

*"The future influences the present
just as much as the past."*

—Friedrich Nietzsche

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Divide and rule

AT the doorsteps of the parliamentary polls, BJP is at a loss to explain a statement made by its Assam chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma to the effect that Shudras were meant to serve Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishya communities. Among others, the CPI-M in its official media page has taken strong objection to this and stressed that the "BJP's Manuvadi ideology is in full play." Biswa Sarma was heard saying this at the Gita Mahotsav in Haryana a week ago, quoting Lord Krishna. Eventually, he removed the comment from his social media page. To have invoked this idea at this critical hour, Biswa Sarma might have done a disservice to the BJP, a party he had joined only less than a decade ago but managed to grab the CM's post. Curiously, Biswa Sarma hardly ever drew national attention for his government's performances or for his utterances as CM, other than when he repeatedly targeted the Muslim community. A former AASU functionary, he drew media attention also in relation to several corruption allegations in the past, and recently in relation to a questionable 10-crore central subsidy for his wife to run a food-processing unit.

Himanta Biswa Sarma's associations with the BJP or the Sangh Parivar are a recent phenomenon but he has ably inherited their penchant to divide the society. Democracy is all about uniting the people to govern the nation. The BJP often proved it could divide the people and grab power. It camouflages its emphasis on Hindutva by singularly focusing on Lord Ram, thereby 'unifying' the majority Hindu society through the arm of religious devotion. The Sudras form the lowest layer of the Hindu framework, outside of which are the BCs and the Dalits. These three together form the bulk of the wider Hindutva concept though all these segments had been treated shabbily and crudely until the dawn of democracy. Even in recent years, Dalits being subjected to inhuman acts in Gujarat, UP etc., at the hands of other communities had been widely reported in the media. But, using Ram as a symbol, the BJP aims to unite all of them under its saffron flag. This, per se, is an equally crude act. Notably, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has shown restraint in such matters after he took charge of the nation. He claims to be a BC on grounds that his community had 'converted' itself to 'backward' some time ago and effectively used this large army of voters to win power for himself and sit at the apex of the nation. Politics today is all about a play of games to fool the people. For the hapless nation, there's no escape from this 'divide and rule' policy.

Envisioning A New Heaven and New Earth: A New Year Reflection

By Kyrsoibor Pyrtuh

The writer joins with friends, relatives and billions of fellow citizens across the State and Country to reflect upon life's journey as we embark into the New Year. Two pertinent questions would always confront me i.e. what has one done in the year gone by and what one should do in the New Year? As we are marching forward, let us for a moment utter in the words of an ancient prayer - "O! God lead us from untruth to truth; lead us from darkness to light, lead us from death to life." However, the violence in Manipur and the genocide in Gaza are still gripping the nation and the world with the threat of escalating communal conflagration and war, unless we the people beseech our respective governments to call for an end to this madness and massacre of innocents.

We also contemplate upon another ancient text which points us towards the possibility of being partaker in a new heaven and new earth. The book of Revelations in the Bible spoke about the creation of "a new heaven and a new earth" (Revelations 21:1). Some would argue that this is a utopian dream, while others would downplay that it smacks of romanticism. However, this apocalyptic idea was common in ancient Hebrew and the New Testament period as well which only a few Bible preachers would care to exegete the profundity of the theology of a new heaven and new earth.

It's clear that the concept of a new heaven and a new earth has been the subject of discussion throughout different civilizations. Such a utopian idea acts as a powerful response to the dehumanizing and suffering society. Nonetheless, this ideal world free from injustices and discriminations has captured the imagination of many of us. In the face of socio-political challenges, the belief in the possibility of hope, that another world is conceivable, is a potent and timeless theme. It reflects the deep-seated desire for a world that is free from injustice, inequality and hate. This vision offers a sense of hope and renewal amid adversity.

The discussion around a new heaven and new earth provides an opportunity to respond to the call on how we can work towards creat-

ing a more just and compassionate society here and now. To remain committed to justice, probity and equality. It's a profound theological/philosophical idea that provokes us to ponder on the possibility of transformation and renewal at all levels, be it social, economic, political and personal.

As part of tradition, this new year, many of us have made certain resolutions to bring improvements to one's life and in our daily dealings with others. The custom of taking new year resolutions has been there for thousands of years and historians are of the view that the people of ancient Babylonians were the first to make new year resolutions about 4000 (four thousand) years ago. Although, during the Babylonian civilization the year did not begin in January, but rather in mid-March when the crops were planted. The Babylonians had recorded their new year festivals also known as Akitu which lasted for 12 (twelve) days during which they made promises to the gods to pay their debts and returned any borrowed objects. These promises made by the people of ancient Babylon were construed to be the forerunners of the modern world's new year resolutions. It was believed that if these promises were kept, the gods would bestow favor upon the people for the whole year, but if they fail, they would be excluded from the blessings of god(s), a condition which no one wanted.

A similar custom was prevalent in ancient Rome after Emperor Julius Caesar adopted the new Julian calendar around 46 B.C and established January 1 as the beginning of the year. The first month of the year, January, is also named after the two-faced Roman god, Janus, who looks forward to new beginnings as well as backwards for reflection and resolution. The people of ancient Rome also offered sacrifices to the deity and made promises to lead a good life throughout the year. According to Catherine Boeckmann, "New year's resolutions were also made in the Middle Ages when medieval knights would renew their vow to chivalry by placing their hands on a

peacock."

While for the early Christians, the first day of the New Year became an occasion for soul searching that will lead to a resounding exhortation upon oneself to become better than the past life. The era of Protestantism represents a different picture as the New Year's resolutions had become deeply religious or spiritual whereby people, especially protestant Christians, expressed their desire to develop stronger moral character and to exercise more restraint amidst worldly pleasures. Sarah Pruitt wrote that, in 1740 John Wesley who was the founder of Methodists' movement in England, started the Covenant Renewal Service which was mostly held on New Year's Eve or New Year's Day. It is also known as watch night services and they included Scriptures reading, singing of hymns, prayers and a sermon. This watch night service serves as a religious alternative to the raucous celebrations in secular spaces held to embrace the coming of New Year. Such religious practice is a very popular and important affair of the Christian churches, especially Presbyterians, across the Khasi Hills till today. During the watch night services or in New Year's Church services people would spend making resolutions and engrossed themselves in fasting and praying to beseech for better days ahead of them.

As stated earlier, the apocalyptic hope for a new heaven and a new earth was popular in ancient Biblical society. Numerous Biblical prophecies about the return of Eden, the era of peace and righteousness, were recounted. Isaiah was among the prominent expounders of such themes and the end of sufferings and injustices in which he said, "For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth... They shall build houses and inhabit them; They shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build, and inhabit another; They shall not plant, and another eat; The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox, and dust shall be the serpent's food. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain, Says the

Lord". (Isaiah 65:17-25). In the current context of turmoil, massacre and occupation, every Palestinian who is indigenous to the land as well as every Jew is entitled to materialize this prophetic vision of a new heaven and new earth. The place where they can co-exist and grow as independent nations and cultivate a sense of shared humanity and understanding.

The violent hidden Manipur where thousands were displaced is a stark reminder of the challenges faced by those who have been uprooted from their homes. Therefore, it is essential for governments and organizations to work together to provide support to the displaced people of Manipur for their safe return to their communities and ensuring access to necessities such as food, shelter, education and healthcare. In this New Year, earnest efforts should be made on creating conditions that enable families and individuals to rebuild their lives in dignity and security.

As for us, tribals of Meghalaya, we re-commit ourselves to ancient tenets which have been handed down from generation to generation. The foundational principles of egalitarianism and communitarianism are fast eroding by the onslaught of materialism and crony capitalism. It is imperative to address this erosion and it requires a collective effort to uphold values of equality, equity and communal responsibility.

Embracing the ancient Khasi tenets of "know humanity, know God" and "earn through righteous means" is a profound commitment. These principles emphasize the importance of understanding and empathizing with others as a path to spiritual growth. They are relatable with integrity, fairness and moral uprightness in all aspects of life.

As tribals we must be proud of our ancient and timeless wisdom inherent in these principles. This wisdom has been guiding our actions and interactions with others since time immemorial and they still hold true today. By practicing empathy, seeking to understand different perspectives, and conducting ourselves with righteousness can contribute to creating a more holistic and just society.

May we have a Blessed New Year.

BJP has narrative advantage against combined Opposition

INDIA Bloc is still to offer attractive agenda for 2024 Polls

By Harihar Swarup

The INDIA alliance meeting in Delhi is broadly an effort at political resuscitation. For three months, the opposition formation had virtually suspended such strategic level dialogue, as the Congress prioritised the assembly elections. Talk of crucial loss of momentum. INDIA's leading partner Congress stands devastated after losing in three states to the BJP, reinforcing perception of BJP's dominance of the crucial Hindi belt. The scale of the mountain the opposition is forced to climb appears quite forbidding. So let's start with a few points of consolidation for the opposition.

One, Congress losses are good for INDIA: These might paradoxically accelerate the

issue of expanding OBC reservation.

Five, the missing narrative: Yet, these points are best seen as footnotes of the emerging campaign. The trouble for the Opposition is that voters are still not aware of the main narrative of the INDIA bloc. If you ask BJP voters about the big message of the NDA campaign, most would reply with India's rising image on the world stage or the Ram temple or welfare schemes of the central government. But opposition voters might struggle to come up with any shared message of the opposition platform. Except in Bihar, the caste census agenda has remained at the level of slogans and hasn't seen any grassroots mobilisation.



process of forging crucial agreements over seat-sharing, as a humbled Congress and assertive allies now appear on more than equal footing. Sure, there was an initial round of recriminations, which included a deferred alliance meeting as SP, TMC, and JDU leaders refused to attend, expressing frustration with the Congress's unilateralism. But most parties have now struck more conciliatory poses, particularly after the Parliament suspensions.

Two, southern gains: In some states, the INDIA bloc appears to be building momentum. In Maharashtra, the incumbent BJP government finds itself embroiled in the Maratha quota stir and farmers' unrest. Also, the weakened Sharad Pawar and Uddhav Thackeray camps have avoided any friction

Six, the missing campaign on price rise, jobs: The opposition has also consistently failed to mobilise people over widespread concerns over price rise. In Madhya Pradesh, CSDS Lokniti post-poll survey showed more than half of all voters claimed to be dissatisfied with BJP over price rise and unemployment. Yet, the survey also showed the very same voters favoured BJP over congress in voting choice.

Seven, the missing economic plan: Congress is still not treated by many to provide better economic management than BJP. It has also struggled to come up with a catchy economic plan to turn around India's economic fortunes. In the absence of such a platform, talk of representation and

"The downsides of an over-reliance on the caste census agenda have also split to the surface. Congress government is sitting on the local caste survey fearing a consolidation of dominant Lingayats and Vokkaligas in favour of BJP."

with the Congress which appears to be the dominant coalition partner.

In Telangana, the Congress victory provides an opportunity for the party to make significant gains in the state (from three seats last time), and perhaps even opens the door towards a position of some leverage in neighbouring Andhra Pradesh.

Three, the Karnataka complication: The addition of JDS has made NDA competitive here. The downsides of an over-reliance on the caste census agenda have also split to the surface. Congress government is sitting on the local caste survey fearing a consolidation of dominant Lingayats and Vokkaligas in favour of BJP. Plus Siddaramaiah (OBC) and D K Shivkumar (Vokkaliga leader) have struck discordant notes on the need for a caste census.

Four, the Bihar cheer: Meanwhile, Bihar is the only state where principal alliance constituents (JDU and RJD) have actually started popular campaigns on the caste census agenda. In both Bihar and Maharashtra, state-level BJP has been forced into a defensive stance on

social justice further derives the elite and middle class voters into BJP arms.

Eight, the popularity of national god: In all the bi-annual India Today MOTN surveys since 2019 NDA share has never been projected to go below 298 seats. This represents both a dominant and stable social base: composed largely of urban middle class, urban class castes and large swathes of OBCs. Over two-thirds of all voters (CSD-Lokniti surveys) in the three Hindi belts states evinced satisfaction with the national government.

Nine, the popularity of Modi: Finally, BJP still enjoys the decisive leadership advantage. Indeed, there is no alternative leader close to Modi in popularity. The national elections are more presidential than state elections. Even when the NDA lost Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan last time. It had won 34 of the 36 seats in Lok Sabha. In Rajasthan, a third of BJP voters claimed to have voted for Modi even in the state elections. In national elections, the PM is slated to drive an even bigger chunk into the BJP coalition. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

Money down the drain

Editor,
The letter "Christmas a tool for politics and commercialization" (ST - December 28, 2023) by Shailin H Lyngdoh hit the nail on the head in highlighting the government's twisted sense of priorities of giving pre-eminence to glitz and ostentation over the truly important matters. In this connection, I would also like to point out the authorities' callousness in keeping the decorative lights on, day and night for 24 hours since December 24. One wonders how many crores of public money has been thrown down the drain in the process. It is tragic that this is happening at a time when the MeCL is drowning in debt and is on the verge of collapse. (Under these circumstances it is hard to believe that this Corporation just won an award for energy conservation).

Some people have said that the Christmas decorations are necessary to attract tourists. I find this argument to be untenable. For god's sake, tourists are not small children who come to see the lights! Everyone knows that Meghalaya's Unique Selling Point (USP) for tourists is its natural beauty. For sure, tourists are coming here for this reason only and not because of the government's feeble attempts to attract them. Another negative aspect of the government's action to decorate Shillong is that in

several localities one can see that the wires and lights have been carelessly fixed at very low heights so much so that from December 24 onwards big garbage trucks cannot pass through the internal roads of the above localities thereby causing avoidable inconvenience to residents.

Yours etc.,
Samuel Sweet,
Shillong-2.

Of New Year Resolutions

Editor,
It is time to say Happy New Year, 2024! The New Year celebration has a universal appeal. It is not confined to any particular region or religion. It transcends all boundaries. Barring very few, almost all the countries of the world use the Gregorian calendar. The Gregorian calendar was proclaimed by Pope Gregory XIII in 1582 as a reform of the Julian calendar.

The Julian and thereafter the Gregorian calendar count years from the birth of Jesus Christ. This is the reason why AD stands for 'Anno Domini', Latin for 'in the year of the Lord' while BC stands for 'Before Christ'. Now religious neutral words BCE (Before the Common Era) and CE (Common Era) have replaced BC and AD respectively to make the Gregorian calendar free from any religious tag.

After these changes, the New Year celebrations have become a truly secular event across the world. The idea

of 'vasudhaiva kutumbakam' that is the world is one family manifests in its celebration. People of different countries, cultures and religions celebrate it without bothering about man-made walls. It takes us away from the falsehood of narrow confinement of jingoism and religiosity to the truth of our spiritual unity.

Transcending man-made boundaries is the speciality of every New Year's day. It carries the dream of John Lennon, "Imagine there is no country/ It isn't hard to do/ nothing to kill or die for/ And no religion, too." In this song, he said, "You may say I'm a dreamer/ But I'm not the only one/ I hope someday you'll join us/ And the world will live as one." We can say that at least on New Year's day Lennon is not the only one as people from almost all countries and religions knowingly or unknowingly join together in celebration to live as one.

Apart from this openness, New Year's day has another characteristic that bears the signature of spiritual endeavour. That is the New Year resolution. People make New Year's resolutions to make their tomorrows a little better. It would be pertinent to recall the words of Abraham Lincoln, "Always bear in mind that your own resolution to succeed is more important than any other." It is important because our resolution is our aspiration to become better human beings for a better tomorrow. This is the driving force of evolution that has taken us from a

society of slaves to a feudal society and from police states to welfare states.

Researchers have produced new DNA evidence that almost certainly confirms "Out of Africa," theory of human evolution that all of us stem from a single group of Homo Sapiens. After originating in Africa, our ancestors began spreading throughout Eurasia 60,000 years ago to seek food after experiencing a "quantum leap in thinking".

Many generations ago, our ancestors could not help but move out of Africa to satisfy their aspirations that they felt so strongly about after having experienced a "quantum leap in thinking". It had opened a new horizon in their minds which could be described in the words of Rabindranath Tagore, "Fountain awakened from its dream."

According to Sri Aurobindo, the cycles of evolution tend always upwards, but they are cycles and do not ascend in a straight line. The process therefore gives the impression of a series of ascents and descents, but what is essential is that the gains of evolution are retained and even if eclipsed for a time, re-emerge in new forms suitable to the new age.

When we look back to the open slave markets in Europe and America and the practice of Sati in India, we cannot deny the upward movement of evolution. But when we see 8,000 dead bodies of children in the graveyards of Gaza, we must also admit that we have to welcome the New Year at a time when a

series of descents are going on across the world.

In India we see descents in the cycles of evolution in rising atrocities against Dalits and minorities. The emergence of India as a secular, democratic country was certainly a gain of evolution. But those gains are likely to be eclipsed for a time as an attempt is being made to create the impression that a religious ceremony is but a State event.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

Newly laid roads with new potholes

Editor,
It's really upsetting to see the newly laid road resurfacing at GS Road, starting from the Umiam dike at Lad Umroi upto Mawiong is not as per the prescribed standards. As soon as the road surface was laid then potholes started appearing within a week of its completion. Though efforts have been made by the contractor to restore the same, but the shoddy repair work has further exacerbated the road surface giving motorists a not so good experience while driving down this busy highway. Further, the absence of paved shoulders along the highway raises questions as to whether the PWD National Highway engineers who are supposed to inspect and check the road quality, have really discharged their duties effectively to prevent such flaws? It is apparent

that nowadays most road construction work in Meghalaya is not properly supervised by the concerned department as we experienced horrible road conditions almost everywhere. Above all, the newly laid roads last only for a few months. Is this not a waste of precious natural resources as well as taxpayer's money?

This same road, GS Road, was relaid twice this year whereas in rural areas there is no proper road connectivity for several years now. As good roads are not just the backbone of the economy, but it reflects the progress and prosperity of the state, it's high time that the State Government implements the same to uplift the state's economy. Most of us can still recall and experience the high standard road quality during the government of Late Purno A. Sangma. He brought in the Oriental Company from Kolkata which built roads that lasted for a decade without any visible potholes. Unfortunately, this Company was later disallowed from further road construction due to protest from certain pressure groups favouring local contractors who bring in their low grade road construction for their own vested interest at the cost of development of the state.

Yours etc.,
Stanley LK Diengdoh,
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.

"Many receive advice, only the wise profit from it."

— Harper Lee

The Shillong Times

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India and China

EXTERNAL Affairs Minister, S Jaishankar claims a sense of realism underpinning India's present ties with China while the approach towards China during the Jawaharlal Nehru era was one of "romanticism." Nehru's Panchsheel pact with China proved to be a total failure as China bluntly violated such principles. The architect of modern India had his strong points, which helped the nation grow on a sound footing, but his friendly overtures to China were not reciprocated in equal measure. Nehru allowed China to take the UN Security Council (UNSC) seat on a platter, saying "China first." Today, China singularly stands in the way of India getting an SC seat. Ignoring history, Prime Minister Narendra Modi played host to Chinese president Xi Jinping in a grand manner just months after he assumed power in Delhi. The wooing continued in their Mahabalipuram meeting too, but Modi learned a bitter lesson from Xi later. In between, the Doklam standoff also happened.

Relations between India and China remain strained. It's very unlikely that this grim scenario can ever change for the better. China let down India repeatedly, and most recently in 2020, when it encroached into Galwan in Ladakh and faced resistance from the brave Indian soldiers. The casualties on the Indian side were painfully high. In 1962, Chinese PLA annexed large swathes of Indian land along the northern border. These still remain with China, but Rajiv Gandhi re-engaged China. Later, India opened its markets to China. This was an 'invasion' too. China is encircling India by wooing our neighbours and building its ports, one after another, all around by offering these nations financial enticements. All these because China's economy and military strength are roughly five times larger than India's, though at the turn of the century, both were on an equal footing. China is today the world's second largest economy and India the fifth largest. The Chinese society progressed by virtue of the hard work put in by its leadership that, in turn, engaged the masses to contribute their mite to the productive sectors of the economy. Work, they must. India, on the other hand, effectively discouraged work by offering its poor subsidized food by way of ration.

India, on its part, has never been an aggressor also for the reason that, under the democratic system, this nation never had the privilege of having strong leaders. The hoi polloi at the forefront of the election process select their representatives and leaders on the basis of their whims, not based on any rationale. This is unlike China where the leader of the nation is decided on the basis of a rationale and consensus among the seasoned veterans of the Communist Party. For them, the nation comes first.

Economic processes of Meghalaya need a rejig

By Benjamin Lyngdoh

An economic process is a system that converts raw materials into finished goods/services which are then consumed by the consumers. For example, potatoes as raw materials are processed into chips/chops which are then offered to the consumers for consumption. The exchange of money in the value chain (from raw potatoes to consumers) drives development. Any economic process is driven by humans. They are more important than machines, equipments, etc. This is the reason why no development can happen without a productive human resource. The failure to factor this results in a handicap. The Meghalaya economic scenario explains the handicap as despite being rich in resources/raw materials, progress has been slow (state GDP growth rate of 4% over 2016-17 to 2020-21 at constant prices [source: MOSPI, 2022]). Clearly, something is wrong with its economic processes.

The first element of economic process is resource management. Meghalaya has been trying to address the problem of unemployment for some time now. But, simply just asking the youth to become entrepreneurs and start a small business has little meaning. Plus the continued practice of motivating the youth to initiate repetitive/imitative businesses which are already present in the market space has little value. For example, if there are already five grocery shops in a locality it would be uneconomical for someone to start a sixth. The solution lies in resource management. It would be beneficial if at every localised level (village/block area) a continuous assessment is done on the resources/raw materials available. This would then become a base for the initiation of economic activities at an individual/community level. If the resources are assessed and managed appropriately the problem of unemployment would not be so bad. Take the southern stretches of Meghalaya which are rich in broomsticks. These have largely been sold in bulk to middlemen for onward pro-

cessing. If the broomsticks can be properly managed at the village level it can lead to the establishment of many broomstick processing units providing employment to many at the village level. This would also generate income for the local businesses.

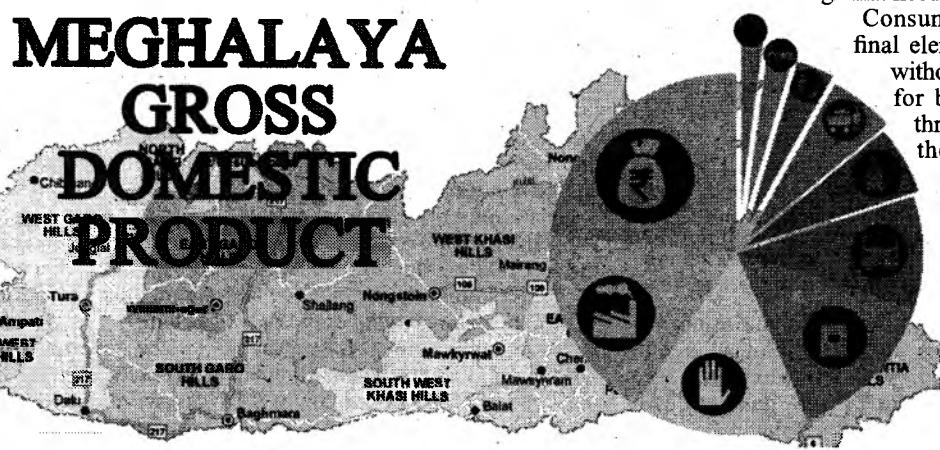
The main challenge of unemployment is that the majority of the business start-ups are drone or imitative in nature. Drone means that businesses being initiated are old-school with no innovation at all (Betel-nut shops, etc). Imitative means entrepreneurs just imitate what-

and capital is equally important. Meghalaya has an abundance of labour which can be trained into productive skills areas. The problem lies in capital formation and its subsequent investment. The situation is such that those who have capital do not know where to invest and those who have brilliant innovative ideas do not have the financial resources. If production has to be seamless then there is a need to bridge the gap between money and talent. What is required is a medium/platform where the two parties can meet and negotiate. Many

This happens when a destination is over-marketed while on the backdrop of poor logistics and service quality. The majority of the tourism services are located in Guwahati and Shillong. This has little value when it comes to empowerment of the rural youth. On the other hand, there is a case of underselling. The varieties of local chips now available are fit to challenge the likes of Lays, Uncle Chips, etc. However, they lack proper packaging and information on the product; short shelf-life and many do not have FSSAI (Food Safety and Standards Authority of India) certification. These are red flags that need attention.

Consumption is the final element. It goes without saying that for businesses to thrive and grow the goods produced and services offered would have to be consumed. In the fitness of things there lies the need for the consumption of locally produced/offered goods and services. Unless the products of local businesses are bought by people the local economy will never grow. It is the starting point of development and the growth of more local entrepreneurs. This is not a case of emotional purchase, rather a sustained practice of buying local products. Emotions come and go. What is needed is an understanding of how the local economy works. Much work is needed in this aspect. The state government would do well to really immerse in the needs of the local businesses and initiate a drive to boost consumption of local products. Making the consumers realize the importance of supporting local entrepreneurs should be one of the focus areas in 2024. For instance, now that the festive season is over the households may evaluate in money terms that 'of all the goods/services consumed in the last three weeks how much was spent on local products'. This analysis might just change our future consumption behaviour.

In the end, what are needed are policies and strategies that factor all the elements of economic processes. It would be holistic and more productive. (Email - benjamin@nehu.ac.in)



ever the others are already doing (Grocery shops, etc). This brings capacity building into play which is the second element of economic process. It refers to making the people capable of productive employment. It is important to draw a line between motivation and capacity building. While the former focuses on mentally preparing oneself, the latter is oriented towards skilling and empowerment. The problem is that the majority of business development programs are purely motivational only. Motivation has no meaning without skills and technical know-how. Now, capacity building requires a dedicated focus on innovation which is of two types - newness and process. Even globally, newness innovation is few as it is difficult to come out with a completely new product/service frequently. Most of the innovations are 'process' as seen in the form of better packaging, better service offering, better product design, etc. Capacity building has to focus on the creation of better processes and new combinations else all start-ups would just be drone/imitative.

The third element of economic process is production of goods and services. Here, labour has to be available

are aware of the reality show Shark Tank in which budding entrepreneurs with bright ideas pitches their business proposals in front of wealthy investors. If impressed and convinced the investor then invests their wealth in the business idea. It is a win-win situation for both. But then again, production cannot take place in the absence of sound infrastructure. For example, in the absence of proper roads, electricity, etc the broomsticks from south Meghalaya would continue to be sold through middlemen with no opportunity for the local villagers to process them into finished products.

Goods production has to be supported by efficient distribution which is the fourth element. This is where logistics and marketing comes into effect. An excellent product X has no value if it cannot be distributed to other parts of India and beyond. The lack of effective distribution networks hampers entrepreneurial spirit. Meghalaya as a market is too small. Again it is about the availability of sound infrastructure. Airports, railways, roadways and waterways are critical for distribution of goods and services. Distribution has to be handled with care. For example, the distribution of tourism is akin to oversell-

Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

Father's Wise Words on New Year..!

"T'was the night before the New Year!
The old man sighed as he watched his family sit together that night. He knew they would be leaving soon for the New Year dance, and he had also got his best suit pressed by the maid, so he would look good as the New Year came in. His wife sat by his side and smiled at him, she gave him a piece of paper and a pen. He watched as the others wrote on their own pieces of paper.

"Dad!" said his elder son, "you aren't writing anything?"

"Yes grandpa," said his eldest grandson, "you're supposed to write New Year resolutions on your paper. See what I wrote grandpa.."

"Sssshhh son," said his mother, "you've got to read it tomorrow after the New Year has come in."

The old man sighed as he looked at his family.

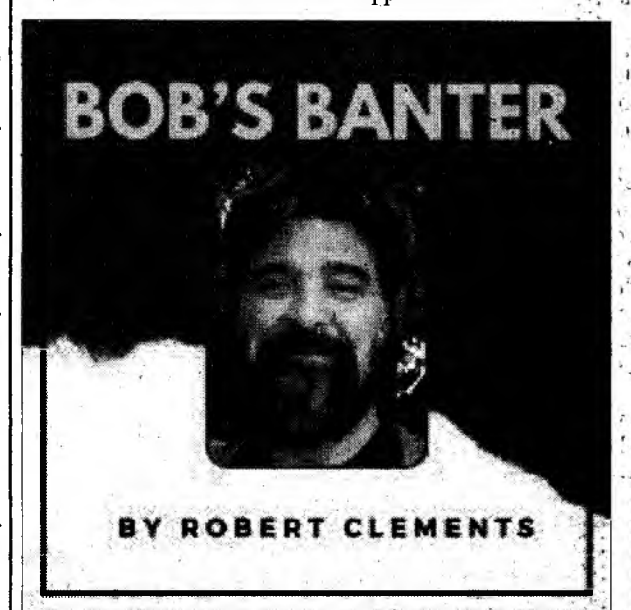
"Remember dad, you were the one who taught us this habit?"

same thing!" He smiled and continued, "And now that I know you all copied my paper, let me tell you why I wrote what I wrote!"

"Nothing like the New Year to make resolutions, right? But most of them hardly last a week, and here's why. Most of us make resolutions that have to do only with ourselves, but if we look around, we will notice that we are all part of a bigger social network, be it a family, nation or world. And so, one way to make a successful resolution is to see whether it will benefit those outside ourselves.

Yes, I'd like to lose weight, but would losing those extra kilos give me more energy and better health in aiding people around me? If yes, then your resolution has suddenly got a bigger purpose. With more energy I will be able to put more time into work which will benefit society at large. My family will benefit, my company will too, and finally I will!

The bigger purpose propels the resolution and makes it happen.



"Yes," sighed the old man.

"I remember one night I wrote so many resolutions I never slept that night," said his younger son, "and then next morning I couldn't find the paper."

"That's because I took the paper out of your hand and hid it," said his mother.

"Otherwise you would never have gone to sleep with so many resolutions to write!" smiled the old man, his father as he remembered that night.

"And what were those resolutions?" asked a curious granddaughter, "and grandpa did he keep those resolutions?"

"Yes," said her grandfather, "he did, for exactly one day, and by the end of the day, he had already broken two!"

They all laughed and continued with their writing. The old man held his blank paper in his hand and looked at them. He cleared his throat once, but did not say anything.

"Dad!" said his elder son, "is there anything bothering you? You aren't writing?"

"Are you feeling unwell?" his wife of many years asked, looking with concern at his blank sheet.

"I'm okay," he smiled at her, but she was a little unsure, as she looked at his paper. Then suddenly he wrote something, folded it in two and put it in his pocket.

"I'm going to change," said the grandfather as he walked out of the room. He watched as they all looked at the pocket where he had kept his little piece of paper. He smiled as his wife followed him into the bedroom after some time. He left his shirt on a chair and walked into the bathroom to have a bath. There was a smile on his face as he heard his wife tiptoe to the chair, he listened as she took the paper from his shirt pocket and rushed back to where the others were waiting.

"What did dad write?" asked the elder son, with mounting curiosity. They all watched as their mother opened the paper:

"My new year resolution," she read, "is to allow God to reign in my life through the whole year. I resolve to do what He wills me to do, everyday!"

There was a smile on the old man's face as his family opened their New Year resolutions the next day. "Isn't it strange," he said with a smile, "that we've all written the

So, even as you make resolutions today, find a huge purpose.

For instance, my new year's resolution is to complete a novel. A novel I started sixteen years ago but have never completed. Why? Because I love writing short stories, they seem easier, have a smaller time frame for completion, and more or less get me instant feedback. But a novel? And then comes the thought, what could my purpose be in writing this novel? Would it help society? Would it help bring about a change in thinking? And suddenly the novel's taken a new turn in my head, and yes, I've already started.

What's your resolution? It's so interesting to realise that we live collectively for each other, and many successful businesses understand that if a product is manufactured just to make them rich, that brand often fails, whereas when something is produced that fills a collective need, it becomes an instant success. I believe the same strategy works for our resolutions. So today let's rewrap them in our mind while seeking the good they will give others.

Maybe, my exercising will help me become less of an unhealthy burden on my family-that's purpose, right?

Maybe, learning a new language will help me communicate my ideas to more people, and make me acceptable to the audience.

Can you see the perspective changing? You can even make it more specific, depending on who you are and what you do. But all this won't matter unless we bring in another huge purpose into our resolutions: Does it fit into what your purpose is in this world? Does it help you realise what part of God's divine plan you are part of? Finally, that's the only purpose that matters. But here's the thing, as soon as you fit into God's purpose for you, your resolutions happen.

Happy New Year dear family, just align yourself with His Divine purpose this year, and watch resolutions become reality!"

The family smiled and nodded. Father's wise words made sense to them..!

The Author writes a daily column. If you'd like to receive it by WhatsApp every morning, send a 'YES' to him on his WhatsApp no 9892572883

Letters to the Editor

PM Modi upstages Church leaders

Editor,

The editorial in the Shillong Times entitled "Complacent Silence of the Church" on Dec 30, 2023 is a timely reminder of the omissions and complicity of the Church in neglecting the social issues of our society and turning a blind eye to human suffering including the plight of Christians in some parts of the country.

The invitation to more than a hundred Christian leaders for a Christmas event at the Prime Minister's residence was a missed opportunity. Not a word seems to have been said about the killings and rapes in Manipur, the burning of hundreds of churches, the thousands of refugees in relief camps, the disruption of education and livelihoods, and the trauma inflicted on homeless women and children. We may criticize the Prime Minister for not visiting Manipur, but how many church leaders have been there?

Instead the church leaders fell over themselves praising the policies and progress of the country, outdoing each other with superlatives about the Prime Minister and the BJP government. Of course,

there are many praiseworthy initiatives, but a discussion balanced with positives and negatives would have been more meaningful. Anyway, while the priests and pastors were singing poems of praise to the political order, it was the Prime Minister who quoted from the Bible and the Pope's Christmas message.

Even if Manipur was given a go bye, other issues of deep concern could have been raised such as poverty, and the treatment of minorities and SCs and STs. Perhaps this was an inconvenient time to be distracted by the daily sufferings of hunger and humiliation faced by millions of our fellow citizens. Was any petition or memorandum given to the PM? The PM's Christmas bash seemed mostly a photo-op.

It was the Prime Minister who brought up the topic of poverty, quoting the Pope's Christmas message that poverty diminishes the dignity of individuals. He talked about the welfare schemes which have benefitted the poor, including poor Christians. The PM cited the example of Jesus in bringing about inclusion and social justice, and said that the Holy Bible emphasizes service to others. These themes should have come from the church leaders themselves.

The vast majority of India's Christians are from the lowest socio-economic brackets, mostly STs and SCs. Hardly any of them featured in the guest list. Pictures of the gathering shows rows and rows of men, some in resplendent robes. Patriarchy and elitism rule the Church roost. The only woman speaker was Anju Bobby George, a sportsperson.

Not all Christians were impressed by the Christmas party. The United Christian Forum recently issued a report documenting 687 incidents of violence against Christians this year up to November 2023. The report highlighted the annual rise in violence, up from 147 incidents in 2014. In UP there are over a hundred pastors and church members in jail under charges of illegal conversions when celebrating birthdays or conducting Sunday prayers.

Meghalaya, a Christian majority state, is led by Christian politicians, and Christian leaders exert great influence. On Sundays we hear sermons loudly broadcast across the neighborhoods. Hardly does this preaching translate into social action. The Christians in this state are among the poorest people in India. Like in that age old parable, Good Samaritans will have to be

found outside the church.

Yours etc.,
Glenn C. Kharkongor,
Via email

Need new bridges, alternative routes

Editor,

The ongoing repairing work of the bridge over the age-old MeECL dam on the Umiam Lake in Ri Bhoi district is causing much inconvenience to the public. While the civil work was long overdue and much needed, this major thoroughfare between Guwahati and Shillong is used for its easy access and lack of any alternative routes. The Mawdiangdiang - Diengpashoh - Umiam route is not a viable option for many as it is lengthy and time-consuming. With flyovers being constructed at a rapid pace in neighboring Guwahati by the state government there, Meghalaya can emulate a few by starting with a second bridge over Umiam Lake instead of depending on the British-era dam alone. The dam needs respite from years of vehicles running over it. The current scenario where vehicles are stopped at one end while allowing passes to

the other side and vice-versa has become the order. The unusual sight, however, is the long line of vehicles on either side waiting to cross over the dam to reach their destinations. Such a sight on the highway was last seen when it used to be a double lane. While the highway has gone on to become a four lane one, the uphill ride from Umiam Lake reduces it to a bottleneck. An alternative route is needed from the NEPA Junction to Mawiong up to the Shillong Bypass. This alternative route has to be explored by the State Government and as it is said, if there is a will, there is a way.

Yours etc.
BC Paul
Shillong - 4

How fascism takes roots

Editor,

This is to convey my heartfelt gratitude to Deepa Majumdar for her inspiring letter, "Ethics must guide human actions" (ST, December 29, 2023). She rightly said, "Far better to be ethical without religion than to be religious without ethics." Fear is the main enemy of empathy and ethics. It can bulldoze human ability to understand another person's feelings. History witnessed how a fear

called anti-Semitism could bulldoze humanity. Now another fear called Islamophobia is taking centre stage for doing the damage.

Apart from fear, inferiority complex is the other culprit. On the psychology of fascism and how people are drawn into fascism, Carl Jung in his famous interview, "Will the souls find peace?" said, "Germans are profoundly troubled with a national inferiority complex, which they try to compensate by megalomania." Instead of fulfilling the basic needs of the people like food, health, education and social security, giving priority to building big statues, going to the moon and what Deepa Majumdar said, "hi-tech theatrics" are the manifestations of megalomania. This needs to be taken care of by getting our priorities right and more importantly by accepting the existence of poverty instead of having an inferiority complex that insists on covering slum areas during international events and denying the United Nations report on hunger.

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

"Old age comes on suddenly, and not gradually as is thought"

—Emily Dickinson

The Shillong Times

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Populism versus Economics

POPULISM is an instrument of political mobilisation. In Meghalaya, populism has always won over good economic sense. Populism has been the driving force for political parties across the spectrum. Hence an economic good such as the railway has been kept on the backburner because certain pressure groups feel it is not good for the state and its people without actually doing a cost-benefit analysis and without consulting cross sections of the population of Meghalaya. The voices of the people have been co-opted by sundry pressure groups ever since Meghalaya was created. Political parties and politicians have not dared to challenge these groups but have been held to ransom by them. In fact, politicians have been pandering to these populist groups at the cost of the economic development of the state. The dichotomy between what is economically beneficial for the long term and the immediate electoral gains from adopting populist politics is what has kept Meghalaya at a huge economic disadvantage.

The advantages of having a rail transport system cannot be over-emphasized. Rail transport is by far the most dependable and also the most economical form of transport. It is also faster and the best option for transporting heavy and bulky goods and food grains over long distances. So why are the pressure groups winning the perception battle all the time? And the perception is that railways will result in influx from other states and that most workers in the railways are non-indigenous. The same pressure groups forget that the Railways are also the largest employers and the people of Meghalaya stand a chance at employment if the railways come into the Khasi-Jaintia hills of Meghalaya. In that respect the Garos have been far wiser in accepting the railways which now come up to Mendipathar and carry back a lot of the agricultural products from the Garo Hills to Assam and other states. Transporting the same by road would not have been economically viable.

Recently, Jemino Mawthoh, general secretary of the United Democratic Party (UDP) gave his considered opinion on the railways and stated that goods trains would be a boon to the State as transportation costs would reduce and exporters from Meghalaya too would benefit equally. Mawthoh also made a pragmatic statement that the Government cannot say "No" to everything. As expected there was a backlash against his statement. Ironically, the Khasi and Jaintia Hills District Councils both headed by the NPP appear to be at cross purposes with the UDP's stance since they are the ones sitting on files that would clear the way for the construction of the railway lines up to Byrnihat in Ri Bhoi district or up to East Jaintia Hills. The fear psychosis created around every project that could boost the economy of the state is unfounded but some groups have thrived and survived on this fear psychosis and politicians have not developed a spine to do what is in the larger interest of the state and its people. Meghalaya needs statesmen who will not think only of warming their seats every five years but have a long term vision for the State and its people.

Indian women continue to remain unsafe, unfree under Modi-Yogi raj
**BHU rape case: Delay in booking
BJP youth leaders exposes hypocrisy**

By Arun Srivastava

Like all his other jumbos, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's pledge to ensure the women of their basic rights and protect them from oppression and torture has proved to be yet another empty promise. Had he really been concerned and committed to protect the honour and prestige of women, by now the message would have reached across the line, and the spiritual BJP leaders who are not tired of reminding the common people of their commitment to Hindu culture, its tradition, moral values and ethics, would not have dared to rape a girl student, that too inside the campus of Banaras Hindu University, a Hindutva bastion, in the heart of Varanasi, the Lok Sabha constituency of the self-proclaimed 'vishwaguru' Modi.

BJP men at 2 am in the dead of the night raped a woman student of BHU. Usually the local police station deputes a team of constables and sub-inspectors to ensure that no criminal act takes place during the night. But in this case, the police were not to be seen around. The top police officials, even the Superintendent of Police, Varanasi, is finding it tough to explain what these BJP-linked men were doing inside the campus at that hour. On the contrary, senior police officers are busy protecting the alleged rapists, ostensibly under orders from their political bosses.

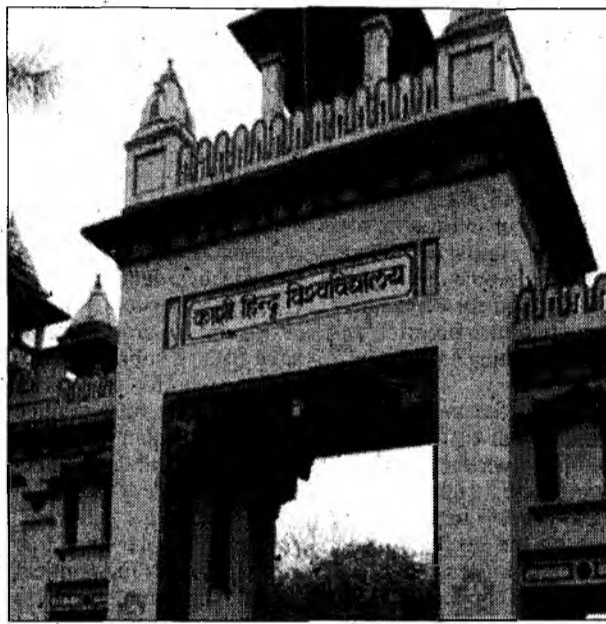
Their roaming inside the campus at that odd hour hints at the fact that they were habitual offenders and used to move around in the campus in search of their prey. In fact, some police sources confide that they had the habit of roaming around the campus every day in the dead of night. It is really shocking that the Varanasi police has yet not come out with the clarification as to why they were roaming inside the campus.

Modi's regard and love for Muslim women is an open secret. It was his concern for women that made him enact a law criminalising the practice of 'triple talaq'. Modi is known as a crusader against religious orthodoxy, seeking to liberate Muslim women from the clutches of the Islamic patriarchy. However, a 26-second viral video from Manipur of three women being disrobed, raped and paraded by a crowd failed to move Modi and persuade him to visit Manipur. His uncaring attitude towards women's exploitation and miseries had even rocked the Parliament.

His so-called concern for the miseries of the women

wrestlers has been widely debated in the public domain. The women wrestlers, who were well known supporters of Modi, had levelled serious charges of sexual harassment against the president of the wrestling association, a powerful BJP MP, Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh, but Modi did not budge. While protesting at Jantar Mantar demanding justice, the champion women wrestlers were beaten and dragged by the police.

The gang rape in BHU took place on the night of November 1. The 22-year-old student was allegedly waylaid, stripped, and sexually assaulted by three BJP youth leaders while she was on a stroll with one of her friends on the campus. The victim had claimed that the three accused, who were riding a motorcycle, also made the video of her sexual assault.



The police accepted the complaint but did not file an FIR on that day.

Within a couple of days the police came to identify the rapists. Though the Assistant Commissioner of Police, Bhelupur, Atul Anjan Tripathi claimed that the three persons — Kunal Pandey, Anand aka Abhishek Chauhan, and Saksham Patel — were identified, the fact is just after five days of the ghastly incident they were made to leave Varanasi. They were assigned the task of electioneering for assembly polls in Madhya Pradesh.

As per the police sources, on the day of crime, the three accused were roaming in the BHU campus after watching 'natakatiya,' a folk drama when they spotted the victim strolling with her friend. They shooed the friend away and raped the engineering student. The perpetrators filmed the act as well before

fleeing the spot. The traditionalist pious souls were all drunk. All the three used to reside in close vicinity of the BHU campus. They reportedly admitted to their crime during police interrogation.

After realising that the situation was getting out of hand as the local people of Varanasi became restive, and hit the streets to express outrage at the shocking incident, the three BJP youth leaders were asked to come back. The trio enjoyed so much political clout and patronage that it took police two months to arrest them. Kunal Pandey is the convener of BJP's IT cell in Varanasi, Abhishek Chauhan is the working committee member and Saksham Patel is the co-convenor.

Usually police take a criminal on police remand, but in this case they were sent to prison on judicial re-

mand. The police did not ask for a PC to find out more of their operations and whether they have been in the habit of committing crimes of this nature. So far no other female or male student at BHU has mustered courage to file a complaint, scared of the accused's political reach and their close relationship with the top BJP leaders. Their photos with Narendra Modi, UP chief minister Yogi Adityanath, BJP president JP Nadda are making the rounds on social media.

The most shameful part is the denial of their association with the BJP by the state BJP leaders. BJP's Varanasi city unit in-charge Vidya Sagar Rai denied the association of the three accused with the party. Nevertheless, the president of the UP Congress Ajay Rai alleged: "Had they been arrested before the elections, the message would have gone to the entire country that these three BJP officials are rapists. To protect the electoral interest of the BJP, the police let them go free."

However, the university academics have started demanding answers from UP CM Yogi Adityanath, the Bulldozer Baba of BJP, whether he would order his bulldozers to flatten the houses of these accused. Whether the girl would get justice. Or this case would also be pushed under the carpet. While Yogi claims he's creating a crime-free state, the bitter reality remains that crime against women has been the highest in Uttar Pradesh. Rai was absolutely correct in saying: "For the BJP, 'Beti Bachao-Beti Padhao' is just a slogan. I had said at that time that BJP people are involved in this matter." Meanwhile, Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav said in a post on X/Twitter that those arrested for gang-raping the woman student are part of a new crop of BJP workers thriving under the patronage of senior leaders.

Though ABVP state media coordinator Abhinav Mishra demanded that police file a charge-sheet in the case at the earliest and also take action against those who protected the accused for two months, a photo on the social media shows them participating at a RSS event in the traditional Sangh attire. The ABVP also called on the BHU administration to take appropriate steps to ensure the safety of everyone on the campus. This only manifests the double-speak of the RSS, which has been primarily responsible for creating a lawless situation in the campus. The RSS cadres have earlier insulted the professors and made them quit BHU. A Muslim professor who was a Sanskrit scholar was forced to stop taking classes of Sanskrit claiming that a Muslim cannot teach Sanskrit.

Under Modi's rule, rising crimes against women in India has been a matter of concern. India has one of the highest rates of violence against women in the world. According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCEB), in 2021, a total of 4,05,861 cases of crimes against women were reported in India, of which 32,033 cases were of rape. 2021 saw a rise of 26.35% over six years — from 338,954 cases in 2016. In Haryana, sexual harassment charges against Sandeep Singh, a minister in the BJP cabinet was again a matter that drew outrage. The BJP did not drop him for political compulsions. (IPA Service)

for 2024, one player got Rs 24.75 crore, another Rs 20.50 crore yet another got Rs 14 crore and so on.

This is called value judgement! While entertaining people with a movie or a cricket match deserves crores of rupees; saving human lives cannot be rewarded with more than thousands. Alas, people cannot be entertained by the act of real heroes who save real lives. So let people wait until a movie is made on the tunnel rescue mission. Certainly that movie on the Herculean task of rescuing 41 reel lives by 12 actors would be a real thriller and worth spending money for. Though the real mission failed to fetch more than thousands, the actors in the movie would certainly be honoured with crores for giving the audience goose pimples. I really admire actors and players for their painstaking endeavours to translate their potential into reality. But I feel terribly sad about how real-life heroes are being treated.

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.

New year, new temple, old problems

By Jagdish Rattanani

We enter 2024 with the spotlight on the grand Ram mandir inauguration coming up in a few weeks, and a spectacular roadshow the focus of which is the promotion of the ruling party and in particular Prime Minister, Narendra Modi. The building of the temple is one promise that the BJP has delivered on, and it is only to be expected that its political machinery will be in overdrive to turn this into votes for the party in the upcoming national elections. The full-fledged involvement of the governmental machinery in a religious movement is of course problematic, first from the standpoint of constitutional correctness but equally for larger implications of governmental capture as opposed to a political mobilisation and of instrumental use of a religious sentiment. But it is a sign of the times that hardly anyone mentions this. There was a time when it was suggested that Narendra Modi should participate in the foundation laying ceremony for the temple in his personal capacity as a Hindu, not in his official capacity as the Prime Minister of India. Not anymore. We are clearly long past the stage where this is seen as something to be flagged, let alone protested.

The narrative we have for the nation amid this frenetic start to the New Year 'was captured in the words of the Prime Minister as he signed

federalism, corruption and nepotism that favours a few chosen business leaders, increased concentration of power in a few individuals and a democratic decision-making process that remains only in name.

All these are old world problems that India has seen for long, and they have only gotten worse during the eight years of the BJP in power at the Centre. Fancy leaflets, well done graphs and nicely cut videos cannot fix these and a host of other problems that the nation faces today. Coupled with this is an anti-democratic tendency that seeks to decimate not only voices from the opposition but also kill competition from inside the BJP, or whatever little of it might be there, if political reports are to be believed. The demand appears to be total subservience to authority and the nation and the party has complied, raising questions on the inner strength of Indian democracy and its still-fledgling institutions.

Is this India more secure or less secure? Is our democracy better off when citizens can challenge authority and set new precedents for freedom or are we better off when all challenges are silenced using various means? How could the British have taken over India were it not for the self-defeating inner squabbles that the outsiders used to with telling effect to subjugate an entire nation?

"To the extent that this sets the BJP's agenda for the elections, adds a lot of colour and hyperbole, and presents the BJP as the favourites for 2024, the exercise is understandable and may even be hailed as good planning and agenda-setting well in advance of a significant national election. We can't fault the BJP for its quick mobilisation and superior messaging."

off 2023: "Today every corner of India is brimming with self-confidence, imbued with the spirit of a developed India; the spirit of self-reliance. We have to maintain the same spirit and momentum in 2024 as well."

To the extent that this sets the BJP's agenda for the elections, adds a lot of colour and hyperbole, and presents the BJP as the favourites for 2024, the exercise is understandable and may even be hailed as good planning and agenda-setting well in advance of a significant national election. We can't fault the BJP for its quick mobilisation and superior messaging.

Yet, it is plain that election-mode is not reserved by the BJP for election time. It appears to be an always-on mode, an ever-present bias towards celebration, overstatement and reiteration of claims that are sought to be turned into perceived reality by a party that is as much flush with funds and media support as the others are devoid of it. The danger is that the party begins to believe its hype, and the government's energies are more towards story-telling and to that extent lesser towards problem-solving. Indeed, the only problem that the party probably sees is that the story has to be fixed, a real life living of that telling Apple ad which shows its rival Microsoft distributing resources between two buckets: fix Vista or do more advertising. The latter gets the bulk if not all of the money while customers complained about the problems created by Microsoft's then new Operating System called Windows Vista.

The trouble with this kind of governance is that the nation and its people will have to sooner rather than later come to terms with the real problems — raging unemployment, the monster of communal hatred, bitter disputes that are ever widening, mounting debt, decimated institutions, the weakening of the spirit of cooperative

How far have we moved in terms of our capacity to question authority, to expand our freedoms and to strengthen our democracy? What has the Emergency taught us, if anything?

The words of Judge Murray I. Gurfein in what is known as the Pentagon Papers case of 1971 are significant. He ruled against the government and in favour of the publication of classified papers by the New York Times. His order, which became a First Amendment classic in the US, read: "The security of our nation is not at the ramparts alone. Security also lies in the value of our free institutions. A cantankerous press, an obstinate press, a ubiquitous press must be suffered by those in authority in order to preserve the even greater values of freedom of expression and the right of the people to know." Gurfein was appointed by the Nixon administration and in his first case ruled against the government.

There is also the larger problem of a very un-Indian way of governance, a manner that is far removed from an understanding of the culture and ethos of the nation that the BJP is so proud to claim as one of its foundational grounds. For at the centre of the Indian ethos is values, a steadfast commitment to 'dharma' and a moral compass whose careful calibration of right versus wrong that is never to be compromised. It might be fashionable to argue that there are no values in politics. After all, which party is about values on the Indian scene? And if that is so, then it is possible to argue that the BJP has not risen to power, it has fallen in power and may be taking the nation down with it. We will need all the Lord's blessings to come out of this sinkhole.

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

Letters to the Editor

Sensitisation for workers of essential services

I had to travel down to Guwahati recently with my family and had an unpleasant experience at the bridge over Umiam where the repair work is underway. While lauding the Government for the repairs which were long pending and we all know the significance of this connectivity, I wish to bring to the notice of those in authority that those on duty don't have the slightest idea of etiquette on how to deal with the public.

I know that they are essential staff who have to perform extensive duties sometimes under duress. However, this doesn't give them the right to use abusive language while dealing with the public.

We were travelling early in the morning and as it's winter, a bit of early morning fog covered the entire area. The policeman on duty had only a torchlight and a walkie talkie with him. He wasn't wearing a fluorescent vest as is mandatory when manning a bridge under repair so as to alert motorists from afar; nor did he use the red light

baton which he had with him. We were travelling at a very slow pace as we knew about the bridge being repaired and slowed down near the entry point. The worker there immediately started ranting at the person behind the wheel for no fault whatsoever. He then told us to park by the side of the road and began venting that we'd have to go to speak to someone at the office, though God knows which office he was talking about at that early hour.

I had to get out of the car and speak in the local language — that is Khasi — for him to tell us to carry on with our journey. I fail to understand what pleasure the police get from harassing the public like this.

Our state thrives on the tourism and hospitality industry and if those who are supposed to help in tourist inflow behave in such an uncouth manner what memories and stories would the tourists take back with them? It's about time that the concerned departments hold counselling and etiquette classes on behaviour so that all benefit including the public who seem to bear the brunt every time.

I hope those in authority are taking note.

Yours etc.,
Angela Lyngdoh,
Shillong -14

The tragedy and belittling of real life heroes

Editor,
Arunachalam Muruganatham is a real-life hero. He invented a low-cost sanitary pad-making machine. His mini-machines can manufacture sanitary pads for less than a third of the cost of commercial pads. Arunachalam generated awareness in rural areas about the need for hygienic practices regarding menstruation. His machine-made cost-effective sanitary napkins not only improved women's health but also gave women an opportunity to earn by selling those napkins. A Bollywood film titled 'Pad Man' was made on his life. It was reported that the actor who did the role of Arunachalam earned Rs 40 crore for acting in that film.

Now, we will shift our focus from one to a dozen real-life heroes. When 41 labourers were trapped behind a 57m-thick barrier of debris that defeated all technology-based efforts to drill beyond 45m, the 12 rat-hole miners rescued them from the tunnel in Uttarakhand's Uttarkashi. They did it by

opening up the unyielding mountain debris by their courage, skill, patience, endurance and perseverance. Their heroic act freed the trapped workers after their 16-day ordeal inside the tunnel when the whole world was on tenterhooks for the results of the rescue operation.

The 12 rat-hole miners Munna Qureshi, Monu Kumar, Jatin, Nasir Khan, Feroze Qureshi, Debender Kumar, Saurabh, Wakeel Hassan, Irshad Ansari, Ankur, Naseem Malik and Rashid Ansari worked at a stretch for nearly 24 hours squatting inside a narrow steel pipe of 800mm diameter on their toes, crouching as low as possible with their knees folded to clear the debris with handheld tools to rescue the trapped workers.

A Lagaan like movie can be made based on this story. I say Lagaan-like because of the similarities between the number of heroes in Lagaan and in the tunnel rescue. In Lagaan, apart from the main hero who acted in the leading role of a cricket team captain, there were other 10 actors who played in the roles of other members of the 11 member cricket team. It is reported that the leading actor of that movie, now charges Rs 100 to 150 crore for his films beside taking

70 percent of the profit. We can make a rough guess at how many crores the actors might charge to act in a film on the successful rescue operation at the Silkyara Bend-Barkot tunnel in Uttarakashi. But there are no prizes for guessing how much each of the rat-hole miners got after saving real human lives and making the seemingly impossible become possible.

Each of the rescue workers was awarded Rs 50 thousand. Beside this nothing more — no permanent employment — no house was given or promised. Wakeel Hassan, proprietor of the Delhi-based agency that provided 12 rat-hole miners for the rescue operation, said, "We have decided not to cash the cheques for Rs 50,000 that chief minister Pushkar Singh Dhama handed to each of us at a function in Dehradun on Thursday. I had reacted to him about the paltry sum given to us and he said he would think about it. We are awaiting his decision."

Had they entertained people by saving lives in a movie they would have been rich by now. Or if they could rescue an IPL team from a certain defeat to victory, they would have earned a bomb in the next round of IPL player auction. In the IPL player auction

"Man cannot discover new oceans unless he has the courage to lose sight of the shore."

— Andre Gide

The Shillong Times

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All show, no results

A fear of the unknown is gripping the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) camp. What could happen to their leader Arvind Kejriwal between now and the coming general elections is a hotly debated topic in relation to the Delhi Liquor Scam. His second-in-command, Manish Sisodia, is already in jail. Chief Minister Kejriwal is set to leave for Gujarat, to take his political fight against the BJP to the Modi camp. Fears are that the arrest could happen any time as the CM did not respond to three summons from the Enforcement Directorate while a fourth was expected on Thursday, followed by a likely raid on his house. Security forces were on standby near his Delhi residence. It is not our case whether Kejriwal is guilty or not guilty. But a few questions beg answers in relation to the way central agencies are handling such cases.

First and foremost, has ED or the CBI been able to nail even a single of the high-profile opposition politicians against whom these agencies were unleashed in the past ten years of the Modi rule; and if not, why not? Several of these leaders are accused of being hugely corrupt and that included BJP's own BS Yeddyurappa in Karnataka. The central investigation agencies are showing a singular lack of will in taking the investigations forward. It would be a pity if investigations go on and on for decades and in the end the whole exercise turns out to be a damp squib. Huge amounts and manpower are spent on investigations. If there are no results, should the PM, who leads the government from the front or his home minister, escape scot-free from their abject failure to nail the corrupt? There has never been a scenario so pathetic when it comes to investigating acts of corruption. It was also during Modi's first term in office that the heads of both the ED and CBI accused each other of taking bribes in crores. The PM could only grin and bear such embarrassments.

Kejriwal, we presume, is no saintly politician. He plays his games. Worse, it's unacceptable that a public figure who spearheaded the anti-corruption movement in the country ended up in such compromising situations. This, granted that fighting elections would require huge sums to take on the BJP that lavishly spends money on poll campaigns. The BJP organises money in the same way as other parties and their leaders do. They make a cut from government deals, be they related to liquor, road works or other matters. Substantial portions of what these leaders organise for the party are believed to be going into their own pockets or to their family chests. Raids and arrests alone will not do. The public desires to see action against the corrupt! Period.

HNLC, MCCL, and the Sohra MLA

By Patricia Mukhim

The above is not a love triangle. On the contrary Party 1 is in league with Party 2 against Party 3 - the MLA of Sohra who obviously is not the reason for the downfall of the MCCL. We are well aware that any business run by the government is doomed to failure because companies follow a strict business model and the prime aim of any business is to make profits so that the company is sustained and salaries etc to employees are paid from the profits. Governments on the contrary are unable to do business because every public sector undertaking is reduced to an employment agency where politicians push in their camp followers as employees irrespective of whether they have the calibre or the qualifications for the job. The MeECL is a good example. Over the years it has added so much flab that it has developed a fatty liver - a huge debt burden which is strangulating the Corporation.

But Meghalaya is not the only state where the electricity corporations are running on losses. The central government has taken a grim view of this and in October 2020 it proposed the Electricity (Amendment) Bill 2020, which could help re-energise the country's power sector and attract foreign investment. The central government found that the pandemic had worsened the situation for an already beleaguered industry which has been battling operational and financial inefficiencies. Meghalaya's debt burden on account of the poor management of MeECL has only increased over the years. As of April 2023, the outstanding debts (principal and interest) is to the tune of Rs 1200 crore. For several years even the accounts were not audited timely. Hence no financial discipline was adopted in the Corporation.

Looking at the MeECL financial reports over the years we see that major constraints hindering the financial viability of the Corporation are (i) its weak industrial base and large share of domestic consumer below poverty line; (ii) high tariff paying industry consumers have decreased over the years; and (iii) it has geographical disadvantage for grid electricity penetration, leading to high loss. Therefore, the financial position of the Meghalaya

Power Distribution Company Ltd (MePDCL) should be practically analyzed and action taken. Meghalaya is basically an agricultural state with about 80% of its total population depending entirely on agriculture for their livelihoods and being an ecologically fragile state it cannot support polluting industries. This low level of industrialization and the relatively poor infrastructure base in the state hinders the economic development of Meghalaya. Without industries the main tariff collected is from domestic users - a huge majority of whom pay subsidised electricity bills. At this rate how can MeECL and MePDCL become viable PSUs?

Beyond a point, states cannot continue to borrow and throw good money after bad money. The Central Government which underwrites these loans knows that it cannot allow unregulated borrowings where repayment schedules are unmet. Hence the proposal for reforms in the power sector which could well be the solution to revive the sector. The bill proposing privatization of electricity distribution is currently with state governments for approval. If passed, it will open the doors to this sector for private domestic players as well as international entities seeking to explore its potential.

It is with a view to privatize power distribution in India that the central government circulated the Electricity (Amendment) Bill 2020. The Bill proposes to strengthen the power distribution aspect by allowing participation of private and international players. While all the three segments of the power sector - generation, transmission, and distribution - are essential, distribution companies (discoms) are perceived to be the critical link in this value chain. Currently, this segment is dominated by state discoms, with little to no private participation, hence the continued losses. The Central Government had stated that it would soon unveil the scheme to cut transmission and distribution losses and to incentivize states to involve the private sector in improving the efficiency of their discoms. As expected, this

would have a political cost hence many states governments including the Government of Meghalaya are yet to approve the Bill.

India will need to look at examples of most developed countries that have privatized their electricity distribution businesses to enhance efficiency. Several have established regulators for the sector to protect the interests of consumers and act as legal and enforcement bodies to ensure a balance between private-sector participation and government control. This is the only model that India could follow to revive its sick power sector.

Now let me come to the crux of the matter - the Mawmluh-Cherra Cements Ltd (MCCL) established in 1966 for manufacturing Portland cement. It is a joint sector company with the government as the major shareholder and a few private shareholders. Over the years mismanagement saw the private shareholders pulling out since the company was running at a loss. In 2021 the state Cabinet had cleared the proposal to initiate the process of a joint venture partnership in the MCCL due to the financial constraints that the State is facing and because of which it is unable to invest Rs 190 crore to revive the PSU. MCCL has been making continued losses since 2007-08. As of 2018-19, the cumulative losses stood at about Rs 234 crore and as of September 30, 2020, MCCL owed Rs 60.75 crore in overdue liabilities to government departments, suppliers and contractors and its employees. It is estimated that the liabilities of the MCCL have accumulated to Rs. 65.93 crore which includes Rs. 27.09 crore due to government departments, Rs. 14 crore to suppliers and contractors and Rs. 24.84 crore as liabilities to employees.

It is evident therefore that none of the PSUs (some of which have already been closed) are run on business models that are intended to deliver profits. They are more like government departments and further political appointees rule the roost. The management has no control over such employees. Besides, the MCCL would now have to compete with private companies produc-

ing cement at huge profits in the state. MCCL is no longer the only cement producer in Meghalaya which it was in the 1960s. Poor management of human resources and finances both have been the downfall of all companies. MCCL is no stranger to this. Since there are no takers for a joint venture with the government, the only alternative is for the government to run the MCCL which would mean the government pouring in money every year into a failed project merely because employees have to be paid! Is there any sense in saving a few employees of a failed project while the state is burdened by more debts from private borrowings?

What's interesting is the Hynniewtrep National Liberation Council (HNLC) jumping into the MCCL issue at this juncture. Considering that the HNLC has substantial funds invested over the years why does it not take over the MCCL and run it efficiently, employing the best management practices? Or is the MCCL issue just a decoy for the outfit to walk out of the peace talks? Since the HNLC represents all of us the "Hynniewtrep" people, we would like to know what are the salient features of the peace deal being discussed with the interlocutor - AK Mishra since we are all stakeholders in this. What is the HNLC going to liberate us from? How can the HNLC discuss a deal with the Centre which will have an impact on all of us, but without us knowing what's in the peace deal? But above all, how can an outfit discuss peace on one hand and issue death threats to an MLA on the other? What can the MLA do to revive a dead company?

From what one can gather, the HNLC is unhappy that their cadres are not getting a general amnesty after all that they had done in the past decades. Well one leader - Julius Dorphang was given general amnesty but he landed up in jail for raping a minor girl. What does that say about the antecedents of the HNLC? Are we sure all the cadres will not get back to their old ways and that extortion has ended? These questions need clarity. The Hynniewtrep people too must engage with this issue because it is "our" issue and not just a binary between the central government and the HNLC.

Bhagwan Ram and our electoral scenario

By Shivaji Sarkar

It was the year 1997. The then parliamentary affairs minister CM Mohammed, a close aide of ex-prime minister HD Deve Gowda, in a casual chat quipped, "We Muslims are responsible for the rise of the BJP by opposing the construction of Ram Mandir. Where else but India could the Ram temple be built?"

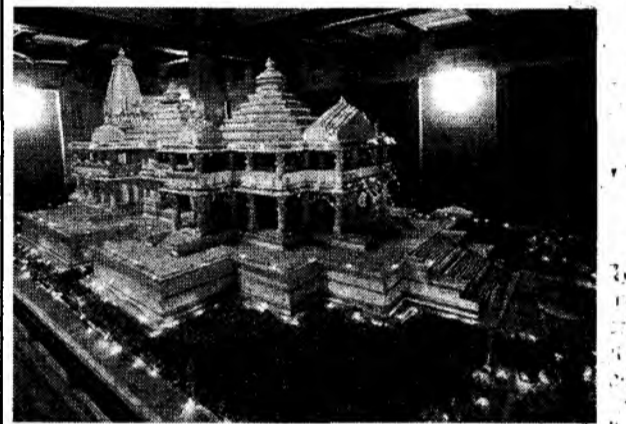
What he said was an apt comment on the Muslim mindset which has heavily impacted the political scenario in independent India. Clinging to the old imperial mindset Muslim leaders could not appreciate the religious sentiments of the majority Hindu community in a democratic society. And that is the reason we have problems in Hindu religious places like Ayodhya, Mathura and Kashi.

The inability of Muslim leaders to change their mindset has led to a political scenario in which Bhagwan Ram finds himself embroiled in a fresh battle joined by all vest-

opponents are no less biased or Ram-centric albeit in a different way.

