showing an eerie set of parallels between the two cases..."

While we religiously celebrate Dylan's birthday, can his song "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll" be adapted to highlight the brutal killings of innocent migrant laborers and targeted violence in Shillong? Also, are there performing artistes in town to treat this song to highlight the plight of the working class and daily laborers who are suffering from several injustices and prejudice?

Recently, two construction workers (non-tribals) were brutally murdered in broad day light in Shillong and any Bob Dylan's fan worth his/her salt would have treated his song to address the systemic and targeted violence and societal inequalities that lead to such tragic events and thus pen down a line or two—"In the hills of Shillong, where the workers come to toil with a dream to find a better life.

But in the city's locality, their fate was decided in one day... They worked from dawn to dusk, for a wage that was meager. But on the day, they died, their fate was sealed, forever... In the dark alleys of Shillong, where shadows do play, their spirits whisper secrets, of a life that went astray... Their stories are but a reminder of the pain of innocent lives lost, in the city's cruel game..." Oh, Lonesome Death of Poor Laborers in Shillong's locality... Your stories are one of violence, of migrant labor's cruel defeats. A tale of struggle, of strength and of might. But in the end, it was just a brutal, lonely day..."

In the second adaptation of the song the protagonist could be a local woman street vendor of Shillong. The reality is that amongst the indigenous street vendors, 80% are women and most of them are single mothers who toil hard to make ends meet and gain their children a decent life. It is also a fact that street vendors, especially women vendors, are confronting hate and prejudices daily. A potential lyric for this adaptation runs, "In the hills of Shillong... lived a woman named Kong Jai, with a heart full of hope. She fought for her rights, against the forces so cold. But her struggle ended in death, young and old. Her voice is silenced by the system's cold hands. But her memory lives on, in this land. Her spirit still whispers secrets to the wind. Of a fight that was just beginning... Her story echoes through Shillong's streets... A reminder of struggles yet to meet. Oh, Lonesome death of Kong Jai... your story will unfold, A tale of resistance, of strength and of might. But in the end, it was just a lonely night..."

All the songs, including "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll", which Dylan had written and composed reflect his personality and belief. It would be unfair on our part to just like his songs and not share his thoughts. Also there can be no cherry picking of his songs. As music has the power to inspire change, challenge socio-political norms and bring people together. In the same way Dylan's "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll" points to the power of song to confront bigotry and injustice.

**Is a secret ballot actually secret?**

By Marbianglang Rymbai

The founding fathers of our Republic conceived of representative parliamentary democracy as the polity most suited to India's ethos, background, and needs. They envisaged equal participation of all the adult citizens in the democratic process without any discrimination. Selection of representatives of the people through universal adult franchise and free and fair elections was for them an act of faith. The universal adult franchise was a bold and ambitious political experiment and a symbol of the abiding faith that the founders reposed in the great masses of the country and in their innate wisdom.

During the last seventy-five years, there have been eighteen general elections to the Lok Sabha and a much larger number to various State Legislative Assemblies. We can take legitimate pride in that these have been successful and generally acknowledged to be free and fair. But the experience has also brought to the fore many distortions, some very serious, generating a deep concern in many quarters. There are constant references to the unhealthy role of money power, muscle power, and mafia power and to criminalization, corruption, communalism, and casteism.

With India going to the polls in seven phases starting from 19 April 2024 to elect representatives to the Lok Sabha for a five-year term, the electoral process has begun. The Election Commission of India gets into action through its various Standard Operating Procedures with regard to the transfer of officials, the appointment of Central Election Observers, Static Surveillance Teams, Mobile Surveillance Teams,

Commission's Standard Operating Procedure, there is an Election Petitions (EPs) period i.e. 45-days from the date of declaration of result during which details of the Register of voters (Form 17A), the results in the Control Unit of the EVM and the slips in the VVPAT machine are kept under the custody of District Election Officer. Unfortunately, the safety and security of this voting data is a very important question because of the scaling down of the standard protocol of security of these voting data after counting. Hence a number of questions may arise in the mind of the voter: (1) After the day of counting what are the Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) adopted and laid down by the Election Commission of India to ensure the CONFIDENTIALITY of the data regarding the voting preference of the individual voters? (2) Is there an SOP regarding the date (how many days after counting) when the Voting Data in the Control Units of the EVMs is to be deleted and when the Serialised Slips in the VVPAT Machine are to be destroyed? (3) During the date when the voting data in the Control Units of the EVMs is to be deleted and the Serialised Slips in the VVPAT machines are to be destroyed, is it part of the procedure to involve representatives of different political parties and civil society to show transparency in the process. If not, then why not? (4) Is there any 24x7 video camera recording of the entry and exit of all individuals or officials into the strong rooms or rooms where the Register of Voters or Form 17A, Control Unit (CU) of the EVM and the slips in the Voter

*If there is indeed video camera recording, then what are the reasons why it is not possible to live-stream the recording of these video cameras on YouTube or Facebook 24x7? Is there a log book to note the signed entry of all individuals and officials into the strong rooms or rooms where the Register of Voters or Form 17A, Control Unit (CU) of the EVM and the slips in the Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) machine are kept after the day of counting.*

Letters to the Editor

**Youth & first-time voters: Shaping the future of Indian Democracy**

Editor,

As India embarks on its latest electoral journey, a significant spotlight is being cast on the youth and first-time voters who are poised to play a pivotal role in shaping the country's political future. This demographic, characterized by its energy, aspirations, and digital savviness, is emerging as a powerful force that could redefine the landscape of Indian democracy.

India boasts one of the largest youth populations in the world, with approximately 65% of its 1.4 billion people under the age of 35. Among them, millions are first-time voters, stepping into the democratic process with fresh perspectives and high expectations. This surge of young voters is not just a statistical increment but a potential game changer for political parties and the policies they endorse. The priorities of young voters are distinct and varied. Employment and economic stability top their list of concerns, with many young Indians seeking robust job opportunities and fair wages in a rapidly evolving job market. Education is another critical issue, with demands for improved quality and accessibility to higher education. Social issues such as gender

equality, mental health, and climate change also resonate deeply with this demographic. Unlike previous generations, today's youth are more likely to prioritize sustainable development and environmental policies, reflecting a growing awareness and concern for the future of the planet.

The digital revolution has significantly influenced how young voters engage with politics. Social media platforms like Instagram, Twitter, and WhatsApp have become vital tools for political campaigns aiming to reach and mobilize young voters. These platforms not only facilitate direct communication between candidates and voters but also serve as forums for political debate, opinion sharing, and grassroots organizing. However, this digital engagement is a double-edged sword. While it allows for greater participation and mobilization, it also opens avenues for misinformation and echo chambers, where young voters might be exposed to biased or false information. Political literacy and critical thinking are essential to navigating this digital landscape.

Recognizing the importance of youth voters, political parties are tailoring their campaigns to appeal to this demographic. From promising job creation and educational reforms to advocating for digital economy initiatives and climate action, parties are keen to address the issues that matter most to young Indians. Innovative campaign strategies, such as interactive online

sessions, youth rallies, and targeted digital content, are being employed to capture the attention and support of first-time voters. Parties are also increasingly fielding younger candidates who can better relate to the aspirations and concerns of their peers. Despite the enthusiasm, young voters face several challenges, including a lack of adequate political education and engagement opportunities.

Many young Indians feel disillusioned with the political process, perceiving it as corrupt or ineffective. Bridging this gap requires concerted efforts from educational institutions, civil society, and the political system itself to foster a more inclusive and transparent democratic process. The participation of youth and first-time voters is not just about increasing voter turnout; it's about invigorating the democratic process with new ideas, perspectives, and energy. By engaging more deeply in the political process, young voters can hold leaders accountable and drive forward progressive change.

As India's youth step into the voting booths, their collective voice has the potential to usher in a new era of political and social transformation. Their active participation could redefine priorities, influence policy decisions, and shape a more inclusive and forward-thinking nation. The ongoing elections are not just a test of political parties but a testament to the evolving and dynamic spirit of Indian democracy, driven by the

dreams and aspirations of its youngest citizens.

Yours etc.,  
Maven Nongrum,  
Shillong -1

**Frequent Power Outages in Lachaumiere**

Editor,

I am writing to express the frustration and difficulties faced by the residents of Lachaumiere due to the incessant and unexplained power cuts that have become a regular occurrence in our locality. These disruptions not only inconvenience daily life but also impede the productivity of those of us reliant on electricity for work.

For several weeks now, we have been experiencing frequent power outages, often lasting from the morning into the entire day. Each time I have contacted the MeECL complaint line, I was repeatedly informed that repair work was underway. While occasional maintenance is understandable, the frequency and persistence of these outages raise serious concerns about the quality and effectiveness of these so-called repairs. Were the previous repairs not effective? Why are the faults not permanently resolved? The recurrence of the same issues suggests a failure to properly address the root cause of the problem.

If such disruptions are happening in Lachaumiere, a centrally located area in the city, one can only imagine the severity of the situa-

tion in rural areas, where residents likely face even more frequent and prolonged outages.

As the sole electricity distribution entity in the state, MeECL's monopoly appears to have resulted in a lack of accountability. Their control over power distribution should not equate to a disregard for responsibility or urgency in addressing consumer grievances. We are often met with excuses rather than solutions, and it is high time for MeECL to address this issue seriously. The residents of the entire state deserve a reliable power supply.

I urge MeECL and relevant authorities to take immediate and effective measures to ensure a stable and reliable power supply. It is essential that they identify and rectify the root causes of these frequent power outages, thereby preventing future occurrences. The residents of the state should not have to endure daily disruptions due to inadequate infrastructure and maintenance.

Through your esteemed publication, I hope to prompt MeECL to address and resolve these persistent power outages effectively.

Yours etc.,  
Rudy Lyngdoh,  
Shillong

**Excellent analysis**

Editor,

The special article "Lok Sabha Elections in North-eastern States - Part I and

Part II" by H. Srikanth (ST May 22nd and 23rd 2024) made very interesting reading. The article in two instalments was excellent for its objective assessment on the election to the 18th Lok Sabha in the North Eastern States of India. The author's presumption on Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Nagaland and Tripura, as well as other North Eastern States of Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Sikkim based on "interactions with colleagues and social activists," as the author puts it, is convincing. Watching and waiting what transpires after June 4 2024, in the region which sends 25 Members of Parliament to the Lok Sabha.

Yours etc;  
VK Lyngdoh,  
Via email

**A correction**

Editor,

Apologies of my column "Saipung afflicted by poor governance" (ST May 23, 2024) where the name of Oliver Chyrmang mentioned in the letter was erroneously written as (Late) Oliver Chyrmang whereas it should have read as Ma Oliver Chyrmang. The error is deeply regretted and acknowledged.

Yours etc.,  
Dominic S. Wankhar  
Via email

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

and videography, etc. We keep seeing wall graffiti, Billboards, and advertisements in the local newspaper seeking to discourage the use of money during elections. The election officials at the polling booth level are also trained to ensure all steps are taken to ensure the secrecy of the ballot on the day of voting. It would appear that the Election Commission has pulled out all the stops to ensure this secrecy of the ballot up to the day of counting on 4th June 2024.

All this is meant to truly facilitate the individual voter to make an independent choice that allows them to exercise their ballot without fear of repercussions from the candidates for whom they have NOT voted for. This fearlessness arising from the Secrecy of the Ballot is the backbone of the largest and most powerful democracy in the world.

The Election Commission also ensures the safety of the Electronic Voting Machines (EVM) up to the day of counting, as the EVMs are kept under a Double Lock System, a Minimum of One Platoon of Armed Police for 24x7, IP Controlled CCTV Camera with DVR and Uninterrupted Power Supply for 24x7.

However, the question that remains is what happens to the EVMs/VVPATs AFTER the counting of votes till the EP period and when the Central Observers appointed by the Election Commission of India have relinquished charge and have left their respective states.

It is reasonable to assume that as part of the Election

Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) machine are kept after the day of counting? If there isn't then what are the reasons for the same? If there is indeed video camera recording, then what are the reasons why it is not possible to live-stream the recording of these video cameras on YouTube or Facebook 24x7? (5) Is there a log book to note the signed entry of all individuals and officials into the strong rooms or rooms where the Register of Voters or Form 17A, Control Unit (CU) of the EVM and the slips in the Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) machine are kept after the day of counting. If there is no such log book, then what are the reasons why this log book should not be kept? (6) What are the steps being taken to prevent this confidential data of the individual voters from falling into the hands of political parties and powerful politicians who may then use this data to their advantage in future elections?

These queries are placed in the public domain because it appears from reports that some powerful and established politicians claim to have in their possession the database of the entire voting history of each and every individual voter in their constituency since the 2019 General Elections.

The presence of such a comprehensive database in the hands of entrenched politicians gives them a huge undue advantage vis-a-vis the genuine, well-meaning candidates and thereby denies fresh candidates a level playing field during the future elections.

"It's fine to celebrate success but it is more important to heed the lessons of failure."

— Bill Gates

## The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXV No. 283 SHILLONG, SATURDAY, MAY 25, 2024

### Meghalaya Government's Policy Failure

THE news item, 'Marten dumping ground on death-bed' reflects the Government's laid back attitude in tackling tough issues. The quantum of garbage generated on a daily basis from Shillong city is humungous. Only people working at Marten know how grim the situation is but most being government employees are apathetic to the issue. When Marten was first conceived the population of Shillong was smaller; the garbage generated from commercial areas and markets was not as huge as it is today. Domestic waste from homes too was manageable. Today the quantum of garbage is so colossal that even after recovery of recyclable waste the mountain of garbage is hardly dented. It remains an ugly titan of modern unscientific living.

The key role of a government is to have a policy on all matters and those policies need to be tested on the ground. Ministers are expected to guide those policies and to have the wisdom and foresight to envision policies that would serve the state for the long term and not just short-term interventions. But no policy in this state has worked so far. It is a known fact that the Government has been looking for an alternative landfill but has met with little success since land belongs to the 'people.' Now if the government can acquire large swathes of land in areas beyond old Shillong for what it plans to turn into a new township, why can some part of that land not be apportioned for a landfill? However, the broader challenge is to explore whether a landfill is a sustainable option? Much has been spoken about how Indore in Madhya Pradesh has managed its garbage. Why can Meghalaya not learn anything from that city?

One of the primary factors leading to reduction in waste is the complete ban on single-use plastic in Indore. The '3 R' (reduce, reuse and recycle) centres, cloth bags and utensil 'banks', parks developed using reusable things out of waste materials and home composting units have also helped in the reduction of waste in the city. The waste from 4.65 lakh households and 70,543 commercial establishments is systematically sorted at the primary source and processed and disposed of at different plants in the city. In Meghalaya most things are doomed to failure. In 2019, Chief Minister Conrad Sangma at a public meeting where thousands of students were in attendance, announced that single use plastics would be banned. This is not the first time that such a ban was announced but the ban failed repeatedly because there is a deep nexus between those in the Government and the strong plastic bag lobby that doesn't care what happens to Meghalaya so long as its deep pockets are filled. At one time the Khasi Hills District Council too had banned single use plastics but that too was short-lived. People should question why policies meant to reduce non-biodegradable waste are not implemented in letter and spirit. Unfortunately, these critical issues are not of interest to the public. Hence Governments get away with fooling the people all the time until calamity strikes.

### Letters to the Editor

#### Support for adopting CBSE Syllabi in Meghalaya

Editor,  
I am writing in response to the recent article published on May 23, titled "Govt adopts CBSE syllabi for HS Arts stream." I believe the decision to adopt the CBSE syllabi and textbooks for Classes XI and XII in the Arts stream is a commendable move that will benefit the students of Meghalaya immensely.

As a UPSC aspirant, I have firsthand experience with the importance of NCERT books in preparation for competitive exams. The comprehensive and updated content provided by the NCERT textbooks is unparalleled. Unfortunately, the Meghalaya Board of School Education (MBOSE) has not updated its syllabi and textbooks as frequently or thoroughly as necessary to keep pace with the evolving educational landscape.

During my preparation for the UGC NET, I relied heavily on the Class XI and XII NCERT books for my subject, which played a crucial role in my success. Adopting these textbooks for our higher secondary students will equip them with the knowledge and skills needed to compete effectively at the national level.

It is worth noting that while the move to adopt the CBSE syllabi is a positive step, it also highlights areas where MBOSE can improve. For instance, the Tamil Nadu Board has developed highly regarded textbooks, and I have heard that MBOSE's textbooks were also commendable in the past. This indicates that with concerted effort and resources, MBOSE can enhance its educational materials to meet high standards.

However, the sudden implementation of this decision has caused some confusion among teachers and students, as mentioned in the article. It is essential for the state government to address these concerns by providing adequate training and resources to ensure a smooth transition.

Adopting the CBSE syllabi is a progressive step for Meghalaya's education system. It will prepare our students to excel in competitive examinations and enhance their educational experience. I hope the state government will also consider strengthening MBOSE's capacity to develop high-quality educational materials in the future.

Yours etc.,  
Chingsan R Sangma  
Williamnagar - 11

#### Brainwashed by fake news

Editor,  
Scene 1: An aerial shot

# Ancient wisdom: A journey beyond boundaries

By Salil Gewali

The article published in your daily, "Searching within, the eternal way" by Hammarsing Kharhmar (ST April 30, 2024) and a letter "Faith imbued with scientific temper" by Deepa Majumdar (ST April 29, 2024) in reference to the Aryan Invasion/Migration Theory, give a deeper insight into what the Vedic people were known for. Both writers praised India's "boundless knowledge"—a concept that remains somewhat elusive to modern intellectuals.

