

"Justice is the sum of all moral duty."

— William Godwin

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No.106 SHILLONG, TUESDAY, DECEMBER 1, 2020

Farmers' protest & NDA response

THE farmers' protest entered the fifth day on Monday even while the protesters threatened to block all five entry points to the national capital. Commuters have been put to great inconvenience but the farmers too have reached the end of their tether. The Central Government has said that it will talk to the farmers only if they move to the Burari ground but farmers are adamant that they will not accept any conditionality to the talks. The protesters had a meeting on Monday evening to discuss their next course of action.

What's angering the farmers is the Prime Minister's unwillingness to listen to their point of view. Instead, the Prime Minister is trying to explain the 'benefits' of the Farmer's Act. The farmers feel slighted that the PM who is no farmer is explaining to them about an Act they consider adversarial to their cause. Interestingly, the farmers had given a 60 day notice saying they would proceed to Delhi if the NDA Government does not listen to their grievance and only when their pleas fell on deaf ears did they march to Delhi.

Home Minister Amit Shah has offered to hold talks with the farmers on December 3 but only if they move to the Burari Grounds and do not obstruct the highways to Delhi. It is difficult to understand why December 3 has been scheduled for talks when a crisis is brewing. On Monday a meeting of over 30 farmer groups was held to discuss Amit Shah's offer for talks. However the thousands of protesters had refused to budge and spent another night in the cold at the Singhu and Tikri border points. Their representatives had said that Amit Shah's condition that they shift the protest is not acceptable and claimed Burari ground is an "open jail".

Over the last five days, thousands of farmers, braving water cannons, tear gas and barricades of the Haryana police, have reached the borders of Delhi. While some of them have managed to enter the city, the rest are sitting at the border areas, saying they are ready to do what it takes to see the end of the three farm laws passed by parliament earlier this year. The farmers' protest has affected supply of vegetables to Delhi and other states leading to rise in prices.

What is of greater concern is that the country is in the midst of the Covid pandemic and farmers are without masks and also exposed to the cold. This could lead to serious consequences. It remains to be seen if the NDA Government is willing to roll back the Act or will stick to its guns. Who will win this battle of nerves will be revealed post December 3 but in the meantime the NDA seems to be on the back foot.

TO THE EDITOR

Press reporters as ping-pong

Editor,
As an ardent reader of your esteemed daily, I find some of your reports highly confusing. Take for instance, the opposition allegation that the state is going to lose Rs 100 crore for certain alleged manipulations in the Power Department. The allegation was made by the Opposition both in the media and on the floor of the Assembly and quite expectedly the ruling side flatly denied them. Subsequently, the Leader of the Opposition renewed his allegations in the media which was once again vehemently denied by the Chief Minister Conrad Sangma. This is intriguing to me. I wonder on which side lies the truth. These allegations are serious not just because the amount is huge for a small cash-starved state like ours but because the charges are specific in some respects. According to your report appearing on November 28 under the heading "Manipulation in Power projects costs state Rs 100 crore," it appears that something fishy is going on in the Power Department. The very next day, your paper carried the rejoinder issued

by the Chief Minister under the caption "No manipulations in Power projects, says Conrad". Such flip-flop reports are causing more confusion and do not help in removing the air of suspicion. Of the two - Conrad Sangma and Mukul Sangma one is speaking the truth. The question is which one?

As an independent minded citizen, I wonder why Dr Mukul Sangma, if he was so sure of his facts, did not take legal course by filing FIR or moving the court of law. He has reeled out some statistics of over-charging of electrical equipment. His charges in this respect are specific. Why he can't adopt a different tactic to take the matter to its logical end is beyond me. Is he not sure of his facts? Is he shooting in the dark? Or is he scared that some of his own omissions and commissions would come under focus?

The other striking feature of this battle of attrition between the two leaders is that the chief minister while flatly denying the charges has clearly launched a counter-offensive against his bete noire. Conrad Sangma has cleverly tried to pay Mukul Sangma back in his own coin when he brought up the prostitution scam in a

A surge in population over the years is impacting a healthy and equitable structure for all citizens. While healthcare has been an area of grave concern as its reach hasn't kept pace with demand, another sector is the judiciary, where inadequate infrastructure has led to litigations remaining pending for years together. Moreover, it is compounded by the fact that with inter-personal and inter-societal relations getting complicated the individual has lost his cooperative spirit to live in peace and harmony, leading to a spurt in legal cases.

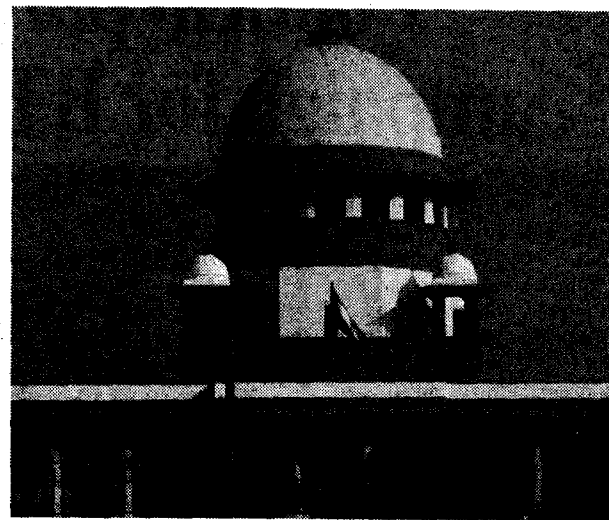
It is often said, and perhaps rightly so, that the rich and the powerful have, over the decades, been getting the benefits of the judicial system. Obviously, they have the wherewithal to engage lawyers and run the case for years together. People from low income groups, including EWS, neither have the financial strength nor the time to fight a case even when injustice is being done against him and his family.

Additionally, the top judiciary lately has been seen to be courting controversy. Recall the Supreme Court issuing a contempt notice against activist and lawyer Prashant Bhushan over a tweet about the Chief Justice of India. It said: "We are, prima facie, of the view that the aforesaid statements on Twitter have brought the administration of justice in disrepute and are capable of undermining the dignity and authority of the Institution of the Supreme Court in general and the office of the CJI in particular in the eyes of the public at large." With Bhushan refusing to apologise, the court imposed a token fine of Rs 1 and said if he failed to do so, he would have to undergo three months' prison sentence and would be debarred from legal practice for three years. Importantly, the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ), an international NGO that defends human rights and rule of law worldwide, considered Bhushan's conviction for contempt to be inconsistent with international standards on freedom of expression and role of lawyers. It had stated that the conviction has a chilling effect on the exercise of protected freedom of expression in India and thus, urged a review of the laws and standards on criminal

contempt as applied by Indian courts.

Also recently, social media went viral and raised questions on Supreme Court's urgent hearing of Arnab Goswami, Editor-in-Chief, Republic TV's petition. As is well known, the TV channel has been blatantly supporting Government policies and programmes and has recently trained his guns against the Maharashtra government under Uddhav Thackeray, whose police had arrested him in an old suicide case.

It promoted President, Supreme Court Bar Association Dushyant Dave to write



a letter to the court's Secretary-General protesting against this urgent hearing. He wrote against "selective listing" of matters by the Registry and even called it a "gross abuse of administrative power". "The serious issue here is selective listing of matters that the registry under your leadership is indulging in for last eight months during COVID pandemic. While thousands of citizens remain in jails, languishing for long periods while their matters filed before the Supreme Court are not getting listed for weeks and months, it is, to say the least, deeply disturbing as to how and why every time Goswami approaches the Supreme Court, his matter gets listed instantly."

Indeed, it is an unfortunate reality that there are thousands of poor and destitute undertrials, without heavyweight lawyers or influential supporters, who continue to languish in prison for years, without getting heard. As per available data, there are more examples of such cases listed urgently in the apex court

Judicial System

Overhaul credibility, strength

By Dhurjati Mukherjee

during the lockdown. Moreover, there are 4098 bail applications pending in the Bombay high court and 37,245 such applications in eight major High Courts combined (as on June end, 2019). The institutional problem remains unaddressed but delays in the case of political prisoners are only its most visible symptoms.

The question that arises is obviously the need to provide equal justice to all quickly and fairly. This is the basic reform needed for the judiciary and therefore it's urgent for more judges to be appointed, at least in the High Courts and the Su-

premise Court. It goes without saying that keeping the country's judicial heritage in mind, the personal liberty of the wrongly incarcerated needs to be given uppermost importance. How can we accept the fact that we have a system that makes it acceptable for those who hold views unpalatable to the government to be arrested without reason and evidence?

Over the years, it is an accepted fact that not just the poor but even the middle class may not be able to find justice from the judiciary. The expansion of the judiciary has not taken place to the extent necessary and obviously that has resulted in piling up cases in high courts, district courts, sessions courts, etc.

Another important aspect which has been a cause of serious concern is the alleged dwindling lack of independence of the judiciary over the years. There is a growing worry that right from the grass-root level, the will to improve the system is lacking thus impacting, what activists would term neutral

and judicious verdicts. However, this is not to undermine some very valuable verdicts of the Supreme Court as also some High Courts specially relating to social, environmental and other related issues. The coveted place where the judicial system used to stand has changed mainly due to lack of promptness in disposal of cases. Obviously the situation would not have been so if there had been adequate judicial officers and sub-divisional magistrates at the lower level and the poorer sections got prompt justice, say at least within a year or so. Apart from the Centre, which unfortunately has not made this top priority, the States are equally responsible in ignoring the judiciary. In such a situation, there is need for action and just highlighting the pendency of cases will not solve the matter. All States should be asked to expand the judicial system by at least 10 per cent within a year. To start with, all vacancies need to be filled on a war footing within a time frame of six months. There has also been a good proposal through a PIL recently in the apex court, seeking re-employment of retired judges in SC and High Courts to fill the large number of vacancies and speed up justice delivery on basis of Articles 128 and 224A of the Constitution.

Even the Attorney General of India, has stated that the Courts of Appeal (CoA) must be set up in four regions of the country to adjudicate appeals against High Court verdicts to provide citizens better access to justice and ease the enormous case burden on the Supreme Court to make it the truly constitutional court, as envisaged by the Constitution framers. He even proposed that each CoA should have around 15 judges who should fulfil the same legitimacy criteria of SC judges. Whether the Centre does it or not, the demand for setting up an independent commission not by the government but by the Chief Justice of India regarding the pendency of cases as also how the poor can approach and get justice within a specific time frame must grow louder. It's time for people and the civil society to stand up for their rights to be protected by this branch of the system. —JNFA

Corruption: Only industry that flourished during Covid India tops list of Asia's most corrupt nations

By K Raveendran

It does not matter if Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman and the mandarins in North Block agree or not, it is official that India is in recession. Data released by the National Statistical Office revealed that India's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) contracted 7.5 per cent in the July-September period, a major contraction for the second consecutive quarter, which makes it a recession technically and otherwise. The conclusion is only confirmation as the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) had earlier estimated that the economy will contract by 9.5 per cent for the full fiscal year.

But there is one Indian industry that has flourished—even in the height of Covid pandemic and the national lockdown, which devastated the entire economy. And that is corruption.

is that young people aged 18 to 34 are considerably more likely than people aged 55 or over to pay a bribe or use personal connections to get their things done. This shows that the new generation is getting sucked into the black hole of corruption, leaving no scope for hope even in the future.

Corruption is a cancer that is eating into the vitals of the Indian nation and people are paying a heavy price in terms of a huge opportunity loss and the fruits of freedom that have been denied to them for ever. Policy planners would do well to take a serious look at our ability to deal with this dangerous affliction, which is much worse than coronavirus or anything similar.

It is not bullet trains or Martian missions that the country needs right now, it is basic solutions to the vices that are retarding our



More interestingly, it turns out that corruption as an industry has an inversely proportional relationship with economic progress. As such, when the economy does badly, corruption increases.

This is what bears out in the findings of the latest report of Transparency International for Asia, named Global Corruption Barometer Asia 2020. The conclusions were based on a survey conducted between June and September this year, when the impact of the lockdown was perhaps at the peak. The survey covered 20,000 participants.

The results showed that India has the highest bribery rate of 39 per cent in the region. Nearly one in five citizens -- 19 per cent -- who came into contact with the police, identity papers and document offices or utilities, used their personal connections to receive a service.

The report identified slow and complicated bureaucratic process, unnecessary red tape and unclear regulatory frameworks as the primary reasons forcing citizens to seek out alternate solutions to access basic services through networks of familiarity and petty corruption. Nearly a quarter of respondents said they had no option but to pay bribe as it was demanded.

There are a few highly disturbing findings in the survey, which showed how deeply entrenched this great bane is into the Indian society. A majority -- 63 per cent -- thought that if they reported corruption, they would suffer retaliation. Another equally disturbing finding

progress as a nation. Technology is a great asset, but it becomes meaningful only when it can transform the lives of common people. Otherwise, it will remain the preserve of the privileged few, leaving only the crumbs for people at large.

It may be time for the revival of a national movement against corruption, an instance of which went awry in the previous decade. Anti-corruption crusader Anna Hazare's agitation that began in 2011 was a watershed event in contemporary history as it provided a channel for people's frustration to find expression. The response to Anna's call had gone much beyond his own expectations and the single event snowballed into a national movement against corruption, nepotism and government apathy towards people's grievances. It was as though all the pent-up frustrations were waiting for a vent and Anna's agitation provided an ideal opportunity. The biggest irony of the agitation is that the BJP, the biggest beneficiary of the agitation, helping it to be swept power in 2014, and now for a second term, has turned the perpetrator that it was supposed to fight. The NDA's priorities are on a tangent and meant to drive the saffron agenda, but without any bearing on the life of common people. National security and patriotism are no doubt emotional issues, but when life becomes miserable to lead, there are other more important things. And the BJP government has been a complete failure on this front. (IPA Service)

Covid Vaccine

Editor,
When one raises any question about this pandemic, one tends to get deluged by a vast sea of facts and figures, mostly of rising number of cases and deaths. The fact that this disease has a recovery rate of about 95 % in India tends to get overlooked if noticed at all. Now a number of questions again assail me. Is a vaccine necessary for any disease with this high a recovery rate? Are these hastily assembled vaccines safe? A lot of rumours abound of severe reactions having been seen in the early volunteers. Is there any truth in this? Why are the trials for these vaccines being carried out in third world countries such as India? Are we the Guinea pigs?

According to a report published in the Lockdown Sceptics, and reproduced by Prashasthi Awasthi in The Hindu Business line on Nov 28, Michael Yeadon, the former vice president and chief scientist of Pfizer claims that the Covid pandemic is effectively over and there's no need for a vaccine. He goes on to add that you do not vaccinate people who aren't at risk.

Yours etc.,
Jonathan C,
Via email

You also do not set about vaccinating millions of fit and healthy people with a vaccine that hasn't been extensively tested on human subjects.

So can we conclude that this fear of a second wave is being created to fuel sales of vaccines by vaccine manufacturers to force people to go for a vaccine -- a thing they might not ordinarily do. The greatest tragedy will only be if governments the world over make vaccination for Covid compulsory. This would simply gobble up scarce resources and reduce spending on preventive care and other more pressing health issues

Yours etc.,
Dr. Tridib Kakoty
Veterinary surgeon
Shillong

Business persons not against ILP

Editor,
It is saddening that whenever there are any grievances against the Government, we the business community are targeted for no fault of ours. Take the example of December last year when shops and business persons were attacked without any reason, and again this year too there are a few incidents. To be honest we have no interest in Government affairs and re-

quest all concerned to ignore us as we just want to do business in peace and are not concerned with matters like ILP, so stop targeting us. Further we request the Deputy Commissioner (DC) to inform us of the list of genuine NGOs as every year people come to ask donation, some even threatening us. We are not against giving donations for a good cause but that should go to genuine organizations. So will the DC instruct every organisation to take permission and get an NOC from the Headman of every locality. Also, no one should be forced to pay. I further request the Government and MLAs to provide us security. We voted for you for a reason, so please fulfill your responsibility.

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request,
Via email

If I were a painter

Editor,
If I were an artist, I would take the ILR (Inner Line Regulation) as my canvas in which the background is Section 7 and all other Sections to fill-in the rest of the canvas wherever appropriate without spoiling it.

Yours etc.,
Morning Star Sumer
Shillong - 2

"In any merger, when you have large organisations coming together, there will be challenges in terms of culture."

—Ajay Piramal

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No.107 SHILLONG, WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 2, 2020

Controlled covid curbs

STARTING this month, a new set of Covid-19 guidelines is in place. Home Ministry directives make it clear that restrictions can be imposed by local authorities in their jurisdictions, depending on the emerging situations. Situations differ from region to region and from city to city. This is the right way forward to limit the spread and allow economic and social activities to carry on in a guarded manner across the country.

A wholesale imposition of curbs in the forms of lockdown and shutdown has proven to be disastrous at the very start, since March end this year. There was little understanding as to how the pandemic would behave at that time. Now, the world is more enlightened as to how a balance is drawn between checking the virus spread and keeping economic activities in good shape. This is no time for a blame-game as to what went wrong; this is time to collectively push for an early exit from the scourge of this Chinese-inspired virus.

Curfew can be imposed where need be; as in Ahmedabad in the post-Diwali days, and in Punjab as well. Less-affected areas can still feel free. The curbs are being progressively eased in the past few months after the hard-edged approach in the initial months. Borders can no more be sealed, as the new advisory stresses, and inter-state movement need not be curtailed. This is important to push the engines of growth. Train services must eventually return to normal; so should air traffic. Schools need to return to normal classes but priority is on the health of the kids. Swimming pools etc., can wait for the situations to ease as they are not an essential part of daily life. Health is more important. In fact, the new guidelines have allowed all normal activities in areas other than containment zones.

The pharma firms involved in the production of vaccines are seriously taking matters forward. A legal challenge has come from one volunteer, which was only to be expected. Yet, it needs be ascertained whether the safety of individuals taking vaccines would be compromised. A cent per cent guarantee is out of question. The visit by Prime Minister Narendra Modi to three pharma firms a few days ago shows the government is raising its state of preparedness vis-à-vis storage, distribution and jabs.

India's active Covid Positive cases now stand at 4,35,000 plus cases. The national capital reported a 30-plus per cent rise in Covid-positive cases in November alone, while the fatalities rose by 29 per cent. This shows the gravity of the present situation.

Traditional industrial houses ill-prepared for the task

Raghuram Rajan has valid points in opposing corporates in banks

By Anjan Roy

All of a sudden, a recommendation of an internal working group of the Reserve Bank of India has raised a storm of controversy. The working group has suggested allowing India's corporate houses to float commercial banks.

When you mention corporate houses it conjures up an idea of big business groups having a chain of companies manufacturing from the so-called safety pins, to steel, to motor cars, to textiles with sundry other businesses thrown in into a maze of inter-connected entities. But basically these were industrial units, which had pre-empted licences for manufacturing a host of items in the licence-permit Raj days.

Ironically enough, I remembered a recent conversation at an embassy reception in the capital when a diplomat from western Europe recounted to me his frustration around buying a garden umbrella. He told me, "try it out, you will not get an Indian made garden umbrella in any of the markets".

Why garden umbrella, think of daily necessities, can you get an Indian-made stuff even if you want. Electrical gadgets are almost universally being imported from China and labelled with names of Indian companies. You get Bajaj fans made in China, electric kettles made in China labelled with some other Indian brand name, toasters, irons, mixers, kitchen chimneys, name it.

Unilever makes all the soaps and toiletry items. Sony makes our TV sets, Suzuki, Honda, Hyundai, Morris Garage (which has been bought over by China recently), Toyota make the most number of cars for us. Gillette makes shaving razors. Air conditioners are made by LG, Samsung, National Panasonic, Daikin, Carrier and only occasionally a Voltas or Blue Star.

Mr Kamal Nath is busy politicking, rather than running his family concern EMC, which used to manufacture transmission towers. The first question is where are the Indian industrial or large corporate houses, excepting one or maybe two. And everyone knows which is at least the one exception!

Hardly, any of the so-called old houses which were big names in say, 1950 to 1980, are any longer really big ones. They have either shrunk in size and influence, if not altogether withered away. Do you readily remember the Birlas, the

Modis, DCM, Bajaj's, Wadias, Singhanias, Poddars, Jalans, and so forth of yesterdays. Those which have managed to stay afloat are no longer among, say, the top twenty large houses in the country. Their places have been usurped by others, mostly in the technology sector. This is symptomatic of the changing nature of present day global

porate narrative today. The industrial houses have split and got splintered, not having too much money to splurge. Many of the big names would not even have the initial money to cough up for starting a big bank. As for political influence, most of them do not have any. Long drawn out family squabbles and partitions have drained them of their

phases on "Make in India". Their energies might not be useful in promoting new banks.

But that does not mean that the Indian corporate houses should not be useful in promoting banks. In fact, fresh corporate involvement would be retraining what was there previously before nationalisation. Tatas used to own and control Central Bank of India and Birlas were owners of United Commercial Bank.

In their heydays, these banks were not sound institutions, not weaklings that most of the public sector banks are today. Despite being art of corporate houses, their loan portfolios were not as much influenced by political dictates as by pure commercial concerns. If there were occasional black sheep in banks, these were confined to the smaller ones.

The issue is one of ring-fencing. How are banking operations of large corporates isolated from their other operations if corporates are allowed in. Corporate banks have to be protected from the other operations of their promoters as much as the public sector banks are to be protected from the politicians of the ruling party.

Who would not know how the rot in directed lending begun under the stewardship of Janardhana Poojary, then a deputy minister of finance, who started the "loan melas". Board members of public sector banks were invariably from political parties and they directed banks to lend money to the select contacts.

V.P. Singh, was the most forceful advocate of loan waiver immediately after he left as finance minister in Rajiv Gandhi government. I have seen myself how Chairmen of the largest banks were summoned to banking division office on Parliament Street and made to sit for hours to meet joint secretaries. In a scenario like this if we get an application from Mr Narayannurthy of Infosys for starting a full scale bank or the chairman of TCS to utilise their massive spare reserves to fund a new bank, could that be a precursor to an altogether financial disaster in train.

Raghuram Rajan has raised huge questions around the Reserve Bank's recommendations and has sent a powerful salvo against the proposal from his citadel in Chicago. The issue is complex and needs a thorough discussion. (IPA Service)



economy. In the USA, Ford Motor Company, General Motors, or even iconic GE, are any longer the big corporates. Their market capitalisation pales in comparison with Google, Facebook, Amazon and rest of their ilk. In India, Flipkart had commanded a huge pre-

resources. Individual wings are no longer that important and influential.

The sad thing is India's industrial houses are on a path to extinction. Manufacturing in India as such is weaving a withering pattern. India's manufacturing sector is being replaced by Indian subsidiaries of multinational

"The sad thing is India's industrial houses are on a path to extinction. Manufacturing in India as such is weaving a withering pattern. India's manufacturing sector is being replaced by Indian subsidiaries of multinational corporations."

mium which soared far beyond any of the conventional groups. Infosys is a big name and of all the Tata Group companies, it is TCS which is in public gaze rather than TISCO which used to be the flagship. It is the upstarts of the start-up sector that dominate the cor-

porations. Surely, we do not mean to bring them into starting banks in India.

What is needed today is a revival plan for the corporate houses by encouraging them into big-time manufacturing. We have miserably failed to launch manufacturing in India, despite the em-

doned by any political party even if it is part of a coalition because ultimately it is the party that is answerable to the people and not individual MLAs/ministers.

Yours etc.,
Timothy Sawkmie,
Via email

Why this push for homogeneity?

Editor,
While a top profile Indian leader scandalously announces that "criminals can be identified by their dress," thereby demonising a large section of Indians who are as indigenous to India as the die-hard saffronites, Jacinda Ardern the New Zealand PM ensures promotion of a dress associated with people who are basically settlers in New Zealand. When sporting of hijab is being prohibited, discouraged or frowned upon by many non-Islamic countries around the world, New Zealand has proved itself as a bright exception in this regard. By its decision of inducting the hijab as part of police uniform, New Zealand has shown the world what the essence of

democracy is all about. In India there are attempts to kill diversity so as to establish a homogeneous way of life which is actually nothing but a crude desire of ensuring cultural dominance of the majority or "mainstream" through language race and religion. An ideal democracy strives to literally accord equal status to each and every linguistic religious cultural groups residing within the country respecting their ethos sentiments sensitivities attire to dietary habits. India, under the ever increasing grasp of forces practicing the parochial imperial philosophy of "Hindi, Hindu Hindustan" and all other believers of majoritarian mindset around the world should learn from New Zealand and Jacinda Ardern what respect towards diversity and sentiment of minorities is all about.

Yours etc.,
Kajal Chatterjee,
Via email

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

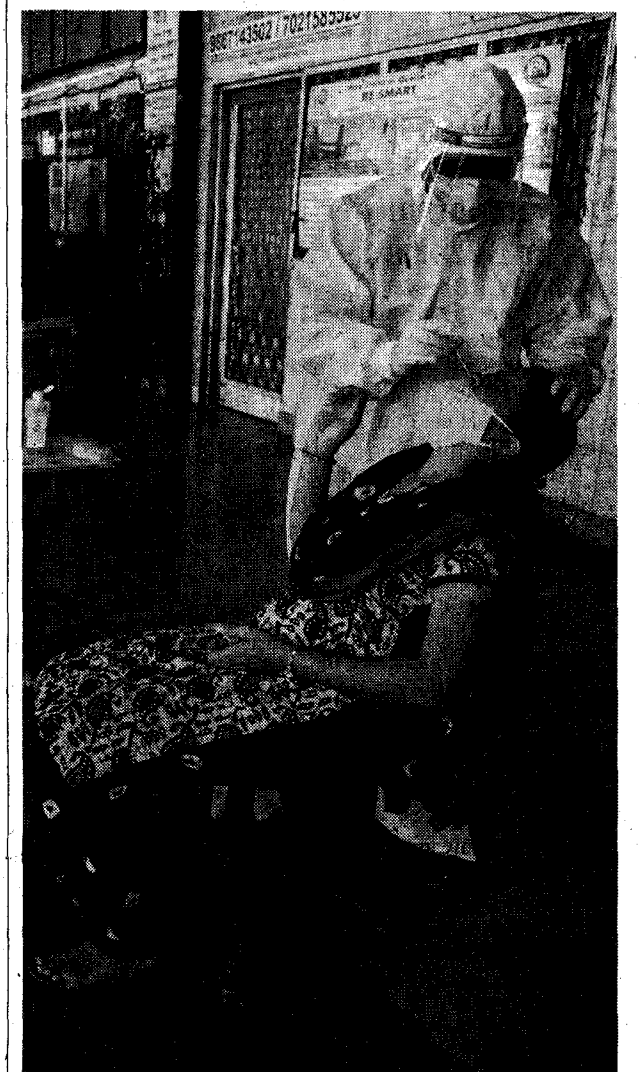
Government's apathy pushing more to Corona infection

By Dr. Arun Mitra

With the onset of winter there is surge in the COVID cases. Delhi is already getting nearly 8000 cases every day. Now the cases are rising in other parts of the country as well. This is time when government needs to be very cautious, sympathetic and in solidarity with the people so as to minimize the number of cases and prevent deaths by giving timely medical care. People should take preventive measures like washing hands sanitizing hands wearing masks, keeping physical distance and avoid going to crowded places. These are important because it is a highly contagious infection. The doctors have warned about it

no opposition member in the house. The MSMEs did not get any interest free loan. Instead of waiving off interest on previous loans, the government imposed interest on interest. On the other hand doles worth lakhs of crores of rupees have been showered to the corporate sector while the poor workers got only 5 kg of grain and 1 kg daal.

Feeling the pinch people have started organising themselves and speaking for their rights. Workers observed nationwide strike on 26th November against the labour laws and for end to privatisation. The farmers are protesting against the anti-farmer laws. But instead of listening to them or hold-



several times.

In one of his addresses to the nation the Prime Minister had said that we should convert the COVID crises into opportunities although he did not specify the opportunities at that time. There was a general feeling that by opportunities he meant that the government will take steps to mitigate sufferings of the people as a result of lockdown. Crores of people lost their jobs and livelihood

ing a dialogue with them the government is out to crush their movement. The farmers were stopped from going to Delhi at the Punjab Haryana border and Delhi border by putting big stones on the way, throwing water cannons and teargas shells and erecting barricades of concertina and razor wires as if they are enemy troops marching to our capital. This is the fate of farmers and workers whose sons are laying down their

"There was expectation that those who had walked hundreds of kilometers to reach home will be given substantial aid."

during the lockdown with many left at the mercy of social organisations for even single meal per day. There was expectation that those who had walked hundreds of kilometers to reach home will be given substantial aid. Several groups including trade unions had demanded Rs.7500/- to each non tax payer during this crisis. The farmers too had difficulty in selling their produce and expected government's aid. The micro small and medium entrepreneurs asked for interest free loans so as to compensate their loss. They also asked to waive off interest on previous loans.

But contrary to this the government converted the COVID crises into opportunity to change labour laws against the interest of workers, to bring laws to push farmers to the mercy of corporates and depriving them of minimum support price for their produce. These laws were passed in the Parliament without debate. The anti-farmer ordinances were passed in the parliament when there was

lives at the international borders defending sovereignty of the nation.

Obviously in such times of mass movements the preventive measures from Corona go haywire. This increases the risk of infection. It is the duty of the government to see that such situations do not arise. People's aspirations have to be met to avoid such movements and prevent the disease from surge. Banging of thalis, clapping or sounding shankhs or lighting diyas are gimmicks which can fool the people for a short period. It is wrong to expect from the people to observe preventive measures when leaders of the ruling party including the Prime Minister organise road shows defying all norms and forms of COVID disaster. Government should convert the crises into opportunity by enacting laws in favour of people, workers, employees and farmers if they are serious to prevent the surge in COVID-19. Otherwise the government's apathy will push people to Corona infection. (IPA Service)

TO THE EDITOR

SC's bail for Arnab Goswami!

Editor,
Arnab Goswami who was arrested by the Mumbai Police on November 4, last for having been accused in being an abettor in the suicide of a 53 year old interior designer, Anvay Naik and the latter's mother in 2018 as he was charged under Sections 306 and 34 of the Indian Penal Code. However, sooner than later, the Apex Court granted him bail in a record time of one week, that is, on November 11, last. This specific action of SC has unmistakably unleashed a flutter in social circles and a great deal of misgivings in the psyche of the conscientious citizens. Oddly, in the wake of Goswami's arrest a hue and cry was raised by the BJP members, not excluding prominent Union Ministers, as they opined that it was nothing sort of an attack on the press and free speech at that, but these social justice warriors are oblivious of the fact that many fellow-journalists, like Goswami, are still incarcerated and

awaiting the much desired bail. In a word, we have to be convinced that Goswami is one of the many journalists, very fortunate!

Notwithstanding the fact that Goswami was once a resident of Shillong, capital of Meghalaya, like me, but sadly I hold no brief for him anymore given that his Republic channel has virtually turned out to be a level playing field for those at the helm, thus defeating the very essence of true journalism and thereby bordering on the contours of yellow journalism. Hence I have long since abstained myself from being his avid listener from those days when he was with the Times Now news channel at the fag end of his association with the latter, when he had, perhaps unwittingly, exhibited telltale signs of being biased in anchoring political debates!

Yours etc.,
Jerome K. Diengdoh,
Via email

Political maturity

Editor,
The war of words between the UDP General

Secretary, Jemino Mawthoh and AL Hek of the BJP and the Health Minister was interesting. Hek is a seasoned politician and weighs his words carefully. He correctly stated that in politics there are no permanent friends or enemies. AL Hek had left the BJP when he felt that it made better sense to join the Congress then. Later he moved back to the BJP and that too was a calculated move since Hek knows that with the BJP in power at the Centre it made better sense for him to be with the winning side. Hek had also calculated that the Congress would not be returning to power in Meghalaya, what with the party in disarray at the national level. Politics is a game at best and all that gibberish about serving the people is secondary. Wise people work at getting re-elected and make very calculated moves towards that end. Hek has done that and also expanded his business because it's not possible to win elections if one has no money and does not own a business or several businesses. Name one politician in Meghalaya today who is also not doing business as a primary occupation and politics/governance as a secondary one.

Jemino Mawthoh served the people well and brought in development schemes in his constituency but that did not seem good enough for the people of his constituency. They did not give him a second tenure. He contested the Lok Sabha election and lost to the Congress candidate and sitting MP Vincent Pala. Then the MDA proposed his name for the Rajya Sabha seat but the NPP pushed its own nominee to the Upper House. It's as good as a betrayal by the NPP which should have consulted all partners before nominating its state president to the Rajya Sabha.

Now as General Secretary of the UDP, Mawthoh is placed in a peculiar situation where he has to defend all the allegations of corruption in the MDA Government of which his party is an ally. The UDP had to do something similar when it had aligned with the Congress to form the government in Meghalaya. That Mawthoh should tell the BJP to leave the coalition just because the Party was pointing out at corruption is an immature reaction. He would have been better off keeping quiet. Acts of corruption cannot be con-

doned by any political party even if it is part of a coalition because ultimately it is the party that is answerable to the people and not individual MLAs/ministers.

Yours etc.,
Timothy Sawkmie,
Via email

"Love, having no geography,
knows no boundaries."

— Truman Capote

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No.108 SHILLONG, THURSDAY, DECEMBER 3, 2020

The ILP imbroglio

THE Inner line Permit (ILP) continues to be a political hot potato. Last year around the same time there was a furore over this issue following the passage of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) by both houses of parliament and its immediate concurrence from the President of India. This led to a series of agitations as the Act was seen to be directed at depriving citizenship to Muslims including those that might not have valid papers for several reasons. In the North Eastern states particularly Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura which are already suffering the pain of influx from Bangladesh and earlier East Pakistan, the agitation took a different form. None of the states was going to accept any further resettlement of those with doubtful antecedents or 'D' voters as they are termed in Assam. The National Register of Citizens' process in Assam had already disenfranchised about 19 lakh people who were detained in makeshift camps and decrepit living circumstances. It was a human rights' violation but no one could be bothered because they were considered non-citizens.

In Meghalaya, the 60 MLAs were coerced by pressure groups that they had to pass a Resolution in the State Assembly to demand from the Centre the extension of the Inner Line Permit to the State. The MLAs complied and the Resolution was taken to the central government. The matter remains inconclusive and now the Khasi Students' Union (KSU) has threatened to arbitrarily implement its own brand of ILP. The question is whether the ILP will necessarily control influx when illegal migrants don't use the regulated entry points. The ILP will instead check all Indian citizens from other states and become a deterrent for any economic activities in a state that has almost no source of revenue generation and depends entirely on central government doles.

Much has been argued about the ILP not being a Berlin Wall or the Great Wall of China but that it is only a glass wall where those who have applied for e-permits would have to produce them at the entry points. But this argument does not hold water. Examples have also been cited that Sikkim with the Restricted Area Permit (RAP) still has many visitors and so have the other states with the ILP regime. But tourism cannot be the only revenue generating activity. Why do states like Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram not have any industries? Why do hordes of youth from Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram have to leave the state to find employment outside? Is this not because there are no job opportunities in these states? Tourism alone cannot feed all mouths. There is such a thing as ease of doing business which investors would look for. No investors would want to deal with an ILP regime. Hence the economy is the first casualty should the ILP be implemented in Meghalaya and the precarious situation will push more youth from here who are without godfathers, to look for jobs outside. It is unfortunate that an issue that has far reaching effects is sought to be implemented without a public debate. Meghalaya has enough protective mechanisms provided these are implemented in letter and spirit. Besides, an overdose of protectionism kills entrepreneurship. Therein lies the rub!

International day of people with disabilities

By Diana Chiu

The United Nations commemorates the annual International Day of People with Disability on the December 3, to encourage equal and full participation, as well as their inclusion in all facets of society. The present article highlights the need to address the concerns of people with mental disabilities who have been marginalized due to a lack of clarity about their plight. According to the WHO World Report on Disability, more than one billion people are living with disability, with an estimation of 450 million suffering from mental or neurological conditions and the dismal reality that about two-thirds are not accessing professional intervention due to neglect, stigma and discrimination. This may be attributed to the fact that disabilities due to mental ill-health such as neurological disorders, differences in learning, cognitive dysfunctions, fatigue, pain, emotional dysregulation are invisible. Therefore society has to remove barriers for all people living with disability, both visible and invisible while creating awareness about two Pandemics experienced globally - i.e., stigma towards mental stress and COVID-19.

There are many views about the factors that cause mental ill-health. These could be collectively described as biological, psychological and environmental factors. The Biological Factors explain the chemical imbalances of neurotransmitters in the brain that disrupt the person's normal cognitive functions and behavior. Heredity (Genetics) also plays a role whereby several mental illnesses run in the family, implying that people who have family members with a mental illness are more vulnerable to developing a mental illness. There are evidences which suggest that a disruption of early fetal brain development or trauma at the time of birth may explain conditions such as Autism Spectrum Disorder. Also, substance abuse may be associated with development of anxiety, depression, and paranoia. Research shows that poor nutrition, infections and exposure to toxins have also been known to play a role in the development of mental illnesses.

Psychological Factor affects the persons' well-being and mindfulness. Studies indicate that severe psychological trauma during childhood, such as physical, emotional or sexual abuse, experiences of significant

early loss, neglect and abandonment may lead to low self-esteem or feelings of inadequacy or relational stress.

Social or Environmental Factors such as dysfunctional family life, socio-economic poverty, social or cultural stress, family diseases and significant life changes (for example, changing jobs or school, losing one's job, divorce) can trigger the development of mental illness.

Detrimental effects of Mental Illness

People with disabilities can experience mental or physical impairments, and this has a long term effect on activities of daily living. Most often livelihood deficits create isolation and loneliness in their lives. Persons with disabilities are discriminated against and their dreams and ambitions are sidetracked because of society's assumptions about their ability or inability. The cost of managing their disability can also put a huge burden on their finances, especially among the poorer sections of society. For example someone with a learning disability could experience low self-esteem because of their inability to perform as well as their classmates, often resulting in depression, anxiety, substance abuse and aggression. It is important for people to be aware that people with disabilities can also be suffering psychologically, and that they can always seek professional help.

Stigma & Discrimination in Society

Cultural superstitions due to ignorance and negative social beliefs prevent them from exploring scientific factors that cause diseases and disabilities. Many fail to understand the condition and become insensitive to all disabilities whether mental or physical. Most often it is believed to be a curse, karma that many cultures accept to be a punishment of sins committed by the parents or religious sacrifice. The society subjects the afflicted to prejudice and discrimination throughout their lives, highlight their problems, deprive them from normalizing their conditions and propagate excessive dependency for care and livelihood. Community undermines their inherent capabilities by viewing them as dangerous, incompetent and unfit. The negative impact is observed in their depression, self-pity, loneliness, low self-respect and suicidal ideations.

Therefore it is important to eradicate stigma by education, exploring treatment options, providing supportive, encouraging inclusivity, developing healthy attitudes and spreading positivity with kind words and actions to alleviate their problems.

Family and Community Environment

Family and community play an important role in providing the basic needs and care towards people with disabilities. Family care-giving usually involves tasks above and beyond assisting with activities of daily living, like bathing, dressing and eating etc. There are reports of common burden of care that leave them overwhelmed, anxious and/or intimidated by their duties. These challenges are observed in time constraints to enjoy hobbies and vacations, emotional and physical stress, financial difficulties, sleep deprivation and depression or isolation. It is known that providing support and care to people with disabilities is important. However, the family members need to seek a balance between care-giving and enjoying their own life. In order to reduce some of the burden, especially the financial constraints, we should also look at government assistance and schemes for person with disabilities. For example the Scholarship for students with disabilities provides financial assistance to access education or vocational training.

Certification for Mental Disability

The United Nations Educational, Scientific & Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) have been instrumental in ensuring equal opportunities and rights for persons with disabilities to achieve their maximum potentials in a barrier-free environment. In this context, it is observed that physical and mental illnesses tend to affect the overall capacity of the person to carry out certain social, educational and occupational functions. Therefore, the person's ability to become independent is compromised which can increase the burden of care for family members.

This year the International Disability Day emphasizes on the need for inclusivity and development for all. Further, the Department of Social Justice and Empowerment in India has introduced various benefits through the Persons with

Disabilities Act (1995). Therefore, family members of persons with mental illness can get access to the appropriate certification done by the psychiatrist, clinical psychologist or special educator. This enables the special considerations for pension, railway concession, income tax deductions, educational programs, vocational training and job placements.

Prevention of Mental Illness

There are three categories of activities for the prevention of mental ill-health. The primary prevention focuses on various determinants in the whole population or in the high risk group, the secondary prevention comprises early detection and intervention and the tertiary prevention targets the advanced recovery and reduction of relapse risk. The primary prevention of mental illness attempts to stop mental health problems before they occur and promoting good mental health for all. Often primary prevention is 'universal' in that it targets and benefits everyone in a community, for example anti-stigma campaigns such as Mental Health Awareness Week or Literacy programs.

Universal prevention is defined as those interventions that are targeted at the general public or entire population group that has not been identified on the basis of increased risk. Selective prevention targets individual or subgroups of the population at risk of developing mental disorders are significantly higher than average, as evidenced by biological, psychological or social risk factors. Indicated prevention targets high risk people who are identified as having minimal but detectable signs or symptoms. Secondary prevention involves decreasing the prevalence of a mental disorder by reducing the number of existing cases through early case detection, screening and effective treatment. Tertiary prevention attempts to reduce the severity of a mental disorder and its associated disability through rehabilitative activities.

(The article is prepared by a non-profit organization, RoUTES Shillong, consisting of a group of clinical psychologists and counseling psychologists providing various psychological services such as psychotherapy & counseling, disability certification & career guidance, mental health consultation and training).

Expansionist lust turns BJP into a confrontationist brute force

Dr Satish Misra

Lust for power has unfortunately become a defining feature of the ruling BJP under the duo leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Union Home Minister Amit Shah. Political power at any cost and by any means is the sole guiding principle of the BJP that is seeking to achieve long set goals of its mentor outfit-the Rashtriya Swyamsevak Sangh (RSS). The above assessment may be challenged by those who are ardent followers and supporters of the saffron Hindutva forces but my conclusion is based on some basic facts and observations that have come to my notice since coming to power of the BJP in 2014 when the party won majority in the lower of house of parliament.

Latest evidence of the above assessment is being witnessed in Greater Hyderabad Municipal Corporation (GHMC) elections in Telangana capital Hyderabad where BJP's top national leadership is actively campaigning for party candidates. Election is scheduled for December 1. Sending of UP Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, who is an abashed Muslim baiter, for a road show only proves the interest taken by the national leadership to polarize voters on communal lines in a city that has about 43 percent Muslim

GHMC civic elections, the RSS-BJP is treating this election as a laboratory experiment whose lessons are going to help the party in assembly elections in West Bengal next year where the BJP top leadership is leaving nothing to chance. Like Hyderabad, West Bengal too has a high percentage of Muslim voters.

The BJP has been working aggressively in West Bengal for decades and it began to see results in 2014 Lok Sabha elections when it won two seats. It went on to improve its tally in 2019 Lok Sabha elections by 16 more seats taking the victory number to 18. However, it could not win many seats in the 2016 assembly elections when its vote percentage plummeted to 10 percent from 17 percent in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections.

Buoyed by polling little over 40 percent votes in 2019 Lok Sabha polls, the BJP top leadership is seeing a bright chance for the party to capture power in 2021 assembly elections and that is why the party has been focusing on West Bengal since Lok Sabha polls itself.

The Union Home Minister has been touring the state frequently and Prime Minister Narendra Modi has also been to the state couple of times in the last two years. BJP cadres are aggressively clashing with Trinamool Congress work-



ers resulting in bloodshed on streets of West Bengal. Ruling TMC government led by Mamata Banerjee is suffering from anti-incumbency and the BJP is seeing its chances to come to power in a state where it would have been impossible for the saffron outfit to win a couple of years back.

With huge resources at its disposal as its party coffers are swelling with corporate donations and electoral bonds, the BJP is even wooing dissatisfied or disgruntled leaders of the non-BJP parties to its ranks. The goal is to capture power by hook or crook.

In its expansionist drive, the BJP top leadership is not shy of confrontation and is encouraging its cadres to treat political rivals as not only enemies of the party but that of the Hindu community. The BJP leaders begin to label their opponents as anti-nationals at the first opportunity and leave no chance to sharpen the communal divide so that electoralate can be polarized on communal lines.

Acquisition of power and sustaining it through a negative framework of hate and intolerance by the BJP as we are seeing the treatment being meted out to agitating farmers in the Union capital by the Modi government officials, ministers and party leaders will finally result in destruction of the very people in whose name and with whose support party governments are being formed. Heaping abuse on farmers and labeling them as 'Khalistani' by party spokespersons may prove to be an effective instrument for discrediting farmers but if it is the correct way is the question that would be asked in coming days, weeks and months. Poor voter turnout however, shows that the BJP campaign has not created any waves among the voters.

Notwithstanding the final electoral outcome at the

TO THE EDITOR

Shillong embraces heterogeneity

Editor,
Can you relate to this? When a child performs or behaves well, one parent says to the other: "It is My Child;" when a child does not perform or behave well, we note the throwaway comment: "It is Your Child."

At the moment, when Shillong is beautifully ablaze with Cherry Blossoms, we read in the papers the proclamation "Our Shillong". As a native of this beautiful part of the country, I affirm that Shillong belongs to its people, the Tribals, and also to all those who love it for the singular distinctiveness, and distinction, of its 'Ethnic Tribal Values and Culture'. There is intrinsically no discrimination in the hearts and minds of the humanity resident in Shillong: past, present, and future... except within a section of single-pointed radically communalised minds, stained by a rationale that is focused on narrow-minded personal interests.

In a metaphorical sense, Shillong is the child of several parents: in the century gone by, well prior to winning independence, India welcomed and witnessed, as an example, people from England and Wales: they gave us their script for use in our local languages, they

designed our clothing, especially our winter wear, using woolen fabrics and the 'Scottish checks' and 'tartans', so uniquely distinctive in style from the rest of the country. They have given us our food habits, sense of colour combinations, designs, etiquette, and never to be overlooked, our exceptional tastes in music and choral singing, and our overall lifestyle to a great extent.

Furthermore, the identity and living dynamics of Shillong, and by extension, Meghalaya, has been catalysed massively by the presence of non-tribal golden-hearted Indians, who have symbiotically been adopted, and have adopted, the essence of Shillong in their bloodstream. The economic heartbeat of Meghalaya is impelled by the business and entrepreneurial acumen of these people. Beyond this, the intensive and extensive efforts directed by this community of spirits, is doing unrelenting social relief works for the marginalised sections of this beloved Abode of the Clouds. Should they be disregarded?

In a very real sense, Shillong belongs primordially, and primarily, to those who have come from other parts of the world, and who, with deeply dedicated commitment, have selflessly done their utmost, in mani-

fold ways, to develop our people and our beloved land. Their immersion in, and contribution to, our culture can never be adequately estimated, and should never be underestimated.

I affirm unapologetically, and without reservation, that Shillong does not belong to those who try to stifle her citizenry by imposing laws and practices that are against all our visions, virtues, and values. It is an unrelenting hallucination to assume that the seemingly friendly and compassionate mien and manner of the North East is the prevailing reality, when the brutal truth is that this sanctuary of providential peace, beauty, and essential goodness is actually dis-integrating! Our lives and livelihoods are being held to ransom by a savage assault on the peace and security within our hearts and in our systems.

I appeal to the soul and spirit of this great land, for God to grant us the soul-smart leadership that is needed to move us from harm to harmony. Only then can we affirm that Shillong belongs to all who respect and honour our religious and cultural beliefs, revering the diversity and divinity of our sacred heritage.

A totalitarian system of forcing us all to cower before a despotic 'One' is nothing less than an uncompromising sledgehammer blow to our serenity, and an inva-

sion into the very essence of our humanness. It is a violation of what it means to be human, and humane! In this stance, there can be no compromise! We must stand together to salvage ourselves against the evil that predominates, for it is our cherished birthright to nourish and nurture the spirit of peace, harmony, and goodwill towards all. This is the core credo of 'inclusivity', and our sacramental birthright. Individually, and collectively.

Yours etc.,
Bertha G Dkhar (Padma Shri),
Via email

The ILP of the Regulation

Editor,
The State has all the authority (under the law) to invoke the Regulation V of 1873 (Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation, 1873) without seeking central consent as the State of Manipur has done recently. The State is empowered to invoke the above without Central Government's approval.

We request the Governments, the State legislature, and, State ministers and their minions to kindly enlighten us on the need for or purpose of adaptation of laws in the context of the Government of India Act, 1935, the Adaptation of Laws Order, 1950 and, the North-Eastern Areas (Re-organisa-

tion) Act, 1971 and how these Acts and Order affect the provisions of the Regulation we are talking about.

Yours etc.,
Morning Star Sumer,
Shillong - 2

Much ado about MNREGS

Editor,
In the last few weeks Umlyngka village in Upper Shillong has been in the news because of the grave anomalies in the implementation of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Scheme (MNREGS), by the Mylliem C&RD Block. Earlier, Umlyngka shot to fame not because it is the darling of the government but because of sheer hard work and dedication of private individuals of the village in dairy farming immediately after the exodus of the famous Nepali dairy farmers. This time, however, this village came under the scanner for certain alleged wrongdoings.

According to RTI Activist, Agnes Kharsing and Doria Shabong, the Mylliem Block had sanctioned 93 schemes for 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 and had accordingly issued 93 Work Orders during the same period. This in itself is favouritism to Umlyngka by the Block. The bulk of the work constituted construction of drains, road and footpath construction, construction of pig sty (pig-

gery sheds), construction of poultry sheds, construction of cattle sheds etc., which together amounted to crores of rupees. According to Shabong much of the work was either haphazardly executed, incomplete or remained undone yet the money sanctioned was released by the Block. It was alleged that the officials of the Block who are responsible for the plans and estimates, supervision, measurement and issuance of completion certificates of different works are Assistant Engineers, Junior Engineers, Technical Assistants and certified by the Gramsevak of the Umlyngka GS circle of the Block. It is learnt that the Village Employment Council selected by the village Durbar is the overall authority in selection and implementation of MNREGS in the village. It is also learnt that the Rangbah Shnong of Umlyngka is also the Chairman of the VEC of Umlyngka and the Chairman of Mylliem Block. The BDO of Mylliem Block, who is the supervising authority was informed about the murky affairs in the implementation of the schemes in Umlyngka but he did not take appropriate and timely action for whatever reasons. Hence the messy affair!

Yours etc.,
Philip Marwein,
Via email

"People who are divided
are easier to control."

— David Draiman

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No.109 SHILLONG, FRIDAY, DECEMBER 4, 2020

Dam dare from China

CHINA is breathing down India's neck. New problems crop up when old issues remain unsettled. The latest is its plan to construct a new dam in Tibet, which will affect the flow of water in the Brahmaputra to large reaches of India and Bangladesh. As of now, China is not taking a confrontational stand on this and says it would discuss and sort out matters before proceeding with the plan. Yet, the Chinese leadership is unpredictable and what it would do tomorrow is anybody's guess.

The dam, planned at Medog in the lower reaches of the river close to Arunachal Pradesh, would come near the Line of Actual Control, a sensitive region. China's foreign ministry states that while it is their legitimate right to explore potential for hydro-power exploration, it would "act in a responsible manner in relation to trans-border rivers like Yarlung Zangbo", the name China accords to what is known in India as Brahmaputra. One of the world's longest rivers, this is the lifeline to large swathes of Indian and Bangladesh populations. The plan for the new dam is part of the decisions taken by the Chinese Communist Party at its plenum last October as part of its 14th Five Year Plan push — meaning, it would be a reality in a scheduled time-frame.

While there are existing arrangements between the three countries for regulating the water flow and to issue flood alerts based on the discharge from above in critical situations, the same cannot be any guarantee for China's future plans vis-à-vis exploiting the waters of this river or even controlling its flow to India and Bangladesh. Notably, China maintains good relations with Bangladesh and this could perhaps be a guarantee to responsible actions from the Chinese side in future, while India comes in between. Notably, India had already raised objections vis-à-vis the Zam hydro-power project in Tibet built by the Chinese in 2015, but China brushed aside the objections.

China is ruthless when it comes to pushing its interests. It has grabbed huge swathes of Indian land at different sectors along the Himalayan region in the 1962 War, and is in no mood to even discuss this matter. Periodic offensives come from the Chinese PLA in Ladakh and several other regions. What happened in Doklam in Bhutanese soil close to a sensitive Indian region is now behind us. Then came the Galwan Valley offensive in June last, which killed 20 Indian soldiers. India will take time to match its military strengths with the Chinese. These are tense times.

What if the ILP doesn't work?

By Patricia Mukhim

My apologies for once again dissenting with the idea of protectionism, which is what the Inner Line Permit (ILP) is, because, this very idea of a visa for travelling within the country is fraught with ambiguities. Also the demand for the ILP is an admission that (a) the Sixth Schedule has failed to protect the tribals (b) the Meghalaya Land Transfer Act (1971) has failed to prevent land alienation. The ILP, it is perhaps believed by pressure groups making a shrill call for its implementation, will prevent land alienation and 'illegal migrants' from entering Meghalaya and settling here. Without having gone through the process of identifying genuine Indian citizens residing in Meghalaya vide the National Register of Citizens' process how do we even know how many illegal settlers there are in the State and whether they are the problem or whether the problem lies elsewhere.

To buttress the idea that the ILP is needed here, Chief Minister Conrad Sangma has expounded that the process of obtaining the permit would be smooth and non-cumbersome as it will be executed online but the fact remains that Meghalaya gets most of its tourists from Assam who come here on weekends. Imagine having to apply for an ILP every weekend or every month for that matter. If the CM is grounded in realism and if his officials have informed him of those realities then he would know that the abandoned sheds selling vegetables along the roadside between Shillong and Sohra and other destinations all belong to vendors who had to close shop because there were no longer any day tourists since March this year. So that's an income gone. You cannot underestimate the contributions made by day tourists to the local economy. And the ILP will be a deterrent to the day tourists. But perhaps that's what this MDA Government wants to call, "high end tourism," which will only benefit hoteliers and guest house owners. Such

hotel guests don't need to buy anything along the highway.

The ILP protagonists have argued vociferously that the states with the ILP regime namely Nagaland, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh and Manipur get a fair number of tourists or more tourists than Meghalaya. I am not sure which statistical data they used for you won't find too many day tourists riding on non-existent roads unless they are enticed by something like the Hornbill Festival or the Ziro Music fes-



ST Photo

tival and the Sangai festival in Manipur. Mizoram is not known to have any special festival to attract tourists. Nagaland and Mizoram are not governed by the Sixth Schedule. The latter has special provisions for minor tribes. Nagaland has Article 371 (A) which is more about central legislations not being binding on the state unless ratified by its legislature. Manipur does not fall under the Sixth Schedule hence the demand for ILP was perhaps granted to make the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) inapplicable in that state. The Centre had said that CAA would not be implemented in ILP states and areas under the Sixth Schedule. Arunachal Pradesh incidentally is the only tribal state with the Panchayati Raj system of local governance. So we have a bouquet of schedules and laws even within the North Eastern states.

If the Government of India has committed not to implement the CAA in

the CAA, where will they find the space other than by staying in rented accommodation? But the question that precedes the above is — how many 'illegal migrants' are there in Meghalaya that have suffered religious persecution in Bangladesh, Pakistan or Afghanistan? Do we have the numbers or are we proceeding on assumptions alone? When will the exercise for determining such illegal migrants start? What mechanisms will be used? Has there been any thinking on this?

The ILP might deter future migrants but economic refugees that cross over from Bangladesh to Meghalaya will not traverse through the entry-exit points because they would not have valid documents to upload and therefore will not be eligible to obtain the ILP. So who are we actually keeping out vide the ILP? Effectively we are checking Indian citizens visiting Meghalaya, not necessarily for tourism. We will also be checking foreign nationals who might be tourists or other categories of

visitors. How does it help the cause? The negotiation with Government of India should be to exempt the CAA from Meghalaya because it is a Sixth Schedule State. Period.

This whole idea of trading in fear and creating a perception in the minds of people that the ILP is the only mechanism to protect the 'indigenous' tribals can go awry. The ILP is a double edged sword. It is a protectionist mechanism which will ward off economic investments because it is a psychological barrier for prospective investors who might want to set up clean industries such as in the Information Technology sector. Nagaland had been trying to sell itself as technology hub from several years now but the idea has not taken off. Can we name one industry that is providing gainful employment to the people of Nagaland, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh or Manipur? Is it any wonder that the number of returnees to these states on account of the pandemic was very high because they all had to leave their states to find employment outside? The number of returnees to Meghalaya was relatively low and comprised more students than the workforce.

With a burgeoning youth population and a cap on government jobs, the private sector will be the only other employment provider. But ILP will be a dampener on investors as stated above because it gives the impression of a surveillance state and no one in this day and age wants to be told that a visit to any part of this country and length of stay would be decided by the state. When we visit Meghalaya via Goa — a tiny state, are we told that we can only stay for a specific number of days and visit only certain areas? Then on what justification are we doing this to other visitors? And imagine people coming to visit their family members here having to apply for an ILP! So whichever way one looks at it the ILP is an untenable idea in Meghalaya.

Global perception Farmers agitation

By Dr. D.K. Giri

Even during the pandemic accompanied with various restrictions like social distancing and the coldest November since 1949, the farmers came on to the streets protesting against three new laws passed by Parliament. The mobilisation in these trying times is unbelievable. The agitation has as usual divided the opinion across the country between pro-government and those critical of the government. What is more, it has drawn international attention and comments from heads of States and Members of Parliament. This has resulted in a diplomatic row between Ministry of External Affairs and those making remarks on the agitation. The issue must be resolved before it is too late.

At the time of writing, two rounds of dialogue had taken place between the government and the farmers. This is a breakthrough as there was hardly any dialogue or bridge between them so far. No wonder, one of the grievances by the farmers is that they were not consulted before such drastic changes were made in the farm sector. Earlier, the farmers refused any offer for talks as government had made it conditional. In the last round, the farmers demanded a special session of Parliament.

The government will have to do some out-of-box thinking and management to resolve this vexatious issue. Unless it does so, the farmers are unlikely to budge, on the contrary, they seem to prepare for a long haul. They have shielded Delhi's borders, are refusing to move into a police-designated site for protest as they fear they will be squeezed into that area and be marginalised in popular attention.

Interestingly, initially, the government tried to delegitimise the protest movement as Opposition instigated, fed by untruths and misinformation. That tactics did not hold much water. The farmers bluntly announced that no leader from any political party could share the platform with them. They were in fact, reported to have shooed away to middle-level leaders who were trying to persuade the farmers to shift to a new venue. The government perhaps failed to realise that farmers are as strong in their resolve as the soldiers are at the borders.

During 1965 war, Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri had given the famous slogan of Jai Jawan, Jai Kisan (Hail the soldier, hail the farmer). It evoked national sentiments for farmers as they provide food security whereas the soldiers give us physical security. Therefore, the agitating farmers could not be called 'anti-national' as often times the government tends to dub protesters and critics as anti-national.

In view of the critical role and sensitive position of the farmers, the government will have to negotiate and find amicable solutions. The unthoughtful use of force by the Haryana Police on the Punjab farmers has left a bad taste in the country and incurred comments from abroad. The government has somehow backtracked from such aggressive actions and is talking. But somehow, the ice has not broken yet. Both parties assume they are right in their thinking and action. This could lead either of them to sit on prestige and take a hubristic posture. This seems to be the case. In democracy, through dialogue, points of convergence are created by conceding space and knowledge base.

Before scanning the international response, it is in order that we take a look at

the three laws passed by the Parliament. The first, Farmers' Produce, Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation Act), which expands the scope of trade for farmers produce from select areas like the mandis to 'any place of production, collection and aggregation'. In theory, this gives freedom to the farmers to sell anywhere by liberating them from either middlemen or even State governments. The government thinks that the Act unshackles the farmers, whereas the farmers think it has orphaned them as the so-called middlemen were the interface between the market and the farm land, and State governments provided them a secured place to do trading. They also apprehend they have been thrown into the predatory traders' carrels.

The second one is Farmers (Empowerment & Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act, 2020, which provides a legal framework for farmers to enter into a pre-arranged contract with buyers including pre-fixed pricing. The Act also provides for a dispute resolution mechanism should the contract become controversial. This is legalising contract farming. Farmers are put against powerful business houses, which will initiate and manage the contract, but it's unlikely that a farmer can monitor its implementation. Nor can he challenge the mighty businessmen in the court of law.

Third is Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act, which allows the government to regulate food items through essential commodities list. It provides for stocking agriculture produce. Government believes by allowing the producers to stock and sell their produce at the time of their choice, they won't be compelled to trade when they don't want to. The farmers suspect that it will lead to hoarding by big traders and thereby manipulation of the market.

So, as said, there is a big gap between the thinking of the government and the farmers' understanding. To be sure, both the government and farmers have enough wisdom and expertise to know what they are saying. Government is working on a strategy. Farmers sense the 'danger' for them down the road the government is taking them. The biggest source of their fear comes from no-mention of Minimum Support Price (MSP) in the Act. The MSP has been the lifeline of farmers as it provided insurance against any natural calamity befalling farming and reducing the price.

Among the international reactions, the strongest by far is from Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. He said that his country has made contacts with Indian authorities, "through multiple means" to express concern about the farmers agitating. He added, "the news of protest unfolding around Delhi is concerning. We all very worried about family and friends". Several other Indo-Canadian MPs and leaders have expressed their concern about the farmers in India and have condemned the police action on the farmers.

Farmers in Germany have taken out tractor rallies in support of Indian farmers. The Indian-origin MPs in the United Kingdom have also expressed their moral support in favour of the farmers. There have been odd reactions from other parts of the world. One could politically suggest that since Punjab farmers have their relations, friends, acquaintances throughout the globe, voices of sympathy and solidarity will be heard. —INFA

TO THE EDITOR

Helmets for pillion riders

Editor,

Helmets are indeed essential for riders of two-wheelers and helmets have been known to save lives too in many cases. It is only natural that the Government of India, through its appropriate departments and offices, should make it compulsory for all riders of two-wheelers to wear them at all times while riding their two-wheelers. The recent notice making it compulsory also for pillion riders to wear helmets has resulted in mixed responses. On the one hand, the thoughtfulness of the law to safeguard the life and limbs of both the driver and the rider cannot be undermined. But the huge inconvenience that adhering to it would cause the drivers of two-wheelers cannot be summarily disregarded either. We can clearly understand how making pillion riders wear helmets will prevent the loss of more lives in road accidents and we would be immature to think otherwise. But there is also a large degree of discomfort that must be addressed too.

There is this issue of having to carry along with you two helmets wherever you go. Imagine the discomfort caused by the need to carry one along with all your work-related tools and gadgets; now you have another helmet that you must have with you, in case you have to give a lift to anyone you meet along the way. Consider the plight of

a parent who must bear the weight of heavy-laden school bags, lunch-boxes, water bottles, their young children on their arm and two clunky helmets that they must carry with them everywhere. Very soon, riders of two-wheelers will begin to resemble those who go on expeditions to Mount Everest — bent under the weight of their backpack, an oxygen tank in one pocket of the bag, an ice pick in another, ropes dangling from yet another pocket.

In a similar vein a modern-day two-wheeler rider will have to carry his/her backpack with all the nuts and bolts, safety suits and protective gears to go to work on his/her two-wheeler. This matter is exacerbated by the fact that it is not safe to leave good quality helmets and gears on parked two-wheelers, whether at work or on errands. Without an extra helmet, we will no longer be able to assist our very own family members who we may meet on the way and while completing our errands. Think of the utter awkwardness and anxiety at not being able to offer them a lift home only because you could not afford another expensive helmet or did not have the facility to carry two cumbersome items with you. It would have been great to have helmets that one could fold or dismantle when not needed and kept in our bags, to be reassembled when needed. It would save a lot of space and also conserve our energy, not to

speak of the ease with which we could continue to carry the usual work-related items or the shopping bags that we need to.

It would appear that I am advocating convenience over the safety of life and limbs; nothing can be further from the truth. My only quarrel in this instance is that adhering to this particular law will greatly hamper daily activities causing more anxiety and irritation to a section of the public throughout the day. I would like to submit here that since the regulation has come into effect largely due to the many fatalities and injuries that have occurred as a result of rash and reckless driving of immature and thoughtless riders, to prevent the occurrence of more such cases more stringent laws should be passed and enforced to penalise riders who violate the speed limits and the traffic rules. What the new regulation will do is only harass riders who are careful and who ride their two-wheelers sensibly. Besides, how much speed can you get in a city packed choc-a-bloc with cars? I would request the competent authorities to kindly consider the above issues as well while implementing the new regulations.

Yours etc.,
P. Majaw,
Shillong-1

Unfair practice by some FP dealers

Editor,
What if our authorities

are unsympathetic towards the poor? The rich then will find "multiple" ways to exploit them. It is always easier for those in higher positions to exploit the downtrodden. The poor can hardly ever raise their voices against oppression. During the early phases of the lockdown, I was startled to know many things that have never been brought to the knowledge of the concerned authorities. The stories and miserable condition of the poor drove me to tears. Many families starved while many others lived on meager amounts of food due to loss of livelihoods. Given the pandemic situation, a few like-minded friends decided to pitch in some amount to support the very needy households. During those exceptionally hard times, I also came to know that "some" unscrupulous Fair Price Shop dealers indulged in unfair trade practices. Instead of 35 kg rice the consumers received 2 to 9 kgs less while some dealers did not issue dal/lentil though supplied by the government for free distribution.

What is very off-putting is that some dealers regularly distribute ration without using the standard measurement scales/machine but use the old fashioned baskets or tins to weigh out the rice/atta/sugar. This practice has gone on for years.

I found this practice highly unethical and I believe this must be brought to the knowledge of the government. I immediately

wrote a "letter of public grievance" to the concerned authorities in the state and also a letter in this newspaper (ST April 28, 2020) — "Suggestion for Fair Price Shop dealers". Meanwhile, I was also informed by other acquaintances from other states about such devious practices prevalent in their states too. Hence with the help of friends, I had sent the same letter to the Union Ministry of Food and Public Distribution. My letter immediately drew the attention of the secretaries, deputy secretaries, and finally the Director of the particular department. After some days, the Ministry issued a nationwide General Circulation to all the authorities in all the states and Union territories against the use of non-standard weighing scales and with strict instructions for the mandatory use of weighing machines. I appreciate the government initiative in the larger interest of the citizens who were victimized. One considerate dealer remarking on the underweight distribution observed that small variations in weight is acceptable but why do they exploit the poor so mercilessly? It is ethically unpardonable! This dealer during lockdowns gave away kerosene and rice for free to many of the needy families who were without ration cards. That's indeed a commendable gesture of humanity.

In response to the na-

tionwide circulation from the Union Ministry, some commissioners and secretaries of other states duly forwarded me the email letter with their intimation about the actions initiated against the crafty FP dealers. I am overwhelmed with inner satisfaction at having done something significant for the needy. I was also optimistic that no dealer would ever indulge in the unholy practice. But I was shocked to know that the same unethical practice is still being followed by "some" of the FP dealers with a vengeance in certain localities. There can't be a bigger irony than this! Despite repeated reminders to the FP shop dealer no decisive action has so far been taken against the offenders. What does one make of it when the poor are experiencing unprecedented hard times while others are preying on their vulnerability. Hope this letter of grievance in the larger interest of the poor will draw the kind attention of the authorities concerned. All loopholes must be plugged for the better. The poor should not be deprived of their fair share.

Yours etc.,
Salil Gwali,
Shillong

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

"Culture is a way of coping with the world by defining it in detail."

— Malcolm Bradbury

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No.110 SHILLONG, SATURDAY, DECEMBER 5, 2020

Love jihad versus India's composite culture

The Uttar Pradesh Government's ordinance prohibiting marriage between a Muslim man and a Hindu woman violates the right to love. It is yet another attempt by the BJP to needle the Muslim minority in this country. Former Supreme Court (SC) Judge, Madan Lokur says the UP 'love jihad' law puts freedom of choice 'on the backseat.' He questioned as to what would happen to earlier SC judgments that have ruled that states have no jurisdiction over an adult's absolute right to choose a life partner.

Now four other BJP-ruled states are framing their own laws on 'Love jihad' with more stringent punishment. Noted activist Sayeeda Hameed observed that this law will break the composite culture of the country. The Love-Jihad ordinance was promulgated by Uttar Pradesh Governor Anandiben Patel on November 28, days after it was passed by the Adityanath-led state Cabinet. It is no surprise that hours later, the police registered their first case against a Muslim man in UP's Bareilly district.