This is getting sharper with unprecedented expulsion of 146 Opposition leaders and getting crucial bills such as the new criminal law bills passed without a discussion in parliament or in the society. The bills adopted all the suggestions of the police and executives while sacrificing the rights of the people by shunning an open social discussion.

But this is not sudden. The vital National Education Policy 2020 was also drafted, passed and implemented without an open social discussion. In the melee, it ignored the basic issue of the well-being of children and youth as it imposed many systems that are uncalled for like the four-year degree course, imposition of three-year nursery education and multi-year so called PhD research, that add little value. The opposition parties have been feeble in their response



ed interests - political, social, cultural and financial.

Of course, the big business is the biggest gainer in this battle as it manipulates and decides the course its political and religious representatives take.

be it the Left, Congress or regional.

The minority syndrome has clouded the decision. A phobia, deliberate or random, decides the course. Enmity replaces the playful inclusive politics, where the then prime

"All those who refuse to subscribe to its 'Hate Muslim' doctrine are termed as anti-national. Even farmers or truckers agitation are seen to be the deeds of these non-Muslim hating 'secularists' and all sorts of expletives are used against them."

In fact, Bhagwan Ram has been a deciding factor in every election since 1991. The Bhagwan Ram factor overshadowed every other issue from corruption to high taxation, galloping inflation, ED, CBI raids or allegations of EVM manipulation. The Press failed to build a dialogue on relevant socio-economic issues and followed suit. How could it challenge the power of Bhagwan Ram factor?

Most regional parties play the Muslim card and swing between soft and hard Hindutva defined by taking the name of Bhagwan Ram to win elections. However, Hindutva is not without its obsession of the Muslims, by which at times going to the extent of calling all sorts of names against the community. All those who refuse to subscribe to its "Hate Muslim" doctrine are termed as anti-national. Even farmers or truckers agitation are seen to be the deeds of these non-Muslim hating "secularists" and all sorts of expletives are used against them. North India that specialized in gender-offensive expletives has now modernized itself with "secularists" ones.

Rationality and exclusivity of Indian politics has been replaced with rabid expression of hatred either way. Since the Hindutva brigade, united by some supposed ideological thread or rabid hatred, is more "modern" in terms of its infotech power. They have a stronger echo system to corner all other sects or parties or persons who differ from them. Trolling the opponents is invective and virulent. Instilling a sense of insecurity is a victory sign to the extent of creating organized "narratives" being churned out differently. They know very well that what they are often narrating is not the truth, but may be the Donald Trumpite post-truth. But the

minister Jawaharlal Nehru praised a young Jan Sanghi, Atal Behari Vajpayee, with "accha bole" after the sharp running down of his decision.

The opponents try but fail. Rising prices or unemployment are not issues. The CAA or NRC onslaught protests succumbed. The farmers' rallies were suppressed with showering of invectives. The issues of inflation or unemployment get lost in the cry of being anti-national. The opposition have a rabid dislike for the regime and its leader, Narendra Modi, but are clueless. A stir or protest has no place. Even blatant safety flaws of Delhi Metro are ignored.

The Bharat Jodo Yatra of Congress leader Rahul Gandhi evoked some response but it failed to raise the massive administrative failures, mayhem in Manipur, shooting prices, heavy debts, questioning of irrelevant infra investments, demolitions and road construction fad.

Though some may claim monopolistic rights on Him but Bhagwan Ram does not belong to any particular party, group or community. He belongs to all. And none should take a position in which one is on a side opposed to him. Bhagwan Ram is everywhere. A political party may lay claim to a temple of Bhagwan Ram. So what! Ram never stayed in one place - went to the Guri's ashram for education, crossed rivers, travelled in the wilderness and tamed the seas to become what he is in the hearts and minds of billions of his followers and admirers today. The day the minorities, opposition parties, intellectuals, social activists, ruling class and others in this country understand this, the nation will have a new narrative. All those who are pitted in the grim 2024 electoral battle need to understand this.

Letters to the Editor

Hit and run law unjustified

Editor, The Modi Government has withheld the hit and run law and the drivers had withdrawn the strike as they await further discussion with the Government.

As per the Bhartiya Nyay Sanhita, a trucker or driver involved in hit-and-run cases can face up to 10 years in prison and a fine of up to Rs 7 lakh. This is the change in the law that has met with strong criticism from the truckers, and they had received moral support from the general public also as the demand is genuine.

As it is well known, this law is one which was passed in the absence of many Opposition members after they were disqualified. As per the earlier law, if the driver was found guilty then he would face punishment of imprisonment of up to two years - of course, only if it was not a case of intentional homicide. The previous punishment was according to the British-era Indian Penal Code which was recently replaced by Bhartiya Nyay Sanhita.

According to the heavy vehicle drivers, the new changes in the law are completely anti-driver, as paying such a high amount is not at all possible for a person in their profession and imprisonment of 10 years is basically ending their entire life.

The immediate ripple effect of this strike was visible at the petrol stations in the cities where long queues were seen since people were

insecure about fuel shortage due to the protest. The Union Home Secretary has called an urgent meeting with the representatives of the truck owners' unions so that the situation does not go out of hand and as the general elections will be held after 3-4 months, the Government cannot take such a strong decision which may go against the Government.

The new law will come into effect from April 2024. Now, what is a hit-and-run case? If a person flees the scene after a hit-and-run accident then he will face the repercussions mentioned above. As per drivers, even if a two-wheeler rider hits a heavy vehicle due to his own fault, then the crowd gathers at the accident scene and attacks the truck driver without any second thought. This could sometimes lead to the death of the drivers and hence, the driver either abandons his vehicle and flees or surrenders himself at a nearby police station. However, the new law directly imposes stricter penalties for drivers which has caught the truck owners in a pickle. The government has cited a rise in hit-and-run cases in the country, which result in about 50,000 deaths a year on an average. Although the Government's reasons are justifiable, whenever a new law is introduced, the authorities must study the potential consequences in advance. Democratically, a draft bill demands a discussion in both the Houses of Parliament before passing it as a law. However, the government is passing laws as per its own will by exercising its power of being the majority

in Parliament. Members of the Opposition are expected to be part of these discussions, however, the Speaker through mass expulsion has already eliminated most of its hurdles. Only when the ruling party members were left in the House, including the Speaker, did the Union Home Minister replace the British-era Indian Penal Code with the Bhartiya Nyay Sanhita. There was neither any discussion nor anyone's views on the matter as the majority of the Opposition was already nullified. It will soon become clear whether the Government listens to the truckers or not. However, if the government fails to handle the situation sensibly then it could lead to a serious dilemma. Any law before being implemented must be discussed publicly and opinions of experts should be considered while drafting any Bill. There is no meaning in conducting blind experiments just to erase the remnants of the past. It is understandable that the British-era names of roads, historical sites and buildings are changed but when it comes to changing the law, the potential consequences must be discussed from all angles.

Finally, the Government should conduct negotiations with the representatives of the truckers; union and there should not be unnecessarily hindrance in reaching an amicable solution as the country cannot bear such a strike which has wide range impacts on the national economy.

Yours etc.,
Yash Pal Ralhan,
Via email

Concerns regarding Govt's decision to adapt NCERT textbooks

Editor, I am writing to express my concerns and to raise awareness about a recent decision by the State Government regarding the adoption of NCERT textbooks for the academic curriculum.

While the government's intention to improve the quality of education is commendable, I find it disconcerting that the decision to modify NCERT textbooks comes without adequate consideration for the recent changes made by NCERT in its curriculum. It has come to my attention that NCERT has initiated a process of updating books for classes I and II, and is in the process of updating books for classes III to X. However, the State Government's decision seems to overlook this critical aspect.

The concern arises from the possibility that after implementing the current NCERT curriculum, the state government may need to adapt to the new curriculum introduced by NCERT the following year. This could result in parents and students incurring additional expenses to purchase updated textbooks, leading to financial strain, particularly for low-income families.

Further, it is highlighted that the Education Department has not updated the Social Science books, which

are crucial for competitive examinations. Instead of adopting the old social science books, the government could have considered using the existing NCERT books for this subject, supplementing them with a separate book that includes the geography of the state and information about freedom fighters.

This approach would have not only aligned with the national curriculum but also incorporated essential local content, providing a more comprehensive and balanced educational experience for the students.

In conclusion, while the government's efforts to enhance the quality of education are appreciated, it is essential to consider the potential implications of decisions, especially regarding the synchronization of the state curriculum with national updates. I urge the concerned authorities to revisit and reassess the current plan to ensure a more sustainable and cost-effective educational framework for the benefit of both students and parents.

Yours etc.,
A Sarki
Shillong

Traffic chaos at Umiam Bridge due to overtaking

Editor, The Umiam Bridge, a vital lifeline for Meghalaya, is currently undergoing much-needed repair works. Consequently, only one-way

entry for vehicles has been enforced. So obviously, there are long queues of vehicles on both sides. Drivers must wait their turn, forming a long line of vehicles on either side of the bridge.

However, to one's dismay, many cunning drivers brazenly overtake vehicles in line, leaving fellow commuters/tourists frustrated and worried about reaching their destinations on time. While rule-abiding drivers spend hours in the queue, (even I spent over two hours about a week ago), those violators breeze through in a matter of minutes.

This breach of traffic etiquette raises questions about the effectiveness of law enforcement in curbing such audacious acts. What one feels is that instead of concentrating solely on the bridge, police presence should extend along the vehicle lines. Authorities concerned must take stricter action against the cunning drivers who violate the rules of the road.

It is imperative that the STP also put up signboards - "No overtaking" along the road. The fair and orderly flow of traffic should be ensured. It is fervently hoped that the traffic department will address this issue with seriousness without further delay.

Yours etc.,
Salil Gewali,
Shillong

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"The only reason for time is so that everything doesn't happen at once."
— Albert Einstein
The Shillong Times

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Stunning silence on corruption

RECENT news reports of investigating officials of the LokAyukta being sacked from their jobs and the termination letter coming over WhatsApp, simply because they had investigated a scam in the Garo Hills Autonomous District Council (GHADC) relating to the construction of the GHADC members hostel at a cost of Rs 6.01 crore from the Special Assistance, Central Plan Scheme 2015-16. Following the investigation 9 former executive members were charge-sheeted besides the sitting NPP MDC, Sanjay Sangma and also a former Principal Secretary of the GHADC. Instead of allowing the LokAyukta to exercise its authority according to its mandate, the State Government unceremoniously removed the officers for doing their appointed duties. The Meghalaya Lokayukta Act enacted way back in 2014 could only function from November 2018 when retired judge of Guwahati High Court, PK Mushahary was appointed as the first LokAyukta. That it should take four long years for an Act to be implemented is in itself a telling account of how unwilling the political class is for any ombudsman to oversee their acts of omission and commission. The LokAyukta is created to enquire into allegations of corruption against public functionaries and related matters. Hence the LokAyukta as an institution is intended to eradicate all forms of corruption in state government institutions. It would be reasonable therefore to expect that its power to investigate corruption also extends to the district councils.

But how free is the LokAyukta to carry out its mandate when its officials have to be appointed by the Government of the day and they can be removed according to the whims of that Government? It is also a commentary on our polity and society that there has been complete silence on this matter. There has not been a whimper from any political party both from the ruling and opposition apart from feeble noises from the Congress chief Vincent Pala. It is unclear as to what the Government proposes to do with the chargesheets which have come about after a thorough investigation by senior ranking, albeit retired police officials. Now that a new set of officials have been appointed, will the chargesheet be overturned and the entire enquiry process become null and void? Is this a way of giving a clean chit to the MDCs that have been caught with their hands in the till? What are the facts of the case? The Government has not clarified why it needed to remove the investigating officials and appoint a fresh batch of serving officials. To the observer it would appear that the MDA-2 Government is unwilling to accept that there is any form of corruption under it. In its earlier avatar too the scams were all sought to be buried. An officer who spoke up against the scams in the MeECL was transferred post haste.

Why therefore have a LokAyukta in the first place if the idea is to get a compliant person at the helm? Even Justice Mushahary, the first LokAyukta complained of lack of cooperation from the Government. Corruption and Meghalaya are synonymous and the public have normalised this. The LokAyukta is therefore just an empty shell.

Bringing Back Big: Tackling Unemployment & Underemployment

By Avner Pariat

The MDA government has the unenviable task of putting its money where its mouth is. We may recall that Conrad Sangma had in February 2023 promised to create 5 lakh jobs if brought back into power (4 Feb 2023, ThePrint). Well, almost a year has passed by and I don't see "no jobs anywhere" (pardon my colloquial coquettishness). We should question as well if these jobs are "bullsh*t jobs," or if they are ones that pay a living wage (and other benefits). Before his untimely death, David Graeber popularised the term "bullsh*t jobs" in his 2018 book, "Bullsh*t Jobs: A Theory." He defined these jobs as pointless, unnecessary, or which provide little societal value, despite requiring significant time and effort. These jobs often leave people feeling unfulfilled and questioning the broader purpose of their work. In addition, of course, they pay the bare minimum.

In my opinion, thus far, every single government in the past 10 years has been guilty of promising "bullsh*t jobs" but that said, we cannot let Conrad and Co. off the hook so easily. In fact, we must hold them more accountable as the times and situations are even more imperilled. Job creation is not just a quantitative statistic that Conrad can bandy about. It has to be looked at qualitatively. Low paying jobs with no social security net must be dismissed entirely from our imaginations. And creating good jobs is doable if we place people (especially "the working poor") at the centre of our planning process. Unfortunately, the management consultants skulking inside the Secretariat are not the "working poor" and they are not able to perform this crucial task because they are not "domain experts."

In fact, every single one of them should be thrown out unceremoniously (preferably into a fire-pit) and in their place, we should bring in real experts who have studied poverty, urban issues, employment etc. This would mean finding people from across the country such as researchers and practitioners in welfare economics, sociologists, union organisers etc. When we start to "plan for people" it means that we will see a shift in how we think about society and the economy. We will start thinking about the welfare of the coolie, the ragpicker, the mason, the street-food vendor, the teacher, the technician etc. Our entire system would re-orient itself around Labour ("low level") and not around the "high level." This is possible and in fact, various schemes and programmes exist within the governmental framework but again they are futile if the interests of the elites come before the interests of the people.

Using a labour-oriented approach, we can see an immediate solution to the serious issue of Unemployment which Conrad promised to resolve. Building up Big Employers that can hire people in the hundreds. These are companies that the government can create or re-organise existing ones

in order to have (A) more efficient (B) more productive (C) more profitable. Profits would not be shared amongst the "high level" management but would instead go towards providing decent salaries and social security benefits to the "low level" workforce. Additionally, the revenue generated would help the state's revenue from taxing such companies. Imagine a scenario where the biggest construction firm in the state did not belong to a single individual or a family. Imagine if the Meghalaya Government Construction Corporation (MGCC) was turned around and was re-structured into a firm driven by - first and foremost - the interests of construction workers. This would improve the life of a mason; a plumber or electrician and his family if he got a share of the approximately 730 crore which has been earmarked for The Meghalaya Ecotourism Infrastructure Development Project (MEIDP) or if he got a sliver of the Shillong-Dawki road project, estimated at Rs 1377 crore! The MGCC could become a Big Employer. It could raise the skill sets and awareness of the workers through training and mechanisation and we could actually export our labour all over instead of being dependent on semi-skilled labour from the outside which is the case right now.

Imagine if we invested in modernising the old Meg Cannery and fruit processing centres and re-vamped the firm into a Big Employer? Imagine doing the same with MTDC and MeECL. Hundreds could be employed and the lives of thousands could be improved. But the consultants - who control the government don't seem to care about Social Justice or Equality. I wonder if they have even heard of such concepts. It is clear most of them are deeply ensconced in their Caste and/or Class privilege. Why would they care about these issues? For them it's just a matter of sending a report to the Secretariat but for us, this is home. We don't get to go back to Baroda or Vizag or Delhi, when our assignment is over. If this society breaks, we break. We don't have a choice. These are our people and we can't ignore the rampant Inequality, Injustice, Corruption and Poverty which are crippling us. Creating good jobs can go a long way (though not the only way, mind you) to ameliorating these miseries.

When I talk about Big Employers, the elephant in the room is, of course, MCLL, which has been spectacularly and dramatically capsizing before our very eyes. And by the looks of it, another upcoming disaster looms on the horizon, namely MeECL. But if the bureaucrats who are expected to lead these organisations are removed, and in their place, professional managers are brought in, the outcome would be a different, happier story. Bureaucrats are not going to rock the boat. If these managers looked at how much money MeECL is losing to the sick indus-

trial units in Byrnihat, they would file cases immediately or discontinue electricity supply completely and find new markets. But since the sick unit owners are close to the various politicians, no bureaucrat will dare go to war with them. One of them tried and look where that got him. At the risk of being called repetitive I will repeat this - Big Employers must be insulated from interference. If we can do that, everything will begin to fall into place.

All of this fits into the Private Sector development which we desperately require right now, since I argue for a form of State Capitalist model of the Private Sector. This is because I do not believe (as I have stated in various articles) that this obsession that we have on "Individual Excellence" is healthy for our society. I don't believe the wonderful stories I hear on Instagram and Facebook about how a single person overcame the odds to become a millionaire or an entrepreneur. We hear this sort of empirically unvalidated baloney daily. As a politician, I cannot think about just one person's wellbeing. I have to think about what is good for the greatest number of people. This is why I argue rigorously for this model of development. Now, let us turn towards what Conrad Sangma has been doing.

As mentioned earlier, Conrad Sangma had promised to create 5 lakh jobs over 5 years. Much of that job creation is premised upon the success of the flagship programme - PRIME - and especially CM Elevate. According to the Economic Times article at the launch of CM Elevate (from Oct 17, 2023) the programme is meant to benefit 20,000 beneficiaries leading to the creation of 50,000 jobs over a period of 5 years. But 50,000 jobs is nowhere near the 5 lakh jobs promised. So how will Conrad create the remaining 4.5 lakh jobs which he has been promising? Perhaps our consultants can tell us. And as far as I know, handing out FOCUS cheques for small amounts of money is not job creation. In total, the grand amount might look impressive on paper but at the individual level it really doesn't amount to much.

That said, let me not be too gloomy. The Government is working on building up co-operatives which is a good sign and a way forward to a State Capitalist model of Private Sector development. But they need to concentrate more on that and less on flashy, sexy, cool gimmicks which any graduate-level marketing professional can do. I fail to understand our Government's obsession for "re-inventing the wheel." Much of what governments are supposed to do has already been laid out. Just follow the precedents. These fancy launches and expensive events for gimmicks like FOCUS, YESS Meghalaya are pointless. Governance, in the bygone eras was definitely not cool, exciting or titillating but it seems to have had a better impact on

alleviating poverty, reducing inequality and supporting social welfare. This is generally true the world over. The world has changed since then. New challenges have emerged, new problems have cropped up but abandoning tried-and-tested methods which had been prescribed by domain experts is surely erroneous.

True that the PRIME and CM Elevate programmes are important interventions but they are only a tiny part of the greater ecosystem. The faster, more inclusive route would be the creation of Big Employers. It is an old Social Democrat/State Capitalist idea. Asking people to become PRIME entrepreneurs sounds nice but what do the statistics say? According to an article on the Ideas for India website, about 50% of firms will go bust within 5 years (from Firm Survival in India: Status of Firms formed over the last 30 years). That means the potential elimination of 50% of the 50,000 jobs which CM Elevate promised to create within 5 years. So, we are back to square one if that happens. Additionally, CM Elevate would be creating too many competitors in its support. This is another important aspect that no one seems to have accepted: that competition is a reality of business. How many pickle-makers, or fruit wine-makers can we create before they start to cannibalise each other? Who will be the winners and what will happen to the losers? Can't we bypass this sordid outcome by pre-empting the best possible scenario where they don't need to compete unnecessarily?

Charles Fourier - a founding father of Socialism, understood this way back in the early 19th century, when he noted how inefficient it was to have three hundred wineries instead of a couple of properly managed ones which could employ many people. Again, these are not new ideas but they are important to discuss.

Unlike the government of our neighbouring state we must stop wet-dreaming of the Adanis and Ambanis swooping down to save the poor and destitute of the state. Those investments are probably not going to come anytime soon for us anyway. So, we have the chance to think local instead. Indeed, they can be "beautiful", they can bring our communities together, we can build companies that we can be proud of; built on the vaunted egalitarianism of our "tribal" ideals. These Big Employers would have to have managers in charge of them, not political appointees at the helm. We cannot rely on the IAS to lead these firms. They are too overburdened. Besides, seeking profit out of an enterprise is not what they are trained for. They have to spend money, not make it. We need professional managers who possess both business acumen and compassion for people. Sure it is difficult to find such people because B-schools aren't known for imbuing compassion into their students but it is not impossible to do. We had a Verghese Kurien once upon a time and I believe we can build an AMUL here as well.

Instead, HNLC should advocate for preserving Sohra's environment and allocate funds to plant trees if they genuinely care about the Khasi people or the Jait-bynriew.

HNLC should observe that the environment in Jaintia Hills, especially in Lumshong, is being polluted by cement factories.

Yours etc.,
David Lyngz,
Via email

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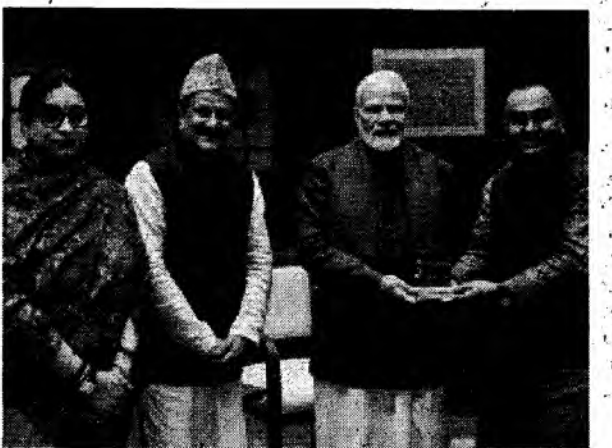
BJP's minority overtures - A calibrated strategy to chug all and sundry

By Chiranjib Haldar

Thinking reflects the mental silos of a politician on the cusp of his third stint as a country's supreme leader. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's minority symbolism ahead of the BJP's sledgehammer Hindutva pitch is akin to mollification prior to turbulence. The party's veering on with its Christian and Sikh outreach in the run-up to the impending national blitzkrieg at Ayodhya, may have been a well calibrated strategy. It seems, outfits of the wider sangh fraternity have been clearly tasked to tap the inauguration of the Ram temple and spark a strong religious fervor across the country. To negate that majoritarian rabble rousing, BJP is also going hammer and tongs to woo various minorities based on state demographics - the pattern changing from Kerala to the North East. The BJP's aim has been to garner a

following the faith bore the brunt. Any tilt by the community towards saffron hues will actually benefit the BJP as its sustained campaign of India's ills being traced to appeasement by "pseudo-secular" forces may gain more traction within its core voter base.

The BJP's acknowledgement of the heterogeneity within Muslims has churned social engineering of another form. The BJP's outreach to the Pasmanda Muslims is a step to gain an edge in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar with significant Pasmanda populations. This has the possibility of impacting the Samajwadi Party (SP) in UP and the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) in Bihar since the Muslims form a major chunk in the Muslim-Yadav alliance. In the past, the BJP dented regional SP-RJD satraps by targeting non-Yadav votebanks. So, there is a political message for



major chunk of the Hindu vote in the general elections and to that end, patronise a section of minorities to play the catalyst.

But what does the curation of minority outreach events by the party top brass and saffron fraternity mean for an ostensibly secular country? The BJP, sangh parivar and its ecosystem have an undeniable

2024 in the Prime Minister's direct overtures to Christians, Sikhs and other minorities.

In 2022, at the BJP's national executive meeting in Hyderabad, Prime Minister Modi had emphasised on reaching out to the "marginalised and non-elite" sections of the minority communities. To expand the party's support base, the prime minister sug-

"Drawing parallels between the teachings of Jesus Christ and the Upanishads, Narendra Modi's correlation was meant to cut ice: 'The Holy Bible says that whatever God has given us, it should be used for the service of others.'"

attraction towards hyperbole and astonishing, odious utterances. That the temple in Ayodhya has always been segued into the Bharatiya Janata Party's project of political triumph is no secret. Symbolically, hardcore BJP loyalists may be projecting the unveiling of the temple as a pluralist republic's embrace of majoritarianism. Hence, the Prime Minister's pep talk and community messages on Christmas and Sikh Martyrdom Day are signals to the religious minorities that they are part of the India growth story and their contributions in various fields are being acknowledged and lauded.

Or else, how does one explain two back-to-back events graced by the BJP leadership signaling an effort to woo minorities amidst the hullabaloo over the scheduled temple opening ceremony. Commemorating the martyrdom of Guru Govind Singh's sons Zorwar and Fateh, the Prime Minister asserted how the Sikh gurus have taught Indians to live for the glory of their land and served as an inspiration to the nation. And at the Christmas lunch hosted by Prime Minister Modi himself, he was singing peacens to the Christian community's contribution to society. With the hype over Ayodhya looming on the horizon, a visit to Delhi's Sacred Heart Cathedral this Easter or addressing an august gathering of the community on Christmas Day are definitely a sign of the BJP's inclusive approach.

Has the BJP realised that the thin veil of secularism can actually win hustings? Yes, Christian votes are decisive in Kerala and the Northeastern states where the new bonhomie may effect a major change in the existing electoral arithmetic, notwithstanding the community's limited influence. The community is irked with the Union government and the BJP regime for its failure to act decisively in Manipur to end the ethnic clashes in which tribesmen

gested a few ideas as part of his subsequent push for winning over Muslims and Christians. Programmes to woo the Pasmanda and Bohra Muslim communities and reaching out to the Christian community in Kerala are pointers in that direction.

While the Ram temple inauguration may be a mechanism already in place to consolidate polarisation and reap electoral dividends, BJP appears to space out comforting signals to the minorities and also gain their support prior to the crucial Lok Sabha polls. Having established dominance with the trajectory of temple politics coming full circle, the party stalwarts feel they can use the perception of the prime Minister's imminent return to power in 2024 to get sections of minorities to back them. Drawing parallels between the teachings of Jesus Christ and the Upanishads, Narendra Modi's correlation was meant to cut ice: 'The Holy Bible says that whatever God has given us, it should be used for the service of others. This is what Seva Parmo Dharma is'. The harping on the spirit of 'Sabka prayas' or everyone's effort for nation building was clearly meant to drive home the party's agenda in subdued tones.

Lakhs of apolitical Modi mitras (friends of Modi) appointed in Lok Sabha constituencies in several states, including Kerala, Delhi, Jammu and Kashmir, Assam, Bihar, Telangana, Maharashtra, West Bengal, and Uttar Pradesh have one task in hand - to disseminate the government's welfare and social outreach schemes. The BJP had reaped rich electoral dividends on the mandir-masjid imbroglio in the past. Prime Minister Modi's electoral roadmap for 2024 is set to make a pit stop in Ayodhya. But this time, he wants to tag all communities of the populace and segue from one anointment to another.

(The writer is a commentator on politics and society).

Letters to the Editor

Delayed expression of concern

Editor,
The letter to the editor by A Sarki, 'Concerns regarding Govt's decision to adapt NCERT textbooks' (ST Dec 4, 2024), is disconcerting for all school principals, teachers and academicians who have given their approval after a studied approach. I don't know whether A Sarki writes from a position of experience or expertise, but I will say this - that the government

has taken the right decision. Now let the ball roll! I do believe that the state gov't has not overlooked the recent changes made by NCERT. And it's time to stop making erroneous statements about the financial burden when the books are cheap!

It seems only Social Science is crucial for competitive examinations! How naive can we be! May I suggest a sitting with A Sarki, (or for that matter all detractors), selected principals, government officers and teachers to get a clearer perspective on developments on the education front. It's dishearten-

ing to read such letters that should have been written long ago when the government sounded the public on the matter!

Yours etc.,
Kevin Phillips
Shillong - 19

HNLC's bold promise of monthly salary of Rs 25,000

Editor,
In recent days, the HNLC issued a death threat to the

tourism industry, as tourists would be reluctant to visit an area where they will have to breathe polluted air. Currently, since the factory is not functional, it is beneficial for the environment. HNLC should consider preserving the natural beauty of Sohra by promoting a clean and green environment with no air pollution.

The promise made by HNLC to offer Rs. 25,000 to eligible Khasi tribe members to join the militant outfit sounds like a 2023 joke. Given HNLC's financial crunch, the source of this money raises significant

questions. Instead, HNLC should advocate for preserving Sohra's environment and allocate funds to plant trees if they genuinely care about the Khasi people or the Jait-bynriew.

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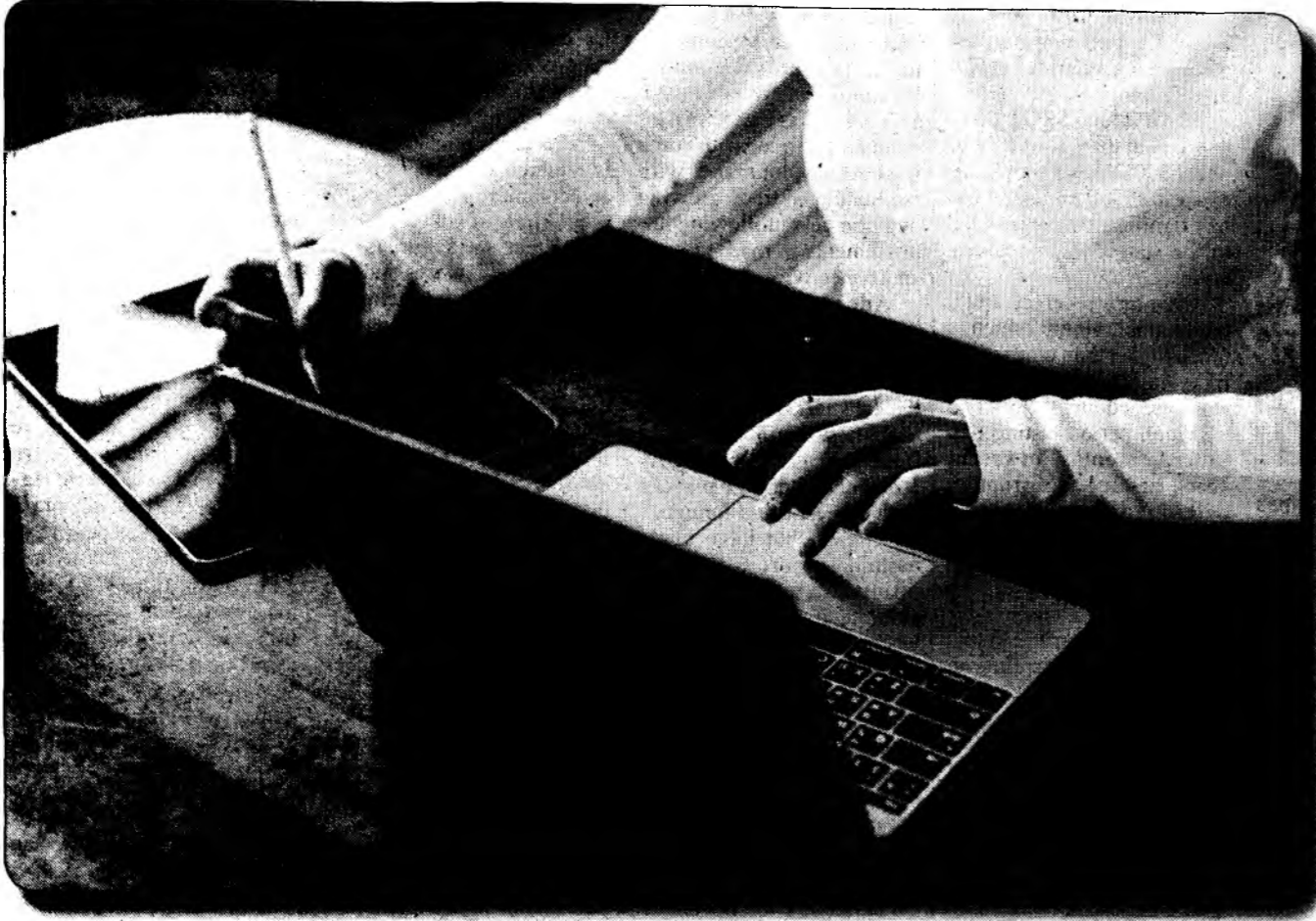
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Yours etc.,
David Lyngz,
Via email

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Think you're good at multi-tasking?

Here's how your brain compensates - and how this changes with age



We're all time-poor, so multi-tasking is seen as a necessity of modern living. We answer work emails while watching TV, make shopping lists in meetings and listen to podcasts when doing the dishes. We attempt to split our attention countless times a day when juggling both mundane and important tasks.

But doing two things at the same time isn't always as productive or safe as focusing on one thing at a time.

The dilemma with multi-tasking is that when tasks become complex or energy-demanding, like driving a car while talking on the phone, our performance often drops on one or both.

Here's why - and how our ability to multi-task changes as we age.

Doing more things, but less effectively

The issue with multi-tasking at a brain level, is that two tasks performed at the same time often compete for common neural pathways - like two intersecting streams of traffic on a road.

In particular, the brain's planning centres in the frontal cortex (and connections to parieto-cerebellar system, among others) are needed for both motor and cognitive tasks. The more tasks rely on the same sensory system, like vision, the greater the interference.

This is why multi-tasking, such as talking on the phone, while driving can be risky. It takes longer to react to critical events, such as a car braking suddenly, and you have a higher risk of missing critical signals, such as a red light.

The more involved the phone conversation, the higher the accident risk, even when talking "hands-free".

Generally, the more skilled you are on a primary motor task, the better able you are to juggle another task at the same time. Skilled surgeons, for example, can multitask more effectively than residents, which is reassuring in a busy operating suite.

Highly automated skills and efficient brain processes mean greater flexibility when multi-tasking.

Adults are better at multi-tasking than kids

Both brain capacity and experience endow adults with a greater capacity for multi-tasking compared with children.

You may have noticed that when you start thinking about a problem, you walk more slowly, and sometimes to a standstill if deep in thought. The ability to walk and think at the same time gets better over childhood and adolescence, as do other types of multi-tasking.

When children do these two things at once, their walking speed and smoothness both wane, particularly when also doing a memory task (like recalling a sequence of numbers), verbal fluency task (like naming animals) or a fine-motor task (like buttoning up a shirt). Alternately, outside the lab, the cognitive task might fall by wayside as the motor goal takes precedence.

Brain maturation has a lot to do with these age differences. A larger prefrontal cortex helps share cognitive resources between tasks, thereby reducing the costs. This means better capacity to maintain performance at or near single-task levels.

The white matter tract that connects our two hemispheres (the corpus callosum) also takes a long time to fully mature, placing limits on how well children can walk around and do manual tasks (like texting on a

phone) together.

For a child or adult with motor skill difficulties, or developmental coordination disorder, multi-tasking errors are more common. Simply standing still while solving a visual task (like judging which of two lines is longer) is hard. When walking, it takes much longer to complete a path if it also involves cognitive effort along the way. So you can imagine how difficult walking to school could be.

What about as we approach older age?

Older adults are more prone to multi-tasking errors. When walking, for example, adding another task generally means older adults walk much slower and with less fluid movement than younger adults.

These age differences are even more pronounced when obstacles must be avoided or the path is winding or uneven.

Older adults tend to enlist more of their prefrontal cortex when walking and, especially, when multi-tasking. This creates more interference when the same brain networks are also enlisted to perform a cognitive task.

These age differences in performance of multi-tasking might be more "compensatory" than anything else, allowing older adults more time and safety when negotiating events around them.

Older people can practise and improve

Testing multi-tasking capabilities can tell clinicians about an older patient's risk of future falls better than an assessment of walking alone, even for healthy people living in the community.

Testing can be as simple as asking someone to walk a path while either mentally subtracting by sevens, carrying a cup and saucer, or balancing a ball on a tray.

Patients can then practise and improve these abilities by, for example, pedalling an exercise bike or walking on a treadmill while composing a poem, making a shopping list, or playing a word game.

The goal is for patients to be able to divide their attention more efficiently across two tasks and to ignore distractions, improving speed and balance.

There are times when we do think better when moving. Let's not forget that a good walk can help unclutter our mind and promote creative thought. And, some research shows walking can improve our ability to search and respond to visual events in the environment.

But often, it's better to focus on one thing at a time. We often overlook the emotional and energy costs of multi-tasking when time-pressured. In many areas of life - home, work and school - we think it will save us time and energy. But the reality can be different.

Multi-tasking can sometimes sap our reserves and create stress, raising our cortisol levels, especially when we're time-pressured. If such performance is sustained over long periods, it can leave you feeling fatigued or just plain empty.

Deep thinking is energy demanding by itself and so caution is sometimes warranted when acting at the same time - such as being immersed in deep thought while crossing a busy road, descending steep stairs, using power tools, or climbing a ladder.

So, pick a good time to ask someone a vexed question - perhaps not while they're cutting vegetables with a sharp knife. Sometimes, it's better to focus on one thing at a time. *(The Conversation)*

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, JANUARY 7, 2024

'Birthday Forecast'

Moon semi-square Mars on your solar return chart which means you will have mixed results this year. Your financial condition will remain strong and stable. And you will do well in your job/profession. But will have to work hard and put in lot of efforts. Your work will get completed but not without delay. You will find resistance even at your work place. Your colleagues might not agree to your plans. But your superior will support you. Those who have been jobless for long time will get good job offers. Health of an elderly family member may cause some concern. Your partner will support you. You will be enjoying good times in your domestic life.

'This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20)

Your career, reputation, and public life are influenced by the planetary combination. Increased public recognition and professional success characterizes this period. An event may occur that expands your career or professional interests, and you derive more pleasure from these activities. Reliability and creativity will take you places now. The more willing you are to put yourself in the limelight, the more positive the rewards. You are outgoing and your initiative is stronger than ever. You would brilliantly and effectively handle difficult projects at work.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21)

Friendship, love, romance and children are highlighted. You would have new attitudes towards family, finance, and social relationships. Home and family matters capture your attention and are a strong source of pride. It is a time when worldly matters are not as important to you. Use this energy to find ways to improve your interpersonal relations and your home and work environment. You might be a bit of a showman at this time. This is a favorable time to go for higher learning and for joining new courses to improve your professional skills and efficiency. Your family would be more supportive.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21)

With communication, creativity and judgment you gain money and influence in business ventures. Success brings status and respect as you dominate the professional scene. This is the right time to participate in community events and share views, ideas and feelings with people around you. This phase brings rewards and recognition in your professional life. You would also work hard with an inclination towards more detailed work, and it can get to you at times. Personal projects are on an upswing. You are in a position to inspire others through what you create. Income from foreign sources could also figure this time. You feel on top of things and replete with good health and energy.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22)

A period of hard work and effort is in your forecast. You would be taking on new responsibilities and will enjoy the challenges. A new set-up in an existing home or a new home altogether may be part of the picture in the coming weeks. There will also be a sense of renewal and reinvigoration with regard to your domestic routines, comfort, and feeling of security. This is a phase when you have an increased awareness of your need for a solid foundation—a place to return to when the rest of the world gets to you. Do not isolate yourself when you are feeling down.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23)

Practical matters come into strong focus and demand attention. An opportunity to expand on a global level arrives now. You would have more energy for work and your daily routine tend to speed up now. You are required to do a balancing act, and something big is in the pipeline. There may be some confusion about your dreams and ideas regarding your career. Give yourself time to digest everything before you make a move. You will also thoroughly enjoy artistic, musical, or cultural events and activities, especially in the company of a loved one. You instinctively know how to place yourself in the best light in order to make a good impression on others.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22)

There may be debates and discussions in family and you may face some opposition. You are likely to exert your energy and initiative into actively pursuing a rewarding love life, social amusement, and pleasure in general. You have a

likeable and competitive temperament. There is a stronger desire for creative endeavors, athletics and risk-taking pursuits. It might be hard for you to work with others in a harmonious manner and a few conflicts are possible. You especially enjoy games that involve competing with others on a mental level. You have a stronger need than usual for intellectual stimulation.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23)

This phase brings good-luck for love and romance. Ego confrontations with family members are possible now, but the best way to handle this is to do your best to strengthen your relationship with your family and your home base. This is a time to do what you can to build trust in your family life and a strong foundation within yourself, so that regardless of what you meet in the outside world over the next weeks, you have a secure place to return to.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22)

Associates at work might find you less sociable, as you are busier than ever and you focus on your activities and your needs. You might have a more materialistic view of life and are more attracted to objects and possessions that give you status. You can improve your love life by bringing more understanding and sharing views with each other. You are more inclined to seek a broad understanding of people and of your immediate environment. Concentrating on listening, connecting, communicating, and learning is your best bet now. If health is affected, fevers or infections are more likely.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21)

This period brings new horizons in your romantic and love life. You explore and search, make new connections, and pay attention to your immediate environment. Give other people a little extra time and attention, notice their efforts on your behalf, and strengthen your connections. You are more curious and alert than usual, and you could be quite busy with work. Much energy is expended in understanding and adapting to your immediate environment. Siblings, neighbours, close relatives, friends, and co-workers may play a more important role than usual in your life. You are eager to investigate new things, whether scientific or technical.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20)

The planetary configuration promotes your luck in work related areas. You would be especially fond of home and family life. You are more receptive and gentle on a romantic level, and tend to be sentimental now. Loyalty and sensitivity in your relationships are more important to you. There would be a bright opportunity to travel, learning or the publishing of a project. Getting your finances on track will be necessary at this time. Do your best to avoid letting emotions rule over good judgment when it comes to expenses and other financial matters. Share your thoughts and feelings with others and you may be surprised at the support you receive from close friends and loved ones.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18)

Pay close attention to performance, it will be rewarded and continuity to perform work would be visible to senior colleagues and people in authority. You will have the ability to build up financial and monetary pursuits and can expect good returns from overseas business. Your idealistic nature is stimulated, and you are likely to yearn for a connection to more spiritual or idealistic pursuits. A sense of belonging through connection to something larger than yourself is something that is entering your life now. There may be a development of romance at your work place.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20)

There would be happiness and fulfillment through the expansion of your mind, widening of your social circle, travel, and connections to people of a different cultural background. Your dreams and ideas about intimacy come into focus, but could also bring the flaws in this area of your life to light. An income boost is likely in this period. This is a phase when you have an increased awareness of the physical world of the senses, and this is a time to start fresh in terms of how you arrange your life in order to feel a sense of value and worthiness. It is also a wonderful time for taking moments to please yourself through earthy, tactile, and comforting endeavours.

Crash diets may work against you

Those trying to kick-start their weight loss or perhaps wanting to lose a few pounds before a big event or holiday may be tempted to try a crash diet. While it's true that in order to lose weight you need to eat fewer calories than your body uses each day, in reality crash diets may actually work against you - and may make weight loss more difficult.

Crash diets have been around for years, but have stayed popular more recently thanks to influencers and social media. Typically, these diets involve drastically reducing calorie intake to 800-1,200 calories a day for a few weeks at a time. Proponents of these diets claim it can lead to rapid weight loss, which may explain why they have such a significant appeal.

Indeed, research has shown these diets can actually be very effective for certain people.

In a study of 278 adults with obesity, a 12-week crash diet of 810 calories a day led to greater weight loss after 12 months than people who only reduced their calories by portion control. The crash diet group lost an average of nearly 11kg versus only 3kg in the moderate diet group.

Similarly, one study showed that very low-calorie diets may be beneficial for people with type 2 diabetes. The researchers found that 60% of participants who ate 600 calories a day for eight weeks were able to put their type 2 diabetes into remission. They also lost around 15kg on average.

A follow up at 12 weeks showed participants put around 3kg back on - but, importantly, their blood sugar levels remained similar.

But while these diets may lead to short-term weight loss success in some people, they can have the long-term consequence of damaging your metabolism. This may explain why around 80% of diets fail - with the person ultimately putting all the weight they lost back on, or even gaining more weight than they lost.

Crash diets and metabolism

Your metabolism is the sum of all chemical reactions in the body. It's responsible for converting the food we eat into energy, and storing any surplus energy as fat. Your metabolism is affected by many things - including diet, exercise and your hormones. Crash diets affect all these components.

With a crash diet, you consume far less food than normal. This means your body doesn't need to use as much energy (calories) to digest and absorb the foods you've eaten. You also lose muscle. All of these factors lower metabolic rate - meaning the body will burn fewer calories when not exercising.

In the short-term, crash diets can lead to feelings of tiredness, which makes doing any activity (let alone a workout) challenging. This is because less energy is

available - and what is available is prioritised for life-sustaining reactions.

In the long term, crash diets can change the hormone makeup of our bodies. They increase our stress hormones, such as cortisol. And over an extended period of time, typically months, high cortisol levels can cause our body to store more fat.

Crash diets can also reduce levels of the hormone T3, which is produced by the thyroid gland. It's critical in regulating our basal metabolic rate (the number of calories your body needs in order to sustain itself). Long-term changes in T3 levels can lead to hypothyroidism and weight gain.

Together, all these changes make the body more adept at putting on weight when you begin consuming more calories again. And these changes may exist for months, if not years.

Gradual dieting

If you're trying to lose weight, the best strategy to use is following a long-term, gradual weight loss diet.

Gradual diets have been shown to be more sustainable and have a less negative impact on your metabolic rate compared with crash diets. Gradual diets can also help maintain energy levels enough

to exercise, which can help you lose weight. These types of diet also preserve the function of our mitochondria - the calorie-burning powerhouses in our muscles. This creates a greater capacity for burning calories even after we finish dieting.

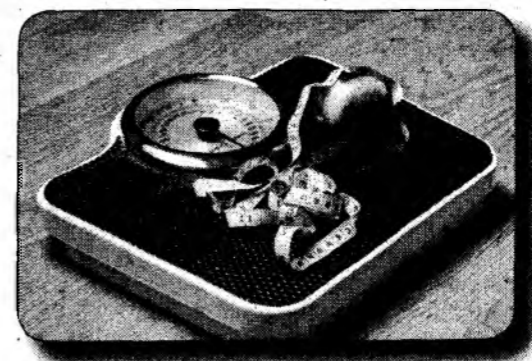
The ideal diet is one that reduces body weight by around 0.5 to 1kg a week. The number of calories you'll need to eat per day will depend on your starting weight and how physically active you are.

Eating certain foods can also help maintain your metabolism while dieting.

Fats and carbohydrates use fewer calories to power digestion, compared with protein. Indeed, high-protein diets increase your metabolic rate 11-14% above normal levels, whereas diets high in carbohydrates or fats can only do this by 4-8%. As such, try to ensure around 30% of your day's calories are made up of protein when trying to lose weight.

High-protein diets also help you feel fuller for longer. One study found that when a participant's diet consisted of 30% protein, they consumed 441 calories less over the 12-week study period compared with a 15% protein diet. This ultimately led to 5kg weight loss, of which 3.7kg was fat loss.

While it may be tempting to crash diet if you're trying to lose weight fast, it could have long-term consequences for your metabolism. The best way to lose weight is to slightly reduce the number of calories you need per day, exercise, and eat plenty of protein. *(The Conversation)*



"The great end of life is not knowledge but action."

—Francis Bacon

The Shillong Times

Vol No. LXVI, No. 147 SHILLONG, MONDAY, JANUARY 8, 2024

Verdict in Bangladesh

AN element of suspense was missing as Bangladesh went to polls on Sunday. The 12-th general election in the world's eighth most-populous nation was marred by violence and arrest of thousands of opposition protesters but it is also poised to give Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina a fourth straight term in power. Admittedly, she's shrewd and has shown the courage and capacity to steer the nation through thick and thin. Bangladesh is among the fastest growing economies, a credit mainly to Hasina's 15 years in power. With a heavy hand, she put down attempts at violence and terrorism by the opposition and Islamic militants. The militants allegedly drew support from the principal Opposition, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party of Begum Khalida, who has been jailed and tamed for the past several years.

The BNP and some other opposition parties have boycotted the polls. Their demand was to hold the elections under the supervision of a caretaker government by arguing that a fair verdict would not emerge if Hasina's dispensation oversaw the exercise. They alleged that the ruling Awami League fielded dummy candidates as independents to create the façade of a democratic election. Nearly 2000 candidates from 27 parties were in the fray. Other than the opposition Jatiya party and nearly 500 'independents', the rest were from the Awami-led alliance. The results are expected later today. While the BNP and its allies may have reasons to hold a two-day protest against alleged "unfair polls," they have to share the blame. Their failure to participate in the elections has resulted in the present scenario. Over 150 international observers including teams from India were in Bangladesh to ascertain whether the polling took place in a democratic manner. Sheikh Hasina knows how to handle matters. All along she has been a good friend to India, also as India ably backed her father Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to carry forward his Independence struggle against Pakistani domination, a grand success. Both Pakistan and the ISI-inspired terror outfits are uncomfortable with Hasina's leadership of Bangladesh.

The fast-paced economic progress for Bangladesh, currently growing at around 6 per cent, is the main guarantee to Hasina's continued leadership. What is now the second strongest economy in South Asia was the world's second poorest country in 1971. Having given eminent stress on industrialization, Bangladesh is the second largest exporter of garments, after China. It ensured employment to women on a massive scale. In several sectors, more professionals from India are seeking jobs in Bangladesh, not the other way round, due mainly to the better salary offers there. The migration of the poor from Bangladesh to India is now an old story. Good leadership ensured Bangladesh's economic growth and better human development indices in several sectors, when compared to India.

Much Ado about the Khasi Mandarin

By H H Mohrmen

The news outlet in the state ended last year with a very positive report about local oranges, or the Khasi mandarin, being exported to Dubai, which is, of course, good news. It was also reported that Khasi oranges are being sold in Bangalore, which is praiseworthy. Kudos to the Agriculture Department in general, and the Horticulture Department in particular for achieving this great feat. Hopefully, the benefits reach the farmers who have toiled day and night to produce the oranges and, more importantly, ensure

year and somehow involved me in the harvesting, which, on the other hand, enables me to share this story with you. I was more fascinated by the activities that went around the harvest, the sight of many piles of oranges collected at different locations in the orchard. During harvest, apart from plucking the fruits, there were people who collected rotten or spoiled fruit and cut it to collect seeds for their nursery. I loved the fact that I could go around and

sia Lyngdoh, who at least transported if not exported oranges from Nongtalang to Bangladesh via Tamabil in Dawki. Surely, oranges from the region were not only exported to Bangladesh but were also supplied to different parts of the state. Producing oranges was the major economic activity of the people in the region then. Oranges doing a vanishing act In the early nineties when I started my ministry, the

the scientist and share their problems. It was interesting to watch the flow of information from both sides while we helped in the translation. There were three lessons learned from the interaction. There were two types of pests that affected the orange trees, which ultimately led to the tree dying. The two major pests affecting orange cultivation are the insect that bores the inside of the tree and the parasite that affects the top or the canopy of the tree. The third and most important lesson learned that day was about orchard management.



production is at least constant if they are not able to improve on the production of oranges in the state.

Khasi Mandarin endemic to the region

It is called Khasi Mandarin because the oranges are endemic to the region, and the places where oranges grew in the past are the War areas of the state. Hence, in the local parlance, which is now being forgotten, the War areas are also known as "ka ri u soh u pai," the land of fruits and sugarcane. Both the War Khasi and the War Jaintia produced a lot of oranges in the past. Of course, it is only natural for the department to go gung-ho on their achievement and for the government too, to take it as an opportunity to add a score on its report card. And, of course, the IAS babus at the secretariat are patting their own backs for the plan well executed. But is this the end? Should we not do some research and at least try to understand the history of Khasi mandarin if we want the production to sustain, and so that the farmers can reap regular, and not a one-off benefits from the golden fruit?

My Personal Story with the fruit

My grandmother is from Nongtalang, and my mother was born in a village. I still remember that during our childhood days, we used to have an orange orchard in the village at a place called Shmia Thiang. At the onset of every winter, after we had completed our school final examinations, my brothers and sisters and I would go to Nongtalang to help in the harvesting of oranges. Not that we could make much contribution to the process. But I am glad that my grandmother took me to the orchard every

pick the biggest of the ripe oranges for me to consume. My grandmother Hat Lyngdoh Mohrmen would also set aside some oranges to be shared with our relatives and close friends in Nongtalang and Jowai, in fact mostly for the relatives in Jowai because in Nongtalang, most of the people have orange orchards. When we reached Jowai after the harvest, our duty was to distribute the oranges that our grandmother wanted to give to our near and dear ones.

It was perhaps in the late seventies and the early eighties, when I could barely carry a 'khoh' (basket) full of oranges from the orchard to the nearest spot on the Jowai-Dawki road. I recall that I could only carry a 'khoh' or 'hoh' chot, as the War Jaintia people call it. Khoh chot is a small khoh which War people (particularly males) used to carry their machete, betel nut and pan leaf containers, tobacco, and their lunch packed in a dob kwai when they went to the fields. Khoh chot is not cone-shaped but rather it is like an egg, which is cut at the top on one side. A small 'star,' a strap made of cane is tied to the khoh for the person to carry it on his shoulder. The height of the khoh chot is a little bit more than one foot with a radius of about 10 inches or a 20-inch diameter, and those days, dear me could only carry a full khoh chot of oranges.

Even then, Oranges were exported to Bangladesh So if those in government today think that they are the first to export oranges outside the state or the country, then they are way off the mark. In the past, my grandmother had a relative from Nongtalang who had a tractor and exported oranges to Bangladesh. I can still remember Khyllaw

Unitarian Church of Nongtalang was also part of the circle of churches under my jurisdiction, and in one of my bus trips to Nongtalang, I felt nostalgic at the scene I saw from the bus. I could not believe my eyes when I saw a man having to buy oranges from Jowai to take home to Nongtalang. My mind's eye then took me back to the days when I spent time at my grandmother's orange orchard at Nongtalang. The time when oranges were produced from Nongtalang in tens and hundreds of tons per season, but then I asked myself, where have all the oranges gone? Not a single orchard can be found in Nongtalang now. Other villages in Jaintia hills which produced oranges in the past are Mowhap, Mowkaiauw, Wahiajer, and even Lumchnong, but orange production from these areas is going down today and in some cases the production has stopped altogether.

Later in the Amlarem area, villages like Padu, Nongbareh, and Khonglah also produced oranges, but now the orange production in these villages has also dwindled. Very recently or to some extent even today, villages like Jarain and Umladkhur also produce oranges, but the production has gradually decreased. The question is what happened to orange production in these areas?

Farmers Scientists interaction

In the years between 2016-2018, the Society for Urban and Rural Empowerment (SURE), supported by NABARD, organized a visit for the orange farmers from Jarain, Thangbuli, and Umladkhur villages to ICAR Umiyam. The visit was organized to create an opportunity for the farmers to have a direct interaction with

One of the scientists asked the farmers, after the harvesting is done, did you do anything with the orchard? The farmers replied that except for cleaning the orchard once a year, weeding, and pruning, they have done practically nothing with their orchard. Speaking in the language that they could easily comprehend, the scientist said, you see, fruit trees are also like humans; after they have given birth, they need nutritious food to replenish their strength. The underlying message is the need to manage the orchard which the farmers in the area ignored till today.

Beyond Bangalore and Dubai

It was reported that the oranges exported to Dubai were from Narwan in the East Jaintia hills. For the uninitiated, Narwan is like an oasis in the middle of the coal mining desert of the East Jaintia hills District. It is the only village which is not affected by coal mining, and because there is no mining activity in the village, it is the only place where water is still potable. It may also be mentioned that orange from Narwan already has a GI tag due to the initiative taken by the DC then. Another village that still produces Khasi Mandarin is Nongirong, but judging from what happened to the villages which used to produce oranges, very soon the production from these villages will also be affected. There is a saying, "if we do not learn from history, we are bound to repeat it." We may have produced a huge amount of oranges and are able to export them to different parts of the world, but if we do not do anything, orange production in these villages will also meet the same fate and, oranges will do a disappearing act from these villages too.

History repeats itself with the killing of senior Hamas official Saleh al-Aroui

Gaza war saw his popularity grow in Lebanon and West Bank

By James M Dorsey

History repeats itself. Palestinian airplane hijackings and attacks on Israeli civilians in Israel as well as on Israeli and Jewish targets abroad pockmarked the 1970s and 1980s. The violence put the Palestinian issue on the world agenda. The violence erupted, and at times, was driven by fierce debate among Palestinian guerrilla leaders on whether to drop maximalist demands for replacing the State of Israel with a (Palestinian-dominated) "secular democratic state" and strive for a Palestinian state alongside Israel.

It took the PLO 16 years to unambiguously accept Israel's existence and end armed resistance against Israel in 1988. The violence ebbed and flowed. It involved targeted assassinations of Israeli and Palestinian representatives and leaders in third countries.

The 1982 shooting in London of the Israeli ambassador to Britain, Shlomo Argov, sparked the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and forced Yasser Arafat's Palestine Liberation Organisation to decamp from Lebanon to Tunisia. For much of the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, Israel refused to engage with the PLO, employing the same language it uses today about Hamas. To be sure, Hamas' October 7 attack on Israel upped the ante in scale and brutality. It has, again fitting a historic pattern, empowered the most extreme ultra-nationalist, ultra-religious elements on Israel's political spectrum, and sparked a war, involving indiscriminate bombing and punishment of a civilian population that Israel and Hamas will find difficult to live down. While the jury is out, the war has not halted a torturous process within Hamas, much like the equally torturous evolution within the PLO. Hamas' internal debate became evident with the adoption of its 2017 amended charter and has continued despite the war. There is no guarantee that Hamas will follow in the footsteps of the PLO.

This week's presumably Israeli killing in Beirut of senior Hamas official Saleh al-Aroui, a 57-year-old co-founder of the group's military wing, the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, and deputy head of its political bureau, raises the spectre of renewed tit-for-tat Palestinian and Israeli killings in third countries with one difference.

Al-Aroui, was widely viewed as a hardliner within Hamas, responsible for the group's military infrastructure in Lebanon and operations on the West Bank, where its popularity is on the rise because of the Gaza war and its contribution to a potentially burgeoning armed insurgency.

Protests erupted on the West Bank, in response to calls by Hamas for "acts of resistance," to protest the killing of Al-Aroui, a West Bank native, and several other Hamas operatives in the Beirut drone strike. A general strike closed down businesses. In August, Al-Aroui telegraphed Hamas' intentions long before the October 7 attack.

"A total war has become inevitable. We all consider it necessary... The resistance axis, the Palestinian people, and our nation, we want this total war. It is not (just) something we say in the media. We talk about it behind closed doors.... We are discussing together the different scenarios and possibilities," Al-Aroui told Al Maydeen TV. Last century's tit-for-tat killings of Palestinians targeted primarily PLO moderates, not hardliners, and were perpetrated not only by Israel but also by Palestinian hardliners, like Abu Nidal, a renegade PLO operative. Israel has repeatedly warned that it will hunt down Hamas operatives wherever they are. In 2015, the US State Department offered up to \$5 million for "information leading to the identification or location" of Al-Aroui.

Even so, Israel failed to notify the Biden administration of its plans to take out Al-Aroui, a sign it feared the US would oppose the operation because it risked expanding the war

beyond carefully calibrated hostilities on the Lebanese-Israeli border and in the Red Sea as well as Israeli-Palestinian clashes in the West Bank. Complicating the fallout of Al-Aroui's death is the fact that Israel and Hamas are not the only players.

Hezbollah has vowed to retaliate for the killing in Lebanon of any representative of the Iranian-backed Axis of Resistance that includes Hamas, the Yemeni Houthis, and Iraqi militias alongside the Lebanese Shiite militia and the Islamic Republic.

Hezbollah has been waging a war against Israel since October 7 to the Israeli forces down on the Jewish state's northern border so that they cannot be deployed in Gaza without provoking an all-out conflict that could prove disastrous for Hezbollah and Lebanon.

Aroui's killing puts Hezbollah between a rock and a hard place. It needs to find a way to be seen as living up to its vow while ensuring the hostilities do not spin out of control. Many in Lebanon fear Hamas could drag the bankrupt country into a war they do not want.

Last month, Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu threatened on a visit to troops on the Lebanese border that Israel would "single-handedly turn Beirut and South Lebanon, not far from here, into Gaza and Khan Yunis" if Hezbollah started an all-out war. In a 90-minute speech to commemorate the fourth anniversary of the US assassination of Iranian Revolutionary Guard Qassem Soleimani scheduled before Al-Aroui's killing, Hezbollah leader Hasan Nasrallah referred only summarily to the Hamas leader's death.

Much of his speech was an ode to Soleimani and Iran's role in supporting militias in Gaza, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen by funding, training, and arming them, enabling them to manufacture weaponry, and creating the Axis of Resistance. Even so, Nasrallah insisted that Axis members independently took their own decisions and did not take orders from Iran.

Clad in a black cloak and turban, Nasrallah praised Hamas' October 7 attack with no mention of the group's targeting of civilians. He described the carnage rained on Gaza by Israel in response as "worth the sacrifice." The Hezbollah leader produced a laundry list of why Hamas was winning the war, including its success in putting the Palestinian plight back on the international agenda.

The war succeeded in "reviving the Palestinian cause, forcing nations across the world to look for solutions," Nasrallah said, noting that Arab countries had been willing to establish formal relations with Israel without a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Yet, the Hezbollah leader seemed to buy time, by saying he would address the issue of Lebanon and Al-Aroui's killing in greater detail in another speech on Friday during a ceremony for a Hezbollah operative who died recently.

At the same time, Nasrallah appeared to suggest that Hezbollah would retaliate for Al-Aroui's killing on the group's timeline, considering widespread Lebanese opposition to a war with Israel. Nasrallah warned, referring to Al-Aroui's killing in the Hezbollah stronghold in southern Beirut, that "yesterday's crime is blatant, it is serious. This crime will not go unanswered. The battlefield is there, the nights are there."

Yet, he also noted that "we are taking the situation in Lebanon into account." Tellingly, Nasrallah seemed to back hardliners in Hamas' internal debate. Arguing that Jewish attachment to the land was fabricated and that Israelis were fleeing the country because Israel was proven incapable of providing security, Nasrallah addressed Israelis directly, saying, "Here you don't have a future. The land of Palestine is for the Palestinians." (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

On uniforms in colleges

Editor, Sabil Gwali's letter, "On making uniforms mandatory in the college," (ST Dec 5, 2023), also echoes my sentiments profoundly. The transition from school to college in India isn't just a change of educational institutions, it's a crucial phase in the journey from adolescence to adulthood. This transition involves not just academic growth, but also significant personal and social development. A key aspect of this development is the shift from wearing school uniforms to choosing one's own attire in college. This notably small change has profound implications for a student's growth and preparedness for adult life. In school, uniforms serve a purpose. They create a sense of equality and discipline, removing distractions caused by clothing. However, extending this

uniformity to college seems counterproductive. College is where young adults prepare for the real world. It's a space where they should learn to make choices, including what to wear. These choices, albeit small, are practice for the larger decisions they'll face in life.

Imposing uniforms in college could hinder this essential aspect of personal development on which Mr. Gwali also puts emphasis. When students pick their attire for different occasions—be it a lab exam, a presentation, or just a regular day—they are learning to understand and adapt to various social contexts. This learning is crucial. It's not just about looking good; it's about understanding societal norms and expectations, which is a vital life skill.

Moreover, the transition from school to college symbolizes a shift in societal perception. Students are no longer seen as children but as young adults capable of making responsible decisions.

This shift is crucial for their self-esteem and confidence. Wearing a uniform throughout college might delay this important transition.

My personal perception is that College is a time for personal growth and preparation for adulthood. The freedom to choose one's attire is a small but significant part of this journey. It's about learning to navigate the social world, understanding different contexts, and making responsible choices. Uniforms in college might seem like a continuation of school discipline, but they could hamper the very growth and preparedness for life that college is meant to foster. Let's focus on building internal moral compasses in our youth, rather than relying on external symbols like uniforms. Lastly, I wish to quote Mr. Gwali's words, "Remember, great minds like Pascal, Leibniz, Newton, Kant, Marie Curie that we have all studied didn't need uniforms to shine. The college could always insist on

"decent and dignified" attire, regardless of its quality." These lines carry profound meanings.

Yours etc., Dr. Shivanshu Shrivastava Assistant Professor, Department of Electrical and Electronics Engineering, Rajiv Gandhi Institute of Petroleum Technology (An Institute of National Importance, GoI) Via email

Improve roads before increasing tourist footfalls

Editor, The MDA-2 Government has been hosting a number of festivals with the intention of garnering funds while also spending funds on such festivals. In simple accounting techniques it's a just about receipt and expenditure. We have been hearing from the Tourism Minister that the tourism footfall is rising,

which if accurate is good for the state and its people. However, before the State Government further makes tall claims a small checklist is important to show whether Government's claims are based on facts and figures. Firstly, the major tourist destinations are still not connected to better, wider and more improved roads. For instance the road leading to Dawki via Pynursla is in a state of animated suspension and no one knows the status of that project funded by JICA. Secondly, street lights are only visible in selected places in and around Shillong while most places beyond the capital remain dark and insecure for both locals and visitors.

So what is MeECL doing to light up the dark alleys? I hope that when the MeECL officials travel even as far as Guwahati they will admit to seeing a huge difference between the two cities. In large parts of Meghalaya internet connectivity still remains a chal-

lenge while other states are enjoying 5G infrastructure. Here the network providers claim to have 5G speed but that is hardly the case. Next lets come to livelihood activities in the tourism sector which Government claims has happened in a big way. We can trust those claims provided we have specific data and information on the public domain. Environmental damage is still visible around and most importantly the declining forest cover which is a serious concern. So before hyping or overhyping our tourism scenario the Chief Minister and his cabinet should walk the talk and see for themselves the realities unfolding on the ground.

Yours etc., Dominic S. Wankhar, Via email

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

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

— Richard L. Evans

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Issues for Lok Sabha election 2024

THE Ram temple will feature in a big way in the BJP's election manifesto for having fulfilled one of what it believes is the aspiration of the average Hindu Indian – to build a Ram Temple in Ayodhya after a standing mosque there was demolished in December 1996. The BJP and its support base the RSS have always made religion a core issue for every election. Muslims have been demonised and the Islam faith considered regressive. Words like "love jihad" have been coined by the present government since it took over in 2014. By design the Muslims and other minorities have been considered second class citizens whose loyalty to the nation is routinely questioned.

While it is a fact that several pro-people schemes have been crafted by the present government and the direct to beneficiary transfer (DBT) has built a sort of trust in the government's delivery system since all middle level interferences are done away with, the identification of beneficiaries is still faulty. Very often only those close to political parties and politicians avail the schemes while others with no clout continue to suffer in abject poverty. Contrary to the claims of the Modi Government the economy is not as buoyant as projected. There is a slowdown in job creations as borne out by the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE) reports. And this is visible in the states as well, including Meghalaya. So what are the issues for the Lok Sabha polls going to be for Meghalaya in particular.