Of course, ancient Indian wisdom, which some may prefer not to call ancient, is synonymous with "seeking within" and finally realizing "You are everywhere," not just in India or Central Asia. The concept of TIME proposed by ancient seers baffled the brilliant modern planetary scientist, Carl Sagan. The Vedic people meticulously documented every detail of the deep metaphysics in the Vedas and Upanishads, along with an endless trove of stories of various kingdoms, their kings, adventures, battles, warfare, and achievements. Regrettably, those sages missed out on mentioning a "single word" about their arduous journey into India. That became rather a matter of more discussion in the country than the profound WISDOM those enlightened sages expounded. Perhaps for this reason, the German scholar Max Müller put in considerable effort into inserting speculative theories at the behest of British administrators in India. Consequently, Max Müller, being true to his salt, aligned himself with British imperial interests, at the expense of his own scholarly integrity, as many believe. David Frawley, a scholar from Wisconsin, United States, has dedicated a major portion of his life to researching and finally exposing the ulterior motive of the British administration in employing Max Müller.

To delve a little deeper into "seeking within" as emphasized by Hammarsing, I wish to quote Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo, who realized how ancient sages of India lost themselves in the cosmic sea of Supreme Consciousness — the doctrine of 'Aham Brahmasmi', as mentioned by Deepa Majumdar.

However, I intentionally refrain from quoting Indian spiritual masters to avoid potential slander. Instead, I refer directly to the thoughts of one of the greatest thinkers and sci-

tists of modern times, Erwin Schrödinger. Renowned for his groundbreaking contributions to quantum mechanics, Schrödinger found solace in the Vedantic teachings of ancient Indian sages. He was particularly struck by the concept of the INSEPARABLE relationship among invisible particles, human beings, the universe, and Divine power. Unfortunately, some prolific writers persistently harp on the notion that Indian literature lacks scientific temper.

In his acclaimed book, "My View of the World," the father of quantum mechanics, E. Schrödinger, expounds the ideas enshrined in Vedanta by asserting: "This life of yours in which you are living is not merely a piece of the entire existence, but is in a certain sense the whole; only this whole is not so constituted that it can be surveyed in one single glance. This, as we know, is what the sages (of India) express in that sacred, mystic formula, which is yet really so simple and so clear: 'Tat tvam asi' — THAT IS YOU. That denotes 'universal consciousness.'" Schrödinger further writes, "Or, again, in such words as 'I am in the EAST and in the WEST, I am below and above, I am this whole world.' Thus, you can 'throw yourself flat on the ground', stretched out upon Mother Earth, with the certain conviction that you are 'one with HER and SHE with you.' Though very difficult to understand, this is how."

In essence, when one achieves purification through unwavering meditation or selfless action without attachment and aversion, being free from materialistic trappings and transcending the dimension of "mine and yours," one begins to perceive all elements of nature — streams, flowers, trees, hills, mountains, seas, stars, etc. — nothing but his or her extension floating in "one" super consciousness.

In amazement at the universality of the ancient wisdom of Upanishads, Schrödinger further, with conviction, writes in another book, "What is Life?" — "Vedanta teaches that consciousness is singular, all happenings are played out in one universal consciousness, and there is no multiplicity of selves." That means there is no question of 'who is who' and 'who comes from where'. This human life in this "impermanent" abode

is just like a bubble in water that may burst at any moment. All beings are here for their self-purification or to burn out their past accumulated karma. Yes, when one's mundane identity and boundaries cease, the enlightenment gradually overwhelms one. All material opulence and luxury seem puny and trivial thereafter. Knowingly or unknowingly, every human being is striving "for that goal" ever since he/she comes out of the mother's womb.

In my understanding, in the modern context, what Schrödinger encapsulated about Vedantic thoughts in some paragraphs, particularly concerning LIFE and the relationship between invisible particles of an object, space, and the universe, as well as the laws of karma, is far more compelling and intriguing than thoughts expressed by revered Aurobindo, Vivekananda, and Dayanand Saraswati. This is because most of us do not hold the thoughts of Indian spiritual masters in high esteem, nor do we have time for meditation or self-enquiry practices; instead, we place our blind trust solely in the assertions of Western scientists. Furthermore, the "Unified Theory of Upanishads" has emboldened 20th-century scientists, who encountered similar concepts in their quest to advance science. One of the greatest physicists and the Nobel Laureate Werner Heisenberg acknowledged this influence, stating: "After conversations about Indian philosophy, some of the ideas of Quantum Physics that had seemed so crazy suddenly made much more sense. This was a great help for me." The interrelationship, interconnection, and interdependence of all things (animate and inanimate), as enshrined in the Upanishads, opened up a new perspective for modern scientists, including the Nobel laureates Niels Bohr and Brian David Josephson.

Nothing is a bigger paradox than that the scholars who initially struggled to distort Indian history with their speculative theories later in life came to appreciate and praise the knowledge of India. Max Müller, the main architect of the controversial Aryan Invasion/Migration Theory, was one of the first among them. Later in life, Müller eventually opened himself up to lauding India's contributions to the world. In

his book "India: What Can It Teach Us?" he proclaimed: "If I were asked under what sky the human mind has most fully developed some of its choicest gifts, has most deeply pondered over the greatest problems of life, and has found solutions of some of them which well deserve the attention even of those who have studied Plato and Kant, I should point to India. And if I were to ask myself from what literature we who have been nurtured almost exclusively on the thoughts of Greeks and Romans, and of the Semitic race, the Jewish, may draw the corrective which is most wanted in order to make our inner life more perfect, more comprehensive, more universal, in fact more truly human a life... again I should point to India."

When the scholars, initially entrusted with the devious assignments by the British administration, began to express contrary views and praise India, key colonial administrative figures such as Thomas Macaulay, John Strachey, and Sir Charles Trevelyan fumed with indignation. It was as if the carefully constructed narrative was falling apart under the weight of "inconvenient" truths.

What's more, H.H. Wilson, Müller's predecessor at the Oxford chair of Sanskrit and a stalwart of British administrative loyalty, found himself in an utterly embarrassing position. His discomfort was obvious as he tried to salvage his reputation, ultimately, in anger, calling Müller a traitor!

Alas, under the brute force of colonial oppression, the logical murmurs of dissent of Indian patriots about Indian history were ruthlessly silenced. Wroth became right, right became wrong. From frying pan to the fire, the British baton of legacy was swiftly taken over by a new breed of intellectuals driven with specific ideology.

Finally, I sincerely wish we had brushed aside what Max Müller propounded while under the employment of British colonial masters and embraced the profound truths he fervently asserted about India once he was liberated from his employer's obligations. Had we done so, we all might certainly have been freed from the burden of prejudices against our own country and be inspired to "seek within, the eternal way" as underscored by Hammarsing.

Family Health Survey. It found that the religious composition of India's population since Partition has remained largely stable, with both Hindus and Muslims showing not only a marked decline but also a convergence in fertility rates.

It appears from the study that the difference in fertility rate lies in region and not in religion. Bihar and Uttar Pradesh showed a total fertility rate (TFR) of 3.4 and 2.7, respectively, in contrast to a TFR of 1.7 and 1.6 in Tamil Nadu and Kerala, respectively. Whereas the fertility rate of Hindus has come down to 2.1, and that of Muslims has declined to 2.6.

Many people cannot move an inch from their bubble of beliefs, though the fact gives a totally different picture.

Yours etc.,  
Sujit De,  
Kolkata

#### Divided by denominations

Editor  
Marriage in Christianity is a sacred ceremony, where two souls exchange their vows in the presence of a priest or pastor who solemnizes the marriage and supplicates the divine benediction of our lord and saviour, Jesus Christ to accord sanctity to the marriage.

But as usual the denomination factors comes into the picture that hinders the union of two people in love. It has

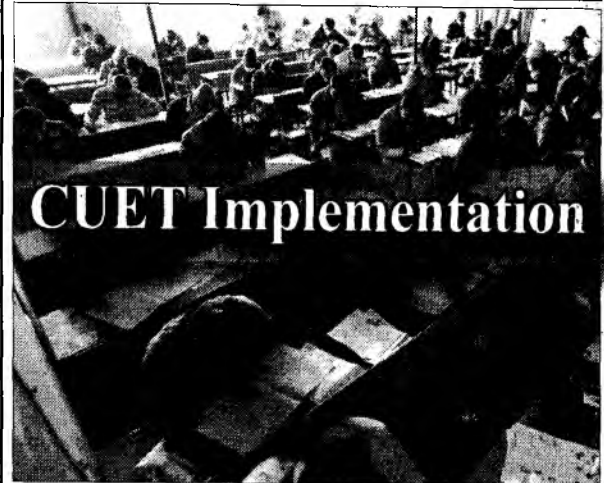
been a convention among Christian converts to be a part of this denomination since though we are of the same ethnic lineage vis a vis the Hynniewtrep identity. Denomination seems to precede the ethnic ancestry among us. This has often led to the frowning of engagement and marriage ceremonies with implausible conditions such as that either one of the couples is from a different denomination and has to convert to a prepotent denomination that one of the couple is a disciple to. Only a few reasonable families would agree to conduct interdenomination matrimony. This has led to denomination-based segregation in the otherwise egalitarian tribal culture. This has besmirched the cultural tenets of our primogenitor pertaining to matrimony. Let us ponder upon this and awaken the defunct conventions of our egalitarian tribal practice and let not denomination precede our cultural conventions that have stood the test of time and thwart the forces of denominations and sectarianism to divide the close knit clan (kur) system of our unique race.

Your etc.,  
Lionel Pyngrope,  
Via email

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

# Meghalaya Education Walking a Tightrope!

By Isaid Khongjee



The last few days have seen the nightmarish experiences on the part of the student fraternity appearing for the CUET exams. That's only the administrative dimension of the story which can be ironed out by the act of sheer will; but it did happen. A while after having written this, I read a headline in this paper saying - "UDR raps CUET Implementation." I read on to find out if there's something to be added to the writing. But, there's nothing new; only the same old-fashioned jargonistic slogans; flowing with the stream. No constructive inputs from one of the prominent political parties of the state were mentioned. Here lies the crux of one of our educational woes. Now we come to the policy matter concerning the subject. Look at the school children, and the parents — any educationist would have witnessed the high hopes, celebrations at the fruit as the matriculation results are out. But do they see the snare lying on the other side? No; but it's not their fault. Passing such a primary barrier is everything. Even the school admins will be buoyed by the same event. Good results, mean good money; and the rat race goes on and on. Praying we won't be flabbergasted by the challenges of CUET which has entered our kitchens? Now, as a State we have a plethora of teaching-learning challenges staring us in the face. Does the Government give a damn about addressing these?

The States have moved ahead — some adopted CUET and perhaps they would have created a mechanism to raise education to the global level. Others rejected — perhaps these too have had the same vision, while at the same time preserving their culture. I've seen the nerves of students from a school outside our State; they were armed with the grit, criticality of thought, and more. Those people, at Class 11 Science stream touched every topic, can debate on any issue — cultural and literary issues as well. Surely our parents also would have been proud to see such qualities in our wards. But does our education system have a mechanism for our students just to have a peek into one of those essentials? Till now, no! Only pep talks. Sad to say that here, mere fluency in English language is a criterion of education, and that also is endemic to the city only. Not a single reform was taken in other critical areas. The only direct impact we at school experience, is a directory from the Department in that the students must take to the streets shouting slogans against smoking. Others, are for the teachers to do the nitty-gritty which anyone can do. We have the online classroom conducting Nishtha, Dishtha. An inquiry I found that any with some amount of English could do it. Why not employ those well-meaning people from there into something meaningful and constructive for our children. It makes one feel like laughing at such frivolities. Another impact, hopefully, is an attempt to reform. It appears in the appointment of an adviser in Mr H.M Shangpliang. We wonder as to whether he's cut out for the job; but the perks did rain on his table; after all none works pro-bono.

This is the fate of our present and future generations. Whatever directive coming from HRD, is gobbled up with the hunger of a person dying for food. But when it comes to the implementation, we stumble at every step of the way. These are my views as one teaching at the Upper Primary Section. The CUET didn't sneak in; it came with an honour. Now the question that arises is that even an open book exam, as one step forward, is unknown. In the end, Meghalaya will see only a resurrection of all types of bodies, but without the soul. The ground reality will be in pathetic state. What makes us so shallow as to cheer about having completed the half century as a State? Where are these state of things going to take us? If we adopt the NEP, CUET, we swallow them whole like pythons, sans discrimination of the god and bad effects. So far there has been no essential policy to change the paradigm of teaching-learning. Even if we say, we'll go on our own we'll still repeat the same old stuff; innovations is not our forte. Our whole educational scenario is carved out with the axe of a butcher, not with the forceps of a surgeon.

Respected ones in the high offices, the incomes, the perks, are all there for them. Life is secured; unlike the teachers. You are no beggars, or tramps who have to roll high and low for the bread. Put your heads together. We are not here to belittle our own wisdom, and position. We owe a duty far greater than ourselves. The history written on foundation stones are too facile and fleeting. After these are done, let the school teachers, admins decide their own fate.

Some other essentials — our children are taking more interest in mobile phones. The high drop-out rate, drug menace. Why these? The answer, to a large extent, if not all of these symptoms, lie in the fabric of the teaching-learning, syllabus, the rat race and more, which in fact, can be done away with one fundamental policy that allows freedom of thinking, creativity, nurtures motivation, critical on-the-spot assessment, active participation. These few would have helped our young to not just learn but also be transformed by the learning. Perhaps our environmental woes would have been ameliorated. We imparted life values which are reinforced by many institutions, but, all have failed — the reason is that the root cause lies elsewhere; this is no rocket science.

I recall the trainings sponsored by Asian Development Bank. Those were not only the experts, but the embodiment of great teaching practices the world over. Honestly, I can't follow all their footsteps; but this writing emanates from such models. How many of us use those bullets shelled out from that arsenal! One reason why they slipped out of us, is because we do not have a sound mechanism mentioned above. The result? A waste of resources. Let's do something, for the Jaithynriew hinges on this too. Sloganeering has failed us!

(Babu Isaid Khongjee is Assistant Teacher at St John Bosco Boys Hr Secondary School, Sohra.)

# Synced brains: Why being constantly tuned in to your child's every need isn't always ideal

It's crucial for healthy child development that children can form secure attachment bonds with their parents. Decades of research identified one key ingredient for this process: the coordination of parents' and children's brains and behaviour during social interactions.

Humans connect with each other by synchronising in many ways. Called bio-behavioural synchrony, this involves imitation of gestures and the alignment of heartbeats and hormone secretion (like cortisol and oxytocin). Even brains can synchronise - with brain activity decreasing and increasing in the same areas at roughly the same time when we spend time with others.

My colleagues and I carried out research which showed that brain-to-brain synchrony between parent and child can be helpful for children's attachment, and tends to rise when a parent and child play, talk or solve problems together. Recently, however, we started wondering whether more synchrony is always better. Our recent study, published in *Developmental Science*, suggests it can sometimes be a sign of relationship difficulties.

Is current parenting advice up to date?

A lot of current parenting advice recommends parents to be constantly "in sync" with their kids. It tells parents to be physically close and attuned to their children and to anticipate and immediately respond to their every need. The advice is building upon attachment theory and research, which show that higher parental sensitivity and reflective functioning are beneficial for child development and secure attachment formation.

Yet, despite its good intentions, this advice misses several important details. For example, research revealed that for about 50-70% of the time, parents and children are not "in sync". During these times, they may be doing separate activities, such as a child exploring something on their own or a parent working. They rather engage in

a constant "social dance" comprising being attuned to each other, failing to do so and repairing this disconnect.

And it's this flow of connection, disconnection and reconnection that offers children an ideal mixture of parental support and moderate stress



that helps growing children's social brains.

Researchers also agree that there can be negative consequences to parents and children constantly being tuned in to each other. For example, it can increase stress on the relationship and raise the risk for insecure child attachment. That is especially true if it is associated with parents overstimulating their child or being too responsive to their child's every need.

For parent-child synchrony, there thus appears to be an "optimal mid-range". Or, in other words, more synchrony may not necessarily be better.

Brain-to-brain synchrony and attachment

Within a large international team of investigators from across Europe, my colleagues Trinh Nguyen, Melanie Kungl, Stefanie Hoehl, Lars White and I set out to investigate how exactly parent-child bio-behavioural synchrony is linked to attachment

We invited parent-child pairs - 140 parents and their 5-to-6-year-old kids - to our SoNeAt Lab where they solved tangram puzzles together.

We measured brain activity with functional near-infrared spectroscopy (fNIRS) "hyperscanning", for which parents and children were asked to

wear caps linked up with optical sensors. We also recorded videos of their interactions so we could assess how much behavioural synchrony they demonstrated - how attuned and attentive they were to each other. And finally, we assessed parents' and children's type of attachment - known as attachment representations.

We previously discovered increased neural synchrony in mother-child and father-child pairs during different tasks. In mother-child pairs, neural synchrony was linked to taking turns in solving puzzles or conversations. And in father-child pairs, synchrony during puzzling was linked to dads being confident about and enjoying their role as fathers. But does that mean higher parent-child neural synchrony is always a measure of a good relationship? In our new study, we actually observed that mothers who had an insecure, anxious or avoidant attachment type showed more neural synchrony with their children. Interestingly, mothers' attachment types

were unrelated to how synced mothers and children were in terms of their behaviour. We also found increased neural but decreased behavioural synchrony in father-child pairs (compared to mother-child pairs) independent of attachment.

Our findings suggest that higher neural synchrony may be the result of putting increased cognitive effort into the parent-child interaction. If mothers' attachment representations are insecure, it may be more difficult for mums and kids to coordinate and help each other during activities such as puzzle solving.

