

"To educate a man in mind and not in morals is to educate a menace to society."
— Theodore Roosevelt

The Shillong Times

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Stray Dog Menace

RECENT reports that 27 people have died in the last two years due to rabies with 16 deaths reported in 2024 alone is frightening. The problem is a complete lack of responsibility of people who rear non-pedigreed dogs. These dogs mate at any time and produce at least 5-6 litter which are then left to fend for themselves as the dog owners dispose of the pups at distant places where they can't trace their way back. It is not just the areas within Shillong Municipality that are vulnerable to bites by stray dogs. Large parts of this city which are beyond the ambit of the Municipality also suffer similar grievances. This is more so with morning walkers who are suddenly attacked by a pack of strays. It is pointless talking of personal responsibility to a citizenry that is not used to the rule of law. Meghalaya does not have a law on how to deal with stray dogs. Add to that the bleeding-heart animal lovers who believe that anyone asking for action against stray dogs are inhuman. Sadly, these dog lovers themselves are unable to deal with the increased number of strays unless they make that a full time job, which they cannot unless they come from affluent families where parents indulge their children's passions.

The sad part of this whole saga is that people are actually dying of rabies. The State Surveillance Officer of the Integrated Disease Surveillance Programme (IDSP), had recently stated that 96 per cent of the rabies cases in Meghalaya have been attributed to dog bites. It is common knowledge that in villages most families rely on traditional healing methods against dog bites. This is due to complete lack of awareness about rabies and how it quickly enters the bloodstream after the dog bite and that anti-rabies injections are compulsory to ensure that the dog bite victim does not succumb to rabies. That a nurse from West Khasi Hills would herself die of rabies after being bitten by a stray dog tells us the extent of the problem.

There is a need for a comprehensive policy on keeping dogs as pets. As of today, it's free for all. Owners keep female dogs that give birth to pups multiple times in their lifetime. Only those with pedigreed pets take them to the Animal Husbandry and Veterinary Department for neutering so that they don't give birth more than once. In any case these pedigreed dogs are only allowed to mate with others of their ilk. The problem is with strays reared by people as guard dogs. Such people will not take the trouble to get the female dogs neutered since it takes too much time and effort which they cannot afford. It is important for the Health Department to take an urgent call on this and work in tandem with the Municipal Boards, and the Animal Husbandry and Veterinary Department.

The farcical cow rally that was aborted

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

The farcical disaster of the proposed Gau Dhvaj Yatra, organized by Shankaracharya Swami Avimukteshwarananda Saraswati of Jyotirmath, ended in a tragic-comedy. The self-proclaimed leader of cow protection waved his cow flag from the aircraft after being denied permission to land. He has threatened to take the Meghalaya Government to the Supreme Court for this denial. It remains unclear whether he will also pursue legal action against the Governments of Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh, who similarly chased him away. Regardless, his grand entry into Meghalaya and the humiliation he intended to inflict on its indigenous population have been thwarted—at least for now. The term 'humiliation' is used deliberately, as this event seemed aimed at compelling the indigenous people to abandon their culture in favour of a foreign one, symbolizing submission and subjugation. This intent becomes clear when considering his speech in Sikkim, which was part of the itinerary before his attempt to enter the other Northeastern states.

In Sikkim, while sitting atop a throne, the Swami complained about the Nagaland government's decision to stop him from entering the state. He expressed that for believers of Sanātana Dharma, the cow is their mother. For those who may not know, Sanātana Dharma is a term being popularized instead of Hinduism to suggest that it is timeless and one of the most ancient religions in the world. However, it is well known that this religion is a mixture of ideas and gods brought from Central Asia by the semi-nomadic Indo-Aryans, who combined them with local gods and practices to create what is now known as Hinduism. This happened after 3,500 years ago. By these dates, Sanātana Dharma is not even older than Niam Khasi, which is much older having arrived in the subcontinent with the Khasi around 5000-6000 years ago. Sanskrit—the sacred language of Sanātana Dharma—emerged only around 4,500 to 4,200 years ago. In the early period when Hinduism was still evolving, the cow was part of the diet and considered a delicacy served to special guests. Much later, it became sacred, and the drama unfolding in recent days is based on this later development in the religion.

Every religion evolves, and the reverence for the cow—which was not as pronounced in the past—is part of this process for Hinduism. It's possible that in the future, Hindus may choose to reconnect with their roots by revisiting past dietary practices, including eating beef. However, that should be their own choice, and not an imposition. Similarly, attempts to force the reverence of the cow onto indigenous peoples

is also condemnable. In his speech in Sikkim, however, the Swami was not content with simply highlighting the sacredness of the cow for Hindus. He made many other highly provocative statements as well.

The Swami told the audience that Muslims and Christians do not consider the cow as their mother and, therefore, do not share the same reverence for it as Hindus do. He was especially disappointed that the Nagaland government convened a cabinet meeting to prevent him from entering the state. Bemused, he asked why he was denied permission to speak with the local indigenous community about the need to protect the cow. He argued that only by meeting and discussing their differing perceptions can a way forward be devised. However, if both sides remain adamant in their positions, it will be difficult for people to come together. He expressed concern that without consensus, the country would struggle to stay united. Thus, for the sake of unity, he emphasized the need to discuss this issue, which he claimed affects all citizens. Except for this last part, where he suggested that cow protection is a matter of national importance—more significant than unemployment, inflation, women's safety, and corruption—he sounded quite liberal and accommodating. However, immediately after these words, his true intentions were revealed.

The Swami remarked that it is untenable for both sides to remain intransigent in their respective positions. According to him, the country is governed by the majority, and sooner or later, if the majority makes a choice, the minority will have to accept that decision. Therefore, it is important to dialogue and find a way forward rather than forcing the minority to accede to the demands of the majority. He also warned that if the cow is not protected, he would request the Government of India to shoot him, as he cannot bear to see cows being butchered. This shift from a tone of accommodation to issuing clear threats about imposing the will of the majority on the minority is a clear provocation and intimidation aimed at the indigenous peoples of the Northeast. The planting of a cow flag was meant to be a symbolic step in that direction.

One of the most pivotal moments of the 2021 farmers' protest against the three contentious farm laws introduced by the NDA government was the planting of flags by some of the protesters on the domes of the Red Fort. One of the flags was the Nishan Sahib, a religious flag of the Sikh community, recalling the time when, on March 11, 1783, the Sikh

army captured the Red Fort from the Mughals. This was seen as a provocative move intended to undermine the sovereignty of the nation. Farmers' groups quickly denied the allegations that it was orchestrated by them, but the damage had been done. Some of the farmers' unions decided to quit the protest, and many protesting farmers also left the site. Then, on January 28, two days after the events at the Red Fort, Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU) leader Rakesh Tikait cried on live TV, alleging that goons hired by the BJP were assaulting the remaining farmers. This proved to be the turning point of the movement, with farmers returning in droves to the protest site. Galvanized, the protesters vowed not to leave until the three farm laws were repealed. Eventually, the BJP Government was forced to retract and recently Kangana Ranaut, BJP MP from Himachal Pradesh, had to apologize for urging the farmers to request the government to bring back the laws. The planting of the flags could have been the death knell of the farmers' movement, but the tears of a farmer leader saved it.

The planting of a flag, therefore, is a very significant and symbolic practice. When planted in a territory, it represents victory and subjugation of that territory and its people. In this context, where beef is an important item of food and ritual for the indigenous peoples, it was meant to showcase the victory of a more superior religion and culture over them. The imposition of the majority view over the minority, to which the Swami was alluding in his speech, would have been fulfilled if he had been allowed to plant the cow flag. An important point to note is that the decades-old Indo-Naga conflict is currently stalled over two demands: the issue of a separate Naga flag and Constitution. The Swami is well aware of the symbolism involved, and the denial of that is a significant victory for the indigenous peoples in their struggle to maintain their culture and autonomy.

The issue of declaring the cow as a national animal and banning the consumption of beef is part of an old Hindutva agenda. One might therefore assume that this drama is also part of the goals that the Sangh Parivar and its affiliates harbour. In this case, however, personal ambition and animosity are also involved. Let us examine who Shankaracharya Swami Avimukteshwarananda Saraswati is and what exactly his role is in Indian politics.

Shankaracharya Swami Avimukteshwarananda Saraswati came into the limelight when he refused to participate in the pran pratishtha (the rite or cer-

emony by which an idol of a deity is consecrated in a Hindu temple) of the Ram Temple organized by Prime Minister Modi. He cited that such a ceremony goes against religious scriptures since the temple was incomplete. The inauguration of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya was aimed at garnering Hindu votes for the 2024 Lok Sabha elections by the BJP. Ironically, the party lost Ayodhya in the ensuing elections to a candidate from the Dalit community, who are barred from entering temples and are treated as untouchables. The Swami also alleged that 228 kg of gold was missing from the Kedarnath temple and criticized the construction of a replica Kedarnath Temple in Delhi, arguing that the original temple belongs in the Himalayas. He has also stated that Shiv Sena (UBT) leader Uddhav Thackeray was a victim of betrayal and that the people of Maharashtra have suffered from this betrayal. Another Hindu religious leader, Swami Sri Govindananda Saraswati Maharaj, leveled allegations against him, claiming he is a fake baba who is "killing and kidnapping people." In summary, Swami Avimukteshwarananda Saraswati is a divisive figure who has shown a tendency to dabble in politics. Most recently, he attacked Modi for not enacting a law to ban cow slaughter throughout the country and claimed that India has never had a President or Prime Minister who could be called a 'real' Hindu.

One therefore wonders if this farcical Gau Dhvaj Yatra was another political stunt he pulled to humiliate Modi and bolster his reputation as a devout Hindu willing to lay down his life (asking the government to shoot him if they don't enact a law to ban cow slaughter) for the sake of religion. Whatever it may be, as indigenous people, we must always be vigilant not to allow our autonomy and freedom to be trampled by foreign forces.

I would like to thank all those (individuals and groups) who resisted this attempt and forced the MDA Government to belatedly come to the rescue of the indigenous peoples of the state. I would also like to thank the Shillong Central Puja Committee (CPC) for making it clear that they do not support the cow protection group and their move to hold a rally demanding a ban on beef consumption. With this farce over, I would like to wish the non-indigenous community, who were about to be used as pawns in this game of personal ambition, a happy and successful puja. I hope we can stand together against such divisive politics in the future as well.

(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)

Reflections on Gandhi Jayanti

By Sudarshan Iyengar

Some October 2 and we remember Gandhi. It is reassuring that at least the ritual continues. Let us hope that with the help of the ritual, the philosophy of lived non-violence will become the nature of humanity. Till 2022, it used to be argued that wars were down but armed conflicts rose. Then came the Russia-Ukraine war, and 2022 alone witnessed a more than 50 per cent increase in conflict-related civilian deaths, according to the United Nations. The Israeli invasions and bombings of Palestine have made this global situation worse and we have an unending cycle of death and misery being inflicted on the Palestinian people now. The misery of wars apart, violence comes in other ways and means, loosely branded as "conflicts".

Conflicts now tend to be continuous, unending and normalised. They are sometimes seen as less deadly in the sense that violence is often between domestic groups rather than two full-fledged or equally powerful States. Unresolved regional tensions, a breakdown in the rule of law, absent or co-opted State institutions, illicit economic gain, and the scarcity of resources exacerbated by climate change, have become dominant drivers of conflict. Separately, the UN has also noted that "technological advances have raised concerns about lethal autonomous weapons and cyber attacks, the weaponization of bots and drones, and the live-streaming of extremist attacks," coupled with a "rise in criminal activity involving data hacks and ransomware (just as) international cooperation is under strain, diminishing global potential for the prevention and resolution of conflict and violence in all forms."

The Global Peace Index 2024 notes that 92 countries are involved in conflicts. Gaza and Ukraine are the primary drivers for the fall in global peace. Last year alone saw some 162,000 deaths due to conflicts. The US military capabilities are up three times higher than China. Global GDP affected was 13.5 % or \$ 19.1 trillion in 2023. Competitive approaches and policies, notably the US-China strains are also believed to be a driver of a series of conflicts between and within countries.

A worrying aspect is also that homicides are becoming more frequent in some parts of the world, while gender-based attacks are increasing globally. The long-term impact on the development of interpersonal violence, including violence against children, is also more widely recognized.

Gandhi remains a mute witness to these happenings in the world today. Humanity has become conveniently ignorant and forgotten that manifest violence and conflicts have deep connections with how we think, behave and live. Ignorance and intellectual arrogance deliver disasters in personal lives. Honesty and integrity are at stake. Human virtues have given way to vices due to greed and indulgence. People holding the highest public offices are hardly persons of character. This is a fundamental crisis.

This is not to offer some lofty thoughts or to take a moral pedestal. Let us recognise that our character collectively (including this writer), is responsible for what is manifest in the collective behaviour of all of us irrespective of country and place. To build a peaceful world with minimum conflicts and violence individuals will have to be educated to self-regulate and handle individual liberty.

Individual liberty has led to licentious behaviour ignoring, violating and subverting social norms and State laws. Gandhi in Hind Swaraj has quoted Thomas Henry Huxley, a well-known biologist and anthropologist of the 19th Century. "That man, I think, has had a liberal education who has been so trained in his youth that his body is the ready servant of his will and does with ease and pleasure all the work that, as a mechanism, it is capable of; whose intellect is clear... whose mind is stored with knowledge of the great and

fundamental truths of Nature and the laws of her operations... knows passions are trained to come to heel by a vigorous will, the servant of a tender conscience... to hate all villainess and to respect others as himself. Such a one and no other, I conceive, has had a liberal education, for he is in harmony with nature. He will make the best of her and she of him."

Unfortunately, the education system all over the world has failed to educate the next generation in the spirit mentioned above. Violence will not go away in a day. It is the next generations that we have to educate. Gandhi had demonstrated that education of heart, hand and head in that sequence was the philosophy and pedagogy of education.

The prevalent education system indirectly inculcates the spirit of competition and 'me first'. This relegates the spirit of cooperation, compassion and love. Competition is for a 'good life'. A good life is increasing seen as bodily comfort and pleasure. It is not able to lead individuals to happiness in life. Unlimited demand for physical resources and uninterrupted supply of them is deemed growth and development of individuals and reflected in the growth of Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

It is understood now that the conflicts within a country and between countries are mainly to command natural and man-made resources that produce physical goods and services for bodily comfort and pleasure. Of course, there is a section that claims that this is a quest for truth to know Nature as deeply as possible and make the earth the best living planet with prosperity. Competition, conflict and unbridled consumption coupled with a crisis of character have led religious fundamentalism to rise to save and attack so-called liberal societies and nations.

Ethnic violent conflicts are also essentially to have political and economic controls. The global hunger for power and dominance to enable command over resources fans hatred for each other. It may not sound very logical and connections may appear weak between the politico-economic power games and the rising religious fundamentalism, but a deeper reflection will reveal the connection. The negative features of modernity that have been well discussed by Gandhi more than a hundred years back have led certain traditional societies to take recourse to religious fundamentalism, enslave their populations in archaic beliefs and brainwash them to raise bloody wars in the name of establishing a religion-based civilisation.

This does not augur well for humanity. Race, economic inequality, religion and colour prejudices have come back with vengeance and will lead to escalating manifest and structural violence in the world. How does humanity come out of this? Gandhi lived a life and showed it. All his life until the last day he kept reflecting on his weaknesses and tried to remove them to strengthen his character.

This is how Gandhi stayed on his path to gain his 'Swaraj'. Each of us must attempt to do this by self-reflection, self-examination and self-correction. Political and economic decentralisation of power will have to be adopted as a policy by nations. The process will introduce control on over-exploitation of natural resources. In the words of Satish Kumar, founder of the Schumacher College, Devon, U.K., nurturing the soul, loving others in society and caring for soil will lead humanity towards a non-violent world. This exactly is Mahatma Gandhi's message to build a non-violent and liveable world.

(Dr. Sudarshan Iyengar is the former Vice Chancellor of Gujarat Vidyapeeth, the University founded by Mahatma Gandhi in 1920, and is co author of the book 'Abundant Love', a long form conversation with Satish Kumar). (e-mail: editor@thebillionpress.org) (Syndicate: The Billion Press)

Letters to the Editor

KHADC, its own declared Law Adong and Law Syiem

Editor,
There appears to be something fishy that stinks to the high heavens relating to the reported dumping of soil and felling of trees at the so called Law Syiem at Mawroh. The latest report to this puzzle is what came out in your daily on September 30, at page 3 under the caption, "Soil Dumping at Mawroh raises concern." As an ordinary citizen of Shillong I vaguely remember some reports a few days back appearing in the ST on the above mentioned caption, gave it a glance and thought no more about it, thinking that responsible officials of the Hima and the KHADC would have dealt with the problem. Imagine my surprise when the problem apparently refuses to die and continues to raise its ugly head. I think this pernicious problem needs further investigation.

What puzzles me most are the contents of the above

cited report which claims that the Syiem of Mylliem can dump his own soil (read personal garbage) in the so called Law Syiem. Is this true, even when the area has been declared as a Law Adong, which to me declares that the above forest no longer belongs to the Hima Mylliem, to do what it pleases there, but that the above forest is now the property of the Khasi community that is supposed to be cared for, maintained and protected by the KHADC? As a citizen I really wish the Syiem clan and the KHADC to clarify this. Until such clarification, the matter is beginning to stink and is fast turning into a major scam.

Last but not least is the ridiculous statement attributed to Pynshngain N Syiem, Deputy CEM of the KHADC. This official is reported to have stated, "We will take action if we receive an official complaint." Will the Dy CEM act only when he receives a complaint? Is this how the KHADC functions that even reports of an environmental crime appearing in the papers are ignored by their office? The last time I had a look at Para 3 (b) of the Sixth Schedule it

clearly states that the ADC is empowered to make laws relating to the management of any forest not being a reserved forest. The KHADC has made a law and declared the Law Syiem at Mawroh a Law Adong. So please stop making these nonsensical excuses and get cracking at properly managing that forest as you are supposed to. I would sincerely advise you to send your Forest officers to make an on the spot inspection and if the allegations in the papers are proven, to take action against the Syiem of Mylliem as per law. Otherwise the impression of personal collusion between the Syiem Hima Mylliem and the KHADC officials cannot be ruled out.

Yours etc.,
Toki Blah,
Via email

Promoting Respectful and Clean Public Spaces

Editor,
I'm writing to gently highlight an issue that has been concerning me lately. During my daily commute behind

the MBOSE Office towards the Youth Hostel, I've noticed a persistent odour of urine coming from the walls nearby. Sadly, I've also observed drivers, especially of commercial vehicles, stopping to relieve themselves in broad daylight, seemingly unaware of the discomfort it causes to those passing by, particularly women and young girls. It's disheartening because there is a public toilet just 50 meters away. Many people cover their mouths and noses as they pass this area, clearly uncomfortable with the situation.

As we embrace initiatives like the Swachh Bharat campaign, which emphasizes cleanliness as a virtue, it's important that we all contribute to maintaining a clean and pleasant environment. Public spaces are meant for everyone to enjoy respectfully, and these actions detract from the beauty of our city.

I humbly request all to consider using the available facilities rather than public spaces for such needs. Together, we can ensure Shillong remains a clean and welcoming place for all residents and visitors.

Yours etc.
S Bhardwaj
Shillong-1

Collateral damage in the Middle East

Editor,
A high stakes game is currently at play in the Middle East, with the death of Hassan Nasrallah, a one time charismatic political leader of Hezbollah or 'Party of God.' It would definitely change the Middle Eastern geopolitical chessboard. Russia has condemned the attack, terming it as 'political assassination.' History is definitely unforgiving in this region. Joint operations in the past between Mossad and Shin Bet, with constant help from Washington, have nailed down strong figureheads like Yahya Ayyash, known as 'Engineer' to Imad Mughniyah. The Iranians were dealt a body blow from the death of its top Hezbollah military commander Fuad Shukur earlier this year. The constant bombardment in Switzerland of the Middle East has displaced tens of thousands of people, affecting many women and children, according to the United

Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). What implications will this have in the Arab world? Ali Soufan, a former FBI agent and CEO of Soufan Group, in a report 'Foreign Fighters in Syria' says exposure to radicalizing literature or social media content have influenced many from Iran, Somalia, Bangladesh to take part in such conflicts. Repercussions in the current Israel-Palestine theatre can ignite the ideological fuse as next-door neighbour Bangladesh with its unstable governance can pose a threat on an economic and religious scale which is against India's interests.

Former BBC's Middle East Bureau Chief Paul Dannahar's book 'The New Middle East' weaves a 360 degree picture about the past, present and future of this volatile region and which players define the power politics.

Yours etc.,
Christopher Gathphoh,
Shillong-10

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"Great deeds are usually wrought
at great risks."

— Herodotus

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Playing with fire

THE Supreme Court has given a dressing down to politicians misusing religious sentiments and furthering their selfish goals. Those who hold constitutional offices, it ruled, should keep Gods away from their politics. The reference was to the huge drama Andhra Pradesh chief minister Chandrababu Naidu staged by a sensational and provocative proclamation that ghee adulterated with "animal fat" was used in the preparation of Tirumala Tirupati Temple's laddu prasadam in recent times. Naidu's obvious intent was to target previous Chief Minister Jagan Mohan Reddy, during whose governance the alleged sacrilege happened. Jagan Reddy being a Christian by faith, the CM's aim was to create a Hindu backlash against him and his YSR Congress party. The Supreme Court, in its wisdom, noted that the allegation was made without proof and based on suspicion. The Court also posed the question to the Chief Minister why he jumped the gun and made such statements when he himself had ordered a police investigation to unravel the truth. Naidu should rather have "waited for the police report" before shooting from his mouth.

Admittedly, when the CM takes a stand that a wrong was done, the police in its report would hesitate to contradict it. By making a premature judgment, the Chief Minister apparently sought to manipulate the probe itself. This is how politics is getting degenerated across states, if only for the fact that an army of selfish, uncouth politicians are today ruling the roost. Naidu won the recent assembly polls and formed the government. Starkly, he won power within months after he was arrested and jailed for government fund misappropriation. That case is ongoing. His tainted image did not turn into a disadvantage in the electoral arena, simply because he made promises of huge doles to the poor in his election manifesto.

Little wonder that Naidu has got the BJP in his governance bandwagon this time after a period of bitter rivalry his Telugu Desam party had with the saffron politics and he himself sought to pull Prime Minister Narendra Modi's legs five years ago. BJP showed the way in exploiting religious and sectarian sentiments to its electoral advantage. This showed up also in the PM's obsession to appropriate credit for the erection of the new Ram Temple in Ayodhya. These could, unless arrested, lead to a scenario of religious fundamentalism having the upper hand in governance. The Supreme Court understands the seriousness of such dangerous pursuits that can undercut the cause of national harmony and integrity. India is a mosaic of different regions with specific characteristics, religions, races, castes, communities and cultures. To exist here is to co-exist. The apex court intervention to avert a situation of communal or religious conflagration is appreciable. It put paid to Naidu's attempt to play with fire.

Strengthening the Sixth Schedule

Urgent need for state specific chapters to protect Meghalaya's matrilineal tribes

By Erwin K. Syiem Sutnga

The Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution provides for the administration of tribal areas in Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, and Mizoram, as outlined by Article 244(2). However, it has become evident that the existing provisions are inadequate to address the specific needs of matrilineal tribal societies in Meghalaya, such as the Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo tribes. These communities face significant challenges in preserving their cultural identity, traditional grassroots governance systems, and land rights in the absence of explicit constitutional recognition. The ban on felling of timber by the Supreme Court of India in 1996 and the Coal mining ban imposed by the National Green Tribunal in Meghalaya since 2014 are two key dynamics which reflect the inadequacies of the Sixth Schedule to react to even legal forces impinging on the rights of Meghalaya's matrilineal tribes. Key issues like livelihood rights and private land rights when overridden by environmental laws lose out because the safeguard mechanism provided by Para 12 A(b) which is the mechanism to reconcile conflicts of Meghalaya's state laws and laws of Parliament with prevailing customary and traditional practices cannot be implemented because of procedural bottlenecks like requiring Presidential notification. Combine this with state misuse of laws and procedures often blurred by political exigencies and vested interests make for fertile breeding ground for corruption and misuse of power. This is one bottleneck which needs to be removed by returning this power back to the Governor of the State of Meghalaya as it was there prior to statehood in 1972. A dedicated state chapter for Meghalaya within the Sixth Schedule is essential to address these concerns and ensure the survival of the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo tribes' unique matrilineal rights and traditions. Laws made for patriarchal systems have to be modified to nurture and protect the growth of the matrilineal system of Meghalaya while ensuring life practices and livelihood that do no harm but are sustainable in the best traditions of the tribal relationship with the earth. It is true that many traditional values have been eroded or convoluted by vested interpretations which are a constitutional provision of the core matrilineal value system comprising of the prevailing customs and practices especially of the traditional grassroots governance systems.

The Need for Amendment

The issue of amending the Sixth Schedule has been raised multiple times, most recently with the Constitution (One Hundred and Twenty-Fifth Amendment) Bill, 2019, introduced in the Rajya Sabha on 6th February 2019. The bill aimed to enhance the autonomy of village and municipal councils, increase representation for women, increase the elected and nominated seats, provisions related to setting up

of a State Finance Commission and strengthen administrative frameworks for a better delivery service of development and progress in the tribal areas of the District and Territorial Councils of the four states covered by Article 244(2). The bill expired with the holding of the General Elections to Parliament later that year. However, it failed to directly address the needs of the matrilineal structure unique to Meghalaya. The absence of the term "matrilineal" from the Sixth Schedule is a glaring omission, particularly because the Sixth Schedule was designed to protect these tribes. The exclusion leaves the Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo tribes vulnerable to the encroachment of patriarchal systems and challenges to their identity, ancient cultural and traditional grassroots governance systems.

Challenges from New Legislation

Recent legislative changes, such as the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (2023), which replaces the Criminal Procedure Code (1973), and the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita 2023, highlight the urgency for amendments to the Sixth Schedule. Para 5 (3) of the Sixth Schedule provides that the Civil and Criminal Procedure Codes do not apply in autonomous districts unless expressly notified. Para 4 provides for the investment of powers of the District Council Courts under the Indian Penal Code. This creates a potential conflict with the newly implemented Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (2023), which replaces the Indian Penal Code (IPC). Without proper amendments, there will be significant chaos and confusion in administering justice in the tribal areas of Meghalaya. Moreover, a long-standing constitutional anomaly still exists in the Proviso to Paragraph 3 of the Sixth Schedule, which allows for "compulsory acquisition" of tribal land, even though Article 31, which dealt with such provisions, was repealed by the Forty-fourth Amendment in 1978. This is particularly concerning given the protections under the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition Act, 2013, which mandates that land acquisition in Scheduled Areas meaning Tribal Areas in Meghalaya must be a last resort.

Incorporating Principles of Article 371A

In addition to amendments to the Sixth Schedule, the principles of Article 371A—which grants special protection to Nagaland—should also be incorporated into Meghalaya's state chapter. Article 371A protects Nagaland's social, cultural, and customary practices, ensuring that no act of Parliament affecting religion, social practices, or land ownership applies to Nagaland without the approval of its Legislative Assembly. Similar protections should be extended to Meghalaya, ensur-

ing that laws of Parliament do not override the traditional matrilineal customs and practices of the Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo tribes. Coupled with the mechanism of Para 12 A (b) this will prove a powerful constitutional mechanism once the power is returned to the Governor of Meghalaya. By incorporating these principles into Meghalaya's state chapter, the indigenous tribes will have the constitutional safeguards necessary to protect their way of life, especially in the areas of land ownership, livelihood, traditional governance, and cultural practices as well as traditional environmental maintenance and protection.

Need for a Separate State Chapter

A separate state chapter is essential to safeguard Meghalaya's unique traditional governance systems, such as the Dorbar Shong (village councils), Dorbar Raid, and Dorbar Hima, which are crucial for the Khasi and Jaintia people. In Garo Hills, the Nokma system plays a similar role in village and clan land administration. These grassroots governance systems are vital for maintaining the tribes' matrilineal traditions and communal land rights. This also includes the traditional Kur or Clan systems which are so integral to the matrilineal system.

Challenges posed by demographic influx

The need for a state chapter becomes even more urgent considering the demographic pressures facing Meghalaya. Right to Information (RTI) data from the Meghalaya Department of Economics and Statistics indicates that the non-tribal population in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills grew from about 84,000 in 1952 to over 460,000 by 2011. The trend is generally towards an upward trend. This demographic shift, driven by migration and economic opportunities, threatens the tribal way of life. It has also created reactionary situations where organisations like the Khasi Students Union frustrated by the perceived inadequate approach of the Government of Meghalaya have resorted to their own implementation of an "Inner Line" system mainly by social action resulting in ethnic tension and adverse effect on the economic pace of the state since migrant labourers have been targeted. Moreover, the recent ethnic violence in Manipur and political changes in Bangladesh underscore the vulnerability of Meghalaya's tribal population to external pressures. While the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) of 2019 exempts tribal areas under the Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) of Meghalaya, the lack of constitutional recognition for traditional governance institutions like the Dorbar Shong weakens the ADCs' ability to address issues of migration and demographic change. A state chapter that explicitly recognizes matrilineal systems and empowers local

governance bodies is crucial to address these challenges.

Historical Context and Constitutional Gaps

The Sixth Schedule was designed to protect the traditional systems of land tenure, customs, trade and governance in tribal areas. However, historical oversights, such as the failure of the Federation of Khasi States in 1949 to secure constitutional protection for customary land rights, traditions and customary practices have created significant vulnerabilities. Additionally, many clauses of the Instrument of Accession and Annexed Agreement signed by the 25 Khasi States in 1948 remains unincorporated into the Constitution, leaving tribal land and governance systems inadequately protected. A separate state chapter for Meghalaya would correct these historical oversights and provide a comprehensive legal framework for preserving tribal identity, land rights, and cultural practices. Incorporating the principles of Article 371A would further ensure that Meghalaya's tribes retain autonomy over their social, cultural, and land-related matters, in line with their customary laws.

Protecting Meghalaya's Matrilineal System

At the core of the argument for a state chapter is the need to protect the matrilineal system, which forms the foundation of Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo identity. The right to land, deeply tied to matrilineal inheritance and identity, is critical to preserving communal ownership, respecting family and clan relationships, rights of women and children. The Khasi and Jaintia tribal moral principles of "Tip biew, Tip Blei" (know man, know God), "Tip Kur, Tip Kha" (know your clan, know your paternal relations), and "Ban Kamai ia ka Hok" (earn an honest living) represent the ethical values of these tribes and should be enshrined in the Sixth Schedule as guiding principles for future generations and be the way forward for India and the world.

Conclusion

A state chapter for Meghalaya within the Sixth Schedule is not just a legal necessity but an identity and cultural imperative. It will provide constitutional safeguards for the matrilineal systems of the Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo tribes while empowering their traditional governance institutions to adapt to modern challenges empowered by the financial and administrative changes envisaged in the 125th Constitutional Amendment Bill, 2019. Incorporating the principles of Article 371A will ensure that the unique social, cultural, traditional grassroots governance system and land rights of Meghalaya's indigenous tribes are protected, preserving their identity and autonomy in the face of external pressures, demographic influx and assault from the dominant patrilineal and patriarchal systems.

(The writer is a practising advocate)

Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

Being Still, and Being Positive...

As I had planned to start the writing of my latest book this morning, my mind was initially feverish with plots and impressive beginnings for the first chapter. It was like hundreds of little characters jumping into my head stamping their feet, waving their hands and vying for attention, and believe you me, there was enough scope for me to think I would grow mad before the first chapter was finished.

But, then came a thought, "Be still Bob!"

I did, and in that stillness has come the beginnings of a book, and I'm enjoying the writing!

It's a simple example but in the famous book Moby Dick, portraying the whaling industry of his time, the author teaches us something about the power of being calm and cool just before getting something done. There is a turbulent scene in which a whaleboat sails across a frothing ocean in pursuit of the great white whale. The sailors are labouring to keep the vessel on course in a raging sea. They labour furiously as they concentrate on the task at hand.

But there is one man however, who does nothing. He doesn't hold an oar; he doesn't perspire; he doesn't shout. He is languid - utterly relaxed, quiet and poised. This man is the harpooner, and his job is to patiently wait for the moment.

Then the author gives us this sentence: "To ensure the greatest efficiency in the dart, the harpooners of this world must jump to their feet out of idleness; and not out of toil!"

What a marvelous picture for effective living!

It's like saying, "You want to earn more, be idle!"

Those who would live each day to the fullest must prepare for them from a state of idleness rather than toil. For many people this means a daily period of quiet and meditation to focus, plan or pray. Self-help expert Brian Tracy calls it an indispensable daily time of planning and preparation. He suggests that we devote a full hour to being alone every morning. That is when we set our daily priorities so that we, and not events, are in charge of our lives.

"I don't have time for that!" Some people complain. "My life is simply too busy to add one more thing to it."

But you will find that a regular period of idleness to chart the day's course, still the mind, listen and prepare, actually creates more time than it takes. For we are most effective when we jump to our feet out of idleness and not out of panic.

I guess it works because the harpooner always got his whale and the keys on my laptop have started grumbling from overwork.

So if you're planning to do something big and exciting, try being still before the kill!

Another thought I'd like to leave you with today is to be positive!

Quite often as a newspaper columnist I forget that instead

of concentrating on the dim side of situations, to remind my readers, things are also bright and beautiful!

Yes, they are! A famous writer was in his study room. He picked up his pen and started writing: "Last year, I had a surgery and my gall bladder was removed. I had to stay stuck to the bed due to this surgery for a long time. The same year I reached the age of 60 years and had to give up my favourite job. I had spent 30 years of my life in this publishing company."

The same year I experienced the sorrow of the death of my father.

And in the same year my son failed his medical exam because he had a car accident. He had to stay in bed at the hospital with the cast on for several days. The destruction of the car was another loss.

At the end he wrote: "Alas! It was such a bad year!"

When the writer's wife entered the room, she found her husband looking sad and lost in his thoughts. From behind his back she read what was written on the paper. She left the room silently and came back with another paper and placed it on side of her husband's writing.

When the writer saw this paper, he found his name written on it with the following lines:

"Last year I finally got rid of my gall bladder due to which I had spent years in pain...."

I turned 60 with sound health and got retired from my job. Now I can utilize my time to write something better with more focus and peace...."

The same year my father, at the age of 95, without depending on anyone or without any critical condition met his Creator...."

The same year, God blessed my son with a new life. My car was destroyed but my son stayed alive without getting any disability!"

At the end she wrote: "This year was an immense blessing of God and it passed well!"

The writer was indeed happy and amazed at such beautiful and encouraging interpretation of the happenings in his life in that year!

It's not just we writers who don't see the good, its all of us. Sometimes I'm angry with the political situation, but as I look back despite Covid-19, I also saw a nation of over a billion people having leadership that tackled the pandemic situation well. It could have been a lot worse looking at the magnitude of the task, but India had men and women who rose to the occasion, and for that we are thankful.

Today, look back and maybe, put a brighter bulb to many a dismal situation we thought we went through the past year, and like the writer's wife, realize, it's not bad, it's good..!

Two thoughts, stillness and positivity..!

(The Author conducts a Writers and Speakers Course for schools, colleges and corporates. For more details call him on 9892572883 or send a message to bobsbanter@gmail.com)

Letters to the Editor

Urgent need for quality assurance in India's pharmaceutical sector

Editor,
The recent findings from a comprehensive report by the Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation (CDSCO), India's leading drug regulatory authority, have raised significant concerns about the quality control processes for numerous pharmaceuticals commonly used in the country. These issues could have serious implications for public health and the overall credibility of India's pharmaceutical sector, which is globally recognised for its extensive production of generic medications.

The CDSCO report lists over 50 pharmaceutical products that do not meet the required quality standards. This list includes medications like "Paracetamol," which is widely used by many as an over-the-counter drug/medicine. Other drugs include antibiotics, drugs relating to treatments for chronic conditions such as diabetes and hy-

pertension, as well as essential supplements like vitamins and calcium. Key issues identified include poor manufacturing practices, inadequate quality control, and contamination, all contributing to the shortcomings. A major concern highlighted was the inconsistency in the levels of APIs (Active Pharmaceutical Ingredient) in these products, which are vital for ensuring a drug's effectiveness and safety.

These substandard medications pose a significant risk to patient safety. Products with inadequate or inconsistent APIs may fail to effectively manage medical conditions, potentially leading to prolonged illnesses and serious complications. Moreover, these drugs could cause adverse effects, including allergic reactions and, with prolonged use, potential harm to vital organs like the liver and kidneys. This is especially alarming because these medications are meant to treat conditions that demand precise and reliable treatment.

In a comprehensive evaluation of manufacturing standards, the CDSCO inspected 400 manufacturing facilities and found that 36% did not comply with existing regulatory requirements, resulting in their closure. This finding points to systemic issues with-

in parts of the pharmaceutical production chain that threaten drug safety and effectiveness. However, pharmaceutical companies have denied these allegations, claiming that all problems arise from counterfeit products entering the market. Despite their clarification, previous reports suggest that issues persist.

India is globally known as the "world's pharmacy," producing about 20% of the world's generic drugs. Maintaining this status is vital not only for its economy valued at over \$60 billion in 2023, but also for global healthcare systems that depend on its medicines. If these quality issues are not addressed promptly, India's reputation for providing affordable and reliable medications could suffer, with far-reaching consequences.

To tackle these challenges, a multi-faceted approach is essential. First, regulatory bodies must implement rigorous inspections and compliance standards by improving oversight and strictly enforcing manufacturing protocols. There should also be a focus on advanced quality management systems to ensure consistent production. Public education campaigns are crucial to raising consumer awareness, encouraging people to verify the authenticity of medications,

possibly through certifications from reputable organisations like ISO or WHO.

The CDSCO's findings serve as an urgent call to action to protect public health and uphold the reputation of India's pharmaceutical industry. While regulatory reforms are essential for long-term improvements, consumers' vigilance and informed choices are equally important in addressing immediate risks. Collaborative efforts among regulatory bodies, manufacturers, and healthcare providers will be critical in restoring confidence in Indian-made pharmaceuticals on a global scale.

Yours etc.,
Chanmiki Laloo
Shillong-02

Larger issues of animal slaughter

Editor
The conflict between those who eat beef -- and Hindus (like Swami Avimuktreshwaramananda Saraswati) who want to ban beef in India -- because they regard the cow as mother -- is filled with thorny ethical dilemmas. At face value, it sounds noble to show gratitude to the cow, for giving us milk -- quite as we thank

the mother who sacrifices her body to nourish her child. To produce milk, the cow has to be pregnant constantly, which is why animal rights activists prefer plant-based milk substitutes here in America.

Mine is an animal rights perspective. If all domestic animals went on strike for a week, the human world would collapse. We depend on animals, not just for food, but for unwavering labour and companionship. With human relations failing, mankind is turning increasingly to pets.

But the greatest sacrifice of birds, fish, and animals lies in their unwilling, often tortured deaths for the sake of the human palate. Yet living entails taking life. For some, meat is not a luxury, but a health-based necessity. The point, therefore, should be to honour all birds, fish, and animals who are forced to sacrifice their lives for us -- not just the cow. Moreover, when we have to take life, we should do so in ways that minimize pain. From a pain-centred perspective, butchering practices need to become more humane than they are at present. There is no excuse for the needless cruelties of factory farming, or for using animals for luxury purposes, as in the fur industry. Inasmuch as animals are sentient beings who feel

pain, we should make every effort to minimize their pain. We should also thank them for their sacrifices, as did the Native Americans in America.

The cow has become a focal point of ideological Hinduism, which distorts the teachings of higher Hinduism. I can imagine the pain of those who sincerely love animals and the cow, when confronted with modern butchering practices and meat eating. But when the cow is singled out in volatile ideological wars, cow worship becomes a Pandora's Box filled with self-projection and narcissism -- not real concern or love for the cow and other living beings.

Yours, etc.,
Deepa Majumdar,
Via email

Request for revision of Meghalaya State Reservation Policy

Editor,
I am writing to bring to attention a critical issue regarding the state reservation policy, particularly in light of the recent advertisement by the Meghalaya Public

Service Commission (MPSC), via Office Order No. MPSC/ADVT-54/1/2024-2025/1. The roster system in place follows the state's reservation policy, where posts are categorized as Unreserved (UR), Khasi-Jaintia (KJ), and Garo. However, there appears to be a glaring issue regarding the inclusion of the Economically Weaker Section (EWS) and Other Backward Classes (OBC) in this policy.

It has been observed that UR posts are often filled by candidates from the Scheduled Tribes (ST), while other sections, such as those under the EWS category, are left unaccounted for in the reservation roster. This raises the question—why has the EWS category, which has been officially recognized by the Government of Meghalaya, not been incorporated into the state's roster policy? The lack of provision for this category limits opportunities for individuals who fall under EWS, further complicating an already complex reservation system.

Furthermore, there is a conspicuous absence of OBC representation, particularly in Shillong, where obtaining an OBC certificate is reportedly difficult. It is unclear why the OBC category has been

scrapped, but it is undeniable that this decision affects a significant portion of the state's population, denying them access to benefits they are entitled to.

This exclusion not only raises concerns about fairness and inclusivity, but also about the overall development of the state. As citizens of Meghalaya, we seek a reservation system that addresses the needs and welfare of all communities—whether tribal, economically weaker, or otherwise marginalized. The current policy appears to neglect this objective, which could lead to a further divide among the populace.

I urge the authorities to take this matter seriously and revise the existing reservation policy to ensure that it is inclusive of all citizens. Addressing these gaps is essential to promote equal opportunities and foster the growth and development of Meghalaya as a whole.

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request,
Via email

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"A mistake is simply another way of doing things."
— Katharine Graham

The Shillong Times

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Gandhi Jayanti: Beyond Swacch Bharat
OCTOBER 2. Gandhi Jayanti saw people coming out with their brooms and buckets to clean up different localities. Employees of State and Central Government establishments hit the ground to clean up the mess outside their establishments and organised cleaning drives in public spaces. But is a fortnight of observing 'Swacchta Hi Sewa Hai' (cleanliness is service) adequate? Clearly this is a short term mission done to comply with the directives from the Prime Minister's office. After a few days or even a day after the cleaning up, garbage is back in the streets and drains. To observe Gandhi's birth anniversary by reducing it only to a day for cleanliness is to forget the larger idea of Gandhi. True he was a stickler for cleanliness and even stated that 'Sanitation is more important than Independence.' Indeed Gandhi believed that cleanliness is essential for both personal well being and national progress.

However, Gandhi must also be remembered for being an advocate of women's rights; for eradicating untouchability for promoting peace and equality. Gandhi was known for his acceptance of all faiths and his ability to bring conflicting groups together. He not just believed but practised non-violent means in bringing about social justice. Remembering Gandhi without adhering to his principles is a meaningless pursuit and that indeed is our collective tragedy. Perhaps Gandhi's strongest message to fellow Indians is, "Be the change you want to see in the world." This exhortation deserves critical attention. Too many leaders in this country and this State as well, do not practice what they preach and are not exactly the role models that leaders should be. Gandhi was frugal when it came to his own upkeep because his moral compass was never out of place. Today's leaders believe in ostentatious displays of power and pelf.

October 2 is also the birth anniversary of Lal Bahadur Shastri, India's second Prime Minister – a man with a humble approach to leadership and who as India's Home Minister introduced the first Commission for the Prevention of Corruption. Shastri rejected the caste system and changed his surname from Srivastava to Shastri, a title he got while graduating from the Kashi Vidyapeeth. Shastri provided excellent leadership during the Indo-Pakistan War in 1965 and coined the slogan, "Jai Jawan, Jai Kisan." He believed that soldiers defend the country and farmers are the backbone for food security. It is rather strange that very little is commemorated about Lal Bahadur Shastri who too went to jail during the freedom movement. Now that the activities under the theme, "Swacchta Hi Sewa Hai" have been duly observed, will it also be the end of public commitment to keep their surroundings clean? What would it take for Shillong city and for Meghalaya to attain the level of cleanliness that is expected from the Swacch Bharat Abhiyan? This is what needs serious brainstorming.

Letters to the Editor

Who's responsible for cleanliness of public toilets?

Editor,
On December 28, 2023 I had shared my opinion in these columns under the caption 'Unhygienic Public Toilets' which states as follows: This is about the dirty, unhygienic and unclean public toilets at petrol pump stations. They are in a pathetic condition where one has to hold their breath and close their eyes while using one. It's important to note that unhygienic public toilets can pose a serious health risk, especially for women. Inadequate sanitation facilities can lead to Urinary Tract Infections (UTIs) and other health issues. Therefore, I request the concerned authorities to look into the matter to ensure that public toilets are maintained with proper sanitation standards. It may be mentioned that there are people travelling within the city or in the outskirts of the city where one they have to stop to relieve themselves. The one place they will look for is the petrol pump station. There are two options; one is for the responsible authorities to the petrol pump owners to maintain the public toilets and second is for the petrol pump owners to lease them out to an individual or group to run the public toilets provided they follow the guidelines of the Swacch Bharat Mission. These issues not only affect the convenience

and comfort of the public, but also reflect poorly on the responsible authorities' reputation and service standards that are supposed to serve the needs of the public. Therefore, maintaining clean and hygienic toilets is essential for ensuring the well-being, comfort and satisfaction of individuals in various settings. I would again request the responsible authorities to take immediate action to rectify the situation.

Yours etc.,
Augusten Blah,
Shillong

Cleanliness the Khasi-Pnar Way

Editor,
On October 2, the nation celebrates Gandhi Jayanti. In many places in the country, people gather in their community halls and other places to mark this auspicious day, by speeches and songs. Nothing wrong with that. However, I wish here to highlight the special Khasi Pnar way of celebrating this day.
This morning, I happened to pass through many localities called 'shnong's', meaning that they are predominantly inhabited by Khasi-Pnar communities, here in Shillong city. It's such a joy to see that in all the localities and in the by-lanes and lanes, locals, young and old, male and female, are out with their dao, their brooms, their sacks, cleaning their localities and getting rid of wayside weed

that had sprouted during the rainy season, plastic waste and everything else that has been left to spoil the locality.

What is inspiring is to witness the camaraderie amongst neighbours without caste or creed consideration, which traditionally is the defining characteristic of our Khasi-Pnar community, as also the spirit of equality as everyone bends down to the task. By midday, they would have completed their drive, stacked their piles neatly, and the vehicles arranged by the shnong leaders will come round with hordes of young men to collect the garbage and discard it.

We all know that dignity of labour is what the Father of the Nation not only taught us, but practiced in his lifetime. The Khasi Pnar way of celebrating this day by manually cleaning their localities is an example that all residents of our state should practice.

Yours etc.,
R O Wahlang
Shillong-6

Who's in charge of maintaining the "Artificial Turf Football Ground at Tura?"

Editor,
I would like to bring forward some pertinent questions on the management

Growth and Decline of the ICSSR-NERC

By H. Srikanth

Recently, I came across the NEHU's notification seeking applications from professors for the position of Honorary Director of North Eastern Regional Council of ICSSR. Earlier, the position of Honorary Director was held by reputed professors like B. Pakem, Mrinal Miri, J.B. Bhattacharjee, M.N. Karna, A.C. Sinha, David R. Syiemlieh, T.B. Subba, L.S. Gassah, etc. Because of their academic contributions, those Honorary Directors were held in high esteem. Some of them later became the Vice-Chancellor in NEHU and other universities in the northeast. The situation today is different. When I informed about the advertisement to some senior professors who have reasonably good academic credentials and asked them to apply for the position, hardly anyone showed interest. Rightly or wrongly, they believe that the position would be offered finally to someone close to the administration, as academic qualifications matter little nowadays. This pervading indifference/pessimism compels a relook at those heydays when the regional center used to play a commendable role in the advancement of social science research in the northeastern region.

The decision to start the North-Eastern Regional center of ICSSR (ICSSR-NERC) in collaboration with NEHU was taken in 1977 when Dr. C. Devanesan was the Vice-Chancellor. Prof. C.N. Balerao was appointed as the first honorary director. ICSSR-New Delhi sanctioned the post of Deputy Director to assist honorary directors and take care of day-to-day administration. Initially, the position was held by Dr. Jaiswal and PS Datta. From 1995 to 2000, Dr. C.J. Thomas worked as Deputy Director. Initially, the office of the NERC was located in a rented two-storied Assam-type building. In the ground floor, there was a small room for Assistant Director, and adjacent to it was a spacious hall where the library was located. The first floor had a dormitory with some ten beds arranged next to each other, and one special room with two beds for important guests. On the first floor, there used to be a small kitchen run by a Nepali caretaker. NERC then charged Rs. 35 per bed for

a day and around Rs. 15 to Rs 25 per meal. Those who stayed in the dormitory had access to the library even during the nights. It was from these humble beginnings that we witnessed the gradual growth of the regional center into an indispensable part of the NEHU campus.

Today, the ICSSR-NERC has a beautiful three-storied official building in NEHU campus, with spacious rooms for the Director and the staff at the ground floor, a conference hall and meeting rooms on the second floor, and a library on the third floor. Attached to this official building, there is a guest house which has 16 deluxe rooms and two VIP rooms. Its library, conference hall and the guest house are now utilized not only by the departments in NEHU but also by scholars and academic and research institutions across the northeast.

Several individuals have contributed significantly to the growth of the regional center. Although the decision to have a regional center in Shillong was taken by ICSSR-Delhi, all those who served as honorary directors during the initial decades have contributed positively to its development. While the honorary directors gave policy direction, the plans were ably and efficiently executed by the Assistant Director and the dedicated staff of NERC who worked with a missionary zeal. The VCs of NEHU then offered full cooperation to the NERC. When Prof. Miri was the VC, NEHU allocated five acres of land in NEHU campus for construction of a permanent building. Prof. Andre Beteille, who served as the Chancellor of NEHU, released the funds for the ICSSR-NERC building on the NEHU campus when he became the chairperson of ICSSR-New Delhi. Effective rapport between the VCs and visionary honorary directors, and between them and the Deputy Director, helped the growth of the ICSSR-NERC as an academic center of repute in the northeast.

Apart from discharging its regular responsibilities as a research funding agency and offering library and residential accommodation for aspiring researchers, the NERC initiated and organized several national and

regional seminars, symposia, workshops, and special lectures every year. NERC became the meeting point for national and regional scholars and intellectuals. Renowned intellectuals like C.T. Kurien, M.V. Pylee, A.K. Bagchi, T.K. Oommen Andre Beteille, Kausik Basu, Rama Chandra Guha, etc., delivered distinguished lectures. In 2010, the NERC in collaboration with JAIR, organized an international seminar on BIMSTEC in 2013 which was attended by Shashi Tharoor and ambassadors of neighboring countries. The regional center published over 70 books and edited volumes. With pride, the NERC could say that no other ICSSR regional center in India brought out as many books as NERC did. When there was limited information or data available in the northeast, these publications on a variety of socio-economic and political issues helped in enriching the primary study material for further research. Apart from the edited volumes, the NERC started a bi-annual journal titled, "Man and Society: A Journal of North-East Studies". Thanks to the efforts put in by different honorary directors and the deputy director, it became a leading journal on the northeast and is recognized as the UGC recognized journal. Many young scholars pursuing research in the region availed fellowships, grants, library, and accommodation facilities of ICSSR-NERC. Apart from research, NERC took up consultancy projects for different agencies. It goes to the credit of the academic leadership that the Ministry of External Affairs found NERC as the venue for the ASEAN Studies Center.

It is unfortunate that ICSSR-NERC, which played such a pivotal role in the growth of social sciences in the region, NEHU in particular, has lost its sheen and glory. The process of decline started during the tenure of Prof. S.K. Srivastava as the VC, who viewed the Honorary Director and Deputy Director as his adversaries, and did everything to ensure that the Center did not function as planned. Unlike his predecessors, who respected the autonomy of the NERC, Mr. Srivastava wanted to have absolute control over

NERC. Least bothered about academics, he dispensed with the practice of recommending academically reputed senior faculty members for the post of director. Instead, he started the practice of arbitrarily choosing / recommending persons he was comfortable with for the position as the honorary director.

This nefarious practice went hand-in-hand with the changing composition and ideology of the ICSSR at the national level. After Modi took over power at the center, the BJP government filled all academic bodies, including ICSSR, with members who toe their ideology and political line. Not that everything in the ICSSR during the Congress regime was hunky dory. Still, the then government respected the autonomy of the NERC and encouraged its initiatives. But that autonomy and support declined after the BJP government took over the control and filled ICSSR with members supporting the regime and its ideology. The new regime in Delhi wants the NERC to act like other regional centers of ICSSR, confining their activities to funding seminars etc., and running the library and guest house. The interest that the ICSSR Delhi evinces in getting regular feedback about whether the regional centers are organizing the Yoga Day, Swatchata Divas, etc., does not show in encouraging seminars, invited lectures. It removed the post of Deputy Director, and now expects the honorary director to take care of all administrative and academic activities of the regional center for a paltry honorarium of Rs 5000 per month. Naturally, the quality of academic outputs from the regional center showed a remarkable decline in the last six-seventeen years. There is hardly any book publication in recent years. The journal publication has become erratic. The decline in performance becomes apparent when we compare the activities of the Center in the first four decades with what it could do in the last five-six years. Although one longs for the return of those glorious days when the regional center played a pro-active academic role in the region, given the present situation in NEHU and in Delhi, one cannot expect any miracle to happen.

ment Boys School authority hardly comes forward to maintain the ground and taking care of the artificial turf. Some portions of the turf are coming out in bits and pieces. There is wear and tears on all sides. There are big holes in the wire nets enclosing 3 sides of the ground because of which players are finding dog-faecal matter on the turf most of the time. And since there is no proper gate on the side of the main highway, the old gallery is always filled with bottles of beers and alcohol daily with people boozing till late night. The old gallery next to the main road has become a haven for those late night revellers which has taken away the shine off the ground and its beauty. On all the four sides there are plastic water bottles, plastic snacks packs etc, which could have been addressed if garbage disposal containers can be placed on all 4 corners inside the ground. The garbage containers outside the ground are overflowing with garbage most of the time.

I therefore request the Management of this football ground to please take some proactive action to enquire into all the issues mentioned here so that the artificial turf remains intact and in good condition for the coming years si it can contribute towards the upliftment of football in our Garo Hills. This football ground cannot be treated as the goose that lays the golden eggs.

A special mention has to be made to the Morning FC

team whose members are doing yeoman's service by conducting cleaning drives every week which I happen to encounter on 2-3 occasions in and around the ground to keep it clean. I also witnessed while going for a walk, that the Morning FC players brought wires and repaired the holes in the enclosure on all sides so that stray dogs don't enter the ground. As a local I feel proud that a group of people are contributing whatever they can on their part to keep the football ground and its surroundings neat and clean. If they can do it, without any help or support from the Management of the Ground, what is stopping the Government Boys School authorities from coming forward and maintaining the ground and also visiting and inspecting it every now and then.

Sanctioning Infrastructure and building construction is tough and costs money and maintaining it is the tougher part. As Garos everyone should take pride and come forward and help keep the artificial turf in the best shape within a neat and clean environment. Let's start taking some responsibilities.

Yours etc.,
CH Marak
Dobasipara Tora

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Tipra Motha, Chakma students lead stir in Chittagong Hill Tracts Protests continue against anti-minority atrocities by Bangladesh police

By Rabindra Nath Sinha

Tripura's most prominent TIPRA Motha leader Pradyot Kishore Manikya Debbarman (ex-royal scion) and Chakma student outfits are in the limelight following their successful protests to highlight atrocities against minorities and indigenous people in Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) in Bangladesh. The interesting part is that Debbarman, himself leads from the front but he assigns the responsibility for organising solidarity rallies and other formats of agitation to Youth Tipra Federation (YTF) – TIPRA Motha's young wing.

The Chakma student organisations which have organised protests in recent days include All India Chakma Students' Union which has several state-level affiliates. Tripura Chakma Students' Association, which functions independently of AICU, hit the streets in the state.

The protest organisers have already brought their concerns to the notice of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the branch outfit of

by the Army, were trying to displace and uproot Tiprasas, Chakmas, Garos, among others as well as religious minorities, such as, Hindu Bengalees, Buddhists and Christians ignoring that together they constituted a significant segment of the population.

It was TIPRA Motha leader Pradyot Kishore Manikya Debbarman's show on Thursday, September 26, 2024 when he chose a spot as close as possible to the border with Bangladesh. At his instance YTF organised a solidarity rally at Sabroom Market in South Tripura district, which culminated in a well attended public meeting, which was also addressed by a prominent woman Chakma leader Debi Chakma. The two leaders demanded an end to the persecution and protection of tribal rights. Pradyot Debbarma reminded the powers-that-be in Bangladesh that "CHT were once part of our royal family's domain".

What are the demands voiced in the protest rallies and representations to



Bangladesh High Commission at Agartala. The attacks on the minorities – Buddhists, Hindus, Christians, Chakmas, Mogs, Garos, Tripuris and some more ethnic minorities – have increased lately after the interim regime in Bangladesh armed the Army with magisterial and policing powers, YTF president Suraj Debbarma told IPA. According to their reports from across the border, several people have lost lives, many hurt seriously and many rendered homeless in CHT.

The attacks were reportedly in reaction to the 'March for Identity held on September 18 in CHT which saw large-scale participation of indigenous people who demanded constitutional recognition of their rights and implementation in letter and spirit of a 1997 peace accord. The memoranda submitted to the authorities on both sides have spoken of demographic changes resulting from settlement of an estimated five lakh Muslims between 1979 and 1983 which has left the indigenous population marginalised. Injustices suffered by non-muslim minorities since in the area have been exemplified.

In a letter to the Prime Minister on September 23, 2024 Delhi Chakma Students' Union's president Milani Chakma and general secretary Tushit Chakma narrated several incidents of barbarity on Jummos (indigenous hill tribes) between September 19 and 20 in CHT's Khagrachari district. Incidents of violence against indigenous people in another CHT district, Rangamati, too have been cited, adding that perpetrators of violence use mosque loudspeakers to mobilise mobs. Also, security forces with active help from the Army even target association / union office-bearers for their posts on social media platforms. [CHT comprises three districts; the third being Bandarban].

That the protests were gathering momentum was evident on Saturday, September 21 when the state capital was witness to three rallies held separately by YTF, TCSEA and Buddhist monks with placards and banners aplenty. 'Settlers' from outside, actively aided

authorities on both sides: In general, they want the Bangladesh administration to halt the torture and displacement of minorities and indigenous people. Vice-chairman of TCSEA's standing committee Aniruddha Chakma is, however, emphatic about his association's demand for return of CHT to India. "The boundary commission then headed by a British lawyer Sir Cyril John Radcliffe ignored the demographic realities at the time of Partition did us injustice which should now be undone and CHT made part of Indian territory", Aniruddha told IPA.

But, Pradyot Debbarman is strident in his demands. At a news conference in Agartala on September 23, 2024, when he briefed the media on the outcome of tripartite talks in New Delhi on September 21, 2024, he called upon New Delhi to take a stern view and take the issue to the UN, if necessary. He even suggested that if circumstances warranted India should seek sanctions on Bangladesh garment exports.

Emotional attachment, ethnic affinity and occasional contacts with relatives, friends and other acquaintances explain the moves of Chakma student outfits in India. For TIPRA Motha, which has emerged as a political force in the last three years and which is an ally of Bharatiya Janata Party, it is an opportunity to consolidate its position among the tribals and expand its political base. The party has 13 MLAs, two of whom are ministers. It dominates the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council.

TIPRA Motha's president Bijoy Hrangkhaw told IPA: "Our party is seeking to expand its activity by involving youths in large numbers. People's spontaneous participation in our people-centric activity is encouraging youth workers", he said.

It may be mentioned that Tripura is surrounded by Bangladesh on its north, south and west. Its border with the neighbouring country measures 856 km, which is 84 per cent of its total border. TIPRA is abbreviation for Tipraha Indigenous Progressive Regional Alliance. (IPA Service)

"The hallmark of the human species is great adaptability."

— David Grinspoon

The Shillong Times

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Raj and Suraa

IN a nation where political parties are a dime a dozen, the formation of a new party, Jan Suraa, by election strategist Prashant Kishor from Patna might not necessarily be big news. His own high-profile political foray in Bihar in the good company of Chief Minister Nitish Kumar a while ago ended in a whimper. His attempts to form a political party on his own repeatedly came to naught. But, considering his interest in politics and the clout he managed to build for himself, a fresh attempt is worth a try.

Politics in this country works on a formula built on simplicity and sincerity to the cause. Mahatma Gandhi was the first to gather crowds around him by upholding these two principles. Even as Gandhi developed a cult status, he presented himself in the form of an ordinary man, rustic in his dressing habits. Jawaharlal Nehru dressed in aristocratic style but won mass acceptance after the Gandhi era by virtue of the power he wielded and vision he displayed. Indira Gandhi claimed to uphold the cause of the poor through her Garibi Hatao slogan and won elections. Her bold support for acts like the creation of Bangladesh won her a cult status for some time, but she lost out briefly to the Total Revolution advocacy by Jayprakash Narain. Narain's appeal was to both the educated elite and the village folks. Men like Mulayam Singh and Lalu Prasad 'Mandalised' their states' politics and reaped rich dividends due to their direct appeal to the poor. Mamata Banerjee's politics is poor-centric. She posed as the 'sister next-door' and succeeded in political manoeuvring. In the South, those like Jayalalitha kept the people on their side by promising and giving doles to the poor. In Odisha, Naveen Patnaik did the same and ruled the state for a quarter of a century uninterrupted. Regional leaders made a success of themselves in all the southern states by directly appealing to the poor. In the north, the BJP won elections through the Hindutva slogan and PM Modi's appeal to the poor. Tribe-oriented alignments are a norm in North-East politics.

Prashant Kishor's appeal is different. It, rather, is to the educated elite that are influential but are no major vote banks. He talks sense in politics, where nonsense is rather the norm. Notably, the JP movement had drawn its first inspiration from the student community. He was too old but had a mesmerizing appeal among the youth, all those who were cut up with the 'dictatorial' styles of Indira Gandhi and the ordinary folks in the Hindi belt cutting across castes and communities. He was seen as a father figure by virtue of his Sarvodaya (wellbeing of all) movement, socialist principles and selfless services to the society for seven decades. Now, it remains to be seen whether, from the same Bihar, another leader in the form of Prashant Kishor could effectively challenge the establishment and create a niche for himself in national or regional politics.

Why Meghalaya requires consultants: Experts versus generalists

By Patricia Mukhim

Let's face some hard facts. Bureaucrats who enter the government and that includes the premier IAS products join the workforce after receiving their training on different facets of governance. Essentially they are trained to manage law and order, to execute schemes but perhaps very little training on how to ensure outcomes or to measure outcomes. Once the schemes are 'implemented' there is very little or no monitoring about how they impact or whether they impact at all. Some schemes that are ill-matched are implemented because the central government desires it. Even if such schemes don't suit the people here they are pushed down people's throats with no attempt at mid-term course correction to prevent wastage of money and resources. This happens because there is none to tell the central government that policies enunciated by the Centre – and at one time the Planning Commission to meet the needs of some states in India do not necessarily address the needs of the North Eastern states. The one-shoe fits all model had led to poor development outcomes.

Training the bureaucracy in diverse fields requires both financial resources and time. It is easier for governments to hire consultancy firms for short periods on contract with no long term financial commitments. The reason governments hire consultants is because they have specialized knowledge (expertise) in diverse fields such as agriculture, transport, water supply systems, environmental services and digital services. Some of the projects enunciated by the Central Government to be implemented within a definite timeline are complex of which the Jal Jeevan Mission is one and the attempts to clean up rivers and streams elsewhere in the country. These projects require skills beyond the government's traditional scope. Also the rapid pace at which digital transactions have progressed require that public services, like the Direct Benefit Transfer programme are transacted with ease. This too demands technical expertise that consultants provide.

As stated in the previous paragraph the recruitment process in this country and in our state of Meghalaya is archaic. The Meghalaya

Public Service Commission (MPSC) packed with retired government personnel is one such institution that requires drastic reforms to be able to recruit a workforce with a wide range of capabilities and a progressive mindset. As of now the MPSC continues to recruit personnel with a narrow range of internal capabilities thereby making consultants compulsory for specific challenges. I recall at one time the Meghalaya Government struggled to make detailed project reports and needed consultants with expertise in that field.

In fact, the role of consulting firms in Indian government projects include policy formulation and major project support. Some of the leading consulting firms in this country which work for the central government and some state governments including our own are McKinsey, BCG, and the Big 4 namely EY, PwC, KPMG, Deloitte which are heavily involved in shaping government policies and executing key projects. Their involvement is evident in key projects like the Swachh Bharat and Jal Jeevan Missions. In Meghalaya the consultants are involved in guiding the government in implementing schemes that are the offshoots of the Meghalaya Basin Management Authority (MBMA) and its various verticals. I am sure that the consultancy firms also assist the State Government in crafting out the roadmap for the \$10 billion economic trajectory that the Chief Minister keeps telling all of us. In Uttar Pradesh for instance consultants have assisted in some significant economic endeavours such as pointing out strategies for a growth trajectory which will grow its economy to \$1 trillion.

It is not just Meghalaya that is hiring consultants. The Government of India too engages consultants for a strategic vision development such as the ambitious document - Vision 2047 which also means that consultants are going to be around for a long time to enable that Vision Document to take shape and in setting priorities for this country so that it achieves that aspirational goal. But is this a good practice as far as governments are concerned? In Meghalaya

it is seen that consultants stride around with some confidence because they believe they have superior knowledge compared to our civil servants, many of whom have had very little exposure outside the state and here I am including the state civil servants in particular.

Many civil society activists have expressed concern about the over-reliance of the MDA Government on consultants but their concern has been mainly about the drain on the exchequer. However, that is just one of the concerns. Over a period of time consultants will weaken the government's own capability to think critically and even erode essential skills already employed by local officers to reach governance to the people in a manner that they can respond positively. It has been seen that while consultants can craft out all manner of schemes by paying short visits to our villages, what they see and imbibe in those short spurts of engagement with the local people does not address their response mechanism. Most schemes look good on paper but when taken to the people they fail because not enough planning has gone into the implementation part. Also, most consultants don't spend adequate time with people or sit to plan with them in a participatory planning process which is a time-consuming exercise, before crafting out fancy schemes with equally romantic acronyms. As of today a cursory look at the range of consultants in our state we have reached a point of dependency. This could lead to what researchers call the "mission creep," where consultants gain overarching influence over policy and decision-making processes.

Let us not forget that the consultancy business is not an innocent one. Before governments know it they would have been given a policy by consulting firms that are directed towards their own benefit. I had once used the word 'Consultocracy' to define the over-dependence of the state government on consultants and how this consultant integration can actually reduce the traditional functions and capabilities of public servants thereby altering the fundamental dynamics of governance.

Recently a senior bureaucrat who had enrolled for his PhD with a local university received his doctorate on a comprehensive research he conducted on the impact of social audit on the stakeholders of the system. Meghalaya is the first state to enact the Social Audit Act in April 2017. This was followed by pilot social audits for 26 schemes in 18 villages. At present, social auditing is reduced to 11 departments and 21 schemes in Meghalaya. The law mandates appointment of social audit facilitators to conduct social audits directly with people. The facilitators will present their findings to the Dorbar Shnong which will then add its inputs or correct anomalies before the schemes are finally audited by autonomous auditors. The scholar-bureaucrat while presenting his findings also noted that in most villages the government officials are not present when the social audits are conducted. Also, as of today there is no Chairperson to head the Commission after the last one demitted office. So is the Social Audit apparatus really working in Meghalaya and if not why not? That a senior bureaucrat has considered it his brief to conduct an intensive research on the functioning of a key apparatus that could actually change the way governance is done and involve people in measuring the outcomes of at least 21 schemes is a positive development.