In preparation for the Lok Sabha elections the State BJP has already sharpened its fangs by threatening to do a series of RTI's to fault the MDA Government of which it is an important ally. This is hypocrisy at its worst. If the BJP believes as it did with the MDA-1 Government and now the MDA-2 Government that there is corruption galore and that this aspect has been normalised in Meghalaya then it should have the moral courage to walk out of the coalition: 'People are not fooled by such chicanery'. They fully understand the political shenanigans that will be in full display as the elections approach. The issues of Meghalaya – and there are many cannot be subsumed by issues plaguing the central government. People of Meghalaya suffer from bad road conditions and roads are largely funded by the central government. Where the central government is at fault is in its weak monitoring and evaluation system. Money released to the states or projects implemented by central agencies in the states are all marked by delays. This needs to be addressed because money down the drain serves no purpose. It is important for the centre to get its money's worth and centrally funded road projects must equal quality national highways. Will the railways be yet another election issue and for how many decades? When will this cease to become an issue?

Modi's new education policy: Colonising minds, curb critical thinking
Corporate-Hindutva alliance aimed at hijacking India's public education

By Prabhat Patnaik

Imperialist hegemony over the third world is exercised not just through arms and economic might but also through the hegemony of ideas, by making the victims see the world the way imperialism wants them to see it. A prerequisite for freedom in the third world therefore is to shake off this colonisation of the mind, and to seek truth beyond the distortions of imperialism. The anti-colonial struggle was aware of this; in fact the struggle began with the dawning of this awareness. And since the imperialist project does not come to an end with formal political decolonisation, the education system in the newly independent ex-colonies must continuously aim to go beyond the falsehoods of imperialism.

This requires that the course contents and syllabi in Indian educational institutions must be different from those in metropolitan institutions. This is obvious in the case of humanities and social sciences where it is impossible to understand the present of the country without reckoning with its colonised past; and metropolitan universities scrupulously avoid making this connection, attributing the current state of underdevelopment of the country to all sorts of extraneous factors like laziness, lack of enterprise, superstition, and, above all, excessive population growth. But even in the case of natural sciences, the syllabi and course contents in third world universities cannot be identical with those in metropolitan universities, not because Einstein's theory of quantum physics has any imperialist ideology in them, but because the range of scientific concerns in the third world is not necessarily the same as in the metropolitan countries. In fact, this was the view of JD Bernal, the British scientist and Marxist intellectual, one of the great figures of the twentieth century.

To believe that the syllabi and course contents in third world universities should be identical with those in metropolitan universities is itself a symptom of being hegemonised by imperialism. Education policy in the dirigiste period in India was aware of this; despite the obvious failings of the education system the education policy of that period could not be faulted for having a wrong vision.

With neoliberalism, however, things begin to change, as the Indian big bourgeoisie gets integrated with globalised finance capital, as

the Indian upper middle class youth looks for employment in multinational corporations, as the nation's development is made dependent upon exporting goods to foreign markets and attracting foreign finance and foreign direct investment to the country. Significantly, even top functionaries of the government start talking of reinventing the East India Company back to India.

Since the era of neoliberalism entails the hegemony of globalised finance capital, and since this capital requires a globalised (or at least a homogeneous) technocracy, the emphasis shifts to having a homogeneous education system internationally to train such a technocracy; and obviously such a system necessarily has to be one that emanates from the metropolis.

This means an education system not for decolonising minds but for recolonising minds. To this end, the UPA government earlier had invited several well-known foreign universities to set up branches in India, and even to "adopt" some Indian universities that could be developed in their own image. Oxford, Harvard and Cambridge were obviously invited under this scheme not to follow in India the syllabi and course contents prepared within India, but to replicate what they follow back home. The idea was to start a process whereby there would be a uniformity of course contents and syllabi between the Indian and metropolitan universities, and even to roll back the attempt made earlier towards a decolonisation of minds in Indian universities. In fact, an Indian Human Resource Development minister had openly stated in parliament that his objective was to provide a Harvard education within India so that Indian students did not have to go abroad for it.

The NDA government has carried forward to a very great extent what the UPA government had started; and the National Education Policy it has enacted gives an official imprimatur to this idea of a uniform education system between India and the metropolis, which necessarily means the adoption of common curricula, course contents and syllabi between Indian and metropolitan universities.

Towards this uniformity it has taken two decisive steps: one is the destruc-

tion of those universities in India that were providing a counter to the imperialist discourse, and that had, for this very reason, attracted world-wide attention; the obvious examples here are the Jawaharlal Nehru University, the Hyderabad Central University, Jadavpur University, and others.

The other is the carrying out of negotiations under the pressure of the University Grants Commission between individual Indian universities and foreign universities to make the course contents in various disciplines in the former clones of those in the latter. The only caveat here is that the UGC insists on having some material on subjects like Vedic Mathematics included in the course contents of Indian universities which the foreign universities do not always agree with.

No doubt some accord will be reached on these issues in due course, in which case the Indian universities would be having curricula and course contents that represent an admixture of the demands of neoliberalism and the demands of the Hindutva elements. It would be a colonisation of minds with a veneer of "how great our country was in ancient times". Imperialism should not have any problem with that. As long as imperialism, which is a modern phenomenon that has emerged with the development of capitalism, is painted not as an exploitative system but as a benevolent civilising mission for countries like India, as long as the present state of underdevelopment of these countries is not in any way linked to the phenomenon of imperialism, which it would not be if there is uniformity of course contents with metropolitan universities, then what had happened in ancient times is not of much concern to imperialism, at least to the liberal imperialist viewpoint, as distinct from the extreme right which favours a white supremacist discourse.

An alternative tendency with the same consequence, of recolonising minds, is to do away with the social sciences and humanities altogether, or to reduce them to inconsequential subjects, and substitute them with courses that are exclusively "job-oriented" and do no ask questions about society, like management and cost accountancy. In fact both the Hindutva elements and the corporates have a vested interest in this, since both are

keen to have students who are exclusively self-centred and do not ask questions about the trajectory of social development. This tendency too is gathering momentum at present.

An education system that colonised minds is the counterpart of the corporate-Hindutva alliance that has acquired political hegemony in the country. Such a recolonisation is what the corporates want; and the Hindutva elements that were never associated with the anti-colonial struggle, that never understood the meaning of nation-building, that do not understand the role and significance of imperialism, and hence of the need for decolonising minds, are quite content as long as lip service is paid to the greatness of ancient India. An education system that purveys the imperialist ideology with some vedic seasoning is good enough for them. This is exactly the education system that the country is now in the process of building.

The corporate-Hindutva alliance, however, is a response to the crisis of neoliberalism, when corporate capital feels the need to ally itself with the Hindutva elements to maintain its hegemony in the face of the crisis. The National Education Policy likewise is not for carrying the nation forward but for managing the crisis by destroying thought, by preventing people from asking questions and seeking the truth. The "job orientation" that this policy prides itself on is only for a handful of persons; in fact the crisis of neoliberalism means fewer jobs overall. In sync with this, the education system excludes large numbers of persons; their minds are to be filled instead with communal poison within an altered discourse that by-passes issues of material life, and makes them potential low-wage recruits for fascist thugs.

This education policy therefore can only be transitory, until the youth starts asking questions about the unemployment and distress that has become its fate. And as an alternative development trajectory beyond neo-liberal capitalism is explored, the quest for an education system beyond what the NDA government is seeking to introduce will also begin; and decolonisation of the mind will again come on to the agenda, as it had done during the anti-colonial struggle. (IPA Service) Courtesy: People's Democracy

Expect a mild slowing down of the economy in the coming year

By Ajit Ranade

The Indian economy grew at a rate of 7.2 percent during last fiscal year, i.e. from April 2022 till March 2023. At that time the forecast from both the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank was that India will further slow down this fiscal year to around 7 percent. This view is still shared by the Reserve Bank of India as per their latest assessment.

However, quite surprisingly, the momentum for the first six months of this fiscal year has been tremendous. That is why the growth rate for the first half of the fiscal year of 2023-24 is an impressive 7.7 percent, much higher than the IMF and World Bank estimates. It was driven largely by a 31 percent growth (in nominal, inflation unadjusted terms) in the capital expenditure, both by government and the private sector. This strong rate of capex push, largely by the government, was far more than the 11 percent pace seen the previous year. Since capex is about one third of the GDP, and if that part grows at 31 percent, surely the aggregate GDP growth gets a strong impetus. Thus, the pace of the first half defies both the international agencies and even the cautious optimism of the RBI.

is two years old with no end in sight. The Israel-Palestine conflict is threatening to spill out in a larger region of the Middle East. More worrying are the attacks by the Houthis faction on commercial ships traversing the Red Sea. Many commercial cargo and passenger liners will simply avoid using this channel which normally hosts more than half the global trade traffic. Any geopolitical flashpoint, especially in the Middle East has the potential to spike up the oil prices, which is very bad news for India. It has negative consequences for inflation, the fiscal deficit, consumer and investor sentiment, and ultimately growth.

The other factor apart from global geopolitics which can affect the growth outlook, is the national election in India. As we get into the model code of conduct period, inevitably it puts a brake on developmental spending. Apart from the Lok Sabha, there are many States too which are scheduled for elections to their legislatures. Election year does provide a small fiscal push to the economy, and the incumbent government fast tracks pending projects; clears many more files, fills up vacancies in government jobs and so on. All of this is a positive for the economy, even if fiscally doubtful. The accel-

This implies that during the second half the government expects growth to slow down from 7.7 in the first half; to around 6.9 during the second half, giving an average of 7.3. This number is still quite impressive and is above RBI's estimates. Is it too optimistic?

Now the government has published its advance estimates for the full year, which is 7.3 percent. This implies that during the second half the government expects growth to slow down from 7.7 in the first half, to around 6.9 during the second half, giving an average of 7.3. This number is still quite impressive and is above RBI's estimates. Is it too optimistic? We will soon find out. The extrapolation is based on detailed data points (called "high frequency data") available to the government. This includes tax collection including GST, movement of cargo, tourist arrivals, export data, oil and energy consumption trend and so on. However, nobody knows how quickly the momentum can slow down. The best of economists are not really expert psychologists, for ultimately it is consumer and investor psychology and sentiment which drives growth. This present fiscal year, consumption growth is growing only at 4.4 percent, i.e. below GDP growth rate and far below the capex growth rate. Consumption spending is more than 60 percent of the GDP and forms the bulk of the momentum. That in turn depends on how household incomes are growing, what are the prospects for employment growth and livelihoods and so on.

So clearly the second half of this fiscal year, from October till March is a slowdown phase, as per the government's own projection. This is also partly because the government funded fiscal push to capex cannot continue indefinitely. It hurts the fiscal deficit, which if not kept under control can make the debt to GDP ratio rise to 100 percent, as has been warned by the IMF. Hence if the government itself tightens its purse strings then the growth momentum has to come from somewhere else.

The situation in India is not immune to what is happening in the rest of the world. Globally there is a talk of recession in most advanced economies. The geopolitical flashpoints cast a dark cloud, and make investors generally risk averse. The Ukraine war

eration of spending now, in a pre-election spending spree, means post elections (after July) we may see a moderation in the spending momentum. Of course, the incumbent government might not choose to accelerate spending now, if it feels that its re-election prospects do not depend on artificially inserting fiscal steroids for now!

The positives for the economic outlook are the strong structural factors. These include a youthful demography and expanding labour force, rapid urbanisation, increasing spending on the green economy and the large infrastructure ambition. On top of this is the continuing strong momentum in the export of software services. The negatives are, as mentioned earlier, weak consumer spending, global uncertainties, potential for an oil spike, still high inflation and weak employment growth prospects. It must be noted that overall consumer spending will pick up when consumers from all income classes are doing well, in terms of their wage income growth and employment prospects. Hence if the lower income classes are not doing well it is a matter of concern. This is the continuing story of the K-shape trajectory of growth, where consumers in the higher income bracket, and those who buy higher priced products and services and luxury goods are doing very well, but those in the lower classes are struggling. The growth in real wages at the lower end, especially in agriculture, rural areas and the informal sector has been very low. This is a serious policy challenge. The extension of the free food scheme for five years for 800 million Indians is a partial response to compensating for their lack of income growth. In the longer term, for high growth to be sustainable it also has to be wider and more inclusive. On the balance we can expect growth to be lower in 2024-25 than during this fiscal year. (Dr. Ajit Ranade is a noted Pune-based economist) (Syn-dicate: The Billion Press) (email: editor@thebillionpress.org)

Letters to the Editor

Wanted fair distribution and pricing of Meghalaya calendars

Editor, I write to express my concern regarding the irregular release and pricing of the Meghalaya calendars by the Department of Information and Public Relations (DIPR). It has come to my attention that these calendars, depicting the rich cultural heritage of Meghalaya, are being sold at a significantly higher price by vendors compared to the cost at the DIPR Dept counter. This not only tarnishes the state's reputation but also places an unfair burden on residents and enthusiasts who wish to celebrate and showcase the unique aspects of Meghalaya.

I kindly request the DIPR department to adopt a more organized approach by setting a fixed release date for the calendars and regulating the quantity sold to vendors. It is disheartening to learn that the calendars are often unavailable at the DIPR office, thereby forcing interested individuals to resort to purchasing them from vendors at inflated prices.

A simple circular from the DIPR department limiting the number of calendars sold to vendors, along with a reasonable pricing guideline, can ensure a more dignified and accessible distribution of these calendars, benefiting both the Department and the people of Meghalaya.

Yours etc.,
A Sarki
Shillong

State's iconic beauty at stake

Editor, Wards Lake- the natural beauty within Shillong city has slowly lost its charm and beauty due to frequent 'FESTIVALS' being organised within its premises. The organisers, participants and attendants do not seem to bother about the surroundings, from the green grass to the trees, the flowers, etc. The setting up of stalls/booths without responsibility for disposing of the waste materials is an eye sore. When one visits Ward's Lake, at times it looks like a location of a mini fete or a small bazaar.

Another disappointment is the time immemorial foot-bridge across the Lake which has been closed for almost a year now. The Department concerned is not taking any

initiative to repair this bridge for reasons unknown.

I am writing to express concern and to raise awareness about the need to preserve this beautiful landmark of our city which is frequented by locals and tourists alike.

Yours etc.,
PM Syiem,
Via email

Caste continues to be a curse in India

Editor, A few days ago, three persons allegedly molested an 18-year-old Dalit girl in Baghat, Uttar Pradesh when she was working at a cauldron of a jaggery-making unit. When she protested, the accused allegedly threw her into the hot cauldron and hurled casteist words at her. The girl sustained serious burn injuries and has been undergoing treatment at a hospital in Delhi.

The above incident is just the tip of the iceberg. The latest National Crime Records Bureau's data show that crimes against Dalits increased from 50,744 in 2021 to 57,428 last year. The graph has been going up since 2013. There

were 15,368 crimes against Scheduled Caste persons last year in Uttar Pradesh, while Madhya Pradesh ranked first in crimes against Scheduled Tribes from 2020 to 2022.

The administrations in these two double engine states need to be more efficient in dealing with crimes against Dalits. However, caste hatred towards Dalits by the upper caste members of the same religion is not confined to those two states only but across India. Many parents follow the "teach them young," mantra regarding educating their children about caste differences. In some schools in Tamil Nadu, students wear colour-coded wristbands to show their caste identity. Those children may or may not wear their hearts on their sleeves. But they definitely wear their castes on their wrists!

The following incident would reveal what 'caste educated' little children could do. A teacher from a lower caste was appointed in a school in Tamil Nadu where majority of the students belonged to upper castes. A student threw a firecracker at her when she had been taking a class. It ruptured her eardrum and she was forced to leave.

On the other hand, a young student was killed in Rajasthan in August 2022 for not getting enough education

on untouchability. The student touched a drinking pot and as a result he was beaten to death by his teacher in Surana village of Rajasthan's Jalore district. As per the India Human Development Survey (IHDS-2) in 2011-12, 27 per cent respondents across India said that they had been maintaining the practice of untouchability in their daily lives.

According to studies conducted by the National Council of Applied Economic Research in 2016, about 5% of marriages in India are inter-caste marriages. Caste identity cannot be changed with the change of class or in other words with the help of money power. One in four Indians who practice untouchability will not touch even a well-off Dalit. On the other hand 95 among 100 Indians continue to avoid marrying even rich Dalits.

There is a long list of atrocities against Dalits like thrashing them for sporting a moustache or riding a horse or drinking water from a public tap or getting a haircut at a barber's shop or entering a temple or taking water from a well or sitting in a row in a feast etc. The story is the same as that of "Sadgati" which is not just a Munshi Prem Chand's short story or a Satyajit Ray's film. As a matter of fact, this is a never-ending story of caste

hatred in our country.

This made Ambedkar embrace Buddhism and Vemula write in his suicide note, "My birth is my fatal accident." And this makes the school-dropout-rate among Dalit children generally high in our country. The UN report says that there is widespread discrimination against Dalits throughout the entire educational system in India.

This is a threat to equality, to our national unity and more importantly to humanity. More often than not, history witnessed what Tagore wrote in his famous poem, Apamanita (Insulted), "Whom you push down will pull you down" or in other words Newton's third law "for every action in nature there is an equal and opposite reaction."

Students should be taught in schools why caste inequality is an ugly blot like sati that needs to be erased from our society. Moreover, a display of any kind of symbol of one's caste identity must totally be banned.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

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"A society that has more justice is a society that needs less charity."

— Ralph Nader

The Shillong Times

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Bilkis Bano: Symbol of perseverance

BILKIS Bano is a household name across the nation and beyond. It has been so for the past over two decades – after the Gujarat riots of 2002. She represented womanhood's struggle in its most pitiable form, punctuated, on the other side, by cruelty of the worst kind reinforced by the high-handedness of the law-enforcing mechanisms. The Supreme Court order this week cancelling the remission order of the Gujarat government has restored the 14-year life imprisonment for 11 men – a gang of communalists -- who had raped her and killed seven of her family including her three-year-old daughter whose head was smashed on a stone in Gujarat's Dahod district in 2002.

In a landmark judgement the apex court noted the notoriety behind the Gujarat government's remission of the jail term. The BJP government did so by first obtaining a Supreme Court nod for remission of sentence of a convict on humanitarian grounds and used this as the base to arrange release of the other 10 convicts. In law, however, there's no clause to punish wanton actions of a government. Overall, the present SC order is no more than a small relief to Bilkis Bano. It noted that the rape and murder case had been transferred out of Gujarat to Maharashtra and the conviction took place there. Hence, it said, Gujarat cannot grant the remission. It's likely that the BJP-led Maharashtra government would now act the same way as the Gujarat dispensation did and these men could, at any time, be let free. Hence, too much optimism on the present SC order is unjustified other than that it took an independent line and didn't allow itself to be influenced by the government.

What should be noted at this juncture is the viciousness that pervades public life in situations when religion and politics mix. It was poignantly evident in the Babri Masjid demolition in 1992, which resulted in riots and deaths of over 2000 people, followed by its after-effects like the Gujarat riots that killed an equal number in 2002. Had law been given a chance to settle the Babri dispute rather than an organised mob taking law into its hands, influenced as they were by a mix of religion and politics in 1992, the deep social divide that marks public life here today on communal lines could have been averted. Those who gained from all these were the politicians, who won power and a chance to lord over the nation. Without influences from the past, there is neither a present nor a future. It will take generations of tireless efforts to heal the wounds inflicted on the nation's body politic by wanton actions of such maniacs.

Personality clash intensifies in India bloc ahead of Rahul's Nvay Yatra
Left feels neglected in Bihar; JDU, RJD, Congress not on the same page

By Arun Srivastava

If the unpredictable posture of Nitish Kumar has been the main factor for demoralising the INDIA constituents in Bihar, the propensity of RJD chief Lalu Yadav not to treat the Left parties as equals has further aggravated the situation to the point of turning the INDIA bloc suspect in the eyes of the people of Bihar.

Not only the leaders of the Left parties are uncertain about the number of seats they would be offered by RJD, even the JD(U) leadership has passed the buck to Lalu. The general secretary of JD(U), KC Tyagi, alluding to the responsibility of seat sharing quipped: "We have made our stand very clear. So, if the Congress and the Left parties have to talk about seat sharing, they should do so with the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), not with us."

This simply underscores the deep frustration that has gripped the JD(U) leadership. Some senior JD(U) leaders nurse the feeling that Lalu Yadav has been resorting to coercive mechanisms simply for pushing Nitish to the wall. The RJD leadership has been creating pressure on Nitish for some time that Tejashvi should have been installed as the chief minister before the Lok Sabha polls. Since Nitish is taking his own time, the issue has upset the RJD leadership. The recent communication gap between Tejashvi and Nitish owes to this factor.

Realising the electoral importance of Bihar, the Left leaders are confident that both Lalu and Nitish will finally have to concede to their demands, but they feel hurt in the manner in which Lalu has been treating them as pariahs. The RJD leadership has made it known to the Left leaders that it was not possible to give more than one seat each to CPI(ML) and CPI. This has certainly not gone well with the CPI(ML). In the present assembly, it has 12 members.

The Left is more angry with the RJD as it was treating Congress as more strong and effective than the Left in Bihar. In the 2020 assembly election, it was at the initiative of RJD, the Congress was allotted 70 seats, while it could win only 19. The CPI(ML) contested 18 but

managed to win 12 seats. The stubborn attitude of RJD leadership even forced the CPI general secretary D Raja to come to Patna and meet Nitish, when he suggested adopting a pragmatic approach towards the Left. He also staked the claim for Begusarai, the traditional seat of the CPI. Raja would also be meeting Lalu Yadav and Tejashvi to sort out the vexed issue.

However, on its part, the Congress is unwilling to give up its claim on Begusarai seat, as Kanhaiya Kumar had contested from it as the Congress candidate in the 2019 elections. At that time the RJD had also put up its

there is a major difference in nature and contour. While the RJD mainly depends on the rich and affluent Yadavs and backward caste people, the CPI(ML) has a large following among the poor and the proletariat.

Lalu and his RJD leaders are scared that giving more seats to CPI(ML) and other Left parties would enable them to expand their base and network in the state that would prove to be detrimental to their interest. In recent years, CPI(ML) has emerged as a major political force in the state and at some places the local level cadres of RJD, belonging to EBC, Muslims, have joined it.



candidate. Begusarai has been the stronghold of the upper caste Bhumihars and the union minister Giriraj Singh, a Bhumihar, represents this seat in the current house. In the past the CPI stalwart, a Bhumihar leader Chandra Shekhar Singh used to represent this seat.

Apart from the electoral chemistry, the primary reason for Lalu not to concede to the Left more seats owes to his sense of insecurity. In the 2020 assembly elections, the Left Front won most seats on their own. The Dalits, EBC, agricultural labourers and even a major section of the Muslims have rallied behind the Left. Since then, Lalu and Tejashvi have been apprehensive of the rise of the Left forces in the state. Incidentally, RJD and CPI(ML) share the same electorate base. But

Nevertheless, the JD(U) leaders are quite upset with the Congress and especially with Rahul Gandhi. They feel that Rahul has failed to keep his leaders under check. While it is a known fact that Bharat Jodo Yatra has been the brainchild of the Congress, especially Rahul, and they insist that the Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra, which will be launched on January 14, should have been undertaken under the banner of INDIA.

"We have nothing against Rahul Gandhi's yatra. It would have been better had the Congress taken the lead in organising a yatra by the INDIA parties," Tyagi said. "We want a strong Congress. We want a strong Rahul Gandhi. But the Congress too should reciprocate, it is not doing so." Intriguingly, the JD(U) leaders are not

willing to acknowledge that it was the public laagering by their leadership that has cast a shadow on the yatra.

KC Tyagi articulating the sentiments of the Nitish Kumar camp, alleged that the Congress was resorting to highhandedness. He even made it categorically clear that the JD(U) will contest 16 of the 40 seats in Bihar with a stern "no compromise" message. He also sought to know why the Congress does not want to spare any seat for INDIA partners in Haryana, in Rajasthan, in Madhya Pradesh, in Chhattisgarh, as well as in Karnataka.

It is equally surprising that while Modi will launch his election campaign from Bihar on January 13, JD(U) leaders are ruing about the INDIA bloc not respecting the stature of Nitish. Just ahead of a week of the launch of Bharat Nyay Yatra, Tyagi struck a discordant note saying, "Nitish's stature is much above the convener's post. He is the architect of INDIA. JD(U) wanted 'samuhik' (collective) leadership for the INDIA bloc without any particular PM-face."

If the seat sharing scene is not cheerful in Bihar, will have an impact on Uttar Pradesh. Already, SP chief Akhilesh Yadav has outstripped his PDA and relegated the INDIA bloc to a lower position. He did not hide his averseness to INDIA, and especially to the Congress. Akhilesh is opposed to the Congress's move to have good relations with Mayawati. Surprisingly, his views were echoed by JD(U) leader Tyagi: "Mayawati (the BSP supremo) is known for her stand against the Opposition bloc. So why are some Congress leaders eager to align with the BSP?"

This is an ominous sign. Irrespective of the fact whether it is Bihar or UP, the regional parties representing the intermediate castes, Yadavs, Koiris and Kurmis, are against identifying with the aspirations of the Dalits, EBC and the proletariat. Had it not been the case, how could Lalu and Akhilesh dare to ignore the compulsions of real politics and the urgency to defeat BJP by not acknowledging their relevance? (IPA Service)

Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

Are You Indian? "Namaste!" she said, as all of us in the New York church turned to greet whoever was sitting by our side on Christmas Eve. For a moment I was startled. I was thousands of miles away from home, and the last thing I imagined I'd hear was a 'Namaste'!

She saw my surprise, and asked, "Aren't you Indian?" "Yes," I said proudly, "Then namaste!" she said again.

I smiled. It felt mighty good being recognised as an Indian. I had to fly halfway across the globe to leave behind the doubts and slurs by country leaders who had started deciding who was Indian and who was not. Who was more Indian and who was less. But a simple greeting by an African-American made me realise that whatever the present dispensation thought, the rest of the world knew I was Indian!

And she must have known what it was to be black, if not she then her grandfather or grandmother, who by the colour of their skin were judged to be less American, less equal than the others. And those same forefathers of hers would have put their head down, accepting the slurs of their white brethren, till bold men like Martin Luther King fought for equality and won

you Indian?" "Now, I am not an MP or VIP and wondered how I would react if the same question were asked to me, "Are you Indian?" "Well don't I look Indian?" And in my mind I hear the American saying 'Namaste' to me.

"Yes sir, but are you?" And after having with great difficulty pulled my luggage up the unfriendly ramps, that most airports have, I look dumbfounded like Kanimozhi, at the security man, as he also stares at me, and repeats, "Are you Indian?"

I then reply: "My shoes are bought from Bata, my socks from Tata too,

And if you look quite closer and I ask that you please do,

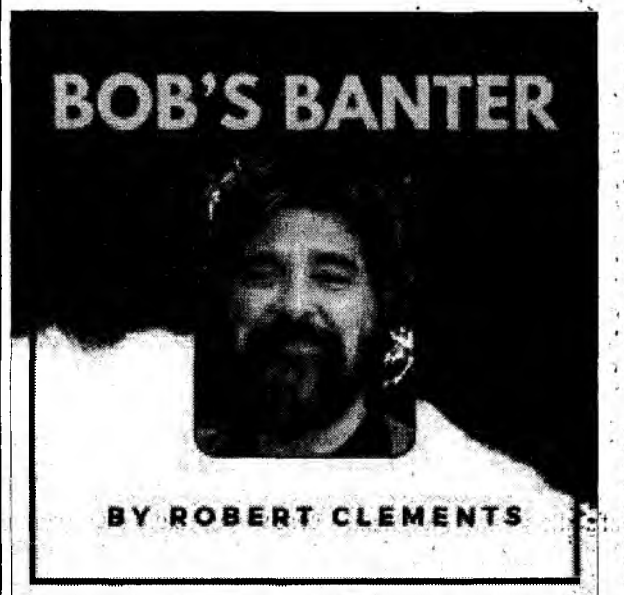
You'll see my shirt is faded, and my trousers out of date,

My belt has let my tummy out, while you just made me wait!

Now if all this doesn't prove to you, how Indian I can be,

What other proof dear sir, would you want to see of me?

"Are you Indian?" asks the security man sternly, like the wife of Tevye in Fiddler On The Roof, asking her husband, "Do you love me?" And now



for her. She was worshipping in a church where there was no segregation anymore, where nobody told her she was not allowed in because of her colour.

Did she know that from the land of Namaste, the fight had only just begun?

How easy it is to divide a nation? How easy to tell some people they are superior to their neighbours, not because of better education, not because of gentler culture, not

deeply frustrated I reply: "Well I was born in India, and both my parents too,

My wife says she's Indian, and so do my daughters too. The missus she buys her veggies from the hawker down the road,

Even though there is a mall, where it's cheaper I am told.

Now if that doesn't prove to you, how Indian I can be,

What other proof dear sir, would you now want from

If I had told her that in my land there were leaders and their followers who felt I was not worthy as much as they to be 'namasted', she would have shook her head and said, "But why? You all look the same! Can anyone be less Indian than you?"

because of more money, but because of how they worship God! How easy it is to brand people as 'us' and 'them'!

If I had told her that in my land there were leaders and their followers who felt I was not worthy as much as they to be 'namasted', she would have shook her head and said, "But why? You all look the same! Can anyone be less Indian than you?"

"No," I would have replied, "Not for a moment have I ever thought of myself as less Indian, but there has come a group of those who garner votes by promising some they are more Indian than others!"

Her fight to gain equality was a hundred years ago, but the fight rages on as men like Trump have latched on to a white America and ride the white wave just as leaders back home garner votes doing the same.

But that 'namaste' said it all! To the world I was as Indian as an Indian can be, and so are each of you who live in Bharat that is India, and with a smile and a greeting loud and clear I shouted proudly back to her, "Namaste!"

But even as I shouted 'Namaste', I remembered poor Kanimozhi, a former Union Minister, daughter of one of Tamil Nadu's most famous chief ministers, and in one's own airport in Chennai, was asked, when she spoke in English and not in Hindi, "Are

me? "Sir, are you Indian?" asks the security man again, and in his face I see no relent.

I sigh, and say: "My skin is brown, my hair is black, and of my nose hair, I can't keep track,

I gargle noisily and also use, tap water, to wash behind my back,

I laugh out loud, and never think, that others may not like the sound

Of me repeating a new joke, from a joke book I have just found!

If all this doesn't prove, how Indian I can be,

What more proof do you dear sir, now want from poor me?

"Sir," says the security at the gate, "Are you Indian?"

I sigh and reply: "What more proof can I give dear sir, than all I have just said to you,

Now the only thing I have left to do, is give you a hundred rupees or two,

Whoa! You have let me in, you give a grin, and even pat my stubbled chin.

And in the midst of airport din, I have proved to you my kith and kin that I am Indian..!

The Author writes a daily column. If you'd like to receive it by WhatsApp every morning, send a 'YES' to him on his WhatsApp no 9892572883

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Letters to the Editor

New elections, old game, same characters

Editor, The news item, "BJP gears up for RTI war" (ST-January 8, 2024) brought a sense of deja vu about it -- it is a new election season but with the same plot and characters, with the same old accusations of corruption and illegalities by the same parties -- the BJP and the UDP. This is happening while these parties are sleeping in the same bed with the NPP. Politics truly make strange bedfellows!

Every political player is now playing "holier-than-thou," until the elections are over and results declared after which all of them will go back to sleep quietly, and lest I forget, I must emphasize "sleep quietly in the same bed together." This is exemplified by the way the BJP and UDP unhesitatingly joined the government as coalition partners after the 2023 assembly elections. This happened after much mudslinging and accusations of corruption by the above two parties against the then outgoing NPP-led government in which the accusers themselves were coalition partners! Things seemed serious then when as reported in your above news item, even the Union Home Minister termed Meghalaya as, one of the most corrupt states in the country." However, as we all saw, the accusers and the accused kissed and made up to form a new coalition government, "in the interest

of the people".

As said earlier, this type of political game has been played again and again and "We The People," have been toyed with repeatedly but we seem to have learned no lesson at all. It also seems that we will forever get stuck with the same types of politicians because of our own greed. Before the elections we the public may cry hoarse about the crumbling infrastructure, abysmal levels of education and healthcare, high unemployment, unbridled illegal coal trade, extreme poverty etc., but come election time, those who have looted from us will ensure victory for themselves by putting money where our mouths are and rest assured this cycle will repeat itself in the future. Hence, the future seems bleak indeed!

Yours etc., Samuel Swett, Shillong-2.

Air travel: Is it still the safest form of transportation?

Editor, We have just entered into the new year, looking ahead for a positive and happy beginning of the year. Instead, the new year turned grim especially for the aviation sector. Within a week, two plane disasters shook the world leaving us wondering whether air travel is still the safest mode of transportation.

The incident related to Japan Airlines at the Haneda

International Airport was really sad as it claimed five lives of five people who were on their way to deliver help to Ishikawa the earthquake hit area. Alas! They met a tragic end.

Its difficult to comprehend how air collisions can still happen today with such great strides in technology, more so when the above incident took place at an airport! How could the Air Control have missed the danger signals? Why did the crew in the aircraft not receive any warnings in their instruments? I don't know whether the Traffic Alert and Collision Avoidance System is operable when the plane in on the active runway.

No sooner had the Japan incident happened than another air accident occurred. An Alaska Flight Enroute to Ontario had to make an emergency landing after a window was blown out mid-flight and had to make a return due to heavy decompression. Thankfully no one was harmed nor injured.

The Alaska flight was a Boeing 737 Max 9 and several accidents had taken place on this series type of aircraft. Thanks to the National Transportation Safety Board and Federal Aviation Administration of the US Government that in our country too, the Directorate General of Civil Aviation has taken alerted the need to do a double check on this type of aircraft (Boeing 737 Max Series) which is widely used by Air India, Akasa Air etc.,

In connection to the Alaska incident, most passengers

had their seatbelts secured even during the flight. That's why no one was harmed nor injured. It should be a reminder and an alarm signal to every air traveller about the importance of the seat belt. Personally I think that seatbelts should be worn during the entire flight and be taken off only when using the lavatory etc, even though the seat belts signs are switched off.

I hope and pray that such incidents would not take place in the future and I hope that the Indian Aviation Sector takes the safety precautions very seriously and also adheres to all safety protocols.

Air travel is the most common mode of transportation across the world and one hopes that this SAFEST form of transportation lives up to it's name.

Yours etc., Chamniki Laloo Shillong-2

Save education from nepotism and corruption

Editor, The recent report in The Shillong Times (14.12.2023) on the alleged nepotism and favouritism in the implementation of the People's College Grant in aid scheme in one of the colleges in the state is a serious matter. If one examines the documents obtained by N. S. Mawphniang, it is evident that no national principle was applied at least on two counts. First, the Department that has the least number of student intakes

was allotted the maximum number of sanctioned posts more than those Departments that have maximum student intake. The Department of Economics with only 12 students appearing for B.A. final examination from 2019 to 2023 and with only 58 pass percentage was given four sanctioned posts while the Department of Geography which had a higher number of students (15 in number from 2020 to 2023) and a higher pass percentage (87 per cent) than Economics was given only one sanctioned post.

Incidentally, the Department of Geography has a faculty with the highest qualification (Ph.D.) in the whole college but that teaching staff was not absorbed in the sanctioned post. Other Departments including English, Khasi and Political Science having five times more student intake than Economics were allotted less number of sanctioned posts. This defies any logic. Second, the absorption and exclusion of the teaching staff in the sanctioned posts seems to be unprincipled. In the same Department, while some serving staff are absorbed others are left out. Instead of absorbing the serving teaching staff, the management decided to open some posts for fresh recruitments. This policy will definitely and rightly be perceived by those who are left out as arbitrary and nepotistic, favouring some while depriving others.

These unprincipled and illogical commissions and omissions were committed

by the concerned management with the concurrence of the Directorate of Higher and Technical Education. This is unfortunate and unacceptable given the fact it involves public funds. Public funds ought to be implemented on the basis of equality, fairness and transparency and not on the basis of whims and fancies of the authority. It is expected that the management runs the affairs of the college on just principles to promote professionalism and commitment among the staff without which no institution can deliver the best.

This matter merits a clarification by the management of the College concerned and the Directorate of Higher and Technical Education to the satisfaction of the public.

Education is a sector that is of prime importance as it shapes the future of society. When this sector is impacted by unprincipled decision, corruption and favouritism, it is no wonder that education in Meghalaya suffers a steady decline with no ray of hope for recovery. When will the Meghalaya Government feel the need to stop corrupt practices? Will it not learn from the white ink scam? Will it not learn from the damning national reports putting Meghalaya always at the bottom of learning outcomes?

Yours etc., Batskhem Myrboh Shillong-14

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

"The great business of life is to be, to do, to do without and to depart."

— John Morley

The Shillong Times

Vol No. 1111 No. 150 SHILLONG, THURSDAY, JANUARY 11, 2024

Umiam bridge repair woes

THE daily line of traffic waiting to cross the Umiam Bridge now under repair is a cause of distress for many who are trying to catch a train or flight from Guwahati. Many have missed their flights in the recent past. For residents of Shillong city travelling out to Guwahati, taking the long route via the Shillong by-pass means burning more fuel and spending more money. What the daily commuters are wondering is why the army are not called in to provide a temporary Bailey Bridge to ease the present woes. The only humans that can cross the long line of traffic without awaiting their turn are the VIPs. This is precisely the reason why VIPs can never understand the woes and tribulations of ordinary citizens. At least where crossing the Umiam bridge is concerned there should be no VIP treatment. Let all vehicles await their turn. If the VIPs need to be at the airport or some meeting at a particular time, they should leave well ahead of time keeping in mind the slow crossing at Umiam. This might push them to speed up the construction work which in any case is proceeding at snail's pace. Normally the work of repairing a bridge that caters to a huge vehicular population should have been carried out on a 24x7 mode where workers are deployed in batches. Anyone crossing the Umiam bridge will vouch for the fact that there are very few workers and if one is crossing that at 9 am there is no sign of the workers having started their work.

It is learnt that two tender were called by the MeECL for the repair work; one for grouting works (a specialised process that involves injecting a fluid-like material into gaps, voids, or spaces within structures to improve structural integrity, and one for bearing works (a machine element that constrains relative motion to only the desired motion and reduces friction between moving parts).

While the public have themselves put pressure on Government at the urgency of repairing the only connecting link between Shillong and Guwahati, perhaps an alternative route could have been found before repairing a bridge with a daily toll of thousands of vehicles. This of course reflects on the lack of attention and responsibility by previous governments which allowed overloaded-coal trucks to pass through this critical bridge which should have been used only for light motor vehicles, despite the completion of the Shillong by-pass. And even after the bridge was considered to be in a critical condition heavily loaded trucks with essentials and LPG cylinders etc., bound for Shillong were allowed to cross the bridge because the carriers find the Shillong bypass too long and narrow from Diengpasoh onwards. For the present, vehicular movement needs to be strictly regulated and anyone taking undue advantage or trying to pass other vehicles must be subjected to strict action by the law. VIPs should take the Shillong bypass if they are in a tearing hurry to reach their destinations.

Letters to the Editor

Concerns on the perpetuation of VIP culture in Meghalaya

Editor,
I hope this letter finds space in your esteemed publication to shed light on an issue that has been a source of frustration for many commuters in Meghalaya. I am writing to express my concerns regarding the prevalent VIP culture, particularly evident during my daily travels across the Umiam Bridge. It is disheartening to witness so-called VIP vehicles blatantly overtaking from both sides with apparent impunity. The dedicated police personnel, who should be empowered to maintain order on the roads, seem powerless to stop or even address this behaviour. Some vehicles even sport sirens, yet they often lack any VIP presence, and the sole occupant is the driver. It seems that the mere sound of a siren grants these vehicles the authority to manoeuvre as they please. What is even more dis-

treasing is the lack of uniformity in the enforcement of rules and regulations within the state. On one side of the bridge, vehicles are allowed to pass within a reasonable time frame, while on the other side, the delay can extend up to 20 minutes. Such inconsistencies only add to the frustration of commuters who are left wondering about the fairness and transparency of the system. Additionally, the absence of police patrolling in critical areas allows reckless drivers to overtake repeatedly, posing a danger to everyone on the road. This lack of enforcement not only jeopardizes public safety but also erodes the trust citizens place in the authorities to ensure a smooth and orderly traffic flow. It is my sincere hope that this letter catalyzes change. I urge the concerned authorities to address these issues promptly and instill a sense of responsibility and accountability in all road users. Only through consistent enforcement of traffic rules and regulations can we hope to curb the VIP culture that seems to have taken roots in our state. I trust that with collective efforts, we can create a

**ED to adopt more vindictive posture in TMC-ruled West Bengal
Modi-Shah out to trouble Mamata govt before Lok Sabha Polls**

By Arun Srivastava

of home affairs. Earlier, the then police commissioner of Kolkata Police was targeted for not toeing Shah's line and for help ought to be looked into this background. The ED chief held a high-level meeting with the senior officials

"Bengal government sources nonetheless assess the motivational speech with caution. They suspect that the ED in future would adopt a more aggressive posture and would take stringent measures against the political opponents of Modi and Shah. These sources confide that Navin's mission to Bengal has the blessings of Shah."

following his diktat. Nearly a year back, Shah had suggested setting up independent offices of the NIA in each state. It would act independently and would virtu-



manner. It also implied that Navin intends to counsel his men not to get scared of the state government. Without targeting police and giving it a bad name, the ED cannot succeed in its mission to show the Mamata government in a bad light and facilitate its political masters to use this tool to malign and smear Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee and her government. Bengal government sources nonetheless assess the motivational speech with caution. They suspect that the ED in future would adopt a more aggressive posture and would take stringent measures against the political opponents of Modi and Shah. These sources confide that Navin's mission to Bengal has the blessings of Shah. Significantly, the ED has come out afresh with the allegation of non-cooperation by the state police, notwithstanding state police denying this charge. It is a fact that in a federal structure, the police of a state are bound to cooperate with the central agency. It is worth mentioning that Amit Shah has been consistently targeting the state police and accusing it of not carrying out the instructions of the ministry

ally have no relation with the state police. This was certainly a suggestion with ominous intentions. It underscored his plan to turn the state police subservient to the NIA and take the instructions from it. Under the existing working arrangement, the state police works in com-

plite understanding with the central authorities. With NIA in operation, the state police will be left with petty crimes only. All other cases would automatically come under the ambit of the NIA. Even today, it is noticed that small cases like clashes between two parties are referred to the NIA on the pretext that it involves national security. Naturally, NIA will be the overriding and dictating authority. The suggestion of Navin to look to the NIA

investigators do not face any problems while conducting probes in West Bengal. The attitude of the ED towards state police is manifest in its allegation that the local police was diluting the cases slapped against the accused in connection with the assault, which left three agency officers grievously injured. It also alleged that local police did not nab the absconding Trinamool leader and it has also failed to make any arrests so far on the mass assault of ED, CRPF and media persons, looting and destruction of their property. The ED has filed an FIR with the local police, but the main question is why Navin is reluctant to talk to top officials of Bengal police.

Reacting to the news of the multiple meetings by the ED, Trinamool Congress spokesperson Kunal Ghosh said: "This is all a drama being coordinated by the BJP. The list is being given by BJP leaders and the agencies are asked to raid the Trinamool leaders whose names are given." Nevertheless

of the CRPF, CISF and BSF to discuss how to launch a coordinated, multi-pronged attack on corruption. Even the SP of NIA was present. But it does not appear that any senior official of Bengal po-

lice was there at the meeting. Incidentally, Rajeev Kumar who was the target of Shah when Kumar was the Commissioner of Kolkata Police, is now the DG of Bengal Police. Evidently, the ministry of home affairs was ignoring state police through the di-

Mamata Banerjee on Tuesday accused the Modi government of using probe agencies to "target opposition leaders with false cases". She said "They (BJP) are scared of the TMC, hence they visit the houses of TMC leaders and arrest them in fake cases. They think that before elections they will arrest all leaders and win. It is not so easy". She even accused BJP of sharing fake videos on social media platforms and said that police complaints should be registered in such cases: "BJP shares fake videos on social media. Don't believe in fake videos. Go complain about it to the police".

The ED is still busy investigating the scam, but with the intention of deprecating Mamata government it issued statement asserting that the magnitude of this "scam" was "enormous" and proceeds of crime transferred by a suspect amounts to Rs 9,000-10,000 crore, out of which Rs 2,000 crore are "suspected to be transferred to Dubai either directly or through Bangladesh". It has already arrested a Trinamool minister Jyotipriya Mallik and his aide Bakibur Rahaman in this case. (IPA Service)

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rector of ED. In all fairness, Navin could have contacted the top officials of the state police and sought their version. Interestingly, the meeting took place a day after CRPF Inspector-General Birendra Kumar Sharma met the Governor and apprised him of the incident. On his part, Navin also met Governor CV Ananda Bose and briefed him about the progress of the investigations and what steps were being contemplated to ensure that

Has Narendra Modi's Kerala visit boosted BJP prospects? Ground realities tell a different story before Lok Sabha Polls

By P Sreekumaran

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leaders in Kerala are on cloud nine. They think that Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent visit to Thrissur will help them win five to six seats in the Lok Sabha elections in 2024. But, the BJP's chances of opening their LS account from Kerala this time around are not at all bright, given the ground realities in the State, which has remained BJP-hostile and a secular bastion.

No doubt, the Prime Minister's visit to Thrissur did create ripples. The massive crowds that thronged the Thekkinkadu Maidan where Modi delivered a fiery speech must have gladdened saffron hearts. But they must realize one thing. Managing a crowd is easy for a party like BJP which has enormous resources and manpower at its disposal. The million dollar question is: will all the people who flocked to Thekkinkadu Maidan be at the polling booths to vote for the BJP?

Opinion is sharply divided on this crucial question. The Prime Minister, for a change, singled out women for special praise in his speech. He spoke at length about the benefits his government has showered on women. Did it have any appreciable impact on the women present? Highly unlikely given the misrepresentation of facts and bipartisan nature of Kerala politics.

not gone down well with a big sliced of Christian voters. Modi would have fared better if he had expressed regrets on the unspeakable barbarities inflicted on the Christians in Manipur. That would have acted as a salve to the devastated community. Remember, former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh tendered a public apology for the Operation Bluestar. And that went a long way in assuaging the hurt feelings of the Sikh community, and helped the Congress to regain their trust to some extent. Modi lost a big opportunity to earn the goodwill of Christians in a similar way.

Also, the PM's speech at the Thrissur meeting was strong on rhetoric and weak on facts. For instance, in his speech, Modi had said that everyone knew which office was engaged in gold smuggling! That was a reference to the Kerala Chief Minister and his office. But the tactic seems to have boomeranged. CPI(M) leaders effectively countered the Modi claim by pointing out that it was the failure of the Central government agencies which resulted in sabotaging the gold smuggling case. CPI(M) state secretary went to the extent of saying that the Central Government was protecting the gold smuggling accused. The gold was smuggled through diplomatic chan-



Of course, there is a reason why Modi chose Thrissur for special attention. The constituency is one where the BJP fancies its chances very high. BJP candidate and superstar of Malayalam cinema Suresh Gopi put up a spirited fight before losing in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. BJP is all set to field Gopi again from Thrissur. And his proximity to Modi is an open secret. How close the duo are is evident from Modi's decision to attend Suresh's daughter's wedding to be held in the temple town of Guruvayoor later this month. The PM's visit will be a game-changer this time, upsetting all equations. That is what the BJP leaders and activists feel. The ground realities are, however, entirely different.

Thrissur constituency has a sizable population of Christians. BJP leaders in Kerala say the PM's latest overtures to the Christian community has had a big impact and that they will vote for the saffron party in a big way, abandoning their traditional allies Congress. What is the perception among the Christians? It is true, Modi's dinner to prominent Christian leaders was a determined attempt to curry favour with the community. But the Prime Minister is unlikely to make a dent in the Christian voter support to both the Congress and to the CPI(M)-led Left Democratic Front (LDF).

Modi would have succeeded in wooing the Christians in a big way if only he had adopted a different strategy. For one thing, a sizable section of the Christians are unhappy about the failure of Christian leaders to raise the issue of horrific attacks against Christians and Christian churches in Manipur. Their silence and the PM's refusal to refer to the sensitive issue has

nels. The State had no role in the affairs of airports. Why did the Centre fail to arrest the accused who is based in a foreign country? That was LDF's poser to the PM. Modi was merely trying to sensationalise the issue with a political aim to kickstart a campaign against the State with an eye on the LS elections. The CPI(M) also said that multiple central agencies could not find a shred of evidence against the CM and the CMO. The reality is the probe has entered a blind alley.

Likewise, PM's claims of having done much to strengthen women's empowerment also sounded hollow. He claimed credit for getting the Women's reservation Bill in Parliament. The Opposition called it an election stunt as the Bill is unlikely to become a Law before 2029. Similarly, his refusal to condemn the parading of women naked in Manipur and the horrible incidents like Kathwa and Hathras has evoked extreme anger in the Christian community. And the anger is bound to reflect in the voting in the parliamentary polls. And last but not the least is the verdict in the Bilkis Bano case. It is a stinging rebuff to the Gujarat Government and the union Government.

All this proves the hollowness of the PM's care for women in the country. And what are the credentials of Suresh Gopi who wants to contest from Thrissur? His misbehaviour with a woman journalist had caused all-round revulsion and evoked strong condemnation. This being the ground reality, the BJP's hopes of opening its account from Kerala are unlikely to fructify, the Prime Minister's aggressive campaign in Kerala notwithstanding. (IPA Service)

lose interest for further cultivation and thus forces them to shift or cultivate different crops such as broom stick to avoid losses as reported by the farmers in the study area. The authors of this study have rightly suggested that, "effort should be taken up by the state government and concerned authorities to provide immediate support for development of better road facility and marketing infrastructure such as cold storage or small processing unit in those areas so that they can increase their productivity on a large scale and better marketing of their produce. The policy implications suggested, if properly implemented, may result in increased revenue of the farmers in particular and the state in general. Thus, it enhances the livelihoods and income opportunities of the farmers".

Yours etc.,
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

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On the Khasi Mandarin Oranges

Editor,
The article, "Much ado about Khasi Mandarin" by H.H.Mohrmen, (ST January 8, 2024) made interesting reading. According to the study by S.Passah and A.K.Tripathi titled "Economics of Khasi mandarin cultivation in Meghalaya: Analysis of economic feasibility and constraint faced by farmers during its cultivation," which appeared in the Indian Journal of Hill Farming, December 2020, Volume 33 page 267-279, it is reported that the total area of Khasi mandarin in Meghalaya is 9.26 thousand hectares and production is 44.02 thousand MT which is today equivalent to Rs 447 crore as on January 8, 2024 prices or 1 percent of the State's GDP. It is cultivated in all the eleven districts of Meghalaya with East Khasi

Hills and West Khasi Hills districts contributing about 59.74 per cent of the total area and 67.77 per cent of the total production of mandarin in the state (GoM, 2019). Seasonality and localized to favourable agro-climatic conditions coupled with the perishability of mandarins produced pose several problems for the growers. Most of the growers lack knowledge on standard packaging practices. The incidence of pests and diseases, poor orchard management (Hangsing et al., 2014) and poor access to extension personnel or exposure to training programmes (Thamizhselvan and Murugan, 2012) are major problems. The high cost of cultivation, especially initial investment (Alipour et al., 2013) and planting material, labour wage and unavailability of credit pose problems to farmers (Rymbai, 2012). Several constraints such as lack of transportation, communication, weak cooperative organizations and storage facilities in the rural areas also cause problems for the farmers (Mahanta and Konwar, 2014). The study was conducted in 4 selected villages which include Mawphu and Um-

blai villages from Shella Bholaganj block of East Khasi Hills and Nongnah and Keniong villages from Ranikor block of West Khasi Hills districts of Meghalaya. The selection was based on the highest area, production and productivity of Khasi mandarin. The study observed that the district wise area and production of Khasi mandarin in Meghalaya has clearly shown a positive and significant growth rate (Porwal, 2014) except in Jaintia Hills. The study also inferred that commercialisation had touched the mandarin farm of the selected households but did not take its position in increasing trends. The study also points out that the reason for the reduction in the number of household growers in the region was mainly because of the decline in production of the fruits as a result of disease and pest such as citrus trunk borers, scales, aphids and leaf miners (Lakshman, 2017) and also the change in climate which deteriorated the production of orchards (Abobatta, 2019). Lack of knowledge on management of the orchards such as rejuvenation, pest and disease control, nutrient and water management make farmers

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

— Mahatma Gandhi

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Maldives diplomacy faux-pas

DIPLOMACY is the art of smiling even in unwelcome situations. It seeks to extract the maximum from others while yielding minimum ground. Like glass, it is delicate but in reality there's nothing opaque about it. India and its diplomacy world-wide are impressive to an extent, but other players often manage to outwit us. Even Pakistan, with its shrewd moves, does better than India in global diplomacy. China has its own style of building bridges with nations near and far. The present standoff between Maldives and India is a case in point. It started with provocative comments from three deputy ministers in Maldives against Prime Minister Narendra Modi after the PM posted some scenic pictures of Lakshadweep on social media platform X during his visit to the archipelago of 36 enchanting islands.

The unwarranted, hurtful comments against Modi by the Maldivian ministers embarrassed India. There was no reason why these ministers should have reached out to the social media to pass these comments other than that this platform is open to all. Ministers are responsible public figures. Provoking a powerful nation like India should have been the last thing they should have attempted. In the event, Maldives faced an embarrassment and the three ministers were immediately removed from the government. Indian travel agencies, apparently taking the cue from the powers here, suspended mass bookings of tourists to Maldives. The hospitality industry there suffered a jolt. Tourism is the major source of income for Maldives' economy, apart from sea foods exports, both taking full advantage of the Indian Ocean that holds the archipelago aloft. Lakshadweep too has the same advantages but these have not been tapped to such a large scale as Maldives in the vicinity did. This reflects a serious deficit in our governance systems. The present BJP government itself was more obsessed with efforts to check the sway of Muslims in public life in Lakshadweep. Notably, like Modi, Rajiv Gandhi too had spent a vacation in Lakshadweep when he was PM, and extolled its virtues. The matter ended there.

It is no secret, however, that the relations between Maldives and India, which were very close for many years, are currently facing odds. Pakistan-based Islamists started influencing the government and the people there. The comments by the three ministers are seen in this backdrop. Also, in tandem, China has begun extending an olive branch and providing economic support to Maldives, the way it did with Pakistan. Sri Lanka and Myanmar to put India in a spot. Significantly, Maldives upgraded its ties with China in the aftermath of the present controversy. Diplomacy demands that India observes restraint even in the face of the present provocation.

Need to Revisit Tourism Goals

By Patricia Mukhim

On Sunday last a very upset young man called me to complain that Laitlum is closed to visitors. Perhaps the only fault of the custodians of that tourist spot is that they did not think it important to inform the public of this decision. Considering it my duty to find out from the horses' mouth as to the reason/reasons for this sudden verdict, I travelled to Laitlum and spoke to a few people there. Their contention is that (a) there are too many footfalls every weekday and more so on weekends. They feel that their young girls who need to cross the place while going to church are not free from cat-calls and unwanted attention. One person said the people of Laitlum, barring a few, gain nothing from the tourism there. The Shnong which runs the place collects Rs 50 per vehicle but collects no entry fee from the visitors. Hence the yield is nominal even while the villagers have to clean up all the mess left behind by tourists. Also, the new culture of carrying boom boxes everywhere and to make noise with loud music is very disturbing for a sleepy village and for other tourists who come to Laitlum for relaxation and peace of mind.

What is observed over time is that villages that have discovered the value of their ecology and are making it a selling point, don't actually know how to develop a full-proof plan for a sustainable tourism economy that does no harm to the environment and which also does not assault the sensibilities of the local people. They quickly advertise their sights and sounds over social media and soon there is a rush and then it's too late for them to impose the do's and don'ts that tourists should observe. Its almost like selling a half-baked cake. It does harm to the person who consumes it and hurts the business of the person making the cake. Every village that promotes tourism should necessarily have to go through a series of training and awareness about what it takes to run a destination. And it's the bounden duty of the State Tourism Department to impart that training and business model.

There is something very wrong with the Indian tourist. They think they own every place they visit and except for a very few eco-sensitive tourists, the rest have no curiosity to learn about the local culture. Since they believe they own every place they visit they also feel they have the right to leave behind the garbage they bring along in the form of packaged food items, silver foil, plastic packages, water bottles and of course the liquor bottles that are left behind and oftentimes broken to smithereens as if they are angry with the bottle for running out of liquor. This is not what the 'real' tourist would do.

So who is a real tourist? There are many academic definitions that answer this question but I will refrain from citing academics because those descriptions are far too convoluted. In simple terms a tourist is one who travels outside his place of residence to visit a place in his own state or another state or country that he had not visited in the past or revisits it because of a relationship he has developed with the place. In the past only people with disposable incomes actually visited places and stayed there for a considerable period of time. There are German tourists (retired types) for instance, who spend as many as six months in India and spend their summers in Kashmir and winters in Goa. These are hard-core tourists who make their plans well in advance and know why they are spending time in the places they choose to visit. They want value for money and they get it so they revisit every year.

Today we have a different breed of tourists who perhaps just want to get away from the madding crowd in their immediate surroundings and take off in their vehicles to visit places known for their natural beauty so they can flaunt the pictures on their social media handles. Whether such visitors actually have the time or inclination to savour the beauty of the places they visit is questionable. For instance, when visiting the Arwah cave one saw a whole bunch of visitors more

interested in photographs than in exploring the caves and asking questions about how the caves were formed etc. Such day tourists as we call them (since their base is somewhere outside Meghalaya and they only come here for a day), don't really come to learn anything and nor are they interested in the local culture. They are not adventurous enough to try out the local cuisine. Some of them turn up their noses at the smell that emanate from the little food stalls run by the local Kongs selling jadoh with doh khleh, and other tibits which are delicacies for us but not so for the tourist who is already prejudiced about the kind of food that tribals eat. Hence, we have so-called "vegetarian" restaurants boldly displayed and "Dhabas" run by the locals. Granted that business demands that they cater to the needs of the fastidious tourists but is there need to pander to tourist palates and give the cultural cuisine a wide berth? Do tourists have such choices abroad? Do they get vegetarian food in South East Asia unless they really search out places run by Indians? The Indian tourist is the most non-adventurous when it comes to food. He looks for almost the same cuisine he gets at home albeit with more spices and embellishments.

All the above being said, the point that needs to be made is that every tourist destination has to come up with a brochure whose cost is added to the entry fee. The brochure should give a brief explainer about the place and what its USP is and above all the do's and don'ts. Every entry point should take note of how much plastic articles/packages are carried by each tourist and all those have to be accounted and paid for at the entry point. On leaving the place if the tourist has brought back all the plastic/non-biodegradable materials they carried in, then they get back their deposit, else they have to pay for what they left behind. For this some trained youth who can keep count in a register are needed. This too is a form of employment and they can be paid from the entry fees collected on a dai-

ly basis. This requires proper accounting procedures which we don't see in many of the tourist destinations.

It is because tourism in Meghalaya is so haphazard that we also attract the worst kind of tourists who would not be welcome anywhere else. Try visiting Hampi in Karnataka to see how strict the entry point to the place is. It's a strictly "No Plastic Zone" and they mean it. If Laitlum has promoted tourism for several years now the question to ask is (a) who has benefitted from it? (b) how many families is tourism supporting? (c) are there any schools or poor children that have benefitted from the spin-offs received from the large number of visitors? If tourism is only going to benefit a few families or people while the pangs of this trade such as the noise, garbage, drunken brawls etc., are suffered by everyone is it really worth promoting? The local people will themselves become enemies of tourists in the end.

Before we come to such a dystopian phase in our tourism history it is important for the State Government to regulate and set down the terms which must be strictly followed by tour promoters, destination owners/stakeholders and tourists before opening up any place to tourism. A free for all tourism experience is strangulating the very idea of tourism which is linked to leisure, nature, ecology, culture and beauty which create the "aha" moment. While the State Government seems to have given a free hand to tour promoters, some amount of government control and regulation is imperative before Meghalaya turns into a hellish experience for the local people.

Here one is not only looking at tourists from outside the state but those within the state as well who love to carry their noise, their plastics and their liquor bottles wherever they travel and to leave behind garbage in an otherwise pristine site. As of date anyone from Shillong who travels to Jaintia Hills or West Khasi hills on a leisure trip is a tourist. Each one must learn and imbibe the rules of tourism.

Supreme Court verdict on Bilkis Bano's rapist convicts is redeeming Learned judges exposed the complicity of Centre and Gujarat govt

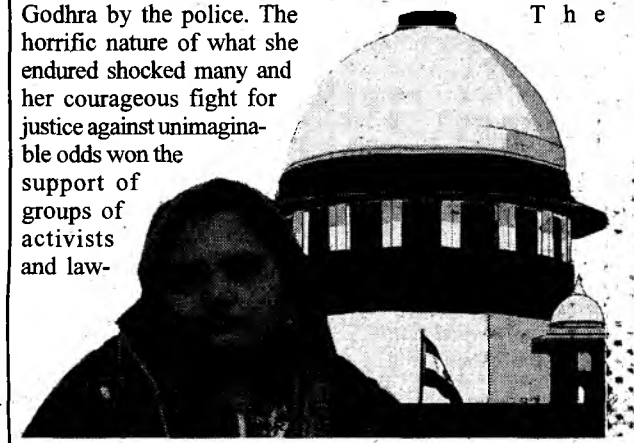
By Subhashini Ali

It was a judgment that was eagerly awaited by many who saw it as a litmus test of whether the diminishing flames of hope in the judiciary's ability to deliver justice would be snuffed out or would burn brighter. These hopes had been considerably diminished on August 15, 2022 when they saw 11 perpetrators of heinous crimes against humanity being garlanded and feted as 'sanskari brahmins' when they left jail as free men granted remission by the Gujarat government. This was happening just when the prime minister was holding forth from the Red Fort against those who did not protect the security and honour of women.

During the 2002 riots, these men had pursued 21 year old and 4 months pregnant Bilkis Bano and her family who had fled the village that they all belonged to, fearing violence. They had surrounded the hapless fugitives a day later and had brutally killed her 3 year old daughter and day-old nephew; gang-raped her along with her mother and sister-in-law and murderously attacked all of them. Only Bilkis survived and was taken to the riot victims' camp at Godhra by the police. The horrific nature of what she endured shocked many and her courageous fight for justice against unimaginable odds won the support of groups of activists and law-

a review petition against this order. Instead, Radheshyam approached the Maharashtra High Court for remission. His plea was rejected by the magistrate of the CBI court that had convicted him along with his co-accused. It was also rejected by the police officer investigating the case. After this, Radheshyam and the Gujarat government approached the Supreme Court in 2021 to allow the plea for remission to be heard by the Gujarat High Court without informing the court of what had transpired earlier both in Gujarat and in Maharashtra. The bench hearing their case ruled that not only was the Gujarat High Court competent to hear the plea for remission but that it could be considered under the government's remission policy of 1992 rather than its revised policy of 2014 under which those convicted of capital crimes could not be granted remission. This was, however, possible under the 1992 policy.

After obtaining this judgment, the Gujarat government rushed through all the procedures necessary to give these convicts remission throwing norms and established principles to the wind.



The Gujarat government extended every kind of protection to the accused and, only after the case was transferred to the special CBI court in Maharashtra, were the accused convicted in 2008. In 2017, the Maharashtra High Court upheld their conviction and the punishment of life imprisonment that they had received. Justice seemed to have been done in at least one case among thousands in the pogrom unleashed by the Sangh Parivar on the Muslim community under the watch of the then chief minister of Gujarat, Narendra Modi.

It was this release that was challenged in the Supreme Court in a series of writ petitions filed by women political activists, an educationist, a retired woman IPS officer and, later, by Bilkis herself. It was defended to the hilt by both Gujarat and central governments. Finally, on January 8, 2024, Justices BV Nagarathna and Ujjal Bhuyan delivered their much awaited judgment and ordered that the 11 rapist-murderers be sent back to jail within 15 days and did much to restore the hope that struggles for justice could succeed.

The judgment described the crimes of these convicts as 'grotesque and diabolical', the Gujarat government was sternly admonished for many acts of omission and commission. However, the remission itself was rendered null and void on the basis of an extraordinary set of circumstances which led the judges to opine "We strike down the remission orders on the ground of usurpation of power by Gujarat government."

The extraordinary circumstances which led to this pronouncement were as follows: in 2019, Radheshyam, one of the accused approached the Gujarat High Court for remission and his plea was struck down on the grounds that it could only be heard in Maharashtra by the court that had convicted him. The Gujarat government did not file

January 8th judgment came to the conclusion that the earlier 2021 judgment by the Supreme Court had been obtained by fraudulent means because important facts had been concealed from the court by both Radheshyam and the government of Gujarat. It said "We have held that the Order of this court dated May 13, 2022 to be a nullity and non est in the eye of law. Consequently, the exercise of discretion by the Gujarat government is nothing but an instance of usurpation of jurisdiction and an abuse of discretion... This is a classic case where an Order of this court has been used for violating the rule of law. Therefore, without going into the manner in which the power of remission has been exercised, we strike down the Orders of remission on the ground of usurpation of powers by the Gujarat government not vested in it. The Orders of remission are hence quashed on this ground also."

It is important to underline the fact that the Supreme Court held that the government of Gujarat had been complicit in its support to the criminals from the very beginning which had led to the case being transferred to Maharashtra in the first place and also that it had been an accomplice in the fraud perpetrated on the Supreme Court itself in 2021. The central government had rendered its full support on its part.

No representative of the governments of Gujarat and the centre has expressed any regret after the stinging indictments by the Supreme Court. The real Manuvadi face of the BJP must be exposed. The impunity with which its supporters commit heinous crimes against women and against humanity itself must be recognised. The identity politics that creates such hatred between groups of people that they not only condone but celebrate crimes committed by their own against the others must be opposed. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

Improve cremation service for eternal peace of deceased

Editor,
We humans live in a perpetual state of uncertainty. No one knows the time span from the cradle to the grave. In the face of this profound uncertainty, it is good if we learn to think about life's most profound question: how do we prepare for the inevitable end that awaits us all? Sadly, very few are inclined to dive into this enigmatic reality.

About a week ago, I was in a crematorium at Jhalupara, the only electric crematory in the state. Despite having two furnaces, only one is in use. Standing among mourners and bereaved families made me more thoughtful. What was distressing was that we were in a queue as the furnace in operation was engaged. We had to wait for another two hours. The departed soul was from a very affluent and reputed family. This fact starkly contrasted the situation we were in the crematorium. Everyone wished that both furnaces were operational. Some even whispered that the affluence and wealth of the departed did not come to any use after his demise.

Probably set up almost two decades ago, this crematory has been serving not only the locals but also people far away from the town. Besides MUDA, the

dedicated members of the Greater Shillong Crematorium and Mortuary Society deserve appreciation for their commendable management of this institution. What we now know is that this crematorium has immensely catered to the needs of "society" in a big way, albeit not without some environmental concerns. Some days, it receives as many as five to six departed souls.

However, the primary drawback here lies in the waiting period that mourners sometimes have to endure, extending even up to three to four hours. By that time, many mourners would leave the crematorium, as they could not wait for so long. As a result, only the deceased's family members are left to wait until the last cremation act is complete. A shroud of sorrow envelops the family members of the departed soul.