A similar explanation may apply to neural synchrony during father-child problem-solving. Dads are more familiar with active, rough-and-tumble play. Engaging in structured and cognitively demanding activities such as puzzles may therefore be more challenging and require more neural



syncrony for father-child pairs. Lessons to be learned

What do our new findings mean? Most importantly, parents should not feel that they must be "in sync" with their kids all the time and at all costs. High parent-child attunement can also reflect interaction difficulties and can often add up to parental burnout, further negatively impacting the parent-child relationship.

It is of course helpful if parents are emotionally available, skilled in reading their children's cues and promptly and sensitively respond to their needs. Especially when children are young. However, it suffices for parents to be "good enough" - to be available when children need them rather than "always on". Children can also benefit from freedom and independence emotionally, socially and cognitively, especially as they get older.

What really counts is that the parent-child relationship functions well overall. That children can develop trust in their parents and that any mismatches, which naturally occur all the time, are successfully repaired. That's the true essence of attachment theory, which is often missed and misrepresented in parenting advice.

To better navigate the challenging parenting path, parents need access to trustworthy and up to date sources of information.

Together with the UK Charity Babygro, we therefore published the free-of-charge Babygro Book for Parents that provides them with evidence-based knowledge on parenting and child development.

It is our hope that our book can empower parents so that they feel reassured and confident in their own parenting choices and can optimally support their children to grow and thrive. (The Conversation)

## 'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, May 26, 2024

### 'Birthday Forecast'

Moon semi-square Sun on your solar return chart could lead to constant emotional disturbance now and then during the time periods ahead. There are chances that you will not get well along with people in your job/profession. They will take offence at what you say. There may be constant back biting against you. Your colleagues and superiors will also be not in good terms with you. Atmosphere in the family will also turn hostile. Peace and harmony will not exist amongst family members. There may be constant exchange of hot words. This will leave you emotionally disturbed and shaken a bit. You will tend to withdraw from people and turn introvert. But things will get better gradually. Your financial position will turn for the better slowly. You will take to meditation, yoga, light exercises and also turn spiritual and religious in nature.

### This week for you'

**Aries: (March 21 - April 20)** The planetary configuration brings love, harmony and entertainment in family and personal relations. A romantic short trip may be undertaken for pleasure. People look upon you with more respect, tolerance, and acceptance. You don't feel the need to prove yourself, and that feels good. You have the chance to shine, largely because you are projecting yourself with self-respect as well as modesty. Opportunities both personal and professional are likely to present themselves as a result. You may enjoy the challenge of tackling a variety of subjects. This is a very self-expressive time when you have lots of energy, but not necessarily self-discipline to match.

**Taurus: (April 21 - May 21)** Activities related to communications such as journalism, literature, public speaking, debates are highlighted and would figure more prominently. You feel touchy and sensitive; the attitude should be more accommodating and compassionate in relationships and you should not to take things personally. Friendships, cooperation and synergy are available to you. You would work creatively in your field of activity. This brings success and good fortune at work and opens new horizons for expansion. You inculcate good team spirit and you are more tactful with your co-workers which bring harmony at your work place.

**Gemini: (May 22 - June 21)** You would have positive results from marketing, communications and public relations. This is a favorable time to go for higher learning and joining new courses such as beauty culture, computers, fine arts and in fields related to show business. Be sure you consider all the factors prior to putting forth your ideas. Do not go on instinct alone; take the opinion of someone close to you. You may modernize your work place and home and give it a new look. You may change your hairstyle, buy new clothes and spend on luxury items. Also spend some time alone to recharge and revitalize yourself.

**Cancer: (June 22 - July 22)** After dealing with tough people and complicated issues you feel much stronger and clearer about your priorities. It might be hard for you to work with others in a harmonious manner, and disputes with co-workers are possible. You may feel a bit defeated by situations at home and work. Allow space and time for things to change on their own. Awkward pauses and false starts do happen; the issue is how you handle them. Use information from the data at hand and your charisma to get back on track. Take care of your health and adopt a routine of regular walk and exercise.

**Leo: (July 23 - August 23)** You are more inclined to take pride in your intellectual accomplishments. Find activities and things to do so that you can channel excess energy constructively. You have mental clarity and a logical approach to resolve matters. Communications and business associates from overseas bring good news. Your heart and head pull you in different direction when domestic and family related decisions are to be taken. Personal relationships may be dreamy and transitory and commitments are to be made and promises are to be honored. A marriage proposal is worth considering.

**Virgo: (August 24 - September 22)** As your confidence gets a boost, you attempt difficult tasks, resolve complicated issues and handle a multitude of activity. Be careful when expressing feelings and emotions as others can misunderstand you. You handle

business seminars and express yourself more specifically about the subject. Business expansion and new professional opportunities are worth considering. You might spend time in short frequent trips, communicating with people and visiting friends and relatives. You tend to entertain others with your sense of humor. You interact with people in position of power and authority with grace and diplomacy. Health and energy need to be conserved through a busy time at home and work.

**Libra: (September 23 - October 23)** This period brings good-luck for love and romance. Your thoughts turn to children, pleasure and romance. You focus on having fun, enjoying sports and expressing yourself. As you recall nostalgic trips, you also maintain a balance of the head and heart in professional and personal matters. You turn things around in business dealings in your favor. You are noble and generous in family situations but have a tendency to worry about those close to you. Monetary transaction brings gains in property related issues. An overseas or long distance journey with includes pilgrimage is on the cards.

**Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22)** Mixed results are foretold this week. You achieve success as you are brilliant and there is good fortune attending professional, personal and material aspects. You interact with people in position of power and authority with tact and grace. You will be able to make good use of your talents, work experience for your work and projects in hand. You have more opportunities to improve relations with relatives and friends in your immediate environment. You can trust your intuition about people and situations when called upon to mediate in conflicts and collaborations. A new work opportunity can change the way you work and relate with people professionally.

**Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21)** New associations and beginnings in work areas will come up as new opportunities and changes may arise. You would improve your romantic and love life by bringing more sincerity, cooperation and humanity as unusual attractions and dreams could feature at this time. Domestic members would be more supportive as this is the best time to bring more harmony and pleasant interactions to your relationships and feel more comfortable. You tend to entertain others with your conversation. Some nagging issues and details will demand your attention.

**Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20)** This phase brings more stability in relations and professional life. You enjoy being in control but many times it is not possible. When you let go you discover that many aspects can be viewed more objectively. This objectivity lends a new edge and adds to your passion at work. This also opens new vistas in romantic relationships and helps you communicate better. Your subconscious and intuitive abilities help you forge professional associations with the larger picture in mind. Having fun that too when relaxed adds an extra element in your life.

**Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18)** The ability to build on financial and monetary pursuits and good returns from overseas business are on cards. As you rid yourself of your inner critic you find that concepts flow and you are able to give shape to them. You or someone close to you may finalize a marriage proposal. Sharing your interests and communications with loved ones may be especially appealing to you. You might spend a lot of time in meeting friends and beloved ones. You could be stressed while meeting people's expectations and approval. Health food, yoga and meditation are recommended as it would help to overcome health problems.

**Pisces: (February 19 - March 20)** This is a phase that brings wisdom, knowledge and creativity in your efforts. Your methods prove to be effective but you need to be circumspect as far as your interaction with colleagues is concerned. People are in awe of you for your intelligent mind. Your social life is enviable as are your interactions. You resolve an important domestic issue that has been causing a rift in relations for some time. Centering within and witnessing inner truth and reflection is the best meditation. You are strong and masterful while turning things around in a positive direction at work.

# Germaine Acogny — the mother of African dance

By Liane Loots

Africa's most celebrated dancer and choreographer, Germaine Acogny, turns 80 on 28 May. I have had the privilege of meeting the Senegalese artist, learning from her, and interviewing her as part of my ongoing research into African contemporary dance.

This is a hymn to an African woman who has inspired not only African dancers but a global community of artists to think differently about who they are, their bodies, their skin, and indeed the way they move.

In a continent plagued by legacies of colonisation, racism and patriarchy, Acogny has risen up as a female artist who has defied stereotypes around her Blackness, her femaleness and her long tall body, to become one of the world's most revered dance makers.

### Who is Germaine Acogny?

Born in 1944 in Porto Novo in Benin, Acogny moved with her family and settled in Senegal as a young girl. She is often referred to as Africa's mother of contemporary dance, because of her long performing, teaching and choreographic career. She has built the legacy of a dance company, Jant-Bi, and her now globally recognised school and dance centre in Touba Dialaw, Senegal, called École des Sables (Place in the Sand).

As a young girl in Dakar, Acogny attended Catholic school. Feeling alienated from the language, the religion and the colonial rituals, she took refuge in sport. This eventually led to her attending the Simon Siegel School for dance and sport in Paris in 1962. She set out to become a physical training teacher.

Encountering western dance for the first time, and being the only Black (and African) student in her class, she was made to feel that she was not "right" and her shape was "wrong". Instead of being defeated, Acogny began to invent movements that corresponded to her own body. She told me: I have taken my flat feet, my big behind and African woman's hips, my tall west African body, and made this the centre.

A meeting with African American dancer Katherine Dunham, who was trying to establish a dance school in Senegal, was the final impetus for Acogny in her journey to find a dance language that spoke to her. The



Germaine Acogny technique is now celebrated as one of the first codified systems for training African urban or contemporary dancers.

Acogny has received numerous awards, among them a Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale and a Bessie Award in New York. She has been bestowed with multiple honours from the governments of both Senegal and France. And she continues to tour the world with her work. While much of the running of her school now rests on her son Patrick Acogny, she also continues to teach and share her dance wisdom globally.

### Contribution to contemporary dance

Understanding what Acogny has done for both dance training and performance leads to a reflection on the nature of contemporary dance. Difficult to define, contemporary dance is an open form with the intention to create new dance languages that engage the "contemporary" (the current moment). In Africa this is a rich interplay between traditional dance forms, European and American modern dance histories and methodologies, and the ongoing search for authentic contemporary African voices that speak to ideas of culture, politics, self and identity.

South African dance writer Adrienne Sichel notes that this definition could further include contemporary dance's "invention and reinvention of artistic and cultural forms and functions and its ability to disrupt, displace, connect and survive".

Acogny was one of the first African dance makers to openly disrupt the European norm of a white, rail thin, weightless female dancing body. She actively sought ways to express her own Blackness and her own west African dance rhythms, and indeed her own gendered journey to finding a voice for herself. Her work often reflects on her own history and her embodied understanding that women's

bodies are often the greatest spoils of war, genocide and patriarchy.

### Two great works

With her belief that we carry our histories in our bodies, two of Acogny's dance works in particular stand out. The first is a collaboration with Japanese dance maker Kota Yamakazi in 2004, with a work called Fagaala (Genocide). It journeys into the horrifying memory of the Rwandan genocide of 1994. This is a dance storytelling that offers a connection between the contemporary Japanese art form of Butoh (often called "the dance of death") and Acogny's own unique west African contemporary dance style.

In Fagaala, Acogny worked only with the male Senegalese dancers in her company and asked them to explore what it meant to be female and live through the Rwandan massacres. So, while the dancers were male, the work explored female stories. Male dancers had to physically and emotionally understand — and perform — the consequence of rape and torture, two tactics of the genocide. This means confronting the horror of men and war. The second work is the deeply personal solo that Acogny created and performed in 2015 at the age of 71. Called Somewhere at the Beginning, this is Acogny's journey back into her own maternal and paternal histories that criss-cross her dual west African heritages of Benin and Senegal. She unearths the devastating visceral effects of colonial Christianity, while at the same time connecting with the suppressed power of her grandmother's Yoruba spirituality.

The work is a palimpsest of dance, video, text, and the layering of Black African female histories as she confronts loss and memory. Somewhere at the Beginning is significant not least for its unique feminist decolonial storytelling; it offers the audience the glorious, unprecedented body of an older African matriarch dancing truth to power.

As Acogny turns 80, this is an anthem of praise to the living legacy of a female dance maker who has helped shape Africa's significant contribution to dance by rethinking bodies, histories and identity itself. (The Conversation)

The author is a Lecturer at University of KwaZulu-Natal

*"The earth is the mother of all people, and all people should have equal rights upon it."*

—Chief Joseph

## The Shillong Times

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### The Countdown Begins

INDIA's jumbo-scale voting exercise has completed six phases and is moving to the June 1 final phase. The polls are mostly over and rival political formations are equally hopeful of forming the next government. The shyness of the INDIA alliance, evident in the initial phases of the polling, has by now given way to a sense of confidence. Congress leader Jairam Ramesh claimed that, based on the present voting trends, the alliance could win up to 350 seats. The BJP has already spread word it 'secured' a majority by the end of the fourth phase of the polling. The first real hint of what's in store would be available on the evening of June 1, when exit-poll results are out. In the recent past, exit poll predictions overall were more dependable.

BJP circles are palpably wary over the lack of a public enthusiasm in the present Lok Sabha polls. Clearly, unlike in 2019, there was no perceptible Modi wave even in the Hindi belt — the mainstay of the BJP. Fact is BJP survived so far on the Modi aura, not by its organisational heft. Its leaders, mouthing Hindutva and little else, basked in the glory of the party's rule from the Centre and decided they need not work as long as Modi brought the votes in. Chances are that this election would drill some sense into their heads. If the BJP and its allies manage to get just enough seats to form the next government, that would still send out a sharp message. The prime minister had set a target of 400 plus seats for the NDA. If it ends up with less than what it got in 2019, the search for a new captain to replace Modi would begin then and there. Not so for the Congress party. Win or lose, it would have the Nehru-family at its apex. This is the material difference between the BJP and the Congress.

Given the dull mass responses to the PM at his election rallies, it was natural for Modi to seek to whip up the public mood by going overboard. For instance, he recently made public his growing feeling that he was sent by God to set things right here. He's understandably being delusional. Note the fact that Modi had been largely 'reserved' all through his governance terms and spoke overall in dignified tones. This time, we are exposed to a different Modi. He's seeing trouble ahead and might pay a price for his perceptible governance lethargy. A golden rule for all in public life is, you cannot take the people for granted.

# The Dilemma Called Saipung

By HH Mohrmen

Nestled close to the Saipung reserved forest is the area where the Biate people live, and the place is also called Saipung. To some of our readers, perhaps this is the first time they have ever heard the name Saipung. It is the remotest and most neglected area in the state and one has to travel from Sutnga to reach the place. It is about 50 km from Khliehriat and about 136 km from Shillong, the state headquarters.

### The people and the place

The people who live in this area are Biate of Kuki-Zo descents, and the Pnar call them "Hadem." The Biate have been living in the area for a long time, as the Pnar have folk stories that mention the Hadem. Among them, the Nampui, Darnei, Thiate, Lalsim, and the Ngamlai are the original clans who settled in the Saipung area. They are collectively known as "namnga kea dewan," the five clans. The traditional office which looks after the administration of the area is called a sardarship, and by tradition, the five clans share the office on rotation basis. (Mohrmen HH, Cultural History of Jaintia in Stories, Stones and Traditions 2021)

### Road connectivity

The only road that connects the area with the rest of the state is in very bad shape, as it took us almost 3 hours to drive from Ladrymbai to Saipung, a distance of about 30 kilometers. In summer, only vehicles with four-wheel drive can navigate the region. Surprisingly, the internal road that connects some of the villages is blacktopped, but road connections to other villages are still absent. It is also very unfortunate that all the basic public necessities are much to be desired in this region. Zo Siam Thianglai, Sirdar of the Saipung area, said that they hope the road will be repaired as Santa Mary Shylla, the MLA of the area, had informed them that she had availed funds of 50 crore for the repair work. But when asked where the funds are coming from, he had no answer.

### Government health services in the area

The only PHC in the area is located at Saipung village and it is run by Karuna Trust under the Private-Public Partnership (PPP) mode. There is only one allopathic doctor stationed at the PHC he is retired Colonel Dr. Dilip

Kumar of the Indian Medical Corps from Hyderabad, who is working as a physician at the PHC. He is a pediatrician and apart from serving in the army, he has also served as a member of peacekeeping forces in many parts of the world. "But it is very difficult to get allopathic doctors to serve in a far-flung area like this," he said. "We have doctors who came here for a few months only and left the center because of a lack of basic amenities," Dr. Kumar said. "The center is manned with the help of Ayush practitioners because even MBBS graduates from your own community are not ready to serve in a difficult area like Saipung," the good doctor said. "We had doctors from the Jowai area that came and left the job after serving for two or three months only," he said. The doctor lives alone in his quarters and makes his own food. He spends his time singing and doing some research of his own. The doctor also said that the Ayush doctors have done a commendable job; without them, they would not have been able to implement many

them with their basic needs," Dr. Kumar said.

### Supply of electricity

Lal Niam Nampui, the Waheh Chnong (village head) of Saipung, reported that electricity supply is erratic, forcing residents to rely on solar power. "In the summer when it rains, there are times that they do not have electricity for days together," the Waheh Chnong said. Dr. Dilip Kumar confirmed that they use solar power to keep vaccines refrigerated. The people in the area cannot rely on the electricity that MeECL supplies them.

### Other public services

There is no government water supply and also no sign that the Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM) is being implemented in the villages that I visited, or even in Saipung. Even JJM projects implemented in some villages, are yet to become operational, so one wonders if they will ever become operational at all. Unfortunately, there is no proper water supply even to the PHC.

### C&RD Block in the area

The Saipung Community and Rural Development

*"The people who live in this area are Biate of Kuki-Zo descents, and the Pnar call them 'Hadem.' The Biate have been living in the area for a long time, as the Pnar have folk stories that mention the Hadem. Among them, the Nampui, Darnei, Thiate, Lalsim, and the Ngamlai are the original clans who settled in the Saipung area."*

National Health Mission programmes.