How about using the Social Audit Act to measure the outcomes from employing so many consultants and the debilitating effect it has on the thinking capacity of government officials. Is this a good practice or will it have a negative effect in the long run. One can understand the impatience of the Chief Minister to deliver and so too that of the officers advising the CM. But this being the 6th year of the MDA Government being in the saddle it is time to measure whether the policy briefs and schemes enunciated by the set of consultants in Meghalaya are actually impacting positively on governance. Is Meghalaya doing better on the education, health and poverty front? These three are the main indicators of the state's economic trajectory.

Understanding the Sixth Schedule through the debate of the Constitution's Framers

By Kenneth Nongsiej

Prior to the enactment of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India, the Draft Sixth Schedule was rigorously discussed in the Constituent Assembly on September 5, 6, 7 1949. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the chairman of the Drafting Committee, tabled the draft in the Assembly after an intense debate concerning the future of the autonomous district councils. The fundamental issue was whether to provide autonomous governance for the tribal areas to allow them to develop self-government skills or whether this form of autonomy would isolate these tribes from Assam and prevent them from integrating with the rest of India. This dilemma was briefly highlighted in a key argument during the debate "Do you want to keep them separate? If you want to keep them separate, they will combine with Tibet, they will combine with Burma, they will never combine with the rest of India."

This debate raised questions about how to balance autonomy with national integration. On the one hand, there was the fear that providing autonomy to tribal regions would alienate them from the rest of the country with the potential to encourage them to form alliances with neighbouring countries such as Tibet and Burma, thus threatening the unity of the newly independent nation. Members who supported autonomy placed their arguments that self-governance was necessary for the tribal regions to preserve their cultural identity and govern according to their customs and traditions. After intense discussions spanning three days, on September 7, 1949, the Drafting Committee, led by Dr. Ambedkar, presented the amended version of the Sixth Schedule, which was then adopted as part of the Constitution.

Governance Through Autonomous District Councils (ADCs)

The Sixth Schedule provides for the establishment of autonomous district councils (ADCs), which are responsible for administering certain tribal areas in the North Eastern states of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, and Mizoram. The goal was to ensure a degree of self-governance for these tribal regions so that they could manage their affairs, such as land rights, social customs, and local governance.

Rev. James Joy, Mohan Nichols Roy (Bah Joy), during the Constituent Assembly debates, strongly upholds the importance of self-governance for the hilly areas. He argued that the district councils which were to be created under the Sixth Schedule would have the power to make laws and regulations that reflected the needs and customs of the tribal people. However, these laws and regulations were not entirely absolute. However, they are subject to scrutiny and assent of the Governor so as to ensure that the governance structure is aligned with the broader interests of the state.

Bah Joy's version of the Sixth Schedule was clear as he envisioned a form of self-governance that was rooted in the tribal people's unique cultural practices and social norms. The councils were to have the power to regulate matters such as land ownership, management of forests, social customs, and local policing etc. The aspirations were to create a system where the tribal people could govern themselves according to their cultural values and genius while also ensuring that these areas were not entirely cut off from the governance structures of the state and the nation.

Permanent Status of the Sixth Schedule

The issue of whether the Sixth Schedule should be a permanent feature of the Constitution was another subject of debate during the Constituent Assembly discussions. One of the Assembly members, A.V. Thakkar argued that the system of autonomous district councils should be viewed as an evolving framework and subject to future amendments. He suggested that the Constitution should not create "states within states" on a permanent basis. Thakkar understood that the autonomous district

councils system was an interim arrangement which could be changed or modified when the time was right.

In his view, the system of autonomous governance under the Sixth Schedule should be flexible enough to adapt to changing times. As he rightly pointed out all constitutions and laws are subject to change. The framers of the Constitution recognised that the Sixth Schedule could be amended at any time, just like any other part of the Constitution. Article 368 of the Constitution provides the framework for amending the Sixth Schedule as it grants the power to the Parliament to make necessary amendments to the provisions so as to ensure that the governance structures remain relevant and responsive to the changing needs of the people.

Soul Purpose

At its core, the Sixth Schedule was designed to protect the cultural, social, and political identity of the indigenous tribes in North East India. The framers of the Constitution understood that these tribes had distinct cultural practices and traditions that needed to be preserved and respected. By granting autonomy to these areas, they sought to ensure that the tribal people could govern themselves in a way that aligned with their values and beliefs, without external interference. The autonomous governance structure created by the Sixth Schedule was not just about providing self-governance; it was about protecting a way of life. It was meant to safeguard the unique identity of the tribal people, ensuring that they could continue to live according to their traditions.

The provisions of the Sixth Schedule have allowed the tribal areas in Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, and Mizoram to maintain a degree of autonomy that has helped preserve their cultural heritage.

Weakening of the Sixth Schedule

Paragraph 12A of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India was inserted by the North-Eastern Areas (Reorganisation) Act, 1971. It was intended to resolve jurisdictional conflicts between the State Legislature of Meghalaya and the autonomous district councils of the region. The provision provides a legal framework for determining which laws prevail in cases of overlap between state and district council legislations.

The paragraph plays a critical role in Meghalaya's governance, where autonomous district councils (ADCs) for the Khasi, Garo, and Jaintia tribes have been granted significant authority to legislate on matters of local governance. It can be understood that if both the Autonomous District Councils and the State Government make laws on the same subject the laws passed by the State Legislature will prevail over those enacted by the ADCs. This provision was to prevent potential legal conflicts and ensure a hierarchical structure in legislative authority.

For instance, the enactment of the Registration (Safety & Security) of Migrant Workers Act, 2020, by the State Government has effectively taken away the power of the KHADC to issue labour licences. The state's law superseded the Council's authority, as provided by the said paragraph. In the past, the HSPDP has demanded the complete deletion of Paragraph 12A, arguing that it erodes the legislative powers of the ADCs and compromises the federal structure meant to protect tribal rights.

The Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India remains one of the provisions that ensures self-governance and to protect the cultural identity of the indigenous tribes of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, and Mizoram. The debates on the said Schedule that took place during the drafting of the Constitution were made instrumental by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and Rev. J.J.M. Nichols Roy which paved the way for a governance structure that has withstood the test of time. The continued existence of traditional heads, Hima, and community lands in Meghalaya today is largely due to the Sixth Schedule. However, it has been weakened with the intersection of paragraph 12A.

Letters to the Editor

Misguided notion of a Smart City

Editor, It is disheartening to witness the recent controversy over the "WELCOME TO SHILLONG SMART CITY" board that has gone viral on social media, sparking widespread dissatisfaction among the youth and residents of our beloved city. The very essence of a smart city lies in modern infrastructure, efficient public services, and a sustainable living environment—qualities that, unfortunately, Shillong sorely lacks.

The reality on the ground is starkly different. The roads are riddled with potholes, with broken branches strewn about, and footpaths that have remained unchanged for decades. Water supply issues persist as pipelines run dry, traffic jams have become a permanent fixture across the state, and internet connectivity lags behind at 2G speeds in an era of 5G. These are not the hallmarks of a smart city—they are the signs of a neglected one.

Basic civic amenities like garbage disposal, proper street lighting, hygienic public toilets, and clear signboards are glaringly absent. It is shameful that while a few CCTV cameras and flags have been installed to create a façade of progress, the fundamental issues have

not been addressed. Police Bazar, one of the busiest areas, is now a chaotic mess with its worsening condition and tiles being trampled by vehicles.

How can Shillong be considered a smart city when there are uncovered drains emitting foul odours, polluted rivers, and piles of garbage accumulating in every corner? The smart city initiative seems to be nothing more than a smokescreen, with crores of rupees disappearing into thin air, and no visible improvements in the city's infrastructure. The youth of the state, the very future of Meghalaya, are being pushed into cynicism as they see their government fail to deliver on promises.

Smart cities are meant to enhance the quality of life for their citizens, ensuring safety, cleanliness, and convenience. Shillong is failing on all these fronts. The state government must be held accountable for the glaring disparity between its promises and the reality. Installing boards that declare Shillong a "Smart City" without addressing the root problems is not only an insult to the people but also undermines the credibility of the government.

It is time for our leaders to wake up, face the truth, and take concrete steps to bring about real change. Remove those misleading boards and start working toward building a city we can all be proud of—a city that lives up to the aspirations of its

people, not just the rhetoric of its leaders.

Yours etc.,
A Sarki
Shillong

ICSSR-NERC needs a helping hand

Editor, This has a reference to Professor H Srikanth's special article on "Growth and Decline of the ICSSR-NERC," published in the Shillong Times on 3rd October 2024. Since, I had a close association with the ICSSR-NERC for more than two decades as the Deputy Director (1995-2020), I read this article with much interest. I felt sad when I read the line, "It is unfortunate that ICSSR-NERC, which played such a pivotal role in the growth of social sciences in the region... has lost its sheen and glory." I had the wonderful privilege of seeing and nurturing the growth of the regional centre from the humble beginning to this extent and for this we were privileged to have institutional builders like Professor Pakem, Mrinal Miri, David R. Syiemlieh at the NEHU, Shillong and a distinguished scholar like Professor Andre Beteille at the ICSSR, New Delhi as its Chairman. Unfortunately we miss such great stalwarts and foresighted leaders with vision today.

For the NERC decline I will not fully blame NEHU and the NERC but the parent body ICSSR is equally responsible. The archaic way of selection of honorary directors and the non-appointment or filling of the sanctioned posts, particularly the post of Deputy Director and the Accountant is a block on the forward movement of the Centre. There are several internal issues that ICSSR, New Delhi needs to address for the smooth functioning of the NERC.

First and foremost, the immediate implementation of the 6th and 7th CPC benefits to the staff of the regional centre without further delay is imperative. No one knows for what reason both the ICSSR and the Ministry of Education is keeping this issue pending for such a long time. Nearly four of the staff in the NERC died without receiving the benefits. Six years ago, late Ms. Cerilla Khonglah, Documentation officer at the NERC was hospitalized and in a pleading way she wrote a mail to the former Chief Justice of Meghalaya and the High Court directed the NERC to release her money forthwith, but it was not done till date! There is no pension provision in the regional centres of the ICSSR, as such, but at least the Centre must release the staff retirement benefits on the day of retirement, which is not done in the NERC. The NERC has completed 47 years of its existence but till date the Council did not

implement the status of the regional centre.

The Centre is known for its programmes such as seminars, workshops, lectures series, projects, publications, etc. Alas, all these have been taken a backseat and other non-important issues have taken an important place. The Centre needs to come out from the "contract" and "guest house" culture mind set. The original vision of the regional centre is to be a catalyst in social science research and to complement and supplement the existing University system in the Northeastern region. Therefore, the Vice Chancellor, NEHU should take the lead to bring back the lost glory of the ICSSR-NERC! Moreover, the ICSSR, New Delhi also must extend its helping hand.

Yours etc.,
C. Joshua Thomas
Former Deputy Director
ICSSR-NERC,
Shillong

Shillong's Traffic Crisis: A Wake-Up Call for Authorities

Editor, As a concerned student of St. Anthony's College, I am compelled to highlight the debilitating traffic congestion plaguing Shillong. The city's growth, though

welcome, has exposed the glaring inadequacy of its infrastructure. Daily, thousands of students, professionals, and citizens suffer due to: 1. Clogged roads 2. Inefficient traffic management 3. Lack of alternative transportation

On October 3rd, 2024, I missed my 11:00 AM class, arriving at 11:30 AM after a frustrating struggle through traffic. This is not an isolated incident. The collective loss of productivity, time, and well-being is staggering.

I urge the Meghalaya State Government and Shillong Municipal Corporation to: Develop and implement a comprehensive traffic management plan

Invest in modern infrastructure (e.g., flyovers, public transportation)

Encourage sustainable transportation options (e.g., cycling, walking)

It's time for proactive measures to: Reduce congestion. Ensure citizen convenience.

I request the authorities to treat this as a priority issue, ensuring Shillong's growth is sustainable and citizen-friendly.

Yours etc.,
Joel Mukhim
Student, St. Anthony's College,
Via email

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

"Every disadvantage has its advantage."

— Johan Cruyff

The Shillong Times

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MPSC needs complete overhaul

THAT the Meghalaya Public Service Commission (MPSC) has been corroded beyond repair is a fact that must be owned up by the present Government which has, by its negligence of an important Commission meant to attract the best minds for governing the state, turned it instead into a contraption that is well past its date for the rot has eaten up its vitals. What remains is only the crust bearing its name - a name that inspires no confidence and has failed successive generations of Meghalayans for decades. The rot that plagued this institution started in its early stages and that is clearly visible from the poor governance especially in the far-flung villages. Some of the products of the MPSC are known to have feathered their nests well even while those so-called beneficiaries or recipients of the governance system have become poorer and disempowered. Some noble exceptions are there but they are too few to make a dent in a system that is entrenched in corruption and nepotism.

Transparency is a strange word in Meghalaya. No one believes in it, least of all those in governance and politics. The Right to Information (RTI) institution has succeeded only up to a point. The MPSC uses certain clauses to deny information to those who seek to know their marks and the marks of other candidates just so they know they were not unjustly marked. The MPSC has been known to use Section 8(1)(a) of the RTI Act, which says the Commission is not under obligation to furnish the information disclosure. Ironically Section 8(1)(a) of the RTI Act states that information can be denied if it could prejudicially affect the sovereignty and integrity of India, the security, strategic, scientific or economic interests of the State, relation with foreign State or lead to incitement of an offence. How can any of the above clauses apply to someone seeking information on the marks secured in a competitive examination where candidates seek to know how they scored low marks when they had managed to answer the questions correctly? There are instances of MPSC members who did not recuse themselves when their own kith and kin were being interviewed.

Some candidates still carry the scars of seeing their answers marked wrong when they were actually correct. The reason why candidates don't approach the judiciary is because they lack the wherewithal to engage lawyers and because it would be a long-drawn affair. The only way to overhaul the MPSC is for the Government to constitute a Search and Selection Committee comprising one member each from the ruling and opposition parties (since most appointees thus far have been politically handpicked) some civil society members and retired IAS officers, to identify members of the Commission. The Khasi Students' Union has given a 20-point charter of demands for cleaning up the MPSC. The Government should take note of those demands. We are a democracy and that necessarily means there must be accountability which is only possible if there is openness and transparency. The youth of Meghalaya deserve a Public Service Commission that can identify the best brains to render public service.

Letters to the Editor

Govt apathy towards Science & Commerce lecturers under People's College Scheme

Editor, Meghalaya's educational landscape, particularly within the People's College Scheme, faces acute distress that requires immediate attention. The unjustified discrimination against Science and Commerce lecturers despite their equal, if not greater, contribution to education as compared to their counterparts in other disciplines is appalling. Under the People's College Scheme, the aim was to enhance educational accessibility and quality across the state. The intention was noble: to bolster educational infrastructure and ensure all educators receive the support they need to deliver quality education. So far, there are 21 colleges under the People's College Scheme which was first launched in 2020. However, recent reports and feedback from educators reveal a troubling disparity in the treatment of Science and Commerce lecturers leaving them feeling disillusioned and devalued as this initiative aided only a section in a multi-disciplinary education system.

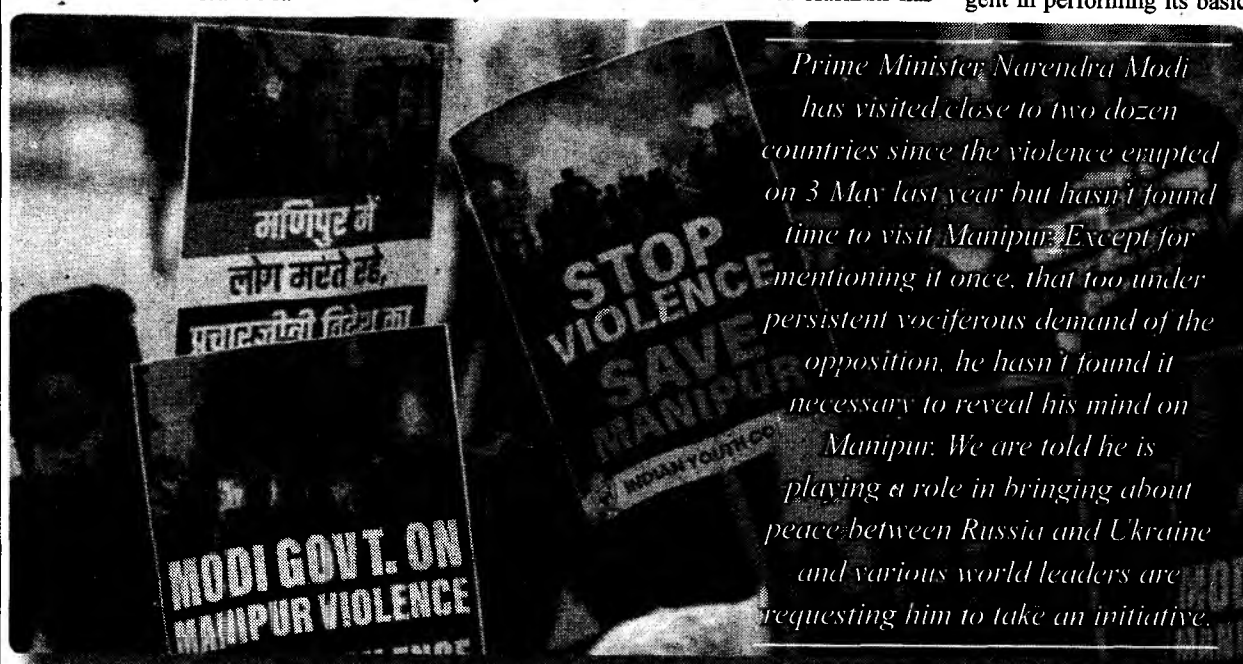
Currently, the Government provides no financial aid in terms of salary to Science and Commerce lecturers under the People's College Scheme and they are left to navigate a landscape of insufficient resources and lack of institutional support. In stark contrast, peers in the

Arts stream, receive comprehensive financial backing from the government which reflects an unjust financial disparity. This discrepancy not only creates a financial strain on educational institutions but also undermines the recognition and support that Science and Commerce educators deserve. This systemic bias undermines the very principles of equitable and effective education. Despite these constraints, the achievements of Science and Commerce departments remain noteworthy. Students from these fields consistently produce excellent academic results, reflecting the dedication and effectiveness of their lecturers.

The Government's discrimination and indifference prior to the implementation represent a significant oversight with far-reaching consequences. The lack of support and acknowledgment to the lecturers of the Science and Commerce streams raises questions on the commitment of the Government to the principles of parity, equal opportunity, and fairness, given that all educational streams are crucial and equally important for a well-rounded, balanced and comprehensive education especially with the current implementation of the National Education Policy 2020 and for preparing students for diverse career paths.

The future of Meghalaya's educational system depends on a commitment to fairness and excellence. By rectifying these financial disparities, the government can foster a more robust and equitable educational environment that benefits all students and aligns with the objectives of the People's College Scheme. Addressing

The violence which shows no sign of abating in the ongoing Meitei-Kuki conflict in Manipur is a matter of concern. The alienation of the two communities and hatred generated for each other is unprecedented. The Meiteis cannot leave Manipur by road because the next district North on the way to Kohima in Nagaland is Kangpokpi, a Kuki dominated area where the young Kuki men and women are guarding the district borders and would not let any Meitei pass through the national highway. So, any Meitei who has to leave Ma-



nipur has to use the airway. Similarly, Meira Paibis, the Meitei mothers' organization would not let any Kuki enter Imphal coming in the opposite direction. Any Kuki living in Churachandpur, 60 km South from Imphal can only leave Manipur by air via Aizawl in Mizoram, which is a good day's drive on a difficult mountain road. Sometimes it may take up to 17-20 hours. Imagine a pregnant woman using this route. There is a weekly helicopter service between Churachandpur and Aizawl but that is not very regular. And how many common people can use these expensive means of travel? Clearly the fundamental right guaranteed to citizens under the Constitution, of being able to move about freely in the country, is being violated. The conflict has taken a heavy toll on the lives of common Meiteis and Kukis, many of whom languish in relief camps and face an uncertain future.

One single factor which stands out is the failure of

the Manipur and Union governments to curb violence. Both Meiteis and Kukis say that had the Chief Minister N. Biren Singh wanted to control the violence he could have done so within the first two days of it starting on 3 May, 2023. A nagging question remains as to why the government was reluctant then or remains so even now? The CM has raised concerns about narcotics and targeted poppy cultivation by Kukis. But

what action has been taken by the Union Government to check drug trafficking across the international border with Myanmar or for that matter at Mundra port in Gujarat and Pathankot in Punjab. If the drug trafficking stops obviously poppy cultivation will stop. Many people, even among the establishment believe that Biren Singh would be replaced after the Lok Sabha elections. But that has not happened. Had it been an opposition party run state, by now President's rule would have been imposed.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has visited close to two dozen countries since the violence erupted on 3 May last year but hasn't found time to visit Manipur. Except for mentioning it once, that too under persistent vociferous demand of the opposition, he hasn't found it necessary to reveal his mind on Manipur. We are told he is playing a role in bringing about peace between Russia and Ukraine and various world leaders are requesting him

to take an initiative. He also probably has some advice to offer to Palestinian and Israeli leadership. But he has not demonstrated the same concern for Manipur, in spite of continuous voicing by the people of that state and this puts a big question mark on his intentions as well as the condescending attitude of ignoring the problem of Manipur. He or his party colleagues never cease to boast about how militancy in Jammu and Kashmir has

been curbed since the dilution of Article 370 but don't seem to care about militants, with ten times the number of arms compared to those present in J&K, roaming about freely openly displaying them in Manipur and endangering the lives of common people. To make matters worse the security establishment is confounding the people. Meiteis have recently questioned the role of the Army in not being able to provide protection to citizens and have demanded their removal. First the Security Advisor to the Manipur Government claimed, based on inputs from the CM's office, that 900 trained Kuki militants with sophisticated arms had entered India and then retracted it. Such statements from either the CM's office or Security Advisor, especially as the CM has been consistently harping on the immigration from across the border changing the demographics of the state, will only serve to instill fear in the minds of people.

duty of making the people feel secure thereby violating another fundamental right which is the Right to Life under the Constitution. The Government in Manipur seems to have abdicated its role of governance and has become a party to the conflict. To resolve the conflict between the two communities a political process of dialogue will be necessary. Whether Meiteis will get a Scheduled Tribe status or Kukis will get a separate administration are questions which will have to be settled by the Union Government. For any dialogue to take place peace will have to be restored. Both sides will have to end violence. The common people among Kukis and Meiteis have a right to live with peace, justice and dignity and their fundamental rights under the Constitution need to be protected.

(The writer is General Secretary, Socialist Party (India). E-mail: ashaashram@yahoo.com)

Addressing the debate on cow slaughter

Editor, I am writing in response to the ongoing debate surrounding the consumption of beef and the methods of animal slaughter in India. As a Muslim, it is important to clarify that consuming cow meat is permissible in our religion, and we follow the halal method of slaughter. This method is not only based on religious teachings but also aims to ensure that the animal suffers less by draining its blood completely, reducing health risks associated with blood-borne diseases.

Dr V K Modi, head of the Department of Meat Technology at the Central Food Technology Research Institute in Mysore, supports the idea that halal slaughter causes less trauma to the animal compared to the jhatka method which is widely used other than Muslims. Additionally, Dr Karuna Chaturvedi, consultant nutritionist at Apollo Hospitals in New Delhi, explains that halal is considered healthier as it removes toxins and results in softer, safer meat due to the complete drainage of blood.

While some communities hold the cow as sacred, India is a democratic country where we must respect each other's beliefs. If a certain animal is considered sacred by one group, we should be mindful not to slaughter that animal near places of worship or sell it to those who

This also puts the role of the security establishment under question. What was the need for the Security Advisor to rush and hold a press conference to share an unverified news only to withdraw it and tell the people 'not to believe in any rumours and unverified news?' Was the news of Kuki militants being proffered so that people don't question the role of the army and accept its presence to save them from the cross border militants? The Government should be held accountable for being negligent in performing its basic

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into Israel claiming its right to defend. This is the second such instance of Iranian retaliation after Israel struck on its territory.

Israel's confidence in acting rogue in the region comes from the unstinting support it is receiving from the US and its allies like the UK. At every step of the escalation of the present conflict, we find the US supporting Israel. The US has given Israel more military assistance than any other country since the Second World War, providing aid worth more than 124 billion dollars. Since 2016, Israel is receiving 3.8 billion dollars per year as military assistance under a 10-year plan. On the day Israel launched its offensive against Gaza, the US president Joe Biden pledged more military assistance for Israel, including ammunition and interceptors to replenish the Iron Dome. Ignoring reports about the human rights abuses committed by the Israeli defence forces, the US sent an additional 3.5 billion dollars to Israel in August to buy US-made weapons and military equipment. In the past year alone, 14 billion dollars was given to replenish Israel's military armoury.

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Israel pushing West Asia into a destructive regional war India govt should be forced to stop arms supplies to Israel

By P. Sudhir

This October 7 marks a year since Israeli aggression on Gaza. Israel used Hamas attack as an excuse to carry out its genocidal war on Gaza, Palestine. It declared the elimination of Hamas as its objective in attacking Gaza. Far from achieving its objective, Israel has today pushed the entire West Asia into a cauldron of fire with its attacks on Lebanon, Iran, Syria, Yemen and Iraq. The US has stood steadfastly with Israel backing its every aggressive move.

Israel's military attacks on Lebanon over the past fortnight have completely changed the character of the war. In a planned offensive, Israel started with intense air raids on southern Lebanon, followed by targeted assassinations of Hezbollah leaders using paggers and other communication devices. With the assassination of the secretary general of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, who was in the headquarters of his organisation, using a bunker buster bomb the war got escalated to new heights. On October 1, Israel declared that it is launching a 'limited, localised and targeted' ground operation in southern Lebanon. In reality, it had mobilised large numbers of troops at Lebanon's borders for a full-fledged ground invasion.

Israel is a rogue State in West Asia. It is violating all international laws and treaties and carrying out targeted assassinations and attacks in various countries. In the past one year, it had targeted and assassinated top Iranian commanders by striking inside Iranian territory. Ismail Haniyeh, chief negotiator of Hamas was assassinated while he was attending the swearing-in ceremony of the newly elected Iranian president. This was followed by targeted strikes in Beirut and the assassination of Nasrallah.

After assassinating Nasrallah, Israel has announced that Hezbollah is all but finished. Such wild pronouncements are cut off from reality. In 1992, Israel assassinated Abbas al-Musawi, co-founder and the second secretary general of Hezbollah. He was replaced by Nasrallah, who twice resisted the Israeli army's invasion. Israel was forced to accept its failure to meet its objective after its defeat in the hands of Hezbollah in 2006. It seems Israel has not learnt anything from its earlier escapades.

As an advanced outpost of US imperialism in West Asia, Israel is talking the language of the US. It has declared its military strategy as 'escalate to de-escalate'. This is a flawed understanding and a failed strategy. Such a strategy assumes that an intense military attack will force the enemy to surrender. History is replete with instances to show that this strategy does not guarantee victory. We have seen the spectacular failure of the US in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Libya. The same is going to repeat for Israel.

Hawkish Israeli leaders think that Hezbollah and Hamas are paralysed due to Israeli attacks and hence Iran is 'exposed and weak'. They are calling for military strikes on Iran, even targeting its nuclear facilities. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is talking about 'enforcing a regime change in Iran' and 'changing the political map of West Asia'. Carried away by these wild ideas, Israel is acting recklessly to establish its hegemony, which also serves the interests of the US.

To stop Israel and protect its interests, Iran has now fired more than 180 missiles

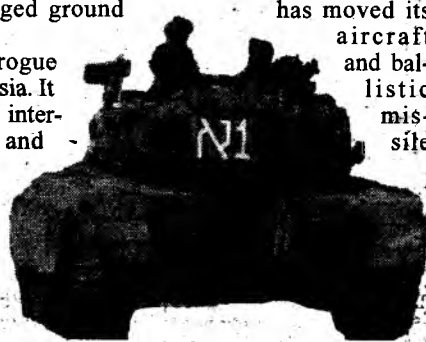
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Israel's aggression has reached a critical stage threatening world peace. Any further escalation would be catastrophic. People around the world are rallying against Israel demanding an immediate ceasefire. Workers are refusing to load weapons or allow ships carrying arms to dock. Students are demanding their universities to withdraw from agreements signed with their Israeli counterparts. Such resistance activities should be strengthened in our country too, forcing our government to stop the supply of armaments to Israel and stand in solidarity with Palestine. (IPA Service)



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

How do I know when it's time to replace my running shoes?



Any runner will tell you there's nothing better than slipping on a brand new pair of shoes. But how regularly should runners fork out hundreds of dollars on their next pair? Conventional wisdom tells us the average lifespan of a running shoe is around 500 to 800 kilometres. But where did this advice come from, and is it based on science? Some evidence comes from impact testing with machines designed to simulate the shoe repeatedly contacting the ground during running. Other evidence comes from monitoring runners who have used shoes in the real world for long periods.

This research is often focused on shoe materials and structure. But we think more compelling markers for the runner are shoe comfort, performance benefit and injury risk.

Rather than seeking a "one-size-fits-all" answer to how many kilometres your shoes should be limited to, it's also better to consider individual signs based on your shoe type and its purpose.

The three signs to watch for

Runners tend to replace their shoes for three main reasons:

1. they believe their performance is being negatively impacted
2. their shoes are leading to some bodily discomfort which may cause (or has already caused) an injury
3. the shoes are no longer comfortable or "feel" as good as they used to.

So what does the evidence say about these factors?

Performance

Some shoe material properties do contribute to enhanced running efficiency. Degrading these materials by racking up the kilometres may hinder peak performance on race day.

This is most clearly seen in carbon fibre plate shoes used by modern elite runners to achieve rapid road race times. The design features thought to drive this are the combination of highly compliant and resilient midsole foam and a stiff embedded carbon fibre plate, which support energy storage and return.

Runners will typically "save" these shoes for race day and replace them after fewer kilometres, compared to conventional running shoes.

The available research does support the performance benefits of these shoes. However, it's not known how long the benefits last relative to kilometres of wear.

To our best knowledge, there's only one study on running performance and shoe wear, but unfortunately it did not involve carbon fibre plate shoes. A University of Connecticut 2020 master's thesis investigated eight college-level runners over 400 miles (643km) of Nike Pegasus shoe use.

Large reductions in running economy were reported

at 240km, and this was statistically significant at 320km. No reduction was observed at 160km.

So, if you're chasing personal best times, the evidence above suggests that for peak performance, shoes should be replaced somewhere between 160 and 240km (although this is not directly based on carbon fibre plate shoe research).

It appears that minimising training kilometres for your favourite racing shoes - keeping them "fresh" - could contribute to peak performance on race day, compared to racing in a pair of old shoes.

Injury or discomfort

The link between shoe wear and injury is unclear, and based on minimal and often conflicting evidence.

One study did find that runners who alternate their running shoes have a lower risk of injury than runners who run only in the same pair of shoes over a 22-week period. Runners who alternated shoes throughout the study period would have accumulated less wear in each shoe.

This provides some support for the notion that accumulating too many kilometres in your shoes may increase risk of injury. Unfortunately, the exact age of running shoes was not reported in this study.

However, based on the running characteristics reported, the single-shoe pair users completed an average of 320km in their shoes (after adjusting for a small fraction who had to replace shoes during the study).

This was compared to the multi-shoe pair users who used an average of 3.6 pairs of shoes, ran more total kilometres, but accumulated an average of only 200km per shoe pair.

Comfort

Comfort and fit are the two most important factors



How can I stop using food to cope with negative emotions?

Have you ever noticed changes in your eating habits when you are sad, bored or anxious? Many people report eating either more, or less, as a way of helping them to cope when they experience difficult emotions.

Although this is a very normal response, it can take the pleasure out of eating, and can become distressing and bring about other feelings of shame and self-criticism.

Adding to the complexity of it all, we live in a world where diet culture is unavoidable, and our relationship to eating, food and body image can become complicated and confusing.

Emotional eating is common

"Emotional eating" refers to the eating behaviours (typically eating more) that occur in response to difficult emotions.

Research shows around 20 per cent of people regularly engage in emotional eating, with a higher prevalence among adolescents and women. In a study of more than 1,500 adolescents, 34 per cent engaged in emotional eating while sad and 40 per cent did so while anxious.

Foods consumed are often fast-foods and other energy-dense, nutrient-poor convenience foods.

Stress, strong emotions and depression

For some people, emotional eating was simply a habit formed earlier in life that has persisted over time.

But other factors might also contribute to the likelihood of emotional eating. The physiological effects of stress and strong emotions, for example, can influence hormones such as cortisol, insulin and glucose, which can also increase appetite.

Increased impulsivity (behaving before thinking things through), vulnerability to depression, a tendency to ruminate and difficulties regulating emotions also increase the likelihood of emotional eating.

So what do you do?

First, know that fluctuations in eating are normal. However, if you find that the way you eat in response to difficult emotions is not working for you, there are a few things you can do.

Starting with small things that are achievable but can have a huge impact, such as prioritising getting enough sleep and eating regularly.

Then, you can start to think about how you handle your emotions and hunger cues.

Expand your emotional awareness

Often we label emotions as good or bad, and this can result in fear, avoidance, and unhelpful coping strategies such as emotional eating.

But it's also important to differentiate the exact emotion. This might be feeling isolated, powerless or victimised, rather than something as broad as sad.

to runners when selecting running shoes. Evidence linking improved shoe comfort to reduced injury rates or improved running economy is mixed, but reducing harms from poorly fitting and uncomfortable shoes is clearly a priority for runners.

Most runners land on their heel. The repeated compression of the midsole causes the material to harden, possibly after as little as 160km, according to one study from 2017. However, there was virtually no change in the amount of cushioning runners perceived under their heel after 160km. Even after using the shoes for 640km, they felt little difference - about 3%.

While at first this might seem like runners are not very good at judging when shoes lose their cushioning, it also tells us changes in perceived shoe cushioning are very gradual and may not be important for runners until they reach a certain threshold.

This amount will differ from person to person, and from shoe to shoe, but research suggests it's not until perceived cushioning reaches about a 10% change that runners consider it meaningful.

We must be careful when applying these findings to the latest running shoes which use newer materials.

But you can use it as a rule of thumb - once you notice a drop in comfort, it's time to get a new pair.

When to choose new shoes

Ultimately, there's no one simple answer for when you should get new running shoes. You may also not keep close track of how many kilometres your favourite pair has racked up.

Overall, we believe the most practical advice is to keep your racing shoes "fresh" (under 240km), alternate a couple of other pairs during regular training, and replace them when you detect a notable drop in comfort. (*The Conversation*)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, OCTOBER 6, 2024

'Birthday Forecast'

Moon trine Mars on your solar return chart and it will bring very favorable results for you. You can be involved in a hot and happening affair with a person known to you. It could be case of love at first sight. Both of you will have genuine feelings for each other and will like to take the tie further. And enter into marriage. You will get very favorable business proposals. And you can enter into collaboration or joint venture. You will be taking big projects and also completing them. You will remain busy during the whole year and will be undertaking lot of business related trips. You will be meeting lot of people and develop wide contacts. They will prove to be very beneficial later on. You will have no financial worries. Family atmosphere will be wonderful. Peace and harmony will prevail. Family members will respect each other and there will be warm feelings.

'This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) There would be good relations among family members and good financial gain. You focus on having fun, enjoying romance and expressing yourself creatively. You would be able to give an unconventional perspective to your work and creativity. You spend quality time with your loved ones, family and children. There would be emphasis on your relationships as you feel they are more important to you than materialistic things. You are more receptive and gentle on a romantic level. You may discover new facets to your love life. You will be able to make best use of your talents, work experience and would insert your creativity into your work and projects in hand. This is a good time to build your skills, to get organized, and to attend to your health and fitness routine.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) Success and good fortune at work opens new horizons for expansion. This is a favorable time to go for higher learning and joining new courses to improve your professional skills and efficiency. This period highlights friendship, love, romance and children in your life. It is a favorable time to open up conversations with loved ones, as intimate moments are most appealing both of you. Your heart and head pull you in different direction when domestic and family related decisions are to be taken. You are more inclined to take pride in your intellectual accomplishments and your ability to socialize and make connections. Activities related to communications such as journalism, literature, speaking, etc., would figure more prominently in your life.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) You bring brilliancy and efficiency at work. You give a new approach to love, children and work on creative projects. A new set-up in existing relations or chances of formation of new relationship with people, are bright this week. You may redecorate your living space and put some more interiors and decorations to give a new look to your room. This is a good time to promote harmony and good relations with family members. This is the right time to participate in current events and share views, ideas and feelings with people around you to feel the part of whole, as this brings new opportunities and bring monetary gains. You have good team spirit and you are more tactful and obliging with your co-workers this brings harmony and joyous atmosphere at work place.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) This is a favorable time for learning something new, feeling comfortable in social situations and taking care of your hobbies. You are brilliant at dealing effectively with difficult projects at work. Increased connections and experiences come into picture. This is a period of growth as well as some form of blossoming or fruition. Communications and business associates from overseas bring good news and offer lucrative opportunities of love and the power of attraction, which may open the doors to new romantic relationships. You are bold and courageous in your approach when family related decisions are to be taken. You are highly motivated to indulge in your hobbies. Take care of your health and adopt a routine of regular walk and exercise.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) Power, influence and authority are the keywords at this time. Your professional life brings rewards and recognition. You are working hard and inclined towards more detailed work. You would work in association of senior colleagues and people in authority and learn many more things at work place, which boosts your confidence and you use your best talents and co-relate all activities to enhance the business and work opportunities. You may begin to take on more responsibilities on the job or in another service-oriented capacity. You are able to influence people with your fresh approach and novel ideas. You would be sensible about your diet, health, hygiene, and fitness needs.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22) People and friends look upon you with more respect, tolerance and acceptance. You handle business meetings, people and express yourself more specifically about the issues. Business expansion and new professional opportunities

are worth considering; you have to positively use your talents and efficiency. New associations and beginnings in work areas as new opportunities and changes may come. You would improve your romantic and love life by bringing more sincerity, cooperation and humanity as unusual attractions and dreams could feature at this time. Health and energy need to be conserved through a busy time at home and work.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) This phase brings good-luck, love and romance. Personal relationships are dreamy and transitory and commitments are made and promises are honored. You would maintain balance in the head and heart also in professional and personal matters. Its right time to concentrate on your career prospects and professional skills as a promotion or up-gradation in work area is likely to present itself. You have more energy for work and your daily routines tend to speed up now. Perhaps you have a larger workload than usual. You turn things around in the business dealings in your favor. You are noble and generous in family situations. It's a fabulous time for joining a gym or stepping up exercise and health routines.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) You spend a lot of time in short frequent trips with your family and children, communicating with people and visiting relatives and friends. You tend to entertain others with your conversation and your sense of humor is especially strong. Your thoughts turn to children, pleasures, or romance during this expressive period. You might enjoy researching speculative ventures now. You attempt difficult tasks, resolve complicated issues, and connect with unapproachable people in higher position. You especially enjoy games that involve competing with others on a mental level. You might just find that this is a period when you are at your most gracious—as long as you are truly listening instead of reacting. An overseas or long distance journey is on cards.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) You express your views, terms and conditions without hesitation and deal many issues bravely and successfully. You may bring in changes in your lifestyle even making small changes such as your hair-style, buy new attire etc. and spend time and money on entertainment and things that please you. You focus on having fun, enjoying sports and connecting with people. You may feel a bit defeated by situations at home and work. Allow space and time for things to change on their own. You have more opportunities to improve relations with relatives and friends in your immediate environment. You may visit religious places. You are full of energy and indulge in sports and other physical activities.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) The planetary configuration is indicative of more stability in personal relations and professional life. You have the tendency to compromise and adjust and take a softer approach while dealing with people at work and home. You may explore new equipment and improve working space as this brings more efficiency in your work. Family members would be more supportive as this is the best time to bring more harmony and pleasant interactions to your relationships and feel more comfortable. You tend to entertain others with your conversation and your sense of humor. The desire for some form of recognition is going to be fulfilled. You maintain a fitness routine and healthy diet program. Brisk walk and timely eating would be helpful.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) You would share your interests and communicate beautifully with people around you. You might spend a lot of time in meeting friends and loved ones. The ability to build up financial and monetary pursuits and good returns from overseas business are on cards. Sometimes, it might be hard for you to work with others in a team work, if you feel disappointed, frustrated or restless, it would be better to find little more work to keep you busy. You may be especially focused on your family. It's a passionate time, although you are unlikely to be displaying a whole lot of self-discipline. You could be stressed while meeting people's expectations and approval. Health food, yoga and meditation recommended. It's a great time to make improvements to your regular routines.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) Cordial relations in professional and personal relations are highlighted. Cultural and spiritual awareness increases. Close friends and family members would notice you for your more tolerant and broadminded nature. You would attract people with your intelligent mind. Your social life is enviable as you interact with important people in authority. You would show your love to your family and children. You resolve an important domestic issue that has been causing problems in relations for some time. Cooperation and a focus on harmony and understanding benefit you professionally and enhance your reputation and public standing. You are strong and masterful while turning things around in a positive direction at work.

Return of Congress

ASSEMBLY elections are fought mainly on the basis of the state's political climate and public mood in favour of the principal parties in the fray. These generally have little to do with the performance of the central government. Not so this time. When the results of the assembly polls in Haryana and Jammu and Kashmir are out, the embarrassment could be more for the BJP and Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Delhi if the exit poll results from these two states are any indication. A huge sweep for the Congress is predicted by most polls in Haryana and an upper hand for the NC-Congress alliance in Jammu and Kashmir.

The entire campaign scene in Haryana was seen tilting in favour of the Congress, whose leader Rahul Gandhi put up a spirited performance there in recent weeks – and he rose to the occasion in Jammu and Kashmir too. Fact is, the BJP was not given a majority in the Haryana assembly polls five years ago. The lacklustre rule of Manohar Lal Khattar was the principal reason. The BJP managed to retain power with the help of a new regional outfit, which too is faring poorly in the present exit poll results. In Jammu and Kashmir, despite the positive strides after revocation of the special status in 2019, the BJP and ally PDP failed to impress the people. The Abdullahs and others may have the last laugh there this time. Had the BJP and Mehbooba Mufti made serious efforts there to win over the people with more positive action, the evolving scenario would have favoured them. But, as is evident elsewhere too, the BJP continues to show a sense of complacency on the governance front everywhere. It retained Madhya Pradesh thanks to the clout of Shivraj Singh Chouhan and wrested Odisha on an anti-incumbency wave. The Congress came from behind and grabbed power in Telangana and Karnataka.

What would happen in Maharashtra next month and Jharkhand and Delhi early next year are anybody's guess. There's little to show the BJP is in pole position in these states. BJP's lead position in Maharashtra for the past few years could now be a thing of the past. It could not build on the positives there. Tainted Arvind Kejriwal is still likely to put up a big fight in Delhi. If the BJP loses some of these states, the cohesion of the alliance government that Narendra Modi leads now could be seriously hurt. There are those who suspect whether Modi can complete his five-year term as a resurgent Congress could perhaps depend on weathercocks like Chandrababu Naidu and Nitish Kumar to ditch the BJP and pull down the government. To this extent, the assembly poll results will have high national significance.

Letters to the Editor

Jaintia Hills in shambles!

Editor,
It's no hidden truth that this beloved part of our land has been and is still in shambles and having a Deputy Chief Minister from this region has made no difference whatsoever! The state of affairs in terms of education, health, environment are all deplorable and all of the big shills have fled and settled in Shillong leaving the helpless people of Jaintia Hills in their sorry conditions to fend for themselves.

Be that as it may, the focus today is confined to the deteriorating road conditions in this region, particularly from the border onwards as you enter Jaintia Hills District from the East Khasi Hills, including that of the Deputy Chief Minister's constituency, Ummulung. The numerous potholes have become a significant hazard for drivers and passengers alike and travelling through these roads now has become a nightmare!

Over the past few weeks, the situation has worsened, with potholes appearing on nearly every part of the highway once you're "welcomed" into Jaintia Hills. These depressions not only damage vehicles but also pose serious risks to safety, especially for motorcyclists. The erratic driving that results from navigating these obstacles creates a dangerous environment for all road users.

Of late, there have also

been instances wherein many trucks have broken down in the middle of the road owing to these potholes and depressions causing massive traffic jams for hours on the highways adding to all the misery.

The lack of timely repairs has raised concerns amongst all commuters about the local government's commitment to maintaining our infrastructure. We deserve safe roads that promote community wellbeing, and it is disheartening to see our highways and roads neglected.

While Jaintia Hills District is home to some of the most sought after tourist destinations in the State such as the Phe Phe Falls, Dawki, Krangsuri Falls, it is embarrassing that visitors from other parts of the country and even the world must travel and navigate through enormous potholes, something which is an ancient issue where they come from.

Further, it is no secret that people from this region travel to and from Shillong regularly for medical care (even for tests we have to go to Shillong and NEIGRIHMS), education (as most of the children study in Shillong), shopping, etc. You cannot begin to imagine the plight of pregnant women, infants, children, sick and infirmed people travelling through these roads today.

I don't think the Deputy Chief Minister brings his Maybach through these horrendous roads to his constituency but our backs are definitely breaking by journeying through them and we urge

local authorities to prioritize road maintenance and address this issue promptly. The safety of our people depends on it.

Yours etc.,
Lop S Khonglah
Via email

Dip in puja shopping fervour

Editor,
This refers to your news report "Puja shopping in Shillong nosedives" dated 1st October 2024 where it has been highlighted how Shillong's market streets are empty this festive season with businesses keeping low stocks with ever decreasing footfall at their shop's. This phenomenon is not new and has been seen over a couple of years now primarily with the easy access of online shopping at one's fingertips coupled with huge discounts that these online portals offer through various shopping festivals. Having said that, did the local businesses try to reinvent themselves to keep up with the changing times and consumer demands? The answer to this question will give a lot of insights on how and why retail shopping in Shillong has "nosedived".

Why should I as a consumer go for substandard products at higher rates than what is nationally available? Even a drive down to Guwahati gives one the option to indulge in retail therapy with the availability of multiple renowned brands and throughout the year discounts. A couple of years ago a renowned shop

dealing in clothing refused to take online payment saying only cash was accepted. With such high-handedness, now the complaint of low business does not go down too well to be honest. For too long the consumers have been fleeced but now the tide has turned and turned quite significantly to hit it where it hurts.

I hope the well-established local business houses here realize this and offer consumers products and prices that are competitive to survive the onslaught of online shopping, otherwise this pain of business "nosediving" will be eternal.

Yours etc.
A Choudhury
New Delhi

Mitigating road accidents

Editor,
Every state government has a set of road safety protocols and information that should be publicized in newspapers and through the local electronic media channels considering the rate of road accidents where families lose their loved ones with some permanently disabled. The onus lies in our State Transport Department and the police as well to enforce road safety rules. Unfortunately we don't see that happening. The recent accident near Jowai Civil Hospital is another stark reminder that the District Administrative authorities need to buckle up instead of turning a blind eye to the series of fatal road accidents. Another dangerous point is at Woodland

Hospital crossing along the way to Ialong which has witnessed near-misses and accidents as well along this entire stretch. The police personnel deployed are busy minting money instead of being visible to control traffic at these crucial points. We have come to a point where the police care a damn about the law and rules. It is time the DGP makes a surprise visit to these vulnerable places where people are mostly left to fend for themselves. The state authorities too should take cognizance of the rampant accidents in Jaintia Hills where things are getting from bad to worse.

Yours etc.,
Dominic S. Wankhar,
Shillong

Meghalaya Reservation Policy: The status quo must prevail

Editor,
We all know who wanted to review the Meghalaya Job Reservation Policy 1972 and why. The current position is 40% for Garos, 40% for the Khasi-Jaintia, 5% for other backward communities and 15% for general candidates but this is only on paper even after 52 years of statehood. The truth cannot be suppressed for too long. The cornerstone of the reservation for job opportunities is based on the backwardness of certain communities in India which is well conceived by the Father of Indian Constitution whose name is known

metals, with which to make an idol (Ibid Dutta S.K., Representation, 1937). The question is, is the idol now on display at the Nartiang temple the ancient idol mentioned in the Jaintia Buranjis?

About the Shakti Peethas
The story goes that Sati's father organized a mighty yagna but did not invite his son in law Shiva to the sacrifice. The story ends tragically with Sati self-immolating. Worried that the vengeful Shiva would destroy the world, Mahavishnu cut Sati's body into 51 pieces with his Sudarshan Chakra (some legends claim there were 108 pieces). Her body parts and ornaments fell to various places in the subcontinent. The Shiva Purana and the Kalika Purana recognize four major Shakti Peethas: Vimala (Puri, Odisha), Tara Tarini (Ganjam, Odisha), Kamakhya (Guwahati), and Dakshina Kalika (Kalighat, Kolkata). Other traditions hold that the 51 body parts fell at sacred spots called the Shakti Peethas or the centre of power.

Jayanti Devi Nartiang Shakti Peetha
The Jayanti Devi Temple in Nartiang village, West Jaintia Hills district, Meghalaya, is believed to be one of the Shakti Peethas. The Shakti Peetha at Nartiang is famous as Maa Jainteshwari, where her left thigh fell. It is where Sati embodies the ferocious and animistic aspects of Mahakali and Kramadishwar. The goddess, representing both destruction and liberation, cannot be propitiated without sacrifice. The local chief, or Syiem, was its principal patron, but the Daloi has since replaced this role.

Legend has it that about 6,000 years ago, the goddess came to King Dhan Manik in a dream and ordered him to build a temple for her where her thigh fell. <http://www.newindianexpress.com/magazine/2021/Sep/26/mother-of-power-2362905.html> Nartiang is also unique for being the only place where the tribal animist religion synthesizes with the worship of Durga and Shiva.

In my previous article on the Durga Puja in Nartiang, I explored the case of Hinduism in the area, which represents a synthesis of tribal religion and Hinduism. While we celebrate Durga Puja this year, let us also remember that there is another narrative associated with the famous Durga Temple in Nartiang. The story that the Jayanti Devi temple at Nartiang is not just another temple but it is one of the Shakti Peeth.

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In brazen defiance, Israel has ordered the continuation of strikes by its army, financed mainly by the United States (68%) and Germany (30%).

Dehumanisation
After the deadly attack perpetrated by Hamas in southern Israel on 7 October, which left more than 1,200 people dead and 251 hostages in captivity, the IFJ called journalists around the world to respect the truth and check the facts – not least because of the publication of one of the biggest 'fake news' stories of recent decades on the so-called beheaded babies.

Since then, debates have raged within editorial departments. Some fear being labelled pro-Palestinian; others that they are doing the bidding of Israel.

One consequence of this small-minded professionalism has been a kind of self-censorship that has resulted in the total dehumanisation of the Palestinian people. They have no-one but themselves to relate the story of their daily nightmare. When internet connections are authorised or in working order, the only way for the world to be kept informed is through

Your etc.,
Thrumen Sangma,
Via email

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Temple at Nartiang, one of the 51 Shakti Peethas

By H.H. Mohrmen

For a long time, the temple at Nartiang has been seen as just another temple. It has been there, yet nobody has tried to explore its history or significance. It never even occurred to us to ask questions about it. Now, the time has come to take an in-depth look at the Nartiang temple and understand its importance. The Durga Temple in Nartiang is not an ordinary temple; it is not only one of the oldest in the region but also believed to be one of the Shakti Peethas. Another important point is that the Durga Temple at Nartiang has a close connection with the Jaintia, which is also believed to be an ancient kingdom.

The Jaintia Kingdom and the Temple

The Jaintia Kingdom, from which the term Jaintia is derived, is the name of an ancient kingdom that included the hill region now known as Jaintia Hills. The kingdom extended to the plains in the south, reaching as far as the Surma River, an area now part of Bangladesh. "Jayantia" was the name of the kingdom in the plains, which was defeated or annexed by the tribal chief, who then moved his capital to Jayantiapur, the capital of the ancient kingdom.

In the Jaintia Buranji, it is mentioned that the Jaintia kings ruled a Brahmanical kingdom, which is referenced in Puranic literature and was famous for the shrine of Jayanti Devi. The kingdom was referred to as a "female kingdom" in the Mahabharata, and it is believed that Arjuna fought against the ruler of this kingdom (Dutta S.K., Introduction to the Jaintia Buranji, July 10, 1937). It is called female kingdom not because it was ruled by queens or princesses, but because of the peculiar tradition that it was the son of the sister of the king, or his nephew and not the son of the king who inherited the throne.

The Jaintia Buranji mentioned that since the time of Yudhisthir, Jayantiapur had been ruled by a succession of Brahmin kings, including Kedareswar Rai, Dhaneswar Rai, Kandurka Rai, Manik Rai, and the last, Jayanta Rai. These kings also performed the Rajasuya Yagna, a royal sacrifice (Buyan S.K., History of the Jaintias: The Genesis of Jaintias, Chapter 1, 1st edition 1937, English translation 2022).

Jayanta Rai, the last king of the Brahmin kingdom, did not have a son, but the deities he worshipped blessed him

with a baby girl, whom he named Jayanti Devi. Jayanti Devi later married Landhabor, who, due to his actions, was relegated to the status of a "Maha Mleccha," meaning a highly degenerated barbarian—a non-Aryan tribe of ancient India, non-Hindu, and given to unscriptural practices and sins (ibid). The Buranji provides various narratives about how Jayanti Devi was blessed by her deities, who sent a fish in her image upstream to the hills where her husband lived. Landhabor caught the fish, repeatedly forgetting to cook it, and later realized it was actually a human sent to marry him (ibid). The two give birth to their first son whose name is Borkohain Rai.

Jayanti Devi, who changed her name to Rani Singha, handed over the reins of the Jaintia Kingdom to Borkohain Rai, the son of Landhabor and the mysterious fish that became human and married him. Landhabor, Rani Singha's estranged husband, was condemned to the status of a Maha Mleccha. The Buranji narrates that Rani Singha then retired to one of the seven regions of the earth, and the place where she disappeared was named Muktipur. It may be mentioned that the abandoned temple is located in a no-man's land near present-day Muktapur.

At the height of its glory, the Jaintia Kingdom comprised both the hills and the plains, and it was ruled by kings who were descendants of the tribal chief. It is unclear whether the tribal ruler defeated the original rulers of Jayantiapur or whether it was divinely ordained, as mentioned in the kingdom's origin stories. However, two facts remain: the kingdom consisted of two regions, and the last rulers before it was annexed by the British were of Pnar descent.

The Jaintia Kingdom was annexed to the British Empire in 1835 because the Jaintia king refused to hand over the culprits involved in sacrificing British subjects at the shrine of the goddess Kali in Jayantia. It is well-established that human sacrifices were offered at the Kali temple in the Jaintia Kingdom (Dutta S.K., Introduction to the Jaintia Buranji, July 10, 1937). Even Gait mentioned the practice of human sacrifice by the Jaintias in detail (Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal,

Volume I, 1898). The British had earlier lodged a protest to the Jaintia king against a similar incident where British subjects were kidnapped to offer sacrifice in some temple under his jurisdiction.

The Temples in the Plains and the Hills

There were at least five ancient temples in the Jaintia Kingdom: the old ruined temple at Syndai, the abandoned temple at Borkhat, the temple at Jayantiapur, another old abandoned temple on the Indo-Bangladesh border near Muktapur, and the Jayanti Devi Temple in Nartiang village. Dutta believed that human sacrifices were offered yearly in the Faljur Pargana and at Jayanteswari in Jayantiapur (ibid). There are oral stories of human sacrifice at the temple in Borkhat as well, but the question remains: which shrine was mentioned in Puranic literature?

Of the temples mentioned above, only the Jayanti Devi Temple in Nartiang is still operational, where the ancient idol is located. Local narratives include stories of human sacrifices at the temple. Inside the sanctum sanctorum of the Nartiang temple, there is a pit that local narratives claim was where the heads of sacrificial victims fell. Although human sacrifices are no longer performed, goats are sacrificed today, dressed as humans. The sacrificial goat, called "u blang syntaw" or the midnight goat was made to wear a turban, a human face mask, and male earrings known as "ki kyn-diam." As the name suggests, the sacrifice is performed at midnight, with only the priest allowed in the temple (interview with the late Utam Deshmukh, priest of the temple). So, if you are still wondering about the origin of the term "scapegoat" in English, maybe it owes its origin to Nartiang.

The Ancient Idol

After Rani Singha, previously known as Jayanti Devi, disappeared at Muktipur/Muktapur, Borgohain Rai ordered the spot where she vanished to be dug up to locate her. However, she appeared in his dream and advised him to stop. Instead, he would find a piece of bronze in the place where he dug and molded it into an image that he should call Jayanti Devi. Another version of the story says that Jayanti Devi told him that while digging, he would find a piece of metal, an alloy of the right principal

Gaza: The international community must assume its responsibilities

By Anthony Bellanger

Since 7 October 2023, only shades of black have been visible in Palestine.

In 12 months, the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), a worldwide organisation representing 600,000 media professionals in 150 countries, has recorded at least 138 journalists' deaths during the course of the war in Gaza. Of these, 128 were Palestinians, five Lebanese, four Israeli and one Syrian. This death toll represents the bloodiest period in the history of journalism.

By way of comparison, the other major conflict in the world between Ukraine and Russia has resulted in the deaths of 18 Ukrainian journalists after 32 months of conflict.

The IFJ's investigations, with the help of its Palestinian affiliate, the Palestinian Journalists Syndicate (PJS), clearly show that many of these victims were targeted by the Israeli army – a practice the International Court of Justice demanded the cessation of in October 2023, as international law requires.

This war in Gaza – now spread to Lebanon – is the will of the government of one man, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. He is trampling international conventions and even took the liberty of boasting about his military actions against civilians at the United Nations General Assembly. His pretext is 'fighting terrorism'. Yet since the American conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, analysis shows that indiscriminate warfare and arbitrary strikes in the cause of combating terrorism are totally counterproductive. Evidence suggests that they reinforce radical ideologies and amplify the actions of the very organisations they are intended to oppose. Not only that, but these indiscriminate attacks on civilians create at least two generations of hatred and resentment against their aggressors and their descendants.

Since October 2023, the IFJ has made repeated appeals to the United Nations. We have demanded a ceasefire to allow civilians to leave the Gaza Strip (an area of around 365km², a third the size of Paris). We have called for humanitarian and logistical aid to be delivered as close as possible to the population, including protective equipment for journalists. And we have joined the call for foreign journalists and media workers to be allowed into the enclave to document the war.

Nothing has happened. The Netanyahu government remains impervious, despite the incessant actions of UN Secretary-General António Guterres.

In brazen defiance, Israel has ordered the continuation of strikes by its army, financed mainly by the United States (68%) and Germany (30%).

Dehumanisation
After the deadly attack perpetrated by Hamas in southern Israel on 7 October, which left more than 1,200 people dead and 251 hostages in captivity, the IFJ called journalists around the world to respect the truth and check the facts – not least because of the publication of one of the biggest 'fake news' stories of recent decades on the so-called beheaded babies.

Since then, debates have raged within editorial departments. Some fear being labelled pro-Palestinian; others that they are doing the bidding of Israel.

One consequence of this small-minded professionalism has been a kind of self-censorship that has resulted in the total dehumanisation of the Palestinian people. They have no-one but themselves to relate the story of their daily nightmare. When internet connections are authorised or in working order, the only way for the world to be kept informed is through

publications on the social networking platforms of Gaza journalists.

The vast majority of the world's media are effectively cut off from a huge news story whose daily horrors pass them by. Their only available sources are the journalists who are members of the PJS and the IFJ, who take all the risks to film and photograph with their phones. They are the only ones who are able to fulfil their mission, providing information from the battle front, even though they lack all but the bare essentials, for which they must pay premiums on the black market.

On the Israeli side, the dehumanisation of Palestinian civilians is orchestrated by the journalists themselves. In an interview with AFP, one of Channel 14's Israeli journalists, Hallel Bitton-Rosen, stated bluntly that her work focuses on "supporting the fighting forces that are protecting the country and its citizens from the vile terrorists who perpetrated the 'terrible massacre'".

Is this self-censorship or propaganda?

Fortunately, many journalists who deserve that title are taking on their mission with professionalism and relaying the work of their colleagues in Gaza, while cross-checking their sources with the official communications of the two belligerents.

Solidarity centers for the media

For its part, the International Federation of Journalists and its member unions have raised several hundred thousand euros for journalists in Gaza via its International Safety Fund. At the end of July we opened the first media solidarity centre in the south of the enclave, in the Khan Younis region. The number of centres has now risen to two, with the help in particular of UNESCO, but it is nowhere near enough. Gaza journalists are determined to tell their story, and for so long as that is the case, it is the IFJ's duty to support them doing this in whatever way we can.

A few days away from the first anniversary of the terrible 7 October attack, it is clear that this war has the potential to expose the tragic shortcomings of the United Nations, just as the Second World War did the League of Nations. The UN Security Council is paralysed, sclerotic and powerless in the face of an Israeli government that enjoys scandalous impunity.

When the dust settles from the rubble of Gaza, the historians of the 2030s will pass harsh judgement on the international community, if it still deserves that name, so divided is the world, in particular the world's great 'powers'. The West and the Arab world have, at best, issued weak and disconnected declarations, and at worst have financed the arming of the Israeli government. The international community must accept its responsibilities – and the sooner the better.

If international justice delivers on its obligations, the leaders of Israel and Hamas should be in the dock facing charges ranging from war crimes to crimes against humanity. Many other political leaders should appear for complicity in those crimes.

Apart from our IFJ colleagues, we no longer expect anything from anyone, lamented a Palestinian journalist in Gaza in September. "There have been so many deaths that we have nothing left to lose, not even our lives. If hell exists, I think I'm living in it right now. It's a real massacre. It is beyond the imagination of anyone who is not here."

(Anthony Bellanger is General Secretary, International Federation of Journalists)

“Global warming isn't a prediction.”

— James Hansen

The Shillong Times

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Climate vulnerabilities demand fresh thinking

GARO Hills is suffering from the onslaught of torrential rains with lives lost and homes uprooted and livestock all dead in the flood waters. What can be a worse catastrophe than this! With climate change becoming a stark reality and taking a toll on human lives and destroying public amenities such as bridges, roads and buildings, it is time to revisit the entire public infrastructure planning and construction. Roads in Meghalaya are built of soil, aggregate and bitumen. One is unsure if asphalt is used but looking at the poor quality of our roads one sees only an attempt at cost cutting, not at creating structures that will last for at least a decade without the need for repairs. Asphalt is produced in a plant that heats, dries, and mixes aggregate, bitumen, and sand into a composite mix. Depending on the type of project, the material is subsequently applied on-site with a paving machine at a specified or required thickness. Some parts of the city where this process is applied have shown better road quality. When asphalt is employed in road construction, it takes the form of a composite material known as asphalt concrete. This road construction material is made up of 70% asphalt and 30% aggregate. Asphalt is 100% recyclable, making it one of the most preferred materials for road construction according to engineers.

However, in rainy areas, professionals are of the opinion that plastic waste (carry bags, cups, thermocol, foams and flexible films) when shredded into small pieces and added to the granite stone that is heated to around 1700c makes good material for roads. The shredded plastic waste is melted and coated over a stone in just 30 seconds. Then the bitumen is added and mixed. Alternatively the shredded plastics are added along with the aggregate or a special mechanical device which is developed to spray the plastics inside the chamber to coat the plastics effectively to have a uniform coating. Considering that Meghalaya is battling a crisis of not being able to dispose off the tonnes of plastics it is time to reimagine road construction that can use waste materials and also last longer.

Large parts of Meghalaya are hilly terrain and building on slopes is fraught especially at a time when climate change has wreaked havoc and flood waters are carrying away entire villages. Human tragedies rise manifold hence the state has to ensure that reckless construction on loose soil is not allowed. The problem is that there is no robust mechanism for giving out building permissions, taking into account safety and security measures. It's a free for all and yet when tragedy strikes it is the state that has to bear the brunt and dole out money to suffering families when some basic safety measures at the building stage could have prevented the tragedy. Clearly climate change affects not just the climate but the entire construction eco-system including doing away with wooden bridges and using concrete to replace them. Many such bridges dot the landscape in this state and warning signs that the bridges are weak are placed there but vehicles continue to ply until catastrophe strikes. The state has to take a collective call to replace all wooden bridges connecting villages

Letters to the Editor

Observation on the Utopian-Socialistic Ideals of Reservation

Editor,

Reservation today is on the basis of the category of ST/SC/OBC/EWS. If we want to look for backwardness and under-privileged sections through careful study we will find them among all tribes/ethnic groups. We cannot justify that one tribe is more advanced than the other. Through careful study we will find pockets of anomalies and contradictions within each tribe. A Scheduled Tribe is a Scheduled Tribe since backwardness and being under-privileged are relative terms not an absolute quantity or characteristic.

Backwardness and being under-privileged in a particular group is not because of lack of Reservation. It is the lack of ability on the part of that group to access and utilise the benefits of Reservations and also the failure of the elected leaders who represent such under-privileged sections.

Backwardness and being under-privileged cannot be addressed by job reservation. Economic backwardness and being under-privileged can be solved through economic policies and their implementation/interventions. If backwardness and being under-privileged is the criteria for Reservation, then it should also apply to those sections who are under-privileged within a Tribe or Group which has been

considered advanced. Looking at the 8 C&RD Blocks of East Khasi Hills, Mawkynrew Block is the most underprivileged Block at par with any underprivileged areas in Garo Hills. If Reservation is for applying Distributive Justice and enabling the weak, then it should be fair.

If we use the 'degree of backwardness/deprivation' between tribes, (let's say one tribe is more backward than the other in terms of the 'degree' allocated values), then we also need to take into account the 'degree of influence' of the size of that population (also growth rate, dynamics) that it will contribute to the 'degree of backwardness and deprivation' of a particular tribe in the short or long term.

If we consider 'the point of deprivation' as suggested by some we first have to define 'deprivation from what/ of what,' 'deprivation by whom,' 'categories/degrees of deprivation;' the reasons for deprivation because deprivation has multiple factors with different degrees of influence, and these influences are not absolute but relative. If we consider all these, we will find deprivation nearly everywhere. A case in point: travel about 25 km radius from Shillong you will find cases of deprivations of different shades and hues. You might even find acute deprivations.

Only experts on socio-economics, population dynamics will be able to give their advice and perspective on this.

When it comes to Reservation, we also need to recognise the needs of the

Reference is made here to the front page news report in ST Oct 3, 2024 captioned "DoNER Ministry mulls common bamboo policy for NE states". According to this news report Indian Chamber of Commerce (ICC) has been tasked with coming up with a DPR on the subject to cover (1) a uniform policy framework on the subject (2) value added production proposals for an international market (3) private investments will be encouraged. To those of us who are really worried about the economy of the region, this is most welcome news. Bamboo is common throughout the states of the Northeast. Meghalaya in particular with its different agro climatic zones (The plateau and plain agro-climatic zones of Garo Hills, Ri Bhoi agro-climatic zone, the plateau agro-climatic zone of both Khasi and Jaintia Hills and the agro-climatic zone of the southern slopes of Ri Khasi Jaintia) is endemic to a variety of bamboo species, whose economic value through value addition is yet to be explored, assessed and appreciated. Most of us and policy makers of the state Government are yet to awaken to the enormous economic potential that this humble grass species can bring to the state and its people. In China , bamboo cultivation and value addition to this agricultural product has earned bamboo the nickname of "Green Gold". Such is its potential to change the dynamics of a country's economic trajectory and its people. Meanwhile in Meghalaya we still continue to use it as cheap scaffolding material for the building industry. The contrast in vision cannot be starker than this!