A senior government officer from the locality says if the two furnaces were operational, it would have saved all of us from an embarrassingly sorrowful situation. Given the circumstances, there is a pressing need for government intervention to provide financial support for this project. An additional increase in funding allocation could render "both furnaces operational" and enhance the quality of services offered. It is worth noting that this electric crematorium played a pivotal role during the challenging times of the COVID-19 pandemic, serving as the final resting place for countless victims. Incidentally, we also must

acknowledge and salute the unmatched courage of the cremator, Mr. Prakash Biswa, of this crematory. He never grimaced and backed down, even when a stream of COVID casualties were brought in for cremation. He single-handedly carried out the tough task of cremating the dead bodies in the electric pyre with great skill and elan. Stoutly-built and with a happy-go-lucky attitude, even ghosts have not been able to frighten away the valour of Mr. Biswa in the dead of night. For the past 7 years, he has mostly slept alone inside the crematorium. I hope one day he will receive a pat on the back and commendation from the government.

As we introspect on the uncertainty of life, we are reminded of the importance of this sanctuary of certainty. I think the government must act with decisiveness to ensure that both electric pyres are operational. Who can deny that our leaders may also have to seek refuge in this crematorium? Should mourners at that time wait hours upon hours for their turn? One's last journey must end with solemn dignity. The money spent on improving the services of the crematorium/ cemetery will ensure peace in heaven.

Yours etc.,
Salil Grewal,
Shillong

True meaning of socialism

Editor,
Swami Vivekananda was

born in Kolkata on January 12, 1863. It is not difficult to ascertain how he would have reacted to the exploitation of religion as a political instrument and the political focus on the inauguration of a temple much before its completion to coincide with the preparation for the ensuing 2024 Lok Sabha election.

It would be pertinent to recall how a BJP leader in West Bengal recently reacted to a famous quote of Swami Vivekananda perhaps without knowing that Vivekananda always gave much more importance to the well-being and welfare of the people rather than religious scriptures, rituals and temples.

A few days ago, "Reading of the Gita by one lakh voices" was organised at the Brigade Parade Grounds in Kolkata. While commenting on that event, a minister of West Bengal government used Swami Vivekananda's famous quote, "You will be nearer to Heaven through football than through the study of the Gita," and said that it would have been better for the body and the mind, had they played football instead.

To counter it, a state BJP leader said, "Bengal has, for ages, been a flag-bearer of Sanatan culture. In the middle, somewhere, Bengal was somewhat misled by the Leftists. Can you not see now, that limited knowledge is detrimental? Those saying football is better than reading the Gita, they are but Leftist products."

Though he tried to describe his political opponent having "a limited knowledge" but it redirected to Swami Vivekananda as it was his quote which the minister used. But there is no doubt about Swami Vivekananda's Leftist political orientation. He correctly described Swami Vivekananda as a "Leftist" but tried to demean his views by adding the word "products". Swami Vivekananda had given a clear answer to this question, "I am a Socialist not because I think it is a perfect system, but half a loaf is better than no bread."

When both National Sample Survey report and Global Hunger Index report show a horrific picture of child wasting and child stunting in India, we can clearly hear his voice regarding diversionary temple politics and misplaced priority to send rockets to the sun and the moon, "I consider that the great national sin is the neglect of the masses, and that is one of the causes of our downfall. No amount of politics would be of any avail until the masses in India are once more well educated, well fed and well cared for. They pay for our education, they build our temples, but in return they get kicks. They are practically our slaves. If we want to regenerate India, we must work for them."

What Swami Vivekananda said long ago about poor people paying for our education is still relevant today as India relies more on indirect taxes. A poor person has to spend almost

all his money to buy essential items and goods and thus has to pay moderate to high GST in the process. The fact of the matter is the poor pay more taxes than the rich in proportion to their respective incomes.

In a modern welfare state, people get benefits from the state because they are considered as stakeholders. It is the duty of a welfare state to ensure resource distribution and equal opportunity for all. Subsidy is regarded as welfare schemes for the people and not as a charity as was the practice in a monarchy. The idea behind tagging those who are getting welfare benefits as 'labharthi' and what they are getting as 'freebies' and 'rewdis' is absolutely monarchical where the king gives aims to his subjects in his name as if from his own pocket.

Given that India is a welfare state as per the Indian Constitution, words like 'freebies', 'labharthi' and 'rewdis' show a total disregard for the people in general and our Constitution in particular. This and the temple politics are also totally contrary to the ideals of Swami Vivekananda who said, "If you want to find God, serve man. To reach Narayana you must serve the Daridra Narayanas - the starving millions of India."

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

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"It is exactly in tough times when we discover our full potential, it allows our mind and body to push ourselves beyond our limits."

— Leonardo Bonucci

The Shillong Times

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TMC-Congress alliance at sea

WHILE the Trinamool Congress (TMC) members in Meghalaya seem keen to have some truck with the Congress for the Lok Sabha polls, things are not hunky dory at the national level where the TMC is unwilling to cede more than two seats to the Congress in West Bengal in the upcoming polls. This is a dilemma that the INDIA bloc seems to be facing. It is a difficult proposition to get different parties to submit to the larger national interest simply because no party has the interest of the nation at heart. The leader of each party in the INDIA bloc, particularly Nitish Kumar, has prime ministerial ambitions. Mamta Banerjee too is not averse to leading the nation. Mallikarjun Kharge the Congress President is also the prime minister in waiting. This is precisely the problem with having too many disparate parties in one platform. It must be quite a task for the Congress to hold these incongruent elements together. There is always the possibility of a slip between the cup and the lip.

In Meghalaya the TMC has not been quite so vocal in recent times. One TMC MLA who kept the Government on its toes – George Lyngdoh lost the 2023 elections and has now gone silent. TMC supremo, Dr Mukul Sangma appears to be unsure if he will continue with the Party. Although he has hotly denied sending feelers to the BJP, it is still unsure as to what his next move will be. Will Dr Sangma himself be the Lok Sabha candidate from Tura under the TMC banner? Are the TMC members going to return to the Congress? These are all in the realm of speculations. The situation is fluid and the Congress Party does not seem to have a credible face to be their Lok Sabha candidate from Garo Hills. If Dr Mukul Sangma returns to the Congress fold, the grand old party in Meghalaya will get a shot in the arm. But is that likely to happen?

Coming to the Shillong seat, this time around it is not going to be a cakewalk for Congress chief Vincent Pala since he is pitted against Ampareen Lyngdoh of the NPP who seems to have garnered a substantial following since she is also presently the Health Minister visiting every nook and cranny of the State on the plea of upscaling health facilities. She is therefore a known face and once elections are announced she would not have much trouble jogging peoples' memories about what she tried to do as a minister. To be fair to Ampareen Lyngdoh she has been the most pro-active Health Minister by far. If she wins the Lok Sabha polls it would be a loss for the State. In fact she is also the most visible face of the NPP after Chief Minister Conrad Sangma and Deputy Chief Minister Prestone Tynsong and this within a very short span of time since she joined the NPP.

Politics is a slippery game and the Congress is facing an uphill task trying to keep the game of cards going. Besides, the INDIA bloc has to have a clear agenda other than just being anti-Modi.

Oranges: A gift from Meghalaya to the world

By Bhogtoram Mawroh and Chenxiang Ch Marak

The article 'Much Ado about the Khasi Mandarin' by H. H. Mohrmen, published on January 8, 2023, made for a very engaging read. Drawing from his own experience of having grown up in Nongtalang, a village in the War Jaintia area, where his family had their own orange orchard, he asserted that the export of oranges from Meghalaya is not a very recent phenomenon. He referred to his own relative, Khyllaw sia Lyngdoh, who at least transported, if not exported, oranges from Nongtalang to Bangladesh via Tamabil in Dawki. This fascinating information was provided with the intention of proving that the cultivation of oranges and cross-border trade has a very long history in the state, especially along the southern part of Meghalaya. He is very correct. In fact, the history of cross-border trade goes much further back in history, and it informs a lot about the region (including Meghalaya) and how it wasn't really a frontier but a vibrant and bustling zone of interaction that had global consequences.

In the section on agriculture in the seminal work 'The Khasis' by PRT Gurdon, there is a detailed description of the tools used, types of agricultural land, farming practices, and the crops grown by the Khasis. Much of these are still in practice, showing contiguity, which in the past may have been seen as backward by some but which is now recognized as a game-changing solution for bringing about a sustainable food system that not only provides nourishment and a healthy diet but also makes it resilient to climate change and other environmental shocks. The FAO's (Food and Agriculture Organization) White/Wiphala Paper on Indigenous Peoples' Food Systems, published in 2021 on the eve of the UNFSS (United National Food System Summit) in New York, made that case very strongly. India's 2022 Guidelines of the National Mission on Natural Farming and Meghalaya's own 2023 State Organic and Natural Farming Policy are but a logical outcome of the new paradigm that is being pursued globally. Coming back to the book 'The Khasis', among the crops enumerated, orange got a special mention and two full paragraphs were dedicated towards describing how to grow the crop. But what was most intriguing was the mention of a thriving trade that was already taking place long before the British came into the picture.

Gurdon mentioned in one of the passages that oranges from the Khasi Hills were famous for their excellence and were an important crop in the southern portion, i.e., the War area. They were known in Calcutta as the Chhatok or Sylhet orange, which could be due to the fact that they were originally sourced from the area. Interestingly, in a documentary on the Khasis residing in Bangladesh titled 'Behind the Green' Jonhinal Kongwang, the Khasi headman of Cholitachara Punjee village claims that Sylhet is actually a corruption of 'Shella Hat' (Hat means market), after the name of Shella, a village in the East Khasi hills of present-day Meghalaya. So, Shella appears to have been a very important

trade center in the pre-colonial period, with oranges and most certainly areca nut and betel leaves being important commodities. Citing another colonial officer, Sir George Birdwood, Gurdon further informed that oranges and lemons from Garhwal, Sikkim, and Khasia (Khasi Hills) had been carried by Arab traders into Syria. From there, the Crusaders helped to propagate them throughout southern Europe. Oranges, he remarked, appeared to be indigenous to these hills. And in fact, that is exactly the case.

On January 31, 2009, Down To Earth, one of India's most respectable magazines focused on the politics of environment and development, published an article titled 'Local citrus goes global'. According to the report, India and to be more specific Nokrek in Garo Hills, is the origin of all citrus species in the world. Though Nokrek was formerly designated as a Biosphere Reserve in 2009 by UNESCO, a section had already been declared earlier as the National Citrus Gene Sanctuary after the Indian wild orange (Citrus indica), which is considered to be the progenitor of all citrus species in the world, was found there. The story of how it was domesticated, however, is a little complicated and still largely unknown.

According to the 2021 paper 'Genomic insights into citrus domestication and its important agronomic traits' by Muhammad Junaid Rao, Hao Zuo, and Qiang Xu, most of the commercial cultivars in the world today are either from mandarin (Citrus reticulata), pummelo (C. maxima), and citron (C. medica) or their hybrids. For example, sweet orange (Citrus sinensis) is known to be a hybrid between pummelo and mandarin. The authors are of the opinion that the three species probably originated from different places: citron and pummelo are most likely to have originated in a triangle region of northwestern Yunnan (China), northeastern India (Nokrek in the Garo Hills), and northern Myanmar, whereas mandarin is most likely to have originated in Mangshan, a branch of the Nanling mountains (South China). This finding becomes very significant when compared with findings on the ancient migrations that took place into the subcontinent.

The 2015 paper 'Y-chromosome diversity suggests southern origin and Paleolithic back-wave migration of Austro-Asiatic speakers from eastern Asia to the Indian subcontinent' by Zhang and colleagues reported that Austro-Asiatic populations (which include the Khasi-Jaintia) display a high frequency of O2a1-M95 (Y-chromosome) lineages, which serve as an effective genetic marker for tracing

the prehistoric movements and origins of these populations. According to them, this lineage originated in southern China and then migrated from mainland Southeast Asia (Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand, and Malaysia) to India. In this, the authors agreed with the 2015 paper 'A late Neolithic expansion of Y chromosomal haplogroup O2a1-M95 from east to west' by Arunkumar and colleagues but differed on the dates (10,000 years instead of around 6000 years), citing different methods used for age estimation. So, the proto-Khasi-Jaintia must have originally migrated from southern China into the area around Laos and then into the North East, with a group continuing into Central India, where it interbred with the local indigenous population (most probably Dravidian), giving rise to the Mundra. And while they were moving, they must have brought with them the mandarin orange, which later became the Khasi mandarin orange, for which Meghalaya was awarded the GI (Geographical Indication) tag in 2014. But it was not just the fruit but the story of its domestication, which must have traveled together.

The 2018 paper 'Genome of Wild Mandarin and Domestication History of Mandarin' by Wang and colleagues argue that there are abundant wild mandarin forms in the Nanling region of South China, from which the semi-domesticated and cultivated varieties were domesticated. According to them, the region is one of the important cultivation centres of mandarin orange for at least 4000 years. A local version of how the mandarin orange came to be grown by the Khasi community provides some insights into how that might have taken place. During a field visit to one of the villages in the Sohra region, an old lady informed that sometime in the past, there was a woman who used to go to the forest to collect fruits and other wild vegetables. One day she came across a wild fruit, which she found to be very tasty. Excited, she brought the fruit to her village and planted the seed, which later grew into the mandarin orange that is now endemic to the area. Most probably, the story must be a common one held by people from a previous time when they were in South China. When they arrived, along with the fruit, they brought the story, which has been passed on through generations.

Garos also have a version of how they domesticated the different citrus species. For a long time, they never domesticated any of the citrus species because they were available in plenty in the forest. These were used for food as well as for medicinal purposes. But over time, as the forest dwindled, they started domesticating many of the species so as to protect them from going extinct. The

local names of the species that were domesticated are Chambil, Memang Narang, Kakji, Tematchi, Serenga, Atol, Jambura/Chambura, and Chinara, to name a few. Memang Narang is in fact the Indian wild orange, i.e., Citrus indica, mentioned earlier.

Tony Joseph mentions in his 2018 book 'Early Indians: The Story of Our Ancestors and Where We Came From' that around 2000 BCE (i.e., 4000 years ago), there was increasing contact between the sub-continent and the east through both trade and migration, which could have brought not just the Austro-Asiatic populations (which include the Khasi-Jaintia) but also the Tibeto-Burman language speakers as well. Among the latter, the Garo, who are part of the Bodo-Garo language branch, which also includes groups like Dimasa and Tripuri, must have been one of the earliest groups to arrive. This is because they are one of the most widespread groups in the region, having a linguistic connection to groups like the Konyak (though considered to be a Naga group, they do not actually speak the Kuki-Chin-Mizo language that other Naga groups speak) and the Jingpho or Singpho (also known as Kachin in Myanmar), who are found across the international borders.

As a matter of fact, there are Garo villages in present-day West Bengal as well. This means domestication of pummelo and citron must have possibly happened after 2000 BCE, when the Garos arrived in what is today the Garo Hills and settled around Nokrek. Since they stayed in close proximity with the Khasis with whom they intermarried (the Lyngngam/Mégam being the by-product of such a union), they must have exchanged food crops, which must have included citrus species, giving rise to more new species. Then, through exchanges, these must have dispersed to different parts of the world. The Arab traders, as mentioned by Gurdon, must have played an important role in that. The paper by Muhammad Junaid Rao, Hao Zuo, and Qiang Xu contains a map, which suggests that citron and lemon from the North East must have reached the Middle East in such a way. Palestinians, in fact, have used oranges, watermelons, olives, and eggplants to represent their indigenous national identity and connection to the land as a form of resistance against the occupation of Palestine by illegal immigrants from Europe and America.

So the story of oranges is not a recent one but one that goes back thousands of years. It involves migration, domestication, international trade, and traditional folk stories that go back many generations. But most importantly, it's a heritage of the indigenous peoples of Meghalaya, the Khasi-Jaintia and Garo, which they have shared with the world. And hopefully, they will continue to do so in the future as well.

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

Four things that mar the beauty of Shillong

By Riwanki Suchiang

There are four major issues that mar the beauty of Shillong. These are (1) Congested Road Conditions (2) Drainage System (3) Waste Management (4) Electrical Posts and The Outdoor Wires/Cables System.

Congested road condition: All of us are talking about the same thing everyday, that is the traffic jam in Shillong which is mainly due to the congested road conditions. Of course there are also several major factors adding to the problem, like parking of vehicles close to the main road; unnecessary overtaking of vehicles instead of waiting in the queue. I am always taken up by that picture which was taken in Mizoram which is circulating on social media where several vehicles stand on the queue including two

Boyce Road behind the Shillong College is properly covered. That could be the best example and we feel nice to walk through that place as we don't get the stench from those drains. If we want to see Shillong as a clean City I think its drainage system should be cleaned regularly and covered properly. I'm sure by now in Shillong or elsewhere through the initiative of Prime Minister Narendra Modi with his mission of Swachh Bharat, somehow everyone is told how to handle the waste material and where to throw the waste products especially plastic and papers after they are used. But, sad to see people throw plastic everywhere they like, unconsciously and worse still consciously, while many of us are just watching them



wheelers waiting for their turn to move. I heard from my friend from Mizoram that traffic discipline is still being followed every day in that state. Why can't this be

and doing nothing about it. It is really disheartening to see that common sense is not common to everyone. Do we even dare to stop someone if he/she throws plastic in front

Expanding the road width seems impossible as we see now in Shillong because of the houses built right next to the road and the land tenure system (the right of tribal people to own land). Certainly, the expansion of the road is possible through compensation which requires a huge amount of money to be paid to the land owners.

observed in Shillong too? Expanding the road width seems impossible as we see now in Shillong because of the houses built right next to the road and the land tenure system (the right of tribal people to own land). Certainly, the expansion of the road is possible through compensation which requires a huge amount of money to be paid to the land owners. If the government is seriously committed to doing that for the good of its people once and for all it would resolve all our problems. Fly-overs seems to be impossible dream because of the landscape of the area. However what runs wild in my imagination is that there is a chance for making fly-overs, if and only if the government is ready to invest in them by constructing them all along the "Wahumkhrak" river and its tributaries. This can be done through new and advanced scientific technology. If Shillong City were to have good road conditions it would be the best place in the world to live in.

Drainage system & waste management: As, I move around the City of Shillong, I'm always disturbed by the way the side-drains are being treated. Some parts are filled with garbage from domestic households and give out a stench. Some drains are filled with mud during the rainy season and are kept without being cleaned for years together. Some are filled with weeds and grass and left uncleared until the drainage is blocked but the most insensitive act is when the drain is being filled with beer bottles and plastics dumped by passers-by and drunkards. Also the most disappointing thing about the drainage system in Shillong is that the water pipes pass through them. In some places the pipes clog the drains and water flows into the streets. We don't even know that the drain exists. Nowadays the pipelines are increasing in number and even start encroaching into the main road. In some places attempts have been made to cover the drains in order that the place looks clean and undisturbed to the passersby. For instance the drainage at Laitumkhrak,

of us? There are some who if they are told to stop throwing by the roadside would instead justify, by saying that there are no dustbins by the roadside hence they throw it anywhere, which of course is true. There were times in Shillong, I recall when we saw dustbins being kept at some corners of the road-side. I saw some of those being burnt and some were stolen by miscreants. The lack of a sense of belongingness to the city of Shillong and the lack of proper waste management are what destroy the reputation of the city.

Electrical posts and the outdoor wires/cables function: Last but not the Least, for me the setting up of the Outdoor Electrical Post Systems in many towns, cities of India and especially in Shillong and also the Outdoor Wires/Cables Function indeed spoil the beauty of Shillong City. In Shillong if you want to take a picture of the place or a picture of yourselves you can never avoid the picture of a bundle of wires hanging over from one post to the next one. It could be the electrical wires or cables of other devices. The most noticeable one, to cite an example, is near the Cathedral of Mary Help of Christians in Laitumkhrak in front of the Calvary. Above the fencing, those bundles of wires which are an eyesore and spoil the ambience of the place. In some places there are too many wires entangling into one another. I often wonder how the lineman can recognize the correct wire of the exact place. The Outdoor Electrical Wires System not only spoils the scenery of Shillong but has also accidentally claimed many lives in the past. If all these are kept underground it would be well appreciated and our beloved City will be a model city. It is difficult to introduce new things immediately but certainly as a concerned citizen of our City, I look forward to a new beginning in the near future. A great city is not to be confused with a populous one. It is a city where citizens have a "sense of responsibility and sense of belongingness".

(The writer is a student of CTE (PGT) Shillong).

Letters to the Editor

Oossa Marateang – the forgotten Jaintia martyr

Editor, Though U Kiang Nangbah was hanged by the British on December 30, 1862, the Jaintias continued their fight even after U Kiang's death. The solemn oath the patriots took was to fight Hadooh Khatar Snem Luti (literally, till the end of a twelve-year journey or

metaphorically, till the bitterest end). U Mynlon Daloi of Mynso and Mon Lato shouldered the leadership role and carried on the fight till their last breath. Meanwhile, a fresh revolt began in January 1863. The people had erected strong stockades and as usual, took advantage of the dense forest and started a fresh attack on the British forces who suffered heavy casualties. People in places like Rymbai, Padu, Nangingi, Nongbareh, Umkiang, Jowai, Mynso, Nartiang, Lamin, Mukhla and Nangbah were

still carrying out the resistance. However, by February 1863 the resistance ended because most of the leaders were killed in the fight with the British troops; some surrendered and were taken prisoner. Except for Oossa Marateang of Rymbai (name as recorded in the Bengal Judicial Proceedings No.214, 4 March 1863) who was tried by Capt. B.W.D Morton and was hanged on January 16, 1863. Today, as we remember the supreme sacrifices that Oossa Marateang had con-

tributed for the freedom of our motherland let us bow our heads in homage to the memory of those leaders who have laid down their lives in the service of the motherland. Prominent among these were: U Mynlon Mynso, U Mon Lato, U Kiri Daloi of Changpung, U Swar Sutnga, U Long Padu, U Mon Rymbai, U Chey Rangbah, U Bang Raliang, U Bukhiar Pator of Raliang, U Woh Riang, U Kiang Sule, and U Kat Changpung. Salute to two valiant patriots of Jaintia Hills U Kiang

Nangbah and Oossa Marateang who were hanged to death by the British rulers. Although they were killed by the British Raj their ideas, patriotic feelings, and sacrifices cannot be forgotten. As we pay our tributes to those men, whose efforts to liberate us from the colonial rulers ended in their supreme sacrifice at the gallows, it is also baffling as to why the episode of the Jaintia Resistance movement finds no place in the historical text of India's freedom movement. More than seven

decades after India achieved independence, the role of innumerable martyrs and freedom fighters from the northeastern region who gave their blood and offered their lives for the motherland need to be given their due place in the history of India's freedom struggle. Yours etc., Dr Omarin Kyndiah, Via email

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

Why is the universe ripping itself apart?

A new study of exploding stars shows dark energy may be more complicated than we thought

What is the universe made of? This question has driven astronomers for hundreds of years.

For the past quarter of a century, scientists have believed "normal" stuff like atoms and molecules that make up you, Earth, and nearly everything we can see only accounts for 5% of the universe. Another 25% is "dark matter", an unknown substance we can't see but which we can detect through how it affects normal matter via gravity.

The remaining 70% of the cosmos is made of "dark energy". Discovered in 1998, this is an unknown form of energy believed to be making the universe expand at an ever-increasing rate.

In a new study soon to be published in the *Astronomical Journal*, the properties of dark energy have measured in more detail than ever before. The results show it may be a hypothetical vacuum energy first proposed by Einstein - or it may be something stranger and more complicated that changes over time.

What is dark energy?

When Einstein developed the General Theory of Relativity over a century ago, he realised his equations showed the universe should either be expanding or shrinking. This seemed wrong to him, so he added a "cosmological constant" - a kind of energy inherent in empty space - to balance out the force of gravity and keep the universe static.

Later, when the work of Henrietta Swan Leavitt and Edwin Hubble showed the universe was indeed expanding, Einstein did away with the cosmological constant, calling it his "greatest mistake".

However, in 1998, two teams of researchers found the expansion of the universe was actually accelerating. This implies that something quite similar to Einstein's cosmological constant may exist after all - something we now call dark energy.

Since those initial measurements, we've been using supernovae and other probes to measure the nature of dark energy. Until now, these results have shown the density of dark energy in the universe appears to be constant.

This means the strength of dark energy remains the same, even as the universe grows - it doesn't seem to be spread more thinly as the universe gets bigger. We measure this with a number called w . Einstein's cosmological constant in effect set w to -1 , and earlier observations have suggested this was about right.

Exploding stars as cosmic measuring sticks

How do we measure what is in the universe and how fast it is growing? We don't have enormous tape measures or giant scales, so instead we use "standard candles": objects in space whose brightness we know.

Imagine it is night and you are standing on a long road with a few light poles. These poles all have the same light bulb, but the poles further away are fainter than the nearby ones.

This is because light fades proportionately to distance. If we know the power of the bulb, and can measure how bright the bulb appears to be, we can calculate the distance to the light pole.

For astronomers, a common cosmic light bulb is a kind of exploding star called a Type Ia supernova. These are white dwarf stars which often suck in matter from a neighbouring star and grow until they reach 1.44 times the mass of our Sun, at which point they explode.



The remains of a Type Ia supernova - a kind of exploding star used to measure distances in the universe. (Twitter)

By measuring how quickly the explosion fades, we can determine how bright it was and hence how far away from us.

The Dark Energy Survey

The Dark Energy Survey is the largest effort yet to measure dark energy. More than 400 scientists across multiple continents work together for nearly a decade to repeatedly observe parts of the southern sky.

Repeated observations let us look for changes, like new exploding stars. The more often you observe, the better you can measure these changes, and the larger the area you search, the more supernovae you can find.

The first results indicating the existence of dark energy used only a couple of dozen supernovae. The latest results from the Dark Energy Survey use around 1,500 exploding stars, giving much greater precision.

Using a specially built camera installed on the 4-metre Blanco Telescope at the Cerro-Tololo Inter-American Observatory in Chile, the survey found thousands of supernovae of different types.

To work out which ones were Type Ia (the kind needed for measuring distances), the 4-metre Anglo Australian Telescope at Siding Spring Observatory in New South Wales was used.

The Anglo Australian Telescope took measurements which broke up the colours of light from the supernovae. This lets us see a "fingerprint" of the individual elements in the explosion.

Type Ia supernovae have some unique features, like containing no hydrogen and silicon. And with enough supernovae, machine learning allowed the researchers to classify thousands of supernovae efficiently.

More complicated than the cosmological constant

Finally, after more than a decade of work and studying around 1,500 Type Ia supernovae, the Dark Energy Survey has produced a new best measurement of w . It was found that $w = -0.80 \pm 0.18$, so it's somewhere between -0.62 and -0.98 .

This is a very interesting result. It is close to -1 , but not quite exactly there. To be the cosmological constant, or the energy of empty space, it would need to be exactly -1 .

Where does this leave us? With the idea that a more complex model of dark energy may be needed, perhaps one in which this mysterious energy has changed over the life of the universe. (The Conversation)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, JANUARY 14, 2024

'Birthday Forecast'

Moon conjunct Saturn on your Solar return chart which ensures mixed time period ahead. You will be not so lucky in love matters. And could face break up. This will cause you some pain. But you will quickly get over it. Those who are single will get good marriage proposal. But they will not rush and will take decisions after thoughtful consideration. You will invest wisely after taking proper advice. Those who are professionals and in service sector will do well. There are chances of foreign travel for job or higher studies. You will also develop religious inclinations and could be drawn to a spiritual guru. Elders in the family will keep supporting you. Family members will respect you. You will be highly organized and disciplined and leave no task left. Your financial position will be excellent. Your colleagues and superiors will support you.

'This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20)

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

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21)

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

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21)

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

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22)

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

Leo: (July 23 - August 23)

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

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22)

This is a phase that brings fun, entertaining events and happiness to the fore. Your effectiveness, self-worth and finances are also highlighted. This stage of your life may be marked by hard work. Financial success may not be remarkable, yet

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

Libra: (September 23 - October 23)

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

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22)

Good financial returns are on the cards. You might have a more materialistic view of life and are more attracted to objects and possessions that give you a sense of comfort and status. You probably should be on the lookout for a tendency to create your own financial stress due to extravagant spending habits. You may visit religious places and strong feelings towards religion are enhanced. You learn to look inside of yourself with a newfound clarity and realism and ideally draw up considerable strength from within. You are full of energy and indulge in sports and other physical activities or a structured exercise routine.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21)

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

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20)

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

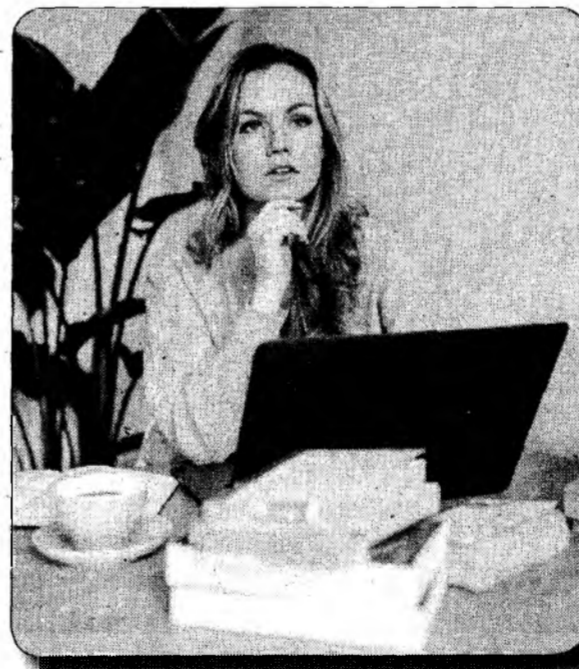
Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18)

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

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20)

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

It's normal for your mind to wander Here's how to maximise the benefits



Have you ever found yourself thinking about loved ones during a boring meeting? Or going over the plot of a movie you recently watched during a drive to the supermarket? This is the cognitive phenomenon known as "mind wandering". Research suggests it can account for up to 50% of our waking cognition (our mental processes when awake) in both western and non-western societies.

So what can help make this time productive and beneficial?

Mind wandering is not daydreaming

Mind wandering is often used interchangeably with daydreaming. They are both considered types of inattention but are not the same thing.

Mind wandering is related to a primary task, such as reading a book, listening to a lecture, or attending a meeting. The mind withdraws from that task and focuses on internally generated, unrelated thoughts.

On the other hand, daydreaming does not involve a primary, active task. For example, daydreaming would be thinking about an ex-partner while travelling on a bus and gazing out the window. Or lying in bed and thinking about what it might be like to go on a holiday overseas.

If you were driving the bus or making the bed and your thoughts diverted from the primary task, this would be classed as mind wandering.

The benefits of mind wandering

Mind wandering is believed to play an important role in generating new ideas, conclusions or insights (also known as "aha! moments"). This is because it can give your mind a break and free it up to think more

creatively.

This type of creativity does not always have to be related to creative pursuits (such as writing a song or making an artwork). It could include a new way to approach a university or school assignment or a project at work.

Another benefit of mind wandering is relief from boredom, providing the opportunity to mentally retreat from a monotonous task.

For example, someone who does not enjoy washing dishes could think about their upcoming weekend plans while doing the chore. In this instance, mind wandering assists in "passing the time" during an uninteresting task.

Mind wandering also tends to be future-oriented. This can provide an opportunity to reflect upon and plan future goals, big or small. For example, what steps do I need to take to get a job after graduation? Or, what am I going to make for dinner tomorrow?

What are the risks?

Mind wandering is not always beneficial, however. It can mean you miss out on crucial information. For example, there could be disruptions in learning if a student engages in mind wandering during a lesson that covers exam details. Or an important building block for learning.

Some tasks also require a lot of concentration in order to be safe. If you're thinking about a recent argument with a partner while driving, you run the risk of having an accident.

That being said, it can be more difficult for some people to control their mind wandering. For example, mind wandering is more prevalent in people with ADHD.

What can you do to maximise the benefits? There are several things you can do to maximise the benefits of mind wandering.

- **be aware:** awareness of mind wandering allows you to take note of and make use of any productive thoughts. Alternatively, if it is not a good time to mind wander it can help bring your attention back to the task at hand
- **context matters:** try to keep mind wandering to non-demanding tasks rather than demanding tasks. Otherwise, mind wandering could be unproductive or unsafe. For example, try think about that big presentation during a car wash rather than when driving to and from the car wash
- **content matters:** if possible, try to keep the content positive. Research has found, keeping your thoughts more positive, specific and concrete (and less about "you"), is associated with better wellbeing. For example, thinking about tasks to meet upcoming work deadlines could be more productive than ruminating about how you felt stressed or failed to meet past deadlines. (The Conversation)

"Time is the school in which we learn,
time is the fire in which we burn."

—Delmore Schwartz

The Shillong Times

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Yatra for justice

THE timing of the Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra is perfect, but on how strongly it could impact the April-May Lok Sabha polls and formation of the next government is a matter of speculation. Rahul Gandhi who started the Yatra From Thoubal in Manipur, the scene of the recent communal conflagration and violence, says it's an ideological odyssey and not linked to the Parliament polls, but the truth lies somewhere in between. The principal idea of this Yatra is to rejuvenate the Congress party and equip it to effectively face the ruling BJP and Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The BJP and Modi are, as of now, in a strong position. They aim to acquire more strength through the Ayodhya Ram Mandir inauguration on January 22, which would form the launch-pad for the saffron party's 2024 general election campaign.

Between now and mid-March, the Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra is set to pass through 15 states, 110 Lok Sabha constituencies and cover a distance of 6,700 km. On its completion, Rahul Gandhi would have covered the whole of India, starting with the first edition of the Yatra from Kanyakumari in the south to Kashmir up north in 150 days from September 7, 2022. The planning of the Yatra this time is in a hybrid mode, involving both walking and motoring. The first Yatra was a success when seen from the point of view of the crowd turnout and the euphoric response it got from the people. It played a major role in re-activating the Congress party in Telangana to finally grab power there. Despite the enthusiastic support the Yatra got in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, the party lost the assembly polls. A strong point with the Congress, even in its timid days, is that it has an organisational network that should be the envy of the ruling BJP. What it lacks today in state after state, is the money power, while the BJP has an abundance of it. Yet, programmes like this work mainly on manpower support at the grassroots level. The grand old party has a base in each hamlet in nearly every state. This is to Rahul Gandhi's great advantage.

The Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra emphasizes on aspects like social, political, economic justice and also justice for the youth. It covers major geographical areas where the minorities — Christians and Muslims — as also the Dalits and Backward Castes are numerically strong. Faced with odds from the saffron dispensation, they are likely to back this Yatra in strong ways. The start from Manipur itself is significant. In what is a contradiction in terms the un-enthused INDIA alliance partners would watch the show from the "sidelines."

The Jañtia Kingdom: An Introduction

By H.H. Mohrmen

Nowadays, we only hear about the Jañtia hills because it is the name of one of the principal regions of the state of Meghalaya. Jañtia hills, now bifurcated into the East and West Jañtia Hills Districts of Meghalaya, has a rich history of its own. Jañtia or Jayantia was a kingdom that has existed for a long time and was once a flourishing kingdom. Hence, there is an urgent need to dispel this lack of knowledge and bring much-needed information about the kingdom to the public domain. It is certain that Jañtia is a local adaptation of a Sanskrit name of the erstwhile kingdom that flourished between the early 1500s to the later part of the 1800s.

The Origin of the Jañtia Kingdom

The origin of the kingdom is quite complicated but interesting, and due to the lack of written resources, to understand the kingdom, we have to rely on oral narratives too. It is not that oral narratives are to be considered inferior, but it is much easier to understand the past if written sources are available. The people of Jañtia hills have always been proud of their history and particularly their kingdom, but there was no evidence to corroborate the claim. That is until the Jayantia Buranji was brought to light. The history of the Jayantia kingdom is a classic case in point where written sources complement the oral narratives that have been passed down from one generation to another.

Name of the Kingdom

Jayantia is the name of a small but flourishing kingdom at the foothills where the plains of Sylhet meet the rising hills of what is now Meghalaya. The name Jayanti is not a tribal name but obviously of Sanskrit origin, and the Jayantia Buranji says that it derives from the name of a female queen who had no issue of her own to succeed her to the throne. The Buranji, which has become the major source of information about the kingdom, also tells a story about king Jayanta Rai who had no son but who had only a daughter. Since the king was without a son, he handed over the reins of his kingdom to his daughter Jayanti Devi. The name of the kingdom is hence derived from the name of Jayanti Devi, the queen of the kingdom. Later on, the highlanders adopted the kingdom of their own and to this day call the hills they live in the Jañtia hills. It is also in-

teresting to note that it is not the plain but the hills people of the kingdom who adopted the name as their identity and continue to call their hills the Jañtia hills. It may also be mentioned that the temple at Nartiang, which was also believed to be a Shakti peeth, is named Jayanti Devi.

What Are the Buranjis

The tribal people have no script of their own, so they have no written history; all they have are oral narratives, which they have passed down from one generation to the other. On the other hand, we are fortunate that the Jayantia kingdom interacted with the neighbouring kingdom, particularly the Ahoms, who are more advanced and the most powerful kingdom in the region too. The Ahoms have their own chronicle in which they recorded their interaction with the neighbouring kingdoms, and these are called Buranjis. Mention about the kingdom can be found in the Jayantia Buranji, which is a collection of information from the chronicles collected by the Ahom. The Buranji was first published by Dr. S.K. Bhuyan, and of the many Buranjis he published, Jayantia Buranji deals specifically with the Jayantia kingdom.

What Are the Jayantia Buranjis

Assamese chronicles dealing with the political relationship of the Ahom Government with other states are called "Chronicles of Political Relations" or "Katakai Buranji" in Assamese. The Buranji includes letters that are bilingual, recorded in Sanskrit and Assamese, some in archaic Assamese, and these are collections of correspondence between Jayantia and the Kachari kings with the Ahom kings and their nobles too (Bora Shiela and Sharma Manorama From the Editors, Jayantia Buranji, July 2020). Jayantia Buranji contains important information about the social customs of the people who lived in the kingdom at that point in time. Hopefully the information essential to grasping the history of the ancient kingdom will be available in the Buranji (Dutta S. K Introduction Jayantia Buranji, July 10, 1937, English Translation 2022).

Jayantia Kingdom was an Ancient Kingdom

There is no dispute about the fact that the Jayantia kingdom was an ancient kingdom

in the region, mentioned in religious scriptures. The Buranji mentions that there is a tradition in ancient times that Jayantia was ruled by a dynasty of Brahmanical rulers and is supposed to be a "female kingdom" mentioned in the Mahabharata. It also mentions that Arjuna was supposed to fight against Jayantia, the female kingdom. The Buranji also stated that the Jayantia kingdom mentioned in the Puranic literature too. It mentions in the main the Shrine of Jayanti Devi (Dutta S.K. Introduction, the Jayanti Buranji etc), which is perhaps the temple in Nartiang.

Chapter one of the Jayantia Buranji, named Genesis of the Jayantias, also says that since the days of Yudhishtir, Jayantiapur was ruled by a succession of Brahmin kings and mentioned how the Jayantias came to be known as Khasi. It was mentioned that since the day of Yudhishtir, Jayantiapur was ruled by a succession of Brahmin kings. King Yudhishtir decided to perform Rajashuya Yagna and to prepare for the sacrifice; he sent his brothers in all four directions. In a show of disrespect, king Indrasen refused to appear before Bhim, Bhim was infuriated and dragged him on his bottom till his testicles ruptured, he spared Indrasen's life because he was a Brahmin. It was said that since then the Jayantia kings came to be known as Khasis and the name where the incident occurred is called Khasipoor. (Jayantia Buranji pp 24) Jayantia is obviously an ancient kingdom but what about the hills people? Are the hills people parts of the kingdom since its inception? Can we say that hills people were ancient people? That is a pertinent question? The question is also how and when did the two kingdoms become one kingdom?

Two Kingdoms become one

It is an established fact that what was once known as the Jayantia kingdom was a merger of two kingdoms. The kingdom of Jayantia included the Jayantia Hills and the plains to the south of these hills, extending as far as the river Surma. What we now know as Jañtia hills was the hills portion of a once great kingdom, the boundaries of which extended from Gobha-Sonapur in the north

and to the south, the mighty river Surma, towards the East the river Kupli, and towards the West the great Brahmaputra. The Sylhet areas, now in Bangladesh, and Nowgong, now part of Assam, were once the plain portion of the Jañtia Kingdom. The highlanders who live in the hills portion of the kingdom were the Pnar, the War, the Biate/Beate of Saipung, and the Hadem of Saitsama (Mohrmen H.H., Cultural History of Jañtia in Stories Stones and Traditions unpublished yet). The hills were the ancestral home of the later kings of Jayantia, which belong to the tribal group called the Pnar or the Synteng, and the plains country was annexed at a later period. But it was the latter track, which was first known as Jayantia and which is considered to have a history that dates back to ancient times.

When did the two Kingdoms merge?

The common conjecture was that like many flourishing and advanced Hindu kingdoms in ancient times, Jayantia kingdom was also demolished by tribal chiefs who defeated them and established themselves in the new territory. In his History of Assam, Gait suggests that it was Prabhat Rai who, though not the founder of the Hills dynasty, extended the kingdom to the plains. Prabhat Rai was the ruler of the hill kingdom which the hills people called 'Ka hima Sutnga'. Prabhat Rai is certainly not a tribal name, so it was suggested that the name Prabhat Rai, which means the Lord of the Hills, was given to tribal chiefs by plains people (Dutta S.K. Introduction, the Jayanti Buranji English Translation 2022). While the tribal narrative was that the Sutnga kingdom, after defeating the neighbouring chiefs had ruled over almost all the villages in the region and became very powerful. They went for an expedition to the plains, and one of the kingdoms that they invaded was Jayantia, located at the foothills. The tribal Sutnga kings, who extended their domain from the hills to the plains and who were also still backward then, moved their capital to Jayantiapur, which is more advanced and has progressed in every aspect.

Conclusion: The Jayantia Buranji has provided a wealth of information about the Jayantia kingdom and its relationship with the Ahom kings in particular; hopefully, more work is done to bring to light the history of the kingdom.

I am sad I will not find my childhood Ramchandra in the new Ayodhya Temple After Ram Mandir inauguration deity will come as a new avatar

By Devasis Chattopadhyay

On 22 January 2024, India will change forever. It's a misstep we may never recover from, a change triggered by a temple.

In our country, regardless of religion, we consecrate shrines all the time. In a multi-faith and primarily agrarian society, home to 140 crore population, places of worship possess a wonderful spontaneity. They have a way of appearing just about anywhere — under banyan trees, along national highways, and at village squares. They even audaciously compete with mammoth steel-and-glass totems in metropolitan cities, serving as oases of peace at busy street corners, unmoved by the swirling chaos around them. Our affinity for prayer is a measure of our devotion. It's just who we are.

Sample this. If you're a motorist, you've probably spotted a temple dedicated to Baba 'Highwayshwar' Shiva on the roadside, along the national highway (hence Highwayshwar!), on the outskirts of Howrah, near Kolkata. As they whiz past the shrine, the truckers and the motorists hastily utter a few words in prayer, seeking blessings for a safe ride-through. That's how intimately devotion is woven into the fabric of our daily lives. Then there's the exhaustive list of 33 crore heavenly souls, or 33 crore of devatas and devis, that we pray to. But even though we are an unusually pious lot, we have never included Ramchandra in our pantheon of gods, at least, not many of us. For us, in Bengal, and in many other parts of our country including the North-East, and in parts of Southern India, Ramchandra, the eldest among four sons of Dasharatha, was a king, a husband, a son, a brother, and at times the father of lovable twins — a noble soul. In fact, in some parts of Bihar, especially in Mithila, he is still the favourite son-in-law.

Based on our belief system, we regard Ramchandra's dedication to his kingdom, subjects and parents with admiration, and his apparent lack of empathy for his wife with disdain. He is one among us, just like the Pandavas in the Mahabharata. To a section of Indians, he is the Maryada Purushotam — the epitome of a man — honourable, dignified and forgiving.

There is a though a section of Indians in the Hindi heartland that worships Ramchandra as a deity but as an incarnation of Lord Vishnu. However, in many philosophical schools of thought in India, Krishna — the king of the Yadavas, also known to us as Lord Narayana, and believed to be a later incarnation of Lord Vishnu — is more widely accepted as a divine being.

Ramchandra has always been a gentle, benevolent soul, accepting exile over the throne of Ayodhya. He was never a god. Also, nowhere in our Smriti school of philosophical narratives, including the epic Ramayana, which narrates his story, are there images of violent, trident-yielding followers marching to a blood-curdling chant that bears his name alongside him.

The consecration of the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya on January 22 will change all that. A political muse for several decades, Ramchandra has been thrust into the Hindu pantheon by our self-indulgent politicians, who are hijacking our devotion to make an organised political statement. The new temple was anointed in violence which is in direct contrast to what Ram stands for, the moment our earthly demi-gods decided to use the symbolism of religion to carpet-bomb their propaganda. The narrative of a Ram Mandir in Ayodhya, built on the site of a mosque, has been meticulously curated on the myth of Ramchandra as a deity for over half a century. It has everything to do with fulfilling an organisational objective and nothing to do with the spiritual upliftment of the masses.

Of all the high-profile international equivalents I can think of that mirror the Babri-Masjid-turned-Ram-Mandir saga in Ayodhya, is the story of Hagia Sophia or Grand Mosque in Istanbul, in Turkey. The Hagia Sophia was an Eastern Orthodox church from 360 CE to 1204 CE, when it was turned into a Catholic church following the Fourth Crusade. It was converted into a mosque after the Ottoman (Islamic Caliphate) conquest of Constantinople (the earlier name of Istanbul) in 1453 CE. It served as a mosque until 1935, when it was turned into a museum.

In 2020, the Hagia Sophia was resurrected as a mosque, when Turkey's incumbent President Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced the decision after a court annulled the site's status as a museum. Defending the decision, President Erdogan, the neo-nationalist strongman of Turkey, said the country had exercised its sovereign right in reconfiguring the place of worship into a mosque. The logic is disturbingly familiar. There are many other cities in the world that have managed to protect and preserve their built heritage with maturity; despite regime changes and religious turmoil.

Ironically, Ayodhya too once stood as a bastion of harmony, its history boasting a rich heritage of Hindu, Islamic, Jain, Buddhist and even Sikh traditions. Apart from the texts of Hindu scholars, Islamic writers such as Al-Biruni, Ibn Battuta, Abul Fazl and Dara Shikoh spoke fondly of Ayodhya, detailing its beauty and rich cultural heritage. This harmonious reality was tragically altered when the sledgehammers were brought down on the domes of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. This singular event changed not only the course of our country but also the identity politics of India.

I am a Hindu and a Brahmin by birth, and I have no quarrel with the faith of my birth; neither do I have a quarrel with any other faith. I believe we can all co-exist peacefully. It's a responsibility each one of us — 140 crore Indians — carried with us till our politicians made us think otherwise. It is one of India's most monumental man-made tragedies.

Like most Indian children, I grew up with the bedtime story of Raja Ramchandra and his wife Sita, narrated by my grandmother. It was not a violent story. It was a story of devotion, sacrifice and love. In the reality of a New India, the retelling of Raja Ramchandra's story has flipped these values while elevating him to a divine status of an aggressive deity assigned by modern-day mortals.

In the two decades of the 1980s and 1990s, India witnessed an unprecedented growth of a radical and militant Hindutva, a huge departure from the traditionally equitable and consultative Hinduism. This departure surprised many social scientists as the essential characteristics of Hinduism had never displayed the fundamentalistic behavioural trends of the followers of Abrahamic religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Violence has never been intrinsic to Hinduism. In fact, Hinduism has always been distinguished by the socio-cultural markers of integration and universal love as opposed to the militant collective hysteria of a bloodthirsty mob. The Ramayana typified this. The believers of Hindutva altered the paradigm.

The events of 22 January will not be a spontaneous celebration of faith but a political war cry. Even the seers, the Sankaracharyas of famed Hindu Char-Dhams, said so. I know with utter certainty that I will not find my childhood Ramayana there. And, that makes me sad because India will never be the same again; the loss will only tarnish our memories and our motherland. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

Magic Cook fire incident and aggrieved residents

Editor,
I write this letter to articulate the concerns of the residents of the neighbourhood regarding the protracted aftermath of the major fire at Magic Cook flour mill on Luckier Road, Shillong-2, which occurred on December 2, 2023. The uncontrollable blaze on that fateful night had in fact caused chaos and panic among the entire residents of the neighbouring localities, who were very worried about their well-being and safety.

It is now almost 45 days since the incident, yet the embers continue to smoulder within the factory premises. For over three weeks the "clouds of smoke" were seen covering the entire locality. Many aggrieved residents had knocked on the door of the Rangbah Shnong with complaints of pollution of the environment and health hazards. Numerous residents, particularly the elderly suffering from asthma, expressed their deep sense of frustration due to the continual smoke emissions. Additionally, until two weeks ago, many residents experienced severe eye irritations, even burning sensation.

The blatant neglect in clearing the burnt debris completely has not only exacerbated pollution but also led to an unusual increase in "houseflies" during this winter season, much to the dismay of the residents. A local man who runs a betelnut shop says that the sudden emergence of pests

raises concerns about potential health risks due to the spread of harmful bacteria.

Moreover, the "offensive smell" coming from the site, as pointed out by Nong-sohphoh-Upper Mawprems' headman, Johnny Kharmawlong, and secretary, Hardeep Rynthathiang, is a reminder of the ongoing pollution. This issue gravely impacts the quality of life in our neighbourhood.

One wonders what is cooking in the pot of Magic Cook that the factory did not bother to douse the smoke-emitting bags of wheat or whatsoever completely. Will that yummy cooked stuff be equally served to all the people around? There is much more than that meets the eyes. A lady lecturer at the nearby college retorts: "This deliberate lackadaisical attitude in managing the fire's consequences is utterly uncalled for. Why do we residents have to be at the receiving end for so long?"

Hence in the greater interest of the locality, I sincerely urge upon the concerned district authorities, the police department, and the pollution control board to take necessary action as promptly as possible. It is essential to investigate why the debris has not been completely cleared till date. The authorities should ensure that at any fire incident, such a dereliction is not "repeated" by anyone in the future. No one has the right to wreak havoc on the precious environment or the health and well-being of the public. The government should investigate the matter without further delay. This letter, written on persistent requests by the

residents, should not go up in smoke.

Yours etc.,
Salil Gewali,
Shillong

Water woes persist in Mawbah: Concerns over new RCC tank leakage

Editor,
In a bid to enhance the water infrastructure in Mawbah (Lower Barapathar), authorities recently replaced the ageing metallic water tank with a new RCC tank. However, instead of providing relief to residents, the installation has given rise to a new concern—excessive water leakage from the tank onto roads and drains.

The installation of the new water tank was anticipated to resolve the long-standing water supply issues in the locality. Unfortunately, a considerable amount of the precious resource is now being wasted, flowing freely into the streets and drains during designated water supply hours.

Residents, who had hoped for improved water access, are expressing frustration over what appears to be the mismanagement of this crucial project. We were optimistic that the new water tank would address our water woes, but the current situation is disheartening. Water is literally going down the drain, leaving our taps dry.

The leakage issue has prompted calls for prompt action from authorities. Concerns have been raised about the environmental impact of water spillage and the potential

for water scarcity during the dry months from March to the end of April.

As the residents grapple with the paradox of a new water tank exacerbating their water scarcity concerns, there is a collective hope that authorities will take immediate and effective measures to rectify the leaks and ensure improved water access for all.

Yours etc.,
Krishna Chettri
Shillong-2

Well done South Africa

Editor,
South Africa deserves our gratitude for pleading with the UN top court to order an immediate halt of Israel's devastating military campaign in the Palestinian enclave. This act of humanity shows that Nelson Mandela's country can really walk the walk.

What drove South Africa to approach the International Court of Justice against the ongoing slaughter of the people of Gaza is pure humanity as there is no question of South Africa having religious affiliation with the Palestinian Muslims. South Africa is a Christian majority nation with Islam being a minority religion. Less than 2 percent of the total population of South Africa are Muslims. Moreover, its geographical location is far away in a different continent.

Therefore, South Africa's filing of an application on December 29, 2023 before the ICJ to stop the butchery in Gaza has its origins neither in a blinkered national interest nor in a parochial religious bonhomie but in an exemplary display of empathy. South

African President Cyril Ramaphosa explained the reason for their empathy with the Palestinians when he said, "As a people who once tasted the bitter fruits of dispossession, discrimination, racism and state-sponsored violence, we are clear that we will stand on the right side of history."

On the first two days of hearings at the ICJ, South Africa rightly pointed out that Israel's offensive demolished much of the coastal enclave and killed more than 23,000 people as per the report of Gaza health authorities. It did not mince words in accusing Israel of aiming to bring about "the destruction of the population" of Gaza.

South African lawyer, Adila Hassim aptly told the judges and the audience in the packed, ornate room of the Peace Palace at The Hague, "Genocides are never declared in advance, but this court has the benefit of the past 13 weeks of evidence that shows incontrovertibly a pattern of conduct and related intention that justifies as a plausible claim of genocidal acts." According to Reuters and the Committee to Protect Journalists, indiscriminate bombing by Israel in Gaza even on hospitals, schools and refugee camps killed over 23,000 Palestinians, displaced 19,35,000 Palestinians from Gaza, destroyed 40,000 homes, partially damaged 2,34,000 homes, ruined 352 schools and destroyed 240 health facilities, 100 heritage sites, 104 mosques and damaged 1,612 industrial facilities.

This bloody massacre of innocent civilians, the pictures of dead bodies of children and fatally injured children make me weak at the knees. I couldn't agree more with what another

lawyer, Tembeka Ngcukaitobi said, "The scale of destruction in Gaza, the targeting of family homes and civilians, the war being a war on children, all make clear that genocidal intent is both understood and has been practiced. The articulated intent is the destruction of Palestine life."

After the Hamas attacks on southern Israel on October 7, 2023 the United Nations secretary-general António Guterres said that Hamas attack did not take place in a vacuum. His comment was as right as the observation that Indian Rebellion of 1857 did not take place in a vacuum. The truth is that 15 million Palestinians have been suffering the brutality of Israel's oppression for decades.

The American government needs to reflect on what Khaled Abou El Fadl has said, "The people in the United States don't like to hear it, but puritanical Islam has been on the rise because of our unequivocal policy of absolute support for Israel, regardless of what Israel does—even if they invade Lebanon and bombard a major city like Beirut, full of civilians."

The USA ought to take a neutral role and help the United Nations to effect a permanent two state solution for a lasting peace in West Asia. The International Court of Justice should issue a prompt order to stop the wholesale slaughter of innocent people and children in Gaza.

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.

"In the public realm, secularism should not concede a single inch to religious intrusions."

— Gad Saad

The Shillong Times

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Meghalaya games needs patronage

IT is ironic that the Meghalaya Games – an event first started in 2001 should only be having its 5th edition in 2024. By now there should have been at least 23 editions of the Games but this also shows how in Meghalaya many events are launched but not sustained due to the lack of political will and an unclear vision about what is good for the youth of the state. Credit must go to the MDA Government for reviving what was a lost cause and holding the 4th edition of the Games in 2022. The 5th edition scheduled for 2023 could not be held due to certain reasons and is now being held in Tura. The idea of taking the Games venue to different parts of the State and not just hold it in Shillong is another good move. Credit must also go to the members of the Meghalaya Olympics Association who have been pressing the government to revive the Games so that the youth of the State have an outlet to showcase their sporting talents which are not in short supply. They only need state and corporate patronage and first grade training to hold their own at national and international events. In fact, many a sportsperson has done Meghalaya proud over the years despite very poor training facilities and not enough coaches in the disciplines the youth wish to pursue.

With about 22 lakh or more youth below the age of 25 years the State has to really plan out how to keep these youth engaged. We are witnessing a scenario where many a young person has taken to drugs due to several reasons but the prime one being that of not having the opportunities to do what they have a passion for. Sports is a great outlet for young people and those who are physically fit usually don't do drugs because they are motivated to pursue their dreams and follow a rigorous self-disciplining schedule and daily practice. This sense of discipline is inculcated through sports right at the school level. While it is true that not all young people are cut out for sports, it is equally important to hone the skills of the youth in other areas such as music, acting, craft-making, art and a host of livelihoods pursuits that they are good at but do not have the space or the training to scale up their skills.

What is also important for Meghalaya is to have dedicated career counselling in middle and high school so that the aptitudes of the youth are identified early and they pursue careers they have the acumen for. Too often the youth are pushed by their parents to take up something they don't have a heart for. This can be frustrating both for the youth and the parents. Indeed, the Government has to allocate more resources to develop the skills of the younger generation. If sports is their forte they should be trained under the best. Football is already a strong point but what prevents the growth of the game is the absence of corporate sponsorship unlike in cricket. This is an area that needs better focus. The young Sports Minister of Meghalaya can perhaps show the way.

The consecration of the Ram temple on January 22 may well have the country anoint a Hindu religious city in Ayodhya like the Vatican City of the Christians or Mecca of the Muslims, though it has always boasted of being secular. The Father of the nation, Mahatma Gandhi, or even his direct followers and philosophers could have never imagined that secularism would yield place to majoritarianism—the transformation that has taken place in the last decade raising a lot of heat and dust.

Apart from the allegation that the consecration of the temple has been timed just before the Lok Sabha elections, what is more surprising is the Prime Minister's claim that God had chosen him as "an instrument to represent all Indians during the consecration". This, in response to questions being raised over his pre-eminence at the event. Modi said he had begun his 11-day special observance as prescribed in the scriptures to "awaken divine consciousness" within himself in the lead-up to the consecration. However, he did not specify what he meant by special observance.

Though the secular spirit is now being slowly vanishing from society, Mahatma Gandhi himself never went to a Hindu temple. Only once he visited the Meenakshi temple in Madurai in 1946 after the shrine was opened to Dalits to enter the premises. Though Gandhiji described himself as a Hindu, his writings bear testimony to his profound religious feelings, his understanding of Hinduism which was completely different from what we see today and his chosen mode of worship was inter-faith meetings, held in open grounds where Hindus, Muslims, Parsis, Sikhs, Jains and Christians would pray together from verses of all scriptures. The Mahatma tried to show that India belonged to all faiths equally and propagated the essence of different religious faiths and doctrines.

The Mahatma believed in the plurality of religions and abhorred any concept of the superiority of some races or religions. Stressing the need for equal respect for all religions, Gandhiji observed: "While I believe myself to

Ram Temple consecration

Farewell to secularism?

By Dhurjati Mukherjee

be a Hindu, I know that I do not worship God in the same manner as any one or all of them". This perception of the Mahatma cannot be said to be the majority view in the society today. The ruling dispensation has made us believe that we should be proud of our religion and in the process, denigrate other religions and the sentiments of those who do not subscribe to the Hindu line of thinking.

It would be pertinent here to mention that just a few days back, over 3000 Christians from across the country registered a protest against community leaders' culpable silence on minority rights and other grim realities while participating in the Prime Minister's

the country. It was indeed distressing to note that the letter even referred to Christians and Christian schools which "have been hounded and harassed, their places of worship destroyed, they have been denied their ordinary rights as citizens and been subjected to denigration and demonisation."

If this happens to be the attitude of the Christian community, one can easily presume how the Muslims have been treated or, to use the right phrase humiliated, and what they think of the present government and its attitude towards the minorities. Obviously, the present genre of Muslims cannot be blamed for what their forefathers have done, and they



Christmas celebrations. In an open letter released recently, it stated: "The hard truth is that the Prime Minister and his government have consistently disregarded their constitutional mandate, be it to the minorities, the Adivasis, the Dalits, the backward castes, the farmers, labourers, migrants etc. hence their gratitude to the Prime Minister was not in our name".

The letter further emphasised that since 2014; in particular, Christians in India have been victims of continued attacks and vilification from members of the ruling establishment across

have a right to life, being citizens of this democratic country.

This brings us to the moot question i.e., while Ram is being worshipped and a grand temple being built in his honour, can the country claim to have introduced 'ram rajya' in India. The answer obviously is a big no. The ruling dispensation has been rather poor in matters of governance and the entire development process has largely ignored the lower echelons of society. The bottom tiers of society have been greatly affected as the disparity in society has widened. Not just

income disparity between the rich and the poor but also between the urban and the rural class, between the formal and the informal sectors, between industrial workers and farmers etc. In the context of such development, all talks of India emerging the third largest economy by virtue of increased wealth of business tycoons such as Ambanis, Adanis and the Tatas appear meaningless.

Truth, justice, equality are steadily vanishing from today's society where violence, jealousy and hatred is manifest. Thus, while eulogising Ram without following the principles that he stood for and the way he ruled his kingdom smacks of nothing but hypocrisy. Moreover, unlike Swami Vivekananda, Lord Ram is just a mythological figure as the Anthropological Survey of India (ASI) did not find any scientific evidence of Ayodhya being his birthplace.

Moreover, religion has always been regarded as a private affair, but the ruling dispensation has made it a political issue, obviously to reap benefits from the coming Lok Sabha elections due shortly. While the Congress has decided to boycott the inauguration on these grounds, the three Shankaracharyas have also decided to skip the event for being held against what they consider scripture-mandated norms.

It may be mentioned here that Jawaharlal Nehru had adopted a stance, underlining the need for the State to keep its distance from religion. However, the current Prime Minister has projected himself as the sole guarantor of Hindu religion and his party, along with the RSS, to propagate and spread Hinduism in the world, though of a distorted version, much different from Vivekananda's approach of unity of all religion.

A section of political analysts and sociologists are quite surprised at the trajectory of the country's political development to being a Hindu state. All the fanfare about the Ram temple is just to ensure that the BJP is assured of a landslide victory in the elections. And this is destined to happen as education and awareness has yet to trickle down to the masses in the backward areas of the country. They leave their destiny to the almighty.—INFA

Artificial intelligence has to be adapted selectively to protect jobs

World economic forum findings should be of concern to India

By Nitya Chakraborty

The World Economic Forum (WEF), the organization of big global CEO's and neo liberal think tanks has expressed its concern at the impact of the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) indiscriminately in the industries of the countries, both developed and developing. The random use of the latest human intelligence technology will be detrimental to the young job seekers throughout the world.

The WEF began its annual session in Davos on January 15 amidst concerns about global growth uncertainty and the possibility of the expansion of the present wars on the global economy. The WEF issues an annual preview of the global economic prospects every year before the summit. This year the 2024 report mentions the challenges in an era of geopolitical tensions and the instability of the economic policies in some countries.

As per the Chief Economists Report of the WEF, global economic prospects remain subdued and fraught with uncertainty, as the global economy continues to grapple with headwinds from tight financial conditions, geopolitical rifts and rapid advances in generative artificial intelligence (AI).

More than half of chief economists (56%) expect the global economy to weaken this year, while 43% foresee unchanged or stronger conditions. A strong majority also believe labour markets (77%) and financial conditions (70%) will loosen over the coming year. Although the expectations for high inflation have been pared back in all regions, regional growth outlooks vary widely and no region is slated for very strong growth in 2024.

The latest Chief Economists Outlook highlights the precarious nature of the current economic environment. "Amid accelerating divergence, the resilience of the global economy will continue to be tested in the year ahead. Though global inflation is easing, growth is stalling, financial conditions remain tight, global tensions are deepening and inequalities are rising – highlighting the urgent need for global cooperation to build momentum for sustainable, inclusive economic growth."

The outlook for South Asia and East Asia and Pacific remains positive and broadly unchanged Majority (93% and 86% respectively) expecting at least moderate growth in 2024. India is set to record fastest economic growth among large economies. China is an exception, with a smaller majority (69%) expecting moderate growth as weak consumption, lower industrial production and property market concerns weigh on the prospects of a stronger rebound.

In Europe, the outlook has weakened significantly since the September 2023 survey, with the share of respondents expecting weak or very weak growth almost doubling to 77%. In the United States and the Middle East and North Africa, the outlook is weaker too, with about six in 10 respondents foreseeing moderate or stronger growth this year (down from 78% and 79% respectively).

There is a notable uptick in growth expectations for Latin America and the Caribbean, sub-Saharan Africa and Central Asia, although the views remain for broadly moderate growth.

About seven in 10 chief economists expect the pace of geoeconomic fragmentation to accelerate this year, with a majority saying geopolitics will stoke volatility in the global economy (87%) and stock markets (80%), increase localization (86%), strengthen geoeconomic blocs (80%) and widen the North-South divide (57%) in the next three years.

As governments increasingly experiment with industrial policy tools, experts are nearly unanimous in expecting these policies to remain largely uncoordinated between countries. While two-thirds of chief economists expect industrial policies to enable the emergence of new economic growth hotspots and vital new industries, a majority also warn of rising fiscal strains (79%) and divergence between higher- and lower-income economies (66%).

Chief economists expect AI-enabled benefits to vary widely across income groups, with notably more optimistic views about the effects in high-income economies. A strong majority said generative AI will increase efficiency of output production (79%) and innovation (74%) in high-income economies this year. Looking at the next five years, 94% expect these productivity benefits to become economically significant in high-income economies, compared to only 53% for low-income economies.

Almost three-quarters (73%) do not foresee net-positive impact on employment in low-income economies and 47% said the same for high-income economies. The views are somewhat more divided on the likelihood of generative AI to increase standards of living and to lead to a decline in trust, with both being slightly more likely in high-income markets.

For India which is on a high growth path expecting to record a GDP hike of more than 7 per cent in 2023-24, the concern is the continuing increase in the number of jobless despite the high growth rate. India has a big talent pool in AI and more and more techies are opting for this latest technology. As the WEF report says the use of AI enabled services will give a big boost to productivity but will not lead to the generation of jobs in general. Even in the United States, big movement has been launched by the affected persons against the indiscriminate introduction of the AI in key areas like auto, publishing and film industry.

AI has a big role in improving productivity. It has to be accepted as the latest technology like the computers that were introduced in the 1970s. But taking into account the absence of the social security facilities in India, the Government and the industry have to make alternate arrangements including retraining for the affected before implementing the AI facilities. The central trade unions also have to demand the absorption of the impacted staff by the concerned industries and the public sector units rather than stressing on the ban on the use of AIs. (IPA Service)



Letters to the Editor

Poor numerical ability the culprit

Editor,
With regards to your paper's news item, "Rakkam goads Meghalaya's youth to crack IAS exams" (ST-Jan 13, 2024), I would like to say that our Hon'ble Education Minister's lamentations about the lack of success of our candidates in UPSC exams did not come too soon. In fact, they came very late in the day. It is concerning that the last time a tribal candidate could crack the IAS exams was 12 years ago. But, should our focus be on this exam only? To me, what is more concerning is the dwindling success rate of indigenous tribal candidates even in lower level exams conducted by the central government recruitment agencies like the Staff Selection Commission, etc. At this level too, tribal candidates from other North-eastern States outperform our candidates. As I see it, the obvious culprit is the gradual deterioration of our educational standards. It has been many years since the MBOSE has devalued the importance of Mathematics at the Secondary level by allowing those who fail in the subject to be promoted to the next higher class. This has spawned tens of thousands of students with weak numerical abilities over the years. Their weak capacity to comprehend, reason about

and apply numerical ideas has put most of them at a lifelong disadvantage. When it comes to competitive exams at almost all levels, everyone knows that tests of numerical competency are integral. So, it goes without saying that most of our students who have been rendered weak in Mathematics by our faulty educational system stand little chance of success.