A plea challenging the Uttar Pradesh government's ordinance that criminalises religious conversion via marriage was filed before the Supreme Court on December 4, by three lawyers who said the ordinance was against public policy and fundamental rights of the people. The petitioners contended that the ordinance will be misused to falsely implicate people and will lead to chaos and fear. Their observation is that this ordinance can become a potent tool in the hands of unruly elements of society to falsely implicate anyone and there are probabilities of falsely implicating persons who are not involved in any such acts contemplated under the ordinance and it will result in grave injustice. The petitioners also questioned the validity of a similar law passed by the Uttarakhand government in 2018.

'Love jihad' is a conspiracy theory used by right-wing groups who accuse Muslim men of using marriage as a lure to force Hindu women to convert to Islam. The Central Government had stated in the Lok Sabha that no "case of 'love jihad' has been reported by any of the central agencies". Investigations by the National Investigation Agency, the Karnataka Criminal Investigation Department, the Uttar Pradesh Special Investigation Team and others have turned up no evidence for this alleged conspiracy. The National Commission for Women also maintains no data about "love jihad."

The Love jihad legislation is a master plan to criminalize inter-faith marriages, especially that between a Hindu woman and a Muslim man and is unlikely to be tamely taken by the youth of this country. Marriage between two consenting adults cannot be the brief of the state or subject to enquiry by police.

Stan Swamy and the Law

By Manraj Singh

Stan Swamy, a priest from South India made Jharkhand his home and the cause of tribal/Adivasi people his religion. Trained as a Jesuit priest, he made political activism and grassroots activism his primary vocation. From taking part in popular struggle during Emergency to the founding of Bagaicha, a centre to co-ordinate tribal rights activism in Jharkhand, he has been instrumental in raising clear categorical questions about the rights of the tribal/Adivasi people, and issues about ownership of land which traditionally belong to them.

Stan Swamy was recently arrested due to his alleged links with Maoists and participation in the commemoration function of the bicentennial celebration of the Battle of Koregaon Bhima organised by Elgar Parishad on December 31, 2017. Organised by more than 250 non-profit organisations, it was attended by prominent Dalit leaders, cultural outfits and lakhs of Dalits. Violence broke out on January 1, 2018 where one person was killed.

Later, a case was made out that the event was organised by Maoists and cases were registered under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967 against a number of prominent thinkers, poets, social and human rights activists, artists, and academicians such as Varavara Rao, Surendra Gadling, Rona Wilson, Mahesh Raut, Sudhir Dhawale, Sudha Bhardwaj, Gautam Navlakha, Anand Teltumbde and others. The National Investigation Agency (NIA) which took over the case from Maharashtra Police alleged that the Persecuted Prisoners Solidarity Committee of which Stan Swamy is a co-convenor is a front organisation of Maoists. Swamy admits that he attended the event at Pune but denied any connection with the Maoists. Swamy has in fact always tried to use the terrain provided by the Indian Constitution and the statutory laws for the betterment of tribal/Adivasi and the downtrodden.

Fifth Schedule of Indian Constitution

The Fifth Schedule of the Indian Constitution read with Article 244, deals with the administration and control of Scheduled Areas (SAs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) in States other than Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram. It empowers the President to declare certain areas as scheduled areas on basis of tribal population, territorial size, economic disparity, and underdevelopment. It creates special governance mechanisms to cater to the different needs of the resident people. It provides for establishment of Tribal Advisory Councils (TAC) to advise the Governor on such matters pertaining to the welfare and the advancement of the STs in the State as may be referred to them by him. TAC, thus, becomes a natural check on Central and State laws which can

adversely affect the tribal populations and also provides them agency to run their affairs. Stan Swamy has consistently questioned the non-implementation of the 5th Schedule of the Constitution in the tribal areas of Jharkhand.

Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA)

Decentralisation of power is perceived as anathema to the ills of governance plaguing the Indian governmental setup. It implies transfer or dispersal of decision making powers, accompanied by delegation of required authority to individuals or units at all levels of organization even if they are located far away from the power centre. The 73rd Amendment to the Constitution of India calls for devolution of powers and authority of governance of the Union Government and State Governments to the sub-State level organizations i.e. Panchayats and Gram Sabhas. PESA was brought in to extend those provisions to tribal areas.

The difference between PESA and the Panchayati Raj Institution structure established under the 73rd Constitutional amendment is that while the latter states that the States "may" transfer the 29 subjects enlisted in the Eleventh Schedule to Panchayats, PESA makes this transfer mandatory at least for those powers which are outlined in Section 4 of PESA, namely: Minor Forest Produce, Social Forestry, Land Management, Fisheries, Village Markets, Tribal Development, Social Justice, Food and Civil supplies, and subjects related to local institutions.

Stan Swamy has repeatedly questioned why the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996, has been ignored which for the first time recognised that Adivasi communities in India have a rich social and cultural tradition of self-governance through the Gram Sabha. He also questioned the silence of the Government on Samatha Judgment. The Judgment came at a time when along with the State policy of globalisation, liberalization and privatisation, national and global corporate houses started to enter tribal/Adivasi areas in central India to mine the mineral wealth there.

Samatha judgement

As elaborated by Ravi Rebbapragada, Executive Director, Samatha, the Government leased out large mining tracts to corporate giants during the liberalisation of the 1990s. This violated the Land Transfer Regulation Act which prohibits transfer of land to non-tribals in scheduled areas. According to Rebbapragada such poorly thought out decisions by the Government ignoring the rights and resources of the people, motivated Samatha, an Andhra Pradesh based NGO to take up the fight for the rights of

tribal/Adivasi communities who would be displaced and affected by private mining companies. A PIL was filed in the High Court of Andhra Pradesh in 1993 on grounds that the Government was also a 'person' and hence does not have the power to grant leases to non-tribals in scheduled areas. After sustained struggle, the Supreme Court (SC) in July 1997 delivered the landmark judgment in Samatha vs State of Andhra Pradesh and Others.

In this judgment, SC stated that tribal people can exploit minerals in scheduled areas without disturbing the ecology or the forest lands either individually or through co-operative societies with financial assistance from the State. It further stated that in the absence of prohibition on the transfer of lands, any licensee or lease must provide certain duties and obligations to the tribal people who are affected by the project. However, the court noted that the transfer of tribal land to State-owned agencies or corporations is excluded from such prohibitions. It also stated that at least 20 per cent of the profits from any project must be set aside as a permanent fund for the affected tribal people's development needs in addition to any expenditure on reforestation and maintenance of the ecology.

If implemented correctly, the Judgment makes tribal/Adivasi partners in the growth story of India and active stakeholders rather than mere cogs in the vast economic system. But responses from various State Governments to the Samatha judgment have been lukewarm. Stan Swamy has used the logic of this judgment and has been calling for its enforcement in Jharkhand.

Swamy has also questioned amendments to the Land Acquisition Act, 2013, by the Jharkhand Government. These amendments did away with the requirement for "social impact assessment" which was aimed at safeguarding the environment, social relations and cultural values of affected people. A terrifying aspect of the amendments is that the Government can allow any agricultural land for non-agricultural purposes (adequate changes were made in the Chotanagpur Tenancy Act as well as Santhal Pargana Tenancy Act of 1876 to facilitate such practices). He also fought for the release of activists of Pothohar movement which opposed these Acts and used the instruments of Gram Sabhas to fight this onslaught.

To understand Stan Swamy's mindset it is important to go through his past works. From starting as the Director, Catholic Relief Services charity in Jharkhand in 1970s, he went to Indian Social Science Institute, Bangalore to improve his understanding of society. This centre later became a hub of anti-emergency activities. From there he tried

to reach out to hundreds of young people from the fringes of society through systematic training sessions. He actively worked with JOHAR — the Jharkhand Organisation for Human Rights. Later on it was felt that there was a need to establish a centre in Ranchi to coordinate the efforts of organisations and movements which were fighting for the marginalised communities, hence Bagaicha came into existence. He was later arrested from here.

A commonality which people of North East can relate to is that Stan has also been an important part of the JOAR (Jharkhand Organisation Against Radiation) which led a campaign against Uranium Corporation of India Limited (UCIL) at Jadugoda. JOAR and other organisations agitated against the ill effects of Uranium mining and processing on people of Jadugoda and adjoining areas. West Khasi Hills in Meghalaya also has rich Uranium deposits and UCIL has been trying to mine Uranium in these areas for long but has not been successful due to the resistance of the people.

During the agitation, the word Jadugoda resonated quiet often in the Khasi Hills and incidentally West Khasi Hills also has a river named Jadukata. Some local leaders at that time attributed the death of fish and other aquatic life in Jadukata river due to exploratory mining of uranium and it caught the popular imagination.

Stan Swamy had attended the Elgar Parishad meeting on December 31, 2017 to commemorate the Bhima Koregaon Battle where the Mahar Regiment had defeated the Maratha army. Now he is arrested due to his alleged links with Maoists. Swamy had always maintained that he has no connection with Maoists. To book an 80 year old poet, Varavara Rao, a management expert like Anand Teltumbde, a social activist like Sudha Bhardwaj and 83 year old Stan Swamy for conspiracy only points to a pervert design on the part of those in power. It is high time that democratic forces, aware citizenry, dalits, and tribal/Adivasi people unite to protest against the arrest of Stan Swamy and others and demand justice for them. Change has to come from ordinary people resolving to do extraordinary things just as Swamy has been doing by asking questions and by standing his ground. Even though Swamy suffers from Parkinson's disease and is losing his hearing, his resolve remains strong as seen from his latest letter from jail. He has not been provided with even a straw and sipper because his hands shiver and he cannot hold a glass of water. It is ironic that the criminal justice system of the country shivers and shudders from the shivering of a geriatric man.

Lakhs of farmers fighting for a better future

NDA government ignoring the demands will spell rural disaster

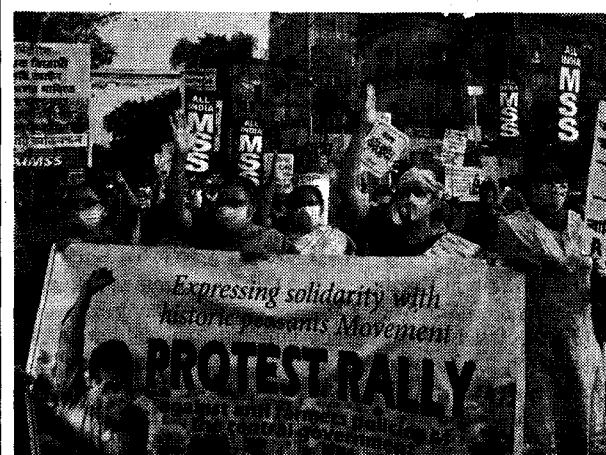
By Binoy Viswam

The challenges posed by those who provide food for the nation is not as simple, as the rulers think it to be. The farmers of India are waiting at the borders of the national capital for the last one week. At the moment tens of thousands of them from Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, UP and Uttarakhand have reached the various gateways to the national capital. No amount of force and intimidation could succeed in suppressing their unflinching determination. Their hearts and mind are throbbing for the country and its food security. Those who do man ki bat as part of the routine propaganda scheme cannot understand the honest minds of the farmers. The man ki bat of real India can be seen now at the borders of Delhi.

All along, in its publicity exercise the government was keen to eulogise the annadathas of the country. Doubling the farmers' income was the crowning promise of the BJP which

government asks them to bargain with multinational giants like Monsanto and domestic giants like Adani, Agri Corp, etc. Understanding this fact, the workers and peasants have taken up the challenge. We witnessed the India of the toiling masses coming together to put up their heroic resistance against the retrograde policies of the right reactionary government.

Cutting across the political barriers the workers and peasants came to the field on November 26 and 27 announcing the awakening of a united fighting force. Since then two rounds of talks have been held with then Modi ministers but the deadlock remains. The present movement is a significant step towards worker-peasant unity which would add a promising class content to the ongoing series of struggles. This is not a political battle associated to any political party. This is a battle of the working people to save their agriculture and industry together with their



has never materialised. In turn, they came with three agriculture related bills. In fact, those bills were the death bell of Indian farmers. The agrarian crisis in the country is so grave that thousands of farmers committed suicides during the Modi regime. Reason behind this phenomenon is the unscientific and anti-farmer price mechanism in the country.

While the cost of farm production was always on the increase, the price of their produce was constantly falling down. This mechanism pushed the annadathas ruthlessly into the debt trap. In the most hypocritical manner the Modi government guaranteed freedom from the debt trap. But their real intention was that to promote capitalist greed at the cost of the farmers' lives. Contract farming and corporatisation were the hallmarks of the farm laws. Essential Commodities Act was altered to suit the greed of the capital. In such a situation the farmers have no other option but to fight unitedly to repeal the anti-farmer laws, the noose around their neck.

The farmers' agitation is a life and death issue not only for those who wait at the borders but for the whole farming community.

In that way this struggle is the concern of every Indian. Their fight against corporatisation is to realize Atmanirbhar Bharat. It is to uphold food security in self-reliant India. The country understands the meaning of their struggle. The Modi government that has adopted FDI as the ultimate solution has their ulterior motive to surrender the large Indian farming sector before the foreign capital.

Similarly, like the labour reforms, agriculture reforms also are drafted for the appeasement of foreign loot. In order to hide their subservience to the FDI, they preach that now the farmers can bargain with everyone, everywhere to get the maximum price for their produce. Statistics say that 82.6 per cent of the Indian farmers are those holding less than two hectares of land. The 'generous' BJP

rights and lives. In that battle they uphold the causes of sovereignty, secularism, and democracy of India. In that sense it is political too, committed to the constitutional principles. With this clarity in understanding the communists and all other secular democratic forces have ever stood in support of the peasants and workers. Needless to say, that support will continue, staunch and stable till the end.

It is the ugly politics pursued by the government that compelled them to see Khalistan and left extremism in the farmers' struggle. So disappointed they are seeing the ever-increasing fighting mood of the peasants who remain peacefully day and night at the borders facing the unbearable cold of a harsh December. They follow a perverted world view only through the mirror of fanaticism and extremism. That is why they unleashed all their propaganda apparatus to slander the peasant struggle. This strategy could only fail. The right-minded people of India know very well the truth behind the farmers' agitation. They know that the farmers are struggling for the whole country.

It is not the farmers, but the BJP trying to bring in politics into the concerns of food and agriculture. The government should set aside its narrow politics and false prestige and concede to the demands of the farmers immediately. They should understand the mood of the country in support of the farmers. Several people of reputation have decided to return their Padma awards and Arjun awards in protest of the government approach to the farmers' agitation. Several political allies of the BJP have expressed their solidarity with farmers. The truck owners of the country have also come out in support of them. The words of the Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau were the reflection of the global mood. It is high time the government opened its eyes to reality. (IPA Service)

TO THE EDITOR

Rejoinder - BDO Myllem Block

Editor, Apropos the Letter to the Editor under the caption "Much ado about MGNREGS" written by Philip Marwein and published in the Shillong Times on December 4, 2020, the BDO Myllem C&RD Block would like to clarify as under:-

1. Apropos the allegation in the letter that there was favouritism to Umlingka by the Block in which 93 Work Orders were issued during 2017-18 and 2018-19 for a bulk of works/projects, it may be brought to the notice of all concerned that MGNREGA is a demand-driven programme where provision of work is triggered by the demand for work by wage-seekers and allocation of funds is based on the number of Job Cards in each of the Village Employment Council. As far as sanction of projects in

Umlingka is concerned, the VEC has demanded work for implementation of multiple projects and the village has a very high number of Job Cards i.e. about 781 (seven hundred eighty one), and which therefore resulted in allocation of huge amounts of funds. Hence, the allegation that there was favouritism is false, baseless and it indicates that the writer/person who made such allegation is not aware of the scheme.

2. Apropos the allegation in the letter that the BDO Myllem C&RD Block being the supervising authority did not take appropriate and timely action when he was informed about the murky affairs in implementation of the schemes in Umlingka, it may be clarified herewith that, hitherto, the RTI activists namely Agnes Kharshiing and Doria Shabong have not registered any complaint(s) with the Block Office against anomalies in implementation of MGNREGA at Umlingka, other than (1)

Filing of RTI applications, to which the Block Office had replied accordingly; and (2) Complaint against dual Job Cardholders, to which the matter had been disposed of accordingly. Therefore, the afore-mentioned allegation is false, baseless and unfounded. However, had any complaint(s) been registered officially against anomalies in implementation of the scheme, the BDO Myllem C&RD Block would have taken necessary action in due course as per laid down office procedures.

The BDO Myllem C&RD Block is always committed to bring transparency and accountability and he is fully responsible and answerable for any lapse/wrongdoing. However, unfounded allegations are highly unfortunate, uncalled for and must be completely ignored.

Yours etc,
P.T. Passah, MCS,
Block Development Officer,
Myllem C&RD Block,
5th Mile Upper Shillong

When the soul speaks

Editor, I am writing to say I was deeply moved by the wonderful letter in The Shillong Times (ST Dec 3, 2020), written by Bertha G. Dkhar (Padma Shri). Both in her soulful language and her soulful substance she expresses that secret universality that threads all living beings (at least all human beings) in invisible threads of empathy. To my ears, her words were like refreshing waters in a desert, or soothing music with the power to redeem all communal cacophony in Meghalaya. Indeed, a heroic life can hardly conceal its inner luminosity. It shines through the words and gestures of a great soul.

Thank you for publishing this letter.

Yours etc.,
Deepa Majumdar
Via email

KSU should know priorities

Editor, Over the course of years, the demand for ILP has come up from time-to-time. While it is necessary to have cultural conservation, issues, such as employment, economic growth, youth empowerment, safety for women, uplifting living standards for the rural folk, have been long standing issues for our state. An ILP, even if it controls influx, will still not solve such issues. I am saddened that people like me are forced to go out of the state to look out for better opportunities because they don't exist in the state. These are more pertinent issues and it brings to question, when will the KSU protest as vehemently for these issues as they do for the ILP?

It is no secret that we borrow heavily from the Centre for sustaining our expenditures. Do we not

want to find sources to generate our own revenue? Is this not of concern to the KSU? As a Khasi, I have never found the KSU fervently protesting for the rights of our people, who till date undergo various afflictions. During COVID, not one headline came up where the KSU went out of its way to help the rural folk and the poor. Tuning up aggression, if not for the right reasons, is not warranted. Our society needs to proceed with development. Enough of political agenda!

Besides, now that the state will (hopefully) implement the MRSSA to check influx, does the KSU even know why this still warrants the ILP?

Yours etc.,
Patrick Kurubh
Bengaluru

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

Academic entrepreneurs in India



By Siddhi Jain

India is the third-largest tech start-up hub globally, yet academicians are still on the fringes when it comes to entrepreneurship in the country. The gaps in academic entrepreneurship are evident in the number of data scientists, engineers and other skilled professionals who continue to seek employment opportunities - even when the job market is down - and hesitate to dream of becoming entrepreneurs, says Esha Tiwary, India head, Entrepreneur First.

In a bid to facilitate academicians to turn to entrepreneurship and be successful at it, London-based talent investor firm Entrepreneur First has launched a nation-wide programme 'Ideathon - Open Innovation' to hunt, nurture and facilitate academicians.

Driving the thought is the idea that while traditionally the Indian market allowed and facilitated the entry of entrepreneurs, it was largely restricted to a family run business or those with decades of corporate experience in the industry. Things are fast changing, premier institutes in India like IIT, IIM, BITS and NIT among others are waking up to the idea of academic entrepreneurs.

According to Tiwary's chat with IANSlife, the idea is that one does not need to have years of corporate experience to build disruptive businesses. More excerpts:

Where do you think lie the gaps in academic entrepreneurship in India? What are some of those key

gaps?

Tiwary: India is the third-largest tech start-up hub globally, yet academicians are still on the fringes when it comes to entrepreneurship in the country. The gaps in academic entrepreneurship are evident in the number of data scientists, engineers and other skilled professionals who continue to seek employment opportunities - even when the job market is down - and hesitate to dream of becoming entrepreneurs!

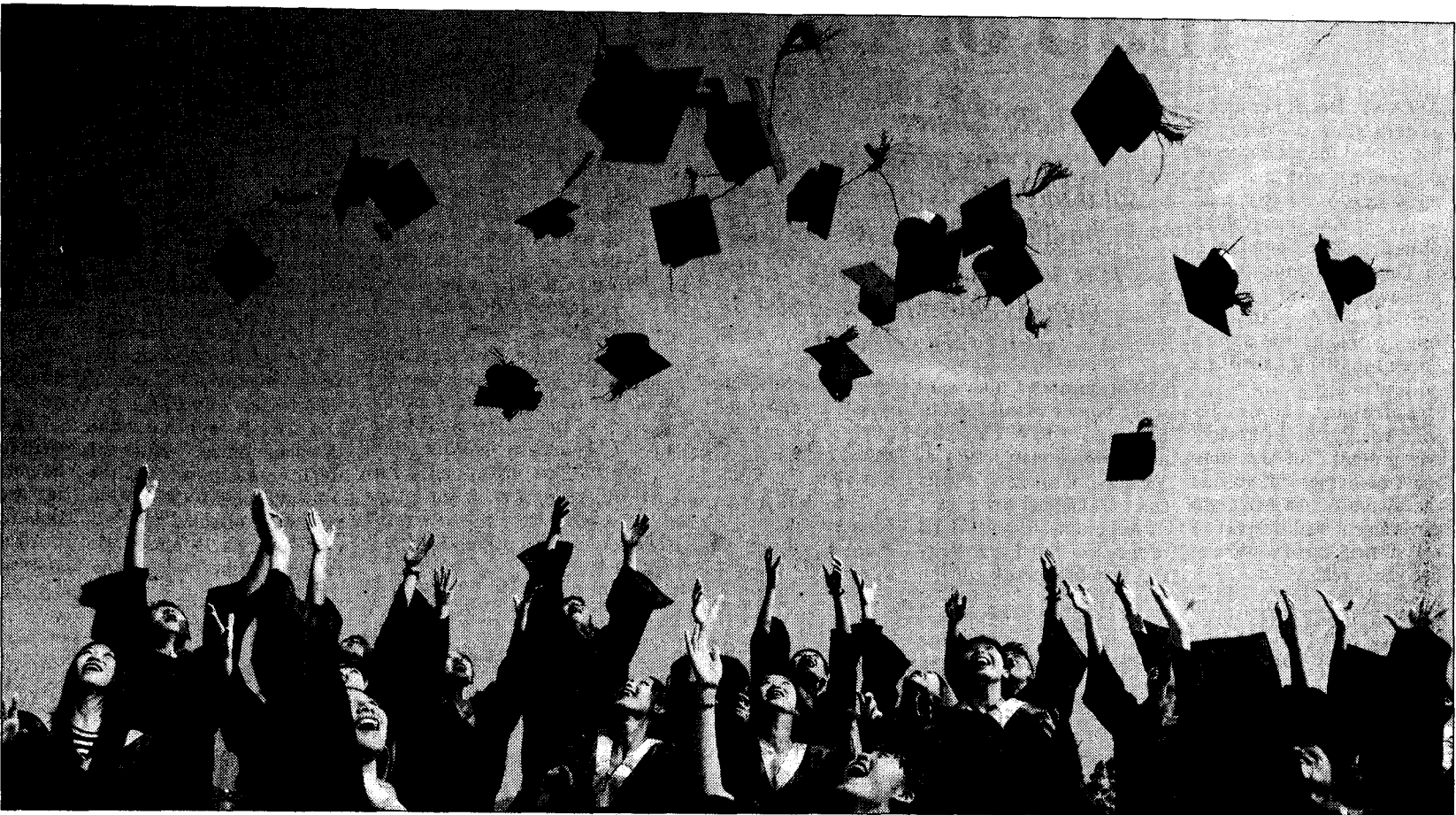
Traditionally, there have been pre-defined pathways, such as family-run businesses or small-scale business establishments, for Indians to get into entrepreneurship. However, tech start-ups have opened up new opportunities and levelled the playing field for anybody with a great idea to set up a business.

Those in the academia, though, are yet to realize the potential of turning their research or discoveries into real world businesses that can have a deeper and greater societal impact. In today's time, you don't need to have a long corporate experience to become an entrepreneur, as long as you have an impactful idea and zeal to convert it into a purposeful enterprise, anyone from anywhere can build a great tech business. For this to happen, India needs to encourage and invest in market-led innovations, powered by new-age technologies such as data analytics, artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning (ML) etc. Getting the academicians on board can make this a rewarding experience, both for the individuals as well as the ecosystem.

Another key gap that needs to be addressed is the gender inequality in entrepreneurship in India. In 2015, only 14 per cent of the patent applications listed women as inventors. Academic entrepreneurship offers a level playing field for female researchers, who account for about 40 per cent of the academic talent pool globally.

All things considered, there's immense opportunity for India to harness the power of academic entrepreneurship to transform the entrepreneurial ecosystem in the country and ride the growth wave.

Is academic entrepreneurship funded enough? If not, why do you



think that is the case?

Tiwary: Academic entrepreneurship is considered a niche subject and not everybody understands the opportunities it presents. At Entrepreneur First, we have a global perspective as we help build start-ups in diverse markets, such as London, Singapore, Berlin, Paris and Toronto in addition to India.

Our experience over the last decade shows that funding is only one part of a startup's success story. The key is to build on the business idea and find the right people to make it a reality. As a technology talent investor, our role is to bring together highly skilled individuals with different areas of expertise to solve specific problems and eventually, create dynamic and innovative companies that otherwise may not have existed! EF acts as the bridge between business and technical experts and thus bringing together the right set of founders to build high potential startups.

COVID-19 has forced a new reality in the teaching and learning space. Your thoughts.

Tiwary: Yes, COVID-19 has upended our lives and forced us to recalibrate our strategies and expectations. It has been, particularly, tough for the educational institutes, given the prolonged uncertainty of the pandemic situation. However, online classes could open up new possibilities for the future, with e-learning becoming more mainstream. The new macroeconomic situation has also led to the opening up of new possibilities for example, the boom in online education has now exposed the need to better track learning ability and retention online, and also improve engagement of online teaching. All these are areas ripe for disruption by new technological businesses.

In the long-term, we need to look at ways to tap into the emerging entrepreneurial potential of India. Educational institutes must be equipped to nurture young talent into ambitious entrepreneurs and to expose students to the potential of entrepreneurship from an early age. Currently, India is home to 38,756 officially-recognised start-ups, including 27 unicorns. It's high time that

we update our conventional understanding of entrepreneurship so that we can create new, exciting career pathways for Indian talent.

How does Ideathon aim to identify and enhance innovation in academia?

Tiwary: With the EF IDEATHON, we are working towards building an ecosystem of budding entrepreneurs who have taken the challenge to move beyond the conventional ways of doing business. It is a unique platform to encourage entrepreneurial thinking of budding entrepreneurs. While the programme is open for all talented individuals across sectors and academicians form a large part of our target group.

The event will provide aspiring entrepreneurs with a platform to showcase their talent and provide innovative, impactful and practical solutions to problems in any industry with a clear plan that leverages tech to create 10x solutions.

Applicants need to submit a problem statement, solution, mar-

ket potential and founder market fit. The shortlisted teams/individuals will be asked to present their submissions to the judges. Apart from a revolutionary idea, participants will need to present wireframe models/mock-ups, websites, working proof of concept (POC), demo videos or any other form of detailed project presentation.

The winners would be announced in December 2020 and there is a total prize of Rs 1.8 lakh up for grabs, along with a fast track application process for Entrepreneur First's next cohort.

Anyone with a technical degree e Btech/MTech/PhD and equivalent.

Preferably, between one to six years of work experience, along with stellar academic and professional background. Graduates from any Indian or foreign university, but must currently be working in India. You can apply individually or together with a team member. A maximum of two participants are allowed in a team. One can register and submit concept note by December 7.

(The author can be contacted at siddhi.j@ians.in)

A room of her own

A middle-aged woman, wife and mother, comfortably settled in a so-called happy family. In this scenario, is the very idea that she wants to live on her own is something of an oxymoron, as in My Happy Family?

Or, take the case of a recent widow who refuses to stick to an image set by society and wants to indulge in her simple fancies thus prove unsettling for the immediate family and society at large, as in Aise Hee?

The two films are from widely divergent locales but the underlying theme has something common - that women who choose to walk a different path even if at a mature age are not looked upon kindly by society dominated by patriarchal values, even if in the 21st century.

In My Happy Family from Georgia, Manana is a 50-year-old scientist, mother of two grown up children, living with a husband apparently dotting on her, and her own parents. The family is jolted out of their comfort zone when Manana announces that she wants to live on her own and has rented a flat in a rather poor neighbourhood. But why? Her own parents accuse her of irresponsibility, her elder brother begs her not to. What a scandal! What will people say? The parents moan at their daughter's mad decision.

The film opens with a birthday party at the house. Manana had told her husband specifically that she did not want to celebrate it. But back from the office she finds he had already invited his friends and the house was raucous with food and drinks. She cannot bring herself to join in the fun which people find difficult to understand.

Directed by Nana Ekvimishvili, the film was screened in the World Cinema Dramatic Competition section of the 2017 Sundance Film Festival (now available on Netflix). The film had its world premiere in the Forum section at the 67th Berlin International Film Festival.

Going against the conventions, stepping out of her organized life bringing many challenges to Manana

In societies set with patriarchal values, middle-aged women trying to chart a life of their own are looked at with suspicion. But some break the norm anyway, as protagonists in two films, one from Georgia and the other from India, show, writes Ranjita Biswas



Still from My Happy Family

but she still does not want to go back to her old home, though she visits it from time to time, in crisis situations too, and has a good relation with her children who seem to empathize better with her 'mad' decision.

When Manana sits on her little balcony, watches a plant grow in a pot she had brought, she finds a kind of serenity which she could not find in her persona as a homemaker. Later, when she finds out that her husband had been cheating on her by then she was living on her own, it affects her no doubt not so much as an aggrieved wife. By now she is content to be on a journey of her own, in quest of an individual inside her. She is at peace with herself - and the world, as she sits in her little balcony.

Back in India, in Allahabad, a recent widow Mrs Sharma (Mohini Sharma) also sits by herself on the balcony of a newly bought flat with

her own money, moving out of her son's (and past husband's house) in Aise Hee (Just Like That), Kislay's debut film. It was screened at the 24th Busan International Film Festival where it received a special mention.

Mrs Sharma's quest for independence, like a butterfly emerging from a chrysalis, starts at over 70 years of age, giving wings to a desire she must have had subconsciously nurtured for long.

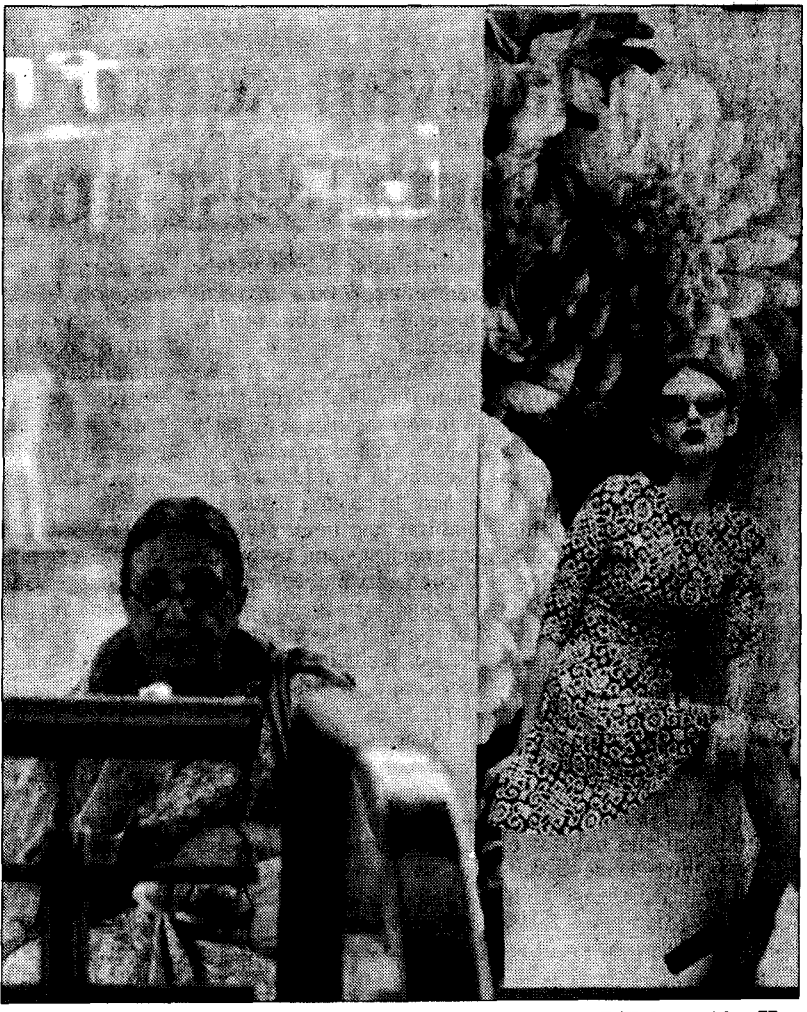
In the process, she rustles quite a few feathers in family and immediate society. Why does she avoid the meditation and exercise sessions in the local park she once dutifully joined along with her departed husband? Why does she want to learn embroidery from 'masterji', the neighbourhood tailor, whose Muslim identity later creates problems? Why does she want to buy red roses for her room? Why does she have to open her own bank account when

she lives with her son and family? Questions, questions. Well, 'just like that'.

The matriarch, always referred to as Mrs Sharma as if her first name disappeared somewhere in the long years of domesticity, constantly has to face enquiring eyes, including from women of her own age, for acts even as innocuous as having an ice-cream in a mall, or visiting a beauty parlour with encouragement of a new friend, a young girl, who works in a salon. It is as if life 'should' stop for women at a certain age and fit in a role that society sketches for her.

This looking for a space of her own as reflected in literature has quite a few instances in modern times (maybe even earlier only it was more subdued). But the search for it continues, even as the world changes outside, for those at home 'comfortably off'.

One remembers Nora in Ibsen's play Doll's House written way back in 1879. Nora Helmer lives like a doll,



Still from Aise Hee

an insipid woman with little show of personality of her own as she tends to her three children and husband, a selfish man. Only later on she realizes that her persona, her own desires, were all submerged in her role as a wife and mother. She rebels at last and walks out - to be on her own, though with many potential, including earning her own livelihood.

"Oh, sometimes I was so tired, so tired. But it was tremendous fun all the same, sitting there working and earning money like that. Almost like being a man," she exults.

Ibsen's portrayal of Nora, and her rebellion in a society deeply enmeshed in conservative values dictating a woman's role in society, has been endlessly discussed and dissected by feminists, social historians, et al.

But the core problem still remains embedded. And when it involves protagonists who are 'past

their prime, it's doubly problematic. Both the directors - Ekvimishvili in the Georgian film and Kislay in the Indian one, tackle the issue of ageing women in society with subtle touches. Their protagonists do not shout from house tops to make their views known but get their own way nonetheless.

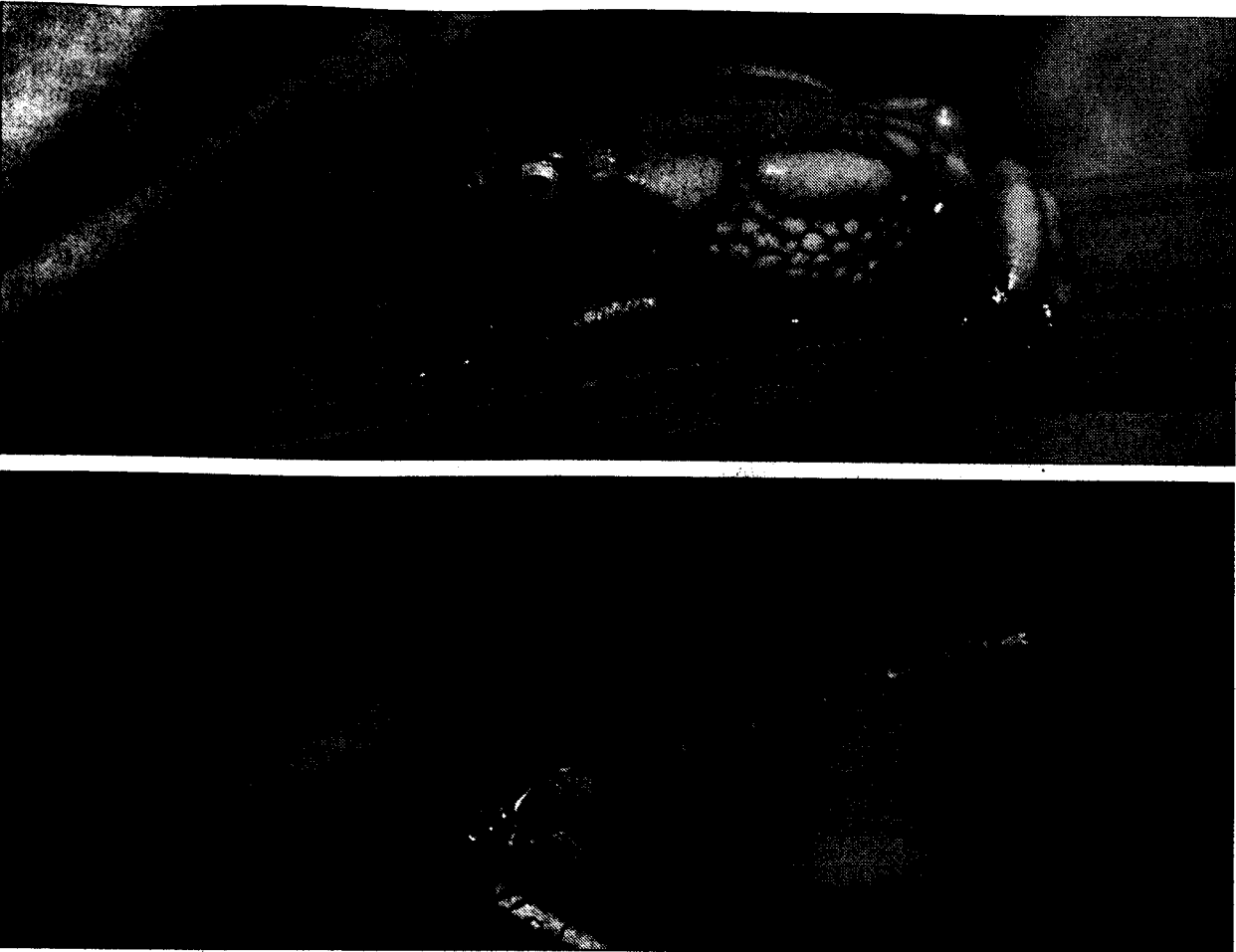
Little touches like Mrs Sharma opting for a flower-printed saree instead of the dull whites and beige that elderly and widows are usually relegated to in middle class families, Manana bringing out her old violin to be repaired, making friends with shopkeepers in the poor neighbourhood she was not used to, reflect on the women's search for freedom.

Manana and Mrs Sharma could well say, 'What's age got to do with it?'

(E-CineIndia magazine / TWF)

(Photos courtesy: Facebook pages of My Happy Family & Aisee Hee)

Guide to wildlife of South India



By Siddhi Jain

Renowned naturalists Surya Ramachandran and David Raju have released their new book 'Photographic Field Guide-Wildlife of South India'. The comprehensive field guide covering all mammals, birds, butterflies, dragonflies, reptiles and amphibians of the six states (Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka, Goa, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana) of South India.

A must have for wilderness enthusiasts, 'Photographic Field Guide - Wildlife of South India' is a window to the rich biodiversity of South India in its own right. It is sure to transform wilderness walks and

safaris and even the way people perceive urban wilderness, starting from one's own balconies and gardens.

The 360-page book covers 1920 species belonging to the six taxa using 1850 photographs contributed by around 280 photographers from India and beyond. It has been designed by MugdhaSethi and edited by Faiza Mookerjee. The book is supported by WWF India and the Muthiah Research Foundation, said a statement about the book.

David Raju works as a naturalist in Central India and has authored a well-regarded field guide on his first love, the dragonflies and damselflies of Kerala, Surya Ramach-

andran used to be a documentary producer and now works as a full-time naturalist. He is currently an ambassador for Swarovski Optik Birding and runs a conservation tourism outfit focussed on snow leopards and other trans-Himalayan fauna in the mountains of Ladakh.

Over the years, the two of them have been invited to conduct many training sessions for park guides, naturalists, wilderness lodges and various forest departments.

The book is a collection of their combined 16 years of experience and knowledge, accumulated over their various explorations.

According to Surya Ramachandran, "As professional wilderness

guides and naturalists, we understand the importance of simplifying and presenting complicated information in a beautiful concise manner. That is essentially what this book is all about a powerful tool for anyone who wishes to explore and better understand the wild corners of the region. It has been three years since we started working on the book and in the end, all we want to do is get back out there and revisit all the wild spaces of South India that inspired us to make this book a reality."

David Raju adds, "The first connect we make with anything we come across, from people we come across to objects and wild denizens, is the process of naming it. This often leads to the building of curiosity, awareness and eventually conservation in some form.

This book is an effort to ensure that the process of initial identification is made easy and plant the seeds of exploration and the need for preservation of our biodiversity."

Field Guides are invaluable tools in the field, which can be used by keen visitors to wildlife parks and guides. The content covers areas like Birds, Mammals, Reptiles, Amphibians and Insects.

This is the second such book by the authors.

Their first book 'The Photographic Field Guide - Wildlife of Central India' was published in 2016 and it aimed to shift the focus of visitors and local guides towards the wilderness as an entity, and not just the mega species.

The book covered 850 species from six taxa and covered all Central Indian landscapes from Ranthambore to Tadoba to the Bundelkand Plateau in the north.

It releases on December 15, 2020. Priced at Rs 1500 in India, it's available at: photofieldguides.com for buyers within India; amazon.com internationally.

(The author can be contacted at siddhi.jain@ians.in)

A biography to warm the heart

The timing couldn't have been more perfect.

"Joe Biden: American Dreamer" (Bloomsbury) is a concise, brilliant and incisive examination of the US President-elect and his lifelong quest for the White House by National Book Award winner and New Yorker staff writer Evan Osnos.

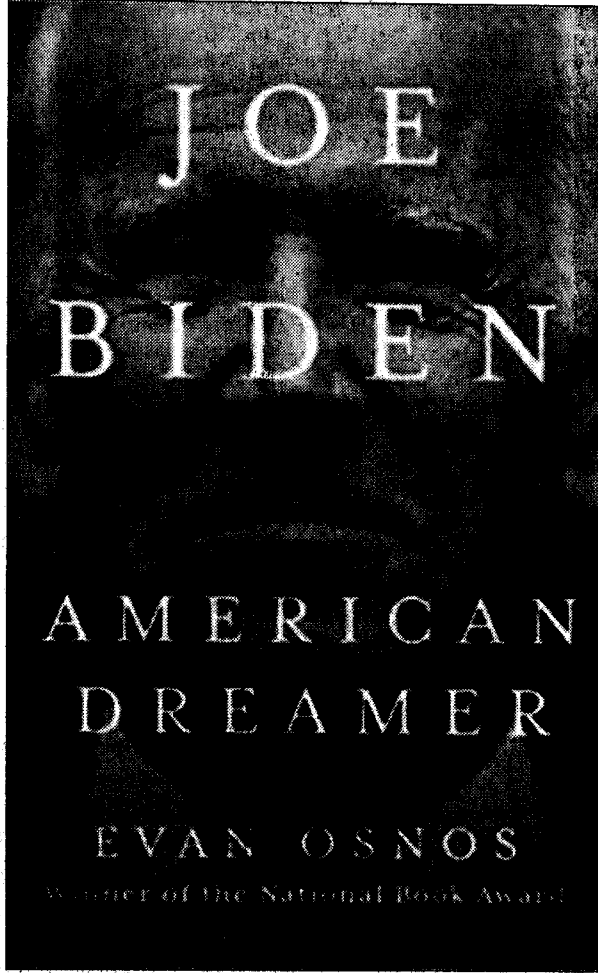
Former Vice President Biden has been called both the luckiest man and the unluckiest — fortunate to have sustained a 50-year political career that reached the White House, but also marked by deep personal losses that he has suffered.

Yet, even as Biden's life has been shaped by drama, it has also been powered by a willingness, rare at the top ranks of politics, to confront his shortcomings, errors and reversals of fortune.

His trials have forged in him a deep empathy for others in hardship — an essential quality as he addresses a nation at its most dire hour in decades.

Blending up-close journalism and broader context, Osnos illuminates Biden's life and captures the characters and meaning of an extraordinary presidential election. He draws on lengthy interviews with Biden and on revealing conversations with more than a hundred others, including former President Barack Obama, Cory Booker, Amy Klobuchar, Pete Buttigieg and a range of writers, activists, advisers, opponents, and Biden's family members.

In this nuanced portrait, Biden emerges as flawed, yet resolute, and tempered by the flame of tragedy — a man who just may be uncannily suited for his moment in history.



Osnos has been a staff writer at the New Yorker since 2008.

His most recent book, "Age of Ambition: Chasing Fortune, Truth, and Faith in the New China", won the National Book Award, among other honours.

Previously, he had reported from China, Iraq and elsewhere for the Chicago Tribune, where he shared a Pulitzer Prize for investigative reporting. He lives with his wife and children in Washington, DC.

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, December 6, 2020

Venus trine Neptune on your solar return chart and it will give amazing results for the whole year. There will be growth in your career/work/business. Money and wealth will keep coming. You will make plans to buy a new residential/commercial property. Additional sources of income can be tapped. You will also take new projects that are in the pipeline. You may also sign some agreements to bring an element of newness in your work. You will get good profit from this. Students will perform well in exams/interviews. They will receive favorable rewards. The results of job-related tests, departmental exams, competitive exams will favor you. You will come up to the expectations of your bosses. You could get involved with a person known to you. It could end up in marriage. Your brother/sister will enjoy your confidence.

Aries: (March 21 - April 20)

You would express yourself with charm and grace, whether it's through what you express verbally or write. This is a cycle of completion and transition. It is a time when we need to let go of things that no longer serve their purpose, and hold on to things that have a future. You would express your sympathetic and compassionate side. The ideas you plant now, will benefit you later. Others might find you less sociable, as you are busier than ever and you focus on your activities and your needs. Still, you are outgoing and your initiative is stronger than ever. You would stand alone, take action and start fresh.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21)

There is perfection and beauty in emotional relationships as you come from a deep and spiritual space within to relate in a new way with your loved one. You display great skill in sports or physical activity that wins you appreciation and brings an opportunity to travel. Beware of a covetous and suspicious person around you who could cause misunderstanding in your personal relationships. Avoid being lazy and laid back as temporary gain or success in business needs to be followed up with hard work and dedication. You desire to learn and improve your practical and creative skills.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21)

You would improve your professional and personal relations, as you express yourself in a gracious and exalted manner. There could be a change in ideas or plans, increase and decrease in finances and fluctuation in business. You can be lead away by enthusiasm unless careful inner balance is maintained. Marriage, business partnership and collaboration are strengthened through understanding and commitment. You are just fair and generous in family and professional situations. Your sense of humor takes you smoothly out of difficult situations.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22)

You are likely to get business and work opportunities from overseas and engage in multiple activities. You may be tempted to spend lavishly on things that make your life more comfortable and pleasant. It is a good time to organize your workplace and make it more efficient and equipped with good infrastructure. You may need to adjust your plan of action. Errors in judgment made now are likely due to impulsiveness and the overlooking of crucial details. You could have so many new ideas that you don't have time to implement.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23)

Realistic levels of optimism and confidence are with you, and you are able to attract fortunate circumstances into your life. Problems are easier to resolve. Your social life will likely increase and bring you in contact with more influential, powerful and helpful people. Matters related to universities, higher education, organized religion, publishing, legal affairs, and foreign interests proceed smoothly. You would be able to see the world around you in practical terms. This is an excellent time to seek advanced training and further your education. Remember to be thankful and humble.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22)

This is a significant time for romantic relationships as you move ahead together. It's a great time to exert your personal influence, as you come across as especially cooperative in your professional and personal life. You desire to learn and improve

your practical skills. New responsibilities are likely to present themselves and you would take them more seriously. You would be able to structure your life and your ambitions. You are now able to discipline yourself. Take this opportunity to structure your life and your goals, and work diligently towards them. Walking and communing with nature can be therapeutic pastimes.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23)

Socializing, romance, and stability are enhanced and in focus. Love, friendship, and relationships are emphasized. You are creative and you succeed in areas that allow you to make something beautiful, attractive, or entertaining. Any artistic or musical talent you have is more prominent. This helps you to stay on track and to meet your responsibilities. Your concern for your future is stronger than usual, and you may find that projects you start, or investments you make, will benefit you for years to come. This period brings joy, understanding and harmony in personal and professional relations.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22)

You may be recognized or rewarded in some way for the efforts you put forth. Because you project a more responsible and credible you, people in authority tend to be more inclined to appreciate you and recognize your work. Practical matters come into strong focus and demand attention. You would achieve success at work and complete projects through interplay of ideas and correlation of subjects since communication is your ability. You could be restless and pay occasional visits to friends and relatives.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21)

You would have positive feelings towards religion and religious people during this phase. You have a passionate nature, although you display self-discipline with people around you. Work and relationships go through a transformation. You may be thrown by certain developments in the family and feel compelled to take a strong stand or things can go out of hand. Complications in financial matters can be expected this week. Avoid confrontations. It's also a good time to break bad habits and start a healthy living routine.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20)

This phase brings confidence, pleasure, involvement, and grace in personal and professional relations. This enhances excellent work opportunities for people in a creative line, marketing, media, show business, consultancy and related fields. Romantic affair and pleasure-seeking activities come into focus. Stick to your regular exercise routine and regular pattern of nutritious diet. Your confidence attracts opportunities and some of you may be promoted or your career could take a new direction.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18)

You would face new circumstances, changes and unfamiliar situations. A positive approach and well-spoken words would benefit and gain favors from people in authority and power. You may take up new assignments and projects that would bring creativity and innovative ideas. Your inner hopes and desires come to the fore even as you tackle your job with a realistic and practical purpose of mind. More loving and appreciative relationships with your children may also figure at this time. This is an especially spiritual time for you—a time when you renew your energy and consider the things that are important to you.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20)

This phase highlights friendship, romance and love in personal relations. Your thoughts turn to children, pleasures and worship during this time. The fine arts are inviting and involving as you channel your creative energy into it. A new person or opportunity leads to renewed interest in creative fields. Fresh attitudes and a new perspective are needed. You give and receive affection and love from friends and relatives. This is a good time to build your skills, get organized and attend to your health and well-being. Children do you proud.

Career preference in Archaeology

By Ranjan K Baruah

Over the years history has been a common subject for students of humanities or social sciences. We have read about history since our school days and this is a subject which is taught everywhere. In our last edition we have published scopes and opportunities related to Museology. Many students have asked me other options related to the same and more focused with history. We must know that there is a difference between mythology, history and archaeology. One of the best options for students who are interested in history may take archaeology as their career choice. It is the study of human activity in the past, primarily through the recovery and analysis of the material culture and environmental data that has been left behind by past human populations, which includes artifacts, architecture, biofacts, cultural landscapes, etc. The word archeology is derived from two Greek words 'archaios' which means ancient things and 'logos' which means theory of science. Archaeology was first put to use by the Romans in the eighteenth century but it was given more accuracy by Heinrich Schliemann who brought to light the origins of Greek civilization.

Archaeology can be one of the rewarding and challenging career opportunities for those who are keen to know about the past. It can give awareness about the heritage and tradition of a country or a culture. It is the scientific and systematic study of past and human cultures through the recovery, analysis and documentation of material remains and environmental data, like architecture, artifacts, features, landscapes and biofacts.

Archaeology is a multidisciplinary science which draws help from geography, history, anthropology, chemistry, geology, art and literature. Those who are involved with the studies of archaeological discoveries are termed as Archaeologists. There are courses related to the same and aspirants may opt for it. Numismatics, epigraphy, archives and mu-



Representational image

seology are the important branches of Archaeology. One needs to spend time to become successful as it needs patience, training and time for research and learning. Courses related to subjects include Advance Diploma in Archaeology and Museology, B.A. Indian History, Culture and Archaeology, M.A. Ancient Indian History, Culture and Archaeology, M.A. Archaeology, etc. Aspirants may join government services or join teaching. There are different opportunities to be in research and other fields.

There are many archaeological sites in the north east and they need trained people. Job options are more with the government sector but aspirants may take up entrepreneurial ventures too related to media and tourism. Apart from qualification it is important to have employability skills to get placement.

ASI: The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), under the Ministry of Culture, is the premier organization

for the archaeological research and protection of the cultural heritage of the nation. Maintenance of ancient monuments and archaeological sites and remains of national importance is the prime concern of the ASI. Besides it regulates all archaeological activities in the country as per the provisions of the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act, 1958. The organization has a large work force of trained archaeologists, conservators, epigraphist, architects and scientists for conducting archaeological research projects through its Circles, Museums, Excavation Branches, Prehistory Branch, Epigraphy Branches, Science Branch, Horticulture Branch, Building Survey Project, Temple Survey Projects and Underwater Archaeology Wing.

(The author is a career mentor and skill trainer and can be reached at 8473943734 or bkrnanjan@gmail.com)

“There is nothing permanent except change.”

--- Heraclitus

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No. 112SHILLONG, MONDAY, DECEMBER 7, 2020

Politics, farmers

IT would sound curious that the unions of farmers have called a Bharat Bandh on Tuesday even as their discussions with the government on the contentious aspects of the farm reforms legislation are continuing, not stalled or halted. While the farmers’ unions have claimed they are apolitical and issues were more important to them, the week-long agitation is acquiring a political colour. Admirable is the fact that the farmer leaders are holding this agitation in a peaceful manner for the past several days. If farmers have problems, their unions have all the freedom to take it up and make every lawful effort to get them solved. At the same time, if the agitation acquires a political colour, that will be to the disadvantage of the farmers. Notably, over 50 unions of transport operators too have jumped into the fray and announced they would participate in the Bharat Bandh in a fraternal spirit for a brotherly cause. This would ensure that the nation will be paralysed for the duration of the bandh. To add steam to the anti-government campaign, the Congress, the Left and the TRS too have expressed their support to the bandh call. More opposition parties are bound to join the pro-farmer protests and hold the government to ransom.

The farmer unions are set to continue their talks with the government on Wednesday. The government has made it clear it has an open mind and is ready to accommodate the genuine grievances, if any, as regards the farm reforms. This is the right spirit on condition that the government is sincere in this commitment. These are difficult times for the nation. The past eight months of the Covid sweep of the nation, as also the world, has turned the economy upside down. So many man-days have been lost due to the shutdown of the nation and the iterations of lockdowns that followed. It is worth considering whether a Bharat Bandh, or more such protests in the coming days that will further hit the national economy, is advisable. Farmers are already proving a point by the blockade they effected on capital Delhi in the past several days. The railway freight services were also affected in the northern region, costing the Railways hefty sums, because of this blockade. On the positive side, the Modi government is handling the situation with patience. Yet, a long drawn-out agitation of this kind is bound to cause hardships to the nation. It is important that all sides conduct themselves more responsibly; more so in these days of Covid pandemic.

TO THE EDITOR

ILP - an outdated colonial law

Editor,

The Inner Line Permit a colonial law made by the British to protect their business interests but sold as a law to protect the identity, culture and traditions of the tribes from various outside "influences" has again become a hot topic. With every passing week some demand or other is made by pressure groups and political parties. The contention of the Union Government that Meghalaya is a 'transit' state and tourism is the backbone of the economy is an over-statement. The state falls under the purview of the Sixth Schedule with checks and balances drawn from the Constitution that empowers local governance at the grassroots through the Autonomous District Councils (ADCs). It is therefore upon the ADCs to see that the Meghalaya Land Transfer Act is not violated. However, the LTA has in fact been violated and this law is just a paper tiger that cannot be implemented in true spirit. A classic example is that of

Jaintia Hills and West Khasi Hills with mushrooming cement plants, brick kilns, charcoal and coke units. How is the LTA working here? Now, obviously when the work force isn't available the intrusion of cheap labour will always be an issue which the ILP will not be able to prevent. We have the State Land Transfer Act and along with this is a pending Land Bill in KHADC and the Khasi Lineage Bill that is gathering dust. These are the foremost instruments that can prevent outside intrusion rather than have a Colonial Act which doesn't stand justification in the Indian Republic after independence.

Yours etc.,
Dominic Stadlin
Wankhar
Shillong-3

ADCs are white elephants

Editor,

The article by Albert Thyrniang appearing in The Shillong Times on Nov 11, 2020 is a frank and transparent analysis of the very existence and continuation of the 3 ADC's in Meghalaya. They are at best described as "white elephants".

ADCs in Meghalaya at the Crossroads

By HH Mohrmen

The President of the state unit of the BJP has recently upped the party's ante especially on charges of corruption against the two Autonomous District Councils in the State. There is a saying in the local parlance, 'Ki sla dieng kim ju khih khlem ka jingbeh ka lyer' which means the leaves on the trees will not move if there is no wind. The charges are not unfounded and therefore the function of the two district councils needs re-examining.

When the staff of one the ADCs has not received their salary for more than nine months and the employees in another Council have not been paid for almost two years, then the members of the ADCs and the State Government needs to take a hard look at the affairs of the two Councils. The people of Meghalaya, particularly those who are active in the District Council Affairs need to do an in-depth introspection on what has gone wrong with the two ADCs. Since the elections to the ADCs are also contested on the basis of party politics, the political parties too are to be blamed for the state of affairs in the two ADCs. The question that begs the answer is what has brought the two ADCs to this sad stalemate.

The Sixth Schedule of the Constitution prescribes that the subject of allotment, occupation or use, or the setting apart, of land, except land which is a reserved forest for the purposes of agriculture or grazing or for residential or other non-agricultural purposes or for any other purpose is a District Council subject. The Council is also empowered to manage any forest within its jurisdiction except the reserved forests. And apart from the rivers, the use of canal or water courses for the purpose of agriculture is also a District Council subject. But why are all our rivers in such bad shape? What have the ADCs done to protect and preserve the rivers in the state?

The power to establish village or town committees or councils and the appointment and succession of Chiefs or Headmen is entrusted with the District Councils. The matter relating to tradition which includes inheritance

of property; marriage and divorce; social customs are also subjects under the purview of the District Councils. But almost all the ADCs have done precious little in this regard and the young people today cannot distinguish between the indigenous and the alien culture.

For example a friend had pointed out on social media, that young people did not realise that the concept of Adam's rib is a foreign idea which is predominantly an Abrahamic religion concept. In the Pnar tradition marriages comprise of three major stages which include 'Kyllad kurim, 'ka e Synjat Lator' or engagement, and 'ka lam-utang' or marriage. The tribals also have tradition of divorce 'ka pynlait san shyieng' or 'i pynleit kurim' in Pnar which includes 'i e thnem or e chipiah' which is an accepted symbol of separation between husband and wife. Divorce is an accepted norm and there is a tradition in place which has to do with this practice, and 'till death do us apart' is also a borrowed idea.

Perhaps this also is the reason why the concept of registering of marriages is not practiced by the people who follow traditional religion. The ADCs have only issued license to the marriage registrar of different Christian denominations as per the existing laws, however no license was issued to register marriages amongst the followers of the traditional religion. It was only recently that the Daloi and other religious heads of the Traditional religion were authorised to register marriages in their respective communities.

Customary practices in the area under the jurisdiction of the ADC have not even been documented and considering the rate at which people convert to Christianity, the fear is that it will be too late by the time ADCs decide to do so. The need to at least have these traditional practices documented before they disappear from the face of the earth is very urgent and important.

The ADCs not only have the powers to establish primary schools in areas under their jurisdictions but

they can also establish, construct, dispensaries, markets, and in some cases look after fisheries, roads, road transport and waterways. Sadly due to the Council's own mishandling of the important subject, management and administration of the Lower Primary Schools in the state has now been taken over by the State Education department.

The Councils were empowered to assess and collect land revenue and to impose taxes but they have failed in this front too. The classic case in point is when agricultural land is allowed to be transferred from 'Patta Hali' which is used for rice cultivation to land holding for non agriculture activities. Such lands were converted to residential area especially those on the banks of or near the rivers. The outcome of such act is as what has happened along the Wahumkhray River is also the subject of the District Council but they have not come up with mechanisms to protect the catchment areas and restrict the construction of any structures on the banks or near the river.

The ADCs are also empowered to issue licences or leases for the purpose of extraction of minerals and the share of the royalties collected each year from licences or leases are shared between the ADCs and the State Government. Earlier royalty was collected by the ADCs but again for reasons best known to the two parties, the State Government took over the responsibility of collecting the same and shared the accrued royalty with the ADCs at its whims and fancy. The District Councils were also empowered with the authority to regulate and control money-lending and trading by non-tribals, but more often than not this authority is used as a means of earning revenue for the Councils.

The major issue which is also a contention that many MDCs have, is paragraph 12A which also hangs like a Damocles sword over the Councils' neck. This is related to the application of the Acts of Parliament and of the Legislature of the State of Meghalaya to

autonomous districts. Para 12(A) says 'notwithstanding anything in the Constitution, if any provision of a law made by a District in the State of Meghalaya is repugnant to any provision of a law made by the Legislature of the State of Meghalaya, then, the law or regulation made by the District Council shall be void and the law made by the Legislature of the State of Meghalaya shall prevail.'

The law mandates that the ADCs shall have to constitute a District Fund for each autonomous district but the reason that the two ADCs in the state are in financial distress is of their own making. It was in the last State Level Audit Advisory Board (SLAAB) meeting that the members were informed that the books of accounts of the two Councils have not been audited for almost a decade now.

The ADCs particularly those of the Garo and Jaintia Hills are in the news on a regular basis but sadly, for all the wrong reasons. The state of affairs in both the Jaintia Hills Autonomous District Council and the Garo Hills Autonomous District Council has caused undue hardship to the staff who have not received the salaries due to them for almost two years. When Garo Hills ADC has failed to pay the staff salary for almost twenty months, the question is how can the Government even consider holding elections to the Council where it will have to spend few crores of rupees to do the same?

Nothing is perfect and the same goes for the ADCs. They have not been able to perform as was mandated by the law, but the existence of the Councils is crucial for the local people of the state. Although a lot has change and society has evolved but the relationship between the people and the land is still a very crucial aspect of their lives. Protecting and preserving the vestiges of culture and traditions of the people is another important matter. The need of the hour is for the State to help the two ADCs come out of the red and transform the important institution for posterity.

h h m o h r m e n 6 7
@gmail.com

Society's moral test and how we treat people with disabilities

By Dr M R Rajagopal

December 3 marked the International Day for Persons with Disabilities. We see a host of coverage on issues that are otherwise not brought to our notice, or concerns we don't even know we should care about. This is the significance of having a day devoted internationally to an issue. But the day has passed. Beyond customary announcements or token actions, we must ask in a lasting manner how we, as a society, treat people with disabilities and what needs to be done so that they can continue to live a meaningful life with dignity and respect.

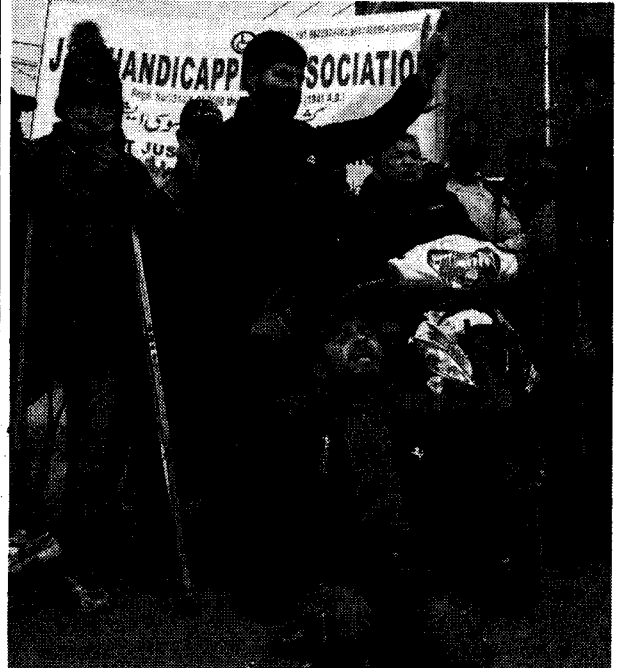
On December 3, like on any other day, I took a one-hour walk just as the world was waking up. Despite the growing traffic, an occasional blaring horn and the noisy loud speakers in places of worship, I could hear the birds singing and could feel the world.

But I know that this is a temporary state of affairs for me. A day will come when I will no longer be able to move around like this. Like everyone else, I also have

is so expensive!' Do I really mean it? And I withdraw, not only from the course; but also farther away from life into a shell deep inside me that I did not know existed.

I would lie there stripped of the right even to feel sad. And I would lie there wondering why the world around me assumes that I am useless because I cannot walk. Why are they no longer involving me in family discussions? In decision making? In child care? Why would I want to exist if I am no longer needed? If I am to be just another not-too-beautiful vegetable rotting in a room at the back?

Add to all this the numerous physical ailments that may follow because the family has not been educated in my care and because nobody bothered to advise them about the right kind of bed that would prevent pressure sores on my back. Or because no one took the trouble to offer me the choice of intermittent 'catheterisation of bladder which would avoid those deadly urinary infections. And all this because of the callousness of a health care



only about 10% chance of dying a sudden death. The greater likelihood is that before I leave this world, I would be bed bound and possibly dependent on a wheelchair for mobility for a period of time.

By the fundamental rights enshrined in our constitution, I believe I have a right to live with dignity even at that time. But I would not have the strength to fight for those rights. I can enjoy my rights only if the world around me accepts that those living with major disabilities have rights too. Granting me life with dignity would mean giving me the opportunity to be part of this world. It means that those around me treat me without the cruel love that makes them say, 'Why do you want to get on to a wheelchair? We shall bring whatever you need over here. Just rest'.

I can, at that time, enjoy any freedom of movement only if I have access to the courtyard or the landing in front of my house and out on to the sidewalks. This would necessitate a ramp to wheel my life out of the confines of my home. But practical difficulties would lie in my way. We do not have all that much space in front of my house. Apartments are anyway getting more compact as India grows.

No one can gauge the earthquake brewing deep inside me as I realise that my life does not really amount to anything much to anyone anymore. Family members and the children don't really mean to say that my life is less important but that's the way it feels to me. Never again do I demand a ramp.

And if some day, I school myself to think positive, get all excited about something and want to enrol myself on an online course, someone may look at the brochure and exclaim, 'Oh God. This

system which has not included rehabilitation as a major element of health care in our country.

A doctor who sees me may wonder whether I am in depression. No one is likely to sit down beside me, lay a hand on my arm and ask, "You look sad. Would you like to talk about it?"

I have been talking about the eventuality of a disability that will happen to 90% of us at old age. But that picture is not complete. And now imagine this happening to the lakhs of young people in India who get paralysed below the waist because of road accidents, falls from construction sites or trees or road accidents. For them the problems are not just for a few months or a few years, but a whole lifetime!

We do not need a lot of money to make lives liveable for them. We only need the recognition that health care is truly 'physical, social and mental well-being and not only absence of disease or infirmity' as defined by WHO. If we do, we will learn to make rehabilitation an essential part of that healthcare system. The first requirement is to make our minds accessible to them, then our homes, then the sidewalks and finally our automobiles.

As Hubert Humphrey said, "The moral test of a society is how that society treats those who are in the dawn of life...the children; those who are in the twilight of life...the elderly; and those who are in the shadows of life...the sick, the needy, and the handicapped".

(Dr. M R Rajagopal is the Chairman of Pallium India and Director, Trivandrum Institute of Palliative Sciences, a WHO Collaborating Centre for Training and Policy on Access to Pain Relief) (Through Foundation of The Billion Press) (e-mail: editor@thebillionpress.org)

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.

Freedom of speech is freedom above all
to say those whose views you dislike most."

— Peter Hitchens

The Shillong Times

Issue 1111 No.114 SHILLONG, WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 9, 2020

New Parliament Complex

With the Supreme Court giving its nod to the Manipuri for the new Parliament Building on December 10, the last word on the Central Vista project is still pending with the court. The Centre must proceed aggressively with the construction and the court takes a final view on the petitions filed before it by environmentalists and others. It is to be assumed that the court will not delay the matter for too long.