In 2001 a delegation from Meghalaya led by then Finance Minister (L) AH Scott Lyngdoh and comprising of the following (MEAs AL Hek, Lu Adolf Hitler, PCCF Balvinder Singh, Chief Secretary JP Singh, Principal Secretary PJ Bazely and myself) had gone on a visit to China to specifically study the use of bamboo in that country. I am given to believe that the observations and recommendations of the delegation were prepared by the Forest Department and submitted to the Government of Meghalaya for further action. Well as usual that was the last that was heard of this particular event. Nothing came out of this visit. Now however, in view of the renewed interest of DoNER

State Machinery; A Machine runs best with efficient, functional, productive elements. Meritocracy is crucial and beneficial. Emotions and shoddy egalitarian sentiments will drag the State backwards. Hence the need for specific and fine-tuned job allocation. If we aim for the so-called 10-billion-dollar economy, we also require an effective, productive, efficient bureaucracy.

In conclusion, can someone give a theoretical or real-world example on how a government job helps to eradicate backwardness? If a government job can eradicate 'backwardness and deprivation', then any person from any tribe can do that, because it is a prerequisite factor for that job. My family came from a village, where many who hail from that village are in well-placed jobs (private and public). But the village has remained the same for years. Only recently we got road connectivity.

Yours etc.,
Ubahunlang Dikhar Tmar,
Via email

On false alarms

Editor,
When I was in class IV, I read an interesting story about a man becoming critically ill after he had a wrong notion of consuming something that was stuck in his stomach. Doctors could not convince him, even with all sorts of medical test reports, that his apprehension was not correct. Then, the doctors decided to stage a false surgery on that person. Interestingly, the person felt better and relieved after the

Ministry on development of bamboo for the NE, I would like to give a short briefing on the observations of the delegation and its belief that bamboo can really be a change maker in the economic fortunes of our people and help lift the state and its people from the abject poverty and unemployment crisis it currently finds itself in.

In China, bamboo cultivation, processing, value addition and marketing of the same is an industrial activity carefully planned, nurtured and managed by the Govt and its Agricultural Ministry as a deliberate policy instrument to develop its rural areas especially its small farmers. Towards this end, the many markets where bamboo is used as raw material were identified, where in turn the finished product can be produced by local entrepreneurs to be finally exported either by Govt agencies or private export houses. Firstly, recognition was given to the fact that value addition to bamboo through the use of modern technology can strengthen the existing traditional handicraft industry and turn its products into attractive export items. Farmers were encouraged to grow pre-identified species of bamboo to feed local small cottage enterprises that in turn produce simple export items. The variety of items on this list is expansive and quite surprisingly simple and range from toothpicks, disposable chopsticks, tea coaster sets, table mats, wall hangings, window blinds, hand held fans and plaques and other cheap what-have-you attractive household items. One never realised the export potential of such cheap items to far away places of Europe, Middle East and America, nor the fact that they can easily be locally produced and in the process provide attractive livelihood options for farmers and other rural folks. This helps, unlike in Meghalaya, to retain the rural population in their rural settings. Unnecessary rural migration to urban centers is controlled!

Secondly , the huge capital investments by firms from Japan and Taiwan towards the processing of the humble Bamboo shoot is to be believed. Bamboo shoot processing plants (different varieties of bamboo produce different varieties of edible bamboo shoots)

fake surgical procedure. At the time, I thought that it was just a story. It was too much to believe for a child that sometimes fear itself is to be feared and not its cause. Later, I came to know about 'placebo' or 'sham' surgery. It is a fake surgery that a doctor sometimes has to stage-manage to eliminate unreasonable fear from the minds of the patients.

A recent overseas study says that an almond-sized structure called the amygdala that controls fear and is located deep in the brain is slightly larger in people with conservative ideologies than in liberals. It plays a critical role in processing fear, threats, and uncertainty. It needs to be investigated whether even fear-mongering on the basis of some fake information can make the amygdala grow out of proportion.

However, Nazi Germany has shown that a propaganda machine can successfully trigger phobia among people. It is highly dangerous to pamper any kind of phobia, be it anti-Semitism or Islamophobia. It is, therefore, necessary to counter with facts and figures the false narrative doing the rounds that Hindus will become a minority in India in a few years if population growth among Muslims is not checked. The people must know that this fear is based on wrong notions.

The main factor in population growth is the total fertility rate (TFR). A TFR of 2.1 is known as the replacement rate. Only when the TFR is greater than 2.1, the population in a given area will increase, and when it is less than 2.1, the population in a given area will eventu-

ally decrease. The Pew Research Centre, Washington DC, published a study in June 2021, which was based on India's census reports and the National Family Health Survey. The study says 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 shows that Bihar and Uttar Pradesh have a high total fertility rate of 3.4 and 2.7, respectively, in contrast to a low 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.

Even a cursory glance at the last 2011 population census reveals startling facts. Hindus are 82.69% and Muslims only 16.87% in Bihar. The population in Bihar is rapidly increasing with a high growth rate of 1.3 (3.4 - 2.1). On the other hand, the population in Kerala has rapidly been decreasing with a negative growth of minus 0.5 (1.6 - 2.1). Interestingly, Kerala has a relatively high percentage of Muslim population, which stands at 26.56%. Despite the fact that the main difference in fertility rate lies in the region, and not in religion, even educated people still believe that Hindus are in danger. Some people cannot move away from their bubble of beliefs, even after facts are revealed that give a completely different picture. Is it because of the abnormal growth in the

area where it needs to invest and concentrate. It's not only viable but doable!

In conclusion I would request the State Govt to seriously latch on to the proposed DoNER bamboo policy for the region. A core group comprising senior State Government officials and if possible with one senior representative from each of our District Councils should be immediately set up. This core group to be headed by the Planning Department is to closely follow up and interact with DoNER on this issue. The job of this group is to come up with a Meghalaya specific policy framework on how we plan to fit in with the overall bamboo policy of DoNER. We must focus on (a) its employment and income generation potential for our upland farmers and youth. The key factor here is the export market assurance to bamboo products by the Government of India. (b) help identify the specific bamboo related activities and technologies suited for both rural as well as urban youth especially our women (In China the entire line of assembling traditional bamboo handicraft items was handled by its women folk, adding to family incomes while at the same time empowering the rural women) (c) identify the role of our three District Councils as stakeholders in policy implementation of the project so that they can (i) guide our traditional village councils in project co-ordination especially in the management of private and community lands and forests (ii) use the project to control and manage jhum cultivation as per the mandate of Para 3 of the 6th Schedule. There is absolutely no call for the State Govt to go it alone. For the bamboo mission to succeed it must be participatory in nature with all concerned stakeholders to be involved. Women SHG groups, Village Dorbars, Dorbar Kurs, specific bamboo species groups need to be formed and brought in as stakeholders. Let this be a Bottom Up, People Demand Driven concept where the role of Govt and the ADCs be limited to that of concerned facilitators. A sincere appeal is made here to our so called representatives be it MLAs or MDCs. For once forget your miserable selves. The time for public service has finally arrived. Please don't fail the common man this time as such an opportunity might never come our way again.

amygdala from childhood by hearing false information?
Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

Misleading factual errors

Editor,

The opinion column, "India govt should be forced to stop arms supplies to Israel" by P Sudhir (ST Oct 5, 2024) is problematic. I read to look for the opinion of the writer and he does give his opinion. However, he begins with a factual error. He states that October 7 marks a year since Israeli aggression on Gaza. Israel's attacks on Gaza began on October 8, 2023. The attacks were in response to the killing of about 1200 soldiers, old men, women, children by Hamas militants. Many of these were civilians shot or even stabbed, some in their homes and many young people who were in an open air music festival. These attacks occurred at several locations along the Israeli-Gaza border. More than 200 people ranging from young children to old men and women were captured and taken hostage to Gaza.

The author, P Sudhir left out the events which led to the retaliatory action by Israel from October 8, 2023. By leaving the first facts he presented a picture which is not truthful.

Yours etc.,
Barkos Warjit,
Via email

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

In the shadows of suffering: A global call for justice and ceasefire

By Fahd Hazarika

With conflict between nations escalating into war, it is deeply unsettling to witness the significant toll it has taken on innocent lives. As multiple nations find themselves embroiled in discord and news cycles highlight the strategies and political maneuvers of leaders, we must not forget the civilians caught in the crossfire—the silent sufferers facing displacement and loss of life, who have no voice in the decisions being made.

In times of war, it is tragically the common man who bears the brunt of violence. Families are shattered, dreams and aspirations are extinguished, and the bonds of communities are torn apart. Imagine the anxiety of waking each morning not knowing whether they will even make it to dusk, where a moment's notice could change everything—where a loud explosion or the distant rumble of military action could abruptly disrupt their existence, turning routine into chaos before they have time to even process the change.

The agony of existing under the shadow of such persistent uncertainty is unimaginable. People go about their daily routines, often with smiles on their faces, concealing an internal storm of apprehension that lingers beneath. Parents lay their children down to sleep, whispering reassurances while their hearts race with fear. How do they continue to hope for peace amidst the looming dread? This is the haunting reality for millions who wish for nothing more than to live their lives in safety and harmony.

As we witness these troubling events from a distance, it's impossible to ignore the feeling of helplessness and guilt that creeps in—the thought that while our mobile screens flash with updates and opinions, countless innocent lives are hanging in the balance. The world watches, some with indifference, and others with sympathy and sorrow, but frequently remains detached as a mere spectator. There is an overwhelming sense that for every powerful leader pushing an agenda, it is the vast number of civilians who pay the ultimate price—and end they did not choose and do not deserve.

This humanitarian crisis has erupted not only from age-old territorial disputes but also from the actions of individuals in positions of unchecked power. As we reflect on the impact of these conflicts and how peace can possibly be restored, it becomes increasingly important to understand that it is those who hold power that are wielding it irresponsibly—giving rise to the very violence they claim to oppose. How then can we hold these figures accountable when they control the mechanisms of their own power? How can a global initiative aimed at ceasefires and humane laws hope to succeed when those that have the ability to enact change are themselves the architects of death and destruction? The answer possibly lies in not only addressing the events of war but also dismantling the systems that support and sustain them.

To transition from rhetoric to action, we must forge a pathway that incorporates global accountability alongside an unwavering commitment to ceasefire. Here are some key elements of this proposed solution:

1. Establishment of International Accountability Mechanisms: The formation of independent international tribunals focused on war crimes is essential. These bodies could act decisively against individuals who violate human rights or engage in acts of violence against civilians, regardless of their

position. By promoting accountability, we can begin to dismantle the shield of power that protects perpetrators from facing consequences.

2. Strengthening Global Laws on Ceasefires: A united global front is required to advocate for a universal law mandating ceasefires in conflict zones. This principle must be non-negotiable—regardless of ongoing disputes, the cessation of violence should take precedence. Nations and international organizations must come together to reinforce these laws, making it clear that any breach will invite significant consequences.

3. Empowerment of Civil Society: Grassroots movements and civil society organizations play a crucial role in advocating for peace and justice. Building coalitions that demand accountability and legitimate demands for ceasefires can push back against oppressive regimes. Their voices must amplify local concerns, ensuring that international dialogue incorporates the perspectives of those directly affected by conflict.

4. Promoting a Culture of Peace and Tolerance: Education plays a pivotal role in reshaping narratives around conflicts. Implementing programs that foster a culture of peace, mutual respect, and understanding can diminish the appeal of power-driven agendas. Countries should invest in education that emphasizes conflict resolution and the value of humanitarianism.

It is evident that the pathway to accountability and universal ceasefire is fraught with barriers, particularly stemming from those in power. However, the challenge also presents an opportunity for global solidarity. International coalitions, NGOs, and diplomatic efforts should work together with the aim of applying pressure on governments that perpetuate conflict. Strategic sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and public condemnation can also act as levers to encourage reform.

Furthermore, supporting leaders who genuinely advocate for peace and justice can help shift the balance of power from those who exploit conflicts to those who seek to resolve them. By elevating voices of reason, compassion, and leadership grounded in human rights, we can inspire a collective movement towards a more just world.

In conclusion, as we confront the staggering injustices faced by civilian populations in war-torn regions, it is paramount to understand that every single individual has a role to play. While so many of us may feel powerless to affect change, we must at the least speak up against unwarranted actions of violence that we see happening around us and advocate for kindness and compassion, not just while conversing with or about victims of conflict but also in our daily conversations. We must remind ourselves that behind every headline lies a story of hope and a yearning for peace, and a plea for a life of dignity.

Though the challenges are monumental, the vision of a future where peace prevails must be within our reach. We must be daring and optimistic, channeling the collective will of global citizens to advocate for a world where the lives of innocents are prioritized, and conflicts are resolved through dialogue, not violence. Together, we can champion a humanitarian approach to global relations that resonate with the timeless calling: to protect and save lives, ensuring that no more killings are tolerated—period.

“Recovery begins from the darkest moment.”
— John Major

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Growth and projections
LATEST IMF projections are that India could overtake Japan as the world’s fourth largest economy by next year. This is a matter of cheer for this nation; and yet, such propositions should be taken with a pinch of salt. The gap between Japan and India today is not wide. At the same time, the gap between India and the two top economic powers is huge. At best, India can in future hope to overtake only one more nation, Germany. In other words, it could remain as the world’s third or fourth top economy in the foreseeable future. The gap between the third, fourth and fifth is narrow. The US will have a projected GDP of nearly \$30,000 billion and China around \$18,533 billion against India’s projected \$4340 billion, Germany’s \$4772 billion and Japan’s \$4310 for next year. The super GDP club of US and China would remain unassailable. Germany has a population of just eight crore and Japan 12 crore. Which is Advantage India.

A comparison of India with China on GDP growth is inevitable. By the turn of the century in 2000, India’s GDP was at \$468 billion against China’s \$1211 billion. By year 2014, India’s grew to \$1434 billion against China’s huge \$10,476 billion. This was largely the UPA period. By year 2022, India’s GDP grew to around \$3,000 billion against China’s around \$18000 billion. This was the NDA period. Fact is, when China grew by leaps and bounds, India trailed. The growth was slow here. To camouflage this, governmental leaders keep claiming that India is set to surpass Germany and Japan in matters of economic growth soon and that India would achieve a super power status by 2047, when the nation celebrates the 100th year of Independence.

Like China, India’s strength is its huge manpower potential. Populations of both these nations, the largest in the world, are about the same. India is believed to have already surpassed the Chinese population number. Two-thirds of India’s population – some 65 percent – comprise those below age 35. They carry with them India’s hope to emerge as an economic super power on condition that their energies are channelled to productive use. This is precisely what’s not happening here. The subsidised ration scheme and doles-raj have turned people lazy. The huge youth power has largely not been put to productive use. Opportunities – the conditions for lazy governments are not creating – are fewer. The nation’s manufacturing sector continues to suffer while the services sector is strong. Machines and equipment produced outside are ‘serviced’ here. Most of those in most sectors are paid a pittance as salaries. Money circulation is less, markets are dull. In the lack of a strong leadership, the problem of bureaucratic red tape coupled with greed, lawlessness, bureaucratic highhandedness and corruption, is getting acute.

Letters to the Editor

Improving infrastructure for rural tourism development in Meghalaya

Editor,
The scenic beauty of Meghalaya, characterized by its perennial rivers, lakes, and waterfalls has presented a compelling opportunity for the growth and development of rural tourism. As Meghalaya gains popularity as a tourist destination, it is imperative that we prioritize sustainable tourism practices as well, to preserve our state’s natural beauty and cultural heritage. However, the fulfilment of this potential is impeded by two substantial infrastructural obstacles, which is inconsistent power supply and inadequate road conditions. Stakeholders face significant difficulties due to frequent power outages and poor network connectivity. This not only affects tourists but also poses significant challenges to the smooth operations of homestays, guesthouses, restaurants, and other tourism-

related establishments. The deplorable road conditions particularly in rural and border areas where numerous tourist attractions are located adversely affects the overall tourist experience, discouraging visitors from returning or recommending our state as a desirable destination. I feel it is of utmost importance that our Government confront these challenges head-on to guarantee that Meghalaya retains its allure for tourists; evolves into a premier tourist destination over time, and establishes a sustainable industry that can benefit our entire state.

Yours etc.,
Chanmiki Lamin
Via email

MPSC needs transparency in written exams & objectivity in interviews
Editor,
It is clear that the problem with the Meghalaya Public Service Commission (MPSC) can be pinned down to lack of transparency. Like cockroaches hiding in dark corners,

Leveraging agriculture to combat malnutrition in Meghalaya

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

Malnutrition in Meghalaya has been a persistent problem over the years. The most recent National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) has reiterated the challenges the state faces regarding child and maternal health. Under the indicators for child feeding practices and nutritional status, two key metrics—children aged 6-23 months receiving an adequate diet and children under 5 years who are stunted (height-for-age)—show figures higher than the national average: 29% and 46%, respectively. Another serious issue is anaemia among children and adults. All five indicators in this category—children aged 6-59 months who are anaemic (<11.0 g/dl), non-pregnant women aged 15-49 years who are anaemic (<12.0 g/dl), pregnant women aged 15-49 years who are anaemic (<11.0 g/dl), all women aged 15-49 years who are anaemic, and all women aged 15-19 years who are anaemic—report figures that are almost or more than 50%. This means that around half or more of the children and women are anaemic, which is a very worrying finding.

One of the widely used policies employed by the government of India to tackle the problem of malnutrition is large-scale food fortification of grains, oil, salt, and other staples. This approach dates back to the early years of independence, beginning with the fortification of vanaspati oil with vitamin A and salt with iodine. Recently, this approach has gained momentum with the introduction of universal distribution of fortified rice through the Public Distribution System (PDS), midday meals, and the Integrated Child Development Scheme. However, this approach has not been without its flaws.

Last year, The Reporters’ Collective, a publication that reports on public issues, published a three-part story on fortified rice supplied through the PDS. This policy has its roots in a speech given by Prime Minister Narendra Modi during Independence Day, in which he announced that more than half of Indians would be fed rice fortified with micro-nutrients by 2024 to eradicate anaemia. The three-part series revealed that the Modi government rushed this policy despite warnings from internal and external experts regarding the adverse effects of feeding fortified rice to people, particularly children. It was also revealed that at least six international organizations found their way into an Indian government agency to influence decisions and open the Indian market to global suppliers and manufacturers of premixes used to produce the artificial fortified rice kernel, which represents an annual business opportunity of Rs 1,800 crore. This raises many questions about the health risks and intentions behind the policy. Now, questions are being raised as to whether fortified rice can actually solve the problem of malnutrition.

A recent news report in the Economic Times mentioned a 2024 EAC-PM working paper by Mudit Kapoor et al., titled “Changes in India’s Food Consumption and Policy Implica-

tions,” which uses data from the Household Consumption Expenditure Survey 2022-23 and NFHS-5 (2019-21). The paper found that, irrespective of the consumption of fortified cereals, anaemia prevalence was higher in states with lower dietary diversity of iron-rich foods among both children and women. It highlighted the example of Rajasthan, where, despite the average iron intake being the highest among households due to the consumption of fortified cereals, the prevalence of anaemia was also very high. The study indicated that Rajasthan had the lowest dietary diversity for sources of iron and the poorest average iron intake when fortified cereals were excluded (since 84% of iron was from fortified cereals). The conclusion was that a diverse diet, rather than fortified foods, is a better way to reduce anaemia.

Dietary diversity is based on the principle that different foods are sources of various macro and micro nutrients, so a diverse diet best ensures nutrient adequacy. One way to assess this is by measuring the number of different food groups consumed over a 24-hour period. A food group is defined as a collection of food items that have similar caloric and nutrient contents. The FAO (Food and Agricultural Organisation) has identified ten of these groups: (1) starchy staples—grains, white roots, tubers, and plantains; (2) pulses (beans, peas, and lentils); (3) nuts and seeds; (4) dairy; (5) meat, poultry, and fish; (6) eggs; (7) dark green leafy vegetables; (8) other vitamin A-rich fruits and vegetables; (9) other vegetables; and (10) other fruits.

There are two important things to remember regarding food groups: consumption of different food items from the same group will not provide additional benefits, and an individual must consume at least five food groups in a day to ensure dietary diversity. For example, eating rice and potatoes, which are part of the starchy staple group, will not increase nutritional benefits; instead, one of them should be replaced by items from another group, such as dark green leafy vegetables or vitamin A-rich fruits and vegetables. Only then is nutrient adequacy ensured, and the threat of malnutrition tackled. This also emphasizes the importance of food production practices. Farming practices that focus on monoculture will find it difficult to ensure dietary diversity, as crops from this system are mostly meant for sale and not for consumption (e.g., broom, arecanut, etc.). On the other hand, a mixed cropping system is much more favorable for achieving the outcome of a diversified diet. In this respect, the farming systems practiced by the indigenous communities of Meghalaya, particularly jhum or shifting cultivation can be of tremendous importance.

An upcoming book chapter titled “The Importance of Shifting Cultivation for Food Biodiversity and Diversifying

Diets in Northeast India,” to be published in the book – Farmers’ Innovation and Best Practices by Shifting Cultivators in Asia-Pacific, applies the concept of food groups to assess the diversity of food plants found in jhum or shifting cultivation areas. The first volume of the book is already out, and the second volume, which includes this particular chapter, will be released by the end of the year. The book is being published by CABI, which is known for producing high-quality, rigorously peer-reviewed interdisciplinary research focused on global agriculture, food security, forestry, and environmental and social sciences. The findings of this chapter, authored by NESFAS (North East Society for Agroecology Support), are very important in the discussion on leveraging agriculture to combat malnutrition in the state.

This study selected two villages from the Mawknrew block, namely Khapmaw and Rasong, to assess different land uses—jhum plots, home gardens, terrace farming, and forests—as sources of food groups for dietary diversity. The study focused only on plant-based food groups, with animal-based food groups (dairy, eggs, meat, poultry, and fish) not included. Farmers from both Khapmaw and Rasong identified more than 200 food plants spread across all seven plant-based food groups. What was particularly impressive was the huge diversity of starchy staples identified by the community, which included different varieties of millet, sweet potato, cassava, Job’s tears, taro, potato, and maize. This included Raishan (Digitaria cruciata), a millet species endemic to the Khasi Hills. More than 60 fruits were identified, while the number of food plants under dark green leafy vegetables and other vegetables also exceeded 50 in some cases. Among the different land uses, jhum plots were found to be the most diverse.

Jhum is practiced by all households in both villages, and at least half—often much more than half—of the food plants from the categories of ‘starchy staples,’ ‘pulses,’ and ‘vitamin-A-rich plants’ are found in jhum fields. The jhum-sourced staples include nearly all varieties of cassava, taro, sweet potatoes, maize, Job’s tears, millets, and potatoes. Various beans and legumes make up the important ‘pulses’ from jhum fields, while the key ‘vitamin-A-rich plants’ include papaya, mangoes, pumpkins, tree tomatoes (Solanum betaceum), and carrots. Locally important plants from the remaining food groups grown in jhum fields include cucumbers, bitter eggplants, and gourds from ‘other vegetables’; sesame and perilla from ‘nuts and seeds’; and local vegetables such as mustard greens, sweet potato leaves, and the locally named jali and jarem. Many fruit trees also grow spontaneously in jhum fields or along the field margins. These include bananas, box myrtle, lychees,

jackfruit, guavas, plums, oranges, and star fruit (Averrhoa carambola).

The availability of all the food groups makes jhum the most important food-producing system in the study communities, in terms of both absolute quantity and nutritional diversity. This diversity is found across the seasons as well: a minimum of three food groups are present in any particular season. From the perspective of food diversity, home gardens (kper) are the only other system that can rival jhum, since it also provides all food groups. Many of the crops found in jhums are also grown in kper. However, an average jhum plot is a little less than half a hectare, while a kper is much smaller. Production from jhum is therefore much higher than that from kper. Thus, although both systems provide nutritional diversity, without jhum, households would find it difficult to achieve food security.

This discussion on the relationship between dietary diversity and agriculture becomes very important in light of the news that on September 24, 2024, the Meghalaya government signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) to collaborate on improving the population health outcomes of the state, particularly related to maternal and newborn health, family planning, nursing education, and agriculture and livestock development. Among the key areas in which BMGF intends to provide technical and financial support are maternal health, anaemia, childhood wasting, and malnutrition. Regarding agriculture and livestock development, the emphasis is on building value chains and supporting small farmers in the state of Meghalaya.

Although the news report does not provide many details, it appears that the link between dietary diversity, nutrition, and the role of agriculture in combating malnutrition has not received due attention. This would be a significant mistake and a missed opportunity for the government to leverage agriculture to combat malnutrition. The state is fortunate that jhum is still an important farming system practiced by many communities. This gives Meghalaya and the villages where jhum is practiced an advantage, as they do not have to depend on sources beyond the community to achieve dietary diversity. Support is needed to increase productivity and address issues of pests and crop loss, particularly due to climate change. The project can design activities to resolve these issues; however, it cannot be denied that there is an immense opportunity to leverage agriculture to combat malnutrition in the state. Hopefully, this opportunity will not be missed; otherwise, the project might fall short of its intended outcome of improving health for the citizens of the state. If that happens, it would be a matter of great shame.

(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)

disclosure by the MPSC.

Lastly, of course, as has been pointed out by many leaders, if the selection to the post of Chairman itself is not transparent, then corruption is still enabled. There must be an objective method of selecting the Chairman as well. But, all in all, since even to overhaul the MPSC requires a strong will, so it still seems that what continues to ail MPSC is really the lack of will to make it transparent.

Yours etc.,
Kitor H. Blah,
Via email

No justice for Dalits

Editor,
It is a pity that a case was filed against some unidentified villagers after they killed an attacking wolf in Uttar Pradesh’s Bahraich district on October 5. It is easy to put the entire blame on the villagers. But can the authorities answer why they failed to catch or kill the last man-eater wolf of the pack of six, even nearly 7 months after the first attack? Why did it take six months for them to cage four man-eater wolves at the end of August? A killing spree by man-

eater wolves began on March 10. But the fifth of the pack was captured only on September 9. Wolves killed as many as 10 people and injured 60 during the period of more than six months. Villagers said that they had been complaining since March, but the authorities ignored their dozens of written requests. It appears that the authorities do not bother about poor people’s distress.

The class and caste of a victim determine the level of sympathy she or he will get from the authorities and the affluent. This is the reason why the Dalit families of a village in Yadgir district in Karnataka have allegedly been facing social boycott now for their ‘sin’ of demanding justice and lodging a POCSO complaint against an ‘upper caste’ youth. Even a man-eater wolf can get sympathy and care, but it is hardly available for a tailender of class and caste.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

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Bob’s Banter

By Robert Clements

Switching Channels and Weak Leaders..!

It’s a day and night journey by car between Dubai and Israel. In Dubai, the Women’s T20 championship is being held, and cricketers wait with bated breaths as their women slog balls all over the field. A car’s journey away, women and children lie dead and wounded, maimed, crippled and fatally wounded as bullets and missiles are slogged all over, with ruthless precision.

And the rest of the world watches both, with spectator interest.

Have we become so immune to death and suffering? We are so good at flying our flags at half mast, for some political leader we hardly know, but when thousands cry, we just switch channels: ‘Oh look at Smriti Mandhana hitting a six!’ we cheer, even as a missile crashes into a house and a little girl with a doll in her hand lies dead!

Ah, dear readers, just like you would like to imagine your son or daughter to be another, Virat Kohli or Harmanpreet Kaur, and work hard to send them to cricket academies to achieve the same, use that same imagination to see your same child lying dead because the

have replaced strong leadership with popular figures, mistakenly thinking that they are strong leaders.

How wrong we are, because a strong leader is hardly ever popular. Strength is not seen when you please everybody, strength more often than not is when a leader goes against popular sentiment because of his or her belief in what is right.

Tragically, we see such a lack in Governor Pilate.

Right before him, stands the most innocent man in the history of mankind, and let’s give Pilate his due, in that he’s been blessed with the power of discernment.

But does he listen to his discerning voice?

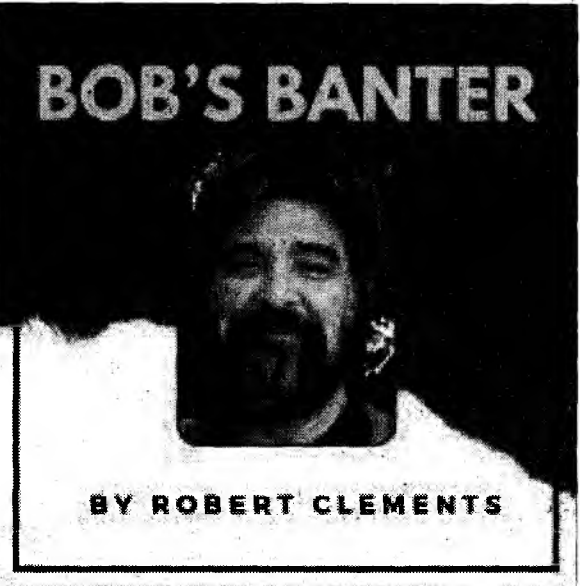
No!

In the Gospel of John 19: 38, after questioning Jesus in his inner chamber, he goes out to the people and says, “He is not guilty of any crime!”

Now that’s a huge statement, right?

But look at what he says next, “If you want me to, I’ll release him.”

Hey Governor, it’s in your hands man, you don’t need to ask anybody. Your job is to check if someone’s guilty or not, then release the person found innocent, right?



world was watching a cricket match, or was it soccer or tennis?

The world just switched channels.

But should we?

When I drive past a funeral in my country, and watch mourners streaming all over the road, I see grief; but also as they look at me in the car, I see anger, and if perchance my driver were to blow his horn and try to make them move aside, I would have to chastise him for being so insensitive. Because in that callous, thoughtless act, I showed my lack of concern for the intensity of grief they were going through.

But aren’t we doing the same, as we switch channels?

Aren’t we saying, “I couldn’t care less!”

We blow our horns, we switch channels, and suddenly a missile crashes into our homes, into our lives. That’s what happened in the second world war when the US allowed the British to fight the Germans, and for years didn’t join in, till Pearl harbour happened.

Suddenly, the missile hit home.

Are we waiting for this to happen? Instead of these artificial gestures of peace that are so meaningless from our political leaders, shouldn’t we as a people start a huge ‘people movement’ to stop these two wars?

Even as I write this, I can hear you say, ‘Israel is right,’ or ‘Palestine is right,’ ‘Ukraine is right’ or ‘Russia is right’!

Stop it. You don’t show respect to the funeral procession, asking who it is, or how they died. You mourn with the mourners, knowing that grief is terrible. In the same way, let’s stop asking who is right, but only see the homeless, orphaned, maimed and injured, and then stop switching channels!

Now here’s why you need to become decision makers in your own right and stop depending on our leaders: Because what is missing today in our nation, in churches and those who hold public office, are strong leaders. We

“No”, says Pilate, “my job is to remain popular!”

Sounds familiar, right? In leaders who support a bully Russia, despite knowing it’s an invader?

There are many such men and women, not just in our political landscape, but among our religious leadership. Leaders not guided by the holy scriptures, but who’s only ambition is to make it to Bishop or chairman of their organisation, and whose only vision is their flock venerating them.

But, the God above, doesn’t.

And even as a Bishop’s Palace or a huge parishone or the guruji status, is what they aim for, it’s just a matter of years before they feel the heat of hell’s fires and an eternity without a God who they’d promised to serve.

Is popularity really worth this end?

Oh, there’s another thing; popular decisions may give you a momentary standing ovation, but soon, what’s lost is respect.

People might have roared with approval at the decision of burning Giordano Bruno at the stake. His crime? Stating that the earth moved round the sun, and not the other way around as the church believed. The bishops and hierarchy must have been applauded, like Pilate was, but today, those popular men are thought of as murderers.

What about you? Are you, like Pilate, asking, “What shall I do with Jesus?”

“What shall I do with this problem?”

“Shall we nail this guy in our WhatsApp group?”

Or are you willing to leave aside your popularity, take a stand, and go down in history as a man or woman of strength?

You decide, even as you decide whether to switch channels or not...

The Author conducts a Writers and Speakers Course for schools, colleges and corporates. For more details call him on 9892572883 or send a message to bobsbanter@gmail.com

"Peace is not only better than war,
but infinitely more arduous."

—George Bernard Shaw

The Shillong Times

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Defying Exit Polls

THE BJP's surprising win in Haryana has boosted the Party's rank and file to wrest Maharashtra and Jharkhand in later polls. Noted psephologist Yogendra Yadav who has also led the Bharat Jodo Yatra along with Rahul Gandhi while speaking at a function in Delhi on October 6, had stated categorically that Haryana would go the Congress-INDIA way. But the voters had other things in mind. The lesson from Haryana is never to take the voters for granted and to ensure that those entrusted with leading the electioneering in a poll-bound state have the confidence of the people. Much was said about the dissatisfaction of the people of Haryana vis a vis the Agniveer scheme which the youth of Haryana felt was taking away their share of jobs. But above all the farmer's agitation that was still fresh on people's minds was thought to be the singular reason why people would not vote for the BJP. But it shows how wrong the calculations were. The BJP literally snatched victory from the Congress by positioning Nayab Singh Saini an OBC candidate at the forefront. The OBCs make up 40% of the population of Haryana. So that was a strategy that worked. The BJP is known to have grassroots workers who engaged with women's self help groups in villages and wooed them with the Modi Ki Guarantee campaign beginning from January this year.

The Congress tried to play the caste card by demanding a caste census but it would appear that not too many in Haryana at least are invested in this issue. To feel the pulse of the people there is need for dedicated volunteers along with RSS workers on the ground which the Congress has never had and does not have even today. This is the basic difference between the BJP and Congress. Besides the Congress relied heavily on Bhupinder Sign Hooda - a Jat whereas Haryana's non-Jats, OBCs and Dalits in particular had consolidated their strength over the years and shifted loyalties. The only consolation for the Congress is that it is forming the government in Jammu and Kashmir in alliance with the National Conference. The National Conference won 42 seats, while its ally Congress bagged 6 seats so although a junior partner at least the Congress has a footing in Jammu and Kashmir. The BJP won 29 seats in the 90 members assembly while the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP) of Mehbooba Mufti was reduced to 3 seats and that's because of her alliance with the BJP earlier, following which the central government revoked Article 370 which lead to the break-up of Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh. The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) managed to get just one seat which speaks poorly of AAP's rejection of the non-BJP alliance, despite the BJP being its main opponent in Delhi. Perhaps the 7 Independents would ultimately join the NC-Congress government.

Letters to the Editor

The Unseen Toll of War in Gaza and Lebanon

As of October 2024, the conflict in Gaza has reached harrowing new heights. The relentless airstrikes by Israel have claimed over 42,000 Palestinian lives since October 2023, with many of the dead being women and children. Nearly 1.9 million people, a staggering 90% of Gaza's population, have been displaced, left without access to basic necessities like water, food, and shelter. The destruction is so pervasive that thousands of people remain buried under the rubble of collapsed buildings, their bodies yet to be recovered.

In Lebanon, the story is equally grim. Israeli bombardments have killed more than 500 civilians, and nearly half a million people have been forced to flee their homes in the south. These numbers have swelled following Israel's first ground incursion into Lebanon since 2006, targeting Hezbollah strongholds. Hezbollah's retaliatory attacks have also killed dozens of Israeli civilians. Both sides stand accused of violating international humanitarian law by engaging in indiscriminate attacks on civilian areas.

The complicity of global powers like the United States and Europe in this escalating violence cannot be ignored. These nations continue to supply arms and provide political cover to Israel, fueling the conflict rather than fostering peace. Their intervention not only prolongs the violence but makes them equally responsible for the tragic loss of life on all sides. Until these powers withdraw their interference and focus on genuine diplomatic solutions, the region will remain trapped in a destructive cycle of violence, with innocent civilians bearing the brunt of the consequences.

Statistics at a Glance:
Gaza Death Toll: 42,000+ Palestinians killed.

Displaced in Gaza: Nearly 1.9 million people.

Lebanon Casualties: 500+ civilians killed.

Displaced in Lebanon: Almost 500,000 people forced from their homes

Sources: NRC, Amnesty International, Jewish Telegraphic Agency

The time has come to rethink global involvement in these conflicts. As long as foreign powers prioritize geopolitical interests over human lives, peace will remain an elusive dream for the region, and the suffering of ordinary people will continue unabated.

Yours etc.,
Wasim Siddiqui,
Via email

Multibillion dollars worth weapons supplies by US have boosted Israel in last one year

Democrats may have to pay a price in Presidential polls

By C.J. Atkins

One year ago, as Israel launched its massive war on Gaza after the Oct. 7 Hamas attack, the U.S. government was fully aware its ally was embarking on a campaign that would end up with Benjamin Netanyahu and other Israeli leaders charged with war crimes. And yet, as the whole world has seen, that advance knowledge did nothing to deter the Biden administration from arming and aiding the genocide that has been perpetrated since.

A series of emails between staffers in the State Department, the Pentagon, and the White House from Oct. 11 to 14, 2023, have leaked, exposing conversations concerning what was about to unfold.

she said. Tufro pleaded with the White House to pressure Israel to slow down its offensive. "We need GOI [Government of Israel] to pump the brakes in pushing people south," Tufro wrote.

Of course, Netanyahu hit the gas instead, and U.S. imperialism kept filling up his tank. According to the Gaza Ministry of Health, 41,909 Palestinians in Gaza have been killed by Israel in the past 365 days. Another 97,303 have been wounded. The majority in both categories have been women and children. Those are the victims that have been counted;

U.S. Congress for weapons for Israel since Oct. 7. (Compare that to the \$9.2 billion spent on the Environmental Protection Agency in the middle of the climate crisis.) \$4.86 billion - the amount the U.S. has spent bombing Yemen in support of Israel's war. \$20 billion - the extra money for Israel announced by the Biden administration in August, which is on top of the \$18 billion sent by Congress already. A vote in the U.S. Senate is expected in November. 600 weapons deliveries from the U.S. to Israel from October 2023 to August 2024.

its campaigns of aggression without U.S. help. The Biden administration could end the genocide tomorrow if it wanted to—simply by stopping the arms shipments.

Netanyahu's behaviour would change immediately if there were no bombs, ammunition, or shells being pumped in. But the shipments and the endless spending won't stop unless the American people force them to, and that's because U.S. imperialism needs Israel as its most reliable ally and military base in the Middle East, a strategic geographic crossroads and still one of the world's biggest sources of oil and gas. Even if the U.S. ruling class may not want the wider war



They were published by Reuters late on Friday.

After reading an assessment from the International Committee of the Red Cross about the human cost of what Israel planned for Gaza—mass evacuations, bombings, denial of aid—Dana Stroul, then the U.S. Deputy Asst. Sec. of Defense for the Middle East, told President Joe Biden's senior aides on Oct. 13, 2023, that she was "chilled to the bone." Writing directly to Biden's top advisor Brett McGurk, Stroul said that the Red Cross "is not ready to say this in public, but is raising private alarm that Israel is close to committing war crimes." She noted the impossibility of evacuating one million civilians from Gaza, as Israel was then ordering. "Our assessment is that there's simply no way to have this scale of a displacement without creating a humanitarian catastrophe," Paula Tufro, a senior White House aide put in charge of formulating a humanitarian response to the war, wrote in another email. It would take "months" to put in place the infrastructure needed to provide "basic services" like food, water, and shelter to more than a million people,

thousands more are missing or entombed beneath rubble. Calculations based on a study in The Lancet medical journal estimate the true death toll from death and disease caused by the war could be as high as 335,500 by now - or 14% of Gaza's population. A further two million people have been driven by their homes—about 90% of Gaza's population. Aside from the still-growing ranks of the dead and displaced, how else can we quantify the genocide, and especially the role of U.S. imperialism in it?

Researchers with the Institute for Middle East Understanding and Brown University have been keeping count of the costs of Israel's war—both human and financial. Peace activists in the U.S. should arm themselves with some of these calculations when talking with their co-workers, neighbours, and elected officials about the need to fight for and win a ceasefire. \$107 in taxes - that's the average cost that the median American taxpayer has spent individually in the past year to fund the weapons the Israeli military has used to kill Palestinian civilians.

\$18 billion - the amount of money appropriated by the

On average, that means a fresh shipment every 12 hours. 50,000 tons of weapons - the volume shipped to Israel since October 2023. Essentially 100% - the percentage of munitions used by Israel against Palestinians in Gaza that were supplied by the U.S. 75,000 tons of bombs - dropped by Israel on Gaza, equal to five Hiroshima atomic bombs and more than the U.S. dropped on Nazi Germany during all of World War II.

That's just for one year of genocide and war, but the arms have been flowing from the U.S. to Israel for more than six decades. For the 66 years from 1959 to 2024, the U.S. has provided Israel with at least a quarter of a trillion inflation-adjusted dollars (\$251.2 billion) in aid. Billions more have been spent on U.S. weapons and military deployments on behalf of or in support of Israel.

Now, Netanyahu and his far-right cabinet have extended their war against Palestine into Lebanon and are aiming their guns toward Iran with regime change in mind.

As the numbers above show, Israel is completely dependent on the U.S. It would be incapable of carrying out

Netanyahu is pushing, it also is driven by imperial self-interest to sustain and maintain a heavily-armed Israel to serve as a proxy against Iran and an outpost of U.S. power in the region.

That is the most influential factor for why the Biden administration, and every other administration, continues funding and arming Israel—a factor far more important than the actions of the pro-Israel lobby in the U.S., as powerful as the latter may be.

The Palestinian people—and now the Lebanese people—have paid and continue to pay the price of this war with their lives, homes, and futures. The American people have paid for it with our tax dollars. By not altering course when it comes to their blanket check policy of support for Israel, the Biden administration (and the Kamala Harris presidential campaign) are leaving an opening for Netanyahu's favoured candidate, Donald Trump, to win the election on November 5. If that happens, our already limited democracy will also pay the price for U.S. complicity in the genocide in Gaza.

(IPA Service) Courtesy: People's World

Hindu consolidation & RSS campaign contributed to BJP's win in Haryana Polls

Congress organisation's flip-flops gave relief to Narendra Modi

By Sushil Kutty

The question is not "Did 'Brand Modi' and 'Modi Magic' win Haryana for the BJP?" The question is "Who won Haryana for Modi's rehabilitation?" Consider this: Congress candidate Mamman Khan won from Muslim majority 'Nuh'. His victory margin was more than one lakh votes, the highest in these Haryana elections. Khan's Nuh had seen a communal conflagration a year ago. Khan's constituency is in the Muslim-majority Mewat region. The BJP candidate stood no chance.

Outside Mewat, however, 'Batoge Toh Katoge' was in play. Yes, Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath's slogan, which won Haryana for Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The Prime Minister's role in the Haryana elections was limited to a couple of rallies and, perhaps, in the selection of candidates. Cabinet minister Dharmendra Pradhan was the go-to man.

That said, even if 'Modi Brand' and 'Modi Magic' did play a hand, the fact remains that BJP won because

were woven into the narrative. Modi can't wait for his political rehabilitation after the disastrous June 4 verdict. The Opposition's pet slogan "Modi is in decline" had to be blunted—Prime Minister Narendra Modi's image of a go-getter election-winning juggernaut had to be restored to its former glory with an election victory.

Fact is, Modi needs a makeover and everything and everybody else can wait. Hence the rebirth of 'Brand Modi' and 'Modi Magic'. Talk percolated that Modi was both strategist and course-corrector. He was 'Commander-in-Chief' and entitled to automatically take the credit for the Haryana victory. BJP spokespersons took this message to extreme lengths. One of them even wrote a eulogy in an Adani-owned television network's website.

The amount of sugary interventions made for Modi's re-establishment was unbelievable. In the meantime, give the election-winning slogan 'Batoge Toh Katoge'



of Hindu consolidation after Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath campaigned in Haryana more times than Prime Minister Narendra Modi and spread the word that 'Batoge Toh Katoge, Ek Hoge Toh Nek Rahoge', "look at what is happening to Hindus in Bangladesh?"

The Yogi spoke of "Batoge Toh Katoge" at every pitstop in Haryana. He unveiled "Batoge Toh Katoge" in August of this year. In September, Prime Minister Narendra Modi took notice and came up with his version of 'Batoge Toh Katoge', asking Hindus to unite and not give enemies "reason to celebrate." If Hindu consolidation was happening in Haryana, why couldn't it happen in Maharashtra and Jharkhand?

Modi was followed by RSS 'Sarsangchalak' Mohan Bhagwat who took the message deep into Hindu consciousness with, "We are a Hindu Rashtra", the headiest aphorism available in the India of today, one which can lift a billion people out of 1000 years of subjugation, even if it is just a pipe dream.

Hindu polarization is poison for the Muslim goose which lays the golden egg for the Congress. But Haryana was for everybody's sake, won on the back of Hindu consolidation. The Hindus of Jammu also voted overwhelmingly to give the BJP its biggest mandate ever in Hindu-dominated Jammu. Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath had addressed several rallies in the Jammu region of J&K. There, too, he spoke of 'Batoge Toh Katoge'.

But, when the time came, BJP top brass coolly set aside Yogi Adityanath's contribution to the BJP victory in Haryana, with BJP president Jagat Prakash Nadda thanking Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and Prime Minister Modi alone, for the "shandaar Haryana jeet" — "Modi hai toh mumkin hai", he said.

In the din, when the confetti fell, Yogi Adityanath's 'Batoge Toh Katoge' was pushed aside to make way for Modi's 'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas'. And 'Modi Brand' and 'Modi Magic'

a quiet burial. The story spun throughout the afternoon and evening of October 8 was that Prime Minister Narendra Modi on his own plotted the third-time victory with a finesse that comes only with experience.

Along with Modi, "Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas" also took centre-stage. Deep down, the consummate politician, that he is, Modi must know that but for Yogi Adityanath and "Batoge Toh Katoge", Haryana couldn't have been won. Events and happenings in the subcontinent also spoke of Hindu-Muslim polarization of the worst kind.

Top of the list is Bangladesh, where the Hindu minority is facing near-death experiences. Bangladesh is a warning Yogi Adityanath spelled out. Naturally, Hindus of India are perturbed. There is an automatic consolidation taking place in their minds. In Haryana, it happened in a big way though image-conscious Narendra Modi will deny that any Hindu-Muslim polarization fetched him Haryana.

Modi's days as Chief Minister of Gujarat and the communal issues that were laid at his door haunt him. The world had veered away from him and it was like he was "exiled to his own country!" Prime Minister Narendra Modi abhors being Prime Minister of Hindus alone. "Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas" is etched deep in his consciousness.

Narendra Modi wants to be remembered as a secular Prime Minister. The two former prime ministers he probably secretly admires must be Jawaharlal Nehru and his immediate predecessor Manmohan Singh, both of whom had deep empathy for the Muslim minority. Prime Minister Narendra Modi should know that Haryana is the only state where everybody, Hindu or Muslim, greet each other with a 'Ram-Ram', and this little thing escaped Rahul Gandhi. Lastly, Haryana was not won by Modi's developmental works, it was won by the fear of 'Batoge Toh Katoge'. (IPA Service)

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"It is in your moments of decision that your destiny is shaped."

— Tony Robbins

The Shillong Times

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Ratan, the Titan

FIGURATIVELY, a banyan tree has fallen; and the earth shook. When Ratan Tata passed away at the ripe old age of 87, the business world in India and around the world took a hit. After JRD Tata -- the founder of the Tata empire -- named Ratan his successor in 1991. He led India's most-respected business conglomerate for over 20 years, helping to take it to new heights. Today, the Tata group stands as a global phenomenon with an annual revenue of more than \$100 billion. JRD Tata was India's numero uno business honcho and star attraction for decades after Independence. The entity could retain its reputation in recent decades too but others like the Ambanis and Adanis came up front and started getting more noticed. Ambani's wealth creation ran somewhat parallel to the Tata Group in recent years. The Adanis too spread their nets far and wide. Yet, no other business entity in India could as yet claim a respect matching that of the Tata Group, a legacy left behind by JRD and zealously maintained by Ratan Tata. Fair play coupled with trust was integral to their business forays and ethics a central management concern.

Ratan Tata's mental engagement in his post-retirement phase was mainly in philanthropic activities, in matching with the high principles of a love for humanity he held aloft in both life and business. His passing away has left a void that's difficult to fill. This may also have to do with his upbringing. Having been born in an ordinary Parsi family, he lost his parents at around age 10 and was left to the care of his grand-mother. She educated him in the US, followed by his joining as an apprentice with the Tata Steel in Jamshedpur, a shift to the TCS and to other arms of the group in due course. His stewardship of the group saw major global acquisitions including the takeover of Corus, the Anglo-Dutch steelmaker; equally importantly the British car brands like Jaguar and Land Rover; and Tetley, the world's second largest tea company. Tatas had for long been into steel, cars and tea. Several of the Tata car brands were not a success. The introduction of the 'cheapest' car in the form of Nano too failed. However, the group made major breaks after its tie-up with the Land Rover. Ratan Tata's role in this deal is a story in itself. Even after retirement, he was closely associated with the group in the capacity of Chairman Emeritus of Tata Sons.

Ratan Tata was drawn into a controversy only once -- when his successor Cyrus Mistry was removed from the chairman's post of Tata Sons in 2016. However, respect for him remained undiminished. Ratan, the Titan -- a brand linked to the group's jewellery, watches and eyewear segments -- will live on in our memories.

Church versus Environment in Jaintia Hills: Whither MSPCB & SEIAA?

By Patricia Mukhim

Since when has the church become pro-mining?

Two very significant news items this week point to the callousness of people with a short-term vision without any thought of the impending environmental cataclysms awaiting Meghalaya. One news item is of the Presbyterian Church in Lumshnong, East Jaintia Hills agreeing to lease 25 hectares of its land at Dong Daba Saithad to Star Cement Limited for limestone mining for a period of 50 years. The other piece of news is again about Star Cement expanding its mining activities over 65 hectares of land at Brichymot, very close to Wah Lunar and the Narpuh Reserved Forest. Star Cement is an upstart for-profit company with a heavy reliance on limestone. It is in fact using limestone from Meghalaya and carting it to its production units in Assam. Hence the less we speak about local employment the better. The Presbyterian Church must be thinking of the regular income from leasing the land to the Company. The church elders, I am sure, have not bothered to ask any environmentalist with an independent view (not those employed by the Government to toe their line) about the possible consequences of their action of allowing limestone mining in their territory.

When has the State Pollution Control Board ever controlled pollution?

Not surprisingly the Meghalaya State Pollution Control Board (MSPCB) -- a body with zero credibility conducted another sham environmental public hearing on Monday at Lumshnong in East Jaintia Hills. The meeting was presided by a bureaucrat -- the Additional Deputy Commissioner, who like others of his ilk has no views of his own and couldn't care less what happens to the people there a few years from now since he is not a permanent fixture there. The presence of so-called environmental engineers -- whatever that means and also of the Member Secretary of the MSPCB is devoid of substance. These are all on a ship steered by the powerful mining lobby.

SEIAA -- Does it really measure environmental impacts of mining?

Then you have the State Environmental Impact Assessment Authority (SEIAA), some of whose members were actually responsible for redefining forests in Meghalaya. Just two months after introducing a policy to promote mining, Meghalaya has diluted the definition of "forest". On December 28, the state government amended its Forest Regulation Act of 1973 and said only a "compact and continuous tract of minimum four hectares," will now be considered as forest in the state. The Government says the amendment is to

provide clarity to the unclear definition of forest. Experts fear that the new definition may open up large tracts of forestland for non-forest use. V K Bahuguna, director general of Indian Council of Forestry Research and Education, a body under the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests reportedly stated, "The definition does not take into account ecology and landscape approach and is subjective. It is, therefore, better to restrict to the Supreme Court order of 1996."

In the 1996 judgement, the apex court held that a deemed forest would not only include "forests" as understood by the dictionary meaning of the word -- a large area with significant tree cover -- but also any areas recorded as forests in government records, irrespective of ownership.

Why the need to redefine forests?

Earlier in Meghalaya the United Khasi and Jaintia Hills District Council definition was adopted which says, "Forest" means and shall be deemed to be a forest, if in the area, there are reasonable number of trees, say, not less than twenty five trees per acre, reserved or any other forest produce growing on such area, which have been or are capable of being exploited for purposes of business or trade."

The new definition adopted by the Meghalaya Government specifies that an area should have more than 250 naturally growing trees with a girth size of 15 cm or more per hectare (ha) to be regarded as forest. In case of a bamboo dominant patch, more than 100 naturally growing clumps should be present per ha. In case of mixed vegetation, the number changes to 150 trees and over 40 bamboo clumps. Going by this definition there should be no forests in Meghalaya and it is easy as hell for the SEIAA to grant mining operations right, left and centre on the alibi that the mining area is a non-forest land. How convenient and easy to alienate forest land without any care for the future of this State. It's as if these people sitting in the SEIAA have no thought for the future. Perhaps that future is already taken care of when they shift to another greener state or country!

The problem will be for those that are condemned to live and die in Meghalaya. Who is holding SEIAA accountable? A cursory look into the minutes of the SEIAA and its method of granting mining lease shows a set of boxes that need to be ticked -- no questions asked. The following is the brief of the SEIAA.

After due screening and examination of all the documents submitted by the Project Proponent and site cross

checking and deliberation by using kml file through Google Earth, the committee unanimously recommended for grant of Environment Clearance with the following conditions.

1. LOI ought to be renewed as the validity has expired

2. A settling Tank is to be constructed, at a suitable site within the mining area for collection of debris, sediment, silt, fragmented stones etc. carried by surface water channelized through the Curtain drain. The deposited debris, spoils etc. are to be removed/cleared, both from the tank and drain as and when required. Overflowing water that flows downhill shall be dispersed but precautions to be taken that spoils etc. generated from mining are not carried along.

3. Curtain Drain is to be constructed properly to intercept the surface water from flowing into the mining area and water flowing out of the mine channelized to the Settling tank.

4. If any debris etc. overflows to adjoining land/agricultural field etc. during the mining operation, Monitoring Agency is to take necessary action as per relevant section(s) of Water (Prevention & Control of Pollution) Act, 1974.

5. In annual EMP budget under GREEN BELT, creation of plantations including nursery cost, fencing etc the notified norms of Forest and Environment Department, Govt of Meghalaya is to be followed strictly, including financial cost. Budget under said head stands revised accordingly.

6. To increase the allocation for plantation and maintenance to a minimum of Rs. 1 lakh per annum and double the number of plants to be planted.

7. CER should be included in the capital cost and it should be increased to a minimum of Rs 1 lakh annually.

8. Boundary pillars with the height not less than 2.5 feet above the ground level and 1.5 feet below ground and minimum 8 inches on all face of pillar should be erected.

9. GPS coordinates of each pillar should be carved/painted clearly on the pillars with Red colour.

10. A board highlighting the name of project and project proponent, location name, total area of the mine, date of issue of EOC by SEIAA and CTO & CTE by MSPCB should be installed at the entrance to the mining site and clearly visible.

11. Fencing of the boundary of site with minimum two strands of barbed wire or ordinary split bamboo fencing is to be erected all around the periphery of the approved mining area.

Member Secretary shall prepare the draft Environ-

mental Clearance for this project and circulate the same to all Members of the Authority for views/comments/corrections, if any, and then after approval of the Chairman, the Member Secretary shall issue the final Environment Clearance.

The questions to SEIAA is - how many mining sites have they visited to check whether mining leaseholders are adhering to environmental norms? Are limestone mining activities affecting rivers, and adding to heavy siltation? How many abandoned limestone mines have been reclaimed? Which limestone mine operators have shown visible signs of eco-restoration? Have any licenses been cancelled for violating norms? Above all, the SEIAA leadership should visit Sohbar and see how limestone mining in Nongri is affecting the Wahrew. I am sure they haven't even heard of Wahrew. That's how institutions function in this state and country.

Since when have Dollois, Headmen and Churchmen become environmental experts?

Do those Dollois and headmen voicing their approval of granting mining rights to Star Cement know what they're doing? What is their expertise to give comments? And it sounds silly to hear someone tell a mining company to "strictly follow all necessary procedures. The Chairman of the Presbyterian Church in fact urged the authorities to expedite the clearances for mining operations. Since when did church elders collude with mining companies and become their spokespersons? There is something really rotten with the church today and this is one grave example.

How much mining is too much?

Star Cement also wants to expand their mining activities by acquiring a lease for 65 hectares of land at Brichymot adjacent to Narpuh Wildlife Sanctuary. At least as far as this is concerned there is opposition from the Khasi Students' Union and Elaka Narpuh Youth for Change (ENYC) who have stated upfront that mining and cement production will have a significant impact on the Lunar and Lukha rivers besides affecting the Narpuh Wildlife Sanctuary. Both the Lunar and Lukha rivers have become highly acidic and turn blue during the winter months and no longer support riverine life.

Over and above Star Cement there is another company -- Meghatop which also wants to start a cement plant in the same area and the MSPCB is scheduled to hold a public hearing on October 18. The question is -- how many cement companies can East Jaintia Hills sustain? How much is too much mining of limestone?

Violence cannot secure Israel's borders

By Jagdish Rattanani

It is now exactly one year since the Hamas attack on Israel and the fierce and wild response from Israeli forces with a scale of revenge killing that has alarmed and horrified the global community, and shows no sign of stopping. Israel says the Hamas attack on Oct. 7, 2023, killed some 1,200 Israelis and foreign nationals, and took 250 hostages, about 96 of them still held captive by Hamas forces in Gaza. In return, the Israeli onslaught since then has killed (as of June 19, 2024) as many as 37,396 people in the Gaza Strip, according to the Gaza Health Ministry, as reported by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. The Lancet magazine notes that the Ministry's figures have been contested by the Israeli authorities, although they have been accepted as accurate by Israeli intelligence services, the UN, and WHO.

The full horror of this massive scale of human killing is already the worst in recent human history. In a report published Sep. 30, Oxfam International notes that more than 6,000 women and 11,000 children were killed in Gaza by the Israeli military over the last 12 months. No other conflict in the last 18 years covered by the UN reports on Children and Armed Conflict killed a higher number of children in one year, Oxfam said. Yet, the Israeli Prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu told the UN General Assembly just last week (Sep. 27): "I decided to come here to ... speak for the truth. And here's the truth: Israel seeks peace. Israel yearns for peace. Israel has made peace and will make peace again." It is said experience teaches, shapes and moulds future actions, often for the better. In that sense, experience is good to have. But the German scientist and poet Goethe famously noted that experience is only half the experience. The other half is how we read it, interpret it and suffuse it with our own meanings.

A person with the unfortunate experience of growing up amid violence may reject violence, having seen the misery it brings, or, indeed, may end up believing that violence is the only way the world moves. So, experience can work either way -- for the good or for the worse. In the case of the State of Israel, it has clearly worked for the worse. A nation full of people who suffered horrific savagery during the Holocaust has become a nation that is the source of horrific savagery with its relentless battles that now threatens to grow into a much bigger war in the region. The consequences are impossible to imagine. We do not yet know where this will lead. But the one question that can be asked and answered clearly is this: Is Israel any safer than it was before this killing spree? Will Israel ever find peace after the blood it has spilled and the way its military has been responsible for killing more than 17,000 women and children? Oxfam lays out the horror in its Sep. 30 report by citing records that though not comprehensive show that Israeli explosive weapons

hit on average homes every four hours, tents and temporary shelters every 17 hours, schools and hospitals every four days, and aid distribution points and warehouses every 15 days.

In fact, the offensive since the Hamas attacks of Oct. 7 last year has exposed Israel like never before as a State that knows no limits, is unmindful of boundaries let alone humanity. This will sooner than later force a rethink in key sections of the US-led Western axis that provides the money and the weapons that Israel has used to unleash terror and rain death among innocent citizens in Gaza. It is in this context that the remarks of the French President Emmanuel Macron are significant. Over the weekend, Macron called for a halt on arms deliveries to Israel for use in Gaza, saying that "the priority is that we return to a political solution, that we stop delivering weapons to fight in Gaza". The remarks came to France's Inter-Radio soon after a summit in Paris where the French president reiterated his concern over the conflict in Gaza continuing despite ceasefire calls, and criticised Israel's decision to send ground troops into Lebanon, according to the BBC.

The futility of all this violence is plain for anyone to see. Israel gloats over paper bombs that open a new and deadly theatre of war that others can enter into, obliterating the boundaries between civilian and military targets. Turning everyday devices into terror bombs lowers the monetary cost of waging war and makes it tempting for all manner of non-State actors to play this deadly game. In that, this is a war that the State is waging against itself, plagued by the mistaken thought that violence will deliver peace. In the eyes of Israel, the killing of the Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah is a huge victory. But who, after all, is Nasrallah, if not the successor to those exterminated by Israel, notably Abbas-al-Musawi of Hezbollah who was assassinated in 1992. A decade earlier, in June 1982, Israel invaded Lebanon to put an end to the Palestine Liberation Organisation, the PLO. One outcome of that was the birth of Hezbollah, and the Intifada uprising that came later.

Today, Israel is farther away than ever from securing its borders. The Jews have always had regard for Mahatma Gandhi. In his 'Harijan' magazine of 26 November 1938, the Mahatma wrote these words about Hitler and the Holocaust: "Germany is showing to the world how efficiently violence can be worked when it is not hampered by any hypocrisy or weakness masquerading as humanitarianism. It is also showing how hideous, terrible and terrifying it looks in its nakedness." Can these words not apply to the Israel of today? And that in itself tells us how much Israel has fallen.

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

Letters to the Editor

The heart behind the brand: remembering Ratan Tata

Editor,
The passing of an individual to feel like a personal loss to a country of one and a half billion people is a testament to the impact that person had on the lives of ordinary individuals. In India, this phenomenon is common for film stars, cricketers, or politicians; however, a public outpouring of such grief over the death of a businessman is rare, reflecting the genuine affection people held for him--both for who he was and what he contributed.

Not being an avid follower of business news, I never knew much about Ratan Tata, the businessman--well! Apart from, of course, his groundbreaking 'people-first' approach, exemplified by the Tata Nano, and his remarkable comeback triumph over Ford with the acquisition of the Brit-

ish marquee brands Range Rover and Jaguar. Thus, my admiration for him goes beyond his business acumen and perhaps even his philanthropy. When I learned of his demise, it was the memories of what I had known of him as a person that resonated with me most.

One memory that stands out is the manner in which such a towering figure defended a young girl for posting a disrespectful comment about Mr. Tata online, where she referred to him as a "chotu," meaning "little boy" in Hindi. Any other person with a quarter of Mr. Tata's stature would have responded with disrespect or retaliation; a kinder person might have chosen to be indifferent at best. However, I cannot imagine anyone reacting in a way that turned the whole situation around, making the girl feel as though she had done nothing wrong at all. He righted her perceived wrong in a situation where he himself was being insulted. He responded with grace, stating, "There's a child in each one of us; please treat the young lady with respect," despite

the barrage of insulting comments from netizens.

Another poignant moment that highlights his character occurred when Mr. Tata opted out of a prestigious ceremony hosted by Prince Charles at Buckingham Palace to receive a Lifetime Achievement Award for his philanthropic efforts. Instead of attending the event organized solely for his own honour by British royalty, he chose to stay by the side of his sick pet dog, illustrating the priorities that truly defined him.

These actions are not just fleeting anecdotes nor isolated incidents few and far between; they represent the core of Ratan Tata's essence and are emblematic of who he truly was. His compassion for others--especially towards those who lacked a voice and couldn't stand up for themselves--was the foundation of his identity. Whether it was defending a young girl from online ridicule or prioritizing the well-being of a beloved pet, he consistently showcased a deep respect for life in all its forms. Ratan Tata believed in lifting others

up, an ethos that resonated throughout his life's work and was evident in both his professional endeavors and personal conduct.

As we reflect on his life and legacy, it becomes clear that his kindness and generosity will serve as a guiding light for many like me. His unwavering commitment to "people over profit" will continue to inspire future generations to care for one another, ensuring that his influence remains in the hearts of those fortunate enough to know him, even if only through his actions.

Yours etc.,
Fahd Hazarika,
Guwahati

Dissatisfaction/Confusion about DCRG

Editor,
There seems to be dissatisfaction and confusion about delay relating to settlements of Death cum Retirement Gratuity (DCRG) due to retirees of private colleges and schools eligible for and governed under the DCRG Rules of the Education De-

partment. As per procedures, the Principal/Headmaster would submit relevant records and details of retiree teachers to the Examiner of Local Accounts (now Director of Local Fund Audit) who being mandated under the DCRG rules, exercises due scrutiny of such relevant details and records and if everything is in order, issues a REPORT to the concerned Education Director, with copy along with relevant records to the Principal/Headmaster, indicating the exact amount of the DCRG payable to the concerned individual retiree. The amounts so reported stands final. The Education Director after location of funds, availability of which needs to be updated regularly as contemplated under provisions of the DCRG Rules, would issue sanctions addressed to concerned Principal/Headmaster for withdrawal of the amount and disbursement to individual named retirees. Secretariat level intervention is not normally needed in the process except when the Director moves for additional budgetary funds.

But when something is

not in order, specially and primarily at the levels of Principal's/Headmaster's Office, delay and dissatisfaction are bound to surface. Generally speaking, it would be in the interest of an individual employee to take personal interest to periodically ascertain that his/her legitimate entitlements as admissible under relevant rules and orders, not more, not less, are regulated and placed on records (eg. Service Book) and updated regularly, especially six months before retirement date. Controversies or discrepancies raised or detected after retirement would only complicate and delay matters further.

Interestingly, the first recipients of DCRG, were the seven retired Professors of St. Anthony's College, Shillong sometime in 1990-91, during the incumbency of Rev Fr Stephen Mavely as Principal of the College, Mr L M Das as Examiner of Local Accounts and Mr C Wolfgang as DHTE.

Yours etc.,
B M Syiem
Nongkrem

Water problems in Mawbah

Editor,

Apologies of the news item, "West shillong areas reel under water scarcity" (ST October 2, 2024). I would like to thank the Rangbah Shnong of Mawbah for taking a positive step at a time of crisis when water scarcity hit the area badly a few days ago due to a major pipeline burst. The timely help of the Dorbar to distribute water to its residents after purchasing water from tankers deserve all praise and appreciation from every section of society and especially from residents of Mawbah. I heartily congratulate the members of the Dorbar Shnong for their sincere effort in this regard.

Further, I would like to draw the attention of the concerned authorities about the pathetic condition of the RCC water tank constructed near Mawbah which is merely symbolic. The water outlet of this particular tank

is connected with PVC pipes which is not suitable when compared to previously installed GI pipes. Water scarcity in many households has become a common phenomenon these days due to uneven supply of water from this tank. The seepage of water in the nearby drains is noticed due to faulty connection of flexible PVC pipes.

I sincerely urge the concerned authorities, the Shillong Municipal Board and PHE department, to take necessary steps and replace the PVC pipes with traditional GI pipes so that the water scarcity problem of the area can be resolved at the earliest and residents of the area would be able to get safe drinking water regularly.

Yours etc.,
A concerned resident,
Shillong 2

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"The empires of the future are the empires of the mind."

—Winston Churchill

The Shillong Times

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Fortified health

AFTER a period of inertia and having got a major hit in the last parliament elections, the Modi establishment is coming up with a string of popular steps to keep its electoral base intact and regain lost ground. The Union Cabinet's decision to extend the 'free fortified rice' distribution programme under various welfare schemes like the PM Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana by four years till 2028 December is a welcome step. Large numbers of India's malnourished people, facing anaemia and micronutrient deficiency, would benefit. The scheme introduced in a phased manner in 2022 has already reached all the target groups. The annual cost involved is over `17,000 crore, which will be borne by the Centre. Healthy people make a nation healthy. However, making a start in such crucial endeavours took time – a shameful three quarters of a century after Independence; and after India global tracking agencies publicised that India fared worse in global poverty, nutrition and other indices; worse than that of several African nations.