The Hon'ble Education Minister promised "that the state government will do its bit of shouldering the responsibility" to reverse this trend. To this end, the government should also give due importance to grooming students to succeed in exams for the middle and lower level central government posts as well as it is being done by the government of Mizoram.

In conclusion, it is my turn to lament the total absence of civil society organizations that work to improve the employability of our armies of unemployed youth. In the past, there used to exist organizations like the Khasi Jaintia Welfare Organization which contributed immensely in guiding our candidates to succeed in competitive exams for various jobs especially in central government departments and organizations. We need such organisations to shoulder responsibility to train our youth the face interview boards, especially the viva-voce.

Yours etc.,
Samuel Sweet,
Shillong-2

Congress boycott of inauguration of Ram temple

Editor,

Now it is official that Cong leaders Sonia Gandhi, Mallikarjuna Kharge and Adhir Ranjan had declined the offer to attend the Ram temple inauguration on Jan 22, because they treat it as a political function and not a religious one. As expected the Congress's refusal to grace the occasion in Ayodhya is going to render it vulnerable to the BJP's accusation of the party being indifferent to the sentiments of the majority community. The INDIA bloc has also been accused of Muslim appeasement.

Presently there is a competition going on as to who is the true custodian of Sanatana Dharma and BJP is the front runner as of now. The Shankaracharyas had also jumped in and up to Jan 22 which is the day of the inauguration of the Ram Temple such discussions will go on. Four Shankaracharyas had decided not to attend the inauguration of Ram Temple saying that it is not being performed as per Sanatana Dharma. This has already caused enough embarrassment for the BJP

It is, therefore, unsurprising that the BJP is eager to deflect public attention towards another act of spur-

ing the invitation to the pran pratishtha ceremony — that of the Congress. Two senior BJP ministers have led the charge, denouncing the decision by the Congress as evidence of its anti-Hindu leanings. Yet, the Congress's reasoning for not attending the grand ceremony is not unprincipled. Religion's status as an article of personal faith — a constitutional position remains. The BJP's inclination to reap political dividends out of the ceremony is an undeniable truth and the hasty inauguration of the shrine which is a violation that the shankaracharyas mentioned — are, the Congress says, the factors that prevented its leadership from honouring the invitation.

It is a well known fact that this is happening even as the Lok Sabha elections will be held after the budget session which is scheduled for January 30 to Feb 09 and as per media elections could be declared in February instead of March as the INDIA bloc is still not united and there are contradictions on seat sharing and also Rahul Gandhi's long March will be resumed and will continue up to the month of March.

However it is seen that there is often a chasm between principles and prudent politics. For instance the origin of AAP was against Congress but now both parties may contest the parliamentary elections unitedly.

The Congress's refusal to grace the occasion in Ayodhya on January 22 is going

to render it vulnerable to the BJP's accusation of the party being indifferent to the sentiments of the majority community. This could be a formidable hurdle in an election year given the electorate's enchantment with the politics of polarisation, a trend that has sharpened with the political ascendancy of the BJP under Narendra Modi. Further, INDIA, the Opposition bloc, is speaking in many voices on the Ram temple inauguration. The Congress's refusal to be present may lead to a strain in the alliance considering Nitish Kumar's position on the matter. But it would be naive to suggest that the Congress is unaware of the political risks of the decision. Also many Congress leaders are speaking against the decision of the Party. For the last two elections Congress party had not won enough seats to be elected leader of opposition. If this trend continues the party may meet the same fate.

In fact there may even be some wisdom to it. The Congress's flirtations with soft Hindutva has usually led to electoral debacles and the latest example is of Madhya Pradesh where the party had chosen to follow soft Hindutva.

Exposing the BJP's electoral, as opposed to spiritual, reliance on Ram while simultaneously investing in a public campaign that prioritises bread and butter issues — the focal point of Rahul Gandhi's Bharat Jodo

Nyay Yatra — could thus be a conscious strategy on the part of the Congress. There is need to read the pulse of a voter who is in favour of the inauguration of Ram Temple on Jan 22 and the boycott of the ceremony by the Congress leaders who had received the invitation. This may prove costly to the Party in the Lok Sabha elections. It will then be treated as a blunder by Congress for declining the offer to attend the ceremony of Jan 22.

As the Lok Sabha elections are fast approaching this refusal could be the litmus test for the Congress party because the Sangh Parivar already wanted this to happen so that the BJP may then concentrate on religious issues and can ignore talks of unemployment and inflation. The Congress has created the situation which can go against the I.N.D.I.A bloc.

By declining the invitation, the Congress party is now exposed as a Party adopting the policy of appeasement. It also shows that the Congress party is fully dependent on its allies and is unable to take a decision on its own. It will become clear after the parliament elections whether this decision to boycott the ceremony was right or wrong.

Yours etc.,
Yash Pal Rathan,
Via email

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

"Life is like unto a long journey with a heavy burden."

— Tokugawa Ieyasu

The Shillong Times

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Fog and worse

THE Indian aviation sector was faced with an unprecedented crisis in the past two days, with over 600 flights delayed for long periods and nearly 80 flights cancelled in the nation's largest aviation hub of New Delhi alone. The stranded passengers across airports fumed in anger and this led to violence and other embarrassing situations. The main reason for the disruption is stated to be the thick blanket of fog enveloping Delhi and the northern regions, which is partly a natural phenomenon and partly caused by environmental issues, all of which are well-known. The scenario was made more critical by the fact that only one of the four runways in Delhi was operational, and the others have been under maintenance work. Reports are also that there were other technical snags at the airport, including the absence of systems like the Instrument Landing System (ILS) on all the runways. This system guides pilots in times of low visibility. There could be other operational reasons too, all of which could be known only through a detailed investigation. The fact of the matter is the disruption has been massive, and its impact on the passengers was huge. If tempers ran high, it was only to be expected.

Those who travel by air or by rail are often faced with situations of a lack of clarity as to what is happening in relation to delays, whether they are arrivals, or departures, or halts midway through the journey as in the case of railways. In these times of excellent communications systems, it is often that the operational heads prefer to remain silent, keep passengers guessing, rather than informing them as to what was going wrong and where, and how long the delay could last. Railways have some such systems at stations, but the airports may not necessarily explain matters and keep the passengers guessing. This happens when a train is halted due to unforeseen circumstances like an accident. Even express trains have no system in place to inform passengers on board as to what went wrong. This is the height of irresponsibility, but all administrative mechanisms in this country manage to escape scot-free from such erroneous approaches.

When Narendra Modi started his rule as Prime Minister in 2014, he had promised a scenario of bullet trains crisscrossing the country. There is only marginal improvement to the railways. This at a time when China is experimenting with trains that run at a speed of 1000 km per hour. Airports in India have improved over the years, but the process was not taken forward with much vigour, as is evident in the present plight of the Delhi airport.

Congress must start immediate damage control following Milind Deora's exit
Uddhav Sena's pitching for his Mumbai South seat may have hastened the process

By Sushil Kutty

Milind Deora s/o Murla Deora on Sunday joined the Shiv Sena of Maharashtra Chief Minister Eknath Shinde, the first casualty of seat-sharing in Maharashtra thanks to the Uddhav Balasaheb Thackeray's Shiv Sena which laid claim to the Mumbai South parliamentary constituency from which Milind Deora used to represent the Congress in Parliament before the Modi onslaught in 2014.

The UBT faction of the Shiv Sena will now have to square off with Milind Deora from the Mumbai South constituency in the 2024 general elections, too, and it wouldn't be a piece of cake for the UBT Sena which now shares happy vibes with the Congress. The Deora exit is expected to be followed by an avalanche of Congress leaders quitting the grand old party. The Congress high command is aware and understands this but doesn't give a damn.

Later in the day, after having sworn dissatisfaction to the parent party, Deora joined the Eknath Shinde-led Shiv Sena in a low-key ceremony. The former Congress MP and Minister of State will be campaigning for the NDA in the forthcoming 2024 general elections. The bigger fear is about how many more Congress leaders would be following in Deora's footsteps?

The Congress would have to mark, get set and be ready for damage control. The Maharashtra Pradesh Congress, especially the Bombay unit, will feel the direct impact of Milind Deora's exit. The "exodus" may come if the Congress high command continues to disregard the reality that Milind Deora's exit is the symptom of an underlying disease that is afflicting the top echelons of the party.

Milind Deora is not a mass leader, but 'family Deora' has clout with corporators and MLAs. There are

many Congress leaders who swear allegiance to the Deora family. Milind's father Murla Deora used to be the mayor of Mumbai and a Union Cabinet minister, too. News hacks say 10 ex-corporators could follow Milind into the Eknath Shinde Shiv Sena and

when out of the blue, he announced he was leaving the Congress for good. The Congress says the "timing" pointed to direct involvement of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Milind quit the very same day when Rahul Gandhi

Deora was the joint treasurer of the All India Congress Committee (AICC). Fact is, Milind's father Murla Deora was thick with "industry on behalf of the party". Come to think of it, Milind Deora even secured an endorsement from business tycoon Mukesh Ambani in 2019. And he remains a prominent face of the Marwari-Gujarati community.

Looking at Deora's exit that way, the Congress will carry Milind Deora's exit to its grave. Milind Deora will be difficult to replace. Journalists of Mumbai remember him from 2014 and before. With Milind Deora's exit, the Mumbai South parliamentary constituency, with a considerable Muslim electorate, is more or less out of the reach of the Congress. The fact that the undivided Shiv Sena won the last two elections makes it easy for one of the two Shiv Senas in 2024.

For Milind Deora, it depends on whether the BJP does or does not lay claim to the Deora family's Mumbai South seat. The Bombay unit of the Congress is aware of Milind Deora's loss. You don't have to be a rocket scientist to get it. The Deora case is typical of how Congress leaders in Delhi are so out of sync with ground realities in the states. For instance, Congress Communications Chief Jairam Ramesh said Milind Deora tried twice to speak with him but couldn't as Ramesh had more important stuff to do.

It was Jairam Ramesh who said Deora's move was "decided" by Modi and that his "exit" wouldn't hurt the Congress at all. Jairam Ramesh spoke with Milind later on January 13, but nothing came out of the talk. Two days later, Ramesh remembered only Milind's father Murla Deora, who, he said, was a "stalwart Congressman". (IPA Service)



that will shake the grassroots more than Rahul Gandhi will ever come to comprehend.

The question is, does Uddhav Thackeray realize the

set out on his Manipur-to-Mumbai 'Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra'. As things stand, the Congress has lost a candidate with the potential to win the

The former Congress MP and Minister of State will be campaigning for the NDA in the forthcoming 2024 general elections. The bigger fear is about how many more Congress leaders would be following in Deora's footsteps?

fresh trouble seat-sharing has landed his party in? Also, Mumbai Congress leaders who have been unhappy with Varsha Gaikwad, who was the chosen president of the Mumbai unit, would also likely jump ship. Infighting in the Mumbai Congress is not new. Milind Deora himself, after becoming Mumbai Regional Congress Committee president, had a running fight with his predecessor Sanjay Nirupam.

Deora subsequently lost his Mumbai South Lok Sabha seat and had to quit his president's post. Congress sources say Milind Deora was preparing to play a national role for the Congress

Mumbai South Lok Sabha seat. This whole seat-sharing exercise of the INDI-Alliance is proving to be more disruptive than unifying.

In fact, there could be a record number of rebel INDI-Alliance candidates fighting the 2024 general elections. The Congress had lost the Mumbai South Lok Sabha constituency to the undivided Shiv Sena allied with the BJP in the last two Lok Sabha polls.

Milind Deora also takes with him his connections and clout with Mumbai's business leaders and the considerable fund-raising potential that came with the nexus. In fact, Milind

nature seriously or in the next five years, there won't be any mountains at all in Meghalaya!

Yours etc.,
Rotarians Yashodhara and Atul Bhide.
Rotary Club of Thane Hills, Pune

Case of good cop, bad cop

Editor,
A few nights ago in Nongrimmar Block C, a white Jeep with black tinted windows was parked in the middle of the road. Not only was the Jeep parked there but they were also blasting music and shouting vulgar abuse. Naturally, the cops were called and to our surprise they did respond very quickly and worked diligently. The only thing was that they arrived too late due to their inability to find our locality.

Again two nights ago a distant neighbour had brought over some friends and they were drinking and peeing all over the road and wall of my house. They were talking so loudly that we had to call the cops again and yet again they got lost. Why? Because they didn't know how to get from the Police station in Beat house to Nongrimmar which is just a 10-minute walk for a fit person. Even though we were all proud of our cops for arriving and picking up the phone we were also angry because not only did they confuse Nongrimmar for Nongrim Hills and Nongrimbah but they were also scared of the boys who were creating a nuisance.

So the question is - why don't our cops know where

Nongrimmar or any other place under their jurisdiction is?

Why do we have to stand outside while these hooligans are creating a nuisance to give our cops directions? Police officers in Mumbai know the ins and outs of not only their district but of the other districts as well.

In a huge city like Mumbai where there are dozens of small lanes and streets. If a cop at the end of Bombay knows the ins and outs of a tiny lane in the centre of Bombay, why can't a cop from Laitumkrah Beat House know how to get to a locality that is situated only 10 minutes away.

The reason our cops flounder like this is because whoever is in charge of their training does not seem to care about teaching them the geography of the place.

Recently I overheard a very senior police officer telling his friends and I quote "I don't even need to do any work, I just come show my face sign a few papers and I'm done." On the other hand, there's another police officer I know who is almost equally at the same rank as the one I mentioned above. She has to do the work of not only her bosses who take these leaves or turn up late to the office but also of the junior cops. A few months ago I saw her doing the work of junior traffic cops instead of her work. She's quite senior in rank and is about to retire, yet she has to do work that is below her rank.

So when we take all of that into consideration, are the cops who are like the first cop I mentioned, capable of being cops? Do they even remember why they became cops in the first place? Even though they pick up

the phone and come when we call them they're still lacking in demeanour. And the reason for all this is because their bosses are people who don't even bother to come to work while the ones that do report for work diligently are so overburdened that they don't even have time to sit!

In this scenario who would want to become a cop? There's no enthusiasm, no encouragement because all that the junior officers are seeing are either the bad cops or the good cops and none of them are appealing to the aspiring police officers.

The seniors are too lazy to even turn up for work while the others are too overworked and tired to even tolerate the juniors so where does this leave us? It's a case of good cop, bad cop and no one in between.

I am writing this out of concern and mean no offence to anyone. The people and places I've mentioned are known to me. The facts are all true and nothing has been doctored to cast a bad light on the Police Department of Meghalaya. I know of some cops who slog through the day but others who take life easy. The Police Department in general has to [provide more in-service training, especially on quick response time. Above all a cop posted at Police Beat House has to know every nook and cranny in Laitumkrah. There's no excuse for poor knowledge of geography.

Yours etc.
Shailin H.Lyngdoh
Shillong -3

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

Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

A Long, Long Walk...!
It's a long walk he's settled himself to do, from Manipur to Mumbai!

Six thousand seven hundred and thirteen kilometres! Stretching and arduous, it's going to be, but tis not the distance covered that will be tiresome and difficult, but the uncovering and tending of all the pain, the hurt, the anger and hatred that have been exploited in the minds and heart of the nation, that needs to be soothed by gentle steps, compassionate strides!

The beard will grow I know, but what if... if love can be regrown into this nation, those unshaven looks will not be in vain. If a mending can happen between neighbour and neighbour, if love can be re-fostered twixt those who worship differently, if friendships, cleverly fractured be fused together, if eyes made to focus only on pictures of hatred be restored to their original vision, then may God above bless each of those six thousand seven hundred and thirteen kilometres his feet touch.

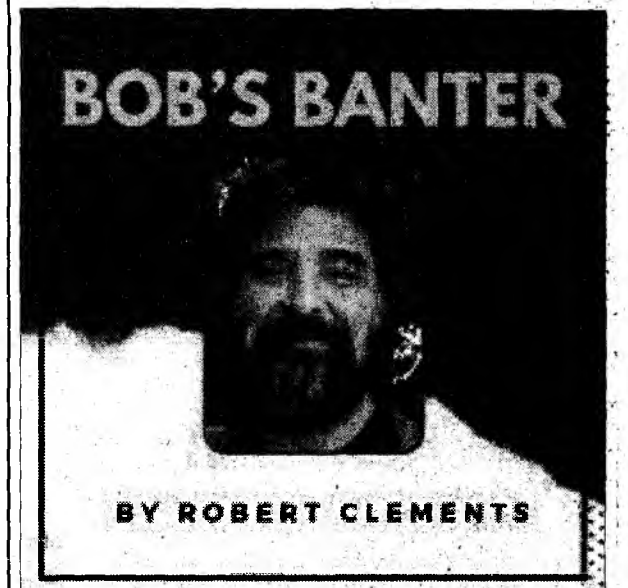
equal to the west.
But is it?

In my recent visit to New York, it was a strange sight I saw. Not just subways, gigantic bridges and lengthy tunnels. Oh yes, they were all there. But what I saw was freedom written on the faces of people.

Freedom to be unhappy with the way things were going and being allowed to express feelings about it. Near close to where I lived was the home of the New York mayor, and in my five minute walk across to sit by the East River and watch the boats and Roosevelt Island across, I had to pass night every day, protesting groups, holding placards and shouting slogans, which I know the mayor must have heard and certainly heeded if he wanted to be elected again.

That was the expression I saw on the faces of the people, the freedom to say what they want, and the certainty to be heard. And that I believe is true progress!

Are you listening my people?



It's a long walk he's settled himself to do and I know his hands will reach out to touch those whose dreams now lie shattered in a land that flowed once with brotherhood and love. I know faces streaked with tears will walk hesitantly by his side, and I pray he will feel their pain as they with no words left will in their silence speak of a brother, sister, father, mother, son or daughter, raped, killed, thrashed, wounded by forces unleashed by professional motivators of hate and violence!

The beard will grow, I know, and blisters will slow down his pace, but even as those physical conditions deter his stride, may the One above magnify the outcome of this two month trudge, that every step, still and rest this unhealthily stirred nation, that as he winds his way, plods, strolls and saunters through a disturbed, roused and agitated people, a calmness, peace and quiet will descend and remain, to be untruffled no more by gusts and winds of hatred fanned intentionally, purposefully and mercilessly by a certain rabid lot.

It's a long walk he's settled himself to do; stretching and arduous. But tis not the distance covered that will be tiresome and difficult, but the uncovering and healing of all pain and hurt, anger and hatred exploited in the minds and heart of the nation, that needs to be soothed by gentle steps, compassionate strides!

My prayer, as men of peace try through gentle ways to hush and quieten harsh blows the country has received, that the One above will protect, preserve and prevent all harm to these who seek to unify and re-form a brotherhood in Bharat once again. My prayer is that all one point three billion will make this their prayer with me!

But even as I pray, a new thought comes to mind; what is it that is blinding the people of India? And sadly, I see what they see. They think they see progress. A bridge that stretches out into the sea, tunnels, metros and bullet trains that cut short travel time and that speak of a new India,

As I walked along the roads and watched the cars going by, I did not see rules being broken, because people had that freedom. I saw rules being followed because citizens were given the right to express themselves.

Ah, but here, even as I see roads being widened, and flyovers stretching across the sea, I know that at the first opportunity the motorist if he does not see a policeman, will ride on the pavement, around, will ride on the pavement, go down a one-way street, and bribe authorities.

We think harsh laws will deter people from doing wrong. Nay, only a value for freedom will.

America was built on the outcasts of the world, who ran away from persecution, starvation, and poverty, but as they tasted a new freedom, they grew to love and cherish it, and then safeguard it, not just with uniforms and police cars, but by themselves.

And as he the walker walks, and lays his arms on the shoulders of the downtrodden, let him also learn to give those same people the freedom they so richly deserve. Because, it is not just those in power now, that have robbed the people of their freedom, but all the previous governments, including that of his mother, father and grandfather, who once seated on yonder Delhi throne, forget us who put them there and pass draconian laws which rob the people of their freedom.

Walk, dear sir, but remember that those same hands and shoulders you touch, also need to be strengthened and that that strength, that power will only come as you set them free just as your namesake Gandhi did, from British rule near eight decades ago.

Compassion and freedom, what a balance that will be, for a country called Bharat, that is India!

Maybe it's a longer walk sir, a long, long walk for such change to come about..!

The Author writes a daily column. If you'd like to receive it by WhatsApp every morning, send a 'YES' to him on his WhatsApp no 9892572883

Letters to the Editor

Why encroach on Veronica Lane?

Editor,
I am "punch drunk", not from the recently concluded festivities, but from the front-page report of ST dated Jan 13, 2024 headlined "Laitumkrah hawkers may be shifted by Feb". Before throwing the final punch in February, I would humbly urge the Honourable Minister and people's representative of the constituency, to revisit the decision.

Lady Veronica Lane has evolved from a dark, bladder relieving lane to a vibrant walking alternative for hundreds of school and college going students and their families, for accessing the many educational institutions located around Don Bosco Square. These include a large number of students with disabilities using white canes, wheelchairs and many depending on visual inputs for walking. Also using the space are numerous people with eye problems (especially the elderly) who avail of services provided by Bansara Eyecare Centre and many, who attend workshops and meetings organised at "The Habitat," Asian Confluence.

Access to public spaces and services on an equal basis with others is a fundamental right. The right to safe and secure livelihoods is as important as the right to safe and secure access. When the drain along the lane was covered, we were given the impression that this would be an accessible safe space for the public, particularly for persons with disabilities and the elderly. With the proposed interven-

tion; humans, cars, NCC vehicles, mini-trucks and taxis carrying vegetables, two wheelers (coming from both directions), local dogs and occasionally rats as big as cats; will be competing for the available space on the narrow road.

Concerned institutional residents of Lady Veronica Lane have approached the local authorities, including a visit and written representation to the Minister and local MLA and to the Chief Minister, raising safety issues for pedestrians, when the proposal of shifting street vendors was announced. It seems as if the problem has been shifted from one footpath to another, except now it will be hidden from the main street. The safety of vulnerable pedestrians will be compromised! A dialogue with public stakeholders would be apt!

Yours etc.,
Carmo Noronha,
Via email

Sky, Earth and water! mesmerizing Meghalaya!!

Editor,
(Lots of happy and few sad memories)

No wonder the Swiss call their land - "Meghalaya of Europe" and Indians call it as - "Switzerland of Asia" ... Meghalaya, halfway to heaven!

Bhumi-Jal-Agni-Vayu-Aakash, the five basic elements of this universe are what Meghalaya has in its purest form and in abundance! (One can write so much just about the Rocks of Meghalaya!!)

From ever changing shades of blue sky that you cannot encompass in both eyes, the huge plateau of Mawrah with vast grasslands in various shades of green and brown, enormous mountain ranges of east Khasi Hills, gigantic rocks in numerous shapes and shades of grey, black, white, brown, pink and beige to the pristine waters of Dawki lake, Meghalaya is truly half way to heaven. The state is a home to some of the longest and most complex cave systems in the world too.

All such beautiful memories! But there are a few sad memories: It is so painful to see nature's heavenly gift being destroyed by men. As one drives across Meghalaya, one cannot simply stop wondering in pain to see massive mining / cutting of those beautiful mountains.

There is a stretch of around 25-30 kms, starting from Amalarem village towards Dawki river and then another 15 to 20 kms, from Dawki to Mawlynnong, the entire road is full of heavy trucks over-loaded with tons of rocks cut from various mountains. (Actually, this pathetic mountain cutting is everywhere)

We counted around 1800 trucks as we drove along with roads in one stretch. Willie, our driver, shared that these trucks are active 24x7. If this continues, I doubt anyone can see any of those mountains in the next 5 years from today.

The roads are pathetic in this patch. If tourism increases to even half of what many other popular tourist cities of India have, it would be impossible to drive safely along those Dawki roads. Hope the State Government takes this God-gifted

*"Better than a thousand hollow words,
is one word that brings peace."*

—Buddha

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVI No. 157 SHILLONG, THURSDAY, JANUARY 18, 2024

Gracious Lady President

IT is not often that the President of India touches base with ordinary folks. They are imprisoned by security rigours but President Droupadi Murmu decided to buck the trend. At Tura she empathised with the sportspersons who stood in the cold to welcome her and expressed her gratitude in so many words. Later she also interacted with women's self-help groups in Tura and found out quite a bit about their work and the challenges they face. The President mentioned these encounters in her speech at Shillong Raj Bhavan where she witnessed a cultural event. Just as late President Abdul Kalam was known as the Peoples' President and he freely interacted with young people and asked them to raise questions which he readily answered, President Murmu too appears to be following in his footsteps.

It is rather unfortunate that in India all 'public' servants of which the President is one are embargued by an overdose of security which keeps them away from the hoi polloi and therefore effectively prevents them from listening to the voices of ordinary citizens. Since the President is also the chief of the armed forces that layer of security cum protocol is also overbearingly protective and is covertly intended to keep the President from hearing anything that she needs to hear other than praises showered on her by ministers and government officials. But there are Presidents that buck the trend. When President Pranab Mukherjee visited Shillong he interacted with invited guests in the dining area opposite the Durbar Hall of the Raj Bhavan. President Pratibha Patil too invited the Padmashree recipients and interacted with them. She perhaps knew that the public voices are as essential to hear as the voices of those in power and their constructs of development. President Kalam couldn't care less about security protocols.

President Murmu seems to follow a different protocol. Following the cultural programme hosted on her behalf, she was whisked away for a private dinner inside the Raj Bhavan with only top politicians, judges and bureaucrats and the police chief in attendance and of course the top brass of the army and air force. Lesser mortals were told to proceed to the dining hall across the durbar hall. This sort of exclusionary protocol goes against the very principles of democracy. The President is a peoples' representative at the highest echelon, since he/she is elected by the MLAs of all states, but is a titular head and acts according to the counsel of the government of the day. In that sense there is very little that the President can do to effect any change in governance. Hence the role is ceremonial in nature. While the Government has taken much credit for bringing the President to inaugurate the 5th Meghalaya Games and several schemes virtually, this is also a scheduled visit followed by all Presidents who in their 5-year tenure have to visit every state of the country before they lay down office.

Letters to the Editor

What's wrong with us?

Editor,
Social media reports about the unhygienic conditions and poor quality of food provided to the athletes in the ongoing 5th Meghalaya Games 2024 in Tura reminded us of the last edition of the games where sportspersons were made to sleep and eat on the floor of the toilets of JN Complex, Shillong. Is this how we nurture our future sportspersons? Being an avid sports lover myself, I am not against sporting events, but I have the following questions:

1. First Cherry Blossom festival of 17-19 November 2023 where the Government spent Rs. 9 crores for a 3-day event and now Rs. 23 crores for a 6-day event which comes to Rs. 3.83, 33,333.33 per day. With the quantum of money involved, the 3000 odd athletes could have been provided with world-class

nutritious food, accommodation, transportation, etc. The Chief Minister, Sports Minister, the Organizing Committee and the Meghalaya Olympic Association must own up the responsibility for the poor treatment of our sportspersons. But the larger question is - can a state like ours holding number 2 position among all the states in poverty index afford these expenditures? This money could have been used in completing pending developmental projects, better roads, electrification, housing for poor, etc. in rural Meghalaya or street lightings, entrepreneurship promotion and employment generation, coaching centers for Civil Services, IFS, CUET centers etc. across the state.

2. What happened to the medal winners of the previous Meghalaya Games? Did the State Government provide them with financial support and better training facilities so that can have podium finish in National Games or

Training of motorists vital to national road safety

By Arun Kumar Shrivastav

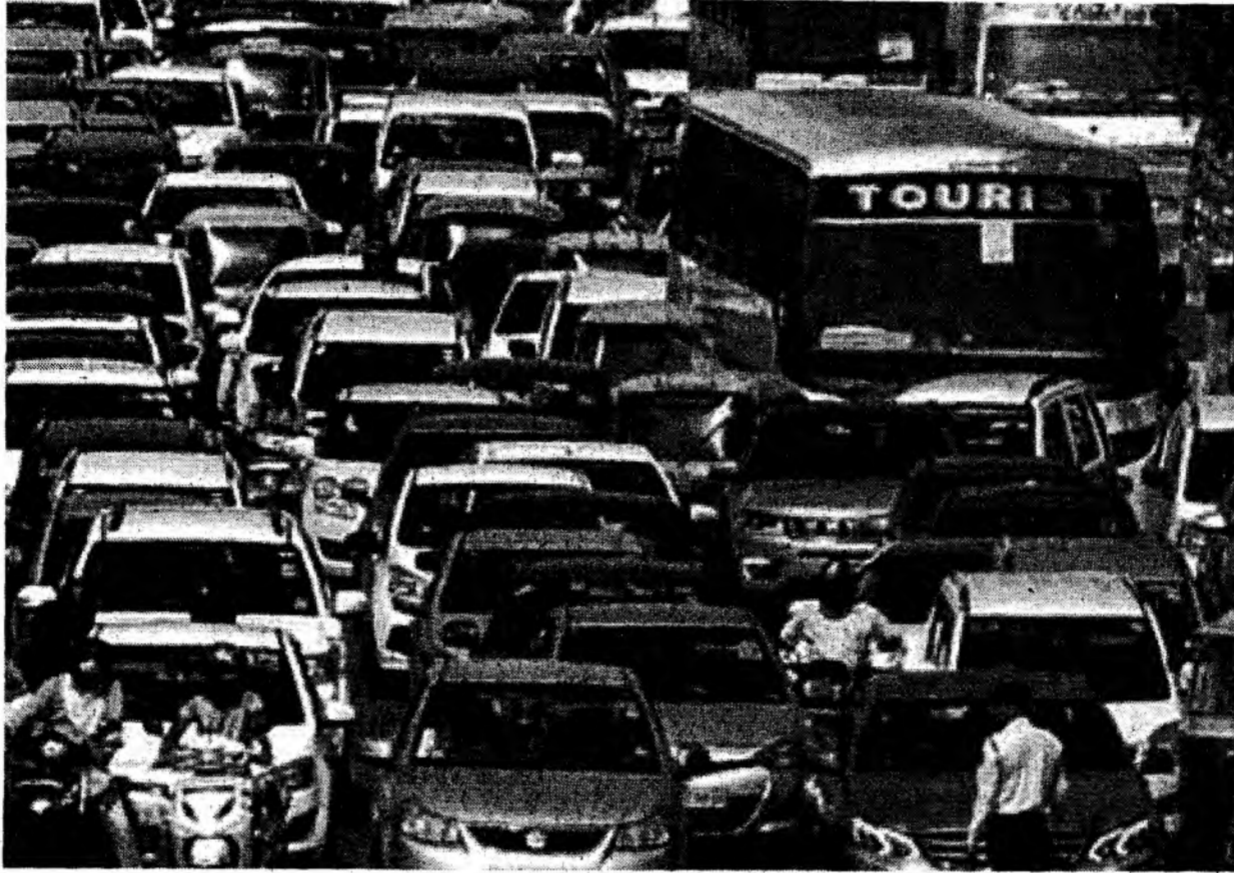
Recent transporters' strike against the newly-introduced legal provisions that provide for a 10-year jail term for drivers who don't take accident victims to the hospital, leading to the death of the victims, throws the spotlight on an issue of immense significance. India has a vast network of well-developed highways and roads and it's growing. The number of vehicles is also growing at a significant pace. India spends a huge amount of money on oil bills. India's need for oil defines its foreign policy.

be on the job for this paltry sum—driving the vehicle for days, sometimes extending to weeks. Away from family, without proper food and rest, they drive on the highways. Their hard work and hardships keep the economy competitive, allowing the Indian poor and middle class to purchase essential items at affordable costs. The same hardship bus drivers suffer and it ensures that the transportation for people with low

drivers alone would not be sufficient to stop accidents and deaths on the road. They need technical capability and education to prevent accidents, for which they need special training at regular intervals. Today's highways and vehicles are designed by top-notch engineers and made with ultra-modern facilities. A poor driver with virtually no education is a complete misfit here! This is an invitation for road ac-

ribes to transport department officials and traffic police personnel, who, too, suffer from low self-esteem under poor working conditions. While new laws to replace the old colonial laws are undoubtedly necessary, our sympathy should be with the poor and hard-working citizens who are giving their best even though, in return, they might be getting much less than what they deserve.

As India moves towards new goals in progress and advancement, we must recognize that these goals can



Ironically, our investments in highways and oil are causing road accidents and deaths. Unfortunately, a sector that sees so much of investments cannot deal with an issue that concerns all of us. For the record, as per the official figure, 1.54

incomes remains affordable. If we look at how people work in developed economies, we realize efficient resources and an enabling environment play a significant role in achieving excellent results in the workplace. If we use this paradigm in the

accidents. Blaming the driver is barking at the wrong tree. When we can check pollution under control certificates and fine the drivers along the highways, we also need to check whether the driver has attended a training program on safe driving

be achieved by improving the value of what we offer, not increasing the quantity. We need to produce goods that can be sold for higher prices, not products sold for discount due to poor quality. And this is possible only when we improve and refine the skills

"Good life and good working conditions for the drivers alone would not be sufficient to stop accidents and deaths on the road. They need technical capability and education to prevent accidents, for which they need special training at regular intervals. Today's highways and vehicles are designed by top-notch engineers and made with ultra-modern facilities. A poor driver with virtually no education is a complete misfit here! This is an invitation for road accidents. Blaming the driver is barking at the wrong tree."

lakh people died in road accidents in 2022. The situation is highly alarming in cities like Delhi, which witnesses over 2000 deaths in road accidents every year. For Mumbai, it is less, but it is still significant.

What is the solution for this menace? Holding drivers responsible for this is not correct. Drivers are poorly paid and have highly stressful work conditions that need to be addressed urgently. Average drivers in the unorganized Indian transportation sector would earn Rs 20,000 a month. They would

Indian transportation sector, we must provide bus and truck drivers better work conditions and higher wages.

Can we make it a law that no driver should drive for more than six hours before taking a six-hour break? And, can we fix the minimum wages for drivers that allow them to buy decent things for their families - a house, a car, a holiday in a beach resort? Let's not be harsh to a community that is the backbone of the Indian economy.

Good life and good working conditions for the

in the last three months.

Top brains at institutions like at institutions like IIT and IIM should prepare these training programs. If we want improvement on the ground, we must spend money on training and upskilling. Right now, the business model in the transportation sector is geared toward maximum profit for transport owners, who use liberal bank loan policies to buy vehicles, employ drivers at meagre pay, and keep the business profitable by making compromises at all levels. It includes paying

of our workforce. Whether for drivers or transport and traffic police officials, advanced and modern training is the key to their success and performance.

The system must make them proud of their jobs. Only then can they give their best. For example, road safety campaigns now focus on giving drivers more instructions and a bigger to-do list rather than clear incentives for better work. Same for transport department officials and traffic police. All of them need regular and high-quality training to improve their performance. (IPA Service)

and mismanagement of public money through official channels. Who are the real beneficiaries of these events is not a million dollar question anymore.

Yours etc.
Prof. Lakhon Kma
Shillong-4

Religion a political compulsion

Editor,
West Bengal Chief Minister and Trinamool Congress (TMC) Chief Mamata Banerjee's decision to hold a 'All religion' rally on the day of consecration of Ram Temple in Ayodhya taking along people from all communities and religious places is a very prudent step to maintain peace and communal harmony in West Bengal and should be hailed by all particularly the Hindu community of the state. She is one leader who is very much aware about the threat and vulnerability

of the followers of Hinduism in Bengal particularly during any mass Hindu religious celebration and rightly decided to lead from the front in order to safeguard the life and property of the majority community. She is well aware that in case, she does not take any pre-emptive measure and remains aloof to the celebration of Ram Temple inauguration, which ideally, she should have done as a staunch secularist, Bengal will burn since to a section of the people of West Bengal, the construction of Ram Temple in Ayodhya is in itself a provocation to foment violence and chaos. A true leader understands his/her limitations and political compulsion and Ms Banerjee is one of them.

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

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

Political impact of Ram Mandir inauguration will not be Pan India Opposition must jointly take on BJP for using religion to win elections

By Dr. Gyan Pathak

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's controversial inauguration of Ram Temple in Ayodhya on January 22 will also mark the beginning of BJP's campaign for Lok Sabha General Election 2024. Religious events, including fetching large number of Hindu devotees to the Ayodhya Ramlala Darshan free of cost for the next two months, will be organized as a special feature of this year's election campaign outside the purview of the Election Commission of India in which large number of RSS-BJP-VHP activists under the garb of Sadhus overtly and covertly will do the work of BJP and PM Narendra Modi who will be seeking a third term. However, the ultimate political impact will be uncertain, because after showing initial panic, the Opposition seems to be firmly opposed to the design, as the four Shankaracharyas declared the consecration violation of shastras of Sanatan Dharma.

The Opposition is bent upon exposing the RSS-BJP clans political design and as political parties many of them will not be participating in the consecration ceremony as the four Shankaracharyas and other apolitical Hindu saints along with the four Shankaracharyas. It is another matter that many of the political leaders of vari-

targeted towards achieving their end. Ekal Prayas is one of them, and in the 2019 election, it was reported in the media, how their teachers helped BJP candidates in Assam.

Several wings of RSS, have trained thousands of volunteers directly in over one lakh villages of the country and indirectly influencing about 4 lakh villages, through their education, rural and agriculture training, and several other social programmes.

January 22 would be the occasion when through lakhs of religious events, RSS-BJP activists would be activating all their wings and associates and putting them in the election work in favour of establishing Hindu Rashtra under PM Narendra Modi.

Given the huge RSS-BJP networks across the country, not only the BJP but also several political analysts have already declared that it is a sure win for Narendra Modi in the Lok Sabha election 2024.

The certainty with which they talk is, however, misplaced. There cannot be a pan-India political impact of Ram Temple inauguration, since Ram is not the most popular deity across the country. Hindus have many popular deities, and there are many sects, who would not like their own deity to be

"The certainty with which they talk is, however, misplaced. There cannot be a pan-India political impact of Ram Temple inauguration, since Ram is not the most popular deity across the country. Hindus have many popular deities, and there are many sects, who would not like their own deity to be overshadowed by Ram, even if the Prime Minister inaugurates the Ram Temple."

ous Opposition parties will be seen visiting Ayodhya, since religion is a personal matter, and no Opposition party is imposing on their individual leader or activist not to observe religious events on January 22.

Many Opposition political parties have planned to organize their own religious events in their states or areas to mark the occasion only to frustrate the RSS-BJP's design to label them as anti-Hindu. In that list is West Bengal Chief Minister and TMC leader Mamata Banerjee who would be leading a religious event in Kali Mandir at Kolkata, and AAP leaders would be organizing Sunderkand paths in Delhi. Many interpret these events as panic reactions in anticipation of political damage that BJP's Ram Temple politics may inflict on them in the forthcoming Lok Sabha elections. Nevertheless, the country will soon be witnessing two sets of religious congregations throughout the country before and during general election campaigns. Vishwa Hindu Parishad has already trained hundreds of

RSS-BJP activists to impersonate themselves as Hindu Sadhus and do political work under that garb.

Many of the RSS-BJP activists have been deployed as Kathavachakas, who will visit every part of the country to emotionally and politically target their audience during their Ramkatha or Krishnakathayagyas. It has been seen in the past during Vishwa Hindu Parishad's campaigns, and many such events will be organized in the near future.

They have also deployed mobile vehicles with Hindu deities that go from one place to the other in the name of religious teaching to the common masses. However, what they do is to prepare them for a Hindu Rashtra.

During their journey at every religious congregation they will talk about Hindu Rashtra, and seek public support for this ultimate aim. All their efforts, even when they do anything in any other field such as education, are

overshadowed by Ram, even if the Prime Minister inaugurates the Ram Temple.

Perhaps, even PM Modi knows it and that is why he recently organized Tamil Sangam in Varanasi, the abode of Shiva, mainly to link Shivaitees of southern India. He has been seen travelling to South Indian religious places dedicated to other deities. Ram Temple politics has almost no political impact on South India.

From West Bengal to North East India, the popular deities are Kali, Durga, Kamakhya and other female deities, worshipped as supreme deities of Hinduism. In old Darbhanga, that is Mithila, the 'dvar banga' Shiva is the chief deity, and they grudge that their daughter Sita, was not treated well by Rama in Ayodhya. There is no great political impact of Rama in that region.

Lord Krishna is popular in Odisha, and Navin Patnaik is seen busy in organizing events for Jagannath Puri corridor even currently when Ram Temple consecration ceremony is being held at Ayodhya.

Ram could have some political impact in Jharkhand and certain parts of Bihar, central Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Chhattisgarh. Krishna is the popular deity in Mathura and its surroundings. In the upper reaches of the Himalayas, Shiva and Shakti are chief deities. Haryana has two popular deities named Shyam - one of them is the Mathura-Vrindavan and the other the Khatu. Maharashtra has its own Ganapati Bappa. It should therefore be noted that the RSS-BJP clan has limited power to impose Ram on everyone else in the Hindu pantheon. Therefore, the real issue is not Ram Temple, but the RSS-BJP-VHP network that needs to be taken seriously by the Opposition political parties. They must not panic, and they must expose how RSS-BJP-VHP activists under the garb of Sadhus (bhagvadhari) are trying to cleverly drive the electorate to vote for BJP. (IPA Service)

"It is best to rise from life as from a banquet, neither thirsty nor drunken."

— Aristotle

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXXV No. 158 SHILLONG, FRIDAY, JANUARY 19, 2024

Targeting terror

A swift retaliation by Pakistan, to the January 16 missile attacks on a terrorist base by Iran, was only to be expected. Yet, an escalation of the present aerial offensives between pro-Shia Iran and pro-Sunni Pakistan looks unlikely. Both sides targeted only terror outfits. Pakistan needed to save its face after the Iranian missile attack on its soil, and more so as our neighbouring nation is set for the general elections in two months. The Iranian leadership seems to understand this as is evident from its low-key response to the Pakistani retaliation. This happens at a time when the geopolitical region extending up to Gaza is shaking in the context of the three-months-long Israel-Hamas war. The war killed over a thousand Israelis and around 25,000 Palestinians since October 7 last. The two Balochistan strikes have no direct link to the Israel-Hamas war. These aerial strikes were different in nature and targeted only the region/nation-specific terror outfits. Iran launched missile attacks on Sunni terrorist bases in Iraq and Syria earlier this month, all these however forming into a wider regional pattern.

Iran's missile attacks on Sabz Koh village in Pakistan's Balochistan province, killing two children, targeted Jaish al Adl, an Iranian terrorist group that operated from Pakistan soil. Two days later, Pakistan targeted Saravan in Iran's Balochistan area with airstrikes, killing nine persons. Iran says these were not its nationals. Iran's foreign minister stressed that Tehran respected the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Pakistan. Iran was obviously retaliating to a bomb attack some days ago in its Kerman province by Sunni terror outfits operating from Pakistan soil — which was cited as the "worst" terrorist attack in Iran in decades. Iran's missile attacks were obviously inspired by the surgical strike India did in 2016 in PoK, and the IAF fighter jet bombing on Pakistan's Balakot in 2019.

Fact of the matter is that Pakistan as a nation is bleeding due to several reasons. Its economy is in a shambles, its provinces like Balochistan and PoK are restive with separatist campaigns and terror outfits have made a mess of life all around. Its proximity to Afghanistan, another failed nation where militants and terrorists rule the roost, has only added to Pakistan's woes. Pakistan turned into a breeding ground for terrorism with direct patronage of such outfits by its military establishment, which has overarching influence and powers on the governance system there. Politicians danced to the tunes of the generals. The military intelligence, ISI, directly funds terrorist outfits including the Kashmiri militants. By concerted efforts, India has managed to call the bluff of the generals in Rawalpindi by the 2019 IAF offensive that took place directly under their nose.

Convergence and Coordination Imperative for Good Governance

By Patricia Mukhim

These days the Government of Meghalaya is in a tearing hurry to complete the Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM) scheme with the promise of bringing water to every doorstep, so that the Central Government can claim credit for it while campaigning for the Lok Sabha polls. Unfortunately, in a State where the Public Works Department (PWD) and the Public Health Engineering Department (PHED) don't seem to be on talking terms with each other and each one is on their separate trip, things have become very disconcerting for the poor "common man/woman" who has to bear the consequences of the ego battle between the two departments. Everywhere you go whether in Shillong city or beyond it there is massive digging work going on. The digging work by the roadside is to lay down pipes for the much-touted JJM. Now after the pipes have been laid it is expected that the PWD would ensure that the dug-out portions are once again tarmacked so that the dust does not rise when a car rides over the exposed sands and stones. The windy season is going to be here soon and we poor mortals who don't live in VIP colonies will have to eat dust. Our homes too are coated with dust. But why would anyone care? If this is not governance failure then what is? People sitting inside the Secretariat may push any number of files but if they have lost touch with ground realities and only see the side of the road while riding from their homes to the Secretariat and back then governance goes kaput! On other occasions when travelling within the state they drive so fast that they don't see the scars of bad governance under their vehicles. Besides, they are too busy to pay attention to bad roads. Their vehicles too are very well cushioned to deal with the potholes.

Lack of coordination between Departments looking at public services such as the PHED and PWD results in unnecessary expenditure. I know of several localities where the road has just been repaired and before we know it the PHED has cut right through it to lay down pipes. Could there not have been a sharing of plans so that one Department digs and the

other one immediately seals up the dug portion because if that is delayed the road deteriorates further and can cause harm to vehicles and topple down two-wheelers since a dip in the middle of the road, especially at night when it's dark and there are no streetlights around, can be dangerous. The Government of Meghalaya is fortunate that no one has till date filed a case for accidents and broken bones caused by bad roads. We are a happy go lucky people waiting for the next festival and the next one and we believe everything is alright with the world around us. So why bother?

This attitude of noncha-

where we were 50 years ago and have only gotten worse with time.

This year the State will turn 52 years old. There will be the usual celebrations. The few privileged who have been included in government schemes as Self Help Groups, entrepreneurs funded by Government and others who have received government patronage will sing hallelujah to the MDA Government. Others will have to crawl back into their hell-holes where even the basic necessities of life are hard to come by. These are the same people who will vote for a person for a mere Rs 2000. Their lives in the

map for implementing those policies. Successful policy implementation requires a leadership that possesses a clear vision of the desired outcomes and how to arrive there. May I ask what is the vision of the leader of the State for us the people?

Policies are to be coherent and understandable by the last person in the village. Above all, coordination within the government is important for development in general. Hence the PWD-PHED coordination is critical. If I may suggest, the Minister for PWD and PHED should, in all fairness, be the same person. Both departments are allocated more resources than others. If one Minister is to hold charge of both departments it would be easier to coordinate, and for the system to hold the person accountable. In Meghalaya, people/communities have never been taken on board as stakeholders of development. People feel they are not part of the government but apart from it. Hence they look on and won't even intervene when they know something is wrong. By engaging communities the Government decentralizes and gives some role to the communities too so that they are stakeholders of their roads; their water supply system, their garbage management system etc. Of course engaging the communities means that governance must be transparent.

Good governance requires accountability, which necessitates effective monitoring and evaluation. The Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General (supreme audit institution) has been an important factor in tracking progress and ensuring efficient use of resources across all levels of government. Anomalies and gaps in implementation and reckless spending are called out year after year. It's a different matter that the Government takes those with a pinch of salt. Unfortunately, even MLAs in the Opposition hardly read the annual CAG reports; much less the citizens. So how do we expect to keep the Government on track? Monitoring and evaluation by other public institutions such as the RTI and LokAyukta should have helped but they seem to have defeated the very purpose of their existence.

Looks like God has abandoned this State!



lance about poor delivery from the Government (in other words poor governance) and our collective unwillingness to hold it accountable is what has brought us to where we are today. We have become a people that can be bought during elections and the politicians know this so well that they don't really care whether the governance system is broken and rotten to the core. The role of political parties is to hold their ministers accountable and ensure that their work results in clear outcomes. But here we find that the only thing that engages political parties is 'politics.' They can only spout politics and shamelessly condemn other parties even while they are comfortably ensconced with each other in the government. This must be a Meghalaya speciality. Before elections the coalition partners go hammer and tongs at each other and when the votes are counted and everything is done and dusted they are back in each other's arms. How often have we been fooled by this seasonal bonhomie and seasonal quarrels. But have we learnt to call the bluff of all these political parties and politicians? No, we are

hell-hole are dark and dreary. They have children they cannot afford to educate. They earn barely enough from tilling the fields and if they fall sick they are as good as dead for the health system, despite many tall claims, is far from being responsive. Anyone with a serious accident and is taken to the Shillong Civil Hospital will be hugely disappointed because they will be told to take the patient to a private health care centre. I speak this from lived experiences and am not just spilling out words to fill the pages of this newspaper.

Governance is a critical factor for any government provided it pays attention to that word. Good governance is ensuring that the delivery mechanisms at every level are working to their optimum for governance is a system that works through officials at different levels. Any disruption at any level is enough to create chaos. We may have appropriate governance structures but if the overall application of good governance principles are missing we will still fail to deliver. One is not sure if the Government of Meghalaya actually follows the policies it enunciates and has a road

that he is chosen by God.

The emergence of India as a secular, democratic country was certainly a gain of evolution. It appears that the gains are likely to be eclipsed for a time because efforts are being made to create an impression that a religious ceremony is but a State event to exploit religion as a political instrument.

Even Sankaracharyas raised objections regarding the inauguration of Ram temple in Ayodhya before its completion to coincide with the preparation of the ensuing 2024 Lok Sabha election. Swami Avimukteshwaranand Saraswati, the Shankaracharya of Jyotish Peeth in Uttarakhand has said the four sankaracharyas will not attend the January 22 inauguration of the Ram temple in Ayodhya as "it is a bad idea to inaugurate an incomplete temple."

Secularism separates the milk of religion from political meat. It is like a doctor who advises us to consume meat and milk separately. Undoubtedly, there will be several ailments in the body politic without secularism.

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

Sharmila-led Congress throws big challenge to Jagan Reddy

By Sushil Kutty

The Congress has appointed YS Sharmila, the party chief of Andhra Pradesh. But Sharmila, who is the politically estranged sister of Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister YS Jagan Mohan Reddy, has a rather weak Andhra Pradesh unit of the Congress to fight her brother Jagan, who in turn is fighting anti-incumbency as well as the old warhorse, the Telugu Desam Party's Chandrababu Naidu, whose ambition knows no bounds, though Prime Minister Narendra Modi's rise did clip his wings over the last one decade.

It is an open secret in Andhra Pradesh that Chandrababu, like K. Chandrashekar Rao of neighbouring Telangana, harboured prime ministerial ambitions even as Andhra Pradesh stood truncated in 2014 and Jagan Mohan Reddy's exit from the grand old party in 2011 left the Andhra Pradesh unit of the Congress a shadow of its old self. Now, the Congress has come back to exact revenge with Jagan's sister Sharmila as the tip of the arrow.



It wasn't a surprise move, as some are putting it. Sharmila wouldn't have got the top Congress post if she wasn't Jagan Mohan Reddy's sister and that, too, a politically estranged sister with a grudge against her brother. Sibling

legency Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister, the late Y S Rajashekara Reddy. The challenge now is for Sharmila to get the state Congress fighting fit. The grapevine says it will not be easy. The "new leader" will have her hands full but she has the advantage of starting from scratch.

Another advantage is that her name-recognition is near total. And being Jagan Mohan Reddy's sister has its own benefits. That said, the brother-sister joust will make it an epic rivalry. Clear battle-lines will be drawn. For the first time, the sister will be asking for votes for herself and not for her brother's party. The electorate will have to realign in an altogether different manner, with both brother and sister starting with the same advantage/disadvantage.

YS Sharmila has already set herself up for scrutiny by talking to the minorities, with her own plans for that segment of the electorate. The YSRCP will definitely feel the pinch and the crunch. Also, both the brother and

sister are Christians. Again, Jagan stands to lose votes with Sharmila set to cut into the Christian vote-bank which happens to be a substantial chunk in Andhra Pradesh. By the way, this whole Christian thing has got accen-

"Now with all of Congress behind her, YS Sharmila has double the thrust she had. In BJP IT Cell lingo, the appointment of YS Sharmila was a Congress party 'masterstroke'. Especially, when Jagan Mohan Reddy is Chief Minister and Sharmila's relations with Jagan come with a keen blood-letting edge. Sharmila had left the YSRCP angry that her brother did not give her credit for the party coming to power."

rivalry is the stuff of legends and sisterly concern is the last emotion in Sharmila's mind, not that Jagan Mohan Reddy suffers from a case of brotherly love.

Now with all of Congress behind her, YS Sharmila has double the thrust she had. In BJP IT Cell lingo, the appointment of YS Sharmila was a Congress party "masterstroke". Especially, when Jagan Mohan Reddy is Chief Minister and Sharmila's relations with Jagan come with a keen blood-letting edge. Sharmila had left the YSRCP angry that her brother did not give her credit for the party coming to power.

The ingrate that he proved to be forced Sharmila to "migrate" to Telangana, in a bid to prove her mettle there against none other than the Telangana Rashtra Samithi leader KCR. Fact is, Sharmila had to migrate to the Congress and with Andhra Pradesh going to polls, along with the 2024 general elections, taking on Jagan Mohan Reddy in his own stronghold had become imperative. Sister Sharmila must surely know the brother's Achilles Heel.

So, YS Sharmila is back in town. And she leads the Congress in Andhra Pradesh. She is pitted against brother and Chief Minister Jagan Mohan Reddy. The two are not friends. Given the slightest chance, they will make a meal out of each other. Congress believes it has a chance to wrest Andhra Pradesh from the YSRCP with YS Sharmila at the helm. Also, with Telangana already in the Congress kitty, the turn of Andhra Pradesh is next. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

Toilet brushes for cleaning plates at Meghalaya Games

Editor,
I am writing with a sense of profound shock regarding the deeply concerning hygiene practices at the Meghalaya Games 2024 in Tura. It has come to light that toilet brushes were used for cleaning plates. This fact exposed the gross disregard for basic hygienic standards at such a mega event, which has been inaugurated by none other than the President of India.

A toilet brush, new or old, is symbolic of uncleanness, and its use in a kitchen setting is a downright violation of basic hygiene principles. Can the persons responsible for this decision eat the "puri-sabji" stored in a toilet commode or served from a potty pan, no matter how clean or new they are? Will it not make them vomit? The brain-nerves run faster than a sprinter!

This incident is not just about an inappropriate choice of cleaning equipment; it's about the blatant disregard for health norms and the well-being of the athletes and attendees. Why were such brainless individuals chosen for the job? This exposes the complete

lack of foresight and planning. Those responsible for this grave oversight must be pulled up forthwith. It is unacceptable for such a lapse to occur, especially at a prestigious event like the Meghalaya Games. The state cannot afford to bring up athletic talents when we gamble with the games.

Yours etc.,
Salil Gwali,
Shillong

Improve work culture

Editor,
So much hullabaloo was made by the Chief Minister and his cabinet colleagues that they are trying to improve the workload and efficiency in all departments of the state government, but a closer look will give the lie to all the tall claims. The reason I write this is because many would agree that there is inefficiency and lack of professionalism in most cases. An example is the slow-paced efforts to hand over pension payments of government employees who even after months are yet to get their service books regularised. Another point is, the appointment of crucial staff which even after proper submission of all documents as per their results are yet to be given appointment orders. The lackadaisical attitude of the MPSC and the

DSCs are a classic example of what inefficiency is all about. Corporates have a very specific and uniform policy of defining work efficiency and performance index for which they give an appraisal based on various parameters. This is not the case in most departments of the Meghalaya government. I recollect an incident of a friend who had applied for medical advance from the Health Department, only to be told that his personal file got "lost." This causes a lot of heartburn amongst the employees as well as of the persons affected. If the state employees only look for a promotion or increment then the state government should initiate corporate-like measures for better efficiency, functionality, performance and professionalism.

Yours etc.,
Dominic S. Wankhar,
Via email

Religion and politics immiscible

Editor,
Meat and milk both have high nutritional value. They build our body. But the combination of the two can be dangerous. Drinking milk after eating meat or combining the two can trigger several issues like gas, discomfort, stomach ache, nausea, acid-

ity, heartburn, ulcers to name but a few. Simply put, the combination of the two can cause several ailments in the body.

Similarly, politics and religion both have high societal value. But the combination of the two is as toxic as that of the mixture of meat and milk. The immediate outcome of such a combination is hate speeches which can be compared with vomiting acid after consuming meat and milk together.

The Supreme Court of India rightly observed that hate speeches would end the moment politicians stop using religion in politics. Justice Joseph hit the nail on the head when he observed that the country was caught in a "vicious circle of hate" and the solution lay in expunging religion from politics.

Earlier in feudalism, a king or a feudal lord used to favour his own religion over other religions. History witnessed that such a practice spelt disaster on every occasion. Just like people learned from their mistakes the need to separate milk from meat, here also they felt the need for a complete separation of religion from politics. This gave birth to secularism. All modern progressive nations have embraced secularism after learning how painful it would be to deviate from its path.

The mixture of politics and religion causes two major problems. When a partic-

"The misfortune of the wise is better than the prosperity of the fool."

— Epicurus

The Shillong Times

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VIP Cult & Commoner's Woes

THIS week out of seven days, at least 4 days were a nightmare for daily commuters. First it was the Presidential visit, her delayed take-off and the commotion for ordinary citizens who are not exactly out of their homes for a joyride but because they need to reach their workplaces; go to the market to buy essentials, visit a hospital or a doctor's clinic and a host of other things that ordinary mortals have to do on their own because they don't have servants, orderlies, peons etc. to attend to all their needs as the VIPs ruling this State have. Hence they are compelled to come out of their homes not because they want to but because they need to. It's not possible for everyone to walk long distances when there are no footpaths in most places. Try walking on the road to NEIGRIHMS to understand how precarious the life of a pedestrian is.

Considering that Shillong is becoming an unsustainable city, was it compulsory for the President to come to Shillong Raj Bhavan in an entourage and thereby bring life for ordinary people to a complete paralysis? What happened to the Garrison Ground where choppers used to land? Is that no longer tenable to function as a helipad? Then comes the Home Minister who heads straight to the Assam Rifles campus in Laitkor? Why could the plenary of the North Eastern Council not be held at the sprawling Assam Rifles complex? Was it necessary to host the NEC meeting at the State Convention Centre so that the traffic chaos reaches its peak? Those who coordinate these meetings need to come down to earth and not plan things in the comforts of their cosy little office cubicles. This distance between the rulers (?) and the ruled has become unbridgeable and the trend only continues. In a country riddled with the caste system where some are more privileged than others, the VIP cult is a natural progression but how did this culture entrench itself among tribals that are supposedly "egalitarian?" Surely the VIP cult following should be repugnant to the tribals. Unfortunately the tribals too have made this part of their culture and those holding positions in government believe they are above the citizens that elected them to power.

A government that cares for its citizens would be cognisant of their problems and should be able to imagine that if on an ordinary day Shillongites face the worst traffic jams and are delayed on their way to work and their return home then their woes would triple if a VIP were to pay a visit and therefore would organise for the meeting to be held away from the city. After all, the President and the Home Minister are as human as anyone else. They don't come from another planet. So why this need to bend over backwards by this supine State Government that does not have even an iota of empathy for ordinary citizens. It's time the public speaks up against this obnoxious VIP cult.

Potholes in Shillong: What does it reveal about governance in Meghalaya?

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

The article 'Convergence and Coordination Imperative for Good Governance' by Patricia Mukhim brought out the fundamental issue that plagues governance in the state: lack of coordination leading to wastage of resources, with the common people suffering in the process. She discussed this by highlighting the state of the roads in the city, which are in a pathetic condition, and lamented that those in charge don't seem to care because their vehicles "are very well cushioned to deal with the potholes" and they drive so fast that "they don't see the scars of bad governance under their vehicles." Commuters, especially those who use two-wheelers, will wholeheartedly agree with this assessment. One of my friends had fallen into one of the potholes that litter the New Colony Road from NEEPCO to Laitumkhrah. He was not seriously injured, but that day may not be far behind. The sorry state of the roads is not just an inconvenience and potentially life-threatening hazard to the public; it also affects other sectors of the state, especially those that are in dire straits and in need of support.

According to the 2022 'Basic Road Statistics 2018-2019' published by the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways, Government of India, Meghalaya is among the top ten states in India when it comes to the share of surfaced road (i.e., a road with a hard smooth surface of bitumen or tar, or in short, pucca road) to the total length of urban roads. The national average is around 79%, with Mizoram reporting the lowest—only 48% of the urban roads are surfaced road. In Meghalaya, 98.7% of its urban roads are surfaced, coming second only to Tripura with 98.9% in the North East. This would have been a proud achievement for the state, except for the fact that such statistics do not inform the status of such roads which makes repairing of roads in Shillong a perennial affair. Come winter, the sight of road rollers and people cleaning and laying bitumen becomes ubiquitous throughout the city. After the work is done, the roads look pristine and attractive. But no sooner than the work is complete, they almost immediately deteriorate. The road from Golf Links to Shiyap had been repaired just over a month ago. But one can already see parts of the surface coming off, giving an indication of where the potholes are going to appear again soon. So, it is not just the lack of coordination between departments (e.g., PWD and PHED, as argued by Patricia Mukhim), but the shoddy work (deliberate or otherwise) that is causing a huge wastage of the exchequer's resources. A corollary to this wastage is that it takes away financial resources from important sectors that need urgent attention.

The document 'Meghalaya Budget Analysis 2023-24' brought out by PRS Legislative Research (an independent research institute that aims to make the Indian legislative process better informed, more transparent, and more participatory)

summarized the 2023-24 state budget as presented by Meghalaya Chief Minister Conrad K. Sangma. On the last page of the document, there is a table that enumerates the allocation towards some key sectors in terms of Budget Estimates (how much was initially allocated) and Actuals (how much was actually spent). The figure was for 2021-2022, but it is very instructive to understand the priorities of the government as it is the same ruling dispensation at the moment. Thirteen sectors were mentioned. The Budget Estimates were to the tune of 13,042 crore, but the Actuals exceeded those by 154 crore. It is logical to assume that this must have increased the amount allocated to the different sectors, with their Actuals getting boosted. This indeed happened for some of the sectors.

Five key sectors saw an increase in expenditure from their Budget Estimates. The lowest increase was reported under Irrigation and Flooding, which was 12% higher than the Budget Estimates. Energy saw the highest increase, a whopping 476%. It was followed by Urban Development, which saw an increase of more than 100%. The Energy sector has been in a crisis for some time now. Last year, 2023, was a particularly bad year for the citizens of the state, who had to face long hours of load shedding. But such a high rise in Actuals as compared to Budget Estimates meant that there must have been cuts in expenditure in some key sectors. That is exactly what happened.

Eight of the 13 key sectors saw a decline in their Actuals. These were Social Welfare and Nutrition, Rural Development, Welfare of SC, ST, OBC, and Minorities, Water Supply and Sanitation, Agriculture and Allied Activities, Education, Sports, Arts, and Culture, Housing, and Police. Social Welfare and Nutrition saw the highest decline of -35%, and Police saw the lowest decline of -8%. Was it the case that the key sectors that saw a decline in their expenditure were doing quite well, and therefore, according to the government's estimate, they decided to reallocate the excess funds to the sectors that were in more dire need of support?

The paper 'Multidimensional Poverty in India Since 2005-06: A Discussion Paper' published by the NITI Aayog discusses the progress the country has made in reducing poverty rates across various time periods. It does this by using the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI), which measures people's deprivation and poverty at an individual level. Globally, it uses ten indicators (the Indian measure uses two additional indicators) covering three areas, namely health, education, and standard of living. The health dimension includes Nutrition, Maternal Health (additional indicator) and Child and Adolescent Mortality indicators; the education dimension includes Years of Schooling and School Attendance indicators; and the standard

of living dimension includes six household-specific indicators, namely, housing, household assets, type of Cooking Fuel, access to Sanitation, Drinking water, Electricity and Bank Account (additional indicator). If a person is deprived in a third or more of ten (weighted) (12 in the case of India) indicators, then MPI identifies them as 'MPI poor'.

Based on the data provided in the paper, over the 9-year period, 2013-14 to 2022-23, there has been a decline of about 18 percentage points, which is equivalent to approximately 24.82 crore escaping multidimensional poverty. However, some states in the country are still lagging far behind. While the average headcount ratio (%) of multidimensionally poor people in India is 11.28%, 25.46% of the people in Meghalaya have been categorized as multidimensionally poor. This is the second-highest in the country after Bihar, which edges Meghalaya by just over 1 percentage point. Let's take a look at some of the individual indicators to see how Meghalaya fares.

The National Family and Health Survey (NFHS-5) found that two of the three indicators under Sanitation and seven out of the eight indicators under Maternal and Child Health have figures lower than the national average. Under Child Feeding Practices and Nutritional Status of Children, two indicators out of five again have figures worse than the national average. This includes the finding that 46% of the Children under 5 years old in the state are stunted. Similarly, when it comes to anemia among Children and Adults around half or more of them are anemic. The Performance Grade Index (2020-21), released by the Union Ministry of Education ranked Meghalaya as being the second-lowest among the states and Union Territories. Then finally, according to the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India, the 2022-2023 per capita Net State Domestic Product of the state was Rs. 98,572, which was the lowest among all the states for which data was available, i.e., the state is financially the poorest in the country.

However, despite the very poor performance in health (linked to Social Welfare and Nutrition) and education (linked to Education, Sports, Arts, and Culture) the Actuals were lower than the initial Budget Estimates. The cut in expenditure of these two sectors amounted to more than 500 crore, which was almost 40% of the total reduction in expenditure of the aforementioned eight key sectors. At the same time, among the sectors that saw an increase in expenditure, Transport (which includes roads and bridges) alone saw an increase of almost 200 crore. How much of this was meant for expansion or the building of new roads, and how much was meant for the repair of existing roads, is not mentioned. But looking at the perennial repairs happening in the city, it is not difficult to

assume that the proportion of the latter must be substantial. In the rural areas, it must be worse. Recently, I cycled to Tyrsad, and it felt like I was on a single-track trail, bumping and swerving to avoid the protruding rocks and potholes filled with water throughout the entire stretch from Mawphlang to Weiloi. Two things emerge from this comparison.

Firstly, an argument cannot be made that the sectors that experienced a cut were doing quite well, which allowed the excess funds to be transferred elsewhere. Government statistics themselves prove this not to be the case. Secondly, the sectors that needed an increase in expenditure include those that appear to have a recurring expenditure that is borne out of a lack of coordination (as pointed out by Patricia Mukhim) and shoddy work execution (various newspaper reports and personal observations). This leads to the wastage of precious financial resources, which are already quite limited because of the size of the state's GDP. What makes this even more worrisome is the growing public debt of the state.

According to the dissertation 'A Study of Trend and Magnitude of Public Debt in Meghalaya: (2010-2022)' by Rimiki Phadong, submitted to the School of Economics, Commerce, and Management at Martin Luther Christian University, Meghalaya's average debt-to-GDP ratio since 2010 has been above 35%. However, over the last few years, this has grown by more than 40%, standing at 54.59% in 2020-2021. This debt will have to be serviced, and in fact, it is presently being done at the moment. The same document brought out by PRS Legislative Research showed that the Debt Repayment during 2021-2022 was a 187% higher than the Budget Estimates. As informed personally by George Lyngdoh (former MLA of Umroi), it is this repayment of loans that, to a large extent, has prevented the government from creating more jobs in the public sector. This also, according to him, reduces the efficiency of the administration as the available employees are overburdened with additional tasks due to less manpower. In the future, as public debt rises, job creation will become even more difficult. In such a scenario, the wastage of whatever financial resources the state generates or borrows is tantamount to a case of criminal negligence.