### Water supply

There is no water supply as such, and people have to make their own private arrangements for water supply in the entire region which is also unsafe for human consumption. Dr. Kumar said that maybe because of the kind of water they use, the PHC had two cases of patients suffering from typhoid last year. However, he also stated that in spite of the area being very near to the forest and the border with Assam, they fortunately don't have reports of malaria cases from the area.

### Education or the lack of it

There is one government secondary school at Saipung and another two RMSA schools, one at Saipung and another at Saphak. There is no higher secondary school in the area, so students have to go to Khliehriat or Jowai to continue their education after they have completed their tenth class. "People here are peaceful and they do not protest even if the government has not been able to provide

(C&RD) Block is supposed to be a hub of administrative activity, serving the people of Saipung. However, the block which is supposed to bring the government closer to the people, is non-existent. The block was inaugurated at Saipung on April 4, 2001, by late E.K. Mawlong, the then Chief Minister, in the presence of H.B. Dan and O.N. Chyrmang, both government ministers at the time. Although the block is officially located in Saipung, sadly nothing exists in Saipung except the buildings of different departments, which are in decrepit condition.

The abandoned buildings of various departments in Saipung are a testament to the substandard work of the contractor and ultimately wastage of precious government resources. The two main buildings, intended to house the Block Development Officer (BDO) office, are in ruins, with large cracks suggesting they could collapse at any moment.

The approach road to the BDO office becomes impassable during summer, and

in many sections, the road has disappeared altogether. Ironically, the block will celebrate its silver jubilee next year, but it still does not function from its designated location, depriving the people of Saipung of their right to access government services. Now, the entire office operates from Latyrke, a village near Sutnga. That the block operates from Latyrke, which is very close to Khliehriat, the district headquarters, defeats the purpose for which it was created in the first place.

### Conflict with forest department

Immediately after I had posted a story about my visit to Saipung, a friend who is an officer in the forest department texted me to inform that there were many pending cases of encroachment into the reserved forest by the members of the Biate community. The Saipung Reserved Forest is located in the area, and people's main livelihood activity is jhum/slash-and-burn cultivation. Lack of development in the villages could also be because of the allegations of encroachment into the reserved forests. Perhaps the reason that fifteen villages in the area are yet to have electricity connection is also because of this conflict.

The State Forest Department is holding only 1145.19 sq km or 5.10% of forest cover in the state, and if we are even losing this forest, then what is the point of planting trees elsewhere if we do not protect the forest we already have? The government is exploring the option of access to the carbon market and to plant more trees to benefit from it, but if we are losing forest cover day by day, then it becomes a futile exercise. The alternative is to help the community by exploring other livelihood opportunities like accessing non-timber forest products (NTFP), so that their dependence on forest is reduced.

### Sustainable development

People already have the solution, and one such option is harvesting wild mushrooms locally known as Tit Tung (Lactarius volemus), which grows on Dieh Snih (Castanopsis armata), particularly Dieng Soh-ot Rit (C. indica). This indigenous knowledge is part of their traditional practices, where this particular tree species is used to harvest the mushroom. The government recently introduced the cultivation of Japanese Shiitake mushrooms in the state, while this indigenous knowledge is ignored. The government, particularly the forest department, should explore sustainable livelihood activities like adventure tourism, where humans and forests can coexist.

Finally, a taste of American-style direct debate between Modi and Rahul Gandhi

## PM takes a leaf out of Arab rulers' book for invoking divinity to his politics

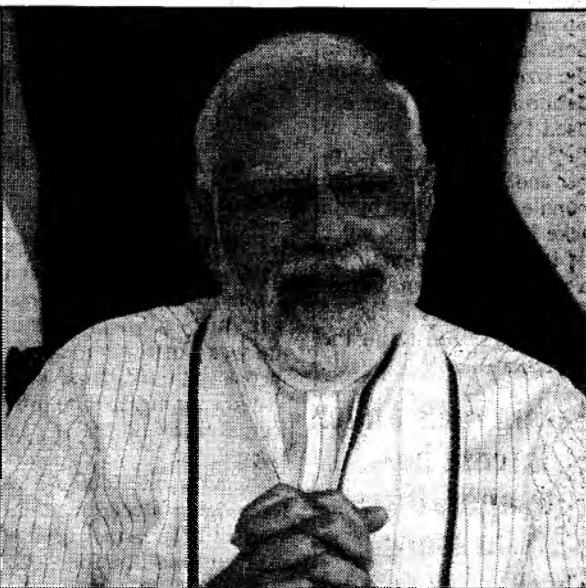
By K Raveendran

In asserting his 'indestructibility', Narendra Modi has taken a leaf out of the books of Arab rulers, who assiduously promote the idea that rulers are God's representatives on Earth. This belief has been historically used by Arab monarchs to legitimize their rule and suppress dissent.

In what is seen as a most unexpected twist in his election campaign, Modi the other day introduced a certain divinity in his quest for a third term. "Until my mother was alive, I used to think I was born biologically. After her demise, when I look at my experiences, I am convinced that I was sent by God. This strength is not from my body. It has been given to me by God. That's why God also gave me the ability, strength, pure-heartedness, and inspiration to do this. I'm nothing but an instrument that God

mine. But his lap dogs are praising the PM and saying he was sent by God. He asked people to clap during the pandemic. When people were taking their last breath outside hospitals, not inside, the Prime Minister — no, not the Prime Minister, but he who was sent by God — was asking people to turn on their mobile phone flashlights," Rahul retorted at a campaign rally.

Rahul Gandhi's sarcasm cut through the sanctimonious aura surrounding Modi's pronouncement. He highlighted the absurdity of a leader invoking divine intervention while citizens grappled with real-world challenges. The juxtaposition of bodies piling up on the banks of the Ganges and Modi's call for flashlight solidarity during the pandemic was stark. At that moment, Rahul painted Modi as the



has sent," he said in an interview to NDTV.

The prime minister, who has religiously avoided talking to the media for much of his two terms, has suddenly turned media-friendly, granting interviews to even the most innocuous television channels and other media outlets. He has been widely criticised for mixing his spiritual orientations with statecraft or political conduct, raising eyebrows about his commitment to the secularist values enshrined in the constitution.

In the series of media interactions, Modi has claimed that he had been sent by God to fulfill certain duties,

'messenger of God' more concerned with symbolism than substance.

Fellow citizens got a taste of what would have been an American-style direct debate between Modi and Rahul, which, despite the best efforts of a few retired judges of the Supreme Court and High Courts along with journalist N Ram, did not materialise.

The initiative invited the two leaders to a public debate to 'meaningfully' respond to each other on the various charges thrown from campaign podiums. It noted that both sides had also questioned each other on their respective manifestos

*"The audacity of such a claim reverberated across the nation. Was this a genuine revelation or a calculated political manoeuvre? Critics questioned whether Modi's newfound divine connection was a ploy to bolster his image or an earnest belief. But it was Rahul Gandhi, who seized the moment to deliver a scathing response."*

an argument that resonates with the concept familiar in the Arab world. The belief that rulers are God's representatives has been historically used by Arab monarchs to legitimize their rule and suppress dissent. While the Islamic doctrine emphasizes the oneness and transcendence of God and traditionally forbids any form of representation or imagery of God, Arab rulers unabashedly employ this to perpetrate their often illegitimate and oppressive regimes. Modi, who acknowledges many of the Arab rulers as his 'brothers', has resorted to a shared strategy of invoking higher powers to fortify political authority.

The audacity of such a claim reverberated across the nation. Was this a genuine revelation or a calculated political manoeuvre? Critics questioned whether Modi's newfound divine connection was a ploy to bolster his image or an earnest belief. But it was Rahul Gandhi, who seized the moment to deliver a scathing response.

"If somebody comes up to you and says such things, what will you say? You will say forgive me, brother, you do your work, let me do

as well as their stand on the 'constitutionally protected scheme of social justice'. Rahul Gandhi had expressed his willingness to take part in such a debate along with party chief Mallikarjun Kharge, but the BJP rejected it asking whether Rahul Gandhi was the Congress party's prime ministerial candidate.

This wasn't the first time Modi and Rahul clashed. A few days prior to this, Modi had accused Rahul Gandhi of avoiding discussions about industrialists Gautam Adani and Mukesh Ambani, claiming the Congress leaders had 'stopped' talking about them. The challenge prompted Rahul to raise the issue multiple times in the subsequent election rallies.

In this high-stakes political theatre, both leaders wielded language as a weapon. Modi's divine claim and Gandhi's witty ripostes revealed the underlying tension between faith and pragmatism. Whether Modi truly believed in his divine mission or merely played the divine card remains a mystery. But one thing was certain: the battle for India's soul is raging on. (IPA Service)

### Letters to the Editor

#### Assault on the poorest

Editor

I was shocked to read in The Shillong Times (May 23, 2024) about members of the Hynniewtrep Youth Council dismantling homes of poor working people at Lum Survey. Not only lawless, this kind of violence, which shows a total dearth of basic kindness and compassion -- an inability to rise above the tribal identity to embrace humanity as a whole -- can only boomerang back to harm Khasi society. If nothing else, Christianity and westernization should have imbued civil society in Meghalaya with altruistic social norms and a thirst for social justice. When will the people of the Northeast and Indians as a whole disregard identities to become kinder to those who are poor, dispossessed, and hurting?

I could not imagine being in the shoes of those whose homes were destroyed with such impunity and shamelessness.

Yours etc.,  
Deepa Majumdar,  
Via email

#### India ignores Amartya Sen's wise counsel

Editor,

There is a saying in Bengali, "geyo jogi bhikh paena." It means that a wise person does not get recognition in his own country. This is applicable to Noble laureate Amartya Sen. When other countries achieved good results after following his road map, the authorities in his own country prefer to turn a deaf ear to his suggestions. They need to listen to his advice and give priority to human development, social harmony, and justice.

He devised methods of measuring poverty. This provided much needed data for improving economic conditions for the poor. His findings influenced policy makers all over the world to give attention to the lost income of the poor and on a stable price for food. He said that social reforms like improvements in education and public health must precede economic reform.

Human Development In spite of getting lucrative offers from many countries, he remains a citizen

of India. His main concerns have always been India and its people. But our political leaders did not pay heed to his suggestions of giving priority to human development. As a result, India is heading towards more inequality. A recent paper authored by the French economist, Thomas Piketty and others observed, "The Billionaire Raj headed by India's modern bourgeoisie is now more unequal than the British Raj headed by the colonialist forces." Yet the authorities have been giving their total attention to GDP growth, ignoring dismal performance in human development.

Heads of the inequality coin show that India has 271 billionaires, which is the third highest in the world (The 2024 Hurun Global Rich List). Tails of the same coin reveal the struggle of the common people to get health care and education for their children in our country, which ranks 134th in the global human development index behind Bhutan (125) and Bangladesh (129). When will the political leaders listen to Amartya Sen and start the journey for inclusive welfare for all the people of our country?

Social Harmony

Manipur has been reeling from the disharmony between communities. It is time to understand the idea of India, which is what Maha Upanishad said, "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam" (the world is one family). While emphasising India's plural legacy, Amartya Sen highlighted that India's two great emperors - Asoka and Akbar - were both non-Hindus. He also reminded us about exemplary secular humanist Dara Shikoh.

He said, "The introduction of European scholars to Hindu scriptures, in particular the Upanishads, was to a great extent based on the Persian translation of the Upanishads done by Dara Shikoh. He was not a great scholar himself but he did work hard with the help of Hindu pundits to learn Sanskrit and he translated parts of the Upanishads into Persian. It was this translation that William Jones read which attracted him to India and to the study of the Hindu religion."

Justice and the UAPA Citing data from the National Crime Records Bureau, the People's Union of Civil Liberties in its draft report pointed out that out of 8,371 persons arrested under the Unlawful Activities (Preven-

tion) Act (UAPA) between 2015 and 2020, only 235 were convicted. The high rate of acquittal (97.2%) showed that prosecution under the UAPA did not have merit in the majority of cases.

In this situation, what Amartya Sen said on the UAPA must be considered, "Under British rule, Indians were often arrested and imprisoned without trial, and some were kept in prison for a long time. As a young man, I had hoped that as India became independent, this unjust system, in use in colonial India, would stop. This has not, alas, happened, and the unsupportable practice of arresting and keeping accused human beings in prison without trying them has continued in free and democratic India."

Yours etc.,  
Sujit De,  
Kolkata

#### Why curb our freedom?

Editor, Never before has any government imposed Section 144 on vote counting day. The MDA Government has truly exceeded its brief. Why should government apprehend trouble? What is

the NPP candidates in both Shillong and Tura win? Who knows about secret ballots unless this government has a way of knowing that it is losing both seats. These are extraordinary measures that are undemocratic and mimic the Modi regime's clampdown on our freedoms. Once the votes are cast we have to accept the results and leaders of political parties have to be able to control their own followers. Or is it that the NPP knows that if it loses both or one seat its own cadres could create trouble? More so if their arch enemy the VPP happens to win the Shillong seat. There are so many probable reasons best known to the government. Till date we have not heard of any states imposing Section 144 on election counting day. What does the Government know that we don't know? And why is the MDA Government which is on the backfoot on many other issues now so pro-active? Will the Government answer?

Yours etc.,  
Rishotbaskhem Lyngdoh,  
Via email

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

*"The harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph."*

— Thomas Paine

**The Shillong Times**

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**Social media bubble**

THE impact of social media has not been fully understood. Research on the topic can only be work in progress. Most people on Facebook look their accounts for fear of the account being hacked and misused for soliciting funds for sundry reasons. What however can cause permanent damage is the trolling that follows an Instagram or Twitter (now X) post, or even a piece of news on the website. Since all news portals allow room for comments, this is also a playground for those with dark, toxic minds to spew out the filth they nurse within themselves. These trolls don't even spare young people who have performed well in their examinations and are being feted for it on news websites. Such trolls have invaded the social media space big time. But those that still wish to be on social media have to learn to take such comments in their stride and this is where discussions on how to handle one's social media account is important. Unfortunately, this subject is not much discussed in schools, colleges and universities. Actually, how to maintain sanity in the age of social media is a social skill that is an integral part of modern education.

Social media here would include WhatsApp too which many have facetiously referred to as WhatsApp University. Anyone who is part of a WhatsApp group would know that this is an echo chamber where everyone is in agreement with everyone else with little space for dissenting voices. The human mind has not evolved at the speed that social media has and it is only natural that this invasion on the human attention span is causing severe disruption and distraction. Every ping on the mobile phone compels the user to check the phone just in case there's something urgent to be tackled right away.

But perhaps what's impacting minds today are the millions of news portals and YouTubers selling instant news without the necessary rigour of editing and fact-checking that traditional or legacy media as it is referred to, goes through. A large majority of media consumers today derive their information on a range of issues from such channels. Some are outright communal and feed a constituency that is already prejudiced against a set of people or community. They play on peoples' fears and therefore need to find only those stories that make victims or some and perpetrators of others. The social media handles of these self-styled content creators have become a location for toxic masculinity to parade itself by putting out misogynistic views that judge women harshly and even propose a set of social mores for them. Such social media channels hardly discuss the ugliness of rape but will find reasons to justify rape. In such circumstances unless there is mass awareness and public astuteness on separating news from views things are going to take a dangerous turn.

**The Lum Survey Imbroglia Vis a Vis Eviction Drive by Non-State Actor (s)**

By Kyrsoibor Pyrtuh

The Lum Survey area, which is adjacent to Umshyri and where the old Guwahati-Shillong Road passes through it falls within the defence line and is under the jurisdiction of the Shillong Cantonment. This area is not in the heat of the sun after the 1947-48 war. The Youth Council (HYC) led an agitation drive against the alleged illegal parties within the area. This write-up is neither an indictment nor a summary report of the incident. However, if there are allegations committed by a pressure group or settlers, it is for the District Administration or the Court to prosecute as per the law and without fear or favour. The State should earnestly resolve this matter in a just and fair manner.

**Shillong as the Administrative Centre:**  
If we are to engage with the socio-political turmoil that has plagued the city for the past several decades, we also ought to consider the historical perspective of the place. This year Shillong is marking its Sesquicentennial anniversary, since it became the capital of the province of Assam (under British rule) in 1874. Before that Cherrapunjee (Sohra) was the Headquarters of the British in the Khasi & Jaintia Hills. However, after the "Thma Synteng" or Jaintia rebellion of the 1860s, the British Government decided to shift the administrative centre to Shillong, which was a more strategic location and in 1866 Shillong was established as the full-fledged Headquarters of British rule.

The British Areas within the Khasi & Jaintia Hills were (i) Shillong British Portion and (ii) Jowai Sub-division. Besides, 30 (thirty) more areas within the Khasi Hills were converted into British Areas. The Shillong British Portion included both the Shillong Cantonment and Shillong Municipality, and it covers those areas which the Myllem State had acceded to the British authority via land agreement in 1865. In his book *Delightful Shillong*, Beh L. Gilbert Shullai had for the sake of better administration suggested that, "An area ceded by the Myllem State to the British Government in 1865 may be known as ROWLATNAGAR and the same may be further sub-divided into three sectors, viz: (1) Lower ROWLATNAGAR which would include part of Rowlatnagar falling within the Jurisdiction of the Shillong Municipality (2) Middle ROWLATNAGAR that part of Rowlatnagar falling within the Shillong Cantonment and (3) Upper ROWLATNAGAR which formed part of Rowlatnagar falling within the jurisdiction of Upper Shillong Protected

Forests." The acquisition of land in Shillong was primarily for the establishment of the British civil and military administrations. Subsequently, there were mass movements of people from across the Khasi & Jaintia Hills and outside. The migration of people was necessitated by the demands for human resources in government, military and other establishments. Others saw the new capital as an opportunity to have a better life and they were drawn by the prospect of economic growth, education and social advancement.