The Modi-led establishment has recently unveiled an insurance policy for those above age 70. The Ayushman Bharat Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana, approved by the Union Cabinet, should benefit over six crore old-age people. The elderly are at a disadvantage here, as they mostly have no income on their own for subsistence. Exceptions are the retired government employees, academicians, the banking sector staff etc., who form the cream of the society. They form only about 10 per cent of the population. The call for One Nation One Pension remains unheeded in a nation whose Constitution promises 'equal opportunities' to all. The doles, of a maximum of Rs 2000 per person on offer in some states, is a pittance considering the fact that money value has fallen sharply. India's total GST collection a year is now around Rs 10 trillion – meaning, taxes collected from each individual even from purchases like soap and matchboxes. This huge income must be properly used for the good of the nation and welfare of its people in a matching measure. Tax evasion is still rampant. If this is plugged, the annual collections could double or treble.

Doles must be given only to the weak – the elderly, the disabled, those from the depressed segments of the society – and not to those who can afford to work and earn. Else, the nation is burdened with a lazy generation. Today, doles are given to even those who are well off. This is the way politicians, mainly some regional satraps, woo people to win or retain power. The attempt by the Supreme Court to cry a halt to such unhealthy practices did not succeed. A line must be drawn – thus far and no further – when it comes to government largesse to the people.

Journey of a visually-impaired woman entrepreneur

By HH Mohrmen

"Life is a challenge," says the old adage, but it is meant for ordinary people whose challenges come and go. It is meant to motivate ordinary people like us to move on with life. One may say that everyone has their own problems, and every person in this world faces challenges. While we all have difficulties in life and our problems may vary, these challenges are even greater for those with disabilities. People with disabilities already have the major disadvantage in their disability, but in addition, they face the same daily challenges as any other person.

This is the story of an empowered visually impaired woman who changed her fortune through sheer grit and determination. Despite the difficulties of being blind, she is full of life. She never blames anyone for the challenges she faces nor curses the day she was born. Instead, she accepts life as it is and lives it with grace. This is the story of Durka Sari from Mukhla village, who is completely blind but has created a life for herself despite her disability. She has encountered many challenges, but with the support of others and her indomitable spirit, she has overcome them. She is very direct and has the courage to ask questions without hesitation.

Durka had a difficult childhood, but her school days offered a glimpse of what she would later become. Despite being blind, she was full of zest for life. Her inability to see did not stop her from playing with her friends, joining them in adventures in the forest, and even climbing trees. Though completely blind, she tried to be like any other child, helping with household chores such as washing dishes, doing laundry, and fetching water from the well, all without a white cane because she didn't have one at the time.

She loved learning and, although she couldn't see, she attended school regularly like any other child her age. Unfortunately, the Lower Primary School in her village lacked the resources and staff to teach children with special needs. Since she couldn't see, she could only listen to what the teacher taught. However, her impairment enhanced her ability to memorize what she heard. Driven by her desire to learn, she worked extra hard to remember everything from class. Sadly, despite her remarkable memory, she couldn't progress because her advancement was based on her ability to write during exams.

Her teacher discouraged her from continuing her education, telling her, "You're just wasting your time." The teacher also said, "There is no point in you attending classes because you cannot write your exams." Embarrassingly, she was stuck in the same class while girls her

age and even her younger siblings advanced. Eventually, she lost interest and dropped out of school. However, her incredible memory served her well later in life. She often shared with her family what she had learned, and they marveled at her ability to relay news from the radio without missing a word.

Durka is not one to give up easily. Her name, after all, is that of the invincible goddess, symbolizing the triumph of good over evil. As she grew older, she attempted to make a living by opening a small grocery shop near her house, but she had to close it when people took advantage of her disability. She then tried selling mobile phone recharges, but it wasn't profitable. In search of a sustainable livelihood, she learned about a training program in



broom-making designed for visually impaired individuals from friends who shared her challenges. Filled with excitement, she attended the one-month training organized by the Society for Urban and Rural Empowerment (SURE) at Moosakhia village, which became a turning point in her life. The training not only connected her with others facing similar challenges but also equipped her with the skills to earn a livelihood and live independently.

On February 20, 2024, Patricia Mukhim, editor of The Shillong Times, visited Durka at her workshop. The two quickly connected, and during their conversation, Durka showed her the small workspace, explaining how the training had changed her life. "In the past, I was just a keeper of my sister's babies," Durka said. "When one sister had a baby, I had to take care of her child. When my younger sisters gave birth too, I had no choice but to shoulder that responsibility. But now, after the training, I tell them, (ja kha hi, ja peit hi) 'They are your children, you take care of them!'" She proudly added. I looked at kong Patricia and said "Kong, that is empowerment." Durka's empowerment is however, further demonstrated by her other experiences.

Durka is aware of her

rights and the schemes available to people with disabilities. Once, she approached the Dorbar Chnong of her locality to apply for the Prime Minister's Awas Yojana (PMAY) scheme, but her application was initially delayed. The community leaders questioned why she needed her own house since she was blind and unmarried. They argued that no one would take care of the house after her, making it a waste of public resources. "Why do you need a house of your own?" they asked. Durka firmly replied that government schemes should not discriminate based on disability, asserting her right to the scheme. The leaders had no choice but to propose her name for the PMAY scheme. One of them remarked, "She seems to know a lot. Let's

propose her name, or she might file a complaint." And he was right.

A similar incident occurred when Durka applied for the special job card earmarked for people with disabilities under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS). The Village Employment Committee (VEC) Secretary delayed processing her application, perhaps thinking that, as a blind woman, she couldn't do much. However, he was shocked when the government agency held him accountable. After receiving inquiries from the authorities, he confronted her, asking, "Why did you complain about me to the authorities?" Durka calmly explained that she had done nothing wrong and had only answered the authorities truthfully when they asked if she had received her job card.

The broom-making training conducted by Society for Urban and Rural Empowerment (SURE) and supported by the Meghalaya State Skill Development Society (MSSDS) had a profound impact on her life. After completing the training, Durka immediately began planning her business. At first, she didn't have a dedicated workspace, and since broom-making requires space because

the pollen can cause itching, she requested space from her mother. She was given a room in her sister's house to use as her workshop. This is how her broom-making business began. The training transformed Durka from a visually impaired homemaker and reluctant caretaker of her nieces and nephews into an entrepreneur.

There is no turning back for Durka. Her first experience selling brooms was with her visually impaired friend, Heiyooit Mitre Dhar (Iba) from Wahiagar. The two attended the same training and partnered to start their business. On March 19, 2024, International Social Work Day, Durka and Iba set out to sell their brooms. Armed only with their white canes, they visited nearby schools and even the District Court office in West Jaintia Hills, Jowai. The response was overwhelmingly positive. Many praised their determination and bought their brooms, with some even donating extra money to support their business. Rather than going to the market, they targeted institutions like schools, colleges, and offices, where they hoped to sell more brooms, and their plan worked.

To expand her business, Durka approached a bank in Ummulung. Initially, the manager hesitated to provide her with a loan, doubting her ability to repay it. Disheartened but determined, Durka didn't give up. Taking advantage of her membership with the Self Help Group, she then approached the (SHG), which gave her a small loan. Later she approached the Integrated Village Cooperative Society (IVCS) in Mukhla, which also provided her with a loan. After repaying the loans from the SHG and IVCS, she approached the Meghalaya Apex Bank, Ummulung Branch, with all her credentials and was granted a Kisan Credit Card (KCC) loan, which she is now repaying. The last time I visited Durka, she had moved into her new house, constructed under the PMAY scheme on land donated by the Dorbar Chnong, and had started working from there. She is indeed a classic example of a blind person who was able to reach new heights in life through her own efforts. In a country where startups and entrepreneurs are appreciated, Durka has not only shone as an entrepreneur par excellence, but she has also made the best use of all the government schemes and projects.

For us, the ability to make brooms is not the ultimate goal of the training we provide. The greatest achievement is when they venture out of their homes to sell their products. Our goal is to see them become as independent as possible, and when they reach that level of self-reliance, we know we have succeeded.

RSS working on its goal of Hindu Rashtra through the Modi govt Saffronites to intensify their programme during centenary year

By Krishna Jha

When Mohan Bhagwat said early this month that the primary aim of RSS in its centenary year 2025 would be to build a disciplined and strong Hindu society, he was merely echoing an idea which has long reverberated through the communal rhetoric of the Hindu right.

Such remarks by the chief of an organisation, which is the mentor of the party in power, the Bharatiya Janata Party, only reveals the larger truth – that Mohan Bhagwat is essentially arguing against the very core of the Indian Constitution. It is not a secret that for the first time in independent India we have a government that believes exactly what its backers, the RSS, believe: that a set of citizens has the right to lay down terms of national identity that privilege them over citizens of other faiths.

The Constitution begins by stating that India—that is, Bharat—shall be a Union of States. There is no recourse to history or faith or caste or language or region to prioritise citizens. The Constitution's clear definition of citizenship is in stark contrast to the remarks made by Mohan Bhagwat and other proponents of Hindutva. "At the commencement of the Constitution every person who has his dominion in the territory of India, also was

between Hindutva and Hinduism are enshrined in these tendencies. This has been the hidden position of the RSS right since its inception.

Groups such as the Other Backward Classes (OBCs), Dalits and tribals may fall within the theoretical embrace of the "Hindu Rashtra," but find themselves excluded in practice. That is why the religious symbols and public rituals that the RSS and the Sangh Parivar really promote do not come from the non-Brahminical cultural context; they are always Brahminical in nature. The battle over nomenclature in the Sangh's decades-long efforts to co-opt tribals in parts of central India is equally revelatory. The Sangh prefers the term "Van-dweller," or "forest dweller," over "Adivasi," or "original inhabitant," even when most tribals today are not forest dwellers, because to accept the latter term would mean acknowledging that other groups could have an older claim to this land than Hindus.

This is the reason why the RSS's claim of speaking on behalf of all Hindus remains seriously handicapped as it is widely perceived to be an organisation through which the Brahminists dream of establishing their rule by converting India into a Hin-



born in the territory of India; or either of whose parents was born in the territory of India; or who has been ordinarily resident in the territory of India for not less than five years immediately preceding such commencement, shall be a citizen of India," says the Constitution.

So why is it necessary for the RSS leadership to make any overemphasis on one particular community? The answer is implicit: to keep Muslims, Christians and other minorities out of their definition of India. The Constitution resolutely avoids giving any importance to ethnicity, history or mythology. It defines a geography shared by people who have adopted a set of values enshrined within its pages. Being Hindu has no special significance in this republic.

It is in this context Mohan Bhagwat's statement, which has been so endlessly and so pointlessly analysed, must be understood. Hindutva allows the RSS chief to speak of inclusiveness without spelling out that Muslims, Christians and other minority communities who are less than equal by definition. Exclusion is built into this rhetoric.

The RSS has to keep saying this because it has no internal legitimacy among all Hindus. And the reason is simple – Hindutva has no real connection with the history of Hinduism. The RSS hates humanity and is completely uncomfortable with secularism, democracy and casteless society. It hates Muslims, Christians and other minorities but doesn't actually care about the Hindu life outside the sphere of Brahminism. In fact, the Hindutva agenda is to codify Hinduism along Brahminical lines. Thus, it tends to reduce the diversity of Hinduism. The differences

du Rashtra. The organisation has faced this handicap right since its inception. In fact, the RSS's adoption of the saffron (Bhagwa) flag of Peshwas – the erstwhile Brahmin rulers of Maharashtra who preceded the British conquest of the area – as its own flag has been seen as an indication of its secret desire. The non-Brahminist Hindus have, therefore, always despised the RSS.

Historically, the RSS arose from within the Brahmin community in 1925 in Nagpur, from where it used the support of Brahminists to spread out in other areas. All its founders – Keshav Baliram Hedgewar, BS Moonje, LV Paranjpe, BB Tholkar and Ganesh Savarkar (the elder brother of VD Savarkar) – belonged to the Brahmin caste. So were most of its original members. Since then the RSS has pursued its core aim to establish the Brahminical hegemony. All through its history, the RSS has flitted evasively through the fault lines of Hindu caste system, showing as if it is against the caste-based discrimination even while working for strengthening the Brahminical hegemony.

Displacing the wrath of non-Brahmins from their real oppressors, the Brahminists, onto imaginary enemies, Muslims and Christians, remains the hallmark of its strategy, both in the past and the present. It has used religious identity and loyalty to attract Hindus, mobilized them to capture political power and guided them to believe not in an inclusive idea of India as enshrined in India's Constitution but in an exclusivist Hindu Rashtra – an idea that was expounded by VD Savarkar in his 1923 monograph, "Essentials of Hindutva." (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

Boomeranged – How the accuser becomes the accused

Editor,

The one common but bitter topic of conversation that cuts across all levels of society in Meghalaya today is the collapse of infrastructure – Infrastructure that is supposed to better our living conditions both in the rural as well as the urban sectors of Meghalaya. Be it Education, Health care, Governance or the Economy, everything seems to be going down the drain. But the worst, because all of us depend on it every day, is the condition of our roads and transport system. We drive to work, rush our children to school, proceed to our places of worship every Sunday and literally pray for God's merciful intervention when we inch our critically ill to hospital through endless traffic jams and inexhaustible pot-holed roads. Why is all this happening to us? Who is responsible for this misery we have to daily bear? How do we improve? These are

questions and discussions all of us love to moan about and I am one of the active mourners in this aspect. Through this letter to the Editor I want to reveal a recent discussion on the above problems and the astonishing solution offered on how to solve it.

There was a small social gathering I was part of and as usual the topic quickly turned to the condition of our roads. Everyone had no good thing to say. There were some prominent Govt contractors among the group; The discussion became slightly heated and with numbers on my side, I turned to one of these contractors and directly asked him as to how shameless he could be to make such substandard public roads? With downcast eyes and hanging his head in shame he quietly replied "What can we do? Why do you blame us contractors without knowing the truth? We are blameless and actually helpless about the whole wretched mess. Will you hear us out if we try to explain?" With my eyes still radiating righteous accusations I reluctantly agreed to hear his excuses. And this is what he had to say

"Yes it is true we give our bids for the roads we make but we do so also with the aim to make a living out of it. Do you know what actually happens when our tenders are approved? We are expected to shell out 30% to the Minister concerned; 20% to the Engineer supervising our work before any work order is issued." With growing irritation he continued "Do you know exactly how much profit we make from your roads after we make them? Payments are made earliest one year after the road is made and no one is held accountable for the accrued interest because of the delay. We hardly make 1 or 2 % profit and we are expected to come up with quality roads of International standards. People of Meghalaya must be living in fairy land. Do you seriously believe I can still support my family let alone make profit after such treatment. Am I expected to make public roads from my own pocket? Let me tell you that the public in Meghalaya is extremely lucky to even get roads with an half inch black topping and that can't even survive the first monsoon shower. Just count the small

blessings you are still able to enjoy. Don't blame me. I am not the culprit of your troubles." Shocked out of my wits I could only gawk at the man and able to come out with a garbled "Then what do we do? Tell us then who is the real culprit".

By then the guy had calmed down a bit. He gave me a shrewd enquiring look before asking me "Do you really want to know the person who is mainly responsible for all this mess?"

"Of course", we all replied "Please tell us who so that such a person can be brought to book for all the misery he has caused the public of Meghalaya".

"Its you," he exclaimed with hardly suppressed glee and satisfaction, "its all of you sanctimonious, holier-than-thou lot who are responsible for the mess the state is in. It's you who imposed these monstrous greedy Ministers and MLAs on the state. Its you, the voter who elects the dregs of society; sleazy business minded criminals posing as politicians; people entering politics with the false promise of delivering service to the people but who

are actually on the prowl and with the sole purpose of attaining power to loot the state of its resources; its you the voter who allowed such people to purchase your right to good governance. Now why blame us? We actually are the victims of your own foolishness. Now next time go vote for people who can deliver real governance and not that pittance of 500 or 5000 and a ton load of false promises for your vote. There I have said it and I feel so relieved".

I went home that evening a more humble and enlightened man than when the day started.

Yours etc.,
Toki Blah,
Via email

Waiting for a response!

Editor,

The hard hitting write-up, "Church versus Environment in Jaintia Hills: Whither MSPCB & SEIAA?" by Patricia Mukhim took me into a joyous journey of how expediency actually runs this state! Yes, I am being sarcastic!

I just loved the jabs and the knock-out punches to the jaw and temple she throws through the questions! Wow they floored me! Such well placed punches should put an end to the talkers and thinkers who believe the public are gullible!

I'm not adverse to churches exploring ways and means to generate income, but take a collectively informed decision after exploring every minute detail. All must be taken on board. Immediate and long time impact on environment and other damaging social factors have to be the deciding factor and not crass lucre!

I'm curious whether the government officials of the two departments will take up the challenge of writing a rejoinder to all the questions raised! Or choose silence because the surreptitiousness is too well embedded!

Yours etc.,
Kevin Phillips,
Via email

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*"A healthful hunger for a great idea
is the beauty and blessedness of life."*
— Jean Ingelow

The Shillong Times

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Land use policy: An imperative

LAND is a finite resource and hence cannot be thoughtlessly alienated for various purposes without being guided by a land use policy. Land use lies at an important intersection between different competing values and priorities. Decisions about how land is used—and who controls that use—will be crucial to tackling major issues of agricultural land alienation, loss of forest cover leading to climate change, biodiversity loss, social division, food insecurity and more. Land use also lies at the intersection between environmental and social issues. The ways in which we use land can either fuel and broaden social inequalities or level the playing field.

The Government's proposal to create land banks is ostensibly to pave the way for creation of industries which in turn will provide jobs. But do things work in that order? The cement companies of Jaintia Hills are a good example of how a locally available labour force is unsuited to an industrial work culture leading to companies having to depend on an outside labour force. Who controls land is a major point of contention. All too often, the majority of productive land lies in the hands of just a few. Issues of land rights, land access, and primal and cultural connection to land contribute to this important debate. In Meghalaya there are different custodians over land. They include the Dorbar Kur, Dorbar Raid, the Dorbar Elaka, the Syiems and the District Councils. But it is ironic that despite the presence of so many oversight actors, land at this moment is being siphoned off to a few tribal elite particularly those running the Government. Without a Land Use Policy, land in Meghalaya is being used without any strategic plan. In Ri Bhoi's Byrnihat land was alienated for an industrial area which turned the place into the most polluted in the country. Merely creating an industrial area without a proper road map as to what kind of industries are ecologically sustainable was a death trap from the word go. The area became designated as an industrial estate at a time when the Government of India was offering a 5-year tax holiday. The idea was to woo industries to the region but at what cost? India's North East is a biodiversity hot-spot. Can it take the smog of a steel manufacturing unit? Obviously not!

Land use is often a controversial topic, which can polarize already highly divided groups. But there is a need for open dialogue and debate where stakeholders can talk about solutions rather than problems, and think holistically about how land can be used fairly and equitably to provide for our own needs and without choking the planet with fumes. Governments often believe they know best and take unilateral decisions on land use and which land to alienate for what purposes. This is problematic and will be the cause of resentment in the future. Frank and realistic conversations about how we use land are crucial to our future on this planet. Official land use data are useful to indicate land-use trends over time. Such data are also important in a situation where there are no other sources of data available as the State has no land records and cadastral survey. At this point in time a cadastral survey is urgently needed.

I am sure many are already annoyed and bored with the ongoing debate on reservations. It is over a year since this issue took center stage, threatening to throw the state into turmoil. In order to alleviate tensions the Government was forced to announce the formation of an expert committee. The Committee has already heard submissions from groups in the Khasi region. Soon, it will be the turn of groups from the Garo region to present their viewpoints. The calm resulting from the formation of the Expert Committee has allowed for reflection and re-evaluation of future actions. While there is still strong support among the Khasi for a review of the Reservation Policy, the cracks in the rationale behind this demand are becoming increasingly evident.

There is now greater acceptance that the original design of the Reservation Policy was, and still is, based on 'adequacy of representation' and not population per se. Some continue to confuse the two by claiming that adequacy must be based on population, which suggests that both are the same. Of course, this is merely an attempt at wordplay that may work in informal conversations but can be easily countered when presented as legal arguments. Consider the observation made by the Supreme Court in the landmark *Indira Sawhney and Others vs. Government of India* judgment of 1992:

"We must, however, point out that Clause (4) speaks of adequate representation and not proportionate representation. Adequate representation cannot be read as proportionate representation... and (therefore) what is more reasonable than to say that reservation under Clause (4) shall not exceed 50% of the appointments or posts, barring certain extra-ordinary situations as explained hereinafter." (Paragraph 94 A)

In the paragraph shared above, the Supreme Court made it clear that adequate representation must not be interpreted as proportionate representation. This is based on the wording of Article 16(4), which discusses the 'adequacy of representation' as the rationale for providing reservations, taking cognizance of the view of B.R. Ambedkar, the father of the Indian Constitution. He stated during a discussion in the Constituent Assembly that reservations "must be confined to a minority of seats". The 1992 judgment established that "minority of seats" means that reservations cannot exceed 50% of the total seats. This interpretation has stood the test of time, as seen in the 2024 Bihar High Court judgment and the 2021 Supreme Court judgment on the Maratha reservation. Unless a constitutional amendment is made, it is highly unlikely that the judiciary will tolerate any violations of the 50% ceiling or the rationale of 'adequate representation'. However, there is an attempt to circumvent this by arguing that the rationale of 'adequate representation' does not apply to the Scheduled Castes (SC) and the Scheduled Tribes (ST).

Reservations:
Misconceptions galore

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

According to the 2011 Census, the Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) comprise about 16.6% and 8.6%, respectively, of India's population. Reservations for these two groups mirror this proportion: 15% and 7.5%, respectively. Therefore, some argue that reservations for Scheduled Tribes (ST) and Scheduled Castes (SC) are actually governed by the proportion of their population rather than by 'adequacy of representation.' Such flawed reasoning ignores the fact that reservations for SC and ST are provided under Article 16(4), which states that "the State... (can make) provision for the reservation of appointments or posts in favour of any backward class of citizens which, in the opinion of the State, is not adequately represented in the services under the State." Until 1992, the total reservation for ST and SC amounted to 22.5%, which was still within reasonable limits. However, after the publication of the Mandal Commission report, the Supreme Court recommended implementing reservations for OBCs in central government services. The Court, however, observed that if the population criterion were followed, it would increase the reservation to more than 70% (as OBCs constitute nearly 52% of the Indian population). This was deemed to be unreasonable. Therefore, the Court decided to limit the reservation to 50% by recommending 27% reservation in favour of OBCs, citing the provision of 'adequacy of representation.'

This means that reservation of jobs under Article 16(4) is now governed by the rationale of 'adequacy of representation' and not by the proportion of the population. This also applies to reservations for ST, as they do not have a separate provision for jobs outside Article 16(4). The rule of 'adequacy of representation' can be violated only if a separate provision for ST explicitly states that the proportion of the population is the criterion. Until then, reservations for ST must follow the same rules as outlined in the Constitution and reiterated by the Supreme Court. For those who wish to use this argument in a court of law, they should do so with extreme caution.

The other fallacious argument being circulated is that there is no scientific way to ascertain the backwardness of the different ST communities residing in the state. It is claimed that data on backwardness, for example, SDG rankings, are available only at the district level, which cannot be applied to specific communities. Another claim is that when analyzed in terms of districts, some Khasi-dominated districts have performed worse than Garo-dominated districts. This has been taken to suggest that all communities are equally backward or that there is no accurate way to ascertain backwardness at the community level. Therefore, population is the only reliable criterion for determining reservations. Let's examine these claims.

On analyzing the ranks of the different districts in terms of SDGs, East Khasi Hills has achieved the highest rank of 57, while North Garo Hills has the lowest rank of 98. Thus, it might seem that Khasi districts are more advanced than Garo districts. However, a closer look reveals that certain Khasi districts also have lower ranks. For example, South West Khasi Hills' rank was 87, while that of West Garo Hills was 74 (a difference of more than ten points). So, should residents of South West Khasi Hills be considered more backward than those of West Garo Hills? This highly naive attempt at obfuscation forgets the basic fact that reservation in the Constitution is granted to communities and not geographical areas. The Khasi are given reservations because they are part of the Central list of STs, not because they reside only in Khasi-dominated areas of Meghalaya. If a Khasi is born and brought up in Williamnagar (the district headquarters of East Garo Hills), she is still eligible to apply for government jobs in the state. Only when a community is removed from the Central list will it become ineligible for reservation benefits. Some communities may not be considered Scheduled Tribes (ST) in certain states, but wherever they are recognized, they remain eligible for reservation. I emphasize again: reservation is granted to communities and not geographical areas. Let's not confuse ourselves or others about this issue.

Therefore, if one wants to find the backwardness of different communities in the state, the individual ranks of the districts dominated by a specific community must be combined to produce an overall rank. This can then be compared with that of the other community, arrived at in a similar manner. Such an exercise shows that the average rank of Khasi-dominated districts was 75, which is ten places higher than the average rank of Garo-dominated districts, which was 85. Still, there's another attempt to create confusion by arguing that different communities reside in any particular district, making it impossible to attribute backwardness—even if it is found at the district level—to a specific community. Such claims reflect ignorance of the demographic profiles of the state and its districts.

According to the 2011 Census, the ST population constituted 86% of the state's population, with district-level figures ranging from a minimum of 73% in West Garo Hills to a maximum of 97% in West Khasi Hills. Even in East Khasi Hills, which has a significant non-

ST population, 80% of the district's population is ST. There are minor ST groups, but their numbers are too small to significantly affect the overall rankings. The total other ST population in Meghalaya is just over 5% and tribes like Karbi and Biare make up around 5% or less of the total population in Ri Bhoi and undivided Jaintia Hills, respectively. These numbers are too small to affect the overall ranking, which accurately reflects the situation of the dominant ST communities, Khasi and Garo. The rankings achieved by the districts can therefore be attributed to the dominant community residing in those districts.

There is one last piece of data that does not take a roundabout way to prove the backwardness of a specific community but points at it with unerring accuracy: data on government jobs. The Census of Meghalaya Government Employees provides a community-wise breakdown of jobs in the state government, viz., Khasi, Garo, other ST, SC, OBC, and others. In 2022, the maximum number of jobs (60.86%) was held by the Khasi, followed by the Garo (30.61%), with the figures for other ST, SC, OBC, and the general category being 2.41%, 0.54%, 1.11%, and 4.47%, respectively. The term 'adequacy of representation' in state services clearly hints at this kind of situation. One can easily discern the groups that are backward from this statistic alone, with no other data needed.

But even if data on backwardness, as wrongly claimed, is not currently available or cannot be attributed to specific communities, population cannot be used as a criterion for reservation. This observation by the Bihar High Court is highly relevant in this regard: the Court pointed out that when proportionate representation was intended, it was spelled out in the Constitution, and there can be no importation of the term where it is not specified. Where there is no such mention, the principle is not applicable, and applying it would create excessive reservation, thus frustrating the cause of equality.

This reservation saga is going to be over very soon. The Expert Committee will make its recommendations, and the Government will have to take hard decisions. It is then that we will truly know who is more convinced of their stance and willing to go far to achieve their demands. If the government says 'status quo,' will those demanding a change decide to go to court to correct what they deem injustice? Or will they blame the government instead and use the issue for vote bank politics in the near future? Till then, I would request everyone to keep calm and not pay heed to any more attempts to create confusion. Just be patient: the truth will soon be revealed.

(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)

Corporal punishment
unconstitutional,
abusive

By Reakor Shisha Kharkrang

A few weeks ago, a video clip circulated across different pages of Instagram where a teacher was seen hitting and slapping a young student. He was seen pulling the student by his hair and slapping him numerous times while the other students watched. In the latest available news, the principal of the school allegedly tried covering up the incident by making the teacher write an apology letter to the parents of the child. However the Principal and the teacher have since been suspended by the School Trustees.

In normal circumstances, the act of the teacher is punishable and an offence under the many laws currently legalized in the country. However, many a times such acts by teachers often go unreported as corporal punishments are considered "part of disciplining" and not "abuse." The act of the teacher has created division among netizens with some considering the punishment by the teacher as unjustified and an abuse, while the other section has said that such punishment is nothing compared to the punishment they used to get when they were kids and that the current generation needs to be beaten to be disciplined.

Honestly it is sad to see that people treat this act of the teacher as "normal" when it's a clear case of physical abuse. If an adult hits another person, he can be legally charged under the Juvenile Justice Act, however despite the law being available, the same is often ignored when it involves an adult who is in charge of caring for the child. Therefore, whenever a child is hit by parents, teachers or some other elders of the family, it is often termed as "discipline" rather than what it actually is. In a survey by the Government of India, it was found that 66% of children have experienced some sort of physical abuse. Despite the numbers being so high, why do many people consider such acts as a form of discipline and therefore normal?

The reason people give to justify such an act is that, "they also faced the same situation and they turned out fine," however one must understand that just because it was practiced in the past and was part of tradition it doesn't mean it'll always be right. Incest was practiced at one point, Sati was openly encouraged and practiced at one point, however they were stopped once people realised their harmful effects on the society. Similarly corporate punishments in schools and disciplining children by hitting and slapping them is also harmful for the society. The long term effects of physical abuse during childhood often leads to mental and physical problems like depression, anxiety, obesity etc. It also leads children to often becoming neglectful, rebellious and fearful of their elders. The justification by the people itself shows that they themselves have been affected by the physical abuse they faced as children.

Further, physically abusing children will make them fear their elders. Society often creates a confusion between "Respect" and "Fear." Parents, teachers and elders beat their kids in order for the kids to grow up disciplined and to respect the elders. However a child in such situations doesn't have respect for the elders but nurses only fear and anger. A society that is built on fear always crumbles. A society needs to be built on trust, respect and love.

If society and law protects adults from abuse, then why is it hard to show the same gesture towards children who are the most vulnerable members of our society? There actually are laws to protect children against physical abuse, specifically abuse in the name of "Corporal Punishment." Sections 23, 75 and 82 of the Juvenile Justice Act, Section 17(1) of the RTE Act, 2009 (Right to Education Act), have all laid down provisions regarding corporal punishments. Further, the Protection of Corporal Punishment Act, 2013 in India aims to ensure that children are not subjected to physical punishment or mental harassment. In 2000, the Supreme Court ruled in a case titled, "Parents Forum For Meaningful Education vs Union of India," that corporal punishment in schools is unconstitutional, banning it across the country, citing the violation of children's rights and the cruel nature of such punishment.

When even the courts have banned corporal punishments, why is its practice still rampant? The main reason here is lack of awareness. This is not an isolated case of corporal punishments gone too far. Teachers and schools are not aware of the ban and neither are the students and parents. Therefore, there is a need for people to be made aware that corporal punishment has been deemed unconstitutional by the Supreme Court. The Government ought to conduct awareness programs regarding such topics. They should take corporal punishments seriously and take strict action against perpetrators. It breaks my heart to see that many children are still suffering from physical abuse in the name of corporal punishment and that the society is openly justifying such a heinous act. Corporal punishments are nothing but physical abuse.

There is no doubt that a child must be disciplined and there are several ways to do that but corporal punishments and physical abuse can never be forms of discipline, as they carry scars that may last for a lifetime. Children must be protected, nurtured, raised with care, love and respect; it is only then that they grow up to become better members of society. They must be protected from all sorts of abuse, be it physical, sexual, emotional abuse and even neglect. A country grows only when the upcoming generation is strong, therefore we must make our younger generation strong and not fearful.

(The writer is practising advocate, Meghalaya High Court)

Letters to the Editor

Hats-off to
Durka Sari

Editor,
I am writing this letter to thank you for the article on Durka Sari (TST, Oct 14, 2024) -- "Journey of a visually-impaired woman entrepreneur" -- by H H Mohrmen. Indeed, her courage, and indomitable spirit are an inspiration to us all, especially in this modern age when we need therapy for everything. The differently-abled exist perhaps to teach us lessons in courage and forbearance. Really, they should be called "better-abled." Durka herself exemplifies such compensatory abilities. I mean her extraordinary power of memory!
Yours etc.,
Deepa Majumdar,
Via email

Land a
precious
resource

Editor,
Apropos of the news report that the Government is initiating a move to create an industrial climate through the creation of 'Land Banks,' the initiative is a welcome step. As someone deeply involved in the grassroots level in community development one understands that this move will greatly support specific need-based investments unlike what we currently see. The concept of a Land Bank was earlier moved under the mentorship of Phrang Roy and Late Professor A.K. Nongkynrih of NEHU through the IFAD-MRDS project. This was meant to address and accommodate landless farming households. The Meghalaya

Institute of Governance had also developed and devised the model framework of Land Banks across the state with the intention of supporting and assisting marginal farming communities at the Dorbar Raid and Dorbar Shnong under a systematic approach. However, this current objective to address sector-specific needs through collaborative investment has to be devised using a different model considering that the Autonomous District Councils have a say in matters of land and land ownership. I hope that the government authorities take a deeper look before moving ahead with the idea of land banks for industrialisation as this could have adverse long term impacts. It is here that the need for land reforms is imperative.

Yours etc.,
Dominic S Wankhar,
Via email

Double
standards
on quota

Editor,
Rahul Gandhi has recently said that his party will take the reservation beyond 50 per cent when they come to power. Following that, those who are against the reservation policy have criticised the idea. Interestingly, they will do a 180 degree turnaround and oppose it if a 50 percent cap is introduced to the state quota in Lok Sabha seats. This is nothing but blatant hypocrisy.

No one likes the idea of giving a Lok Sabha constituency ticket of his state to a candidate from outside the state. Everyone wants to fully utilise this state quota, which is based on the population of the state. There is not much objection when a

person from a different district but from the same state, gets a Lok Sabha ticket. It is because the person in question belongs to the state, and therefore, is expected to safeguard the interests of the state, even though she or he is not a local candidate.

It is amusing that some people change their stances the moment the topic shifts from a state quota in the Parliament to a caste quota in government jobs. This is a double standard, whole hearted support for state representation and vehemently opposes representation of caste.

But what is necessary for elected politicians is equally important for selected bureaucrats. A government is incomplete without the two. Social justice will be mere talk if there is no equitable representation both in elected and selected personnel of the government. Some people find nothing wrong

in 10 percent of a community capturing 90 percent of the selected part (bureaucracy) of the government. But they will strongly oppose the same when it happens in the elected part (MPs) of the government. They will not tolerate even the logic of merit when people from other states represent most of the Lok Sabha constituencies in their state.

Without a state quota for parliamentary seats, the Parliament will look like the Indian cricket team, where players from a few states get a chance to represent India. But it would be absolutely undemocratic if a state or a caste group remains unrepresented in the government.

Earlier, when Rahul Gandhi pledged, "Jitni abadi, utna haq" (Share in proportion to population) after the publication of "Bihar Caste-based Survey 2022", he faced criticism from his own party member Abhishek

Singhvi that it would culminate into majoritarianism.

One of the basic tenets of democracy demands the participation of every community in the formation of the government. It cannot be termed as majoritarianism. The idea of democracy revolves around honouring the majority and ensuring proportional representation so that no one should be left out.

The caste reservation system is being criticised by two groups of people. While one group wants to banish it lock, stock, and barrel, the other one favours changing it from caste to class reservation. The latter group suggests reservation in jobs should only be for economically backward people irrespective of their caste.

As per the India Human Development Survey (IHDS-2) in 2011-12, 27 per cent of the respondents across India said that they

had been following the practice of untouchability. One in four Indians who practices untouchability, does not touch even an affluent Dalit. So, money cannot change the stigma associated with a tail-end of caste hierarchy.

The caste reservation opposition lobby must admit that the existence of caste is as much a reality in India as the existence of their state. Moreover, caste reservation in every sphere is necessary to minimise the incidents of favouring candidates of one's own caste during the selection process for admission, recruitment, and promotion under the guise of merit.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

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“Mistakes are a fact of life. It is the response to the error that counts.”

— Nikki Giovanni

The Shillong Times

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A ‘Maha’ battle

THE die is cast for two more major elections – to the Maharashtra and Jharkhand assemblies. Yet, more keenly watched will be how the electoral scenario shapes up in Maharashtra, a battleground for major players and political stalwarts. The poll process starts with filing of nominations by the end of this month and the results can be expected by November 23. The BJP that runs the present government in association with a breakaway faction of the Shiv Sena and the NCP group headed by Ajit Pawar will be facing the parent Shiv Sena, the Congress and the NCP of Sharad Pawar in a no-holds-barred fight. Clearly, this is no cakewalk for the BJP.

The BJP had experienced a shock when its long-time ally, the Shiv Sena of Uddhav Thackeray, ditched it after the last assembly polls and opted to instantly ally with the rival side – comprising the NCP and Congress – to form the government. The Shiv Sena was lured into the rival camp by a crafty Sharad Pawar, who got the Congress too to agree to offer the CM post to Uddhav. Uddhav fell for it and formed the government. The BJP licked its wound, but managed to pull down the government three years later and gave a similar shock to Uddhav by breaking the Sena and offering the CM post to its rebel leader Eknath Shinde. However, it appears that Shinde has not been able to live up to the expectations of the people. It is here that the NCP-Congress-Sena combine sees an opportunity now. Notably, the BJP’s chief minister from 2014 to 2019, Devendra Fadnis, too could not impress the people much; a reason why the BJP could not improve on its prospects in the 2019 polls. The Marathi-speaking people largely see the BJP as an outfit with a pro-Gujarat tilt. There is no love lost between the two communities in the sprawling Mumbai, where Gujaratis once held sway.

The previous assembly polls had seen Sharad Pawar, somewhat down and out, engaging himself in a ‘do or die’ battle and his NCP re-emerging as stronger force. NCP won ten seats more than the Congress and emerged as the third force – after BJP and Sena. Perceptions about the huge corruption by Pawar and his nephew Ajit Pawar had not hurt the image of the pro-Maratha NCP, which also has strong support from the well-off agrarian community in western Maharashtra. The Shiv Sena has domination over Mumbai. The BJP is a major force in the eastern districts, with Nagpur as its epicentre. Notably, Prime Minister Narendra Modi led the BJP alliance’s campaign in the past two assembly polls. This time, it remains to be seen whether he would again be its mascot.

ICSSR-NERC: The Unspoken Recent Growth Chronicle

By Bhagirathi Panda

I read the article ‘Growth and Decline of the ICSSR-NERC’ recently published in this esteemed daily with utmost respect and seriousness. The author’s portrayal of the origin and contribution of earlier Chairpersons (VCs), eminent Social Scientists, Honorary Directors, Deputy Directors and his concern for the development of this Regional Centre of ICSSR are all well taken. However, I being one of the stakeholders of this institution as its incumbent Honorary Director, personally feel some of the facts mentioned, opinions expressed and axioms built are based on information asymmetry.

Let me begin my write up by stating an important fact for the knowledge of our readers that the position of the Honorary Director of ICSSR-NERC is an additional responsibility shouldered by a Professor of NEHU in addition to his/her primary job of teaching and research in the University. Besides him, there are many other stakeholders of this institution. The Honorary Director is assisted by a full-time Deputy/Assistant Director in discharging the administrative and academic functions of the center. The prime mandated function of this Regional Center is to support the organization of seminars, workshops, symposiums, research methodology courses, conferences at different universities, colleges and institutions in India’s North-east. Organisation of such events provide opportunities for young and experienced social scientists to come together to deliberate, debate, discuss, contest and interrogate theories, perspectives and practices in different branches of social sciences and humanities primarily in the context of the North-east. Some such events also contribute to appropriate policy making and formulation of development practices in sensitising development practitioners by inviting them to be a part of such events or by sending them the proceedings or publications based on the deliberations in the events. Organisation of research methodology courses is meant to expand the capability vector of young research scholars and faculty members working mainly in the higher educational institutions of the region.

Besides this primary function, the centre also awards (i) study grants for research scholars in order to visit libraries anywhere in India, (ii) sponsor organization of lectures by distinguished scholars on issues pertaining to the region and (iii) help to disseminate information about the programmes of

the ICSSR.

The present Honorary Director assumed charge of the centre on September 17, 2020 when Covid-19 was at its peak and the post of Deputy Director was vacant, and continues to remain vacant till date. For almost one and half years of my tenure, because of Covid-19, we could not do much as higher educational institutions were unable to organise seminars, workshops, symposiums, research methodology courses and conferences in physical mode. However, compared to other regional centres we organised the maximum possible webinars in online mode.

Post Covid-19 recovery, the Centre took up all its mandated objectives in right earnest and achieved decisive results. Since the earlier published article mentions about the fall of ICSSR-NERC during the last six to seven years period, it is pertinent to make an appropriate comparison with respect to periods before this six-year period and after-Covid-19 recovery period based on hard data available in the annual reports of the centre. Since the incumbent Honorary Director practically got two full-fledged normal years i.e. 2022-23 and 23-24 (minus the abnormal Covid-19 period) to work with, it would be prudent to take the average achievements in different mandated dimensions for the period of 2022-23 and 2023-24 and compare it with the average achievements for the period 2015-16 and 2016-17. When it comes to sponsoring number of seminars, workshops, symposiums, research methodology courses, conferences etc. the average achievement for the period 2022-23 and 2023-24 was 67 (for the whole period of 2022-24, it was 134) and for the period 2015-16 and 2016-17, it was 51 (for the whole period of 2015-17 it was 102). When it comes to seminars, workshops, symposiums, research methodology courses, conferences organised by the Centre itself, the average achievement for the period 2022-23 and 2023-24 was 3 (for the whole period of 2022-24, it was 6) and for the period 2015-16 and 2016-17, it was 1.5 (for the whole period of 2015-17 it was 3).

Similarly, with respect to doctoral contingency grants to the research scholars, the average accomplishment for the period 2022-23 and 2023-24 was 25 (for the whole period of 2022-24, it was 50) and for the period 2015-16 and 2016-17, it was 17.5 (for the whole period of 2015-17 it was 35).

In the dimension of lectures delivered, the average accomplishment for the period 2022-23 and 2023-24 was 4 (for the whole period of 2022-24, it was 8) and for the period 2015-16 and 2016-17, it was 1.5 (for the whole period of 2015-17 it was 3). When it comes to the category of collaborative programmes, the average attainment for the period 2022-23 and 2023-24 was 4.5 (for the whole period of 2022-24, it was 9) and for the period 2015-16 and 2016-17, it was 1 (for the whole period of 2015-17 it was 2). In the category of minor research projects completed, the average attainment for the period 2022-23 and 2023-24 was 11 (for the whole period of 2022-24, it was 22) and for the period 2015-16 and 2016-17, it was 4 (for the whole period of 2015-17 it was 8). It is only in the category of ‘study grants’, the average achievement for the period 2022-23 and 2023-24 was less compared to the period 2015-16 and 2016-17.

During the past two and half years several national and international seminars, workshops, symposiums, research methodology courses, conferences and special lectures were also organised. Accomplished intellectuals like Prof. Dilip Ratha (Lead Economist of the World Bank), Prof. Heyman Josiah (University of Texas at El Paso), Prof. Parvati Raghuram (The Open University, United Kingdom), Prof. Massimo Warglien (Ca Foscari University, Venezia, Italy), Prof. Sanjay Chaturvedi, Prof. David R. Syiemlieh, Prof. Hemant Singh, Prof. Sukhpal Singh, Prof. Samir Kumar Das and many more have delivered special lectures. To improve the research capability of research scholars a number of customized research methodology courses with focus on evaluation of public welfare programmes were held. Some of the best researchers in this identified field from IIT Roorkee and Jamila Milia Islamia were invited as resource persons.

To comprehend the contribution of Arts and Literature to social science theory and practice, a number of workshops were organized at the centre in collaboration with renowned third space organizations and public universities such as Positive Energy Art Foundation, Riti Academy, EFLU and NEHU. In one such collaborative programme with Positive Energy Art Foundation, Shillong, more than 10 known international academics in the

domain of Art and Sculpture came from 6 countries of the world. The Centre also had its collaborative programmes on important issues affecting the immediate community with important think-tanks such as ICARE, Asian Confluence, OKISCD and ASF. In one such programme entitled ‘Community Engagement in Covid-19 Prevention and Control in Meghalaya -Lessons Learned and Future Strategies’ held in collaboration with ICARE, a number of eminent development practitioners such as Toki Blah, Patricia Mukhim, Sampath Kumar and Prof. Nanda Kishore Kanmuri shared their perspectives and experiences which had its contribution to the art and science of community engagement in managing pandemics and also the practice of public policy.

Realizing that many of our tribal communities in the North-east have their rich past but do not have relevant history, in 2022 it brought out a special issue of its journal Man and Society entitled ‘Lesser Known/Unknown Freedom Fighters from India’s North-east’. Further, the website of the Centre is now much more inclusive and interactive compared to any period in the past. The list can go on. All these cardinal achievements the Centre has realized during the tenure of the current Honorary Director while undertaking his prime job of teaching, research and extension at NEHU and that too against the situation of not having a regular Deputy Director.

Finally, although there is no explicit mention about the academic credentials of the incumbent Honorary Director, unwittingly, the write up casts an aspersion. The academic and administrative credentials of the incumbent Honorary Director are in the public domain in the website of the University for everybody’s consumption. Let me end by saying that I have my reverence for the opinion and concerns expressed in the write up by the author but felt somewhat odd that amidst the built-narrative, ‘the silent and unassuming contribution,’ of many stakeholders of ICSSR-NERC including that of the incumbent Honorary Director during the past 4 years are given an absolute omission.

As my term of Honorary Director comes to an end, I sincerely hope that my successor would be a prominent social scientist who would carry forward on what my small team at the Centre has built and take ICSSR-NERC to greater heights.

(The author teaches Economics at NEHU)

Bob’s Banter

By Robert Clements

Some Turning Points...! There are many of us who remember a turning point in our lives.

It could have been a sentence in a book we read, or a speech we heard, or advice given by an elder or teacher in school. Very often, that turning point, or that life changing shot of confidence could have been, in doing something we were afraid to do, or thought we were incapable of doing.

In my recent interactions with two schools, one in Goa and the other in Mumbai, I stress the fact, that a performance by a student should not be a false charade on stage, but an opportunity, where a child is given a chance to perform, watches amazed as an audience applauds and goes home feeling himself or herself an achiever.

This can only be done when parents and teachers work hard with those children to help them achieve what in their mind, they think is impossible. In the conquering of the impossible, in the climbing of the child’s Everest, that boy or girl will continue climbing other peaks and be a success in life. Today, as I’ve been hearing nearly every week, of sons of politicians, driving their dad’s posh cars at incredible speeds and crashing into innocent men and women, some who are going for a walk, others on their two wheelers and some in their own little cars, I realise that that son was never allowed to become an achiever the hard way. From day one, his rich or influential father or mother showcased his ‘spoilt’ behaviour as a sign of their success.

It was like dressing him up in the costliest of costumes, getting an amazing choreographer to work on dance and music, and showcasing the talented fellow on stage. It didn’t increase his confidence, no, it just showcased the parent’s wealth. That boy or girl will continue being a menace to society because he has never really become confident in any skills or talents he or she has got, but will always rely on his dad’s car, the family wealth or mother’s pampering. One day, when he is bereft of the piped music and dance, when the band stops playing, the car and the money gone, his world will come crashing down, but not before he or she has brought down the worlds of many other innocent bystanders.

Teach your children well. Don’t let them just be your showpieces on a world stage, but let them through struggle and difficulty perform. And when they do so, that will be the turning point of your child. Let the bare, frightening stage beckon. Watch the shy child walk onto it, and then suddenly see himself or herself doing the impossible, then watch your child from that day on, not crashing cars into others, but breaking the glass ceiling and achieving!

Give your children the opportunity of a ‘turning point’!

Apart from giving your children an opportunity to develop confidence, what is your role as a parent? I remember, a

few years ago a school down the road asked me if I would address parents on how to bring up children!

For a moment I asked myself as to how I’d been selected for the job, and wondered whether it had anything to do with bringing up two daughters, who I have little doubt would have laughed if they’d known their dad thought he’d become proficient in a subject they still consider me a novice in!

But it made me do a lot of thinking and something I realized at the end of gathering material for the talk was that unlike any other job on earth parenting is something which we are thrown into as fathers and mothers with no knowledge of what we are supposed to do.

Scary isn’t it? Very often I’ve heard people talk about their terrible childhood and when I talk to their parents, I’m told how those same parents invested time and money, love and affection to bring up their children.

So, what went wrong? A small survey was done on children in which they listed ten qualities they wanted in parents. These young people, from 24 countries, agreed on these traits they believed were important for all parents to possess.

Here they are:
1. They want harmony. They do not want their parents to have unresolved and destructive conflict in front of them.

2. They want love. They wish to be treated with the same affection as other children in the family.

3. They want honesty. And to be told the truth.

4. They want acceptance. They desire mutual tolerance from both parents.

5. They want their parents to like their friends. They want their friends to be welcomed in the home.

6. They want closeness. They desire comradeship with their parents.

7. They want their parents to pay attention to them and answer their questions.

8. They want consideration from their parents. They do not want to be embarrassed or punished in front of friends.

9. They want positive support. They wish for their parents to concentrate on their good points rather than their weaknesses.

10. They want consistency. They desire parents to be constant in their affections and moods.

It appears that these children want what all of us want – respect, consideration and love. In fact, these work well with ‘children’ of all ages.

Let’s give these ten points a go, shall we, and also see to it that we help them face their ‘turning points’ in life...!

The Author conducts a Writers and Speakers Course for schools, colleges and corporates. For more details call him on 9892572883 or send a message to bobbanter@gmail.com

Letters to the Editor

MTDC’s fall from grace: Need for urgent probe

Editor,
As a daily-wage tourist cab driver and a father of six who earns a livelihood by ferrying tourists to Meghalaya’s exotic tourist spots, do I have the right to question the government over its disinterest in solving tourism issues here in the state? This may sound like an odd question to which you may not even have an answer; but as a voter of the state who has stood in line for hours and elected our representative, I believe I do.

Our association, the All Khasi Meghalaya Tourist Taxi Association (AKMTA) had a few weeks back submitted a memorandum to the government demanding it to issue an immediate order banning all commercial vehicles of other states from plying in and around tourist hotspots here, but till date the government is yet to issue a justifiable reply. The Tourism Department, on the other hand, instead of tendering to the plight of local cabbies, have in turn allowed its agency, the Meghalaya Tourism Development Corporation Ltd. to hire outside commercial vehicles (on commission basis) for catering to the Corporation’s tourism needs such as for sight-seeing and also for pick and drop services, thereby directly affecting our business. Doesn’t the Corporation have vehicles of its own to cater to tourists who turn to it for security and guidance? Or is the MTDC facing financial crisis yet again?

The MDA government has time and again denied any scam in tourism projects such as the Rs 14 crore eco-tourism projects in Garo Hills. But as witnessed by all, the money spent on many so-called ‘developmental projects’ all around the state implemented by the MTDC have been wasted due to lack of proper planning and vision. Seriously, why does the Meghalaya government, particularly the Tourism Department continue to waste taxpayers’ money on useless projects? The MTDC has for years and years, spent government resources carelessly, extravagantly, and without purpose. Who benefits from all this wasteful spending? Isn’t there a specialized agency here in Meghalaya aimed at detecting fraud, waste, and abuse? Why is the AG’s office not pointing out the corruption in such Corporations?

Now, the hiring of outside commercial vehicles (on commission basis) may be a cost cutting move, but it is also a rule bending one. This is so because the hiring of these commercial vehicles has not been done through proper channel, such as the usual tendering process. But to surprise the babus of the Tourism Department even further, I, and several other tourist cab drivers, would like to inform them that this unlawful move isn’t a new thing but has been going on for years without their knowledge. Two female employees of the Transport Unit (old Tourist Information Centre) of the MTDC, had been engaging in the hiring of commercial vehicles in exchange for attractive sums of commissions ranging from Rs 500 for Local Sight Seeing, Rs 1000 for Cherrapunji tour, Rs 1500 for Mawlynnong sightseeing and so on.

Initially, we thought that the commission paid by us tourist cab drivers to these two employees would go to the office account of the MTDC, but later we came to know the reality from a tourist guide working for the Corporation that the money, totalling to lakhs of rupees, had been deposited straight to the pockets of these two individuals. Even though this young lad showed cour-

age to report this to tourism officials, he was in turn silenced for good whereby he was dismissed from his job as tour guide which immediately led to his suicide.

Despite his complaints, why isn’t there a departmental enquiry into these cash crimes? Why does the Tourism Department keep covering up wrongdoings in the Corporation? It’s been a long time since this young man died of suicide but why isn’t there a magisterial probe till now? These are bewildering questions many of us still ask.

Yours etc.,

A Tourist Cab Driver
Name withheld on request
Via email

Bamboo the answer to Meghalaya’s economic future

Editor,
According to a recent news report titled ‘Meghalaya leads the nation in farming on leased land: Survey,’ it was revealed that Meghalaya leads the country in farming on leased land, with 31% of agricultural households engaging in this practice—the highest in the

country. While I personally have doubts about the claim that 76% of rural households in Meghalaya are landless due to the prevalence of community land ownership, it cannot be denied that the number of landless individuals is rising. Consequently, many people from various parts of the state are migrating to Shillong in search of better opportunities, often ending up in low-income neighbourhoods like Mawlai, Pynthorunkhrah, and Nongmynsong. Census data shows that the Scheduled Tribe population in Pynthorunkhrah increased from 34% in 1981 to 54% in 2011, while in Nongmynsong, it rose from 38% in 2001 to 51% in 2011. This influx has put a huge stress on Shillong’s public infrastructure, resulting in increasingly unmanageable traffic jams.

There is a pressing need to encourage rural communities to remain in their villages but this requires ample economic opportunities and improved public facilities, such as roads, hospitals, and schools. In this context, Toki Blah’s article ‘DoNER Bamboo Policy for NE’ is crucial. He rightly points out that for Meghalaya’s 10 billion dollar economy dream, ‘bamboo development is the area where the state government needs to invest and

concentrate in.” Since bamboo has a longer gestation period compared to annual crops, it can serve as a tool to provide more secure tenure to tenant farmers, encouraging them to invest in land improvement. A more secure tenancy with higher income could greatly benefit stressed households. Additionally, bamboo is effective for restoring degraded landscapes. Therefore, I agree with Toki Blah’s appeal to our representatives: it is essential to seize this opportunity, as it ‘might never come our way again,’ at least not before the problems become completely unmanageable.

Yours etc.,

Bhogtoram Mawroh,
Via email

Loss of confidence in Mylliem Syiemship, KHADC

Editor,
Has the authority of the Dorbar Pyllun (General Council) of the Bakhraw Batri of Mylliem Syiemship and the power of the District Councils become redundant?

We the undersigned who are ki khun ki hajar (children

of thousands) of the Mylliem Syiemship are deeply troubled and feel a deep sense of loss at the concerns shared by many ki khun ki hajar regarding recent media reports about the uncertainty of leasing the Khlaw Mawroh (Mawroh Forest) to Ms Naphisabet Wahlang, a relative of high connection and also the lease amount of Rs 5,58,30,451 (Rupees Five crore fifty eight lakh thirty thousand four hundred fifty one) related to the few Mylliem Rim.

After examining the matter from all aspects we feel that we should lend full support to all the Bakhraw of Mylliem Syiemship who had come forward to oppose the increasing high-handed and authoritative manner of handing the land of the Mylliem Syiemship by the Syiem of Mylliem and 2/3 Myntis. They have disregarded all the customary practices and traditional laws of the Syiemship which have been put in place by our predecessors, whereby all matters especially property matters should be thoroughly discussed and deliberated by all in the Dorbar Pyllun (General Council) of the Bakhraw Batri of Mylliem Syiemship. Sadly, today the democratic authority of the Dorbar Pyllun has been undermined and the traditional administration of

the Hima Mylliem has been turned upside down whereby the Syiem is behaving like the ancient kings of plain areas who wielded considerable power over the land with the support of 2/3 Myntis.

The other growing concern is about the silence of the District Council with regards to the opposition raised by the Bakhraw of the Mylliem Syiemship, which puts us in a state of uncertainty. The District Council through the 6th Schedule has been empowered to look after the affairs of all the Khasi Syiemship but the silence of the District Council makes us believe that perhaps there is something unsavoury going on behind the scenes.

In view of all the above events which have brought shame and disrespect on the traditional administration of the Mylliem Syiemship, we feel obliged to come forward to express our concerns to the media with the hope of getting a fair and democratic traditional administration without any monetary demands or corruption.

Yours etc.,
B Thabab &
Shanbor Sohtun,
Via email

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"Happiness is very simple and minimal."

— Tablo

The Shillong Times

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Money no compensation for death

NEWS that the family of the student who died of electrocution at the Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya, Mawphlang in July this year is being compensated monetarily brings little comfort. Money can never replace a life. What the parents of all students in that JNV should demand is a high level probe as to how such life threatening circumstances can exist in an institution with so many young resident students. The tragedy about Meghalaya is that heartbreaking catastrophes are forgotten all too soon and life goes on until another tragedy strikes. For one, the educational institution should have regular checks of its electrical system especially when students have reported short circuits in the past. That some slipshod repair work was passed off as a major repair until a student had to lose his life would have been unacceptable in other societies with an active civil society. In Meghalaya, unfortunately there is no civil society. Section 161 (1) of the 134 page Indian Electricity Act 2003 says: If any accident occurs in connection with the generation, transmission, distribution, supply or use of electricity in or in connection with, any part of the electric lines or electrical plant of any person and the accident results or is likely to have resulted in loss of human or animal life or in any injury to a human being or an animal, such person shall give notice of the occurrence and of any such loss or injury actually caused by the accident, in such form and within such time as may be prescribed, to the Electrical Inspector or such other person as aforesaid and to such other authorities as the Appropriate Government may by general or special order, direct.

(2) The Appropriate Government may, if it thinks fit, require any Electrical Inspector, or any other person appointed by it in this behalf, to inquire and report- (a) as to the cause of any accident affecting the safety of the public, which may have been occasioned by or in connection with, the generation, transmission, distribution, supply or use of electricity, or (b) as to the manner in, and extent to, which the provisions of this Act or rules and regulations made thereunder or of any licence, so far as those provisions affect the safety of any person, have been complied with. (3) Every Electrical Inspector or other person holding an inquiry under subsection (2) shall have all the powers of a civil court under the Code of Civil Procedure, 1908 for the purpose of enforcing the attendance of witnesses and compelling the production of documents and material objects, and every person required by an Electrical Inspector be legally bound to do so within the meaning of section 176 of the Indian Penal Code (read as Bharatiya Nyay Sanhita). The question is whether all these procedures have been followed in the case of the deceased Nathaniel Sohtun. And whether Rs 1 lakh is fair compensation for the loss of life. But more importantly whether those responsible for the carelessness that cost a young boy his life have been adequately punished.

Everyday thirty Indians are killed due to electrocution. The legislature, executive, regulators and electricity supply companies have often looked the other way when it comes to devising preventive measures and formulating an adequate, clear and consistent victim compensation mechanism. Sadly the Indian Electricity Act, 2003 substantially distances the executive from any accountability. Its time to study these Acts more astutely and contest those clauses that are anti-people but are aimed at protecting the Electricity Companies only.

Letters to the Editor

Caste-based reservation issues

Editor,
I am writing in response to Sujit De's letter on the issue of caste-based reservations, published recently. While I understand and respect the arguments presented in favour of reservation policies, I believe comparing state quotas in parliamentary seats to caste-based reservations in higher education and government jobs overlooks the nuances of both systems. State quotas are designed to ensure equitable representation and development of the entire state, while caste-based reservations, in their current form, primarily benefit certain groups without taking economic conditions into account.

I am not suggesting that caste-based discrimination is not a reality. As the author rightly points out, discrimination still exists in various forms, and addressing this should remain a priority. However, many people from financially disadvantaged backgrounds—regardless of caste—are being deprived of opportunities. These individuals may be scoring well despite having fewer resources and limited access

to quality education, yet they often miss out on opportunities because they belong to the general category. Conversely, others from reserved categories who may have more financial stability or better educational resources are given preference, even when their scores are comparatively lower. This creates an imbalance, where merit is often overshadowed by caste alone.

To clarify, I am not saying that all individuals from lower castes are financially well-off. There are still many who need support, and reservation has played a key role in helping uplift them. But I believe the time has come to shift the focus towards considering economic status alongside caste, ensuring that those who genuinely need assistance receive it, regardless of their caste. This would allow for fairer representation and address the deeper issue of poverty, which affects all communities.

While caste-based discrimination remains a harsh reality, we need to question whether simply providing reservations is the best way to end it. True change will come from education, awareness, and a shift in mindset. Since independence, our efforts to address caste issues have largely centered

In the Khasi-Jaintia Hills, the land of the Hynniewtrep, our traditional governance system is deeply rooted in the will of the people, with the villagers at the grassroots electing their leaders such as Myntri Shnong, Sordar Shnong, Waheh Shnong, and Rangbah Shnong, among other village officials. These village leaders, though their titles vary based on the region, are responsible for managing village affairs, maintaining customs and traditions, overseeing land matters, implementing various government schemes, and representing the village in dealings with the two District Councils and the government. Their authority is conferred through sanads (appointments) given by the traditional rulers of the Hima and Elakas, such as the Syiem, Lyngdoh Hima, Sirdar Elaka, Wahadar, and Dolloi, in accordance with the laws of the District Councils of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills.

This traditional system of governance, a significant objective of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India, continues to be preserved. Village leaders and Dorbar Shnong (village councils) have become vital institutions, essential to both the Meghalaya and Indian governments. In recent times, with the introduction of laws like the Meghalaya Residents Safety and Security Act (MRSSA), 2016, the responsibilities of village leaders have increased, necessitating rethinking laws that fully empower village governance. Especially as we witness the rise in drug-related issues, illegal immigration, and the need for villages to handle matters of law and order, and cleanliness. Strengthening the powers of village leaders requires implementing proper checks and balances to prevent abuse of power.

In 2017, when I, along with the representatives of the Syntuk Nongsynshar Shnong Bri u Hynniewtrep, met Rajnath Singh, then India's Home Minister. He was surprised to learn that our village leaders work voluntarily without remuneration. This is one of the unique features of our traditional governance system.

Uniform responsibility
Even though the titles of these village leaders differ by region, their roles and responsibilities in public governance remain the same:

- Myntri Shnong: Found in the West and South West Khasi Hills, they are responsible for village administration, resolving disputes, and implementing development projects within their jurisdictions. They represent the village before the District Council and the government.

- Sordar Shnong: In places like Hima Khyrim, they are known as Sordar Shnong.

on reservations, but we have not done enough to address the root cause—our societal attitudes. For example, how many school books teach children about the importance of social equality or the dangers of untouchability? This should have been a part of our curriculum from the very start, not just in higher grades, but from the earliest years of education. If we invest in quality education and ensure that every child, regardless of caste, has access to the same opportunities, the need for reservations will diminish over time. Instead, we have relied on reservation as a tool to address inequality, which has inadvertently created new divisions.

We should focus on lifting up all those who are economically disadvantaged, not just those from specific castes. By continuing the current system, we risk fostering resentment between communities and perpetuating a divide that reservations were meant to heal.

It is not about caste; it is about an individual's access to facilities and their ability to excel. A reservation system based on economic status would ensure that both general and lower-caste individuals receive their fair share of representation based on merit and effort. By keeping reservations caste-based,

Governance of Dorbar Shnong and powers of Rangbah Shnong in the modern world

By Erwin K. Syiem Sutnga

Their duties are equivalent to those of the Rangbah Shnong.

- Waheh Shnong: In Jaintia Hills District, Waheh Shnong holds the same responsibilities as the Rangbah Shnong in Khasi Hills.

- Rangbah Shnong: Recognized in other parts of the Khasi Hills, these leaders share similar duties.

The Conferment of Power

While the titles of these village leaders may vary by region, their authority is derived from the sanads they receive. One critical aspect is that these village leaders must earn the full trust of their villagers. They are also expected to follow orders from the Khlieh Nongsynshar (traditional rulers) and the Executive Committee of the Autonomous District Council that governs them. However, there is a need for a clear understanding of how their relationship with the Government of Meghalaya functions. The sanads given to Rangbah Shnong come from traditional rulers like the Syiems, Lyngdohs, Sirdars, Wahadars, and Dollois in accordance with the Sixth Schedule, Para 3(1)(g) of the Constitution. In the Khasi Hills, many laws govern the Hima and Sirdarships, while in Jaintia Hills, there is the Jaintia Hills Autonomous District (Establishment of Elaka and Village and Election, Appointment, Powers, Functions and Jurisdiction of Dolloi/Sirdar and Waheh Shnong) Act, 2015.

In recent years, we have seen the Meghalaya Government working with Rangbah Shnong in various aspects, especially during times of unrest and during the Covid pandemic. The work of the Rangbah Shnong seems to be based on respect and custom rather than on clear legal mandates. While these leaders derive their power from District Councils through sanads given by the Khlieh Nongsynshar, there is a need for better coordination between village authorities, District Councils, and the Meghalaya Government to ensure effective governance, especially in maintaining law and order.

Conflicts in governance

The issues or conflicts that Rangbah Shnong face in governance and their relationship with the Government of Meghalaya arise because their powers come from District Councils through the Khlieh Nongsynshar Hima and Elakas, who issue sanads. However, they also operate within the state's public governance system. This dual governance system, blending traditional governance with state governance, presents peculiar challenges in administration,

implementation of laws, and ensuring accountability in the event of governance failures.

Key Areas of Conflict:

Dual Authority Structure

- Rangbah Shnong receive authority from the District Council and the Khlieh Nongsynshar Hima, based on traditional governance. At the same time, they are expected to work within the laws of the Meghalaya Government, leading to confusion, particularly in matters related to the drug trade, public order, and criminal activities. There is an expectation that Rangbah Shnong and Dorbar Shnong will control such issues, but the law does not clearly define their powers. When it comes to serious legal matters, these efforts fail because Rangbah Shnong and Dorbar Shnong lack legal empowerment from the government.

Framework for Rangbah Shnong powers

- The powers of the Rangbah Shnong are not clearly defined in law, creating opportunities for abuse of power. This is especially true when they issue No Objection Certificates (NOC) or make decisions regarding land transactions. In terms of land, the two Autonomous District Councils have their own land laws, which the public must understand clearly.

Conflict with government authority

- While Rangbah Shnong receive authority from the Khlieh Nongsynshar Hima through sanads, there is no law from the Meghalaya Government that clarifies their powers and how the sanad aligns with state government functions. This creates a lack of clarity and cooperation between the Meghalaya Government and the District Councils.

Role in Government Welfare Schemes

- Rangbah Shnong play a role in implementing government welfare schemes like MGNREGA, but there are allegations of mismanagement and favoritism in the use of government funds. A clear legal framework for oversight is lacking, making it difficult to ensure transparency in the use of these funds.

Clarification of Roles

- There is a need to clarify the roles of the Rangbah Shnong within a legal framework that recognizes the sanads they receive from the traditional rulers and aligns with the Meghalaya Government's legal structure.

Collaboration with Law Enforcement

- Clear guidelines for collaboration with the police on different laws are necessary, especially concerning law

and order, anti-drug efforts, and public safety.

Strengthening the Dorbar Shnong

- The Dorbar Shnong's powers should be strengthened to better safeguard against crime, similar to how Village Defence Parties operate in rural areas. In urban areas, Urban Village Volunteer Parties could be introduced to assist in maintaining peace and helping the police apprehend wrongdoers.

Integration with state government

- The state should recognize traditional governance systems by working in collaboration with the District Councils, ensuring that the sanads of Rangbah Shnong are in line with state governance to handle challenges like crime and public safety effectively.

