

"Pursuing fame is the ultimate in people pleasing and the ultimate betrayal of self."

— Justine Bateman

## The Shillong Times

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### Parliament disruptions

PARLIAMENT, in its winter session now, should have its sanctity preserved at all costs. It cannot be a theatre for unruly behaviour. Protests are one thing; unruly behaviour is quite another. Indian Parliament has increasingly been misused by political parties to fight the government on issues instead of using it as a platform for reasoned debate. This has brought shame on the institution of democracy. In this context, a firm 'no' to a plea for revocation of the suspension of 12 Opposition Members in the Rajya Sabha, from chairman Venkaiah Naidu on Tuesday, is both justified and appreciable. If elected 'representatives' do not behave in a responsible manner, this sends wrong signals to the general public. Dignity in behaviour in the august house is expected from elected representatives, and enforced first and foremost.

No parliament session in India starts without stormy scenes and disruptions – sometimes, lasting days before a modicum of normalcy is restored. A seasoned Pranab Mukherjee as President had called for an end to wayward behaviour in parliament. The present head of the nation, Ram Nath Kovind, repeated such exhortations; all without any effect of course. Elected representatives cannot be a rule unto themselves. As per a data analysis, the last (Monsoon) Session was the third least productive Lok Sabha session in the last two decades. It registered a productivity of just 21 per cent while the Rajya Sabha scored just 28 per cent, this being its eighth least productive session in a span of two years. Most of the time was wasted in "disruptions" – engaged in more by members of some parties that have only nominal presence in the country. Parliament is not the stage for such entities to show off a clout that they lack in the public sphere. As per an estimate 10 years ago, each minute of Parliament functioning costs the exchequer Rs 2.5 lakh; which could, as per rates now, be double of this – meaning a loss to the exchequer of Rs 36 crore per day.

There is less interest in discussing matters and putting the government on the defensive by citing facts and figures. This should be interpreted to mean a disinterest on the part of public representatives to study matters in-depth. Mere shouting requires no preparation, no spec of intelligence, and it needs only lung power – sadly, the main attribute of present-day politicians. By indulging in such reprehensible acts, they take the nation for a ride. Bills are passed without meeting the elementary requirement of discussions. The very purpose of having a parliament is defeated. This is unacceptable.

# The Meghalaya defection and the epitaph for Congress

By Albert Thyrniang

The Roman Empire lasted for 1000 years but it ended with the fall of Rome in 476 BC. It continued in the East in the form of the Byzantine Empire for another millennium but Constantinople fell in 1453, bringing down the curtains on one of the most influential civilisations. The Indian sub-continent was a land of empires – from the Maurya Empire to the Maratha Empire – but all is history now. The 500 year British Empire too, on whose territory it is said 'the sun never sets,' finally crumbled in the late 1960s. After each end life went on.

These days predictions are made of the end of the 1885 founded 'nationalist movement'. No matter that it was Mahatma Gandhi's which got Independence for India. It does not matter that it is a 136 year old party that pulled down the mighty British Empire. Little can be done for this once Indian born movement which powerfully influenced other anti-colonial nationalist movements against the British Crown. It is weakening and nearing its end.

The BJP is the main architect of the 'downfall' of the Grand Old Party. With the double heavy defeats in 2014 and 2019 general elections rebounding looks more and more unlikely. In states too it has been outsmarted by the saffron party time and again. The main cause is the unsettled central leadership and the inability to look beyond the Gandhi family. The present leadership are no match to the firebrand BJP cohort of Narendra Modi, Amit Shah and others. Facing a bleak future, the exodus from the Congress is now a regular affair.

Now it is the turn of All India Trinamool Congress (AITC) to catch Rahul Gandhi and others napping in Meghalaya. The Trinamool and its ambitious supremo, Mamata Banerjee, engineered a shocking midnight coup, courtesy her election strategist Prashant Kishor by stealing 12 Congress MLAs right under the nose of the newly elected state president, Vincent Pala. Led by the disgruntled and disillusioned former chief minister, Mukul Sangma the legislators controversially jumped into the Mamata bandwagon blaming the Congress of not being able to challenge the BJP's sectarian ideology while giving a thumbs up to their new leader to give Modi a run for his money nationally.