With nod for a constituency delimitation process pending for long, it is for the Centre to have it done at the earliest so that justice could be done to the people's representation; meaning the states with a larger population bulge over the years must require to have more members in the Lok Sabha. States where population has dwindled over the years might not necessarily lose the existing strength. This would mean the Lok Sabha requiring an additional seating capacity of about 300. The Centre has referred to this requirement while the case came up for hearing; and that 888 seats have been planned out for the lower house in the proposed building against the present LS strength of 543. Similarly, with Rajya Sabha too.

Having come this far, the Modi government is bound to persist with the completion of the project in two years' time, coinciding with the 75th anniversary of Indian Independence. Erecting a new parliament house would also mean the BJP planning this out in a manner that befits its ideological concerns and political agenda. For instance, if a Congress government does this instead, it will prominently have the stamp of the Nehru family legacy. The BJP government can be trusted to downplay this. The present objections, though, are mainly in relation to environmental concerns, the loss of precious greenery, the strain on resources, the likely traffic congestion for the area etc.

The design for the new parliament building looks impressive. The rest can be left to the imagination unless details are provided to us. The present parliament building has a special design, grandeur and dignity. It is unique in style and imposing in its appearance. Hope is that the new building too will match with the expectations of the modern generation and stand out as a showpiece with more amenities. The Central Vista project also involves a residence for the Prime Minister and Vice President as also space for offices on a larger scale.

The larger question at this time, however, is whether India can afford this multi-crore project when the country is passing through an economic downturn.

And they lived happily ever after

By Toki Blah

The demand for the Inner Line Permit (ILP) system for the whole of Meghalaya is the most stringent demand resounding all over the state today. The demand for an influx regulating mechanism has always been there and various mechanisms, aside from the ILP, had been proposed, discussed and examined as Meghalaya, its politicians and its pressure groups, probed and searched for the best possible option. The peculiar nature and strategic location of Meghalaya within the political setup of the NE was not lost sight of in these debates. Then came the Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019 and everything changed overnight. The threat of influx was no longer limited to the shadowy confines of stealthy illegal immigration from across the border but suddenly became an uncluttered stark reality, encouraged and abetted by the Law of the land itself. That's how the indigenous people of Meghalaya saw it and the inclusion of Manipur within the protective umbrella of the ILP only helped raised the pertinent question, "if it's good enough for Manipur why shouldn't it be good for us too?" A Pandora's box has opened ever since. One hopes that the Centre has the bandwidth of statesmanship to deal with the problem but frankly speaking it is a distant hope.

Let us within the framework of this essay assume that Meghalaya will be granted the ILP. What then? Placing emotional enthusiasm aside, one has to accept that things then will no longer be the same as before. An element of change with the potential to impact on the social, political, cultural and economic aspect of life would have been introduced into the system. The day to day lives of all the inhabitants of Meghalaya, irrespective of race, creed or ethnicity, will then have to flow along and adapt with this change. So as we clamour and demand for the ILP a question arises. Do we have a plan of action; a vision; a forethought as to what to do in the event of our ILP demands being fulfilled? Has a road map for the future been prepared? It is not without reason that a few discerning voices have also been heard asking about the future of a post ILP Meghalaya. Asking such

questions is not to oppose the ILP but simply a recognition of the fact that life must go on despite whatever happens and that we have to prepare for it. The onus for such preparations will of course fall on the shoulders of political parties and politicians or those with the pretensions of being leaders of the state and its people. Of concern therefore is the absence of any preparation for such an eventuality. With the ILP, the self proclaimed saviours of the state would have achieved their objective but why this dearth of futuristic and visionary political leadership? It reflects poorly on those elected to power.

The unanimous resolution of the Meghalaya Assembly in its demand for the ILP is a clear indication that cutting across the political chess board, everyone is deeply apprehensive and concerned over the demographic mischief that the CAA is in all likelihood capable of introducing into the state and the region as a whole. It was realised that the ILP is the only protective mechanism available against such tomfoolery. This realisation should however be accompanied by the understanding that our ethno-political survival also needs to be supported by a robust and viable economic environment. Political self determination requires to be accompanied by self sustaining economic viability. One is incomplete without the other. Question is—does this combination exist in Meghalaya? Exploiting our coal and limestone resources has simply created wealth for a few without changing the fortunes of most. 80 % of the population are agrarian while this sector continues to crawl at 2% growth rate. Any pretext at industrial activity without the support of Central subsidies is unthinkable. Employment for our youth is still Government service oriented which now has reached saturation point. 48 years down the line as a state we are still dependent on New Delhi's largesse for our economic survival. Even after 48 years of political self determination through statehood there is hardly anything new or exciting in the economic sphere to contribute to the GDP of the state. For 48 years we fo-

cused on political development alone. Economic development was kept in the backburner. Today our roads, highways and bridges are going kaput faster than we can repair them. The civic infrastructure of our cities have fallen into rapid disrepair. Our education system has more or less collapsed. Our health care system is on the verge of crumbling. The only visible growth is the growing number of incompetent politicians. With statehood we miserably failed to relate the significance of economic development and infrastructure development with the overall growth of society. Can we say we are paying the price for this oversight?

At this point one's attention is drawn to an emerging enterprise which has been hailed as the most promising for job creation and income generation for our hilly landlocked state. Yes, we speak of the potential of Meghalaya tourism, an industry which has been identified as capable of meeting the economic expectations of both urban and rural areas. It was an activity beginning to bloom. Investments, largely private and thrillingly local were beginning to flow into this sector, albeit with rising concerns of its negative impact on the ecology and fragile eco-systems arising mainly out of the type and kind of tourists we were attracting. Expectations of a new dawn were however on the rise. Even a staid and unimaginative administration was beginning to take notice. Unfortunately the Corona pandemic has nipped this budding business in the bud but with luck this will be a temporary setback. Expressions have also been raised that the introduction of the ILP would prove to be an impediment to the growth and development of Meghalaya tourism. Perhaps, but again perhaps not. Perhaps the ILP would be a golden opportunity to curtail the entry of busloads of monkey capped visitors who hardly contribute to the economy of the state and who instead are the main contributors to tourism related traffic jams and pollution. Perhaps the ILP would be the opportunity to introduce high-end, low volume - high value tourism, the likes of which prevail in Bhutan and Sikkim. Tourists who then come will be visi-

tors willing and capable of not only spending but also conscious of their environmental responsibilities, for in the final analysis that's what sustainable tourism is all about.

Then there are those who sincerely believe that with the implementation of the ILP all of us will live happily ever after. Sorry to be a wet blanket but nothing can be further from the truth. We witnessed the same "No Hill State, No rest" euphoria during the Hill State movement. We got our hill state but look at the sorry plight we are now in. One has to accept the truth and admit that influx is not the only threat that Meghalaya faces. ILP or no ILP, these threats will continue to grow as long as we the people and the politicians we elect continue to ignore reality. Landlessness is now a reality which is bad news for a state whose identity is linked with community ownership over land. Where the Land Transfer Act is supposed to prevent the alienation of tribal land but where it's District Councils turn a blind eye to a land grab by the tribal rich at the expense of the tribal poor. Poverty is on the rise in Meghalaya. The BPL census 2002 shows a staggering 48.90% incidence of poverty (Meghalaya Human Development Report 2008). God only knows but with the onset of the Corona pandemic and the recession in livelihood options, the Meghalaya incidence of poverty must by now have shot up to the high heavens. The gap between the rich and the poor is increasing and this again is bad for a community that loves to showcase egalitarianism as the centre piece of its culture.

Government after government throughout the years has shunned the concept of good governance. Governance as we once knew it has all but disappeared. Others are aware of this and that is why investments into the state are so hard to come by. In the process Meghalaya has gradually deteriorated to join the other bimar (sick) states of the NE. The ILP might save us from outsider infiltration. Yet what we should truly be worried about is how do we save ourselves from ourselves?

E m a i l :
toki@neline.com

After ILP what?

By Wankitbok Pohshna

It's exactly a year since the 60 MLAs passed a resolution in the august house that Meghalaya should be brought under the ILP regime since the Citizenship Amendment Act was passed by both houses of parliament. The special session of the Assembly was convened as pressure was mounted on the government from several pro-ILP groups. While the assembly debated the ILP, thousands of protestors gathered outside the streets to impress upon the MLAs to pass the resolution come what may. The assembly must have certainly deliberated on the matter, following which the MLAs to consensually passed the resolution for implementing ILP in Meghalaya as the only means to safeguard our tribal identity and indigenous culture in this vast nation.

Ironically the same Assembly had never used the same yardstick when the authority of traditional bodies' was questioned by the High Court of Meghalaya. No discussion was even brought to the assembly on subject related to the grassroots system of governance which is the first contact point when it comes to issues like influx etc. Except that such similar session was only convened by the KHADC to pass the Village Administration Bill (VAB) which never could see the light of day. No doubt in the advent of CAA, many have argued that ILP was the only tool, since our identity was at stake as post CAA will bring in unabated influx. But this agenda was never debated at length except by demands put forth in public meetings led by various groups. It has also reached a point that the Sixth Schedule and Land Transfer Act are regarded as failed laws and their inability to tackle core issues of our 'Jaitbynriew' when it comes to protectionism.

We are soon turning 50 years as a tribal state and our so called leaders are still of the opinion that we are an endangered species. Hence who has failed who should be the point of debate. Now exactly a year after, just like an anniversary occasion, we see some MLAs from the Opposition urging the Government that an all-party meeting should be called to discuss at length on the demand for ILP and that groups should also be taken on board. The million dollar question is what had they discussed in the special session of the Assembly? Why were they party to the resolution passed when they were in doubt all this while? While the leader of the Opposition is all praise for the MRSSA passed during his regime, those who have gone through the Act will agree that it can be effective if there is a fool-proof mechanism to check on doubtful residents at the grassroots. The MRSSA if implemented in letter and spirit will tackle the issue of influx appropriately. The Government should have ensured that this act is made applicable in every nook and corner of the state but as usual this Act too reached the Governor's office to not return with the assent. But most MLAs till date are unaware of which law is better when it comes to tackling influx - ILP or Resident's Act? The state itself is in doubt with an Act on the one hand and a Resolution on the other for the very same purpose of protecting our race. Perhaps if at all such demands are met, Meghalaya will become the first state in the country with its tribal identity, the Sixth Schedule, the MRSSA and the ILP, all with the same purpose and intent - to protect - but from whom?

As a citizen of the State who has thoroughly observed the entire episode of anti-CAB protest and ILP

demand since 2013, I can surely conclude that the problem here is not which law is better to protect our identity, our race or our culture. The problem lies with our representatives and their fickle minded attitude and their readiness to come under pressure whenever time warrants them to be. As representatives they have surely failed to uphold their duty as enshrined in the Constitution. They are less of legislators and more of agitators in the least literal sense. Not all stakeholders were taken on board when the Resolution was passed in the Assembly that Meghalaya needs ILP, and after CAB became CAA with riders that the Sixth Schedule areas have been exempted. The matter is being politicized and misinterpreted instead, and the normal area is being made the bone of contention. The MLAs are silent to speak on the exceptions that the CAA speaks of; they are playing to the gallery instead of performing a constructive role in the interest of the state as a whole.

The article 'What if the ILP doesn't work' by Patricia Mukhim has enlightened not just what impact the ILP will have on the state especially in job creation and the economic disparity that will follow if such a regime is introduced.

Now let's turn to our public representatives. What assurance do they have that ILP is the only tool which would protect the tribes of Meghalaya from invasion etc? Since invasion is the only language they use when speaking publicly, no other word fits here. As representatives how do they define Protectionism? Who do they represent the people or the pressure groups? With the pandemic experience at hand aren't our so called MLAs aware that those who had returned to the state since March are either jobless or clueless. Many hostels are shut and those running them are in despair. Aren't they aware that tourism industry is collapsing no matter how much the Government is claiming to boost this industry? The local economy is cold as footfalls from students/day tourists are almost negligible. Some may argue that the pandemic is the cause of the dwindling footfalls, but the Covid-19 situation could as well be taken as an eye opener.

As the saying goes the poor becomes poorer while the rich gets mightier is true when the system tries to justify such irresponsible actions of judging the book just by its cover. I'm sure the MLAs are more busy thinking of 2023 rather than resolving reasonable issues at hand such as unemployment, health, grassroots governance and many more. Did they take their constituents on board when such a contentious permit regime was proposed to be imposed into the system? Is there a concrete database of exactly what is the source of local economy that runs the daily lives of many in the state, not accounting only the lives of politicians, businessmen, group leaders and govt servants? Will the ILP regime not cause a glitch to the flow of normal activities in the state? Will the ILP not affect the future economic condition of the state and its people in general?

The system cannot be biased just because one side is of the opinion that ILP is the only mechanism and that we shall be free from all apprehensions if it is implemented. Politicians should make their stand clear to the people they represent in general and not play second fiddle just to satisfy the agitated lot.

E m a i l :
wankitbokpohshna@gmail.com

TO THE EDITOR

ANEIGRIHMS ailing its students and doctors

Editor,
This is to bring to your notice that there is a grave situation developing in the ANEIGRIHMS Campus, Nongstangdiang. For a time period of almost one month there is no electricity in the ANEIGRIHMS hostels and there is no drinking water in the ANEIGRIHMS Medical Officers Quarters (PMO-H). The Administration is turning a blind eye to the requirements of the COVID-19 warriors of the state who have toiled in this cold weather for the welfare of the general public. No action has been taken from the administration in this matter till date. Students are unable to attend their examinations and are not being able to attend even their daily classes. Due to power failure in the MBBS Hostels, students are now forced to study in biting cold without heaters and proper drinking water. Even the mobile phones and laptops are rendered useless as a result.
I urge on the ANEIGRIHMS Administration to take a premier insti-

tute and such lack of basic amenities to the ones who are serving the public without a second thought?

There have been instances of posters being pasted all over the campus by the doctors but the Deputy Director, Mr David T Umdor who is responsible for these matters remains unavailable even if he is in his office.

Please help us put pressure on the administration side. Only if the media reports such things will the Administration pay heed to our suffering.

Yours etc.,
ANEIGRIHMS Doctor,
Name withheld on request,
Via email

Joyride to Delhi!

Editor,
Whatever be the urgency that needs to be addressed by the Government of Meghalaya in consultation with the Government of India, I believe carting all the 60 MLAs to Delhi is a waste of time and of the state's meager revenue. At best the CM, the HM and the Leader of the Opposition may make the trip to Delhi. This suggestion of taking along all the 60 legislators is a ridiculous idea

and is perceived more of a Christmas outing for little children.

Proper governance is required and not to give in to the whims and fancies of the MLAs. This is very poor judgment and it should not happen.

Yours etc.,
Tyrone D'Brass
Tura

Will the DC intervene?

Editor,
Under the Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) scheme, the Government provides subsidy on 12 LPG cylinders to every household in a year. However, most localities like Kench's Trace, Howell Road and Harisabha area of Greater Laban haven't received their full quota of 12 subsidized cylinders in the current year. In Harisabha area households will get their seventh cylinder if there is another supply of refill cylinders in this last month of the current year. So, M/s Longkmie Gas Agency, where are the remaining five subsidized cylinders that the residents of Harisabha are entitled, too? It is going to be fifty days since the delivery of the last refilled LPG cylinders in Harisabha. Similarly, in

Kench's Trace, Howell Road and other localities of Greater Laban, which fall under M/s Longkmie Gas Agency. The number of delivered refill cylinders varies between six and seven, that is, one in every two months. Where are the domestic, subsidized refilled LPG cylinders of gullible customers ending up then? Which force is working behind the scenes and gulping up LPG cylinders in connivance with the gas agency?

In all these localities, it is seen that the said gas agency has wilfully delivered refilled cylinders at a gap of sixty days, instead of thirty days, leaving customers high and dry. One can easily see the wilful ploy of M/s Longkmie Gas Agency here which is depriving customers of their annual quota by a whopping fifty percent. Now, why should customers like us not suspect whether our quota of cylinders are ending up in the black market? The East Khasi Hills District Administration must look into the matter and see that the remaining five/six refilled LPG cylinders are delivered to the customers of Greater Laban from the godown of M/s Longkmie Gas Agency and also ensure that there is no foul

play by the said gas agency.
Yours etc.
BC Paul
Shillong - 4

X'Mas or Christmas?

Editor,
Christmas is also sometimes known as X'mas. Some people don't think it's correct to call Christmas X'mas as that takes the 'Christ' (Jesus) out of Christmas. Christmas comes from Christ-Mass, the Church - the bride of Christ that celebrated the birth of Jesus.

But that is not quite right according to ecclesiology! In the Greek language and alphabet, the letter that looks like an X is the Greek letter chi / ? (pronounced 'khi' - it rhymes with 'eye') which is the first letter of the Greek word for Christ, "Christos".

The early church used the first two letters of "Christos" in the Greek alphabet 'chi' and 'rho' to create a monogram (symbol) to represent the name of Jesus. This looks like an X with a small p on the top.

The symbol of a fish is sometimes used by Christians (One might see a fish sticker on a car or someone wearing a little fish badge). This comes from the time

when the first Christians had to meet in secret, as the Romans wanted to kill them (before Emperor Constantine became a Christian). Jesus had said that he wanted to make his followers 'Fishers of Men', so people started to use that symbol.

When two Christians met, one person drew half a basic fish shape (often using their foot in the dust on the ground) and the other person drew the other half of the fish. The Greek word for fish is 'Ikthys' or 'Ichthys'. There are five Greek letters in the word. It can also make up a sentence of Christian beliefs 'I-e-sous Christos Theou Huios So-te-r' which in English means "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour". The second letter of these five letters is X or Christos!

So X'Mas can also mean Christmas; but it should always be pronounced 'Christmas' rather than 'ex-mas'!

Yours etc.,
Dr. Chanmiki Ezra Laloo
Via Email

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

"There is no compromise when it comes to corruption. You have to fight it."

— A.K. Antony

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No.115 SHILLONG, THURSDAY, DECEMBER 10, 2020

Politicising corruption

IN Meghalaya pressure groups don't take up issues of corruption. Only in the year 2000-2001, did some civil society groups come together to blow the whistle on the attempted sell-out of the Meghalaya House at Russell Street Kolkata. The group that called itself Peoples' Rally Against Corruption (PRAC) was able to unseat the government of the time and also ensure that the deal signed by between the Government of Meghalaya and Asian Housing Corporation Ltd, where the former would lease out the Kolkata property to the latter for 99 years (which in short was as good as a permanent lease) was annulled. Had the PRAC not intervened, the Meghalaya House at Russell Street would have gone into private hands and become largely a commercial complex with only a few rooms in the rear being in the possession of the Government of Meghalaya. Meghalaya is the first state in this country where a government fell on account of corruption. It is a pity that PRAC now no longer exists.

This time when the BJP alleged that there was large scale corruption in the Garo Hills District Council, the matter was seen as an attempt to settle political scores. The allegations were taken amiss by the MDA Government which turned it into a political issue. Initially the Meghalaya BJP went hammer and tongs at the NPP-led, MDA Government where the Party has two MLAs, one of whom is a cabinet minister. The public was led to believe that the BJP was following in the footsteps of its Pradhan Sewak, Narendra Modi who during his election campaign in 2014 used the much touted phrase, "Na khaunga, na khaane doonga," (BJP will neither indulge in corruption or allow others to do so). But that was not to be. The BJP that had gone on for months to needle the Conrad Sangma Government has now gone all quiet after their boss in charge of Meghalaya and the Party's National Vice President came to Shillong and told them to hold their horses. Apparently, the alleged corruption should first be taken up with the Government. This is almost like expecting the Government to admit that there is corruption in GHADC.

That corruption is undesirable is a truism. But in Meghalaya while there is a pressure group for every ill under the sun, there is none to fight corruption. The BJP's recent moral outrage against corruption is used not to tackle corruption but to settle political scores, now that elections to the GHADC are fast approaching. Elections would have been fought on the plank of corruption but now that the BJP has decided to retire into a shell, has corruption also become a non-issue? If corruption is just a handy tool for politicians to target their opponents then it is likely that Meghalaya will sink deeper into this morass in the coming years.

The message of perpetuating corruption

By Albert Thyrniang

Communication is effective and complete only if there is feedback. It is heartening that a few articles of this writer have evoked responses from readers. It doesn't matter whether the rejoinders are in sync with what's written or vehemently disagree with the writer; or whether they are intended to do a deep dive into the writer's intent via insightful queries. Besides the letters and articles, feedback also comes in the form of emails, inboxes, SMSes and Whatsapp messages. It is comforting that the articles are reaching the audience. For a person who lives in an obscure village of Karbi Anglong, close to the disputed border between Meghalaya and Assam, where electricity is an extravagance and mobile connection is a luxury, to be able to comment on powerful men like Donald Trump, or the no-nonsense Indian Prime Minister and the Union Home Minister, the Chief Minister of Meghalaya, the Government of Meghalaya, on institutions like the Supreme Court, the Election Commission of India and our 'beloved' ADCs is quite amazing. The person who coined that phrase, "The pen is mightier than the sword," deserves applause.

A couple of friends have wondered why this writer has not responded to some reactions in this paper. The temptation to retort to every reaction the next day is tempered by the thoughts of the famed columnist, HH Mohrmen who says, "Everyone has a right to his/her opinion."

Since we have come so far let me just state my case vis-à-vis those who felt provoked by my statements. Someone urged me to impress upon the KHADC to be fair in granting trading license to non-tribals. Well, I am no one to influence KHADC. Another reader wanted to know who benefits from the conversion of tribals to Christianity. To him/her all that can be said is that this soul has no ready-made answers. To the one who contends that there is no one in Hinduism who works to assimilate tribals into its fold, it can be pointed out that tribals in Jharkhand and elsewhere are resisting the RSS's all-out efforts to convince 'non-Hindu tribals' to declare themselves as Hindus in the next census. In Assam many tribals with religious practices distinct and different from Hinduism have identified themselves as Hindus. There is no need for any example. If one opens one's eyes it is self-

evident.

The above 'self-glorification' is not to build a fan base. In fact, the conscious decision to 'bark' has cost this writer his friendships. After a couple of critiques on religion one is seen as having malafide intent by some circles. The article that questioned a school that introduced a traditional dress as uniform earned unforgiving enemies. Expressing yourself works both ways. No complaints. It is only fair!

The purpose of this article is not on winning or losing friends. It is on feedbacks. For three months the media was captivated by corruption allegations. Ever since the State BJP 'unearthed' huge scams in three district councils (ADCs) as appeared in the media on September 9, not a single day went by without a report on the alleged multi-crore financial scandals. The BJP attacks came fast and furiously against the NPP-led ADC administration. From RTI findings, to FIRs with the CBI, to demand for CBI inquiry, to threats of pulling out of the MDA government, to the war of words with the NPP, what we have now is the indecision of the party that claims to have a 'zero' tolerance for corruption. As an eye-wash it strategically decided to approach the Lokayukta knowing full well that it has no jurisdiction over GHADC and JHADC's alleged embezzlement of central funds. The visit of the BJP in-charge Meghalaya, M Chuba Ao has culminated in making sure the corruption allegation saga has come to a tame end. All it can say is that the 'party with a difference' will study all angles before the next move.

The Meghalaya Chief Minister and the NPP leadership have staunchly denied any wrongdoing in the ADCs and stoically disagreed with the accepted adage, "There is no 'smoke without a fire.'" Their firm defence is that all allegations are unsubstantiated. Never mind RTI documents. Never mind if the NITI Aayog rules are bent backwards by JHADC, never mind if Rs 4.15 crore is made to 'disappear' in Sunny Hills by KHADC, never mind if GHADC spent Rs 58.25 crore for untendered documentaries; never mind if there are ghost roads, bridges, footpaths, duplications of projects and high quotations for repair of buildings. Never mind if close relatives of the two

most powerful men in the government have befitted from the scams!

Now, what is the feedback that the people of the state get from the Government? What message is the Government giving to its citizens? That corruption is impossible to get rid of! The BJP has to succumb to this reality. The visiting BJP national vice-president and in-charge Meghalaya had to brush aside corruption charges as a minor issue. The UDP's assessment is that the corruption controversy has side-tracked all other important issues in the state, thereby agreeing with the BJP's 'minor issue' evaluation. Other regional parties have not uttered a single word on the chronology of events. The message conveyed to the common folks is: corruption is here to stay. We have to live with it. Don't even try to minimise it, let alone eliminate it. It is a futile exercise. Things will go on as usual. Corruption is normalised. Even the self-anointed anti-corruption warriors will fail to combat corruption. Fatigue will set in and the fight will be given up for want of will. Also, political parties like the BJP may be flashing the show to portray themselves as anti-corruption fighters.

The Congress leader and former chief minister is persistent with his allegations of manipulation in implementing power projects that might have cost the state an additional Rs 100 crore but the Government is no mood for any investigation dismissing the allegations as baseless. The new Rajya Sabha member and NPP president, W.R. Kharlukhi who has been robust in defending all graft allegations, rubbished the Congress' claims as an election stunt. The Leader of the Opposition (LO) also drew the attention of the public regarding the 2017 Internal Revenue Service (IRS) scam involving the Chief Minister and his brother, James of tampering with evidence and derailing the investigation by transferring the officer probing the alleged scam in SS Netcom, a company owned by the family members of the Chief Minister. Besides the 'personal attacks' salvo the predecessor was taught a history lesson because the previous government transferred the investigating officer of the 2016 prostitution racket at Marvelene Inn (a guest house of then Home Minister in the Congress government), within a month. In this case the public is told, "Don't

expect us to be any different. We are same as the Congress." Was that message given to the electorate before the last election?

In the illegal coal mining and transportation too the same tactic is employed. In spite of the heaps of fresh coal in the coal belts and the suspicious movement of trucks, in spite of confession of Meghalaya truckers in Assam, in spite of the 2000 registered cases of illegal coal mining and transportation in the past five years in the state, in spite of the 'on-the-spot' verification, in spite of the Home Minister being accused of shielding coal racketeers, the Government is unmoved. In spite of the Home Minister seeking reports from the DGP on illegal coal trade nothing has come out. Nothing will come out. We don't even know whether the report has been submitted.

The message filters down from the top to the bottom. The fight against corruption has hit a thick and impregnable wall. Because of the example at the very top, the common man will continue to encounter corruption. The other day I was told that for four signatures an officer demanded Rs. 2000. A head of a school narrated that for some small work he was told to revisit the office after 10 days but when he offered money the task was completed in one hour. The incidents did not happen in Meghalaya but even in this 'Christian' state the situation is almost similar. The widows, the elderly, the innocent individuals will be told by unscrupulous officers to 'come next week', the 'bara babus' will continue to extract money from the poor, the police will continue to snatch the licenses of truck drivers under unreasonable pretexts. Bribes will continue to thrive. Top officials, politicians and ministers will continue to divide the shares of projects and schemes leaving the contractors no other option but to do sub-standard work.

Corruption is not abnormal in the state. NGOs and pressure groups are least bothered about corruption. They don't mind vandalism and goondaism to disrupt a legal public hearing. They are ready to agitate for the implementation of a law that will potentially isolate the state. Against corruption not a finger is lifted. No one challenges the Government when it is bluntly teaching the people to perpetuate corruption.

Email: thalbert@rediffmail.com

Tough job market Right skills critical

By Moin Qazi

In an age of skyrocketing unemployment, made worse by the pandemic, it is integral to incorporate marketable and real-world skills within the education system. A system that integrates skills and education can go a long way in ensuring that the youth are better equipped to handle a challenging employment market.

Employers need to interact with education providers. Both can benefit from strong reciprocal relations, with employers advising educators what skills they need (and even assisting in designing curricula and extending faculty support) and educators providing students with practical training and hands-on learning. There are compelling economic benefits in rebalancing the labour market; conversely, the human costs of failing to do will be enormous.

By deploying its corporate and social responsibility (CSR) capital on skill development projects, the private sector stands to benefit enormously from the availability of a large skilled and disciplined workforce. This can parlay into better levels of customer service, increased productivity and efficiency, reduced absenteeism and employee turnover, along with lower wages and recruitment costs.

The results of several such programmes have, however, been mixed. Programmes have reported high dropout rates, low employment percentages and continued attrition post-placement, leading to dissatisfied employers as well as frustrated youth. Providing 'skill-training and certification' alone cannot be a solution to the problem. There is clearly a case for going back to the drawing board.

The new emphasis on skill training should focus on a lifecycle approach. This approach looks at all aspects of skilling, from the aspirations of people before training to counselling and following up with beneficiaries during their employment. Adopting a lifecycle approach to skilling will make sure the kind of skills imparted to trainees are marketable and linked to the available jobs.

It is also important to ensure that specific skills are not scaled across multiple areas in the same region as it saturates the market with limited opportunities for those who are trained. If everyone is trained in becoming a blacksmith, there will be too many blacksmiths and not enough jobs. Imparting locally relevant skill sets like repairing bicycles or motorised two-wheelers, solar lamps, mobiles and running a poultry unit or small animal husbandry and the like makes families self-sustaining.

There are hundreds of organisations and agencies engaged in honing vocational skills and promoting entrepreneurship. While these successful efforts demonstrate the critical roles that employers and social sector actors play in the development of a healthy workforce, they are not able to achieve system-wide change. Businesses, educators, governments and young people need to adopt a collective approach and synergise their latent strengths. Closing the skills gap requires that educators and employers work together more closely.

The missing link that underlies the growing unemployment is 'skill development', which is the key ingredient to robust economic growth. With the dilutions of the old 'iron bowl' of employment protection, the idea of lifelong secure employment has now been shattered.

Technology is advancing

ing faster than we can adapt, upending the job market and delivering unimaginable shocks to both our values and or patterns of thinking. Repetition-based jobs are stagnating the world over and will soon disappear. Most children entering school today will do jobs that don't exist yet.

Many of the children now being educated in the old system will find the norms, institutions and patterns of working and civic life they were trained for scrambled, when they enter the adult world. Tools of the job are in a state of extreme flux. Spreadsheets, PowerPoint presentations and other boardroom documents have all been changed by the cloud — sharing and group editing are the new norm.

Capacities for specialised problem solving and mass communication, until recently controlled by a few elites, are now accessible to anyone with a smartphone. Yet our education system and other institutions remain geared towards the old, siloed, hierarchised, repetitive system leaving young people ill prepared for the cascading changes coming. Young people need to look outward, get out of their zip codes, and experience situations different from the ones they are conditioned to expect. Their success will depend much on how well they can navigate a world of diverse cultures and beliefs.

Skills development holds the key to India's ability to activate the vast potential of its youth population for inclusive growth and to evolve as the hub of the global economy. It is perhaps most critical to long-term alleviation of poverty. However, much thought needs to be devoted to evolving the right training method. It should focus on learning by doing rather than in the classroom. A range of entrepreneurs in the fields of construction, textiles, leather, gems and jewellery, and so on will have to be brought in, and candidates will need to work as apprentices.

Several challenges remain for skill development in India. The huge proportion of informally trained workers who form a part of the informal sector have still no formal training avenues, skill training is generally carried out through individual learning, observation, or a transfer of skills from a master craftsman to an apprentice. These craftsmen can set up small cottage units but cannot be absorbed in factories where basic technical skills are essential. With the influx of cheap machine made products, handicrafts are being driven out by the competition even though they are aesthetically superior. Traditional craftsmanship is losing value and the market offers poor compensation to the artisans for their skills and artistry.

The mismatch between academic training skill, and employment has widened, leading to a situation where, on one hand, the youth are unable to find employment that are aspiring for and on the other, employers are unable to find people appropriately trained for jobs they have on offer.

We require a more coordinated and collective impact approach from the various stakeholders if we want to enlarge the network of training programmes and ensure that training is closely aligned with specific demands of the industry. It would require developing a clear common agenda around the entire ecosystem of workforce training.

One of the most demanding needs will be digital fluency. It is a much wider concept than the metaphorical digital literacy. — INFA

TO THE EDITOR

Giving a go-by to Covid

Editor,
All the market areas of Shillong whether it be Laitumkrah, Police Bazar or Bara Bazar (Jewduh) are so crowded that physical distancing of six feet (two yards) as proposed by Amitabh Bachchan in the BSNL ringtone is impossible. Not only are people violating social distancing norms but many are not even wearing masks any longer. Some wear then to cover their chin which as good as not wearing the mask at all. It's true that we are all tired of this pandemic and are cocking a snook at it but that has consequences which we may not be able to handle. The pandemic is a public health challenge and if we care to watch the international news and not be glued only to the local or Indian TV news then we would have heard of the third Covid wave in Italy and other European countries and the spiralling death toll.

Yesterday, while walking past a bank in Jaiaw I saw a long line of school girls

dressed in their uniform queuing in front of the bank, perhaps to pay their school or examination fees. They were all huddled together. No distancing was observed. This is very troubling because we are approaching winter and the Covid virus like the other corona-viruses tends to peak during the cold winter months. We cannot let our guards down. But then who do we talk to when the educated and aware citizenry are the ones violating all protocols. And I am sure that as Christmas approaches all the protocols will be thrown to the winds. It really is a sad state of affairs and sadder because those most vulnerable will suffer the consequences. Also I am not sure that policing will help. It's an attitudinal change that we have to adapt to but we won't. Perhaps big fines for those not wearing masks might help. But as far as social distancing is concerned, this city and its footpaths are too congested for anyone to be able to distance oneself from another human.

Yours etc.,
AR Marbaniang,
Via email

Virtual ILP & Meghalaya

Editor,
Your newspaper has been using the word 'virtual ILP', leaving it to the readers to decipher what it means. It is only now that I comprehend the meaning of the word 'virtual.' It means 'almost or nearly as described, but not completely or according to strict definition.' The entry and exit points at different places in Meghalaya such as Byrnihat or Ratacherra are meant to ascertain the identity of every person entering the State. Isn't that the intent of the ILP too? So, how many instruments/mechanisms are going to be used to decide who can and who cannot enter Meghalaya? The argument that the same happens in Sikkim or the other ILP states does not wash. Meghalaya cannot and should not compare itself with the other states which do not even have an IIM or IIT. The Indian Institute of Mass Communication (IIMC), Mizoram campus has hardly any students from outside. Most students

opt for IIMC Delhi because of its cosmopolitan nature. Someone the other day had written a satire that all institutions of national importance should shift out of Meghalaya so that the purity of the indigenous people is 'preserved.' I thought only dead animals and picked fruits are preserved for eating purposes. And amongst the protestors, I wonder how many are educated enough to know what cause they are supporting or whether they are simply being led by demagogues whose aim is to fight the next elections. Once elected, they will follow their own paths, which is not always in the interest of the people. We don't have to look too far. Meghalaya is replete with examples of self-declared leaders who first pretended to serve people as activists by creating a fear psychosis. Then they either joined political parties or formed new ones. They then won elections because they promised the moon. Once elected, they got busy serving their own interests. So for how long will the voters of this state be led like dumb cattle? How can educated, intelligent people not understand this modus op-

erandi? Why are they silent and complicit in all of this?

Yours etc.,
D Khonglah,
Via email

Recalcitrant GPO clerk

Editor,
Counter No. 1 at GPO (General Post Office), Shillong is different from the numerous other counters operating adjacent to it. There the clerk comes after 11 o'clock everyday caring two hoots for the queuing customers. It seems that this recalcitrant clerk has made it a habit to come at her own whim and fancy, as if, the GPO's office timing is meant for the other mortals alone. After arriving she goes roaming inside and even enquiring whereabouts of her co-counters. Next she turns on her computer — which takes another fifteen minutes or so until she resumes her work by 11:30-11:45 am. This same counter till last month was located just next to the main entrance to the GPO hall and manned by a physically challenged lady known for her efficiency and speed of

work. She used to come and open her counter right on time, despite her challenges, and execute customers' queries with visible agility. Customers like us acknowledge her good work. However, those days are gone now with the relocation of the counter alongside to the long row of counters on the opposite side. Now, the current counter clerk being fit and fine, in comparison with her predecessor, is running her late show with impunity. On several occasions many standing at the queue had to leave without their job done since the clerk hadn't arrived until 11.00 am and they had to rush to their workplaces. The Senior Superintendent of Posts (SSP) upstairs should sometimes drop in at the main hall and see if the affairs, under him, are going on well for the visiting customers. The SSP should immediately bring back the earlier clerk at Counter No. 1 to rescue the queuing customers.

Yours etc.
BC Paul,
Shillong — 4

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

"Live as if you were to die tomorrow.
Learn as if you were to live forever."

-- Mahatma Gandhi

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No.116 SHILLONG, FRIDAY, DECEMBER 11, 2020

Farmer protest rigmarole

THE negotiations for withdrawal of the farmer protests are reaching nowhere. Six rounds of talks since October 14 has yielded no result and the farmers are bent on stepping up the agitation. What the farmer leaders stated on Thursday was very much the same as they demanded at the start of the agitation; a repeal of the contentious laws. The government has agreed to consider some of their demands, mainly on continuation of the Minimum Support Price, but has firmly ruled out a repeal of the three-part farm reform laws.

A wholesale repeal of the major reform step is out of question. The government is highlighting the positive sides of the reform but the farmer leaders are not convinced. Clearly, politics is playing a role here and parties like the CPI-M and its small farmer organizations are also "actively" campaigning against the legislation.

Yet, from the government side too, it is politics that will dictate the final word. The local body polls in Rajasthan provided a barometer to gauge the public mood, especially in the rural areas where the fight is principally organised on behalf of the farmers. The BJP did much better than the ruling Congress party in these polls, the results of which were announced on Wednesday. If the BJP had any worry over the farmer reform measure turning the countryside against it, that fear is now gone. What this means is that the Centre is not going to budge before the farmers' pressure tactics.

The Modi government is tactful, normally avoids a confrontation, and its strategy in such situations has been to tire out the agitators. It looks like, prima facie, this is what is happening now. The principal Opposition, the Congress party, is neither in a mood to jump in and lead the agitation nor does it have the moral courage to do so at this juncture. The Rajasthan results would add to the already weak mindset of the party even as Congress leader Rahul Gandhi is aiming arrows now and then at Modi and speaking in favour of the farmers' demands.

Two states where the farmers are in a fighting mood are Punjab and Haryana. Punjab is with the Congress. Haryana is worth a watch. The regional outfit, the JJP that shares power with the BJP there, is a pro-Jat, pro-farmer entity. A couple of legislators have sided with the farmers but the government might not face a problem of stability yet. The agitation is weak in other states. Therein lies the rub.

The book "How the Mighty Fall," by Jim Collins bears re-reading. Each time one reads this book one learns lessons on how and why companies falls and why some companies are better off dead. In our case we can substitute state for company; it will work out the same. This book is in fact an anatomy on how not to fail provided some tangible steps are taken when the signs of failure begin to peek in. Jim Collins speaks of failed companies that have recovered and others that could never come out of the ICU. In politics we have heard references to "a failed state," but have not really understood or bothered to find out the parameters of that failed state and what series of events have contributed to that failure. Meghalaya shows those signs of a failed state where governance is concerned. And I don't think I need to amplify this. The signs are so obvious! When a state is held hostage by forces inimical to its growth then those who govern it have virtually surrendered their mandate.

Sometimes in conversations we let slip that nothing seems to work in Meghalaya. Dystopia sets in as we see corruption being normalised and no longer a talking point. The rich are getting richer and the poor are staring at a very bleak future, what with potato - the poor man's food - touching Rs 55/kg. We know that landlessness in rural Meghalaya is also staring us in the face but just don't have the stamina to address this issue. It is in any case a political hot potato. Anyone who touches it is sure to get fried in the next election. But is that the only reason why a cadastral survey is not carried out in Meghalaya? As journalists we often come across too much information. The latest is that the plush Birla House next to Tripura Castle in Cleve Colony - the Lutyens of Shillong - which must cost several crores of rupees will soon be acquired by a high-ranking politician of this Government. Just think how interesting it would be if a cadastral survey is carried out just in Shillong city and we get to find out who owns how many mansions in this City of Bliss. This asymmetrical development in Meghalaya which has created a class hierarchy is bound to result in localized turbulence, sooner than later.

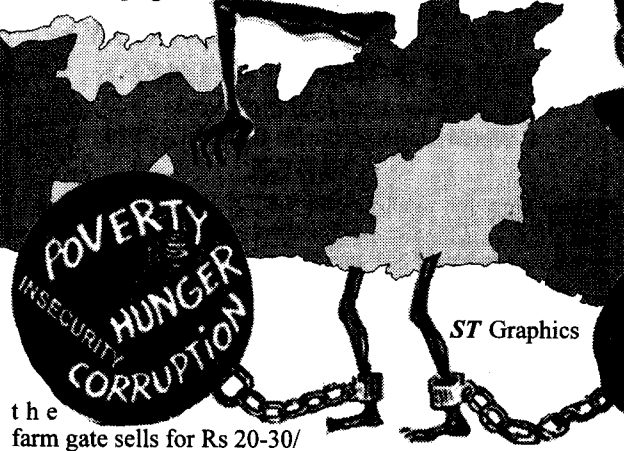
Unfortunately, while in most parts of India the prin-

cipal beneficiaries of India's economic growth seem to have emotionally seceded from the politics to carve out their own growth story, in Meghalaya, politics is the way to affluence even as those in the ruling party live in a make-believe world of smug insularity. They are not bothered about the growing poverty due to loss of jobs and livelihoods.

Meghalaya has had a farm crisis which the Government seems to be unaware of and that is because those in charge of the Agriculture/Horticulture Department never go to the market to buy vegetables and nor do they care to find out at what rate the farmer sells her produce at the farm gate. Let me inform that ginger at

loads of ginger for which the farmer never gets the right price. So why not a state MSP for ginger?

Alas! No farmer has ever been elected to the State Assembly. It's the businessmen and contractor lobby that have managed to run this state. The closest we had to a farmer (one who understood the travails of farmers) was Ardent Basaiawmait. The other day I met a few people in Laitkor and asked them how their MLA was and whether he was developing the constituency. Their answer was not unexpected. He helps those that voted him in the last election. They said Ardent Basaiawmait implemented the MLA scheme judiciously and hence had no



the farm gate sells for Rs 20-30/kg while we retailers buy it at Rs 200/kg in the market. Why is this huge profit margin allowed to be raked in by the middleman? Is this not a cause for farmers' protests here too? Should there not be a Minimum Support Price (MSP) for ginger and other agricultural products here, below which the buyers are not allowed to quote? When the Agriculture Minister, Banteidior Lyngdoh was asked how the

money to buy votes during the elections. They were very cynical and said, "In this constituency anyone who has money to spend will win the next election and we hear that the new contender from the constituency in the next election has money to burn."

"In this constituency anyone who has money to spend will win the next election and we hear that the new contender from the constituency in the next election has money to burn."

three Farm Bills would affect farmers here his contention was that the State does not have mandis where the Government procures farm products in bulk at MSP, so that farmers are not squeezed to sell at less than the production price. Isn't it time for Meghalaya to have a Farm Bill of its own which is farmer-friendly? Government of India provides MSP for wheat and rice. We don't grow wheat and rice in bulk but we grow

If at all it is discussed in public meetings it is generic in nature and not spelt out as it would be in Punjab and Haryana. Just goes to show what our political priorities are! Have any of the pressure groups spoken on behalf of farmers or had a protest on their behalf? Why not? Am curious to know!

Thankfully all is not lost for farmers. In Meghalaya we have bureaucrats that are committed and hyperactive and work with rare passion.

They are not in a job but work with the intention to deliver. They know what ails the system; they know the loopholes in the system; they work around it but they still cannot bring about any perceptible change that's worth writing about. That's because the political system is unresponsive to addressing the cause of farmers.

For instance, the turmeric farmers in Jaintia Hills, mostly women have a close interface with officials in the Agriculture and Horticulture Department. But where they fail is at the brand-building and marketing level. The Meghalaya Basin Development Authority (MBDA) has several verticals, one of which is to do with entrepreneurship. Perhaps this vertical needs to take a harder look at how to enable the women turmeric farmers to build a robust brand and to join the dots that will enable a seamless marketing strategy. I can't imagine a politician ever trying to do any such thing for farmers, although the bulk of voters are from the farming community. Our bureaucracy has to mend this fault.

Recently, it appears that the BJP has started a farmers' wing and is touring the state to create awareness and help the farmers form a collective. This is imperative because farmers need a voice and a strong one at that. They should be the ones deciding what policy the Government should come up with rather than someone who knows to spell the word agriculture, framing a policy at the Secretariat. But who will empower the farmers? It is time that farmers' collectives learn to speak for themselves. One hopes the farmers of Meghalaya are watching how their counterparts elsewhere are able to create pain in the body politic.

Politics in Meghalaya has been about advancing personal goals. But it's one thing to make deals to advance those goals and it's another to open the door to zombie ideas (ILP). When you do that, the zombies end up eating your brains and quite literally your economy too. So enough of zany ideas and get down to real governance and turn your eyes to the people who bring food to your home.

Government must implement Swaminathan report on farmers

Minimum support price should cover more crops

By Nantoo Banerjee

It seems the government has lost the trust of farmers. Instead of keeping its promise to expand the list of agricultural products under the 'minimum support price' (MSP) system to prevent distress sale of farm produce, the new farm laws threaten to abolish the practice that helped India to grow over the years as the world's second largest food producer, after China. Before the 2018 Karnataka legislative assembly election, the prime minister himself listed three more agricultural products as his TOP priority for price support. By TOP, he meant Tomato, Onion and Potato which come under distress sale by their producers year after year while their market prices peak in the off season by several thousand percents with traders making huge profits.

India is the world's eighth largest exporter of agricultural products. Domestic shortage also help merchant exporters turn importers during crisis months. The practice goes on right under the nose of the government which do little for distressed farmers. Marginal farmers have been the worst sufferers. Unremunerative prices and debt burden force hundreds of farmers across the country commit suicide almost every year. Aided by good summer rainfall this year, farmers fought the Covid-19 pandemic to grow record amount of agricultural products, but could not find enough good buyers due to lockdown and transport bottlenecks. In the retail market, TOP prices hit the roof. A remunerative and stable price environment for farmers is very important for increasing agricultural production and productivity. On paper, the Government's price policy for agricultural commodities seeks to ensure remunerative prices to growers for their produce to encourage higher investment and production and safeguard consumers' interest by making available supplies at reasonable prices with low cost of intermediation. The price policy seeks to evolve a balanced and integrated price structure in the perspective of the overall needs of the economy. The MSP system was evolved for this purpose. Currently, the MSP system covers some 25 major agricultural commodities in the Crop seasons on the basis of the recommendations of the Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices (CACP).

The latter also recommend 'Fair & Remunerative Price' (FRP) for sugarcane. The crops covered under MSP are: Paddy, Jowar, Bajra, Maize, Ragi, Arhar, Moong, Urad, Groundnut-in-shell, Soyabean, Sunflower, Sesamum, Nigerseed, Cotton, Wheat, Barley, Gram, Masur (lentil), Rapeseed/Mustardseed, Safflower, Jute and Copra. In addition, MSP for Toria and De-Husked coconut is fixed on the basis of MSPs of Rapeseed/Mustardseed and Copra, respectively. The government is supposed to organise procurement operations of these agricultural commodities through various public and cooperative agencies such as Food Corporation of India (FCI), Cotton Corporation of India (CCI), Jute Corporation of India (JCI), Central Warehousing Corporation (CWC), National Agricultural Cooperative Marketing Federation of India Ltd. (NCCF), and Small Farmers Agro Consortium (SFAC). State governments also appoint their independent agencies to undertake pro-

urement operations. MSPs of kharif crops are supposed to be fixed at 50 percent profit or 150 per cent of production cost. However, this is not being done. The so-called TOP priority crops - tomatoes, onions and potatoes - are still to be included in the list of commodities under MSP. Incidentally, India is the world's second largest potato grower, after China. And, nearly 55 percent of the country's potato production comes only from two states - Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal. Other key producers are: Bihar, Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh. These five states account for over 80 percent of India's annual potato production. Two years ago, TOP growers suffered heavy losses. Potato growers were estimated to suffer losses to the tune of Rs.30,000crore as the market price crashed during the harvesting season. Before the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, the prime minister had promised that if voted to power, his government will change the way MSP is set. It will follow a new formula - the entire cost of production plus a guaranteed profit of 50 percent which was one of the key recommendations of the 2006 M.S. Swaminathan Commission on farmers. The government wrongly claims that it has already implemented the key Swaminathan Commission recommendation. Agricultural producers' bodies say that MSP for crucial crops such as paddy and wheat is only 12 percent and 34 percent higher than their respective production costs. For other products too, MSP is far lower than the price recommended by the Commission.

What is more that several states, including those rule by BJP, allege that the CACP calculated costs for agri-products under MSP are much lower than their actual production costs in those states. The idea behind fixing MSP is that the government will step in and purchase those farm products if their prices in markets fall below MSP. Unfortunately, this is also not happening. The government is not allocating enough funds to procurement agencies to make it happen. As a result, growers are forced to make distress sale of their products. Before the new farm laws were brought in, a key demand of farmers' bodies was the implementation of the Swaminathan Commission recommendation on fixing MSPs in letter and spirit. The farmers are agitated because the new farm laws ignore their demand. They fear that the government may ultimately dilute or dump MSP.

The government attitude is inexplicable. Few will disagree that food is one of the most fundamental economic products. Only a small number of countries are actually lucky to excel in agricultural production. China, India, the US and Brazil are the world's top four food producing countries. While China and India tend to use most of their food products to feed their own large population, the US has long been a superpower in food markets, as both consumer and exporter. In India, only 10 of its 28 states and nine union territories produce enough crops to feed the nation. West Bengal is the biggest crop producer, followed by Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Gujarat, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Assam, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Chhattisgarh. The earlier the government accepts the just demands of the country's farmers and provide the legal sanction, the better it is for the nation. (IPA Service)

TO THE EDITOR

All ethnic minorities deserve equal treatment

Editor,
I am immensely delighted to read the statement of ex-KSU president and current politician Paul Lyngdoh under the news item "KSU warns Hmar outfit against threatening Khasis in Cachar" (ST Dec 1, 2020). In condemning the Hmar outfit's threat held to the Khasi-Pnar residents of Cachar District of Assam, he has ruled the fact that "there is lack of respect for ethnic minorities, especially in the context of the Khasi people in that region, who have always been peace-loving and have never known to be in conflict with other communities." These expressions ring inside me loud and I, as an ethnic minority of Meghalaya, take them as a good augury. I would sincerely like to believe that Paul Lyngdoh has spoken these words realising the helplessness and vulnerability of the ethnic minorities in Cachar district. I hope that this thought will also be extended to the ethnic minorities of Meghalaya in the spirit of "charity begins at home".

It bears repetition that the ethnic minorities of

Meghalaya have been facing an existential crisis due to the overt and covert policies adopted by the ruling class since the advent of this state in 1972. The history of the state bears testimony to the fact that there has been an undeniable intolerance towards the very presence of the various ethnic minorities on the soil of Meghalaya. If we take into consideration the plethora of laws enacted since Meghalaya was created and the direction of the waves of agitations witnessed over the past four decades, it will be clear to one and all that intent is one and the same---to ease out the ethnic minorities. This seems to have the tacit approval of the majority since it suits them one way or the other.

Through this letter, I wish to bring to everybody's attention the fact that the ethnic minorities of the state have been living in constant fear of their lives and properties. Just to bring home my point, last week when the current agitation for ILP saw a sit-in demonstration at Malki ground, a strong rumour was afloat in town that there would be a street rally. All ethnic minorities, once beaten twice shy, were on the alert. So much so that shops and business establishments of the minorities in Police Bazar, Bara Bazar

etc., did not open during the first half of the day. Shops opened only after it was evident that it was all rumour. Such is the fear today that there is no courage even to file FIR or expect any remedy. Looks like, we minorities are living only in God's mercy. For, the system has become so corroded by populism that it does not inspire confidence any more.

I hope my delight over Paul Lyngdoh's aforesaid statement is understood in that context. Does that bring relief to the likes of me? Perhaps, no; after all, one swallow doesn't make a summer! All said and done, for once, I hope my unexpressed negativity is proved wrong!!

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request,
Via email

Inflation and the common man

Editor,
Recently, it has been observed that the prices of essential commodities have been shooting through the roof and the common man has been at the receiving end. One does not know whether this is the result of a real scarcity in the market or an artificial one caused by the merchants who conveniently blame the pandemic

for the situation. Moreover, the government's decision for booking and purchase of gas cylinders online has added to the woes of the consumers and the general public. I have faced this situation with regard to the LPG cylinder booking. On trying to book online, there is often no response and when we finally get the commodity, the price is different every time. Since we, as consumers, require the product, we are left at the mercy of the crafty agency.

My request to the government is to display the prices of cylinders as issued by the Indian Oil Corporation so that consumers are not fooled of their hard earned money. My earnest request is also to the many NGOs who claim to be the messiahs of the people to really spare a thought for the people who bear the brunt of the inflationary situation.

Many of the indigenous people of our state are daily wage earners and earn little whilst supporting a large family. So, such exorbitant prices of daily commodities hurt them the most. While exhorting the government to check price rise, I also urge the NGOs to look into this matter and be the voice of the people thus, living up to their claims.

Yours etc.,
Angela Lyngdoh,
Shillong -14.

Whither human rights

Editor,
December 10 is observed as Human Rights Day the world over but in our state of Meghalaya, this day was very subdued. The theme of Human Rights Day 2020 is to "Recover Better - Stand Up for Human Rights". This theme has been chosen because of the Covid pandemic. It focuses on creating equal opportunities for everyone and addressing the failures and disappointments we all were exposed to due to Covid-19. In India as a whole and in Meghalaya in particular there are many very poor people for whom the phrase 'two square meals' a day has no meaning. Some families have to really beg and borrow to feed the family because one earning member no longer has a secure job. I am someone who was working in the hospitality industry in Bangalore. In the month of May this year I had to return home because the hotel I was working in had to close down due to the pandemic. I could not stay in Bangalore after that because we were not promised a salary after the hotel closed down and I could not afford to live in that city thereafter.

I was sending money home regularly because I

come from a middle class family that gave me education so that I can earn and support my parents and younger siblings. Ever since I came back to Shillong, I have been trying to find some job, any job, but to no avail. The hotels here too are closed so the managements are not employing any new person. The Government has announced that tourism will open up on December 21 but the lengthy protocols will deter anyone who wants to visit Meghalaya. If the hotels don't open up then people like me, and those I know who have returned home from the cities, will be without any job. Does the Government have any scheme to accommodate people like us? If it does, will it make such schemes public? I am not an entrepreneur. I can only work in an organisation/institution. Is there an opening for people like us? We need answers. For us it's now or never! We have a right to work but where are the jobs?

Yours etc.,
Oliver Nongrum,
Shillong -3

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

"A good leader takes a little more than his share of the blame, a little less than his share of the credit."
— Arnold H. Glasow

The Shillong Times
Vol No: LXIII No.117 SHILLONG, SATURDAY, DECEMBER 12, 2020

MRSSA - a comprehensive safety net

THE Meghalaya Residents' Safety and Security Act (MRSSA) enacted in September 27, 2016 and its amended version of 2019 seeks to address the issue of influx by making everyone who wishes to enter Meghalaya go through set protocols of establishing their identity at facilitation centres set up at entry points to the State. The earlier Act of 2016 was aimed at registering tenants at the office of the local authorities and the local police stations. The amended version makes sure that every person entering the State registers himself/herself at the facilitation centres so that the State can keep a tab on their whereabouts. In short, the prime objective of this Act is to contain influx which has been a nagging problem, or is perceived to be one and a long-standing issue although there is no data on the number of illegal migrants in Meghalaya till date.

There is no denying that coal mining and the construction business rely heavily on migrant workers from Nepal and Bangladesh. These workers are put up in ramshackle huts around their place of work. Since the coal mining activities are ongoing these workers are seen at the mining sites. They are well protected by their employers and it would be safe to assume that the employers have procured the necessary documents for them.

One of the stringent instruments the MRSSA proposes is to set up facilitation centres at entry points to the state where visitors and tourists would have to establish their citizenship credentials. This is as good as the Inner Line Permit (ILP) which also stresses on the same set of documents to be produced by visitors before being permitted to enter the State. Is it necessary therefore to add to the list of laws which will ultimately be mired in bureaucratic red tape? Of course at this juncture it is not politically correct to critique the ILP hence there is complete silence from the citizens of Meghalaya including its intelligentsia. No one dares go against this populist demand because the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) has created a fear psychosis that non-citizens will be granted citizenship and allowed to settle here. This fear is legitimate but the MRSSA and its modified version is empowered to meet these exigencies. The ILP has the propensity to deal a death blow to tourism in Meghalaya. The worst hit would be tour operators and home-stay/guest house owners both in urban and rural areas of the state, when footfalls will dwindle owing to the plethora of requirements needed to enter the State.

TO THE EDITOR

MeECL pensioners in a dilemma

Editor,
Pensioners after retirement are entirely dependent on the monthly pension to meet their bread and butter needs and other basic necessities of life. Since the MeECL Management has held up the Pension for the last two months (i.e Oct. & Nov. 2020), the pensioners and family pension holders are facing financial hardship and are on the brink of starvation. They are now in a dilemma on how to manage their lives. Being aged senior citizens, it is practically impossible to start looking for a job elsewhere nor to carry out any business activities for survival.
All employees who joined the erstwhile ASEP, MeSEB and are now under MeECL are pensionable as per the pension rules and the law whereas those who joined service on or after April 1, 2010 are entitled under the new defined Contribution Scheme (NPS). From the very inception of the Board (ASEB) during the 1950s pensioners and working employees never

experienced such crisis as they are doing now insofar as release of monthly pension and salary is concerned.
The aggrieved pensioners through the MeECL Pensioners Association have time and again approached and earnestly appealed to the MeECL Management for releasing their pension. But it seems there is no sign of hope yet. The Management may please note that payment of monthly pension and terminal benefits is the legitimate and legal right of the retirees. Therefore, being a matter of life and death the pensioners are in dilemma on what to do next to realize the monthly pension and retirement benefits.
However as an Adviser to the recognized and registered Association, I earnestly implore upon the MeECL Management, the Power Minister and the Chief Minister to explore all ways and means to clear at least the monthly pension in order to rescue us from the impending peril of starvation.
Yours etc.,
B.S. Mawlong
Adviser, MeECL Pensioner Association Shillong
Via email

Farmers imperiled

Editor,
Apropos the article by Patricia Mukhim, "Signs of a failed state," (ST Dec 11, 2020) I was interested to know that the farm products of Meghalaya are short-sold to avaricious middlemen at less than the production cost for farmers. There is something very wrong in the Agricultural Policy of the State Government if as the writer says, there is no minimum support price (MSP) for crops that are produced for the market and for exports. I recall reading the statement of the Agriculture Minister some weeks ago when he was asked to comments on the Farm Bills enacted by the NDA Government. The minister said it would have no impact on Meghalaya farmers since there are no mandis (government procurement institutions which buy farm products at wholesale rates and sells them onwards to retailers). In one sense the farmers in Meghalaya are free to sell their products to the highest bidder which is what Government of India wanted to introduce

through the recently enacted Farm Acts. Unfortunately, in Meghalaya the farmers are often forced to sell their products to the lowest bidder and there are no safety nets for them. It is a buyers' market and the seller is at a serious disadvantage. Hence the Agriculture Minister should understand this and be informed that the farmers in Meghalaya are very often pushed into situations of distress sales.
We have heard the word "cold storage" for a long time in Meghalaya but I am not aware if any of them exist or were ever created. Cold storages are meant to store the farmers' crops until he/she can get a good price for them because if every farmer decides to sell ginger at one time there will naturally be a glut in the market and the price will dip even while the wholesale buyer enjoys a bonus while the poor farmer is in distress. I also wonder what the Farmers' unions of the various political parties are faring and why they are quiet about a crisis that the farming community faces year after year.
In Meghalaya we have become adept at chasing an urban mirage. All issues are

urban centric while issues that affect nearly 80 percent of the rural population are glossed over. As the writer says, no public representative cares about the plight of farmers because they are not organised and do not vote en-bloc. Until an issue begins to hurt politicians they will not respond to it. It's time the farmers' unite themselves into a formidable force. But who will lead them?

Yours etc.,
Artimai Dunai,
Via email

Letting the Covid guard down

Editor,
Chief Minister Conrad Sangma tweeted on Friday that he has tested Covid positive. Covid knows no boundaries and anyone is susceptible to it hence we cannot let our guard down. More aggressive testing is required so that we know exactly how we are faring as a state. If we don't test we won't know whether we are asymptomatic carriers and could be spreading the virus to unsuspecting ac-

quaintances or at public spaces. It is true that free testing is no longer a viable proposition for any state. Hence those that can afford to pay for the test should do so. The Government should get the names of those that cannot afford to pay, from the respective Dorbar Shnong and see that they are provided free testing. Now that winter has arrived we are told to be aware that Covid cases might just go up. This is a frightening scenario knowing how under-prepared we are even today to deal with large number of cases because the hospital beds have not been sufficiently added and nor have makeshift Covid hospitals come up. We really need to be individually responsible in preventing the spread of Covid.
Meanwhile we wish the Chief Minister a speedy recovery and pray that he is back on his feet soon!
Yours etc.,
RV Sohtun,
Via email

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

India & neighbours

What future SAARC!

By Dr. D.K. Giri

countries being a part of India in the past brings up other traditional problems. The partition between India and Pakistan has been painful and is incomplete, and the separation of Bangladesh from Pakistan with support from India is another chapter of history that reminds the people of the sub-continent of human tragedies of incredible degree. Time has not yet



healed the wounds, which fester often calling for vengeance and retribution. The socio-religious configuration in South Asian countries emanating from such a history is unique. India is a Hindu majority country with a large Muslim population as a minority along with other smaller religious groups like Christians, Parsis, Bahais, and Indic religions like Buddhist and Jains. Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan and Maldives are Muslim major-

The SAARC was hobbling from the beginning. It has been a body of unequal and disparate members. The size of India as the biggest country compared to smaller ones like Sri Lanka, Maldives and Nepal cuts both ways.

ity countries with other minorities, 'Hindus' in Bangladesh and Pakistan. Nepal is a Hindu majority country with non-sizeable minorities and Sri Lanka is Buddhist majority State with Tamils, Muslims and Christians as minority. Such demographic composition should make the countries socio-religiously inter-dependent. Strangely that's not the case.
Similar is the history of conflicts and wars between the members of European Union. There is also huge difference in size and population. Take for instance Germany which is now after unification 80 million and Luxemburg is under 2 million. All member countries in EU, including the six founding members, are matured democracies and sound economies. The desire for greater economic

good in unity and solidarity in Europe was the driving force behind the creation and growth of EU into one political entity.
The Détente between two major European powers France and Germany made EU possible. A similar development between India and Pakistan could perhaps do the trick for SAARC. Unfortunately, while India is a democracy, Pakistan has been

with neighbours. Secondly, India's stature and strength cannot be isolated from the quality of its relations with neighbours. The most important principle was that with neighbours like Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka, India does not ask for reciprocity, gives and accommodates what it can in good faith and trust.
Former Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee belonging to BJP, which is perceived to be anti-Muslim and so anti-Pakistan, had famously said, "You can change your friends, but you cannot change your neighbours". The statement was made in reference to traditional tensions between India and Pakistan. Vajpayee was apparently legitimising his attempts at restoration of relations with Pakistan and genuinely, like his predecessors, endeavouring to normalise these. His famous bus trip to Lahore as a symbol of rebuilding friendship was received warmly in Islamabad raising hope for peace. But the military as said before wanted to scupper it and sent mercenaries to Kargil. Rest is history.

Even Modi began well by inviting the heads of SAARC nations to his first swearing-in ceremony as Prime Minister. He went to Lahore on social visits to show warmth and friendship. But sadly, Islamabad did not reciprocate and things have gotten worse. Pakistan-sponsored terrorism continues unabated. There is no scope for dialogue. India maintains dialogue and deaths by terrorists' bullets cannot go together. Pakistan while conniving with China to foment trouble in India wants to have dialogue with New Delhi. It is fast learning the Chinese art of duplicity.

That has been the SAARC story, stalled by a recalcitrant Pakistan hopelessly under military grip, thriving on terrorism and drugs, playing a side kick as a satellite country of China, denying democratic space and even human rights to its population let alone the Baluch. Unless SAARC countries put pressure--moral or otherwise on Pakistan, SAARC is a no-go. Rest of SAARC countries are democracies, not under military rule except Pakistan. Yes, there is a Prime Minister in Pakistan but controlled by whom, the Constitution or Commanders in the military. The crux of revival of SAARC is a genuine democracy in Pakistan refusing to play Chinese game in South Asia politics. —INFA (The writer is Prof, International Relations, JIMMC)

Whom does a political blame-game help?

By Chitra Rajpal

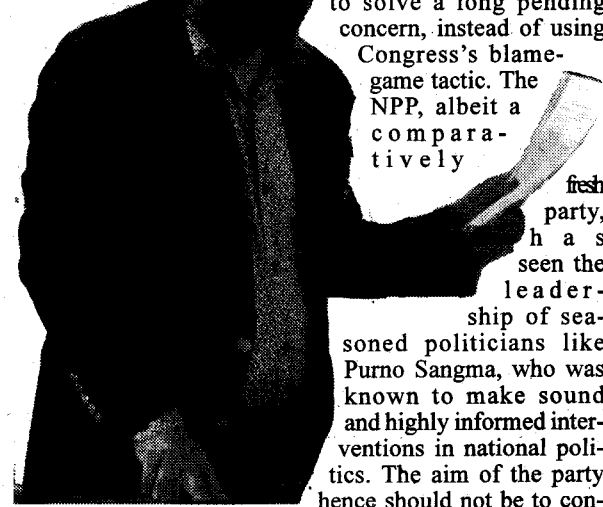
The Meghalaya Autumn Assembly 2020 session, concluded in November, witnessed immense participation from politicians of the NPP-led Meghalaya Democratic Alliance (MDA) government as well as the Opposition. Somewhere in the heated debates, a political blame game emerged, which continues till date, despite many arguments being made on the floor of the house regarding key policy measures. At this point for the people of Meghalaya, one side does not seem better than the other. Hence, a greater burden lies on the legislators to deconstruct key political measures for the people and not just simply engage in a blame-game for easy political mileage.
The problem in Meghalaya's political history so far has been that the Opposition usually tends to take a holier-than-thou stance despite knowing that many sitting legislators on their side of the House are also guilty of wrongdoing. In such circumstances, it is easy for a blame-game to get triggered as evidence is neither scarce nor hidden from the public. To be honest, a political back and forth helps no one. The informed audience already know the details; the middle class either

such a situation, given the fact that the opposition cannot come clean and the ruling government has to defend itself, public loses out on key discourses.
Taking the instance of coal mining, it is no secret that the practice has flourished in the state for over a century through the nexus of the mine owners, the bureaucrats, and the government. For almost a decade that the current opposition was in power in the state, this issue was pertinent. The state's coal mining industry ever since has been making headlines for all the wrong reasons. In the past, several incidents of miners dying due to unscientific methods of mining have spurred the conscience of the entire country. For example, in 2012, 15 miners in the Garo hills succumbed to injuries when an illegal mine got flooded unexpectedly. The bodies of the miners were never recovered. A year later, through a probe conducted by the Jaintia Hills District Authority, 222 child miners were found being involved in rat-hole mining. Of these 222, 153 belonged to the local communities while the rest were from families from Nepal, Bangladesh, Assam, and Bihar.

have their opinions sealed or choose to remain apolitical, and the majority want amenities and developmental agendas. The small fraction which remains are politicians, who ensure that they create sufficient noise to manipulate public perceptions, helping them to stay in power. Thus, maturity in political discourse slowly erodes. It makes nothing more than headlines for media organisations, which also have economic reasons to run certain types of news.
For instance, the issues of coal mining have repeatedly made the morning head-

lines of the newspapers in the state. While it is the Conrad Sangma-led

It was only after sufficient noise was created by national dailies that legislators took the issue into cognizance and came out publicly with this. This is just one of the issues. The trumpet has been blowing on several issues and there is no solution for it as yet.
Now, what is the way forward? Again, taking the instance of mining, the NPP-led government must come up with a comprehensive mining policy and make it a point to break this nexus to solve a long pending concern, instead of using Congress's blame-game tactic. The NPP, albeit a comparatively



National People's Party which has come under the radar now, for almost a decade it was the Congress who had played hide-and-seek on the matters at hand. A cursory glance over the Congress regime's history is sufficient to bring out its tryst with coal mining, the extremely controversial Meghalaya Mines and Mineral Policy, 2012, being a case in point. The policy spearheaded under the leadership of Mukul Sangma would have given rat-hole mining legitimacy had the NGT not exercised its wisdom and stopped the policy in its tracks. These issues were covered extensively even then, but at no point can any average citizen of Meghalaya claim that despite media coverage on these issues, they were well informed to make political decisions. This is the way citizens are manipulated. In

fresh party, has seen the leadership of seasoned politicians like Purno Sangma, who was known to make sound and highly informed interventions in national politics. The aim of the party hence should not be to continue with the ancient practice of pointing fingers but to make interventions which can help people move in a better direction with respect to state politics. That can be the only pertinent way forward not only for the health of politics of the state but also for policies for the people. Likewise, for the opposition, ultimately, the goal should be to critique policies and advance alternatives that are pro-people, irrespective of who is proposing them. In a developed democracy, the opposition should be mature enough to discuss the welfare value of the actions being taken by the government first, and discrediting the government second. Such an attitude is of paramount importance for constructive engagement. (The author is a public policy postgraduate student of National Law School, Bengaluru)

Fighting to save a bird haven

A Navi Mumbai couple has been fighting to save 80 hectares of wetlands in Navi Mumbai that are home to thousands of flamingos. The wetlands were proposed to be converted into a golf course and residential complex but in 2018, based on their petition, the Bombay High Court quashed a notification to this effect. Mongabay-India writer Tanvi Deshpande reports

What started as a police complaint about the destruction of mangroves in 2016 turned into a passion for conserving wetlands for the Agarwals. This Navi Mumbai couple, both in their 50s, has been fighting to save 80 hectares of wetlands in Navi Mumbai that are home to thousands of flamingos.