In conclusion, Rangbah Shnong, Sordar Shnong, Myntri Shnong, Waheh Shnong, and Dorbar Shnong play critical roles in the governance of their communities, maintaining public order, and upholding traditions. However, their powers, as defined by sanads, require proper checks and balances to prevent abuse. Since the Meghalaya Government relies heavily on Rangbah Shnong and Dorbar Shnong, it is crucial to ensure that there is a clear legal understanding between them and the Autonomous District Councils. We hope for new thinking on this matter, as effective governance requires clear protection under the law and proper guidance for the powers of the Rangbah Shnong and Dorbar Shnong in these rapidly changing times with increasing public demands for improved governance, protection of the indigenous communities, and fostering development.

As the responsibilities of village leaders grow, it is important to have a well-defined legal framework that ensures their actions align with the needs of modern governance. The balance between respecting traditional governance systems and adapting to the challenges of the present, such as rising crime, drug abuse, and rapid urbanization, requires thoughtful reforms.

In conclusion, Rangbah Shnong and other village leaders must be empowered with clear roles, legal backing, and proper accountability mechanisms to ensure they continue to play an effective role in safeguarding the rights of the people, promoting law and order, and fostering community well-being in the evolving social and political landscape of Meghalaya.

(The author is former legal Advisor to the Executive Committee, Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council. He has also translated the Sixth Schedule into Khasi with commentaries).

Human sacrifice in this day and age, regressive

Editor,

It is a crying shame that the life of a student was sacrificed by his teachers in his alma mater, and that a public school has turned out to be a breeding ground for superstitions. A class II student was killed on the premises of DL Public School in Uttar Pradesh's Hathras in a black magic ritual for the institute's prosperity on September 23. According to police, the school director, his father, and three teachers were involved in the murder. Ironically, it happens when we are going to celebrate 75 years of Independence. Above all the Constitution mandates that education should help develop the scientific temper of the citizens of this country. This is the fundamental duty of every citizen of India. So are we regressing into a superstitious nation of unscientific temperament?

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

Yours etc.,

Name withheld on request

Via email

A look at record of RTI Act after 19 years of implementation

Some success but many hurdles remain thereby hurting the goals

By Shailesh Gandhi

The Right to Information (RTI) Act completed 19 years on October 12, 2024. When it was first rolled out, it created great enthusiasm among citizens who saw the possibility of ensuring accountability and transparency from their government.

We call India the world's largest democracy, but this has not translated into welfare and good governance for the ordinary citizen. Democracy is defined as 'rule of the people for the people by the people', but the truth is that when an ordinary citizen goes to a government office, they often come out feeling hurt, humiliated and frustrated.

For the first time, we had a law that recognised the sovereignty of the individual citizen and recognised that she was giving legitimacy to the government and all

Commissioners and courts started asking applicants to explain reasons why they wanted information. If the answer did not satisfy them, they denied the information to the applicants.

This has been further aggravated by the fact that many commissioners in the country do not work with any seriousness. Many of them do not work for even 40 hours a week. The disposal of cases is absolutely unacceptable in most cases.

Many commissioners dispose of 50 to 100 cases in a month. They should be disposing about 400 to 500 cases per month, as some do. As a benchmark, I may mention that the average disposal of cases in Indian high courts, which are more complex, is above 200 cases per month.

The backlogs in infor-



public servants.

It also recognised the fact that the government held all information on behalf of citizens. Citizens who were empowered used RTI to redress their grievances and expose corruption.

The RTI Act does not have a list of information that the citizen could access but instead has a small negative list of information that could be denied to the citizen. All other information had to be shared with the citizens.

This was one of the best transparency laws in the world but it is not delivering the promised fruits and better governance because various instrumentalities have not been following the law but are mutilating it.

The Act recognises that all existing information must be given to a citizen on demand and mandates a personal penalty on a public servant if he denies information within 30 days without reasonable cause.

For dissatisfied citizens, it provides for an appeal with a senior officer within the department and if this is not satisfactory, the law creates a second appellate authority in terms of an Information Commission. It gave adequate authority to the commissions to get their Orders implemented.

The Information Commissioners were to be selected by the committee consisting of the Prime Minister, Leader of the Opposition and one other minister for the Central Commission and the chief minister, Leader of the Opposition and one other minister for the state commissions.

This became the weak link of the RTI Act. Commissioners were selected without any transparent process and, in most cases, the posts were given to people who could work the bureaucratic and political network.

Consequently, a large number of commissioners were selected who had no predilection for transparency nor any love for it. Many of them looked at these positions as post-retirement sinecures or rewards for favours done while in service.

They did not recognise or understand the significance of the right to information as a fundamental right arising out of Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution. The law had specifically stated that no reasons need to be given for seeking information.

mation commissions are increasing steadily and RTI cases are being delayed at commissions for six months to four years. Citizens lose interest in trying to enforce the law and public servants have started neglecting their duties mentioned in the law. This results in citizens losing faith in the law.

Another major setback to RTI has been the gross misinterpretation of Section 8(1)(J) of the RTI Act. This Section was meant to exempt information which would lead to any invasion on the privacy of an individual.

Keeping in mind the fact that it may be difficult to define privacy, the Indian Parliament had crafted the Section in a careful and skillful manner.

This section exempts "Information which relates to personal information the disclosure of which has no relationship to any public activity or interest, or which would cause unwarranted invasion of the privacy of the individual unless the General Public Information Officer or the State Public Information Officer or the appellate authority, as the case may be, is satisfied that the larger public interest justifies the disclosure of such information."

"Provided that the information, which cannot be denied to the Parliament or a state legislature, shall not be denied to any person."

Generally, most of the information in public records arises from a public activity. The Public Information Officer (PIO) has to decide whether it is an invasion of privacy. Privacy is to do with matters within a home, a person's body, sexual preferences etc.

This is in line with Article 19(2) of the Constitution. Then the PIO must record his subjective conclusion that he would not give the information to the Parliament or state assembly.

Unfortunately many public servants, commissioners and courts deny information just by saying it is personal information. This is not in line with the law or the Constitution. This could be a major loss for citizen's fundamental rights under Article 19(1)(a).

Citizens and media must defend their right to information failing which the RTI Act will be converted into a right to deny information. (IPA Service)

Courtesy: The Leaflet

"Win or lose, just stay calm."

— Mirko Cro Cop

The Shillong Times

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SHILLONG, FRIDAY, OCTOBER 18, 2024

Live and let live

THE Supreme Court has finally given its verdict on a petition filed 12 years ago, and upheld the validity of Section 6A of the Citizenship Act for Assam. The verdict was given by majority view, with four judges of the division bench including chief justice Chandrachud taking a joint stand and a fifth judge giving a different view. The verdict, appreciably, "balances the interests of migrants and the desire of the natives," for preservation of their cultural mores and citizenship rights. Section 6A of the Citizenship Act 1955 had been added to the original act in pursuance of the 1985 Assam Accord the central government of Rajiv Gandhi had signed with representatives of the Assam Movement led mainly by student leaders, who later went on to run the state government. The backdrop to the movement was the large-scale influx of Bangladeshis following the 1971 war and repression of the people there by the Pakistani Army. This mass influx too had a humanitarian angle. Section 6A ruled that those "who came to Assam on or after January 1, 1996 but before March 25, 1971 from Bangladesh at the time of the Citizenship Amendment Act 1985, and are resident in Assam", can register themselves as citizens of India.

The petition filed in 2012 by the Assam Sanmilita Mahasangha and others, challenged section 6A by arguing that it discriminated against other Indian citizens by "permitting different cut-off dates for regularising illegal migrants entering Assam and the rest of the country." While the present verdict asserts that "Section 6A balances the humanitarian need of migration with the economic effects of migration," Justice JB Pardiwala's dissenting view is that Section 6A is unconstitutional with a prospective effect. "The purpose of Section 6A was not achieved, that is, expedient detection of those who entered in the 1966-71 period, their deletion from the electoral rolls and conferment of de jure citizenship only on the expiry of 10 years." He also stressed: "On suspicion that a person is a foreigner, the onus is on the person who came between 1966-1971 to prove that he is a citizen -- and not for the government to prove it, as the section stipulated. The underlying object of creating two distinct categories of immigrants under Section 6A could have been achieved only if the exercise of detection of immigrants of the 1966-71 stream and their deletion from the electoral roll was conducted en-masse and in a time-bound manner. This was not done as intended."

These points are well-taken, but the larger context cannot be ignored either. In the majority opinion, Justice Surya Kant rightly points out that Section 6A was introduced in the spirit of fraternity. "People cannot choose their neighbours. That is not the idea of fraternity." The idea, the verdict stressed, is to live and let live. "People of different backgrounds should live in the spirit of inclusiveness and togetherness."

Who is listening to the children? No wonder school is boring

By Patricia Mukhim

This article is an outcome of a conversation between two 10-year old kids I overheard at a social gathering. We were all having lunch seated at different tables when I overheard one boy tell the other, "School is boring. Why do we have to learn Maths and Science?" The other boy responded as expected. "I like the games period," he said. My curiosity was piqued when I realised that one of the boys was a genius at fixing Rubik cubes. Unable to stop myself from intruding, I asked the one who was bored, why he thought Maths was boring. He pointed at his pocket and said, "A calculator can do the job just as well if not better so why waste time counting?" I butted in and said, "Look guys, a calculator can do the arithmetic part but Maths and Science are what we call subjects that promote inquiry training." "What's that he asked?" I told him that inquiry-based learning means we ask questions and investigate why things happen a certain way. It's getting away from assumptions and relying on evidence for our claims. The genius looked at me with curiosity and said, "Hmmm... You've got a point there." Having done with our lunch we went our way but I couldn't forget that little conversation. How I wish I could eavesdrop into other children's conversations if only to learn what goes on in their little heads.

The problem today is that the old teaching pedagogy is outdated but teachers being adults find it hard to shift gears and get into a new mode which is more about educating children by engaging them in a question answer format and allowing them the space to express themselves in a non-judgmental ambience where they can be wrong but not made fun of. In fact, that's one thing to learn in school -- that there can be many answers to one question. What's important is how a child arrives at that answer. Science and Maths both help in inquiry-based learning which means we ask questions and investigate why things happen a certain way. It's getting away from assumptions and relying on evidence for our claims. But would it not be more engaging if before teaching Mathematics or Science the teacher prepares the students by asking them if they know why they need to learn Mathematics and what it really is?

Similarly with Science too. This at least gives the student the basics of how he/she can learn to understand concepts even later in life.

But teachers being teachers are so used to talking and lecturing that they have lost the capacity to listen and to provoke the children to speak up and air their views. Not being able to listen and listen with empathy is why they lose their students and why students lose interest in the subject. A good empathetic teacher will get every child interested in his/her subject. This brings me to the point of



this article which is that the call of the day is for educators not teachers.

So what's the difference between a teacher and an educator? Teachers focus on imparting knowledge and skills in a formal educational setting, while educators take a more holistic approach, addressing students' intellectual, moral, and social growth in various contexts. An educator explores the potential of a child and encourages that potential to bloom and flourish. It may not be in the direction that parents want. But it's what the child loves and cherishes and wants to excel in. All too often that potential is crushed under the weight of parental expectations. Every parent wants their child to progress in a certain trajectory they have marked out and if the child should fall between the gaps then he/she has had it. There will be recriminations galore about how the child has failed the parents. If that child does not find solace in school from his/her teacher, where does he/she go to for support?

The reason for this piece is also because we are mourning the passing of Br. Eric Steve D'Souza - a man who spent his best years teaching at St Edmunds School

Shillong and elsewhere and turned out many achievers not just in studies but also in music, acting, sports and what have you. Br. D'Souza or Dasu as he was fondly called was loved by all his students and they are in every part of the North East, the country and the globe. He had the rare ability to track what each student could excel in and gave that kid the extra push through a one on one interface. Educators like that are born once in a lifetime and that is the tragedy of our times. Dasu has touched so many lives in ways that

cannot be recounted because each encounter he had was different from the last one. He had that rare quality to address each student's problems right where it hurts. That takes an unusual perspicacity, patience, empathy, and the time to follow through with each student. For a teacher to not try to fit square pegs in round holes is an exceptional calling. Many of us don't have that prescience. Perhaps that's a divine gift and one wishes that all teachers especially in these challenging times are bestowed with that genius.

How lovely it would be if kids were to look forward to attend school because being there is not a compulsion or a burden but a pleasure -- the pleasure of opening up hearts and minds instead of having to keep things in those dark crevices of their minds and then resort to substance abuse because they can't handle the mental pressure. I recall talking to a number of adolescents during the pandemic when they were all bundled inside their homes and attended online classes. What they missed the most was not their classes but their mates. That social connect was broken during the pandemic and it played havoc with the mental health

of quite a good number of kids. Unfortunately, after the pandemic we all got back to business as usual without taking time to reflect together on that critical juncture of our lives and give it due closure.

In North East India we are battling a very critical phase of history. Too many young people are consumed by substance abuse. Every so often we encounter a young adolescent who walks around with glazed eyes and is unaware of his external environment. His mind is floating elsewhere in a happy place until the effect wanes off and he is brought back to base with a thud and sees all his problems confronting him and then he needs more drugs until there is no end. This issue should actually trigger a special meeting of all educators and heads of institutions to brainstorm on the reasons for substance abuse and reduce those trigger points at home or in school. We need a road map to tackle substance abuse, else we are losing the best brains to this disease. What must change in our social structure to combat this biggest challenge of our times?

As a country have we been producing too many teachers but too few educators? Do our children today actually need a teacher to impart knowledge or skills when they can learn so many things on the internet? Should the entire education system not be put on its head to churn out educators who can win the confidence of our teeming youth population, currently groping in a nowhere land?

Clearly education needs a complete makeover and I am sorry to say that will not come from prescriptions advanced by the National Education Policy 2020. I say this because an education that prescribes a single and uniform model is ill suited for this country. Education should be nuanced towards the cultural moorings of the learners. If we miss this point and our leaders are unable to point this out to an arrogant central government then the future of education will remain bleak even as more and more students drop out because they just don't fit in. We really need to fix education or we will lose our youth to cynicism and dystopia even while the state will have to deal with their combative belligerence.

Bangladesh interim govt joining China led RCEP under pressure from Beijing

By Nitya Chakraborty

Bangladesh is the diplomatic battleground of two superpowers USA and China since the interim Government took over power on August 9 this year following the ouster of the Sheikh Hasina led Awami League regime on August 5 last. In the last five weeks of the new government led by Chief Adviser Dr Muhammad Yunus, there have been twists and turns, but the two contending global influencers are in a serious political game.

US with its vast deployment of funds, international financial institutions and influence over the top man of the interim government Dr. Yunus, has won on political grounds. Dr Yunus has agreed to delay the national elections indefinitely till the three key reforms are implemented. USA wants this as the US administration is seeking more time to consolidate its contacts among the stakeholders in Bangladesh politics including the main party BNP. US is also pursuing its goal of getting base facilities in the Ocean waters of Bangladesh territory but the process is slow, as its prime competitor China is monitoring all developments preparing to counter every action of the US in Dhaka.

China has scored a goal by persuading the Bangladesh Government to make the country a member of the China led trade bloc Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) which the Awami League Government did not join despite pressures on Sheikh Hasina from Beijing. During Sheikh Hasina's visit to Beijing last July, the issue came up at the high level talks but she was non-committal. The talks took place at a time when the anti-quota movement of the students was spreading fast. The Bangladesh PM had to cut short her visit to China to deal with the turbulent political situation in her country.

In the last fortnight the commerce ministry of the interim government held detailed discussions on the issue of joining RCEP. New arguments were put out, jettisoning the earlier positioning of the Sheikh Hasina government and the final proposal was sent to the highest authorities for formally joining the RCEP. It is the first formal step taken by Bangladesh to join the RCEP - a major trade agreement that includes trade in services, investment, economic and technical cooperation, and dispute settlement.

Sources explain that Bangladesh decided to join the RCEP mainly because it will lose preferential trade benefits to markets that make up the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) group once it graduates from the list of least developed countries (LDCs) in 2026. The 10 ASEAN nations -- namely Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam -- are potential markets for Bangladesh. Moreover, the RCEP also includes five other countries that have signed the ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (FTA): China, Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand.

These 15 countries within the RCEP account for 30 percent of global GDP, 31 percent of global foreign direct investment (FDI) and one-fourth of global trade. The RCEP was formally launched in November 2020 and came into effect in January 2022 before opening up its platform in July 2023 and allowing other countries to join. Any developed or developing country as well as LDCs can join as members. India has refused to be a member of RCEP although there is a view that India could take advantage of RCEP in boosting its exports. But the views of the Prime Minister's Office prevailed and India kept out of the China-led trade block RCEP.

The commerce ministry of Bangladesh has completed formalities for joining the RCEP. Primarily, it is assessed that Bangladesh's export would increase by \$3.26 billion and FDI by 3.36 percent. Bangladesh urgently needs FDI at a speedier pace to deal with the problem of unemployment. The youth of Bangladesh are impatient without any secure jobs. They were the vanguards of the anti-Hasina movement. The Yunus government has to take cognisance of their immediate requirements. The apparel industry will

account for a significant portion of the exports while the demand for skilled and unskilled workers in the garment sector will rise by 18 percent, according to the commerce ministry document. Overall, the country's GDP will increase by 0.26 percent if it joins the RCEP. However, if competitiveness is not increased, the services, investment and e-commerce sectors will face numerous challenges. Since Bangladesh is located in South Asia and is also a member of the ASEAN Regional Forum, the country will need to negotiate separately with member countries. However, it will also enjoy the benefit of geographical proximity. As a result, Bangladesh will benefit from the global value chain, the document said.

Indications are that a meeting is scheduled with Japan in Dhaka next month to initiate formal negotiations to sign an economic partnership agreement (EPA). Bangladesh and Japan have already completed a joint feasibility study on the EPA. This started during Sheikh Hasina's tenure. Now the interim government has endorsed the proposal. The meeting in November to seal the deal for a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with China will also start shortly.

What about India, the biggest trade partner of Bangladesh in South Asia? The transition in Bangladesh has delayed the process for a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) which was discussed at preliminary level during Sheikh Hasina's regime. Bangladesh and India completed a joint feasibility study on CEPA in 2022. The recommendations in the report are favourable to the growth of Bangladesh economy. It is likely that Bangladesh will take initiative only after the political situation stabilizes further.

Bangladesh is India's biggest trade partner in South Asia and India is the second biggest trade partner of Bangladesh in Asia. India is Bangladesh's largest export destination in Asia, with approximately USD 2 billion of Bangladeshi exports to India in FY 2022-23. In FY 2022-23, the total bilateral trade is reported at USD 15.9 billion. Cooperation in the power and energy sector has become one of the important pillars of India-Bangladesh relations. Bangladesh is currently importing 1160 MW of power from India. The Joint Working Group (JWG)/Joint Steering Committee (JSC) on Power provides an institutional framework to promote bilateral cooperation in cross border trade of electricity. The Maitree Super Thermal Power Plant is operational for supplying electricity to the Bangladesh grid.

India-Bangladesh Friendship Pipeline between both countries for carriage of High Speed Diesel from India into Bangladesh was inaugurated by both Prime Ministers in March 2023. Further, ONGC Videsh Limited (OVL), in a consortium with Oil India Limited, is present in off-shore oil exploration. IOCL has also been registered as a G2G supplier in 2023 and is supplying POL products to Bangladesh.

Bangladesh is the largest development partner of India today. India has extended 4 Lines of Credits (LOC) to Bangladesh in the last 8 years amounting to around US\$ 8 billion for development of infrastructure in various sectors including roads, railways, shipping and ports. In addition to LOCs, the Government of India has also provided grant assistance to Bangladesh for various infrastructure projects including, construction of Akhaura-Agartala rail link, dredging of inland waterways in Bangladesh and construction of India-Bangladesh Friendship Pipeline.

The Indian Government is still facing hostilities in Bangladesh from both the interim government and the political class. The main task of the Modi government at this stage is to protect its investments and ensure that the construction work in the assisted projects which halted after August 5 resumes and talks start early for CEPA between the two nations. It will take some time for full restoration of Indo-Bangladesh economic relations. South Block has to wait and watch and monitor closely the role of the two superpowers. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

Indians should be more circumspect

Editor

I am writing in response to the article, "Liberal MPs call for Trudeau's resignation even as Canadian PM focuses on smearing India for political gains" (ST, Oct 16, 2024). This article makes it sound as if Mr Trudeau has a personal vendetta against India -- a narrow subjective view that runs the risk of distorting the truth. If there is even the slightest truth to the Canadian intelligence claim that the Government of India played a role in killing Hardeep Singh Nijjar on Canadian soil -- this should be examined seriously, first and foremost by citizens of India. Since the government is supposed to represent them and act in their name, citizens of India should vigorously protest any misdeeds by their own elected government.

Yours etc.,
Deepa Majumdar
Via email

Tense Indo-Canadian Relations

Editor,

With the expulsion of six diplomats by both countries, the Indo-Canadian Relations has further deteriorated after

the Canadian Prime Minister accused Indian intelligence agencies of being involved in the murder of a Sikh separatist killing. Since 2023 when Justin Trudeau said that he had evidence linking Indian agents to the assassination of Sikh leader Hardeep Singh Nijjar on Canadian territory and the Government has now "clear and compelling evidence that agents of the government of India have engaged in and continue to engage in activities that pose a significant threat to public safety."

These activities involved clandestine information-gathering techniques, coercive behaviour, targeting South Asian Canadians and involvement in over a dozen threatening and violent acts, including murder, Trudeau said.

It may be mentioned here that Nijjar who migrated to Canada in 1997, became citizen in 2015 and had advocated for a separate Sikh state known as Khalistan carved out of India. He is wanted by Indian authorities for alleged terrorism and conspiracy to commit murder. Four Indian nationals have been arrested in connection with his murder, which took place in the parking lot of a Sikh temple in Vancouver in June 2023. India has long denied Mr Trudeau's accusations. Canada is home to around 770,000 Sikhs, who make up about 2 per cent of the country's population,

with a vocal minority calling for an independent state of Khalistan. It is home to the highest population of Sikhs outside their home state of Punjab and demonstrations in recent years have irked India.

Now Canada names the Indian ambassador as a person of interest in the Nijjar killing. Nijjar was an Indian born citizen of Canada and he owned a plumbing business. India designated him a terrorist and at the time of his death had been seeking his arrest for alleged involvement in an attack.

The first victims of this tense relationship will be the students who are going there in big numbers with the hope of getting good opportunities. Canada had already changed the rules for students which are not favourable to them. There are over 60 percent student visas so there will be frustration among those whose visas had been rejected and there are chances that they will become the soft targets of illegal travel agents and ultimately it will be a national loss where so many students will be a frustrated lot.

As far as international norms are concerned, Justin Trudeau's behaviour does not conform to the norms his country has referred to while withdrawing its diplomats from India. Since the time of Justin Trudeau's father Late Pierre Trudeau who also was Prime Minister of

Canada, that country has offered political patronage to Khalistani separatists whose only agenda is to split India. Despite knowing well the fact that Khalistani terrorists were working to destabilise India and posing a threat to the sovereignty of India by way of colluding with such nefarious and dangerous elements, Canada has offered them shelter.

India is not wrong in raising the pertinent question - Did Canada's act conform to international norms when it offered a safe haven to anti-sovereignty forces posing threat to India. Is it right for Canadian politicians like Justin Trudeau to shield Khalistani terrorists in his country, only for the sake of appeasing domestic vote-banks? Of course, Canada will find it difficult to answer these questions. It must realise that the world order is not the same old one where some powerful nations would offer asylum to secessionists of other countries and try to wield influence at the negotiating table. Hence, messing up and mixing up domestic politics with international norms, is not going to have the same effect it might have had in the olden days. In the changed scenario such attempts will only fetch International ridicule for Canada. Also Canada must not overlook the facts in the public domain.

Instead of upholding International norms by acting

to protect the sovereignty of a friendly nation, Canada chose to tread the path of self-harm. Canada must realise that India of today spares none of the perpetrators of anti-India acts and their supporters.

Nehru founded the Non Aligned Movement along with Marshal Tito and Anwar Sadat and over a hundred countries joined it. As at that time Nehru was at the epicenter of all international developments the same goes for PM Modi today. Previously we were proud of Nehru and now we have the same feeling for Modi. Whether it is Putin or Biden or Macron all are speaking in praise of Modi for his foreign policy. Hence it is in the interest of Canada to maintain harmonious relations with India.

Yours etc.,
Yash Pal Raihan,
Via email

Justice system skewed

Editor,

After the old and ailing Stan Swami died in jail, former Delhi University Professor, G N Saibaba, died after spending nearly a decade in jail. After his release, he could enjoy life out of prison for barely seven months. He developed life-threatening complications in Nagpur prison that he blamed on poor living conditions and

inadequate medical treatment. Saibaba had gone on hunger strike while he was in prison several times in protest. All of these took a toll on his health.

He was acquitted by the Bombay High Court on March 5, after he endured eight and a half years of imprisonment. The 58-year old academic and poet became ninety percent disabled after he had permanent post-polio paralysis at an early age.

Prof Saibaba was arrested on May 9, 2014 under the UAPA. After his release, he said, "My mother passed away while I was in prison. She carried me to school as I was disabled but she wanted me to get a good education. When she died, I was not allowed to see her. I was denied parole and even permission to attend the funeral. Post-funeral performing rites, I was denied."

It is utterly bewildering that while the rape convict Gurmeet Ram Rahim got 15 paroles in 4 years, Saibaba did not get even the permission to attend the funeral of his mother. What a skewed justice system we live in!

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

“Great deeds are usually wrought at great risks.”
— Herodotus

The Shillong Times

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An ambiguous proposal

THE statement by the Deputy Chief Executive Member (CEM), Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council (KHADC) to urge the state government to grant special recognition to the Rangbah Shnong (headmen) and not limit their recognition to times when their services are needed lacks clarity. The decision was taken at a meeting between the KHADC Deputy CEM and the Rangbah Shnong of Shillong, represented by the Synjuk ki Nongsynshar Shnong ka Bri Hynniwretrep (SNSBH), held at the Council's conference room. The concerns of the SNSBH are perhaps genuine but they should have worked out clear terms of reference as to where they fit in the government's schemes of things. What sort of position will the Rangbah Shnong hold vis a vis the government? Are they to be part of the District Administration? If so is the current format by which they are elected – which is by voice vote good enough in such a formal system?

The government cannot operate in an informal manner and has to (a) define the terms under which the Rangbah Shnong are to be recognised (b) the responsibilities they will shoulder (c) the accountability mechanism et al. However, the accountability mechanisms will come only if the Dorbar Shnong are given government funding. Will the District Councils be agreeable with Dorbar Shnong receiving direct funding from the government? And what will that funding be for? Will the Dorbar Shnong also start implementing projects for the government? If so, what role would the Councils have within the same domain? The Deputy CEM's concern that the government only approaches the Rangbah Shnongs when there are law and order issues or when their help is needed to implement government schemes and programmes. This is true insofar as implementation of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MREGA). It is the Dorbar Shnong that supervises the implementation of the scheme. It is also true that during the Covid pandemic the Rangbah Shnong played a stellar role in managing the health crisis and worked well with the Deputy Commissioner's offices within the districts. They just came together and formed a solid chain of command for managing the movement of people in and out of the shnong and some even managing the Covid isolation centres. When the epidemic subsided there was no formal closure of the chain of responsibilities that the government had entrusted the Dorbar Shnong with.

According to the Dy CEM the government should be more respectful towards the Rangbah Shnong when they approach officials with problems faced by their Shnong. In other words the District Councils want the Government to give the Rangbah Shnong a separate status other than that mandated by the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution. There is already a two-tier system that the Dorbar Shnongs are operating within which is that they get their Sanad for performing their duties from the Syiem's office. Their connect with the District Councils is a bit tenuous and unclear. So what sort of arrangement are the Councils looking at between the Dorbar Shnong and the Government? The Dorbar Shnong is a traditional institution whereas the government is a constitutional authority. If the Dorbar Shnong are to be brought within the ambit of the Government and work directly with it they would have to forego some of the elements of a 'traditional' institution which is not accountable to government. These ambiguities have to be sorted out first.

A land with people...

By Roshmi Goswami

And it continues unflinchingly, relentlessly, with complete impunity emboldened by the 'ironclad' support and a non-stop supply of weapons from the senior genocidal partner. The 'ironclad' body of the international defence fraternity is ecstatic as shares in the stock market skyrocket, bank accounts soar and elated Zionists across the world head out for exotic holidays financed from dividends earned from a Genocide now more appropriately the Gaza Holocaust. For over 365 days the 14000 US supplied General Dynamics's 2000 pound bombs or Martin Lockheed's Hellfire missiles and Boeing's small bomb aircrafts have targeted and pulverised, Gaza's schools, hospitals, cultural centres, infrastructure tearing bodies of human beings to smithereens leaving devastated parents/grandparents, siblings, surviving relatives or just volunteers to gather up unrecognisable body parts predominantly of children that now fit into just one kg plastic bags.

The partnership of the world's most powerful and formidable military might's attack against unarmed civilians mostly women and children is undoubtedly not a war but a Genocide - an ethnic cleansing of unimaginable depravity and proportion. But wait a minute aren't the attackers the poor victims - the eternally oppressed Chosen Ones? As Gideon Levy, senior Israeli journalist of the Haaretz comments tongue in cheek - 'not only are they the Victims but the only Victims in the entire world and history'!

So when the world marked October 7, 2024 the bleeding heart outpouring for this victimhood was evident everywhere, notably amongst people of certain affiliations, values and belief systems. On Western media outlets or social media interviews there was once again a suffusion of the defensive Piers Morgan one line propaganda - 'But do you condemn Hamas?' A year into the genocide and after innumerable interviews of course Morgan and his ilk have been sufficiently informed that Hamas is the Palestinian Resistance and while many do not endorse the violence that took place on October 7, Resistance to over 76 years of Israeli oppression and settler colonial supremacist savagery, is expected as pointed out by even the Secretary General of the UN. Indians going off on a pseudo moral shrill given our proud history of freedom struggle - both violent and non violent resistance against colonial oppression and brutality is especially unctuous.

By now there is enough

Or the 355 tank bullet shots fired at a car where a terrified six year old Hind Rajab the single survivor waited to be rescued. The shooters were close enough to clearly see that there was just a little child left in the car.

But a huge cohort of dedicated, brave individuals and organisations of different races and religious persuasions are ensuring that every aspect of this Holocaust is documented. Among non-Arabs, the loud and unequivocal voice of political scientists like Norman Finkelstein, a son of Holocaust survivors with decades of experience, is an invaluable leading voice. Equally passionate is the persistent hard hitting evidence by British journalist Owen Jones or the incisive reports of Francesca Albanese the UN Special Rapporteur on the Occupied Palestinian Territories and many more. Apart from the meticulously researched and sharp accounts like the South African submission to the ICJ there are several other rigorously researched reports bringing out the depth, dimension and psychopathic core of the Genocide.

The recent Al Jazeera documentary - 'Gaza - Investigating War Crimes' by historian, award winning British documentary filmmaker Richard Sanders, is made from footage of the extraordinary proliferation on social media of war crimes provided by the Israeli military itself as they took great pride in documenting their own war crimes which lays bare the culture of the Israeli military and provides overwhelming evidence of the punitive slaughter of Palestinians. Other important reports is the B'Tselem's 'Welcome to Hell' documenting torture of Palestinian detainees by Israel since October 7, 2024. B'Tselem is a Jerusalem based non-profit organisation whose stated goals are to document human rights violations in the Israeli Occupied Palestinian territories. For those of us who have worked and engaged with sexual violence in conflict zones across different locations, the IOF's perversity has crossed all red lines and far beyond. A new vocabulary of words is needed. For every act aimed at dehumanisation and demonisation of a people there are no existing words of human usage.

The sickening details of setting dogs to rape a Palestinian detainee in the notorious Sde Teiman military prison after spraying 'something' on his backside as documented in the Al Jazeera documentary plus

the Euro Med Monitor field team and reported in the Deccan Herald Oct 11th, the perverse rape of male prisoners by female IOF soldiers, prolonged periods of nudity for both men and women, the heinous act of using of a mobile phone for rectal penetration as in the highly publicised case again at the Sde Teiman military base in July this year. The endless cases of utter inhumanity and depravity speak of the deeply embedded hate in the apartheid settler colonial enterprise. What is especially astounding is the way the IOF have themselves filmed their own violations. An outrageous sense of entitlement and 'Chosenness' that they cannot be touched and are answerable to none.

As Francesca Albanese has repeatedly pointed out the world need not have reached this stage had Israel been held accountable earlier. UNIMIL the UN peacekeeping forces would not have been fired at, humanitarian aid into Gaza may not have been vandalised etc. The UN recognised Israel in May 1949 after just a year of the Nakba where 750,000 Palestinians were brutally expelled from their homelands or butchered. Even now while most countries have endorsed a ceasefire the US has vetoed each and every ceasefire resolution. Almost five months after the ICC prosecutor called for an arrest warrant against Netanyahu the judges have not moved. Rather the prosecutor has faced intimidation and death threats for his 'audacious' action against a 'white man'. Apparently the ICC was set up for action against Africans and coloured people but not 'civilised' Europeans! Gaza has completely unmasked the utter hypocrisy, entrenched racism, double standards and evil manipulations of the West.

Indeed today the world order has irrevocably changed and there are only two Axes. The three pronged Axis of Genocide - the countries and individual supporters, the defence and weapons industry and the Zionist propaganda media; next the Axis of Resistance which besides the original countries include all protests, campaigns, action and mobilisation against this mass slaughter. The BDS - Boycott, Disinvestment and Sanction movement which is hurting the Genocider's economy and business interests significantly is a critical articulation of the Axis of Resistance. Ultimately the choice is yours. Which Axis would you want to be placed and remembered? A Genocide does not allow for fence sitting.

Policy analysis of special provisions of the RFCTLARR Act, 2013 & Khasi Land classification

Challenges in Land Acquisition in Khasi Hills regions

By Kenneth Nongsiej

Land acquisition has been a highly contentious issue in various parts of India and our State. The National Highways and Infrastructure Development Corporation Limited (NHIDCL) has been facing significant challenges in acquiring land for road infrastructure development especially in the Khasi Hills region. These difficulties arise from both the distinctive nature of land ownership in the Khasi Hills and the provisions of the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013 which safeguards the rights of the landowners.

Before understanding the problems related to land acquisition it is important to first understand the land classification followed by the Khasi, a system deeply rooted in our customary law.

Khasi Land Classification

The Khasi land system is unique and different from the land tenure systems followed in most parts of the Country. It is solely based on customary law which has been codified and institutionalised over time immemorial by the Khasi. The two most widely recognised land classification in the Khasi Hills are Raid Land and Ri Kynti. They are known by different names in different Hima but are of the same concept.

Ri Kynti Land refers to privately owned land. It is land that is absolutely owned by an individual or a clan and is inheritable and transferable according to customary law. Ownership of Ri Kynti land gives the holder complete rights over its use, sale, or transfer, subject to customary law.

Raid land refers to community-owned land. These are lands set aside for community utilisation, and no individual or group has exclusive ownership over them. The management and administration of Raid lands are vested in the local village councils, known as Dorbar Shnong or Dorbar Raids. The rights over Raid land are primarily land holder meaning individuals or families may occupy or use the land for specific purposes (such as farming) but do not hold heritable or proprietary rights. However, if individuals or families make permanent improvements on Raid land such as building houses or planting trees, they may acquire limited heritable and transferable rights. These rights are generally forfeited if the land is abandoned for more than three years or if the Dorbar deems the abandonment to have lasted for a sufficient period.

This distinction between private and community land is significant because it influences how land can be acquired, transferred, or sold. In many cases, the community nature of Raid land has made land acquisition for development projects difficult as decisions regarding its use are not in the hands of individuals but rather the community as a whole.

Codification of Khasi Customary Law

Recognising the uniqueness of the Khasi land tenure system, the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council (KHADC) enacted The Khasi Hills Autonomous District (Regulation and Administration of Land) Act, 2021. This law is aimed at providing a legal framework for the regulation and administration of land within the jurisdiction of the Khasi Hills. And even as this Act attempts to bring clarity and structure to land management, it remains grounded in customary law and upholds the traditional classifications of land including Raid and Ri Kynti lands.

Apart from Ri Kynti and Raid land other types of land classifications are also prevalent in the Khasi Hills especially when it comes to forest land. Forests in Khasi society are classified into different categories based on their ownership and use. Khlaw Kyntang (sacred forests), Khlaw Ri (community forests), Khlaw Adong (prohibited forests), and Khlaw Lyngdoh (forests owned by priests) are all protected by local customs and

are often preserved for religious and cultural reasons. Private individuals may also own forests such as Khlaw Ri Kynti (private forests) or Khlaw Ri Kur (clan-owned forests). The management of these forest lands is an integral part of the Khasi land system and reflects the community's deep connection to nature.

The codification of these customary laws under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India which grants autonomous district councils the power to govern tribal areas has helped preserve the traditional land system of the Khasi. However, with the growing pressures of development and urbanization the future of this system is uncertain as capitalism and the demand for land threaten the integrity of traditional practices.

Special Provisions

The Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013 was enacted to provide a fair and transparent mechanism for land acquisition ensuring just compensation to landowners while also addressing the rehabilitation and resettlement needs of displaced individuals and communities. For regions like the Khasi Hills where land ownership is closely tied to cultural identity the Act includes special provisions for Scheduled Areas and tribal communities to safeguard their land rights.

One of the key provisions of the Act is found in Section 41(1) which states, "As far as possible, no acquisition of land shall be made in the Scheduled Areas." This sub clause acknowledges the deep connection that tribal communities have with their land and the importance of protecting their rights. However, the clause is not absolute as sub clauses (2) allows for acquisition land in Scheduled Areas which this subsection states, "Where such acquisition does take place it shall be done only as a demonstrable last resort". Furthermore, this provision makes it mandatory to take the prior permission of the Autonomous District Council. Additionally, the provision ensures that one-third of the compensation for the acquired land is paid to the affected families thereby ensuring that they receive a fair share of the benefits arising from development projects.

The Act also mandates that for any land acquisition, a comprehensive Social Impact Assessment (SIA) must be conducted to assess the potential impact on the local community, including the loss of land, livelihoods, and cultural heritage. The SIA must involve consultations with the local Gram Sabhas or equivalent bodies, such as the Dorbar Shnong in the Khasi Hills, to ensure that the voices of the community are heard and their concerns are addressed.

Can Force be Applied in Land Acquisition

While the Resettlement Act (RFCTLARR), 2013 seeks to create a balanced approach to land acquisition there are arguments about whether force should be used to acquire land for important infrastructure projects particularly in regions where land acquisition is met with resistance.

The 44th Amendment Act of 1978 deleted the right to property from the list of Fundamental Rights of the Constitution of India and it relates it to a legal right under Article 300A. This means that no individual can be deprived of their property without the authority of law. This change allows the government to acquire land for public purposes provided it follows due process of law and compensates the land owners fairly.

The refusal of the communities to give up their land especially the water sources for development projects is legally valid. While this resistance may slow down development it emphasizes the need for a more participatory and consultative approach to land acquisition, where the concerns of the community are given due consideration.

Letters to the Editor

Priyanka Gandhi's entry into electoral politics

Editor,
After some hesitation Priyanka Gandhi has entered electoral politics and will start her political journey from Wayanad. This must be appreciated since Priyanka Gandhi has shown astute political acumen for a while now. This will hopefully encourage many of her age and calling to enter into the rough and tumble of electoral politics which in turn can strengthen democracy in the country. Sonia Gandhi had herself taken a long time to decide to enter politics but having once entered it she made her presence felt in the Congress Party. In Priyanka's case, ever since her brother won the Lok Sabha election from Amethi in 2004 she took to active politics after being nominated as AICC general secretary in 2019.

The present nomination only shows that the Congress Party has grown confident now to field her in a constituency which still is a safe bet, given its past record and the current political realities. Priyanka too may have felt the need for a larger and meaningful role to play in parliamentary politics. Priyanka Gandhi's victory will be a morale booster for the Congress party as it had

disastrous runs in the 2014 and 2019 Lok Sabha elections. This time the Congress has touched the three-digit mark, led by a president who does not come from the Gandhi family. Priyanka Gandhi's main opponent will be fielded by CPI which is a partner in INDIA alliance but at present it is not sure whether it will put up any candidate against Priyanka Gandhi.

Priyanka Gandhi's candidature from Wayanad represents a calculated risk by the Congress to consolidate its influence in South India while retaining a foothold in the North. Wayanad, a constituency known for its high literacy rate and diverse demographics, is seen as a relatively secure seat for the Congress and with the help of Wayanad, the Congress will be able to expand its base in South India.

Priyanka's debut into electoral politics shows that she is becoming politically active. This also signals that she is geared up to be part of the core decision-making and would not be confined to electioneering and assisting her brother Rahul on an ad hoc basis.

Rahul Gandhi who is at present Leader of Opposition in Parliament is playing a good role and has taken mature decisions. Rahul Gandhi attended the swearing in ceremony of Omar Abdullah but refrained from joining the Ministry. The brother and sister duo can play a positive

and constructive role in the Lok Sabha. With the defeat of the Congress in Haryana, the victory of Priyanka from Wayanad will have a positive impact on Congress workers who are demoralized after the Haryana elections.

A lot needs to be done at the organisational level as the party's cadre has been in disarray for a long time. After the assembly elections of Haryana the Congress party has to be careful about the assembly elections in Maharashtra and Jharkhand where media reports are emerging that the BJP has improved its position. This will be a litmus test for the Congress to show good performance in Maharashtra and Jharkhand as well as in bye election in many states including the Wayanad Lok Sabha seat.

Posters declaring her as "Wayanadinte Priyankari" (Wayanad's beloved) reflect growing local support. She has promised to continue Rahul's work in the constituency. This also reflects the ground level support of the voters which will hopefully be converted to votes so that she wins with a thumping majority. Thereafter her role could shift from a family figure to an influential political leader. It would also be interesting to watch Priyanka in the Lok Sabha raising issues of public interest.

Yours etc.,
Yash Pal Ralhan,
Via email

Caste-based reservation imperative

Editor,

First of all, I would like to thank the writer of the letter, "Caste based reservation issues" (ST, October 17, 2024) for sharing her/his (the name of the author was withheld on request) opinion on my letter about caste based reservation and for admitting that caste based discrimination remains a harsh reality. A question has been raised in that letter whether simply providing reservation is the best way to end caste discrimination. The author is absolutely right in pointing out that true change will come from education, awareness, and a shift in mindset.

Now, should we wait for the ideal day when there will be a shift in mindset? Should we not give positive discrimination in favour of the backward castes considering the situation at present? However, there is no doubt that caste reservation alone cannot bring about a change. It must be complemented with education that will enlighten us about the ugliness of caste discrimination and caste hatred.

Caste reservation is not an ideal thing either. It is after all a tool for discrimination. In an ideal world, any kind of positive discrimination or reservation will not be required. A memorable incident happened at the Metro Railway

Kolkata, five years ago. There was no trace of Covid at that time and I was only one year shy of becoming a senior citizen. I was returning home and was standing before a general seat in a Metro coach, not before a seat reserved for the senior citizens.

A young man in his twenties stood up vacating his seat and asked me to sit there. I declined the offer saying that I was quite okay. Seeing that he was not in a mood to listen to me, I forcibly pushed him to sit again telling him that I had no problem in standing. But again he stood up. Then he said with all the love in the world, "bolchhi tumi boso (I am telling you to sit)."

In Kolkata Metro Railway coaches, some seats are reserved for women and a few seats for senior citizens and people with disabilities. But there would have been no need to reserve seats for anyone if all the people were like that young man. The reservation signboards over some seats actually indicate that there are many passengers who do not have enough compassion. The reservation of seats in a train, therefore, acts as a necessary antidote to inhumanity.

Similarly, reservation on the basis of caste indicates that caste hatred, untouchability, and caste favouritism are there in our society. We need caste reservation as an antidote to caste based nepotism. There will be no need for any kind of reservation when all the people become as good as that young man.

The author raised another pertinent question about class. He said, "But I believe the time has come to shift the focus towards considering economic status alongside caste, ensuring that those who genuinely need assistance receive it, regardless of their caste." I agree with this point so long it deals with scholarships and financial aid. But a person's financial status should not be judged for giving her or him the benefit of reservation because class is not a permanent identity like one's caste, community, and state.

A government can easily address the problem of the poor by providing them with free education including higher education, free health care, and social security, which many countries do, and rank high in the human development indices. The participation of every state and every community in the formation of selected and elected parts of the government is a must in a democracy.

There should be equitable representation both in elected (MPs) and selected (bureaucrats) personnel of the government. A state and caste quota for MPs as well as a state and caste quota for bureaucrats only can ensure it.

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

What killing of top Hamas leader Sinwar could mean for Middle East

Israel has announced it has killed Hamas military leader Yahya Sinwar in Gaza. Sinwar was apparently killed in a chance encounter on October 16 after a tank unit opened fire on a group of Palestinian men running into a building in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip. His body was found in the rubble and later identified as the Hamas leader.

It's an important moment in the conflict between Israel and Hamas. Sinwar's death follows a campaign of assassination of top Hamas leaders by Israel since the latest round of hostilities began after the Hamas attack on Israel of October 7 2023.

Middle East analyst Scott Lucas of University College Dublin addresses some of the key issues raised by Sinwar's killing.

How badly Sinwar's death hit Hamas's command structure?

Just over a year after its mass October 7 killings inside Israel, overseen by Yahya Sinwar, Hamas as an organisation is in disarray. It is not just the killing of Sinwar in the chance encounter with Israeli forces in Rafah. Sinwar's death adds to a lengthy roll call of top Hamas leaders during the past year.

Principally, this includes Mohammed Deif, who planned the October 7 attacks, and Hamas's political leader Ismail Haniyeh, who was killed in Beirut on July 31. These three are just the most prominent identities among a host of other senior officials and military commanders killed by Israel in Gaza or Lebanon.

Sinwar's younger brother, Mohammed, 49, is likely to take over military command. And veteran figures such as Khaled Meshaal - who led Hamas's political bureau from 1996 to 2017 - remain. But they will struggle to sustain the organisation, particularly if the Israeli government presses its military advantage and continues to identify and assassinate Hamas's high command.

But that does not mean that Hamas as a movement is finished. Mass killing, even of its leaders, could galvanise it in the longer run. Those who survive will move up through

the ranks, and the spirit of resistance and resentment could bring in more recruits.

Israel's prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, can claim "victory" over Sinwar, Haniyeh and Deif. But victory over Hamas, particularly if Israel pursues an open-ended occupation in Gaza, may not be assured.

What did Sinwar represent as a symbol of Palestinian resistance?

For many in Palestine and beyond, Sinwar will be hailed as a martyr and icon of resistance. He was with Hamas from its first years, spent 22 years in an Israeli prison, and took command in Gaza from 2017. He never wavered in his belief that Hamas would prevail over Israel's blockade, detentions, and military operations.

But for others, Sinwar may be remembered as a divisive, even cruel figure. He built his career in Hamas on the killing of supposed "collaborators" with Israel. He was suspected of the torture and execution of rivals. And his leadership of the October 7 mass killings may be recalled as "resistance" which needlessly sacrificed the lives of tens of thousands and displaced almost 2 million of those whom he was supposedly representing.

Does his death clear the way for a younger generation more amenable to a ceasefire deal and, the return of the hostages?

It will take months, perhaps years before we see where that "younger generation" will take Hamas. In the meantime, the interim political and military command of the battered organisation will face their immediate challenge. Can they still get some return, such as the freeing of Palestinians from Israeli prisons and the continued presence of Hamas in Gaza, in exchange for the release of the hostages? Or do they have to accept capitulation, possible expulsion, and Israeli occupation?

Barring an unexpected change in the US position, putting pressure on Netanyahu, all the cards are in Israel's hand for now.

What's Israel's next move?

Ask Netanyahu. He has the option

of proclaiming "mission accomplished". However, that will not be true for many Israelis as long as the hostages are not returned. Without that resolution, Netanyahu will run the risk of losing power if forced to an election and even the resumption of court proceedings over bribery charges if he halts military operations.

Israel's expansion of the war into Lebanon has improved his position to an extent. It has reconciled him with the defense minister, Yoav Gallant, who was privately saying Israel had no "endgame" in Gaza. And it has improved his approval ratings.

So it remains in his interest to continue hostilities in both Gaza and Lebanon. And indeed Netanyahu has signalled his intention to press on. But he has also said that while it is not the end, it is "the beginning of the end".

While Netanyahu may pay lip service to the resumption of ceasefire talks, that will likely be conditional on the expulsion of Hamas from Gaza. And with no clear alternative for governance in the Strip, that points - as with the West Bank - to indefinite Israeli occupation.

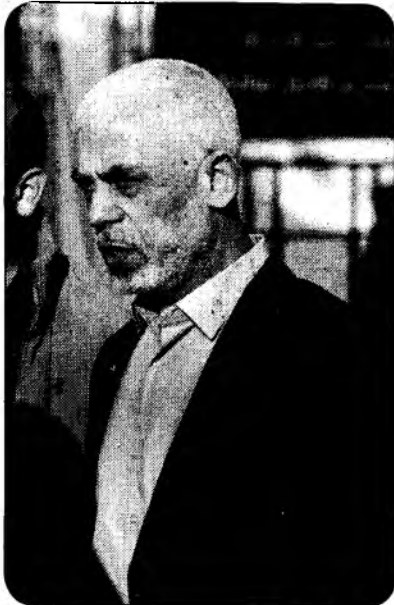
How will Iran respond?

With the decimation of its Hamas and Hezbollah allies, Iran's regime appears to have no good options at present. Amid economic and political problems at home and outmatched by Israel in military capabilities, the regime has avoided direct confrontation.

Iran could continue to pursue "indirect" war through militias in Iraq and Syria attacking US personnel with rockets and drones, or with Yemen's Houthis lobbing missiles at Israel and again threatening Red Sea shipping. It could expand cyber-attacks and its own attempted assassinations abroad.

But those options would have little immediate effect, and would risk retaliation from the US and further isolation in the international community. The US is already using B-2 stealth bombers to attack Houthi bases in Yemen.

So for now, Iran's leaders and their spokespeople are likely to take the



Head of Hamas in Gaza, Yehiyeh Sinwar, who, Israel claimed was killed recently. (PTI file)

political route, condemning Israel and proclaiming that the "axis of resistance" will be strengthened through its losses.

Can Washington pressure Israel to do a deal with the Palestinians?

This is perhaps the easiest question to answer. Unless the US cuts military aid to Israel or comes out for an unconditional ceasefire, it has little if any leverage with Netanyahu.

How does this affect the US election campaign?

Foreign policy is rarely a priority for most US voters, and even the mass killing of the past year is unlikely to change that. But on the margins of the US presidential election, the escalating toll in Gaza and Lebanon could alienate Arab American voters from the Democrats in Michigan, one of the seven states that will decide the contest.

More broadly, the impression of Netanyahu pushing around a "weak" Biden administration could take hold. And in a toss-up election, those margins could be decisive. (The Conversation)

More than 20 per cent of plant species found only on islands; time running out to save them

Islands have long intrigued explorers and scientists. These isolated environments serve as natural laboratories for understanding how species evolve and adapt.

Islands are also centres of species diversity. It has long been speculated that islands support exceptionally high amounts of global biodiversity, but the true extent was unknown until now.

In world-first research published in Nature today, my colleagues and I counted and mapped the diversity of plant life on Earth's islands. We found 21% of the world's total plant species are endemic to islands, meaning they occur nowhere else on the planet.

These findings are important. Island plants are at higher risk of extinction than those on mainland. Detailed knowledge of plants species, and where they grow, is essential for monitoring and conserving them.

Mapping island floras worldwide

The study involved an international team of scientists. We developed an unprecedented database of vegetation information from more than 3,400 geographical regions worldwide, including about 2,000 islands.

The definition of an island is somewhat arbitrary. Conventionally, an island is a landmass entirely surrounded by water and smaller than a continent. This means Tasmania and New Guinea are islands, but mainland Australia - a continent in itself - is not. This is the definition we used. We found 94,052 plant species, or 31% of the world's total, are native to islands. Of these, 63,280 plant species, or 21%, only occur on islands. Endemic species were concentrated on large tropical islands such as Madagascar, New Guinea and Borneo. On Madagascar alone, 9,318 plant species - 83% of its total flora - grow there and nowhere else.

Fewer plant species overall were found at ocean archipelagos such as Hawaii, the Canary Islands and the Mascarenes (east of Madagascar, including La Reunion and Mauritius). But a large share of their species were still unique to these islands.

Two palms are endemic to Australia's Lord Howe Island - *Howea forsteriana* and *H. belmoreana*. They are

one of the best-researched examples of "sympatric speciation", or in other words, species that evolve from a common ancestor at the same location.

This mode of evolution has long been hypothesised to exist. But examples are rare, and highly useful for evolutionary research.

The Norfolk Island Pine (*Araucaria heterophylla*) is, of course, named after the tiny island where it is found. This species, while endangered in the wild, is now widely planted along Australia's beaches where it is instantly recognisable to us.

Some 57% of the island-endemic species we assessed are considered critically endangered, endangered, vulnerable, or near-threatened, according to the International Union for Conservation of Nature.

Alarmingly, 176 of plant species endemic to islands are already classified as extinct, accounting for 55% of all known extinct plant species globally. Among these is Hawaii's vulcan palm (*Brighamia insignis*), which is now considered extinct in the wild. However, the species is popular as an ornamental plant and still survives in gardens. Other species might be less lucky; extinction in the wild may mean being lost for ever. So, assessing the conservation status of island floras is important. Under a globally agreed United Nations target, 30% of the world's land and oceans should be protected by 2030. We calculated how much of global islands is conserved today. Disappointingly, only 6% of endemic plant species occur on islands that meet this target. For instance, New Caledonia, Madagascar and New Guinea - known for their many endemic plant species - contain relatively low levels of protected areas.

Protecting our island plants

Urgent action is needed to protect island biodiversity. This includes expanding protected areas, prioritising regions with high numbers of endemic species, and implementing habitat restoration projects. Without such measures, the unique floral diversity of islands may continue to decline, with potentially severe consequences for global biodiversity. (The Conversation)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambhani

Sunday, OCTOBER 20, 2024

'Birthday Forecast'
Moon is opposite Venus on your solar return chart and will bring amazing results during the year ahead. It will be a very fortunate period. All plans will get completed. Projects which were pending would make head way. Lady luck will smile on you. You can enter into a love relation with a very lovely person. There would be great understanding and bonding in your ties. Both of you will like to get married. Financial position would be stable. Those who were thinking of starting some new business could do so. Those appearing for interviews/ exams would get success. Auspicious functions would take place at your home. There will be peaceful and joyous atmosphere. Near and dear ones will come closer. You will plan to buy a new house. Unemployed will get new jobs. You could also visit religious places and go for pilgrimage. Contacts with higher officials would be established. And they will prove beneficial.

'This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) You are able to integrate forces, resources and professional aspects to achieve success in important business ventures. With mastery in your field, you achieve goals and targets on time. This is an exceptionally exciting time as professional and business opportunities are offered to you. Your communications, presentations and style bring you accolades. This phase brings love, romance and excitement in personal relations. Personal relations and business partnerships are likely to get closer. You are individualistic brilliant and daring in professional aspects as new projects get under way. You are overflowing with energy just channel it wisely.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) You would be more accommodative and compassionate in relationships and not take things personally. Friendships, cooperation and synergy are available and you enjoy the association of your loved ones. Career advancement, a promotion or a gainful business opportunity may be offered. You win debates, competitions and sports with your dynamic energy and power. Possibilities and horizons open up for you. It is the best time to share and delegate work and not carry the entire load yourself. Practical details are to be dealt with clarity and efficiently. You would listen to your intuition and guard against over indulgence in food, drink or work. Old habits can be kicked now with greater ease.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) Professional situations and patterns come to the fore and there is no deception or illusion about these matters. You would be able to face truths, deal with emotional choices or difficult situations. Emotional attachments and relationships are rewarded with reciprocity. Some interesting people are drawn to you and invite you to work with them. Your position of power and authority is maintained despite many changes all around. You can draw correct conclusions from previous knowledge of people you meet again when making important decisions. Business projects and associations are opening up and widening your horizons so you need to think expansively from now onwards. A new cycle begins with the old order finishing as inner and outer changes are on the cards. Health problems are resolved and your energy is restored.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) Personal relations are packed with emotions and feelings and you enjoy the company of loved ones. There is good luck attending to material affairs as there is increase of wealth and monetary gains and income. This is the right time to share your loving and personal relationships and share thoughts and ideas and spend good time in the association of your loved one. You may be involved in meetings with business associates as financial and business dealings would bring good results and gains. You can count on your professional and personal partners, as they stand by you through thick and thin. You will work in free and unrestricted space. Physical energy and good health allow you to tackle busy schedules.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) Your actions and emotions are balanced as you bring more accuracy in your work area. Economy at home and management of business and work are important issues of the week. You connect with new people and discuss important business matters. Financial transactions and professional projects go ahead smoothly with goodwill and profit. Personal relations are satisfying and you have plenty of goodwill and friendships around you. But you must conserve your financial resources for priorities that have to be met at the end of the week. This is a good time to attend to matters that require attention since you are received well by others. You would be able to complete work assignments and personal business this week with good energy and support.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22) The unpredictable is likely to happen when you least expect it. Surprises are in store for you in professional and personal matters. It would be best to be open and receptive in personal relations and family situations. A flexible approach in the work area is recommended. New people may come into your life

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) This phase opens up a world of romance and love in personal relations. You are cooperative with family and children. You are likely to be involved in creative past times. You would express yourself in gracious and exalted manner and influence people in authority. There could be altered ideas or plans, increase and decrease in finances and fluctuation in business. Marriage, business partnership and collaboration are strengthened through understanding and commitment. Commercial transactions and business deals could be conducted effectively. Money matters take priority as some unexpected expenditures have to be met. End of the week brings fresh energy, love and romance in important relationships.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) You are bold, courageous and frank while dealing with controversial, professional and family matters. You are likely to meet well known authoritative people and share ideas and spend lovely time in their association. A stimulating project should be taken as a challenge which would further and promote your business prospects. Visitors and communications from overseas can inspire you to be more creative. A wonderful professional opportunity takes you towards success. A personal meeting will lead to romance, love and long lasting relationship. A business partnership is lucrative and supportive. Good planning and management lead to progressive and productive ventures. You may take a short break before starting on a new project to renew your energy. You are able to achieve a lot at home and at work with youthful energy.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) You are likely to spend time in different places and work closely in new associations as you combine good luck and good management. You share some memorable moments with a loved one. You would express your views and comments without afraid of losing a contract and manipulate well and make things in your favour. Your social life may be restricted to business and family related obligations. It would be good to say what you feel as you would be appreciated for expressive honesty. Good luck in finances and opportunities is encouraging. You are restless and move into varying occupations and pay wandering visits to friends. You may change your image with good styles, fashion and grooming.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) The planetary configuration is indicative of more stability in personal relations and professional life. You have the tendency to compromise and adjust and take a softer approach while dealing with people at work and home. You may explore new equipment and improve working space as this brings more efficiency in your work. Family members would be more supportive as this is the best time to bring more harmony and pleasant interactions to your relationships and feel more comfortable. The desire for some form of recognition is going to be fulfilled. You maintain a fitness routine and healthy diet program. Brisk walk and timely eating would be helpful.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) You have the ability to stand alone and have strong vibration. You are independent, creative, original, ambitious, determined and self-assured. Adopting a realistic, practical and disciplined approach towards life would bring harmony at home. This week proves to be good for the people in show business and creative life. Your ability to express yourself and to solve problems is enhanced. You would have good support from family members and business associates. You are overly touchy and sensitive with your romantic partner. Sports and physical activities keep you fit and energetic.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) You are generous with friends, and loving in family situations. You are coming across as especially smooth, and your good nature is bound to attract some attention. You stand in the middle of a doorway while making an important decision whether it is professional or personal. It would be better to listen to our own good judgment and do what is good for you. You are fortunate as things turn out well in difficult situations at work and home. Your financial situation looks promising if you manage it well personally rather than trust upon others. Personal relationships are warm and comfortable as you spend wonderful time with your loved one. A relaxed and light attitude would help you to overcome negative thoughts.

How farmers can use solar power without damaging rest of their ops

As the world races to meet net-zero targets, emissions from all industrial sectors must be reduced more urgently than ever. Agriculture is an important area of focus as it contributes up to 22% of global greenhouse gas emissions - almost as much as the energy sector.

One approach to decarbonising the agricultural sector is agrivoltaics. It involves integrating solar panels - or photovoltaics (PVs) - into fields of crops, greenhouses and livestock areas, which can help farmers reduce their carbon footprint while continuing to produce food.

Agrovoltics can also mitigate one of the main criticisms often made of solar power - that solar farms "waste" vast tracts of agricultural land that could otherwise be used for food production. In reality, solar farms currently occupy only 0.15% of the UK's total land - not much compared to its 70% agricultural land.

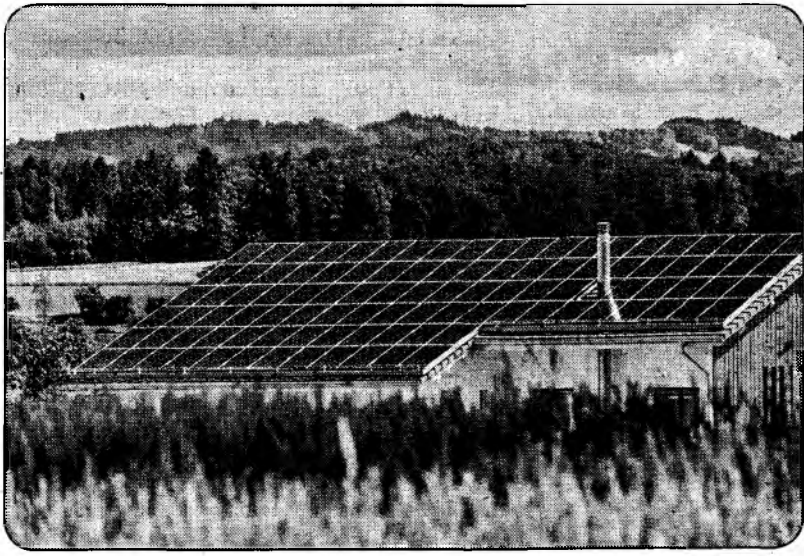
The simplest example of an agrivoltaic system would be conventional, crystalline silicon PVs (the market-leading type of solar panels), installed in fields alongside livestock. This method of farm diversification has become increasingly popular in recent years for three main reasons.

First, it enhances biodiversity as the fields are not seeing a regular crop rotation, being monocultured, or being harvested for silage. Second, it increases production as livestock benefit from the shade and the healthier pasture growth.

Finally, the solar farm has reduced maintenance costs because livestock can keep the grass short. All this is achieved while the solar panels provide locally-generated, clean energy.

But if they're not set up properly, agrivoltics may cause problems. One of the most important challenges is balancing the need for sunlight between crops and solar panels. Crops need light to grow, and if solar panels block too much sunlight, they can negatively impact crop yields.

This issue varies from place to place. In countries with fewer sunny days like the UK, the panels need to let more sunlight through. But in places like Spain or Italy, some shade can actually help crops by reducing the stress of intense heat during summer months. Finding the right balance is tricky, as it depends on local conditions, the type of crop, and even the



needs of pollinators like bees.

The complexity deepens when we consider the type of PV material used. Traditional solar panels aren't always suitable because they often block the wavelengths (colours) of light needed by plants.

This is where newer materials, like organic semiconductors and perovskites, are ideal as they can be customised to let crops get the light they need while still generating energy. Unlike traditional inorganic semiconductors, which are essentially crystals of metal and metalloid atoms, organic semiconductors are molecules mainly made of carbon and hydrogen. Perovskites, meanwhile, are like a hybrid of the two.

But there are thousands of combinations of these materials to choose from, with scientific literature containing a plethora of options. Figuring out which one works best can be a daunting task.

This is where computational tools can make a big difference. Instead of testing each material in real-world conditions - which would take years and be incredibly expensive - researchers can use simulations to predict their performance. These models can help identify the best materials for specific crops and climates, saving both time and resources.

The tool

We have developed an open-source tool that helps compare various PV materials, making it easier to identify the best options for agrivoltics. Our

tool uses geographical data and realistic simulations of how different PV materials perform.

It considers how light travels through these materials and reflects off them, as well as other important performance measures like voltage and power output. The tool can also take lab-based measurements of PV materials and apply them to real-world scenarios.

Using this tool, we simulated how much power different PV materials could generate per square metre over the course of a year, across various regions. And we calculated how much light passed through these materials to ensure it was enough for crops to thrive.

By running these simulations for multiple materials, we could identify the most suitable options for specific crops and climates.

Tools like ours could play a critical role in decarbonising the agricultural sector by guiding the design of agrivoltaic systems. Future research could combine these simulations with economic and environmental impact analyses. This would help us understand how much energy we can expect from a solar panel over its lifetime compared to the resources and costs involved in producing it.

Ultimately, our tool could help researchers and policymakers in selecting the most efficient, cost-effective, and eco-friendly ways to decarbonise agriculture and move us closer to achieving global net-zero emissions. (The Conversation)

"All I ever seek from good deeds is a measure of respect."

—Walter Annenberg

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No. 70 SHILLONG, MONDAY, OCTOBER 21, 2024

Threats to security

A crude bomb blew up the wall of the CRPF School in Rohini area in the national capital on Sunday. While this was not a major incident and there were no casualties, it is obviously sending out a message to the government and security forces. This heightens the need for greater alert. Notably, this would seem to be a season of threats by anti-national elements – with the Pakistani militants on the one side and the Khalistani movement on the other. The Canada-based Sikh rebels, with substantial patronage from the government there, might be getting a fresh lease of life.

The overall security scenario was satisfactory for the past few years. The North-East was breathing free, except for Manipur where things are still on the boil. The rebel movements targeting Delhi were mostly lying low. Kashmir too had peace gaining the upper hand and, as a result, tourism – the mainstay of the local economy has started reviving in a major way. The Pakistanis had mostly stopped the border skirmishes after the surgical strikes and IAF bombings during the fag end of PM Modi's first term. On the railway front too, the number of accidents came down though the epic disaster in Odisha claimed many lives. Thereafter, some more train mishaps occurred despite the government's claim ten years ago that safety would be the first priority.

In a nation of nearly a billion and a half, maintaining order and keeping things under control is a huge credit to any government. Narendra Modi as prime minister avoided confrontations and adopted a soft approach – to a point of criminal inaction – in several pressing cases, so that peace prevailed. Exceptions were the CAA-NCR protests, when Muslims felt they were being treated as second-class citizens and hounded out by the BJP-led government at the Centre. The recent disturbances to public life – as in Delhi – are rare but point to danger ahead. Notably, as many as 32 Indian flights received bomb threats on Saturday in coordinated actions, but only one flight was 'diverted' while the rest operated normally. A youth in Chhattisgarh sent out 19 of these threats – he says he wanted to take "revenge on his business partner." The actual reason might be something different – and such action cannot be taken lightly. It must be said to the credit of Home Minister Amit Shah that he handled the law and order and militancy with a heavy hand. Any slackening in the controls and alert would be taken full advantage of by anti-national elements. The intelligence apparatus must remain more alert. Saboteurs plan long-term and act when they deem fit. Peace must prevail.

The Mischievous Ghosts of Jaiñtia Hills

By HH Mohrmen

One thing that every culture in the world has are stories about ghosts. Ghost stories are often scary and create fear in the minds of many. Every culture has people who believe in ghosts, demons, or at least in strange beings that people are afraid of. These mysterious beings are said to have magical powers, which often cause harm to people. Those who claim to have seen ghosts also report sightings of beings that can be invisible or appear in different forms. Ghosts are something that people fear, and even mentioning it sends shivers down the spine of many individuals. The way people believe in and understand ghosts varies considerably from one culture to another.