Mukul and company have credited Kishor for presenting a clear plan of how the BJP would be defeated by 'Didi'. They have sung praises of how concerned he is at the current state of affairs in the country where the BJP government is trampling down on religious rights

and that Mamata alone is capable of restoring the trust of all faiths. With due respect, Kishor is only an employee of the TMC. He speaks for his employer and does not necessarily have ideological convictions. For the information of the defectors it was Kishor who strategized and helped Modi, then Gujarat chief minister get re-elected for the third time in the Assembly Elections in 2012. Again it was his organisation Citizens for Accountable Governance (CAG) which conceptualised the aggressive campaigns in the 2014 general election to enable the Modi-led (BJP)

get the party ticket. He or the person of his choice might not be the party candidate. Highlander Kharmalki would have consolidated his position. Therefore, the former Speaker might have planned for Kharmalki's loss as it would be easier for him to convince the Congress to hand over the party ticket to him even if he remains in the party. Now that he is in the TMC, he can choose either of the two while facilitating another person in the other constituency. In Nongthymmai there is also a sizeable Bengali population.

More baffling is the de-



to win an absolute majority. So it is Kishor too who has made Modi. Now he portrays himself as anti-Modi and positions to undo the brand he himself has created. Besides the BJP the political tactician has worked also for APP, YSRCP, DMK, Janata Dal (United) and more importantly the Congress. He is professionally under contract with TMC till the 2024 Lok Sabha Elections. After 2024 he might work for the Congress. Will the 'Judases' return? If political allegiances follow strategists God save this country!

The defeat of the Congress particularly in Mawryngkneng and Rajabala has now fallen in place. The main reason was sabotage by the rebels. Reportedly Charles Pyngrope did not campaign enough. The same was with Mukul Sangma in Rajabala. Clandestine support was allegedly for the UDP candidate. The plan to join the TMC was probably already more or less decided. The number 12 was already in their mind. Had the Congress won the two seats the fresh winners would not have joined their camp. Their design would then be thwarted. So, the loss was likely intentional. This is blatant dishonesty. While to the gullible public the party candidates were official but secretly they were otherwise.

The State Congress leadership was surprised that Pyngrope joined the rebel camp. The reason for his alleged sabotage was because if Congress takes the seat in 2023 the same person will

cision of George Lyngdoh from Umroi. In what way will Mamata or Mukul help him to get re-elected from his constituency? Now he has to depend entirely on his own. As for Himalaya Shangpliang, he has been close to the former chief minister from his days as MCS officer. Even then is the TMC supremo and his former boss so valuable that they will ensure his victory from Mawsynram in 2023? To entertain the thought of becoming champions of secularism in the country even before being certain of winning one's own seat is putting the card before the horse. It is inexplicable except, as hinted by reports, that the TMC has promised to fund their elections generously which the Congress cannot as its coffers have dried up. As for Shitlang Pale it is natural he moves to another party. The lone Congress MLA from Jaintia Hills suspects Vincent Pala will contest from Sutnga Saipung in 2023 in his bid to be the next chief minister.

That all the seven MLAs from Garo Hills are loyal to the "undisputed" leader is logical. Though Mukul built the party 'brick by brick' he has made politics a family business. The eight break-away legislators include himself, his wife, his brother and daughter. If Mukul had no MLA from his family would he have managed to contrive the split? The other four were given tickets through his influence. This writer, during his sojourn in Garo Hills, met several former Congress workers who claim they were

summarily side-lined by the leader. Mukul built a party of loyalists in the western part of the state.

For the first time in many years the Congress has no MLA from Garo Hills. Asked to sum up the mood after the sensational defection a political activist from Tura simply replied, 'confused'. Another terms it 'a compelling situation' blaming both the INC central leadership and Mukul himself for the parting of ways. A candidate in the last election reveals there is a mixed response from the public. Another MLA hopeful estimates that 60 per cent of workers will remain with the Congress. The general opinion is that both the 'cousins' will have a challenging time ahead.

The Congress has filed a complaint with the Speaker questioning the validity of the so called 'merger'. There was no discussion at any level in the party for any merger proposal. Subsequently there was no voting arming the 'two thirds' to proceed with the merger with the TMC. This is a clear case of defection and not a merger and hence the Speaker has to disqualify the 12 deserters as claimed by Bindo Lanong, the former Assembly Speaker. The intention of the Tenth Schedule is to root out defection and its letter and spirit must be upheld.