**Shillong and Its spatial growth (1874-1947)**  
According to K.D Saha, "the real expansion of Shillong town happened from 1874..." when the headquarters of Assam Province was transferred to Shillong vide Notification No 49, dated March 20, 1874. In the subsequent years and during the pre-independence period the capital also witnessed spatial expansion within the two urban administrative units, i.e. the Shillong Municipality and Shillong Cantonment. Several notifications were issued in connection with the expansion of Shillong under the Bengal Municipal Act, 1876. The first expansion occurred with the inclusion of Mawkhar and Laban villages under the jurisdiction of Shillong (Municipal) Station vide the Proclamation Dated November 26, 1878. It is interesting to note that in 1913 an agreement was again executed whereby Ron Sing Syiem, the Syiem of Myllem further ceded to the British Government the villages of Malki, Laitumkrah, Jhalupara and Mawprem which were brought under the Municipal Administration. This agreement also clearly defines the power relations between the British Government and Hima Myllem (Myllem State). The Syiem agreed to extend the Bengal Municipal Act, III, B.C of 1884 to villages of Malki, Laitumkrah, Jhalupara and Mawprem to the rivers of Umshyri and Wahumkrah provided that his proprietary and manorial rights and his authority as Syiem within such villages, otherwise necessary to be waived for the purposes of such Municipality, shall not be interfered with, and provided that the Municipality shall not give permission to anyone to build houses on new sites without his previous consent. Later, the localities of Kench's Trace and Rilbung were included in the Shillong (Administered) Municipality as per Notification No. 253-IB Dated 7th August 1941.

1879 the area of the Shillong Cantonment was extended towards the western part of the capital and an agreement between Hain Manik, Syiem of Myllem and J. Sherer, Deputy Commissioner Khasi & Jaintia Hills, was executed to this effect on the July 16, 1879. The text of the agreement runs thus- "Whereas it is necessary that the present boundary of Shillong Cantonment should be extended towards the West and as the land required for such extension pertains to the Syiemship of Myllem of which I am the presiding ruler, I do hereby in terms of my engagement with the British Government cede to the Government all that parcel of Land..." With regards to the boundary and jurisdiction of Shillong Cantonment, the British Government had issued several notifications from 1880 to 1932. It must be remembered that the functions and jurisdiction of Shillong Cantonment also include the areas within the Shillong (Rifle Range) Cantonment and Shillong (Umlong) Cantonment.

**Shillong: Its complex and multiple powers of administration.**  
Shillong is fraught with multiple powers of administration. The city is governed by a complex web of authorities, each with its own jurisdiction and responsibilities. Understanding this complex administrative landscape is crucial to grasp the intricacies of governance in Shillong. The Shillong Cantonment Board (SCB) is responsible for the administration of the Cantonment area as per the Cantonment Act, 1924. Whereas the Shillong Municipal Board (SMB) and Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council are also empowered by law and the Constitution to govern their respective areas. Besides, the East Khasi Hills District Administration is responsible for the overall administration of the district, which includes the city of Shillong.

**Hate and violence not the solution:**  
The fault-lines between indigenous and non-indigenous communities in Shillong are razor thin, and any slight confrontation may lead to the city being engulfed in flames, a scenario that the city and the people of the state can no longer afford. One slight provocation from either side will affect the economy of the city and state, especially since tourism is now the major source of income outside the government sector.

Let us assume that those 80 odd households were illegally occupying the open space at Lum Survey and that the demand of HYC to evict them is justified. But there

**Kerala Model: As guest migrants workers**

By Ajit Ranade

The Class 10 state board exam results were announced last week in Kerala. One remarkable achiever was Shivraj Mohite from St. George's High School, Vennikkulam in Ernakulam district. He scored A+ in all his subjects. What's remarkable is that this boy is the son of migrants from Maharashtra's Sangli district, and he has scored very high marks in all subjects including Malayalam, which is also the medium of instruction of his school. His father is a salesman in a textile shop and settled here two decades ago, even before his marriage. Both his children have received free education in a private school of fairly high quality, making it possible for his son to be a top scorer. Another girl, daughter of a migrant worker from Uttar Pradesh also scored A+ overall. This is very unlike in the migrant worker's village in Uttar Pradesh where girls do not even reach Class 10. Here they are already planning further studies for the girl, whose elder sister is pursuing an engineering degree in Kerala.

The success of 85 such students in Ernakulam district is due to an initiative

exploitation; unsafe working conditions or illegal low wages. The State has established a comprehensive database to register guest workers which helps in planning and implementing welfare schemes. In 2021 a survey conducted by Gram Vikas, an NGO in the Kalahandi district of Odisha, found that seasonal migrants from 26 percent of the households chose to go to Kerala to work in various sectors (unskilled) and earned an average salary of Rs 12000. Two third of most of the migrants located outside Odisha reported Kerala as their destination. The internal migration of workers from the rest of the country to Kerala itself has created a mini-remittance economy, as money flows from savings generated in Kerala to the home States like Odisha, Jharkhand, Assam and Bihar. There are over 50 million migrant workers in India who are working outside their home State, of which 4 million are in Kerala. Ultimately Kerala's absorption rate of migrant workers will be limited by the size of its economy and its growth rate. Kerala used to get nearly 25 percent of its State income as remittance

*"There are hundreds of such success stories of children of migrant workers, who get free education in the local language and move on to enhancing their careers by pursuing higher degrees, based on this solid foundation. A few years ago the topper in the statewide Malayalam literacy exam was a woman from a Bihari migrant family."*

called ROSHNI supported by the district administration. The ROSHNI project helps migrant children acquire proficiency in Malayalam, English, and Hindi by taking extra morning hours of about 90 minutes before the morning classes. Services of volunteers who are proficient in Hindi, Bengali and Oriya are used. There are hundreds of such success stories of children of migrant workers, who get free education in the local language and move on to enhancing their careers by pursuing higher degrees, based on this solid foundation. A few years ago the topper in the statewide Malayalam literacy exam was a woman from a Bihari migrant family. Another case was the daughter of a Bihari migrant who topped a University B.A. exam. During the pandemic the migrant labourers and their families were helped with provisions and rations and did not have to go back to their respective states. They got food, shelter and medical care.

Kerala is far ahead in the demographic transition and ageing among all the states of India. It also is the State which traditionally has substantial out migration to the Middle East. Due to a combination of these and other factors its dependence on migrant workers is high. An estimated 4 million migrant workers are based in Kerala where they are called guest workers. But for the State, it goes beyond lip service as some of the anecdotes above illustrate. For starters the average daily wages paid to unskilled workers in the State was Rs 709 in 2021, as against the national average of Rs 309. Workers do all sorts of jobs from working in plantations, construction, retail malls, or as cooks, waiters, security and helpers in workshops. Kerala also has skill development and vocational training programs to enhance the employability of guest workers. Then there is the free Aawaz Health Insurance scheme covering hospitalisation and medical treatment of guest workers. Free education for children, and assimilation into the local language is a high point and has already been mentioned. There is also special attention paid to protect the legal rights of workers from

**Letters to the Editor**

**CUET(UG) Fiasco and Subservient Politics**

**Editor,**  
Developing a region into an educational hub requires years of concerted efforts, effective policies, and a supportive ecosystem. It is indisputable that this type of development represents one of the safest forms of economic growth, as it does not rely on the exploitation of non-renewable resources. Historically, Shillong was considered a premier educational centre in Northeast India. However, it is disheartening to witness the city's gradual decline in this regard. Various stakeholders are surreptitiously undermining the attributes of being educational hub for their own interests, eroding the very ecosystem that sustains and enhances Shillong as an educational hub. This negligence goes largely unchallenged, even as it saps the vitality of the sector of the state.

In recent years, there has been a noticeable shift, with students from other hill states increasingly opting for Guwahati over Shillong for their studies. This shift can be attributed to poor decisions and delays by policymakers, government authorities, and the management of the state's lone

affiliating university, all of which have contributed to diverting students away from Shillong.

The recent implementation of the CUET(UG) exam illustrates a systemic failure not only in the state but also all over the country. It is widely acknowledged that less than 20% of students who completed class XII were able to sit for the exam, due primarily to an insufficient number of testing centres. This scarcity is not only a problem in this state but also prevalent across other states in the Northeast. The state government has remained passive, ignoring the hardships faced by thousands of students who cannot afford to study outside the state. The state government is engaging in complicitous and subservient politics, prioritizing directives from their masters in Delhi over addressing the concerns of the 80% of the state's students. Politicians of the state are unscrupulously obsessed with packages and logistic support from Delhi by relegating the interest of the people of state in the background.

Meanwhile, the Assam government has promptly to exit the CUET(UG) for admission to the degree colleges, a wrong step even though the quality of teaching and communication skills in Assam may not match those in Shillong.

ditionally, the North-Eastern Hill University (NEHU) appears more concerned with aligning itself with right-wing politics in Delhi than with addressing the increasing dropout rates.

These issues raise critical questions about the future of education in our state: Where will the disadvantaged students of our state turn? Is Shillong rapidly transforming from a renowned educational hub into a deserted one in the education sector?

Yours etc.,  
Mary L. Labin,  
Via email

**What happened to 'Hello Meghalaya'?**

**Editor,**  
It is deeply concerning to see the current government's take on the 'Hello Meghalaya' project. The project was a noble initiative to promote the state and its culture, and it has already gained significant traction. However, the government's decision to abruptly end the project is a disservice to the state and its people. The project was a source of pride and a source of income for many of the state's citizens. It was a source of pride because it was a project that was owned and operated by the state's citizens. It was a source of income because it provided a platform for the state's artists and performers to showcase their talents. The project was a source of pride and a source of income for many of the state's citizens. It was a source of pride because it was a project that was owned and operated by the state's citizens. It was a source of income because it provided a platform for the state's artists and performers to showcase their talents.

interested in mass media, providing them with a platform to publish their content and earn revenue, as was claimed by Chief Minister Conrad Sangma in his press briefing.

However, over a year has passed, and there has been no progress or communication about 'Hello Meghalaya.' Instead, the Government has recently supported a well-known event management group (which surely needs no introduction) by hosting a new show on tourism called 'Hills on a Plate' on JioCinema. Does the Government believe the public has forgotten its initial promise?

If the government was so confident about 'Hello Meghalaya', why did it not start the local OTT platform and host 'Hills on a Plate' on this platform itself? Where is the confidence of the Government on its own initiatives announced in public interest?

The silence on this project suggests it may have been a publicity stunt, a move to gain brownie points without any genuine intention to follow through.

It is disappointing to see the Government favouring one organization over the broader community of content creators. This raises concerns about the Government's commitment to nurturing local talent and providing equitable opportunities for all. The creators and filmmakers of Meghalaya deserve better and as someone who is always in close interaction with them, it must be made known that they indeed stand disappointed.

They need the platform that was promised to them - a platform that supports and amplifies their genuine work. The youth of Meghalaya deserve to know whether their government truly supports their creative endeavours or if they have been sidelined in favour of more prominent entities.

Yours etc.,  
Patrick Kurbah  
Via Email

**Palestine needs to become an independent country**

**Editor,**  
Kudos to Spain, Ireland, and Norway for their decision to recognise a Palestinian state on May 28. Palestine should be treated as a sovereign country as per the partisan plan of Great Britain's Palestine in 1947.

Israel has been ignoring the two-state solution as per the 1993 Oslo Accord for decades, and now it has engaged in genocidal violence in response to the October 7, Hamas attack. The United Nations secretary-general António Guterres said that the Hamas attack did not take place in a vacuum. His

comment was as right as the observation that the Indian Rebellion of 1857 did not take place in a vacuum. The truth is that 15 million Palestinians have been suffering the brutality of Israel's oppression for decades.

There were acts of terrorism against British civilians like Kennedy ladies during the British Raj in India. Khudiram Bose and his friend Prafulla Chaki threw a bomb at a carriage thinking that the district magistrate of Muzaffarpur, Douglas Kingsford, was in the carriage. However, Kingsford was seated in a different carriage, and the bomb killed two British women. Can such attacks on the British civilians justify the Jallianwala Bagh massacre?

Had the British still been ruling India, would the world have lent moral support to the colonial regime against the freedom fighters? Gaza massacre put Jallianwala Bagh to shame. More than 35,000 Palestinians, including nearly half of them children and elderly, have been killed in Gaza.

Yours etc.,  
Sujit De,  
Kolkata

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

"Rain symbolizes darkness but also represents an essential part of rebirth."

— Sabrina Claudio

## The Shillong Times

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### People's power will prevail

THE cacophony of the high-voltage general election campaign ends on May 29, after a frenetic run for two and a half months since the EC declared the schedules on March 16. The poll process in seven phases that started on April 19 would culminate in the declaration of results on June 4. In between, an anxious nation waited with abundant patience through the slow progress of the world's largest democratic exercise. The Election Commission cannot be faulted for the delay since the deployment of manpower and elaborate security for an exercise involving 97 crore voters, also involving assembly polls in four states, is a herculean task. Threats from Maoists and several other pressure groups on the one side and the high level of rivalry between political party activists make a staggered election schedule imperative. Central forces from one state/region needed to be deployed and redeployed in other states/regions to provide additional security cover. That the polls were held in an orderly manner all through the many phases so far --with only stray cases of violence or disruptions as in West Bengal or Andhra Pradesh -- demonstrates the healthy traditions that India zealously preserves, maintains and promotes on the election front. This grand exercise, by itself, is a celebration of democracy.

The curbs imposed by the Election Commission on poll-eve opinion polls and exit polls before the close of the entire voting process till 5pm on June 1 ensured that interested groups or parties could not attempt to swing the public mood by fancy projections of the ground situations. A tendency among many is to side with or vote for the winning side; hence the attempts to create such feelings through manipulated opinion poll results. In the present elections, such polls were barred from the time the tempo of the polls picked up. They are free to air these after the last vote is cast. Focussed attention will now be on such results by the evening on June 1.

Big claims by politicians of rival sides about the chances of their win, however, continued. The voters read through the lines, though. Prime Minister Modi raised the stakes by claiming they would win over 400 seats in the Lok Sabha; which might boomerang on him if the BJP underperforms this time. From there, a wiser, weather-beaten Amit Shah now says the BJP would form the next government even if it falls short of 10 to 20 seats. The INDIA alliance maintained moderate expectations, based more on the strengths of the regional parties that have tied up with the principal opposition, the Congress this time. The voting season is drawing to a close with no wave in sight and poor voting turnout. Voters it would appear are fatigued by the so-called dance of democracy as it does not work for them.

# How indigenous peoples were viewed in ancient India

By Bhogtaram Mawroh

In India, indigenous peoples (IPs) are termed Scheduled Tribes, and they have been given special provisions under the Constitution, which include the right to practice their customs and traditions and protection from land alienation. However, in actual practice, outside the Sixth Schedule areas, the situation of IPs is not very reassuring. For example, in 2019, India's Supreme Court ordered the eviction of more than one million people, many of whom belong to indigenous communities, from their ancestral land, claiming them to be encroachers. This is ironic, considering it is not IPs who are encroachers but the state that is intruding into their territory. This encroachment has a long history in the subcontinent.

Ashoka's thirteenth rock edict is a momentous occasion in the ancient history of the subcontinent. This particular inscription records the renunciation of violence by Ashoka (the third monarch of the Mauryan Empire) after having witnessed the devastating effects of war in Kalinga and vowing to devote his life instead to the practice of Dhamma (Buddhist teachings). But the edict, according to Upinder Singh in her book 'Political Violence in Ancient India' also carried a warning to the forest chieftains (atavi) that they should not provoke him. This warning sheds light on the relationship of the pre-modern states like that of Mauryas and the challenges they faced as they tried to expand their domain, which ultimately brought them into conflict with a different group of people who were already present in the subcontinent.

In the same book, there's a whole section on Kamandaka's Nitisara, which is a political treatise written several centuries after the Arthashastra by Kautilya. Nitisara mentions that among those that threaten the power of a king are those that are "only partially integrated into the circle of kings" — sāmāntas (bordering rulers) and ātavikas (forest dwellers)". The latter, as the name suggests, have their abode in the forest, which, in ancient texts, is also the home of demons, demigods such as yakshas, and spirits. The forest was a site of many conflicts with the intrusion of Brahmanical culture in the form of āśramas and agrahāras leading to conflicts with forest dwellers and the fracturing of their livelihoods, habitats, and culture. One group whose name comes up repeatedly in the discussion of the forest dwellers is the Nishadas. The term Nishada appears to be a generic one used for all indigenous non-Aryan speakers, and some have identified them with the modern Munda-speaking population (related to the Khasi). Recent evidence has revealed, after the Dravidian, Austro-asiatic people are possibly the second oldest population group in the subcontinent. This group appeared to have arrived from the east around 5000 years ago, first landing in the north-

east, where the remnants of that population are the Khasi, and then continuing west, where they intermixed with the local Dravidian population, giving rise to the Munda around 4000 years ago. This is around 1500 years earlier than the migration of the Indo-Aryan-speaking people from Central Asia. Since the latter are the ones who have left written inscriptions, there is a tendency to take their description as the authentic version while leaving out the voices of those from oral tradition without any written word. As Upinder Singh notes, the "perspectives of the forest dwellers toward the state are recorded nowhere." But can the negative stereotyping tell us anything authentic about these people? Actually, quite a lot.