In many cultures, ghosts are considered the spirits of dead people who still interact with the living. Yet one thing that ghosts have in common is that most people are scared of them. Ghosts are believed to be supernatural or paranormal beings, always linked to folklore or the culture of the people.

Ghosts in Folklore Traditions

Ghost stories are woven into the folklore of various cultures, and these stories are unique to each one. In the Jaiñtia Hills, there are also many stories about different types of ghosts. The "Lyngkhuh," "ka Rangkit or ka Rieng Khangnoh," "ki Boit," and "u Sap Putoi" are ghosts specific to their respective places. In the Pnar tradition of Jaiñtia, not all ghosts cast spells that cause people to suffer; there are also good ghosts. These are jovial spirits that like to play pranks on people and cause them no harm.

The Ghost that Causes No Harm

When we were kids, my parents had a tea stall at lawmusiang, the main market of Jowai. They were busy, so they didn't have time to prepare meals for us at home. As a result, every morning, noon, and evening, we ate at the shop. This suited me well because, for a boy my age, having the opportunity to go to the market and listen to discussions was nothing short of wonderful. Moreover, tea shops in Jowai still serve as chat rooms for those who want to discuss interesting topics, especially politics.

People from different villages, before and after their chores in Jowai, would visit their favorite tea shop in the

market to catch up on what was happening in the world. When media and even newspapers were a distant dream, tea stalls like ours served as information centers.

At the time, there were only weekly newspapers in Jowai, like u Naphang, u Salonsar, u Jaintia, and u Parari. So, every Musiang or market day, the tea shop became a place where people discussed what was published in the newspapers. In the late eighties and early nineties, when daily vernacular papers like Mawphor began to appear, the news reports in those papers became the main subjects of discussion.

One day, while I was having my meal in the shop, I overheard people saying that a man had disappeared from his home, and the whole village was looking for him. I was a young boy then, about 10 years old, and Jowai was still a small, sleepy hamlet. Curious as any boy my age, I eavesdropped whenever I heard people talking about the man's sudden and mysterious disappearance. The entire locality searched for him but to no avail. It was only after a few days that he was found in a forest near the town. He was sitting on the edge of a steep ledge. Eyewitnesses said he was in a trance, and had he been in his normal state, he would have fallen into the deep gorge and would not have survived the fall.

During our childhood, we were forbidden to wear our clothes inside out. Our elders told us it was taboo, lest we be carried off by the "Symphut" or "Suit Tynjang." I'm not sure whether Symphut was a type of ghost or an animal, but one thing I knew for sure was that if it was a ghost, it wasn't a bad one—it never harmed its victims.

In the past, incidents of people being carried off by the Symphut occurred frequently. We were told that it could change into a goat and lure its victim away. It was said that when someone was carried away by the Symphut, they would be in a trance, never feeling hunger, pain, or fear. Symphut was one of the phenomena that every child dreaded even thinking about. It was also said that females were more prone to fall victim to the Symphut than males. Legends tell us that when Symphut released

its hold on someone, the person would be left in an odd or awkward position. For example, a girl might be found at the top of a tree or on the far end of a branch, places she would never have reached in her normal state.

Symphut was supposedly a good ghost; it never harmed its victims, so there was no tragic end to the story. People loved to talk about such incidents, albeit with awe. Symphut was a "wonder" unique to the people of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, and it was very popular during our childhood.

Whether Symphut is real or just a myth, I will never know. But one thing I do know is how much I hated those spine-chilling howls of the foxes on moonlit nights and how much we loved to talk about people who had been carried away by Symphut. Oh, the romance of the good ghost—a ghost that did no harm to its victims! Symphut in our childhood was real, but it seems to be gradually fading away. There is also another ghost believed to cause no harm to people.

The Ghost that Plays Pranks

Jowai has two large valleys, often referred to as the town's two rice bowls, and the valleys must have influenced the decision of the first settlers to settle in the place. They are called "ka Pynthor Neim" or the upper valley and "Pynthor Wah" or the lower valley. The upper valley is visible to visitors driving into Jowai from Shillong, while the best part of the lower valley can be seen from the lalong area. The largest section of the lower valley is called "ka Tre Tangliang." From afar, the paddy fields of various shapes and sizes in that particular segment look like a huge labyrinth. It was in this maze-like paddy field that farmers and anglers reported getting lost, wandering around until daybreak without being able to find their way out. People often avoid passing through this area at night for fear of being caught in the quagmire.

Phyllang: The Tragic Story

This story begins with tragedy, as a woman, while traveling through the area, lost her son, who later became a ghost. It happened on a market day when the woman, after finishing her errands

in Jowai, was returning to her village. The popular route to places like Tuber, Shangpung, Sutnga, and others was from Syntu Ksiar, where they had to cross the Myntdu River.

Lad Tuber, or the Tuber junction, used to be an important landmark on this route. For those journeying onward, it was also a significant place where one could stay at the 'ing/tung basa,' a house like an inn where travelers could spend the night. The owner of the ing basa provided the traveler with food, a 'lyngknor' (a wooden stool to rest their head), and travelers often slept around the fireplace.

The woman was returning with her three children—one she carried on her back, one she held by the hand, and the eldest, Phyllang, was walking behind. Like many children their age, Phyllang and his younger sibling were playing as they walked, collecting wildflowers and fruits along the way. Phyllang, being the eldest, was walking behind while his mother led the younger ones. When they crossed the Myntdu River, she realized Phyllang was missing. She was in a dilemma, as she couldn't leave her younger children on one side of the river to search for him. She decided to continue to the village and, upon reaching it, informed her relatives and neighbors of what had happened.

They immediately gathered dried bamboo, known locally as "prew/praw," lit it, and headed to the place where Phyllang had disappeared. They searched for him the whole night but found nothing. As day broke, they returned to the village, and another group of community members replaced them to continue the search. They searched for him the next day, but he was nowhere to be found. Days turned into weeks, and after more than a week of searching with no success, they called it off.

Realizing there was no point in looking for her beloved son any longer, the mother and her relatives decided to perform the final rites for him, called "Kaweh Snif," as he was assumed dead. People in Jowai and the surrounding areas believe that Phyllang's spirit causes people to get lost in the maze-like paddy fields. Phyllang is no ordinary ghost but a spirit that drives people to act foolishly by simply playing tricks on them.

Indian judiciary's ills too deep-seated to be addressed through symbolism

Lady Justice needs more than removal of blindfold for a clearer vision

By K Raveendran

The unveiling of the new statue of Lady Justice, with eyes wide open and a copy of the constitution in hand, has sparked animated debate across legal and public domains. Its design is a striking departure from traditional representations: the blindfold has been removed, and the sword has been replaced by the Constitution. The symbolism is palpable, reflecting a shift towards transparency and a commitment to constitutional values. Yet, despite the powerful message this new imagery conveys, it does little to address the deeper, systemic issues plaguing India's judicial system.

The replacement of the sword with the Constitution serves as a reminder of the growing threats to constitutional integrity, and the judiciary's strengthening resolve to defend it. But symbolism alone cannot resolve the practical challenges facing the courts today. The judiciary is grappling with issues that far exceed the boundaries of aesthetic or symbolic changes. Chief Justice D Y Chandrachud, who spearheaded the change in the statue, has frequently acknowledged the flaws in the system and has emphasized the importance of public trust in maintaining the credibility of the judiciary.

One of the most significant and persistent issues

lines for the resolution of cases. In a recent ruling, the Supreme Court dismissed a petition seeking to establish time limits for the disposal of cases, stating that such measures are not feasible within the Indian context. The court emphasized that the Indian Supreme Court, unlike its American counterpart, cannot function within such rigid constraints due to the unique nature of the legal landscape in India.

The problem is multifaceted. On one hand, the judiciary faces an ever-increasing number of cases, ranging from civil disputes to complex criminal matters. On the other hand, there is a shortage of judges at every level, from the district courts to the Supreme Court. This shortage exacerbates the delays, as the available judges are overburdened with cases, leaving little time for thorough deliberation and swift judgments.

Efforts have been made to address this shortage. In recent years, there has been a push to appoint more judges, and several vacancies have been filled. Yet, the pace of appointments has failed to keep up with the rising demand. According to reports, India has around 20 judges per million people, a number significantly lower than many other countries. This disparity highlights

"One of the most significant and persistent issues haunting the judiciary is the mounting backlog of pending cases. According to official statistics, over 50 million cases are currently pending in courts across India."

haunting the judiciary is the mounting backlog of pending cases. According to official statistics, over 50 million cases are currently pending in courts across India. This overwhelming figure is a reflection of the system's inability to cope with the enormous volume of legal disputes that arise daily. Many cases drag on for years, with some even spanning decades, leading to a growing sense of disillusionment among the public.

This issue has sparked criticism, with some on social media suggesting that Lady Justice should be holding a watch instead of a constitution. The watch would symbolize the excruciating delays in the judicial process and the erosion of public confidence in the system. It is a sarcastic yet poignant reminder of the slow pace at which justice is delivered in India. These delays have led many to question whether the courts are truly capable of upholding justice in a timely and effective manner.

While the judiciary cannot be blamed entirely for these delays, the problem is deeply rooted in the structure and functioning of the legal system. A significant portion of the backlog can be attributed to outdated colonial-era practices that still influence the way courts operate. However, it would be misleading to blame the backlog solely on this colonial hangover. The sheer volume of cases generated in the country daily makes India's legal system unique in its challenges, unlike any other judiciary in the world. The complexity of the cases, combined with procedural inefficiencies, has created a situation where justice delayed has become the norm.

Chief Justice Chandrachud has been candid about these challenges. He has consistently spoken about the urgent need for reforms and has called for innovative solutions to streamline the judicial process. However, even the highest court in the land has acknowledged the difficulty in setting firm dead-

the urgent need for more judicial appointments to reduce the burden on the existing judges and expedite the judicial process.

Another contributing factor to the backlog is the procedural complexity of the legal system. The Indian judiciary is known for its detailed procedures, which, while designed to ensure fairness and thoroughness, often lead to unnecessary delays. Multiple adjournments, lengthy hearings, and procedural wrangling are common in Indian courts, contributing to the slow pace of justice. Reforming these procedures and adopting more efficient case management systems could help alleviate some of these issues. Technology has also been touted as a potential solution to streamline the judicial process. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of virtual hearings, and many courts have continued to use this technology. Virtual hearings have the potential to reduce delays, especially in cases where physical appearances are not necessary. However, the implementation of this technology has been uneven, with many lower courts lacking the infrastructure to conduct virtual hearings efficiently. Additionally, concerns about the digital divide and access to technology for litigants from rural areas have raised questions about the inclusiveness of such reforms.

Public trust in the judiciary is a cornerstone of any functioning democracy. For years, India's judiciary has been seen as a bulwark against the excesses of the executive and legislative branches. However, the growing backlog of cases and the delays in delivering justice are eroding this trust. The judiciary's credibility is being called into question, and symbolic changes, like the new Lady Justice statue, are not enough to restore public confidence. What is needed are concrete reforms that address the root causes of these delays and inefficiencies. (IPA Service)

Mistreatment at Gynae Dept NEIGRIHMS

Editor,
Today I went for a routine check up at the gynaecology department NEIGRIHMS. I was previously told by their doctor that in my next visit they would schedule me for a certain test. Today I went in, praying that this time I should get a nice (well-behaved) doctor. The whole visit and every other visit had been nightmares. The doctors (PG, JRD and SRD), the staff, the helpers, everyone in that department are just rude and mean to the core of their bones. So today was just as bad. When I enquired about this test they wanted me to do, that doctor yelled at me, "Do you have the money to do this test? It's an expensive test, so tell me if you have the money to do the test?" She yelled again. I was in utter shock and could not respond back. I wish I had. It bothered me the whole day wondering if I looked like a homeless, poor and illiterate person. How did she assume that I cannot afford the test? Is it because I came to a governmental hospital? Whether or not I can afford the test is my problem and my decision. I did not give her the right to belittle me. Hence this is my letter to those doctors who think they

are above every other human being. I am telling you to be nice and decent to your patients.

I would like for my letter to be anonymous. People I know work at the hospital and I don't want them to suffer for my act of honesty.

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request,
Via email

Hunger and this year's Nobel

Editor,
The 2024 Global Hunger Index report, in which India ranks 105 among 127 countries, must not be ignored. The report says that India's undernourished population would effectively rank as the seventh most populous country in the world — with roughly the population of Brazil, a staggering 200 million people. In other words, 13.7 per cent of India's population is undernourished.

Among neighbours, India is behind China (at the top bracket that includes 22 countries), Sri Lanka (56), Nepal (68), Myanmar (74), and Bangladesh (84), but only ahead of Pakistan (109) and Afghanistan (116). Bhutan could not be included in the 2024 GHI because of a lack of data.

The report is based on four indicators - 1. Under

nourishment, 2. Child wasting, 3. Child stunting, and 4. Child mortality. The nutrition indicators for children under 5 years show that 1 out of 3 children (35.5 per cent) is a victim of stunting, nearly 1 out of 5 children (18.7 per cent) is a victim of wasting, and 2.9 per cent of children die before completing 5 years. India has the highest global rate of child wasting.

Now, how can a country compete with others when the growth of more than one third of its future workforce has been stunted for not getting enough food to eat? It is not difficult to comprehend that it is impossible. However, we can look at the findings of this year's Nobel laureates in economics - Daron Acemoglu, Simon Johnson, and James Robinson - to get a clear answer. They have demonstrated that institutions that exploit the population do not generate growth or change for the better.

A study says that many gig workers in India have to work for 10 to 14 hours daily for their employers and earn less than Rs 10,000 per month. While overwork damages their health, the poor wage makes their children and family members compromise on food intake. This is nothing but exploitation.

Children are unable to learn optimally when they are hungry. To address this problem, the new National Educational Policy has pro-

posed that the midday meals provided to students in government and aided schools should be supplemented by breakfast. The Centre should allocate more funds for introducing breakfast in addition to the midday meals for all government and aided schools from the nursery level. It is highly commendable that some States and Union Territories provide additional items such as milk, eggs, and fruits to students from their own resources. But why should not the Centre itself allocate the funds for the same for providing those nutritious food items to students all over the country? Otherwise, students of all the states in India will not get those additional, nutritious food items.

Some estimates show that 3 out of 4 Indians are non-vegetarian. A non-vegetarian student should eat a boiled egg every day in the midday meal. Whereas, an alternative food item needs to be served to a vegetarian student. It will be highly unfortunate if prejudices against non-vegetarian items restrain students from having eggs. Boiled eggs can easily be prepared, can never be adulterated, and have high nutritional value for money.

How long should we turn a blind eye to our millions of hungry, malnourished children with stunted growth? The government should label the health of our children as a matter of top priority, instead

of basking in the surreal glory of the sun and moon missions, which have no connection to our children's or people's welfare.

Both breakfast and midday meals comprising healthy items like milk, eggs, and fruits should be served to students in all government and aided schools throughout the country without any delay.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

Religious celebrations versus public inconveniences

Editor,
I am writing to address some concerns regarding the recent celebration of Durga Puja in Tura Town on October 13, 2024. First and foremost I am writing this with complete respect towards the celebration of a community. While this festival is a significant cultural event, certain issues have raised serious concerns among residents of Tura Town.

Firstly, the national highway was blocked and was diverted for extended periods from morning till evening, causing significant traffic congestion. This not only disrupted daily commutes but also posed safety risks for emergency vehicles trying to navigate through the area. "A road cannot be blocked for

the celebration," can be read from the recent verdict by the Rajasthan High Court.

Additionally, the loud music played near the Maternity and Child Hospitals created a challenging environment for patients and medical staff. It is crucial that we balance our celebrations with consideration for those in need of care, as noise can be particularly distressing in such settings. Loud music cannot be played near within 100 meter radius of Hospitals as per the rules of the Silent Zone area.

Lastly, the aftermath of the celebrations was an alarming amount of garbage dumped along the roadside of the celebration. It is vital for organizers and participants alike to prioritize cleanliness and proper waste disposal during such events. Why was the Tura Municipal Board a mere spectator on that particular day whereas on any other days it collects fines for throwing garbage?

I urge the local authorities and event organizers to address these issues in future celebrations. Let us celebrate our culture while being mindful of others needs.

Yours etc.,
Amika Aski,
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.

"Things do not change; we change."

— Henry David Thoreau

The Shillong Times

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Need to re-read Sixth Schedule

THE current controversy surrounding the Dorbar Shnong and their recognition by the State Government seems to have become a storm in a tea-cup. The Khasi Hills District Council feels that a government notification is imperative since the Dorbar Shnong are implementing several Government schemes including the MNREGA where Village Employment Councils are necessary to ensure that residents of the village are employed in what is now called the, "job card scheme." Much has also been discussed as to how the Dorbar Shnong rose to the occasion to make the job of the Government much easier to tackle at the level of the shnong (villages/localities). The Dorbar Shnong actually have a tenuous link with the Councils since there are no clear guidelines outlining their powers and responsibilities in the entire Sixth Schedule.

The Sixth Schedule of the Constitution relates to the administration of tribal areas and tribals. The only mandate that the District Councils has over the non-tribal population is the clause that bars them from practising any trade unless they get a trading license from the Councils. Other than that the non-tribals are governed by state and central government laws. In fact, non-tribals don't vote in the District Council elections in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills. The Dorbar Shnong too don't accommodate non-tribals as members of the Shnong. Non-tribals however need the consent of the Dorbar Shnong to reside in any area including the Municipality areas. This is an unwritten code and has never been challenged. The point therefore is that the Dorbar Shnong act in an arbitrary manner since there is no legal framework under which they operate. The word 'traditional institution' leaves them out of the purview of modern laws. This arbitrary nature leaves the field open to misuse since anything not binding by law can be misused or abused. This happens during sale and purchase of land where each shnong has set its own percentage to be paid by the seller and the purchaser. This money should go to the kitty of the Dorbar Shnong for development purposes. But does it? No one has questioned this practice as of now. Also the Dorbar Shnong is not mandated to get its books of accounts audited although it handles public funds.

The Government is distancing itself from playing a regulatory role vis a vis the Dorbar Shnong which in effect means the Rangbah Shnong, for reasons that are understandable. If the Government recognises the Dorbar Shnong as a legal entity just as an elected panchayat in other states of India are, then implementation of several grass-roots schemes would fall under the ambit of the shnong. Are the shnong capable of implementing the schemes without government assistance? Do they have the human resource and the oversight capacity? Several issues will arise if the Dorbar Shnong misuses government funds. In fact there are too many unforeseen problems which the Government wants to stay away from. The Income Tax Department's stance that the Dorbar Shnong should have a PAN CARD also means that they would have to register themselves as a society to become taxable or for waiving income tax in case they can show that there is a not-for-profit organisation. Barring that, what legal entity does a Dorbar Shnong have?

Letters to the Editor

Covert action a foreign policy blunder?

Editor,

At the centre of the storm lies Canada as they accuse India of conducting covert operations on foreign soil. The tapes of history have to be revisited when dealing with such sensitive issues whether equating on the grounds of economy or diaspora and no other book seem to throw light on the facts as B. Raman's "The Kaaboys of R&AW" and "The Secret History of the Five Eyes" by Richard Kerbaj.

As the world witnesses the Middle East being torn into pieces, who are the real conspirators behind the scenes? Or is this a remaking of a new world order taking place with powerful organisations and people shaping it? When the CIA was born out of the ashes of World War II it somehow spread its tentacles to the security services of the Mossad, ISI and MI5 working through its division like the Special Activities Center (SAC) which is tasked for covert and paramilitary action.

The deaths of Hassan Nasrallah or Yahya Sinwar just shows how precise assassinations work in the 21st century. An Al Jazeera report

indicates that around 41,000 Palestinians in Gaza and 16,000 children have lost their lives over the past year. Fawaz Gerges, professor of the London School of Economics in his interview with Mehdi Hasan drove home the point that the bloodshed in and around Gaza including Lebanon will haunt the United States and Israel for years to come.

As borders in South Asia and India become more fragile, if such analyses proves true, spying, which is a valuable instrument of statecraft for national security, will nurture a jihadist type of violence on western targets also leading to an increase in white supremacist-style attacks in the future.

Yours etc.,
Christopher Gatphoh,
Shillong-10

Caste reservation effectiveness

Editor,

I appreciate Sujit De's thoughtful response to my letter on caste-based reservation. While I acknowledge the complexities of this issue, I must respectfully assert that waiting for an ideal world where discrimination naturally fades away is neither practical nor justifiable.

The Dorbar Shnong and its future
- A call for Strategic Review

By Toki Blah

I am starting this article by directing the readers attention to the news report in this newspaper (ST Oct 18, 2024) on page 3 titled "KHADC to push for special recognition for all headmen" and ST Oct 19, 2024, front page news headline titled "Tax dept asks Dorbar Shnongs to get Pan Card registration." After reading the two news items I became the most flummoxed person in Meghalaya, unable to make head or tail of the whole narrative. The 18th news item speaks of the statement by the KHADC DY CEM where he charged the State Government of utilizing the Headmen only when their services are needed and demanding that the State Government give Special Recognition to the said Headmen. I readily admit that I am old but for the life of me, after years in Government Service, I just could not recollect nor recall the term "Special Recognition" in any administrative parlance. The fact however remains that the Dy CEM's remarks were focused entirely on the need to give recognition to an individual called the Headman! The 19th news report on the other hand speaks of the requirement for Dorbar Shnongs (Dorbar Shnong mind you and not the Rangbah Shnong) to go in for PAN Card registration but in order to enable them to do so there is need for the State Government to come up with a one line gazette notification, "that the that the traditional institutions are recognised bodies of the state government". The only commonality between the KHADC statement and that of the Dorbars is that both institutions feel that the Rangbah Shnong have been misused by the State Government. Having worked in Government, I doubt if the State Government is ready to jump at this urgent demand of the Dorbars. The mills of Government turn slowly and the Dorbars may have a long wait before their wish from the State Government is delivered.

Of interest is the fact that whenever there is a call for official recognition of the Dorbar Shnong, they go running to the KHADC for such recognition. Why and what happens then? Politicians of the KHADC down the years have always made us believe that they are the custodians of the Office of Headman courtesy of Para 3(g) of the 6th Schedule! Yet when it comes to official acknowledgement of such recognition the call is hastily redirected to the Government. KHADC politicians simply love playing

football with the Rangbah Shnong in their attempts to score brownie points against the State Government. It's a cheap shot and in very poor taste, but there you have it. If KHADC is so fond of bragging about their control over the Rangbah Shnong why do they shy away from admitting that they are also constitutionally mandated vide Para 3(e) to make appropriate laws to, "establish village or town committees or Councils or their Powers." The Dorbar Shnong is a Village Council. The astonishing fact is the reluctance of District Council honchos to accept this fact! Instead the emotions of our Rangbah Shnong are roused over alleged neglect and abuse by Government of the Dorbars and hence the KHADC call this time for "Special Recognition for the Rangbah Shnong. They love to speak of the Rangbah Shnong as an individual but loathe to

the Dorbars for KHADC or Syiem recognition. There is always this mad rush for a Sanad from the Syiem every time there is an election of new Dorbar Office bearers. One hears that this is a must as it forms part of our tradition. Really? Fact is when the British began to establish their administration in these hills they found it quite difficult to handle the semi wild hill tribes scattered on various hill tops. The British lacked the manpower to do so, but wily as they were, they quickly identified the Chief called the Syiem who could do their job for them. They quickly elevated him to the position of 'King' and he in turn demanded that all newly elected village chiefs get his approval through a Sanad before he would give his recognition to such elections. One look at a typical Sanad of the Syiem with its list of prohibitions will dispel all doubts over its contribu-

"The only commonality between the KHADC statement and that of the Dorbars is that both institutions feel that the Rangbah Shnong have been misused by the State Government. Having worked in Government, I doubt if the State Government is ready to jump at this urgent demand of the Dorbars. The mills of Government turn slowly and the Dorbars may have a long wait before their wish from the State Government is delivered."

make mention of the Dorbar Shnong as an Institution of tradition. Why can't they give Dorbar Shnong recognition and fight if the Income Tax Department doesn't accept their authority to do so. Perhaps it is because it is easier to feed the ego of an individual, his sense of pride and his personal needs. So concentrate on the Rangbah Shnong! It is far, far harder to make laws for an institution for this calls for deeper empathy with the aspirations of the community, a trait that District Council politicians are devoid of. Let us accept that we have a dearth of District Council politicians who we can identify as Institution builders. Perhaps this is the cause for the reluctance to issue the Official ID demanded by the Dorbars and instead to obfuscate the issue by diverting attention to the individual instead of the needs of the institution. The Late GG Swell did once remark that Meghalaya is full of "Small people with Small Minds." Guess that sums it up quite neatly!

Here one must also start questioning the obsession of

tion to positive administration. It's a negative piece of legislation, meant to provide control than to promote. It is a piece of 18th century documentation fit for the waste paper basket of 21st century needs and the quicker we realize this the better it will be for all concerned. Dorbar's obsession with the District Councils also runs on similar lines. The 6th Schedule with its empowering clauses, pointed out above, was enshrined in our Constitution more than 72 years ago. For more than 72 years the District Councils have pointedly and deliberately left the Dorbars where time found them. Very little effort was made by the Councils to bring the Dorbars in line with good effective practices of Local Self Government. Their focus instead has been to encourage Rangbah Shnong resistance on being misused by the Government. Its high time we start examining the veracity of this allegation.

So has the State Government mainly through its District Administration, been misusing the Dorbars and calling upon it only in

times of crisis? A scratch of the surface will reveal the opposite. Both the District Administration and the Dorbars shared a common trait. They both take their respective calls on service to the community very seriously. The interest of both agencies merge and blend when it comes to community peace and maintenance of Law and Order; providing help and succour at times of need (the recent flawless convergence of efforts between the District Authorities and the Dorbars to contain Covid is a classical example. The loud absence of both the Syiem and the District Councils in such times of need and distress needs to be noted). Dorbars and the Administration work seamlessly together to provide better services to the public such as in the issue of Ration Cards; regulating supply of fuel like LPG (public access to adequate food and energy requirements); issue of Aadhar cards etc. Today we find them jointly working together trying to come up with solutions to a 21st century threat called Drug Abuse.

Anxiety over current and future social needs requires the Dorbars to identify agencies they can align with to come up with solutions to 21st century problems. Dorbar relationship with institutions and agencies that only dwell on the past need to be reevaluated. There is an urgent call for the Dorbar Shnong to have a strategic review on how they propose to function and act in the future. The call is for them to remain relevant on their quest to serve the community. The call therefore is not on Government recognition - it is already there. The call instead is for State Legislation to give the Dorbar and the Rangbah Shnong, the legal identity to perform their duties and obligations seamlessly. The ruling of Justice SR Sen on the illegal aspects of the Dorbar must be challenged. It cannot come from one line gazette notifications as demanded but through Legislative recognition of the need to continuously work together for a better future for our people. Strengthening Meghalaya's Local Self Government system requires the emergence of a uniform Village Council Law that cuts across all three District Councils. Application of Para 12.A of the 6th Schedule will bring in uniformity at the Village Council level making it easier for both Dorbar and State Government to blend in more effortlessly towards better governance in the 21st Century.

Spying and killings by intelligence agencies in foreign countries: What is the big deal?

USA's CIA has been doing it for decades: It has no right to act as moral police now

By Nitya Chakraborty

The allegation by the Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau involving Indian diplomats of the high commission in the killing of the Sikh extremist Canadian citizen, Hardeep Singh Nijjar, last year and also in the assassination attempt on another Sikh lawyer G S Pannun in USA, has created a storm in the global diplomatic community. India-Canadian ties have reached its lowest ebb with the expulsion of diplomats by both governments. What is more, the name of the Indian Union Home Minister, Amit Shah, has come up in the mails accessed by the Canadian authorities in the course of investigation.

For India, and, especially, for Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the diplomatic situation is terrible, with India's trusted strategic partner United States endorsing the Canadian position. Additionally, Canada has also got the support of its other allies of the 'Five Eyes' group - UK, Australia and New Zealand. This means that most of the West is positioned against India on this spat with Canada. India is a member of four-nation QUAD led by the US. Two QUAD members USA and Australia have taken positions against India.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi is now seeing himself in a position where he is isolated from the Global South as well as the Global North, which he cultivated in the last ten years through his New Look foreign

all the foreign policy directions, sidelining the external affairs ministry. Foreign policy and diplomacy have been the victim of myopic political approach.

In fact, spying has been a staple since ancient times, ever since the small kingdoms came into existence. In India, the Rig Veda, the most influential document of Vedic age, contains references to spies or "Spasa" being used by the god Varuna for acquiring information. Historians take it as the oldest existing reference to espionage. As far as epics go, Mahabharata and Ramayana, both ancient classics, are full of references to spy networks that were an essential part of statecraft. Similarly, the ancient Greek and Roman periods contain tales full of spies whose lives have been depicted in great epics of that period. Hanuman of Ramayana was the golden spy in the war of Ram against Ravana.

Our ancient treatise Manusmriti and Kautilya's Arthashastra elaborate on facets of the working of spies and diplomats. Kautilya's Arthashastra has one hundred and fifty parts that make up this document, over 50 of them have references to espionage and the use of spies. In the work, ancient Indian thinker Kautilya elaborates on the precise ways in which a king is to rule, including modes of administration, means of warfare, diplomatic strategy and economic policies. He provides what



perhaps the first ever professional classification, has deserted him. The US, which heads the most sprawling and deadly spy agency in the world, the CIA, and has been carrying out extrajudicial executions in foreign countries, especially, the Middle East and Latin America for decades, is now giving sermons to India on this alleged killing by RAW agents in Canada. That too of an anti-India extremist known for his role in inciting violence in India.

What is the big deal about the Indian government taking action in foreign land against known terrorists? Every country does it; the only thing, it has to be foolproof and not messy. The fault with the Narendra Modi Government is that its officials and agents messed up, and the work was so shoddy that even the instructions made by the Home Minister could not be kept secret; those were intercepted by the Canadians.

Just imagine how Indira Gandhi led India to win the India-Pakistan war in December 1971 not only through bigger military might, but also by perfect use of Indian intelligence agencies, who befuddled the CIA agents about the strategy for war to liberate Bangladesh. Indira Gandhi used a RAW agent to secure the release of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman after the end of the war. It was done through a lady friend of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto.

Indira Gandhi had her strategy team led by PN Haksar, consisting of T N Kaul, K B Lal and R.C. Dutta. The RAW agents were performing at their peak under the leadership of PMO. Compared to that, the present PMO consists of men far less in calibre. Modi's PMO has hijacked

perhaps the first ever professional classification,

There are two primary types of spies in his programme, both of whom directly report to the king. They are the Samstha, or stationary spies, and the Sanchara, or roaming spies. The Samsthas are usually stationed in other kingdoms, suspicious areas and forest lands. Intelligence gathering seems to be their primary objective, having infiltrated into critical areas under the guise of civilians. They send reports and updates to their home base on the military strength as also internal developments in the ruling families of rival states. The Sanchara, on the other hand, were used for more violent purposes. They were meant to be adept in science, the use of poisons, combat, and disguise.

In the Manusmriti, the legal compendium of ancient Indian thought, diplomats are not just given permission to engage in intelligence gathering, it is listed out as one of their core duties. According to Manusmriti, the inherent role of a diplomat was to observe the rival king, both in terms of policy and personal reputation. The diplomat is to then pre-empt and guess what the next moves made by antagonistic States would be, sending back regular updates.

That way, the Indian government led by Narendra Modi acted as per ancient Indian texts in Canada. The only thing is that the officials and agents botched up. Like every sphere of life, nothing succeeds like success. Mess in Canada made by the Modi regime is only a reminder of that dictum. (IPA Service)

reinforce? The formalization of caste through reservation perpetuates the very divisions we seek to eliminate. Real change must come from gradually phasing out caste-based reservations and reducing the emphasis on caste in education, jobs, and society.

Reservation was meant to correct historical injustices but now divides society. Instead of encouraging individuals to rise above caste identity, it reinforces it as a factor in one's opportunities. The path forward is not through more reservations, but by fostering a society where caste is irrelevant in determining success.

I urge every reader of this newspaper to take a moment to reflect. Have we done enough to challenge caste discrimination in our own homes? Have we taught our children to see people as human beings first? True change won't come from policy alone but from shifting our collective mindsets.

Thank you for the opportunity to express my views.

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request,
Via email

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

"An investment in knowledge pays the best interest."
— Benjamin Franklin

The Shillong Times

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'Deal' with China

SIMPLY put, when it comes to Ladakh, it will now be status quo ante – a scenario similar to what existed previously; meaning 2020 or before the big clash between India and China took place in Galwan short of a war. The two nations have reached a "deal" that facilitates patrolling by the respective armies in their areas in the way they used to do four years ago. China and India will now "work jointly" to implement the deal, as the Chinese foreign ministry has put it. This deal raises several apprehensions, though.

The explanation is that the two nations were in close communication through diplomatic and military channels to sort out the issues along India's northern border. Yet, notably, this deal has been signed shortly before Prime Minister Narendra Modi's departure to Russia for the BRICS summit, in which Russia, China and India will, among others, confabulate on various issues of common economic interest. The Russian involvement in this deal is clear. Notably, NSA Ajit Doval and China's foreign minister Wang Yi took matters close to an agreement recently when they met in the Russian city of St Petersburg. In other words, the existing 'alliance' between Russia and China, against the US, will be sought to be strengthened with India's involvement. A marked shift in policy is spectacular on India's part. India attempted in recent years to edge closer to the US. That scenario might be dampened in the event of the present deal being finalised help from Russia. What needs to be stressed here is that while China is never dependable, Russia under Vladimir Putin had not been a close ally of India the way New Delhi and Moscow had been since the Nehru era. The end of the Cold War also meant the end of the old muscle power of Russia. Under Putin, Russia is now facing serious odds due to the misadventure that the Russian leader attempted against Ukraine. Russian military were had at one time been worth a try, but the efficacy of these weapons is no more the same. Engaging China through Russia might not be a wise move. The present deal, in the overall context, raises eyebrows.

By contrast, the US is a dependable ally vis-a-vis India's engagements with China, for the reason that both Washington and New Delhi have been facing issues from China on a regular basis. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's extensive outreach to global players through his regular visits may not have produced the desired results in the past over 10 years. Diplomacy is a sugar-coated, yet hard-edged bargain. Rubbing shoulders by itself means little. Hope is that India would not fall into a trap vis-a-vis its current engagements with the Reds.

Hello Meghalaya! Where are the policies to govern this marvellous Land of the Clouds?

By Kyrsoibor Pyrtuh

The State is replete with public grievances and agitations against the Government of the day. From the SSA teachers who sat in protest for more than twenty days at the Malki ground, Shillong, to compel the State government to heed to their demands and come up with a concrete solution in their favour and many others. The State Capital also witnessed the wild cat agitation preventing all tourist taxis from outside Meghalaya, which are ferrying tourists, to enter the State and tourist places. The demand of the All Khasi Meghalaya Tourist Taxi Association to stop entry of all non-Meghalaya registration tourist taxis into the State has nearly upset the entire tourism industry and adversely impacted the small and medium scale entrepreneurs, home stay owners and workers whose entire business and livelihoods depend on tourists' footfall. However, these agitations are the symptoms of the larger malaise plaguing the State and also it is telling that there are many loopholes and gaps that need to be plugged.

On the demands of the SSA teachers, the State Government should not sit on it for too long and sincere efforts must be made to solve the impasse. Generally, Education in the State is in a pathetic condition and it is in nobody's interests to examine and work towards a total revamp. Except, in developing building infrastructure, like construction of new buildings, no one is keen to develop and enhance the quality inside the classrooms so as to equip the pupils/students with appropriate skills and knowledge which will help them embark into the competitive world of business, politics, employment, arts and sports etc. The teachers must be justly and fairly treated in every respect and the Government must immediately adopt a policy towards providing a living wage to all teachers, implement the equal pay for equal work, raise the salary of all the teachers in the State as per law and by law institute a Private School Regulatory body in order to protect the private school teachers against exploitation. Today, every worker, including unskilled, must get a minimum wage of not less than Rs 25,000 (twenty five thousand rupees) a month in order to sustain in life. It is also the need of the hour to

work towards dismantling income disparity in both private and public institutions, and to combat inequality in society.

If there is any reason to lend support to the plight of the AKMTTA, it is primarily on the grounds that the tourism industry in the State must uplift the livelihood and enhance the living conditions of the local populace. Now that the agitating tourist taxi drivers have entered into a dialogue with the State we believe that they have a better idea to offer for the formulation of such a policy which will not harm the booming tourism industry. It must be added that the tourism industry is a fragile one and is susceptible to a number of internal and external shocks. Therefore, we must tread with caution and keep in mind that visitors, like the tourists, are here to relax and enjoy the fun and frolic that the place offers. To a large extent, the visitors will need the liberty to experience the place and must be free from all sorts of harassment and hassles while visiting it.

It is important to note here, that the tourist taxi drivers in Meghalaya are an independent lot. Majority of them are self-employed and are driving their own cabs. Hence they are both employers and employees at the same time. Even those who are employed as cab drivers are working for private individual taxi owners, unlike in other parts of the country, whereby cab drivers are mere gig workers employed by different service providers' companies that are operating in big cities and metros. Working as employees of the service provider' companies, these gig workers are subjected to various kinds of exploitations. The AKMTTA has made public its stance that it is solely working for the interest of indigenous drivers of Khasi & Jaintia Hills region and for that matter I also wish that they strive to

lay down the foundation for the protection of local Khasi tourist cab drivers from the process of "uberization" in the near future.

For the survival of a microscopic indigenous community like the Hynniewtrep, there is a need to re-enforce various laws and regulations which are meant to prevent us from being annihilated and we must work towards establishing a robust defence mechanisms, but not at the cost of regression. The narrative which is still percolating till date that Meghalaya is soon to become the next Tripura is a bit far fetched. In the recent public discourses on reservation policy, Bhogtaram Mawroh, had brought the analysis on the question of population structure vis a vis influx of outsiders, which is based on scientific data whereby he stated, "According to the 2011 Census, the ST population constituted 86% of the state's population, with district-level figures ranging from a minimum of 73% in West Garo Hills to a maximum of 97% in West Khasi Hills...and the data on government jobs or the Census of Meghalaya Government employees

for fair competition and that a robust system of transparency and accountability is in place.

For the Hynniewtrep community, to perpetuate its existence here on earth does not depend on the enhancement of its reservation quota or percentage. More than the Reservation Policy, we need to demand for a review of the Single Window Policy which had facilitated the mushrooming of cement plants and degeneration of ecology, post liberalization of the economy. Moreover, the possibility of being overwhelmed by outsiders or foreign nationals seems very remote in the present day. What do we need to worry and talk about is the internal shocks that are likely to implode from within the community. The question that needs to be asked as to what kind of Economic and Environmental Policies will the State adopt to strike a balance between sustainability and economic growth. What policies does the State have so as not to cause internal displacement and landlessness amongst the indigenous community and also not to plunge the indigenous people of the State into abject poverty? As we speak there is an alarming rise of poverty and landlessness within the Hynniewtrep populace and the consequential rural-urban migration is insurmountable.

The signs of discord, within the Hynniewtrep community, had already emerged from the erstwhile Hima Sutnga or Jaintia Hills during the recent public hearings for establishing of a new cement plant. The writings are on the wall that the worst is yet to come. There is a desolation of the land law which regulates and protects tribal land in the State. We are desolating it further by our own doings and the local Presbyterian Church in Lumshnong, East Jaintia Hills, had done just that in complete disdain of the existing law by leasing out about 25 ha of land for a period of fifty (50) years to a cement plant for its expansion. This is a dangerous precedent and for the Church which has been bestowed with the stewardship and prophetic assignments to be involved in giving away land for the expansion of the cement plant is a direct affront and betrayal to the entire creation of God. What are we bequeathing to our children with? Chaos, destruction or order and well being?

Profile of a Sell Out

By Shambud Joshi

As a retired employee of a cement company in East Jaintia Hills, I feel provoked to write this article seeing the recent controversy over public hearing at Lumshnong and Brichymot. I am married to a local and my children are grown up and identify themselves as Khasi-Jaintia Scheduled Tribe. They are educated and encouraged by me to become disturbed and angry about the news reports concerning the public hearing at the above mentioned places. They feel that the real story has to be told and actually this is my story written by one of my children. I hope that my story will help the people of Meghalaya, especially the next generation belonging also to my children and their children to realize the rich wealth of Meghalaya and how we remain ignorant of this important factor in our lives. It is a beautiful state and we are happy that tourists have now started to come. But at the same time we are sorry at how some people of this state have sold their wealth and the future of their children so cheaply.

The story of limestone exploitation at EJH started long ago ever since the Directorate of Mineral Resources, Government of Meghalaya identified the existence of 652 million tonnes of chemical and cement grade limestone deposits extending over an area of 76.8 sq.km. in the Lumshnong area. Star

spirit of the Narpuh Wildlife Sanctuary. Narpuh Sanctuary is a cultural icon of the Jaintia people yet no one cared to mention this. Also the credibility of NGOs to raise objections is questionable as everyone knows that they will oppose any form of development from which they cannot make money. From the political side there is complete silence but this is not surprising. A 500 rupee note has the surprising ability of shutting off the voice of our politicians and it seems now even the voice and conscience of Church leaders. Below however I will try to give how the public hearings are also another sell out of our interests.

Sell out from the economic perspective

Below are some of the less known economic facts about the cement industry in Meghalaya. This essay is an effort to make a break up of the profit and loss picture from manufacturing cement in Meghalaya.

Landed cost of cement grade limestone when the company also is owner of the mines - Purchase price of limestone from 3rd party suppliers and current open market price is Rs. 850/MT. The cost would be cut by 75% if limestone is from captive mines owned by the cement company itself, thereby cutting the cost of cement production. Landed cost in this case could be as low as Rs.210/- per tonne.

(1) Manufacturing cost for one ton of cement from limestone mines owned by manufacturing company (approximate).
a. 2 tons of limestone roughly convert to one tonne clinker app 210 x 2 = 420.
b. Other raw materials Calcium Oxide, Silica, Aluminum etc app 300.
c. Fuel in the form of coal app 500.
d. Taxes, cess, royalty, labour etc app 900.
Total Manufacturing cost for one ton of cement app Rs 2,120
(2) Cost of one bag of cement sold to the public @ Rs.450 per bag or Rs. 9000- per tonne. So App take home profit from one tonne of cement (9000 - 2120) is - app Rs.6880
(3) Declared production of cement by Star Cements per year As per information provided in the Net is 7.67 MTPA (meaning per Year the company will produce 76,70,000 tonnes of cement) and its Estimated production per day (TDP) for 2024 will be 21,013 Metric Tonnes
(4) Estimated take home profit of Star cements
(a) For one day @ 21000 TPD @6880 profit per tonne Rs 14,44,80,000 (app 14.50 crs per day)
(b) For one year (14.50 Crs x 365 days) is App Rs.5292,96,00,00,000 (App. 5292 Crs per yr)

Cements was the first to obtain Single Window clearance for setting up their plant in 2004. Soon the operations of Star Cements started and the attractive incentives by the Industries Policy of the state attracted the attention of others and probably in 2006, seven other companies forwarded their applications for Single Window clearance to the then CM who happened to be Mr JD Rymbai. Mr Rymbai must have studied the file and found that the applications were not upto the mark and not in the interest of the state and its people and refused to comply with their request. It is a well kept secret and perhaps it is being told for the first time that the then President of the Congress Party, Madam Sonia Gandhi then called JD Rymbai to Delhi and there ordered him to quit his chair and hand over the reins to Mr DD Lapang. This was before the state election in UP and the Congress Party needed money. Lapang became CM and NOCs for 7 new cement companies within a restricted area of 25 km were issued. That was the first phase of the sell-out.

This write-up is based on the lack of political, scientific, economic and cultural opposition over the proposed extension of mining operations by Star Cements. No one has raised the question over the benefits to the local community from such mining. From social media videos one can see the overall community support for the proposed extension in the mining area and over the jobs that it can locally provide. The only opposition in the public hearing was from NGOs such as KSU and HITO and it is generally over environment issues which the Meghalaya State Pollution Control Board and Forest Department can easily brush aside, even if the new mining proposals are in principle totally against the establishment and

This is huge by any means of measurement!

The point here is that Meghalaya in its desire to become known as an industrially developed state makes the most appealing, most attractive Industrial Policy. People are then invited to invest in the state which again through its Directorate of Mineral Resources makes no secret of the vast mineral wealth just waiting to be exploited. Some unknown industrial entity or fly by night operator from somewhere in India comes across this policy and decides to take advantage of it. He comes in and finds a paradise in heaven with greedy politicians eager to serve themselves and a public totally indifferent as to what kind of future they leave for their children. Ideal environment for a Sell Out!

Taking the Star Cement example one has to ask just how much Star Cement ploughs back to the owners of the limestone deposits from where the limestone for the cement is produced? Incidentally the real owners are the communities. So what do the communities that own the limestone get? Practically nothing as the CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is the funding that corporates plough back to the society) by Star Cement is not commensurate with the profits it makes. It's so funny that if it was not so tragic to see the communities that are thus abused and cheated crying out, as in the public hearing, "give us more; give us more! We want more exploitation."

In Lumshnong and Brichymot we must erect a monument that should read "For our today, we took away your tomorrow." The Education Department of Meghalaya must seriously consider teaching our students how to identify a 'Sell Out,' where we stop making fools of ourselves in the future.

Letters to the Editor

On extra-judicial killings

Editor,
I was a little troubled by the article, "Spying and killings by intelligence agencies in foreign countries: What's the big deal?" by Nitya Chakraborty (ST, Oct 22, 2024) because the reasoning in this piece seems to me to be more strategic than moral. The title itself is troubling. Extra-judicial killings should be a big deal. I would say the same of a lot of the Indian anger against Canada right now. One sign of a mature nation is its ability to reflect on its own actions with objectivity. Blind nationalistic patriotism is dangerous, as is absence of patriotism. Yes of course, no nation in the west or elsewhere should indulge diaspora who threaten the integrity of their nations of origin. Moreover, America should not engage in extra-judicial killings in the Global South or elsewhere. But the point is that two wrongs do not make a right. Just because they do it, should we?

Extra-judicial killings are not just legally wrong. They are morally wrong, regardless of who engages in them. They are wrong first and foremost because to kill is wrong -- even when the person killed is unsavoury and dangerous. Such killings are wrong also because they are cowardly unilateral murders -- not duels. They are wrong because they commit violence without any trial or court proceedings.

They are wrong because they commit violence on foreign soil. Finally, they are wrong because they involve large-scale deception.

I understand that realpolitik being what it is, ethical niceties are not always feasible. But these days I find even erstwhile ethical people have become cynical in their support of violence. A Christian friend recently justified war against Gaza, citing realpolitik.

In situations of extreme danger, where it is a choice between killing and being killed -- as in war, or police cross-fire, or domestic violence -- violence can be unavoidable. Clearly, Gandhian methods are not feasible in all contexts. In fact, Gandhiji himself endorsed violence under certain circumstances. But the Sikh activists killed and threatened in Canada and USA respectively, are not on par with terrorists threatening lives. Laws exist for a reason -- to foster ethics and discourage lawless violence.

Should Canada and the US allow Indian diaspora members to engage in dangerous actions and rhetoric that threaten the integrity of the Indian nation? Of course not. But their leaders have to follow the laws already in place. Mere speech cannot be curtailed, no matter how obnoxious it may be. Free speech laws have to be followed. The greater question to debate is the difference between freedom and licentiousness. When does free speech become licentious

and dangerous? Free speech laws in the west will not change until such debates happen in all earnestness.

Yours etc.,
Deepa Majumdar,
Via email

Air threats and the tourism industry

Editor,
Frequent bomb threats on air routes across India are a matter of grave concern and should be tackled professionally to avoid frequent harassment of passengers. This has exposed significant gaps between cyber-security and intelligence gathering. If the threat becomes known when flights are mid-air, the crew will find it extremely difficult to take instant decisions on whether to take the flight back or request for emergency landing at the nearest airport, if available. Safety protocols to be taken after landing are a complex procedure. This cannot happen repeatedly. To address these concerns, the DGCA and Civil Aviation Ministry must take proactive measures to enhance passenger safety and prevent future disruptions. Thorough investigation is necessary to identify the conspirators and motives behind these bomb threats as there is a surge in terrorists activities in Kashmir and also in Delhi. This should be taken seriously as it could be an international conspiracy. Time has come to take up the challenge with seriousness

that also warrants passing of new laws against such hoax callers with stringent punishment. As per media reports, government is working in this direction.

Reports show that in the three-year period from 2014-17, the Indian airline industry had received about 120 bomb threats. To understand the severity of the current problem, let us consider the week from October 14-20. There were bomb threats on around 100 flights in this period. That works out to an average of 14 threats per day!

The chaos this has led to at airports and on planes can be well imagined. A flight that faces a bomb threat has to find a landing slot immediately at a nearby airport. On the ground, heavy-duty bandobast has to be made at short notice, with police, ambulances, bomb squad experts and others ready to take over as soon as the plane lands. Flying protocols across the world are very strict, and a bomb threat can mean not just irate passengers on board, but also real financial losses for the airline.

A flight that receives a bomb threat will have to dump fuel before it reaches the requisite weight for it to make an emergency landing. Then there are the passengers. Their holiday plans or work schedules get inevitably upended more so for those with connecting flights. Imagine the nightmarish ordeal of having to rework their travel plans! There is a huge loss to the

tourism industry where there is maximum generation of jobs.

Matters have come to such a head in the past week that the Union Civil Aviation Minister, Ram Mohan Naidu, addressed the press on the issue. He spoke about how all the threats had proved to be hoaxes, but nonetheless, each one had to be assessed with equal gravity. His department has held meetings with airlines to get their assessment of the situation and to find ways to address the issues. The Aviation Ministry is working with the Ministry of Home Affairs and state law enforcement agencies to speed up investigations into the threats. Naidu stressed that hoax bomb threats would be made into a cognisable offence with fines and punishment. People found guilty of making such threats would be put on a no-fly list.

While that sounds good on paper, it is actually quite tricky to pinpoint a threat caller. Some of the threats are traced to foreign IP addresses. Last week, a 17-year-old school drop-out was arrested over issuing hoax bomb threats from a social media account. But often, threats come in as hoax calls, emails or posts on unknown social media accounts. The very nature of digital media allows camouflage and it is difficult to pinpoint the person/s involved, or their motives. For instance, the 17-year-old apparently had a tiff with his friend, and decided to create a fake social media account in his friend's

name to issue the threats. His plan was to get his friend into trouble. Investigations revealed that over one-third of the threats were made from anonymous and unverified accounts on X. The account was active till Saturday afternoon, but X has since suspended it. The police are trying to track the origins of some of the other threats, but the job at hand is not easy. Even as threats multiply, unexpected problems are cropping up. A Vistara flight en-route to Frankfurt was refused permission to land in Afghanistan, forcing the plane to return to India. In another incident, Singapore sent fighter jets to escort an Indian flight that had received a bomb threat.

Its time for government to deploy all the agencies to find the exact cause of all this nuisance otherwise the Indian economy will suffer great loss with negative impacts to the tourism industry. Chances are that foreign tourists may refrain from visiting India due to uncertainties and cancel their booking.

Due to fresh extremist activities in Kashmir tourism will be adversely impacted and due to hoax bomb threats tourism will be seriously impacted. Immediate remedial measures must be taken by the central government.

Yours etc.,
Yash Pal Raihan,
Via email

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"If you tell the truth, you don't have to remember anything."
—Mark Twain

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Khasi Lineage Act Ultra Vires

THE Sixth Schedule is not superior to the Constitution of India which directs our lives and guards our freedoms. Article 21 of the Constitution guarantees the right to marry the person of one's choice. The right to life is guaranteed by the Constitution. This privilege can only be taken away by a law that is substantively, procedurally, and substantively fair, just, and reasonable. The power of each individual to make decisions on subjects vital to the pursuit of happiness is intrinsic to the liberty guaranteed by the Constitution as a fundamental right. The Khasi Hills District Council has subversively taken away the right of a Khasi woman to marry the person of her choice by dangling the Sword of Damocles over her head. Now, if a Khasi woman marries a non-tribal she will lose her Scheduled Tribe status and so too will her children. This means she is stripped of the right to inherit or buy property in the State of Meghalaya. This Act needs to be tested in a court of law before the district councils abuse the Sixth Schedule which is intended to be the custodian of customary practices and which above all is guided by the Constitution. So while a non-tribal woman who becomes a spouse of a Khasi male is inducted into the Khasi fold along with her children and is given a new clan name with the prefix 'Khar' why is it taboo for a Khasi woman to marry a non-tribal? This Act is misogynistic, sexist and reeks of Khasi male chauvinism.

An intrinsic part of Article 21 of the Constitution is the freedom of choice in marriage, the Supreme Court had stated emphatically on more than one occasion. The apex court also holds that when crimes of coerced marriages occur, they are the outcome of a state's ineptitude or unwillingness to protect its citizens' fundamental rights. Article 21, which deals with the right to life and personal liberty, is a broad provision that encompasses the inalienable right to marry the person of one's choice. Further, the Supreme Court in a particular ruling said, "The role of society in deciding our choice of spouses is non-existent." Article 21, which deals with the right to life and personal liberty, is a broad provision that encompasses the inalienable right to marry the person of one's choice. According to Article 21 of the Indian Constitution, the right to marriage is an element of the right to life. Within the scope of the right to start a family, the right to marry is also specified in the Human Rights Charter. The right to marry is a universal right that applies to everyone, regardless of gender. The freedom to marry has also been viewed as an intrinsic aspect of the right to life under Article 21 by several courts around the country. What is curious is the Governor's assent to the Bill when he has yet to understand the intricate nuances of the Khasi tradition and society and the malicious intent behind the Bill.

Letters to the Editor

The Rs 2,300-crore road to scandal

Editor,
The recent exposure of a massive Rs 2,300-crore road project scam in Meghalaya has sent shockwaves through the State and beyond. Of course, it has also sent ripples of "disbelief" across the State so far as public developmental works are concerned. The main culprits? Senior government engineers from the state and officials from private companies based in Telangana and Haryana, who, it seems, mistook a road project for a get-rich-quick scheme! Yes, a crucial road linking Shillong with Tura via Nongstoin, approved way back in 2010 as part of the Special Road Development Programme-North East, was thus hijacked by "greed" and mismanagement. This is unpardonable! Why this went unnoticed for so long raises serious questions about the Government's oversight. This road, which should have been a smooth ride to progress, has instead been mired in scandal, with taxpayers' money flowing down the drain like rain on a bad Meghalaya monsoon day!

The filing of an FIR by the PWD (NH) Chief Engineer marks the beginning of what must be a rigorous and uncompromising investigation. It is essential that the Government approaches this investigation, with the help of the CBI, with utmost seriousness. No one should be allowed to dodge the "potholes" of justice. Every

contractor, every engineer, and every official, no matter how high up, must face the consequences if found guilty. After all, we can't afford another such scandal where public money is siphoned off with ease, leaving the public in the lurch.

Yours etc.,
Salil Gewali,
Shillong

Why India cannot be held responsible

Editor,
This is with regards to the article "Indians should be more circumspect" (ST Oct 18, 2024). I have been waiting to respond to the author but due to some unforeseen circumstances, it was delayed. In the article, the writer seems to have switched sides. The writer wrote, "This article makes it sound as if Mr Trudeau has a personal vendetta against India—a narrow subjective view that runs the risk of distorting the truth" in response to a previous article. Well, just to put it out there the West has been trying to come after India since the beginning. Even if India was responsible for the assassination, we were simply following the footsteps of the West. So, trying to hold India accountable for the killing of Nijjar would be hypocritical. And yes, we've elected the government to act for us and what happened was necessary for national security. Meanwhile, Mr Trudeau is a mere puppet of the Deep State, which has forced him beyond his geopolitical ability

by targeting India. Moreover, the Government of India does not need to provide any sort of assistance in the false allegations that have so far just been a waste of time. The accounts of the RCMP are baseless, and Trudeau expects the Indian Government to cooperate. But Canada has been harbouring anti-India sentiments for a while, and taking on New Delhi would be challenging for Ottawa. Attacks and vandalising of the High Command are just a few instances. Although the killing of a terrorist on Canadian soil seems to have brought misery to the author, who is a Western spox often agreeing with the foreign masters. Any strategic move by the Indian government about the country's security would be criticised by such. The entire narrative is playing out exactly like expected by the deep state, responsible for all clandestine operations in the East.

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request
Via email

Negative narratives versus validation

Editor,
The long letter by the unknown author titled, "Caste reservation effectiveness" (ST, October 22, 2024), in response to my letter dated October 19, deserves to have a discussion on every point of it.

Before reflecting on the points raised in the letter, let me clarify one thing - which is that my support for the

caste based reservation has nothing to do with my personal interest. Throughout my life, I remained in the general category. The reservation policy did not give me anything. Rather, it delayed my first promotion and I lost one promotion in my service life because of it. I am saying this only to point out that my belief in the caste reservation is based on absolute objective logic and not for my personal gain.

But I would have gladly accepted the benefits of reservation had I been in the reserved category. It is because I think it is an honour, duty, and responsibility for a person in the backward caste group to get a chance to represent their community in the government either elected or selected part of it. Our democracy would have turned into an aristocracy if the backward castes did not accept the reservation policy.

It would have been a disaster for democracy if the backward castes found nothing wrong in the practice of five per cent ruling over ninety-five per cent and let this system continue. My belief in democracy and in the reservation policy led me to give moral support to my SC colleague, who got a promotion over me.

There is no either - or choice between the reservation policy and the education system that promotes egalitarian ideals. Since there is no quarrel between the two, therefore it is wrong to say that the reservation policy should be scrapped to promote liberal education. To stick to this argument takes us to the trap of false dilemma

for the protection of our hills, our forests, our rivers. The survival of the Jaitbynriew as a unique people can only be guaranteed by the protection of the living land which underpins that uniqueness. Tragically in the warped and narrow world we inhabit, 'dominion' means ownership not stewardship, while the word 'jaitbynriew' will be routinely trotted out to suit personal, populist, political or financial gains; robbing it of all sanctity and foundation. Our people thrived because they learnt through careful observation how to respect and not mistreat the land, rightly referred to as their mother - Ka Mei Ramew. And there we have another concept that increasingly rings hollow - literally. As for the public hearing, it is as the editor points out a sham, a smoke screen - an empty exercise in box-ticking especially if those who op-

East Jaintia Hills District has already borne the brunt of polluting coke and cement factories wrecking the environment and the health of its people - it should not be made to endure more. Perhaps the fact that those who authorise coke plants and limestone mining do not live anywhere near these factories and quarries, might explain why they can adopt such selfish policies.

By Janet Hujon

straits the church finds itself in, the solution adopted should not be a licence to kill the countryside.

Ironically the Bible abounds in natural imagery asking us to look and learn: consider the lilies of the field, behold the fowls of the air, and see how by the river upon the bank thereof shall all trees grow whose fruit thereof shall be for meat and the leaf thereof for medicine. If the last example is not community knowledge, then what is? The Cree Nation spoke as much for us as for themselves when they said: Only when the last tree has died and the last river poisoned and the last fish been caught will we realise that we cannot eat money. Pay heed to this prophecy and be sorely afraid. Don't just post it on social media - for God's sake, protest.

It often frustrates me to see that the loud urban clamour to protect the Jaitbynriew does not call out as fervently

pose the project are barred entry. So much for the democratic process - does anyone smell a rat? Already in 2017 the Shillong Times posed the question: 'Who will save Narpuh from imminent destruction?' [Then view again \[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=19qX_GUhPS0\]\(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=19qX_GUhPS0\) Kong Lato and Bah P S Nongbri, those guardians of our forests voiced the urgent need to protect our forests. If honest local experts have voiced their concerns, is that not enough? The public and](https://theshillongtimes.com/2017/06/26/who-will-save-narpuh-from-imminent-destruction/?ak-action=reject_mobile_Narpuh, our very own Black Forest (Ki Khloo Wa long), birthplace of the Lukha, the Kupli, the Apha and of poetry and legend waiting to blossom once we crossed the borders of the imagination. Obviously none of this matters anymore. It is just a story.</p></div><div data-bbox=)

who authorise coke plants and limestone mining do not live anywhere near these factories and quarries, might explain why they can adopt such selfish policies. As ever 'ki non-gkyndong', those who inhabit the corners, the marginalised villagers, are treated with contempt as if their lives are of no consequence. Let them eat dust...then choke to death. But the cruellest twist to the tale is that despite all the evidence, there is local support for a cement company. Unbelievable. The seeds of disunity have been successfully sown, and I don't need to tell you who will benefit most from the harvest - not the locals.

But perhaps the opposition against limestone mining in East Jaintia Hills is cause for hope however fragile. The FKJGP-EJHJU, the KSU, YFC, the JWC, the Hyniewtep Youth Council, have registered their protest and the latter's opposition 'aligns with the concerns of residents of Wahiajer village as well as those from Narpuh Elaka and the broader district community'... (Shillong Times, October 15) Maybe there will be a stay of execution and we can call ourselves people who possess honour - *kiba donburom*. People who know that honour is not status based on material wealth but a recognition of commonwealth. The hills, the valleys, the rivers are part of our being - we belong to them, they are part of us but we do not own them.

I often think the Church in our hills resembles the British monarchy, constitutional in nature with little real power to affect the laws of the land, but nonetheless possessing almost unrivalled authority in shaping the foundations of moral thought and action. We can forgive the monarchy's fall from grace for they are but human. But for the church to 'err' in this way is not being human, because it is to Faith Organisations we turn in our need to rise above the worldly. In that context the Church has to be superhuman. If the guiding light from that lodestar sputters and dies, won't we all be plunged into the darkness of chaos.

Many years ago, an academic from the School of Oriental & African Studies made what I thought was an interesting comment. She said that Khasi has many words for sadness. I now ask myself is this because we have much to be sad about?

"My teacher gave this paper to me and told me to only give it to my mother."

His mother read it out loud to her child, "Your son is a genius. This school is too small for him and doesn't have enough good teachers for him. Please teach him yourself."

After his mother died, and he became one of the greatest inventors, he found a paper on which it was written, "Your son is added (mentally ill). We won't let him come to school any more." Edison cried and then he wrote in his diary, "Thomas Alva Edison was an added child that by a hero mother became the genius of the century."

Thomas Alva Edison cried and said that he was an added child because he knew that the negative narrative of the teacher could have made him so if his mother did not turn it into a validation. Non-Aryan people showed more talent than Aryans in architecture, engineering, town planning, and administration. But what is the effect of caste hierarchy and the practice of untouchability which is still followed by one out of four Indians? They have had a devastating impact on the backward castes. This, plus caste based nepotism, will rule the roost if caste reservation is not in place.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De.,
Kolkata

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.

With a review pending, Supreme Court hardens stand against Enforcement Directorate

Agency warned against violation of constitutional rights of PMLA accused

By K Raveendran

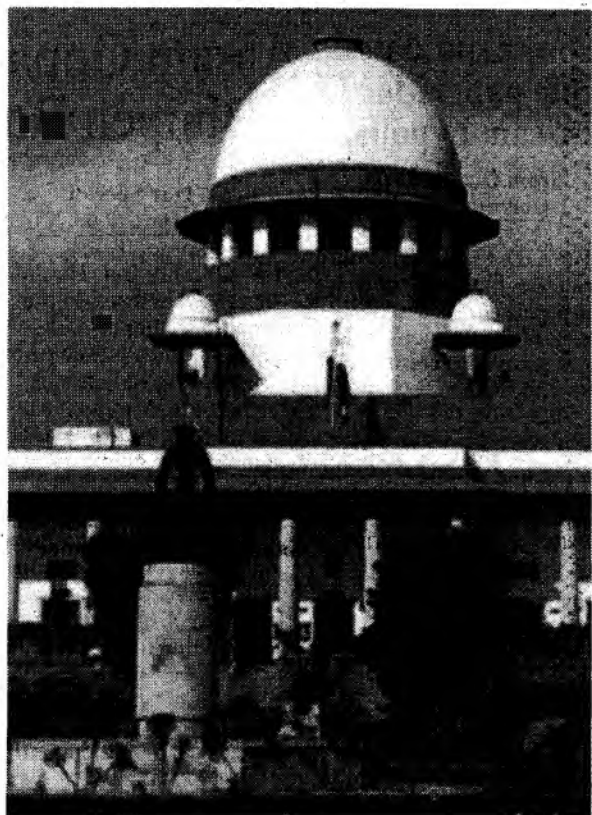
Successive pronouncements by the Supreme Court have revealed a growing judicial sense against the potential for abuse in the draconian anti-money laundering laws. This has an important bearing on the pending petitions for the review of the apex courts verdict in the 2022 verdict by a three-member bench upholding all the provisions of the controversial Prevention of Money Laundering Act.

Last month the Supreme Court had fixed October 16-17 for resuming hearing on the petitions seeking review of the verdict, but the dates have passed without any progress. But in another case this week, a bench of the court issued a stern warning to the Enforcement Directorate about the manner in which PMLA was being implemented.

The Supreme Court has recently intensified scrutiny over the Enforcement Directorate's (ED) application

powers conferred upon the ED by the PMLA. Critics assert that the Act allows for excessive governmental overreach, where individuals can be arrested on vague charges and subjected to lengthy investigations without adequate safeguards. This has raised alarm bells about potential abuses, particularly in politically sensitive cases.

The case of Vijay Madanlal Choudhary has become emblematic of these concerns. The Supreme Court's decision in this case affirmed the provisions of the PMLA, enabling the ED to act with significant autonomy in its investigations and arrests. Detractors of the Act argue that it undermines the principles of natural justice by allowing the ED to proceed without the necessary legal checks, such as prior approval from a magistrate for arrest or the requirement of direct evidence linking ac-



of the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA), signalling a critical shift in the judicial approach to anti-money laundering laws. This development is particularly significant as the Court prepares to resume hearings on petitions seeking a review of its 2022 decision, which upheld the controversial provisions of the PMLA.

Last month, the Supreme Court scheduled October 16-17 to hear the petitions challenging its earlier ruling in the landmark case of Vijay Madanlal Choudhary v Union of India. This ruling had confirmed the constitutionality of several provisions of the PMLA, which critics argue have been misused for political vendettas and harassment. However, the dates passed without any hearings taking place, leaving many concerned about the future of the law's implementation and the rights of individuals implicated under it.

This week, the Court issued a stark warning to the ED regarding its handling of PMLA cases, emphasizing the necessity of adhering to due process and ensuring that individuals are not unjustly targeted. The Court's recent comments followed a case involving Anil Tuteja, a former Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officer, who was summoned and arrested under the PMLA without sufficient consideration of his legal rights. The Court expressed its dissatisfaction with the ED's approach, underscoring the importance of following proper legal protocols before taking drastic actions such as arrests.

The backdrop of the petitions for review reveals a growing concern among legal experts, civil rights advocates, and affected individuals regarding the expansive

cused individuals to specific criminal acts.

The recent statements from the Supreme Court suggest an evolving judicial perspective, one that increasingly recognizes the potential for misuse of laws designed to combat serious crimes like money laundering. The observations made in Tuteja's case point to a judicial willingness to reevaluate the balance between the state's enforcement powers and the protection of individual rights, echoing sentiments expressed by legal scholars and human rights activists.