The constitutional and legal legitimacy aside, the 12 'honourable' members have placed the whole state in a strange situation. How can the TMC with zero presence become the principal opposition party overnight? It is unfair to the state. Such a political adventure should never have arisen.

Much is the TMC hype these days. From Sushmita Dev to Kirti Azad to Ashok Tanwar and Varma to Subramaniam Swamy to Babul to Luizinho Faleiro, all have hugged the TMC. To say that this migration, none with mass following, would make Mamata the chief opposition leader pan India is living in a fools' paradise. The recent results of municipality elections in Tripura are a reality check. Except for West Bengal and probably Meghalaya, the TMC will not make inroads in any other state.

Anyway, the reason for peoples' exodus from the Congress to the TMC and other parties lies with the former. It no longer has the muscle to fight the BJP juggernaut, their narrow ideology and dangerous policies. The grand old party is in the process of running its course. The Congress era has ended. Only the influence of its ideals, particularly secularism and pluralism on society, is cherished. If the Congress fails, the space is reallocated to others. No one is indispensable in the Congress. Neither is the Congress for India!

## The other Cherries behind the Festival

By Kit Shangpliang

Thanks to the half-baked politicization of things, a section of Meghalaya has developed an allergy to the word 'Festival', so much so, that we are now incapable of thinking of celebratory events as opportunities to build our economy holistically. Activists have knowingly or unknowingly taken advantage of this lack of public awareness and have been romanticizing the notion that cherry blossoms are not as indigenous as local pears or plums, or by those standards, we are not supposed to celebrate our naras, our jainspong, even our duitara – because they come from across the border. Some of them have joined the band wagon of bringing the non-payment of salaries to a section of teachers, as if they themselves don't have the mind to understand proper budget allocation that need to be spent for a certain government department under a certain budget head.

This expression of opinion here is not to defend the government apparatus, because there is nothing to defend, since Meghalaya has been in shambles already for many years. This opinion is simply that of the artiste community and for public understanding on how such events need to be properly managed and promoted, so that they bring sustenance to the stake-holders connected to the arts and tourism (though we can't officially speak for the latter).

If we were to believe in numbers, the footfalls in the recently concluded Cherry Blossom Festival 2021 were impressive. Blame it on how the pandemic has locked down people in their homes, resulting in authorities restraining entrance in keeping with Covid protocols; all said and done, the numbers have spoken for themselves.

The attempt by a section of the youth to break into the Polo venue at Shillong was a sorry reaction yet its one minor glitch out of the many things that had happened in the three days. Nevertheless, social and mainstream media amplification was doing the rounds to add to bad press. It is evident, that there may be Covid protocol issues and social concerns brought up by the moral policemen on social media, besides, there is no denying that the event is far from perfect, but it is fair to say that the effort has been focused and many stakeholders who are members of the public, some of them local artistes, local artisans, local entrepreneurs, local tourism specialists have benefited from this.

What do events like these mean for the artistes?

It's almost two years since Covid had arrested all arts and music activities here and everywhere around the world. The artistes have been left alone high and dry – no gigs, no earnings, and no motivation whatsoever, with struggles to put food on the table. While thousands of artistes in the state whose livelihoods depend on arts and music struggle because of Covid, no one talked about their well-being. The hosting of any event now is therefore, not only a livelihood opportunity but also a morale-booster to say that it is time for artistes to bounce back.

If an organization is lethargic to address the unemployment problems among the youth – it is targeted for not doing so; if it tries to address the same by exposing our youth to global experiences, it is accused of something else and other parallel livelihood verticals and social issues get dragged into the vortex of NGO-government politics and what not. In either case, the artiste remains the loser.

On the hand, events at home prepare our young artistes for bigger stages here

and elsewhere and the more they do it, the better they get. Strategically, these events are not just a tamasha as they are perceived to be, they are a Creative and Capital Investment that need strategic public-private collaboration and cross-accountability not animosity. When it comes to arts and entertainment, the climate in Meghalaya has been gloomy, hence, the need for all the stake-holders mentioned above to look at pragmatic solutions for the sake of the artistes.