The wetlands were proposed to be converted into a golf course and residential complex but in 2018, based on their petition, the Bombay High Court (HC) quashed a notification to this effect. The forest department now plans to declare the area a conservation reserve but is facing resistance from within the government.

Navi Mumbai, a satellite city of Mumbai, is more scenic and serene as compared to the commercial capital owing to large number of trees, open spaces, mangroves, mudflats, salt pans and a creek. Thousands of migratory birds visit the area every year.

Several residents of Navi Mumbai have been fighting to save their local environment, specifically the wetlands, from destruction for years now. These wetlands are under threat from proposed construction for residential and other infrastructure projects.

One example is a movement to save Panje wetlands in Uran, a part of Navi Mumbai, where the core wetland covers about 213 hectares and is an important site for migratory birds. This wetland is also close to a proposed airport. Not far from Panje are two more wetlands – one, measuring 13 hectares, behind Training Ship Chanakya (TSC), a maritime academy on Palm Beach Road and another near NRI Complex, a residential complex in Navi Mumbai's Sea-woods area.

The NRI Complex wetland is located south of TSC with an area of around 20 hectares. While these wetlands constitute a small percentage of the area of Navi Mumbai, they support more than a hundred species and most of them are migratory with declining populations around the globe.

Sunil and Shruti Agarwal and their two children, moved to NRI Complex in 2016. On one of their morning walks, they saw an instance of mangrove destruction. They quizzed the labourers and eventually, an FIR was filed at NRI Complex police station. They have been fighting against the destruction of mangroves and these wetlands since then.

"We had not been environmental activists before we got into this issue. We had fought against defacement of Navi Mumbai due to hoardings in the past. Even today if you ask me the definition of wetlands, I won't be able to tell you. But all I can understand is something wrong is

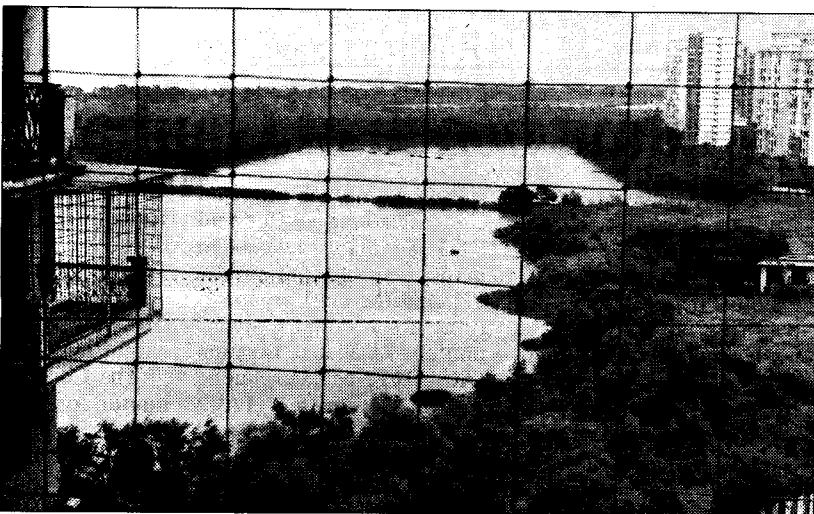
happening," said Shruti Agarwal, a television producer. The couple also raised alarm when hundreds of trees were cut at the wetland citing permissions from local authorities. As work on the wetlands got more demanding, Sunil, a self-employed chartered accountant and Shruti decided to take a break. Now their children also help them in their cause.

What is the fight about?

In a Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) report published in 2019 titled 'Coastal Wetlands and Waterbirds of Navi Mumbai: Current Status', both T.S. Chanakya (TSC) wetlands and NRI Complex (Talawe) wetlands find an elaborate mention. The TSC wetland has 21 bird species including four near threatened species and one vulnerable species.

Between January and September 2018, BNHS recorded waterbirds on the TSC wetlands including near threatened species (IUCN status) such as painted stork, lesser flamingo, Eurasian curlew and curlew sandpiper. These species were also observed at the NRI Complex wetland during this period. The NRI Complex wetland hosts 37 waterbird species, including four near threatened and one vulnerable species, according to the report.

According to documents from City and Industrial Development Corporation (CIDCO), the agency responsible for the proposed infrastructure works in the area, there are three plots



in question, viz, pockets A, C and D located in Seawoods, Navi Mumbai. Of these, zone changes have been made in Pocket A (20 hectares) and D (0.85 hectares) – and proposed in Pocket C (47 hectares) – to facilitate the development of the golf course and residential area and make the areas economically viable.

The golf course, approximately under 20 hectares, is planned on parts of NRI wetlands while the residential complex will come up on a 13 hectare plot part of TSC wetlands. The changes were made according to Maharashtra government's notification of October 5, 2016, for a sanctioned modification to Navi Mumbai's Development Plan.

However, the same BNHS report has warned of landfilling, excavation of soil, intensive fishing and overcrowding as threats to the TSC and

NRI wetlands. Therefore, as a conservation and management action, the report has suggested, "land reclamation work should be strictly prohibited at this site."

This wetland (TSC) should be declared amongst protected areas associated with Thane Creek Flamingo Sanctuary (TCFS) because water birds from the sanctuary are using it as high tide roost when sanctuary gets flooded during high tide." For NRI wetlands also, the report has suggested managing traditional fishing practices in a way to manage the water level in the wetland for birds and that crowds should be regulated.

Sub-unit Panel that consist of the T.S. Chanakya Wetlands and NRI Complex wetlands finds a mention in the National Wetland Inventory and Assessment (NWIA) Atlas. Even though NWIA does not list all 2.01 lakh wetlands covered under it, a Bombay HC order referred to TSC and NRI wetlands as part of NWIA.

"If these wetlands are declared a conservation reserve, it will be a victory for us. These wetlands are protected by Supreme Court (SC) order but construction could start just because of a CIDCO order. If these 2.01 lakh wetlands are protected as per SC order, it is only SC that can change this status," said Sunil.

Navi Mumbai wetlands "For every year we delay it (the golf course project), we prevent environmental destruction. We feel like we are owners (guardians) of 80 hec-

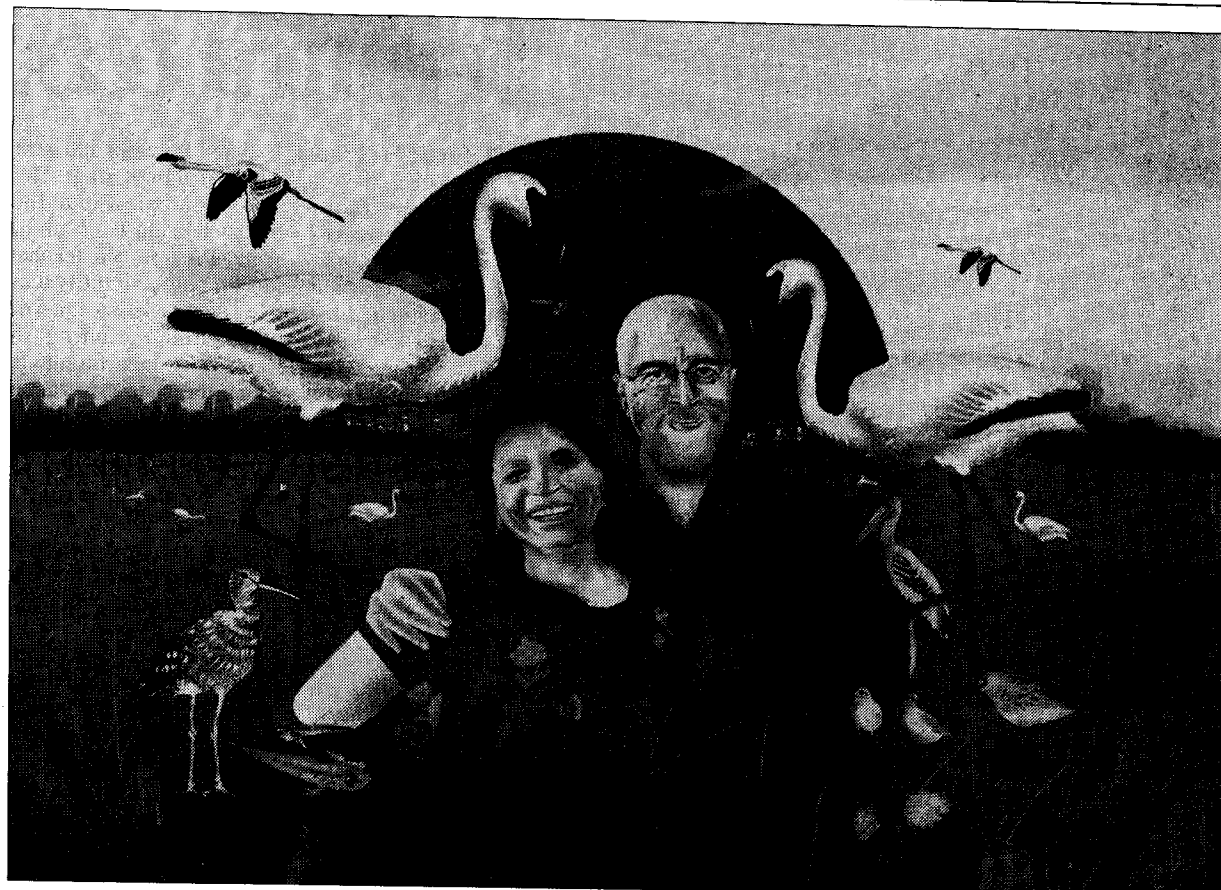


tares of land. We are also happy that we have inspired people to save their local environment as well," said Shruti.

Navi Mumbai's changing land use has contributed to the current geography of its wetlands. Till the 1970s, it was covered with large expanses of salt pans and paddy fields, notes the BNHS report.

Tide gates regulated tidal water for agriculture, salt farming and fishing, but these traditional practices declined by the 1980s. Once the region started to get developed into a metropolitan area, increasing land prices, changing hydrology and economy of this region due to construction activities, government policies and changing lifestyles could have made people abandon farming and fishing, notes BNHS in its report.

"This might have brought trans-



formation in this region — new wetlands were formed naturally in abandoned salt pans and paddy fields and artificially by soil excavation — existing wetlands became shallow or disappeared due to heavy siltation and landfilling and along with uncultivated and unmanaged lands, they were replaced by prolific growth of mangroves and scrubs," it noted.

"People point out to us that where we are living right now also used to be a wetland before. I say to them, 'Alright, but does that mean we let the last of wetlands also be destroyed?' Just because it happened once doesn't mean we should let it happen again," says Shruti.

About 100-200 citizens take part in the protests to save the environment. They are mobilised on social media. On the importance of citizen activism, Shruti adds, "We had not been environmental activists before we got into this issue... When we were working against hoardings, we exposed a lot of people. There was a defamation case against Sunil also but we are undeterred. Environment became our focus when we shifted here... Our children also actively help us. We are also happy that we have inspired people to save their local environment as well."

Are these wetlands or not?

Navi Mumbai resident Vinod Punshi said, "When CIDCO came to London and approached the Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) living there, one of the selling points was an 18-hole international standard golf course. Later, the plan was amended to a nine-hole golf course but then that also did not seem feasible. That is why a golf course was built at Kharghar. They just want this land bank."

The Agarwals who mobilised residents of the Seawoods area and have been opposing the golf course at the wetland site filed a PIL in the matter in 2018 that was clubbed with an existing PIL of 2013 filed by Navi Mumbai Environment Preservation Society and Punshi. A judgment was pronounced on November 1, 2018, which relied on a Supreme Court judgment that emphasises the doctrine of public trust. While referring to it, HC states, "...there is a total ban on reclamation of wetlands identified under NWIA. There is a ban on any permanent construction on such identified wetlands."

In the order, HC further stated,

"The agenda note (of 435th meeting of Board of Directors of CIDCO held on May 9, 2002, which proposed modification of Development Plan) will show that the decision of proposing change of DP was taken mainly for commercial reasons. There is no greater public interest reflected from the agenda note for converting the water bodies in NDZ into a golf course and residential complex."

The court further noted, "Moreover there is nothing placed on record to show that the impact on the ecosystem and environment of filling in water bodies for making construction of residential complex and for making golf course was assessed or at least such assessments were made available to the Planning Authority or the State government... Therefore, we have no manner of doubt that the impugned notification is illegal and is liable to be struck down," the court noted.

The court passed an order quashing the notification, ordered reservations provided therein cannot be implemented, allowed the wetlands to continue to remain protected as per Apex Court order.

According to documents from CIDCO, VC and MD Bhushan Gagrani had written to the state Environment Department on September 9, 2016, stating that it is a matter of grave concern for the city of Navi Mumbai that large chunks of developable land have been included in the NWIA. "The wetland delineation has been carried out at 1:50000 scale and there are anomalies which are primarily due to errors in drafting maps, confusions in identification in case of smaller land pockets, apparent similarities in mangroves and terrestrial vegetation and lack of site verification."

The Atlas has been prepared independent of any consultation of the legally incumbent Development Plan or the concerned Development Authority. Since the entire Navi Mumbai area is under development as per the planning approach already frozen as far back as in 1979 following Wetland Atlas in toto will not be possible due to mismatches/errors narrated above." Therefore, the CIDCO MD stated that there is no important wetland around Navi Mumbai notified area.

Where things stand now

After the HC order, the project contractor and CIDCO moved the Su-

preme Court and has secured a stay on the HC order.

Meanwhile, the Thane Creek Flamingo Sanctuary (TCFS) plan 2019-20 to 2029-30 has included a chapter titled Satellite Wetland Management and Conservation Plan. It refers to the aforementioned BNHS report and cites six satellite wetlands of the TCFS including TSC and NRI wetlands and even suggested an action plan for their conservation.

Therefore, in April 2020, the Additional Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (APCCF)- Mangrove Cell Virendra Tiwari wrote to CIDCO and district administrations of Thane and Raigad asking for comments since the Cell intended to propose protection and conservation measures for these six wetlands as per Wildlife Act (for eg. declaration of conservation reserves, etc).

CIDCO wrote back to APCCF on July 21, 2020 stating, "...this is to inform you that CIDCO had carried out a scientific survey in Navi Mumbai area in 2016 with reference to the wetland atlas published by GoI. As per the report of this survey, these five locations are not wetlands." While referring to the TSC and NRI wetlands, CIDCO has stated that the areas used to be salt pan lands and several ponds were created hereafter fishermen broke bunds to do fishing here.

Besides, CIDCO cited another BNHS report contradicting the one mentioned above. The said report had stated that 'Navi Mumbai International Airport site and adjoining areas should be made unattractive for birds.' Apart from the fact the HC order was stayed by SC, CIDCO has also cited a letter by Principal Chief Conservator of Forests, Nagpur to State Revenue and Forest Department on March 3, 2016 "to not propose the bird sanctuary at NRI complex and behind TSC Chanakya locations."

Based on this CIDCO letter, APCF has now written to BNHS on July 30, 2020, asking for comments.

When asked about the latest development, Tiwari said, "If the land is maintained as it is and birds can continue to visit the area, nobody would have an issue. Environment department has to take a call now. Declaring conservation reserve will require owner's consent as land does not belong to us."

CIDCO MD Sanjay Mukherjee did not comment on the matter.

(Mongabay India/TWF)

By Siddhi Jain

Actor, comic and musician Aadar Malik says digital and live experiences will have to sync in the future, and make for an opportunity that many performers and productions will explore in a big way.

Malik features in Rajat Kapoor's adaptation of the Shakespearean comedy *As You Like It*, titled *I Don't Like It As You Like It*, which has gone digital with Aadyam's digital edition. The play is available to watch on Insider's theatre platform on December 12 and 13.

Excerpts from an IANSLife chat with Aadar Malik:

As an actor, how different is taking the stage to screen? Do you find it challenging?

AM: Honestly speaking, the question of stage vs screen is asked mostly to theatre actors because I think we are the only people who end up experiencing both in a very serious way. It is something that is very different in terms of the number of takes that you would get, you get to really experience what the script is taking the character through on stage and so both have their ups and downs. In fact right now, it's so weird that we have to -- speaking in terms of this show -- because we are so accustomed to going through the motions of this character in that one and half to two hours. Now suddenly when you are in this space

where you know there are so many cameras and you have to, as opposed to acting for the audience you know that there are certain cameras are replaced in certain places that you have to perform for. That really is a bit of a shock to the system after after you performed 60-70 shows. That is new but other than that I think in the basic principle of it is just remains the same. You have to adjust a little here and there but over the years I just figured out that it's it's ultimately the same, it's just certain things change, certain aspects change but acting in the acting in its basic form remains the same.

Q: In terms of connecting with the audience, both in comedy and theatre, there's some live feedback that may help the performer. In digital performances, this feedback may not be present. Does this affect a performance?

AM: Of course, live feedback helps. That's why a lot of people talk of stage performances like a drug, because of that live feedback, that immediate applause, or laughter, or even if you're performing something dramatic, it's that immediate reaction that really fuels you, and I think after a while you start getting dependant on it. And as someone who's been creating content

'Digital and live need to sync'



on YouTube and other platforms, I do feel you get immediate feedback in the comments section which is not feedback that is not constructive in the strictest sense. So, the lucky part is that we know how the audience reacts to this show, we had enough experience with the sheer number and magnitude of the shows we have done. In this case (recorded play), not having that feedback and assuming that feedback in some moments is because we have done it so many times. That's a big advantage in terms of shooting the play as a compared to shooting a new show for a maiden production entirely. That would be quite difficult because plays do come into their own after the 20th-30th show, so you really start figuring out a lot of things as a group.

Q: Going forward, how do you think digital and live performances will sync together? Do you see both happening together?

AM: We will have to. Digital and live will have to sync together. I think there's a major integration as far as live and digital that's going to come our way. You could be performing for an audience that is geolocked in America by creating a stage and a worthwhile experience for them while staying in

Bombay. I think that is something that is going to be explored very seriously by a lot of performers and productions very soon.

Q: Please tell us a little about your role in *I Don't Like It, As You Like It*.

AM: In *I Don't Like It As You Like It*, we are performing as a troupe of clowns who are trying to put up a play *As You Like It*, and their theatre gets taken away from them, and they have to make the most of what they are left with, which is pretty much nothing, and they end up performing in a jungle. It's a really nice connection to the situation we are in right now, because we have lost our ability to perform on stage because of a pandemic. Now we are trying our best to bring it to an audience.

My clown is Coco, who ends up playing Rosalind but wanted to play Orlando. That's the role reversal we are playing with which is very Shakespearean in a way because most of the female characters were played by men. We really went on that where the men are playing women and women are playing men by the end of the show. It's something that has really excited me, and I always wanted to do it in a way truly unique and this particular production - Rajat Kapoor's version - is really the right way to attack something like this and have fun while doing it.

(The author can be contacted at siddhi.j@ians.in)

Now, this number does not exist

By Sukant Deepak

With the news of one of India's best known Hindi poets, Manglesh Dabral's death coming in on Wednesday evening, when he breathed his last at AIIMS after Covid related complications, it was clear that Indian poetry had lost a reluctant star.

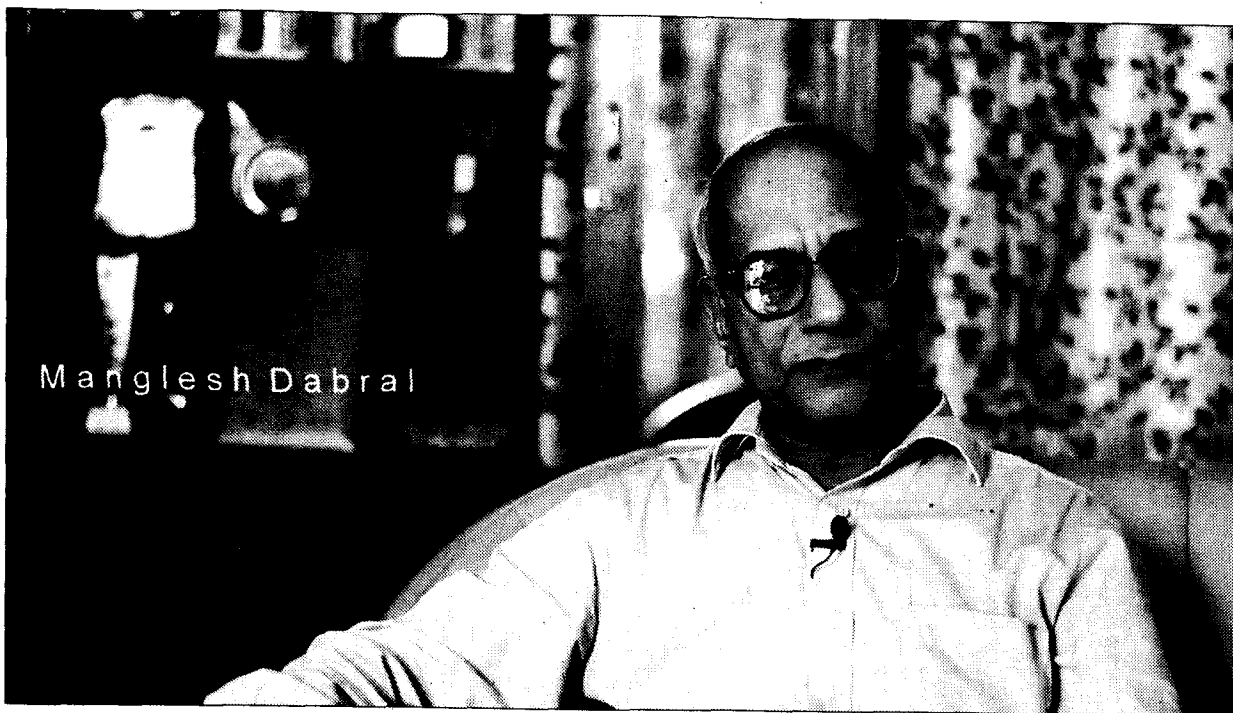
Quiet, and preferring to let his poems do the talking, the 72-year-old Dabral, who was born in a village in Uttarakhand was awarded with the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2000 for his poetry collection *Ham Jo Dekhte Hain*.

One of Hindi world's most translated poet -- English, Russian, Spanish, Polish and Italian, Dabral's most well-known poetry collections included *Pahad Par Laiten*, *Aawaz Bhi Ek Jagah Hai*, *Ghar Ka Rasta*, *Ham Jo Dekhte Hain*, *Mujhe Dikha Ek Manushya* and prose titles like *Lekhak Ki Roti* and *Kavi Ka Akelapan*. He was also considered one of India's best literary editors. During his years with *Jansatta* and many other publications, Dabral was instrumental in introducing a whole new generation of writers and poets.

Poet Arundhati Subramaniam, who first met Dabral in 2008 in Rotterdam, Holland remembers him as gentle, soft-spoken, wry, wonderfully devoid of affectation -- that it was difficult not to warm to him right away. "And yet, for all the mildness of his manner, one only had to read the poetry to know that this was a man capable of searing clarity and unsparing acuity."

We talked a lot, walked around the city a lot, as one often does at festivals far away from home. That became the basis of an enduring friendship. Each time we met, there was a warmth, a familiarity that was the result of that first meeting."

Remembering his warmth, generosity, humility and "in particular, his humility, his refreshing inability to brag -- such a rarity in the cultural world", Subramaniam feels that Dabral for her is a perfect reminder of all that a poet can and ought to be. "Truly a beacon in this world of shrill self-advertisement. He never lost his unassuming manner, his capacity to listen and for quiet self-deprecation. I don't believe I have



Manglesh Dabral

THIS NUMBER DOES NOT EXIST

This number does not exist.

Wherever I go whichever number I dial

At the other end a strange voice says

This number does not exist yeh number majood nahin hai

Not too long ago at this number I used to reach people

Who said: of course we recognize you

There is space for you in this universe

(From Sudeep Sen's translation of Manglesh Dabral's *Yeh Number Majood Nahin*)

met many poets who combine literary caliber with this degree of humility."

The poet, who in many of her interviews has described him as one of the country's finest poets asserts, "Manglesh's strength as a poet is his utter clarity, his deceptive simplicity, his quiet reflective voice that swivels on the edge of piercing recognition. He combines craft and conscience, dexterity and depth. There is a refined literary sensibility, but it is never self-conscious; there is a great wealth of insight, but he achieves it without ever seeming mannered or precious. This sahaja quality - the capacity to seem natural, unforced, deeply human and yet, never turning facile or aesthetically anemic - is a rare achievement, something that few

artists accomplish in a lifetime."

Surjit Patar, recipient of the Sahitya Akademi and Padma Shri (which he returned recently) honours and the deceased poet's friend for more than 25 years says, "I still cannot believe the news. This is a great loss. I have read many of his poems multiple times and what strikes me most is his deep understanding of the language, ability to perfectly distill his thoughts and command over the structure. Even when writing about social struggles and injustice, he never let go of the emotional gamut. There was no sloganeering in his work. His understanding of the human emotions ensures that people across generations relate to his work."

Delhi-based Sudeep Sen, who has translated Dabral's poems in-

cluding *This Number Does Not Exist* and *Accompanist* remembers the time spent with Dabral over several years "with many cups of *chai* and glasses of whiskey". "Dabral will always be remembered for his acute attention to detail, his lyrical and commanding reading voice, the social and political relevance in his poetry, his interest in his mountain heritage of his family, and his connection with the younger readers."

Poet Nirupama Dutt may have been introduced to Dabral in 1986 but she still remembers that evening. "I had recently moved to Delhi to pursue creative writing. Those were the years of struggle. My friend Kumar Vikal came to the capital and introduced me to a ration shop owner who would give stuff on credit and Manglesh Dabral, who ensured that I had a steady stream of freelance work in order to survive. I had never written in Hindi, but Dabral was extremely kind to me."

Dutt, whose book on Lal Singh Dil, titled *Poet of the Revolution* was released by the late poet says, "He never forgot his roots. For Dabral, it was always important to give a voice to the marginalised -- but never loudly. For him, it was always important to be humane -- in work, in life."

Literacy program for school dropouts

Global Dream Shaala, an initiative for providing free education to out of school children starting with Uttar Pradesh, launched earlier this week on Human Rights Day. The initiative will promote functional literacy and numeracy among masses, and was born out of an observation of underprivileged children aged 6-14 unable to read even a one-paragraph story fluently.

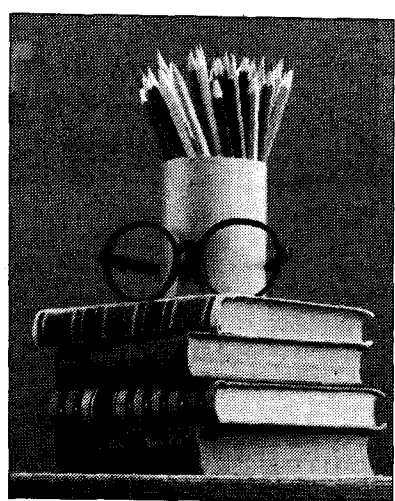
According to educationist Dr. Sunita Gandhi, "Our primary objective with Global Dream Shaala is to provide a zero-cost scale-up model of learning that is both quick and effective, and that makes learning gain real every day. This keeps the motivation of both volunteers and learners high."

A pilot of this approach was carried out with 22 women volunteers in Karauni village in a rural block of Lucknow.

Soon, these women turned teachers and within the first few months prepared 180 women to take the NLM Basic Literacy Exam by NIOS. Together, they made more than 800 women in Karauni capable of reading, writing, numeracy. Later, the program was carried out in other cities targeted to educate underprivileged children, adults and their mentors. may themselves be illiterate. Their main roles are motivating learners and facilitating their learning as in the new version, the videos do the entire job of teaching. The volunteers too become literate in the process. This will prove helpful in tapping into opportunities to scale up these projects across Uttar Pradesh, starting with Lucknow's urban slums.

There are plans to expand the initiative across India including Tier 2 and 3 cities and to take the children from basic literacy to Class 3 and 5 levels within the program.

The Global Dream Toolkits, which are used as curriculum to teach illiterate people, help learners start to read much faster than other existing primers and curriculums. Many learners can begin to read within one to two months with just 15 minutes learning sessions per day. This is one of the biggest attractions for a



learner and the excitement for them is real when within the first 15-minute sessions itself, they can begin to read six words and associate ten letters.

Dr. Sunita Gandhi, Founder, Global Classroom Private Limited (GCPL) & Global Education & Training Institute (GETI) told IANS: "The way we approach education is very much reducing to a minimum the capacity of the children using only their left brain and focus only on very small, narrow perspective of academic learning. We may fill the course with a lot of different facts and figures and so forth, but real learning is very limited. So in India, we need to consider a vastly different education, learn from global research. "We find a lot of kids get dropped out along the way or the interest wanes, they're not motivated by the system of education. We think that children should be strong enough to take care of themselves and or parents will take care of that side of things. But the reality is that many children are falling out of the cracks and they're not being able to lift themselves up again and see themselves as having any meaningful engagement with life because they feel they're not good enough. We should be doing just the opposite, we should be making her feel that every child is capable of getting the highest success, and serving their own families and communities." (IANS)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, December 13, 2020

Moon sextile Jupiter on your solar return chart and it will give you favorable results for the whole year. You will make plans to buy new house, land, property or vehicle. Take all precautions before new investments this year. Court cases or government related matters will find a peaceful solution. Keep your expenses under check. New job/business opportunities will keep coming. Your performance at workplace will be exceptional and you will come up to the expectation of one and all. Your enemies will be active with their evil plans but they will not get success. You will be involved in your family matters and atmosphere at home will be peaceful and joyous. Money will be spent in the activities of children such as their studies, career and marriage. Your spouse/partner will keep supporting you. You will enjoy good relations with family members/friends. Auspicious functions will keep taking place.

Aries: (March 21 - April 20)

You would be fun loving, energetic and willing to explore new ideas. You may feel frustrated in relationships as there is a lack of communication and it is hard for you to verbalize your true feelings and express them. Stress may crop up at unexpected turns and this would require you to look at some lifestyle changes and even incorporate some techniques like exercise and meditation. Health needs to be replenished with a planned diet and physical fitness schedules.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21)

You might particularly enjoy discussions about your early life, or the past. In fact, it's a great time to open up conversations with loved ones, as you are more rational when it comes to personal matters now. Your mind often wanders to domestic concerns, and issues surrounding your home, family, and personal past. Domestic relationships and the home environment tend to be harmonious and peaceful. It's a fabulous time for joining a gym or stepping up exercise and health routines.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21)

This phase brings harmonious relations with friends, colleagues and loved ones. There would be love, grace, beauty, happiness and pleasure in personal relations success and good fortune at work bring new opportunities for further progress. You will be able to make best use of your talents, work experience and would insert your creativity into your work and projects in hand. You would be more determined and hard-working at this time.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22)

You would have to restructure and reorganize activities at work and analyze the situations at home. Your daily routines and business dealings need to be restructured for better gains and productivity. You tend to be a perfectionist while completing business projects and campaigns. It is best to accept challenges that life offers you and keep going through ups and downs taking it all in your stride. There will be a fluctuation in energy levels before a balance is achieved.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23)

You would be compassionate and generous with family, friends and relatives and gain respect from them. You are ambitious and ready to achieve professional goals and targets at any cost. You would maintain balance, strength and completion in personal and business partnership. Restructuring business schedules and dealings would be productive. If health is affected, fevers or minor infections are more likely.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22)

News and visitors from far off places are likely to arrive. You are loving and caring in personal relationships. You look at the world in terms of value and worth now, and what you have

is foremost on your mind. Money issues pop up now-the discovery of a way to increase your income, an unexpected gift or reward, or a brief and tiny financial crisis that motivates you to find new ways to make money are possible. You are blessed with good mood and health.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23)

Your personal charm and attractiveness would have a positive effect on your relationships. People see you as a loving and lovable person, and as someone who is aware of their needs and feelings, which can benefit you at this time. Others are willing to help and cooperate with your goals and ambitions. Group activities can be a therapeutic pastime.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22)

You encounter people who are very considerate and understanding. You would also form relationships with people based on a deep level of mutual appreciation and understanding for each other. A sudden job opportunity, or some form of assistance with regards to career, home, or property matters, could be part of the picture. This can also produce an event that requires you to take charge and show your responsible side. Health needs to be addressed with a diet plan as well as some physical exercise.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21)

Personal relations are precious and need to be treated with tender love and care. You feel fresh and re-energized. A blast of personal energy comes your way, and showing your leadership skills works for you now. You are at your most convincing, as others accept you at face value. Now you need a little attention, and career matters come to a head. This is also a strong period for finances and close partnerships. A pleasant surprise may be in store.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20)

Efforts at self-promotion might be made now. This is the time when you're noticed for what you've done or haven't done. Do your best to be in top form, make career adjustments if needed, and don't be afraid to show others exactly what you are made of. Perhaps this is not a time to make a presentation or to come on too strong to the world. You are feeling reflective rather than expressive. At this time, you instinctively know how to place yourself in the best light in order to make a good impression on others.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18)

You will be creative, adventurous and unconventional at work and this brings appreciation from senior colleagues. Your partnerships are highlighted right now, and it's time to compromise. Insecurities in your partnerships are brought to light now, and the best way to handle this is to understand that you need others instead of competing for the limelight. Concentrate on truly listening to those close to you, and on playing a supportive role. Keep stress at bay.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20)

You're at your best when you are showing the world your practical, competent, and responsible side. A wonderful professional opportunity takes you towards success at this time. A personal meeting will lead to romance, love and long lasting relationship. There are chances of new associations and beginnings as changes may occur. Your efforts to reach out to new people will be accepted and welcomed as you get success in foreign matters too. Physical energy and good health enable you cooperate with busy schedule and work commitments.

Career in Finance

By Ranjan K Baruah

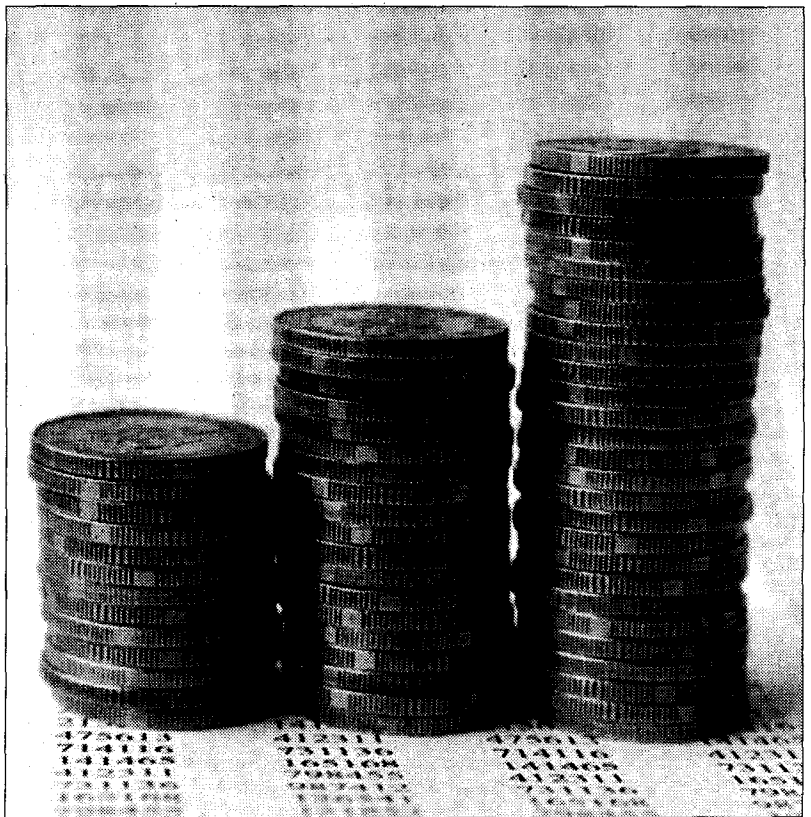
We are aware of the recent advertisements which are related to mutual funds. In today's edition I am trying to write something related to making money and a career option related to financial market. Before writing about the career option let us understand about the field which is yet to be explored by people in the state or in NE region.

Securities market is a component of the wider financial market where securities can be bought and sold between subjects of the economy, on the basis of demand and supply. Securities markets encompasses equity markets, bond markets and derivatives markets where prices can be determined and participants both professional and non professionals can meet.

Securities markets can be split into below two levels. Primary markets, where new securities are issued and secondary markets where existing securities can be bought and sold. Secondary markets can further be split into organised exchanges, such stock exchanges and over-the-counter where individual parties come together and buy or sell securities directly. For securities, a holder knowing that a secondary market exists in which their securities may be sold and converted into cash increases the willingness of people to hold stocks and bonds and thus increases the ability of firms to issue securities.

There are a number of professional participants of a securities market and these include; brokerages, broker-dealers, market makers, investment managers, speculators as well as those providing the infrastructure, such as clearing houses and securities depositories. A securities market is used in an economy to attract new capital, transfer real assets in financial assets, determine price which will balance demand and supply and provide a means to invest money both short and long term.

We keep money in banks or invest in many other areas. We also keep money in insurance companies. When we look at the interest then we could see that interests are different in different companies or financial institutions. Have you wondered who manages the funds or capitals that we invest? As an indi-



vidual any one may invest in mutual fund or by buy stocks or shares of different companies. The Indian Securities Market is one of the leading markets in the emerging world. Over the past few years, the financial markets have become increasingly global.

Some of the career options that come to our mind straight include Broker/ Dealer, Merchant Banker, Mutual Fund Distributor, Research Analyst, Wealth Manager. This financial services sector looks for graduates with commerce, economics, finance, mathematics, management background, etc.

There are many mutual funds companies or trade brokerage agencies which hire aspirants. Leading brokers in India includes Angel broking, ICICI Direct, Motilal Oswal, ShareKhan, HDFC Securities, Kotak Securities, Axis Direct, etc. Stock broker work with institutional investors as securities traders, securities analysts, advisors or dealers. Brokers also work with banks, MF, pension funds, insurance companies and other FIs or work with individual clients. All companies require efficient researchers and hence this brings opportunity for people who

are efficient in market research.

Like working for other companies one may also become good advisor and earn good amount. Like advisor smart young people may invest in share market and earn good amount of money. We need to study the market properly and now days there are many options to learn about the share market.

There is website like www.moneycontrol.com which helps individuals to learn more about the recent trends in the share market. Presently, only two exchanges in India-the National Stock Exchange of India Ltd. (NSE) and the Bombay Stock Exchange (BSE)-provide trading in Futures and Options. There are post graduation management courses related to securities analysts. Securities analysts' job involves a lot of reading, research, meeting people, writing etc. With ideas all of us may earn extra income or full time income through trading or through share market.

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

*"Knowledge is proud that he has
learn'd so much; wisdom is humble
that he knows no more."*

--- William Cowper

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No. 119 SHILLONG, MONDAY, DECEMBER 14, 2020

Birth control by choice

THE Modi government's stand on population control has been unequivocally explained before the Supreme Court. The government made clear that it is not in favour of forced birth-control as was done in China for decades. Ideally, India subscribes to the theory of "hum do, hamare do" (two kids for a family) but use of force is not the way forward in a democratic society and the government understands as much. The government stand was presented before the apex court in response to a PIL that sought strict implementation of birth control norms that India had introduced in the 1960s. This was messed up during the Emergency of the 1970s through forced sterilization and has eventually lost its steam. Voluntary birth control steps to reduce the number of births are being encouraged. Two is ideal, but there's no strict limit. Significantly, the government noted that the total fertility rate (TFR) or birth per female on average has come down from 3.2 in Year 2000 to 2.2 by Year 2018 and might be still lower now. The acceptable fertility rate is 1.8 and this is clearly an achievable target.

The message has spread. Families more or less have volunteered to adhere to the two-child norm. Exceptions are mostly Muslim families as their religion does not sanction birth control. Still, large numbers of educated Muslim families are opting for smaller families. With a population explosion seeing India having over 135 crore people, next only to that of China's, this is admittedly causing a huge strain on national resources as also natural resources. Yet, there are those who favour more births by citing India's current demographic dividend or the larger population of youths. But an unchartered youth population could also be a cause of unrest. The institution of marriage is strong in India and in most Asian nations with the exception of nations like Japan. Europe, as also Japan, is faced with the problem of ageing populations with lesser child births. The system of marriages has become old-fashioned in the West. This results in lesser childbirths even as couples choose not to have children. The urban sprawls in India present a pathetic picture. Governments and local bodies have not been able to provide even proper water and sanitation facilities to these areas where millions have an existence worse than that of cattle. Jobs are hard to come by due to lack of economic growth. Huge sums are spent on the free- foodgrain scheme. Healthcare system is facing serious strain. The only consolation is the steady fall in TFR.

Beyond COVID-19: Lessons from the Pandemic

By HH Mohrmen

We are at the threshold of 2021 and people are anxiously waiting for the New Year with the hope that like a new day dawning, they will be able to leave behind all the bad experiences of 2020. Hope is what keeps the world going. After all life in the world revolves and evolves because hope is perpetual. But the pertinent question is whether the world is going to be the same as this year or the year before. The answer is yes and no. A lot will remain as it is and there will be not much difference. Yet there will also be subtle changes happening around us.

There is already a new term that is doing the rounds since the governments of the world put into operation their lockdown to prevent the spread of COVID-19. It's called the New Normal. Just as a person cannot cross the same river twice, the world can never be the same again. Besides, change is also constant in the universe. The world has changed and in many ways it cannot go back to how it was. It is also not for humans to try to unwind what has happened and live in the past because the world and the entire universe can only move forward.

Many writers and thinkers are also of the opinion that the pandemic marks the end of an era and the beginning of another because in many way what has happened had changed the way people live their lives. Since the pandemic had hit the world very hard, it will definitely have a permanent impact on the culture and the way of life of every society. It is also true that government's response to COVID-19 pandemic has no doubt affected every individual and in all strata of society.

The major effect of the pandemic on the way of life of the tribal people like ours is, with regards to the tradition that they have with bereavements. The tradition of laying the body in state (pyinchong sngi) for at least one day especially when an elderly person in the family dies is now done away with. The customary practice of laying the body in state for friends and family to pay their last respects to the deceased person is no longer practiced as the cremation or funeral is arranged as soon as possible even if the

person had not died of COVID-19. The most noticeable impact of the pandemic is the number of people visiting the bereaved family nowadays. This used to be a unique tribal tradition that people follow, but now people avoid doing so and visit only when the bereavement happens to close friends or a family member. Perhaps people avoid visiting the bereaved family also out of respect for the government SOP.

Another interesting development in Jowai which has a positive impact on the office of Waheh Chnong in particular and the Town is



general is the empowerment of the headmen and their organisation. The secretary of ka Synjuk ki Rangbah Shnong Jowai Urban, L.D. Lakiang has rightly said that the pandemic is like a blessing in disguise because it has strengthened and united the headmen of different localities in Jowai. It may be mentioned that the Waheh Chnong in Jañtia are already empowered by the Act of the Jañtia Hills Autonomous District Council which has also received the assent of the Governor, but Jowai as such is in a peculiar situation. Although it is an urban area and a cosmopolitan town, yet there is neither a Town committee nor a Municipal body to look after the general welfare of the town. Jowai has more than 22 town localities or dorbar chnong which function independently although they are all part of the same town. This leaves a vacuum in administration of the town that the council of Waheh Chnong has to fill.

In the absence of a town level committee or a municipal body, the Synjuk ki Waheh Chnong of Jowai town by virtue of it being an organisation of headmen elected by their respective communities is by default a town level committee. The government has many a time tried but failed to conduct the election to the Jowai Municipal board. Hence it

should therefore treat the Synjuk as the Council of Headman of Jowai town. And by virtue of the office of Waheh Chnong being recognised by the Act of the Jañtia Hills Autonomous District Council the same should be treated as a legal entity.

Another interesting story from Jowai which needs to be shared is the lesson learned from the taxi owners and drivers association of the town. When the District Administration started easing the number of vehicles to ply on the road in the town and the odd even regulation was done

away with, the taxi owners and drivers association decided to voluntarily continue with the plan. They decided to continue with the arrangement and carry on plying with the odd-even numbers arrangement. This has saved the people from prolonged traffic jams which happen on a regular basis. This is a win-win solution for both the people and the drivers and it happens without any government intervention but as a result of the association voluntarily deciding to do what they think is right and for the benefit of all.

While governments are calculating the pandemic impact on the economy of their respective countries, the poor and needy who do not have that luxury, have to move on facing all the challenges that come their way.

Also while the world is trying to defeat COVID-19, agencies and institutions are also trying to assess the damage the pandemic has had on the different aspects of society. Studies conducted in many countries suggest that mental and health problems and domestic violence have increased by 40% during lockdown and the major factor which contributed to this is alcohol. It was found that alcohol addiction has been a significant factor in both mental health issues and domestic violence.

Even if no study has been done yet but it cannot be denied that a large section of the population in the state of Meghalaya too is either alcoholic or alcohol-dependent. This needs the immediate attention of the government. Just look around and one would realise that any person would at least have two friends or relatives who are suffering from alcohol addiction.

Although no agency or institution in the state has conducted any tangible study in this area, but suffice it to say that a large part of our health resources are spent on coping with alcoholism and alcohol related diseases. Records from hospitals and health centres will provide us with evidence on the grave reality of the issue. Apart from that there are other alcohol related crimes like accidents, domestic violence and other petty crimes which affect not only the individual but the family too. This is also a drain on government resources. Other consequences of alcohol addiction are - broken homes, unwanted pregnancies, neglected children, suicide, homelessness, debt, crimes, mental problems and un-timely and needless death.

Post COVID-19 the emergent issue that the government needs to take seriously is the growing number of people who have become alcoholics. Although both the state and the central government has allotted a huge financial resources to combat the drugs menace and alcohol addiction is also clubbed in the programs, but in the context of Meghalaya, alcohol addiction deserves to be treated separately.

Post COVID-19 the government should take the support of different institutes and universities and conduct a study to understand the effect that alcohol has on society. General observation gives one the idea that it seems that out of every two youth who die, the cause of death of one would be alcohol related. If the government can control alcohol addiction, it would save the state the much needed resource and more importantly precious young lives because alcohol is eating the vitals of the tribal society in the state.

Email: hhmohrmen67@gmail.com

EU-DisinfoLab report 2020 exposes a transnational political scam

Hollowing out of democracy via Hindu-nationalist propaganda

By Annie Domini

Resurrecting a dead professor from Harvard Law School to suit ultra-nationalist interests is only the tip of the scam-berg that has been exposed in the recent EU DisinfoLab 2020 report, called the "Indian Chronicles". A vast transnational political scam, funded by a certain Srivastava Group, has been brewing for over a decade and half, with hundreds of fake websites, shadowy thinktanks and lobbying groups hustling it out in Geneva and Brussels targeting the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) as well as pliable Members of the European Parliament, often of a converging far-right ideology, to serve "pro-India interests". But a harder look makes it clear that those interests are not at all pro-India, at least for the India that believes in constitutionalism, democracy, secularism and good-old diplomacy to make its case, instead of bankrolling nefarious organisations that hijack the human rights discourse for a far-right agenda.

The report – the second of this nature; the first one came out in December last year – shows that the crepuscular network is primarily aimed at "discrediting Pakistan internationally", with its lobby groups approaching far-right MEPs to raise anti-Pakistan questions dressed up as human rights issues in the European Parliament. While there are several genuine human rights breaches occurring in India's western neighbour, not to mention the cross-border terrorism that had been originating from it for decades, a pro-India network spanning over a hundred countries and over 700 fake publications mimicking real newspapers and websites is hardly the way to highlight it.

In fact, of these websites, EP Today, discontinued since the December 2019 DisinfoLab report and resurrected as EU Chronicle, was often quoted by ANI (Asian News International), the news agency most proximate to the Modi government. The lobbyists, inserted in various nodal points of the miasma that is the Srivastava Group, persuaded far-right MEPs like Ryszard Czarnecki, Thierry Mariani, Fulvio Martusciello to write op-eds in support of Narendra Modi government's Islamophobic legislations such as robbing Kashmir of its special status in August 2019, bringing in the Citizenship Amendment Act in December 2019, or in support of the Balakot "surgical strikes" against Pakistan in 2019, in the wake of the Pulwama attack and just two months before the 2019 Lok Sabha elections.

These op-eds published in the dubious EP Today or EU Chronicle were then quoted by ANI as representative of the European Union en bloc, thereby seriously misrepresenting the fringe, sponsored opinions of the loony bunch of ultra-conservatives in the European Parliament. All these three MEPs were part of the controversial Kashmir trip in mid-2020, organised by, among others, a lobbyist called Madi Sharma, who pressured Julie Ward, a British MEP, to co-sign on an anti-Pakistan, pro-India column for EP Today, even though Ward is equally critical of Modi government's "nationalist and authoritarian drift".

The multi-layered media and think-tank network, inter-quoting and bolstering each other, even managing to resurrect several American and European NGOs which closed down

in the 70s or 80s, and get them UN accreditation to spread blistering pro-India, anti-Pakistan propaganda, orchestrating demonstrations outside UN buildings in global cities, inserting speakers at UNHRC and other human rights bodies to skew the narrative in favour of India – isn't just a matter of managing foreign relations and one-upmanship with Pakistan. While it hasn't been definitively linked with the Narendra Modi government, the Srivastava Group's activities can be said to have equally hampered democracy within India by clouding the domestic and foreign affairs in a stinking bubble of disinformation, fake news, fake opinions and articles that piggyback on ultra and Hindu nationalism of the current government at the centre.

For example, when far-right MEPs write on the Balakot strike, itself shrouded in mystery, and influencing the outcome of the 2019 general elections in a decisive way, it doesn't remain confined to India's external relations with Pakistan alone. Similarly, when far-right MEPs visit a besieged Kashmir – a Kashmir unconstitutionally stripped of autonomy, robbed of dignity and digital connectivity for months at a stretch, imprisoned in their own homes, without adequate medical care despite Covid-19, always staring at the barrel of a gun – and parrot the Modi government's line, propaganda to milk foreign relations and paper over the rough edges spills over into domestic politics, furthers the anti-Kashmiri narrative in mainstream media and injects into the drip-feed of Islamophobia the steroid of wrongly framed national security.

There are just so many questions which arise out of the findings of the EU DisinfoLab report. The first and foremost is this: Who and what is the Srivastava Group, and how have they managed to dig so deep into international diplomatic circuits with their army of fake NGOs, think-tanks and 750-plus media outlets? How can a relatively lesser-known corporation survive globally on its own and pull as many strings without raising governmental eyebrows? If the network has been active since 2005/2006, how has its modus operandi changed since May 2014, when India took a decidedly ultra-nationalist turn in its domestic and external affairs?

The second question is this: with the high-voltage exposé of ANI's prominent role in disseminating the disinformation from EP Today, EU Chronicle and other fake websites, passing them off as credible sources of information, presenting fringe far-right MEP op-eds as views of prominent European powers, plugging these op-eds and tweets into Indian mainstream media – what is to be done about it? Till the time of writing this column, this writer hasn't seen a statement by the Editors' Guild of India condemning ANI's role in propagating malicious misinformation, and instituting an enquiry into the same.

The third question is what happens to genuine human rights discourse when its grammar and lexicon is disabused thus, suiting ultra-conservative agendas and becoming a pawn in despicable psy-op games of hard powers. We have come a very long way from India's pioneering of the Non-Aligned Movement and global anti-colonial struggles, to now our foreign and domestic policies being appropriated by shadowy, unaccountable networks of unparalleled, unchecked and undemocratic powers. (IPA Service)

TO THE EDITOR

Acquiescing in corruption

Editor,
Your editorial "Politicising corruption" (ST Dec 10, 2020) is interesting. On one hand, there are serious and credible allegations of corruption against the present regime and on the other there are politicians who are trying to fish in troubled waters. The most notable thing in this whole drama over corruption in Autonomous District Councils is that the ruling coalition is trying to brazen it out. Every time, somebody raises a corruption charge, the response of the political masters (read NPP) has been to deny it outright. Instead of agreeing to look into the specific charges, the NPP-led government has bravely shielded those against whom the charges have been brought. It is politically expedient that with Garo Hills Autonomous District Council election impending, the ruling side would not like to show chinks in its armour. That's perfectly understandable. But what about the other two? Obviously, NPP realises that its best bet is

to buy time. And precisely this is what they are trying to do. By ordering a meaningless exercise of audit of the funds management during the past ten years, it has been ensured that Garo Hills election does not trigger electoral reversal for the ruling side. The bottom line is: Power at all costs. Devil may care is the attitude today.

This is a decadent political culture quite in contrast with earlier times.

In the earlier years, as you rightly pointed out, people owned moral responsibility. Can we forget that BJP ministers (T.H.Rangad and A.L.Hek) had resigned from the cabinet over the allegations of corruption in construction of Meghalaya House Kolkata? Can we forget that chief minister E.K.Mawlong had to quit? Don't we remember big heads rolled in the Jowai PHE scandal? And what about a minister from Garo Hills who had to resign after some embarrassment in Kolkata? Anybody, who has observed Meghalaya's emerging political culture will agree that today, it has degenerated into ostrich-like denial of corruption charges

and that with a straight face! This is the real tragedy, not the corruption per se.

Our young Chief Minister can play the political blame game when his arch rival Mukul Sangma raises the issue. They also cleverly silenced the coalition partner BJP's voice. They might have weathered the storm over a cabinet minister's direct link with coal smuggling. Stripping of Home portfolio after cabinet colleagues pushed the Chief Minister is a tacit admission of guilt. The fact that nobody is punished, no investigation was carried out and the minister still continues to feather his own nest is most despicable. How I wish the pressure groups were out in the streets raising slogans and putting up banners seeking punishment to the corrupt.

Kindly permit me to mention an interesting fact about Singapore which is the second least corrupt country in the world. Singapore's legendary Prime Minister Lee Kwan Yew had set strict moral standards for ministers and officers. Once a cabinet minister had gone on a tour abroad with his family - all

sponsored by a businessman friend. When he returned to the country after the jaunt, at the airport police arrested him since he had violated the moral code of corruption-free governance. By taking the hospitality of a businessman friend, the minister was seen as indulging in corruption. Such gold standard made Singapore what it is today.

By comparison, such rotten standards set by our politicians has plunged Meghalaya to its current depth of despair. Is there a hope for rising from the gutters? Unfortunately, no! Because public, and more especially the youth of the state, has accepted corruption as a way of life! Today's youth will be tomorrow's leaders and that's where the real despair lies.

Yours etc.,
C. Lyngdoh,
Via email

Farmers Protest

Editor,
The farmers' protest enters the 17th day with no end to the deadlock on the three Farms Laws. Multiple

rounds of dialogue had taken place between the farmers and the government, yet there is hardly any breakthrough. The number of protestors is growing with each passing day and with more from across Punjab and Haryana making a beeline to join the protest in the national capital. The agitation has drawn international attention and also singers, actors from Punjab have joined the bandwagon in support of the farmers. Attempts are being made to delegitimise the protest from those in support of the government and certain sections of the media by calling out names such as "Khalistani" and "Agents of the Congress".

Union Minister Raosaheb Danve also claims that Pakistan and China are behind the ongoing protest by the farmers, which evoked a sharp reaction from them. Meanwhile, the protestors said that their agitation has remained apolitical and they did not allow any political leaders to use their platform.

So now, what's next for the government? The government is working on a strategy and is welcoming the farmers to

come to the table for a discussion. Is there a trust deficit? The manner in which the Bills were rushed through amidst the pandemic certainly raised some eyebrows.

The farmers' apprehension comes mainly from no mention of MSP (Minimum Support Price) in the Act and they fear that they could be exploited by private players who would buy their crop at cheap prices. No doubt, a reform is the need of the hour but any changes to the laws would massively impact their livelihoods.

However, discussions with different stakeholders and farmers should have taken place prior to the passing of the bills and not after. Farmers have a vital role to play in the growth of India's economy. Hopefully, the government will find ways and means to reach a consensus with the agitating farmers and may peace prevail.

Yours etc.
Steven Marbaniang,
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.

"Be brave. Take risks. Nothing can substitute experience."

— Paulo Coelho

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No.120 SHILLONG, TUESDAY, DECEMBER 15, 2020

MeECL employees in a quandary

THINGS seem to have reached their nadir as far as the MeECL is concerned. Never before have pensioners been denied their dues or staff salaries been delayed. However, this is not a sudden development. Over the years the debt burden of the MeECL has only piled up with no serious thought given to pull up the straps of this major public sector undertaking (PSU). The MeECL has vast assets which could have been judiciously capitalised towards building up its liquidity. But, record keeping of all government assets, particularly land holding are inefficiently done. If truth be told then government itself is not fully aware of the assets that it holds as a public trust. MeECL has over the years become an employment agency. The number of employees in the clerical cadre is more than what a corporation the size of the MeECL actually requires. The problem with Meghalaya is that we don't have corporate giants setting up shop here which would have been good models of how profit-making corporations/companies are run and managed. Every employee is judged by his/her performance. The call is clear - perform or perish. Is the MeECL run that way? Also, the principle of every profit-making industry is, "lean and mean." The MeECL is neither lean nor mean and cannot afford to do so because it would lose the goodwill of its staff and vote-banks will be affected.

Like every government owned PSU the MeECL has not learnt the hard lesson that unless it makes profit from the whole business of power generation, transmission and distribution then it cannot continue to pay its employees or run the industry. A corporation is meant to be a profit-making entity but a state-owned corporation has the luxury of government pumping in funds every now and again or government standing surety for loans availed by the corporation.

What's evident is that all public sector undertakings whether those are run by the state or central government are floundering under colossal debt burdens. Air India is a fine example of how bad management has ensured that profit-making routes are sold out to private players even while the national carrier does all those routes that private airlines would not touch with a bargepole. In the 1990's there was a proposal to privatise the MeSEB. Private parties including foreign bidders had expressed interest in the corporation then but politics prevented any pragmatic decision - making and that's how far we have arrived today.

It's time for the State Government to get out of the denial mode and start exploring opportunities for tuning up the MeECL and turning it into a modern, progressive power producing industry through better management. That will cause some pain but does Government have a choice?

Neutralising India's "too much democracy"

What Amitabh Kant's remarks reveal to us

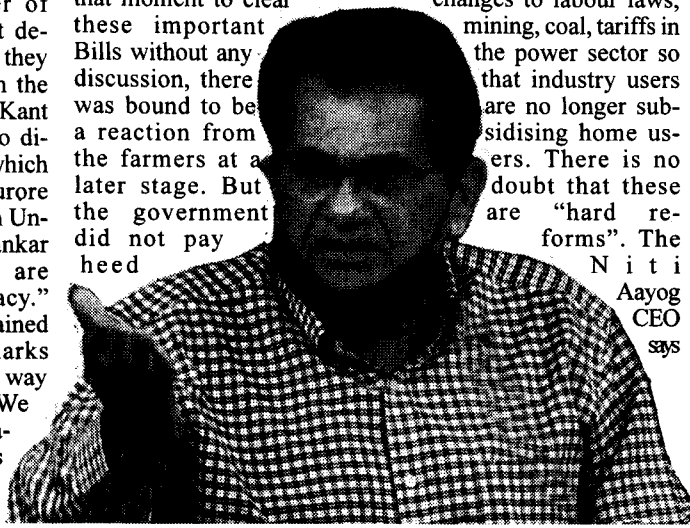
By Jagdish Rattanani

The BJP has distanced itself from the remarks by the CEO of Niti Aayog Amitabh Kant that India has been "too much of a democracy" to allow for reforms that the career bureaucrat categorised as "bold". Officers trying to keep the ruling party in good humour, particularly when they have been given plum roles, is nothing new. Also, they do not and must not have the right to oppose political choices of an elected government. Yet, how much they sing today's tunes, where they sing and how they sing is a matter of choice. Each one must decide individually where they want to stand or fall in the full glare of the public. Kant was a little too much to digest even for the BJP, which has tried to end the furore over those remarks with Union Minister Ravi Shankar Prasad saying, "We are proud of our democracy." Kant himself has explained that the way his remarks were reported is not the way he meant to say it. We must accept his explanations yet note that his choice of words and the timing is ironic, even if nothing else need be said about the thinking in such senior echelons of our bureaucracy.

Kant's other remarks in the same meeting that have not caught as much attention reveal more about how actually this difficult thing called democracy is being set aside as the government marches ahead with its plans like no other government has before. Kant plays to the political tune by painting a rosy future of a path he talks of as if he knows it so well; it is precisely this idea of certitude, blind in its beliefs, unmindful of what the nation feels and suffers that has brought us unprecedented strife of which the farmers' protests are the latest example.

The question is not about "reforms", which many might reasonably argue are required (though the popular mood appears to have distinctly turned anti-"reform"). The point is the way these policy actions are being pushed down the throat of an unwilling nation

when trust in the promises and actions of the government isn't at its best, and gets lower by the way it works and stands in the face of unprecedented opposition. There are simple ways to understand what the nation is going through. Sharad Pawar explained it in a few lines when he said: "When these Bills were tabled before Parliament, it was conveyed to the government that even though it was possible for them at that moment to clear these important Bills without any discussion, there was bound to be a reaction from the farmers at a later stage. But the government did not pay heed



to this and cleared these Bills with a nominal discussion of 15-20 minutes." The Nobel laureate Abhijit Banerjee understood it equally simply and explained: "It is not so much that you could not make a case for getting rid of many of these very old-fashioned institutions in the agriculture sector..., but the lack

way, the approach and the method of choice for this government. We have it on authority from Kant, who explains in remarks that have not been cited enough: "The (Covid-19) crisis has been used by this government as an opportunity to unleash reforms that will modernise India's agriculture..." He goes on to cite a host of reforms that can only be contentious and even more so when they are pushed without discussion. These are changes to labour laws, mining, coal, tariffs in the power sector so that industry users are no longer subsidising home users. There is no doubt that these are "hard reforms". The Niti Aayog CEO says

they were held up for years, and he cares not to pause to think or ask: Why? These changes are bound to be contested; they will generate political heat and social strife when pushed. The anger may not find its way out on the streets in every single case but people are seething and this will come out somewhere and with not

"Let us therefore not confuse the protests with reforms. People see them as only they can. This is a government on an agenda that has nothing to do with the ordinary, everyday citizens of India."

of trust is massive. The sudden cancelling of Centre's liabilities under the GST Act does not help. You...have power delivered from top down and (you say) we are just going to take decisions."

But this is precisely the

very good outcomes. Consider how must labourers respond when the pandemic is put to use to stretch working hours, when basic protections, already rendered weak by a contractual system, are withdrawn and the unorganised

are left to the vagaries of an owner class that has been known (with some exceptions) to care a damn.

Should a government use the suffering wrought by a pandemic to push through such deep changes that will carry long standing ramifications for ordinary citizens without listening, debating, arguing and settling down for a bit of give and take? What is this, if not the working of a system that has decided that we have too much democracy, and it's time to cut it down and push ahead on a path that the people at the top have decided is best for all of us - with people at the bottom having little say in the matter? The pandemic has thus been used, not as much to bring immediate relief to the people, or to help migrants who were forced to flee amid the ill-advised order of an almost sudden shut down, but to push an agenda while people of the nation are down. And in the process, more strife and more suffering follow and we see it on the roads and highways where farmers have the wintry weather to take on a haughty government. Is it any surprise then that the names of crony capitalists are today becoming synonymous with the leading lights of the government? This is not even getting into the arguments over MSP and how and why it has been left out of the farm laws. Let us therefore not confuse the protests with reforms. People see them as only they can. This is a government on an agenda that has nothing to do with the ordinary, everyday citizens of India. It is taking us on a ride to a mythical, vainglorious future, trampling aspirations, dignity and rights today to build airports, exports and fancy factories for tomorrow. To achieve this, "too much democracy" has to be tamed. And thus, all the nation's energy, vibrancy and diversity is being sucked out. It is the ultimate plunder of India.

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

Simplistic plan of vaccination in complex scenario is an error

Differentiate between perceived and actual risks

By Gyan Pathak

People most at risk should get COVID-19 vaccine before those who are running a lower risk of the contagion. This is the principle of priority - seemingly very simple, but very difficult to implement. India, undergoing the process, is now faced with several impediments in the way, including the danger of falling in the trap created by error of application of mind due to several reasons. Tasks at hand are not only ensuring distribution of Covid vaccines on priority and equitable basis, but also ascertain the vaccines safe, effective, affordable.

In the midst of COVID-19 pandemic, several countries of the world including India have been racing to develop and deploy safe and effective vaccines. There are currently over 50 vaccine candidates in trial, and several manufacturers have applied for emergency use approval for their vaccines, which they claimed effective. India was the top country to have ordered the largest number with 1.6 billion doses followed by European Union with 1.58 billion and the US with 1.1 billion as on November 30.

However, India has to reduce the number of ordered doses to 1.5 billion as on December 11 indicating the difficulties the country is facing in acquiring sufficient numbers of doses to its 1.38 billion people. Since every person requires several doses of the vaccine, there is a great shortfall. It is here India needs prioritization of deployment of the vaccine. Presently, the five manufacturers of covid vaccines are Oxford-Astrazeneca, Pfizer-BioNTech, Moderna, Novavax, and Gamaleya (Sputnik).

Though India is almost ready with its vaccination plan, only about 30 crore people could be vaccinated in phase one which is only 21.7 per cent of the population. The population to receive this vaccine in the first phase include one crore health care workers, two crore frontline workers, and 26 crore persons above 50 years of age. The people below the age of 50 years suffering from chronic critical illness, which are about one crore, will be provided vaccines after completion of the first phase.

It goes without saying that the plan of distribution of vaccines on priority basis is simplistic while the situation is complex. It is an error similar to that India committed in its order of complete lockdown on March 24, followed by several ad hoc orders on containment measures. The mistake was realized only after a great damage done to the economy and thousands of lives lost both on account of diseases and several other reasons such as chaos among migrant labourers. We had locked even those areas and regions where there were no infections. Only with Unlock-1 on June 1, we could come to terms with our own error, and started giving relaxation to the areas without any infection. The lockdown orders were simplistic and lacked careful application of mind. Lockdown and containment measures were required only for those areas where there were infections, not for those areas where there were no infection.

Similarly, while ascertaining priority, the government should not adopt simplistic logic that people above 50 years of age are most vulnerable to corona. After careful application of mind one can easily find error in this attitude. There are many areas in the country where there is no corona in-

fection, and subsequently no risk of the contagion. Why should we then insist on giving vaccines to them when they are not at all at risk? If the government implements its present plan, several states with lower risk of contagion and less population would receive more doses of vaccine than the states running higher risks on the ground with higher population. It would be due to demographic differences. To avoid this we must assess the actual risks on the ground, not the age.

Since records for all the states are not available, the country needs to collect them first to assess the real situation in each of the states. We do have 50+ population records for all the states but do not have records for high blood sugar or on medication for high blood sugar, and also high blood pressure or on medication for blood pressure population for 11 major states - Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Odisha, Punjab, Jharkhand, Haryana, Chhattisgarh, Delhi, and Uttarakhand. Additionally, this fact should also be taken into consideration there could be millions of people in the country suffering from high blood sugar and high blood pressure who are yet undetected for several regions ranging from carelessness to lack of medical facilities available to them. In due course of time the number of newly detected persons with these ailments could sharply increase.