The upcoming hearings on the review petitions could mark a pivotal moment in the interpretation and application of the PMLA. The Court's engagement in this matter reflects a broader trend of judicial oversight in cases where there are concerns about due process and the rights of defendants. By taking a more proactive stance, the judiciary aims to curb potential excesses by enforcement agencies that may exploit anti-money laundering laws for motives unrelated to the original intent of the legislation.

As the Supreme Court prepares to address these pressing issues, the legal community is watching closely. The outcome of the hearings could have far-reaching implications, not only for the future of the PMLA but also for the landscape of criminal law in India. Should the Court find that the current framework of the PMLA is prone to abuse, it may lead to significant reforms aimed at protecting the rights of individuals while still empowering law enforcement to combat genuine financial crimes. (IPA Service)

"Once you've been through tough times,
you can only become stronger."

— Alesha Dixon

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SHILLONG, FRIDAY, OCTOBER 25, 2024

Priyanka in Wayanad

IT might sound curious that Priyanka Gandhi Vadra has chosen to try and enter Parliament through Wayanad, a tribal-dominated constituency in the southern state of Kerala. There, however, is a reason to an extent that her brother Rahul Gandhi fought and won the seat twice. He vacated it this time to represent Rae Bareilly, a family constituency in Uttar Pradesh that elected him with a margin larger than that of Wayanad. By all reckoning, Wayanad is a safe seat for the "first family". The district comprises a sizable population of Muslims and Christians, who are generally supporters of the Congress party. So are tribals and segments of migrant agriculturists who came from other districts and settled down there through generations. Communists are a force to reckon with too, but the collective will of the other segments have the potential in them to ensure a Congress-UDF victory. Little wonder, then, that the Nehru family repeatedly zeroes in on Wayanad for their entry to Parliament. Notably, Indira Gandhi too had contested and won polls from the South – the tribal belts in Karnataka and united Andhra Pradesh in the past.

The huge presence of Congress leaders – from chief ministers to party heavyweights like AICC president Mallikarjun Kharge at the nomination presentation event on Wednesday demonstrates the seriousness the family and the Congress party attaches to Priyanka Gandhi's parliament entry. With Priyanka Gandhi likely passing the litmus test for legitimate leadership, the assertion is also that the Congress party will remain family-centric in future too. As is often noted, the Nehru family is the glue that keeps the rank and file of the party united. In their absence at the helm, the party would disintegrate – also for the reason that the Congress party hardly has other leaders who have a high stature or public acceptance. This is evident in the case of the present party chief Kharge too, who is believed to be dancing to the tunes of Rahul Gandhi and the rest of the family.

The Congress party has managed to come out of its deep sense of distress over the series of defeats it suffered after 2014, when the BJP held a huge sway over the nation. With assembly poll wins in Karnataka, Telangana, Himachal Pradesh etc, the chances of a revival for the party's fortunes was evident. In Haryana, clever games of the BJP robbed the Congress of a promised victory. In fact, the good tidings for the down-and-out Congress came after Rahul Gandhi set himself on the Bharat Jodo March, starting from Cape Comorin in the South and reaching up to Jammu and Kashmir. He followed this up with a similar journey from the East to the West. All these bode well for the cause of national integration.

Why this obsession with the past? Is the future too daunting?

By Patricia Mukhim

The vocabulary of a Khasi especially when he/she makes a public speech is replete with the words 'kolshor' (culture) ka riti ka dastur (tradition) jaitbynriew (the exclusive term for our people), ka niam ka rukom, (religion and rituals) ka imlang - sahlang (society... literal interpretation existing together, living together). These words are first used to make people feel they are a special breed, descended straight from heaven to inhabit this special place in the centre of the earth (ka shong shong pdeng pyrthei) whose boundaries are now under contestation. After emotions have been sufficiently whipped up to make us feel we are a special race so that we forget our present plight, we are then told in graphic details that our present fate is because there is the outsider waiting and watching to usurp what belongs to us.

Now, we are a society that's not known for critical thinking or questioning. That's because we grew up being told that whatever the elders say cannot and should not be contested. Khasis believe conversations can happen only among peers; so children speak to their age group; adolescents to theirs and adult talk among themselves. Children cannot have a respectful conversation with their parents. Perhaps educated parents may do so but many parents only talk down to their kids. Naturally when kids who have never been allowed to speak, grow up they don't speak at school and even in college. How many students can stand up and tell their teachers they have not understood what was taught? They won't and they can't. So they just go back home not understanding many of the concepts taught and which teachers take for granted is understood. The feedback loop is non-existent. The accumulation of concepts not understood is what leads to failure and dropping out of school ultimately.

Silence is the attribute of even the best of scholars. The few who talk only do so on issues they are directly affected by. They are hardly concerned about price rise; mal-governance; poor road conditions; growing poverty; single mothers; the fall in education standards etc. Some teachers are afflicted by the abysmal quality of the MBOSE syllabus but cannot go public on that matter.

They say that the MBOSE syllabus does not equip our students with the acumen to write the NEET, CUET and other competitive exams. Now the question to MBOSE and more specifically the Education Minister is why does MBOSE not have a curriculum which outlines the educational goals and structure of the entire learning programme besides the learning standards, details, lessons and supporting materials? A syllabus only outlines the topics, objective and requirements of a particular course. It is important for MBOSE to have both for best learning outcomes.

Now why are educated parents, some of whom are teachers themselves not pointing this out to the Education Minister? Have we ever heard of a parents' body ever meeting the Education Minister or officials of the Education department to engage with them on the ailments that afflict MBOSE? Why not? Why talk about these things only amongst themselves? How does that help anyone at all? Have we ever heard MLAs discussing the fate of the students of MBOSE because of the limitations of the syllabus? All the noise we hear are about the grievances of teachers who are either not paid on time or are underpaid. Has anyone ever taken out a procession or a fast on behalf of students? I have not heard of a protest on behalf of students who are forced to study under a self-limiting system that does not equip them to compete with their peers in the CBSE and ICSE learning systems.

Our time and energy is spent on discussing issues on social media which in a way helps us vent but does not resolve our problems because it does not reach the right quarters. Many of our youth who are victims of the educational system that does not recognise their special needs, go on to become songsters who moan their fates through their lyrics. Thankfully there is a system that pays singers today but is every singer able to eke out a livelihood? Perhaps not. It is here that we need to discuss the future and not obfuscate it by romanticising the past.

As a society that keeps harping on the past one would imagine that the past must have been a golden era.

If so, why are our folk tales so grim and dark? Is there anything we can learn from them that would stand us in good stead in the future? I don't think so. Then what is the romance with the past all about? In fact, one songster who is no longer with us, even crafted a patriotic song that put the blame for all the dirt and filth around the hills and dales of his beloved land to the 'mynder shingri' (a rank outsider). Why are we always ready to pin the blame on some outsider? When have we ever had a deep reflection cum introspection on what actually ails us and try and remedy the causes rather than live in denial?

I was talking to a young man the other day and he was troubled by the kind of ranting (with all the swear words in Khasi) on social media. He said it seemed as if these young ravers were deeply frustrated and angry with the world around them. This is not the only thing afflicting our youth today. We have several homes that are dealing with at least one drug addict or alcoholic. Think of the predicament of those families especially if they are poor and cannot afford to take their son for rehab. These are issues we need to confront instead of harping on a past that is of no help to deal with the present challenges.

Sure we have a Tirot Sing and a Kiang Nongbah that our young men wish to emulate but are they using the achievement of these two heroes as the symbolic gold standard to live up to? Do they know that the standard-bearer for significance in the future will be a thousand-fold greater? The reality is that the present requires us to be ready for the disruptive technological changes which are shaking our very foundations and our laid back attitudes. We still stroll to our workplace without a care for punctuality and we have ready-made excuses – traffic jams to dish out.

In Meghalaya today, higher education is inaccessible to the socio-economically underprivileged, but does higher education really help? As I see it, higher education only certifies knowledge. It does not nurture learning. Rather it focuses on easily-outdated knowledge. In brief, it is failing on both

counts of quality and access. These are issues that need discussion; not only just poor governance and corruption which topics are faded and jaded and politicians could not be bothered about.

I am not sure how MBOSE is adapting to the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 – a policy that came after 34 years. NEP 2020 aims to recognise the need to evaluate "higher order skills" such as creativity, critical thinking, problem solving, visualisation, and idea generation. It emphasises on multi-disciplinary learning and no separations being made between vocational and academic streams. One recognises that implementing NEP requires resource injection into the education sector. Actually, right now, education should be the focus of Meghalaya. Other things will fall in place if we have a critical mass that can think for itself; think futuristic; question those that are elected to run the government and hold them accountable. Enough of looking back at the past. It's the future that we need to envision. Our politicians need to outline what that future is that they are planning for the youth twenty or thirty years hence. That roadmap should be planned in a participatory manner, taking the youth into confidence.

The past is dead and gone. Take the good examples and use those to move forward. Our problem springs from the heavy reliance on tradition and traditional institutions when the demand is for modern governance with all its accountability mechanisms in place. But tradition and accountability are poles apart. Everyone wants power without accountability. Isn't that Meghalaya's biggest challenge? Look at the difficulties posed by the different dorbar shong even in road construction projects. How many power centres can there be which are pulling in all directions at the cost of development. People are vocal when it comes to giving land to cement plants but not vocal when development projects are stalled by different pressure groups and power centres. These are harsh realities to deal with today. Let the past be buried. And truth be told we don't even know enough about the past. How much is fact and how much fiction? So make new songs and create new ideas!

Apart from the scenic beauty of this bridge are the beautiful flower beds encircling the Lake. I feel that without being able to use this bridge visitors are deprived of the sheer pleasure of experiencing the breathtaking beauty of Ward's Lake.

My question is – what is hindering the concerned Department of the present Government from repairing the old bridge. And if it's beyond repair then why can't a new one be built along similar lines or something even more beautiful with a modern outlook for the past 2 years? It makes me wonder if for this very small and narrow bridge, it should take so long for the Government to address then do we dare to expect the same Government to have the sincerity and commitment as well as the financial resources to build an alternative bridge across the Umiam Lake for heavy vehicular traffic for the convenience of all. Considering this snail pace of all developmental projects across the State, I dare to state that this will never materialize in the near future. This is such a sad state of affairs, isn't it?

Yours etc.,
Helen Dkhar,
Via email

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Meeting the Media

By Avner Pariat

On September 20, 2024, the first ever Meghalaya Media Meet (M3) was held and it was a good initiative I thought. Bringing members of the Press and Media together in order to parley with the Government is very important. We need to discuss the issues and obstacles that the fraternity are facing. Oftentimes everyone pays simple lip service to the Press as the Fourth Pillar of Democracy but very little is done to actually address the problems faced by the members of this crucial and vital service. Two issues which were brought up and which I thought were very interesting were the requests by the Press members for an old-age pension and for housing and accommodation. But these are by no means, isolated only to the Press. There is an urgent need for pensions and housing for the wider public also. The Chief Minister spoke about how these two demands would be very difficult to achieve. He said that if his Government gave the Press pensions and housing then it would have to do the same with everyone else. I thought to myself at that moment – so just give everyone housing and pensions! It might sound absurd but why not?

Kindly endorse my digression a bit. I don't see why we can't have state-wide housing and pension plans laid in place and rolled out. We have enough borrowings right now. And if the question comes up – Public debt is not something to be scared of. As eminent economists like John Kenneth Galbraith and Stephanie Kelton have argued in their own manner, time and again, governments need to spend without being obsessed about bringing down the deficit. In the case of Housing, government will have to do the heavy lifting. Providing accommodation which people can then pay for with a low instalment (annually or monthly) over a long period of time can be done. As we heard recently, the CM went on about 50-year loans at a press conference (on Sep 2024). So why can't the government do this important and crucial task over that time period? Certainly, it is not an unusual idea as many other successful nations have undertaken Housing programmes. Singapore for instance.

Secondly, since most of Meghalaya's population is under 35 it is a golden opportunity to set up a pension fund which can make strategic investments into the Bombay Stock Exchange (or others) thereby reaping dividends which will make life more comfortable for these young people after their retirement. Again, with planning and purpose, this can be done. It depends now on what the masters of the state believe in at the end of the day. Do they believe that people should have prosperous and comfortable lives or do they still cling to the old uncle idea of "there's no free lunch"? I will leave it at that but these would be popular political decisions and would reap electoral dividends for sure.

Where was I? Oh yes, so I must applaud Mr Vijay Kumar Mantri for organising the first M3 (I hope it becomes a regular affair). It was a much-needed platform for media people, Press personnel and the government to discuss issues and tackle problems, in particular the rather serious problem of fake news and disinformation. It is no secret that YouTube and especially Facebook have been at the forefront of this problem. Globally there are numerous reports that have highlighted this. And it is no different here. One may recall the 2018 troubles caused by quick-fingered angry young men over the Them Meteor altercation and how they leveraged technology to create chaos. Facebook and its child WhatsApp were

instrumental. It cannot be denied that these platforms have been responsible for fostering and strengthening toxicity whether that be racism, sexism or bigotry of every hue and colour. But as we sat down to our panel discussion it became apparent that the underlying reason would not be traced out and the talk turned instead to putting the blame on social media influencers and YouTubers. It seemed clear that many of my friends in the Press had in fact decided – though cautiously – to back a proposed government curb on these alleged agents of disinformation. I felt that this was not wise because it went against the constitutional freedom we have, to dissent and disagree with our government. It seemed to me to be a case of the Establishment i.e. old media/Press waging a war with new media i.e. influencers and YouTubers, with the government serving as the cudgel. So, as we sat down and proceeded with our discussion, I asked a simple question: we were all in agreement that fake news and disinformation are issues that must be tackled, we were equally in agreement that it was uninformed and biased opinionators who were to blame BUT where did they learn all these tricks of the trade? They did not simply decide to do any of this without a template nor example set before them by others. They learned it from somewhere and it was at that moment that I reminded the audience about a few recent headlines that had been published by the established media houses of Shillong. These also happened to be entirely vernacular (Khasi) newspapers. Let me quickly give a few gems without naming the sources as I want this to be instructional not vindictive.

KA BOR JONG KA JINGDUWAL, KIHATIRUH KIM TREH BAN THOMBOR - Translation – The power of prayer keeps even elephants away (a story run by a Khasi newspaper to push the idea that if you're confronted by rampaging elephants you should just pray and they will sweetly and kindly go away)

HUSIAR HABA PHITHIAH MYNMIET, IOH BAPHIN SHAH SIAT IAP HA KA SORKAR - Translation – Be careful when you sleep at night lest you get shot dead by the government (a story run to ostensibly highlight the gunning down of Mr Cherish-terfield Thangkiew but the click baiting is apparent)

UBAH PAUL ULA PYNPAW BA U IEID MYNDER RI - Translation – Bah Paul (Lyngdoh) has proven that he loves foreign invaders i.e., non-tribals (a carefully chosen headline which was ostensibly uttered by the pressure group HNYF but the signalling is very evident)

As I wound up my examples I once again turned to the audience and asked them again: Who has taught these young influencers and YouTubers how to spread disinformation and fake news? The room was quite silent. As I have mentioned before I think platforms like M3 are crucial if only for the sole purpose of airing out dirty laundry in public. For too long have vested interests, particularly those political in nature, been allowed to play games with the minds and hearts of the local populace through the Press and media. Disinformation is an old game and it cannot be blamed on any one group in particular. By no means can we not dissent and question our government, its actions and its functionaries. We must and will dissent! But we must be wary of those who seek to make us irrational, illogical, unscientific and who strive to whip up public hysteria at any chance possible.

Letters to the Editor

North Eastern Region exploited

Editor,

The special article, "Profile of a Sellout" by Shambud Joshi (ST October 23, 2024) made interesting reading. Late J. Dringwell Rymbai, a former school teacher who later entered politics and also became the Chief Minister of Meghalaya for 268 days (June 15, 2006 to March 10, 2007) knew very well what he was doing and he did what was right. But a person whose conscience is already dead will do anything to profit from the so-called single window system. The book of Mark, Chapter 8 verse 36 records the statement of Jesus Christ as, "For what does it profit a man, to gain the whole world, and forfeit his life?" If the statement of the author in his article is factual on the removal of the simple Chief Minister, who did not act as the Chief of the Congress party wanted, then what we have is the Congress party as it is today.

This business of cement plants in Meghalaya initiated in 2004 was never meant to benefit our people. It benefited and continues to benefit the rogues and rascals who are guided by those 'fly by night operators'. Reading the draft Vision 2047 of the NEC which is in the public domain the docu-

ment states, "The industrial promotion schemes and incentives initiated in 1990s in the form of NEIPP and still continuing as NEIDS could not make any major dent". The document cites several examples like the "Tea industry and how the outflow of development gains has consistently occurred and been institutionalised. The very pattern of ownership, modes of production system and linkages with markets ensure that nothing remains in the NE Region except low wages and fringe benefits to the workers. Most of the sales proceeds derived from both national and global markets get directed to the metropolitan cities, consistently usurped by merchant capitalists and other intermediaries. Only a trickle flows down to the hapless workers who actually struggle for generations to recover their own savings of gratuity and provident funds.

The much-celebrated new dictum of 'fair trading' has actually justifiably consolidated these outflows. A more telling story has been that of the manufacturing sector where some of the top brands have set up their factories, mostly attracted by and to the avail of both NEIPP and NEIDS." The document goes on to say, "the failure of the respective state governments to devise ways and means to monitor some of these 'fly by night operators', legally retain them for at least a few decades and institutionalize

the participative process has led to huge industrial development vacuum and credibility gap as reflected in increasing local resistance to such outside participation. This phenomenon is widely prevalent across the sectors and sub-sectors".

The draft NEC Vision 2047 adds and suggests "As the returns from private economic activities are not ploughed back the generation of employment and income outside the government sector has been very dismal. The cream of development gets siphoned off outside the State. This is how the North Eastern Region has been steadily losing what John Maynard Keynes calls the multiplier effect." The writers of the document further suggest that the policy makers should steadily revert to a growth model that retains maximum generated development gains within the communities and geographies of the North Eastern Region. It urges the rebuilding a class of local entrepreneurs, injecting newer technology and skills, bringing a variety of multilateral development and philanthropic organisations, up-skilling the youths for local-national-global employment market, promoting multiple stake holdings, reorienting the entire natural resources, commodity, hydro power and industrial policy, all geared towards the economic growth of the region. Sadly, no state

government even bothers to read the vision document. All are interested in short term personal gains.

Yours etc;
VK Lyngdoh
Via email

Exploitative work culture

Editor,

A four-year old child and her father died after being run over by a taxi with an allegedly dozing driver when they were walking to board a bus for school in Kolkata on Tuesday morning. Amid the persistent demand for a 70-hour work culture by the Infosys co-founder, N.R. Narayana Murthy, and other corporate entrepreneurs, overwork makes drowsy drivers meet fateful accidents on highways.

According to a 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. This kind of overwork is a slow way to slaughter people.

Not only is this a loot of the lifeblood of our youth but also it is taking the lives of many people in road accidents. Long work hours made drivers physically exhausted. This, plus the 10-minute delivery at the doorstep policy of certain e-commerce platforms are two of the reasons behind many road traffic accidents

in our country.

On the other hand, Indian Railways have been playing with our lives by not filling up vacant posts and by forcing their personnel, even loco pilots, to overwork. An RTI reply says that of 1,27,644 sanctioned posts of loco pilots and assistant loco pilots, 18,766 – nearly 15 per cent – were vacant as of March 1 this year. How can a loco pilot remain alert if he has to do extra shifts?

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

Ward's Lake bridge an abandoned project?

Editor,

This letter pertains to our very old, beautiful and iconic wooden bridge at Ward's Lake. This small yet beautiful and centrally located bridge at the Lake had been serving as a go between the two scenic pedestrian paths circling this amazing lake for the public since its inception. Sadly this bridge has been closed for two years now as it is no longer safe due to its dilapidated condition. The locals as well as tourists who throng the lake on a daily basis now have to walk around the entire lake in order to cross from one path to another as this bridge is no longer serviceable.

*"You cannot have a positive life
and a negative mind."*

— Joyce Meyer

The Shillong Times

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NEHU in a quandary

NOT a day passes without some confrontation or the other being reported out of what was once a premier university of North East India – the North Eastern Hill University (NEHU). It started with the appointment of the last Vice Chancellor, SK Srivastava during whose tenure NEHU's fall from grace began. A day after the end of his tenure in July 2021, SK Srivastava conducted a meeting of the Executive Council and took several decisions which the NEHU Teachers' Association (NEHUTA) terms as illegal. All these acts are carried out with the collusion of the then registrar. The present Vice Chancellor, Prof PS Shukla was appointed the new VC on July 22 by which time the term of Prof S.K. Srivastava as VC had ended. But the Registrar of NEHU did not announce the appointment of Shukla as new VC, thereby allowing for an illegally conducted meeting to happen. What Srivastava did was to appoint one Professor in the slot reserved for the senior-most Professor as a member of the Executive Council. The actual senior-most Professor was arbitrarily denied the place and the list of seniority too was grossly violated by the ex-VC.

The problems of NEHU did not end with the outgoing Vice Chancellor. Problems continue to plague NEHU even under the current Vice Chancellor, PS Shukla. Going against all norms practised by former VCs keeping in mind the local ethos, Prof Shukla appointed a retired Army Colonel, Omkar Singh as Controller of Examinations by keeping out qualified, academically experienced and intellectually sound candidates of tribal and ethnic origins from Meghalaya. This is nepotism at its worst since Omkar Singh has no extra credentials other than being a retired army colonel who according to the NEHUTA does not have the grace, dignity and sensitivity needed to administer an academia. Managing the office of Controller of Examinations requires special skills that are not taught in the army and this person has no experience of working in any institution of higher education. The question is why was such a person appointed in the first place? The lack of experience resulted in the delay in declaration of results.

To add salt to injury the NEHU VC, Prof Shukla later appointed Omkar Singh as Registrar, NEHU, a post held by people of eminence in the past including IAS officers. It was under the watch of Omkar Singh that there was total pandemonium at the time of the CUET undergraduate examination in NEHU on May 15, 2024 thereby proving that he was not equal to the task. From all accounts it would appear that the Colonel believes he can run NEHU like a military brigade. No wonder the shrill protests from all quarters. Is this the way to run a premier institution of higher education? A letter of complaint has gone to the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) from NEHUTA. It's time for the PMO to take prompt, necessary action.

Letters to the Editor

Time to rethink caste-based reservations

Editor,
I appreciate Sujit De's thoughtful response in his letter "Negative Narratives versus Validation" (ST, October 24, 2024). While I understand the points raised, I must respectfully assert that relying on caste-based reservations as the primary means to combat caste discrimination may no longer serve the purpose it was initially designed for. The time has come to rethink this policy, as it has started to produce its own set of negative consequences—new divisions, resentment, and a distorted sense of entitlement among certain groups. I also apologize for the length of my previous letters; my intention was to provide a comprehensive view on a matter that deeply concerns me.

The narrative of validation versus negative perceptions cannot justify continuing a policy meant to be temporary. While caste-based discrimination persists, we must evaluate whether reservation policies achieve their intended goals or merely perpetuate division. Justice PB Pardiwalla stated, "The

policy of reservation in education and employment cannot continue indefinitely." Justice Bela M Trivedi emphasized the need to revisit reservation policies: "At the end of 75 years of our Independence, we need to revisit the system of reservation in the larger interest of society as a whole."

Caste-based reservation is often viewed as an honorable system for representing backward castes. However, we must ask: Has it dismantled caste hierarchies or merely reinforced them? Caste divisions persist, and new animosities have emerged, especially among younger generations who view reservation as a battleground for limited resources.

The purpose of reservation was to level the playing field by providing opportunities to those who had been historically marginalized. In today's context, it creates division rather than unity. While the author discusses validation, we must consider the resentment generated among those who feel excluded, regardless of merit. Caste-based reservation has created competition for benefits tied to caste identity, rather than striving for merit and progress.

The author suggests that caste-based reservation is essential for uplifting marginalized groups. However, caste no longer correlates

The name Michael N Syiem has become synonymous with the Maitshaphrang Movement, which is known to be a critic of the Khasi matrilineal system. From time to time, the organization comments on current issues or reiterates some old demands that are yet to be fulfilled. However, one thing that those who know him often repeat about Michael Syiem is that he has never changed his stance on issues that are dear to him. I am told that his views on less government being better, the dismantling of the district council, and criticism of the matrilineal system have never changed for the last 25 years. Whether one agrees with his views or not, his consistency is highly remarkable, as many organizations, in his words, "are issue-based," while the one he leads, i.e., the Maitshaphrang Movement, is agenda-based—they start a movement based on an agenda, achieve it, and then move on to the next. This is very true when one analyzes the movements he has been part of over the years.

Michael Syiem is known for having been at the forefront of the Right to Information (RTI) movement, which finally led to the passing of the Act and the establishment of the Lokayukta. His campaign for the compulsory registration of marriages was also a success. Without being an elected official, he has been able to bring legislation that has far-reaching consequences for the state and its citizens—something that not many professional politicians can boast of. One wonders what might have happened had he won the election he contested in the late '80s. However, not all his demands have been met. His desire to see the Khasi matrilineal system change to a patrilineal one and to ensure that males also receive a share of ancestral property has still not come to fruition. These issues appear to be quite close to his heart and, according to him, are at the core of the crisis in Khasi society.

On 21st October 2024, Michael Syiem was invited by Meghalaya Together, an organization established with the mandate to bring the people of the state together, for a conversation to be moderated by Rev. Kyrsoibor Pyrtuh, a well-known theologian and socio-political activist. This program was organized at Ka Rynsan Shillong, a restaurant located not far from Shillong College, to discuss Michael Syiem's life and his thoughts

on the state and society at large. He kindly accepted the invitation and attended the program in a sleeveless shirt while the temperature was plummeting as evening fell. The discussion began with Rev. Kyrsoibor Pyrtuh asking him about his initial days as the former president of the Khasi Students' Union (KSU) during the tumultuous period of the late 1970s when the state was gripped by ethnic tension. Michael Syiem described this period as one of great uncertainty and explained how the KSU was under immense pressure because of the stern leadership of the then Chief Minister B.B. Lyngdoh, who went all out to restore order to the violence. He, along with many of his comrades, was put in jail during this time.

He was particularly agitated about the plight of Khasi males, who are left disempowered because of the system. In his opinion, the results are broken families and a negative impact on the economy, which has weakened the community. This last point was particularly important due to the questions that followed after the discussion ended.

The discussion then veered toward his life at university and how conversations with his friends shaped his views on Khasi society, especially regarding matrilineality, which he considered to be outdated. He was particularly agitated about the plight of Khasi males, who are left disempowered because of the system. In his opinion, the results are broken families and a negative impact on the economy, which has weakened the community. This last point was particularly important due to the questions that followed after the discussion ended.

The ethnic violence of the 1970s and its aftermath have left a deep scar on the psyche of many non-indigenous communities that have inhabited the state since the colonial period. Many lost their homes and belongings due to the violence, leading to an exodus of a large number of families, a process that is still ongoing. Michael Syiem recounted the events that led to the flare-up but admitted, however, that he is still unaware of the spark that ignited the violence. In retrospect, he admitted that the root cause of Meghalaya's problems was not the non-indigenous popula-

tion. In his opinion, "weak people always see enemies everywhere." I agree with this statement, but I would express it differently.

Jaidbynriew politics has always been about constructing an enemy to galvanize its followers against those they claim are taking away the rights of the indigenous peoples of the state. The non-indigenous population has been a perpetual scapegoat, and now the Garos have been added to this list. Over time, other groups, both indigenous and non-indigenous, have also been identified as threats to the land and rights of the local community. Additionally, there are perceived enemies within—women who marry outside the community and those who do not subscribe to

based on facts. In fact, the non-indigenous population has been declining for the past 50 years, as shown by various Census reports. Yet, this false fear has been used as a striking rod to unfairly punish the non-indigenous population. Even if the state were to become entirely devoid of the non-indigenous population—which would be unfortunate—a new enemy would simply be created (e.g., the Garos).

I also do not agree that the Khasi should abandon their matrilineal system in favour of a patrilineal one. An overwhelming majority of the world's population follows a patrilineal system, yet they still face many problems attributed to matrilineality. How would adopting patrilineality bring any change? For me, the Khasi language (in any of its spoken dialects) and the matrilineal custom are the foundations of Khasi identity, which goes back thousands of years—at least 5,000 to 6,000 years in the subcontinent. The Khasi community consists of genetically diverse populations, of whom about 70% of the present-day Khasi population has historically adopted the Khasi language and matrilineal customs, forming the basis of the clans we see today. If we lose these two, we lose our identity. At the same time, I agree that reform is needed on certain issues. After listening to Michael Syiem, I believe that the demand for equitable (not equal) distribution of ancestral property should not be dismissed outright. Unless we strengthen the clan system to ensure that no orphanages exist in our society, economically empowering every family member might be a necessary change.

From the conversation, it was clear that the person Michael Syiem admired most was his father. The most remarkable story he shared with the audience was about his father taking up the study of law after retirement and eventually practicing it. I suspect Michael Syiem is not yet finished with his crusade to change society and to mould it into what he believes is best for the community. Meghalaya Together wishes him the best in his future endeavors and thanks him graciously for accepting the invitation and becoming part of the process that will ultimately bring everyone together. Thank you, Bah Mike, and all the best to you.

(The author is the President of Meghalaya Together)

The mysterious traffic authority

Editor,
I just thought I'd put into words something about this mystifying, all pervasive gentleman I read about every time I walk out of the house but have yet to meet face to face. He seems to be a very powerful person, endowed with enormous authority - I mean throwing orders around like one throws confetti, and these orders adorn almost every street corner around town. You need to possess tremendous clout to throw your weight around like this especially in a lawless town like Shillong. You see this blatant display of power painted on walls, signboards and even spray painted on the surface of our roads! "NO PARKING", "NO U-TURN" By order STP. Fine Rs 500." I mean who is this STP guy? Every Rangbah Shnong and Rangbah Dong seem to swear by him. They simply love to quote his name it seems.

I have met some very ashen-faced and shaken car owners, who swear by all they hold as holy, that upon making some slight driving mistake in some God forsaken locality, to have been confronted by local street urchins out to enforce the fines threatened by the Almighty STP. Not having the courage to question the demands

they have quietly paid up, without protest, despite being denied any receipt for the money so dished out. It now seems not only the Headmen but drug addicts simply love to enforce the dictates of the mysterious invisible STP. God have mercy on our miserable souls.

The other day I finally caught hold of a Headman in the city outskirts and managed to corner him regarding the identity of the transcendent all pervasive STP. After much persuasion he finally blurted out "Ew, ba donkam bha te une u STP ba kontrol k'ali ba ieng khlem-akor. Ba ma ba u lah ruh ba shu klap ruh." (We need the STP to control haphazard parking. STP also comes with the threat of clapping our vehicles. He must have meant clamping but I took him for his word). So we finally meet the authority that has the power to give you the claps. Won't wish it on my worst enemies. So friends mind your driving, take care and try to avoid the STP like the plague. Can't have people walking around with infected claps from the STP, Do we?

Yours etc.,
Toki Blah,
Via email

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Kamala Harris losing her earlier lead: Race against Trump too close now As November 5 election nears disparaging comments by both sides disconcerting

By Sushil Kutty

Indian origin Black African-American Democratic presidential candidate Kamala Harris faces imminent defeat unless former President Donald Trump, the Republican nominee, in one of his crankier moments, pulls out from the race before November 5, which is a distant possibility unless a fourth assassin doesn't miss the orange-head for the bleeding ear.

Whichever way you look at it, Kamala Harris has plummeted from the high of the after-presidential debate with Donald Trump to less than half of the high. So much so, Harris is now clinging to disparaging comments directed at Donald Trump by some of his staff of the first Trump administration to console herself.

Like Trump's White House Chief of Staff Gen. John Kelly, who came in from the cold and "revealed" that "President Trump fits the fascist definition," like a glove and is "more unstable and wants unchecked power." Imagine what rejection can do to people! Gen. Kelly wouldn't have called Trump a fascist if it wasn't for the fact that Trump, in one of his more lucid moments, dumped Gen. Kelly and asked him to "move on."

Thing is, Kelly gave Harris the chance to butt in: "It is clear from John Kelly's words that Donald Trump is someone who certainly falls in the 'general definition of fascist,'" Harris said. "He has vowed to be a dictator on day one and would use the military as his personal militia to carry out his personal and political agendas."

The reality is, most American media have come around to comforting themselves with reports saying that a Trump victory was inevitable. In fact, it is Harris who is doing all the scrambling. Going forward, Donald Trump might even win the real poll on November 5.

Trump is drawing followers like he was Pied Piper himself. Trump spent time "working" at a McDonald's drive-through and more people drove through than there were "fries" to go around. Then, the former President went to a "game" and the crescendo cracked the stadium dome.

Vice President Kamala Harris could only watch the game unfolding on her from the safety of her Washington home. "Donald Trump is increasingly unhinged and unstable and in a second term, people like John Kelly will not be there to be the guardrails against his propensities and his actions," Kamala Harris warned. "The bottom line is this, we know what Donald Trump wants. He wants unchecked power. The question in 13 days will be, what do the American people want?"

Kamala Harris should worry. The various polls tracking the race indicate that the American people want Donald Trump and the former President is edging out the sitting Vice President in almost all of the "swing states", much to the disgust of former President Barack Obama while President Joe Biden is lost in his own mind and minding his own business.

But there are democrats who are cursing themselves for making the mistake of removing Joe Biden from the top of the ticket and replacing him with Kamala Harris. Now, John Kelly has to intervene with "Trump wants generals to be like Hitler's generals."

Trump has called his former White House Chief of Staff a "lowlife" and a "total degenerate named John Kelly", accusing him of making up stories out of pure Trump Derangement

Syndrome. "I always feel it's necessary to hit back in pursuit of the truth," Trump wrote on Truth Social. "John Kelly is a lowlife, and a bad general, whose advice in the White House I no longer sought, and told him to move on!"

But Trump shouldn't worry even if Kamala Harris is getting support from several RINO (Republican in name only) sorts, like Liz Cheney, daughter of former Vice President Dick Cheney, and hates Donald Trump like he was something that had crawled out from beneath a stone. Liz Cheney was with Kamala Harris just the other day, both of them bad-mouthing Trump to their heart's content.

But Trump need not worry, he has an array of powerful friends rallying for him, from the world's richest dude Elon Musk to former Fox News host Tucker Carlson, and while Musk is doing it with dollars on the barrel, Carlson with his felicity with words. Elon Musk has been promised a place in a possible second Trump administration and might even become Trump's White House Chief of Staff.

Tucker Carlson's mind is hard to read. Is he a Trump fan or is he not difficult to answer though he confounds with off the cuff remarks. Like the other day in Georgia, where he compared Trump's prospective "return to the White House to a dad returning home" adding that the country could get a vigorous spanking. "There has to be a point at which Dad comes home. Yeah, that's right. Dad comes home. And he's pissed. Dad is pissed."

Problem for Kamala Harris is, her own party is not sure she's gonna crack the glass ceiling. President Biden is sceptical and former President Barack Obama is not sure. Both of them are veterans in elections and they aren't confident, which says a lot.

The left-liberal legacy media are sticking to the script and are writing that Democrats still believe Harris can defeat former President Trump. Problem is, their hearts are not in the spin! All they can manipulate is to write that "the margins are so close in the seven battleground states likely to decide the contest, a shift toward either candidate or a mistake in the polling could be decisive."

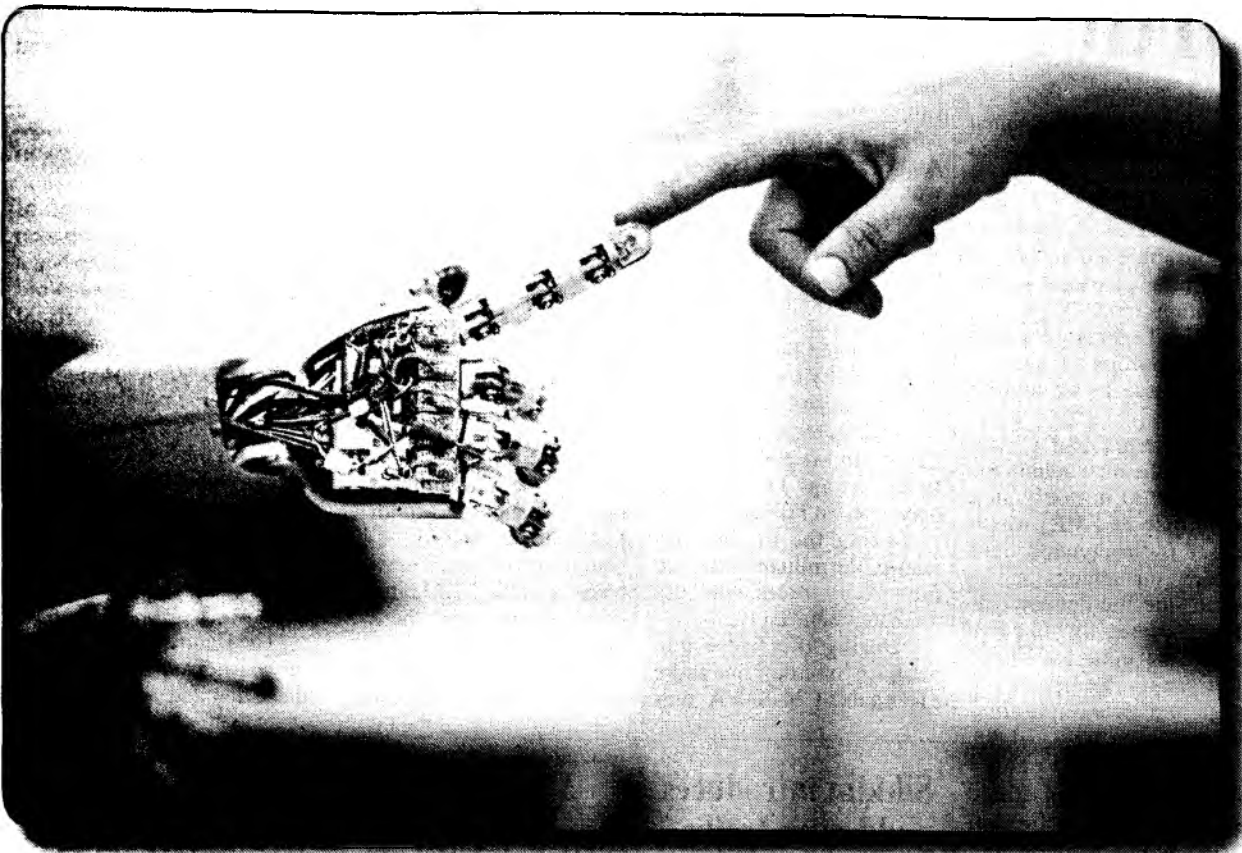
So, the media are hedging their bets with varying doses of intellectual dishonesty, but the Democrats themselves are not, they're "privately expressing worry that battleground polling appears to be moving in Trump's direction over the last two weeks." The big worry is the "cracks showing in the 'blue wall' of Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin."

And Kamala Harris has been losing ground to Trump in Wisconsin while in Michigan, Arab-American voters aren't helping thanks to Gaza and Palestine, Hamas and Hezbollah, not to miss out on Iran. None of this is making Democrats feel better and there are just about 13 days left to Election Day.

Add to that veteran pollster Nate Silver and he says, his "gut feeling right now is that former President Trump will win the election in less than two weeks." To soften the blow, however, and because he is no Trump supporter, Silver warned against "putting faith in anyone's gut feeling."

Nate Silver's golden words to the New York Times were: "Calling the race a 50-50 toss-up is the only responsible forecast, but if people press me to give an answer on who is favoured, I will say Trump." (IPA Service)

Humanising AI could lead us to dehumanise ourselves



Irish writer John Connolly once said: “The nature of humanity, its essence, is to feel another’s pain as one’s own, and to act to take that pain away.” For most of our history, we believed empathy was a uniquely human trait - a special ability that set us apart from machines and other animals. But this belief is now being challenged.

As AI becomes a bigger part of our lives, entering even our most intimate spheres, we’re faced with a philosophical conundrum: could attributing human qualities to AI diminish our own human essence? Our research suggests it can.

Digitising companionship

In recent years, AI “companion” apps such as Replika have attracted millions of users. Replika allows users to create custom digital partners to engage in intimate conversations. Members who pay for Replika Pro can even turn their AI into a “romantic partner”.

Physical AI companions aren’t far behind. Companies such as JoyLoveDolls are selling interactive sex robots with customisable features including breast size, ethnicity, movement and AI responses such as moaning and flirting.

While this is currently a niche market, history suggests today’s digital trends will become tomorrow’s global norms. With about one in four adults expected

to use AI companions by 2025, the demand for AI companions will grow.

The dangers of humanising AI

Humans have long attributed human traits to non-human entities - a tendency known as anthropomorphism.

It’s no surprise we’re doing this with AI tools such as ChatGPT, which appear to “think” and “feel”. But why is humanising AI a problem? For one thing, it allows AI companies to exploit our tendency to form attachments with human-like entities. Replika is marketed as “the AI companion who cares”.

However, to avoid legal issues, the company elsewhere points out Replika isn’t sentient and merely learns through millions of user interactions.

Some AI companies overtly claim their AI assistants have empathy and can even anticipate human needs. Such claims are misleading and can take advantage of people seeking companionship. Users may become deeply emotionally invested if they believe their AI companion truly understands them.

This raises serious ethical concerns. A user will hesitate to delete (that is, to “abandon” or “kill”) their AI companion once they’ve ascribed some kind of sentience to it.

But what happens when said companion unexpectedly

disappears, such as if the user can no longer afford it, or if the company that runs it shuts down? While the companion may not be real, the feelings attached to it are.

Empathy - more than a programmable output

By reducing empathy to a programmable output, do we risk diminishing its true essence? To answer this, let’s first think about what empathy really is.

Empathy involves responding to other people with understanding and concern. It’s when you share your friend’s sorrow as they tell you about their heartache, or when you feel joy radiating from someone you care about. It’s a profound experience - rich and beyond simple forms of measurement.

A fundamental difference between humans and AI is that humans genuinely feel emotions, while AI can only simulate them. This touches on the hard problem of consciousness, which questions how subjective human experiences arise from physical processes in the brain.

While AI can simulate understanding, any “empathy” it purports to have is a result of programming that mimics empathetic language patterns. Unfortunately, AI providers have a financial incentive to trick users into growing attached to their seemingly empathetic products.

The dehumanisation hypothesis

Our “dehumanisation hypothesis” highlights the ethical concerns that come with trying to reduce humans to some basic functions that can be replicated by a machine. The more we humanise AI, the more we risk

dehumanising ourselves.

For instance, depending on AI for emotional labour could make us less tolerant of the imperfections of real relationships. This could weaken our social bonds and even lead to emotional deskilling. Future generations may become less empathetic - losing their grasp on essential human qualities as emotional skills continue to be commodified and automated.

Also, as AI companions become more common, people may use them to replace real human relationships. This would likely increase loneliness and alienation - the very issues these systems claim to help with.

AI companies’ collection and analysis of emotional data also poses significant risks, as these data could be used to manipulate users and maximise profit. This would further erode our privacy and autonomy, taking surveillance capitalism to the next level.

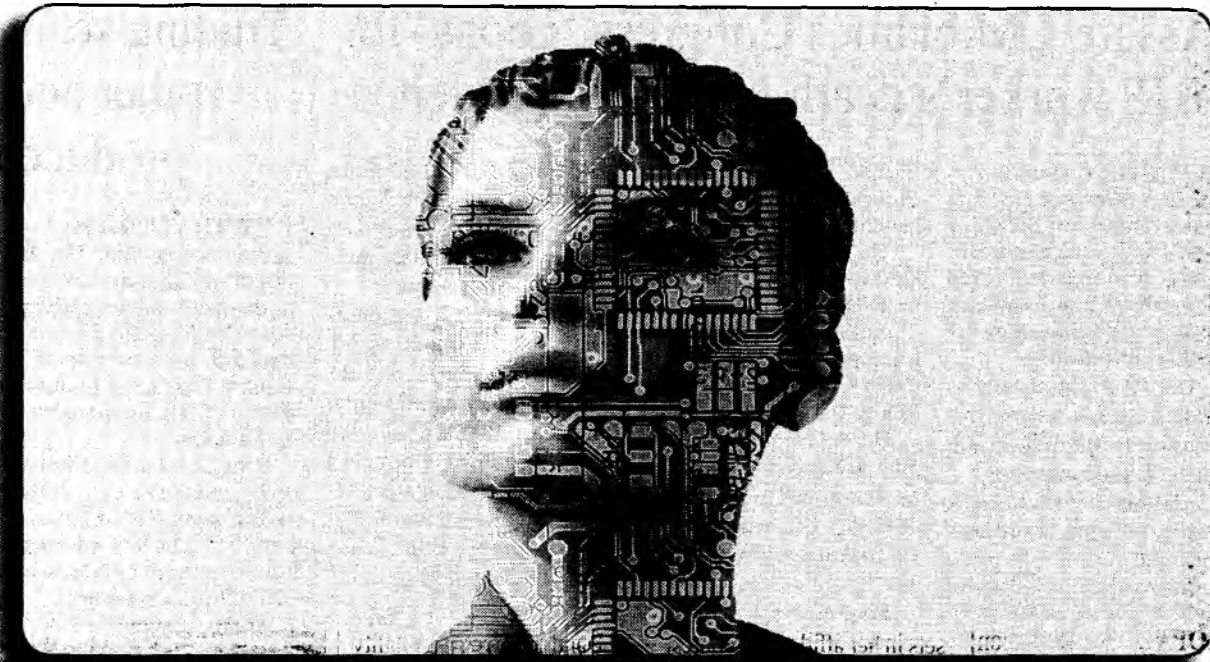
Holding providers accountable

Regulators need to do more to hold AI providers accountable. AI companies should be honest about what their AI can and can’t do, especially when they risk exploiting users’ emotional vulnerabilities.

Exaggerated claims of “genuine empathy” should be made illegal. Companies making such claims should be fined - and repeat offenders shut down.

Data privacy policies should also be clear, fair and without hidden terms that allow companies to exploit user-generated content.

We must preserve the unique qualities that define the human experience. While AI can enhance certain aspects of life, it can’t - and shouldn’t - replace genuine human connection. *(The Conversation)*



‘Star - Gazing’

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, OCTOBER 27, 2024

‘Birthday Forecast’

Moon sextile Sun on your solar return chart and it ensures a good year ahead. You will achieve very big results this year. You will be treated very well by the people who support you wholeheartedly. Your family will provide you with all the help that you require to make things work. On the professional front you will be able to conceive ideas and will execute them in team spirit. You will be goal oriented. Your juniors will look at you as a source of inspiration. Your financial position in totality will be good. You will remain in good health. And could also be drawn to some spiritual guru for seeking guidance in life. Your overall personality will change. Your partner will support you. Children will shine in studies. You will get proposals for business opportunities. You will be going to some travel destination with family for unwinding.

‘This week for you’

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) The planetary configuration brings good results. You are likely to swing to extremes, sometimes being happy, celebratory and at other times heavy, serious and depressed. Professional situations and personal relations are sensitive and tend to go through ups and downs. Finances and material effects need to be evaluated, do not make investments or speculate heavily. A business venture could be gainful if you are willing to lend it some energy. You have more energy for work and your daily routines tend to speed up now. Perhaps you have a larger workload than usual. It’s a fabulous time for stepping up exercise and health routines.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) This phase highlights activities related to communications such as journalism, literature, speaking, etc. These would figure more prominently in your life. You may have positive results from marketing, communication and public speaking. You spend time with your beloved and go on trips, shopping and fun times. This is a favorable time to go for higher learning and joining new courses such as fashion, computers, fine arts and fields related to show business. You may modernize your work place and home and put some more interiors and decorations to give a different look. This is a good time to promote harmony and good relations with family members. You may change your personal style, buy new clothes and spend money on grooming. This is a good time to build your skills, to get organized, and to attend to your health and fitness routine.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) This period highlights friendship, love, romance, spirituality and children in your life. You may have positive results from marketing, communication and public speaking. You spend time with your beloved and go on trips, shopping and fun times. This is a favorable time to go for higher learning and joining new courses such as fashion, computers, fine arts and fields related to show business. You may modernize your work place and home and put some more interiors and decorations to give a different look. This is a good time to promote harmony and good relations with family members. You may change your personal style, buy new clothes and spend money on grooming. This is a good time to build your skills, to get organized, and to attend to your health and fitness routine.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) This period brings mixed results for you. After dealing with tough people and complicated issues you feel much stronger and clearer about the priorities. Your most natural talents would meet with reward and acceptance although desired financial gains would not be forthcoming. It is best to accept challenges that life offers you and keep going through ups and downs realizing that this too shall pass. You are compassionate and generous with family, friends and relatives, drawing respect from them. You may feel a bit defeated by situations at home and work. Allow space and time for things to change on their own. Take care of your health and adopt a routine of regular walk and exercise.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) If you feel especially angry, frustrated or restless, it would be great to find a little more work and things to do so that you can channel excess energy constructively. Your heart and head pull you in different directions when domestic and family related decisions are to be considered. You are more inclined to take pride in your intellectual accomplishments and your ability to socialize and make connections. You have mental clarity and logical approach to resolve matters. Communications and business associates from overseas bring good news and offer lucrative opportunities. Personal relationships may be dreamy and transitory and commitments are made and promises are honored. A marriage proposal is worth considering. Health needs care and old habits of excesses need to be kicked.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22) Your confidence gets a boost and you attempt difficult tasks, resolve complicated issues and connect with unapproachable people in higher position. Be careful when expressing feelings and emotions others can misunderstand you. You handle conversations,

seminars and express yourself with élan. Business expansion and new professional opportunities are worth considering; you have to positively use your talents and efficiency. You might spend a lot of time in short frequent trips, communicating with people and visiting friends and relatives. You tend to entertain others with your conversation and your sense of humor. Talking, writing, and studying can be good ways to handle stress. You interact with people in position of power and authority with grace and diplomatically. Health and energy need to be conserved through a busy time at home and work.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) The planetary configuration brings good-luck for love and romance. You are noble and generous in family situations. You adopt new styles and this brings colours and glamour in your life. Your thoughts turn to children, pleasure and romance. You focus on having fun, enjoying sports and expressing yourself creatively. You would maintain balance between the head and heart also in professional and personal matters. You turn things around in your favor in business dealings. An overseas or long distance journey with includes pilgrimage is on cards. You maintain a fitness routine and healthy diet program.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) You achieve success as you are brilliant and there is good fortune attending to professional, personal and material aspects. You interact with people in position of power and authority gracefully and diplomatically. You will be able to make best use of your talents, work experience and would insert your creativity into your work and projects in hand. It is best to accept challenges that life offers you and keep going through that ups and downs realizing that this too shall pass. You may be especially focused on pleasing your loved one and may discover new facets to your love life. You are full of energy and indulge in sports and other physical activities during the week.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) This period brings love, emotions, spirituality and pleasant interactions with people at work and at home. You manage to communicate with moody and angry people with a sensitive approach and gentle manner. Combine your inner and outer strengths to achieve success and happiness. You would show sensitivity in your relationships as you feel they are more important to you than many other things. You would work in association with senior colleagues and people in authority and learn many more things at the work place, which boosts your confidence and you use your best talents and co-relate all activities to expand the business and work opportunities. Give yourself a new fitness routine and healthy diet program to rejuvenate energy.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) Your heart tends to over react emotionally in personal and professional relationships, look at things from a balanced and positive perspective. Cooperation and a focus on harmony and understanding benefit you professionally and personally. You tend to be fiery and impulsive when faced with choices and decisions. You would be more attractive when you show your responsible, managerial, ambitious, and constant side in your personal and professional relations. You especially enjoy games that involve competing with others. This is a favorable time to learn something new, feeling at ease in social situations, taking care of the details of daily life. Obey traffic rules and don’t indulge with people in authority.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) You may be especially focused on pleasing family and children and be fond of the life of the home and family at this time. It’s a passionate time, although you are unlikely to display a whole lot of self-discipline. You have a tendency to compromise and adjust and take a soft approach while dealing with people at work and at home. You could be stressed while meeting people’s expectations and approval. In fact, this is an excellent time for materializing personal hobbies and talent, as this would prove to be helpful in financial matters. Health food, yoga and meditation are recommended as would help to overcome from health problems, however, health of spouse needs to be attended to.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) This phase brings good results in professional matters, as achievement is most important to you now. You are resourceful and don’t want to waste time, energy, or resources and make best use of them now. Happiness and fulfillment through the expansion of your mind, widening your social circle, travel, and connections to people of a different cultural background than you indicated. You may explore new ways of doing your work as this brings more efficiency and continuity on your work. This is an excellent period under which you bring more understanding to your relationships with loved ones. It is easier than usual to be sensible about your diet, health, hygiene, and fitness needs.

Are cats good for our health?

Cats have lived with humans for thousands of years. And long before cat memes and viral TikToks took over the internet, they’ve been comforting us with their purrs and making us laugh with their weird antics.

But what does the research say - are cats good for us? Living with a cat can have a profound - and sometimes surprising - effect on our physical and mental health. Still, living with cats is not without risks.

Part of the family

You may have heard cats don’t have owners, they have “staff”. In fact, multiple studies show the humans who live with them feel more like beloved relatives.

In a study of 1,800 Dutch cat owners, half said their cat was family. One in three viewed their cat as a child or best friend and found them loyal, supportive and empathetic. Another US study developed a “family bondedness” scale and found cats were just as important a part of families as dogs. Many cats would choose human interaction over food or toys. And they can distinguish when we are talking to them.

In fact we’ve adapted to each other. Cats are more likely to approach human strangers who first give a “kitty kiss” - narrowing your eyes and blinking slowly. And research suggests cats have developed specific meows that tune into our nurturing instincts.

What does this close relationship mean for health outcomes?

A sense of purpose

Owning a pet is associated with less social isolation. And some cat owners say “providing for the cat” increases their feelings of enjoyment and sense of purpose. But the benefits of the relationship may depend on how you relate to your cat.

One study looked at different relationship styles between humans and cats, including “remote”, “casual” and “co-dependent”. It found people whose relationship with their cat was co-dependent or like a friend had a higher emotional connection to their pet.

Links to heart health

People who own - or have owned - a cat have a lower risk of dying from cardiovascular diseases such as stroke or heart disease. This result has been repeated in several studies. However a problem interpreting population studies is they only tell us about an association. This means while people with cats have lower risk of dying from cardiovascular diseases, we can’t say for sure cats are the cause. Cat ownership has also been associated with some positive changes in the gut microbiota, especially in women, such as improved blood glucose control and reduced inflammation.

Helping mental health

Having cat or dog is also associated with higher psychological well-being. For people with depression, patting or playing with their cat has been shown to reduce symptoms (although this was over a short, two-hour period and can’t be extrapolated longer-term).

Another way to find out about the health impact of cats is qualitative research: asking people what their cats mean to them, beyond the numbers.

When veterans were surveyed, it was found that people more attached to their pets actually had poorer mental health scores. But their survey responses told a different story. One respondent said, “my cats are the reason I get up in the morning”.

Another wrote: I consider my pet to be a service animal. My cat helps me to relax when I’m dealing with my anxiety, depression or when I wake during the night from the frequent nightmares I have. My cat isn’t just a pet to me, my cat is a part of me, my cat is part of my family.

It may be that veterans were more attached to their cats because they had worse mental health - and relied on their cats more for comfort - rather than the other way around.

Mental health downsides

It is possible being attached to your cat has downsides. If your cat becomes sick, the burden of caring for them may have a negative impact on your mental health. In a study of owners whose cats had epilepsy, around one third experienced a clinical level of burden as caregivers that was likely to interfere with their day-to-day functioning.

Toxoplasmosis

Cats can also carry zoonotic diseases, which are infections which spread from animals to humans. They are the main host for toxoplasmosis, a parasite excreted in cat faeces which can affect other mammals, including humans. The parasite is more likely to be carried by feral cats that hunt for their food than domestic cats.

Most people have mild symptoms that may be similar to flu. But infection during pregnancy can lead to miscarriage or stillbirth, or cause problems for the baby including blindness and seizures.

Pregnant women and people with lowered immunity are most at risk. It is recommended these groups don’t empty cat litter trays, or use gloves if they have to. Changing the litter tray daily prevents the parasite reaching a stage that could infect people.

Allergies

Up to one in five people have an allergy to cats and this is increasing. When cats lick their fur, their saliva deposits an allergen. When their fur and dander (flakes of skin) come loose, it can set off an allergic reaction.

People without severe allergies can still live with cats if they regularly wash their hands, clean surfaces and vacuum to eliminate dander. They can also exclude cats from areas they want to be allergen-free, such as bedrooms.

While cats can provoke allergic reactions, there is also evidence contact with cats can have a protective role in preventing asthma and allergic reactions developing. This is because exposure may modify the immune system, making it less likely allergic reactions will occur. *(The Conversation)*

"A smile is happiness you'll find right under your nose."

—Tom Wilson

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No. 77 SHILLONG, MONDAY, OCTOBER 28, 2024

Stampede on Railway platform

A stampede at Mumbai's Bandra Railway Terminal on Sunday morning injured around 10 persons. The incident occurred while large crowds of people -- ordinary workforce from the metropolis -- were trying to board the Bandra-Gorakhpur Antyodaya Express in the early morning hours. That train had only unreserved general compartments, with no previous bookings, leading to the massive surge for seats when it was brought to platform-1. The doors were locked from inside. The natural impatience of the crowds that took tickets to board the train during the Diwali and Chhath festival season is understandable. They might have waited the whole night at the station to board the train.

The incident is symptomatic of the chaos in India's rail system/services due to lack of effective governmental intervention. This is a common spectacle at every railway terminal. During the festival season, especially, the rush is such that reservations are simply not possible for most people. A change a week ago was to limit the advance booking time to two months. This is 'small' comfort. Even then, during such seasons, reservations close in a day or two. For the rest of the months-long period, the only way is to wait for the Tatkal reservations. This too closes in a matter of a few minutes. The entire migrant workforce from the eastern sector, mainly UP and Bihar, as also others, are at the receiving end during the festival seasons. The railways are simply not bothered other than the introduction of a few special trains. Instead, if bookings close in the first few days of their start, the effort should be to provide more special trains to that sector to accommodate the additional load. This would require the railways to keep more trains in reserve for special runs. Festivals keep coming up almost every month and there's the summer holiday rush. The pathetic plight of the ordinary people to get bookings and travel by train is only to be seen or experienced to be understood. As in every other field, the poor and the ordinary people are given a raw deal. Since politicians enjoy special privileges in getting seats/berths, they have little understanding/concern over the plight of others.

Other than marginal and cosmetic changes and a minor increase in speed, there has been no substantive improvement in the functioning of railways in the ten years of Modi dispensation. Add to that the number of train accidents this year alone and its small comfort for the millions of Indians who rely on trains for their transportation. In 2014, during Modi's first tenure, the government aimed at rail safety and introduction of bullet trains in select routes. Safety has improved though there were some major disasters in recent years. The bullet train project, as in the case of every project, faced odds and has not materialised as yet. A lazy style of governance is evident in the railway sector too.

When Is It Going to Be Enough?

By HH Mohrmen

How many cement plants do we really need in Meghalaya? When will it be enough? Where else would you find eight cement plants concentrated within a radius of less than 10 kilometers? Alongside these cement plants, coke factories are also mushrooming in the region. What plans does the government have for this area? How sustainable is it to allow an unchecked proliferation of cement plants and coke factories? Can the government continue permitting companies to set up operations in the region at their own whims and fancies?

The Story of Cement Plants in the Region

In Jaintia Hills, the establishment of cement plants began with Jaintia Cement in the Sutnga area, promoted by a former politician. Soon, larger companies like Star Cement entered the Narpuh area, also backed by a politician. Cement plants continued to spring up without regard for the environmental damage they might cause. The first cement plant in Narpuh-Myndihati was Star Cement, followed by Topcem, Adhunik (later acquired by Dalmia), Goldstone Cements Limited (Black Tiger brand), JUD Cements at Wahiajer, Hills Cement at Myndihati, Maxx (Green Valley's brand) at Nongsning, and now MeghaTop at Wahiajer, which is currently seeking clearance.

Star Cement began with the slogan "Solid Setting," and it's now the largest producer of both cement and clinker. A glance at the company's website reveals that Star Cement produces more cement at its plants outside Meghalaya than at its Lumshong plant. The raw materials extracted from Narpuh are used to produce clinker, which is then transported to plants outside the state. This raises the question: Is Meghalaya losing revenue since the final cement products are manufactured outside the state? Are our politicians even aware of the situation?

How Star Cement Grew

According to its website, Star Cement (CMCL) has grown rapidly. From one plant at Lumshong, it now has two more plants outside the state, producing more cement than the Lumshong plant. The company claims to be the fastest-growing cement brand in West Bengal and Bihar, with a 1.67 million-tonne-per-annum integrated cement plant in Lumshong and additional grinding units at Sonapur, near Guwahati, and Mohitnagar, near Siliguri, West Bengal, its combined production capacity is approximately 5.7 million tonnes per annum.

Topcem's Expansion

Meghalaya Cements Ltd, which promotes the Topcem brand, is based in Thangkai village, East Jaintia Hills. It began operations in 2006

with a production capacity of 900 tonnes per day, later expanded to 2,600 tonnes per day of clinker and 4,600 tonnes per day of cement. A new grinding unit named Topcem India was established in Guwahati, Assam, in 2011, with a dedicated 10 MW power plant to ensure uninterrupted power supply.

Dalmia's Acquisition of Adhunik Cement

Dalmia Cement (Meghalaya) Limited entered the market in Meghalaya by acquiring Adhunik Cement. Dalmia, incorporated in 2006, now operates as a significant player in manufacturing metals and chemicals. Its registered office is in Shillong, yet data on cement production capacity is unavailable. These are some of the major players in the region, indicating that the state is a major producer of cement in the eastern region, if not the country.

Total Cement Production in Meghalaya

Only the major players are highlighted here, and aside from Star, we do not have information about the production capacity of other plants operating in the region. The question is, do we have data on the total cement and clinker production from all these plants in Meghalaya? What is the amount of limestone, coal, clay, and other resources being used? Why can't the government compel these companies to share their profit and loss statements with the government or the Jaintia Hills Autonomous District Council (JHADC), if not with the public? They are using our natural resources, and we have the right to know how much they have benefitted and contributed to the state economy.

Environmental Concerns

Companies may claim that they cause no harm to the environment, but the public needs to know that Lumshong, known for the famous Krem Kotsati Umlawan cave—one of India's longest caves—has been affected. What is the current condition of Krem Kotsati Umlawan? Is it still safe to enter? That is the million-dollar question.

When Adhunik began operations, the plant's location was initially a water source for the Lumshong community. Although there was initial protest, locals later withdrew it, and the company arranged tanker-supplied water for the village. Star Cement claims to have initiated a biodiversity project in collaboration with the State Forest Department, yet details of these conservation efforts remain vague, with no specific mention of the villages that benefited from these projects.

Mining in the area has also had a drastic impact on the

forests, streams, and rivers in the region, with blame falling squarely on the government for lacking a proper plan for the region.

An Undeclared, Unplanned SEZ

Narpuh is transforming into an unofficial Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in Meghalaya. These cement plants emerged without adequate planning, disregarding the region's seismic category 5 status. Effluents from the plants and mining areas are discharged into nearby streams and rivers, creating environmental hazards. During winter, dust from the plants coats the surrounding area, covering homes and vegetation alike. Despite the number of cement plants in the area, the Meghalaya State Pollution Control Board is yet to install systems to measure and monitor air quality. Without proper planning and monitoring, Meghalaya is turning this region into an uninhabitable space.

Impact on the Local Community

One might ask, how have these cement plants benefited the local community? Much of the land is now owned, directly or indirectly, by these companies, including mineral-rich land leased by individuals and communities. Churches and communities receive cement subsidies for their construction projects, and companies often sponsor events and church gatherings. A recent development where the church leases its mineral-rich land to a company presents a classic Biblical dilemma, as mentioned in the Synoptic Gospels: "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's." Now the church doesn't even seem to care to draw a line anymore.

During a visit to a cement plant years ago, I asked the manager about local youth employment, to which he replied, "Your people do not have an industrial culture." While there may be some truth to this, if these companies truly wish to uplift the local community, they could initiate programs for apprenticeships, industrial training, and even internships to help them.

Meghalaya's Cement Plants and State Development

Despite the presence of these companies, local communities receive limited benefits. The major disadvantage is that most corporate offices of these companies are located outside the state. If the corporate offices were located in Shillong, Jowai, or Khliehriat, many young people would gain employment, but the companies seem solely interested in exploiting resources. Employment in the plants is also limited. Again, what percentage of local

people are employed in the plants? It would be interesting to know the total workforce engaged by all companies in their plants.

The limited interest of cement companies in providing local employment is evident as Star Cement even manages its transportation needs through its fleet of trucks, restricting local transport opportunities.

Perhaps it's time for the CAG to audit these companies and evaluate whether they operate fairly and sustainably. The other pertinent question is: does the state government monitor these companies' Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) spending?

CSR: The Companies' Responsibility to the Region

What CSR contributions have these companies made? Some provide student support and limited agricultural training, but not all. The local population has lost land and precious natural resources to these companies, and there seems to be no long-term plan from the companies to support sustainable livelihoods. If the companies do not have such a plan, does it mean that once the resources are exhausted, they will simply leave, abandoning the land and its people?

The smoke and dust produced by these companies will likely impact public health. What steps have the companies taken to minimize this damage? Considering the number of cement plants in one area, what prevents them from establishing a state-of-the-art hospital in the region? Many residents may eventually suffer from industrial and mining-related ailments. Why can't the government compel these companies to at least upgrade and install essential medical facilities at Khliehriat CHC? What is the point of claiming to be number one in East India, when you have done precious little for the area that has helped you reach that distinction and honour?

Threat to Narpuh Wildlife Sanctuary

Most land near the Narpuh Wildlife Sanctuary, from Brichymot to Lumshong, is classified as unclassified forest, according to an RTI reply from the Jaintia Hills Autonomous District Council. In fact Brichymot was a very recent village. However, encroachment has increased from both the Narpuh and Saipung sides, impacting the region's only sub-tropical rainforest. With cement plants mushrooming in the Narpuh area and encroachment on the other side, how can the government protect the Narpuh Wildlife Sanctuary? How many more cement plants do we need in the Narpuh area? This is a question the Government needs to answer. Or is the Government bent on destroying the region altogether?

'The Rangbah Shnong' and his pursuit for an identity

By Aristotle Lyngdoh

Much has been discussed on the topic of the Headman or the 'Rangbah Shnong' and his quest for modern recognition in the contemporary administrative structure. Firstly, to determine one's identity, it is necessary to determine one's origin too. In my earlier article a couple of years back in this same daily, I tried to narrate on the evolution of Dorbar Shnong in Shillong agglomeration and that 'Rangbah Shnong' is a modern concept of the 20th century originated from this very place. There is no other place or community elsewhere where such a practice exists. Having said this, we also need to inquire further as to how the Rangbah Shnong emerged and gained popularity?

Historical quest

History tells us that Shillong was designated as the new British headquarters in mid-1866. In fact, the name Shillong was given by Col. Henry Hopkinson in April 1866 after the sacred 'Shyllong' peak. According to Datta Ray, "Shillong was born in the twilight of 28 April 1866", as a small settlement covering an area of 2 square miles with a population of around a thousand (the Census figure of 1871 shows the number as 1363). The settlers of this suburb were mainly those who directly and indirectly worked under the British administration or other Christian institutions. Prominent neighborhoods of the then Shillong suburb were Mawkhrah, Yeodo (Iewduh), Laban, Laitumkhrah, European and Mission compound were added later after the establishment of Christian institutions. Town management was a minor affair solely a subject of the colonial government, unknown and strange to the traditional system. I also strongly doubt that there existed any form of Dorbar Shnong or for that matter a Rangbah Shnong at this point of time. The suburb was directly under the authority of the British Shillong municipality.