Artistes are supposed to be smart and the young artistes of today are nimble and quick. They can be anyone they chose to be, but they also want to break away from limitations as they discern their calling. Their job choice could be a clerk in a government office or an assistant somewhere, where monthly salary is guaranteed, yet they do not choose that; they choose music and other art forms for a specific purpose, they are the custodians of our traditional and evolving culture and they are the equal foretellers of what it is to become of our society. A society on the move is the one that learns to value the role of such forerunners and understand to invest in their conviction and commitment to keep the cultural and creative sanity intact. On that note, the efforts of the concerned departments, their collaborators, partners and undertakings are commendable, if not perfect.

Reasoning together:

Lastly, artistes are not the ones without feelings or else they can't write and play their songs. We feel for the teachers at the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) who have not got their dues, in fact, we feel, therefore, we think we must do something about it as members of the creative society and members of the public. On the other hand, to think that the artiste's economic opportunities may be derailed, because of unreasonable public debate on a very clearly laid-down fiscal allocation is unfortunate, and here, the artiste community is a mere panda caught in the fight between two elephants.

In case we got it wrong, this write-up does not intend to discourage citizens to be watchdogs and whistleblowers – it is intended to call people to exercise the freedom to critique, but not necessarily to crucify the public role of those who are critiqued, because if we do it, the people (in this case the artistes) lose big time. The other reality is that every other government department has its own challenges and discrepancies as a consequence of systemic displacement. All this leaves it to the members of the public to engage without compromise or attack without weighing and history tells that the former is more effective.

It may be right to suggest that organisations (government and non-government alike) leave their organizational egos at bay and start thinking of their sons and daughters who are called to speak the truth and become artistes for whatever it may fetch them. They are natural ambassadors of the indigenous and evolving culture of the hills and society cannot leave them high and dry as it cannot leave the citizens working in the tourism sector or even our valued teachers high and dry. We have no choice but to be inclusive, unless, we are anti-something. All said and done, Meghalaya cannot ignore its blessings in the form of tens of thousands of talents and young artistes who are the other cherries blossoming before, during and after festivals.

(The writer is an artiste and social communicator. He was not part of the recently concluded Cherry Blossom Festival 2021)

### Letters to the Editor

#### Agatha Sangma's CAA dance

Editor,  
"I rise here today to extend my support to this amendment bill" These were the words that our MP started when she stood up in the Winter Session of parliament in 2019 to pledge her consent to the CAA. It was followed by her generous praises to the Home Minister for his so-called extensive consultation prior to tabling the bill. 119 Hrs to be precise as quoted by her!! (I wonder who was keeping count)

It would take 119 years or more for the Home Minister to actually understand the Northeast Dear Agatha.

A clip of her speech is there on YouTube and the comments on it speak for themselves on the sentiments of the people on her action. The Meghalaya CM himself, post her statement looked clueless and didn't have any answers. There were protests across the state, though no one was held accountable

or even asked to explain and justify her stand to the people.

The CAA is a bill that needs to be thrashed out but to apply the logic that "I accept it but please do exempt the Northeast from its purview," is hypocritical and selfish to the core. It's like saying that racism is fine and justified as long as it does not apply to me. So please let's not go on that path of pleading and begging that we should be exempted from it.

Her recent position now against the Bill is ironic and laughable. I wonder whether it's the whiff of the upcoming election air that is blowing and hence the need to make another stand going by the recent repeal of the farm laws. It's a tragedy that we have such representatives from the state who will bend and dance whenever the tune changes.

Though it's a fact she had no choice in the equations of things when her party sold itself to the BJP, I would sincerely then request her to stop quoting that she represents the Northeast and that their sentiments

and her voice is the voice of the people as that would be insulting and demeaning to all of us. Rather let her be honest and state that it's her party's agenda and decision of toeing the line of the BJP as and when dictated by the bosses.

Yours etc.,  
Robert R Khongwir  
Via email

#### A Mixed Model for Higher Education

Editor,  
The article "Higher education in the state" (ST Nov 30, 2021) is a one-sided view. Among other biases, Dr Saji Varghese makes the sweeping statement that "higher education has now become a privileged commodity of the wealthy". Actually, more than two-thirds of the universities in the country are in the government sector and private universities generally have much lower enrolments. So

there is no stranglehold of the private sector in higher education. To use extreme words like 'exorbitant' and 'extortionate' is unfairly painting the entire sector with a black brush. It also betrays a narrow mindset and unfamiliarity with data and nuances.