If we look at state wise demography of the country with 50+ population, and the population with high blood sugar and high blood pressure below and above 50 may alter the present priority of the government. It would be a wrong decision only to go on 50+ population basis and ignore the cases of comorbidity in the first phase. People with actual higher risks must get the vaccine first irrespective of their age.

The records of the patients with high blood sugar and high blood pressure are available only for 11 major states - many of them have very high levels of corona infection. These states are Maharashtra, West Bengal, Bihar, Karnataka, Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Telangana, Assam, Jammu and Kashmir, and Himachal Pradesh. Maharashtra and West Bengal have the highest number of people with hypertension and diabetes respectively, while almost one third of Kerala's population is 50+ with high prevalence of these diseases.

Uttar Pradesh has the highest 50+ population followed by Maharashtra, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, and Bihar. It's a very sorry state of affairs that the present strategy of prioritization ignores even 6.5 per cent of adults below 50 years of age having diabetes and hence running the risks more than others without such ailment. This is only an example to show the error in the present strategy that needs more thought to reach the people actually running the highest risks.

Acquiring the safest vaccine at an affordable price along with their deployment within the shortest possible time is also a challenging task due to maladministration breeding corruption and lack of infrastructure and medical personnel. Vaccination at the rate of only 100 people per session at each site per day needs to be substantially increased. Government has declared to increase the number to 200 if logistics allow, indicating how tough the task is going to be. (IP4 Service)

TO THE EDITOR

Don't dare the MeECL employees

Editor,

The Meghalaya Energy Corporation Limited (MeECL) is undoubtedly one of the most essential and basic service providers in Meghalaya. It's fundamental responsibility revolves around the supply and distribution of electricity to each and every household of every resident of the state. Logically and realistically, it should ideally be the top-most priority of a sensible state government to ensure that such an essential public institution should not go through any inconvenience. Furthermore, a wise state government would not, in any way, draw bitter contempt and hatred from the employees of such an essential service provider and would sensibly not play a dare game with them lest the entire state goes into a darkness and chaos.

The MeECL Union had recently threatened total shutdown. Can we imagine the entire Meghalaya going dark even for a day? I shudder to think of it. Based on the facts and figures brought by the MeECL Union members it is evident that the State Government has failed miserably and mismanaged the MeECL to the ground. Several crucial problems are at the core of the MeECL dilemma. It is such an embarrassment and filthy shame that the Board

of Directors of the MeECL have become mere spectators and lame-duck officials oblivious of the plight of their own employees. It is a filthy shame too that the Board of Directors are not doing anything to address the desperate cry for help of their own employees. Nothing positive has been reported in the newspapers and public forums so far in this regard.

Critical lapses which include, inter alia, loans (sometimes unnecessary loans) taken by the MeECL which have increased exponentially, pending electricity bills in lakhs and crores of rupees owed by several industrial houses and commercial establishments which remain unrecovered to this day due to apathy of MeECL top-brass to initiate action, non-payment of salaries of working employees for the past two months; non-payment of salary of pensioners; delayed disbursement of salary of workers and pensioners and a whole lot of other critical problems plague the MeECL.

As keen and informed observers, we often ask ourselves, when did the trouble at MeECL all begin? In the past, we heard stories of how the erstwhile MeSEB was one of the most sought after public institutions for employment because of efficient management, good work ethics, timely disbursement of salary and other positive comments. So what went wrong? One thing is crystal clear - the MeECL has plunged to an all time low

today. I am especially appalled to see the inhumanity and ruthlessness of the State Government and the Board of Directors of MeECL in handling the matter of disbursement of pension to the erstwhile ASEB/MeSEB employees. These pensioners have given everything in service to the people of this state. These pensioners can no longer look for any jobs now and depend on their pension for their very existence. Some pensioners stay all alone; some are widowed; some have grave medical conditions, besides other problems. So how does the State Government expect these poor, old souls to live a day longer without financial sustenance?

The MeECL top-brass, the powers, that be in the Power Department and the CMD have failed terribly in the administrative arena in dealing with the MeECL crisis. Nonetheless, there is still time for the State Government and the MeECL top brass to address each and every problem of the employees. Let's be practical and sensible - not one demand of MeECL employees is unreasonable. It is based on their statutory rights as employees of the Corporation. They have their constitutional rights to protest under Article 19 of the Constitution. Their demands are sensible. Timely salary is needed to feed themselves and their families. Ministers and IAS/MCS officers get their salaries on time and live luxurious lives, but MeECL employees are slogging to

survive! What discriminatory and step-motherly attitude is this?

The State Government should find a quick and lasting solution to the plight of the MeECL employees. A word of advice to the State Government - salary will always be the prime motivator for any government employee. The logical inference is that when there is no salary, a government servant loses interest in his work. Even if he does work, he will do so half-heartedly and this attitude is very dangerous especially in a power sector which deals with real human lives.

To conclude, I sometimes wonder where the so called "leaders" of the Jaidbynriew such as the KSU, JSU, JYE, GSU, FKJGP, HYC, etc disappear when these matters come up for consideration. Are there no Khasi, Jaintia or Garo employees in the MeECL? Similarly, where are the so called intellectuals of Shillong who speak posh English and mingle with high political and bureaucratic circles and who claim to represent Meghalaya's metropolitan image? Does the MeECL issue not merit their voice? In whatever small way I can, I express my solidarity with the plight of the MeECL workers and wish the union leaders good health to fight onwards. The State Government should listen to the MeECL employees' demands and resolve their problems immediately.

Yours etc
Jeremiah S.
Via email

Oppressive attitude!

Editor,

Through this letter, we the student community of Mawkhair express our deep anguish, frustration and anger over the selfish attitude of the labourers of the Rangbah Shnong's daughter's bakery, Mawkhair.

For the last two years, we students are facing a lot of disturbance and distractions caused by these labourers. Now with the pandemic, things are worsening since we have to attend to online classes from home. There are days when in the middle of the class, while giving presentations, you'd hear these people shouting/calling each other at the top of their voices and that too ending each sentence with a cuss word. Every day, be it morning, noon or evening/night time, they have peculiar ways of talking, like sending signals to the residents that that they are there and no one can stop them. They talk in tones which make you want to shut your ears and shut everything that you can until they finish talking. It does not end here. There's also the music which is being played since morning and at such a volume that by evening your head actually spins. Who doesn't listen to music? Everyone does. Music when played at the right decibel gives one a calm, relaxed and soothing effect. But these people are doing just the opposite and are purposely causing mental agony to

others. They don't care for the sick or for those who are studying; elderly people taking a nap, babies sleeping, etc.

The behavior of these people makes us wonder if they are a pack of hooligans or simply cheap labourers with nothing in their heads except to cause suffering to others. Yes many people are suffering because of these labourers.

I often wonder why the owners don't say anything about this. Is it because they consider themselves high and mighty and therefore they can get away with anything? There are nights when at around 1-2 am the sound of cars and loud voices can be heard; so loud in fact that one who is in a deep sleep is rudely awakened by the noise. Sadly, no one dares say a word or they've had it. A proof of this is when the next door neighbours tried to say something about the noise! The kind of words used to answer them back made one wonder whether these people are indeed civilized. We wanted to side with these poor neighbours but dared not as these people are arrogant and selfish. Trying to reason with them would certainly be a waste of time.

Yours etc,
Student Community
Mawkhair,
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

“There is only one corner of the universe you can be certain of improving, and that’s your own self.”

--- Aldous Huxley

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No. 121 SHILLONG, WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 16, 2020

Diplomacy and Trudeau

INDIA’S relationship with another foreign country has soured; this time, it’s Canada over the “interference” in India’s internal affairs by Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. This, vis-à-vis the farmer protests around New Delhi. While granting that Trudeau’s support to the protests was uncalled for and a violation of diplomatic norms, the context cannot be lost sight of. That context also goes back to 2018 when he visited India and was not impressed by the responses he got. Obviously, by supporting the farmers’ stir, Trudeau was extending his moral support to the large Sikh community in Canada. Trudeau’s eyes might be fixed on the Canadian elections next year, where the 1.5 million plus Indians settled there form a decisive electoral force; nearly half of them Sikhs. Trudeau’s support came at a Guru Nanak anniversary event. “Canada will always be there to defend the right to peaceful protest,” was how he commented. New Delhi responded with concern and cancelled some diplomatic engagements between the two nations.

Under Trudeau’s rule, there have also been allegations from the Indian side that the Khalistani separatists are allowed to target India from Canadian soil. The large-scale migration of Sikhs from India to Canada came in the backdrop of the alienation the community felt in India after the Khalistan offensives and counter-offensives in Punjab, as also the Delhi riots after the assassination of Indira Gandhi. Now, Sikhs are among the most-prominent migrant communities in Canada. They drive the economy, and the defence minister is a Sikh. The suspected soft-corner that Trudeau has for the Khalistani separatists in Canada might have acted as a dampener to the Modi government when Trudeau visited New Delhi in mid-2018. PM Modi sent the agriculture minister in his first government to receive the foreign dignitary at the airport, rather than the PM himself turning up as has often been the case. Not much came out of the visit too. Notably, another embarrassment for India from a friendly foreign nation came recently when seasoned Malaysian leader Mahathir Mohammad, who served as PM till March this year, criticised the Modi government over the Citizenship Amendment Act. That rupture in relations between the two countries continues. In fact, for one reason or other, India is losing close friends, as is also evident in the negative vibes that are spectacular in bilateral ties with Nepal, a brotherly nation till the turn of the century. Such trends are a serious strain and need be reversed through sustained efforts from the Indian side.

Water everywhere! Not a drop to drink

‘Water everywhere: Not a drop to drink’ a line from the poem, ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ by Samuel Taylor Coleridge suits Meghalaya - the abode of clouds, home to the wettest place on earth which has many unanswered questions when it comes to sufficient supply of safe drinking water to the overall population of the state. There is acute shortage of water especially during the dry seasons; what the reasons are is hard to comprehend. The principal department which looks into the affairs of water supply is the undisputed PHE (Public Health Engineering) and the newly created Water Resources Department is of course trailing behind in managing the sources, springs and catchment areas. The State Water Policy is yet to see the light of day, as the draft policy even with the cabinet’s nod since 2019 is still lying in the closet with perhaps no expectation to rise from oblivion. The anticipated GSWSS Phase 3 with so much mayhem is also moving at a slow pace as it needs more money as usual to further make progress.

When the PHE introduced the loop system for water supply during the 90’s, the objective was to effectively distribute water as per the consumption needs of a particular household. However, the entire project could not meet people’s expectations as some areas of Shillong did receive adequate supply while others faced the brunt of inadequate supply or no water at all. The irony is that drinking water has now become a lucrative business for those who supply it through mobile tankers, the cost for which ranges from Rs 350 - 500 per tanker depending upon the distance from the source of water to the delivery point. They make huge sums during the winters and one has to book in advance to get 1500 liters filled to their storage tanks. Those who manage to have bore wells in their premises, are somewhat blessed if their well is placed in a suitable confined aquifer, while those whose wells are within 180 ft deep usually receive water only during the rainy seasons. Their wells remain almost dry during the off-monsoon months.

One fails to understand the policies adopted by the State towards safe drinking water. As many would agree, the water we drink from Mawphlang reservoir is either muddy or contaminated. Fill a bucket and leave it for hours and a reddish brown stain with silt deposit at the bottom appears which is unsafe for human consumption. There were lab findings verified by agencies that the water is not fit for drinking, which was later clarified by the PHE through widespread publicity that the water they supply is completely safe. This has created confusion among people about who or what to believe. Are the tests results true or is the department’s claim accurate? In limbus test the laboratory’s claim is taken into consideration since they are authorized to make such a report card. None can disagree, that there aren’t serious health issues that follow when consuming contaminated drinking water. Who then is responsible for the risk factors that follow when consuming untreated water? When even bore well water is not free from impurities and such water also requires tests by suitable agencies to certify that the water is safe to drink, then how can the Mawphlang water be completely safe?

Ground Water

The conventional practice here is to hire the agency that offers deep tube well drilling services and with a no objection from the administration, the drilling could start with no scientific calculations made for the future ramification that comes with the digging. The Central Ground Water Authority which monitors ground water development in the country with its branch located in Shillong has not much to say when it comes to regulation of ground water extraction in the state as water is a state subject. So unless there is an effective mechanism to regulate ground water extraction by a state agency like the Water Resources Department or so, not much is being debated on the after effects of rampant drilling of ground water by private entities.

Almost all of the natural occurring water resources in the state in the form of springs, streams, rivers etc. are drying up rampantly. The Um-Sawli rivulet in New Shillong area which could have been made a major source to draw drinking water to supplement the city’s rising needs, has also been left open for encroachment. The Umkhen source manned by the SMB needs upgradation such that it remains sustainable in the years to come, else this will also turn otherwise. No fact finding mechanism has been opted by the state to identify the root cause of such effect which led to depletion of natural sources. The important sources of water seen till the start of this millennia, which comprised the main rivulets have completely dried up in the last decade itself.

In Shillong, most sources of water have also disappeared and those which are seen flowing during the monsoons remain dry during winters. What factors attribute to such changes is hard to define unless there is collective responsibility taken by all to learn the reasons thereof. The future of water is grim and for ordinary mortals getting a bucket of water will be a blessing and a patronage and without it their lives will be an accursed one.

What is understood from various laws available in the country is that underground water belongs to the people as water is a common property resource, but here in Meghalaya anyone can drill ground water at his or her will. In the recent past the district authority had issued a notification to all those who owned tube wells to report to the office, but the reason why such information is being sought is not known till date.

For instance, in Laitumkrah locality a letter was received from the PHE, that drilling of underground water should not be encouraged by the Dorbar since it affects the stability of ground water. There was heated debate amongst the stakeholders, which later led

Responsibility in education

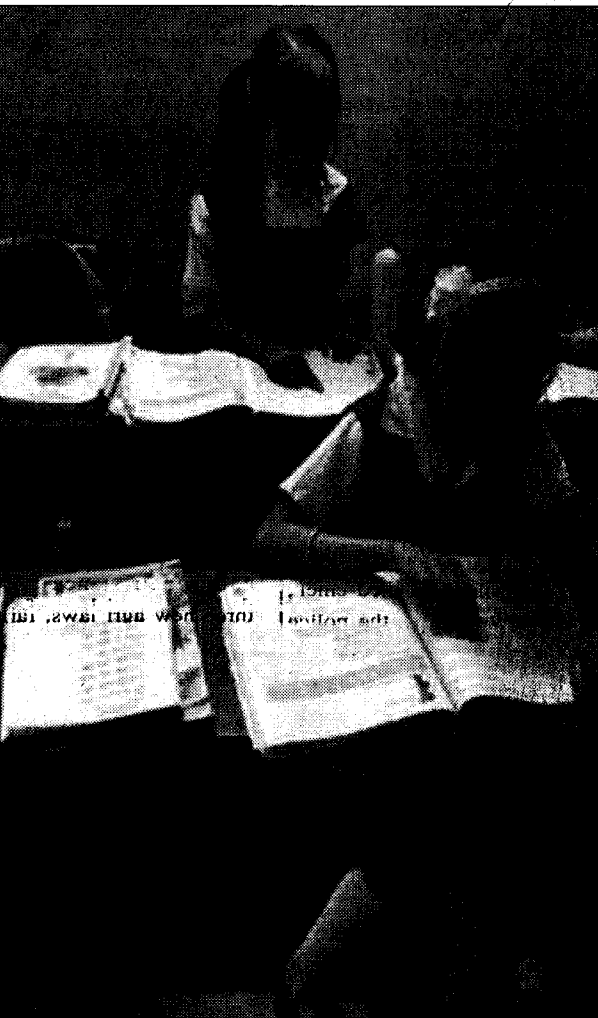
By K J Jose

Right to Education 2009 guarantees, free and compulsory education for children up to 14 years of age. The act says clearly ‘Free and compulsory education’. The implication of the act is that; a proper and value based education will be imparted to all children poor, rich, marginalized, children with disabilities, migrants, etc.. an inclusive education for all. The idea is incredible and far-fetched.

For the past five years, when I teach the children on RTE in my value education class, I ask them this question - when RTE assures ‘Free and compulsory education’ why do you pay the school fees? The students get a shock, since the Principal himself is asking the question, ‘why do you pay the fees’. After some discussions the children come up with this

single or two teacher schools can accomplish much if they are sincere, dedicated and have self responsibility. The passion for imparting knowledge and the thoughtfulness to build the future society with educated citizens need to be awakened within the teachers. The spirit to do one’s duty despite lack of supervision is a virtue, every teacher needs to nurture within himself/herself.

Monitoring is another important factor in implementing the teaching-learning process. Governmental departmental supervisions need to be systematic and ongoing. The authorities need to check the learning of the learners. In-service training for teachers should be mandatory during winter vacation. Every teacher needs to brush-up their knowledge and teaching skills. Use of



answer - since the government schools are not functioning or imparting proper education we are compelled to study in private schools.

This is the common scenario all over India, except in one or two states. The question is who is responsible for this pathetic condition of our government run schools? Who is accountable - the government departments, the Headmasters and teaches or the parents? In any case the children are not responsible. It is us adults that need to take responsibility.

In our state, Meghalaya, the scenario is no better, especially in Garo Hills. In the past few years the result of class X is between 28-32%, whereas in Khasi and Jaintia Hills it is more than 70%. It doesn’t mean that the children in Garo Hills are dull and not able to learn. They have good capacity to learn like any other children. Then the question arises, what is wrong? Who is responsible for this state of affairs?

I feel, we have failed collectively. There are many government/SSA Primary schools with two teachers. Five class rooms and two teaches is a poor ratio. There are other high schools with 100-150 students and ten or more teachers. The quality of education suffers when the student-teacher ratio has a wide gap. I believe our primary duty is to bridge this gap. Once the human resource is in place the rest would follow. In the same breadth, I like to say something about self responsibility. Even when the ratio is not proper, the

technology and innovation needs to find a place in the class rooms. When Primary education is not inclusive and conclusive, the whole system of education fails.

Another important area is the supervision by the parents’ body and the School Managing Committee. They have a great role to play in the proper management of the school. They can check and report to the authorities, whether the teachers are regular to the school and teaching is taking place regularly. This can happen when the concerned departments are open to their suggestions and keep a link with the parents’ body and the School Managing Committee.

I strongly feel, we need to take certain concrete measures to improve the quality of education in Garo Hills and improve the skills, knowledge and pass percentage in the Board examinations, otherwise we will be left with youngsters who are disillusioned, dissatisfied and jobless. There are schools with zero pass percentage in the Board examinations every year. Can this be tolerated and accepted as a pattern or norm? Someone should take the responsibility and do corrective measures to stop this ‘Zero pass’ system!

I earnestly hope, this present government would ‘bell the cat’ and revamp the whole system of education in Meghalaya, especially in Garo Hills.

(Bro. K.J. Jose is Director and Principal, Montfort Centre for Education, Tura Email: mctetura@gmail.com)

TO THE EDITOR

Tough talk on outlaws and terrorists

Editor,

“Rymbui talks tough on HNLC blast” (ST Dec 15, 2020) came in as a pleasant surprise from a Government that has otherwise lost its spine when it comes to dealing with any ragtag social organisation. As citizens of Meghalaya we must be very clear about what the HNLC is all about. The outfit projects itself especially to our gullible and innocent youngsters as a romantic organisation of patriots that stands for the life and freedom of the Hynniewtrep people. Nothing can be further from the truth and the truth has to be spoken. It is nothing but a bunch of lazy thugs who want to enjoy a life of luxury and ease by robbing and stealing from those who earn honest money by the sweat of their brows. The HNLC has murdered more innocent Khasis than anything else. This must always be kept in mind. It is a banned terrorist organisation that kills only for money should remain banned unless it changes its ways.

The Home Minister is correct when he states that peace talks with the outfit cannot be initiated by way

of threats or through bomb blasts. Terrorists cannot dictate terms to any legitimate elected Government. The HNLC has perhaps gained confidence because of the offers from some misguided and attention seeking colleague of the HM who has repeatedly called upon the Govt and the Centre to start talking to so called misguided elements. I think this particular minister should first concentrate on how to save the state from Covid 19 than to speak of saving the skin of these criminals. They are criminals and extortionists and nothing can change that. We are glad to have a Home Minister made of tougher stuff. Let the banned outfit first lay down arms. Govt should talk from a position of strength and confidence; with the understanding that it speaks for the interest and concern of the common man not for some cheap media publicity and must not be cowed down by the threats of more bomb blasts or criminal acts of desperation from the HNLC.

The HNLC is in fact on the verge of collapse and they manage a hand to mouth survival from the extortions (they call them Tax) they make from fly by night coal miners and coke and cement plants located in Jaintia Hills and Shillang. A bit of pressure from the

police and these financial sources will also dry up. The HNLC has nowhere to go and will try to bluff its way out with some cheap terror tactics it has picked up from the ULFA and the NSCN. But all this is the death throes of a dying outfit. It will try to create as much mayhem as possible. The people of Meghalaya deserve to live in peace. The police had kicked out the HNLC once. It can do so again. Let us not try and give it legitimacy once again. Our Home Minister needs the support and praise of the public for doing what he is supposed to do. Keep up the good work!

Yours etc.,
S. Passah,
Jowai

Chaos faced by final year students

Editor,

Several higher educational institutions have resorted to online classes for students in Shillong. The examination for the final year students was also conducted in an online mode. The app used by the University i.e., NEHU was called My Placement Perfectice which was rated in the playstore with only 1.8 stars. Making the app

work was a herculean task as the students had to face tremendous difficulties during the examination and also while uploading the PDF file. As the app was not up to the mark, the students were also asked to submit the hard copies to their respective institutions in order to avoid any chaos in the future. After fulfilling all the requirements, the students were still harassed after the results as they had to rush to their institutions due to several issues related to their examination marks. This might be due to some errors by the faculty checking the papers of the respected university which however led to unfair allocation of marks to various students. Also there were other issues like some students being considered absent when they actually appeared for their online examination. Therefore, I request the University to kindly look into the matter and allocate marks with fairness and equity.

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request,
Via email

Vacancies in State Govt departments

Editor,

It is mind-boggling that

while the festering issue of unemployment in Meghalaya is unerringly acute, but, conversely, it has been reported that there are a good number of suitable vacancies in our state which are lying vacant indefinitely. A move to fill up the same is evidently progressing at snail’s pace much to the agony of qualified and keenly desirous unemployed youths thereby putting the latter in a limbo and in utter desperation.

In this context, I am given to understand that of late in one of the premier departments that is in Agriculture, there are one hundred (100) or thereabouts number of vacancies exclusively pertaining to technical line to be progressively manned by the agricultural passed graduates following the expansion of the Department through its various outreach programmes, retirement of officers, deceased in service and promotions of officers which have therefore resulted in the vacancies. Markedly, it has been appraised that of the outstanding vacancies which number about 183 have been conveyed to the nodal department to conduct the selection proceedings of applicants. With so many vacancies a lot of official work is

pending and the existing staff are asked to multi-task. There is undue pressure on the existing officers in the wake of man-power shortage.

Hence there is a crying need for the appointing authorities to speed up the recruitment process by ensuring that the interviews/appointments are held at the earliest in order to ameliorate the angst of these unemployed youths. And on the flip side and vis-à-vis the extant vacancies in question, there is a growing army of the unemployed agricultural graduates annually, who are pining to be absorbed in Agriculture and other allied sectors, but currently they have had to cool their heels indefinitely. And in the fullness of time they may utilize their time, while awaiting appointment, to pursue higher studies like M.Sc in farming eco-system and even acquire a PhD degree but by then many of them would have crossed the employable age and thus lose the opportunity of serving their state, a speculation they had nurtured so passionately when selecting Agriculture as a course of study and employment opportunity.

Yours etc.,
Jerome K. Diengdoh,
Via email

“Very little is needed to make a happy life; it is all within yourself, in your way of thinking.”
--- Marcus Aurelius

The Shillong Times
Vol No: LXIII No. 122 SHILLONG, THURSDAY, DECEMBER 17, 2020

The Bodoland saga
AFTER 17 years the leadership in the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) has changed hands. The BTC was created to appease the Bodo demand for a separate state which saw several insurgent outfits emerge and a saga of bloodshed and killing in Bodoland as the state launched its counter-insurgency operations. In Kokrajhar, the Bodoland capital, there is a memorial where the names of nearly three thousand martyrs are recorded. These included those that died in fratricidal killings since there was no love lost between the different insurgent outfits of Bodoland even though they all claim to fight for the Bodo cause. It was also a case of turf wars between the outfits. The loss of over three thousand lives is a big price to pay for any demand however legitimate. In 2003 the Bodoland Liberation Tigers (BLT) headed by Hagrama Mohilary came over ground and signed a peace deal – the Bodoland Accord which also saw the creation of the Bodoland Territorial Council which many political observers say is a state within a state. The BTC has more powers than the other district councils created under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution. The BTC is funded directly by the Centre and hence does not suffer from funds crunch like the other autonomous district councils do.

After 17 years, the leadership of the BTC has changed hands. The new Chief, Pramod Boro has led the All Bodo Students; Union (ABSU) for over a decade and has always chosen the path of peaceful protests. He now heads the United Peoples’ Party Liberal (UPPL) which won 12 seats in the 40 members Council. The UPPL has teamed up with the BJP which won 9 seats and another councilor from the GSP to form the new Council. Hagrama’s party the Bodoland Peoples’ Front (BPF) won 17 seats and was ready to team up with the BJP but they were rejected as the popular mandate appeared to be in favour of the UPPL-BJP combine. Hagrama had lost the confidence of the public since corruption was rampant in the BTC under his watch. Besides, Hagrama has won successive elections through coercion and by using the strategies of a militant outfit. Initially people voted for the BPF with the hope that their fortunes would change but they realised that Hagrama was more interested in serving his interests. The next time around people voted out of fear of reprisal rather than because they trusted the BPF and Hagrama to bring in the much sought after development for which they had sacrificed so much. Now the people of Bodoland have hopes of seeing a new leadership from a person who has been consistent in pursuing the path of a peaceful struggle for Bodoland.

TO THE EDITOR

Rejoinder
Editor,
Apropos the letter to the editor appearing in your esteemed daily under the caption “Oppressive Attitude” (ST December 15, 2020, by some Student Community of Mawkhbar expressing their deep anguish, frustration and anger over the labourers of the Rangbah Shnong’s daughter’s bakery, Mawkhbar, I on behalf of the Mawkhbar Dorbar Shnong, request the concerned Student Community to immediately meet the Two Asst Headmen and the Block VII representatives of Mawkhbar Dorbar Shnong within 3 days from the date of publishing of this letter to resolve this issue. In case they fail to do so the name of the letter writer will be obtained from the esteemed office of The Shillong Times for further necessary action by the Executive Committee of the Mawkhbar Dorbar Shnong.
Yours etc.,
General Secretary,
Mawkhbar Dorbar Shnong Shillong

Spare a thought for students

Editor,
In these highly unprecedented times of the Covid-19 pandemic, where

not even a daily wage earner nor a top bureaucrat is safe from the overwhelming reach of the virus, a sizeable chunk of the population is under duress: mentally, economically, physically, and socially.
Keeping all this in mind we also need to pay attention to the plight of the students, regardless of which level of education they are pursuing. I write specifically to bring to the attention of the greater public about the issues that plague the college students under the banner of the North-Eastern Hill University. Difficulties ranging from the lack of proper internet connection for online classes to the inequality that exists between the students who reside in the capital and the students who had no choice but to head back to their respective home towns in the light of the pandemic. Instances galore of students being asked to submit their examination papers online and their inability to do so due to the server crashing and multiple bugs present within the app “MyPerfctice” which was graciously rated at a generous 1.4/5 stars on Google Play Store, have surfaced. The App is not even available in the Apple App Store to begin with. There were also situations wherein the app did not show the status of the

The United Kingdom Prime Minister Boris Johnson will be the Chief Guest on Republic Day next month. His presence on the occasion signifies the deepening of partnership between India and UK in a post-Brexit and a post-pandemic world. Johnson will be the second British Prime Minister to attend the Republic Day parade after former Prime Minister John Major in 1993. This would be the British PM’s first bilateral visit taking office. India attaches great importance in terms of protocol and recognition of relationships when it invites a foreign head of government on this particular day.
In the run-up to Johnson being the chief guest there have been attempts at scoping the partnership between the two countries. Prime Minister Modi after the virtual meeting with his British counterpart on 26 November said, “We agreed to work towards a quantum leap in our cooperation in all areas – trade and investment, defence and security, climate change and fighting Covid”. Adding a personal touch, which is the new diplomatic style of our Prime Minister, Modi said, “I met my friend Boris Johnson, had fruitful talks on issues of mutual interest and invited him to be the chief guest on Republic Day”.
On his part, Johnson said, “I am absolutely delighted to be visiting India next year and look forward to delivering the quantum leap in our bilateral relationship that Prime Minister Modi and I have pledged to achieve. As a key player in the Indo-Pacific region, India is an increasingly indispensable partner for the UK as we work to boost jobs and growth, confront shared threats to our security and protect our planet”. Note the emphasis on India-Pacific.
Arguably, the Indo-Pacific tilt in UK foreign policy will view India as a crucial strategic partner. The UK will most likely align with India in its outlook towards China. Like other western powers, London is also wary of Chinese expansionism and

aggressive foreign economic policy. A significant decision taken by the UK in this regard is the deployment of HMS Queen Elizabeth career group in the Indo-Pacific region. This is, in part, a response to increasing Chinese dominance in the area.
India and the UK is about to sign a joint military logistic agreement like New Delhi has done with Australia, Japan and the US. This would mean sharing of services including fuel and facilities, more joint frequent exercises and smoother port calls. This marks another radical departure in India’s foreign policy as New Delhi has been reluctant to have former alliances especially with western powers. On the part of UK, it no longer seems beholden to China or Pakistan despite the latter’s a big influential diaspora.
Let us recall that India has been ‘jewel in the British crown’ during the colonial times. After decolonisation, India was debating whether to be a part of the Commonwealth consisting of British colonies. After quite a bit of reflection, New Delhi, quite correctly, under the Cambridge-educated Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru decided to stay in the Commonwealth. The argument was that the Commonwealth will open up the window for New Delhi to the world. Britain gradually declined in its influence, resulting in the dilution of the Commonwealth. At the same time, Britain joined the European Union in 1973 after vetoed by the French President, Charles De Gaulle.
The wheel of time has moved a full circle. Britain has withdrawn from the EU. From 1st of January, 2021, Britain will no longer be its member. The process of withdrawal has been divisive, complex and controversial. It is another matter that Britain was never in the inner circle of the EU, rather a reluctant and dissenting member. For the EU, exit of Britain is good riddance. For Britain, it has always looked beyond the EU and at its Trans Atlantic partner the US.

Now, London is seeking to reinforce the Commonwealth. This is where India figures in its priorities in a big way.
A study conducted by the British Council in 2015, concluded that India is going to be a powerful country in the coming years. It advised the British government to pay special attention to India as a growing power. India was the fourth largest economy in terms of purchasing power. The working population in India will be larger than that of US and China combined by 2050. Also, massive growth of India’s English-speaking middle classes offers a window of opportunity for Britain. The study predicted that, “India will soon be one of the biggest influences on the world.”
From Britain, India could benefit in education, research and contribution to the creative sector. However, a strong bilateral relationship depends upon the foundation of mutual knowledge, understanding and trust. The cultural awareness and affinity support the economic and diplomatic ties. Sadly, the study suggested that there is no adequate understanding of India amongst the youth in the UK. A MORI poll found that 74% of young Indians knew about the UK whereas only 21% of the young Britons knew about India. On the other hand, the interest of Indian students in the UK declined by 49%.
The suggestion from the ‘British Council’ pointed towards creation of a UK-India young leaders/next generation forum for young people between the age of 15 and 35, who will potentially be leaders of 2050. This will strengthen cultural and educational collaboration between the two countries to improve mutual understanding and underpinning of economic and strategic engagement benefitting both the countries in terms of influences, security and prosperity.
Despite deep historical links in politics, education, institution building and

even trade and economics, the relations between New Delhi and London have not been very strong. The colonial hangover caused by complex British legacies burdens the relationship. Yet, because of the linkages mentioned above, the relationship is natural and is indispensable. The challenge is to deepen it to the advantage of both the countries.
The problems are basically two. On India’s part, New Delhi is reluctant to plunge into a relationship mainly with western countries. Take for instance, the free trade agreement. Britain has been apparently keen on it to offset the damage from its exit from the EU. But New Delhi is reluctant to sign a free trade agreement. The British Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab in a preparatory meeting with his counterpart S. Jaishankar was forthright in declaring that a trade agreement with India is a top priority. In their meeting on 15 December both countries agreed on a ten-year 360 degree road map for upgrading the India-UK partnership, mainly in trade. Raab said, “I think this could unlock huge opportunities for British and Indian businesses, lowering barriers in areas like food and drink, health care and life sciences, IT, chemicals and financial services. I think there are some exciting possibilities”.
To conclude India-UK partnership hinges on four factors. One, India must shed its inhibition in forging partnership with western powers, a diplomatic legacy from the days of Nehru. Second, both the UK and India should be watching US-China strategic competition. Third, both countries should measure and cope with the impact of the pandemic. Fourth, Britain should assess and adjust the negative consequences of breaking away from the EU. While we hold our horses on India-UK partnership, it is desirable and mutually beneficial for the partnership to grow. One hopes that leadership in India and the UK are conscious of this need as the people are. ---INFA

Present financial crisis in MeECL & way forward

By Hamarbabiang Lyngdoh
The attention of the public has of late been drawn to the problems plaguing the MeECL and the agitation of its employees due to non-payment of their salaries for the last two months. It seems that the financial problems of this Corporation keep recurring and the measures taken to address them so far appear to be for the short term only. To solve the problems of MeECL, one has to solve all the problems faced by its subsidiaries, which is no easy task.
MeECL is a parent company with the following subsidiaries - Meghalaya Power Distribution Corporation Ltd. (MePDCL) or the State Discom which is mandated with distribution of power in the state, Meghalaya Power Generation Corporation Ltd. (MePGCL) or the State Genco which is responsible for generation of power from its generating stations and Meghalaya Power Transmission Corporation Ltd.(MePTCL) or the State Transco which is tasked with transmission of power at voltages above 33 KV within the state. These three subsidiaries have different objectives and the problems they face are unique to them. However, the common problem they all face is financial.
For distribution of power within the state, MePDCL purchases power from the state Genco, MePGCL, as well as from Central PSU’s such as NEEPCO, NHPC, Palatana and NTPC with whom the Discom has entered into Power Purchase Agreements (PPA’s) for purchase of power from their generating stations. Once the PPA is signed, the Discom is bound to purchase the power from the respective power stations and if it fails to do so, it has to pay the capacity charge which is equal to 50% of the tariff determined by the Central or State Electricity Regulatory Commission for that particular power station. At present, Meghalaya requires about 1200 Million Units (MU) of energy annually for sale within the state (ref. MSERC’s Distribution Tariff Order for FY 2020-21). The power available from the Central Power Stations is around 1200 MU and from MePGCL’s Power Stations is also about 1200 MU, totalling around 2400 MU against the State’s requirement of 1200 MU only. Therefore, the state Discom is bound to sell about 50% of its available power (which has become surplus) in the market at rates which are usually below the average tariff of about Rs. 5.50 per unit it sells within the state. The state Discom is therefore caught in a dilemma – it has to pay 50% tariff as capacity charge if it refuses to take the power from the power station for which the PPA was signed and if it does take, it has to sell the power at less than the purchase rate. The average purchase price from the Central generating stations (NEEPCO and Palatana) is Rs. 3.00 / unit for about 1200 MU of their power while from NTPC it is much higher. The State Genco sells its power to MePDCL at an average tariff of only Rs. 1.37 / unit fixed by the State Electricity Regulatory Commission.
MePDCL, therefore, cannot afford to sell the power it purchases from the Central Generating Stations in the market (i.e., at the Power Exchange) since to do so it would be selling at a loss. To recover its costs, it has to sell all 1200 MU of power it gets from these stations at rates not below Rs.5.00/unit which it is recovered by selling within the state. The surplus power from MePGCL can then be sold directly (either through cross border trade or to bulk consumers outside the state) by the State Genco which at present is selling its power at a throwaway price of Rs. 1.37/ unit (which is even less than the minimum sale rate at the Power Exchange). The state Discom and Genco can mutually dissolve the PPA’s they have executed for the new Power Stations which still have interest and debt liabilities and whose tariff is still high (about Rs. 4.00 to 5.00/ unit).
It may be mentioned that for construction of a power project, all Gencos take loans from financial institutions to the extent of 70% of the project cost and have to repay the loan with interest in 12 to 15 years’ time from the date the project is commissioned. The contribution of loan repayment and interest to tariff ranges from Rs. 2.50 to Rs. 3.50 / unit. Therefore, the tariff from all new projects in the Central, State or Private sector will be high in the initial years and will gradually come down once the loan is repaid over the years. The present tariff of Rs. 1.29 / unit for the Myntdu Leshka H.E. Project which was commissioned a few years ago and Rs. 0.85 / unit for the recently commissioned New Umtru H.E. Project fixed by the SERC are way too low and hardly cover their normal expenses, not to speak of repayment of loan and interest. The result is that the State Genco loses its ability to honour its debt obligations and if interest and loan instalments are to be paid on time, it will be at the cost of the salaries of its employees. Besides, repairs and maintenance which are vital to the health of the power stations have to be dispensed with, which will lead to total shutdown of the power stations in the near future.
By letting the State Genco sell its power either through cross border trade or directly to bulk consumers outside the state, the tariff it would get will be much higher than Rs. 1.37 / unit which it is now getting. The export price to Bangladesh is around Rs. 5.00 to Rs. 5.50 / unit at present. If the power from the new power stations (i.e., Myntdu-Leshka and New Umtru) totalling about 650 MU is sold at this rate, the State Genco would get more than Rs. 300 crore annually from such sale, against its annual financial requirement of close to Rs. 400 crore. The remaining requirement of less than Rs. 100 crore can be raised from its old generating power stations through sale of around 500 MU within the state at the rate of less than Rs. 2.00 / unit.
The agreement for sale outside the state may be made for about ten years or so till the loans taken for the new projects are liquidated and tariff would then come down drastically (by about Rs. 2.50 to Rs. 3.50/unit) from the initial rate of Rs. 5.00 / unit. This power can then be sold within the state at very low rates and the consumers in the state would not have to bear the interest and loan burden of these projects.
It may be pointed out that states like Jharkhand and Tripura have already taken the initiative to export power to Bangladesh. Similarly, countries like Nepal and Bhutan have also entered into agreement with Bangladesh for export of power from some of their power projects to this country. With power surplus states rushing to fill the demand gap in Bangladesh, time will not be far when the country will fully meet its power demand and the opportunity of export from Meghalaya will be lost forever. While the early birds from far and near have already caught the worm, Meghalaya is still to notice the opportunity standing at its doorstep and which is likely to slip away very soon.
E m a i l : lyngdohamb@gmail.com>

You don't choose your family. They are God's gift to you, as you are to them.

--- Desmond Tutu

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No. 123

SHILLONG, FRIDAY, DECEMBER 18, 2020

India at bottom-third

THE movers and shakers of India claim the nation is "growing" and heading for an economic Super Power status. Yet life for most of the people remains the same; weak as ever. The Year 2020 Human Development Report published by the United Nations Development Programme this week makes this clear yet again. India ranks 131 among a list of 189 nations across continents, based on parameters like standard of living, health care and education. The report brackets India with Bangladesh, Myanmar, Nepal, Cambodia and Pakistan – nations having medium human development. Nations in the Asian region like Sri Lanka, Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam, apart from China, fared better. India's gross national income, per capita, fell last year to \$6681 from \$6829 the previous year – or, much before the Covid pandemic came. As per the report, India figures in the "bottom third" vis-à-vis most development indicators. The hard truth is that poverty has gone up post Covid and all the big-talk from the pulpit by politicians is just hogwash. The nation's fast-paced growth as is projected by these leaders is reflected only in the lives of a small segment of the people; those who form the upper crust, while life remains difficult for most – the 70 per cent of the population placed in the lower rungs. These poor have seen changes like a gas stove in their kitchens in place of traditional choolahs, or electricity replacing the kerosene lamps in their homes. These are changes not specific to the poor in India, but happening around the world.

When Indira Gandhi raised the slogan of Garibi Hatao (banish poverty) in the 1970s, it gave hope to the people and won a general election for her and the Congress party. Some 40 years later, with little change to the life of ordinary folks, the UPA government introduced the National Food Security Programme that reached foodgrains at subsidized rates via ration shops to the poor. Even today, poverty is a reality for two-fifth of the population, as manifest in poor health care and poor living conditions. The society as a whole is not growing, but its parts – the upper crust – are on a roll. This is the frenzy that one witnesses in the urban landscape; the 10 per cent rich having a gala time, the 20 per cent middle-class having all basic comforts and the rest 70 failing to get opportunities for sufficient income to lead a normal life. Governments keep changing, but the life of the ordinary masses remains in a pitiable state.

Education: The only game changer

By Patricia Mukhim

Education is the most debated topic during these Covid times and "online classes" have become the buzzword. Some call it the new normal. When you ask a parent if their child has got the results, their rather insipid answer is that their kid/s never really had an exam because they could consult their books and that is no exam; it's a faux exam. So what do parents actually want from their children? Isn't it enough that the kid understands what's been taught and that consulting the book for answers is not cheating? As a teacher for at least two decades I can safely say that some students don't know where to find the right answer to questions even if they had a book in front of them.

There is no doubt at all that parents, teachers and students have experienced the most devastating impact from the Covid lockdown and that's because all three categories of humans have had to do things differently and that's something the human mind does not easily lend itself to. But one wonders if the pandemic would help to reconstruct the whole paradigm of what constitutes education. Far too many people in this country have a fixation for marks. Parents assume their children should be in a particular space mentally but the kid is spaced out into some other zone and wants something very different from what his/her parents do. There is this huge gap between parents' expectations and the kid's ability to meet those expectations. And I have a fair guess that this twin shall never meet until parents learn to respect the child's potentials and stop pushing him/her to achieve the impossible.

I have rarely met parents who would say they want their kids to be ethical humans with respect for the rights of others; children who will not discriminate on the basis of community, ethnicity, religion or other such divisive factors that are currently emerging. If children are brought up to not differentiate between those that speak a different language or practice a different faith I am sure they will become wholesome adults who will not pin the blame for their own failures and under-achievement on someone else. Children with low self esteem often grow up to become pugnacious adults that believe in 'might is right.' What they cannot achieve by fair means they will do so by manipulating the system or by blaming the system for their failure. We

have too many of such drop-outs who then become part of groups that destabilize society or develop delusions of grandeur about themselves. Soon they try and find ways to catapult themselves to the political eco-system which they believe is the ultimate success in life and the quickest way to wealth creation. They have neither vision nor inclination to do anything for the state and its people but limit their focus on serving their constituency only so that they are elected and re-elected. But then that's what the average voter in Meghalaya wants.

But let me not digress

that's a tall order in a country where the availability of trained teachers is abysmally low. However, there's no harm in listing out some of the qualities that are desirable in a teacher. I would rate ethics very high. An ethical teacher will do his/her work irrespective of whether the principal is supervising his/her work. Only a motivated teacher will be able to motivate students. And if we want students to develop into emotionally intelligent beings who can handle their emotions and their lives, outside their classroom then we also need emotionally intelligent teachers. Many students

too will burn out and become demotivated. When a teacher has lost the passion for teaching but sticks on to the job because there's nothing better to do then believe me, no teaching will happen. The teacher is just doing a job and the students have to put up with him/her. It's a lose-lose situation. That's why refresher courses are so important. So is the task of unlearning and re-learning new methods of making communication more effective.

Heads of institutions too have to understand that teachers are not automatons that can work at the same pace all the time. They have their highs and lows; they have their challenges at home and in society and more often than not perhaps teachers too need counseling as do parents. The biggest hurdle for any child is when he/she is unable to have a decent conversation with the parents and every conversation ends up in a dramatic blame game that goes something like this – "Did you study today? Have you completed your homework? Are you prepared for your test tomorrow? Make sure you get full marks in maths; and mind you if you don't do well you can expect a spanking when you come home; look at so and so... how proud he makes his parents... what about you? Do you even care for your parents? This sort of blackmailing goes on day in and day out and I can imagine how frustrated the child becomes. If only we have more stable and pragmatic parents who don't expect the unattainable from their children perhaps life would be better.

One of the worst things about education is for a child to have passed out of school without having developed the critical faculty of questioning. If students don't question they are not going to learn what life is all about and how to live it; how to negotiate the politics all around them and how to integrate into society as contributing citizens. Teachers must bear the responsibility of helping to develop critical thinking skills and to integrate academic success with other avenues of growth such as in the performing arts, media, leadership activities and sports, etc. With the internet providing all information the role of teacher is that of a mentor and facilitator nudging the child gently to follow her heart. But for that we need innovative teachers who can make education a joyful and interesting pursuit.



further. Let's get back to education. There are certain components in the education system that cannot be compromised. They include teachers that are trained to communicate unequivocally. Communication is completed only when the receiver of that communication has understood what is being said and can execute a task based on what is comprehended. Very often, in the classroom if teachers stop in their tracks to ask questions on the lesson taught they will find students fumbling for answers. That's because the student has not understood what's taught and we don't encourage a system of questioning by students. Most teachers take this as an affront. So the student goes through the lesson without having understood what was taught. After a while the student would accumulate a series of such lessons that he/she has not understood and will begin to hate the subject or the teacher or the school.

There are many qualities that institutions ought to be looking for in a teacher but

go through their school years without learning social responsibility. And what does social responsibility mean? It means being accountable for every action in society; it means being involved in building a better society; it means having empathy and compassion for the less fortunate and being involved in activities that help build a better society. It's important to inculcate this spirit of social responsibility in the formative years because in this age of technology and addiction to gadgets children have become detached and engage with the virtual world more than the real world. And this to me is scary because we cannot escape the travails and challenges of the real life.

Unfortunately, teachers in our country have very little opportunity for building their capacities once they have joined the profession. In any case there's too much to do and unless they are freed from their daily teaching and correction chores for a week to attend a refresher course it is possible that teachers

The politics of deception

By Banshan Ferdly Lyngdoh

Here we go again. Again the rhetoric for the repatriation of the usurping dkhar, who potentially portends the existence of the Khasi native, has made it to screaming headlines. But for how many months or days will this mindless gusto last? Like all previous propagandist agitations of the pressure groups, who masquerade as 'NGOs', this too will lose steam. If that happens, it will inexplicably resurrect itself to wreck our normal lives in the near future. That's a given. The pressure groups' ardent fans may churn their teeth at this remark, but past events bear testimony.

I vaguely recall the turbulent times when Bull N. Lyngdoh launched a whirlwind campaign in line with the Assam Agitation in the late 1970s and 80s. But I do recollect how Paul Lyngdoh and his cronies roared on the streets of Shillong, calling office picketing and bandhs during the KSU's KsanRngiew Movement in 2000-2001. Among many politically unviable demands, including the implementation of ILP, the hottest potato was the revocation and amendment of Meghalaya's Job Reservation Policy. Paul Lyngdoh and his friends in the Jaitia Students' Union (JSU) felt the policy hugely favoured the Garos, hence, required amendment. School and college students assembled at Don Bosco Square to demand for a new Reservation Policy. It was a jamboree of mayhem and madness to the extent that the private residence of EK Mawlong, the incumbent Chief Minister, was stoned as he couldn't immediately meet the unfeasible demand. Since then governments have come and gone, and after 20 years, the reservation policy remains as it is. There's hardly any individual or pressure group that squeaks about the issue now, thus illustrating the illogicality and inconclusiveness of agitations instigated by pressure groups in the Khasi-Jaitia Hills.

After witnessing similar mayhem for so many years, one feels such activism is nothing but proxy manoeuvres of some over-ambitious few to propel themselves into the limelight and eventually into politics. Like Bull Lyngdoh in the 90s, the new millennium hailed Paul as the new saviour of the apparently rudderless jaitbyrriew. However, despite being in the political dispensation, the two Lyngdohs' achievements pertaining to the issues they fervently bayed for on the streets are there for everyone to see. It is indeed easier to ridicule than to act.

The same is the case with the present brouhaha over the demand for the implementation of the Inner Line Permit—a 147-year-old primeval regulation that will definitely impede progress. This insistence has once again been resurrected, albeit by a new group of saviours. And now that they have realised that the final say lies with the central government, the focus has shifted to New Delhi. Pelting stones at the PM's residence is ludicrous, so burning his effigy is the only recourse. But to what end? It looks improbable that the ILP will be implemented considering Christmas 2020 is almost here. Amit Shah told Conrad Sangma to meet

post-Christmas 2019 to discuss the issue.

Politicians have usually succumbed under duress and given in to the demands of these pressure groups. So it wasn't surprising that the resolution was unanimously passed in the State Assembly in December 2019. Political parties have to play to the gallery to survive turbulent storms, notwithstanding the irrationality. That the resolution was passed under compulsion is apparent considering the Congress party's recent demand for the implementation of the Meghalaya Residents' Safety and Security Act (MRSSA) 2016. Now the Honourable Governor is singing a similar tune. The au courant also opine that the regulation is unfeasible in a transit state like ours.

As things stand, the common folk are in dolour particularly during this year of the pandemic. There are many other causes worth championing. Wouldn't it be better if these groups agitate for better roads, MeECL issues, timely payment of salaries to teachers and staff of PSUs, corruption charges, and many other problems that presently afflict us? But that day may never come because xenophobia is their fuel. The 'outsiders' have to be incessantly made to feel insecure because once the fear subsides, endowments will also diminish. That is the reality.

Coming to the current plight of our beloved state, circumstances are indeed pitiable. Roads which are the backbone of development have never been in more pathetic condition. Why is it that the PWD can't build roads that last at least ten years or more? Friends from Garo Hills communicated that the Rongram-Dadenggre road that was built sometime in 2016 didn't even last six months. The same is the condition with most state-made roads. The drive along the Shillong-Nongstoin-Tura road is indeed delightful, but the same can't be said of the road that leads to Nongstoin town.

It is understood that a small state has its constraints. And since 1972 our leaders have had to visit New Delhi with a begging bowl to meet the financial shortfall. When one has little, resources should be used judiciously. But the little that we have is also manipulated and splintered to feed the insatiable appetite of the powerful. Notwithstanding the incumbent Chief Minister's repeated denial, corruption is rampant. And this vicious cycle will only get worse with the entry of more and more businessmen into state politics.

In 2022, Meghalaya will celebrate 50 years of statehood. I request all to google Meghalaya's standing in the Human Development Index. Among the 8 North-Eastern States, we are ranked second from the bottom. Is there any reason to celebrate?

Now that we have Satyapal Malik as the Honourable Governor, one has half a mind to earnestly request him to pull off another Kashmir operation here. In it lies hope that all forms of political deception that presently surround us will be annihilated. May Meghalaya be made the country's Tenth Union Territory.

The writer is Assistant Professor Central Agricultural University E m a i l : writtoferdy@gmail.com

TO THE EDITOR

Mawkhar Dorbar's rejoinder

Editor,

In December 2014, Justice SR Sen, since retired had ruled that the Dorbar Shnong must function according to laid down procedures which should have the sanction of the State Government. Since the Dorbar Shnong operate within the ambit of the District Councils, the ADCs are supposed to come up with the Village Administration Bill (VAB) so that the Dorbars function within the laid down framework and do not overstep their brief. Since that time the Dorbars have forfeited their right to give no-objection certificates to those applying for electricity connection or for

opening of bank accounts etc. It is unfortunate that the VAB initiated by the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council has been hanging fire since 2014. In the interim most Dorbar Shnong continue to function in a vacuum.

But what interests me is the response of the Dorbar Shnong Mawkhar to a letter to the editor titled, "Oppressive Attitude" (ST Dec 16, 2020) written by some students who possibly live within the vicinity of the Rangbah Shnong's house. The students are irked by the noise emanating from the Rangbah Shnong's bakery where the workers create nuisance and use foul language. The letter should have been seen as an opportunity to correct the wrongdoing in the bakery. Instead the Rangbah Shnong has used his office

to literally summon the complainant/s for daring to write to the media and complaining about the noise that is affecting their online classes. The Dorbar went as far as to intimidate the students, that if they do not appear before it on the stipulated date then it would find out their identities and deal with them. This is not the way that a democratic country functions. The public have a right to go to the media to address their grievances and no one has the right to take action against any person who tries to seek redressal of a wrong.

Noise pollution is also a violation of the environmental norms and the Rangbah Shnong should know this better than anyone else. In fact, leaders of any institution have to be more circumspect

than others because they are expected to lead the way. I am appalled that the Dorbar instead of taking corrective measures is seeking to punish those who are complaining against a wrongdoing. This is like saying that no one has a right to point fingers at the executive members because they are beyond any reproach. This is a very wrong precedence. What the Rangbah Shnong does in his personal capacity should not be the brief of the Shnong.

This is where the Dorbar Shnongs tend to go wrong. They think they are the law unto themselves, but that's not the case. They too are subject to the same laws as all of us are. We are all guided by the Indian Constitution.

Yours etc.,
Isaac Pynprope,
Viaemail

Daylight corruption in Meghalaya

Editor,

I am sure many of us hear stories of bribery and corruption at various levels of the state department offices / politicians. These rumours prove to be true when one is actually witnessing firsthand the acts of corruption of the so called respected sirs / babus / auditors / police / directors / engineers / officers and many more. Alas! many of us are not aware of how to report such crimes committed by these people with no conscience except to gain temporary financial blessings. And many of us who are aware of how to report the crimes are simply put off by the long and

cumbersome process of reporting such crimes.

In today's age, everything is becoming more accessible with the help of the internet, and it's where we can get almost everything at the click of a button. I strongly suggest that the State Anti-Corruption Branch / State Vigilance Commission should come up with a very user friendly app where a lay person who wishes to report corruption / bribe-taking anonymously, can do so. Only that can ensure that we have a corruption free Meghalaya for our children to live in.

"The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing."—Edmund Burke

Yours etc.
M. Khyriem
Viaemail

"We are made wise not by the recollection of our past, but by the responsibility for our future."
— George Bernard Shaw

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No.124 SHILLONG, SATURDAY, DECEMBER 19, 2020

Right to health

ON December 18, the Supreme Court while hearing a petition on Covid treatment observed that health is a fundamental right and that Right to Health includes affordable treatment. The apex court urged that state governments to ramp up their health care facilities and also to put a cap on the fees charged by private hospitals. Due to unprecedented Pandemic, everybody in the world is suffering, one way or the other. It is a world war against COVID-19. Therefore, there shall be Government-public partnership 'to avoid world war against Covid 19.' The Court added that there shall be more and more testing done and Government should be transparent in informing the public about the number of tests carried by declaring the correct facts and figures of people infected by Covid, otherwise people will be misled and they will be under the impression that everything is alright and they will become negligent.

Taking a considerate view of those who cannot afford the high cost of treatment, the Court observed that the pandemic has already caused immense economic and financial hardship for the common people and with hospital costs skyrocketing, they will be in penury. The apex Court told the states to invoke the clauses of the Disaster Management Act to bring down the exorbitant health care costs in private hospitals.

Closer home those who have tested Covid positive and been admitted to private hospitals have a very sad story to tell. Doctors and nurses don't want to come anywhere the patient. Seeing this paranoia among health workers, Covid patients are frustrated and depressed and wonder if they are better off being treated at home since the treatment narrows down to taking of medicines and/or injections. Only patients with co-morbidities generally feel the need for hospitalization in case they run low on oxygen and need to be intubated by specialists for supplemental oxygen.

There is no doubt at all that testing in Meghalaya has come down drastically and there is urgent need to step up testing especially now that the festive season is at hand and people are seen crowding inside shops and market places. Past experience has shown that a lockdown should be the last alternative since it dealt a death blow to the economy and many had lost their jobs on account of it. Hence a lockdown is unlikely in the near future, yet the Covid cases have been rising in India and winter just seems to trigger the infections. After Diwali the Covid figures had spiked up. Now Christmas and New Year are approaching and while there is need to be extremely careful in maintaining Covid protocols, people seem to have decided to lower their guard. This will have serious consequences.

In a free enterprise, the community is not just another stakeholder, but is in fact the very purpose of its existence. — Jamshedji Tata

Corporate altruism in India has found a new purpose since the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic. With the nationwide lockdown hard-braking economic activity on the one hand and disrupting lives, especially of the poor, on the other, companies have not only opened purse-strings but also rolled up sleeves to respond proactively to the pandemic. Over the past few months, corporates have been using all or most of their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) kitty to combat the pandemic, be it through contribution to the PM CARES Fund, other relief funds, distribution of food, masks, personal protective equipment (PPE) kits or relief material to the needy.

The CSR agenda got a wider role in pandemic management with the government expanding the scope of CSR spending to include companies engaged in research and development (R&D) of new vaccines, drugs and medical devices. These amendments to the CSR rules permit such companies to categorise as CSR activity any Covid-related R&D activity even if undertaken as part of its normal course of business.

CSR is a concept whereby firms integrate social and environmental concerns into their business operations and is generally understood to be a tool for achieving a balance between economic, environmental and social imperatives, while addressing expectations of shareholders and stakeholders.

In the global economy, stakeholders include customers, suppliers, employees, communities, and financiers — shareholders, bondholders plus banks and other sources of capital — and they are all intertwined.

In fact, when we flip through the world's business history, we find that all large mercantile communities were great patrons of the art of philanthropy. They regarded it a divine tradition. The world today is witnessing a growing realisation in enterprises of the importance of altruism. Hence, a great deal of money has been flowing into the social sector. Like individual citizens who have moral and social responsibilities, businesses are being perceived as corporate citizens who need to commit time, talent and resources for welfare of society as they draw their

sustenance from it.

CSR aims at managing a business in a way that it contributes towards sustainable development by delivering social, economic and environmental benefits to all stakeholders. It addresses issues like human rights, corporate governance, health and safety, environmental effects, working conditions and contribution to economic development. Whatever the definition is, the purpose of CSR is to drive change towards sustainability.

We are seeing the emergence of a new crop of mega donors who are upending long-established norms in philanthropy. Not only are they increasingly willing to take on hot-button social and political issues, they also have a problem-solving and impact-making mindset. CSR is now being recognised as a critical component to an organi-

public impact, companies are using the power of their brands to speak out on major public policy issues.

CSR is rooted in the knowledge that businesses have a duty to enable all living beings to get a fair share of the planet's resources. Businesses are powerful constituents of society and the most respected businesses feel oriented to do much more than making money; they exist to use the power of business to solve social and environmental problems. They are involved in a wide variety of community development projects related to education, health, skills training, entrepreneurship, women empowerment, food security, livelihoods and supporting services for the differently-abled.

India has a unique law — the Companies Act, 2013, and the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)



sation's values, its operating ethos, its business strategies and its purpose. Businesses are being measured on financial and social metrics.

Over the years there have been many voices within the business community who believe that companies must break out of conventional preoccupation with profit and do more to address the world's pressing social needs. The chorus has been joined by leaders from civil society, governments, policy think tanks and world bodies on education, health and rehabilitation. Business leadership has acknowledged the demand for enlarged corporate responsibility in ways which can reflect a profound attitudinal change individually and collectively.

Beyond profits and share prices, companies are now standing up for their beliefs, their customers, and employees. They are integrating social missions into their business operations. In this new model of social and

Rules—which came into effect on April 1, 2014. India is the first country to require companies to expend resources on CSR programmes. The approved activities under Schedule VII of CSR include eradicating extreme hunger, poverty, and promotion of education, promoting gender equality and women's empowerment as well as reducing the child mortality, improving maternal health and combating diseases. Ensuring environmental sustainability and promoting employment enhancing vocational skills are other activities approved under CSR.

The push for legislation came because voluntary CSR encouraged practices such as free-riding (companies taking advantage of benefits without actually spending), greenwashing posing as CSR, and false disclosures. However, CSR could be more socially relevant when it is a voluntary exercise driven by altruistic motives rather than a mandated policy that prods businesses to use creative means to camouflage busi-

ness promotion activities as socially driven programmes. It is very difficult to legislate moral obligations. Laws only set minimum standards, but do not create an impetus for charitable action.

There are marked aberrations in the CSR agenda and they need a course correction. Many businesses are using these opportunities for enhancing their social profile and in the process expanding their business markets. These CSR projects are now the fulcrum of aggressive brand building exercises and are being leveraged to their fullest mileage. Charity leaders have a geographic bias with corporations funding projects closer to their headquarters. Consequently, more remote regions where development aid is acutely needed are being bypassed and deprived of this 'new social revolution'. Politics can skew priorities, with some companies looking to gain goodwill by backing government-led projects rather than initiating independent initiatives. A popular CSR activity is contributing to natural disaster relief funds, which is probably directed at scoring favourable points with the political party in power.

There can be a subtle use of CSR to brush off bad reputation as well as camouflaging of the dark acts in marketing. CSR has been peripheral in most organisations and is not woven into the fabric of the business. Even as annual CSR spend is on the rise, the impact on the ground and effective deployment of the funds remain a matter of debate. It is not necessarily always transparent and mission-oriented and there may be strings attached-terms that dictate exactly where and how it must be used.

CSR could be a moral counterbalance for practices that have had direct negative impacts on the poor. It often masks and smokescreens corporate irresponsibility and aid conditionality and treaty commitments have significantly constrained policy making. Reporting requirements are onerous and often impose huge administrative burdens for organisations which must devote the scarce skills of educated, English-speaking personnel for writing reports for donors rather than running programmes.

It is wise to remind ourselves again of the advice of Henry Ford: "A business absolutely devoted to service will have only one worry about profits. They will be embarrassingly large." — INFA

India suffers further decline in human development Approach to social sector planning needs to be reframed

By Gyan Pathak

Hoping for progress, the government was claiming the same, but we actually regressed. UNDP's Human Development Report 2020 has just revealed. In place of human development, India registered a human decline, going two ranks below, from 129th to 131st among 189 countries in the world in 2019. Per capita income fell, health deteriorated, education was greatly impacted. Children and women suffered more than men. All these were happening and then came the dark year 2020. Hidden in the dark shadow of the pandemic are the numerous untold miseries we are trying to unearthen.

What is 'the next frontier' then that became the title of the report of this year with a subtitle 'Human development and the Anthropocene'? We have evolved the Human Development Index (HDI) and have been using the same for years which gave us a picture of development, though a little hazy. We have had development but not without heavy destruction of the nature and environment since mid-20th century that we proposed to call the Anthropocene Epoch.

The report estimated the pressure of the environment in large scale for the first time and prepared Planetary pressures adjusted Human Development Index (PHDI), that gave a little clearer picture of human development. India's performance in this regard is a little better but we are still miles to go before we achieve environmentally sustainable development goals, though we have fulfilled some commitments and obligations made under the Paris Agreement five years ago.

The fall in India's overall ranking in HDI is proof that other countries did better than ours in comparison to India. In absolute value, India's HDI in 2019 was 0.645 only a little better than 0.645 in 2018. However, looking inside the composite data may dishearten sensitive minds who really care for people's well being. In several areas that are key factors for calculating the index, India performed worse than its own earlier performance.

Livelihood, health, and education are three key factors. Wellbeing of the people is largely dependent on household incomes, but India's Gross National Income (GNI) per capita fell from \$6829 in 2018 to \$6681 in 2019 on Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) basis, a measurement of prices in different countries that uses the prices of specific goods to compare the absolute purchasing power of the countries' currencies. For common people to understand the severity, the fall was over 11,000 rupees per annum per person. We can understand it even better, we can even consider the rising inequality in incomes of the rich and the poor. It is now known that the policies adopted favoured the rich making them richer while the poor became poorer. It exposes the government claim of rising income.

This situation increased the level of hunger and malnutrition. The UNDP report is the second after the National Family Health Survey – 5 phase 1 results that showed an increase in hunger and malnutrition among Indian women and children is general and indigenous people in particular. Among the 189 countries surveyed, it pains to read India's name among three specifically mentioned countries – the two others being Cambodia and Thai-

land – for which records showed more malnutrition related issues such as stunting and wasting especially in indigenous children. It exposes the government claim of protecting the health of common people.

The third major factor in calculating HDI is education. "In India different responses in parent behaviour as well as disinvestment in girl's health and education have led to higher malnutrition among girls than among boys as a consequence of shocks linked to climate change," the report says. Where were then gender equality and the progress in education? It also reveals that India needs much more to do to readjust itself to absorb the shocks from climate change by reprogramming its plans for environmentally sustainable progress.

India has been categorized in medium human development countries and ranking 131. Eleven countries are above India in this category while 119 are high development and very high human development countries. The scores of Economic Sustainability and Social Sustainability of the country were also not encouraging. Overall loss in the HDI value due to inequality during 2010-2019, Gender Inequality Index during 2005-2019, and Income share of the poorest 40 per cent during 2005-2018 were in negative at -1.3, -1.7, and -0.4 respectively. Environmental threats continue. In the Red List Index, India scored 0.676. The carbon dioxide emission index score of 0.972 and material footprint index score of 0.970 need improvement.

All these have impacted Indians adversely. Health expectancy has been lost by 14.5 per cent in 2019. Inequality in life expectancy was at 19.7, while the gender inequality index was 0.488. Life expectancy at birth has improved only a little from previous 69.4 years to 69.7 years, while the expected years of schooling and mean year of schooling did not improve, which remained the same as the previous year's at 12.2 and 6.5 respectively. Many countries fared better in this regard including some of our neighbours.

Impact of climate change on life has specifically been mentioned in the report along with rising temperature, loss of hundreds of lives, and acute water shortages and floods, needing urgent attention of the our planners and the government. Education for sustainable development has been criticized for lack of evolution of its effectiveness. The report specifically mentions India along with Mexico where teaching was observed to often be rather disciplinary and textbook based, which has led to a neglect of a more systemic approach to study causes and solutions.

What we need to do? The report finds out that poverty, environmental justice and governance are often missing in our approaches indirectly suggesting their removal from our planning to reduce the planetary pressure that is making imbalances at an unsustainable degree. Cases in India and Nepal are specifically mentioned that show that environmental decision-making can be democratized when control over the means of production is transferred to local communities, which can lead to more sustainable outcomes. Moreover, participation is key for strengthening transparency and accountability. (IPA Service)

TO THE EDITOR

Caught in a time warp

Editor,
The article "Politics of deception" by Banshan Ferdyn Lyngdoh (ST Dec 18, 2020) is a courageous piece that calls a spade a spade and not a shovel. He has touched at the core of what the ILP demand is all about. It has become commonplace now for all wannabe politicians to take up issues or make demands that are regressive and unsustainable. The Khasi Students' Union unilaterally decided for all of us that Meghalaya should not have railways because of the same old argument — influx which might lead to the marginalisation of the tribals here. Now the KSU have teamed up with other groups to demand the ILP, knowing very well that it will not come through. But while the high jinks of these pressure groups is predictable what the people of Meghalaya need to consider at this point is that they have no leader who can stand up to these groups. All sixty MLAs have capitulated and passed that Resolution in

December last year demanding the ILP — a colonial instrument that had sought to keep the tribes within their sanctuaries and with no governance extended beyond the Inner Line Permit. The British can be trusted to do what is good for the empire and governing an unruly people that unleashed terror in areas beyond their jurisdiction was something the British felt was not worth it. Hence the Inner Line Permit!

To try and use this medieval law in the 21st century shows a mind that's clogged with clichés and is incapable of novel ideas. In fact this is a state where there's no thinking at all. Not among politicians and not among the public either. Intellectuals are busy pursuing their interests too. Now even NEHU teachers and students want a tribal Vice Chancellor. Can't the stakeholders of NEHU demand the best person to lead the University? Would anyone go only to a tribal doctor even if he/she is half baked? I can't see a dynamic tribal VC who will replace the present one. If all of us spend half our lives

insulating ourselves from others then how do we become citizens of the world? What do we teach our children? To not venture beyond home lest they are eaten up by the more advanced non-tribes? This insulation is not good for our upcoming generation because their minds will be stunted and their vision only as far as the end of the tunnel.