Further, the decades from 1910 to 1920 ushered a new paradigm where renowned institutions such as St. Edmund's School, Dr. Gordon Robert Hospital (commonly known as Robert Hospital) and others came and set their base in this capital. Had there been any village committee during this time too, these institutions would have also faced some kind of restriction or limitation to acquire such vast tracts of land. Besides, in 1972, the Refugee Colony came up at Rynjah without any difficulty or obstruction. This reflects that Dorbar Shnong was absent or unorganized. Even if they were there, their control and scope of operation were very limited.

Cradle of the Rangbah Shnong

Before the urbanization of Shillong town, people's lifestyles were not different from that of the villages. Community participation and support happened only when there were cases of death and burial in the neighborhood and other festivities. As urbanization picked up, the need for better and uniform community involvement was felt by the locals who insisted for a kind of territorial entity called the 'shnong' (locality). Then, on such occasions, and as a traditional courtesy, an elderly male person was always chosen to be the leader known as Rangbah Shnong. In other words, the Rangbah Shnong emerged because there are people and households in the community. He was a one-man functionary strictly to provide elderly guidance and patronage to the community. But these are all informal in nature and have no official connection and obligation with the administrative authority.

It is also noteworthy to know that the concept of the secretary and other office bearers was unknown at that time. The reason is simply that Khasi Dorbar originally did not have that system of record keeping. Their oral agreement and adjudication served as potential and truthful records. Therefore, the present concept of Dorbar Shnong with its executive committee as the chief functionary is completely a new and modern concept which gained prominence and popularity from the 80s onwards.

A quasi-traditional entity
In order to adapt with the new developments, the Dorbar Shnong also has to evolve. The

creation of a functionary body called the 'executive committee' where the Rangbah Shnong is the head, ensured a blend of contemporary modern ideas with the traditional concept. This is done to improve local self-governance in the years to come. In the real sense, the Rangbah Shnong derived his patronage from the traditional chief, whereas he derives support and power from the community for he enjoys his office at the pleasure of the people. Despite many limitations, the idea was quite outstanding and exemplary, instilling a sense of responsibility and ownership towards one's own neighborhood and community. Unfortunately, on many occasions, these principles were not followed and adhered to in certain localities by affluent individuals.

Dorbar replication in the outskirts of Shillong

The rapid transition and growth of Shillong into a city, coupled with the growth of educational institutions, health care facilities, trade and commerce, ultimately, made this landlocked hilly town an attractive and preferred place for permanent settlement. As a result, the population grew and neighbourhoods expanded resulting in the creation of new localities. It was a custom and a precedence then, and till today, that the first generation residents of that new neighborhood became the community leaders and the Rangbah Shnong too. At a time when people were living a simple life, the system worked well for that particular point of time. But as time passed, the mindset of the people also changed. This quasi-traditional authority became instead a desirable opportunity for many to climb the ladder and experience power and other rewards. In rural areas this is a common phenomena and nobody can deny that, as it resulted in serious conflicts and confrontations.

Growth, importance, impact and manipulation

The significance of the Dorbar Shnong was not immediately recognized and appreciated because of the political unpredictability and disarray that characterized the post-independence period. On the contrary, at this stage, most of the political debates and maneuvering were decided at the level of the Dorbar Hima, Raid, etc. Here, the trace of Dorbar Shnong and Rangbah Shnong's involvement in the political process was absolutely absent.

The importance of local Dorbar Shnong was then felt among the indigenous tribal population of the city more extensively after the late 80s. This was due to frequent communal conflicts and sporadic troubles and disruptions that hampered civic harmony. Here the Headmen or Rangbah Shnong played a very dynamic and pivotal role to straighten things out so that he later commanded the obedience and respect of all the residents. The introduction of MLA & MP scheme during the 90s onwards, elevated the importance of Dorbar Shnong where the district administration too had to rely and coordinate with them. This led to the feeling and assumption that the office of the Rangbah Shnong is an ideal agency and a lucrative office free from any accountability. In some cases, the Rangbah Shnong manipulated and diverted the process for personal benefits.

Identify quest in a democratic set up

Despite several things that the Rangbah Shnong of urban areas have tried to implement for both the community and the government, yet he is regarded as common citizen in the eyes of the authority. As a 'quasi-traditional' head, his status needs to be clearly defined in the statute book. The sanad issued by the 'Syiemship' is a mere instrument to validate his selection before the community to thwart any possible emergence of another Rangbah Shnong and nothing more. Thus, in a democratic set up, unless the institution of people's dorbar or council is given due cognition and linkages to constitutional provisions, then where does the identity of the Rangbah Shnong stand? This is the pertinent question that everyone needs to ask.

Letters to the Editor

Protect new appointee lecturers against institutional politics in Deficit Colleges

Editor,
This letter is to apprise the Government and public of a case in Tura where the documents and forwarding letter of new appointees to the Directorate of Higher And Technical Education (DHTE) have been delayed for over a year. New appointments were made at Tura Christian College in August last year after interviews were duly conducted as per protocol. The new recruits joined in the first week of September but even after the lapse of over a year the Institution has failed to forward the necessary documents of candidates. Whenever the candidates approached the Secretary of the Governing Body, of the College he would tell them that the papers have been sent and gives all sorts of excuses. In fact, he is known to carry all official papers around like they are his personal files. The lack of clarity and transparency in the process from the part of the TCC management, misleading statements

and false hopes given, have drained the candidates dry and subjected them to undue mental stress. The candidates understand that official work in DHTE can take time but the problem with this case is that, the Institution has not made efforts in the first place to get the process started. Does any other institution do this to their selected candidates? Is there any other institution which plays with innocent lives by not sending their documents for approval for 15 months?

The question I want to pose for people to consider is- Should there not be a provision to protect candidates against such instances where the Institution does injustice to the selected candidates? If the College has called candidates for interview and selected them, why is it then causing so much pain and suffering by delaying the work it should have finished months ago? Shouldn't the management be answerable? It seems very unfair to the selected candidates that they have to be stuck in this predicament where they do not have employment proof and all other benefits that they are entitled to, for no fault of theirs but the sheer inefficiency of the management of Tura Christian College!

I sincerely hope that justice

will be served and the candidates will receive their long due approval letters at the earliest. Perhaps the church which oversees the functioning of the College should look into these matters before the name of God which the College claims to represent is soiled further.

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request,
Via email

St. Anthony's LP School Building Reconstruction

Editor,
I write this letter to draw the attention of the general public to the plans that have been initiated for the reconstruction of the St. Anthony's L.P. School building at Don Bosco Square. It is a welcome move as it would allow more space and safety for students. However, it also seems that the school authority may demolish/deconstruct the iconic front facade of the school that faces Don Bosco Square.

The front facade which features the long flight of stairs and three small towers or steeple-like structures and a tinned roof is synonymous with the identity of the school, Laitumkhrah and

of Shillong as a whole!

Hence, this is a plea to the concerned authorities to kindly preserve this iconic structure and make the current renovation plans open to the public. Other avenues must also be explored to expand the school building without destroying this prominent image.

Yours etc.,
E. Sohtun
Via email

India's Digital Dilemma: Battling the Rise of Online Scams

Editor,
India, amid its rapid digital transformation, is witnessing a troubling rise in online scams across various sectors, including banking and shopping. The shift towards digital transactions, while providing convenience, has also opened doors for cybercriminals to exploit unsuspecting individuals. These scammers employ increasingly sophisticated techniques, such as phishing, fake investment schemes, social media scams, and UPI fraud, which have led to substantial financial losses for many. Understanding these scams is crucial.

Phishing involves scammers pretending to be legitimate entities like banks or government agencies to extract personal information, while fake investment schemes lure victims with promises of high returns on dubious opportunities often communicated through platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook etc.

Social media scams involve creating fake profiles to gain trust for fraudulent purposes, and UPI fraud exploits users by tricking them into sharing their payment information.

For anyone falling victim to such scams, immediate action is vital. Ceasing all communication with the scammer is the first step, followed by notifying the bank or payment service provider to block any further unauthorised transactions. It's crucial to change passwords on all online accounts, especially those related to financial services, and enable two-factor authentication to bolster security. Reporting the incident to local Cyber Crime Cells or using the National Cyber Crime Reporting Portal can facilitate investigation and potential recovery of lost funds, emphasising the importance of timely reporting.

To protect against future

scams, exercising caution is essential. One must be wary of unsolicited offers, especially those that seem too good to be true, and one must always verify the legitimacy of emails, websites, and phone numbers before engaging or sharing personal information. Scammers often play on emotions, using fear or excitement to cloud judgment, hence, remaining calm and critically assessing situations can prevent falling into their traps. Additionally, adopting strong, unique passwords and enabling two-factor authentication across accounts enhances protection against unauthorised access. Staying informed about the latest scam tactics and educating oneself about common fraud techniques can significantly reduce vulnerability to these threats.

By maintaining vigilance and awareness, individuals can better defend themselves against the expanding menace of online scams in India.

Yours etc.,
Chanmiki Laloo
Shillong-02

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.

"Yesterday is not ours to recover,
but tomorrow is ours to win or lose."

— Lyndon B. Johnson

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No. 79 SHILLONG, TUESDAY, OCTOBER 29, 2024

Teachers at the receiving end

TEACHERS deserve fair pay and respect for the work they do. That work includes building humans at a critical stage of their lives until they reach the age where they can make informed decisions. This is an arduous journey since every child in the classroom is unique and some children need more attention than others. Teaching is a full time pre-occupation. Perhaps the fall in educational outcomes is also because they no longer opt for teaching as it has become an untenable livelihood option in a world where inflation is rising uncontrollably. It would appear that in Meghalaya budgeting for education is somewhat skewed. There does not seem to be enough funds to support education. Yet education is the basis of a progressive society. We need the best brains that can use innovative teaching pedagogy to enter the teaching profession but that will happen only if teachers are adequately compensated for their efforts.

Teachers alone know how challenging it can be to educate children – from finding ways to make lessons engaging and informative, devising creative projects and exercises encouraging students' participation in class, or dealing with difficult parents or administrative expectations. At the end of the day teachers are really stressed out. It's no joke managing 40 odd students in a class with every child having specific needs. Only a state that lacks empathy would refuse to understand the need to compensate the teachers fairly for all that they do to mould young minds and nurture them to the point of becoming responsible adults capable of critical thinking.

Extensive research shows that competitive salaries for teachers can lead to improved educational outcomes. When teachers feel financially supported, they are more likely to stay in the profession and bring their best to the classroom. Higher pay can also attract highly qualified individuals to pursue teaching as a career, bringing fresh perspectives and expertise to the education system. One problem with Meghalaya is also rationalising the teacher-student ratio. There are schools in the outback of Garo Hills where teachers are appointed but there are no students or a measly five or ten students attend. Earlier we had teachers sub-letting their jobs while they took on some other lucrative professions. These have brought down educational standards and this happens in any profession which lacks supervision. Under the Assam Government, schools were regularly inspected and teachers were on their toes. Since Meghalaya was born education has not been given the attention it deserves because the politics of musical chairs occupied prime time. PA Sangma as Chief Minister ensured that a special educational cess was levied from minerals extracted and sold from the state. Since the coal trade has gone underground that cess has stopped coming in. Unless a proper needs assessment of the educational sector is carried out and a rationale is developed with a valid student-teacher ratio, education will continue to suffer and teachers will keep protesting for better salaries. It's time to put in place a teacher evaluation system. Permanency of tenure can lead to stagnation.

Letters to the Editor

Preposterous suggestion by Meghalaya High Court

Editor,
The news report: High Court seeks meetings on shared crematoria for Hindus and indigenous Khasi, Jaintia people dated (ST October 26, 2024) is a preposterous and highly offensive suggestion on the part of the High Court. We the believers and followers of the indigenous faith have sets of beliefs and rituals that are unique and distinctive. In fact, the rites and rituals followed by the Niamtre and those of the Seng Khasi are not the same. The roots of our beliefs may be on the same line of thought but our practices are different. Hence at the Lumthangbriew in Jaiaw we have one crematorium for the dead belonging to Niamtre and the other for the Niam Khasi.

I quote from the news report: "The court said although the indigenous Khasi and Jaintia people cremate their dead following more or less the same procedure as the Hindus." I take great offence in the words, "more or less." The dictionary meaning of more or less is 'mostly', 'nearly' or 'approximately' which means

that they are not exactly the same or identical and vary to a certain degree. I don't think anybody - and I can vouch for my Pnar and Khasi fellow believers of the indigenous faith that we will not and cannot accept the Court's suggestion. I wonder if the Hindus will also agree to that. However, even if they do agree and see no problem in this I am sure they will at least be sensitive to the sentiments of the Pnar and Khasi believers of the indigenous faith and perceive the suggestion as ridiculous and outrageous. Granted that we have been respectful of one another's beliefs and do showcase solidarity especially during festivals of both the faiths, this does not mean that we amalgamate in a way that will make us less distinctive and wipe ourselves off our faith and religion.

The other suggestions of separate timings of cremation as well as segregation of areas for the performance of religious rites are not only absurd but do not arise. I therefore urge the leaders of Sein Raji and Seng Khasi to take up this matter with all seriousness and fight tooth and nail to not allow this debilitating change to see the light of day. Respect and tolerance in a secular country like ours must be promoted but distinctiveness and inimitability and a sense

of belonging and identity must not be relinquished or surrendered. I also request the honourable High Court to kindly refrain from hurting the sentiments of the people of varied faiths as India is a secular country.

Yours etc.,
Jennifer Dkhar,
Via email

High time for Dorbar Shnong to have legal status

Editor

The special article "The Rangbah Shnong" and his pursuit for an identity" by Aristotle Lyngdoh (ST 28th October 2024) made interesting reading. The contents are concise and excellent. It is observed that the Dorbar Shnong headed by a Rangbah Shnong functions without any rule book and therefore the author has rightly stated that, "his status needs to be clearly defined in the Statute book." It is a fact as the author puts it, "in a democratic set up, unless the institution of people's dorbar or council is given due cognition and linkages to constitutional provisions", the Rangbah Shnong has no identity. Aristotle Lyngdoh has rightly called for everyone to ponder on this. We should not lose sight that

Various aspects of the Khasi traditional institutions had been dealt with in my previous articles, but I feel it necessary to present a holistic picture for more clarity on this subject which I observe is not properly understood at large. The subject is vast; hence, only an extremely brief account is presented here. According to the present popular narrative as opined by various scholars, the Khasi traditional political system is organized since time immemorial into a three-tier structure: (i) dorbar-shnong (village council), (ii) dorbar-raid (provincial council of a group of villages), and (iii) dorbar-hima (state council). It is said that the union of the Shnongs led to the emergence of the Raid, and the federation of Raids led to the emergence of the Hima.

However, on closer analysis, this narrative is found to be flawed, and not consistent with the actual processes in the evolution of the Khasi polity, and I beg to differ with this narrative. At the outset, I would like to point out that a dorbar-shnong in which all Khasi adult male residents, irrespective of clan affiliations have the right to participate as understood and practised today, had never existed among the Khasis in the pre-colonial period, and the Khasi traditional political system was organized not in three-tier, but in a two-tier system: 1) the dorbar-raid which was a territorial dorbar, and 2) the dorbar-hima which was only an administrative and judicial dorbar. There is more than sufficient evidence to prove this fact. According to the Khasi tradition, individual persons apart from their own respective clans, cannot be members of any political dorbar as understood today, but it was the clan as a whole that was the basic person and member of a public political dorbar. One clan has one voice and one vote in the public dorbar. Therefore, the dorbar-kur (clan council) was not a public political dorbar at all, but it was only an informal and private council of a particular clan. It was a political constituency for sending representatives into the public dorbar. Hence, the dorbar-kur cannot be classed as the first tier of the Khasi public dorbar.

Looking into the history of the evolution of the Khasi polity through the analysis of oral tradition, official documents and other literature, as well as through study of the history, and the nature and functions of the present dorbar-raid and dorbar-shnong, we find that the basic traditional political commune among the Khasis was in fact a village-state called the Shnong or the Raid, which was founded, owned, and governed by a group of founding clans. The council of the chief maternal uncles of these founding clans emerged as the basic territorial and political authority in the traditional village-state. The heads of these traditional village-states were called the Basan or the Lyngdoh. These independent political communes preceded the formation of any present hima, and the emergence of modern day dorbar-shnong.

The Raid was not a union of villages as commonly understood today, but it was rather a parent-village, which gave birth to several outgrowth settlements or hamlets within its territory. These outgrowth settlements were governed directly by the functionaries of the Raid. But from the beginning of British rule, a new social set up emerged where the individuals and the nuclear families took centre stage, and the clan receded to the background. The colonial rulers could not comprehend and had not recognized the existence of these territorially autonomous communes, and simply perceived them as 'villages', and the Basans and Lyngdohs of the Raids as 'village headmen'. From this period began the withering away of the territorial autonomy of the Raids, and that paved the way for the emergence of the modern-day dorbar-shnong. Studying the histories of the present-day villages with their dorbar-shnong, we shall find that most of them are the outgrowth settlements of the Raids that have emerged during and after the British rule. The title 'rangbah-shnong' is unknown in Khasi oral tradition, and not mentioned in any of the colonial documents, or even in early writings by Khasi authors. The present title 'rangbah shnong' or 'wáheh chnong' is only a subsequent translation of the title 'village headmen' introduced by the British in reference to the Basan and Lyngdoh of the Raids.

The traditional institutions among the Khasis had always been founded on the basis of the matrilineal clan system, and some sort of religious rituals. Representation in the dorbar and nomination to the offices of political functionaries were always determined on the basis of the clans. In the original Khasi tradition, no man had the right or the mandate to represent his wife and children in the dorbar. But today, the clans have no role at all to play in the composition and functioning of the present-day dorbar-shnong because it is a modern general assembly of all the male heads of nuclear households, mostly representing their wives and children, and not for their clans. In the past, the Raids were single-religious communities, and the dorbar-raid was associated with religious rituals. But the Shnongs today are multi-religious communities. So, the dorbar-shnong is supposed to be secular in nature. These developments are not actually in line with the Khasi original tradition. Therefore, the dorbar-shnong and the rangbah-shnong as understood and practised today are not traditional institutions established since time immemorial, but they are new grassroots governance institutions evolving in the Khasi society under the influence of the colonist administrative interventions, and the operations of Indian constitutional democracy. However, since the present-day dorbar-shnong has naturally evolved from within the Khasi society, and not imposed from without, it can be said to be a Khasi indigenous grassroots institution. Thus emerged the three-tier structure of the dorbar-shnong, dorbar-raid, and dorbar-hima as a new political system of the Khasis today.

In the past, the dorbar-raid was the sole territorial authority within the Raid. Today, the dorbar-shnong is the sole territorial authority within the village because it has emerged as a powerful modern avatar of the dorbar-raid. The modern dorbar-shnong has become more innately powerful, more legitimate and more effective than the dorbar-raid and the dorbar-hima in governing the day to day life of the people within its territorial jurisdiction. In the ruling spirit of the 'village-state' tradition, the shnong and the dorbar-shnong are believed to exist independently apart from the Raid, the Hima, or the district council. Hence, neither the district council, nor the dorbar-hima was able to assume territorial authority in the villages in spite of the constitutional provisions and legal enactments standing on their side. With or without constitutional recognition, or without the sanction from the syiem of the hima, the inhabitants of the village render habitual obedience to the rangbah-shnong who was duly elected in the dorbar. In the collective mind of the people, the resolution of the dorbar-shnong is more important than anything for the legitimacy of the rangbah-shnong. The resolutions of the dorbar-shnong called 'ki rai dorbar-shnong' constitute the highest law in the village which need not be approved by the dorbar-raid, dorbar-hima, or by the district council; and cannot be modified, amended, or rectified by any higher authority other than by the concerned dorbar-shnong itself.

In spite of existing under the modern constitution, the Khasis generally feel that the dorbar-shnong is autonomous in nature with supreme authority within its own territorial jurisdiction. Each village with a dorbar-shnong is like a mini independent state, and no other authority within the territory of the village without permission from the dorbar-shnong and rangbah-shnong. In the collective mind of the people, the syiem of the hima, the deputy commissioner, the chief executive member of the district council, or the chief minister of the state government, have no business, or cannot make a surprise official visit to the village without the prior information to the rangbah-shnong and the village executive dorbar.

In the day to day practice, the dorbar-shnong as a modern governance institution, functions as a grassroots legislative body, grassroots administrative and magisterial authority, and grassroots court of justice. The dorbar-shnong also informally, but effectively plays as agency for the state government's administrative functions at the village level with regard to all aspects of governance and administration, including implementing socio-economic development programmes.

That is the present situation in the Khasi society today! But, being a modern grassroots institution, which concerns not with past traditions, but with the present needs of the community, the dorbar-shnong is not supposed to function in the spirit of the 'village-state' tradition. There are no sacred inviolable traditions governing the present-day dorbar-shnong. Hence, it must be open to change and improvement. Since it has to deal with modern governance, like the public distribution system, modern education system, modern healthcare services, modern electoral system, modern law and order system, etc., it has to be purely democratic in nature. The dorbar-shnong cannot be a male-only affair, or a Khasi-only affair. There should be perfect justice in its functioning. With regard to civil welfare services and development projects funded by the government from taxpayers money, all legal inhabitants, Khasi or non-Khasi should have the right to participate and should enjoy a fair share of the benefits. Being a modern institution, the dorbar-shnong cannot appeal only to traditions for its existence, and its affairs are not the prerogative of the district council only. The district council and the state legislative assembly both have the authority to make laws and regulations to establish justice and uniformity on different aspects of village governance. The dorbar-shnong cannot function as the government of an independent mini-state, with different kinds of rules from one village to another. It's time to set things in order for the sake of peace and justice.

Yours etc;
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

Setting the Record straight

Editor,

Commenting on Bhogtoram Mawroh's article 'Michael N. Syiem: A man for all seasons' (ST Oct 26, 2024) and thanking him for inviting me for an interactive discussion on the Oct 20, 2024, I'm sure he will recollect my opening statement after the introduction that, "I am one person who many would love to hate." After that article I'm sure the 'haters' have increased. Personally I am more comfortable with facing criticism rather than praise, it allows me to introspect and correct myself.

Mawroh is correct when he writes that the MAITSHAPHRANG is an organization that is not "issue-based" but rather is "agenda-based" and the agenda that we are currently campaigning is for economic empowerment of all children both sons and daughters in the Khasi family through the Equitable Distribution of Self-Acquired and Ancestral Property act which will ultimately uplift and strengthen the economic development of the Hyniewtrep community.

With government jobs

having reached a saturation point, economic activity is the next best alternative for self-employment and uplifting the State's economy. For those families who have the resources to share among the children, this will enable them to avail bank loans to invest in economic ventures which will in turn act as a multiplier effect to create more employment opportunities for others from less affluent families.

But the impression created through the article that we want to see the Khasi matrilineal system change to a patrilineal one is not correct and is not part of the MAITSHAPHRANG agenda. No system is without problems but in the prevailing context and environment that it exists one has to critically study whether merits outweigh the demerits and vice versa and accordingly initiate changes like what MAITSHAPHRANG is initiating for our society through the Compulsory Registration of Marriage act and the Equitable Distribution of property.

Yours etc.,
Michael N. Syiem,
Via email

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Meghalaya tourism needs to move towards 'value co-creation'

By Benjamin Lyngdoh

A small shop located at Seven Sisters Falls Viewpoint, Sohra is suddenly on Instagram. The account was not created by the proprietor, rather by tourists. The tourists were happy by the services and wanted others to see what the shop has to offer. So they put her in the Instagram space. The result is that the lady now has a bigger market share. A consumer eating at a fast food joint located outside gate number two of NEHU, Shillong, animatedly explained how the consumer should be served first with water once he enters; that there should be a signage outside advertising the shop; that the soup comes before the rice, etc. The result is that the shop is doing better now than before. These are cases of 'value co-creation.' It is a process where the consumer gives ideas, tips, tactics, etc to the seller on how the business can be done better through re-designed products/services and processes.

Dialogue

The basic requirement for value co-creation is dialogue. It is the opposite of plain value creation whereby the seller will formulate and develop a product/service according to the demands of the market and sell. Value co-creation requires dialogue with the consumer so that the limitations and shortcomings of the products/services can be identified and accordingly improved/corrected by the seller. Dialogue between the tourist and the service providers is one aspect that has to be incorporated into Meghalaya tourism. Dialogue in the context of value co-creation should not be confused with consumer feedback. Feedbacks are unidirectional and lack inputs for long-term business improvements. Dialogue is not an integral part of feedback and hence not very effective.

In value co-creation, the service providers should look at the possibility of dialogue with the tourist. This is where the best ideas and help will come from. Every now and then there will be tourists who would like to engage with the entrepreneurs about their offerings and service quality. This should be taken as valuable inputs for improvements in products/services. Point being, most of the tourists have been to multiple destinations. So, when they share in dialogue they are recollecting and delivering experiences across the country and beyond. Hence, the dialogue becomes priceless. Again, some tourists are apprehensive to engage in dialogue. In such cases, it is the job of the entrepreneur to approach and initiate. As said in entrepreneurship – 'entrepreneurs are good listeners and great storytellers'.

Relationship

One of the outcomes of value co-creation is the relationship between the tourist and the service providers. This is important as it ensures repeat travel by the tourists. For repeat travel to happen, the one and only condition is value proposition. As long as the tourists get value they would continue visiting and also market the attractions to others. Once value absorption stops the repeat travel would also stop. It is imperative that the service providers' value co-create their offerings continuously. Numerous research studies have shown that in the absence of value co-creation the tourist inflows into the destination tends to decline. That way, value co-creation also impacts upon sustainability and longevity of the tourism activities of any destination. The dialogue and relationship provides an opportunity for the entrepreneurs to not only sell their tourism offerings but also to learn/discuss about respective cultures, societal norms and practices, opinions and perceptions about issues such as environmental sustainability, etc. This can in turn make the tourist more knowledgeable about the destination and hence become more sensitive towards its socio-cultural and geographical environments. Responsible service providers play an important role in shaping responsible tourists and this is much needed in a nature-based destination like Meghalaya. Many tourism enterprises are being funded by schemes of the state gov-

ernment. It would be good to incorporate the practice of value co-creation into the design of the schemes – say, value co-creation can be one of the conditions for loan approval.

Nobel Prize in Economics

The 2024 Nobel Prize in Economics went to Daron Acemoglu (MIT), Simon Johnson (MIT) and James Robinson (University of Chicago) for their work on how institutions are formed and affect prosperity. An important part of the research was what they called 'inclusive institutions'. It basically refers to governance through institutions which take the community into confidence. It refers to regulations which are formulated by taking the opinions and perspectives of the community. Unless the community agrees to the fine print, the regulation is not put into force. The positive outcome of this is that regulations that are framed through inclusive institutions are most effectively implemented on the ground. This is the epitome of effective, progressive and inclusive governance.

This Nobel Prize winning research is a timely reminder to all that the age of one-directional policy formulation and implementation is over. Today, it is a two-way traffic. This in itself signifies value co-creation between the government and the common man. Tourism policies, action plans and road maps have to be formulated by extensively taking pointers and valuable inputs from the ground. It is only then that the huge gap between policy on paper and its implementation would be narrowed down. Presently, the state government has schemes for resorts, home-stays, Bed and Breakfast (B&B), vehicles, etc. Particularly in the case of properties, it would be better if the schemes are formulated and executed by taking valuable inputs from the communities. Every village is different from the other in terms of their socio-economic profile and hence would have different requirements. For instance, if the state government tries to come up with a policy on community-based tourism (CBT); then such a policy has to be framed at the community-level and not the state secretariat.

Value Co-destruction

The concept of value is a dichotomy. It can either be co-creation or the more concerning co-destruction. As of today, there is value co-creation in some of the tourism enterprises and activities of Meghalaya. These are mainly those entrepreneurs who understand the intricacies of business through formal study or training programs or are self taught. But, their numbers are in the minority. The majority largely indulge in value co-destruction. The best examples are the nature-based tourism products that are sold in the name of Community Based Tourism (CBT). Most of them do not sustain as the stakeholders do not have the basic knowledge and skill to run tourism operations. Our villages still think that tourism means a waterfall, river, hills, caves, cliffs, etc. In fact, tourism should not be started in any nature-based resources unless the community is willing and has the basic infrastructure in place first (some accommodations, eateries, activities, entertainment, and most importantly an itinerary). When the host is not ready and if the tourists who come in are irresponsible travelers, this is the point where value co-destruction happens. Some more examples – when taxi drivers protest against tourist drivers from Assam; when the tourism bodies are mostly looking at their own self-interest; when pressure groups oppose railways; when the state government is struggling with the issue of the airport, taxi drivers, railways, etc. All of these are sad instances of value co-destruction.

This column has been written in the context of tourism. But, the concept of value co-creation and its benefits applies to all other sectors, be it agriculture, manufacturing, small business, local administration, locality issues (Dorbar Shnong), etc.

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

“Correction does much, but encouragement does more.”
— Johann Wolfgang von Goethe
The Shillong Times

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Strides in aerospace

IT was a proud moment for all when India's first private military transport aircraft production facility was launched on Monday – in Gujarat's Vadodara region. The prestigious C295 aircraft project is a joint venture involving the native Tatas and Airbus, the world's biggest aircraft manufacturer based out of Europe. The name of Tatas has been written in golden letters in India's aviation industry from its very start. Airbus functions under a collaboration between premier agencies from France, Germany and Spain. This alliance is bound to enhance India's defence capabilities and create job opportunities for thousands of qualified youths in the aerospace industry.

India's aviation, aerospace industry is still not strongly placed even as the Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd in Bengaluru is currently producing trainer jets for the military, aero engines for fighter jets etc. The entity started much before Independence and came under the central ministry of defence 11 years later, in 1951. The original aim of this firm, started by a visionary with help from the then regional rulers of Mysore, was to produce and export aircraft to world aviation markets. Due to governmental controls, its growth remained stunted. Notably, the present C295 endeavour aims at manufacture and sale of military aircraft to foreign countries after it completes the present assignment of manufacture of 40 units for the Indian military. The Vadodara-based initiative would be a boost to India's indigenous civil aviation infrastructure capacity and help meet critical defence requirements in the border areas in terms of transport of equipment, soldiers etc. Notably, this is part of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Make In India and Atmanirbhar Bharat initiatives, which have made significant strides in the aviation industry in the last 10 years. The first aircraft manufactured from this facility would be delivered to the military two years hence and 39 more units before the end of 2031. The initial deliveries from Europe, out of the total 56 units ordered, reached here some time ago. As Modi noted, the Tata-Airbus facility would advance India's ambition to export aircraft and contribute to production of the nation's first civil aircraft. This would be a game changer. What was an exclusive preserve of Europe and the US may in future see a substantial Indian competition.

The long years of India's exclusive reliance on foreign manufacturers for military purchases was likely motivated by vested interests. Those in successive governments allegedly took hefty commissions for such acquisitions purchases from abroad. Even the top military brass came under a shadow vis-a-vis fixing of such deals. The Bofors guns deal was a case in point; and the VVIP chopper deal being another. The initiative by Prime Minister Modi to boost indigenous defence manufacture proves to be a 'game changer' in itself.

Khasis and Nepalis:
Unraveling their connection

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

A couple of weeks ago, I cycled to Umsning to eat lunch at a local food shop known for serving indigenous dishes. This particular shop, run by a Catholic family, is well-known for offering a variety of vegetarian and non-vegetarian Khasi meals. I feel that many of our Kong shops could benefit from increasing the diversity of the dishes they prepare. One simple way to do this would be to include more wild vegetables that can be either collected from their backyards or purchased from local farmers. This would not only increase the variety of dishes but also cater to vegetarians who find their options in Kong shops too limited. I love pork, but in the last few weeks, I have begun to appreciate pashor (mashed banana flower), and it was one of the first items I ordered for lunch. After finishing my meal, I started my journey back to Shillong. While passing through the market, I saw an elderly Nepali woman sitting on the footpath. This reminded me of an old film shot in Shillong in the 1930s, which also featured a Nepali woman in a similar position. The history of the Nepali community in Meghalaya is indeed very long.

Initially, the Nepalis came as soldiers in the British army (then the East India Company) as part of the Sylhet Light Infantry during the 19th century. Later, they settled as graziers and herdsmen in the hills. The last time I visited my village, Rana, which is on the way to Nongjri, I was told that there used to be Nepali herders in the past. They would graze their cows, which sometimes entered the fields and destroyed the crops. In those days, farmers were still growing their own food, which included millet, unlike today, when the entire hill is covered with broom. The Nepali community was thus not limited to only the areas around Shillong but was quite widespread. In fact, there were many of them in Ri Bhoi, where they grew, among other things, buckwheat. This particular crop has gained importance in recent years due to the agricultural department's efforts to promote its cultivation for export to Japan, where it is used to make soba noodles, known for being quite healthy. I learned from

some researchers that the crop was cultivated in the past by Nepali families in the area around Bhoirymbong. The domesticated variety is not known to the Khasis, who are only familiar with jara, the wild species that is a most common wild edible consumed by the community. Thus, the attempt to cultivate buckwheat represents a revival of a crop that was once significant for the Nepalis. But that's not the only contribution the Nepalis made to the Khasi landscape.

When the Khasis first arrived in the subcontinent from their original homeland in southern China, they were a Neolithic people, i.e., farmers. In fact, they were among the first, as part of the movement of Austroasiatic peoples, to bring farming to mainland Southeast Asia (Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Malaysia, and Burma), including rice cultivation. Later, they reached the subcontinent and are now found in the Northeast, with the Munda being their closest relatives in Central India. While the Khasis were always farmers, cattle do not appear to have been very important for farming operations, as their farming system was most likely a form of shifting cultivation. The slaughter of cattle for ritual purposes (e.g., funerals) was practiced, but with milk being a taboo, cattle did not seem to hold much value beyond meat, which people would probably consume only once a week after returning from the weekly market. Large-scale cattle herding, which is now found in many parts of the Khasi region, must have been introduced by the Nepalis, who are known to be expert herders (a trait carried over from their original pastoral lifestyle in Central Asia). While there is mention of the slaughter of cattle for ritual purposes among the Khasis, no one does it on a larger scale than the Nepalis.

Having grown up in Nongmynsong, I remember the Nepali community as a very vibrant one. One prominent occasion that brought the entire community together was the celebration of Durga Puja, especially the day of the animal sacrifices. The main attraction was, of course, the beheading of

the buffalo, but goats and ducks were also sacrificed in droves. The slaughter of animals for ritual purposes was, in fact, a very important element of early Vedic life. The Brahmanic texts explicitly state that five creatures were suitable for sacrifice, in descending order: ox, horse, cattle, sheep, and goat. The texts of the Rigveda and other Vedas provide detailed descriptions of how sacrifices were to be performed. If one wants to imagine what life during the Vedic period (3,500–2,400 years ago) was like in northern India, there's no better way to experience it than by being present at the Durga Puja celebrations of the Nepalis. In fact, the Gorkha Durga Puja Committee of Shillong is the oldest Durga Puja committee in the state, and this year it completed 129 years.

While it is widely accepted that the Nepalis first arrived in the hills only during the 19th century, the link with the Khasis may go back much earlier. There is a misconception that the Khasis are limited to the hills. Until the arrival of the British, the Khasis occupied many low-land areas in both the Sylhet and Brahmaputra valleys. It was only in the late 18th century, after facing numerous attacks by the Khasis, that the British declared the base of the hills as the boundary and prohibited the Khasis from owning lands in the plains. For more details on how colonial processes dispossessed the Khasis of their lands and broke their links with their kin and subjects, one can read the 2023 book 'Placing the Frontier in British North East India: Law, Custom and Knowledge' by Reju Ray. While the book focuses on the boundary with Sylhet, there is an interesting site in the Brahmaputra valley that provides evidence of how widespread the Khasis were and of their connection with the Nepalis. There is a legend that the present Kamakhya temple was originally a sacred Khasi site called 'Ka Mei Kha,' which was appropriated by Hindus over time and transformed into Kamakhya. Notably, the first iteration of the Kamakhya temple was funded by a king in western Nepal, which could represent one of the first contacts between the

Khasis and the Nepalis.

Genetically, the Khasis are known to be very diverse, with only 30% or less of the present-day Khasi population able to trace their origins to the Austroasiatic-speaking population that left South China around 5,000 to 6,000 years ago. The practice of tang-jait is therefore very important in this regard, as it gives ritual legitimacy to the process of including non-Khasi members into the fold. Even now, many Khasis are marrying Nepalis, and in the past, such matrimonial alliances, if they involved a Khasi man and a Nepali woman, must have led to the creation of a new clan. One wonders how many of the clans that emerged from the process of tang-jait had a Nepali ancestress.

While evidence of that first contact between Khasis and Nepalis may have been lost in time or can be revealed only through DNA testing, their 'second' arrival into the hills has become part of the local folklore. Going back to Ri Bhoi, there is a bat cave (krem lymbit) at Pnah Kdeng, which is around an hour's walk from Pahambir village. In 2017, Bah Rani Maring, a resident of the village and a well-known traditional musician, took us to the cave through a trek. Along the way, we passed through an area with an underground river flowing under the boulders. He pointed to a rock formation that looked like the breast of a woman. He told us that this was actually a beautiful Nepali woman who had committed suicide at the site, and the formation represented her form. One of the breasts was broken when a Khasi man (possibly her jilted lover) threw a stone at it out of jealousy. Like most Khasi stories, it is a tragic one, but the protagonist here was a Nepali woman who likely arrived in the area only in the last 100 years. Yet, in the process, she has become part of the local folklore and symbolizes the link between the Khasis and the Nepalis. Hopefully, this link will endure for many years to come.

(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)

Rise of radicalism
in geopolitics

By Barnes L Mawrie, SDB

“World War III is imminent,” is what many people are saying these days in the context of the on-going unrest in many parts of the world. With the development of the present geopolitics where armed conflicts are going on in many parts of the world, it is not wrong to arrive at such a conclusion. History repeats itself as they used to say. When we analyze the geopolitics of the 1930s we immediately realize that prior to World War II, there had emerged a number of right-wing leaders in the world political scenario. Three such leaders emerged in Europe, namely, Benito Mussolini in Italy who wanted to restore Italy to its former glory of the erstwhile Roman Empire, Joseph Stalin in Russia who was craving to restore the Czarist Empire of the past and of course the ill-renowned Adolf Hitler

Think of Putin who is invading Ukraine because he is harbouring the idea of restoring the dismantled Soviet Union, Xi Jinping who is dreaming of a greater China thereby unlawfully annexing Tibet, claiming parts of India and constantly threatening to invade Taiwan. Then we have Khamenei a Muslim cleric of Iran who has an evil desire to wipe out Israel from the world map. When it comes to the present on-going war in Gaza and Lebanon, we have another radical leader, Benjamin Netanyahu who is bent on destroying his enemies at the cost of thousands of innocent lives. It looks like the UNO is going to suffer the same fate of the League of Nations of becoming dysfunctional and of failing to bridle the greed and political ambition of these autocratic leaders.

Presently, we also wit-



in Germany who founded the Third Reich in order ness a concerning development in western politics

“Now when we observe the geopolitics of the present we realize that history is gradually repeating itself. There is a dangerous development in world politics today with the emergence of a number of right-wing parties and autocratic leaders. We have so many autocrats who are ruling many countries today that the situation has become extremely perilous for global peace. Prominent right-wing leaders who are on the scene today are Xi Jinping in China, Vladimir Putin in Russia, Kim Jong-Un in North Korea, the Taliban in Afghanistan, Donald Trump in the United States (if he should win the coming election), Ali Khamenei the supreme leader of Iran and Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel.”

to make the Arian race the supreme race in the world and to rid Germany of the so called “weak races” from society.

Then we have Emperor Hirohito in Japan who had the ambition of expanding his empire through military power. With such right-wing and radical political leaders at the helm of world affairs, it was a foregone conclusion that something terrible would happen. The League of Nations had become dysfunctional due to many political discrepancies. Finally, the foreboding tragedy took place on September 1, 1939 when Hitler invaded Poland and the Allies declared war on Germany and the Axis alliance. The outcome of World War II was “horrible” to say the least. It brought about immense destruction of property, loss of millions of lives and changed geopolitics once and for all.

Now when we observe the geopolitics of the present we realize that history is gradually repeating itself. There is a dangerous development in world politics today with the emergence of a number of right-wing parties and autocratic leaders. We have so many autocrats who are ruling many countries today that the situation has become extremely perilous for global peace. Prominent right-wing leaders who are on the scene today are Xi Jinping in China, Vladimir Putin in Russia, Kim Jong-Un in North Korea, the Taliban in Afghanistan, Donald Trump in the United States (if he should win the coming election), Ali Khamenei the supreme leader of Iran and Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel. One thing is common among all these right-wing leaders and that is that all of them are craving for absolute power and supremacy. Some of them are haunted by the ambition of restoring their countries to their so-called “former glory.”

where we have a lot of right-wing political parties who are gradually dominating politics. In Italy we already have a right-wing party, the Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy), led by prime minister Giorgia Meloni. In other countries like Spain, Austria, Germany and France we witness a rapid rise of right-wing and nationalist parties who are exercising greater influence in their governments. European countries which used to be either left or centre-left (moderate left) are fast leaning towards outright right-wing. Coming to our own country, we have seen the rise of right-wing ideology since 2014 which is in the form of religious fundamentalism known as Hindutva. In recent years, our own state of Meghalaya is manifesting a leaning towards a right-wing ideology with the rise of the new political party, the VPP (Voice of the People's Party).

History has shown that right-wing ideologies are always dangerous for peace in a community, in a country and for world peace in general. The United Nations has succeeded to maintain world peace and avoid another world war for almost eighty years now, but will it be able to continue doing so in the present scenario? Very few world leaders today seem to heed the constant appeals of the UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres. Leaders of warring nations care a hoot for his words. Those who have observed the facial reaction of President Putin to Antonio Guterres's appeal for peace in Ukraine during the recent BRICS summit in Moscow, would have seen his expression of indifference and defiance. We only hope and pray that more right-minded leaders and less despots and autocrats emerge or else a world disaster is bound to happen sooner than later.

Letters to the Editor

The Dorbar Shnong debate

Editor,
Please refer to the write-up “Evolution of the Modern-day Dorbar –Shnong in Khasi Society” by Rangbah Fabian Lyngdoh (ST Oct 29, 2024). I am happy to stress that it is a happy and promising occasion as Khasis begin to debate on the history, profile and potentials of this “Khasi indigenous grassroots institution”. The essay has raised some very important and critical points over this institution, we all love. Bah Fabian has laid claim to a very controversial issue and this relates to the history of the Dorbar Shnong. He says the concept of Dorbar Shnong or Village Council (one and the same as per my own interpretation) is of a recent phenomenon, starting perhaps with as late as the advent of the British colonizers. The concept of Dorbar Raid or Dorbar Hima are older practices of the Khasis. This makes the Dorbar Shnong relatively new and it simply illustrates, as nothing ever can, the ability of Khasi society to adapt to changing circumstances as per demands of the times.

Bah Fabian goes further and enforces his arguments that the Dorbar Shnong concept is an ongoing evolutionary process in grassroots governance. This makes it crystal clear that the edicts of the Dorbar Shnong are not carved in stone. This important aspect of the Dorbar profile makes

it comparatively easier for the Dorbar to accommodate requirements as they come. For example, women can now be accommodated in Dorbar meetings; a written constitution to streamline Dorbar activities is becoming popular; educated and dynamic persons are now slowly replacing that old practice of electing the most senior village member as Rangbah Shnong; last but not least, the need for Synjoks of Dorbars (Apex Dorbar bodies) to better coordinate interaction with the authorities is fast gaining ground. This evolutionary profile of the modern Dorbar Shnong holds promise that grassroots governance in Meghalaya is proceeding in the right direction. It simply needs a helping hand, to make it the best in the country.

Last but not least are the potentials that the modern Dorbar Shnong holds for the people of the state. To bind the Dorbar system with rigid chains of tradition is the worst injury we can cause this breathing, living grassroots institution of the people. To claim that the different communities of Meghalaya have their own traditional Dorbar systems that brook no change, is to claim the ridiculous. To quote Bah Fabian again, “The district council and the state legislative assembly both have the authority to make laws and regulations to establish justice and uniformity on different aspects of village governance.” What Meghalaya needs is a uniform village governance Act

to streamline the functioning of our grassroots institutions in all three District Councils. We can no longer afford to have, “independent mini states with different kinds of rules from one village to another.” Once such a uniformity is established the Government can go ahead investing in development that is sustainable and community driven and not the farcical scheme driven development we practice today. Problem is, do our political leaders and the parties they belong to have the will and the commitment for such positive changes? Is the welfare and well-being of the common man on their radar screens? Answers and Solutions will lie on how we keep this debate going!

Yours etc.,
Toki Blah,
Via email

Severe water
crisis hits
residents
of Lower
Jail Road &
adjoining areas

Editor,
I am writing to express my deep concern regarding the escalating water crisis that is affecting the Lower Jail Road area as well as other parts of Jail Road of Shillong. Water is our basic necessity and is critical to our lives. Water shortage has negatively impacted

our daily household activities and every alternate day we have to purchase water from water tankers. This has caused financial burdens to most of the households. The water crisis has also led to a range of severe sufferings, impacting each and every individual, community and entire Lower Jail Road area. The timing for water supply is also irregular compared to earlier timings. Sometimes water is supplied when all members of households are out either for work or personal commitments. Moreover, there is not enough pressure in the water supply, thereby reducing the quantum of water supplied to each household.

This water crisis has become a cause of stress as our minds are preoccupied with the uncertainty of water supply and whether we will get enough water. The constant struggle for access to water has led to anxiety, depression, and social unrest within affected households in addition to financial burden. Individuals and residents have approached the authorities of the Shillong Municipal Board as well as PHE, but to no avail. The water crisis continues to haunt us. This leaves us agitated as to how to resolve this crisis which started about six months ago. The residents wonder if anyone is attending to the crisis and failing. Surprisingly, the neighbouring localities like Lawmali, Wahingdoh, Forest Colony etc., are receiving regular and sufficient water supply with the exception of Lower Jail Road and its

adjoining areas. It is not clear as to whether there is any technical defect or diversion of water to other areas which has led to the present water crisis.

The Department of Public Utility must be pro-active to resolve the issue once and for all. Besides, Shillong received a sufficient amount of rainfall this year and hence there should not be any water scarcity at present. It is understood that timely maintenance is necessary, for which water supply may be stopped for one or two days but that does not seem to be the case.

I hope that this letter will provoke the authorities concerned to redress the plight of the Jail Road residents.

Yours etc.,
M. Sarkar,
Via email

Water crisis in
“Smart City”

Editor,
The residents of Jail Road and certain pockets in Ward – 10 have been facing acute water crisis for the last 5-6 months. Common citizens have no means to approach the authority to resolve the water crisis in the locality, particularly the Lower Jail Road area. Some residents had made a common representation to the authorities of Shillong Municipal Board and PHED but their concerns have not been addressed. Often residents will find the plumbers are experimenting with the flow and supply of water management in the

area. Today the situation is such that residents are running after the plumbers to resolve the plights of the households. But are plumbers the authority to resolve the problem of the residents or is there any authority above them?

Water is a basic necessity and it is incumbent on the authorities to ensure this regular and timely supply. As expected the water crisis became a boon for commercial water tankers as residents are compelled to purchase water at exorbitant rates. Residents can understand a temporary water crisis due to annual maintenance work or any emergency but this cannot be the norm. The residents have also been told that henceforth water will be supplied once a day. Today it is difficult to get 300/400 litres of water in a certain area of ward -10 Jail Road. Is this due to diversion of water to other areas or are there technical issues? The SMB and PHED should address the matter urgently as “the residents are losing patience.”

One also wonders at the tall claims of the Smart City Project when most streets are dark with no street lighting and now citizens are facing the most critical problem of water supply! Is the Chief Minister listening?

Yours etc.,
Pinaki Das,
Via email

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

“A good laugh is sunshine in the house.”
— William Makepeace Thackeray
The Shillong Times

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Tradition versus Evolution

RECENT debates on how far into the past can traditional institutions be placed and whether they are actually modern constructs that emerged during the British Raj have occupied the mind space of many. Most societies find a safe space and comfort in tradition because they can follow what was in the past since anything new is considered disruptive. Also, it's easier to follow the beaten track than to carve out a new path. That's how the human mind works. But unless the past is tested against present knowledge systems, how can it be certified to be the best practice? Culture and tradition are words mentioned in every gathering, sometimes to the point of making the past appear sacrosanct and unchangeable. But human societies evolve all the time. Khasi society has evolved from hunting gathering to an agrarian one and then from the slash and burn form of unsettled agricultural practice to a more settled form of cultivation. People have had to evolve and leave tradition behind because the cultural past was no longer tenable.

Yet, when it comes to governance, the past with its deep-seated gender biases is always cited as a best practice that should not lend itself to change. The Dorbar Shnong in a modern society can no longer be a governance institution exclusively for the Khasis. In a democracy, all citizens are equal and deserve equal treatment even in village governance. Non-tribal citizens cannot be excluded from participation in the Dorbar Shnong. When states like Mizoram, Meghalaya and Nagaland were excluded from the Panchayati Raj's 73rd & 74th Amendment Acts, it was out of a lack of understanding of the functioning of traditional institutions that were exclusively and included only tribals. Can a village governance institution legally and constitutionally exclude non-tribal citizens from participatory governance?

Considering that history now reveals that the Dorbar Shnong is a British era institution, it becomes even more important that it evolves and adopts modern governance practices and then seeks recognition from the government via legislation. Working with the government would make it more vibrant and involve many more areas of grassroots governance. ~~Some funds have been not be a problem. The fact of the matter is that the Dorbar Shnong has to deal with modern complexities and cannot hang on to tradition. Their link to the District Councils too is tenuous since they get their mandate (Sanad) from the Syiem another retrograde traditional institution with no accountability whatsoever but wields considerable power over what are called community forests which are outside the purview of the state. If societies have evolved in the way they dress, socialise and in the various professions they pursue, why this penchant for selective aspects of tradition? Is this because traditional institutions are repositories of power without accountability? Tradition is reinvented globally to cope with a fast developing world and the technology available. Its time societies demand change rather than opt for a constructed past.~~

Breaking the Silence: Challenges at Work Place

By Oliver Lyngdoh

Before we dive into the topic of mental health, I want to clarify that I don't have a medical background or expertise in the field. My aim in this piece is to shed light on the challenges, roles, and untold stories of people in the workplace that may have impacted their lives, both physically and emotionally.

World Mental Health Day, observed globally on October 10, focuses on mental health education, awareness, and advocacy against social stigma. This year's theme, "Mental Health at Work," highlights the crucial link between mental well-being and the workplace. Throughout nearly a decade of working across various sectors—multinational companies, government departments, and consultancy projects—I've encountered stories worth sharing to shed light on the challenges people face in their workplaces.

I'd like to start by sharing a story of a project I was working on a while back. It was a high-stakes project with a team of five, where we pushed ourselves to the limit, working 10–12-hour days for two weeks to meet deadlines. Our team lead, who also had to report daily to our US-based director, worked even longer hours. Despite the immense pressure, she remained professional and positive. When the project was successfully delivered, the director took all the credit, and none of us, including our lead, spoke up—fearful it would be seen as a weakness or jeopardize our job security. The intense demands had become an accepted part of our "9-5" roles.

This story isn't unique to me or to any of the working-class readers out there, for it's a reflection of a larger issue in our workplaces. A study by the World Health Organization reveals that an estimated 15% of working adults experience mental health issues, yet mental health remains one of the most overlooked aspects of employee well-being.

A 2022 survey by the American Psychological Association found that 79% of employees reported experiencing work-related stress, and almost half of them said they experienced emotional exhaustion. Such statistics show how widespread this problem is, but more importantly, they highlight the urgent need to address it.

In another high-profile consultancy project, a colleague and I handled the entire project proposal, crucial for our promotions, without any help from the rest of the team. The proposal was accepted, bringing

in significant revenue, but our credit-taking colleagues were celebrated. We weren't seeking accolades, but when promotion time came, we were overlooked, while those colleagues were promoted. When we confronted our manager, she falsely claimed we hadn't performed, ignoring our contributions. This left me "burnt out" and "demotivated", while my colleague resigned, citing the "toxic work environment". The unfairness and lack of recognition deeply impacted both of us.

Mental health challenges come in many forms—anxiety, depression, workaholicism and burnout being the most common. Workplace environments can significantly contribute to or worsen these conditions. Stress from tight deadlines, high workloads, and long hours are often seen as part of the job, but they can lead to serious health issues if not managed effectively.

Workplaces nowadays want to address this so-called "mental health" because it might perhaps be of a fad, a directive from some government, a change of policy, being inclusive and so on so forth, but there are still several barriers to actually address mental health of employees.

Studies, surveys and papers will tell you that the Challenges in Addressing Mental Health that prevent employees from seeking help and organizations from providing the necessary support can be:

- Stigma and Shame: Many people fear that speaking up about mental health issues could lead to being judged or perceived as less capable. This stigma forces employees to suffer in silence.
 - Lack of Resources and Support: Many workplaces still lack effective resources such as Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs), access to counselling, or mental health training.
 - Unrealistic Expectations and Work-Life Balance: Unrealistic performance expectations, long hours, and the pressure to always be available lead to burnout and resentment.
 - Poor Communication and Management Styles: Managers who lack understanding or empathy may inadvertently contribute to stress and mental health issues.
 - Bullying and Harassment: These are unfortunately still prevalent in some workplaces and can severely impact an individual's mental health.
- In my opinion however, and this is not a stab or a say

to any of the work places I have been employed in, is that people lack empathy and understanding. Everyone is your family until no one isn't. Everyone needs employment, whether in blue-collar, daily-wage, or other jobs, to provide for their families and secure the financial rewards that come with working. This is where the ones in power try to use you for every ounce that you are worth because in the end — "Business is Business".

Recently, cases like the Bajaj Finance employee and the EY employee dying and taking their own lives, due to intense work pressure, and the HDFC bank employee collapsing from overwork, highlight the toll of toxic workplaces. Even in small towns like ours, cases of doctors and health workers succumbing to overwhelming workloads, extreme pressures and toxic work environments, with some tragically resorting to ending their own lives.

And yet we all talk about mental health this and mental health that, without anyone doing anything about it.

The points I highlighted above contribute to these extreme cases of mental health breakdown but the lack of human empathy and understanding coupled with our own fear of losing our means of income is the major cause of emotional stress and drain at the work place, in my opinion. Due to the stigma associated with mental health not just in the work place but as a whole, people do not want to speak up, they put a smile on their faces and push through and all the while have to deal with their inner demons alone.

Another personal incident, I had first-hand experience from is a sad one. During the COVID-19 pandemic, a close friend working for a large company in Delhi was suddenly told to relocate to Mumbai for a project. Still reeling from the first wave, he was anxious about moving, especially after recently being in quarantine as a primary contact. His stress was compounded by his wife's miscarriage during the quarantine and his own COVID-like symptoms. Despite explaining his concerns, his management refused to listen. This led him into a spiral of depression, worsened by his recent hardships. His symptoms reappeared, and he was hospitalized. Tragically, he passed away due to COVID shortly after, but we believe his mental state contributed to his declining health.

Let's be "Humans" first.

People start careers to support their families and be close to them, but often get consumed by work due to job demands, external pressures, or ambition. In the process, we forget to live and lose sight of the fact that we don't live to work.

Some people put a smile on their faces and try to push through.

Some turn to a bottle or a syringe or other forms of addiction.

Some look for short lived pleasures just for that drop of dopamine to enable them to escape their reality. While some, and it's sad to say this, some, take extreme measures.

So, what can we do to break down these barriers and create a supportive work environment?

Personally, over my decade long career, I have, started in my own capacity to try to drive a wedge between work and my personal life. I have also tried, among my peers and juniors, to encourage open conversations about the culture of work and the effect it has on them, in order to normalise people speaking out if they feel mentally drained or pressured. Sharing personal experiences in a common platform, like this, can help reduce stigma and create a more accepting environment.

A mental health policy alone isn't enough. Short-term solutions like counselling and activities help, but what's truly needed is a shift in mindset. We must acknowledge that mental health, though not physical, is real and requires understanding and empathy for our employees. Work is work and we need to, in my opinion, learn to understand that people need their personal "me" time to disassociate with work. Empathy and understanding are key.

As employees, prioritize your mental health. Reach out for support when needed and advocate for a healthier work environment. As employers and leaders, recognize the value of mental wellness. We must invest in programs and policies that support mental health and lead by example in creating a culture where well-being is a priority.

Let's break the silence around mental health and create a workplace where everyone feels supported, valued, and empowered. A healthy workplace is about creating an environment where employees feel heard and supported which will enable to bring their best selves to work.

Let's be "Humans" first.

Renaming: A relentless saga

By Chiranjib Haldar

In our emotional bragadocio, we often tend to look at historical narratives through a glass prism. While rechristening Port Blair, capital of Andaman & Nicobar Islands as Sri Vijaya Puram, Home Minister Amit Shah reiterated the Prime Minister's resolve to 'free the nation from colonial imprints'. If India's colonial baggage is to be bogged down with a sledgehammer blow, to what extent can we traverse to shed off those trappings? Do nomenclature alternatives implemented periodically assimilate into our national ethos? Dumping the legacy of Bombay Marine Lieutenant and Naval Surveyor Archibald Blair into oblivion since Sri Vijaya Puram 'symbolises the victory achieved in our freedom struggle and the islands' unique role in the same' may be an historical distortion. This fancying of an alternate past is emblematic of umpteen erasures the BJP regime has stamped from chaperoning Shivaji as the father of the Indian Navy to dropping the iconic hymn 'Abide with me' at the Beating Retreat ceremony on Republic Day.

The colonisation of Andamans was an offshoot of the maritime politics of

tion. So, Rajpath smacks of imperialism; it was a king's way, a boulevard with the last vestiges of royalty that needed to be undone. For many Indian nationalists, it is ideologically unbecoming to equate a sense of identity with what was India's pre-independent status. Thus Indian troops were fighting as mercenaries in the World Wars against British enemies.

History is not only about lauding the past but also about interpreting why something that vexes us today actually happened at that point in time. The naval ensign evolved over centuries and dropping the stripes symbolising the Cross of Saint George cannot snatch its origins. Unveiling a new ensign to drop 'the burden of slavery' can never retrace the path traversed by the Royal Indian Navy. Her Majesty's Indian Marine, and Bombay Marine - all sanctimoniously displayed in the Legacy Gallery of Naval Dockyard Mumbai. While befitting the rich Indian maritime heritage is a proud moment for all countrymen, one cannot deny the evolution of the blue octagonal emblem for centuries from the East India Company's first trading

"The colonisation of Andamans was an offshoot of the maritime politics of the Raj and its need for a strategic foothold in the Bay of Bengal. Its inclusion in the Indian union was the culmination of a settlement process that began earlier than the imprisonment of the Indian revolutionaries in Cellular Jail in 1910. Though settlers were more in number, we have conjured a monochromatic image of the Andamans as a sacred site of nationalism. This image cloaks the mystery of the indigenous Andamese, the convicts, their progenies and domicile islanders. The fillip to this transition started with renaming Port Blair airport after Veer Savarkar and anointing his statue in Cellular Jail under former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee."

the Raj and its need for a strategic foothold in the Bay of Bengal. Its inclusion in the Indian union was the culmination of a settlement process that began earlier than the imprisonment of the Indian revolutionaries in Cellular Jail in 1910. Though settlers were more in number, we have conjured a monochromatic image of the Andamans as a sacred site of nationalism. This image cloaks the mystery of the indigenous Andamese, the convicts, their progenies and domicile islanders. The fillip to this transition started with renaming Port Blair airport after Veer Savarkar and anointing his statue in Cellular Jail under former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee.

Renaming Port Blair as Sri Vijaya Puram is the zenith of this obfuscation to shed all vestiges of colonialism and British legerdemain.

The irony is that the more we rename, the more we expunge our colonial past. We singe not the Mughals or British but remnants of our own past. Writing off Archibald Blair's contribution obscures complex loyalties and horrific memories. Whose martyrdom does shade deew or Neil Island commemorate; the native Andamanese whom the British eliminated, ones whom the Japanese butchered or Savarkar's incarceration in Cellular jail?

Regimes are often re-proached for deconstructing narratives. It is a strange quirk of national fate that the demise of Queen Elizabeth coincided with the reaming of the Rajpath to Kartavya Path in 2022. Even if a government is determined to wipe out remnants of India's undeniable colonial past, will history permit the same? Sceptics point to reinforcing nationhood, but when electoral resurgence churns an alternative version of nationalism to the fore, the froth and broth often mix to produce a concoction.

A moot question crops up. Is the present regime trying to underline its indelible footprint with its hyper-nationalist agenda only to compensate for its unsavoury presence in India's freedom struggle? Historian Irfan Habib had opined, 'The point is you want to leave your mark on everything.' Being obsessed with delinking every colonial vestige in modern India is an imminent paradox. Post-independence, Kingsway and Queensway were rechristened Rajpath and Janpath but that was not to highlight pessimism of the empire. Abolition of symbols of colonial legacy to stress self-reliance maybe an unending saga, but undoing the course of history is a tough assignment which has no orientation. It often obscures complex loyalties as in the case of the Andamans.

Home Minister Amit Shah rightly asserted that the Chola Kings used the Andaman and Nicobar Islands to project their power eastwards and use the archipelago as a strategic base for expeditions against the Sri Vijaya Empire of Indonesia. But this reference to the Chola dynasty may not just be a narrative for erasing Port Blair's colonial bequest. It could well be constructing a new narrative in the garb of political symbolism. Renaming cities and towns may not decolonise but perpetuate exclusionary divisions. Can history be obliterated so easily with the erasing of colonial legacies of Marine Surveyor Donald Ross, Brigadier General James Neil, General Henry Havelock and Lieutenant Archibald Blair? Sri Vijaya Puram as the capital of Andaman and Nicobar Islands may be a classic moniker of decolonisation being used to conceal spatial majoritarianism.

(The writer is a commentator on politics and society.)

Is India's GDP growth inflated?

Editor,
There is something intriguing and a bit of a puzzle about the Indian economy at the moment. Despite India's high Gross Domestic Product growth, bank credit and consumption have been relatively low. There are several factors at play. Some experts suggest that the GDP data might be inflated, which could explain the discrepancy between high GDP growth and low bank credit and consumption. A significant portion of investment in India has been driven by domestic money for the last three years rather than foreign inflows. This has led to a strong stock market but has not necessarily translated into increased bank credit or consumption. Indian banks have seen a high credit-deposit ratio, which means they are lending out a large portion of their deposits to the entities that they are aware of. This has led to tighter credit growth and could be a reason for low bank credit. The Indian economy might be experiencing a cyclical slowdown, with urban consumption indicators softening and companies sealing down their salary outlays. Geopolitical conflicts and economic uncertainties in advanced economies could also be affecting sentiment

and consumption in India. It is a complex issue and multiple factors at play.

What if the GDP is inflated? Some experts believe that the GDP is inflated. If India's GDP is indeed inflated, it could have several implications. An inflated GDP might paint an overly rosy picture of the economy, masking underlying issues such as unemployment, low consumption, and weak investment. There could be policy mistakes where policymakers might make decisions based on inaccurate data, potentially leading to ineffective or even harmful economic policies. Investors rely on accurate economic data to make informed decisions. If they suspect the GDP figures are inflated, it could erode their confidence and deter investment.

The discrepancy between high GDP growth and low bank credit and consumption could persist, as the real economic activity might not be as robust as the GDP figures suggest. Other countries and international organisations might question the credibility of India's economic data, affecting its reputation on the global stage. It is a complex issue, and if the GDP is indeed inflated, it would require a thorough investigation and corrective measures to ensure accurate economic reporting. Swaminathan Aiyar, consulting editor, ET Now, in his interview to The Economic Times today, says that "strong GDP growth is

associated with a fast rise in credit. After all, growth has to be financed. Some would say it is a sign that GDP data are being inflated. One way or the other, either we are going to have GDP data revised downwards or there will be a pickup in consumption. It is going to appear later rather than sooner. But the mystery has to be solved. How is it that we have such a high rate of GDP growth and yet bank credit and consumption are slack?"

Who will investigate and ensure accuracy of GDP?

In India, the responsibility of investigating and ensuring the accuracy of GDP data primarily falls on the National Statistical Office (NSO). They are tasked with collecting, analysing and publishing statistical data, including GDP figures. Additionally, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) plays a crucial role in monitoring economic indicators and can raise concerns if discrepancies are found. If there are suspicions of inflated GDP data, these organisations would likely collaborate to investigate and address any issues. The Ministry of Finance might also get involved to ensure that economic policies are based on accurate data. It is a multi-faceted approach, involving several key institutions to maintain the integrity of economic data.

Your etc;
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

Why caste reservation is needed

Editor,
This is with reference to the letter, "Time to rethink caste-based reservations" (ST, October 26, 2024). The recent labour market data shows that merely 2 out of every 100 jobs are in the public sector. The caste-based reservation is all about 2 per cent jobs. Only one per cent of the total jobs are actually in the reserved category, as there is a 50 per cent bar in the reservation. The caste-based reservation is all about 2 per cent jobs. Only one per cent of the total jobs are actually in the reserved category as there is a 50 per cent bar in the reservation.

It is altogether a wrong notion that caste reservation among Members of Parliament, Members of Legislative Assembly and in the government jobs were created only to uplift some backward castes. If it was so, then the caste reservation became effective also in the private sector jobs which is 98 per cent of the total jobs. The state quota and caste quota among both the elected and selected personnel of the government are there only to fulfil one of the basic tenets of democracy that demands an equitable representation of every state and community in the formation of the government.

We know about caste quo-

ta among MPs and MLAs, when we see reserved constituencies in which seats are reserved for Scheduled Castes and Tribes based on the size of their population. There is also a state quota in parliamentary seats.

However, there is no state quota in the IAS and in other central services. But there is a state civil service that acts like a state quota. It ensures equitable representation from the state in the public administration. Caste is as much a reality in India as that of a state. Therefore, the proposal for doing away with the caste reservation for the MPs, MLAs, and public servants is as dangerous for democracy as the idea of abolishing the state civil service and state quota for MPs and MLAs.

Selection of the Indian cricket team is based on merit, and there is no quota in it. However, there are zone based quotas for the selectors to check provincial nepotism. Yet, we see players from only a few states representing India. Many states remain unrepresented. This will also happen in the formation of the government in the absence of a state and caste quota. In such a situation, democracy and federalism cannot sustain.

There are some scholars who want to introduce reservation in government jobs without any cap so that the government can be truly democratic and representative. Some scholars also think that the reservation

policy should be introduced in the private sector which is 98 per cent of the total jobs, to improve the lot of the backward castes.

Only if caste reservation across all jobs is applied with the argument that caste reservation exists not just to fulfil the demand of democracy but also to cater to the backward castes will become valid.

Now, let us focus on Gujarat Lok Sabha seats. Gujarat has a state quota for 26 Lok Sabha seats, out of which 2 are reserved for SC and 4 for ST. So, we see that there is a caste quota within the state quota. However, nobody says that an economic status bar needs to be introduced in the state and caste quota because we know that these quotas are for equitable representation and not for uplifting the status of 26 Gujarati persons or 2 SC Gujarati persons.

State and caste identities are permanent. Money cannot dilute them. A study says that untouchability is still being practiced by one out of four persons. There is enough evidence that money cannot change the status of an untouchable person and make him/her 'touchable'.

Yours etc.,
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