The potholes that are ubiquitous and a recurring feature of the roads in Shillong are not just a symptom of the failure of governance. It hints at a much larger mess that threatens not just the present but the future prospects of the citizens of the state. More than a hundred policies (i.e., Jaidbyntiew politics), it is the issues of governance that must agitate the public to demand accountability from its government. Maybe that time has not arrived in our state. But it cannot be denied that change is urgently required; the sooner the better.

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

Bharat Jodo Nvay Yatra raises political heat in North-East India BJP to suffer the most, high stakes for panic stricken Himanta

By Dr. Gyan Pathak

The first week of Bharat Jodo Nvay Yatra has stirred up the politics in North East India. The political churning that began with the former Congress President, Rahul Gandhi led Yatra launch on January 14 from Thoubal in Manipur has already alarmed the BJP leaders, especially Himanta Biswa Sarma, the Chief Minister of Assam, who seems to be panic stricken, as his actions and statements reveal.

NDA has 20 out of 25 Lok Sabha seats from the region, which includes 15 of the BJP, which they cannot afford to lose when the BJP and its leader PM Narendra Modi would be seeking their third term in the forthcoming Lok Sabha Election 2024, and Himanta's political fate depends on their success, because he has been leading the BJP and NDA in the North East. His personal political stakes are very high.

Rahul's Nyay Yatra covered Manipur and Nagaland in two days and is now travelling in Assam. In Manipur it travelled 107 km with Imphal being the key place. The Yatra covered 4 districts in Manipur. The Manipur violence since May 2023, under the double engine BJP led government has brought unprecedented miseries to the people of the state.

Manipur has two Lok Sabha seats. BJP had won one seat in the Lok Sabha election 2019 by defeating Congress candidate by only 17,755 votes, while the other was won by (Naga People's Front) NPF defeating BJP by a margin of 73,782 votes. The Manipur violence has an adverse impact on the BJP's political prospect this time, and even a minor gain by Congress would prove too costly for the BJP in the State. Nyay Yatra in Manipur gained good support from the local people, much to the chagrin of BJP leaders.

In Nagaland, it travelled 257 km in two days covering 5 districts with Kohima as a key place. Nagaland has only one Lok Sabha seat that is held by National Democratic Progressive Party (NDPP), which was a part of NDA in the Lok Sabha election 2019. NDPP has bagged only 49.73 per cent of votes as against 48.11 per cent gained by the Congress in 2019. Swing in favour of the Congress was 18.1 per cent. Obviously, Rahul's Nyay Yatra, has further strengthened the Congress, as seen from the positive response from the people. Even a minor gain to Congress may upset the political apple cart of NDA in the state. After successful Yatra in Manipur and Nagaland, it has entered Assam on January 18, the state where BJP's Himanta Biswa Sarma is the Chief Minister. Already alarmed from the success of Rahul's yatra in the two states, he is witnessing how the yatra is successfully progressing in Assam too. The Yatra is intended to travel 833 km in Assam in 8 days covering 17 districts with key places like Jorhat, Dispur, and Guwahati.

Himanta has much to worry in Assam, because the state sends 14 Lok Sabha seats, out of which BJP had won 9 seats in the 2019 Lok Sabha election. The Party could bag only 36.05 per cent of votes against 35.44 per cent of votes polled by Congress. It was a matter of great worry for the BJP since the winning margin was wafer thin. Additionally, there was negative swing against BJP of minus 0.45 per cent though it was able to get two more seats compared to 2014. The swing in favour of Congress was 5.84 per cent, but it could get only 3 seats. AIUDF had lost its two seats but had gained 7.8 per cent vote.

Even before the Nyay Yatra entered Assam, AIUDF and Congress have almost settled the issue of seat sharing in the state. AIUDF will be contesting 3 seats while the Congress will contest in 11 seats. The combined vote share would thus be much more than the BJP's in the forthcoming Lok Sabha election. It was the chief reason for Himanta's panic while the positive response the Yatra is gaining from the people in the state has additionally heightened his political stakes.

The Yatra is clearly helping Congress to revive its presence and popularity in the region where it has lost considerable ground to the BJP and its allies in the recent years. It has an appeal to the diverse ethnic groups and communities in the North East who have faced violence, discrimination, and neglect from the Central government led by PM Narendra Modi, and the state governments such as in Assam led by BJP Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma. In Manipur people have tasted the outcome of choosing the double engine government of BJP in the form of ethnic violence. The Yatra is also highlighting the unresolved issues of the peace talks with certain communities, the Citizenship Amendment Act, the Inner Line Permit System which have caused considerable resentment and unrest in the region.

No wonder the Yatra is facing several challenges including legal disruption by the governments led by BJP and NDA, and criticism, especially in Assam and by its CM Himanta Biswa Sarma. They are alleging that the Congress is anti-national, divisive and corrupt. On the other hand, Rahul Gandhi has alleged that the Assam Chief Minister is the most corrupt in India.

The Yatra has also been undergoing some tough times. Its organisational weaknesses and factionalism have come to fore on several occasions, and the Congress leaders needed to address them. The performance and credibility of the Yatra needs even better coordination within the party and also with the INDIA alliance partners, if they want to really succeed to upset the BJP's apple cart in the North East. The Yatra must try to give out a clearer and compelling narrative for the Lok Sabha election 2024. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

India must impart quality education

Editor,
The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) highlights the various educational challenges which need to be taken seriously as the students in the age group 14-18 can't read Grade 2 level text in their regional languages. The nationwide citizen-led household survey has provided a glimpse of the status of schooling and learning outcomes of students aged between 14-18 years. It says that overall 86.8 per cent of all children are enrolled in either school or college, which is a decent number, seen in the light of our historical backwardness. However, the survey also reveals that almost a third, or 32.6 per cent, of 18-year-olds do not attend college which is depressing. But the

fact that a quarter of teenagers surveyed cannot read a Class 2-level text fluently in their regional languages, and a substantial 42.7 per cent cannot even read sentences in English, are alarming findings.

The "Beyond Basics" survey, conducted among 34,745 young people in 28 districts across 26 states, pointed out that schooling has brought no significant change in their foundational literacy and numeracy skills, and this gets worse as the years pass by. The Survey has found that 76.6 per cent could read a Class 2-level text in 2017, but that share declined, slightly to 73.6 per cent in 2023. The scene, however, is better in Arithmetic. While only 39.5 per cent of youth could do a simple division problem in 2017 the same has now gone up to 43.3 per cent. But that more than one half of the students struggle with division is unacceptable by

all counts
The Survey Report suggests that there are fewer takers for science and mathematics than for humanities, which is not a good sign for the progress of any country. While the gender gap in enrolments is negligible, the survey shows that male candidates do better than females in their ability to apply basic numeracy and reading skills. More boys opt for studies in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) than girls. Almost two-thirds of the youth either do not have a computer or do not know how to use it. While 92 per cent students can use a smartphone, only 20 per cent males and nine per cent females have ever sent an email.
An interesting finding from the Survey is that the Covid-19 pandemic has not resulted in a massive drop-out of students as had been feared previously. The

Survey claims that the proportion of out-of-school children and youth has been declining as a result of the government's push to universalise secondary education.
The sum of the Survey findings indicate that the constitutional mandate to offer free and compulsory education for children up to 14 years has been met in a substantial measure in our country but we have not been able to retain the momentum as the age of the children goes up. The results also cast a shadow on the quality of education being imparted to them. We need a lot to do to ensure that our girls keep pace with boys.
While a large percentage of students drop out of the education system once they reach the age of 18 years, which presents its own set of problems, the overall outcome in terms of learning for employability of our youth is disheartening. Will

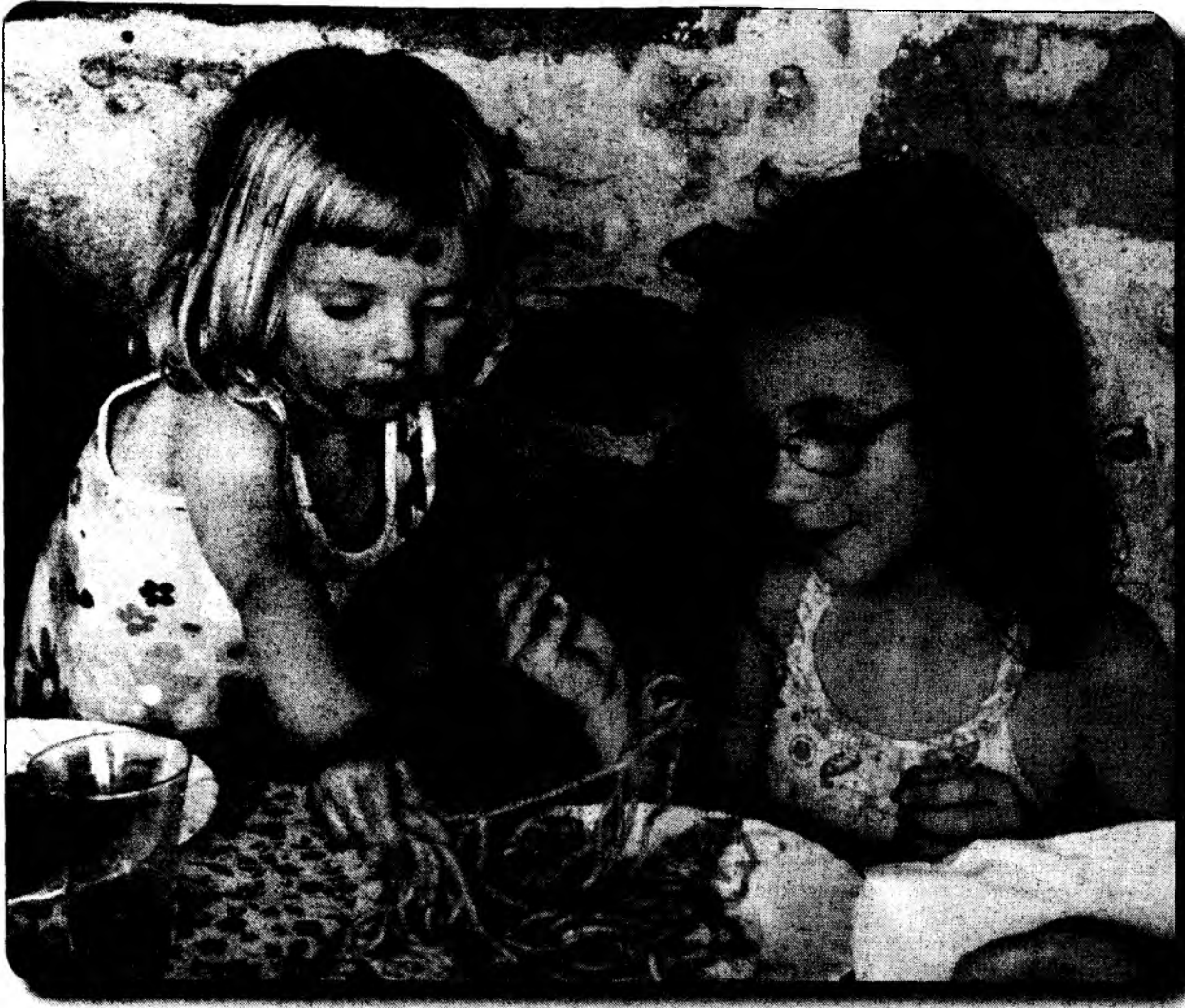
the new education policy currently being rolled out at least begin to address some of these questions?
The report further highlighted that students who are enrolled in Science in grades 11 and 12 are high performers in grade 9 and therefore have been selected for the Science stream, and are therefore more likely to do well.
The ASER Survey looked at a few critical points, namely - Basic reading skills; Mathematics and English abilities; Application of basic skills to everyday calculations; Reading and understanding written instructions; and Financial calculations that need to be done in real life. Close to 80 per cent of youth report having used their smartphone for entertainment related activities such as watching a movie or listening to music.
The report, however, pointed out that while young

people remain in school longer, there's no significant change in their foundational literacy and numeracy skills (FLN).
The worrying trend has been that less than half of youngsters (about 45 per cent) could calculate the number of hours that a child slept based on the time he/she went to bed at night and woke up in the morning.
In another everyday task of measuring an object with a scale, 85 per cent of those surveyed could calculate the length of an object correctly if it was placed at the "0" mark on the ruler. But when the object was moved and placed elsewhere on the ruler, less than 40 per cent could correspond correctly. Two-thirds of youth (65.1 per cent) were able to read functional instructions on a packet of ORS solution.
Across all tasks that test youngsters' ability to apply basic numeracy and reading skills, male candidates tend

to do better than women. The survey showed that overall 86.8 per cent of youth between the age of 14 and 18 years are enrolled in an educational institution, with the gender gap in enrolment being only 0.2 per cent.
The report pointed out that among both males and females, most youth who are working in activities other than household work tend to be working on family farms.
The significance of the ASER 2023 survey is that it measures educational development across several parameters. For nearly two decades, ASER reports have consistently pointed to deficiencies among children in elementary school with regards to foundational skills like reading and basic arithmetic. But this year's focus on an older age group also points to a similar gap in learning outcomes at higher levels.
The report reveals that

children continue to struggle with basic reading and arithmetic skills well into their teenage years, even after reaching Class 10 and higher secondary levels of education (Classes 11 and 12). The findings point to a huge skill deficit among adolescents, many of them only a few years away from entering the job market.
The challenge is for the government of the day to take all necessary steps to improve the standard of education which is imperative for the all-round development of the country even as India moves towards becoming the third ranking economy in the world by 2030.
Yours etc.,
Yash Pal Ralhan,
Via email
Articles and letters appearing on this page are the views of the writers/authors and not that of The Shillong Times

Is our sense of fairness driven by selfishness?



We've all been there. You're dying to grab that last piece of cake on the table during an office meeting, but you are not alone. Perhaps you just cut off a small piece - leaving something behind for your colleagues, who do exactly the same thing. And so you all watch the piece of cake getting smaller and smaller - with nobody wanting to take the last piece. Whenever we make choices in a social setting about how much we want to share with others we must navigate between our own selfish interests and social norms for fairness. But how fair are we truly? And under which circumstances do

we offer others a fair share of the cake? Neuroscientific research has started revealing answers. A team used electric brain stimulation on 60 volunteers to figure out which parts of the brain were involved. Humans have a strong preference for proactively conforming to social norms - even if there's no punishment for not doing so. This has been extensively studied with economic games in which participants can decide how to distribute an amount of money between themselves and others. Past research suggests that we simply prefer an equal split between ourselves and others. Interestingly, this is not only in situations when we are disadvantaged compared to

others (disadvantageous inequity) and may have something to gain from the sharing of resources, but also in cases when we are better off than others (advantageous inequity). This ultimately suggests that our sense of fairness isn't solely driven by a selfish desire to be better off than others. What's more, the preference for a fair share between ourselves and others emerges early in childhood, suggesting it is to some extent hardwired. The willingness to equally share resources with others persists even at the expense of sacrificing personal benefits. And when others give us an unfair share, we

often feel a strong urge to punish them to protect our own interest. However, we typically do this even if it means that both of us end up with nothing in the end. This raises the question of which psychological mechanisms support actions of different types of fairness decisions. Depending on whether we or the others find ourselves in a less favourable position, do the same psychological mechanisms drive our willingness to ensure a fair share with others?

Understanding others

One explanation for our tendency to be fair, even when we are better off than others, is that we understand other people's perspectives. This might in fact encourage our willingness to sacrifice personal benefits for them.

Therefore, by taking the other's perspective into account, we try to create a more equal environment by reducing inequality. Research has suggested that a small brain region facilitates our ability to navigate complex social environments: the right temporo-parietal junction (rTPJ).

The rTPJ plays a crucial role in understanding the thoughts and perspectives of others and might therefore help us make pro-social decisions. Given this, it has been proposed that this brain region contributes to our willingness to sacrifice personal benefits for the sake of others.

But what about when we're not better off than others? It may be that advantageous and disadvantageous inequity are based on different psychological mechanisms, potentially represented in different brain regions.

Some researchers suggest that the right lateral prefrontal cortex (rLPFC), a brain region which drives the rejection of unfair offers and promotes the decision to punish social norm violators, might be involved. This is what ultimately makes us dislike being treated unfairly, particularly, by those who are better off than us - unleashing negative emotions such as anger or envy.

Overcoming selfish motives

A recent research offers new insights and reveals that the rTPJ and

the rLPFC do indeed play different roles when it comes to fairness.

In the experiment, 60 participants made fairness decisions while undergoing a non-invasive type of electric brain stimulation called transcranial alternating current stimulation - applying a current to the scalp over a certain brain area to make it active. This enabled the researchers to assess the involvement of specific brain regions.

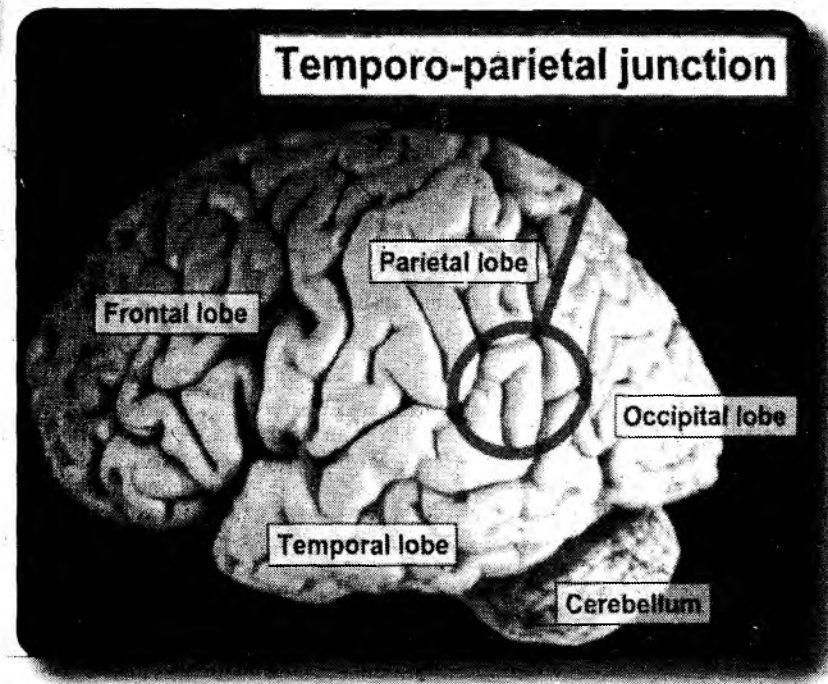
Specifically, the study explored whether the same brain rhythms underlie the processes involved in making fairness decisions and take another's perspective into account. The researchers did that by electrically stimulating each brain area with different types of oscillations, or rhythms, and seeing how that affected people's fairness decisions.

The findings provide direct evidence that oscillations in the rTPJ play a crucial role for switching between one's own and the other's perspective. And when we do that, it ultimately helps us make proactive, fair decisions that also benefit others. A different type of underlying oscillation in the rLPFC instead seems to make people more utilitarian to overcome their less favourable position.

Future research will need to explore this link more deeply. But it does seem that fairness is not only driven by restricting one's own selfish desires - which makes sense when you consider that cooperation is probably the single most important factor in the evolutionary success of our species. Being selfish doesn't always make us successful.

However, the process of trying to make fair decisions is, as we all know, complex. The fact that there are different brain regions involved in doing so ultimately shows why this is the case.

We all have the capacity to be selfish. But we are also simply hardwired to balance our own perspective with understanding the minds of others - and empathising with them. (The Conversation)



'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi Sunday, JANUARY 21, 2024

'Birthday Forecast'
Moon is forming an angle of 150 degrees with Mars on your solar return chart which is good. You will enjoy a wonderful time. Financially you will be strong and stable. And will tap additional sources of income. You could plan some new line of business. Your business associates will help you immensely. And keep on supporting you. Your professional circle will grow. And you will meet lot of influential people. You will also receive help from some unexpected quarter. A lovely person will come in your life all of a sudden leading to a rollicking affair. It will be a very fulfilling relation. And will go a distance. Your siblings will make good progress and you will keep on guiding them. You will be undertaking lot of business related trips which will prove beneficial later on. Health will remain perfect. Overall it is going to be a good year.

'This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20)
You are likely to swing to extremes in this period, sometimes happy, celebratory and at other times heavy, serious and even low. 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. This would be the right time to concentrate on your career prospects and professional skills. A healthy body holds a healthy and positive mind - work towards this.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21)
The planetary configuration brings to the fore activities related to communications, competition and examinations. You feel touchy and sensitive but would be more accommodating and compassionate in relationships. You would create a work of art in your field of activity. This brings success and good fortune at work and opens new horizons for expansion. This is the right time to participate in current events and share views, ideas and feelings with people around you. Sports and physical activities keep you fit and energetic.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21)
This week highlights friendship, love, romance, spirituality and children in your life. There would be positive results from written and oral communication. Short trips, shopping, and journey are on your agenda. This is a good time to promote harmony and good relations with people around you. You are also dealing with issues that force you to rid yourself of guilt about under-performing, and to develop faith and trust in a larger more spiritual plan. It's time to let go of some of your fears that you are not doing enough; to develop more compassion and understanding of others, and to be humble, feeling content in the knowledge that you are putting in your best.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22)
This week brings mixed results for you. After dealing with tough people and complicated issues you feel much stronger and clearer about your priorities. You are compassionate and generous with family, friends and relatives, drawing respect from them. It's also important to let go of some of your obsessions with rules, details, and fears of not doing things perfectly. The movement is towards a more balanced approach to dealing with practical, worldly matters and your own spiritual growth. Health needs extra care and old habits detrimental to your health need to be discarded.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23)
Mixed results are indicated this week. 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 addressed. Communications and business associates from overseas bring good news and offer lucrative opportunities. A marriage proposal is worth considering. Children may be a stronger focus as well. Sponsoring or supporting other people would be rewarding. New or changed responsibilities around the home or towards family also figure at this time.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22)
This phase indicates income and gain from investments and speculations. This is a time of increased psychological understanding, intimacy, and perhaps accumulation of wealth if you manage your resources well. You are more capable of helping

friends and loved ones who are dealing with a crisis—you can be leaned upon. Any type of in-depth study or research is likely to go well. Be careful when expressing feelings and emotions as others can misunderstand you. You might spend a lot of time in short frequent trips, communicating with people.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23)
An intimate relationship develops or figures strongly in this period. Learning to share on a personal level brings you some measure of joy. Money matters make big headlines. A bigger drive for security is with you and re-organizing your home and domestic life comes into play. Other people's money may come your way or you might secure some real estate. You adopt new styles and invest in clothes, jewelry, perfumes and this brings color and glamour in your life. Your thoughts turn to children, pleasure and romance. You focus on having fun, enjoying sports and expressing yourself efficiently. You maintain a fitness routine and a healthy diet program.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22)
The planetary configuration brings mixed results for you. A partner's resources could have a significant impact on your home life. Finding joy in developing intimacy is featured, and this is a time where you develop and enhance your love on a deeper level. Work could be moving towards more research and development. The work you do could be supported by your spouse or other people's money in general, such as work in finance. You achieve success as you are brilliant and there is good fortune attending professional, personal and material aspects.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21)
This phase brings new associations and beginnings in work areas as new opportunities and changes may come about. You are likely to see benefits in the areas of finances, shared resources, personal transformation, research, investigation and emotional matters. An insurance settlement, tax rebate, could come your way, and this is an excellent time to work on financial planning and strategy. Financial gains may come through a partnership or there may be an increase in income. Benefit can come through jointly held resources, loans, or taxes. You need to be aware of the areas that could add value.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20)
You would enjoy making things that are beautiful and you succeed in areas that require an aesthetic sense as well as technical ability. You would compromise and adjust and take a softer approach while dealing with people at work and home. It's a passionate time, although you are unlikely to be displaying a whole lot of self-discipline. This is a time when you could get a mortgage or other property- and home-related financial backing. You would get serious about home, family, and domestic concerns. Health food, yoga and meditation would help to overcome from health problems.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18)
The ability to build up financial and monetary pursuits and good returns from overseas business are on the cards. Sharing your interests and communication with your loved one may be especially appealing to you. Family obligations may get in the way of your experience of pleasure and of the achievement of your personal goals. There may be some emotional distancing as well in your home. Your current living conditions may feel restrictive, limiting, too small or cramped (physically and/or emotionally). Delays and slowdowns may be experienced in the areas of health, mobility, and career.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20)
This period brings wisdom, knowledge and creativity in your behavior and cooperation and harmony in personal relationships. Your drive for personal freedom and insistence on your rights is pressing, and a confrontation in which you have to stand up for yourself is likely. You certainly don't like to follow orders. Do your best to avoid impulsive decision-making that is built upon your desire to be a free spirit. You may recognize talents that you never knew you had, and this can be a sudden, exciting discovery. A health program finds favour with you.

6 ways inequality holds back climate action

Are improvements to green technologies, like better batteries and more efficient solar panels, enough on their own to tackle climate change? Unfortunately not. Our behaviour and lifestyles must change too.

Rolling out the solutions to climate change (electric vehicles, solar power, heat pumps) will require confronting the enormous gulf in wealth and resources separating the richest and poorest people - both within countries and between them.

In a recent article for *Nature Climate Change*, it was explained why inequality remains one of the biggest barriers to the net zero transition.

- 1. The very rich are very big polluters**
Oxfam recently shone a spotlight on the gap in emissions between the richest and poorest people globally. According to their latest analysis, the richest 1% emit as much CO2 as the poorest 66% combined. To limit warming to 1.5°C, each person has a yearly carbon budget of about 1 tonne. However, the top 1% of emitters currently burn through more than one hundred times the sustainable amount, emitting on average a staggering 110 tonnes of carbon a year each. If we want to transition to net zero fairly and in time to avoid the worst effects of the climate crisis, we need to slash emissions from the biggest sources.
- 2. Political solutions are limited**
The political power of the rich prevents measures that could otherwise distribute emissions and energy use more fairly. This is because wealthy people can shape government policy to suit their interests. Billionaires who have made their fortunes through investments in the fossil fuel industry have donated to groups that campaign against policy solutions to climate change, obstructing and delaying efforts to decarbonise. With the ability to successfully lobby against climate policies, the super-wealthy have no compulsion to curb their highly polluting behav-
- 3. Carbon taxes could be more effective**
No price attached to carbon emissions, in any country, accounts for their full damage to the Earth and to human health. This means that it is often cheaper for industries to pollute than switch to clean alternatives. Carbon taxes are supposed to increase the price of emitting greenhouse gases and pollution so that the greenest option is also the cheapest one. For example, taxing diesel and petrol vehicles (and investing the revenue in public transport) could make it cheaper for families to travel by train and bus instead of by car. If such taxes were widely introduced, research indicates they could be effective at reducing emissions. Instead, carbon taxes tend to disproportionately affect poorer people and countries by increasing the prices of goods and services that remain highly polluting, while wealthier people can afford to keep emitting. More equal societies, without extreme poverty or wealth, could introduce carbon taxes that enable everyone to decarbonise.
- 4. Green options aren't in reach for all**
While carbon emissions are not priced at their true cost, some lifestyle changes (such as replacing a gas boiler with a heat pump) require a hefty upfront investment. If you're one of the many people on a low income then you may not be able to afford them. In the UK, subsidies for energy-efficiency improvements like home insulation tend to be restricted to homeowners, leaving renters with little control over the building they live in - including its emissions. Similarly, tax breaks or grants to buy electric bikes are largely restricted to those in stable jobs which pay above the minimum wage. Ensuring that subsidy schemes
- 5. People need free time to go green**
Beyond wealth and income, there are also inequalities in available time to consider. Some low-carbon options take longer or are less convenient than the polluting alternatives, such as travelling long distances by train instead of flying. Learning new skills, like how to cook plant-based recipes to cut down on your meat consumption, can take time which wealthy people can more readily afford by working part-time, retiring early or paying others to take care of cleaning and childcare. More equality in free time, such as a four-day working week, can help people make lifestyle changes that benefit the planet.
- 6. Public services cannot meet their potential**
Providing high-quality public services to all makes low-carbon choices easier for everyone. Universally available amenities also meet basic standards of human wellbeing, while using less energy overall. In the UK, London boasts the cheapest bus fares and the most comprehensive public transport network. Although rent and property prices can be lower in rural areas than in cities, the deregulation and subsequent privatisation of the UK bus network in the 1980s - as well as austerity since 2010 - has led to more unequal access to public transport. Fare increases and axed bus routes have put low-carbon public transport out of reach for many and made it harder to get around without a car. The planet's dwindling resources are being squandered by a rich minority. Reining in their emissions and redistributing their power and influence would help everyone live more sustainably so that the planet can support a decent life for all. (The Conversation)

For example, private jet travel remains legal despite it being the most polluting transport mode of all and useful to just a tiny minority. Specifically support those on lower incomes could allow everyone to make the changes necessary for reaching net zero.

"We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give."

—Winston Churchill

The Shillong Times

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Message from Ayodhya

THE Pran Prathishta or idol consecration ceremony for the newly erected Ram Temple in Ayodhya today has been turned into an epoch-making event at the behest of the ruling political establishment. The majority community has every right to hold a temple consecration event in a dignified manner and in keeping with religious traditions. The nation would heave a sigh of relief that, after decades of wrangles and large-scale bloodshed, those who campaigned for the setting up of a Ram Temple at the spot where a dilapidated Babri Masjid stood, would now be at peace with themselves. Religion holds an important space in the life of most individuals and this is an occasion for large-scale celebrations across the nation, though this frenzy was built to the present level by a governmental push.

Every religion teaches its adherents to follow the path of brotherhood and compassion towards all. Hinduism, with all its divisions and discriminations within its ranks, has also spread the message of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, or sought to see the world as one family. In practice, though, this is wishful thinking. The modern principles of globalization revisited this concept by seeing the world as a global village. Steps have been taken in this direction in matters of trade etc., but every nation cannot do without protection of its borders. Boundaries did not disappear, unlike the Berlin Wall. Hindus as a whole were a patient society, despite conquests in the past from alien Muslim rulers. But the frenzy against the Babri Masjid leading to its demolition and the present consecration of a Ram Temple there had reached its height in 1992, resulting in bloodshed on a massive scale. For, religious feelings of Hindus were raised to a high level since the 1980s by vested interests, taking full advantage of the serialization of a Doordarshan serial, Ramayana. Its by-product is the BJP that rules India today with supreme authority.

Religious faith as such is well-appreciated. But, too much of any indulgence is dangerous. The Muslim societies are examples. They have gained less from the present religious frenzy built to a climax by the mullahs taking advantage of the oil boom in the Muslim nations in West Asian regions. While the campaign for demolition of Babri Masjid set Muslims against Hindus, the terrorist offensives from the Pakistani soil turned many Hindus against Muslims. Yet, the Hindu edifice demonstrates stains of a secular outlook. While the Sangh Parivar often takes aggressive stands on the basis of religion, the wider Hindu society is still tolerant and peace-loving. They are a guarantee to India's integrity. The present frenzy over the Ram Temple consecration is fine as long as it does not build further on the negativities in future.

52 Years of Lies

By Michael J. Kharkongor

After endless struggle and decades of disappointment, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi inaugurated Meghalaya on the 21st of January 1972, as a full-fledged State to much joy and celebration. From then on, Meghalaya has been reaping the benefits of Statehood which came about from the tireless work of our Statehood Hill Leaders. But 52 years after the creation of Meghalaya, several questions still linger. For instance, have our leaders really lived up to expectations? When, if ever, is it justifiable for a politician to break a promise? Are campaign promises really promises, or are they just musings about the things that candidates and parties might like to do if given the chance? And finally, should lying and deception in Meghalaya politics be treated as an ethical offence?

This last question is a pivotal one. Consider an MLA or MP who has engaged himself in some wrongdoing. Should he reveal this? If he admits his guilt, voters will know he is guilty, but may think him honest. What if he denies wrongdoing? If he is caught, he will be seen as both guilty and dishonest; if he is not caught, he will be seen as both innocent and honest. As long as honesty is not too important, relative to innocence (which is likely if the scandal is important), denying is better than admitting if he is not caught, but worse if he is, then denying is more risky than admitting. How might this decision be affected by a politician's political security? Suppose a guilty politician's re-election chances are marginal prior to the scandal. If he admits to wrongdoing, he will lose any hope of re-election. He would have to lie, and hope he is not caught, to have any chance at re-election.

On the other hand, if a politician is relatively secure, he may be able to survive his wrongdoing provided he is honest about it. However, he may not survive if voters learn about both his wrongdoing and his attempts to cover it up. Admitting will maximize his reelection prospects. Aside from this, people are more likely to lie if innocence is more important than honesty. For example, a politician whose polling tells him that his electorate can forgive wrongdoing, but not being lied to, is more likely to admit to his mistakes. Finally, there is the obvious point that the higher the probability that a lie will be caught, the less attractive lying is.

When our Chief Minister says that the economy is

creating jobs for the youth and that the unemployment rate in the state stands at 1.8 percentage points, Meghalaya isn't really feeling the joy, because -- believe it or not -- politicians like Mr. Sangma are selectively quoting numbers that are outdated and make it appear as if the economy is doing better than it really is.

Someone stopped looking for work. But our MLAs treat this as "clear evidence" that "their laws and policies" are "improving" and so is the unemployment rate. Truth is, politicians here in Meghalaya just can't help lying; much of the decline in the unemployment rate is due to people giving up looking for work and the official unemployment rate has fallen largely because we've stopped counting large numbers of jobless people. These numbers should be alarming to the general public, but for some reason the issue fails to attract public interest.

So, in my view, I feel there are at least three reasons to formally acknowledge lying and deception in Meghalaya politics as an ethical offence. First, politicians here might campaign more responsibly, and choose their words more carefully in general, if they knew they might have to explain any discrepancies and inconsistencies at some later date. No MLA or MP would want to be the subject of an

ethics investigation. Second, if politicians were to explain why they broke promises or withheld information, the exercise would have significant educational value for the public. I understand that not all broken promises start out as lies and not all modifications of the truth are malicious.

I also understand that sometimes politicians make promises with genuine intent to see them through, only to learn later that circumstances prevent their fulfilment. In these cases, the public would benefit from knowing the reasons for the change of plan. It would force citizens to acknowledge the complexity and unpredictability of the policy process and the very real constraints that politicians face when allocating resources. Although voters always have the next election as a chance to remove an MLA or MP who fails to meet expectations, accountability between elections is weak. Politicians can avoid giving answers and defences until the next campaign. This would change if politicians were forced to answer for broken promises and other variations on deception.

Every five years, citizens of Meghalaya are treated to stories of how stimulus spending and quantitative easing have brought in development in the State; created jobs and employment opportunities for the youth and how the great leaders who brought us these wondrous gifts deserve to be re-elected. I'm sure this coming election will be no different. We the people of Meghalaya have been exploited enough; politics in the state truly is a mess! We have leaders who can't or shouldn't be allowed to lead. We endure governments that lie, and seek to undermine our democratic values; and we are confronted with policies that serve the interests of the privileged few.

The ugly truth is politicians here in Meghalaya are all the same; they promise to bring in more public buses even when there are still no flyovers. But this is not just about Conrad Sangma or his sidekicks; in the past, people like D D Lapang, S C Marak, E K Mawlong, Flinder Anderson Khonglam, J. Dringbell Rymbai, Donkumar Roy and Mukul Sangma whose de facto executive authority had once upon a time rested comfortably on their trusted shoulders, had for years, along with their council of ministers (who are collectively responsible to the assembly) done nothing but lie and loot.

(The author is a teacher and social worker)

Is religion an agenda for 2024 election?

By Barnes Mawrie

The general Lok Sabha election is at the threshold and every political party is busy planning and scheming. The question that is uppermost in the elector's mind is "what agenda will be foremost in this coming election?" It looks like the BJP and its allies are bent on making religion the principal agenda for this election.

There are many factors that point to this political development. The Government has intelligently planned to have the inauguration and blessing of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya in this election year. The event is scheduled for 22nd January and it is going to be a mega event with a lot of fanfare. Prime Minister Modi is going to be the hero of this event along with his party leaders. The leaders of the Opposition seem to have been relegated to the background. This is deliberately done in order to boost the image of the Government and belittle the opposition in the eyes of the public. It is evident that every TV channel today is full of advertisements on Ram Temple and stories from the Ramayana, as if this is more important than other issues which affect the lives of people like unemployment, inflation, poverty etc.

It looks like the BJP has run out of ideas and now it is playing the religion card. Can the Indian public be fooled again? It seems so, for religion as they say, runs thicker than blood in our veins. The

election of 2024 will prove to be the last straw in Indian democracy. It is a do or die election for the survival of our democratic system. Our country is at the mercy of the intelligent citizens who have the power to put an end to the rightist dominance and bring back democracy.

We pride ourselves in being the largest democracy in the world, but will that soon transform into being the largest theocracy? India used to be known as a very tolerant and accommodating country where Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs and every religious group lived together as brothers and sisters. Mutual respect, support and concern used to be our nation's age-old creed. Today this creed is being dismantled bit by bit as we witness the surge of religious intolerance and Hindu fundamentalism. Our forefathers fought for freedom and democracy and many of them laid down their lives for this. Finally, they achieved their dream and aspiration when in 1947 India got its independence from the British colonists. Since 1950, the beginning of our Republic, our country has been functioning as an exemplary democracy in the world. Many nations looked up to us for inspiration. The famous national cliché "unity in diversity" which is a typical democratic philosophy, was very much adhered to. All the ear-

"Today all Hindu fundamentalist groups are becoming bold in carrying out their Hindutva agenda. The cow vigilantes, the saffron hate speakers, the mosque and church demolishers and the oppressors of the minority groups, are flexing their muscles and they are taking the law in their own hands with impunity."

vast population of Hindus in our country especially in the "cow belt" region, are easily motivated by issues related to religion. With the unprecedented religious sentiments running in the country through politicization of Ram Temple and other religious issues, it seems like a foregone conclusion that the BJP will come to power again in this coming election. Making Lord Ram (with all due respect for this great deity), the national hero, is the worst idea in any democratic country. Let us leave the gods and goddesses in the realm of religion alone and not tamish their images with mundane ideologies. I do not yet know of any Christian country in the world which has made Jesus Christ the national hero. Individuals may take their deities as their personal heroes, but it is unbecoming for a nation to adopt deities as political or national heroes. That is an archaic idea which belonged to the ancient civilizations.

Technically it may sound all right but there is an apprehension. If it is found by the court that there was a temple in that area, what will be the consequence? It may lead to another total collapse of law and order like what happened during the Babri mosque demolition.

More controversies Be that as it may, it appears the exemption allowed in the Places of Worship Act, would not bar more such petitions to determine the religious character of some places of worship to be accepted by the courts. Historian DN Jha's "Brahmanical Intolerance in Early India" cites accounts of Pushyamitra Sunga destroying thousands of Buddhist stupas and monasteries. What will happen if Buddhists start filing petitions to determine the religious character of so many places of worship now?

Today all Hindu fundamentalist groups are becoming bold in carrying out their Hindutva agenda. The cow vigilantes, the saffron hate speakers, the mosque and church demolishers and the oppressors of the minority groups, are flexing their muscles and they are taking the law in their own hands with impunity. With another term for this government, India is going to witness more and more persecution of the minorities and God forbid, we might be heading towards national disintegration.

To be candid about the present government, I would not deny the fact that the present BJP-led government is very efficient and a lot of development has taken place in these past few years. In comparison, there is much less corruption in governance today than before. But what is casting a slur on this government is its unholy marriage with religion which becomes a threat to democracy. We do not want to see India becoming another Iran or Afghanistan where religious rules become supreme and human rights and freedom are suppressed. Every right-minded citizen of India irrespective of race and religion, should therefore resist any attempt to destroy or belittle democracy in our great country. This election therefore is going to be either "bye bye BJP or bye bye democracy."

Letters to the Editor

Ram mandir & politics

Editor There is a narrative which believes that the consecration of Ram Temple at Ayodhya is more politics than religious and largely meant to make electoral gains for the ruling party.

In this context I would like to state that the Ram Mandir at Ayodhya is not merely another temple which may be found in every lane of India, it holds immense significance by virtue of being the BIRTH PLACE of Lord Ram, worshipped by over a billion Hindus across the world. The importance of this temple is nothing less than that of Jerusalem or Mecca/Medina for Christians or Muslims where followers have a special devotion and emotions attached to it.

This day is not just a matter of great pride for Hindus but for all Indians who believe in upholding civilizational values as today we witness the rectification of a historical injustice perpetrated by the Mughal Emperor Babar way back in 1528 when he built the Babri Masjid over the existing Ram Temple. Please note, this is not merely a rhetorical statement to harness glorification but a fact duly proven by the Archeological Surveys in 1976-77 and 2003 which found concrete evidences that a Ram Temple existed

and its original structure was blatantly used to build a mosque over it.

It is also to be noted that there were allegedly thousands of temples which were being destroyed in the medieval and modern history of India but Hindus sought and fought for the restoration of just this Ram Temple because it is a proven Birth Place of Lord Ram.

Today we also need to spare a thought for the millions of people since the last 500 years and the pain and agony which they must have gone through of watching their religious sentiments being trampled upon; the sacrifice of thousands of activists who gave up their lives to see the light of this auspicious day and for this reason, if the descendants of those generations are celebrating and overjoyed today, they certainly have a very genuine reason to do so which is way above political motives.

Hence, this auspicious moment should not be looked through the narrow lens of politics but as a victory of truth over injustice - Satyameva Jayate.

Yours etc.,
Raghav Bajaj
Via Email

Secularism is the life-blood of democracy
Editor,

The article, "Opposition must jointly take on BJP for using religion to win elections" (ST, January 18, 2024), has rightly pointed out, "Religious events, including fetching large number of Hindu devotees to the Ayodhya Ramlala Darshan free of cost for the next two months, will be organized as a special feature of this year's election campaign outside the purview of the Election Commission of India in which large number of RSS - BJP - VHP activists under the garb of sadhus overtly and covertly will do the work of BJP and PM Narendra Modi who will be seeking a third term."

Now the question is, should we let our democracy become a theocracy? Should we live in the distant past and spend our time and energy to engage in digging up controversies regarding religious character of places of worship? If we indulge in such activities, we have to face four major problems.

Deviation from important issues It would deviate the focus from important issues such as unemployment problem, inflation, hunger, child stunting, inadequate health care infrastructure, lack of social security, law and order to name but a few. Also, it would add more load to the overloaded judiciary. I remember a comedy show

where a man lost his car while giving his whole attention to get some free extra ice cream. It showed the danger of engaging in trifling matters forgetting the real ones.

Threat to secularism It would pose a major threat to secularism. Secularism prevents a ruler from converting a democracy into a theocracy. It also fulfils one of the prerequisites of democracy that is religious equality. Secularism is a trusted path that leads to peace and prosperity. Religion is a personal matter between God and a person. But whenever it gets mixed with politics, the resultant mixture becomes a toxic one. After learning from mistakes like the Holocaust and other disasters as a result of such a mixture, many countries embraced secularism and this path leads them to prosperity. Whereas a number of countries including some of our neighbours have to suffer a lot for ignoring secularism. It would be a great loss for us if we deviate from such a proven path to success.

Breakdown of law and order According to Section 4 (1) of the Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act, 1991, the religious character of a place of worship existing on the 15th day of August 1947 shall continue to be the same as it existed on that day. This section acts as a neces-

sary safeguard to the secular character of our country. It also gives the policy makers a subtle message not to reopen the past conflicts and controversies but to give all their attention to the present problems.

However, section 5 stipulates that nothing contained in this Act shall apply to the place or place of worship commonly known as Ram Jamma Bhoomi - Babri Masjid situated in Ayodhya in the State of Uttar Pradesh and to any suit, appeal or other proceeding relating to the said place or place of worship.

After Babri mosque now the focus is on Gyanvapi mosque. Three members of the majority community filed a case to settle the issue whether a temple was demolished or not to make space for the mosque. It has been reported that the Allahabad High Court has, recently, dismissed the petition from the management committee of the mosque and other parties from the minority committee questioning the maintainability of the case in view of Section 4 of the Places of Worship Act, 1991. According to the Allahabad High Court, the 1991 law prohibits the conversion of a place of worship, and the original plaintiffs did not seek "conversion". Instead, they requested a declaration about the religious character

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.

Case of "Independent" LokAyukta

THE controversy over the irreverent sacking of the officials of the LokAyukta who were investigating the wrongdoings in the Garo Hills District Council following a complaint from a citizen, has taken an unsavoury turn with the Voice of People's Party taking on the Government head-on. If the very appointment of the officials of the Lok Ayukta, namely the director of enquiry and prosecution have to be serving government officials then it follows that they would be part of the LokAyukta with their hands tied. If the Director of Enquiry and Prosecution and other officials have to be non-retirees and as claimed by the government, they were appointed for an interim period, then why were they only removed after they had charge-sheeted the Mahendraganj MLA Sanjay A. Sangma for anomalies in the construction of an MDC hostel in Garo Hills? Why was the Government blind to the fact that the LokAyukta rules demand that the appointees should be serving government officials.

The Meghalaya LokAyukta Act states that no sanction or approval of any authority shall be required by the Lokayukta for conducting investigation by any agency in respect of the cases investigated by such agency on the direction of the Lokayukta, under section 197 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973 or section 19 of the Prevention of Corruption Act, 1988, as the case may be, for the purpose of making preliminary inquiry by the Inquiry Wing or investigation by any agency into any complaint against any public servant or for filing of any charge sheet or closure report on completion of investigation in respect thereof before the Special Court under this Act.

To that extent therefore the institution of LokAyukta enjoys a certain independence but it also depends whether the appointed LokAyukta is asserting that independence. The Act provides for a Selection Committee for selecting the LokAyukta. The Committee comprises the Chief Minister as chairperson. Members include the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly; the Leader of Opposition; the Chief Justice or a Judge of the High Court of Meghalaya; an eminent person nominated by the Governor. The Chairperson and Members shall be appointed by the Governor after obtaining the recommendations of the Selection Committee. The Selection Committee constitutes a Search Committee comprising of at least five persons of standing and having special knowledge and expertise in the matters relating to anti-corruption policy, public administration, vigilance, policy making, finance including insurance and banking, law, and management, or in any other matter which, in the opinion of the Selection Committee, may be useful in making selection of the Chairperson and Members of the Lokayukta. With so much oversight, how did the Government overlook the fact that retired personnel were carrying on with their jobs until they nailed the person behind the GHADC scam? The Government needs to convince the public why it needed to sack the person/s behind the investigation and prosecution at this juncture and what happens to the chargesheet now? Should it not stand scrutiny merely because the investigation was conducted by retired personnel?

Propagating Pnar/Jaintia as not Khasi is faulty education and a false woke: Failure of the intellectual community

By Mankular Lamin Gashnga

In this era of a woke culture (whether it's about politics, religion or race), most of us are often afraid of speaking out lest we offend someone, somehow by what we have to say or what we have in our minds. We always want to be politically correct. However, to be politically correct is sometimes intellectual suicide. Such is the case now with what I will term the false dichotomy of Khasi and Jaintia, Khasi-Jaintia, Khasi Jaintia, and Khasi-Pnar or Khasi Pnar. The question is, is Pnar not Khasi? If we were to be honest, we should examine the claim and close the case for the sake of our intellectual health as a community. The division is more ideological and not real. It is like the case of the Berlin wall and it needs to be broken down as soon as possible. I therefore laud the Meghalaya Government for taking the first step by not including Pnar in the State Anthem (because doing so would have been injustice to other regional groups as the Waar, the Bhoi and others.) The question now arises whether NGOs and politicians who do not understand this false division are fit to lead us as the Khasi society into a brighter future. I hope my following arguments that Pnar is Khasi will clear any intellectual conundrum and give our thinkers and scholars and more importantly the youth some guiding light on how to think in a critical manner about this false woke.

The body: If we were to look closely at the physical features of the regional groups Pnar, Waar, Khyntiam, Maram, Bhoi, Lynggam, the lines of difference would overlap so much or blur so much that it would be impossible to tell. In other words, we would imagine that we see the difference, but it would not be for the required characteristics. To illustrate my point, I would like to take for example the display at the Don Bosco Museum of the tribes of Northeast India. There we see the busts of the so-called Khasi and the so-called Jaintia separately as though they are two different tribes. I know it is not the intention of the museum as such, but it is a point overlooked in order to follow the trend of political correctness and not for any anthropological reasons. It gives the impression that there are two tribes and that they look different, when in fact there is no such tribe as a Jaintia tribe. It is not the fault only of the museum but of so many intellectuals in our state to the point where if you were to bring up this point of discussion at an intellectual discussion, they would almost immediately not know what to say and everyone would lose the point of the conversation. That is how low we have reached

in our education levels here in Shillong; and that should not come as a surprise given how low we have ranked at the national level. As a corollary, I humbly request the museum, if not too difficult, to correct this point by either displaying all the other Khasi regional groups or to display Khasi as one tribe. Otherwise, it will only support a false dichotomy and a false woke and a false alienation within the Khasi community.

The language: How different is Jaintia from Jaintia, bru from brieve, bei from mei, deit from dieng, chkur from shkor, lai from leit, cheinu/cheiwon from shano? Only a fool would say they are different languages. In fact, there should be around 95-98% lexical similarity between Pnar and standard Khasi. In other words, Pnar falls under Khasi language. In fact, there is much more difference between Waar-Amlarem and Pnar than between Pnar and standard Khasi. To each of the above words, the Waar-Amlarem dialect would be sni, jeprew, ma, trvia, terang, lia/kap, tihiah. Waar-Amlarem would easily have only 20-30% lexical compatibility with either Pnar or standard Khasi. Should we conclude then that Waar-Amlarem is a different language and a different tribe from Khasi? Should we conclude the same for the Lynggam? Only a fool would come to such a conclusion.

Again, as an example, I see it is useless for the AIR to translate from Khasi to Pnar because it does not reflect reality as there are other more difficult dialects within the Khasi language than Pnar. It would make more sense to translate from Khasi to Lynggam or Waar-Amlarem than to Pnar on any given day. However, because of our intellectual failure, we also waste public time and resources on unnecessary exercises. I want to give one example to this case which has involved me personally. Because I had started a small publication in Waar-Amlarem dialect since 2009. In 2016, I was co-opted as a member of the Pnar Alphabet Committee by the JHADC. I did not know Pnar, but I was curious and surprised, and I obliged. After two or three sittings, the Chairman of the committee (who I shall not name here) showed his true colours. He started ranting about the 'Jaintia race' in some of his speeches. I could then start to see the true intention of the members of the Committee which was to divide Khasi society in half through the alphabet formation. I was alone in my ability to understand their intention. I started to frantically explain to the members about how Pnar is Khasi and it will be reinventing the wheel and is foolishness, but

they would not listen to me because they thought they knew better. However, the straw that broke the camel's back for me was when in the sub-committee, the same Chairman started distributing a newspaper clip that clearly had a statement that the Jaintias do not want to be called Khasi and wish the state to be named Jaintialand. I decided there and then to write to the CEM my resignation from the Committee and to demand never to include Waar-Amlarem dialect in such insidious endeavours of the JHADC.

In fact, when I informed the Khasi Authors Society of the same, they sent me a letter to thank me for the step I took that would help in not fragmenting the Khasi society. I take this opportunity also to correct here one Professor, Omarlin Kyndiah, who at least twice in his articles to The Shillong Times had cited my name as a researcher of the Pnar so-called language, perhaps with good intentions, but I have to clearly state here that his information about me is wrong and academically misleading. It only emphasises the fact that our professors and academicians have failed to lead us in how to think intellectually and it sounds more like that they have picked up their intellectual prowess from tourists and politicians rather than doing any original thinking. No wonder most of the PhD theses in our universities have no academic value to contribute anything for the betterment of our Khasi society. (For the readers' information, I write and research the Waar-Amlarem dialect, but I will nowhere state that it is not Khasi. In fact, I can submit a thesis right here and state that Pnar and Waar-Amlarem are mutually unintelligible, and that there is not such a thing as a Jaintia language.) Only a qualified professor can assess me on this one.

The hills and the name 'Jaintia': The British left one seed of division and that was by using the name of the abominable goddess 'Jaintia'. The failure of the Pnar rulers then and the failure of the intellectual community today to critique that word 'Jaintia' have proven to be our undoing. We would gladly maintain the name of the hills and the region as 'Jaintia' as though it is a legacy to be proud of. I have seen some professor even writing a book called, 'The Jaintias' as though it means a people. Such books are not honest and are a 'click bait' in modern terms. They are more for creating a niche in the intellectual community for the authors rather than for pure scholarship (just trying to cheaply imitate PRT Gurdon and to gain leverage). The

truth is that the name Jaintia still stinks of human sacrifice to this day. If you do not believe me, read the following from the The Northeast Encyclopaedia: 'Till the advent of the British, the Jaintia Rajas used to make human sacrifices at the Hindu temple at Nartiang, and earlier to Kupli River and to Jayanteshwari or Kali deity. Many a time, a person volunteered for such a sacrifice, convinced himself or was at times forced to believe that it was the Deity's wish. Such persons were known as "Bhoge-Khaore".' The Bhoge-Khaore were the brainwashed subjects of the Jaintia rulers, to the point where they willingly submitted and segregated themselves and their children as sacrificial lambs to be slaughtered at the beck and call of their rulers. The intellectual community are the Bhoge-Khaore of today because we have never learned to think freely let alone condemn the abominable deeds of the Sutnga Rulers (so-called Jaintia Rulers) who had let themselves to be converted to an abominable and ghastly form of Hinduism. I take this opportunity to condemn their evil and inhumane practices. I also advocate that the name of the Jaintia Hills be named Sutnga Hills instead, to rid once and for all that evil and demonic name 'Jaintia' and to let that name forever go down in infamy.

The two Autonomous District Councils: The creation of a separate autonomous district council in 1964 does not mean that it was because there are two separate tribes. When the Jowai Autonomous District was created in 1964 (which later became Jaintia Hills Autonomous District Council), the attempt to create a separate scheduled tribe was not successful because the Pnar were not different from the Khasi. In fact, at that time, it was two political giants from the Pnar region, Bah Edwington Bareh and Bah Gilbert Lytan who argued against the creation of a separate district because it would be a false division. They had gone so far as to have appealed the case against the Government of Assam in the High Court and in the Supreme Court in 1964.

Late Mr LG Shullai wrote that Bah Edwington Bareh in his Petition to the High Court (Civil Rule No. 216 of 1964) and his Appeal Petition to the Supreme Court (Civil Rule No. 968 of 1965) submitted that we are one community, "That the people inhabiting the territory comprised within the United Khasi Jaintia Hills District are ethnically, racially, culturally, economically and by tradition are one and the same people. When the British subjugated and annexed the territory, they

divided it into different units for administrative conveniences, but the people of the said area continued to remain united and maintained the existing closest relationship." (L. G. Shullai (U Nongsañ Hima, 1981, as quoted UNH 9/10/2017)). Bah Hoover Hynniewta argued before the Jarm Commission on the same grounds. Ultimately, the autonomous district was created for administrative convenience and not to indicate the difference in tribe or community. The Supreme Court only used the words, Jowai Sub-Division or 'people of Jowai sub-division' and did not even once use the word 'Jaintias' or 'Jaintia' people. This is made clearer if one would read the list of scheduled tribes in India where there is no such tribe as a Jaintia tribe (In the list, number six, Khasi means Khasi, Jaintia, Synteng, Pnar, War, Bhoi, Lynggam. Only number fourteen is listed Synteng, but that can be nullified because the same is already in the number Six in Khasi). This means that people under the JHADC are Khasi by definition, and I hope ST certificates reflect that.

Yet many books today wrongly educate students and give wrong information that there are three tribes in Meghalaya instead of just the Khasi and the Garo. This is because of this intellectual failure on the part of the intellectual community to address the fallacy. Are we still wondering why education in Meghalaya is going down with every passing year? How sad that we do not even know what our identity is! And we boast of being the educational hub of the North East. What a farce!

I have to say that till last year, (October 25, 2023), people still feel sad about how some Pnar people had initiated the division of the autonomous district council, and this is evidenced with the publication of an article from 1963 by U Nongsañ Hima called 'Ka Jingkwah Thlieh iing' or 'The Wish to Divide Family', which is clearly a reference to the words of Jesus, 'And if a house be divided against itself, that house cannot stand' and applied to the article about the false division between the so-called Jaintia and Khasi. Jesus was right.

Identity and family relations: If we are to name one clan among the Garo related to Khasi, the answer would be none. However, if we were to name how many clans are related among the Pnar and the rest of Khasi, the answer would be a long and boring list. This is because everyone knows the relations are so interwoven that it would be very difficult to tell which clan or which individual belongs to which tribe if there were two tribes as some would wish it to be.

In fact, the whole Khasi tribe is made up of the interrelations of the clans within the tribe. To say that the Pnar are a different tribe on the basis of clans and clan relations would be an attempt of an idiot. The Khasi Lineage Act definition clearly states, "Khasi" means a person belonging to Khasi tribe who may be a Khasi, Jaintia, Pnar, Synteng, War, Bhoi or Lynggam. The same cannot be said of our Gato neighbours because they are a different tribe by all definitions. Therefore, there is no such thing as a Pnar/Jaintia tribe as separate from the tribe Khasi because it is proven by family relations. Let each kur testify to that and elaborate here to help me, I don't need to speak any further on this point.

Semantics: I can go on and on with my arguments ad nauseam but I have to stop here. However, I would like to end with one encouragement here to our intellectuals and academicians to please take words very seriously, for words have the power to make and break our lives. As a writer, I take words very seriously. For example, the word Hynniewtrep has been misused so much by the public that even scholars, academicians and writers have fallen trap to the suggestion that Hynniewtrep means Khasi (or as a way to avoid the false dichotomy Khasi-Jaintia that I mentioned above). Falling into such fallacies as intellectuals should not be easily forgiven for it shows how far away we have strayed from our roots and our own culture. Hynniewtrep means the entire human race and it will be an insult to Khasi religious traditions to misuse this word because it belittles the weight and the depth of the tradition. We the Khasi are only a section of the entire population of the human race and cannot claim the name to signify only our community. Those who claim a separate divine origin of the Sutnga Rulers apart from the rest of the Khasi tradition should look at the story of the Lumshad-klew to see how wrong they are and that Pnar is Khasi tradition. Neither is the so-called Niamtre religion different from Khasi religion. The only difference with the Pnar is that their form of practice is a false-Hinduism, because at the core of their religion, it is Khasi by definition.

The name Khasi is an exonym and a secular term that encompasses a meaning 'hills' that is not derogatory or evil. The strength of organisations such as the KSU lies in that one single word 'Khasi'. The word Khasi does not need a pro 'Jaintia' or 'Pnar' or it will mean nothing. Let us not play with words for we are playing with our own sanity.

Letters to the Editor

State Anthem- a discriminatory treatment

Editor,
On the eve of Meghalaya Statehood Day, the government officially released the State Anthem. The anthem is typically sung in English, Khasi, and Garo. The state emerged as a full state on 21 January 1972 after a struggle for two decades. Earlier consequent to the adoption of the Constitution of India by the Constituent Assembly the area under Meghalaya was constituted into Autonomous District Councils namely United Khasi and Jaintia Hills and Garo Hills, as envisaged in the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution. The Hill Politics in North East India started with the establishment of the Jaintia Durbar in 1900. Later in 1923, the Khasi National Durbar was established. It is to be noted that the Hill State struggle involved the

three major tribes- Khasis, Jaintias, and Garos under one common political platform. Hence, excluding the Jaintia dialect in the State Anthem is an act of 'discriminatory treatment' of Jaintia Hills and its people.

Omission of Jaintia language in state anthem

Editor,
The recently released anthem of the State is distasteful for its blatant omission of the Jaintia language despite Jaintia being a recognized tribe in the state. While the video displayed visuals from Jaintia hills and its festivals, the lack of any lyrics in the Pnar language is disheartening. It is an undeniable fact that the Khasis and Jaintias (collectively called 'Niaw-

was' in Pnar) are sibling tribes that share many things in common and I can never foresee a future where these tribes are not together. However, it must be respected that our ancestors were not used to being clubbed together with the Khasis despite being called the same which is why they fought for a separate District Council in the 60s.

The omission is a part of a trend by some in the Khasi hills that wish to undermine the identity of us Jaintias by clubbing us together with the Khasis. To add to this, one of the lyricists of the anthem is a huge opponent of the Jaintias obtaining a separate identity. I take this opportunity to condemn such individuals and especially the seven Jaintia MLAs who allowed this to happen. We take pride in our identity and it is sickening to see how the government allowed it to be undermined.

Yours etc.,
Heirtami Paswet,
Via email

Fresh recruitment needed into Meghalaya Agriculture Service

Editor,
Through your esteemed daily, we write to draw attention to a matter of great concern for the agriculture graduates of Meghalaya. It has come to our notice that the last advertisement for the Meghalaya Agriculture Service was released in 2019, and since then, five years have elapsed without any new recruitments. For the unversed, the Agricultural graduates have faced a prolonged court case, which has now concluded, followed by the disruptive impact of the pandemic and subsequent challenges with the Roster system. Internally, the Department of Agriculture & Farmers' Welfare has not been able to prepare the Roster till date. Additionally, from the recent RTI, it has come to light that there

are many vacant posts within the said Department.

This prolonged delay, coupled with the existence of vacant posts, is causing significant frustration and anxiety among the agriculture graduates who eagerly await the opportunity to contribute to the state's agricultural sector. The absence of recent advertisements and the existence of numerous vacant positions highlight a critical need for immediate attention.

Understanding the complexities of the roster system, we urge the Department of Agriculture & Farmers' Welfare to not only address internal issues promptly but also to expedite the process of releasing a new advertisement through the MPSC for the Meghalaya Agriculture Service.

We believe that a swift and transparent recruitment process, coupled with efforts to fill existing vacancies, will not only benefit the aspiring candidates but will also contribute to the welfare

of Meghalaya's agricultural community as a whole. The agricultural sector plays a pivotal role in our state's economy, and ensuring a well-qualified and motivated workforce is essential for its sustainable growth.

We trust that the Department of Agriculture & Farmers' Welfare will take prompt action to address this matter and keep the interests of aggrieved Agriculture graduates in mind (They have suffered and are still suffering).

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request
Via email

Can 144 CrPC supersede Article 19 of Constitution?

Editor,
The recent confrontation between the members of the VPP and the enforcement authorities of the Government brings into question the rule of law and the supremacy

of Constitutional rights of citizens fighting for justice and redressal in a non-violent way. What is the Supreme Court Judgement on Section 144 CrPC? The Supreme court in one judgement said that Section 144 CrPC cannot be used to impose restrictions on citizens' fundamental right to assemble peacefully; cannot be invoked as a 'tool' to 'prevent the legitimate expression of opinion or grievance or exercise of any democratic rights'. The first observation on Section 144 CrPC was made in 1970, when a Constitution bench of the Supreme Court held that mere disobedience of the law is not enough, and there must be obstruction, annoyance, danger to human life, health or safety or riot or an affray for passing an order under Section 144. Hence the question is whether there was any imminent danger to human life or any other underlying factors for the Home Department and the DC to impose Section 144 CrPC? Article 19 of the Constitution

is supreme and speaks of a citizen's right to protest and assemble peacefully without violence and without disturbing law and order, as in this case it was a permission sought to meet the DC and to sit-in protest against the unjustified, irresponsible and arrogant abrupt termination of retired Lokayukta members by this coalition government.

To deny a citizen the right to protest is a contempt of the Constitution and a violation of human rights. Perhaps the state authorities should learn to read Constitutional laws and rules in a judicious manner lest they become an embarrassment of their own decisions if contested in the Court of Law.

Yours etc.,
Dominic S. Wankhar,
Via email

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"You can find peace amidst the storms that threaten you."

—Joseph B. Wirthlin

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Suryodaya on rooftops

A nation's economic progress is directly linked to its access to energy sources like oil and gas, coal and of late renewable energy. The launch of the PM Suryodaya Yojana by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, aimed at equipping one crore households with rooftop solar power systems, is an ambitious project. The idea is to increase the nation's rooftop solar installed capacity to 40 GW by March 2026, after achieving an increase from 1.8GW in March 2019 to 10GW by end 2023 in the first phase of implementation of the plan. When the project was first launched in 2014, 40GW was the target set for the next ten years, but the forward push faced constraints. The present endeavour's success depends on the effective leadership of governmental agencies in realizing the goal. The first phase experienced problems in relation to implementation as also sale of the excess power that households produce, over and above their use, to the Discoms. Red tape has a unique capacity to defeat well-meaning initiatives.

The energy sector has undergone revolutionary changes in recent decades. Renewable energy sources are being increasingly tapped, as in the case of wind, solar, geothermal and hydropower as also oceanic waves-based energy generation and even bio-energy production. So much so, waste from kitchens is now used to produce biofuel for the same kitchens. In fact, the reliance on coal-based thermal power had decreased when tapping of oil and gas-based energy sources increased. Thereafter began the age of renewable energy parallelly with the arrival of shale gas in the US; and now the production and use of electric cars. All these now pose a threat to economies based on the oil and gas wealth in West Asia. Nature's renewable sources do not exhaust and the possibilities of their tapping are immense. The reliance on hydraulic power, once a craze, is reducing as dams are believed to be causing serious environmental disturbances.

Notably, Nepal was among the early enthusiasts in tapping solar energy with installation of rooftop solar panels decades ago, even as the mountainous nation had an abundance of hydraulic power. One of the first state governments to lay stress on renewable/solar energy in the country was Modi's in Gujarat. Now, front-running states in use of solar energy are Rajasthan and Gujarat while the rooftop solar energy sector has Gujarat at the top and Maharashtra in the second slot. Notably, the Kochi international airport was among the first such entities to run solely on solar power. A constraint in recent years was the high costs of solar panels. Subsidies by the government majorly helped overcome such problems. This endeavour would have positive implications for motor vehicles too in the near future.

State anthem: Questions about Khasi identity

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

Meghalaya Chief Minister, Conrad Sangma, recently released the state anthem in Tura, which generated a fair bit of controversy. A critique of the anthem was made by the Jaintia Students' Union, wherein they demanded corrections be made to it by removing the English words and replacing them with Jaintia. But is this demand justified? Also, why only Jaintia? What about the inclusion of the Maram, Lyngngam, War, and Bhoi languages into the anthem? What about the dialects within those groups? We also have to remember that the Khasi dialect used in the anthem is from Sohra, but among the Khyntiam (identified with the group found in present-day East Khasi Hills and West Khasi Hills), there are many other dialects. Should all those dialects also be included in the anthem? Are there "three" indigenous people groups in Meghalaya, or are there actually seven (six from the Khasi and one from Garo, since I am not aware of the latter's sub-group dynamics)? Finally, why is this question important, and what are its implications?

An argument for the special mention of Jaintia as a group separate from the Khasi is merely because there are three autonomous district councils: Khasi Hills, Jaintia Hills, and Garo Hills, which represent the three different groups. But these are modern administrative arrangements. In the past, there were political entities like the Jaintia kingdom and the various Himas, with Hima Nongkhaw being an important one from which Tiro Singh came. Does that mean that Nongkhaw is also a separate ethnic group like the Jaintia? Also, accepting modern administrative arrangements as a criterion for classifying ethnic groups would suggest that the unified Khasi-Jaintia identity is a modern construction and is not authentic. However, is that true?