Yours etc.,
Basil Nongkhaw,
Via email

Whither MCS results

Editor,
The Meghalaya Civil Services (Mains) Examination or the Written Exam for the 38 sanctioned posts of Junior Grade MCS officers was held in the month of January 2020. It is to be noted that 12 (twelve) months have already passed since then. Undeniably, there was a nationwide lockdown implemented in March of this year and the said lockdown lasted for quite some time. It can also not be denied that the COVID 19 situation had created immense chaos in the

functioning of the government and its various institutions. That having been said, however, it must also be pointed out in the public forum that as the subsequent months progressed, relaxations after relaxations were promulgated by the State Government thereby allowing for normalcy in public institutional functioning to return. Since the past 3 to 4 months, MPSC has started to function properly once again. Therefore, no right thinking citizen would believe that the evaluation of the MCS Mains Examination answer scripts has not been completed as of yet. Additionally, any excuse that there was no Chairperson to sign off on the permission for declaration of the results also does not hold water because a full-fledged Chairperson has already been appointed more than a month ago. No action has been taken by him till date on this very important issue. MPSC is silent and refuses to clarify to the public at large. The State Government needs no reminding of the tremendous importance of the MCS officers who are essential in en-

suring the efficiency of grassroots governance as well as the efficient delivery of public services to the masses. If there is no hindrance caused by any legal or judicial issue, I see no reason why MPSC should keep on delaying the declaration of MCS Mains results. Further delay only raises serious suspicion in the minds of the general public. I sincerely appeal to MPSC to declare the MCS Mains results before the Christmas vacation, and to wind up the Personal Interview by January end of 2021.

Yours etc.,
Jeremiah S,
Via email

Hope justice is given soon

Editor,
It is noteworthy that the four accused in the alleged gang-rape and torture of a 20-year-old Dalit girl in Uttar Pradesh's Hathras in September, were charged by the CBI of gang-rape and murder on Friday, over three months after the incident that triggered outrage across the country. The CBI has also invoked charges against the accused under the SC/ST (Prevention

of Atrocities) Act. The probe agency filed its charge sheet before a court in Hathras, some 200 km from Delhi. After the heinous incident had taken place, the victim's cremation was allegedly done without the family's approval and her family was harassed and threatened through different ways by the Uttar Pradesh police and the accused were supported by some leaders of the ruling party. What was worse is that the main accused had written to the Uttar Pradesh police from jail, claiming that he and the three other accused are being framed in the case and sought "justice" for the four men. He had also accused the woman's mother and brother of torturing her, while the woman's family had denied these allegations. I condemn all the injustice and baseless statements and support that was given that time by some political leaders and organizations as well. I also condemn the main accused's false allegations against the victim's family. Hope justice will prevail soon!

Yours etc.,
B Ahsanullah,
Delhi

BOLLYWOOD 2020: THE YEAR GONE BY

Pandemic, death of an actor and the rise of OTT

Bollywood in 2020 wilted under the raging pandemic like any other industry. While movie theaters remained out of bound, what shocked the cine-goers is the yearlong news of deaths - from coronavirus to unnatural ones like the demise of Sushant Singh Rajput opening a Pandora's box of movie world open secrets. *IBNS-TWF correspondent Supriyo Hazra* looks back alphabetically with a heavy heart.

AAMIR KHAN: No, this year we did not see any Aamir Khan movie releasing onscreen but fans are keeping themselves busy waiting for his next project *Laal Singh Chaddha*. The film is expected to hit the theater next year. An adaptation of the 1994 American film *Forrest Gump*, *Laal Singh Chaddha* stars Aamir Khan in the title role with the sensational Kareena Kapoor paired opposite him.

AMITABH BACHCHAN: Amitabh Bachchan gave his fans a scare when he contracted COVID-19 and spent several days in hospital. However, Big B defeated the virus and finally returned home, giving relief to his well wishers and showing the world that he still remains the *Shahenshah* of India at the age of 78. His son Abhishek Bachchan, daughter-in-law Aishwarya Rai Bachchan and grand daughter Aaradhya also fought the disease and won. Big B's *Gulabo Sitabo*, opposite Ayushmann Khurrana, also became the first B-town movie to release on OTT platform since the cinema halls were shut down. Amitabh Bachchan earned praise with his comic timing in this Lucknow-based movie.

AKSHAY KUMAR: He is a box office rockstar and Akshay Kumar's horror comedy genre movie *Laxmii*, which hit the OTT platform due to COVID-19, made the biggest ever opening on the new platform of movie release. Meanwhile, he has unveiled the new poster of his upcoming movie *Ram Setu*, promising to deliver another entertainer in the year to come. He also won hearts with his Rs 25-crore donation to the PM Cares Fund.

AYUSHMANN KHURRANA: Ayushmann has created his own set of fans over the years who love him and deliver one strong character after the other onscreen. In 2020, Ayushmann made yet another bold statement with the gay-themed *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan*. In *Gulabo Sitabo*, the movie which was released on OTT platform, he once again touched the right chord of the audience sharing screen space with Big B.

ANUSHKA SHARMA: Anushka Sharma will surely remember 2020 with a smile on her face as she announced her pregnancy. Yes, Anushka and her husband Virat Kohli are expecting to be parents soon and even the Indian skipper has been given a leave during the Test series against Australia so that he can be on Anushka's side during the special moment in their life. In the world of OTT, Anushka Sharma produced two successful ventures - *Paatal Lok* (web series) and *Bulbbul* (movie).

ALIA BHATT: Alia Bhatt joined the shooting of SS Rajamouli's film *RRR*. The film also stars Ram Charan, Ajay Devgn and Jr NTR in the lead roles. This year, Bhatt was seen in *Sadak 2*, which released in one Over-the-top (OTT) platform. However, the movie failed to create magic in the hearts of her fans or movie lovers. She was mercilessly trolled and attacked online by many grieved by the shocking death of Sushant Singh Rajput that triggered an almost never-ending debate on nepotism in film industry.

DEEPIKA PADUKONE: Deepika Padukone shocked her fans by transforming herself to Malti, an acid-attack survivor, onscreen. The Indian actress surely won hearts by portraying the agony and resilience of a victim/survivor in the Meghna Gulzar movie. She will soon be seen in the movie *83*, opposite husband Ranveer Singh in the sports drama. But she was also in the news for the wrong reasons - drugs in Bollywood - after the death of Sushant Singh Rajput opened a Pandora's box.

JACQUELINE FERNANDEZ: Apart from remaining busy posting new images on Instagram for her fans, Jacqueline surely was the talk of the town with her foot-tapping performance in rapper Badshah's song *Genda Phool*. During lockdown breaks, Salman Khan and Jacky also teamed up to shoot a video song *Tere Bina*. Jacqueline also remained busy shooting for her upcoming movie *Bhoot Police* at the end of the year in Himachal Pradesh.

KANGANA RANAUT: Bollywood's 'Queen' of controversy, Kangana Ranaut lived up to her outspokenness this year. Rather she pushed the envelope with all guns blazing with the tragic end of actor Sushant Singh Rajput. Kangana stoked the fire when she alleged that the *Kedarnath* actor did not suffer from any mental illness and was rather "murdered" by the cruelty of the "Bollywood mafia promoting nepotism". As her battle raged with the Shiv Sena dispensation in Mumbai, Kangana found herself sucked into it further when in September a portion of her Pali Hill office was demolished by the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) holding that it was an "illegal construction". The act saw Kangana taking on Uddhav Thackeray head on on social media and warning him of the consequences in a rather pedestrian language. She got relief from the Bombay High Court on Nov 27 when it quashed BMC's order on demolition. It also described BMC's move as "mala fide". Kangana even jumped into yet another row after tweeting a misleading post about an elderly woman in the ongoing farmers' protest in the capital. The 'Queen' even engaged herself in a twitter battle with actor Diljit Dosanjh over the farmers' protest. In the world of social media, Kangana also joined Twitter this year and keeps posting her controversial views on different issues, not even sparing industry veterans like Jaya Bachchan. Well on the workfront she wrapped up the year completing the filming of *Thalaivi - the revolutionary leader*, a biopic on late Tamil Nadu chief minister J Jayalalithaa.

KARAN JOHAR: Netizens trolled and slammed director Karan Johar for days and months after the debate over nepotism once again haunted Bollywood following the death of Sushant Singh Rajput. Fans blamed Karan Johar for supporting only star kids over outsiders like Sushant. Netizens blamed Karan and many other Bollywood A-listers for nepotism and for not standing by SSR in his time of crisis. As expected Kangana Ranaut joined the debate and attacked Karan by calling him again "the flag-bearer of nepotism". An old video of Kangana targeting Karan on the 'nepotism' issue while she appeared in his chat show *Koffee With Karan* went viral on social media ever since the debate got reignited this year. Things reached a stage that the Bollywood giant had to unfollow almost everyone on Twitter, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi and actors Amitabh Bachchan, Akshay Kumar and Shah Rukh Khan. He was also dragged into the Bollywood and drugs nexus row with his house party video of 2019 with top stars coming under the lens of Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB) for allegedly being drug-fuelled, a charge he junked as "baseless".

KAREENA KAPOOR KHAN: Kareena Kapoor Khan gave one big news to her fans — that she will soon be a mom for the second time in her life. Yes, Kareena and her husband Saif Ali Khan announced in 2020 that they are expecting the birth of their second child. The power couple of Bollywood already has a son, Taimur. In the world of her works, Kareena paired up opposite late actor Irrfan Khan for their release, *Angrezi Medium*. However, with COVID-19 wrecking havoc, the movie failed to earn the result that was expected from it. The movie was one of the last major releases in India before lockdown.

KATRINA KAIF: The Barbie Doll of B-town is busy preparing for her next

project *Phone Bhoot*. The horror-comedy genre movie will also feature actors Ishaan Khatter and Siddhant Chaturvedi. The movie is expected to go on floors next year. Katrina also posted videos of her at home, cleaning dishes and attending household chores herself amid a pandemic.

KRITI SANON: Kriti Sanon remained busy with several releases in 2019 but this year none of her movies hit onscreen amid COVID-19 pandemic spread. In December, Kriti surely left her fans worried when she announced that she has contracted the virus. We hope she will recover soon and keep delivering Box Office hits next year.

PRIYANKA CHOPRA: Priyanka Chopra is back with her new Hollywood movie and this time she will be seen in the project *We Can Be Heroes*. Recently, she made the announcement by sharing a teaser and posters of the movie on Instagram.

RANBIR KAPOOR: Ranbir Kapoor will surely want to forget 2020 as he lost his father and Bollywood veteran Rishi Kapoor on April 30. With his upcoming film *Brahmastra*'s release postponed by COVID-19, he actually had no release in 2020.

RANVEER SINGH: Bollywood's poster boy Ranveer Singh kept teasing his followers with his Kapil Dev look for his upcoming sports-based movie *83*. Fans are eagerly waiting to see the onscreen chemistry between Ranveer and his wife Deepika Padukone in the movie. As a matter of fact, *83*, directed by Kabir Khan, is one of the most awaited movies of 2021 when he will also appear in two more movies - *Sooryavanshi* and *Jayeshbhai Jordaar*. Raveer's look from *Jayeshbhai Jordaar* has already been unveiled to his fans. Now it is time to wait and let the calendar turn to 2021.

SAIF ALI KHAN: The Nawab of Pataudi will soon be a dad again as Saif and Kareena Kapoor Khan are expecting their second child. In the world of his works, Saif Ali Khan featured in three movies - *Tanhaji*, *Jawaani Jaaneman* and *Dil Bechara*. Next year will be interesting as he will be seen in the much-awaited sequel of 2005 hit film *Bunty Aur Babli*. Saif has replaced Abhishek Bachchan but Rani Mukherji will once again be seen in the movie that is expected to tickle the funny bones of moviegoers.

SARA ALI KHAN: If daddy remained so busy in 2020, then Sara Ali Khan can't be far away as the gorgeous beauty was busy recreating 90s magic with Varun Dhawan in their upcoming movie *Coolie No. 1*. The comedy film, which originally featured Karisma Kapoor and Govinda, will release online this December. The trailer, first look and even few songs of the movie have been released by the makers, generating excitement around it. However, she is again another actress of Bollywood hogging limelight in 2020 for the all the wrong reasons - the drug abuse in Bollywood triggered by the death of Sushant Singh Rajput, her debut hero (in the 2018 film *Kedarnath*) with whom she allegedly had a relationship for a while.

SALMAN KHAN: Salman Khan was back as a singer when he created a music video during lockdown to help his fans forget their lockdown gloom. Moreover, the original Bollywood rockstar was also busy hosting popular TV show *Bigg Boss* that remained equally interesting even after 14 seasons. Next year, Khan will be seen in *Radhe*, returning to the big screen after a pandemic imposed break of one year. He also had his share of abuse from the fans of late Sushant Singh Rajput after the latter's unnatural death (suicide according to police) triggered a debate on nepotism and bullying of outsiders in Bollywood.

SHAH RUKH KHAN: The King Khan of Bollywood remained absent from the big screen in 2020 amid pandemic onslaught but his Kolkata Knight Riders team surely featured in Indian Premier League. But it failed to deliver a tournament winning performance even this year.

PANKAJ TRIPATHI: Actor Pankaj Tripathi is slowly emerging as the next big thing in Bollywood with his repeated powerful performances in movies as well as web series. He appeared in movies like *Angezi Medium*, *Ludo* and *Gunjan Saxena: The Kargil Girl* in 2020. However, Pankaj perhaps gained more appreciation as he returned to play the character of *Akhandanand* - Kaleen Bhaiya Tripathi in the high-octane web series *Mirzapur 2*.

VIDYA BALAN: From appearing in a short movie *Natkhath* to her performance in *Shakuntala Devi*, Vidya Balan made her presence strongly felt among movie buffs in this eventful year otherwise marred by the pandemic. *Natkhath* premiered on YouTube as part of the We Are One: A Global Film Festival.

SPECIAL MENTIONS

ABHISHEK BACHCHAN: He may have been down with COVID-19 this year but Abhishek Bachchan will love to remember 2020 as one transforming moment in his life when he delivered strong performance with his appearance in the web series *Breathe: Into the Shadows*. His performance in the series was appreciated by netizens and Abhishek once again won hearts with his acting prowess. He played the role of a psychiatrist with a split personality in the web series. Abhishek is also busy shooting for his upcoming movie *The Big Bull*. The movie is expected to hit OTT platform soon. The Junior B was also seen in another OTT platform released movie *Ludo* this year. The movie featured Aditya Roy Kapur and Rajkumar Rao in the lead roles.

BOBBY DEOL: After remaining away from films for several years, Bobby is back with a bang in the web series *Aashram*. He played the character of a fake godman *Kashipur Waale Baba Nirala* aka *Monty*.

NASEERUDDIN SHAH: Like many of his B-town colleagues, Shah made his digital debut with the Amazon Prime Video original show *Bandish Bandits*. He played the character of Pandit Radhemohan Rathod in the series.

SONU SOOD: Despite his good looks and robust body, Sonu Sood in "A-listed" Bollywood movies was mostly a villain or a second fiddle to the heroes. But the pandemic brought the best out of him and he emerged as the true hero of the film world and India. So go to his Wikipedia bio and you now find him introduced as "an Indian film actor, producer, and humanitarian who Well Sood would now on be known as the humanitarian who pooled all his resources to send back home hapless people - read migrant workers - stuck in the big cities like Mumbai - amid the raging COVID-19 lockdown. In September 2020, Sood was chosen for the prestigious 'SDG Special Humanitarian Action Award' by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) for his humanitarian works during the COVID-19 pandemic.

SUSHMITA SEN: The Miss Universe teased her fans earlier this year about her digital debut and she finally made it later on with the web series *Aarya*. In the crime drama, Sushmita could be seen playing the titular role who is caught in a web of lies and deceit within her family. *Aarya* remained one of the much loved web series of the year. (*IBNS-TWF*)

Sushant Singh Rajput: Celebrity death which shook everyone



Sushant Singh Rajput left his fans shocked one Sunday afternoon when he supposedly committed suicide in his Mumbai residence, triggering a tsunami of events that almost felled big Bollywood names and dragged several top stars and personalities into controversies ranging from nepotism, bullying of those from non-film backgrounds and drugs.

An engineering dropout, Sushant came to Bollywood from a middle-class background but went on to deliver many memorable movies, including the biopic on former Indian skipper MS Dhoni. The entire country was left shocked when on June 14 the actor was found dead in his Bandra flat. He had allegedly committed suicide by hanging himself to death. A CBI investigation into the incident is still on. The death left a deep impact in Indian society as a section of people saw the instance as a wake-up call to introspect on the functioning of the entertainment industry in Mumbai.

The death triggered debates on issues like favouritism, insider versus outsider, and nepotism like never before. With Bollywood actors making strong remarks and observations on the death at that point of time, it was actress Kangana Ranaut who created a massive controversy by saying that Sushant's death was "a planned murder".

She even questioned the role of "Bollywood mafia" in his alleged suicide. The actress alleged that the film industry sidelined Sushant despite putting up strong show in several films like *Kai Po Che*, *MS Dhoni: The Untold Story*, *Kedarnath* and *Chhichhore*. A major divide was witnessed within the industry when several prominent actors like Abhay Deol, Abhishek Kapoor, Raveena Tandon, Shekhar Kapur, Abhinav Kashyap, Ranveer Shorey spoke out on the imbalance of power, nepotistic and bullying culture and privilege club in Bollywood.

They mentioned how these practices make it difficult for the real talents with no film connections to sustain and thrive in the Bollywood industry. Soon the case took a turn when Sushant's family alleged that the actor was murdered and lodged FIR against the actor's girlfriend and actor Rhea Chakraborty.

The Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB) is even investigating into the drug angle connected to the death of the actor. His last film *Dil Bechara* was released online after his death.

REST IN PEACE

RISHI KAPOOR: One of Bollywood's most loved actors, Rishi Kapoor, who kept entertaining his fans with his evergreen performance onscreen, died on Apr 30. He was 67.

IRRFAN KHAN: A day before Rishi Kapoor died, Bollywood's international star Irrfan Khan passed away at a hospital in Mumbai on Apr 29. Irrfan will always be remembered for his exceptionally strong acting skills.

WAJID KHAN: Wajid Khan, of composer duo Sajid-Wajid fame, died on June 1 at the age of 42, leaving behind a bouquet of memorable songs that will keep buzzing in the hearts of movie lovers for years to come. He was corona positive.

BASU CHATTERJEE: Filmmaker Basu Chatterjee died due to age-related ailments on June 4 at the age of 90. He is best remembered for directing movies like *Chhoti Si Baat* (1975), *Chitchor* (1976), *Rajnigandha* (1974), *Piya Ka Ghar* (1972), *Khatta Meetha*, *Chakravayuha* (1978 film), *Baton Baton Mein* (1979) among others.

SAROJ KHAN: Veteran Bollywood choreographer Saroj Khan, who was the woman behind Madhuri Dixit's silver screen success as a dancer, died at the age of 71 on July 3.

SP BALASUBRAHMANYAM: 74-year-old singer SP Balasubrahmanyam, who sang several evergreen Bollywood songs, died in Chennai on Sept 25.

ASIF BASRA: Shocking his fans, actor Asif Basra was found dead at a house in Dharamshala on Nov 12. He was reportedly found hanging when police reached the spot. The cause behind his death is still known and the police have started investigating into the case.

SOUMITRA CHATTERJEE: Legendary Bengali actor Soumitra Chatterjee left his fans grieved when he passed away aged 85 at a hospital in Kolkata on Nov 15. A Dadashaheb Phalke winner, he was late movie legend Satyajit Ray's favourite actor.

“Success is not final, failure is not fatal: it is the courage to continue that counts.”
— Winston Churchill

The Shillong Times
Vol No: LXIII No. 126 SHILLONG, MONDAY, DECEMBER 21, 2020

Soul-searching in Congress

A soul-searching exercise lasting ten days is currently under way in the Congress party. It started with a meeting this weekend by the top-three family members with the dissidents, or those who have openly expressed dissatisfaction with the present state and styles of the party leadership. It is too early to say whether these discussions will help achieve the desired results. The “family” comprising Sonia Gandhi, Rahul and Priyanka is still in a mood to run the party affairs between them and collectively. They would do so in one form or the other. There is every hint that no major change is contemplated. Rahul Gandhi has said he is willing to take a more active role – a step-up from the state that he is currently in; of blowing hot and cold. Until the time Rahul Gandhi steps in, Sonia seemed ready to hold on. By the end of the month – and year— more clarity on this could be expected. Notably, the group of 23 who sought organizational elections through a letter in August have not given up hope. Senior parliamentarian Shashi Tharoor, former Maharashtra chief minister Prithviraj Chavan and former party spokesperson Manish Tewari used the occasion to stress that the “nomination culture” in the Congress should end and organisational polls must take place. Former Union minister P Chidambaram too took a similar stand. How far the “family” would be willing to reconcile with the dissidents’ push for internal democracy is what will ultimately decide the future of the grand old party.

The nomination culture, not new anyway to the Congress establishment, has progressively reduced the inner spirit of the organisation and leaders of real merit have not been allowed to come up within the party. With the result, many state units are dysfunctional and not able to electorally equip the party to winning propositions. Fact is also that organisational elections, if allowed, will weaken the hold of the family over the party. Significantly, Rahul Gandhi held his own views about the organisational conduct and in some respects sounded realistic; as in the weak positioning of the party in Tamil Nadu where those like P Chidambaram have not been able to keep the party in good form but are waxing eloquent on all other matters. A big question is also whether Rahul Gandhi will take up the president’s post again or allow the present drag to continue. From the initial phase of the discussions, it is clear that the family is in no mood for any big change in the topmost rung of the party.

TO THE EDITOR

It’s time to question

Editor,
The article ‘The politics of deception’ by Banshan Ferd Lyngdoh (ST Dec 18, 2020) is a bold, straightforward, and beautifully written piece which every right-thinking indigenous Khasi should read to understand and further question the actual motives of pressure groups. I thank the writer for bringing out an intelligent, properly researched, and well-argued piece. Alternate voices like his are essential for a healthy discourse on important subjects. The world should know that the pressure groups are not mandated to exclusively speak on behalf of the ‘jaidybnriew’.

We are all part of the same ‘jaidybnriew’ but we choose to distance ourselves from those who destroy property or stab faultless shopkeepers at lewdth. Are we still entitled to call ourselves ‘Ka jaidybnriew ba Tip Bricw Tip Blei’ (a community that knows man and knows

God)? With all that’s happening around us, how many members of these pressure groups who sing paeans of martyrs and poets honestly proclaim that they truly ‘Kamai’a Ka Hok’ (earn livelihood through honest means)?

The trajectory of pressure group movements in the state right from the 1970s was well documented in the article and are now lessons that we should all learn from. We should no longer be gullible or give in easily to populist agitations. It is time to question whether any propagandist movement has a possible outcome or not. And even if it does, how it will affect our lives. The implementation of ILP will definitely have regressive impact on livelihoods as tourism will definitely take a hit. Guest house owners, tourist and taxi drivers, roadside vendors, tour guides, local tourist societies, and the like are the most vulnerable. We have seen and heard how people in Sohra—the most sought-after tourist destination—

What ails MeECL and its subsidiaries - An indepth analysis – Part I

By Rudi Warjri

It is said that sometime in the late 18th century, Benjamin Franklin, sold off his possessions to fund his research of the lightning rod for conducting electricity. In Meghalaya today, funding the generation, transmission and distribution of its electricity means begging for loans from third parties. Even the payment of salaries of employees has to be financially engineered from a loan.

The turmoil in MeECL and its subsidiaries has attracted extensive media coverage. Lots of data and figures have been banded around. They pertain to revenue, expenditure, loans, corruption, agitation by employees etc., some factual and some distorted, thereby adding regular fuel to the negative public perception. The purpose of the this op-ed is to inform the public about the in-depth malaise afflicting the organization. The public can judge for themselves to what extent they may willy-nilly also own part of the problem. The op-ed being explanatory in nature is also lengthy and has therefore been divided into two parts.

Assets: The inheritance of the State Electricity Board by the state of Meghalaya from Assam had included both its assets and liabilities. Among the assets was large amount of land worth in multiple crores today. Some of the land are in prime locations – next to National Highways and scenic spots that are ideal for creation of assets and promotion of tourism. Most of the land has been practically lost due to encroachment. Among the encroachers are well placed and influential elite of society. Legally, the land may have been acquired by the State Government and recorded in the Land Registers of the respective Deputy Commissioners office. In practice, however, some private individuals have managed to have the lands registered as their own private property. So land records exist only in name. Few attempts made by the Corporation to survey and demarcate the Corporation’s lands to arrest encroachment (including eviction of squatters) and to settle disputes by way of lease or rent of its lands, have been met with open resistance from the said individuals and even the entire village.

Other assets include dams, power houses, power stations and sub-stations for generation, transmission and distribution activities, worth literally thousands of crores. Electricity towers and cables of all categories stretching over hundreds of kilometers all across the state owned by the Corporation are also worth

crores. The Corporation also owns schools (read land and infrastructure) and buildings that it utilizes as quarters and office space all over the State. The main complex that serves as the Headquarters of the Corporation at Lumjingshai, is itself worth crores today. Its Inspection Bungalows located in prime locations are capable of generating huge revenue returns. They needed regular maintenance and repairs. Even with depreciation, these infrastructural, capital and revenue assets together, still have a very high net worth today. A proper inventory and assessment and valuation of these assets, is of utmost importance. Assets also include human resources; in other words the employees of the organization.

Liabilities: Topmost among the liabilities is financial in the form of mounting debts that it is crippling the organization every moment. Its survival only depends on loans. Paradoxically, the human resource asset is also a liability. There are about 3500 regular employees and an equal number of pensioners and about 1000 contractual employees. The question arises about the ration between the size of the employees and pensioners to the financial capacity of the organization. The other question is the output. To the consumer the frequent power cuts and interruptions speak for themselves. To the management, it is the lack of professionalism in the execution of projects all the way from preparation of basic documents to completion of projects; several of them resulting in cancellation of work orders leading to losses in terms of time, resources and monetarily. The practice of revision of estimates for projects and delay in delivery of services to the paying public with the attending inferences and implications, has become the norm. Accounts cannot be closed on time, as a result of which, the audit process is delayed. Hence the Corporation is unable to stand on a sound footing when it needs to access funds for the implementation of its various projects.

Infrastructure: The infrastructure of transmission and distribution lines is not as robust as it should be. Their systematic and planned upgradation and maintenance has not been taken up since their commissioning. The Government of India provides funds for the strengthening of the existing infrastructure and the creation of additional infrastructure, which are to be utilized as per the guidelines issued. Failure to adhere to these guidelines entails cancellation of funds in favour of better performing States.

This in turn, affects funding for future projects, resulting in loss for the State. Identification of viable projects is therefore extremely crucial.

The Myntdu-Leshka Hydro Electric project has cost the State an enormous sum. It can only generate electricity during the monsoon season. A very advanced and sophisticated monitoring system had been installed for this project. A generator had failed earlier this year, which resulted in loss of revenue running to tens of lakhs per day. This can happen only if the monitoring system was compromised or the data provided by it was not given due attention. A post mortem of the failure should be conducted to prevent the same calamity from happening in other dams of the State as well.

There was a monumental failure of Unit I of Umiam – Umtru Stage IV Power Station which has remained on emergency shut down since August 5, 2019. Till July 2020 the financial loss to the Corporation was about Rs 41 crore. An Inquiry Report on the causes and reasons for the failure was conducted by Mr i Malcolm David Roy, Reid, Executive Director, NEEPCO Ltd. The Report was submitted on August 7, 2020. The Report also carried an observation: “During my visit to the Stage III and Stage IV Power Stations, the condition of housekeeping and upkeep of the Power Stations were found to be extremely poor and unsatisfactory. Such conditions reflect adversely on the plant and its staff and are indicative of the attitude towards these precious assets of the Corporation, which can manifest even in the quality of maintenance of the equipment. Major attention is required towards housekeeping”.

The electricity provided by the MeECL to its consumers comes not only from the power it generates from its own Hydro Electric projects but also from Central Generating Stations outside the State such as NEEPCO, POWERGRID, OTEC, etc. The power procured from these Central Generating Stations during the year 2019-20 was around 2008 Million Units at a cost of Rs 967 crore approximately (excluding transmission charges of around Rs.180 crores), out of which, 238 Million Units were sold outside the State (for an amount of Rs.74 crore approximately). The balance of around 1770 Million Units was available for sale inside the State. However, the total energy actually sold within the State was about 1212 Million Units (at about Rs 713 crores). The balance energy of 558 Million Units is unaccounted for; the loss for which, amounts to about Rs 360 crore, approximately, per

year.

Loss: To a layman loss could be understood only in terms of financial and commercial loss. In addition, there are also technical losses. And technical losses though inevitable at times also add up to the overall financial loss. Further, the technical loss is compounded by a weakened power infrastructure due to wear and tear over the years. The situation is further aggravated by the absence of field officers from their post. Many of them commute from their District Headquarters and are not immediately available when exigencies arise. The delay in attending to exigencies that arise in the field adds to the cost of repair and maintenance.

There is also loss in the actual distribution and consumption of electricity itself, inside the State. This category of loss is caused by theft of power by persons/parties who are not registered consumers of the Corporation and therefore can be deemed to be illegal. It is also caused by inadequate billing for electricity consumed by registered consumers (the rate of realization is only Rs 5.58 per unit against the tariff of Rs.6.54 per unit approved by the Meghalaya State Electricity Regulatory Commission (MSERC). The loss of Rs 0.96 per unit translates into crores per year. This is largely due to non-detection of defective meters and failure to actually read the meters of consumers, as there is no enforcement of these requirements by the field officers and staff. When these failures were detected upon enforcement of these procedures recently, an outcry was raised against ‘inflated’ energy bills. That nobody wanted to verify how this ‘inflation’ came about, is another matter altogether. The deficit in payment of energy bills over the years cumulated in actual financial loss for the Corporation which no one wants to bear or take responsibility for. The shortfall in the income from the sale of power (Rs 360 crores approximately, per year) and the loss from under-realization of revenue is also in crores per year).

The Electricity Supply Code has laid down detailed instructions for the supply of electricity to consumers. If this Code had been complied with, the Corporation would find itself in a much better position financially, today. Somehow, this revenue leakage as a result of non-compliance with this Code, has been overlooked over the years and has probably still not been taken into account, till date.

(To be concluded)

This is the very reason why Kalyan Singh once demanded removal of ‘Jana Gana Mana’ from the status of national anthem as it is nothing but ‘Tagore’s tribute to the British Raj/George V’. Vested interests are at play to ‘purify’ NCERT text books by attempting to remove the writings of the Nobel laureate from it! If some heavyweight claims that he ‘took birth’ in Visva-Bharati, another demands revision of the national anthem on the pretext that Sindh does not form part of India anymore! Indeed how can the name of a Pakistani region ‘pollute’ the national anthem in ‘New India’! How can a song celebrating the diversity of Indian civilization and culture be allowed to hold its head high in these chauvinistic times!

It’s high time Swamy and his ilk are enlightened about the fact that ‘Jana Gana Mana’ is actually a great song or poetry, not a mere textbook of geography or general knowledge enume-rating the list of Indian provinces! It is Tagore’s tribute to the traditional India and it’s people representing the

various cultures and regions embedded in the geography. Indeed Sindh does not exist physically in the Indian map any longer, but how can one ignore the contribution of Sindh towards economic or cultural enrichment of pre-partition India and which is still continuing through its indigenous people ie Sindh community who are part and parcel of present day India and no less Indian than say a Gujarati or Marathi.

In the same breath shall we discard Surya Sen and his brave Chittagong comrades who had sacrificed their lives for Indian independence just because that area falls in present day Bangladesh? Will we then discard chapters of Mohenjodaro Harappa from history text books just because those ancient Indus valley sites are today located in Pakistan? How can we exorcise Sindh from our national anthem and psyche, the region which forms the very genesis of the word ‘India’ and ‘Hindustan’?”

Yours etc.,
Kajal Chatterjee,
Kolkata

Badgered economy Govt puts up its hands!

By Shivaji Sarkar

2020 is a year every individual would wish had not been on the calendar. The devastation is immeasurable. Corrections are difficult. Getting back to normal is not easy. Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman sums it up, telling the Indian Chamber of Commerce in Kolkata that no amount of government intervention is adequate for pandemic-hit economy. Early 2020, she says, green shoots and revival signs were visible, but it was upturned by the pandemic.

No doubt the crisis has hit the world over but a complete lockdown of all activities in the country since March has created enormous hardship for the industry and the people leading to job losses, bank repayment crisis, severe - 23.9 per cent GDP contraction and the race to have a vaccine for an illusive disease leading to collapse of the health sector. Wealthy Indians and those in the formal sector covered by government and private insurance schemes are not affected, but the poor are.

The hospitals are either non-functional or emerged charging the people at super rates further adding to the hardship. The farmers issue may not have been there in a normal economy but the pandemic panic lockdown has accentuated the problem with loss in income as they could not sell their products or sold at lower price despite about Rs 1.5 lakh crore doles announced for their pension and pandemic blues.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Friday told farmers at Raisen, Madhya Pradesh that they are today facing the problems because other governments though made manifesto promises but did precious little to make the reforms real. Warehousing and other promises made in the three Bills are the panacea, he asserted. However, reports coming from Madhya Pradesh itself say that amidst the new farm laws and pandemic, State mandis have taken a big hit. Mandis at Shahdol and at 143 other places have seen their revenues drop by a whopping 40 to 50 per cent in October, 2020 and an overall business fall by 20 per cent after the Centre’s farm laws came into effect.

The State Mandi Board Managing Director Sannadeep Yadaav, says the mandis have recorded a drop in business of about 20 to 25 per cent as a chunk of business has started taking place outside the mandis. In 2019, 259 mandis in MP generated about Rs 1246 crore of revenue and paid Rs 413 crore in taxes. The maize prices have fallen to Rs 800 from Rs 1100 a quintal as no procurement of maize has been done this year. So despite another Rs 1600-crore dole to the MP farmers announced by Modi there is nothing to cheer about.

Amid such scenario the GDP is projected to shrink by 7.8 per cent to 10 per cent by various rating agencies. An optimist Reserve Bank of India says it will shrink by 7.5 per cent in December monetary policy outlook against its own projection of 9.5 per cent in October.

The pandemic has also lowered India’s human development ranking to 131 from 130 earlier in the UN Human Development Index report. This is a sad reflection on the way the country is taking care of its people. The closure of government activities have seemingly affected the well being of the people.

The loss of revenue and consequent problems has impacted the social system. Overall spending, including revenue expenditure, by the Centre and States will rise only 15 per cent over the Rs 33 lakh crore second half of spent in the first half of the fiscal 2020-21. The economy has not received much government support in the second quarter, when government expenditure fell

22 per cent, though post-October there has been some improvement.

However, the State’s capital expenditure (capex), owing to GST tangle, have sharply fallen by Rs 1.2 lakh crore in the first half and is likely to remain subdued in the second half as well. It may be one of the lowest in recent years and may achieve no more than 46 per cent of the budget target, about Rs 3 lakh crore against targeted Rs 6.5 lakh crore. The public capex of States and Centre and public sector enterprises in 2019-20 was about Rs 5 lakh crore.

No wonder, Sitharaman says that no amount of government intervention would improve the situation. This is indicated by the contraction for the eighth consecutive month, the output of eight core infrastructure sectors dropped by 2.5 per cent in October, mainly due to decline in production of crude oil, natural gas, refinery products and steel. The production of eight core sectors had contracted 5.5 per cent in October 2019, data released by the Commerce and Industry Ministry reveals.

The rising inflation at 7.6 per cent, petrol prices shooting up every day despite falling international prices, reducing purchasing power due to wage cuts or job losses have convoluted the market has hit the country. The rise in steel and cement prices have added problems to the infrastructure sectors. Steel prices have risen by Rs 2500 to 2700 per tonne and cement by Rs 60 to 90 a bag. The consumer markets are, however, thriving and touched normal. Fridges, television and appliances like dishwashers are finding bulk consumers in tier 2, 3 and 4 cities. Some brands like Tata’s are having 40 per cent revenue from these segments.

However, the industry is not too confident about ending the fiscal on a positive note. Not all brands could have such booming sales. Post-festivity a lull is also being seen. It may be recalled that the lull had set in between December 2019 and March 2020 and had hit the market, government suppliers and even the government itself had to cut down its own expenses. So blaming it all on the pandemic is easy but not necessarily correct. The core sector had a worse performance in 2019 and the present recovery is tepid. Meanwhile, Credit Suisse notes bottoming out of the economic downturn as it finds that post-October growth stopped falling. Ica Ratings say that the technical recession to end by March and limit the GDP growth contraction to 7.8 per cent.

This does not, however, mean that all those migrant labourers who had returned from major metros could go back to their work. Only small numbers so far have been able to resume. This means that the free food doles that the government had announced in April simply cannot be withdrawn.

India, as per official statistics, lost 99 lakh lives due to COVID-10. There is a catch. Nobody apparently had a normal death since March. This apart many with other ailments collapsed due to lack of treatment. The health care sector has lost credibility and its revival may not be easy.

It so happens that the pandemic has helped cover up the economic crisis starting since October 2019, when many official suppliers’ payment started getting delayed along with cuts in expenditures of departments and autonomous bodies. The economy is facing low revivals but higher costs as prices rise. The correction process may have been delayed by the pandemic but the fact remains that the crisis is severe and cure is not easy.—INFA

"Poor is the man whose pleasures depend on the permission of another."

— Madonna Ciccone

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No.127 SHILLONG, TUESDAY, DECEMBER 22, 2020

Covid mutation more infectious

INDIA has banned all flights from the UK from Monday fearing that the new Covid strain that has affected parts of that country might be carried by passengers from there. UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson has announced another lockdown termed as "stay at home," in London and Southeast England to combat the spread of the new strain. This has put paid to peoples' hopes of celebrating Christmas with lesser restrictions.

Other countries that have also temporarily banned flights from the UK include Ireland, Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Turkey, Belgium and Switzerland. Medical experts have, however, said that there is as yet no evidence to indicate that the mutation causes a more severe form of Covid19 or is resistant to any of the existing vaccine candidates. Considering that viruses regularly mutate, the SARS-Cov-2 (Covid) has also appeared in several countries. The new strain was discovered by the genomic surveillance of England's Public Health authorities. This was brought to the attention of the UK Government on December 18 and this was immediately communicated to the World Health Organisation (WHO).

In India the process of opening up had begun even while the lockdown since March 24 this year had created its own sets of problems and has had a devastating effect on industries and livelihoods. To have the current strain of Covid restricting movement of people, pushing many to work from home, closing schools, colleges and universities yet again would be disastrous. It is imperative that the health care system is ramped up and testing improved so that any sign of the variant in India is immediately controlled. The new variant has appeared independently in the UK and South Africa, and experts say this is not unusual as viruses undergo numerous mutations.

That this new variant should appear at a time when a vaccine for the old one is yet to be fully available is indeed unfortunate. But according to Dr Moncef Slaoui, chief science adviser for the US government's vaccine distribution effort, the possibility that the new variants will be resistant to existing vaccine candidates is low, but not "inexistent." Other researchers also claim that the mutations may not be resistant to existing vaccine candidates and will still protect against them. Unlike influenza viruses, the coronavirus evolves and mutates at a much slower rate.

However as more people get vaccinated, researchers expect the virus to evolve mutations that will help make it resistant to vaccines in the future. So the problem continues to baffle the world of science and medicine. Everything today is tentative and the economy does not seem to stand a chance against the virus.

Meghalaya State Electricity Regulatory Commission (MSERC)

The Electricity Regulations in Meghalaya 2007 under The Electricity Act, 2003 had constituted the Meghalaya State Electricity Regulatory Commission (MSERC). Para 86 laid down the functions of the State Commission in detail. In practice the Commission is effective only with respect to 86(a) of its functions which means determining the tariff to be paid by the consumer. The tariff has remained fixed for the last several years despite the inflation. The cost of power production, supply and power purchase, had called for a higher tariff. Consequently, the cost of production, transmission, distribution and purchase of power, far outweighs the revenue from sale of power. In these circumstances, the only possible outcome is financial loss. Para 91 is about Secretary, Officers etc of the Commission. As can be seen in the appointment of persons to posts in the Commission's office, the Rules followed by the State Government with regard to their eligibility criteria such as age, qualification, etc., have not been followed. Some officials enjoy their appointment without any retirement. Interest business groups also play in determining tariffs. Government should review the functioning of the Commission else it has become more of an institution to accommodate retired bureaucrats.

Unbundling: Upon its corporatization, the Board was re-organized into four Companies; the Meghalaya Energy Corporation Limited (MeECL) as the parent Company with the Meghalaya Power Generation Corporation Limited (MePGCL), Meghalaya Power Transmission Corporation Limited (MePTCL) and the Meghalaya Power Distribution Corporation Limited (MePDCL) as its subsidiary Companies. One basic requirement upon its corporatization is the unbundling (separation) of the accounts of the MePGCL, MePTCL and MePDCL from the accounts of the MeECL. This would have ensured true and correct accounting while at the same time, apportioning responsibility among the companies. It has been ten years since the corporatization of the MeECL. The accounts of these Companies have not been unbundled till date. This should have been the foremost priority of the Accounts Wing. The absence of a full time Director of Accounts for a very long time

An indepth analysis (Part II)

What ails MeECL and its subsidiaries

By Rudi Warjri

has worsened the situation. Even the most basic of tasks, including identifying and putting a check on wasteful expenditure, is proving to be difficult. The combination of inadequate funds and wasteful expenditure is a recipe for disaster, which is beginning to manifest itself in the agitation by the employees unfolding before our very eyes.

The failure to unbundle the accounts of the different Companies, means that the parent Company has to juggle the affairs of each subsidiary company, besides its own, which is a mammoth task in itself. The nebulous character of this arrangement impedes the growth of the individual companies. With no proper demarcation and delineation of powers, there is nothing to prevent overlapping of jurisdictions and authority and subversion of the protocols and procedures necessary to sustain the Companies themselves. Despite marathon Board meetings it is not possible to scrutinize proposals and propose proper checks and balances.

Management, Board of Directors, Government etc:

The CMD or Chairman cum Managing Director is the Chief Executive of the Board. Some CMDs have tried innovative strategies and methods with regard to revenue generating. Bonds were floated. Its success however also depends on the credit-worthiness or rating of the corporation. In the midst of the Pandemic another CMD had mobilized volunteers to do the meter reading and billing just to meet the revenue target that at least had enabled the payment of the salaries of the employees on time.

The Board of Directors include two Independent Directors (IDs) who act like watchdogs and represent public interest in the Board. Their effectiveness however depends solely on the information and inputs made available to them by the management with all its limitations which runs contrary to the approved practices and norms followed by Companies.

The Corporation also requires legal expertise that can protect its embattled

interests and vulnerable assets. Lack of proper scrutiny and vetting of the contracts it enters into, will harm its interests. The issues that the Corporation finds itself embroiled in, whether they relate to acquisition of land for projects, breach of its contracts, encroachment of its lands, processes related to taxation procedures, petitions before the State Electricity Regulatory Commission or Electricity Tribunals or various other litigations, can only be resolved with the aid of sound legal counsel.

It has been almost fifty years since the Board, now Corporation, has been handed over to the State of Meghalaya. In all these years, there has been no visible action or initiative taken by the Government to address or halt the problems faced by the Corporation. It is incomprehensible that the public should be made to pay, in more ways than one, for the stupor exhibited by the Government. The void left by the inaction and stultification of the Government is a fertile ground for the interplay of the personal interests of pressure groups, delinquent employees who do not want to be accountable for dereliction of their duty, and politicians, whether accomplished or in the making. These actors stoke the fires of unrest without delving into the root of the problem, which perhaps, if practised over the years, could have benefitted the Corporation.

At this juncture, it would be wise for the reader to remember that this is not the failure of only the present Government. As tempting as it may be to politicize the issue, it will not do much good. The heat and dust only increase the attrition without offering any concrete way forward. The MeECL did not deteriorate overnight. There are many contributing factors that have led to this situation, a few of which have been mentioned above.

Way forward: In this digital age, electricity is a basic and essential requirement. The COVID scenario has seen a shift from 'offline' to 'online' mode of execution of all kinds of official, commercial and economic activities, including academic and other professional activities which cannot be sustained in the absence of regular and efficient power supply.

For such a tidal wave of problems, there is no easy solution.

(i) The Corporation could identify its liabilities and weaknesses whenever and wherever they are detected, whether in its human resources, infrastructure, administration or management and deal with them comprehensively and conclusively. Rules provide the backbone and skeleton for every organization. Reluctance to administer the Rules will lead to the collapse of the administration and ultimately, the power supply structure. The Inquiry Report by Mr Malcolm David Roy should be studied and taken seriously. The report reflects among other things the work culture in MeECL etc.

(ii) More focus to capacity enhancement and skill training. All its employees must be grounded in the concept of the word 'Corporation' and the duties and responsibilities required of them. They must not, under any circumstance, be led to believe that the Management and the Government exist only to pay their salary. It is important for them to understand that they are responsible for their own revenue and that failure to perform their duties will have a disastrous impact on the Corporation.

(iii) MeECL etc is basically an operational body. Government should leave the entire operation to the Management under the CMD and not interfere in its day to day activities like tenders, purchases, contracts etc.

(iv) One way of reducing cost on the billing and revenue generating system is to make the Smart meter mandatory.

(v) Government must come out with a comprehensive Power Policy that would tap all sources of energy from conventional to renewable. The workload of MSERC should be optimized as per the Electricity act 2003.

(vi) I am not advocating that Government should sell its family silver just to meet the crisis. However, outsourcing services especially proven successful in other States should be seriously considered.

(vii) In fine, it calls for a fundamental change in mindset by all stakeholders from the Government all the way to the consumers.

"We cannot solve our problem with the same thinking we used when we created them" - Albert Einstein

(The writer is former diplomat and is also the Ex-Independent Director, MeECL, etc)

Stubborn Govt

Who cares for farmers, poor?

By Dhurjati Mukherjee

At a time when farmers are agitating for their rights and the entire Opposition supporting them, the Government's stance of unwilling to budge is very unfortunate. Worse, the message that goes out to the thousands of farmers across the country is that they are certainly not a priority for this government. Instead its energies are being spent on the Central Vista project, estimated to cost over Rs 20,000 crore and aims to erect new buildings for Parliament, the Central secretariat and the residences of the Prime Minister and the Vice President. Both the health sector and the economy too take a back seat! Some experts believe that the bhavans (government ministries) in Delhi reflect Soviet-style architecture and the clunky look very much mirrored the dominant political paradigm of the time. Thus, these need to be replaced with modern architecture without analysing deeply the exchequer's ability to meet this massive expenditure. Recently, an analyst pointed out that this project will create jobs as if this wasteful expenditure is the ideal way for employment generation.

Though the Supreme Court allowed Prime Minister Modi to lay the foundation stone for the Vista, the three-judge bench recorded an undertaking from the government that no further construction, demolition or tree removals would be taken up until the court decided on the batch of PILs seeking scrapping of the project. Besides, the environmental concern, the financial condition of the country is far from encouraging, specially due to the prolonged pandemic-induced lockdown.

With the farmers agitating in biting cold for the past three weeks, Congress spokesperson Randeep Surjewala very rightly pointed out: "Modiji, history will record that when lakhs of farmers were fighting on the streets for their rights, you were building a palace for yourself in the garb of Central Vista project. In a democracy, power is not fulfilling personal whims but a medium of public serve and welfare". Many others have pointed out that the government is snatching the fundamental rights of the poor and accuse the government and Modi of "This is a crime against humanity. We will have to honour the rights of every section of society for a better future for India".

The farmers are clearly dissatisfied with the government's proposals to make amends and demand a complete scrapping and codification of the MSP regime in law. The protest is also against the Prime Minister's observation of private investments in farming made at the recent Annual General Meeting of FICCI, confirming their farmers' worst fears. As he himself stated: "In the fields of supply chain, cold storage and areas like fertilisers etc. both interest and investments of the private sector are needed." The Prime Minister further observed "After reforms, farmers will get new benefits of technology. The country's cold storage infrastructure will be modern. By doing this, there will be more investments in agriculture that will benefit farmers". But technology does not reach small or even medium farmers and all this is intended at corporatisation of the agricultural sector. Surely, the government must try to be more convincing.

Other than the farmers protest which has come into sharp focus, the government has sadly completely lost its focus on priorities that need to be focused and allocation of resources during these unprecedented times, with the pandemic having added to an already beleaguered economy.

Much is being said and written about the vaccine, but if it has to be given at reduced rate or preferably free to the poor, the EWS and the low income groups, who constitute 80 per cent of the Indian population, the government would need to shell out a whopping amount for the project. Who will foot the bill? Though the expenditure may be insignificant in the current fiscal, fund requirement in 2021-22 would be substantial and this should not be left to the mercy of the States.

The priority of public health in national policies, resources and investments has been missing. As is well known, the past year has shown unknown, communicable pandemic without any effective cure but managed through non-therapeutic measures like distancing and masks etc. in treating high infection volumes all over the country. The very poor public health infrastructure and investment deficit were severely exposed in the pandemic, including the hurried augmentation of capacities. The public health gap has been reviewed by the 15th Finance Commission whose chairman stated that public health expenditure needs to immediately increase from the current 0.95 per cent to at least 2.5 per cent. But it seems the government is not listening.

The financial distress of the Union government is well manifest but it is the States that are suffering the most. Though the economic situation would improve in the second half of the current fiscal, there is nothing to be complacent about. The government it appears is dependent on the private sector for everything and wants companies to come out with investment but they may not be in a position to do so. Investment has to come primarily from the government and the public sector.

Meanwhile, the ratio of private consumption to GDP has fallen and this suggests that the incomes of working people must have fallen even more than GDP in this period. The share of government consumption expenditure in GDP has also declined during the second quarter of the current fiscal. When GDP declines and government's tax revenue goes down, its expenditure, a large part of which consists of salary payments, does not go down to an equivalent extent.

Analysts and economists have rightly pointed out that the orientation of the government's policies is geared towards the corporate sector and the leading ones witnessed a jump in profitability even in the first half of the current fiscal when migrant workers and economically weaker sections suffered immensely. Some of them are still in a critical situation even now.

The attitude of the government is geared towards improving its image amongst the people through propaganda without bothering to think how the incomes of the marginalized segments can be increased. In this connection, it may be mentioned that, unlike most countries, India does not have a sector-wise perspective plan for the next 20/25 years and even the strategy to be adopted every five years. The political leadership appears to be only interested in changing and renaming schemes and dishing out political messages.

In the present situation, there needs to be careful planning, at least for the coming fiscal, but it appears that government bureaucrats and technocrats are not responding to the crisis situation or are under pressure to toe the political line. Even neutral economists are highly crucial of government policies, which they think are obviously not based on judicious logic.---INFA

TO THE EDITOR

Pressure groups don't reflect society

Editor,
The 'saviours' of our state, namely the pressure groups which are suddenly so vocal about the LLP, have continually failed to stand up for the rights of our people whenever it was required. All through these years, our state has featured at the bottom half when it comes to calculation of economic progress. Now that our Khasi brothers and sisters are making steady progress, there is no support or empowerment from such 'saviours'. Moreover, do they even consult any stakeholders? Time and again our fellow rural farmers, who toil hard and were also affected bitterly by the pandemic, have made it known that they do not support such means and methods of persuasion of the pressure groups because it is detrimental to their livelihoods. Do our 'saviours' even listen?

The demands of pressure groups do not reflect what our society wants. For the common man, long-pending concerns of basic rights like education, health and employment still take precedence over anything else. This is not to say that preservation of culture is not important. But what is required much before that is establishing a self-sustaining ecosystem where we are able to produce sufficiently for our own needs. Only then can cultural preservation thrive in such an atmosphere.

But our 'saviours' have no time to understand this because all they require from time-to-time is an issue to protest over and gain some limelight. They have not created any tangible benefits for our people so far. Why must they still be seen as relevant?

Yours etc.,
Patrick Kurbah,
Via email

Gratitude to MeECL, CMD

Editor,
The MeECL Pensioners' Association heaved a sigh of relief after the Chairman-Cum-Managing Director (CMD) of MeECL released the pension for the month of Oct, 2020. The Association hopes that as per his commitment and assurance in the last meeting held in his chamber the pension for the month of November, 2020 will also be released within this week before Christmas Festival.

The Association expresses its deepest gratitude and immense thankfulness to CMD, Arunkumar Kambhavi for being a man of not only words and promises but also of deeds and action. The Association indeed reposes full faith on him that henceforth pensioners will not suffer any tension due to inordinate delay of payment of monthly pension.

The Association wishes him good health and long

life for all years to come.

Yours etc.,
B.S. Mawlong, Advisor
MeECL Pensioners
Association Shillong

Is India lucky to escape sanction?

Editor,
In the second week of this current month, the United States of America had deemed seven countries in the world which include Pakistan, China Iran and one of our nearest neighbours Myanmar, etc., as countries of 'particular concerns' as far as religious freedom for their citizens is concerned. These countries are accused of giving leeway to the systematic on-going violations against religious minorities. On the premise of such reports the United States government has in no uncertain terms warned the countries in question to mend their ways or face outright sanctions. It was, therefore, an immense relief

that India was exonerated from this disconcerting list.

However, in the early parts of this year, the US Commission on International Religious freedom had downgraded India to its lowest ranking, in its report. Fortunately, Prime Minister Modi being in the good books of the Trump administration managed to get a reprieve in the end, else India could have been bracketed with the aforesaid rogue countries. Either way, with the exit of Trump and the assumption of the Biden administration within a few days, the implication of the case may not be as identical. President Biden may be less disposed towards India, contextualized on the latest love-jihad legislation, favoured virtually by all the BJP ruled states, or the recently passed Uttar Pradesh Unlawful Religious Conversion Prohibition Ordinance, 2020. Although India may dismiss such charges but the stark stigma would continue to bedevil the psyche of India, being the largest democ-

racy in the world.

But going by the bare objective ground realities, it is being reported that religious minorities in India are in the throes of social disabilities. I have read on social media how the small minority of Christians in Chhattisgarh had suffered under the previous saffron regime like being denied receipt of some social amenities implemented by the authorities. And what is more unnerving is that the Roman Catholic mission was prevented from building a Church in its periphery by the right-wingers citing glib reasons pertaining to land disputes etc. Hence the said strip of land was thus left fallow. The same measure of hostility, it is feared, is replicated in most BJP ruled states. Come what may, I pray that our hallowed country, India, would still not figure in the above blacklisted countries even next year. But can India get lucky again? We are left to wonder!

Yours etc.,
Jerome K. Diengdoh,
Via email

"Knowledge is power. Information is liberating. Education is the premise of progress, in every society, in every family."

-- Kofi Annan

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No.128 SHILLONG, WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 23, 2020

TMC in a quandary

THE Trinamool Congress is on the defensive in West Bengal after the group exit of several legislators of the party. Led by senior leader and right-hand man of Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, rebel leader Suwendu Adhikari, the MLAs and several functionaries of local bodies acted in unison to embarrass the chief minister and the party. This, significantly, in the run-up to the May Assembly polls for which the Election Commission's initial steps have begun. Clearly, the BJP has got a fresh shot in the arm in its attempt to turn the electoral tables on Mamata Banerjee. At the same time, a close study of the defection drama shows many, if not all, of them feared sidelining in the TMC for one reason or the other.

Election strategist Prashant Kishor clearly played a role in hastening the exit of these leaders from the party. He had expressed the view to the CM that about half the MLAs would need to be replaced in the next TMC candidate list for the assembly polls. An organisational revamp too along the lines recommended by Kishor sent shivers down the spines of local level functionaries. Under the circumstances, it was easy for the BJP to exploit the situation to its advantage. Yet, what needs to be noted is also that Mamata Banerjee won polls exclusively on the basis of her personal charisma and direct appeal among the masses. She still stands head and shoulders above other leaders in the state.

What must also not escape attention is that the TMC is essentially a party of defectors from other parties like the CPI-M and the Congress. That was how she scripted the obituaries for these two parties in West Bengal. Defection being written in the DNA of the TMC this could happen again. How many more would defect to the BJP in the coming weeks is anyone's guess. BJP has money power and manipulative edge because of its hold at the Centre.

Mamata ably fought against PM Modi and the BJP for long. She can be trusted to fight back until her last breath, though this is affecting the development aspirations of West Bengal. She has already got in touch with veteran Opposition politicians like Sharad Pawar to open a united front against the BJP, Modi and home minister Amit Shah.

What gives hope to the BJP is the fact that it has won nearly as many seats as the TMC in the 2019 Lok Sabha polls. The dynamics for LS polls and assembly polls differ but it is doubtful if Mamata can keep her flock together. Having come this far, Amit Shah is bound to go for the kill.

Hacking ourselves to death

By Patrick Kurbah

ants are to furnish information to police stations and to local authorities. This not only takes care of the issue of property possession, so acutely related to citizenship, but also helps in formation of a databank to understand the numbers of migration. More so, the retention of traditional institutions also forms as a strong check measure.

With such stringent measures in place, no deliberation has happened so far within all the stakeholders of the state as to why a demand for ILP, an amended MRSSA, or entry-exit points is still warranted. The only deliberation that has happened so far has been amongst political leaders, whose only vested interest in this debate is to win elections and retain power, in which members of the august civil society have time and again refuted the installation of any more barriers for the state.

This refutation from the civil society is very well warranted because every time the topic of influx flares up in the state, motives of pressure groups and political leaders start from 'preservation of culture by curbing illegal immigration' and end at 'no outsiders'. The derogatory nature of the term 'outsider' in a globalised world, especially when said with the worst of intentions, cannot be discussed enough given the fact that we have always been taught to see our fellow countrymen as our own. Our indigenous fraternity will agree that barring few incidents involving ignorant and mindless people, there have hardly been instances that they have not been welcomed when they step into the native lands of other communities all across India. Our children have studied in cities like Delhi,

Hyderabad, Bangalore and Kolkata for better quality education, have worked for securing good jobs in some of the top firms, and have come out to be stellar humans of appreciation. And yet today, in a thriving world of diversity, creativity and excellence, our state is finding ways to add more barriers for our state, staying in denial that it will not affect anything, but very well knowing the harms.

It is over simplified for anyone to say that barriers will not affect anything. States which currently have the ILP today, namely Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland, have a Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) much below that of Meghalaya. Such states, even till date, are not seen

as lucrative destinations of business and economic development. The resultant? A high number of youths staying unemployed, migration of young people to other states to take up meagre-paying jobs, and in worst cases, militancy. The borrowings of such states from the centre has also been growing every year because of the lack of revenue generating streams.

In Meghalaya, though we are very marginally better off, our situation is not very different and will be worsened furthermore, if we do not end up creating efficiency for revenue generation. Pressure groups will not do that for us. Along with that, there also has to be investment in job capacity creation and skilling. It is not enough for us to be satisfied with few institutions of national importance. We have to go beyond that to try and build more such institutions which can remain sustainable and beneficial for a larger number of people. These are the real issues of our state today. India being a nation with a large young population dividend, in Meghalaya we are wasting this.

It has to be mentioned separately and much more exclusively that coal cannot be a major revenue generator as it has environmental implications and is bound to extinguish in stock. It is not sustainable.

However, I am not making any new arguments here. Many people, much more learned, have made such arguments before me. But it apparently seems that pressure groups have more say in the state's functioning than the civil society. Disguised as student unions and youth fronts, it is the safest claim to make that a majority of the members of such groups are either drop-outs, unemployed or have ambitions to make the easiest entry into politics by constantly staying in the limelight by making tall claims. They have been asked repeatedly in many interviews by the media of the importance of having measures like ILP, given that many other safeguards already exist. Their simple answer – because it is needed for protecting our people. There is no nuance in their arguments, no understanding of the comparative harms and benefits, and of course, no consideration of our own people who have been vehemently stating that they do not appreciate such measures because it hampers their livelihood. Such a voice has been even stronger from the section of our society who have suffered bitterly due to the pandemic and know

what it means to work hard for a living. Interestingly enough, the pressure groups have never taken up their issues. At this point, it does seem more personal for them; it was never about the people of the state because they were never consulted in the first place. Despite this, our governing institutions continue to act at the whims of such groups.

For any ecosystem to exercise self-sustenance, the foremost requirement is to evolve with time, adapt to circumstances and then devise mechanisms through which self-reliance can be sought. Self-reliance can only be made functional in today's world if there are sufficient resources for everyone, knowledge on how to utilise the resources and then creating sufficient room for everyone to generate more of such resources for the system. Of course, every ecosystem which we have seen in early history strove for self-sustenance. But given the irony of the lack of equitable distribution, people formulated mutually beneficial alliances for sustenance through sharing of resources, ideas and wealth. This model holds true for the globalised world of today, where none can claim that the prospects of growth come without any interdependence. This is how the human race progresses. This is what we direly need for the state of Meghalaya given the unutilised potential and the demand of growth from society.

We need to stop playing to the tunes of pressure groups, who have never stood up for our progress. We need to voice our concerns in numbers against any measure which we think will be detrimental to us. Staying silent is not an option today when we are going towards regression, because tomorrow we will not have anything left to fight for.

To end, a utilitarian and noted philosopher John Stuart Mill had said something which holds water even today, "It is hardly possible to overstate the value, in the present low state of human improvement, of placing human beings in contact with other persons dissimilar to themselves, and with modes of thought and action unlike those with which they are familiar ... Such communication has always been, and is peculiarly in the present age, one of the primary sources of progress."

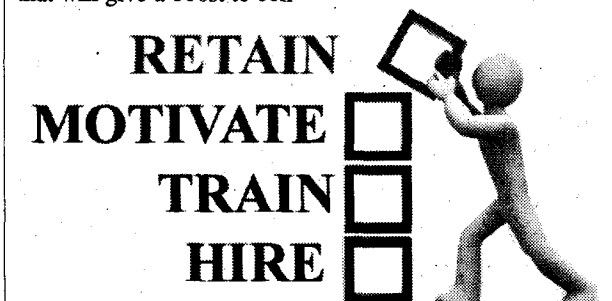
(The author is an independent legal consultant in Bengaluru) Email: kurbahpatrick@gmail.com

Focus on building human capital

By Ajit Ranade

The macroeconomic winds are blowing favourably as we enter the New Year. The stock markets are at an all-time high. Share price indices are up nearly 60 percent from their lows of March. The stock market is supposed to be a harbinger of economic times to come, so clearly it is indicating a strong revival. Liquidity in the banking system is more than ample. The interest rates are at multi-decadal lows. The gap between Indian and Western policy rates is the lowest it has been in a long time. Coupled with inflation rates above 6 percent. What this means is that for borrowers the real interest rates are close to zero or negative. This should bring cheer to the government which is the biggest borrower in the system, or to those contemplating taking a home loan, or those businesses planning to raise loans for expansion. The September ending quarter showed spectacular growth in corporate profits across many sectors. The lead indicator, called purchasing managers' index has been expressing bullish expansion for four months in row. If all this business confidence manifests in a robust rise in hiring and recruitment, and visible job creation, then that will give a boost to con-

sumer confidence as well. Both business and consumer confidence build on each other. So, a positive virtuous circle would be greatly welcome. The finance minister is promising a budget like never before, which hopefully is signaling a big spending stimulus. Spending on infrastructure will benefit allied sectors like construction, and of course employment. And yet it is worth pointing out the grim side. Firstly, despite an anticipated sharp V-shaped recovery next year, the fact is that this year has been a recession. We are going to have a reduction in GDP and national income by about 8 to 10 percent. A sharp recovery next year of say 10 to 12 percent, would still mean that over two years the net income growth is barely above zero. Secondly, due to measures like the harsh lockdown, and earlier slowdown of four years, the potential growth rate of the economy has possibly slipped closer to 5 percent. So, any growth above that is sure to cause overheating. Hence, we will have to watch out for inflation, which can hurt household budgets, and also business sentiment. As such for the past twelve months the consumer price index-based inflation rate has been above 6 percent (except for being marginally lower in March). This is above the tolerable band of the Reserve Bank of India. Sooner or later the RBI which has been extremely accommodative in its monetary stance, will have to start tightening money supply. This will affect growth adversely. Thirdly, there has been a lot of forbearance regarding tolerating credit indiscipline. So, after a prolonged moratorium, and restructuring of stressed loans, it is possible that the day of reckoning is not too far for India's banking sector. Be prepared for a nasty spike in the bad loan ratio, which will need substantial capital infusion by the government. Fourthly and most importantly, is the silent and deadly impact on education and health.



hoods. For instance, during the lockdown, since schools were closed, so were the mid-day meals. For many kids from poor or nearly poor households, that was the only meal they got during the whole day. There have also been spending cuts in child nutrition schemes due to fiscal compulsions.

The covid-19 pandemic has affected the education of 290 million people across the country. The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) states that nearly 5.3 percent of the kids in the 6 to 10-year age group have been pulled out of schools. Many kids have been pulled into supporting the family's livelihood. Similarly, even among school going children almost 38.2 percent had no access to smartphones. So online learning has bypassed a large section of the students, partly because they had no access or could not afford digital access. Digital inequality has worsened, and is most visible in education. Similarly, in healthcare too, the high priority to Covid treatment has meant that patients of diseases like HIV, cancer and renal disease who need regular access to hospitals have been denied treatment or have faced immense hardship.

Thus, on one hand the economy is on a strong revival path, but on the other the human capital base of the economy needs substantial rebuilding and investment. Both in children's education and overall healthcare the governments at all levels have to increase their financial and resource commitment. Public health expenditure should be increased to 3% and education to 5% of the GDP. Even if that means a higher fiscal deficit, it is worth noting that spending on human capital is an investment for the future. India's public spending on both health and education is below global benchmarks, and its enhancement must be given high priority.

(Dr. Ajit Ranade is an economist and Senior Fellow, Takshashila Institution) (Syndicate: The Billion Press) (email: editor@thebillionpress.org)

TO THE EDITOR

Education sans ethics equals intellectual indigestion

Editor, The recent article by Patricia Mukhim entitled "Education: The only game-changer" (ST 18 Dec, 2020.) was very thought-provoking. The writer laments - "I have rarely met parents who would say they want their kids to be ethical humans with respect for the rights of others; children who will not discriminate on the basis of community, ethnicity, religion or other such divisive factors that are currently emerging...." These few words touched me more than anything. It led me to dive deeper into the matter concerning the present condition of education and the consequences thereof.

In my personal observation, the definition of EDUCATION in modern times is crisp and direct. Be good at your chosen area of studies; the rest will take its own

course. Who cares about the ethical norms if the disciplines chosen have been endorsed by the mainstream academic! What was ethically outrageous has now become the new normal. You can be excessively cunning, self-centered, uncompassionate, biased, or even illogical, but still, you can be academically qualified and you would be applauded. Only thing is that you need to maneuver yourself with an air of dignity and ostentation that appeals to the masses.

Dr. X, a noted neurosurgeon of a certain city is unkind, arrogant and lecherous. But he is a much-sought-after medical professional. He has mastered every part of your nervous system. Since he can deftly deal with your delicate nerves, you have no right to question his unrestrained testosterone and other personal failings. Moreover, in his vast study of science, there is literally no exclusive emphasis that he must be ethically acceptable after attaining academic proficiency.

Similarly, our advocate for justice can be a tricky fox. He can cook up crafty schemes to squeeze out fees mercilessly from his unsuspecting clients. For the sake of money, he can drag on cases for several months, may several years. Any fear that his qualification will be derecognized? There is no such precedent. Therefore, a lawyer these days can also go to the extent to prove a wrong as a right and vice-versa. Has a deviant rapist not got away through a lawyer's contrived design and legal skills? A murderer gets acquitted if he can hire a high-profile lawyer.

Look at the legislators that govern us. Many of them are involved in the most unethical activities and high-voltage corruption. What can we expect when lawmakers are the first to break the laws? Just the other day I happened to watch a video clip by a frustrated social activist from West Bengal - Ms. S. Chakraborty who is actively associated with Human Rights. With an intense surge of anger, she thun-

dered -- "West Bengal Chief Minister is a hardcore despot who has used her administrative machinery to torture people who protest or disagree with her style of functioning. In spite of being the Head of the state she has blood-thirsty party cadres who have allegedly murdered so many people against whom even FIR cannot be lodged...." Is it because of lack of education that the Bengal CM has acted this way? No, not at all! Mamata Banerjee has a high degree of academic qualifications. What's more, Didi has additionally been crowned with a Doctorate of Literature degree by Calcutta University. Will this academic honour be taken away now when she has abused the constitutional power unethically? That we "tolerate" such abnormality in our leaders is a serious question to all citizens who brag about the power of democracy. Have we actually lost our intellectual "prudence"? It calls for serious soul-searching.