James C. Scott's monumental book 'The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia' argues that the Chinese and other civilizations discourse about the "barbarian," the "raw," and the "primitive," practically means ungoverned or not yet incorporated. In the Roman Empire as in the Chinese, ethnicity and "tribe" began where taxes and sovereignty ended. According to Encyclopedia Britannica, the term barbarian is derived from the Greek *barbaros*, which was used by the early Greeks to describe all foreigners, including the Romans. The term soon acquired a negative meaning, being associated with the vices and savage natures that the Greeks attributed to their enemies. Later, the Romans themselves adopted the word for all peoples other than those living under the Greco-Roman influence and dominance. In simple terms, people who have not been subjugated and conquered, or the free people, were known as barbarians.

In the context of Indo-Aryan culture, the equivalent term for barbarians is Mleccha, which is a generic term that includes all tribal groups and foreigners. The term *ārya* is variously contrasted with *mleccha* (barbarian), *dāsa* (slave), and *candāla* (untouchable), all of whom lie outside the *ārya* fold, i.e., outside the Varna system (progenitor of the caste system). The Vishnu Dharmasutra claims that the land of the mleccha is the one where the order of the varna is not established. Vishakhadatta, an Indian Sanskrit poet and playwright, in his literary work Mudrarakshasa (which narrates the ascent of the king Chandragupta Maurya to power), expanded the term mleccha to include not only foreigners and tribals but also other military adversaries within the subcontinent. But although both foreigners and forest dwellers were "outsiders," the crucial difference noted by Upinder Singh is that some of those invaders who came from the west were incorporated into the political elite. In Vishakhadatta's Mudrarakshasa, among Chandragup-

ta's adversaries is mentioned a confederation of groups that include "Gandharas, Yavana chiefs, Shakas, Chinas, Hunas, and Kaulutas—a multiethnic array of mlecchas, including the Chinese!" The Brahmanical dharma experts attempted to incorporate these mlecchas into the fold of the varna system by describing them as the result of inter-varna unions or as degraded Kshatriyas. Many of these groups were made part of the Rajputs, whose origin is suggested to date to the mid-5th century CE onward, when the northern and northwestern Indian subcontinent came under the impact of the Hephthalites (White Huns) and associated tribes. But the attitude towards the forest dwellers, or the Nishadas, was one of hostility and condescension.

The Shanti Parva is the twelfth of eighteen books of the Indian epic Mahabharata and gives one of the two origins of kingship for the Indo-Aryan culture. According to this story, the sages killed "the bad king Vena by stabbing him with kusha grass sanctified with their mantras. They then churmed Vena's right thigh with mantras, and out of it, there on the ground, was born an ugly little man. He had red eyes and black hair, and he looked like a charred post. "Stay down!" those Brahman-speaking seers said to him. And so there came into being the awful Nisādas, who took to the mountains and forests, and those other barbarians [mlecchas] who dwell in the Vindhya mountains-by the hundreds and thousands". Nishadas are shown as not being kingly material and were therefore kept apart from the varna system. Thus, there is an attempt to incorporate the forest dwellers into Indo-Aryan mythology, but their reluctance to accept the assimilation is also alluded to. That led to their being addressed with derision and contempt by the Brahmins. A recent example will be useful to understand this situation.

Recently, Avner Pariat was expelled from the VPP for anti-party activities. But according to Avner, he actually had intentions of resigning from the party and had even sent a draft letter to some of the party functionaries before the party took the decision to expel him. It is very clear what has transpired. The party knew the contents of the letter, which was very damning, and by expelling Avner Pariat on pretext of anti-party activities, they tried to discredit the charge of religious fanaticism that he had labeled against the party. In a similar way, the Brahmins knew the forest dwellers, i.e., Nishadas, valued their freedom and would not accept a place in the non-egalitarian varna system. Therefore, they decided to discredit the Nishadas by claiming that they are basically outcasts who are not noble enough. *Ārya* actually means noble or illustrious.

In the ancient texts, forest

dwellers, i.e., IPs are shown as being untrustworthy and violent, strongly connected to the practice of killing animals. But recent research has shown that these groups, i.e., the Austroasiatic, were the earliest farmers to introduce rice cultivation, millet and other crops in Southeast Asia and beyond. Two of the most prominent civilizations in SE Asia, belong to them, viz., the Khmer (Cambodian) empire and the Đại Việt (Vietnamese) kingdom. Before the time of the Gupta period (300 CE–600 CE), which is considered the golden age of Indian civilization, Khasi (an offshoot of the Austro-asiatic group that migrated west) had already developed the technique of iron smelting, as reported from sites in Nongkrem that date around 353 BCE–295 BCE, which is even earlier than the time of the Mauryan empire. That was also the time when the Khasian languages began diversifying, with Lyngngam coming out of the War-Amwi, followed later by Pnar and the standard Khasi. The emergence of Pnar must be connected with the transformation of Hima Sutnga into Hima Jaintiapur, when the War Amwi conquered the kingdom of Jaintiapur in present day Bangladesh. However, there are still a lot of gaps in our story, some of which can be reconstructed from folklore, but archaeological, linguistic, and genetics will be needed to complete the story.

The history of the IPs has been told from the perspective of others, and therefore indigenous people are viewed with disdain and contempt. It is high time that it be changed. At the same time, as IPs in Meghalaya and elsewhere reclaim their history, it is equally important to acknowledge the contribution and influences of other cultures to their own civilization. This has continued from the time we (the Khasi) first came into contact with the ancient Dravidians (founder of the Indus Valley Civilization), giving rise to the Munda, to the post-colonial period, when different non-indigenous groups like the Bengali, Nepali, Marwari, Sindhi, Punjabi, and others made this land their home, making great contributions towards the people and the place. Just as we need the mainstream to accept and respect our inalienable rights to our homeland, which has been maintained for thousands of years, we also need to acknowledge that our history is one of mixed influences and contributions from groups other than our own. We have in fact prospered because of that, and it will be disrespectful not to acknowledge that debt. We are all the product of our history, and on the subcontinent, history tells us that we were never alone and that we are part of the story that is still continuing. And that story has to be of mutual respect and peaceful coexistence.

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

## CUET is necessary

By Benjamin Lyngdoh

After the arrangements for the 'pen and paper mode' Common University Entrance Test (CUET) Under Graduate examination went horribly wrong at NEHU, Shillong on May 15, 2024, there were many opinions and demands to scrap or exempt CUET for Meghalaya. This writer views such demands as a knee-jerk reaction as the context of entrance examinations for admission into higher classes requires an extensive analysis. Even the state government cannot wash its hands of CUET examinations by claiming itself as a meagre third-party at the periphery. The unfortunate episode at NEHU should be taken as learning for better preparations in future by all stakeholders concerned. But, that should be that. Anything beyond would be a case of cutting the whole tree just because of one affected branch, when, what actually required is only tree pruning.

**Lack of clarity**  
There is lack of clarity from the state government on how it intends to deal with CUET. What is forthcoming are only stop-gap measures. Asking for exemption or showing intent to ask for exemption every year is not a solution. In fact, exemptions only depict two things — one, the state government is unwilling to address the issue once and for all; and two, it shows Meghalaya as being unwilling to sync (or at least even try) with national developments in education. This type of indecisiveness is hurting the psyche and future prospects of the students. One of the roles of any government is to 'foster support'. However, the CUET episode of this year has shown no inclination of 'support' from the state government. For instance, in the earlier part of the year this writer received calls from many concerned parents whose children were waiting for the class 12 results. The questions were what to do about CUET UG? Is it to be done or not? Will it be required for admissions this year? Till that time, there was no direction from the state government. Will the one addition year of exemption for 2023-24 (with the very first exemption being in 2022-23) be further carried forward to 2024-25? No clarity at all. The best advice that could be given was to apply and try for CUET as we will never know what the state government would decide. Hopefully the coming year(s) will be less confusing.

**Everything is not an imposition**  
Meghalaya has a history of looking at things with suspicious eyes. For instance, when it was mandated to have PAN cards for identification, etc there was hue and cry. But of course this was not too much of a problem as the STs of Meghalaya and working within their own state do not need to pay income tax. The hue and cry became a lot louder when it came to the Aadhaar card. Biometrics is somehow related to the devil. Then news came that Meghalaya was exempted from Aadhaar. People rejoiced. But, it was futile as today Aadhaar has become mandatory in almost all walks of life. Now, it is CUET's turn to be frowned upon. Some observers and political parties view it as an imposition. This is followed by a straight rejection of the test without looking into the merits. All that is seen are the demerits. The feeling of 'imposition' in the backdrop of poor preparations by the state government is tenable; however, this lacuna could have been used to demand from MDA 2.0 to make quick and proper arrangements. Strategize for appropriate number of testing centres in every district as per some parameter, say student population. Use problems to create opportunities and solutions and not spread negativity in

society, especially amongst the young students.

**The big picture**  
CUET has been sold in Meghalaya as something of a taboo. It is depicted as something very difficult and that which the students will never be able to accomplish. Wrong! The message is misleading with a dosage of misdirection. The question that needs answering is whether our students should be taught that they are mentally and intellectually inferior even at this age and time? How about driving them to try new things and view themselves as being part of the bigger Indian picture. A recent survey by iDreamCareer, New Delhi categorised CUET 2024 as being 'easy to moderate'. The conclusion was based on student responses and examination format study. These types of findings can be used as motivational factors for both the state government (to prepare for it) and students (to undertake it). Further, CUET provides an equal opportunity to all to highlight their in-depth domain knowledge and skills. It helps in rationalising lenient and strict marks allocation. It is a fact that all educational institutions have their own understanding with regards to awarding marks for answers. It is subjective. For instance, a student with 60% marks may be more knowledgeable and skillful than the one with 65% marks. CUET is an opportunity to mitigate and rationalise such cases.

**State university**  
It is a matter of pride that Meghalaya now has a state university. It is equally a matter of concern that MDA 2.0 is looking at the state university as a medium to escape from CUET requirements. The step if indeed implemented would be regressive in nature. It would be a reaction to the past failings of the state government. A better approach would be to act by preparing a blueprint on the targeted progress of Meghalaya education into the coming 5-7 years. Embedded within it would be the infrastructural requirements for CUET implementation. This makes more sense than the argument that a student from rural Meghalaya will not be studying outside the state and hence, no need for CUET. As stated earlier, CUET is a means to rationalise high-low percentage marks; and, who is to say that the students from the rural areas are less knowledgeable than the urban lot?

**Start again, now**  
The very first exemption for Meghalaya came on May 13, 2022. This was extended for another one year on March 15, 2023. The dates are important as it shows that the state government has had two full years (and more) to prepare for CUET implementation. Two years is a lot of time for any government to show tangible outcomes. Again this year an opportunity is provided. Will it be a case of fight or flight for the MDA-02. Further, on the concerns about mushrooming of coaching centres, many such centres will continue to come up in the near future as they respond to the market dynamics. Coaching centres hence cannot be an excuse to dodge CUET; rather, it is an opportunity for the state government to do something about it in these nascent stages by framing appropriate rules and regulations on their functioning.

In the final analysis, CUET is necessary not only in terms of the demands of the times. It is about having a wider perspective towards human capital and its development. Small drops of water make an ocean. CUET is just one small drop. It is up to society to decide what type of ocean Meghalaya should become in the next 10-20 years.

(The writer teaches at NEHU; email: blyngdoh@gmail.com)

### Letters to the Editor

#### Navigating the world of social media

Editor,  
The editorial "Social media bubble" (ST 28 May 2024) has touched upon an essential aspect of our modern digital age. "The human mind has not evolved at the speed that social media has and it is only natural that this invasion on the human attention span is causing severe disruption and distraction," shows that the rapid evolution of technology, including social media, has outpaced our biological evolution. Our brains have evolved over thousands of years to process information in the natural environment. However, the constant influx of information from social media platforms challenges

our attention span. Social media bombards us with notifications, updates, and content, leading to cognitive overload. Our brain struggles to filter relevant information from noise. Social media platforms are designed to trigger dopamine responses. Likes, comments, and shares provide instant gratification, reinforcing our desire to stay connected. This constant reward cycle encourages frequent checking, leading to shorter attention span.

Social media encourages multitasking. We switch between platforms, messages, and content rapidly. However, our brains are not optimized for efficient multitasking. Cognitive load increases as we juggle multiple tasks, affecting our ability to focus deeply on any one thing. Social media amplifies fear of missing out (FOMO). We fear missing

out on events, news, or experiences shared by others. This fear drives compulsive checking, further fragmenting our attention. Algorithms personalize our feeds based on our preferences. While this enhances user experiences, it also creates echo chambers. We are exposed to content that aligns with our existing beliefs, reinforcing confirmation bias. Critical thinking and exposure to diverse perspectives suffers. To mitigate these effects we should consider digital detox by regularly disconnecting from social media and allow our brains to reset. It's important to be aware of our attention. This can happen from focused, intentional engagement rather than mindless scrolling. Remember, while social media offers immense benefits, it is crucial to strike a balance. Our minds adapt, but conscious

efforts can help us navigate this digital landscape more effectively.

Yours etc,  
VK Lyngdoh,  
Via email

#### Is the DSC East Khasi Hills Sleeping?

Editor,  
The written test for the post of Junior Soil & Water Conservation Demonstrator Junior-I was scheduled to be held in January 2022, following the publication of the names of candidates who qualified in the physical test. However, the exam was postponed indefinitely, and to date, no further information has been provided. More than two years have passed, and the District Selection Committee East Khasi Hills

has neither conducted the exam nor given any indication of when it might be held. It is disheartening to see qualified individuals waiting for years without any clarity or progress in the recruitment process.

Many of the candidates applying for this post have now become over-aged. By the time they qualify or get selected for this position, they will only have 20-25 years of service remaining, which will significantly affect their retirement and pensionary benefits, especially under the current contributory pension scheme.

This situation reflects poorly on the efficiency and accountability of the recruitment process, leading to frustration and disappointment among the applicants. The posts were advertised in 2018, and nearly six years later, the recruitment process

remains incomplete. The delay in conducting the written exam is causing distress and uncertainty among aspiring candidates.

It is crucial to review and improve the overall recruitment framework to avoid such prolonged delays in the future. Timely recruitment not only benefits deserving candidates but also ensures that the requisitioning offices are not adversely affected by such delays. The government must strengthen all DSCs to enable them to conduct recruitment tests more efficiently.

Yours etc.,  
Kynsaibor,  
Via email

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*"But man is a part of nature,  
and his war against nature  
is inevitably a war against himself."*

— Rachel Carson

**The Shillong Times**

Vol. No. LXV No. 288 SHILLONG, THURSDAY, MAY 30, 2024

**Cyclone Rewal's trail of havoc**

IT takes a cataclysmic weather phenomenon to reveal the underbelly of a governance system that has all but failed to implement the basic building laws that take into account the hilly terrain; the need for proper drainage systems and to allow rivers to flow their course without obstruction. Instead, all the streams and rivers have today been reduced to massive drains clogged with garbage until a cyclonic storm with extremely heavy rains enables the rivers to belch out everything from inside out and lo and behold we have a flood in a hill station – an oddity if there is one. Everything that is wrong with Meghalaya today is not just human-induced but politically engendered as well. The legislature makes policies, the government makes the rules and politicians enable all these rules to be broken with impunity. In fact, politicians themselves violate rules by encroaching on rivers to set up their enterprises. Political acolytes are given the license to reduce the size of rivers so they can erect their pompous buildings. Nature is bound to take its annual toll. But human memory is short and after Cyclone Rewal recedes as every cyclone is bound to do, its back to business as usual until another one hits the state.

A cyclone wherever and whenever it hits has always impacted the poorest. In Odisha, West Bengal etc. governments have built cyclone shelters to ensure that those evacuated from places likely to be most affected by flood water find temporary shelter. Meghalaya has not arrived at that point since it is located at a plateau and away from the sea. But the manner in which hills are being brought down one after another to allow for unregulated quarrying and mining is a recipe for future disasters. Already landslides have created havoc and rapidly flowing rivers in rural Meghalaya have carried away bridges thereby causing long term disruptions to human movement and economic activities.

Much has been said about storm drains that were funded by some external agency but what's the point of a drain if it is choked by garbage, mainly plastic bags that are ubiquitous. While single use and other plastic bags have been banned in many cities of India, in Meghalaya this has met with some political and bureaucratic lethargy. The reasons are not far to seek. Will the plastic lobby in Meghalaya come out and clean the rivers and drains? Are all the packaged goods companies extending their corporate social responsibility (CSR) wing considering this state and others are invaded by their products? The recent weather phenomenon calls for a citizens' platform that has to engage in a substantive manner with the Government. Citizens can no longer leave everything to the Government. They need to come out with a list of action plans and engage proactively with the Government.

**Religion and Khasi Tribal Identity**

By Fabian Lyngdoh

The Khasi social order was founded on the character of the Kur (clans) as basic social units, independent economies, primary political institutions, and independent religious institutions. The basic traditional Khasi society was established by the association of a number of clans (Ki Kur) within a particular geographical territory to establish independent village-states called the Raid or the Shnong. Hence, the Raid/Shnong was the basic functional society, and the basic political community among the Khasi. Strictly speaking, there can be no Jaidbyrniew (Khasi society) without the institutions of the Kur.

Presently, the Khasi are under the protection of the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution of India as a scheduled tribe. But currently an erroneous narrative has emerged that protection and benefits would be provided to people of a scheduled tribe only on condition that they maintain their identity in the political museum strictly on the basis of age-old beliefs, customs, thought and practices. That if some sections of the tribe deviate from age-old traditions and customs and recreate some improved ways of life according to emerging circumstances, then they violate traditions as well as the constitutional provisions; and therefore, they lose the benefits of scheduled tribe status. This deviation from tradition is being perceived mostly in the context of religion. The implication is that, the Khasi who have converted to Christianity which is a foreign religion, are no longer full-fledged Khasi, and have hence forfeited the scheduled tribe status.