One argument always made about the unity of the six groups (one lost) that today make up the Khasi is their origin story. According to this legend, there were sixteen families who, though they lived in heaven, would come down to earth to cultivate the land. One day, seven families came down but were unable to return because the tree that connected heaven and earth had been cut down. These marooned seven families became the "Ki Hinniew Skum" (the seven nests, or the seven roots). They are also known as the "Ki Hynniew trep" (the seven huts), who are today identified with the seven groups, viz., Khyntiam, War, Bhoi, Jaintia, Maram, Lyngngam, and Diko (the lost group), that make up the Khasi. This origin myth first appeared in written form in Mrs. Rafy's book 'Folktales of the Khasis' published in 1920. Before that, parts of the story about the tree connecting heaven and earth were also mentioned in the 1907 book 'The Khasi' by PRT Gurdon. Curiously, the story of the seven groups was not mentioned.

Although the origin story of the seven families was not mentioned, the groups identified with those families find mention in Gurdon's book. The War people of the Southern Hills were mentioned, as were the Pnar/Synteng (Jaintia) of Jowai; Lyngngam staying adjacent to the Garos, and Bhoi to the north, many of whom were identified as actually being the Karbi. The Maram were not mentioned, and the

Khyntiam were actually called the Khasi, and inhabiting the "central high plateau, Cherra and Nongstoin, Maharam, Mario, Nongkhaw, and the neighbouring Siemships." This is one of the reasons why some have suggested that the Jaintia do not prefer the term Khasi since it refers to the Khyntiam. Therefore, a term that has been proposed is Hynniewtrep after the origin story. But what is also to be remembered is that in the same book, Gurdon himself mentioned that all the groups mentioned above were part of the "Khasi nation" (page xix). At another place, he stated that "these divisions represent collections of people inhabiting several tracts of (Khasi) country and speaking dialects which, although often deriving their origin from the Khasi roots, are frequently so dissimilar to the standard language as to be almost unrecognizable."

The story of the seven families was mentioned in Rafy's book, but not the names of the seven families identified today with the seven sub-groups. Some of the present groups have been mentioned in Gurdon's book (which was earlier), but not the origin story. Does it mean that the origin story and the connection between the different 'Khasi' groups were invented in the intervening thirteen years (between the publications of the two books) by politically conscious Khasis or most astoundingly by the British? The former suggests a very high degree of inventiveness and innovativeness by the Khasis, who created an entire mythology connecting different groups immediately after coming into contact with the British. The latter, on the other hand, implies that the British created a new group called the Khasi, taking all the groups mentioned in the book earlier by Gurdon, while simultaneously ensuring that they did not mix with the Garo, whom they kept separate. In fact, Major A. Playfair, Deputy Commissioner of Eastern Bengal and Assam, brought out his own book on the Garos in 1909. Did the British do this because they knew a 100 years from now, there will be those who will be arguing that the Khasi and Jaintia are separate groups? At that moment, they would need to remind people they were the same. It seems the British had a vision of the future and planned accordingly. Or is there a less convoluted explanation?

Even before the arrival of the British, the groups that make up what is presently known as the Khasi (which includes the Jaintia) always had the sense that they were a single people. This derives from stories like the origin myth, which was a combination of a group who, over time, settled in different parts of what is today known as Meghalaya (particularly the eastern part), becoming identified with specific geographic locations, which could be the initial criterion for differentiation. This later got ossified into a restrictive ethnic category where lineages became the defining criterion rather than location. But in the end, they are part of the same group, connected to each other. Work done in recent years actually proves these connections to be true.

Linguistically, the language spoken by the different sub-groups, i.e., Khyntiam, War, Bhoi, Jaintia, Maram, and Lyngngam, is considered to be

part of the Mon-Khmer branch and has no connection with any other languages outside groups that are known to be part of the Khasi group. Their closest cousin is the Munda, who belong to the larger Austro-asiatic language family. Recent studies confirm what was known from linguistics: that the Khasis and the Mundas also share a genetic link. Coming back to the Khasi, this connection between linguistics and genetics was most interestingly confirmed in the case of the Lyngngam.

From their appearance, dress, and certain cultural habits, the Lyngngam resemble the Garo. In fact, according to Gurdon, they were a mixture between Khasi and Garo. However, it has also been mentioned in the book that the Lyngngam insisted they were Khasi and not Garo. This has indeed been found to be the case. According to the 2012 paper 'Molecular Genetic Perspectives on the Origin of the Lyngngam Tribe of Meghalaya, India' Banrida T. Langstieh and her colleagues concluded that the female lineages of the Lyngngam came from the other Khasi groups, most probably the Nongtra group found in West Khasi Hills, who are the nearest. In short, the Lyngngam are part of the Khasi group.

Regarding the Bhoi, who were described as mostly Karbi by Gurdon, Philippe Ramirez's 2014 book 'People of the Margins: Across Ethnic Boundaries in North-East India' mentions a peculiar phenomenon of equivalence of surname. Members from the different ethnic communities (Khasi and Karbi) in Ri Bhoi are found to share membership in more than one ethnic group. A surname among the Bhoi-Khasi is found to have an equivalent among the Karbi. This is because sometime in the past, many Karbis assimilated with the Khasi but kept cognizance of their original clan so that they would not commit any incest in future (i.e., not marry within the same equivalent clan). The Khasis must have welcomed this because it would have increased their numbers, which, like in the past and even now, is a very important strategy to increase the strength and bargaining power of a group.

It is therefore very clear that the books written by Gurdon and Mrs. Rafy were accurate in their description of the Khasi and the unity of the different groups that make up the larger group today. The stress on books by outsiders like the British officers (I haven't found out who Mrs. Rafy was, but most probably she must have been the wife of a British officer) is for objectivity. This, of course, has also to be confirmed by testimonies from within the community. In this regard the 2018 article 'lawchibidi: the Pan-Jaidbnyriew Clan' by H.H. Mohrmen is very illuminating. In this piece, he talks about the clan stories, especially those of the 'ka lawchibidi', the progenitor (Seinjet/lawbe) of Laloo, Pyrbot, Lamin (clans in the Jaintia Hills), Diengdoh, Pariong, and Syngngai (clans in the Khasi Hills). Those well versed in the history of the other clans will, undoubtedly, have similar examples.

Hence whether it's from inside or outside sources, it is clear that the various groups that are today known as the Khasi (which include the Jain-

ties) are a single people and have always known themselves to be so for a very long time. This identity is not a recent construction conjured up for political purposes. However, it has to be accepted that groups like the Jaintia might feel left out since the language used in the anthem belongs to the Sohra dialect, which is part of the Khyntiam group. The reason for its use as the standard Khasi, though, is pure chance. If the British had established headquarters in Jowai, the anthem today would have had Jaintia words instead. Then it would be the non-Jaintias who would be complaining about being left out.

Personally, though, the more sinister danger is that any division that might seem trivial today has the potential to become a large fissure tomorrow, which would have devastating consequences for the community. The groups that make up the Kuki-Chin are a linguistically and culturally homogenous group. But there have been violent clashes between the different groups with deadly consequences less than thirty years ago. This has been a feature of the Nagas as well. I know things are not that bad, but if you give enough time and create enough dissensions, anything can happen in the future.

Recently, the former Lok Sabha Speaker, Kariya Munda, asserted that "those tribals who convert to Islam or Christianity must not get any benefits of reservation meant for the tribals." This is nothing but an attempt to create hostility between groups that have converted and those that are still practicing their indigenous faith by giving the impression that only the latter are genuinely indigenous (and thus taking away the indigenous status of those who converted). Of course, such thinking stems from a lack of understanding or willful obfuscation of what the term 'indigenous' means. Perhaps this can be discussed in greater details in the future.

Khasi is a composite identity comprising the different sub-groups, which include the Jaintia, that are linguistically, genetically, and culturally similar. There are local variations, no doubt, but that's understandable given that the community is spread out and occupies different locations, which has given rise to regional differences. Such a phenomenon is not unique to the Khasi, as other ethnic groups around the world also experience it. Khasi also include the different non-Khasi groups, viz., Karbi, Garo, and non-tribal, i.e., Dkhar (with the numerous Khar prefixes in the surnames), who have assimilated into it over time, boosting its number and enriching its culture. But there is no doubt that Khasi is a community that has been aware of its unity for a generations as told through their origin legend and the clans that cut across the present-day administrative divisions. Recent studies in anthropology, linguistics, and genetics have also confirmed this. While the sub-groups that make up the larger identity of the Khasi should not be made to feel excluded (not only the Jaintia), this cannot be allowed to create divisions, which will be harmful in the long run. People who for long were one should not become divided, not by those from within and not at the behest of those from outside.

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

Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

An Acceptance of Hypocrisy..!

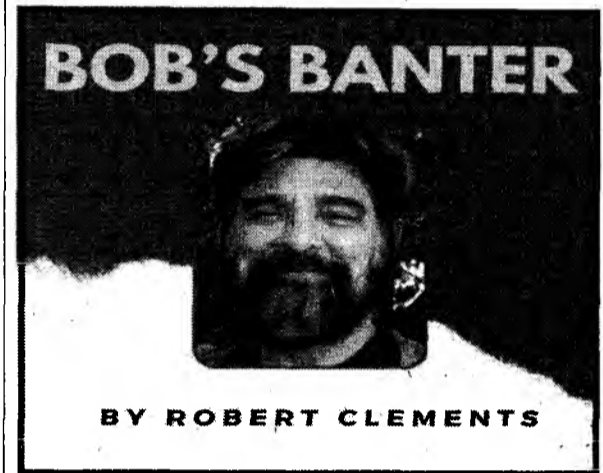
On one hand we have Donald Trump, from the White House walking to a church clutching a Bible in his outstretched hand for all to see, then we see the same man accused of the most perversed sexual assaults. And yet to the Bible belt Christians in America and even in other parts of the world this man should be voted back in like a messiah! And could be too! Have we become blind to hypocrisy or has hypocrisy become an accepted norm? This is not just about Trump but other leaders across the world. Leaders who've realised the best way to win the hearts of the electorate is to make themselves religious icons and edifices in the eyes of the people.

But I don't blame the ones who are making use of this sure-fire method of victory, I'm wondering about what has happened to our own discerning minds? Have we forgotten what an actual spiritual awak-

about temple building. No, it's not the Ayodhya temple I'm talking about, though there's a faint possibility that all the temple talk going on around could have influenced my thoughts.

The temple I'm writing about is the one in Jerusalem, built to the almighty God, but a God, who was specific about who would build it for Him. One would have thought that the man who finally united all the twelve tribes of Israel under him, the man who was 'after God's own heart' would be allowed to build a temple to his God, but it was not so.

King David was disturbed that he had been blessed so immensely 'In 1 Chronicles 17:1, David's thoughts turn to building a temple for the Lord. The king sent for the prophet Nathan and said, "Here I am, living in a house of cedar, while the ark of the covenant of the Lord is under a tent." The discrepancy bothered David. Why should the king's house be a palace, while the



ening should do to a leader? That it is not about holding a religious book like the Bible above your head or jumping into holy rivers that matter, but a change of heart. That compassion and love starts reigning within, that your language becomes tempered, that you look at others as brothers and sisters, and yes, that you do not ever, ever bring about division and separation.

These are the outward signs that show a depth of spiritual awakening, and if we are being fooled by anything else, then we the people are the bigger fools. And bigger and bigger fools we are becoming! Which brings me to a more pertinent question, that we cannot discern these hypocrites, because we ourselves follow the same principles? On Sunday I go to church or to the temple or mosque, and the other days of the week I do as I please, which could mean every kind of wrong under the earth. And because of this we accept leaders who do the same.

Yes indeed, it's a strange world today where hypocrisy is an accepted norm, but do remember that it's the same as the honest looking bank director who has embezzled your savings and left you broke, or a best friend who has seduced your husband and broken your family, and many more saintly faced people who've played the devil behind your back.

Because finally that's what the hypocritical leader will do; destroy you, your home, your country, your faith, your trust! It is an accepted truth that people get the leader they deserve, so are these hypocrites who act with violence and hate, and invest in religious rituals, actually giving us what we deserve? Compassion, love and brotherhood are expressions we need to look for in leadership, as we try to get back our ability to discern between a hypocrite and a sincere and genuine leader!

Beware, this acceptance of hypocrisy!

A connected thought is

house of God was just a tent? At first, Nathan encouraged David to follow through on his desire to build a temple for the Lord (1 Chronicles 17:2). Yet that night the word of the Lord came to Nathan, changing their plans: "Go and tell my servant David, 'This is what the Lord says: You are not the one to build me a house to dwell in'"

First Chronicles 22:8 sheds some light on God's decision not to allow David to build the temple: "You have shed much blood and have fought many wars. You are not to build a house for my Name, because you have shed much blood on the earth in my sight." David's background of shedding blood in times of war was God's reason for choosing David's son instead (see also 1 Chronicles 28:3). God wanted a man of peace to construct the temple, not a man of war.

As I read these verses it reminds me that more than anything else in the world, God is a God of peace, and whether we are fighting people of other faiths or not, a God above does not like it. We are all children of the same God, and it must have broken God's heart to see women and children of other nations being killed and annihilated by the Israelis.

Who finally built the temple in Jerusalem? A man who when asked what he wanted from God, asked for wisdom. A man of peace who treated his own people and even neighbouring kings and rulers with fairness, justice and trust. I know for a fact that there is a deep truth here, that only when one's hands are clean can one build a temple, a church or any organisation to the Living God!

Anyone else doing so is again an acceptance of hypocrisy on our part..!

(The Author writes a daily column. If you'd like to receive it by WhatsApp every morning, send a 'YES' to him on his WhatsApp no 9892572883)

Letters to the Editor

Ram Mandir and Christianity

The inauguration of the most important place for Hindus just turned traumatic and scary for Christians in the country. A day which was meant to be full of joy and happiness, took a communal turn when a "Bhagwan flag" was hoisted on the Sacred Cross of a small Church in Jhabua district of Madhya Pradesh. And the even more horrifying fact was, that it was just 'One out of the Four' incidents that took place in Madhya Pradesh. 4 villages, 4 incidents and tribal

dominated areas. It is very disheartening to see all this, despite the immense support showered by the Christian community. In Jhabua, Bishop Peter Kharadi took out posters and banners congratulating the Hindu community for the Ram Mandir "Pran Prathista" on behalf of the entire Catholic Community in Madhya Pradesh. And the Christian Association and Alliance for Social Change even called for lighting candles in solidarity with the Hindu Community in hope and expectations for 'Democracy' and 'Secularism' to prevail.

Considering all these events that took place, it is very important for the citizens of this country to be

reminded of the Constitution of India, especially the Preamble where it clearly states that "India is a Secular country". If these kind of mis-happenings continue to take place in the future, then a very big question along with doubts will arise in the minds of the "Religious Minority Communities" especially the Christians as whether India is really safe for us? "Are we subjected to being second class citizens just because of our faith?"

In remembrance of Graham Staines and his sons who were murdered 25 years ago.

Yours etc.,
Elandina Kharsyntiew
Via email

Occasion marked by elitism

The Jan 22, 2024, consecration of the Ram temple in Ayodhya raises profound spiritual questions about the nature of God and the futility of elitism and pomp in religious matters. Such pomp and elitism have always existed. They are hardly new. Religion has always been plagued by both. The grandeur of the Vatican is but one example. Although they contradict the essence of religion, such examples abound and afflict many religions. I once visited a gigantic Hindu

temple built by a very rich man. Mere brick and mortar can never compensate for absence of ambience. To this day, its chilling coldness haunts my mind.

In TST (Jan 23, 2024), it was reported that "India's crème de la crème... attended the grand consecration ceremony at the Ram temple in Ayodhya on Monday." The list of invitees included "prominent politicians, leading industrialists, top film stars, sports persons, diplomats, judges and high priests." To some, this penchant for elitism is inherent in Hinduism, given its bane of the ancient caste system. But this is lower Hinduism. The highest Hinduism teaches that all beings (not just human

beings) are nothing but varying manifestations of the only Reality that is God.

It is for a number of reasons that we question the pomp and elitism surrounding this consecration ceremony. Not only because too many Indians are still poor and dispossessed, not just because this temple was built on the site of the Babri Masjid, which was deliberately destroyed in 1992, so that it is an unholy and inauspicious site of violence – but because such pomp and elitism raise fundamental questions about the very nature of God. From the lives of divine Incarnations we know that more often than not, they are born to poor unlettered (but pious) parents. Sri Ramakrishna was born to humble villagers – in a hut –

not a palace. Jesus is said to have been born in a manger – not a palace.

So, the undue pomp and elitism of this consecration ceremony begs a few questions. Where was Rama during the ceremony itself? In the hearts of all beings, of course. For, the heart is the real temple, of which, external temples are mere symbols. But was Rama present at the ceremony held in His honour? Or, had He fled the scene to bestow his grace on all who are poor, ordinary, and suffering – regardless of who they are and which religion (if any) they follow? Chances are, He fled Ayodhya that day. For, the worldliness of pomp and elitism obscure divine

presence in the human heart. Chances are, Rama was with Bilkees Bano, wiping her frozen tears and restoring her faith in mankind. Chances are, Rama was with all rape survivors in India and all who suffer from class-caste oppression. Lost in the revelry of the moment, and in the abyss of egotism, not too many of those who attended may have noticed Lord Rama's absence.

Yours etc.,
Deepa Majumdar,
Via email

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

"The best part of beauty is that which no picture can express."

—Francis Bacon

The Shillong Times

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RDA: A Tenuous Bond

THE Regional Democratic Alliance (RDA) of two parties the United Democratic Party (UDP) and the Hill State Peoples' Democratic Party (HSPDP) is an old ploy aimed at deceiving the voters before every election. The fact that the Voice of Peoples' Party (VPP) — another regional party is out of the fold is indication enough that the two-party coalition has nor locus to call itself an alliance of regional forces. Regional parties have this one fatal flaw — they can't spell unity. The HSPDP is a spent force and hardly able to make a dent in state politics. It was reduced to 2 MLAs in a house of 60 seats while the UDP got 11 seats. If the UDP thinks it can swing the votes in favour of the RDA alliance it has another thing coming. Contestants from Shillong Parliamentary seat include Congress veteran and sitting MP, Vincent Pala although the Party is yet to formally declare him as their candidate — officially; the National Peoples' Party (NPP) has set up Ampareen Lyngdoh, an old war horse as its candidate. Both are well versed not just in passionate public appeals but also what is really needed to win votes and hearts.

The VPP will be setting up Dr Ricky Syngkon, an academician. He too is a strong contender also because the VPP is the flavour of the season. Only the BJP is yet to declare its candidate. But in Meghalaya the BJP stands a poor chance of winning the Shillong seat since the Party has not been able to make inroads in rural Meghalaya. Ironically, it is Meghalaya's case that before every election, the parties that are part of the coalition government instead of coming together and setting up a common candidate, all come apart and assert their political egos. They enter the fray as rivals of each other and throw dust on peoples' eyes. Post election they are back to business as usual. How long can this deception carry on and for how long will the voters be fooled?

While it is true that Robert Kharjahn, a lawyer by profession and a pressure group leader has what it takes to represent the people of Meghalaya in Parliament the fact is he has to feel his way around in politics and then in the Delhi durbar. So too the VPP candidate. It takes a lot to build coalitions in Delhi. If the NPP wins the Shillong seat, then it immediately becomes part of the BJP-led NDA coalition. Such may not be the case with the RDA and VPP candidates. They will be in the Opposition and they will have to build bridges with other Opposition parties to make their voices heard. That's how politics works.

Policy dynamics of Meghalaya

By Benjamin Lyngdoh

A policy is a set of guidelines or rules or framework which are to be followed in order to attain a certain goal. The nature and potency of any policy totally depends on policy dynamics which basically refers on the manner in which a policy is being formulated and implemented. Policy dynamics grapples with elements such as understanding of the problem, decision-making and so forth. The key element is 'willingness to change' based upon a certain perspective of developmental issues. In Meghalaya, the policy dynamics is paralysed as what is formulated is hardly being implemented. For instance, environmental sustainability as an element of policy is good to read, but its implementation is a different story altogether.

ability or lack of dedication amongst the students. This flawed definition is convenient as the state can then just wash its hands of the matter. How about defining it as the lack of preparation and awareness right from the high school days?

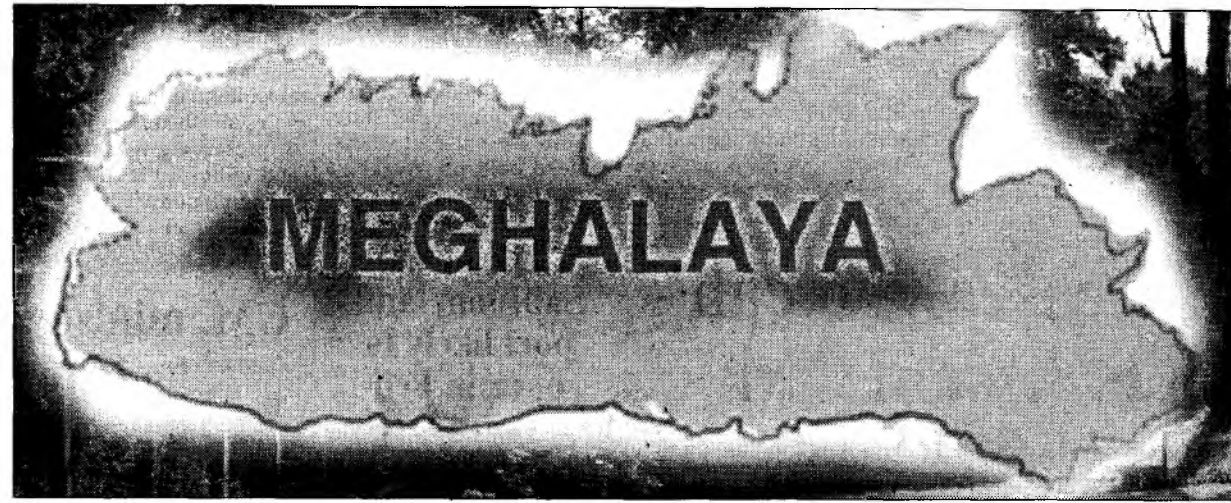
If the start is right then everything else that follows will also go right. Policy dynamics works in the same way. Once the problem is correctly defined then the second element which is policy formulation would go off effectively as well. Here, decision-making on the problem takes centre-stage. The policy document should entail procedures to be followed to deal with the problem. In Meghalaya the

is critical. It is seen that in developmental policies the 'partnership/involvement of the grassroots' is harped upon. The reality is not so. Most of the villagers are not part of any implementation processes. This is the lack of collaboration and without it any policy is bound to fail. If the government would move beyond policy alone and also work on tie-ups with village bodies like the dorbar, societies, etc., then the outcomes can be far better. What will happen is that a sense of urgency will be created on any intended intervention.

The case of conflict is more difficult. It happens when two or more sections have different opinions on matters of policy. Conflict is a

the policies are not forward-looking then how is the state supposed to develop? Stop-gap and placating solutions like a toy train is ineffective for growth. Policies should look to embrace macro interventions that would benefit the people at large and not just a section of the economy. The proper roadmap is first having passenger/goods railways and then within that have the provision for toy trains and not the other way around. Policy has to be progressive and not regressive.

Dialogue in policy is a must. Some of the best ideas on governance actually come from the streets. The small vendors, taxi drivers, daily wage labourers, unemployed youth, etc., do give good inputs on how policy and development interventions need to be. Some of them



Policy dynamics is mostly seen in terms of how a problem is defined. Take unemployment as a case. It is mainly defined as the inability of the state to provide jobs for all and/or provide the infrastructure and support-base for self-employment. This definition is flawed primarily because it is practically impossible to provide jobs to all and that infrastructure building is not easy for a financially dependent state. The point is that if the problem is wrongly defined then the solutions will also be wrongly formulated. On the contrary, the proper way to define the unemployment problem should encompass the inability to assess and exploit the resources that are available locally. For example, seasonal fruits like oranges are plainly sold as a finished product. It would be wonderful if capacities are built to process them into juice and preserve them in tin cans for wider marketing. The possibilities are unending. Horticulture and agriculture are Meghalaya's strength which have not been sufficiently tapped. Similarly, the failure to produce IAS and IPS officers on a regular basis is defined as the in-

practical picture is quite the opposite. Policy documents look great and are pleasing to read but with little impact on the livelihoods of the targeted people. In most cases it is not even clear who the targeted people are. This happens when decisions on the problem are made against the backdrop of poorly defined problems/issues.

For example, the state government is trying to deal with unemployment by focussing on the establishment of IT hubs, call centres, small businesses, gaming, tech-art, culture and creative performances, etc. These are fine, but they encompass a small section of the youth who are on the look-out for jobs. The majority are still in the villages, stuck in the villages and they do not see any livelihood scope other than what they can do at the village. What about them? Solutions for them are not forthcoming as they are absent and invisible to the decisions made in the process of policy formulation.

In the policy dynamics of formulation and implementation two things are possible — collaboration or conflict. For a policy to impact on the ground collaboration

result of too much assertiveness and no cooperation. For example, the policy dynamics of ILP is full of conflict. The pressure groups are assertive with no inclination to cooperate and the state government is helpless. This becomes a lose-lose situation for all. The way out of a conflict is compromise. The degree of assertiveness has to come down and cooperation should increase. Now, for this compromise to happen the state government has to come out with a remedial solution (say an acceptable to all MRSSA).

Policy dynamics is futuristic. It adapts to new developments and the changes in the economy and society. An important aspect about policy is that it is not ideated and conceived in a closed environment. In fact, policies are action plans for development while also keeping in mind the competition in the region/country. For example, Meghalaya's policy on railways should have been enforced keeping in mind the development competition from other states. But it is not so! Meghalaya is a small state which is basically dependent on central government funding and loan borrowings. Now, if

have an analytical mind and give out wonderful suggestions. They just need a space to be heard. As of today, when public suggestions are invited on a draft policy document it does not touch the grassroots. It would be good if they are reached out for suggestions in local dialects and then processed accordingly into the document.

For instance, the intended shifting of street vendors from Laitumkhrah main road to another location (earlier Lady Veronica Lane and now Beat House) is much needed due to footpath congestion. However, the residents of the lane disagree and it remains to be seen how much Beat House would help. Plus, a conversation with those vendors amply shows that the ideas are a no-no. They raise the question of marketability at those locations. So, where is the dialogue in the dynamics?

In the end, if Meghalaya intends to experience the development that it craves for then its policy dynamics require a sea change. This can only happen with the change in perspective amongst the people and the government.

(Email - benjamin@nehu.ac.in)

The Extraordinary Weight of Being Ram

By Binodan KD Sarma

I was a restless 6 year old when the Ramayan was first aired on national television. We did not have a television at home those days. My father believed that knowledge of all kinds can be obtained from books. So, we had books all over the home. Books on dining tables, on sofas and divans, book cases, bedrooms and even some lesser read magazines in the puja room. My mother is a devout lady and would oppose the books being stacked in the room of worship. My father, the eternal logician, would wittily defend saying that books are representative of the Goddess Saraswati and therefore are in a rightful place. That is how I grew up learning of our religion. That it is less of a religion and more a way of life and philosophy that can guide us to become a better human.

Ram and Ram was one such representation of the way of life amongst the 33 million and others that we may have conjured during the process of evolution in society. No God was supreme. Each one has their own place and purpose in helping humans to explore humanity or their spiritual self. Hindus therefore had multiple shrines or places of pilgrimage. We were not fastidious about having a single location like Islam with Mecca or Christians with Bethlehem. In a way this made the religion widely accepted as a philosophy.

Lord Ram, like all His other counterparts, was representative of a wide philosophy not occupying any super-power status across the country. If we break down our country's religious alchemy, we will also realise how democratic it stood itself with different regions and communities finding solace in either worshipping of avatars of the Devi or the Devs, not succumbing themselves to a single deity at any point of time. Even the holiest scriptures maintained this democracy with deep philosophies that is not the course of discussion today. Somewhere in the democracy of the Hindu religion, lurked an inherent insecurity of the lack of a superman that could galvanise a community with a single call. There was no scope of a religious crusade that Hindus could ever envisage on a large scale like the ones that happened in Europe between the Christianity and Islam. This was a boon for our community but a bane for anyone to be able to politicise and polarise the country in the name of Hinduisim alone. This insecurity of the lack-of an anchor deity and the inherent lurking desire to have one (as a cause) is a narrative that slowly started to manifest over the last 99 years with the objective to make a Hindu Rashtra.

Every nation founded in the name of religion, needs an anchor God/purpose. I don't need to cite examples but if you do a bit of reading and observation, this will be clear to you about the countries that we speak of. Manifesting an anchor God/purpose is not something that can happen over a few years. It will need a narrative to be created, performed and repeated much like our own religious texts and mythologies that have been translated, narrated and

performed over thousands of years through word of mouth to become what they are in their current avatars. This period can be expedited over the years with the advent of technology and availability of multiple channels to spread the narrative. It is natural that we find ourselves in the pulp of a key juncture of this narrative with the consecration of Ayodhya as the epicentre of Hinduism and Lord Ram, or as he is fondly being referred to as Ram Lalla. Ayodhya is our quintessential Bethlehem and Mecca. In establishing so, the profound narrative that we all have been exposed to is that we are now a religion and not a philosophy any longer.

My interest in the entire Ram Mandir narrative is sociological, rather than just political. It is a keen observation of how a repetitive narrative can stoke inherent insecurities of us as humans to find a single anchor to hold on to, rather than 33 million options. By establishing Lord Ram, as almost a single known face of Hinduism, the narrative of the political and social forces gears up for stage three of the purpose of making a Hindu Rashtra. This stage will be about celebrating a pompous pride of being a Hindu rather than a humble one that all our scriptures preach. We will find it manifesting itself in capitalist elements from t-shirts (remember 'Jesus Superstar merchandise', coffee mugs, rings, clothes, to key chains and a million other elements that will be commodified and sold to progress the narrative. Our generation and the coming generations will be exposed to this in a structured manner through text books, entertainment and everything else that we consume. So much so, that like the celebration of the grand temple, which I am sure is grand, we will celebrate becoming a religious nation, rather than a secular one. Society is most glibble when it comes to finding a purpose to live. As we evolved from the neanderthals, we are instinctively led to find purpose collectively and not tuned toward individual goals. We love mass movements, because it allows us to be part of something that everyone is doing. It helps build a collective responsibility and irresponsibility (that can never be accountable). The few evolved manage to stoke this instinct and make us a part of the narrative.

In the coming few years as we head towards another win for the ruling party, it is evident that we will witness more of such narratives and more such spectacles. And while all this happens, Lord Ram, who may have till now been privy to only prayers of a select few (read North India), should brace to listen to an exponential number of prayers, who, having seen the crescendo and mindless euphoria of 22nd January, I can safely say, will be crying out loud, everyday - 'Jai Shree Ram', in every exclamation.

(The writer is a marketing consultant and a keen observer of sociology and politics. He writes in hope that the world becomes a better and kinder place to live in soon.)

Letters to the Editor

Excluding Jaintia/Pnar language in State Anthem uncalled for

Editor,
The non-inclusion of Jaintia/Pnar language in the recently released State Anthem should have been avoided by the MDA government as it has been widely criticized. While it does not harm our oneness as Bri ki Hynniewtrep Hynniewskum, it is totally uncalled for since Jaintia/Pnar is officially recognized as one of the three major tribes of Meghalaya. There can be no justification not to include it in the anthem; it's a misadventure of the Cabinet which approved it. No matter how comfortable we are with English, it not our mother tongue and its non-inclusion would have not done any harm but excluding Jaintia language, does hurt the emotions of any Pnar and needs to be corrected immediately to include a line or two in Jaintia/Pnar.

In fact, I would go one step further. Since we are in this modern era and not in the 60s or 70s, why not include War and Bhoi languages as well. After all, the State Anthem is supposed to represent the souls of Meghalaya and there is nothing

wrong to showcase our linguistic richness. There is no dearth of scholars who can pen down a line or two in War and Bhoi languages as well. Presently it becomes more important that our linguistic and cultural identities are cherished, conserved and celebrated akin to what is happening across the country. Just as the National Anthem binds us together as Indians or Bharat wasi, our State Anthem should bind us together as a State and that cannot be achieved by aggraving a major section of the population. It should be a true representation of our spirit, emotions and inclusiveness as Meghalayans. I hope the MDA Cabinet did not give the same bogus logic which was given to our predecessors in the early 70s when one of the three major tribes took the lion's share while framing the reservation policy through an Office Memorandum in spite of being lesser in number and occupying a smaller geographical area and accordingly having fewer number of seats in the Legislative Assembly compared to the other two combined, which is rightly under review.

This is 2024 and such gimmicks of the government will not be tolerated and need widespread condemnations and immediate correction on the part of the MDA government. Let's not repeat or ignore the mistakes of the past but rather learn from them for

a harmonious future of our beautiful Meghalaya.

Yours etc,
Prof. Lakhon Kma
Shillong-4

Senseless arguments!

Editor,
With reference to the article mentioned above written by a certain Mankular Lamin, I would like to add my two cents on the contents in that write-up. I would like to admit that there are indeed a few points that make sense in an otherwise contemptible article. The writer seems to be of War-Jaintia origin and is scornful of the usage of the term Jaintia. He wants all of us to be clubbed together as Khasis. How lucky of us that scholars do not follow his line of thinking. However, he is more than welcome to do so alone since we are in a democracy.

First of all, contrary to what Lamin wrote, the term 'Hynniewtrep/Niawwasa', as the name suggests, actually refers to only the seven (hynniew/niaw) tribes of the Khasi-Jaintia hills and not to the entirety of humans at all. The article is rife with personal resentments and inconsistencies.

The body: Physical features simply aren't the only parameters employed in dis-

tinguishing different ethnicities or races otherwise all brown people would simply be called brown and there would be no such thing as a Bengali or an Odia and so on.

The language: The different subtribes indeed do speak different languages as he himself mentioned that War-Jaintia and Pnar are not at all mutually intelligible. And neither are Pnar and Khasi mutually intelligible. Lamin cherry-picked a few words to make it seem like Khasi and Pnar are extremely similar. Mind you, it can be concluded from another sentence he wrote that he is actually not fluent in Pnar. Hiram Ring, a Singapore-based linguist has indeed written that Khasi, Pnar, Bhoi, War, etc. are not simply dialects of Khasi but distinct languages grouped together as 'Khasic' languages under the Austro-Asiatic family.

The hills and the name Jaintia: While it is likely true that the term Jaintia is an exonym, it is simply not true that it was the British who started using the word 'Jaintia' to refer to the Pnars and Wars of Jaintia hills. The Jaintia Kingdom is much much older than the British Raj and the term Jaintia would have already been popular among the Pnars by the time the British arrived; a term that is more than 500 years old can be called an

indigenous one. Also, he provided evidence contrary to his hypothesis by saying that PRT Gurdon, who was a British administrator, actually called the Pnars as Khasis!

The two ADCs: The move for a separate district council was the wish of the Pnar and War-Jaintia people. He cited two individuals who opposed the move while ignoring the hundreds of our elders who wanted the separation. While the JHADC has a plethora of flaws, its inception was needed in order to safeguard our identity. On the other topic of 'identity and family relations', the writer rightly pointed out that Khasis and Jaintias are sibling tribes and no less. However, it is to be understood that the preference of the Jaintias to not be called by a term other than 'Jaintia' is to be respected as we are not used to any of the other terminologies. If the term Khasi was actually used by our ancestors, we would not object but sadly there is no evidence that they did in the hundreds of oral traditions that they left for us.

In the article there are other childish ramblings against Hindu gods and the Niamtre religion while he seemed to be favourable towards Christianity; to this I have nothing to say and that it only reflects the personal prejudices of the writer. The one big takeaway from the article is the neg-

ligence of scholars, as the writer correctly pointed out, in promulgating the names of the different subtribes of the hills as they too have their own unique dresses and customs.

In all, the writer appears to be disturbed by his personal experiences with certain Pnar individuals and hence he harbours these prejudices. I would like to apologize to him and to others who have been wronged this way. Lastly, let it be known that individuals can write as much as they wish about our identity on newspapers and their Facebook pages, but the Jaintia people will continue to be proud of their own unique identity and we will stand together with our Khasi brethren in our goal towards a brighter tomorrow.

Yours etc.,
Heirtami Paswet
Via email

Jaintia ethnicity in question

Editor,
This has a reference to "Propagating Pnar/Jaintia as not Khasi is faulty education and a false woke: Failure of the intellectual community" by Mankular Lamin Gashnga (ST January 23, 2024). The

tone and tenor in the article indicate the writer's attitude. The writer forcibly asserted his views as if he is authoritative of the Jaintia and Khasi history.

The writer, a pastor raises doubts about the historicity of the Jaintia traditions, customs, and religion. I personally consider it offensive, hateful, and bigotry to describe Niamtre as "false-Hinduisim". The bigot pastor owes an apology to the Niamtre communities. Raising doubts about the traditions, customs, and religion of the Jaintias, the writer thinks that just because these are "somewhat flexible" as they can be easily amended and easily discarded, they are therefore imitations of the Hindu practices due to Jaintia people's long history of contact with the plains. What the writer does not know is that all religious practices, social traditions, and customs undergo changes with time. If the writer had taken pains to know the history of the major religious and social systems of the world such as the Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, and Islam he would have known to what extent all of them had undergone amendments to adjust to the changing times.

Can the writer explain why there were so many sects and cults within such a system? Secondly, all such

systems have mutually influenced and been influenced by one another. Look at the Bhakti and Sufi movements in medieval India or at the socio-religious movements in modern India. Was there no interaction between the Brahma Samaj and the Unitarian Church? The experts have already shown that the three Abrahamic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam had influenced one another.

Loyalty to one's strongly held religious faith has been a feature of human nature for aeons. Unfortunately, that loyalty has only too frequently been matched by intolerance and hostility towards all other faiths. It is rooted in the negative attitudes, values, and beliefs held towards those of a particular religion by our so-called intellectuals.

Freedom of speech and expression is enshrined in the Constitution of India. However, one should not denigrate the belief of others be it indigenous or otherwise.

Yours etc.,
Dr Omarlin Kyndiah,
Via email

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"The clearest way into the Universe is through a forest wilderness."

—John Muir

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Policing Gujarat style

POLICING in a civilized and democratic society has, at its core, a set of rules and regulations. This is materially different from the policing in a totalitarian state where it often borders on barbarity or brute force. The Supreme Court has made this clear, in terse and pithy words while rejecting an appeal by a set of Gujarat state policemen this week. The plea from these cops was against the state high court order sentencing them to 14 days' jail in a communally sensitive case. The charge against them was that they tied some Muslim men to a pole in a public place and brutally cane-charged them over a complaint that they disturbed a Garba dance event in 2022.

The police action obviously drew wide media publicity and visuals of the police action numbed the senses of all well-meaning individuals. The errant cops were punished by the high court by citing contempt of court, as a previous Supreme Court order had laid down rules for the police force when it needed to act in similar situations. While rejecting the plea from the cops, the apex court of Justice BS Gawai expressed shock over the incident and termed the police action an atrocity, which deserved punishment. The very appeal against the high court order was unwarranted and only demonstrated, yet again, the arrogance of the state police force.

The Gujarat Police as a whole should have hanged their heads in shame for what some men in uniform from their ranks did. Instead, the attempt was to be ambivalent, irreverential and self-righteous. Gujarat Police had been at the centre of the epochal Gujarat riots of 2002, when it demonstrated both partiality and paralysis of the policing system with its alleged inaction and blatant support to the side that was pitted against the Muslims there and which unleashed violence on a hapless population and indulged in acts of rape and loot. This act was widely condemned by civilised nations.

Post 2002, Gujarat did not have communal riots. Across India too, communal tensions had reduced though the riots in Delhi during the final phase of the anti-Citizenship Registration stir and, worse, the recent communal conflagrations were major exceptions. These suggest that policing is not measuring up to society's expectations. Police intelligence systems often failed to anticipate the threat to law and order. In many situations across states, police went beyond their brief and acted in a callous manner. It is well-known that the police force is being grossly misused by political parties in power to their advantage almost everywhere and get away with their act. It is therefore timely that the apex court has given a dressing down to the errant Gujarat cops yet again. It strengthens people's trust in the judiciary and reinforces feelings of its impartiality.

Republic Day, HNLC and Peace Talks

By Kyrsoibor Pyrtuh

were put within Assam by the promulgation of the Constitution.

Until 1949 the Khasi States under the Federation continued to fight collectively for the unification of all Khasi Territory amidst political wrangling and sharp divisions among the major political groups, namely, the Federation of Khasi States and the Khasi-Jaintia Federated State National Conference. The latter which espoused the formulation of Sixth Schedule and whose leader Rev J.J.M Nichols Roy, a member of the Constituent Assembly from Assam, prevailed upon the Assembly to relegate the Khasi States to the Sixth Schedule in contravention to the resolution passed by the Khasi States Constitution Making Durbar held from April to July 1949.

As quoted in the book, *Ka Ri Hyniewtrep Shuwa bad Haden Ka "Independence Day" (Ri Hyniewtrep Before and After Independence Day)* the root of political dissent could be traced to 1948 when Rev J.J.M Nichols Roy

under the District Council which would be then under the aegis of Government of Assam and therefore would mean their automatic merger with Assam. We thought by keeping these States as a separate entity it would quickly facilitate the creation of a separate State. Our efforts collapsed even though we had a majority in the Constitution Making Durbar of the Khasi States...and the Durbar itself was soon wound up under somewhat mysterious circumstances."

The sudden announcement by the HNLC to withdraw from the peace talks has thus provoked the reopening of these historical debates and political contexts. There can be no workable resolution that can be arrived at by disregarding history. However, there is limited material regarding the HNLC vis a vis its structures, ideology and demands. In the academic exercise conducted twenty years ago it was found that 40% of the unemployed youths and 25% of the students respectively supported

threat to national security and law and order in the region. Several top functionaries and cadres of HNLC have been charged under various sections of Indian Penal Code (IPC) and UAPA. Therefore, summons have been issued to them to appear before authorities for questioning and investigation.

Since 2004, efforts have been made to bring the HNLC to the negotiating table. Several organizations, including successive governments, religious and civil society groups have come forward to appeal and reach the leaders of the HNLC to engage in the peace process and find a final settlement of its varied demands. The same year, Rev P.B.M Basafawmoit was engaged by the Ministry of Home Affairs as an emissary to the HNLC and unfortunately subsequent attempts to bring the HNLC leadership to the table did not fructify. It was until 2022 when the HNLC agreed to send five of its functionaries led by the Vice Chairman to kick off the peace negotiations.

It is understood that when HNLC agreed to come to the peace talks they had stressed for general amnesty and safe passage of their leaders as a prerequisite to the peace talks. Perhaps these demands can be construed as confidence-building measures amongst the parties involved in the talks. However, the same might face contestations outside the negotiating room and the HNLC may also have questions to answer to the public, especially the victims of its alleged violence.

Be that as it may, the State and society need peace and a final settlement must be reached sooner than we later. As a member of the Hyniewtrep community I earnestly appeal to the HNLC to reconsider their decision to withdraw from the Tripartite peace talks. At the same time, I want to make the following submission: - (i) the HNLC to share with the public their proposed political framework and call for participatory and wider consultations with the people/society (ii) to provide for Truth and Reconciliation process to be led by elders (both men and women) of society. Such a platform will allow the victims of violence and killings to express themselves and enable them to heal the wounds and come to terms with what happened. It will also facilitate the HNLC to reach out to the community, especially the victims, and reconcile with them. (iii) Seemingly, the numerical strength of HNLC cadres has dwindled, but there can be many factors which may cause the resurgence of armed conflict. The State/society should be wary and make sincere efforts to find a final settlement to this vexed political problem.

In between December 1947 and March 1948, when the Khasi States acceded to the Indian Union, via the Instrument of Accession, the Hyniewtrep people were granted the desired dream of self-rule and autonomy as prescribed in the Annexed Agreement.

moved for the insertion of the following proviso to Article 190, "Provided that notwithstanding anything contained in article 225 the Governor of Assam may by public notification direct that any Khasi State area may be administered as if they were part of the autonomous district of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills mentioned in Part I of the table appended to paragraph 19 of the said Schedule..." On the other hand, Article 225 of the Draft Constitution provided that the power of Parliament to make laws for a State or group of States for the time being specified in Part III of the First Schedule are subjected to the terms of any agreements entered between the State or group of States with the Government of India.

The Federation of Khasi States resolved to oppose the motion and immediately dispatched the letter to New Delhi to inform about its stand and urged upon Mr Guha, who was the representative of the Khasi States, to object and place before the Constituent Assembly its resolution. Later, Professor G.G Swell explained the well-founded position of Khasi States in these words, "It was on this score that we opposed the coming of the Khasi States

the idea of secession from the Indian Union, whereas the overwhelming majority opted for a special constitutional and political status for the Khasi States. It must be noted that, "In 1992, the Khasi Students' Union revived this issue and included in its demand the restoration of the Khasi States to their original position..." by way of Special Provision in the Constitution.

This issue is also being championed by the HNLC, a liberation group which demanded for the secession of the land of Hyniewtrep from the Indian Union. The HNLC was of the view that an armed struggle was necessary for the political settlement and in its efforts to sustain the liberation movement it was alleged to have committed serious criminal acts and is charged with the killings of police personnel, informants, innocents, kidnappings and extortion. Subsequently, in 2000 the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), Government of India, declared HNLC as a banned Organization under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) 1967. The ban is renewed several times and again in 2019 the MHA has notified the ban as the group continued to pose a

Importance of debate in Khasi society

By Patricia Mukhim

A brand new writer as far as The Shillong Times is concerned - Mankular Lamin Gashnga - was bold enough to share his views on the current controversy vis-à-vis the State Anthem and the claims following the release of that anthem that Jaintias as a people are a separate entity with a separate script/language. That debate is never ending because there are many sub-tribes under the broad umbrella of 'Khasi.' I am no linguist and nor do I have any claims to scholarship authenticated by a PhD, hence my arguments here will be that of a common citizen who dispassionately watches how even the indigenous faith (Niam tynrai of the Khasi and the Niamtre of the Jaintia) is now being equated to Hinduism with its myriad deities/gods when the indigenous faith has always stressed on U Blei Nongbuh Nongthaw - one God the creator who has placed us humans on this earth. This enthusiasm by some leaders of the indigenous faith to jump into the bandwagon of the Ram Lalla temple consecration in all their finery, actually reeks of politics. Such people give credence to the claims of the RSS that before the advent of a 'foreign' religion (read Christianity) into these hills, we were all Hindus. If people want to join the BJP and fight elections from that Party they are free to do so but stop using religion to create a new narrative about us as a tribe.

It is unfortunate that some scholars have come down like a ton of bricks on Mankular Gashnga and even made personal references about his profession/religion et al. This is pettiness at its worst. While disagreeing with someone's point of view there is no need to make disparaging remarks.

In a democracy every person has the right to express his/her views and it doesn't really matter what the person's occupation - present and past is. If anyone wishes to argue, let him/her argue on reason and logic alone. As it is this society is one where people prefer to simply gossip about issues. Most are experts at outsourcing their ideas to the sundry "Seng Bhalang" while others cajole someone else to write so that the crossfire is not borne by the person with the ideas but the poor guy who decides to write, out of a sense of concern.

There are many things wrong with governance in this state; there is unbridled corruption, nepotism and appropriation of powers by those who are actually vested with powers to take governance to the people. But how many scholars/academicians/thinkers/intellectuals et al actually pen down their concerns and send them to the newspapers? Either they don't want to offend the powers that be lest they need favours from them; or they are just too lazy to read, sit, write and send their write-ups. Those who do write will do so when something affects them personally but they will come up with the rider, "Please don't mention my name, mo."

In a society that keeps flaunting its matrilineal descent, there are very few or no women writers. Don't women have a point of view on the functioning or the malfunction of society? Who is sealing their minds, brains and mouths from speaking out? Isn't it true that Khasi women are acting out their gender roles where they are always warned not to speak or laugh out loud and that when women do speak they don't make sense? I have heard this many a time while growing up. Hence when women

attend the dorbar meetings within their localities they sit quietly; they are not expected to speak. We can actually count the number of women who voice out their views without flinching. They are ubiquitous like Angela Rangad, Agnes Kharshing (who has in recent times gone silent). Other than these two ladies, no political party has a woman spokesperson; no pressure group is headed by a woman unless it's a women's only group. And yet we see nothing wrong with these insidiously gendered arrangements.

The Khasi society is faced with multiple problems and haranguing about the languages of the state anthem is to me a waste of energy which could be deployed to look at the real issues confronting society, one of which is the growing poverty and the fact that Meghalaya is becoming a state with the highest number of school drop-outs. This is a matter of grave concern because a semi-literate population is a burden on its family and society. Take the growing number of drug dependent individuals whose numbers are rising. They are a burden on their families and by extension their society. Everywhere we turn we hear stories of bold thefts taking place and the police just don't seem able to keep track of such heists because they have become commonplace and hence normalised.

So yes, instead of quibbling over the language/languages of a state anthem it's time to focus on more critical issues. One point I consider important is that of having societal conversations on issues. Pressure groups of all shades make demands on our behalf without consulting us. We the people are taken for granted as if we have no minds of our own. Before any demand is put before the government, pressure groups should consult people and have a series of discussions in different areas. Let's make the demand-making process a democratic one because we will all be affected one way or the other by the demands (a) if they are fulfilled (b) if they are not fulfilled. We need to weigh the pros and cons of both.

Coming back to the state anthem, in Assam, a state of many tribal groups speaking different languages; some of them already recognised in the 8th Schedule like the Bodo language, but the state anthem is, "O mur apunor dekh" which is in Assamese and all the people of Assam, tribals included sing that with pride. That basic unity is important. But our Achilles heel as a community is our disunity. We can never agree on any single point. And whether we admit it or not we are a very communal breed of people. We are divided by community, faith and politics. The fact that we cannot, till date, have a common platform for regional parties is indication enough that we thrive on division. And it is this division and the absence of a single-minded purpose as a people (not as different communities) that is keeping Meghalaya backward. While we have these internal squabbles, issues that need focus are thrown like garbage into the rivers. There are too many people with too many ideas and too much rhetoric but too few to do the dirty work.

When will we ever learn to transcend the community ego and start working to correct the trajectory on which Meghalaya is riding? The State is 52 years old. Do we need another 50 years for revolutionary ideas to take shape?

Letters to the Editor

On rebuttals to article on state anthem

Editor,
In response to rebuttals to my article (ST Jan 23, 2024), my reply to Prof Omarlin Kyndiah would be that my comment about false-Hinduism was not a personal comment, so I'm sorry if you took it personally and was hurt by it for that was not my intention. It was an intellectual comment and I think I need to elaborate: If the religion of the Pnars makes provision for the worship of Hindu gods like the Kali, the Durga, Ram & Lakshon, abstinence from eating beef and others, then it should be Hindu, but it is not Hindu because the Pnars do not fall under the varna system of the Hindu religion. Otherwise, they would be either Scheduled caste or Other Backward Class, if they do not fall under the four varnas. However, we see that the Pnars are a Scheduled tribe under 'Khasi' on the basis that their

blood relation is inseparable from the rest of the Khasis. It would be impossible to differentiate which individual is Khasi and which one is Pnar/Jaintia/Hindu on that basis (what tribe is a Lanong, and what tribe is a Mukhim).

Another fact is that the Pnars very strongly subscribe to and more ardently in fact to the creation tradition of the Khasi which is the Hyniewtrep tradition. We all know that symbols of these traditions are in the form of Lum Diengiei and Sohpetbeng and those are located in the Khasi Hills. The way I see it therefore is that the Pnar religion is almost-Hindu but still Khasi by all its core characteristics, hence my definition in scientific jargon (such as a pseudopodia [false-limb] in a cell membrane, which is a term often used for clarification). It is not meant to be derogatory in any way. I'm sorry if it came across that way. And for the information of Prof Kyndiah, I am not a pastor. Also, I should say that religion is not important to me, so I would like to end this discussion on religion here

and let it remain as my opinion if you do not agree. Love is more important to me and I would like to continue on that note if I have to. I don't mind changing my opinion if somebody can counter my arguments. In fact, I'd be happy to do so.

Apropos Heitarmi Paswet's response to my article, I should say that it is a well-appreciated attempt to rebut, but I never said most of the words. For example, I never pointed out that 'Khasis and Jaintias are sibling tribes and no less'. In fact, I said there is no such thing as a Jaintia tribe and that we are all Khasi. Also, I do not harbour any prejudices against anyone personally. I love everyone, but I hate bad ideas and ideologies. The other rebuttals to my arguments seem weak and not properly argued. If you can prove me wrong, I'd be more than happy to discard my opinions because I only want the truth. Thanks for the opportunity to discuss!

Yours etc.,
Mankular Gashnga,
Shillong-3

Ward's Lake, the venue of the evening market!

Editor,
Ward's Lake is known as one of the famous and iconic lake in Shillong. The lake is very much popular among the tourists and is one of the prides of Shillong besides the Golf Course. These two sites should in fact be considered as heritage tourist spots.

The initiative of the Meghalaya Tourism Department to set up an evening market from 19th January to 31st March 2024 at the premises of the lake is not a good lead to promote tourism. Ward's Lake is surrounded on three sides by well-kept gardens with a variety of flowering plants, shrubs and trees, which serves as a micro natural habitat for birds and other creatures such as bees which are very essential for the environment. In the past few years, Shillong has witnessed various events being hosted in this premises with the erection of several stalls and this year a stage for mu-

sicians was also constructed. The natural beauty of Ward's Lake should be kept unscathed by the frequent erection of these temporary shacks. The late evening loud human activities and music can be a disturbance for many birds that have made their homes on the trees around the lake. This has distorted the natural beauty and serenity of this place.

I am not against the promotion of tourism in our State but this kind of frequent nuisance is disruptive to the peaceful ecology at the lake. The State has been focussing on youth development and growth by promoting various start-ups for which they need this kind of exposure, but the Tourism Department could have selected other spots for hosting such kinds of evening markets.

Quoting your daily dated June 26, 2022, "Ward's Lake is maintained by various Departments, like the Forest and Environment Department, Tourism Department and Fisheries Department". I would prefer to suggest that the Horticulture Department can also be involved in maintaining the gardens and the

flower beds. The people of Shillong and Meghalaya as a whole are mostly flower and plant lovers and are passionate about gardening. Ward's Lake could be further upgraded into a much more popular beautiful garden besides the lake if the Horticulture Department takes it seriously in putting more effort. This can attract the attention of more tourists to visit the place. This will help generate more income for our State without distorting the iconic and beautiful Ward's Lake. I request the Forest and the Environment Department to take steps to safeguard the natural beauty of the lake and preserve it for our future generations for many more years to come.

I assert that the Tourism Department should find another spot to promote its cause and spare Ward's Lake.

Yours etc.,
Balasara Lyngdoh,
Via email

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The Solar System used to have nine planets; maybe it still does?

By Sara Webb and Rebecca Allen

Some of us remember August 24 2006 like it was yesterday. It was the day Pluto got booted from the exclusive "planets club".

I (Sara) was 11 years old, and my entire class began lunch break by passionately chanting "Pluto is a planet" in protest of the information we'd just received. It was a touching display. At the time, 11-year-old me was outraged - even somewhat inconsolable. Now, a much older me wholeheartedly accepts: Pluto is not a planet.

Similar to Sara, I (Rebecca) vividly remember Pluto's re-designation to dwarf status. For me, it wasn't so much that the celestial body had been reclassified. That is science, after all, and things change with new knowledge. Rather, what got to me was how the astronomy community handled the PR.

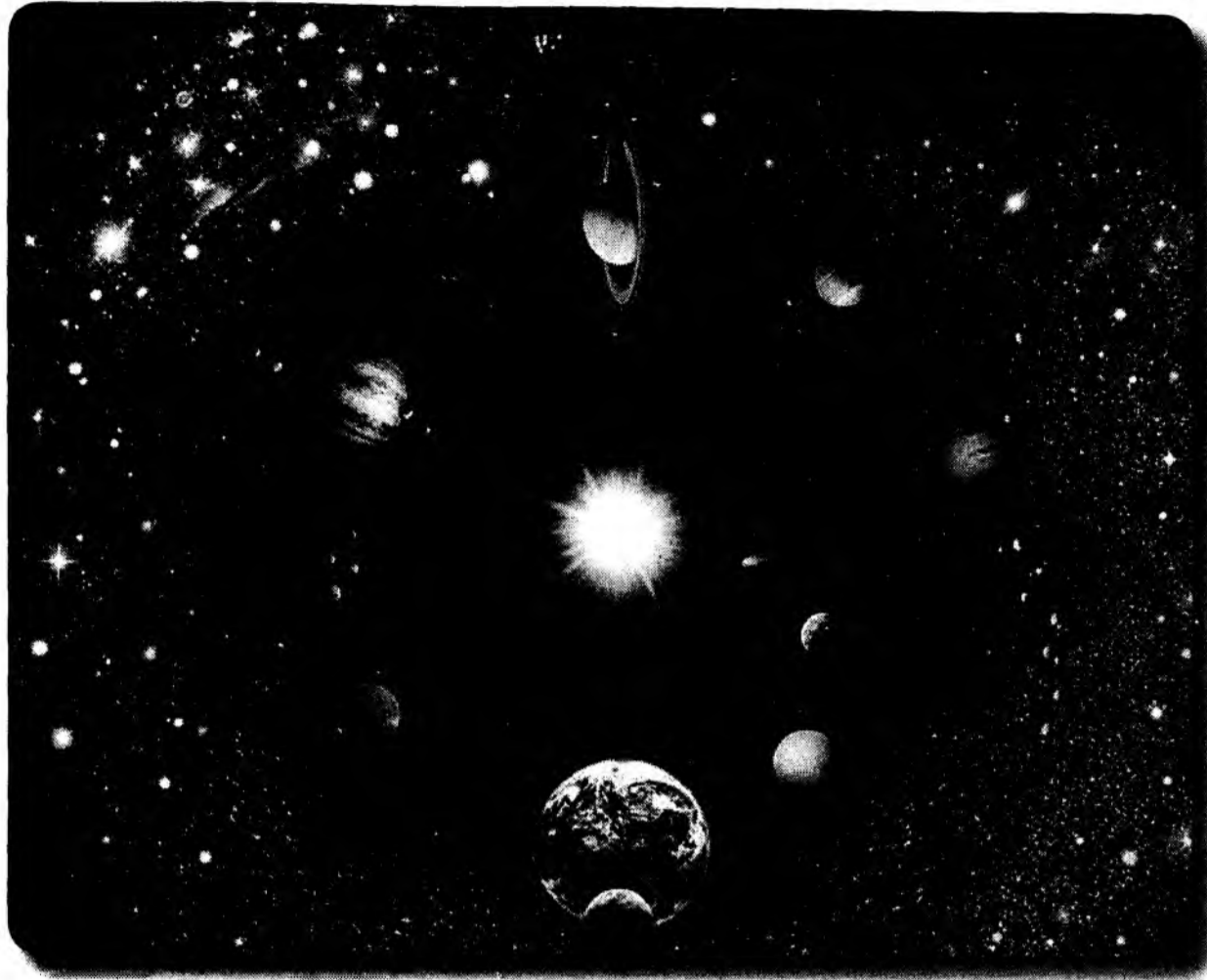
Even popular astronomers known for their public persona stumbled through mostly unapologetic explanations. It was a missed opportunity. What was poorly communicated as a demotion was actually the discovery of new exciting members of our Solar System, of which Pluto was the first.

The good news is astronomers have better media support now, and there's a lot of amazing science to catch up on. Let's go over what you might have missed.

A throwback to a shocking demotion

Pluto's fate was almost certainly sealed the day Eris was discovered in 2005. Like Pluto, Eris orbits in the outskirts of our Solar System. Although it has a smaller radius than Pluto, it has more mass.

Astronomers concluded that discovering objects such as Pluto and Eris would only become more common as our telescopes became



more powerful. They were right. Today there are five known dwarf planets in the Solar System.

The conditions for what classifies a "planet" as opposed to a "dwarf planet" were set by the International Astronomical Union. To cut a long story short, Pluto wasn't being targeted back in 2006. It just didn't meet all three criteria for a fully fledged planet:

1. it must orbit a star (in our Solar System this would be the Sun)
2. it must be big enough that gravity has forced it into a spherical shape
3. it must be big enough that

its own gravity has cleared away any other objects of a similar size near its orbit.

The third criterion was Pluto's downfall. It hasn't cleared its neighbouring region of other objects.

So is our Solar System fated to have just eight planets? Not necessarily. There may be another one waiting to be found.

Is there a Planet Nine out there?

With the discovery of new and distant dwarf planets, astronomers eventually realised the dwarf planets' motions around the Sun didn't quite add up.

We can use complicated simula-

tions in supercomputers to model how gravitational interactions would play out in a complex environment such as our Solar System.

In 2016, California Institute of Technology astronomers Konstantin Batygin and Mike Brown concluded - after modelling the dwarf planets and their observed paths - that mathematically there ought to be a ninth planet out there.

Their modelling determined this planet would have to be about ten times the mass of Earth, and located some 90 billion kilometres away from the Sun (about 15 times farther than Pluto). It's a pretty bold claim, and some remain sceptical.

One might assume it's easy to determine whether such a planet exists. Just point a telescope towards where you think it is and look, right? If we can see galaxies billions of light years away, shouldn't we be able to spot a ninth planet in our own Solar System? Well, the issue lies in how (not) bright this theoretical planet would be. Best estimates suggest it sits at the depth limit of Earth's largest telescopes. In other words, it could be 600 times fainter than Pluto.

The other issue is we don't know exactly where to look. Our Solar System is really big, and it would take a significant amount of time to take the entire sky region in which Planet Nine might be hiding. To further complicate things, there's only a small window each year during which conditions are just right for this search.

That isn't stopping us from looking, though. In 2021, a team using the Atacama Cosmology Telescope (a millimetre-wave radio telescope) published the results from their search for a ninth planet's movement in the outskirts of the Solar System.

While they weren't able to confirm its existence, they provided ten candidates for further follow-up. We may only be a few years from knowing what lurks in the outskirts of our planetary neighbourhood.

Finding exoplanets

Even though we have telescopes that can reveal galaxies from the universe's earliest years, we still can't easily directly image planets outside of our Solar System, also called exoplanets.

The reason can be found in fundamental physics. Planets emit very dim red wavelengths of light, so we can only see them clearly when they're reflecting the light of their star. The farther away a planet is from its star, the harder it is to see.

Astronomers knew they'd have to find other ways to look for planets in foreign star systems. Before Pluto was reclassified they had already detected the first exoplanet, 51 Pegasi B, using a radial velocity method.

This gas giant world is large enough, and close enough to its star, that the gravitational tug of war

between the two can be detected all the way from Earth. However, this method of discovery is tedious and challenging from Earth's surface.

So astronomers came up with another way to find exoplanets: the transit method. When Mercury or Venus pass in front of the Sun, they block a small amount of the Sun's light. With powerful telescopes, we can look for this phenomenon in distant star systems as well.

We do this via the Kepler space telescope and the Transiting Exoplanet Survey Satellite (TESS). Both have observed tens of thousands of stars and discovered thousands of new planets - dozens of which are about the same size as Earth.

But these observatories can only tell us a planet's size and distance from its star. They can't tell us if a planet might be hosting life. For that we'd need the James Webb Space Telescope.

Looking for life

The James Webb Space Telescope (JWST) has just wrapped up its first year and a half of science. Among its many achievements is the detection of molecules in the atmospheres of exoplanets, a feat made possible by the transit method.

One of these exoplanets, WASP-17, is also known as a "hot Jupiter". It seems to have been plucked from a page in a sci-fi novel, with evidence for quartz nanocrystals in its clouds.

Meanwhile, the super-Earth K2-18b (a Kepler find) shows signs of methane and carbon dioxide. But while such discoveries are amazing, the magic ingredient necessary for life still eludes us: water vapour.

The field of planetary studies is evolving and 2024 looks promising. Maybe JWST will finally produce signs of water vapour in an exoplanet atmosphere. Who knows, we might even have a ninth planet surprise us all, filling the void left by Pluto.

(Sara Webb is a Lecturer, at Centre for Astrophysics and Supercomputing, Swinburne University of Technology and Rebecca Allen is the program lead of Microgravity Experimentation, Space Technology and Industry Institute, Swinburne University of Technology)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, JANUARY 28, 2024

'Birthday Forecast'

Venus sextile Saturn on your solar return chart thus resulting in an excellent year ahead. It will turn out to be an amazing year. You will appear far more assured and wiser. You will enjoy your work. The projects that you have been thinking getting completed would see the light of the day. You would be man with the Midas touch. You will be able to win a big order for your concern. Your name and fame will spread far and wide. People will start taking notice of you. And you will be able to convince them too. You would be invited at social gatherings and new contacts would be developed. You will have numerous business opportunities too. A female person might prove lucky for you and will be a source of comfort. Your brothers/sisters would support you and will be a source of inspiration. Financial position would be good.

'This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) Some associations can be competitive in business as you shine and work well in your field of activity. You initiates a current of forceful energy to achieve success in an important venture. You are likely to protest against domination by people at work. You may have to face egotistic people. This week brings love, romance and excitement in personal relations. Deep personal relations and business partnerships are likely to get stronger. Good luck in finances and new opportunities are encouraging. This is an excellent period for starting new regimen to improve your health and well being, such as regular exercise, more structured and productive use of your time, and so forth.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) You have the desire for love, harmony and a peaceful life. It is a gentle, considerate, and sensitive vibration. You are diplomatic, warm and sensitive. This week brings for you socializing, romance and stability at the work place. Love, friendship and relationship are emphasized. There are strong chances of materialization of friendship into a long term relationship during this time. Your social life may be restricted to business and family related obligations. Luxury shopping may make a hole into your pocket but makes your family happy and brings a smile to their face.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) Self-confidence and prompt action are highlighted. You are generous with friends, and loving in family situations. You come across as especially smooth, and your good nature is bound to attract some attention. You stand in the middle of a doorway in the middle of the week while making an important decision be it professional or personal. It would be better to listen to your own judgment and do what is good for you. People around you could be judgmental or manipulative. Do not forget to share your feelings with the one who loves and cares for you.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) You are loving, stable, and harmonious in personal relations. There is conflict within and discord outside. You may be divided about business and professional matters and finally come to terms with compromise which might be the best thing to do at this time. You may disagree mentally with your partner but the love between you allows peace and acceptance. Emotions and moods can swing to extremes and it is important to achieve equilibrium. You can get stressed and manifest a health problem as you worry about everything.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) You are practical, trustworthy, hard working, and helpful. This week influences your finances and material aspects, suggests that you are considerably more goal-oriented related to earnings. Your ability to concentrate and focus helps you to achieve what you set out to do. A new project or goal begun at this time has a good chance of being successful and long lasting. Self-confidence and action are highlighted. You may go in for a change of your image. Personal relationships especially with your loved one are stable and rewarding.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22) You have intellectual vibration and ability to adapt to most situations. This period brings financial gains for those in banking, investment, hotel industry and those who are in the teaching profession.