Don't be surprised but our spiritual masters of vari-

ous religions are not far behind. Many of them have been caught committing the most satanic acts and so on. How do you define the custodians of spiritual values who throw ethics to the wind? What about the terrorist activities hurting humanity which have roots in religious fanaticism?

In the entertainment world, the lesser said the better. Every human abnormality is on display and every imaginable bestiality feasted upon. Have we ever thought about our tender kids who have been exposed to all these immoralities? Our silence is itself blameworthy.

What I've cited here as examples are just the tips of the iceberg. In every sphere of life, we see ethics being trampled to pieces. In one's eyes, our present education has completely failed to inculcate human values, which must have been the "first requisites" of education. Amidst the glitter of gross education, our system of academia has lost sight of ethics. I don't think the greatest thinker Albert Einstein was wrong when he

"prized" moral values over education with facts and figures. He has "forewarned" society by proclaiming - "The most important human endeavor is the striving for morality in our actions. Only morality in our actions can give beauty and dignity to life." This rational scientist did not stress on the accumulation of raw information that tends to run riot.

Education without ethics has only led to intellectual indigestion. This sickness has rapidly been draining away the very strength of humanity and inner values from society. I wish we had listened to what Einstein said about ethics as we had listened to his "MC square" and "Theory of Relativity".

Yours etc., Sali Gwali, Shillong

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

“Ignorance is a matter of laziness, indifference, and apathy.”
– Tom Tancredo

The Shillong Times
Vol No: LXIII No.129 SHILLONG, THURSDAY, DECEMBER 24, 2020

Tourism on a downhill slide

FORMER MLA Ronnie V Lyngdoh has made an impassioned plea that Meghalaya should not be overly dependent on Delhi for central doles. He has pointed at tourism as the game changer for Meghalaya because it will create employment and boost the economy of the State. Guest house and home-stay owners have created jobs for themselves and are also employing others. The tourism economy operates in a cyclical manner. Farmers who grow produce sell them to the local markets or supply vegetables and livestock directly to these tourist facilities from restaurants/dhabas, to home-stays, guest houses and hotels. Everyone is inter-dependent. The tourist taxi owners and drivers rely heavily on tourists. In fact the pandemic has caused much loss and pain to those who availed loans to purchase vehicles for transporting passengers on a daily basis. Now that the Government has announced the opening up of the tourism circuit since December 21, those with stakes in tourism are all geared up to receive tourists. However, there are destinations where the village councils have decided to set their own dates for reopening. Some have decided to allow tourists to come in only next year.

Tourists too are wondering about the new entry-exit point protocol and many are unsure about where and how to apply and what documents are required. Protagonists of the entry-exit points.ILP have pointed to Sikkim as an example of how tourism thrives despite entry protocols. But Sikkim had these protocols ever since it became a state of the Indian Union. To enter Sikkim, international visitors require a Restricted Area Permit (RAP). Both international visitors and Indians require a Protected Area Permit (PAP) but only if they wish to visit certain areas of Sikkim; otherwise the latter don't require the PAP.

The new tourism policy of Meghalaya wants to deter day tourists from neighbouring Guwahati because the bulk of such visitors don't opt to stay back but prefer to make a return trip the same day. The new policy speaks of high end tourism which states that a person visiting Meghalaya would be designated a tourist only if he/she stays back at least two days. Anyone else would be considered a traveller and not a tourist. This new 'high-end protocol' might ultimately deter day tourists who have their own utility. Day tourists may not check in at hotels but they patronise all the eating joints along the way. The variety of 'tourist' envisaged by the Tourism Department of Meghalaya is the moneyed class who will travel from point to point, eat only in the hotel/ guest house and will not opt to eat in any of the multitude of eating places along the way. What happens to these eating joints when there are not enough locals to patronise them? Policies that are knee-jerk in nature will destroy the small economic activities of the little eating joints. Sadly they are not high-end enough!

TO THE EDITOR

Legislation takes a backseat

Editor,
Whilst going through the newspaper for the last two to three days, it's become apparent that some of our former legislators miss the spotlight and would do or say anything to be in the centre of it. Be it our savvy lady Congress legislator Ampareen Lyngdoh or former firebrand leader Ardent Basaiawmoit, both of whom harped on the present ban of the government on Christmas carolling in the streets. No doubt, such a ban is a dampener on the Christmas spirit but given the present Covid scenario, I feel the ban is justified. There are many more pressing issues which affect the lives of the people in the state like the rising prices of essential commodities, the BPL families who've had to still pay fees for their school kids even though the government had given an order that fees for at least 3 months be

scrapped, the loss of livelihoods of many due to the pandemic and so on. These are but a few of the issues affecting this marginalized group of our society. Why can't our representatives speak up for the people instead of grabbing air time to engage in mudslinging against each other?

The people are fed up of this charade and want answers and solutions to their problems. After all, this is what the legislators were elected for or have they conveniently forgotten this fact?

Yours etc.,
Angela Lyngdoh
Shillong -14

Overcharging bus/taxi fares

Editor,
Apropos the news report titled, "Take action against fare overcharge: DC to DTO" (ST December 16, 2020), I would like to thank the Deputy Commissioner, East Khasi Hills for taking the initiative to direct the District Transport Officer,

One of the key promises of the NDA government was doubling farmers' income by 2022. There are only two years left for that promise to materialise and it seems to be destined for failure unless something drastic happens. Now something indeed drastic has happened. While the country was reeling from the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, three important laws were introduced by the Government: The Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act, The Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Bill, and The Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Bill.

These policies are part of the Government's strategy to ostensibly bring profitability in farming operations and raise farmers' incomes, driven by the logic that the market and not the government should take a leading role in managing agriculture in the country. These laws are part of a greater trend of the State moving away from various sectors of the economy and facilitating the entry of private players who bring with them the much-touted efficiency and dynamism of market forces. Yet these forces have been found to be inimical to the plight of those with limited resources, as is aptly demonstrated by the rising inequality in nations embracing free market economies, with the starkest example being the USA. The majority of India's farmers are small and marginal and these reforms have been perceived as a death knell to their protests; hence, the nation-wide outcry.

In Meghalaya, there does not seem to be much of a debate on the issue. Not surprisingly, the NPP-led Government of the State supported the reforms while the opposition party, i.e., the Congress is following the national directive. The Hill Farmers Union extended moral support to the protest but could not bring about much enthusiasm for the 'Bharat Bandh', which highlights its lack of reach among the farmers of the State. A lot of it has to do with the fact that though majority of the workforce in the State are engaged in agriculture, Meghalaya's contribution to the national production is miniscule. That does not mean that the effects of the three laws will be in any way insignificant.

The first law The Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act, has stated that controlling the supply of food stuffs can only be done only under extraordinary circumstances, while

giving criteria in case of a steep rise in price rise. An exemption is made for holders of private stocks whose limit has not exceeded the ceiling of installed capacity and through this clause, the law has basically made hoarding legally tenable. Meghalaya is not self-sufficient when it comes to the major staples like cereals and pulses. This makes the local consumers highly vulnerable to any stocking of these items. The argument of regulation only during extraordinary circumstances is highly flawed. Extraordinary circumstances are by definition 'extraordinary' but daily life is lived in 'ordinary' situations. The essential items, cereals, pulses, potato, onions, edible oilseeds and oils are required on a daily basis and for those who are of low income, they constitute a major proportion of their income. Meghalaya comes in 28th place in terms of per capita income among the States and Union Territories in India meaning that purchasing power of majority of the people in the State is already very low. This means that ordinarily the common citizens of the State are already in a precarious situation and the promise of protection during extraordinary circumstances means nothing to them. It is likely that consumers will be left to fend for themselves in any case, as per the Amendment, private stocking is allowed even during extraordinary times if it does not exceed the allotted limit.

The second law 'The Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Bill' is basically about encouraging contract farming. Private companies/players will be encouraged to get into agreement with farmers for buying their produce. This will entail farmers producing the crop under the agreement and following the conditions as laid down, which will include management of the whole farming operation (seeds, land preparation, inputs, etc.). In order to ensure that the produce is of the requisite quality such control is inevitable. Contract farming is not alien to Meghalaya (or for that matter India) with quite a few farmers already engaged in it. But with this law there will be greater push for it. Since the State will not be able to compete in terms of food crops, the focus will be on cash crops. This can have tremendous implications for the

agrobiodiversity of the State. Though Meghalaya may not be able to compete with the other parts of the country in terms of production, it can rival any in terms of agrobiodiversity, i.e., the variety and variability of animals, plants and micro-organisms that are used directly or indirectly for food and agriculture, including crops, livestock, forestry and fisheries. An average of 202 food plants per village were documented derived from the diversity of land uses practised by indigenous farmers in the State during a participatory mapping exercise done in 28 villages by the North East Slow Food and Agrobiodiversity Society (NESFAS) as part of the project 'No One Shall Be Left Behind Initiative: Biodiversity for Food, Nutrition, and Energy Security, Meghalaya and Nagaland, North East India' supported by the Rural Electrification Corporation. Among the diversity of land uses in Meghalaya, bri (plantation) is an example of a traditional cash cropping system that is mostly associated with arecanut and mandarin orange cultivation in the Khasi-War areas (Southern Slopes of Meghalaya). This cropping system has existed alongside jhum plots, home-stead gardens and harvesting (flora and fauna) from the local landscape as strategies to meet family needs. An important feature of the traditional cash cropping system is that it is not a complete monoculture. In the bri, jackfruit, bay leaf, wild pepper, taro and pineapple can also be found. In the modern contract farming system, such diversity could be lost. As the Central Government is pushing for expansion of palm oil cultivation in the North Eastern States, including Meghalaya, there is a good possibility that palm oil will be pushed as a substitute crop. The environmental catastrophe that palm oil plantations effect is thoroughly documented, while similar devastation could result with the promotion of other cash crops as well.

The expansion of the Banana export industry in Central America in the early 20th Century led to soil exhaustion and the spread of Panama disease throughout the plantations. The companies who had entered into agreements with local communities abandoned the plantations leaving the communities to deal with the cost of landscape degradation. One could read about this case in more detail in the chapter titled 'Altered Land-

scapes and Transformed Livelihoods: Banana Companies, Panama Diseases, and Rural Communities on the North Coast of Honduras, 1880-1950' by John Soluri in the book 'Interaction between Agroecosystems and Rural Communities'. Meghalaya has very little arable land. In search of profitability the limited arable land could be exposed to large scale degradation. The expansion of broom cultivation, for example, has been reported to degrade land quality for food crop production by Rabi Narayan Behera and colleagues in their paper 'From jhum to broom: Agricultural land-use change and food security implications on the Meghalaya Plateau, India'. The diversion of land from food crops to cash crops risks adversely affecting household food insecurity because of increased exposure to price volatility, limited rural market infrastructure, and reduced self sufficiency in food staples. With hoarding being given legal protection this could exacerbate the difficulties of low income households, which include the farmers, in the State.

The Agriculture Produce Market Committees (APMC) and Minimum Support Price (MSP) for crops have been strategies to improve the state of agriculture and farmer incomes. However both of these strategies are under attack under The Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Bill. In the name of giving choice, this law is laying the ground work for dismantling of this system. With the state of market infrastructure in Meghalaya, it can be argued there is a need to expand APMC and bring more farmers, not the other way round. As a large number of farmers in the State are subsistence-oriented with limited access to roads and state markets, it is unclear how these new laws will help to boost farmer incomes. Whether the stakeholders in Meghalaya appreciate the gravity of the issue, the potential harm from the three laws on the farmers of the State is very real and it will require vigilance as they are implemented to avoid negative repercussions.

About the writers:
Bhogtaram Mawroh is a Senior Associate, Research and Knowledge Management at NESFAS and can be reached at bhogtram.nesfas@gmail.com
Gennifer Meldrum is a consultant with Bioversity International and can be reached at gennifermeldrum@outlook.com

Covid-19 Apathy

By Benjamin Lyngdoh

When it comes to covid-19 today, 'apathy' is the best term to describe it. This is the reality in general. There is a saying that 'people are scared of anything which they do not understand or have inadequate knowledge of'. Well, this is the exact development in relation to covid-19. We all remember December, 2019. This was the time when the first cases were being reported from Wuhan in China. Over the next two months we were basically spectators and ignorantly thinking that this is a phenomenon to be analysed and critiqued upon with no possibility of it crossing over into our hills. Alas! All of that changed when the first case was reported in India from the state of Kerala on January 30, 2020. The outcome of this event was the scared concerns and speculation by a few here in Meghalaya. However, at that time the majority still believed that it will never reach our hills. Then the real encounter with covid-19 happened on March, 2020 where we underwent the three week lockdown. By now, it was a realisation by all that it was only a matter of time before the virus SARS-CoV-2 which causes the disease covid-19 hits us as well. Indeed, with the first cases being gradually reported on April, 2020, we were in the global covid-19 map as well.

As such, April, 2020 was basically a month filled with confusion, anxiety, fear, paranoia and hysteria. One might say that in the many years of discourse across media platforms there has never been a topic as hot and talked about as covid-19. In fact, social media was full of it and to the extent that at times it became an overflow and a mental burden of information, facts and figures. However, as of today the degree of discourse over covid-19 has significantly come down. Although in the face of it this may be an indication of apathy towards the subject-matter; the underlying factors determining such apathy are important to be noted.

To start with, initially we knew very little about the novel coronavirus. In addition, some of the information lacked credibility or was incomplete. As a case in point, at the very initial stage we all thought that just washing hands would do the trick. Apparently, that was not so and just look at how the body of knowledge concerning covid-19 has developed since then. To this end, the knowledge about other related ailments like SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) and MERS (Middle East respiratory syndrome) has significantly contributed towards a better understanding and mitigation of covid-19. As such, it is this better understanding that has also resulted in the current apathy. The people these days fear it less as they are well versed with the facts of the case. That way, it is a change in behaviour due to the scientific knowledge on the dynamics of covid-19. Come to think of it, such a 'change in

behaviour' sounds pretty alright!

As we move forward on the apathy discourse, the fact is that our diverted approach towards covid-19 has less to do with science and more with economics and the burning question of livelihoods. As a people we have become fearless and the government has become helpless. As of today, the word out in the streets is that we can fight against this coronavirus. After all, we have fought against many other corona viruses before. So, we will beat this one too. All that is needed is a strong immune system or just pray and hope that we shall not contract it. However, even if one is to get it; all that is needed is to stay home for a few days. As such, in the minds of the people at large the evils of covid-19 are all mapped out. It is this very confidence that has led people to move out and crack on with life. For the many, livelihood is a bigger question than covid-19. The government on the other hand has to continue to move with the flow. It has no other option. If it does not, it will result in an additional financial burden in providing for the daily wage earners and small businesses. Talk about being caught between the devil and the deep blue sea; this is what the government is being caught up in now. The point to be noted here is that unless something really drastic happens, it would be very difficult to reverse the relaxations in covid-19 restrictions as far as the economy and livelihoods is concerned. At best, all the government can do is aggressive social marketing by continuously reminding the people about the dangers that still linger and the imperative for following the health protocols.

In the end, our response to the covid-19 pandemic is perfectly epitomised by the term 'resilience'. It is a depiction of the human mentality and its resolve. This is good on all counts. However, we must all note that resilience is based upon the knowledge of what can be done and what cannot. Else, resilience turns into taking risks. This is what we have to guard against. It is important to factor that the medium for resilience to turn into risks is apathy. This is primarily seen as letting our guards down against covid-19. Well, through observation it is clear for all to see that the majority have turned apathetic. There is no fear for self and no concern for the other. This is a recipe for a disaster. Yes, the economy is important and livelihood is a must; however, let us practice our needful activities in a responsible manner. After all, the best and the most effective protection against covid-19 are being self-alert and not just following directives that come from government. Accordingly, this calls for the continuous following of hand washing, masking and distancing. If this can be supplemented with a good routine of physical activity then we can safely say that all is well indeed. Email: benjamin21in@yahoo.co.in

Dec, 2020) crying for a return to moral values.

As I reflect on my childhood in India, the most precious class for me was "Moral Science" -- a class routinely despised by worldly parents back then -- because it did not fetch accolades, prizes, or fortune. I was grateful as well for the rich Bengali culture, which whetted my appetite for philosophical thinking -- the poetry of Tagore, kirtan songs with their soulful lyrics, etc. Although I am not a Christian, I enjoyed as well the Bible classes for children in my convent school. This was the rich general education I received - in stark contrast to what education has become today -- a utilitarian feeder pipe into industry -- for only one purpose -- to make money. In the world today, a glib tongue alone matters. We have forgotten the spirit behind the words!

A nation needs more than scoundrels with credentials (as Mr. Gewali points out). It needs morally sound citizens. For leaders, it needs

ethical statesmen and states women -- not scoundrels with oratory skills. To be religious without being ethical makes no sense either.

Thanks again for your article and Mr. Gewali's letter.

Yours etc.,
Deepa Majumdar,
Via email

Right person for the right job

Editor,
It's a sorry sight to see the sorry state of affairs in MeECL. What is urgently needed is a capable person who has experience in this field to rescue this ailing Corporation from troubled waters. Only one person comes to mind and the State Government doesn't have to look too far to find such a person. Many may not have even heard of his name. Mr Andrew Langstieh who has now returned to Meghalaya his home state took charge of the Damador Valley Corporation a few years ago when the Corporation was in the

red. DMC is the first multipurpose river valley project in the country. After Mr Langstieh took charge, the Corporation's fortunes spectacularly changed for the better. So my humble suggestion to the State Government is to start appointing capable people like Mr Andrew Langstieh to important posts across the board. My suggestion does not carry an iota of nepotism since the man has proved his credentials.

Yours etc.,
Gary Marbanian,
Via email

Poor work culture

Editor,
Visiting the Laitumkhrah Post Office has always been a terrible experience for me. Every time I go to the PO to either withdraw cash or update my passbook, I'm told that "there is no link." The work culture at the post office is extremely poor as is evident from the frustrated faces of the customers who line up to get something

done. One has to wait for almost half an hour just to get his or her passbook updated. There is so much chaos inside the office and no one seems to care. Yesterday, I got another shock as this time, I saw a girl who barely looked like an adult, sitting at the counter and it was obvious that she has no experience and knowledge about the working of the system. On most issues requiring clarification they tell the customers to visit the main Post Office (GPO). What then are they working for? What is their job?

I request the concerned authorities to take action in this regard as the current work culture of the Shillong post office is pathetic and inconvenient to the customers who have to stand in long queues. There is absolutely no practice of social distancing either which makes it such a risky place. It is high time for the Government to intervene and bring about some kind of normalcy to the office.

Yours etc.,
Pratham K Sharma
Shillong -3

"If you haven't got any charity in your heart, you have the worst kind of heart trouble."

-- Bob Hope

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No.130 SHILLONG, FRIDAY, DECEMBER 25, 2020

Economy: Signs of recovery

WITH activities reviving, optimism about a positive turn to the badly hit national economy is high. RBI has reinforced this optimism with a statement that the Indian economy is recovering at a pace higher than most predictions since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. Its monthly bulletin for December says the recent weeks have raised the level of optimism about a significant recovery for the economy. This was only to be expected in the emerging circumstances.

While all segments of life had been paralysed for months since March, the positive vibes began being felt only in the recent months. Overall, the nation is now in a position to cope with the pandemic's presence. The arrival of the vaccine shortly will strengthen this optimism.

Admittedly, new threats are emerging on the Covid-19 front, resulting in imposition of night curfews in several cities in the western and northern sectors, as also Bengaluru in the south. Yet, economic activities have regained pace across the board. The exceptions are those like the aviation and hospitality sectors. Road communications have been restored and there is partial restoration of train services. Freight movement now remains unhindered. Factories are in working mode and agricultural activities have regained normal pace. There, though, are limits on the money spent for festivals due to restrictions on public engagements.

RBI recently revised the real GDP growth projection for fiscal year 2021 upwards to minus 7.5 per cent – up from the previous projection of minus 9.5 per cent. The month of November has been better and so is December. RBI expects growth to enter the positive (above zero) zone by October next, the third quarter of the next fiscal. Faster recovery thereafter is possible also as large sections of the people would be vaccinated by then and a return to near-normal life likely. This is on condition that new and harsher strains of Covid-19 would not surface and play havoc with life yet again. With the world getting more and more inter-connected other than in the present situation, chances of more virus invasions and unpredictable health risks could only be anticipated.

RBI is optimistic that, although headwinds blow, steadfast efforts by all sides could put India on a faster growth trajectory. Based also on the demand-supply dynamics and related factors, RBI noted that the western sector including Gujarat and Maharashtra registered the worst economic downturn up until August. But there was a sharp upturn in such activities across regions since October. The scenario further improved in the past two months. This is a welcome sign.

Since the tragic death of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, America has been up in flames protesting racism. Never since the Civil Rights movement have so many people chorused in unison for a common cause. We may dispute the ethics and style of protest. But no person of conscience can dispute the moral worth of this particular cause. Ignoring the dying man's pleas, "I can't breathe," Derek Chauvin, a white police officer knelt on Floyd's neck for at least eight minutes – his sadistic action symbolizing the entire tragic history of the African American – a history of the white man pressing his knee upon the neck of the black man.

While racism and xenophobia are easy to spot, the two are not always easy to tell apart. Xenophobia, or hatred for the outsider can be a subset, expression, or species of the genus, racism. This implies that while xenophobia can take racist forms, not all forms of racism need be xenophobic. Thus white-on-black racism within America is not literally xenophobic – in that it does not persecute the outsider or foreigner, but its own black citizens. Nuances of a metaphoric xenophobia may flavor this type of racism. Seeking to convert the black insider into an outsider, racism ends up making the white racist a moral outsider – someone society as a whole rejects as abhorrent. Thus Chauvin's deracinating act of violence threw him outside the pale of respectable society. Notwithstanding all such metaphoric xenophobia, domestic racism in America is not literally xenophobic. Very likely this is because American individuality weakens the scope for identity politics. Yet this is not to say xenophobia does not exist in America. A separate prejudice, it expresses itself as dire racism against brown and black-skinned immigrants (legal or otherwise). Under Mr. Trump's hostile policies, one saw this type of xenophobia in the tendency to scapegoat undocumented immigrants from Latin America.

The risk of xenophobia is inherent in all identity politics. By contouring and defining its native group, an identity thereby also defines the outsider – with the "us" and "them" mutually exclusive forever! But defining the outsider need not translate into prejudice. Although all identities come with the potential for xenophobia, not all actualize this noxious prejudice. Xenophobia occurs when the outsider is not only defined, but also reviled. Xenophobia often morphs

from mere prejudice to scape-goating the outsider, who is blamed for all ills of the native group. When it expresses itself in physiological terms, expressing a toxic fleshly aesthetics that aims at power, xenophobia becomes racist! As old as the hills, xenophobia, which has always existed in perhaps all civilizations, can be both secular and religious. Thus, to Plato and Aristotle, non-Greeks were barbarians. To the Chinese, foreigners were foreign devils. To the ancient Hindu, the non-Vedic person was a Mleccha. To the Jew, the non-Jewish were gentiles. To the European Christian, non-Christians were heathens or pagans. To the Muslim, non-Muslims are infidels. Finally, the twentieth-century is littered with the killing fields of genocides forged by xenophobia born of identity politics. Signifying yet another form of xenophobia, the Khasi term Dkhar – which, in practice, can be secular, religious, or both – takes its place of ignominy among all these pejorative terms. Like barbarian, foreign devil, Mleccha, gentile, heathen, pagan, and infidel – Dkhar rings a death knell upon our common humanity and human rights, by identifying the vast majority of human beings (who are non-Khasi) as foreigners to be hated. Except of course, Dkhar is usually aimed at mainland Indians who are in Meghalaya for employment and other purposes! While this term may not have been originally intended as pejorative, it has, by now, acquired its own noxious fumes of xenophobia.

Yet, crucial to the fate of any identity is its share of universality, without which it withers away in the abyss of narcissism. In order for an identity group to thrive and survive, it must ventilate itself with the fresh air of universality. Minority groups therefore serve essentially as windows letting in the fresh air of universality to mitigate the narcissism inherent in the identity that defines the majority group. In the context of Meghalaya one might say, the presence of the mainland Indian Dkhar thwarts the danger of Khasis drowning in the narcissism of their own identity. In short, the Dkhar infuses into Khasi society, the necessary ventilator of otherness.

Without undermining the gravity of the Shoah, we might say that the Bengali has been to the Khasi and the Assamese, what the Jew was to the European Chris-

tian anti-Semite. If their malice against the Bengali did not reach the chilling mass proportions of Nazi murders of Jews, this is only because we Indians are too chaotic to be as organized and diabolically practical as the Nazi anti-Semite. Adding to this, we have the tragic inward xenophobia of the Bengali from Bengal, for whom, the diasporic Bengali – including those in other states in India – is a "Probashi Bangali" (Bengali living outside Bengal). A mere slur, this self-directed xenophobia can hardly be compared to the toxic hatred and violence in Assamese and Khasi xenophobia towards Bengali Hindus.

But of the two (Assamese and Khasi), Khasi xenophobia is more perplexing for me. I cannot understand why, given their xenophobia towards the mainland Indian Dkhar, they have embraced wholeheartedly, the white western Dkhar. Despite anti-colonialism, the independence movement, and the freedom of India – why have they welcomed western civilization in its modern decadent forms? Why have they overlooked the terrible worldliness of the modern west – especially that of the sensual culture of America – an impudent synthetic offspring of western civilization? Why have they raced to the west instead of resisting neo-colonial forms of cultural imperialism that corrode the spiritual foundations of all cultures?

In this context, two incidents of neo-colonial ignominy leap out of my memories of the Shillong-of-the-sixties. Yes, the beautiful Tricolor was already flying high and the country was independent. But servility before the white man had not abated. The first incident happened in perhaps Class Three in my convent school, where our only blonde child was a source of wonder and awe for my colonized classmates, who included Christians of "tribal" origin. The rest of us "Dkhars" were so used to brown-on-brown racist xenophobia against our physical appearance that despite our youth, we already despised racism. The blonde child was not directly racist. But she knew she was "superior"! One day she plucked one hair off her head. To this day I blush at what happened next. My awestruck colonized classmates passed around her single strand of gold hair as if it were gold itself. Needless to say, this idolatrous adoration of a blonde Dkhar left us brown Dkhars (with self-respect) in a state of quiet dis-

gust!

If this first incident demonstrated worship of the white Dkhar, the second demonstrated the opposite – racism towards the brown mainland Indian Dkhar. One day in the assembly hall of that same school, a venerable maestro of Hindustani classical music was on stage. The hall was filled with school girls of varying age groups – including many Christians of "tribal" origin. To my dying day I will never forget what happened next! As the hall filled with his sonorous disciplined voice, these girls burst into a chorus of derisive laughter at the sound of the complex, mathematically exact cadences of his khyal – a source of wonder in the western world. The hall therefore reverberated with two sounds – first, the voice of a maestro lost in his classical music, and second, derisive laughter from a hall full of young girls. That they did not invoke the universal inner ear to appreciate the subtle complex melodic structure of the musician's ragas, was a sign of how hate-filled their hearts were. That he received derisive laughter instead of applause, signified the same! That they did not understand that white Dkhars sometimes travel all the way to India to learn this genre of ancient classical music, was proof that they were out of touch with historical reality – again a sign of a hate-filled heart.

My question therefore remains unanswered... In the immediate aftermath of independence, faced with a choice between two opposite civilizations – a decadent west that had lost its spiritual luster, and a not-yet-modern higher India, still shining with its unique historical lineage of unbroken mysticism – why did the Khasi people make the choices they did? Why did they react in such extremes – on the one hand unthinking acceptance of the cultural hegemony of a decadent west represented by the white Dkhar – and on the other – violent racist xenophobia against the brown mainland Indian Dkhar – especially the Bengali Hindu? Were they not aware that the land of brown Dkhars (mainland India), in its higher aspect, can be a source of wonder and salvation to the white Dkhar they imitated so assiduously?

The answer does not blow with the wind. It lies in the depths of the history of the Khasi people.

(The author teaches at Purdue University, Indiana, USA. Email: dmajumda@gmail.com)

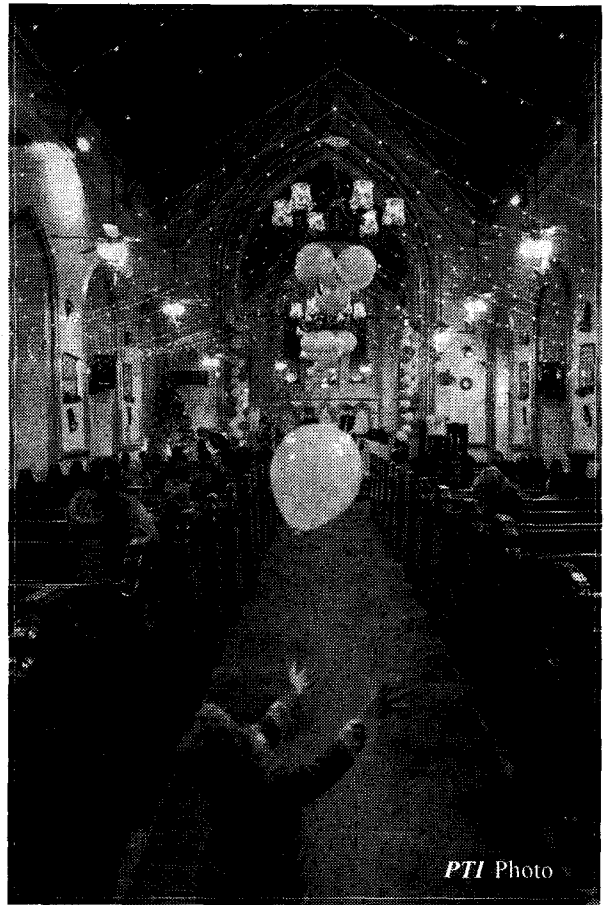
Covid & Christmas 2020

A message of hope

By Barnes Mawrie

The Christmas celebration of 2020 will be remembered as a Covid Christmas. The second wave of Covid 19 which is sweeping Europe currently has left Christians disappointed as they are unable to have the usual fanfare associated with the feast. European countries have already declared a second lockdown. This pandemic has had its toll on every aspect of our life from politics to economy, from entertainment to leisure time, from the religious to the cultural life of people all over the world. However amidst this gloomy picture, there are silver linings to this tragedy. First of all, a realization

ues to suffer day after day. Humanity has been taught a lesson of humility, that God is still the master of our lives and he could confound us even with a little sickness. Even developed countries are realizing their limitations as their hospitals are unable to cope with the number of increasing patients and they are running short of ICUs and ventilators. Being unable to hold the usual Christmas revelries which are often spending on trivialities, family members would spend more time together this Christmas time. One can expect more time would be spent in prayer this Christ-



PTI Photo

that Christmas is not all about Santa Clause and Christmas tree. Commercialization of Christmas has been adversely affected by the pandemic and this should be viewed by believers as a blessing rather than a misfortune.

Degeneration of the significance of Christmas has been witnessed all these years where we see this event being associated with mundane things like Christmas trees, Santa Clauses, cakes, gifts, concerts, parties and dinners. The true meaning of Christmas which is the birth of Christ has been limited to some liturgical services. This year Christians are compelled to

mas than in other years and more time would be spent on purposeful things than on meaningless revelries.

COVID as I would put it Christ Our Victor Is Divine should sound as good news to all Christians. Christ's advent as prophesied by all the prophets was perceived as the arrival of the Messiah, the King of peace who would set everything right. He is the Son of God who has everything under his control. He is the final victor of the power of darkness and sin. Christmas is about God becoming man, assuming our human form. He has become the Emmanuel (God with us) and so it should



"Christmas during this pandemic has an additional significance for all believers. It brings us a message of hope and optimism."

reflect on the true message of Christmas, namely, that it is about the birth of our saviour, Jesus Christ. Secondly, Covid Christmas is a blessing in disguise for the poor and have-nots because it has cut down festive expenses by more than 50%. This pandemic has become a sort of leveller between the rich and the poor. What would be the Christmas message in this year of pandemic? This would be the question in the minds of many people. I would like to offer a few reflections along these lines: This Covid Christmas has taught humanity a vital lesson about our human limitations. Man who thought that he is a demi-god and that he has solutions to every problem, has shamefully realized that he is limited in many ways. Man who has been able to probe the depth of the oceans, explore the space and build artificial intelligence (AI), is unable to control even this little virus and as a consequence humanity contin-

remind us that as human beings, we are not alone in the fight against diseases and pandemics. Christ who assumed our humanity has himself gone through the experiences of sickness, suffering and death. Consequently he understands and empathizes with the suffering humanity.

Christmas during this pandemic has an additional significance for all believers. It brings us a message of hope and optimism. Rabindranath Tagore once said "every child born into this world brings the message to us that God still loves the world." If this is true for an ordinary child, how much more the birth of Christ, the divine child, would mean for humanity. It is a clear message that humanity is still the predilection of God and that he would neither abandon us nor let us be doomed. Christian faith teaches us to be resilient in times of trials and perseverance will ultimately bring us victory. Happy Christmas to one and all!

TO THE EDITOR

Rejoinder from SSPO

Editor, Apropos the letter by Pratham K Sharma (Dec 24, 2020) on the subject of displeasure about the functioning of the Laitumkhrah post office, the print media and Department of Posts: India always work for the benefit of the public and with a common goal for the welfare of society. We are happy that customers feel free to lodge complaints against us for any matter, including fighting on behalf of other customers also. In this case, Pratham K Sharma, mentioned about a frustrated customer. I would like to add here that the frustrated customer is the daughter of Geeta Das Astapati, who came to withdraw money from Laitumkhrah S.O and came to the undersigned also to lodge her complaints. The undersigned has noted her grievances and initiated necessary action on December 23, 2020. Again, Pratham K Sharma, has mentioned about a counter staff and assumed her to be

under-aged judging by her looks. This is highly objectionable and irresponsible statement.

As far as social distancing and Covid-19 protocols are concerned all the post offices under Meghalaya Division have already been instructed and necessary material has already been supplied to all Post Offices since March, 2020. Due to social distancing and Covid-19 protocols people have to wait in queue for long hours. However, the situation will be reviewed again for any necessary improvement.

It is our endeavour to work for the betterment of the society as a whole and try to provide service to all and with respect for all genders.

Yours etc.,
Susmita Majumder,
ASP (HQ), Meghalaya
Division, Shillong-1

Ethics never lets us down

Editor, Apropos the meaningful letter, "Essence of education" (ST, Dec 24, 2020) by Prof Deepa Majumdar from

Purdue University, USA, I do express my sincere gratitude for her appreciation of my letter – "Education sans ethics equals intellectual indigestion" (ST, 23 Dec, 2020). I am also heavily indebted to Prof. Majumdar who had written a significant article on my research-based book – "Great Minds on India" about nine years ago. Of late, as Ms. Patricia Mukhim points out, the parent fraternity has failed to inculcate ethical values in their children. Though we try to overlook this factor, it's deleterious impact on society has started to take its toll.

With the rapid rise in consumerism and base entertainment in the digital world, the whisper of morality gets easily drowned out. But at the end of the day, it is morality in which we all have to take refuge. I remember a profound thought of Blaise Pascal in this context – "Knowledge of physical science will not console me for ignorance of morality in the time of affliction, but knowledge of morality will always console me for ignorance of physical science." Given the situation, we need to

think more upon the "Theory of Ethics" than the "Theory of Relativity". Without our knowledge of the "Theory of relativity" NATURE will continue to nourish us, but without the strength of ethics and human values, we shall certainly be overcome by various kinds of miseries and griefs.

Yours etc.,
Salil Grewal,
Shillong

Probation for how long?

Editor, Apropos the news report published by your esteemed daily on Dec 23, 2020, as an aggrieved parent I thank you for highlighting this long pending issue of these "STILL PROBATIONERS" of the Meghalaya Tourism Development Corporation. To recount the ordeal, I remember the MTDC advertisement No. MTDC/413/Per/Recruit Manager/2017 Dated May 31, 2017 to which my ward had applied and after clearing the recruitment process comprising a written test, personal interview and

group discussion was selected for the advertised post along with 8(eight) others. One of the points in the Advertisement and also in the appointment letter was "Probation period will be for one year subject to extension of 6 (six) months at the discretion of management". After the completion of one year probation the young candidates approached the management for consideration of absorption but the management extended the probation period for another 6 months. But the story didn't end there. The management has been extending their probations after the completion of six months. Further the management has been irresponsible by saying that "the recruits were at least paid salaries". Prior to the appointment of this batch, similar recruitment had happened and on completion of probation, they had been absorbed to their respective vacancies. My question to the management is why such step motherly treatment is being given to this batch? Whenever the probationers have approached the management they were only given verbal assurances. On one hand we

are all out to open our state to the tourists - "Atithi devo bhava" but on the other hand we forget that, "Charity begins at Home". Hope the management learns from this and puts an end to the suffering of our children.

Yours etc.,
Rishab Poddar
Shillong-4

Spirit of Christmas

Editor, Christmas is here. Let us take this moment to be grateful about this wonderful journey called life. The year 2020 had been quite a ride, but here we are, blessed with another chance to spread love, peace and joy. Let us therefore take this Christ-filled festivity to assure hope and prosperity and to touch another soul with our warm tenderness of a happy heart. Have a blissful Christmas and a prosperous Happy New Year.

Yours etc.,
Christene Nongbet,
Umsning



Offbeat experiences in desi locales

One-of-a-kind activities designed and hosted by locals gives you a feel of the destination like nothing else can. Airbnb Experiences go beyond the activities themselves and offer a deep-dive into the local host's world through their passion. Hosts offer their guests special knowledge, unique skills, and inside access to local places and communities that guests couldn't find on their own, creating lasting connections and treasured memories.

Hilloferry - A guided Bike Ride in Dharamshala

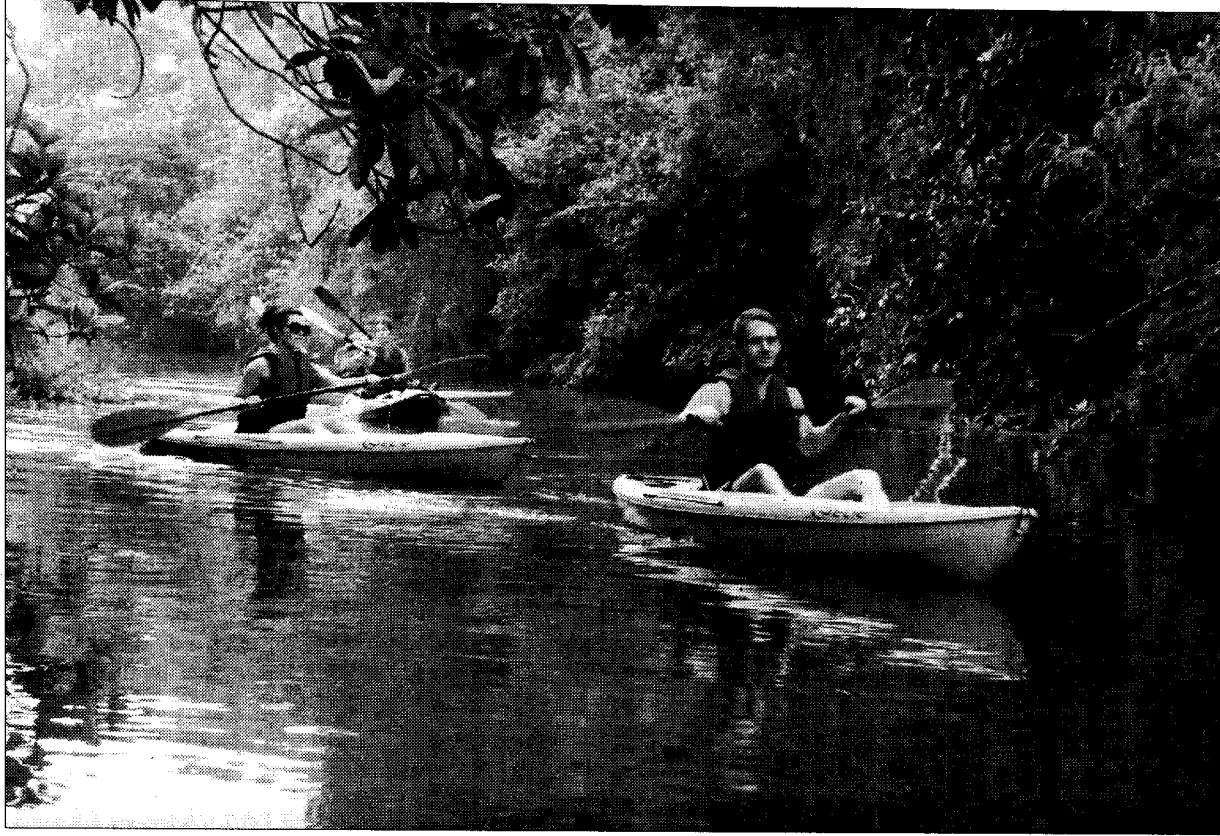
Experience the joy of riding a mountain bike amidst beautiful views of Dhauladhar ranges, enjoy sight-seeing, cherish the nature closely and explore hidden treasures. One will be provided with a well-equipped mountain bike, suitable costume for cycling and helmet for safety. Witness beautiful landscapes close to nature and beautiful tea gardens!

Colonial Walking tour in Puducherry

The Colonial Walking tour has been created to give tourists the real French colonial experience in the Pondicherry. France is still in the food, the architecture, the games of boules played by local Tamils and the language French is spoken widely in the city. Know more about local history, food, festivals, customs, street names, connections with French with this mind blowing experience.

Himalayan village hike & Nepali lunch in Kalimpong

These handpicked walks will take you through the adjoining villages and introduce you to the rural, rustic and peaceful life beyond the hustle-bustle of cities. You get to interact with the local communities and



gain tremendous traditional knowledge on their lifestyle, history, culture besides learning more about the flora and fauna of the surrounding landscape. The walks are of different levels of difficulty, from easy to moderate, and can be tuned to your needs and preference. You will be served with a sumptuous Nepali vegetarian lunch prepared just for you using fresh local produce. Kalimpong coffee or Darjeeling tea will follow before you make your journey back.

Dessert Safari in Bengaluru

In this 3 hour tour, you will be taken around to the choicest spots in Bengaluru to sample the tastiest

desserts. You will also learn about what goes into making them, the different techniques used, the different variants of the same dessert across countries and so on. This will include a walk in the alleys of Bangalore parking your sweet tooth at best desserts cafe on the way tasting both local Indian and international desserts.

Kayaking Sal Backwaters in Goa

This popular and celebrated excursion on flat dammed up waters, takes you on a winding journey through narrow waterways deep in the mangroves, sighting different birds, fish, otters and exotic local plants like cashew, bamboo and

mango. Red and white lotus and migratory birds, make this a must do trip for all ages.

Learn Honey Beekeeping in Himalayas at Bhimtal

At Silent Valley - Alchauna, observe the sophisticated structure of bee civilization. From the guards at the hive entry, to the nurses tending the little, to the "energetic females" and "lazy males", to the glaring elusive queen, each bee has a place inside this complex community. A memorable experience to "suit up" in a beekeeping suit, and get up close and intimate with the bees for a thrilling experience and a great photo opportunity. (IANS)

Devika Rani was an enigma to most - but not anymore

By Vishnu Makhijani

"I hope that I have managed to establish who Devika Rani really was. A rebellious and unusually talented and beautiful woman, a great actress and studio head who changed the course of Indian cinema in many ways, despite her intense personal suffering. A pioneer then and now," writes author Kishwar Desai of *The Longest Kiss* (Westland), the biography of India's first international superstar in the 1930s and 1940s.

"I hope this book will be of help to others who care to study this very important phase in Indian cinema, with its passion, idealism and entrepreneurship, in the days before it became a business like any other," adds Desai, whose husband, Lord Meghnad Desai is a lifetime member of Britain's House of Lords.

Astonishingly beautiful, prodigiously talented, and a great-grand-niece of Rabindranath Tagore, Devika Rani (1908-94) earned rave reviews for her first film, *Karma* (1933), a bilingual in Hindi and English. It elicited interest in England for a prolonged kissing scene featuring the real-life couple of Devika Rani and actor-producer-director Himanshu Rai, one of the pioneers of Indian cinema whom she had married in 1929, but bombed in India.

Together, Himanshu Rai and Devika Rani set up India's first truly professional studio, Bombay Talkies in 1934. Over the next few years, the studio became the launch pad for some of India's best-known talent, including Ashok Kumar, Leela Chitnis and Dilip Kumar.

After Himanshu's controversial death in 1940, Devika Rani took over Bombay Talkies. She ran the studio with a steel hand, squashing all rebellion and constantly walking a tightrope when it came to the men around her. Then, in 1945, she met the handsome and reclusive Russian-born painter Svetoslav Roerich, and, just like in a Hindi film, nothing was ever the same again as the couple eventually settled down in Bangalore (now Bengaluru), where they are buried in the tranquility of the Tataguni estate on the outskirts of the city.

"Devika died as she had lived, in the middle of controversy and



refuses to be forgotten. Even now, when one visits the ruins of Bombay Talkies or the chalet at Naggar, (in Himachal Pradesh, that Svetoslav's father Nicholas Roerich had built), where a rough-hewn stone spreading banyan tree in Tataguni, one can sense her spirit, wild and free, and her desire to create beauty all around her," Desai writes.

"She wanted her ashes to be kept both at Naggar and at Tataguni, where she lies next to Svetoslav, the only man to understand her and give her the freedom she needed to be herself. He was the 'reward' she believed she had been given for keeping faith in spite of all the abuse and humiliation she had suffered. And her restless passion seems to still hover the graves.

"In both places, the tombstones stand next to stone idols symbolising Shakti. A strange energy emanates from the idols - their sturdy, gray bodies, with their vivid red

bindis and the shining zari on their dupattas" Desai concludes.

Devika Rani was a recipient of the Padma Shri (1958) and the Dadasaheb Phalke Award (1969). In *The Longest Kiss*, for the first time, through her letters and documents, Desai pieces together the life that she kept away from the world. The romance and the abuse that characterised her marriage with Himanshu, the struggle of being a woman at the helm of a hyper-male domain, the circuitous ways in which cinema found its feet in Bombay, and the soaring happiness and tragedy of a life lived on the edge, always.

Kishwar Desai is an award-winning author and playwright who writes both fiction and non-fiction. She worked in television as an anchor and producer for over 20 years before becoming a writer. She is the chairperson of The Arts and Cultural Heritage Trust that set up the world's first Partition Museum at Town Hall, Amritsar. She also helped her hus-

band to install the statue of Mahatma Gandhi outside Westminster in the UK.

Desai is the author of *Darlingji: The True Love Story of Nargis and Sunil Dutt* (2007).

Her novel *Witness the Night* won the Costa First Novel Award in the UK, in 2010, and was followed by two others: *Origins of Love* (2012) and *Sea of Innocence* (2013). The trilogy featuring has since been optioned for a web series.

Desai's first work of political non-fiction, *Jallianwala Bagh: The Real Story* (2018), won critical acclaim and inspired exhibitions on the massacre in India, the UK and New Zealand. She also wrote a play, *Manto!* which won the TAG Omega award for Best Play in 1999. Most recently, in 2019, her play, *Devika Rani: Goddess of the Silver Screen*, was successfully staged in venues across India.

(The author can be reached at vishnu.makhijani@ians.in)

Melancholy in the idea of romance

Author Nasreen Munni Kabir was the guest at the tête-à-tête organised by Prabha Khaitan Foundation where she spoke about her latest book *In the Year of Sahir 2021 Diary* which is based on poet-lyricist Sahir Ludhianvi. IBNS-TWF correspondent Souvik Ghosh brings excerpts

How did you discover Sahir? Can you go back to those memories?

Honestly to me, it was *Pyaasa*. The cinema was shown in London. It was the songs. The Urdu was difficult. So I didn't understand the whole meaning of his words. But I think he is amazingly romantic in one way, but underneath that there is a layer of melancholy and that struck me more. He manages to describe emotions in very simple and effective terms. But there is a sad ending. They are not happy songs. I think the romantic songs that we remember are the sad ones. When we are sad, we listen to sad songs and not the disco songs. He really connects to people who are discerning and caring about the world but have a tinge of melancholy in the idea of romance.

And he talks about the deeper issues and philosophies of life and all. When I opened the diary, the first page I landed upon was Gulzar saab talking about *Man Re Na Kahe Na Dhir Dhare* (song). I think that one song encapsulates life as it is for many of us. Again in the past nine months (COVID-19 era), that has spoken to us so deeply.

Yes, absolutely. That's the right song for lockdown. But the fact of the matter is that many people have remarked that actually he had such mastery over language, be it in Hindi or Urdu, that he knew how to convey the very deep philosophical ideas in simple terms.

What was special about Sahir when it came to film lyrics?

Most of the Urdu poets of that era had to work in films in order to earn money because publishing was not paying money so much. He worked with Arnold brothers and Chetan Anand. So from the very start, he was not working for C-grade films but with the top people of the era like Dev Anand and SD Burman, who were very educated and sophis-

ticated people. He was moving in an educated milieu. He was not asked to lower the tone of his lyrics ever.

So his literary and poetic elements were never compromised yet it wasn't so obscure that couldn't reach out to the common people. Both were nicely balanced.

I will say the most difficult thing was to appeal to everybody. One can only do that if he masters something and speaks in a very straightforward language. When one knows something, he or she will say it simply but will beat around the bush if



someone doesn't know. He knew how to use language and in what context. He also knew the character. He also used to write the poetry, lyrics and the song which will match with the character of a particular film.

Don't you think he had reached out to people because of a team work with the director and composer?

Absolutely. A film is made by a team and not just a director. It is more so in the Hindi cinema because there are various fragmentations in the creation of the film. But the director chooses the right person for each fragment.

Bringing change to their lives

The recently published *A Plate of White Marble*, translated from Sahitya Akademi winning Bengali writer Bani Basu's book (*Swet Patherer Thala*) throws up the age-old question of woman's place in society, and whether financial power changes the equation. **Ranjita Biswas** in conversation with the author

This is the first translation of Swet Patherer Thala, though a film has been made on the novel quite long ago. Why do you think it has taken almost three decades to come out in English though it is a well-known book in Bengali?

I can ask you in return why it would seem natural that a well-known book in Bangla should necessarily be translated into English very soon? It is fortunate that it is translated at all. The book market may have changed since then, and the twenty-odd languages of this country thriving within their narrow local boundaries may have been curious about one another which has resulted in a new interest in translations. The publishers have just responded to this new demand.

The novel is set in the early 50s where Bandana, the protagonist, a young widow, is portrayed as the voice of the 'new woman' emerging in the middle class milieu

Bandana is not the outcome of any movement as such. Freedom from superstitions, liberal attitude of a few elders towards women - these happened just as a matter of course. Another reason must have been the shock of Partition. In Bengal especially, the women of the displaced families took the reins in their own hands while most men, middle-aged by then, found it difficult to find a footing in the new country. With shouldering the financial responsibility the women automatically earned some power and moved into a higher status. Social constraints could no longer be as binding on them as before. Financial self-sufficiency is the highest power to change women's lives. With that came

the right of decision making.

But the entire process was very slow. It has been extremely delicate for women to shake off the shackles of widowhood, as Bandana was, because their very loyalty and love for their husband were held in question. It always needed some agency.

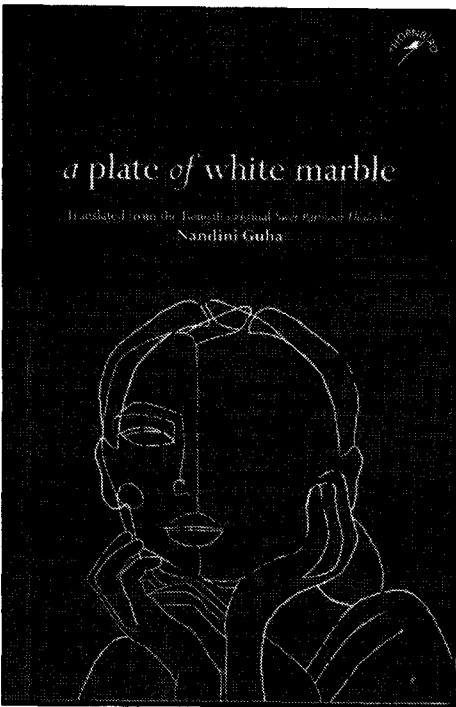
But during the Independence movement many women from different classes came out to join too. Do you think once Independence was achieved, women got suppressed or expected to play the 'back to the kitchen' role? It has happened in other countries as well, even in post-War Western countries when women holding the fort during the war years were now expected to be 'good housewives' and stay at home.

I have already pointed out that the transition or freedom, whatever you call it, has never been fast or easy. It has been a constant tug of war between the old and the new values. Society's expectations from women are still the same at the core. Even when they are highly educated and financially independent, and contributing to the family fund, they would be judged by their skill in doing the household chores, their willingness to embrace the old values including widowhood practices. If they fail there but excel in other fields, like raising the children, providing security for the entire family etc., she would be grudgingly accepted.

How much research did you have to do to bring out the nuances of the

era?

Hardly any. It was all stark reality happening every day, everywhere. Exceptions were few. I, as a sensitive girl, had to pass through paralyzing trauma



of pain and anger every time the incident of somebody's widowhood occurred.

Today in the mid- 21st century, when Indian women are participating in all fields, even combat warfare, how much difference in societal attitude towards women do you observe from the era you have portrayed in the book?

Not much. There has been a grudge-

ing surrender. Most men are completely insensitive to the sufferings of women. They just don't understand. However, Indian society is neither static nor the same everywhere. There are different levels of progress. Several centuries are living side by side here.

Fiction is often based on real-life experiences. Did you come across anyone like the protagonist/ or the people that suppressed women in their families, though educated and supposedly sophisticated with familiarity to modern ideas?

Of course I have seen Bandana-like situations. But the real women were less fortunate than Bandana. They had no such supportive uncle, nor a friend as the office boss. Though the lover often materialized, at times it complicated the situation.

One question today's reader might ask, why did Bandana reject the offer of marriage by an understanding, liberal friend, whom she liked immensely? Was she afraid to go the whole hog by breaking the set tradition of widowhood?

The answer is there in the novel for everybody to see. She was held back by her son. This is another piece of reality which we must not ignore. Widow remarriage has been made legal, but society is still in doubts about its morality, especially when there are children. If they are small there is one kind of trouble, if they are grown up the trouble is of a different hue. But trouble is there, all right.

(Trans World Features)

Making of a Hindu patriot

RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat will release a book hailing Ma-hatma Gandhi as the "biggest Hindu patriot" on the first day of the new year.

On January 1, Modi government ministers Prahlad Patel and V. Muraleedharan will participate in the release ceremony of this book titled *Making of a Hindu Patriot* by authors J.K. Bajaj and M.D. Srinivas, at Rajghat here.

Bhagwat had also released a book in February this year, appealing to build Gandhi's dream of India.

Bhagwat had said, "Gandhiji had many times described himself as a staunch 'Sanatani Hindu'. He was never ashamed of being a Hindu himself.

J.K. Bajaj is the founding director of the Centre for Policy Studies and a member of the Indian Council of Social Science Research, and is also a member of the commission constituted by the central government to subclass the OBCs. M.D. Srinivas is the founder president of the Centre for Policy Studies.

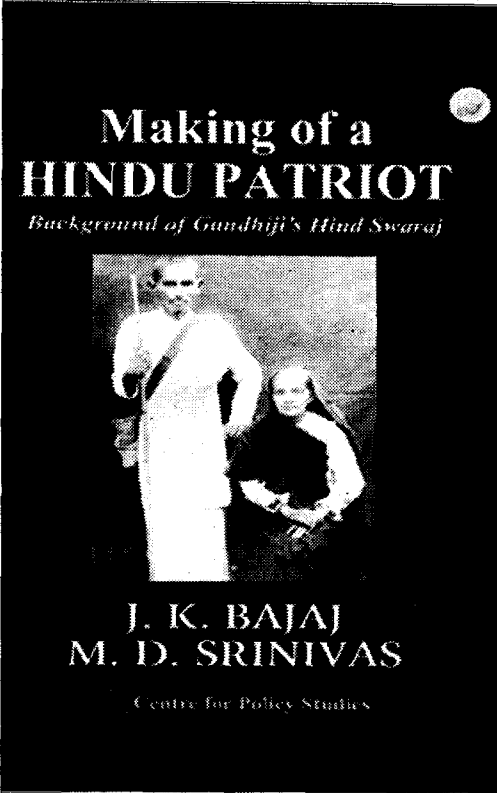
Bajaj told *IANS*, "Gandhiji was a born Hindu, but he became a strong Hindu in the days of his experience in South Africa. What is it like to be a Hindu? He learned this during his struggle in South Africa. Gandhiji openly used to say - 'My patriotism is increasing and this patriotism originates from my religion'.

Bajaj said that Mahatma Gandhi refused when Christian and Muslim friends tried to convert him while living in South Africa. During this time he started an in-depth study about Sanatan Dharma which further strengthened his Hindu identity.

The book gives the background of Gandhi's 'Hind Swaraj'. There are many interesting details ranging from the development of Gandhiji's per-

sonality and the campaigns he undertook during his stay in South Africa. The book also narrates the story of how Gandhi's developed 'Satyagraha' at the historic meeting on September 11, 1906 at the Empire Theatre in Johannesburg. The chapter titled *The South African Jail Diary* also tells the story of the torture in prison endured by Gandhi and his supporters.

The book also describes the correspondence between the great Russian writer and philosopher Leo Tolstoy and Mahatma Gandhi. The



book states that it was Tolstoy who first gave Mahatma Gandhi the title of 'Hindu Patriot'.

The book claims Tolstoy was a fan of all aspects of Gandhi except his 'Hindu patriotism'. It also has information about two meetings held in July 1914 during Gandhiji's arrival from South Africa in which he received the title of 'Patriot Mahatma'. (*IANS*)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, December 27, 2020

Venus is forming an angle of 40 degrees with Pluto on your solar return chart and it will give mixed results for the whole year. You will become wiser in your outlook and will look at life from a totally different perspective. You will show maturity in doing things. You will be meeting lot of influential persons who will help you a lot in times to come. You would do something extra ordinary at your workplace. This will enhance your status and prestige. You will become favorite of your bosses and colleagues. But there will be some persons who will be jealous of you at your workplace. Your relations with your partner will grow. There will be lot of understanding and give and take spirits in relations. Financially you will be well off. Children will shine in studies. Health will remain fine. You will get support of your friends. Elders in the family will remain happy and give their blessings.

Aries: (March 21 - April 20)

The planetary configuration brings good results for you. Increased involvement with siblings, students, classmates, or neighbors may also figure at this time. This could also be a time of mental restlessness. The pace of your life may be a bit hectic now, and if you're not used to it, it could make you a tad nervous. You are more inclined to seek a broad understanding of people around. Concentrating on listening, connecting, communicating, and learning is highlighted. Your attention to the logical world of reason has also been a focus.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21)

This phase highlights friendship, love, romance and children in your life. Your home life is especially busy and sometimes hectic. Arguments with, or on behalf of, family members cannot be avoided but conflict resolution is bound to be quick and relatively easy. Excess energy is best channelled into constructive home improvement projects. You are slightly more defensive and certainly more protective than usual during this period. There may be the need to revisit old, nagging issues regarding personal finances.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21)

Communication, creativity and authority are highlighted. You are eager to investigate new things, whether scientific or technical. This is a phase of completion and transition. Social interaction is also emphasized. 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 errands, paperwork and phone calls. Much energy is expended in understanding and adapting to your immediate environment.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22)

Your need for a little attention and career matters come to a head. You're called to perform, perhaps on a moment's notice, and it's best to keep your cool and do whatever you can to show your competence. A sudden job opportunity, or some form of assistance with regard to career, home, or property matters, could be part of the picture. This can also produce an event that requires you to take charge and show your responsible side. Your mind is especially inquisitive and learning, short trips, and other forms of communication and making connections appeal strongly.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23)

You are especially fond of the life of the home and family, as their entertainment and pleasure are on your main agenda. There is ample support and unconditional love from your partner. Take this time to re-budget instead of making premature purchases. Hold off on decision-making regarding money. Instead, take the time to re-think your sources of income and how you spend your cash during this period. Put off finalizing anything important for the time being. In fact, some money-making ideas or ventures may be put on hold due to circumstances beyond your control.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22)

You may be involved in lectures, debates and discussions. You are looking to expand your activities, and you may find that you have a lot of energy for higher studies, travel, or new subjects. You are quite preoccupied with feelings of security and your inner experiences. This is a time when you find your roots and seek

a feeling of belonging. Besides spending more time tending to domestic affairs, the focus can be on cultivating and-nourishing your inner foundations that support you and your growth. You might also enjoy analyzing different health or nutrition programs. It's an excellent time for entertainment, and fun.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23)

This period brings good-luck for love and romance. More loving and appreciative relationships with your children may also figure now. Your power of attraction skyrockets during this phase. Yet, you are not aggressive in your approach to love. Instead, you attract more if you allow yourself to be pursued. Creative self-expression of any kind is favored. At this time, you instinctively know how to place yourself in the best light in order to make a good impression on others. Any love affair begun now will be characterized by good cheer, fun, and a fair share of emotions.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22)

People 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 symbolic of status. You're called to take on an assignment, perhaps on a moment's notice, and it's best to keep your cool and do whatever you can to show your competence. A sudden job opportunity, or some form of assistance with regards to home or property matters, could be part of the picture. This can also produce an event that requires you to take charge and show your responsible side.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21)

This week brings new horizons in your romantic and love life. Your mind is especially inquisitive, when learning. Short trips, and other forms of communication and making connections, appeal strongly. You enjoy the challenge of tackling a variety of subjects. Talking, writing, and studying can be good ways to handle stress. It's a good time for rethinking and revising educational plans, paperwork, mental projects, and communications. Now you need a little attention, and career matters come to the fore. It's an excellent time to further your hobbies and interests.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20)

The stars promote your luck in service and work related areas. Your mind is especially sharp and you are quick on the uptake as additional work comes your way. You enjoy the challenge of tackling a variety of subjects. Expressing yourself using your writing skills, through the medium of arts or talking to a confidante are ways to handle stress. It's a good time for rethinking and revising educational plans, paperwork, mental projects, and communications. You are most likely to express your social, romantic, and artistic qualities through an intellectual appreciation of art, cultural pursuits, and literature.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18)

In addition to your efforts and hard work pay close attention to performance metrics. Your efforts will be rewarded and continuity to perform work would be visible to senior colleagues and people in authority. You have an increased interest in your own possessions. You are more attracted to objects and possessions that give you a sense of comfort, and luxury. Romantic matters are usually from within the local environment close to home, although many romantic short trips may be undertaken for pleasure. You prefer an intellectual and communicative partner.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20)

This phase brings in happiness and fulfillment through the expansion of your mind, widening your social circle, increasing travel opportunities, and connections to people of a different cultural background than yours is indicated. You desire to learn and improve your practical skills. You are especially drawn to family life where your affections find expression. You are more receptive and gentle on a romantic level, and tend to be sentimental or nostalgic now. You may now particularly value the aesthetics in and around your home. If things are out of sync on the home front, you will do whatever you can to re-create a peaceful and stable atmosphere.

GST Practitioners as Career Option

By Ranjan K Baruah

We are aware of the professions or career options like Chartered Accountant, Company Secretary, etc. There are different roles and responsibilities of these people who are related to financial matters or other planning matters. Goods and Services Tax or GST in simple is a popular word for anyone in India. We pay GST and let us see what it is and what profession may be directly associated with GST.

The genesis of the introduction of GST in the country was laid down in the historic Budget Speech of 28th February 2006, wherein the then Finance Minister laid down 1st April, 2010 as the date for the introduction of GST in the country. Thereafter, there has been a constant endeavor for the introduction of the GST in the country whose culmination has been the introduction of the Constitution (122nd Amendment) Bill in December, 2014.

GST is a dual levy where the Central Government will levy and collect Central GST (CGST) and the State will levy and collect State GST (SGST) on intra-state supply of goods or services. The Centre will also levy and collect Integrated GST (IGST) on inter-state supply of goods or services. Thus GST is a unifier that is going to integrate various taxes being levied by the Centre and the State at present and provide a platform for forging an economic union of the country.

Individuals may become GST practitioners or consultants who can assist and provide services to others. A registered person may authorise an approved GST practitioner to furnish information, on his or her behalf, to the government. The manner of approval of goods and services tax practitioners, their eligibility conditions, duties and obligations, manner of removal and other conditions relevant for their functioning have been prescribed in rule 24 and 25 of the Return Rules. Standardised formats from GST PCT-1 to



GST PCT-5 have been prescribed for making application for enrolment as GST practitioner, certificate of enrolment, show cause notice for disqualification, order of rejection of application of enrolment, list of approved GST practitioners, authorisation letter and withdrawal of authorisation. A goods and services tax practitioner enrolled in any other State or Union Territory shall be treated as enrolled in the State/ Union territory

Aspirants should satisfy any of the following conditions: - (a) s/he is a retired officer of the Commercial Tax Department of any State Government or of the CBEC and had worked in a post not lower in rank than that of a Group-B gazetted officer for minimum period of two years; or (b) s/he has been enrolled as a sales tax practitioner or tax return preparer under the existing law for a period of not less than five years; (c) s/he has passed: (i) A graduate or postgraduate degree or its equivalent examination having a degree in Commerce, Law, Banking including Higher Auditing, or Business Administration or Business Management from any Indian University established by any law for the time being in force; or (ii) A degree examination of any Foreign University recognized by any Indian University as equivalent to the degree examination mentioned in sub clause (i); or (iii) Any other examina-

tion notified by the Government, on the recommendation of the Council, for this purpose; or (iv) Any degree examination of an Indian University or of any Foreign University recognized by any Indian University as equivalent of the degree examination or (v) Has passed any of the following examinations, namely - (a) Final examination of the Institute of Chartered Accountants of India; or (b) Final examination of the Institute of Cost Accountants of India; or (c) Final examination of the Institute of Company Secretaries of India.

A person desirous of becoming GST Practitioner has to submit an application in the form GST PCT-1. The application shall be scrutinised and GST practitioner certificate shall be granted in the form GST PCT-2. In case, the application is rejected, proper reasons shall have to be mentioned in the form GST PCT-4. The enrolment once done remains valid till it is cancelled. But no person enrolled as a goods and services tax practitioner shall be eligible to remain enrolled unless he passes such examination conducted at such periods and by such authority as may be notified by the Commissioner on the recommendations of the Council. Further details may be collected from the official website.

(The author is a career mentor and skill trainer and can be reached at bkrnanjan@gmail.com or 8473943734)

"Life is not a problem to be solved, but a reality to be experienced."

— Soren Kierkegaard

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No. 132

SHILLONG, MONDAY, DECEMBER 28, 2020

Freedom and democracy

THERE is no cap for human aspirations; the more we have the more we want. Similar is the case with freedom and democracy too. Those in the Opposition from time immemorial kept complaining that governments of those times were acting in undemocratic ways. Similarly, now Congress leader Rahul Gandhi and the set of self-styled intellectuals in the capital keep attacking the Modi-led NDA government for subversion of freedom and democratic principles. Prime Minister Narendra Modi is understandably not enthused and has openly aired his resentment over such insinuations against his government. A fair assessment of the situation in India, except for the Emergency period in the mid-1970s, could be that democracy here is in full flow. There is rather a surfeit of freedom we as a society enjoy and which we tend to use and misuse to our heart's content. In most respects there is not much difference in the style of functioning between the NDA and UPA. Modi has not been able to chart a new course. It also meant a slow march forward for the nation, adhering to the Hindu Rate of Growth, other than for most parts of the Manmohan Singh era when GDP rate rose up to nine per cent and then started falling. Overall, India remains where it was long ago.

Contrast this with China, where the word of the party is law and the top executive of the nation is duty-bound to implement its diktat. That helped take matters forward, while the elected leader and government of India will keep squirming in their chairs once a plan is rolled out for implementation; as in the case of the farmer protests in Delhi now. An assessment now is that China will, in a decade's time, overtake the United States as the world's largest economy. The corresponding scenario for India will be unpredictable. At the same time, Indian democracy has its strengths. A self-acclaimed chaiwala has become the chief executive of the nation of 1.4 billion people. This itself is a big step forward for democracy from the decades after Independence when one family concentrated the power in its hands and ruled the nation for three successive generations. Democracy or any system is fine as long as it helps in the growth of the nation and welfare of its people. Democracy per se or the freedom that it offers people will alone not suffice. Other factors that need to drive a nation is a robust economy and for that a participatory economic vision is a must where the Opposition too must lend its weight. After all, good economics alone will enable growth and progress it and partisanship is not expected while dealing with issues of national importance.