The fact is that, long before the advent of the British rule and the coming of Christianity, the Khasi in many Raid and Hima have already deviated from the religious traditions of their ancestors. Adoption and enculturation of Hinduism had taken place in the community religions of many Raid and Hima. Hindu deities like Viswakarma (Biskorum), Mahadeva or Mahesh (Mahet), Lakshmi (Lukhmi), Shiva (Bari Bhai-Sari Bhai), Laxman (Lakhon), Kali, Chandi, Durga, Ram, Bisori and Ramshandi, etc., have been integrated in the community religion of some Raid in Jaintia Hills, in Ri Bhoi, in Hima Shella, in Hima Mawlong, and in some other parts of the Khasi Hills, including human sacrifices in some areas. In Raid Iapngar, human sacrifice was offered to a god called, Baribhai-Saribhai. The Dima Kachari talk of Shiva by the name of 'Brai Sibrai' which is similar to Baribhai-Saribhai of the Iapngar. Indeed, Bhairava is another name of Shiva. But in spite of the adoption of foreign gods at the community level, the Khasi during that period still maintained the matrilineal system which is the core of Khasi tradition, and did not

lose their identity. Likewise, majority of the Khasi today have adopted the Christian faith, but they still believe strictly in the traditional principles of ka tipbriew-tiplei, tiphok tipsof, and tipkur tipkha, and strictly maintain the spirit of being Khasi. Hence, religion is not the basic foundation of Khasi identity. The Khasi Raid and Hima never had a common capital for the whole tribe. But during British rule, a new modern capital emerged. Individuals and families belonging to different Kur migrated from their original Raid and Hima to settle in Shillong, the modern capital emerging within the territory of Raid Myllem. The social structure of the Khasi society evolving in this new-found capital began to be based on individual persons and nuclear-family households, and not on the basis of the Kur as used to be the Khasi tradition. These immigrant clans had no role to play in the traditional politics of

emerging modern influences, especially by the spread of the Christian faith. But in the later period the name was changed to 'Ka Seng Khasi', and the emphasis was shifted to that of a new kind of religious institution. This happens because of the wrong interpretation that 'a Khasi is a Khasi because of his religion'.

On the other hand, there were also attempts to interpret the religion of the Khasi in line with other religious philosophies, especially with Hinduism. According to Jeebon Roy the performance of rites and rituals in every Kur is not a true religion, but only a 'Niam'. True Khasi religion according to him is not 'Niam', but 'Dharma', that grows and develops within the persons' hearts. Jeebon Roy also wrote that when a person dies his/her soul goes to the house of God and merges with divine consciousness. This is an adaptation from Hinduism. The Khasi religious belief says

*The immigrant Kur lost connection with their niam-kur and community religions that were established in their own respective original Raid. When the nuclear family with the father as the head emerged, the Kur began to lose its institutional character, and the institution of the iing-khatduh (natal household) as the centre of the Khasi niam-kur, has lost its meaning.*

Raid Myllem until the emergence of the modern dorbar shnong. Cross-migrations of Kur from one Raid to another, and from one Hima to another began to take place incessantly, and continues till today. The immigrant Kur lost connection with their niam-kur (clan religions) and community religions that were established in their own respective original Raid. When the nuclear family with the father as the head emerged, the Kur began to lose its institutional character, and the institution of the iing-khatduh (natal household) as the centre of the Khasi niam-kur, has lost its meaning. Community religions meant to sustain the traditional social order, have been abandoned in most of the Raid and Hima. All the changes that have taken place in the new-found modern capital in Raid Myllem, transmitted waves of changes to all other Raid and Hima, and induced cultural shocks in the entire Khasi society.

In the year 1899, some educated Khasi leaders who lived mainly in Shillong, founded 'Ka Seng Khasi Association' which originally was not a religious institution, but as a body to preserve the Khasi socio-cultural structure in the midst of

that the departed souls do not go to the house of God, but they go to eat betel nut "ha dwar u Blei" (in the portico of God). That means that the human soul would not merge with divine consciousness but retains his/her personal entity as an individual soul.

Sib Charan Roy made an effort to streamline the Khasi religious thought in tune with the tenets of Hinduism and Christianity. He says that God is within us and we are in God. He taught people in sickness to pray to God who resides within the self. But the Khasi do not believe that God resides within human beings. This concept is borrowed from Hinduism, and Christianity. He also suggested that those persons who are born crippled may have been criminals and oppressors in their previous lives. This is a Hindu doctrine of rebirth and transmigration of souls in the cycle of the wheel of existence (Samsara). Sib Charan Roy also instructed his followers that when they pray to God, they should not pray in front of other people, but to go into a room, close the door and pray to God, who is unseen." This is inspired by what Jesus said in the Gospel. He also opined that God created man last, after He has created

everything that man needs. This concept is also adopted from the Biblical creation account. The Khasi traditional thought pre-supposes that man already existed in heaven as the Khathynriew Trep before the creation of the earth.

The fact is that much of the original Khasi religious traditions have been lost and disappeared from the tribe. According to Khasi traditional religious belief, the collection of the bones of the deceased members in the Kur's 'mawbah' (clan ossuary) is a strict religious necessity for the spirits of the departed to find eternal rest with the ancestral mother in the spiritual realm. All the religious rites and ceremonies of the Kur must be performed within the ambit of the Kur, and cannot be performed by another Kur. H.O. Mawrie, one of the great thinkers of Ka Seng Khasi also pointed out that the Khasi religion is instituted in each Kur independently. There is no temple or religious building for the common worship of all Kurs, because each Kur has its own religious house in the iing khatduh (natal household of the clan) for the performance of all religious rituals. J.K. Tariang, a leader of the Seng Khasi also submitted that according to the traditional belief of the ancestors, the rituals of interring the bones of the departed members in the main clan ossuary was essential for the spirit of the deceased persons to reach the abode of God. But he also sincerely admitted that since the interring of bones of deceased persons into each clan's ossuary has become very difficult and expensive, many rites, rituals and ceremonies have been modified and even discarded altogether to suit the needs of the times and the prevailing circumstances.

So, we find that Khasi Hindus, Khasi Christians, Khasi Muslims, and believers of the new Khasi indigenous faith have almost all deviated from the original religious traditions of their ancestors. But the Khasi of all religious faiths still maintain the cultural traditions of the tribe. Though today, around 70 per cent of the members of all clans have embraced other religions, clan-relationships are still being maintained between clan members. Christian church denominations have largely replaced the role of the clans as religious institutions for guiding the moral and spiritual life of the people in villages and urban localities. The Seng Khasi and Seif Raj also emerged as guiding institutions of the reformed indigenous faith for the Khasi who do not want to convert to Christianity or any other religion. So, if the Scheduled Tribe status is to be maintained, it has to be maintained for all the Khasi. If it has to be abolished, it has to be abolished for all Khasi because 'Niam' is not the basic foundation of Khasi identity.

**Bob's Banter**

By Robert Clements

The Monster, Our Brother...

The WhatsApp message that came to me was from a phone number of an Indian in America, it said, 'Terror has only one religion.' However, it was not making a casual statement, it was mocking a particular religious community, with statistics and data that had fake facts dripping from the pen of the writer.

After sending it to a group which had a sizable number of members from the same community he'd attacked, he then sent another message saying, 'Sorry wrong group!'

Clever tactic by someone who wanted to antagonize people, then say, 'I didn't mean it for you!'

I looked at his message, and pondered over why he'd sent it.

I had seen the fellow, an inconsequential, insignificant fellow of little or no importance. Therein lay the problem; therein lies the problem.

These are men and sometimes women, who have no confidence in themselves, are highly insecure, and instead of trying to pull themselves up by their britches, to use an old English term, they use every means possible to pull others down. Unfortunately for them,

from around 5% in the 1950s to around 80% in the 2000s! Which means that because of a stupid law, people felt marrying from another community was wrong.

And because they felt it wasn't good, they segregated blacks and whites, not just in schools, and buses but sadly also in churches! After all, they felt, their daughters could fall in love with an African-American while listening to a sermon!

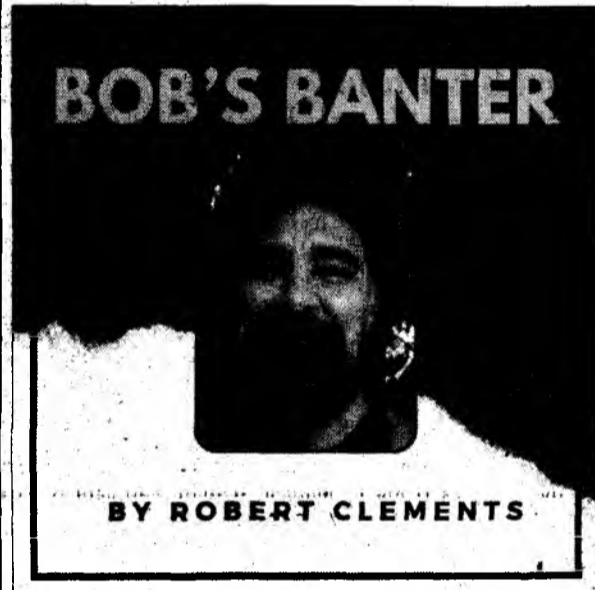
A law that disallowed interracial marriage, made racial hatred deeper.

And as we see such laws passed closer home, all that will happen is deeper divisions. In America, just over a half century after that draconian law was thrown out, an African American became the President

Laws that cause divide, cause deep rifts. Rifts that take ages to heal, and sometimes never heal, as with the case of Trump, exploiting racist sentiments he knows still exist in those who give him support,

It is so easy to bring about racial and religious discrimination! And we in India, have even learned to coin new terms for it! Such discrimination isn't entirely new.

'Hey Moses, your wife is black!' his brother Aaron and sister Miriam must have



being weak, and having to deal with stronger people around, they use the easiest weapon available, one they know they can get away with: Either language, colour or religion.

'Look! they shout, 'he's speaking in English, but this is Maharashtra!'

Or "Hey, he" wearing 'other clothes', be careful of him! Many fall prey to this clever weapon.

Most politicians use it well and to their advantage. When they want to divide a vote bank and get votes for themselves, they draw on the religion/ language card and like sheep, we voters forget reason and follow.

It is time all of us learn to avoid this trap. And for this we need to understand that the person whose language we don't understand, whose religion we don't follow, still has a mouth, a nose, two ears and a tongue like ours that can wag, thirteen to a dozen. He's as human as you and I are.

There's this story of a man who'd camped in a desert. As he looked out into the darkness of the night, he beheld a monster. The monster walked closer and closer to him, and the light from his lamp made the monster look even more monstrous in the sands. The man unsheathed his sword and ran to the figure, and suddenly realized what he'd been looking at was the gigantic shadow of a man. He ran closer, peered hesitantly at the face, and found it was his brother!

When you get messages hitting out at a particular religion or lingual community, look closer, recognize it is an attack on a brother: Then find the real monster, most often an inconsequential, insignificant fellow of little or no importance sitting on a statesman's chair! Stop that monster! Till 1967, seventeen states in the USA, banned interracial marriages!

That same year the law was found unconstitutional and thrown out. Immediately after that public approval of interracial marriage rose

shouted after they saw their brother had married Zipporah a Cushite woman, and they fought with her, till God intervened and what was Miriam's punishment? These words may not be actually from the Bible but I can imagine a furious God saying, "So you're proud of being white is Miriam? Okay I'll even make you whiter!" And she became white with leprosy!

I can't think of a more fitting punishment! Which makes me wonder what our punishment is going to be, as He watches with concern our own racial and religious discrimination?

Coming back to the USA; I wonder what would have happened if the law had not been thrown out in 1967? We don't have to look far to find out. Just across the very narrow sea we saw a genocide in Sri Lanka as Tamils were killed. We see the same in Pakistan as Christians and Hindus have hardly any rights, and today the same is slowly happening to India, as hate is being manufactured by hate machines and a hate manufacturing political party! Progress is a coloured path! America discovered all over again. A path which rolls out a carpet of unity through diversity. Any other method, which might get votes as short term gains, will only see the crumbling of the carefully built red ramparts of the fort of our nation!

Do remember what I said at the beginning of this piece, that when a weak man with a weak ideology has to deal with strong people around or a robust constitution, he or she uses the easiest weapon available, one they know they can get away with: either language or religion or the colour of your skin. But what is the monster you and I run to attack with our unsheathed sword?

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

Letters to the Editor

**Lessons from Cyclone Remal: A call for traffic consciousness**

Editor,  
For the past three days, Meghalaya has been facing nature's fury with the onslaught brought by Cyclone Remal, leading to incessant rains. This forced authorities to close schools, colleges, and universities on May 28. While this provided relief to students, parents and educators, it left office-goers with no choice but to brave the weather – rains, and gusty winds and commute to work.  
My routine is to use a car when it rains. I live in Nongthymmai, a place famous for its traffic congestion, especially in the morning

hours which makes it difficult to commute by car which would take an hour or more to reach my workplace in Dhankheti. Hence I opt for a two-wheeler which makes it easier to reach my workplace. However, to my surprise, the usually clogged roads with heavy traffic jams were not so clogged. Of course, cars were plying on the roads but the usual traffic jam that I would normally experience every morning was missing, allowing me to reach my workplace on time.

This ease of travel made me introspect. While it is easy to point fingers at the shortcomings of the government and concerned departments in addressing traffic issues, perhaps, it is also time that we, as citizens, take a closer look at our own roles in adding to the congestion. The closure of schools, and subsequent absence of parents dropping their children

to educational institutions, undoubtedly seemed to play a significant role in alleviating traffic congestion.

It also begs the question: Could better utilization of school buses such as STEMS, coupled with willingness from parents to embrace this mode of transport, contribute to a sustained reduction of morning traffic jams? While I acknowledge the challenges parents face in entrusting their children to school buses for a number of reasons, as I myself am a young woman too, it is worth considering the broader impact on traffic flow.

This letter is not to criticize anyone, especially not the parents, but a gentle reminder that we all have our part to play in all aspects of governance including tackling traffic congestion. While government intervention and policies remain crucial, our individual choices also add weight towards shap-

ing the traffic landscape of our state.

Yours etc.,  
Cassandra K. Gathphoh,  
Shillong -14

**Of fake notifications**

Editor,  
These days one sees fake notifications and circulars attributed to the government, being circulated by some groups and individuals. This is uncalled for and needs to be dealt with severely in accordance with the law. Creating and circulating false information like that has caused panic, confusion, and raises many questions. Henceforth the credibility of any information will be questioned and government notifications will not be taken seriously because of this menace.  
An example is the no-

tification of the closure of schools and institutions on account of the cyclonic storm. A fake or forged notification appeared on social media saying that all government offices and institutions too would remain closed thereby creating both panic and confusion.

Secondly, the fake circulation of the MBOSE, HSSLC and SSLC result notification has also become a trend, happening as it does every year. Why is this happening from time to time? Why can't we put a stop to this nuisance and nip it in the bud? Its high time that individuals indulging in such cyber-crimes are apprehended and given stringent punishment.

It's a crime to disseminate wrong information to the public and the Indian Penal Code has clearly mandated that anyone involved in cyber-crime should be dealt with stringently. The IT Cell

of the State Government or the Cyber-Crime Branch of the Police Department can easily track who is the perpetrator who first escalated the information which spread like wildfire.

May I suggest that the Government upload these orders and notifications on their official websites so as to enable the public to verify the authenticity of the orders/circulars issued with QR codes printed on them to prevent misuse and so that the same can be verified on our mobile phones. This practice of circulating fake notices in the name of the government has to stop!

Yours etc.,  
Chanmiki Laloo  
Shillong - 2

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"Your silence will not protect you."

— Audre Lorde

## The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXV No. 289

SHILLONG, FRIDAY, MAY 31, 2024

### Pakistan as villain

IT'S often difficult to decipher the positions taken by Pakistani politicians vis-à-vis bilateral relations. They speak in one tone and act to the contrary; or their positive moves get scuttled at the hands of the military establishment there. This being the past experience, the "affirmation" by former president Nawaz Sharif that Pakistan, not India, violated the 1999 Lahore Declaration does not mean much. This does not mean the Pakistani government is ready to make amends. Sharif had been driven to the wall, sent to exile, and politically struggled hard for six years before he now returned as elected head of his PML-N party that has his brother as the Prime Minister. Notably, the 1999 Declaration for peace signed by Sharif and Vajpayee, as PMs, was short-lived. Within months, army chief Pervez Musharraf scuttled that agreement by a military intrusion into Jammu and Kashmir, which resulted in the Kargil War and massive deaths. Sharif, who was still PM, could only grin and bear with it.

India and Pakistan have been having more strained relations thereafter, which turned worse during the first term of the Narendra Modi-led government. This, even as Modi too held out an olive branch to Sharif, while he was again serving as PM there for a third term between 2013-17. Modi's abrupt, but highly publicized landing in Lahore to wish Sharif on his birthday, raised hopes of an improvement in bilateral relations. However, the Pakistani army undercut such sentiments by organising a 'terrorist' (read secret military) siege of the Pathankot air base. Uri, Pulwama and much else followed. Pakistan broke its diplomatic relations with India after the 2019 central government decision to end the special status for Kashmir. In between, Balakot happened, which drilled some sense into the minds of both the political and military leaderships of Pakistan. They lay low thereafter.