There could be alteration in ideas or plans, increase and decrease in finances and fluctuation in business. You can be lead away by undue enthusiasm unless careful inner balance is maintained. Marriage, business partnership and collaboration can be strengthened through understanding and commitment.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) This phase brings youthful energy and you accept challenges in your life. You are diligent and pedantic at work and specialize further in your field of activity. You are on the threshold of a creative and inventive work that brings you name and exposure. Meditate on the constant changes happening around you and centre within. Good health and energy enables you to participate in sports and related pastimes. A pleasant surprise awaits you at the end of the week.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) The planetary configuration brings mixed results for you. A partner's resources could have a significant impact on your home life. Finding joy in developing intimacy is featured, and this is a time where you develop and enhance your love on a deeper level. Work could be moving towards more research and development. The work you do could be supported by your spouse or other people's money in general, such as work in finance. You achieve success as you are brilliant and there is good fortune attending professional, personal and material aspects.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) You would be more accommodating and compassionate in relationships and not take things personally. You would express your adaptability and persistent energy in professional projects. You deal with official and personal matters with calm authority. You possess great power to attract creative and charismatic people around you to make your social life enviable. You would be dynamic, forceful and assertive in professional ventures to establish a position of authority. Health and energy need to be conserved through a busy time at work.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) You are practical, hard working and helpful in personal and professional matters. New friendships and group associations are likely to come about and you will experience increased energy and a stronger ability to assert yourself. A new approach to friendships or new friendships altogether will pave a new path towards happiness and fulfillment. New associations or affiliations, or plenty of social activity are in store for you. This is an excellent period for beginning a new health regimen.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) This phase brings excellent work opportunities for sportspersons and lawyers and also a favorable time to appear in written exams, handle court matters and attend to legal matters. Self-confidence and tremendous efforts are highlighted to attend professional goals. Financial benefits may come your way through investments. You need to be careful in your interpersonal dealings and you must avoid confrontations with your family. Your financial situation looks promising if you manage it well personally rather than look to others. Make sure that you do not get caught up in arguments as a simple and straightforward approach is all that's called for.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) You may see the light in a friendship, realizing its importance in general, as well as the importance of acceptance and camaraderie. Circumstances may be such that you bring a new spirit of friendship into a romance or another connection in the next months. This can be invigorating. Surprises coming from children may be part of the picture. Your creativity, romance, pleasure, and children are involved. This could manifest, for example, as a romantic proclamation from a lover, a creative project bearing fruit, a child revealing something significant to you, and other such possibilities during this time.

Benefits of slow running

Runners are obsessed with time. Amateur or professional, for most avid runners the aim is to get faster - constantly training in order to shave even just a couple of seconds off their marathon time or 5K pace.

But one running trend that's started to gain a foothold in recent years is that of "slow running". The idea behind the slow running movement is that anyone can run - no matter your ability or how fast you run.

Fans of this approach say it has many benefits - not just for your health but also in how enjoyable you find running. Research agrees, with evidence showing slow running may in some ways be more beneficial than training at higher intensities.

When we think of elite runners such as Eliud Kipchoge or Kelvin Kiptum, we might assume that to set world records, they primarily train at these record-setting paces. But surprisingly, elite runners spend around 80% of their time training at what's termed zone 2 running - a running pace which raises your heart rate, but is still slow enough that you can hold a conversation. Only around 20% of their training is done in the higher intensity zones, which are closer to their race pace.

The reason for this relates to the amount of stress that training puts on the body. As running speed increases, the more strain the body is put under. The more strain the body is put under, the greater a person's risk of illness, infection and injury. By reducing the amount of time they spend at higher intensities, athletes limit their chances of missing out on training due to illness and injury.

But there's more to this approach than just reducing the risk of injury and illness. A fundamental aspect of training is developing what's known as "base". This term describes the physiological foundations that underpin all training adaptations. For the endurance runner, this refers to their baseline cardio-respiratory fitness on to which their higher intensity adaptations can be built.

Think of it like a pyramid, which has a solid base on which the rest of the structure is built. The bigger the base, the taller the pyramid can be.

The same holds true for training. The better your base, the more capable you will be when working at higher intensities.

Your base is developed during slow (zone 2) running, where physiological stress is relatively low. But even though the heart isn't under very much stress during zone 2 running, the amount of oxygenated blood leaving the heart each beat will be close to or at its maximum amount.

This is important because while the pumping capacity of the heart adapts to training, higher intensities do not increase this gain. Developing a strong base allows for more oxygen to be delivered to the working muscles per heartbeat, which is crucial to running success.

Not only that, but running at slow paces causes the body to use stored fat for energy - as opposed to relying on carbohydrate stores that come from the foods



we eat.

Burning fat is metabolically a far more efficient process, as the amount of energy derived from a single molecule of fat far exceeds the amount from a molecule of carbohydrate. This means runners will use less energy overall - and will be less fatigued and better able to run fast on race day.

Studies have shown that gains in VO2 max (oxygen capacity) and race speed are around 1% greater for athletes who spend more time slow running. Crucially, the gains in aerobic base are around five times greater in slow runners compared to athletes who more frequently use high-intensity runs.

Even if you aren't an athlete, aiming to keep most of your runs at a low intensity may still be optimal.

Slow and steady

If you're keen to give slow running a try, the most important thing is your pace. How exactly do you know you're at the right speed to be classed as slow running? Some scientists divide running pace into five or six different zones. Physiologically, zone 2 is defined as occurring below the lactate threshold - the point where lactate (an acid the body produces when it begins to burn carbohydrates for energy) first starts to appear in the blood.

In simple terms, this should be at a speed where you can still hold a conversation and your heart rate is only around 70% of your maximum. If you find conversation starts to become difficult then you should slow your pace down.

If you're running on your own, you can try the talk test. If you can sing out loud to yourself without struggling to catch your breath, you're in the right zone. If you do struggle, you're at too high an intensity and lactate will start to build up in your muscles (which may make your legs feel heavy).

Slow running offers many benefits - both for your body and your mental health. So if you're someone who's always been shy about your slow running pace, perhaps this will inspire you to put on your trainers and give running a go. (*The Conversation*)

"The quality, not the longevity, of one's life is what is important."

—Martin Luther King, Jr.

The Shillong Times

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Kursi Kumar again

CHIEF Minister Nitish Kumar has been staging the familiar political trapeze act for many years -- and successfully at that. He switched political sides with rare ease and made friends with 'devils' too in the last 11 years. The JD(U) leader performed his latest colour change on Sunday by resigning as chief minister and forming another government with BJP support. In the process he ditched the RJD of Lalu Prasad and the Congress party at the precise moment when Rahul Gandhi's Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra was set to enter Bihar. The INDIA alliance that Kumar stood in the front to cobble received a fatal blow from his shocking exit from it to share power with the BJP. With what face can Rahul Gandhi traverse through Bihar is anybody's guess now.

Nitish Kumar, known also as Kursi Kumar for his knack to retain power as chief minister, belonged to the Socialist bloc at whose head were principled leaders like Jayaprakash Narain, the Sarvodaya leader whose Total Revolution movement unseated Indira Gandhi from power and helped install a Janata Party government at the Centre in 1977 after the Emergency years. In course of time, Kumar functioned as Railway Minister in a BJP dispensation and later formed a coalition government in Bihar, first with the BJP and later with the RJD, only to ditch Lalu and join hands with the BJP again in 2017. In 2022 he ditched the BJP and cohabited with the RJD again. Clearly, Kumar -- also known as Kursi Kumar and Paltu Ram for his ruthless somersaults -- sacrifices ideology at the altar of self-interest.

Notably, this 72-year-old politician has been the curse of Bihar if in that the state failed to transform itself into a modern entity under his long years of governance. Kumar made positive changes to life in Bihar, at the start, by jailing the goons of Lalu Prasad. His principal slogan was "Sadak, Pani", aiming to lay roads and reach water to all villages. He mostly accomplished this task and then failed to take the state's progress forward. He lacked the vision to think anew, ensure steady growth and invite investment to Bihar. Vested interests had full play under his governance though no one has alleged he looted the exchequer. This is one positive factor that still holds him aloft in state politics. His present somersault would hit the INDIA alliance hard in the run-up to the parliament polls. Unless a miracle happens, as in 2009 past the India Shining slogan, the BJP-led NDA is likely to retain power after the 2024 polls. Kursi Kumar, for one, knows as much.

Jaintia is Not Just an Idea

By HH Mohrmen

The recent imbroglio about the state anthem created by this Government has helped bring to light the old debate about Pnar and the term Jaintia, which has a long history. However, this debate is not only about the two terms, but it is also about the identity of the community as Khasi, which is currently based on argument using linguistic points of view only. The truth is this debate is not about language only; it is about history and the pride of the people who belong to (the once upon a time) the greatest kingdom amongst the Austro-Asiatic Mon Khmer-speaking people in this region.

About Jaintia, which later became Jaintia
The region, which once comprised hills and plain lands to the south, is now part of Bangladesh and North Assam. The Jaintia kingdom was once a very flourishing kingdom. In the previous article, this column had, to some extent, dealt with the beginning of the Jaintia kingdom and its evolution to Jaintia, which has a history dating back to ancient times. The Jaintia kingdom, with its capital in Jayantiapur, is the only kingdom of the Jaidbyrniew that issued coins (Rhodes, N.G and Bose, S.K. (2010). *The coinage of Jayantiapur - with an account of the last days of the Jaintia Raj. Kolkata: Marudhar Arts.*). Till date the monolith and the structures in Jayantiapur still stand tall as a testimony to the fact that it was once ruled by the people of Pnar descent. (Mohrmen, HH, Cultural History of Jaintia hills is a story of stone and traditions)

The Jaintia to Jaintia in a Nutshell
Let us start the 500 years' history of Jaintia hills (1500-2024) by delving into the name, and identity called Jaintia. The term Jaintia is derived from the name of Jayantia Devi. It was a very ancient kingdom mentioned in Hindu scriptures. In the previous article, mention was made that the Jaintia Buranjhi also tells a story about King Jayanta Rai who had no son but a daughter only. Since the king was without a son, he handed over the reins of his kingdom to his daughter Jayanti Devi. The kingdom derives its name

from the name of Jayanti Devi, and its capital is also called Jayantiapur. Till today, a considerable population of Pnar origin can be found in Jayantiapur.

A successful tribal chief, after defeating all the villages in the hills, extended his kingdom to the plains and ruled over the Jaintia kingdom. The first tribal chief who extended his domain to the plains was called by his adversaries as Prabhat Rai, meaning the Lord of the Hills. From 1500 onwards, it became one of the very flourishing kingdoms in the region, interacting and intermarrying with the Ahoms, the Dimasas, and the Tripuris. Initially, the Jaintia kings had a very good relationship with the British. But Jaintia started having problems with the British from 1830 onwards, and the main contention was that the Jaintias kidnapped some British subjects and used them to perform human sacrifices at the temple. The British annexed the Kingdom in 1835 because the Jaintia kidnapped British subjects and sacrificed them in their temple.

Kiang Nangbah and the Country "Ri" He Fought For
In the book "U Kiang Nangbah: The Swordsman with the Stealth of the Tiger," this author dealt with the very important question - For which country did U Kiang Nangbah sacrifice his life? The causes of the rebellion were the house tax and the interference of the British with the religious ceremonies, but at a later stage, the leaders of the rebellion demanded the reinstatement of the king of Jaintia. The British also used the royal family and asked them to move from the plains to the hills to convince the rebels to end the rebellion, proving that the royal family still has a strong influence on the hills subject.

Later, when fed up with the members of the royal family whose only concern was the pension promised by the British, U Kiang Nangbah declared that if they did not wish to continue to serve as the king, then the people will find a new king. The country he had in mind when he rebelled against the British was certainly not the Indian

then, the Jaintia kings came to be known as Khasi, and the name of the place where the incident occurred is called Khasipoor (Jayantia Buranjhi pp 24). Later, the missionaries who first settled at Sohra used the Sohra dialect to translate and write the Khasi language, and this, along with shared culture, are strands that unite the Jaidbyrniew.

The Anthem Controversy and the History
Thanks to the NPP-led government, the state anthem compels one to revisit history and understand the fact that the issue is not merely a language issue; it is about the identity of the people of Jaintia. The people, which include the War, the Pnar, or even the Beate/Biate, and the Hadem of Saitsama, were part of this cohesive identity called Jaintia. Tradition has it that during the heydays of the kingdom, even the Hadem, which are of Kuki Chin descent, had a dance that they presented to the king to show allegiance to the Jaintia king. The fact is, Jaintia has always been inclusive of others and lived with people of different tribes and races since ancient times.

Jaintia/Jaintia is not just an idea, and for the people of Jaintia, the anthem controversy is not merely a linguistic issue. It is true that the community speaks the same language and follows the same culture, but the history of Jaintia/Jaintia cannot be easily done away with because it is inherent in the hearts and minds of the people. From U Kiang Nangbah to U Kiang Nangbah and to the present generation, they have been told and retold about the greatness of the Jaintia kingdom. To ignore this truth is to undermine the feelings that people have for their history and their tradition. Moreover, the Pnar and War have never in any way expressed that they do not belong to the Jaidbyrniew. So, how can one question their allegiance to the community just because they demanded that the anthem needs to be more inclusive? In fact, if we are going to brand the people who asked the government to include Jaintia in the anthem, "ki nong pynpait jaidbyrniew," then what about U Kiang Nangbah who fought for the freedom of ka hima Jaintia?

The Origin of Khasi
Khasi is an exogenous name given to us by others. The Jaintia Buranjhi has a story of how the Jaintia were given the name. King Yudhishthira decided to perform Rajashuya Yagna and to prepare for the sacrifice; he sent his brothers in all four directions. In a show of disrespect, King Indrasen refused to appear before Bhim. Bhim was infuriated and dragged him on his bottom till his testicles ruptured, spilling Indrasen's life because he was a Brahmin. It was said that since

How serious is Kejriwal charge of BJP trying to bribe AAP MLA's of Delhi?

Confusion galore in India Bloc parties as Lok Sabha Polls approach

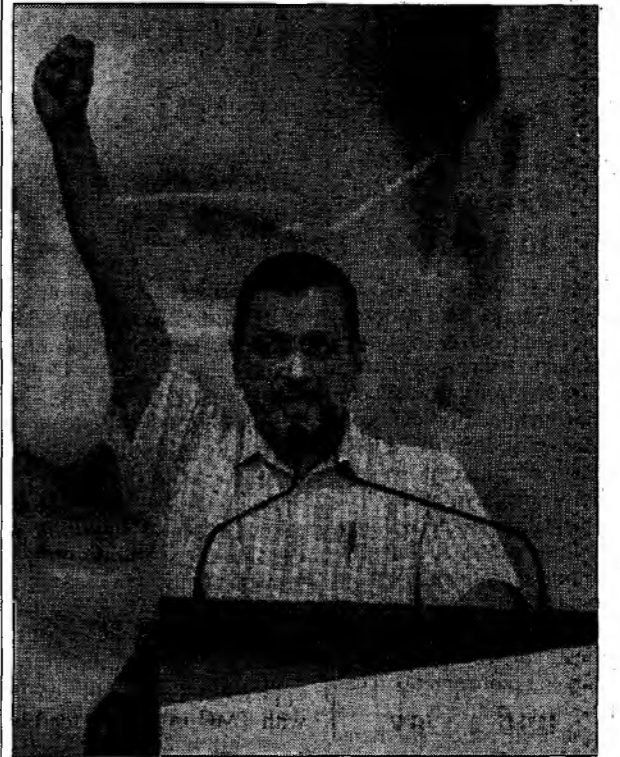
By Sushil Kutty

Amidst the happenings in Bihar where Nitish Kumar is doing what he does best, i.e., lodge a new government with another coalition partner with himself remaining Chief Minister of the remodelled dispensation, which is more like a reshuffle than an overthrow or a change of government, comes an allegation from none other than Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal that "7 AAP MLAs have been threatened and offered Rs 25 crore (each) to topple the Delhi government."

What is the BJP at, in the ongoing political turmoil, whether it's behind the crisis to force a regime-change using "Operation Lotus" or is it doing its best to derail, however little or much, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi's Bharat

"Although they claimed that 21 MLAs have been approached, but as per our information, they has (sic) contacted only seven MLAs so far and all of them have refused (to join the BJP)," the Delhi Chief Minister's 'X' post mentioned, adding that it had nothing to do with the Delhi liquor scam but was a conspiracy to "topple the Aam Aadmi Party government in Delhi".

It is common knowledge that the Bharatiya Janata Party doesn't shy away from using central investigating agencies to topple opposition-ruled states and "Operation Lotus" has been frequently resorted to, to bring about regime changes over the 10 years of Modi rule, starting from Mad-



Jodo Nyay Yatra, which has been giving the BJP a headache ever since it launched on January 14? And don't forget the INDI-Alliance of which the Janata Dal-U and the Rashtriya Janata Dal are also a part. The INDI-Alliance is sworn to defeat the BJP in the ensuing general elections, denying Prime Minister Narendra Modi a third term.

Now, Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal is going around alleging that some AAP MLAs have been threatened and were offered bribes to topple the Delhi government? Kejriwal is not alone in making such revelations. Over the last 36 hours, there are numerous reports that some of the 19 Congress MLAs of Bihar are in contact with the Bharatiya Janata Party and some of them with the JD-U leadership. The inference is that these Congress MLAs would walk out of the Congress as and when asked to. That is, they are likely to jump ship giving not only the Congress a jolt on the eve of the 2024 general elections but also to the INDI-Alliance, which otherwise also is under considerable strain from BJP machinations.

The question is, are the "threats and offers of bribes" to the 7 AAP MLAs to allegedly topple the Delhi government part of a pattern and a larger plot to destabilize INDI-Alliance governments given the prevailing political atmosphere in the country, which recently saw the 'Pran Pratishtha' of the Ayodhya Ram Mandir?

At least, Kejriwal has alleged a conspiracy and has asserted that 7 AAP MLAs were enticed with Rs 25 crore bribe each to break free from the Aam Aadmi Party and join the BJP on the eve of the 2024 general elections. Kejriwal says the BJP plan was to arrest him after a few days and then break the MLAs.

The Delhi Chief Minister posted on 'X' that a total of 21 AAP MLAs were targeted and that the BJP was "talking to others also". He spoke of a bribe of Rs 25 crore and a BJP ticket to contest elections in exchange for toppling the Delhi's AAP government.

haya Pradesh. According to politicians in the know, this largely coercive operation invariably involves threats and bribes, which is what Kejriwal has alleged in his 'X-post', which adds a degree of authenticity to the Delhi Chief Minister's allegation.

According to one media source, Kejriwal spoke of "many conspiracies to topple his government in the last nine years". Quite surprisingly, he thanked God and the people who supported AAP for surviving the nine attempts. But while Kejriwal had God on his side, does the Congress also have God Almighty guarding its flock of MLAs in Bihar? Last heard, all the political parties including their JD-U have "corralled" their MLAs from BJP raids. Were the Congress MLAs also "offered bribes and/or threatened"? Like Kejriwal said "these people" know how to break parties and replace governments.

For sure, Nitish Kumar wouldn't have got the spark of inspiration to break free one more time on his own, he must have had the BJP to help him along with the thought. For, it is difficult to pinpoint a reason or motive which is making Nitish Kumar to take such a drastic step unless it was absolutely necessary? Nitish Kumar cannot be bribed and he cannot be "threatened" like Kejriwal's "7 MLAs", so what's it that is making him a puppet?

What if Nitish Kumar's target is the INDI-Alliance and some leaders of the alliance, which he "fathered"? On Saturday, West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee said the INDI-Alliance without Nitish Kumar is better off. Kumar hadn't liked it when Mamata Banerjee suggested Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge's name for the "PM face" of the INDI bloc. The ongoing "Bihar government crisis" poses a definite threat to the INDI-Alliance and is already wreaking havoc with it, which suits both the BJP as well as Nitish Kumar fine. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

Reclaiming Hindu places of worship

Editor,
Report of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) and its observation that the Gyanvapi Mosque at Varanasi had been built over a pre-existing Hindu temple is nothing but confirmation of the glaring truth known to everyone. Even a casual visitor of Kashi Vishwanath Temple just by a cursory look can comprehend the fact that the mosque had been built over a temple. It is however, a matter of great pride that the Hindu community has adopted the correct legal recourse to address the historical injustice committed by invaders involving one of their holiest shrines. The destruction of the Kashi Vishwanath temple by the tyrant Mughal has been documented by none other than the court-news writer of Aurangzeb- Mohd Saqi & Mustafa Khan in 'Maasir-i-Alamgiri' - the chronicle of the reign of Aurangzeb which mentions "...news came to the court that according to the emperor's command, the temple of Biswanath at Benaras has been destroyed. (in 1669 AD)".

Litigation of the case is expected to continue primarily resting on the Places of Worship Act, 1991 which bars conversion of any place of worship of any religious denomination into a place of worship of a different religious denomination. Since ASI survey report confirms the true character of the premise surveyed as 'temple', and the Places of

Worship Act nowhere mentions 'possession' (legal or otherwise) as a determining factor to arrive at the 'character' of a place, therefore, it is expected that in due course of time the historical injustice involving the Kashi Vishwanath Temple will be corrected through judicial pronouncements.

Yours etc.,
D. Bhattacharjee
Shillong- 1

Significance of Republic Day

Editor,
Republic Day, celebrated on January 26 holds wholehearted significance in the heart of every Indian, as it marks the culmination of our hard struggle for independence and the beginning of a new era of hope, equality and justice. There is a special reason behind choosing the date January 26 for implementing the Constitution. Very few people know that Independence Day was celebrated for the first time in the country on 26 January 1930. In fact, on December 31, 1929, a resolution was passed in the Lahore session of Congress under the chairmanship of Jawaharlal Nehru. In this proposal it was demanded that if the British Government did not give India the status of Dominion State by 26 January 1930, then India would declare itself completely independent. After this, Independence Day was celebrated for the first time on January 26, 1930 and the tricolor was also hoisted on this day. Since then, the date - January 26 has become very important for the countrymen. When the country

became independent on 15 August 1947, Independence Day was officially celebrated on 15 August. But to make January 26 memorable it was chosen to implement the Constitution on this day. This is the reason that even after the Constitution was ready on November 26, 1949, there was a wait of two months and it was implemented on January 26, 1950. On this very day, the first President of India, Dr. Rajendra Prasad, hoisted the flag with a 21-gun salute and declared India a full-fledged republic. Since then, every year Republic Day is celebrated as a national festival. On this day, the President of the country participates in the program and hoists the flag and is given a 21-gun salute.

Yours etc.,
Pinaki Nandy
Shillong

Why treat AYUSH doctors like 2nd class citizen?

Editor,
The AYUSH Medical Association of Meghalaya (AMAM) expresses its disappointment with the advertisement dated January 23, 2024 given by the Meghalaya Medical Services Recruitment Board (MMSRB) for the post of medical officer MBBS-74, Dental-8 and Medical Physics 17, whereas the 14 posts for AYUSH doctors was left unadvertised. AYUSH physicians are one of the main pillars in providing medical care in the State of Meghalaya. We have witnessed this during

the COVID -19 pandemic where most of the Corona Care Centres were being run by AYUSH physicians of the State. Sadly, the moment the Covid War ended the Government had just dumped the AYUSH doctors in the Swachh Bharat Dustbin.

The last advertisement by the Meghalaya Public Service Commission (MPSC) for AYUSH doctors was in March 2015 almost a decade ago. Since then no post has been created and there have been no job advertisements for AYUSH doctors. With the exception of the National Health Mission (NHM) of course. Thanks to the NHM, over 100 AYUSH doctors are working under NHM on a contractual basis. The question therefore is why so much disparity and partiality by the State Government as if AYUSH doctors are not performing their duties. The fact of the matter is that especially in rural areas in the CHC or PHC or in any other Health centre the task of AYUSH physicians is equivalent to that of MBBS doctors except that they have no assistance and have to do everything themselves.

If we talk about a Directorate, the only state in India which does not have a separate Directorate of AYUSH is Meghalaya. Every other state has a Directorate of AYUSH. The irony is that recently the State Government clearly mentioned in the appointment letter of Dr Joram Beda, IAS that he is also Director of AYUSH and not as Director of AYUSH Mission. So how is it possible that there is a Director for AYUH without a Directorate? It is high time for the

Government to realise that AYUSH doctors are an integral part of the healthcare system.

The Government justification is that it does not have enough AYUSH doctors to have a separate Directorate. The strength of AYUSH doctors in the state is almost 1000 now. There are three systems existing in Meghalaya as of now, namely, Ayurveda (BAMS) Yoga Naturopathy (BNYS) and Homeopathy (BHMS). Beside a central institute like NEIAH is housed in Meghalaya. AYUSH doctors do not have a Council for registration except for Homeopathy.

The Government justification of lack of manpower can be divided into man and power. The man part is there. It is the power that is missing. If the Government thinks there's a manpower crunch in AYUSH then it should recruit more doctors so that we can also have Power. Without recruitment how can the Government have manpower? Sadly, most AYUSH doctors working under NHM are about to reach the upper age limit for entering government service.

I therefore urge the Government and the Health Minister to look into this matter urgently and not force us to wear our aprons and sit in front of the Secretariat. It is shameful for us and shameful for the Government too. Our immediate demands are 1) Job recruitment 2) Separate Directorate.

Yours etc.,
Dr B Langstang,
General Secretary,
AMAM
Via email

Overnight experts of Jaintia history

Editor,
Following the release of the controversial State Anthem, a number of writers (Bhogotram Mawroh, Mankular Lamin Gashnga et al) expressed their view points on the historicity and ethnicity of the Jaintias - a tribe whose source of history has been well researched and documented right from the pre-British period. As in the history of other communities, the pre-British history of the Jaintias may be broadly based on literary, archaeological and other allied sources. The literary sources consist of both internal and external accounts. In the external sources we have the Burmese and Chinese accounts etc.

In recent times everyone has become an expert of Jaintia history overnight by quoting colonial sources. Since when have Gordon's and Rafy's or for that matter any other colonial ethnographer's writings been treated as gospel truth? The colonial legacy is too strong and these newspaper articles want to wipe out the history of the Jaintias with one stroke of the Anthem.

This kind of cultural imperialism has to stop. It's been going on for a very long time and one cannot suppress others.

Yours etc.,
Dr. Omarlin Kyndiah,
Via email

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

"If an individual wants to be a leader and isn't controversial, that means he never stood for anything."

— Richard M. Nixon

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State Anthem Controversy

THE controversy sparked off by non-inclusion of the Jaintia lyrics in the State Anthem is likely to become a political hot potato sooner than later. The present MDA Government will be projected as one that has tried to make light of the weighty issue of non-inclusion of a major component of Meghalaya's tribal cosmos – the Jaintia people. Many scholars and intellectuals have lent their weight behind this issue because of the simple reason that every introductory foreword about Meghalaya is prefaced by words such as, "The three major tribes of Meghalaya are the Khasis, Jaintias and Garos." Never has the word Jaintia been excluded from the definition of Meghalaya although the origin myths of the so-called Hynniew trep, Hynniew skum or the seven hearths is oft repeated.

Over a period of time a certain political dimension has been constructed where the Jaintia Hills with 7 MLAs was pointed out as not ever having produced a Jaintia Chief Minister. No other region was called out as if the 29 other MLAs representing the Khasi-Jaintia region are all included in Khasi. Ri Bhoi district has 5 constituencies but they have always been considered an integral part of the Khasi Hills. The West Khasi Hills combined, too have 7 MLAs but it has never been the political lingua franca to say that a "Maram/Lyngngam" has never become the Chief Minister of Meghalaya. The first well-known patriotic anthem – Khynriam U Pnar/U Bhoi U War/U dei u paid Khasi baiar," seems to have been relegated to the dustbin if history because of the emergence of a sort of political narcissism as opposed to an inclusive altruism.

Those at the helm of governance should have anticipated this storm in the basin (not the proverbial tea-cup) had they been more grounded and wisely sought the views of a cross section of people. To assert that there is the primacy of two languages in Meghalaya with English being the common bond, is an intellectual rationale but as noted psychologist and writer Daniel Goleman says, emotions influence us more than reason because they are found within a more primitive and deeper part of our brains. They are at the basis of everything we are. Emotions play a vital role in elections and have nearly the same weightage as money power. The very fact that an election anthem of a particular political party has been so embraced that it was played at the recent State Games at Tura and had athletes gyrating to it should inform us about the power of a song to electrify a people or group to the point that they would vote for the candidates of that party. Clearly those in government don't understand the power of emotions especially when it comes to an ethnic group's attachment to its self-image.

Is the State Anthem ignoring Jaintia History?

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

The debate over the anthem is not going to die down very soon, and there have already been some rebuttals, a particular one directed at me, which I really welcome. I say this because I am going to take this opportunity to share more materials that are about the Khasi community (which includes the Jaintia as well) with my thoughts on them. I have always tried to share my reading materials with the readers because they should not believe me but actually go and read the materials on their own so that they can make up their own minds. There might have been a time when reading materials were very hard to come by, and one might have had to rely on others to know the facts. But now, many are available for free online. Therefore, if one talks without reference, they are just being lazy. That, in turn, can lead to them being manipulated by those who think they can speak for others. The point about intellectual discourses is not to trust anyone, but to check things out for ourselves.

Now coming to the criticisms, a vehement critic of my article, Omarlin Kyndiah, stated that, "in recent times everyone has become an expert of Jaintia history overnight by quoting colonial sources," and complained that unfortunately, colonial ethnographers' writings like Gurdon's and Rafy's are being treated as gospel truth. He also alleges that the colonial legacy is too strong, and these newspaper articles want to wipe out the history of the Jaintias with one stroke of the anthem. Now there are some interesting allegations here; the first is about the sources, and the second is about ignoring the history of the Jaintia's. Let's take the first argument.

The use of colonial ethnographic works is because they are the earliest that are available on the subject. There is also Jayantia Buranji, which will be referred to later in the article. However, apart from them, we will have to turn to oral sources, which also give a good idea of the history and culture of the people. That's where folk tales come into the picture. Rafy's work is therefore interesting in that regard because it does give an idea of the worldview that the Khasi adhered to. It is not to say that these sources should be read uncritically, and there are a few passages that do show the condescending attitude colonial officials like Gurdon had towards the native community who had not converted to Christianity. However, does it mean that the remaining information that he provides is somehow tainted by that? I see no evidence of that.

In fact, Gurdon's observations about the Lyngngam and the Bhoi were very insightful, as was his mention of the nearest ethnic group that might have kinship with the Khasi based on vocabularies, the Palaung (an indigenous group found in present-day Shan State, Myanmar). All of them have been found to have been

proven by works like the 2012 paper 'Molecular Genetic Perspectives on the Origin of the Lyngngam Tribe of Meghalaya, India' by Banrida T. Langstieh and her colleagues, Philippe Ramirez's 2014 book 'People of the Margins: Across Ethnic Boundaries in North-East India' and the 2013 paper by K. S. Nagaraja, Paul Sidwell, and Simon Greenhill, 'A Lexicostatistical Study of the Khasian Languages: Khasi, Pnar, Lyngngam, and War' which will be discussed later.

Rafy's book is a collection of folk tales. To dismiss them is to assume she must have invented some of the stories, which is an incredible argument to make, which I will not. So, I will not dismiss the colonial sources just because they are colonial. To do so in fact reveals a bias that is not borne out of critical scholarship. It is, however, an attempt to create an alternative narrative not based on facts. What might that attempt look like? We will have to wait and see.

The second criticism is regarding ignoring the history of the Jaintia. I don't see the connection between the anthem and this allegation. The anthem is based on the one official and two associate official languages of the state, English, Garo, and Khasi (the Sohra dialect). Pnar is one of the languages spoken by the Khasi (by this, I mean one of the groups within the larger umbrella, i.e., Pnar/Jaintia), but because of historical reasons, they were not chosen as the standard Khasi. That went to the Sohra dialect, which became the associate official language mentioned in the Meghalaya State Language Act, 2005. It is also the language for which the 8th Schedule is being demanded. So, it's not about ignoring history, because the anthem is not about that. Also, including Pnar, which is not part of the Meghalaya State Language Act, 2005, will be a grave injustice to the other languages, one of which is actually the oldest among all from which Pnar and other Khasi languages emerged.

Regarding the Jaintia history, one has to appreciate HH Mohrmen's effort in this regard, who has been trying to do a lot by sharing it every now and then with the public. His latest article, 'Jaintia is Not Just an Idea', is a continuation of that, albeit this time with an attempt to link it with the anthem, which I feel is misguided. According to him, the debate is not about language but about "history and the pride of the people who belong to (once upon a time) the greatest kingdom amongst the Austro-Asiatic Mon Khmer-speaking people in this region." Yes, the Pnar had a kingdom, and it was a great one, stretching all the way to Jaintiapur in present-day Bangladesh. It did issue coins, had some small cannons, and appeared to be quite advanced politically. A lot of the information about the kingdom comes from the 'Jayantia Buranji', a chronicle on Ahom-Jaintia political relations. The Eng-

lish-translated version came out in 2022, and it is a really fascinating book. For those who can, please buy the book and read it.

The book begins with the hostilities between Jaintia and the Kacharis, which includes the account of the murder of the Jaintias (called Garos here) by the treachery of the Kacharis. Interestingly, a very similar strategy, using deceit to kill your enemies, was mentioned again later, which was used against the Mughals. Similar stories are also known in the Bhoirymbong (Ri Bhoi district) of killing one's enemies by inviting them to the assurance of peace. So, such stories seem to be quite common, or the practice is quite widespread. After that, the mention of the Ahom-Jaintia relations began during the reign of Swargadeo (Swarga means heaven and Deo means god—not very pompous at all) Pratap Singha, and the contemporary Jaintia King was Jasamanik. A feature of this relationship was the fact that both were independent kingdoms. The chronicle mentions the Ahom-Jaintia war that happened during the reign of Swargadeo Rudra Singha, in which the Jaintia King Ram Singha was defeated and taken hostage. Ram Singha later died when he was about to be sent back to his capital. Fighting, however, continued till the Jaintia got back their prince, who was warned by the Ahom king not to create any trouble in the future. However, this was not the end of the fighting, and there are accounts of clashes between the Ahom and Jaintia during the reign of Swargadeo Siya Singha as well. So, it's not that the colonial accounts are the only sources; the Jayantia Buranji, however, is referring to matters of statecraft and not the ethnography of the Jaintia, for which we have to depend on the colonial sources. There is one account, though, that reveals an agreement with the colonial sources. This is about the origin of the word Jaintia, which is claimed to have been derived from the name Jayantia Devi.

In Jayantia Buranji, Jayanti Devi is mentioned as the daughter of Jayantarai, the Brahmin king of Jayantia. She was married to Landhabar, the son of the royal priest. Landhabar was, however, cursed by the goddess Bhadrakali and was driven out by his wife. Later, in remorse, Jayanti Devi prayed for the goddess Mahamaya, who asked her to bathe in the river. When she was bathing, her reflection was devoured by a fish. The fish was later captured by Landhabar, who brought it home for eating but forgot all about it. Over the next few days, he found that all the household work would be done and his food would be cooked when he returned home. Afterwards, he found that a maiden would appear from the fish when he was away. He married the

maiden (the reflection of Jayanti Devi) and had a son called Borgohain, who was later appointed as the king of Jayantipur by Jayanti Devi. Curiously, there is a similar story in PRT Gurdon's book 'The Khasi', which is about the origin of the Syiems of Sutnga (another name for Jaintia). It's about U Loh Ryndi and Ka Li Dokkha.

According to this version, there was a man from War Umwi (Amwi) named U Loh Ryndi who went fishing. He caught a fish, roasted it, and placed it on the tyngir, but forgot to eat it. The next morning, he went for a walk, and when he came back, he found the house clean and food cooked. This continued for a few days. Then one day he concealed himself and found that it was a maiden who called herself Ka Li Dokkha who did all the work. There was then an incident that made her leave and go stay in the river Umwai Khyrwi in a village called Suhtnga (Sutnga). There they both got married and had children, after which they returned to the stream of Umwai Khyrwi. One can already notice similarities between the two stories about the fish who was a celestial maiden, from whom the kingdom/Hima originated. The Sutnga story seems to be the older version, which later got co-opted by applying Hindu embellishments when the Pnar established their kingdom in the plains. This is not surprising, as the process of the rulers becoming Hinduized and trying to build a connection with the larger Indo-Aryan (the central Asian migrants who brought early forms of Hinduism to the subcontinent around 3500 years ago) religious mythology was quite common. The process is still ongoing, and one can find out more about it in the YouTube series brought out by The Wire, 'Indians: A Brief History of a Civilization'.

A similar attempt can be seen in the Jayantia Buranji, where the son of the Landhabar and the maiden (the fish who swallowed Jayanti Devi's reflection) was called Borgohain, which is an Ahom surname and an administrative title. I don't think anyone will make the argument that the Jaintia came out of the Ahom. A similar thing must have happened with the story of the name Jayantia Devi, which must have been an attempt to make it appear more Hindu. So where are the Pnar/Jaintia, actually?

Most probably, the Pnar are actually the War Amwi people with the story U Loh Ryndi and Ka Li Dokkha making that connection. This origin is indirectly supported by the 2013 paper 'A Lexicostatistical Study of the Khasian Languages: Khasi, Pnar, Lyngngam, and War' by K. S. Nagaraja, Paul Sidwell, and Simon Greenhill as well. The paper supports the unity of the Khasian branch of the Mon-Khmer languages (this includes the

languages and dialects of Khynriam, War, Bhoi, Jaintia, Maram, and Lyngngam), which means that all these languages emerge from a common ancestor. The Pnar and the standard Khasi are closely associated, but the War-Lamin and Lyngngam are a little further away from both. Based on dating methods, it is assumed that the oldest languages spoken must have been quite similar to those spoken by the Palaung (mentioned by Gurdon in 1907), who are also an Austro-asiatic speaking group. Khasi appears to have diverged from Palaung around 4000 years ago and within the Khasian group it diverged from War more than 2000 years ago (the earliest) and from Pnar around 600 years ago (the most recent). Because they recently diverged, Pnar and Khasi are in fact, so similar that they are termed as being dialects of the same language. This suggests that among all the languages spoken now, the oldest and most similar to Palaung must have been something that sounded like the War-Lamin. So let's try to reconstruct the origin of the Khasi (which includes Pnar and all the sub-groups) based on this information.

Based on the papers 'Y-chromosome diversity suggests southern origin and Paleolithic back-wave migration of Austro-Asiatic speakers from eastern Asia to the Indian subcontinent' by Zhang and colleagues and 'A late Neolithic expansion of Y chromosomal haplogroup O2a1-M95 from east to west' by Arunkumar and colleagues, the groups known as Khasi today arrived in the sub-continent between 10,000 and 6000 years ago. These early groups spoke what must have sounded very similar to the War-Lamin. Then, over time, the groups started occupying different areas, with the name of some of the seven groups that emerged later actually being geographical. War is a term given to those who stay in the deep gorges of the southern part of what is today known as Meghalaya, while Bhoi, as Philippe Ramirez himself puts it, means "people of the border." In time, clans started to reorganize and form into Hima, with Hima Sutnga, founded by the War Amwi, being one of them. Maybe it was around this time, or a little later, that the name Pnar came to be used. Now, Mohrmen personally informed me (he can verify it later) that the 'Pnar' actually comes from the term pakka nar, i.e., good quality iron. Interestingly, in the Jayantia Buranji, along with the letters, pieces of iron from the Jaintia King and chillies from the Ahom ruler were exchanged.

The paper 'Two thousand years of iron smelting in the Khasi Hills, Meghalaya, North East India' by Pawel Prokop and Ireneusz Suliga claims that the Khasi (which also include the Jaintia/Pnar) had already developed an iron smelting industry 2000 years ago. The 1958 book 'Secret Lands where Women

Reign' by Gabriel Bertrand (this book was written after India got independence, so I am sure it will not qualify as a colonial source, but Omarlin Kyndiah will know better) has a chapter 'In the Mountain of the Serpent (most probably it's the Thlen) God' where there is a mention of the Garos and Nagas living in fear of "those who live up above and draw fire from heaven to iron". "Those" here refer to the Khasi (which also include the Pnar), who would raid these tribes and carry their people to work as slave labour for erecting the monoliths that now dot the Khasi landscape. So, the word Pnar must have its origins in the iron industry. In time, as Hima Sutnga grew in power, it conquered the plains, and it was around then, in an attempt to link the Syiem/King to Hindu mythology, that the legend of Jayantia Devi was created with a little modification of the original legend of U Loh Ryndi and Ka Li Dokkha. That's how the people of Hima Sutnga, who came to be known as Pnar, also became known as Jaintia. But in reality, they were the War Amwi. In fact, all Khasis are descendants of the War Amwi (or people who originally spoke a similar language).

The State Anthem is not ignoring Jaintia history because it is based on the three official languages, with the Sohra dialect being one of them. In fact, it is quite propitious that for the Khasi, where the khadduh is of such importance, the youngest language is the lingua franca of the community. The Jaintia have a fascinating history, but so do the other groups that make up the Khasi. To ignore them smacks of arrogance and defeats the very argument of Khasi subsuming the identity of groups like the Jaintia. So, if there's a change made to the anthem, first the Meghalaya State Language Act, 2005, should be scrapped, and instead of the Sohra dialect, the War-Lamin dialect should be included as an official language since it is the oldest and the one from which other Khasi languages, including Pnar, emerged: Mankular Gashnga's Lamin War-English Dictionary (I am not sure if it is out) can be helpful in this regard, and through incorporation into education and other official works, it should be made the lingua franca, which is to be used by all those who belong to the Khasi groups, with the name Khasi also being changed to War. All groups now, except War, should have the suffix War attached to them: Jaintia-War, Bhoi-War, etc. Let us be authentic and go back to our roots. That will be true justice. If anything, this will be a lasting contribution to the state anthem debate.

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

Letters to the Editor

What else shall unite us as a people?

Editor,
Many writers from inside and outside, among them the anthropologists, linguists and ordinary citizens have shared our common concern as a people who once upon a time originated from common ancestors. Yet these seemed not to be enough for us. Once in the history of our existence we have participated in that womb, breathing through the same umbilical cord; and still say, "Ki Thawlang-lawbei", "Lei Longkur- Lei Longkha", thus raising them to the rank of God. Many more vocabularies such – "Ki Mei-Ki Pa Bahok. ki nongpynkup-

pynphong ia ka longrynieng" and so on. This is the sanctity attached to those ancestors; so also, is the sanctity of this present life embedded in that past. The highest Godhead known as "U Nongthaw-Nongbuh"/"Ka Blai Wabuh Wathoo" and other names for the same entity, were but the result of Inference from the basic premise. This tradition which is fast eroding in our hills, is still strong in Jaintia Hills. This is the meeting point of our realism and idealism. This has constituted a part of our metaphysics system which validates our communication to the cosmic law, the essence of the nature/universe/the knowing-knower of goings-on, specifically in human and nature in general.

Take away the above from us, and we'll find that

all our rites and rituals will become mere symbolisms, mere colours devoid of efficacy, and no one wants this to happen. In one Beh Diekhlam Festival in Jowai I heard the words "Blai Ryn-gkaw-Wasa" the same spirits invoked in other parts of our hills. This and its entailments and the implications, we know well.

Yet despite this richness of tradition and profundity of knowledge, an event sparked by a some-year-old anthem, seemed to have snapped off the blood relationship witnessed by our cosmology and metaphysical system, we had for hundreds of years. We cannot afford to trivialize the civilization so profound and all-embracing such as ours without belittling ourselves. We are not a material culture, the past of

which can fall back on the museums in case we fade away from this world stage. The outside world did come to us, and so did we say to them about what we are as a culture. But have we done enough and done justice to the ones who never had the opportunity to voice what they know because they lacked the education and position?

To conclude, I once said this to a friend who asked – "who are the Khasis?" The knowledge system, the tradition we all inherited, is a string running through the pearls being the Khynriam-U Pnar-U Bhoi-U War-U Maram-U Diko-U Lyngngam." As a tribe we did worship the form and the ideal as well; not only one of the above. These are the fountain springs and the

foundation of our unity. We can't afford to be seen as a Christian, Niam Tre, Seng Khasi and other colours for this being we wear is more profound than the man-made tags. A culture, the feet of which were not planted in the past shall never see the light of the future.

Yours etc.,
Isaid Khongjee
Sohra

The controversial state anthem

Editor,
Many learned writers/scholars have given their opinions/ views for or against this topic that has been made controversial by the MDA 2 government which always makes deci-

sions without weighing the pros and cons.

My first and foremost argument is that from the elite to the common man on the street it cannot be denied that Khasi, Jaintia and Garos are the three major tribes of Meghalaya since our struggle for statehood till today and under them there are numerous sub-tribes with their own different dialects, traditional attire, cultures, etc. No one can deny the fact that whenever we talk about the principal tribes of Meghalaya, these 3 major tribes are named.

So, it disappoints me to hear that my language was left out. Even in the tableau of Meghalaya at the recent Republic Day Parade, it is there for everyone to see that the statues of the girls at the tableau were of Khasi, Jaintia and Garo girls and not of any sub-tribes.

Period. Even the Ministers, especially Mr Paul Lyngdoh who penned the lyrics in the Khasi language (forgetting his Jaintia friends of his constituency) knew this pretty well but they failed to address this lapse for reasons best known to them. Why is this biased and step motherly treatment meted out to us? Why create this unnecessary controversy?

If we go by the lyrics of the anthem, it looks as if in Meghalaya we have 3 main tribes, Khasi, Garos and the English. We can do away with the usage of the English language as in our country's national anthem not a single word of any foreign language was used. Likewise in Meghalaya, we have numerous sub-tribes' lyrics and typical music with the beating of traditional drums or duitara. Why not incorporate them instead?

Last but not the least I would like to ask, why our Pnar/Jaintia ministers, MLAs and MDCs are keeping mum? Why are our leaders acting like zombies about matters that do not concern their personal advantage? Don't you have an iota of love and pride for your people and land? It seems not. My only prayer and fervent request to the authorities is to put a stop to this controversy by incorporating a few lines of our language in the anthem. I know that it is not late or impossible to do so at this stage.

Yours etc.,
Helen Dkhar,
Via email

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"The key to growth is the introduction of higher dimensions of consciousness into our awareness."

— Lao Tzu

The Shillong Times

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Crime and punishment

WHEN it comes to a juxtaposition of politics and judiciary, India and Pakistan are poles apart. The Indian judicial system rarely acts tough against those who held high offices in government, while the Pakistani judiciary has been a nightmare to the top politicians there. The scenario in the two countries presents two extremes. The 10-year-jail sentence awarded to Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) leader and former prime minister Imran Khan and former foreign minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi on Tuesday by a Pakistan court, in the Cipher case, follows a familiar pattern. The charge against the two was principally that they made references, at a public rally in 2022, to a "classified cable" message sent to Islamabad by the Pakistan envoy from Washington after his meeting with the US officials, who suggested Khan's removal from the prime minister's post. Notably, the rally was held a month before Khan's ouster from government, his arrest and jailing. The convicts can go on appeal, but the immediate prospect is also that Khan and his party can be banned from contesting the polls.

Popular Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto had been sentenced and hanged to death by a court in 1978 on charges of plotting the murder of a political opponent. The arrest happened in the run-up to parliament elections; and so is the case now. Top Pakistani leaders, at the receiving end of military rulers or courts, have often faced exile and their life was ruined thereafter. Exiled former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto was shot dead during a street show upon her arrival from abroad in 2007, weeks before the parliament elections in which she was planning to lead the Pakistan People's Party founded by her father. While the three power centres in Pakistan are the political leadership, the Army and the Judiciary, it is often that the military and courts maintain the upper hand and politicians are at a disadvantage. The judiciary as such might not be immune from temptations, pulls and pressures there. The scenario in India is relatively "better" perhaps.

Unlike in Pakistan, Indian politicians have been having a smooth sail. Most corruption and other cases against senior politicians have never led to their conviction or jailing. A notable exception was the Allahabad high court conviction of then premier Indira Gandhi in an election malpractice case in the 1970s. She avoided resignation and instead clamped Emergency, lifted it in 1977, ordered parliament polls and was defeated. Second-line leaders like George Fernandes, Bangaru Lakshman, Lalu Prasad, VK Sasikala and some AAP ministers were among the few politicians here who faced court punishments. The rest are having a gala and enjoy impunity.

Khasi or Hynniewtrep: A continuing debate

By Fabian Lyngdoh

The recently released Meghalaya State Anthem has stirred up some suffocating dust and smoke in the Khasi society because the Pnar dialect was not included in the State Anthem. But the dormant cause is a deeper intellectual rift brewing in the minds of the social leaders and academics. Silence in this matter, would be the best policy for safeguarding one's personal dignity and self-interests. But, since the culture of silence, deeply entrenched in our collective psyche has kept the people in general, in woeful ignorance of facts, which in turn brewed chaos and confusions in the society, I feel the urge to contribute some ideas on this contentious issue. For proper understanding of the nature of any indigenous tribal community, sufficient knowledge of oral traditions, and affective experience of the cultural spirit of the tribe is necessary besides literary information.

Before the British had established modern political and administrative systems in these hills, there was no operational concepts of Jaintia hills, Khasi hills, Ri Bhoi, Maram, etc. The whole land, from east to west, north to south was one piece under dynamic human migrations and socio-political formations around the operational concepts of the raid and the hima with the preponderance of the raid over the hima. The raids which are the permanent territorial and political entities had existed for hundreds, or perhaps thousands of years before any hima was formed or any siyemship was instituted. The structure of the hima, on the other hand, was fragile. A new hima might be formed at any point of time in history, or an existing one might be dismantled in the dynamics of socio-political changes.

In 1859 when the British had already been the colonial rulers in the region, hima Shyllong was dismantled by the dispute of the founding clan elders, and new himas: Myllem and Khyrim came into being. But the constituent raids along with their established political territories remained intact in the two respective himas. Hima Jaintia was dismantled, but the raids as its permanent constituents remain to this day, and assumed the status of Elakas under the Act of the District Council. The people's basic territorial and political identifications were based not on the tribe or the hima, but on the raids, as u Jwai, u Raliang, u Sutnga; or as u Thaiang, u Nongtham, u Nongtluh; or as u Nongkrem, u Myllem, u Nongkseh, etc.

The ancestress of the siyem (chief) of hima Shyllong and the ancestress of the siyem of hima Jaintia were

non-Khasi women brought from the plains and adopted in the community, and their offsprings were consecrated as the jait siyem. It is from the lineages of these two siyem families that the jait siyem in most of the lesser Khasi himas originated. In the wisdom of the ancestors, this process of adoption was clothed in stories narrating that the siyem ancestress emerged from the cave or from the fish. Similarly, the siyem family of raid Umsaw-Nongbri is related to a young woman carried by storm from outside the raid and hidden in a cave. The ancestress of one of the leading basan clan in raid Iapngar is also said to have originated from a fish that a man caught from the Umiam River.

The ancestors clothed this process of adoption in stories to establish political covenant, as well as to justify or rationalize the adoption of a person from outside the community. That is our ancestors' wisdom that we should respect, even if we have to view and understand it rationally and intellectually. 'Siyem' and 'Rajah' are political titles, but the siyem family has a clan name as any other clan. That is not part of this article to deliberate, but let it be a suggestion to young scholars to find out what clan name the existing family members of the erstwhile Jaintia Raja maintain today in the plains of Jaintiapur. The clan name of the siyems of hima Shyllong is quite obvious.

Unlike the siyems of hima Shyllong who had severed connection with the non-Khasi community of its ancestress and became fully integrated with the Khasi society, the siyems of hima Sutnga maintained connection with the non-Khasi community of their ancestress who perhaps belonged to the Hindu royal family of the previous Jaintia kingdom in the plains. When the siyems of hima Sutnga were able to integrate the hills and the plains into one kingdom, the whole territory became the Jaintia kingdom with the capital at Jaintiapur in the plains. The ruler became the Rajah with absolute power with regards to the plains, but remained the siyem with limited powers with regards to the Pnar and War people in the hills. That was how the name Jaintia was also applied to the Pnar and the War in the hills, though the name Jaintia simply refers to the headquarters of the Rajah in Jaintiapur.

Everyone living in Khasi Hills and in Jaintia Hill, has conscious knowledge and feeling of belonging to the same Tribe. Clan relations cut across all through the

present Khasi and Jaintia Hills. There are no genealogical sub-divisions, but only territorial and political identifications separating people living in the Khasi Hills and those living in Jaintia Hills. There are hundreds of pieces of evidence to prove this fact.

The British had contact with the people of Jynteeah (Jaintia) since 1774. From 1826 onwards, they had encounters with the people of hima Nongkhlaw, Sohra, and Shella, and called the inhabitants of the areas as 'Cosseyas' (Khasis). The British later realized that the people in the Khasi Hills and people in the Jaintia Hills belong to the same tribe, and so they described the Jaintia kingdom as "being one of the most considerable of the Cosseya States." But the Pnar in Jaintia Hills called the inhabitants of other Khasi himas lying in the west, as 'Khyrim'. The inhabitants of the Ri Bhoi area, called the inhabitants of the Shillong plateau as 'Nongkhasi', and the people of the present Jaintia hills, as 'Pnar' or 'Syntiang'. On the other hand, the Mikirs (Karbis) who live in Ri Bhoi called the Khasis, 'Chumang', and not 'Khasi'.

Truly speaking, we do not know what is the original name of the Austro-asiatic-speaking people who migrated and settled in the present areas of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills. The question is whether the British had created the collective name 'Khasi' for the people living in both the Khasi and Jaintia Hills. That is possible since the British perceived the Jaintia kingdom as 'one of the Cosseya States'. The colonial rulers combined the hill portion of the Jaintia kingdom with other Khasi States under one administrative unit called the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, under the Political Agent of the Government. The rulers together with the missionaries created the Khasi alphabets and established the Sohra dialect as the common written and spoken language for the whole Khasi and Jaintia Hills. So, we have the common name 'Khasi' for the whole tribe, and the Sohra dialect as the 'Khasi language'.

So far, the name and the language had been instrumental for establishing the unity of the tribe. If 'ki parakur ki parakha' (kith and kin) living in Jaintia Hills today accept these new instruments of unity, then we have no problem. But if they are unhappy with it, then there is a problem. Presently, in all official documents of the government, and writings of the academics, the name 'Jaintia' is mentioned

as one of the three major tribes of Meghalaya, which is factually false. Moreover, the establishment of the Jaintia Hills Autonomous District Council legally implies that there is a tribe called the 'Jaintia, which is also false. There from, arose the problem.

In the past, when human societies naturally evolved and developed through dynamic migrations and social change, and when the social narrative is carried forward through oral traditions, there was little problem of human integration. People who migrated from one place to the other, naturally identified themselves with their new place of habitation. But from the advent of British rule when the social narrative began to be recorded and transmitted through written form, the cultural dynamics became frozen. As oral traditions are alive and self-editing, people who migrated from hima Jaintia to hima Nongkhlaw before British rule became 'Khyrim' after twenty to thirty years. But as written narratives are frozen and dead, people who migrated from Jaintia Hills or from Ri Bhoi to Shillong during the British rule, failed to be identified as Khyrim after a hundred years of colonial rule, and even till today, seventy-five years after Independence. That is the freezing effect of written narratives!

As Kong Patricia Mukhim pointed out in her article (ST, 26/1/2024), discussions and debates are still important in Khasi society today. It would be most convenient, and conducive to the unity of the tribe if we all accept the common name 'Khasi', and the Sohra dialect as the Khasi written language. Argument against this is only a matter of sentiment. But sentiment is also very important if it is really a collective sentiment of a large section of people, and not merely a personal academic interest of the few.

The name, 'Hynniewtrep' in the Khasi origin myth applies to the whole human race, not only to the Khasis. Elders differentiated between the concepts of 'u khunbynriew' which means the human race, and 'ka jaidbynriew' which means a particular race or tribe. The Seven Huts myth always refers to 'u khunbynriew', and not to 'ka jaidbynriew'. So, the Seven Huts were conceived of as the forefathers of the human race, and not only of the Khasis. However, if the name 'Khasi' is not acceptable to the collective sentiment of the whole population of Jaintia Hills, then the name 'Hynniewtrep' would be the only alternative, as it refers to the people of a tribe who believe in the Hynniewtrep origin story. The debate is still open...

Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

Six Billion Missing Spectacles...!

On silver sands on a beachfront a pair of spectacles looked myopically at the sea. They belonged to me. I discovered they were missing only after reaching home. Couldn't find my spare pair either. I could do everything but read. The morning papers arrived the next day:

"Don't strain your eyes!" said my wife. I did and smiled, how different was the news.

"Awesome!" I shouted as I read the headlines, "Israel and the Palestinians are going to sit and work things out!"

A little further I read how North Korea had decided to send their president to South Korea for talks. "Why are they sending Kim to South Korea?" I pondered aloud.

"Maybe to sit with his counterpart and have talks!"

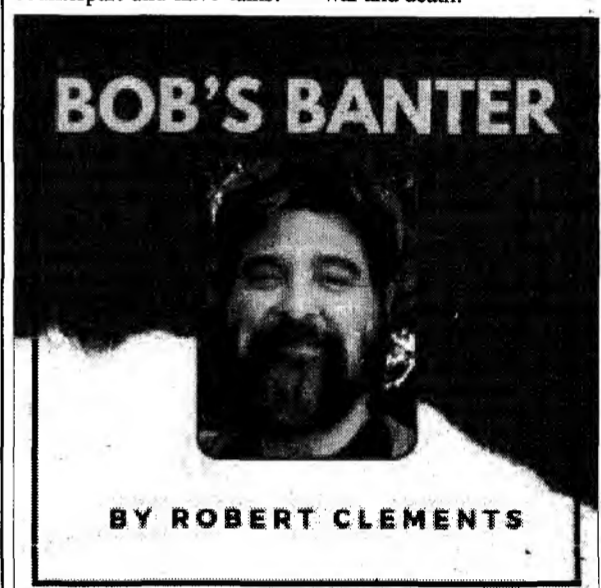
ful consecration of the Ram Mandir.

Tit for tat, right? But when the tit is done by an eighty percent majority, it could have been done in a wiser way.

The 'bulldozer retaliation technique' did not start in Uttar Pradesh but started in Israel, where the Israelis decided to teach the Palestinians a lesson; every time there was an attack by a Palestinian whether a suicide bombing or firing, bulldozers tore into the Palestinian neighbourhood and tore down buildings.

The Israelis were happy, and only now realise the war they are fighting is against those who resented such bullying, and who are now involving the whole world in their battle.

Yesterday's bulldozers, today's missiles, kidnappings, war and death!



said the wife.

"And so it is!" I cried, "Kim is being sent to have talks with South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol to work out issues and get things sorted out! This is fantastic!"

I held the newspaper closer to my eyes and eyeballs nearly fell out in sheer astonishment, "China is willing to talk to Taiwan!" I shouted, "They're willing to have peace talks with Taiwan and discuss the issue threadbare. This will herald peace in the region!" I shouted, waving the newspaper and jumping around the room.

"You better be careful, you're not wearing your spectacles!" said my wife, "I don't need broken limbs and a blind husband!"

"Who needs glasses!" I shouted jubilantly, "Peace is round the corner!"

I switched on the television, and watched the prime minister speaking about the constitution of the country, "He says it's the best constitution in the world, and there's no need to change a single word."

"He said that?" asked the wife.

"Yes," I said, "Even without my glasses I can see his lips saying those words! And he looks sincere without my glasses!"

I walked over to the window and looked out, "Hey," I cried, "Look at Mr Hussein walking along with Mr Talwar! I wonder where they're going?"

"Maybe to the friendship club!" said my wife with a yawn, "are you sure you're seeing right?"

"Never better!" I shouted, "The world is changing!"

The doorbell rang, "Sir," said a man smiling at the door, "we found these glasses at the beach!"

"Thank you!" I said and put them on, and quickly looked at the newspaper, "Putin bombs Ukraine!"

I ran to the TV, the news-caster had tears as she showed bodies piling up in Palestine and one of the bodies of an Israeli who was kidnapped. I stared at the newspaper again, "Bulldozers raze shops in Mumbai!" read the headlines. I threw the glasses on the floor, then picked them up wearily. "Why didn't you leave my glasses where you found them?" I cried as reality hit me hard! And then read the news about the bulldozers: A procession by a majority community into a minority neighbourhood, stone pelting by foolish residents, and the next day bulldozer retaliation by authorities, demolishing shops on the same street with the excuse of encroachments, spoiled the otherwise peace-

Such retaliation techniques send out a wrong message.

From childhood I have been fascinated by history books revealing the story of King Ram of Ayodhya, but what I loved most was the kind of ruler he was, an archetype of the Maryada Purushotam, the perfect follower of rules, honour and traditions. Much of India's fascination for him and that of the world, stems from their faith in him as the ideal ruler. What does that mean? Ram represents the kind of ruler who puts his people and his nation above everything else.

Which is why, we as a nation, from the day we installed a temple to Ram, need to show the world what it means.

The world, war-torn and weary, is watching us. And if we want to make Ayodhya the capital of what Ram embodied, we need to start practising it right away. Bulldozer retaliation techniques, sloganeering to incite, and other harmful methods, though exciting and uplifting for the majority community, doesn't serve the Ram Rajya purpose.

Modi's speech, during the inauguration of the Mandir was tempered well, and came close to what Ram brought about as a ruler. Not our beliefs in Hinduism, nor Christianity, nor Mohammedanism, Sikhism or any 'ism' should stand in the way of our 'desh sarvopari' or the nation above all else. That is what a Ram Rajya is all about, which will lift our country into what Ram created and is revered forever for doing so.

This message is not just for the authorities in Mira-Bhayandar, a suburb of Mumbai who used bulldozers to teach a lesson, but for all of us who belong to this beautiful land, whatever religion we follow, that we need to stop giving a wrong message, because a war-torn, weary world is searching for the right one!

Wearily I turn to my nation and say, "Take off these glasses that you are wearing! Spectacles that have made you blind as you don't notice atrocities around us, and all over the world. Throw those glasses away, and suddenly we will see... South Korea and North Korea talking, Putin going home to Russia, and the law being used and not bulldozers.

I dreamt that on a beach somewhere in the world, six billion spectacles lay lost and the world got back its sight and sanity...!

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

Letters to the Editor

Don't misrepresent!

Editor,
Of late some writers have mentioned Khyrim, Pnar, Bhoi, War, Maram, Lynggam and Diko as the sub tribes of Hynniewtrep race. While some writers mentioned that Diko is a lost/extinct subtribe, let me correct this misinformation/misrepresentation. The Khasis earlier treated the Lynggam as non Khasi- Jaintia tribe. Renowned first historian among the Khasis Hamlet Bareth considered them as a Garo tribe which "have embraced Khasi customs". (Hamlet Bareth: History and Culture of Khasi people, p 10). Lynggam is the name given to them by the Khasi, though they call themselves Lynggam (a Jaintia word meaning "lonely"). The Garo name for the Lynggam is Megam who in turn term the Garos as Diko.

Inclusion of Diko as a subtribe of Hynniewtrep is a misnomer. Bah Karlan Lanrin in his article published in Mawphor (2015) stated that, "Ia ka ktien kynnoh U Lynggam U Dyko bad kiwei kiwei dei ban pynkyllo noh".

The Jaintia version, U

Khyrim, Pnar, Bhoi, War, Mynri, Yinthong and Hadem are the subtribes of U Niaw Wasa or Hynniewtrep.

Yours etc.,
Dr. Omarlin Kyndiah,
Via email

Shillong a true Rocking city

Editor,
Shillong is acclaimed as the "rock capital" of India. Our people's love for music, especially rock music, is no secret at all. We have seen international rock bands gracing this city in the past few years. These groups ranged from Mr. Big, Sepultura, MLTR, Scorpions, Smokie, Whitesnake to the recent Ne Yo, Pink Panda, Ronan Keating and Indian rock groups like Sanam etc. But metaphorically, our city is truly a rock city for the reason that when we travel around the city, the passengers inside the vehicles do experience a physical rocking due to the bad condition of the roads.

A good humoured person one day commented, "I do not need to go for massaging because travelling on our city's roads is already a complete massage." We may laugh at this, but the truth is

that it is a matter of shame for our city. These days, we can witness and experience the horrible condition of the roads, be it the New Colony road, or the Polo road, the Mawpat road or the Law-Sib road and worse still the Goraline or MES road. I have not gone to other parts of the city but I guess they must be in similar conditions. Travelling through these roads, one witnesses potholes galore; some of them so deep that they can damage vehicles. Often, I have seen accidents take place because every vehicle is trying to dodge these potholes.

Do we have to wait for another G20 meeting or perhaps we need to invite the Prime Minister to make a round of our city, so that good roads may appear. It is a matter of great shame that our governments past and present, have never been able to provide the four basic amenities for the citizens, namely, good roads, cheap and regular electricity supply, running water at home and good health care. Let us hope that the public money is not squandered uselessly on petty things but instead be put to use in order to improve public amenities.

Yours etc.,
Barnes Mawrie sdb
Via email

Will we see a Black Swan event in 2024?

Editor,
The editorial "Kursi Kumar" (ST January 29, 2023) made interesting reading. The Black Swan event in 2014 brought BJP to power and Narendra Modi propelled it to secure 303 seats in 2019. One may feel that the good times never end but given the nature of the Black Swan (a high-impact event that is difficult to predict under normal circumstances) one should try to identify threats but never forget to prepare for the unexpected because the next Black Swan event will probably take us by surprise! Now that Nitish Kumar has dumped the Mahagathbandhan government in Bihar, the opposition alliance is left with the DMK in Tamil Nadu, Shiv Sena (Uddhav Thackeray faction) in Maharashtra, CPM in Kerala, RJD in Bihar and SP in Uttar Pradesh. The Times of India appropriately termed Nitish Kumar's action as, "Sultan of swing strikes again." After the Bihar and Bengal debacle, the Congress and its allies in the

opposition bloc are left with fewer options when it comes to counting a vote bank that is solely theirs. The scenario changes rapidly as India approaches the all-important general elections in April-May 2024.

Yours etc.,
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

Outdated Criteria

Editor,
Recently, the MPSC called an advertisement for the post of Junior Grade Meghalaya Finance Services Officer with the eligibility criteria - Graduate in Commerce, Arts and Science with Commerce, Economics or Mathematics as one of the subjects. The nature of duties for the post is to work as Finance & Accounts Officers in various heads of departments of the state, as Treasury Officers in the various Treasury offices of the state Government and further up in the career ladder they also serve as Financial Advisers to the various departments of the State Government. At present age, when there are plenty of professional courses being offered and

pursued at the degree level by the youths of the state, it is not justified to accept applications only from B.Com, B.Sc or BA graduates as there are other professional courses which have Mathematics or Economics or Financial Accounting in their curriculum.

Further one also finds that the system for accepting the applications is faulty since a BSc graduate not having Mathematics or Economics or Commerce is provisionally allowed to apply even if the applicant does not have the mentioned subjects as prescribed. The Finance department which is the controlling authority of the Meghalaya Finance Services should look into this matter so that other candidates completing their degrees with other disciplines while also studying one of the subjects prescribed, are also given a chance to apply for the post and serve the State as Finance Services officers.

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