British misjudged strength of Nangbah-led Jaintia rebellion

By H H Mohrmen

A mere disturbance which turns to a fight for Independence would be the best title of the entire study of the Jaintia rebellion led by U Kiang Nangbah. Like a fire which started from a single spark, the rising in a petty eleka by few tribal was what the British considered the Jaintia rebellion to be when it initially started. In the beginning the Jaintia rebellion as it is commonly called was not taken seriously by the British government, till it became well organized and gained support from every nook and corner of the hill areas and went beyond the government's control. The British underestimated the uprising and thought it was restricted to people of only one eleka. And they were not wrong in their assumption either because even the Daloi of eleka Jowai was not against the government.

The British miscalculated the general feelings of the people of the entire hills portion of erstwhile Jaintia kingdom towards the highhandedness of the government's officers and the domination of a foreign power over their land. The British had treacherously captured Jaintiapur on March 16, 1835 and this created ill-feelings against the foreign rulers among the hills people. The feeling of being subjugated by a foreign power is what compelled the people to join in the fight despite the internal politics among the elekas and their animosity against each other. The officers of the government also failed to judge the feelings of the people of the hills portion of Jaintia kingdom and did not anticipate that their anger against the empire would be able to unite the people of the elekas of the erstwhile kingdom under one banner.

The British officer did not anticipate that an upheaval of a small tribal group could create so much trouble for the British Empire. Captain BWD Murton Deputy Commissioner of the Cossyah and Jynteah Hills, in his letter to Major J.C. Houghton, officiating Agent of Governor General, North East frontier in his letter No. 278, dated Cheerapoonjee, the 28th August 1862 stated that the rebels have no general grievance, such as would in any way justify or account for rebellion of some dozen of inhabitants of which in ordinary

circumstances had nothing in common, but were also at feud with each other.

There is no denying the fact that after the British had conquered the Jaintia kingdom and kept the king and royal family under pension, the internal differences among the communities which by now had organized themselves from Raids in one village to elekas (which comprises of several village headed by their respective Dalois) were in constant conflict with each other. In fact the region abounds with folk stories where elekas were in hostility and were in constant feud with one another especially after the fall of the Jaintia kingdom. During the glorious reign of the Jaintia kingdom, the elekas were under one sovereign dominion and they respected their king so there were no stories of hostility amongst them.

Capt Murton however admitted that the only grievance which can be considered as one is the solitary instance of Police interference with religious ceremony at Jallong Ilakah (eleka Jalong) which is also established by oral narrative. Captain Murton was referring to the instance when the police on being informed that the people of the raid Jalong were going to perform their annual 'Pastieh Kaiksoo' went to the spot and intervened in the ceremony. The British were under the wrong impression that the pastieh which included men donning warrior attire with their swords and shields and performing warrior dances, were preparing a rebellion against the government. Government officials not only stopped the ceremony but also confiscated all the swords and shields that the people used in the warrior dance. The local tribal people consider this to be a direct interference in their religious beliefs which amounted to sacrilege. Unfortunately ever since the act of sacrilege was committed by the British soldiers the people of raid Jalong had not been able to revive the traditional warrior dance of the people in the area. The interference sounded the death knell on the tradition.

That the ceremony was performed away from the village on the bank of the river Myntdu adjacent to where part of the river called Kaiksoo is located was perhaps performed by the Dhar clan of Jalong

because 'ka Kaiksoo' is the clan's deity. Perhaps the location where the dance was performed being a forest also convinced the British that the rebels were preparing their guerilla warfare against the government. The area is surrounded by at least four sacred groves, the Jalong sacred forest, the Tuber sacred forest at Chohchrieh village, the Chyrmang sacred forest and the Khapiaba sacred forest near Jlongnoh village.

In his communiqué Murton was also convinced that mere interference with religious ceremony in Jallong will not account for a rebellion in Raliang (Raliang) district. The officials have rightly calculated that the sheer distance of Jalong from Raliang will make it impossible for the two to join forces in fighting the British. The leader of the two elekas Raliang and Jowai and Jalong were part of the eleka Jowai and were also always feuding against each other. The British assumption was the Daloi Raliang will not have any inclination to fight alongside the Daloi of Jowai even if it was against a common enemy.

It is an obvious fact that religion played a very crucial role in convincing the Pnar and the War to fight against the foreign dominion which later becomes the fight for independence of the Hills people of the Jaintia kingdom from the British raj. The interference of the British official in the religious activity of the people compelled them to unite and made other elekas join in the fight against the oppressors.

Capt. BWD Murton is also of the opinion that he cannot term a complaint against taxation a grievance as the governments were perfectly at liberty to impose what taxes they pleased on their own subjects. The Capt was right in his assessment and moreover according to oral narratives, it was only the Daloi of eleka Jowai who had started collecting the house tax imposed by the British government on his people. The government initiated the collection of house tax from Jwai perhaps because it is the seat of the eleka and was also the place where the only police station was located. As it turned out, it was a major blunder that the Capt committed because levying taxes on tribals who believe

that land belongs to them is a wrong move.

Land is an integral part of tribal life and culture and their lives revolve around the land which they believe is God given. Nature is also the dwelling place of the nature gods 'ki ryngkaw ki basa' and they believe they have complete ownership over the land and no power can take that away from them. Besides paying tax is an alien idea and compelling them to pay tax on their own house was an absurd idea they could not accept.

In his letter to the Officiating Commissioner of Assam, dated Jowai, the 30th of September 1862 BWD Murton DC of Cossyah and Jynteah hills informed that no chiefs of sufficient influence had as yet delivered themselves up. In his journal BWD Murton informed that at Jowai he met the Dolloye (Daloi) of Shillong Muntang (Shilliang Myntang) and Jowai and when asked about the rebellion, the former feigned ignorance about the rebellion while the latter casually stated that it could be because of the Police interference with the religious ceremony at Jallong. What this journal entry by Murton tells us is about the power and influence of the rebellion. The rebellion had so much influence that even the two Dalois who are with the government feigned ignorance and refused to talk about the proposed rebellion to the government perhaps out of fear of being punished by the rebels.

True to the guerilla tactics that they employed, the leader of the rebellion remained elusive and the government has not been able to even identify this leader for a very long time. As a matter of fact according to oral stories the rebels from the beginning had arrived at a consensus and elected U Kiang Nangbah as their leader, but the government intelligence failed to identify the leader of the uprising till the end of September 1862.

End notes: I must thank Tarun Bharitya who is married to 'ka pyrsa ka ksu' the grand niece of U Kiang Nangbah for having the confidence to share with me the documents pertaining to the Jaintia rebellion which helped me in this important work of recreating the history of the rebellion.

Email: hhmohrmen67@gmail.com

British cultural hegemony and U Kiang Nangbah

By Dr. Omarlin Kyndiah

An Irish poet, dramatist, and prose writer William Butler Yeats once said, "In dreams begin responsibility". The patriot whose death anniversary we are commemorating was a perfect epitome of this. He is U Kiang Nangbah who dreamt of an independent motherland and shouldered the responsibility of leading the fight against the British rule. On the occasion of the 158th Death anniversary of U Kiang Nangbah, we are reminded of how India fought to free itself from the shackles of colonial rule, and the stories still reverberate in our hearts. From the Great Revolt of 1857 to the attainment of independence in 1947 lakhs of freedom fighters fought to free the country from British tyranny.

The Indian freedom struggle was a long and arduous one. It started with the revolt of 1857, which is twenty-two years after the Jaintia Kingdom was annexed by the British. The Indian National Movement was one of the biggest mass movements the world has ever seen. It was a movement that inspired millions of people of all classes to revolt against the colonial empire.

After the Anglo-Burmese War of 1824-26, the British came into closer contact with the number of hill tribes in the Northeast region. Though at first, it took the form of an understanding with the British against the forces of Ava, but later because of the repeated incursions, differences came about which finally led to armed conflicts. The case of the Khasi resistance of 1829 led by U Tirot Sing Syiem is one such instance. However, it was only with the surrender of U Tirot Sing on January 13, 1833, on condition that his life be spared that the Khasi resistance came to an end.

In the context of the Jaintias, though, the event of 1857 has no major impact, yet the reforms that were carried out had an important effect on the Jaintias.

The British annexed the Jaintia Kingdom in 1835 and destroyed the political edifice which had been built, brick by brick, by the Jaintias. The top structure was completely destroyed when the institution of the Jaintia King (Syiem) was abolished, and the rich fertile plains of the Jaintia Parganas was annexed to Sylhet district and some areas to Cachar district, while the Gobha Raj and other smaller principalities were annexed to Nowgong district. This marks the end of the golden era in the political history of the Jaintias. The British adopted a policy of least interference and left the Jaintia people almost entirely to themselves for a period of more than two decades. During these periods Kiang Nangbah became fully aware of the policies and plans of the British to impose authority on the Jaintias.

The British realised that political, administrative, and financial control exercised by them were primarily based on the bayonet and they attempted to justify their colonial power on ideological grounds. They did it by establishing cultural hegemony over the locals. This was done by arguing that the local cultures were decadent and inferior and that those of the colonial masters were superior. The conversion of a number of Jaintias and using them to expand their base by the church caused suspicions about the real intent of the British in the minds of the people.

However, the anti-British feelings started when the British India Government attempted to impose taxes and interfered with the

custom and religious activities of the people. These acts are viewed by the people as an attempt of the British to impose authority and make the people "submissive to that authority" and to "acknowledge the supremacy of the British government". In 1860-61, The British imposed a house tax and income tax and also prevented cremation of the dead - a traditional practice of the indigenous faith. These activities led to the revolt of the Jaintias against British imperialism. A man of commitment to his people, U Kiang Nangbah could not remain indifferent to their plight. He took up leadership of the Rebellion in January 1862, waged a war against the colonial rulers. The colonial records attest to the fact that it could be suppressed after prolonged and arduous military operations and that the government found it difficult in the face of Nangbah's guerilla tactics. The British had to reinforce regiments to conduct a full-scale military operation against U Kiang Nangbah and his men and yet they described it as a "Little War". However, as it happened throughout history, Kiang Nangbah was caught with the help of a traitor and was hanged after a "mock trial" on the December 30, 1862 at Jowai.

The Jaintias continued their fight even after U Kiang's death but in an unorganised manner. People in places like Rymbai, Padu, Nanggingi, 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 while some surrendered and others were taken as prisoners (except for Oossa Marateang (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 16 January 1863).

Kiang Nangbah's reply to Brigadier Dunsord and Captain Morton, Commissioner on the Act XI of 1857 during the proceedings in the case of U Kiang Nangbah Charged with Rebellion, is one that bears reflection in these times. He said, "I shall speak the whole truth though I am hanged for it. I am neither a Dolloi nor Pator. I have attended to my fields. In the cold season I have traded with Meekiers. Manick Dolloi held a durbar at Jowai, at which he informed all the ryots that by order of the Government the religious observances and burning of the dead were prohibited. On hearing this I thought it was all up with us, and I therefore said at the durbar that I would not pay any tax."

Today, as we remember the supreme sacrifices that U Kiang Nangbah had made 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 Swar Sutnga, U Long Padu, U Mon Rymbai, U Chey Rangbah, U Bang Raliang, U Kher Pator Raliang, U Woh Riang, U Mulon Mynso, U Kiang Sule, and U Kat Changpung.

As I conclude, I would like to remind our youth that we should not simply harp upon past glories. In order to make our dreams a reality, we must struggle to strive and not to yield. Meghalaya needs a new and young generation imbued with new ideas, new values, new hopes, and new vigour in the social, economic, and political sphere to make the dream of our leaders a reality.

(The writer is General Secretary of Sein Raji Niamtre Shillong. Email kyndiahomarlin@gmail.com)

TO THE EDITOR

Its a 'No' to development in Meghalaya

Editor,

I was reading the report, "No NOC for railhead" (ST Dec 27, 2020) and am amused at an institution that's literally on its last legs as far as resources from the formal/legal sectors is concerned has to put spokes in the wheels of development even as they happily allow cement companies and limestone by the millions of tonnes to be mined, at great cost to the environment. There's something very wrong with the kind of people being elected both to the state legislature and the district councils. They are at best people with commercial interests but will not allow anything above board to happen. A report on the same day speaks about the illegal toll/check gates set up by the Councils which we are all aware are for the

purpose of collecting money and not about checking illegal consignments of timber cut from the forests under the watch of the ADCs. Anyone who travels on the Jowai-Shillong-Guwahati road or the Nongstoin-Shillong-Guwahati road will not fail to see pine trees whose girth does not meet the specifications set up the State Forest Department, being carted daily with no bothered to take action because the only interest is so collect, collect and collect. The ADCs are like buckets with holes. They are never satiated and will never be until the last tree has been brought down and nothing more is left to cut. It's also a stark irony that the State Forest Department with a clutch of officers and guards only control 4% of the forests in the state. And these same people are supposed to be the custodians of our customs and traditions! What a farce!

The railways have come to Garo Hills and brought in

much ease in transportation of goods and humans but in the Khasi Hills it's a 'No' 'No' to every idea of development. Those who produce goods that are exportable often find the transportation cost higher than the production cost. How long will this negativity persist and people keep quiet? What Meghalaya needs right now is a revolution by right thinking youth who are looking at entrepreneurship and not government service as their future. For too long we have allowed our fates to be decided by a bunch of self-seeking politicians and wannabe politicians under the guise of pressure groups. These two groups of vested interests are hell bent on keeping Meghalaya at subsistence level forever while they have shamelessly accumulated personal wealth not just for one generation for the second and third generation as well.

Every year we faithfully read about the Lukha River

turning blue. Some say it's due to acid mine drainage; others claim that it is due to effluents from cement companies. Till date there is no definite report about the actual cause although NEHU seems to have done some studies. Whatever it is, it shows that the state and its government don't care what happens to our rivers and streams and will continue coal mining to carry on unabated the way it is being done - the rat hole mining variety and no one can do a thing about it. The rule of the jungle prevails and lawlessness is the order of the day in this state. And the public silently acquiesces in all this venality. Who will save Meghalaya from itself?

Yours etc.,

RK Kharmawlong,
Via email

U Thlen in our midst

Editor,

It's shocking that the

HNLC should make allegations on social media and in the local media of misuse of power, corruption and scam after scam naming politicians in the MDA government. The Khasi Thlen is now alive and kicking in the government. The Thlen thrives on the blood of its own people and that's what it is feeding on now - the blood of the weak, the powerless and the poor. The Deputy Chief Minister had made a feeble defence of these allegations but the allegations call for a deeper enquiry by the Central Investigation Agencies. The break-up of Rs 399 crore for Covid expenses has not yet been put up in the public domain. Hence we the public must not shy away from asking straight and incisive questions about the state of our economy and finances. We often tend to remain silent or to ignore allegations of corruption and to take it as an 'accepted' trend. This is going to destroy the state because of the thriving black

money transactions. It is laughable that some of these corrupt politicians occupy the front seats in any religious gathering. Now the poor are getting poorer; the teachers are not paid their dues; muster roll workers are on strike and government employees not paid their DA; the MDA government has plunged Meghalaya into an abyss. This coalition government is best described as a 'Coalition of Unscrupulous Politicians'.

A directionless government with zero investment and failing governance is having a very negative effect on our state. If there is no immediate course correction we are staring at a Financial Emergency anytime soon.

Yours etc.,

Dominic Stadlin Wankhar
Shillong-3

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

"The brutal history of colonialism is one in which white people literally stole land and people for their own gain and material wealth."

— Patrisse Cullors

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No.134 SHILLONG, TUESDAY, DECEMBER 29, 2020

Need for conclusive studies

THE clamour by pressure groups and now the Khasi Hills District Council for an independent probe into the alleged uranium leakage from a tank adjoining an exploratory mine in South West Khasi Hills is well taken. An environmentalist who visited the place and measured the radiation levels claims it is very high and consequently dangerous for living beings. Since then the Government has engaged the North Eastern Hill University (NEHU) and IIT Guwahati to carry out their studies and submit their reports accordingly. These two institutions are considered quasi-government bodies because they rely on government funding. The groups demanding the probe by the so-called independent agency also have to names those agencies. Government of India is unlikely to permit any international agency into a territory with uranium deposits. So the institution has to be of Indian vintage. Any group demanding anything from the government ought to have a blueprint of action and suggest specific measures — in this case the name of the independent agency they feel they can trust. Just telling the government so do something without taking the trouble of doing their own research is not pragmatic. If the groups are dissatisfied with NEHU and/or IIT Guwahati they need to find the Institute they trust and push government to engage it. Government should always be presented with practical alternatives instead of vague ultimatums.

On another more serious note the Lukha river which turns blue around this season has interestingly not attracted the same kind of anxiety from any of the pressure groups, other than a hue and cry from the students' body of that area. That riverine life continues to die year after year since 2007, due to the toxins in the river does not seem to pain anyone; not even the residents of the area and district. No self-acclaimed environmentalist has visited the Lukha to take a sample of the water and to carry out an independent study in a laboratory other than that owned by Government, if indeed there is any such lab. What's interesting is that NEHU located within the state has so far not come up with any study so that a course correction can be made. Is the blue colour due to the effluents from cement companies as alleged? Does acid mine drainage from coal mines have anything to do with the Lukha changing colour? Unless an in-depth scientific study is carried out, there will always be claims and counter-claims. Whatever the reason for this rare phenomenon, it requires urgent action.

When inner clouds blind the heart

By Deepa Majumdar

To answer this basic question — why the Khasi people made the choices they did (favoring the Caucasian west, while xenophobic towards mainland India) — one must be nuanced and objective. One must first understand Khasi history, identifying those aspects of western culture they embraced — especially religion, arts (especially music), and the great progressive political movements of the west. Moreover, one must understand the history of the west. Finally, one must understand the impact of modernity on the fate of indigenous communities worldwide. In the end, one must understand our universal human condition of existential exile.

It is true that colonialism decimated indigenous communities worldwide — especially their native religions. In the words of James Rachels, "Europeans and their cultural descendants in America have a shabby history of destroying native cultures in the name of Christianity and Enlightenment, not to mention self-interest." But Rachels' words represents a repentant secular progressive west. From a more objective standpoint, colonialism was perhaps a historically necessitated coat of many colors that included benevolent white men and women who sacrificed their lives to serve the native. Not all religious missionaries destroyed native religions. Moreover, Christ Himself perhaps spoke to at least some sincere souls, which is why Christian devotion is sometimes more alive in the former colonies than in the west. Adding to this, we have, in the context of Shillong, great medical missionaries like Dr. Arthur Hughes, the Schweitzer of Assam. Stalwarts like Dr. Hughes have enriched the colonial legacy of Western Europe and America upon Khasi society. This background should help us understand Khasi admiration for the west. But it does not. Many brown Indian Dkhars have also given up their lives to serve the Khasi people. The venerable monks of the Ramakrishna order have served Meghalaya for decades. Have they received the same accolades as Dr. Hughes?

But more mystifying than this is the fact that Khasis have welcomed something as culturally corrosive and morally dangerous as the decadent aspects of the modern west, which are foreign, not only to Khasi indigenous culture, but to the human condition itself. For the deracinating passions the west worships make foreigners of us all. For a people so afraid of demographic and cultural extinction, why have Khasis embraced, al-

most suicidally, modern western culture — an insidious pecuniary-conspicuous force that can extinguish their culture in a matter of a few years? I can understand admiring great western philosophers like Plato and Aristotle, or Neoplatonic masters like Plotinus, or medieval Christian saints like St. Francis of Assisi and others. I can understand admiring British virtues or the great good side of modern America — its democratic principles, philanthropic tradition, rare sensitivity to ethics, generosity, and legalism. But I cannot understand emulating western religious bigotry, or the more sensuous expressions of western art, music, and culture. Nor can I understand Khasi complacency before the culturally corrosive west — a far greater threat to their existence than the mainland Indian, or even the illegal refugee. Armed with pecuniary might, the modern west is formidable, compared to the helpless refugee. From the stand point of justice or even survival, who or what is the real enemy? The Indian Dkhar, or the cultural hegemony of the west?

Having grown up in the Shillong-of-the-sixties, I recall my own attraction to the west. At least part of our fascination was ethical and aesthetic — hence, genuine and universal. We admired the discipline, moral awareness, industriousness, and justice in the west. We admired their scientific temperament. We admired their savants and saints. Yet, even back then, there was something humiliating about our enthrallment with Enid Blyton. That we sought to recreate Blyton's Five Find-Outers in the hills of Shillong — thus recreating British fiction in post-independent India — exposed the powerful displacement caused by our neo-colonial homelessness. I can understand admiring Blyton's wisdom, relative innocence, and high moral standards for children — but not her racism or sexism. To look for elves and fairies amidst the stalwart pines of Shillong may sound innocent. But is it?

So my questions linger... Why does the culturally corrosive modern west fascinate the Khasi people, although it is the greatest threat to their existence? Why does modern India repel them, although they benefit at the cost of the Indian taxpayer?

The modern west is a spiritual desert, as is China. Bereft of all soothing waters of wisdom — except, in a snatch of a song here and there — the west has become a shopping mall, a

therapy hub, and a drug den all rolled into one. Since the schizoid historical separation of science and religion in the history of Europe, western civilization has progressively fallen away from the spiritual heart of religion, thus losing its foothold in the life-saving ascetic norms that enliven all religions. Having replaced the true Christian Trinity with a new unholy trinity — capitalism, the so-called sexual revolution, and the hi-tech war—the west has lost its soul. There is therefore little to admire about this west — except the lingering light of western savants that continues to illumine western civilization. The spiritual crisis endemic to modernity (an offspring of western culture) reveals itself especially in philosophy and the arts. What else can it be but a crisis, when philosophy lacks wisdom, poetry loses rhythm, and music becomes noise — when a whole civilization loses sight of the supreme virtues of chastity and renunciation — when blind utilitarianism replaces contemplation? So why emulate this version of the west, instead of its aforementioned virtues? Why emulate its blinding materialism that desecrates the environment and denudes this beautiful earth? Instead, why not emulate thoughtful westerners who seek refuge in philanthropy? The answer lies in our own worldliness and conspicuous-materialistic aspirations. We admire that which we ourselves long for.

Modernity threatens indigenous communities worldwide. Any community, whether indigenous or not, has the right to self-defense, when threatened with extinction. So I more than understand Khasis resisting racist Indians, or voyeuristic Indian tourists seeking human zoos, or Hindu fundamentalists threatening the rights of Christians and other minorities, or the sensual culture of Bollywood. I also understand fears of demographic extinction, which, however, should never override the human rights of others. While indigenous communities deserve self-actualization, the surge to sovereignty must have reasonable limits, without which, it destroys justice.

Like every nation, India has its ugly stereotype. But Khasi xenophobia does not aim at the ugly Indian. Instead it aims at the helpless Indian who has lived and served in Meghalaya for generations. Moreover, like indigenous black communities in Africa, Khasis have borrowed western racism (secular and Christian) to deliver a vicarious (more lethal) secondary racism against the hapless mainland Indian

Dkhar. Khasi racism and xenophobia therefore have two layers. The first is indigenous, but the second is borrowed from the west — a vicarious prejudice sometimes more evident in Khasi Christian rejections of other Indian religions. Both are to be distinguished from the understandable Khasi rejection of noxious Indian condescension and racism.

What then is the ultimate solution to xenophobia? The answer, which must be spiritual, existential, and therefore collective, defies politics altogether. How does an identity-laden traditional community ventilate itself with the fresh air of universality? By recognizing our shared human condition of existential exile, which turns us all into perennial outsiders or existential Dkhars. Religious savants have always urged us to let go of the world, even as we celebrate it. If the Psalmist sings "... the earth is filled with Thy riches" (Ps. 103: 24), then St. Bonaventure celebrates the traces of God in this world:

"Open your eyes therefore, prick up your spiritual ears, open your lips, and apply your heart, that you may see your God in all creatures, may hear Him, praise Him, love and adore Him, magnify and honor Him, lest the whole world rise against you."

But a still higher teaching tells us that despite these celestial traces, we must let go of the world. Our earthly lives therefore are subject to a twofold exile. First, the fall of man — whether through Vedantic maya, the Judeo-Christian idea of original sin, or the Plotinian idea of tohma (audacity) — puts him in a perennial state of passive exile from his true home in God. But second, he must consciously practice detachment, so he can experience active exile, by letting go of the world. Or, as Thomas a Kempis says:

"If you would stand surely in grace, and profit much in virtue, consider yourself as an exile and a pilgrim here in this life..."

Given our twofold state of exile — the first intrinsic, the second, potential — why persecute those in a state of literal political exile? Why exile others through xenophobia? Why add to our inner alienation and exile, by imbibing the hatred endemic in racism and xenophobia?

The physical clouds that enshroud the majestic hills of Meghalaya are ethereal in their beauty. But the moral clouds of racism and xenophobia are toxins of the heart that can only boomerang back to hurt the Khasi people. Email: dmajumda@gmail.com

Fake TV TRP saga becomes gang war between Republic TV and Times Now

Channels linked to BJP put Modi government in a fix

By Sushil Kutty

The Mumbai Police has wound a complicated path in its quest to discipline Republic TV, struggling to get a foothold, gaining it and then, inexplicably, losing it at that exact time when it looked like the cops were on top and the journalist was down in the dumps with his face in the mud! And now, in the unending Republic TV-Mumbai Police saga, with yet another twist to the narrative, it clouds the mind to fully comprehend that, at the end of the day, it all boiled down to what — an ugly war for supremacy between two media outlets — one established and hoary in age, the other way considerably younger and on the go with whatever it takes. And the Mumbai Police says Republic TV has been doing exactly that, engaging in "whatever it takes, legal and illegal" to stay ahead of every news channel in TRP. The police and a whole lot of other people call it the 'Fake

from 2006 to 2016 and Goswami now claims that if Times Now slipped to "2nd or 3rd or 4th" spot on the TRP totem it was because he, Arnab Goswami, quit Times Now and with him moved out a huge-huge chunk of the Times Now audience to the Republic TV news channel he launched.

"My popularity, my popularity," says Goswami and, to tell the truth, Times Now's star anchor Navika Kumar and star reporter Nikunj Garg, both of whom worked under Goswami, have no answer forthcoming. Navika Kumar called Republic TV's manoeuvre to claim top-spot the ploy of a beaten adversary, the last resort in the face of continuous defeat. Nikunj Garg went a step further and branded Goswami's Republic TV a "propaganda channel of a party."

That is rather cute. Funny! If Republic TV is the "propaganda arm" of a particular political party, what is Times Now? Both are equally wedded and sworn to pitching the ruling party's propaganda into every home and hearth that both are beamed into. Times Now anchors take the BJP

TRP Case.' TRP, as everybody would know is which TV news channel/TV show gets watched for the most part of the day. And, according to the Mumbai Police, Republic TV allegedly used illegal and wily ways to "suppress" Times Now's TRP to second spot to perch itself on top!

To that Goswami says "bollocks, how can that be possible?" If anybody makes any news channel "tops", says Goswami, it's the viewer, the audience, the "diehard fans" of the anchor who won hearts and eyeballs with his manner of presenting news. "It isn't my fault if people like my style," boasts Goswami, much to the disgust of his peers in other channels including the ones in Times Now. In fact, Times Now has called out Republic TV's unvarnished and blatant takeover of TRP supremacy using all means classified 'hook or crook.' "It's the ultimate disgrace, blatant cheating of humanity," said a Times Now news anchor the day the Mumbai Police held its second press conference to let the Republic's cat out of the bag and expecting Goswami to blanch in a meek meowwww. But, instead, the cat snarled!

Goswami retaliated with the #CanTouchRepublic hashtag and "17 points" on why so? According to the Republic TV Network, 1) the Mumbai Police have no jurisdiction on TRP; 2) a thorough probe of 'Barc' will reveal how hollow the Mumbai Police claims/allegations of Republic TV using unfair means are and 3) Republic TV will take on everyone in court, "you just wait and see."

The Mumbai Police are not talking after its second presser on the 'Fake TRP Case.' The first one boomeranged with the Supreme Court taking the Mumbai Police to task for calling the presser. That did not pierce Mumbai Police armour. So, the 2nd presser came along. The Mumbai Police has filed a charge-sheet and might do an addendum shortly, fueling talk that "it's a witch-hunt" and that the Mumbai Police, especially Commissioner of Police Param Bir Singh, will not stop at anything till Arnab Goswami's goose is thoroughly cooked.

The rest of the mainstream media are steering clear of the case. Minus Times Now and the Times of India of course. Recall that Arnab Goswami was Times Now's star anchor

line hook, line and sinker and spread it far and wide. Ditto Republic TV. Times Now's Navika Kumar and Rahul Shivshankar are no less BJP moles in the media than Arnab Goswami is. When it comes to covering politics — which is what they do on weekdays, primetime, night after night — they toe the BJP line and do everything in their command to suppress and flay the voices of the opposition parties, whether it's the Congress, the Samajwadi Party, the BSP, CPM, CPI, DMK, TMC, Shiv Sena... For both Times Now and Republic TV, their day begins and ends with singing hosannas for Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his party BJP. Both channels know what's good for them and they are shameless, unabashedly so, in being totally under the thumb of the BJP and the Modi Government. In fact, that is partly why I&B minister Prakash Javadekar does not appear fully on Arnab Goswami's side when it comes to the 'fake TRP case.' He has to look out for the other vassal channel, Times Now! And Navika Kumar is as powerful and needed in the Centre's corridors of power as Arnab Goswami is. So, Javadekar and the Modi Government did not jump to the Republic TV's rescue as most would have expected.

What we are witnessing is a series of power struggles, all over-lapping each other. It began with the BJP losing power in Maharashtra and the Shiv Sena-led MVA forming government. If the Palghar lynching had happened under a BJP dispensation, Arnab Goswami wouldn't have gone hammer and tongs after the Maharashtra Government and the Mumbai Police wouldn't have lost its head. And Times Now wouldn't have made an issue of TRP, taken the issue of who's 'No.1' and who's 'No.2' to the Mumbai Police. The funniest part is India Today TV made a clean getaway!! (IPA Service)

TO THE EDITOR

Entry-pass system repugnant to Constitution

Editor, Meghalaya Government has recently introduced e-pass system for tourists and outsiders willing to visit the state. From what I have seen in the media reports, it appears that the state has practically slammed the door on people like us who love to visit Shillong on week-ends and other festive times. We visit Shillong because it carries a lot of fond memories of our old connections with the place. Not only was the place part of Assam but also its capital for over 150 years. Many people of Assam have relations and friends in Shillong. Some have retained their houses in the hill station as a getaway from the heat of the plains. Besides, Shillong has been the getaway destination for the Assamese for a long time. Convenient because of close proximity, good

roads and salubrious climate, Shillong also provides an easy option for rejuvenation of health. When we visit Shillong, we spend on our stay, food and entertainment, besides doing some shopping as well. Certainly, we add to the money circulation in the state.

Now, suddenly, with one stroke of the pen, all these have gone. We have to per force seek e-pass to revisit the state. According to one published report in a Guwahati daily, Meghalaya has decided not to allow entry to tourists who would not be staying overnight. Every tourist will have to give details of place of stay. I find it incomprehensible why any tourist cannot go to Shillong in the morning and return by evening? What is the rationale?

Come to think of it, Meghalaya is behaving like a foreign country by introducing a system which seeks to prevent the right of a fellow Indian to enter the state. This is a violation of the Constitution of India which allows every citizen

free access to all parts of the country. As a north-easterner myself, I find this extreme protectionism repugnant to my fundamental right as a citizen of this country. Seriously, somebody should challenge this unconstitutional system in the court of law. If Meghalaya government does not take back this "visa system", we, the harmless tourists, may be compelled to file a PIL in Gauhati High Court challenging this regressive action.

Yours etc.,
Alpana Khound,
Via email

II

Editor, The Shillong Times of December 22, last quoted our Deputy Chief Minister Prestone Tynsong as having said that the permanent residents, both tribals and non-tribals, need not worry about their exit and entry. The impression he has created is that those who are permanent residents, need not go through the rigma-

role of registering and reporting at facilitation centres. As a permanent resident of the place, I was much happy to read the minister's statement. However, I am a little skeptical about it after hearing the tales from some of my friends. One friend told me that he had gone to Assam on December 23 for a one-night's stay. He had to pre-register himself online, obtain a computer-generated pass and was required to report to the Umting facilitation centre both ways. He had to produce his EPIC as a proof of his bona fide. Another non-tribal friend while returning from a tour, was detained, questioned endlessly and then "let off". These reports have created a sense of confusion among the citizens who are normal residents of Meghalaya. One person told me that it is not enough to get clearance from the facilitation centre; they had to also show identity card at Byrnihat in two places. So, what is the prescribed procedure? Is there any deviation at the ground level

from what the government at the top had decided?

I therefore urge upon the concerned authorities to be kind enough to issue a clarification detailing the prescribed norms for the residents when they wish to travel out of the state or return home. And also, what about our children who are studying/working outside and wish to be back home?

Yours etc.,
S.K. Deb,
Shillong-4

III

Editor, The entry pass system recently introduced in Meghalaya has created problems for the indigenous people of the Northeast. In order to tackle foreigners, Meghalaya has decided to deny entry to people like us. We are never going to settle down in Meghalaya. We have our own state Nagaland which has judiciously kept Dimapur out of the purview of ILP. We welcome everybody who

wishes to visit us for business or tourism. However, some of us need to visit Meghalaya a few times in a year, because of our children who are students of some private schools in Shillong. My daughter tells me that her school is going to reopen on January 11. The permit system is a dampener for me. I am in a quandary as to whether I should withdraw my child from Shillong and put her in some good school in Guwahati. May I request the political leaders of Meghalaya to keep Shillong out of the new permit system? This will help people like us to travel to Shillong without any restrictions, like others can freely travel to Dimapur.

Yours etc.,
Bendang Ao,
Via email

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

"The direct use of force is such a poor solution to any problem, it is generally employed only by small children and large nations."

-- David Friedman

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No.135 SHILLONG, WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 30, 2020

New strain, more stress

THE new strain or mutations of Covid-19 that would spread faster has arrived in India. With the Union Health ministry confirming its presence in eight persons who arrived from the UK at various airports in recent days, a safe guess is this might already be spreading here from the loads of returnees in recent weeks. Its spread being faster, a heightened alert is called for. This arrives at a time when the worst of the Covid-19 pandemic was thought to be over for us.

Notably, the strain was first detected in the UK in September. A count for the past couple weeks here alone showed over 33,000 people have returned to the country from the UK. This, at a time when the Christmas and year-end revelry season had just set in. Stretching the scene back to September could mean larger numbers are already here. By the time India alerted itself, many might already have reached here and transmitted the virus to their local contacts. Also, the new strain is now detected in several European nations and Japan. The UK was just a start. The same strain appears to have had some two dozen mutations. Doctors here say the virus might have done local mutations here too, as such viruses do.

Extreme caution and a three-week shutdown at the start of the Covid-19 spread in India since March did not help much in checking the spread. India emerged as the worst-hit nation after the US in the number of infections. Now Russia confirms it faced the third worst scenario in terms of deaths. Brazil and several European nations were hard-hit and the global economy is down in the dumps.

On the positive side, we have learned to live with this virus. The confidence levels of both governments and the general public have risen. The virus from China is not as deadly as it was thought to be, though several prominent names also paid with their lives as they were infected. Scientists say the vaccines currently under production will suffice in handling the new strains/mutations too; and that, if need be, modified vaccines can be introduced in a matter of six weeks. This offers some relief.

Notably, the scare of the new strain emerged just as four states have started a dry run a day ago, preparatory to the start of the vaccine storage and distribution processes across the nation from next month. Hope is that we have the wherewithal to handle the emerging crisis too in effective ways.

We should build our children's future first

By Dominick "Dauni Roising" Rymbai

India is an ancient country, with the Indus Valley civilisation as proof; but a young nation-state. Looking at that time period, the ancestors of the present-day English people were literally barbarians compared to the amazing drainage system, architectural wonders and culture of the Indus Valley people.

A news article, "Materials to be on display during Monolith Fest" from The Shillong Times, dated March 28, 2016 mentioned a research excavation project carried out by archaeologist Dr Marco Mitri, along with Prof Desmond Kharmawphlang and Prof B.Myrboh of NEHU at a site on Lum Sohpetbneng. Neolithic age tools and objects, dating back to 1220 BC, were found after preliminary excavation. That means the Khasi people are an ancient tribe.

The British empire, the one where the sun never set, was built by Englishmen in which they used (and disposed off after use) the blood, sweat and tears of their colonial subjects' men and women. They used these subjects to advance and protect their interests, through their divide and rule policies. Starting off with the Scots, the Welsh and the Irish, they moved on to other colonial subjects - the Indians, Chinese, Africans, Malays, Gurkhas, etc. And like most imperialist powers then, the Christian Missions were used to advance the British interests - the gun on one hand and the Bible on the other. It took the mass non-violent Indian Independence movement of Mahatma Gandhi, a half-naked fakir in their imperialist leader's words, to bring about the beginning of the sunset of the empire. In today's 21st century, the Scots, the Welsh and the Northern Irish are demanding independence from the UK (English) through constitutional, non-violent means.

As we commemorate the 158th Death Anniversary of U Woh Kiang Nangbah and his leadership of the Jaintia Rebellion or Resistance of 1861-62, certain oral narratives, urban legends and academic works come to mind. In his Ph.D. thesis, Prof. Shobhan N. Lamare remarked that "The resistance broke out when certain administrative measures (of the British Raj) were introduced where it affected the religious sentiments and the economic life of the (tribal) people". The religious sentiments started off with the police intervention on the Shad Pateish of Raid Jalong, Elaka Jwai and the ban on cremation rites; the imposi-

tion of house tax added to the economic hardships of the Aam Aadmi. A common man named Kiang Nangbah, literally and figuratively, rose to the occasion and took on the leadership of the Resistance. He was ably supported by the Dollois and other traditional functionaries. The rebellion was purely a tribal movement. In many places of the Jaintia Hills, though the leadership mantle was taken by the traditional official heads, men and women from all walks of life joined the resistance. Women suffered hardships as much as the men.

In 1860-61, Christianity was in its early days in the Jaintia Hills. During the Rebellion urban legend in today's Jwai town has it, supporters of U Woh Kiang Nangbah from today's Pohchnong (the original Jwai village) used to massacre and burnt down the houses of the early Pnar Christians in today's Pohskur (Mission Compound). The Christians were seen as collaborators of the white colonial power. Today, to look at it objectively, it was in accordance with the spirit of those times and the prevalent socio-economic and geo-political factors. Simply, an enemy's friend is an enemy. Post-1947, it is time for all generations, irrespective of religious beliefs, to forgive and forget and move on. Why harp on the past when we can build a better future for our children through unity, collaboration and engagements.

Today, nobody can deny the positive effects of Christianity in our hills, especially in the education and health sectors. Many of our leaders, educators, doctors and nurses, irrespective of clan or caste or creed, have been educated in Christian Mission schools. Also today, Christian Mission hospitals augment the government's efforts to fight the spread of COVID-19 virus.

We are a state of barely 3.2 million people, in a country of 1,350 million people. We share a 443km border with our southern neighbouring country of 160 million people. Surrounded by hundreds of millions of people, it is but natural to worry for our Jaidbynriew. As we demand protection of our interests, the question is: Will a Regulation drafted in the 19th century help to protect us in the 21st century of globalisation and ever-changing scientific and technological innovations? Will violence beget

protection or more violence?

As we move on to a new year with new challenges (hoping and praying that there is no second wave), we should learn from the glory of our past and, the rights and duties of our present.

The Neolithic Age objects proved that we have survived in these hills for thousands of years. In terms of language, the Khasi language belong to the Mon-Khmer group surrounded by the Tibeto-Burman group speakers, a unique case. Geographically, the Khasi-Jaintia-Garo Hills may be considered to be the foothills of the Himalayas but they are also an extension of the ancient Chotanagpur plateau. We are a 3000 year old ancient people! And settled in these ancient Khasi-Jaintia-Garo Hills we call home. We will survive.

Former MLA, Loniak Marbanian used to tell the story of a certain Ahom invasion of our Khasi Hills. Hima Shyllong was the target. The Ahom's war machine camped downstream. Upstream and uphill, the Syiem of Hima Shyllong could not mobilise enough men to meet the Ahoms in battle. So, in the trek downstream, he told all his men to carry 50 leaf plates each but with just enough food bundles. When they break for food, he told all his men to use all the leaf plates for eating and then throw them in the river. The Ahom war camp downstream, saw tens of thousands of leaf plates and imagined a huge army, retreated from the potential battle. For our children's future, we can strategise, without violence. We must not forget the roles of Lokapriya Gopinath Bordoloi and Rev. J.M. Nichols Roy in getting us the protection of the Sixth Schedule within the then composite state of Assam and inclusion in India, not East Pakistan. Also, Meghalaya achieved its full-fledged statehood in 1972 through a non-violent movement.

Much has been written that the British Raj was responsible for uniting this ancient country (and these ancient hills too) into a modern political entity called India. They only did it inadvertently, for their own vested interests. In the Khasi-Jaintia Hills, the colonial rulers used their Divide & Rule policy and cultural/religious domination to suppress the tribals, of which the scars are still present today. We need to remember the Old Khasi anthem by Bah Brek (Late E. Brekrist R. Wanswett), "Khyrniam, U

Pnar, U Bhoi, U War, Udei u paid Khasi baiar" and, encourage unity and discourage petty divisions. We may have been ruled by a white colonial power for a hundred years but forget those with which we had dealings with for a thousand of years. We worship white skin but look down on the brown and wheatish-yellow skin. As part of a young nation in the globalised 21st century, we need to engage, cooperate and collaborate with our fellow Indians from the mainland. Fighting the insurgency hand-in-hand with our able tribal officers and men, the brown skin IAS/IPS officers shed blood, sweat and tears to bring peace to these hills. In the Lockdown, the brown skin took initiatives to support our economically less-privileged. We are Indians first, our passport says so.

Border Management Division is under the Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India. Under the Constitution of our Republic, we have every right to demand a water-tight border with our southern neighbour and the border openings well-managed to facilitate Education, Trade & Commerce and Tourism.

To conclude, we should not hate the white skin. It took an acclaimed academician of Scottish descent, Prof. David Reid Syiemlieh, to confirm the correct date of death of our beloved freedom fighter, U Tirot Sing. English, our official language, is the lingua franca of the world and technology, and we are quite good at it. There's a lot to learn from the positive traits of the English, Rudyard Kipling's poem if.

Our Honourable Prime Minister has invited the Prime Minister of our former colonial power to be the Chief Guest for our 2021 Republic Day celebrations where our 5000 year old civilisation will be showcased. They will sit as Equals, discuss business and geo-politics, and sign agreements that may concern us Khasis too.

P.S.: The writer is a Khasi tribal; a Pnar married to a Khyrniam, with roots in Tuber village and most relatives permanently settled in Jowai town. Brought up in the Niamtre and Roman Catholic traditions, presently he is a member of the Riatsamthiah Presbyterian Church, Shillong. A graduate of IIFT-Delhi, he opted for public service.

Disclaimer: Views are personal; they do not reflect those of the Government of Meghalaya.

2020: The world's deadliest of times and economic downturns

No one ready to forecast what is to come next year

By Nantoo Banerjee

Few will shed tears to sing the dirge of the dying year, 2020. It was a year of fear, the fear of a pandemic the like of which the world never experienced. Covid-19 sent the world into a big death trap and depression. Will the New Year be different? As for now, there is little sign of a strong recovery. The scare of a more deadly mutant Wuhan virus has spoiled the cherished Christmas in the United Kingdom. "Over the last few days, thanks to our world-class genomic capability, we have identified a new variant of the coronavirus, which may be associated with the faster spread in the South of England," UK Health Secretary Matt Hancock told the House of Commons on December 14. The UK has already notified the World Health Organization (WHO) about the variant. Europe and the rest of the world are worried.

Several countries, including India, have suspended travel from Britain until the New Year. Medical scientists and researchers strongly doubt the capability of vaccines to control the new virus variant. The pandemic had hit the world hard though largely sparing China, the controversial source of the virus origin, in terms of the number of people attacked and dead. Reportedly, China even showed a modest economic growth of over three percent in 2020. However, if the spread of the new variant is not controlled, it will mean a fresh economic disaster for countries in 2021.

In December 2019, the first Coronavirus case was identified in China's Wuhan. Initially, it was not considered deadly. At that time, few could imagine the kind of impact this virus would have globally. China recorded the first death on January 11, 2020 and subsequently two months later, on March 11, WHO declared the virus to be a world-wide pandemic. Interestingly, many market players hedged early, figuring the COVID-19 respiratory disease might soon spread around the world.

While the pandemic continues to create panic around the world, the year 2020 would also be remembered for high incidence of terrorist attacks and China's expansionist actions along its western and southern borders. The year witnessed at least 50 major terror strikes across the globe. Not a month passed when some country or the order did not witness mass shooting, suicide bombing, drone and missile attacks, stabbing, kidnapping, ambushing, massacre, looting and beheading. Natural disasters such as earthquakes, flush floods, forest fires, volcano eruptions and cyclones too killed and displaced thousands. India witnessed the worst pest attack in the last two decades. Several states, including Gujarat, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Punjab, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh suffered locust attacks. Cyclone Amphan, classified as one of the most powerful and deadly tropical cyclones, ravaged parts of India and Bangladesh. Forest fires at Uttarakhand engulfed some 51 hectares of Himalayan forest land. Flush floods in Assam ravaged 128 villages and five districts. However, none of these natural disasters and terror strikes could match the damage to life and economy being caused by the pandemic. The panic continues to pervade. (IPA Service)

health worker has the right to be safe at work, and it is a scandal that so many are paying the ultimate price," said Steve Cockburn, Head of Economic and Social Justice at Amnesty International. Many months into the pandemic, health workers are still dying at horrific rates in countries such as Mexico, Brazil and the USA.

India's economic growth suffered its worst fall on record in the first quarter of the current financial year with GDP contracting 23.9 percent. Correspondingly, double-digit GDP contraction reported during the period by other economies included the UK (21.7 percent), France (18.9 percent), Canada (13 percent), Germany (11.3 percent) and Japan (10 percent). Barring China, the world's second largest economy, all major economies witnessed the negative impact of the pandemic.

According to Swiss Re, one of the world's leading providers of reinsurance and insurance, Covid-19 pandemic is likely to put a \$12-trillion hole in the global economic output by the end of next year, a burden far too high for insurers to cover. Said Chief Executive Christian Mumenthaler: "Pandemic, and that's known by the insurance industry, is not a risk you can cover. We think the output loss for the world over these two years will be \$12 trillion. And the balance sheet of insurers are a tiny fraction of that. So a pandemic is a risk that cannot be diversified and therefore it cannot be insured."

In December 2019, the first Coronavirus case was identified in China's Wuhan. Initially, it was not considered deadly. At that time, few could imagine the kind of impact this virus would have globally. China recorded the first death on January 11, 2020 and subsequently two months later, on March 11, WHO declared the virus to be a world-wide pandemic. Interestingly, many market players hedged early, figuring the COVID-19 respiratory disease might soon spread around the world.

While the pandemic continues to create panic around the world, the year 2020 would also be remembered for high incidence of terrorist attacks and China's expansionist actions along its western and southern borders. The year witnessed at least 50 major terror strikes across the globe. Not a month passed when some country or the order did not witness mass shooting, suicide bombing, drone and missile attacks, stabbing, kidnapping, ambushing, massacre, looting and beheading. Natural disasters such as earthquakes, flush floods, forest fires, volcano eruptions and cyclones too killed and displaced thousands. India witnessed the worst pest attack in the last two decades. Several states, including Gujarat, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Punjab, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh suffered locust attacks. Cyclone Amphan, classified as one of the most powerful and deadly tropical cyclones, ravaged parts of India and Bangladesh. Forest fires at Uttarakhand engulfed some 51 hectares of Himalayan forest land. Flush floods in Assam ravaged 128 villages and five districts. However, none of these natural disasters and terror strikes could match the damage to life and economy being caused by the pandemic. The panic continues to pervade. (IPA Service)



The year has proved to be one of the deadliest times to be alive. From locust swarms, earthquakes, floods, landslides, and of course the Coronavirus, the year 2020 has kept everyone at the edge of their seats, waiting for what is to come next.

Going by the current trend, global Corona virus cases at the end of 2020 would cross the 100-million mark and the number of deaths could be close to two million. The list of top 10 countries with most number of virus related deaths names the United States as No.1, followed by Brazil, India, Mexico, the UK, Italy, France, Iran, Spain and Russia. Among the Asian countries hit hard by the pandemic are: India, Bangladesh, Indonesia, the Philippines, Pakistan, Nepal, Iran, the UAE, Oman, Kazakhstan and Armenia. The good news for India is that infections and deaths due to Covid-19 are dropping 14 weeks after the pandemic had peaked. The cases in the third week of December registered a 17.30 percent decline over the previous week, making it the steepest weekly drop so far in percentage terms. The cases, however, rose again in the last week.

The number of active cases per million in India is 223. In comparison, the US has 21,612 active cases per million population and Russia 3,513 per million, listed the union health ministry's data. Sadly, thousands of health workers across the world died of coronavirus infection while trying to save others. It is a crisis on a staggering scale. "Every

TO THE EDITOR

Knowing our heroes more intimately

Editor,

Today is the death anniversary of a great hero who stood for what he believed was the greater good of his people. U Kiang Nangbah had no personal motives. He did what he did because he had a personal conviction and understanding about his duties as a citizen and that at a time when the concept of state or nation had not entered our hills. To give up one's life for something one believes in is the sign of a noble heart. True that the Jaintias then were not united and that some even betrayed Kiang Nangbah but that's the nature of humans. Cheating, lying, betraying, colluding for the sake of a few silver is common. I am not sure that our younger generation are really keen on knowing more about our local heroes.

As parents, elders and teachers it is our duty to

give our children the education that encourages questioning, debating and dissenting. To question is to learn. It is high time that someone wrote a book detailing the early life of U Kiang Nangbah to make it compulsory reading in middle and high school. What is it that set Kiang Nangbah apart? What sort of upbringing did he have which instilled in him the courage to defy the might of the British with all the ammunition at their command? These facets of U Kiang's character should be made known to all so that those values can be imbibed by the younger generation which tend to see only politicians as their role models because of the power they wield. In fact the youth today equate success with power. This is completely wrong. Success is the ability to live a life worthy of emulation. Is there one politician we can point to today as a role model? U Kiang Nangbah was a Jaintia. Why has his life not inspired anyone who would

go the extra mile to call out corruption and illegality in the present system? If U Kiang was alive today would he have remained silent in the face of all the wrongs that are being committed by no less than those elected to govern us.

Sometimes, it is important to not just observe the death or birth anniversaries of our heroes but to delve deeper and see if we can draw or have drawn any lessons from their lives. Otherwise it's just a hollow observation and remains only a symbolic one if it does not touch the hearts and minds of the younger generation and inspire them to "Be The Change They Want To See In The World," as Gandhi says.

Yours etc.,
B Lyngdoh,
Via email

Can Congress offer solution?

Editor,
I have been following

the news regularly and also the constant nitpicking by the Congress on the ruling MDA government. In my understanding of politics the Opposition within the legislature is basically to check the excesses of the ruling party but not to be totally antagonistic and certainly not to pile all sins on the present government. A good Opposition waiting for its turn to take the government would suggest measures on every problem that's plaguing the state and there are far too many but let me dwell on the Harijan Colony issue. The Congress has been in power for the longest time in Meghalaya. What did the Party do to effectively remove the residents of the Colony located in a commercial area with poor hygiene and mobility? Without taking sides but looking at the realities on the ground, the present location for the Municipal employees is no longer feasible. We are allowing a slum to come up at a very crowded part of the city and the children growing there have no space for recreation.

They are all cramped up in little rooms that look like chicken coop. This is no way for people to live. The people living here should not play politics with the issue but agree to move to a more decent place.

It is a sad testimony of things that the homes that have been built for these SMB workers in McCabe Road are now being used for some other purpose. Political leaders from both sides of the divide should speak to the residents of the Colony and convince them to move to a different location and no one should play politics with this issue. We have had enough of blame game all leading to naught.

Yours etc.,
Roland Marbanian,
Via email

Meghalaya tourism

Editor,
Since December 21, tourists have been coming in slowly but surely but the local people at the tourist

sites don't seem ready yet to welcome them. Most eating places are shut and it is not possible to get bottled water in most destinations. At Dawki, most of the boats owned by the boatmen are leaking thereby making it dangerous for boaters. Also there is no safety gear in case the boats topple for some reason and the people in the boat don't know how to swim. Safety first should be the motto of the Meghalaya Tourism Department. People at tourist destinations need a lot of training and hand-holding to be able to make the tourists' experience a worthwhile one. Food is a big draw at any tourist destination but not packaged chips and coca-cola. Tourists look for local food. This too should be a selling point.

Yours etc.,
SK Jena,
Bhubaneswar

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

"I've always seen first responders as unsung heroes and very special people because, when everyone else is running away from danger, they run into it."
— Dwayne Johnson

The Shillong Times
Vol No: LXIII No.136 SHILLONG, THURSDAY, DECEMBER 31, 2020

One nation, one election
THE BJP has given a renewed call for 'One Nation, One Election' and is now firmly decided to give this idea a try by suggesting that elections to local/urban bodies, assembly and the Lok Sabha should be held simultaneously. The BJP buttressed its point by flagging the idea that good governance is the ultimate goal of democracy and elections only a means towards achieving that objective. Having continuous rounds of elections is a hindrance to governance. The BJP has also proposed changes to the Constitution for setting fixed terms for legislative assemblies and the Lok Sabha.

While speaking at a webinar on the theme, "One Nation, One Election" on Tuesday, BJP General Secretary Bhopender Yadav said that a Bill to this effect can only be brought in if there is political consensus. Earlier a parliamentary panel, comprising representatives of all parties, had recommended simultaneous elections. There is no denying that India is on election mode through the year, so much so that Prime Minister Modi seems to forget he is not addressing an election rally whenever he addresses a crowd. In a democracy elections are held to elect people to the Lok Sabha, state assembly or panchayats so that the elected can get on with the task of governance. A simultaneous election saves money and human resources as security forces need not be rushed to different places at different times. The BJP has also proposed that if a government loses the confidence of either of the two Houses, it could elect a new government for the remainder of the term. That would ensure that governance is the main agenda of democracy and not the act of holding elections.

The idea of 'One Nation, One Election,' is not new. It was first mooted by the Election Commission in 1983 and is now being revived by Prime Minister Narendra Modi after he won the 2014 general elections. This is the first time that the BJP as a Party too has proposed holding all elections together. Earlier the idea was to hold only the Assembly and Lok Sabha elections simultaneously. In its 170th report in May 1999, the Law Commission, headed by Justice BP Jeevan Reddy, said that India has to go back to the situation where the elections to Lok Sabha and all the Legislative Assemblies are held at once.

One state that has practiced simultaneous elections to the Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabha is Odisha although the voting is somewhat different for the Assembly and the Lower House.

Meanwhile the Niti Ayog had also submitted a 36-page letter to the Government recommending the same. It remains to be seen if all the political parties will invest in and subscribe to this idea.

TO THE EDITOR

The decadal conundrum

Editor,
There has been much debate about when the old decade ends and when the new one begins? Some say the old decade had ended on December 31, 2019, and the start of the new one began on January 1, 2020. A lot of conundrum is seen on this matter. For others, the new decade doesn't start until January 1, 2021; the old one concluding on December 31, 2020.
Now the question that arises is - who is correct or who is at fault here?
As we think about New Year resolutions, here's one we should all make together and that is to resolve that decades begin with the year ending in the numeral 1 and finish with a 0. For a decade to begin, we must start with the year ending with 1 (2021) and finish with 10, or so far as chronology is concerned, a year ending in 0 (2030). For example, January 1, 2001, opened the 21st

century and the start of the new millennium, just as the year 1 A.D. marked the beginning of the Christian era. Of course, many of us will remember the euphoric celebrations that were touched off at midnight on December 31, 1999. But was that a year too soon? Yes!
And if at the stroke of midnight on December 31, 2019 you thought you were celebrating the start of a new decade, guess again. As was the case 20 years ago, you'll be one year early, for the new decade will actually start in the year 2021.
A calendrical confusion arises here: If you want to criticize anybody for this confusion, you can blame two men - Dionysius Exiguus, also known in some reference works as "Dennis the Short," and the Northumbrian monk Bede, also known as the "Venerable Bede." Dionysius was born in what we now call Romania around the year 470 and was the first to suggest counting the passage of the years from the date of the birth of Jesus Christ;

the beginning of the anno Domini (which means "Year of Our Lord" in Latin) era, or A.D.
According to the contemporary historians of the time, Jesus was born on the 28th year of the reign of the Roman Emperor, Caesar Augustus. There is, however, considerable confusion about exactly when Augustus' reign began, so the year Dionysius called 1 A.D. was not accurately placed in history; in fact, most religious scholars now think that Jesus might actually have been born several years earlier. When Dionysius finished his computations, he figured that the year Christ was living in was 525 A.D. But he never bothered to number the years prior to Christ's birth. We had to wait until 731 A.D. when the Venerable Bede popularized the anno Domini era in Anglo-Saxon England and extended the counting of years before the birth of Christ - the "B.C. era."
Taking the elevator analogy as an example if you were to go into an elevator

located in the lobby and wanted to go 10-flights up, you would actually end up on the ninth floor (if you were to assume the lobby as the "zero" floor). But if you assume the lobby as the "first" floor and went 10-flights up, you would end up on the tenth floor. In essence therefore, on our calendars, 2021 is the equivalent of a "first-floor lobby," and after going up ten flights (or years), we'll arrive at the tenth floor. Or in this case, the year 2030—when that decade ends. Unfortunately, Bede did not account for the year zero in his calculations. So 1 A.D. was immediately preceded not by a 0, but by 1 B.C.
As we are nearing the end of 2020, we hope and pray that 2021 will be a new decade or the beginning of a new era with positivity and optimism and let 2020 pass away taking all that was unpropitious and grim along with it, and cheers to a Whole New Year 2021 and a New Decade.
Yours etc.,
Dr Chanmiki Ezra Laloo
Via Email

Meghalaya's financial crunch

Editor,
Mr Charles Pyngrope's suggestion that the fiscal crisis of Meghalaya which shows a shortfall of nearly Rs 800 crore needs an all-party discussion is timely and mature. Mr Pyngrope has suggested that the state take the help of economic experts to help it identify potential areas for raising revenue. He also suggested an economic think tank of sorts to provide a sense of direction to the Government. Mr Pyngrope has perhaps forgotten that Meghalaya had created the Meghalaya Economic Development Council which was legislated by the state legislature at the time when Mr Salseng Marak was the CM. It was precisely to help the state develop and economic roadmap that the MEDC was created and its composition was such that there would be political

consensus insofar as the economy of the state was concerned.
The MEDC was supposed to include economic experts both from within and outside the state; politicians from the ruling and opposition and civil society members to provide inputs from the ground. The MEDC is now a defunct institution and has been a sort of dumping ground for politicians who have no idea what the Council was created for. Hence the suggestion to create a similar body is an exercise in futility. The state is getting deeper and deeper into debt with borrowings from international institutions. How long can the state sustain this profligacy? Meanwhile those in the government are getting richer by the day. One wonders where the money comes from when the state is in a financial crisis.
Yours etc;
Jameson Nongkhaw
Via email

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

A tribute to all healthcare personnel involved in the care of COVID-19 patients
Mental Health and Social Stigma

By Maribon Viray, Anniesha Lyngdoh, Jochanan Diengdoh & Phibawan Syiemlieh

the ambulance driver/staff/ward boys/security guard while more than half (58.3)percent included the auxiliary nurse/paramedical staff. However, a total of 64.7 percent of all the participants showed that regardless of their categories, they were facing psychological distress during the period of data collection - that is between September 15 to November 25, 2020. Records show that some are working 24 hours and 7 days a week. In the Burnout scores, nurses recorded the highest scores followed by doctors and auxiliary/paramedical staff. The interview revealed that the pre-dominant factors revolved around the workplace, family life, and experience of stigmatization.
Impact of COVID in work life and family life
All participants have reported that workload has increased during the pandemic. The results highlighted burden of work. One doctor said, "We have to juggle between COVID duty and our own normal duties," while an ambulance staff mentioned, "We are exhausted because of overwork, and we sometimes get angry too because public don't understand the situation."

Feeling of inadequacy was expressed by a doctor, "I feel demoralized at time when people look at me with a question mark in their eyes. It was like the people are not trusting me anymore."Worry over shortage of adequate supplies, lack of management appraisal, strained relationship among colleagues due to pressure, discomfort in using PPEs, and feeling of dissatisfaction in giving quality time to the patients are other highlights of work related stressors.
On a positive note, some of the staff highlighted the importance of teamwork. One staff said, "We work more as a team now than we did earlier when we were working separately performing our own duties."

Impact of COVID on family life
The impact on family life underlined having limited family time and fear of infection. Statements like, "I miss home, because now I do not get a chance to go and my family every day." Or "I cannot risk their lives so I have to keep my distance." To, "I worry about them getting infected from me. I cannot be near my children/parents, etc." resonated among the participants.

Experience of stigmatization
Stigmatization was found to be prevalent in the workplace, within the family, and in the community level. At work, comments like, "Non-COVID duty colleagues do not talk to us or mix with us anymore."; patients or family of patients saying, "It is your fault," when the patient gets worse or passes away. In the family, echoes such as, "Immediate family are somehow supportive, but relatives shun us so that we are not even invited nor invited to any family occasions. It is painful!"
In the community, "Even the relatives who are healthy cannot come out to go to work just because they are related to me. At that time I really felt discriminated." Another person says, "In our village, we were told not to enter the village, even though we were not COVID positive." Others said, "We are exhausted from long hours of duty yet could somehow replenish our strength for the next day. But when we are blamed or shunned, the struggle is worse - we have to fight emotionally and mentally." Someone said, "I just hope that people will understand that we are humans too, and that even we are new to this virus." Many participants, however, expressed that the intensity of the stigmatization was worse in the beginning of the lockdown compared to the time of the interview.

Coping strategies
The most prominent coping strategy recorded was the "expression of faith" and "spirituality" across religions. Praying, meditating, reading the Bible and Holy books, listening to spiritual teachings and songs gave solace. Receiving family and social support which also included prayer were sources of encouragement. Engagement in recreational activities such as indoor exercises, reading, watching movies, social media, and music while in isolation like in hotels or quarantine centers, were found helpful.
At the work place, occasional team-building exercises, venting of emotional and psychological stresses to colleagues, and sessions conducted by a Psychiatrist were found helpful. However, the participants expressed hope that a full-time Psychiatrist would be employed in all the hospitals. One of the hospitals reported that only a part time Psychiatrist comes once in a while which does not meet the increasing need for mental health care.

Suggestions from the healthcare personnel
Wide awareness programs at all levels on the concept, prevalence, and manifestation of stigmatization, improvement of infrastructure and increase of essential supplies, increase of human resources including training were suggested. Training should include recent updates on the pathogenesis of COVID 19 (and the new strain of the virus) and also psychological coping mechanism. They all voiced the need for appointment of full-time Counselling Psychologist, Clinical Psychologist, and Psychiatrist for public and private hospitals and CHCs. They also voiced the need for enhanced salary packages for all healthcare workers, clearer communication between the government and community leaders for dissemination of new guidelines and notifications and transparency of the government on the management of COVID 19 which would increase the trust of the public in the health sector. Above all they aspired for development of community based strategies for psycho-social care in both rural and urban areas.

A tribute message
Charles Glassman said "Kindness begins with the understanding that we all struggle". As the team researchers for this project, we acknowledge the fear and anxiety that may arise towards our healthcare personnel in the process of battling with COVID 19, and this article reflects the very need for encouragement, trust, respect, and kindness towards them. As stated by Daniel Goleman, "True compassion means not only feeling another's pain but also being moved to help relieve it".

A conscious effort, as individuals and communities, will promote positive mental health which will in turn enhance our own wellbeing.
On behalf of the patients and their family members who were the recipients of care, we salute all the healthcare personnel who were involved in the management of COVID 19 patients in Meghalaya in particular as well as the rest of the country and the world. We pay tribute to the healthcare personnel who have lost their lives in the war against COVID. For your sacrifices and commitment to uphold your calling to serve the humanity, we thank you.

The authors are faculty members of the Department of Psychology, Martin Luther Christian University, Shillong and may be contacted through cpmlcu06@gmail.com

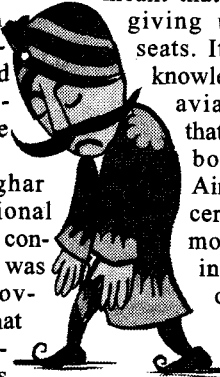
Air India 'Ghar Vapasi' has implications for aviation sector
Sordid tale of the destruction of a national airline

By K Raveendran

By all indications, Air India will land up with its original owners as Tatas are believed to have the best chance of clinching the deal. The other bidder is a consortium of Air India employees in partnership with US-based NRI investment fund Interups has relatively less credible credentials.
While the 'ghar vapasi' of the national airline is in far worse condition than when it was acquired by the government, although that does not make the re-possession any less sweet.

For, the impact of Air India in the lap of Tatas will be similar to the entry of Jio in telecommunication, which has progressed beyond imagination in its relatively short period of existence, but brought cataclysmic changes in the industry, introducing

and backroom gratifications.
The civil aviation ministry under the UPA regime virtually handed over the highly profitable sector to Emirates on a platter, which meant that Air India was giving up that many seats. It was common knowledge in the Gulf aviation sources that for every seat booked on non-Air India flights, a certain amount of money was going into the pockets of those who were in charge of Air India. Obviously, this could not be done without the viability of the national airline being jeopardised.
The bonhomie between Dubai ruler Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum and Chandrababu Naidu when he was chief minister of Andhra Pradesh provided a convenient cover



"Air India falling into the hands of Tatas would introduce a similar shift in the aviation sector, as the national airline will give them much control of the market. With Air Asia and Vistara, already with significant market shares of their own, the addition of Air India would give complete domination of the sector, particularly in terms of international traffic, and to a lesser extent in the domestic sector as well."

large-scale sickness in the rest of the sector in the process. While initially, Jio has altered the terms of operation in favour of the customers, its near monopoly has long term adverse implications for the users, the signs of which are already visible.

Air India falling into the hands of Tatas would introduce a similar shift in the aviation sector, as the national airline will give them much control of the market. With Air Asia and Vistara, already with significant market shares of their own, the addition of Air India would give complete domination of the sector, particularly in terms of international traffic, and to a lesser extent in the domestic sector as well.

With monopolies such as Emirates controlling the market dynamics of international traffic, another monopoly player would clearly work against the interests of the customers as the Dubai airlines has been actively pushing rate coordination among airlines to keep airfares high. Most significantly, Emirates and Air India are the two dominant players in the highly profitable Gulf sector and further cartelisation portends dangerous implications for customers. Further, Air India under the Tatas, as opposed to its public ownership, will give the dominant Gulf-India sector players unfettered freedom to control prices. It is also pertinent that this sector has been largely responsible for Air India being reduced to its current situation, apart from the inexplicable acquisition of 111 aircrafts from both Boeing and Airbus during the UPA rule, for which there is no apparent justification except the potential for kickbacks

for Emirates in its market expansion policy, which ended up in Air India giving away large number of seats to the Dubai monopoly. A thorough investigation would bring out the conspiracy behind these deals. This reduced Air India to an airline with routes that were largely a liability rather than profit-generating.

The aircraft purchases worth about Rs 70,000 crore and further their leasing to other airlines along with the surrender of profit-making routes are already under investigation by Enforcement Directorate and CBI. Also under the scanner is the merger between Air India and Air India Express, which was used as an alibi for the large-scale acquisition of aircrafts.

In fact, the CBI has filed four FIRs relating to the controversial merger as well as the purchase and subsequent leasing of the aircraft, possibly leading to large-scale generation of black money. But most importantly, these cases have been registered against unidentified officials of civil aviation ministry and Air India, which means that the deals had been done as a perfect cover-up.

The Comptroller and Audit General had also questioned the rationale behind the government's decision to order 48 aircraft from Airbus and 68 from Boeing for both for Air India and Indian Airlines and called the decision a 'recipe for disaster' and squarely blamed the Ministry of Civil Aviation, Public Investment Board and the Planning Commission.
The loot will remain as one of the most notorious scams seen by the aviation sector, both globally and domestically, for a long time to come. (IPA Service)