Fact of the matter is, the Pakistani army often asserted its supremacy over the elected government. It's also the reason why, when Americans negotiate a deal with the Pakistan government, they invite and hold parallel discussions with the military chiefs too. Pakistan's history is marked by military coups that unseated elected governments and hanging of top political executives like Zulfikar Bhutto. Even the assassination of his daughter, former PM Benazir Bhutto who landed in Pakistan after years of exile to participate in the elections, was believed to be at the behest of the Pakistani military. After the IAF air-strikes in Balakot and the surgical strikes in PoK, however, the Pakistani military lost some of its bargaining power with the political establishment. Sharif, if he's sincere about his words now, should attempt a fresh positive start to mend his nation's ties with India where a new government is in the offing.

Khasi women have grown up being told that they should not speak over men in any gathering. Tradition ordains that women are custodians of the domestic space (ki kam jing, kam iing) and therefore have no understanding of the world outside it hence they would not have the bandwidth to engage in 'world affairs' (ki kam pyrthei).

I would not be too far off the mark if I said that even in a much-trumpeted and often unfairly eulogized matrilineal society that is the subject of interest of overseas and national scholars, women by and large have pygmy-sized self-worth. If you ask them anything they will dither before they answer. After all they have been schooled to believe that a woman who speaks boldly is a 'hen that crows' - an abomination if there's one. So each time one speaks to rural women out there toiling hard for two square meals, many as single parents, they will smile away their deep-seated insecurities and give answers that will just help them get away without saying much. I have prodded women about the candidates contesting elections in their constituencies and whether they have gone to those candidates with their specific problems? They gasp in disbelief. "How can we go to the candidate with our problems? Why would they listen to us? They are such busy people. And when they come to the village it is only to campaign for themselves. The Rangbah Shnong and other members of the dorbar are there to engage with the candidates. How can we women even go anywhere near the podium?" This is the story of our lives as women. Always in the background; always listening; never able to speak our minds for fear of being shouted down with 'wat leh stad' ('don't be over-smart').

It's only in a women's only forum that women are able to speak more freely but here they are speaking to each other and sharing their woes. Each one has some problems; some issues to resolve. It becomes an echo-chamber unless there is a leader who will take down notes and make sure that those grievances reach the

# When Will the Matriarchs Crow?

By Patricia Mukhim

right quarters for affirmative action. It is here that the idea of self-help groups (SHGs) comes as a ray of hope for women.

Last week the School of Languages and Cultural Communication and the Centre for Gender Equity and Diversity, Education and Research of the Martin Luther Christian University (MLCU) in collaboration with Film South Asia and Hri Institute, Kathmandu, Nepal held a two-day film screening and art exhibition on the theme - Challenging the Visual Depiction of Women and Violence in the Media in South Asia. As a member of the audience watching the documentaries - some with scenes that were raw and soul-searing such as the protests by women in Pakistan demanding more rights to their bodies and calling out the cruelties inflicted by the male members of their society, I must admit I had never seen such a spirited protest. Here were women who were accosted cheek by jowl by men who said they were violating the tenets of Islam by asking for the right to decide on their own rights and freedoms over their bodies. The women protestors, most of them young, articulate and educated would meet and strategize on how to go about their protests. They were a committed bunch that would not retrace their steps and go back into the dark crevices of a life controlled by the male. It was such a brave, protest like nothing I have witnessed before.

Later in a conversation with others in the audience, I expressed my admiration for those women protestors in Pakistan who despite all odds and defying the mullahs came out to demand their rights to a gender equitable society. I also lamented that it is unfortunate that we don't have such protests by women in Meghalaya. In fact, there isn't a single robust women's civil society group that will come out to the streets if need be to raise the banner of protest against all the adversities faced by women here; the growing cases of rape and sexual abuse; the barely

working health care system in some of the unreached villages like Rasong to name one. The answer from the people around me was shattering. They said, "We in Meghalaya are so much better off. We don't suffer the kind of domination or the atrocities that women in Pakistan do." Oh really? So, we matriarchs of a matrilineal society are better off but how? Do we have a voice in governance? Do we have reproductive rights? Can women decide how many children to have? No way! Not now, not in the past. Reproductive rights are the exclusive rights of the educated, urban elite; not the poor woman hawker or the woman slogging in the field or the domestic help we use to lighten our burdens.

True there are NGOs dedicated to serving the cause of women but they won't or can't be caught organising a protest for they would lose whatever little support they get from government or some funding agencies. A protest should be a spontaneous response from a civil society group dedicated to women's issues. Why do we not see such a civil society in Meghalaya? Why are all pressure groups led by male members? And this in a matrilineal society! Khasi women have yet to realise that voice is agency. Once they have spoken they empower themselves. We have been repeating ad-nauseam the words "women's empowerment," for decades now. What we don't ask is who will empower women? Women's empowerment means that power must be equitably shared between women and men in all spheres. I am using the word "equitably" and not equal because there is a perceptible difference between the two. Equality means each individual or group of people is given the same resources or opportunities. Equity recognizes that each person has different sets of attributes or a disadvantage. Hence any assistance must address the disadvantage by making use of their strengths. It means allocating the exact resources and opportunities needed to reach an equal

outcome. The reason why many schemes fail is because they adopt a 'one size fits all' model.

Coming back to the MLCU film festival, after the films were shown there followed a panel discussion on the theme of visual depiction of women and violence in media portrayal where a panelist teaching in North Eastern Hill University stated that there's pushback from the students when any topic on violence against women is discussed. This was followed by a statement from a student who said she did not believe in feminism. Earlier that distraught student had shared how she was sexually abused at age 12 and how she had to relive her agony when her case went to court and the defence lawyer would cross question and confuse her with his intimidatory tactics. She seemed to have lost faith in the justice system too. She might not be the only one. And she comes from a matrilineal society.

One really doesn't see how women in a matrilineal society are more privileged than their peers in a patriarchal society because patriarchal undertones and sometimes overtones operate in Khasi society too. The much touted, "women can own land" syndrome is now an urban legend. In the villages there is landlessness staring women in their faces.

Coming back to voice, as a woman editor one is always looking out for women writers to contribute their thoughts so one gets to know their minds and the breadth of understanding on issues but this is like looking for a needle in a haystack. Women's voices can help deliver better governance and engender a more equitable world. When will women speak up and speak out boldly and when will they claim their space in this world where women are brainwashed to believe they hold up half the world? No, they don't. It's still a man's world out there.

So the hen must crow and the unheard female voice must rise like the sphinx into a crescendo. Let more hens crow if that is needed to change this world into a more equitable place under the same sun. And let's remember, that for us Khasis the sun is female.

## World No Tobacco Day 2024

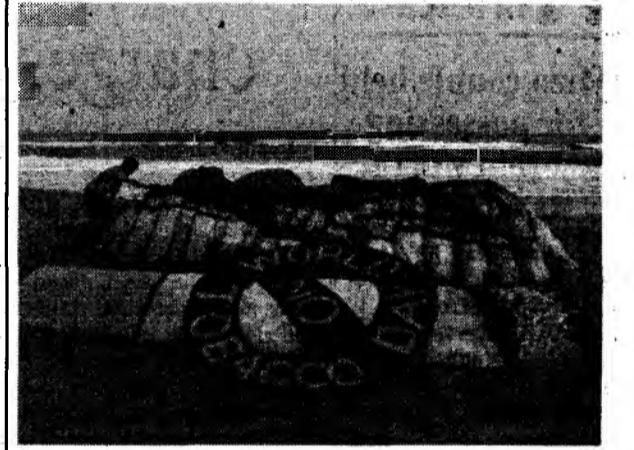
By Dr. Caleb Harris

We have witnessed a lot of action in the past few days, purportedly as a fight against drugs. While not everyone will agree with the action taken, none would disagree with the need to act against drugs. It was heartening to read about the plans of the government to bolster the Village Defence Parties to address the challenges posed by drug trafficking and abuse. And it is wonderful to note the concern shown by the pressure groups towards the drug menace. Drugs are a threat to society and need to be curbed by a multi-pronged approach. Studies have shown that use of tobacco by children may lead to drug use as they grow older. Hence tobacco is considered a 'Gateway Drug'. This is very important in Meghalaya because, according to the Global Youth Tobacco Survey 2019, 34% of 13 to 15 year-olds in Meghalaya were found to be using tobacco. This is a survey done among children aged 13 to 15 years of age, commissioned by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India (GoI) and found that across India, the corresponding rate was 8%. Sad, because many of these

children, who are exposed to these products at a young age may feel that it is normal for people to use tobacco and in future may go on to use drugs too. I am sure many of us would have seen minors selling tobacco and if we explain the consequences, some of them may change for the better.

The Government of Meghalaya, through a joint effort by the departments of health and education, has successfully implemented the 'Tobacco Free Educational Institution' (ToFEI) program to curb use of Tobacco by school students. As part of this program, the school is expected to ensure that no tobacco product is sold in and around schools (upto a radius of 100 metres), no teachers (or other staff) use tobacco in the school and activities such as pledge against tobacco are taken up on a regular basis by the students. The students have participated in rallies to spread awareness about the ill effects of tobacco around the state and have conducted a signature campaign to this effect too. But such an initiative of the government would be fruitless without the support of the society.

World No Tobacco Day



children are likely to take to the use of drugs. Apart from this, these children are at risk of cancers, respiratory and cardiac illnesses. As a child, I have noticed

has been observed on the 31st of May every year, since 1987. An initiative of the World Health Organisation (WHO), this year, the theme is "Protecting chil-

Youngsters across the world are appealing to their governments to adopt policies which would protect them from the schemes of the tobacco industry. The Meghalaya govt has adopted the theme, 'My Meghalaya, Tobacco-free Meghalaya', which has been propagated widely by the school children.

that society played a role in curbing the use of addictive substances by children. The elders would scold children who smoked or chewed tobacco, betel nuts, etc, even if they were total strangers. But sadly, in Meghalaya, I have seen several kids using tobacco in public places, with the elders around them not concerned about this. This is probably because many of these 'elders' consume tobacco themselves too. Not surprisingly, 47% of adults in Meghalaya use tobacco, as compared to the national average of 28.6% according to the Global Adult Tobacco Survey (GATS 2016-17).

The shop where I frequently purchase groceries and vegetables is run by a family with three school-going children. While the older children help in the shop, the youngest kid plays around the shop after school hours. Earlier, tobacco products were openly displayed and I have seen the children assist in selling these to customers. After explaining to them the provisions of the COTPA (Cigarettes and Other Tobacco Products Act), they no longer display tobacco products openly, but the sale continues. As per COTPA, smoking in public places, selling tobacco products to or by minors, or selling tobacco products within a radius of 100 metres from any educational institution is illegal. Establishments where tobacco products are sold must display messages like "Tobacco Causes Cancer" and "Sale of tobacco products to a person under the age of eighteen years is a punishable offence under

drugs from tobacco industry interference," and aims to give a platform to young people across the world, who are calling for the tobacco industry to stop targeting them with products that are harmful to their health. The tobacco industry targets the young children because they will continue to use tobacco for several years, and since many of these tobacco users live truncated lives, the industry needs younger people to join the user pool. Youngsters across the world are appealing to their governments to adopt policies which would protect them from the schemes of the tobacco industry. The Meghalaya government has adopted the theme, 'My Meghalaya, Tobacco-free Meghalaya', which has been propagated widely by the school children.

Society needs to take responsibility for curbing the use of tobacco, as this will have multiple benefits. Apart from impacting the incidence of cancers, which is higher than the rest of the country, it would lead to much lesser respiratory and heart diseases too. This would improve the economy of the state as illnesses may lead to poverty. Since this can impact the state in several ways, the pressure groups should take upon themselves the task of educating people on COTPA, thereby reducing the usage of tobacco and this in turn may impact the drug use too.

(Dr Caleb Harris, MCh is Surgical Oncologist at NEIGRIHMS. Email: surgonco@outlook.com Views expressed are personal)

### Letters to the Editor

#### Stolen freedom of June 4, 2024

Editor,

It was on March 2, 2023 that celebratory rejoicing filled the streets of Shillong. With all educational institutions closed, even the youth could join in celebrating the victory of their respective elected representatives. On that day all the gatherings and rallies observed law and order. It was a day to celebrate democracy. Come 2024, and questions arise as to why the supporters of candidates for the Lok Sabha election cannot celebrate the victory of their candidate? Are we considered as threats to the Government of the State? If so, in what senseless way will we obstruct peace, law and order on June 4, 2024? Articles 14 and 19 of the Indian Constitution respectively read that the State shall not deny any person equality before the law or equal protection of laws within India, and that, under the 6 freedoms, we have the freedom and right to assemble peacefully without arms. Now, Section 144 Cr.PC unarguably, authorises the Executive Magistrates to issue an order to prohibit the assembly of four or more people. However, this would be reasonable and valid if and only if the concerned group or mass of people are a threat to the State's law and order.

This law, preventive in nature, is valid in urgent cases of nuisance and when there is apprehension of breakdown of law and order. So, is the

public a threat to the peace and order of the State? We, as the public, respect all laws and regulations that protect us from injustice, inequality and threats present in the society as we solely rely upon the Government to provide us equal laws and to view us as equals in the eyes of the law. We seek freedom and rights to protect the interests and opinions of individuals even as we obey the laws that bind us together. However, to live to see the day when a government seeks to steal the rights that have been so given to us, is a shock and disappointment, for me as a youth hoping for a better democratic and equal future.

We are willing to comply with any reasonable conditions brought forward by the authorities to ensure that our gatherings and rallies on June 4, are peaceful and will not result in any disharmony. Since past celebratory rallies have been safe and non-threatening, the public has demonstrated its ability to safely, peacefully and joyfully celebrate its victories.

This letter is not meant to side with any participating political party, as the results have yet to be declared. It is a respectful request to the authorities to lift the restrictions imposed and allow the public to take part in peaceful gatherings and rallies on June 4 next. I urge the public to stand up for OUR rights and exercise the equally influential powers that we hold. Democracy lies in our hands and in our voices. Let us, then, participate in protecting and exercising our

'Rights' towards achieving a 'Stronger Democracy' and an equal future.

Yours etc.,  
laphilaniekor Thangkiew,  
Via email

#### Liberal spaces invaded

Editor,

After the alphabet 'e' comes 'f.' Similarly, education is the road to freedom. Leo Tolstoy rightly said that the only purpose of education is freedom. Then, what is the purpose of education when academic freedom is restricted? In the 2023 Academic Freedom Index, India is among 22 countries (out of 179) where institutions and scholars enjoy "significantly less freedom today than 10 years ago".

But is there any sign of improvement after the publication of the report in February last year? Recently over 600 alumni of Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) have criticised their Alma Mater over the two-year suspension of a Dalit scholar for taking part in an anti-government protest using the name of the Institute.

The alumni urged the TISS administration to repeal the suspension of Ramadas Prini Sivanandan, who took part in a demonstration outside Parliament during a protest programme on National Education Policy in January under the banner - Progressive Students Forum, TISS. The alumni in its statement said that the action by the TISS is opposed to the democratic values and

constitutional ethos of social justice, inclusivity, and free thought that have been instilled by the institute over generations.

There was another incident that happened at TISS in January this year. The students of the Institute have been organising the Bhagat Singh Memorial lecture every year from 2018 onwards. It was held at the campus amphitheatre until 2020 before Covid forced a shift online in 2021 and 2022.

In 2023, human rights activist Harsh Mander was to speak at the event at the amphitheatre. But the Institute denied him permission. Thereafter, it was held online. The students informed the TISS administration in December 2023 that in 2024 Magsaysay award winner, social activist Bezwada Wilson would deliver the lecture.

Interestingly, the Institute which had been regarded as a liberal campus, came up with a notice on February 16 stating that the lecture, which was scheduled to be delivered on February 17 that TISS would not associate with the event in any capacity. However, the event was organised over Zoom by the Students Organising Committee, an independent forum of TISS students. Wilson, a campaigner for the eradication of manual scavenging and caste atrocities, delivered the Bhagat Singh Memorial Lecture on, "Human rights and constitutional values in contemporary times: Role of University and Public".

A student observed that

the Institute had been trying to restrict student-led activities for one year. The student further said, "In the name of issuing new guidelines, the Institute has been creating hurdles for students' activities. The students are major stakeholders and have a say in the management of the Institute. Efforts to curb their voices are undemocratic and unacceptable."

India performed poorly in the academic freedom report about campus integrity because of political interference. The situation has been deteriorating further since the publication of the report. Sabyasachi Das, an assistant professor at Ashoka University, resigned as a result of the controversy over his research paper on India's democratic backsliding.

Recently, Unacademy, an online education platform, fired an instructor, Karan Sangwan, after a video of him talking to students about voting for educated candidates went viral. All these incidents are in sync with the Academic Freedom Index which described the autonomy of Indian institutions to express views on political issues as very poor.

We must not forget Albert Einstein's views about restrictions on academic freedom. He said, "It is evident that any restriction on academic freedom acts in such a way as to hamper the dissemination of knowledge among the people and thereby impedes national judgement and action."

Yours etc.,  
Sujit De,  
Kolkata

#### Root Canal Therapy

Editor,

Deep within my heart, I feel voices whispering to me to write about the Umiam dam repair, which I term as 'Root Canal Therapy', or (RTC) till we get a new wisdom tooth (new Umiam dam bridge), by the wisdom of an enlightened one after 25 or 30 years of life expectancy. When experts were on board already, why was not the decision taken earlier to go for the RCC work? The long stretch of road from Jagiro to Nagaon stretch is an RCC one. What was the need to go for bitumen surface which requires frequent repairs with every monsoon season? Is this bridge not the lifeline to our State? If we happen to arrive at the Umiam bridge during the night we are left twiddling our thumbs or chew betel nuts, while tourists and families walk bare feet, being gracious enough to go patiently with the extended grace period sought for. Only in Meghalaya would a less than 1 km road repair take nearly a year to complete. What governance model is this?

Yours etc.,  
Joydeep Sharma  
Shillong-2

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