Various governments at the centre and in the states have studied and accepted the role of the private sector in higher education since the mid-1990s when the standing committee on education in Parliament took up the matter. The Supreme Court in a milestone judgment (TMA Pai Foundation vs State of Karnataka, 2002) commended the needed role of private institutions saying, "The state with its limited resources and slow-moving machinery is unable to fully develop the genius of the Indian people".

One may fondly imagine that it is the "needy but capable" students who obtain the free or highly subsidised education in government universities or in the top institutions such as the IITs or IIMs. In the same judgement, the Supreme Court

quoted data showing that the so-called 'free' or 'merit' seats in professional colleges were not occupied by poor students but rather by those from affluent families, whose better schooling and expensive tuitions elbowed out the poor students from the rank lists. Very few poor, rural or SC/ST students are admitted through the general quota.

A UGC survey showed that 70% of university students are from the upper 20% income bracket. Very few poor students make it to university because of the substandard school system. Since indirect taxes come mainly from the poor, an eminent educationist, Malcolm Adeshiah, has observed that "university education is a conduit for transferring resources from the poor to the rich". In his well-known book, The Earth is Flat, noted economist Thomas Friedman observed that the IITs were the best suppliers of engineers to the USA. Why should they have received a nearly free education in India? If government higher education in India is largely monopolised by

the rich, why blame private universities. At least they are charging those who can afford it, instead of burdening the exchequer.

Most countries with well-developed higher education systems have a mixed model of institutions set up by government, religious organisations and the private sector. Depending on the stage of development, its political system, and the economic resources of its citizens, each country has to decide which balance is best. No doubt there are malpractices in some private institutions, such as taking fees under the table, but government institutions suffer from their own maladies of inefficiency, outdatedness and corruption.

It's all very well to espouse an ideology, but workable models are based on data and realities.

Yours etc.,  
Glenn C. Kharkongor,  
Via email

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*"First say to yourself what you would be; and then do what you have to do."*

— Epictetus

The Shillong Times

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**What the 10th Schedule says**

THE Congress Party has written to the Speaker, Meghalaya Legislative Assembly seeking disqualification of 10 of the 12 MLAs that recently deserted the Party to join the All India Trinamool Congress (AITMC). Curiously the Congress left out two MLAs from the list submitted to the Speaker. Perhaps the idea is to woo back the two by using intimidatory tactics. The 10th Schedule of the Indian Constitution commonly referred to as the Anti-defection Act says that disqualification on ground of defection will not apply in case of a split. Where a member of a House claims that he/she and any other members of his/her legislature party constitute the group representing a faction which has arisen as a result of a split in the original political party and such group consists of not less than two-thirds of the members of such legislature party, he/she shall not be disqualified. From the time of such split, the faction shall be deemed to be the political party to which he/she henceforth belongs. The Anti-Defection Law is not without loopholes. Those against say that voters elect individuals in the election and not parties and hence the Anti-Defection law is infructuous. Others who abhor the unchecked defection of MLAs/MPs from one party to another and therefore destabilise governments feel that the law should be applied so as not to disrupt governance.

Earlier the 10th Schedule required one third of the party strength to defect to another party for the legislators/parliamentarians to avoid disqualification. This was changed to two-thirds of the party strength vide the 91st Amendment of the Constitution in 2004. Two-thirds of 17 MLAs makes it 12 MLAs. Hence the 1 Anti-Defection Law should not apply to the 12 who left the Congress. Also mergers of well-defined groups of individuals or political parties are exempted from disqualification provided the breakaway group constitutes two-thirds of the total number of MLAs. The final decision on whether or not to disqualify the group of 12 finally rests with the Speaker, Metbah Lyngdoh. The 10th Schedule says if the next general election is less than 2 years away the disqualified members can retain their seats. However if the gap between the defection and elections is over two years the defecting MLAs/MPs will have to contest elections within 6 months. Following the current anti-defection rules which allow two-thirds members of a legislative party to officially break from the parent party, Congress MLAs in Goa used this provision to join the BJP and their counterparts in Telangana used it to join the ruling Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS). As they say 'in politics, the search for fool-proof remedies is a fatal temptation.'

# Beyond 50 years of Meghalaya

By Benjamin Lyngdoh

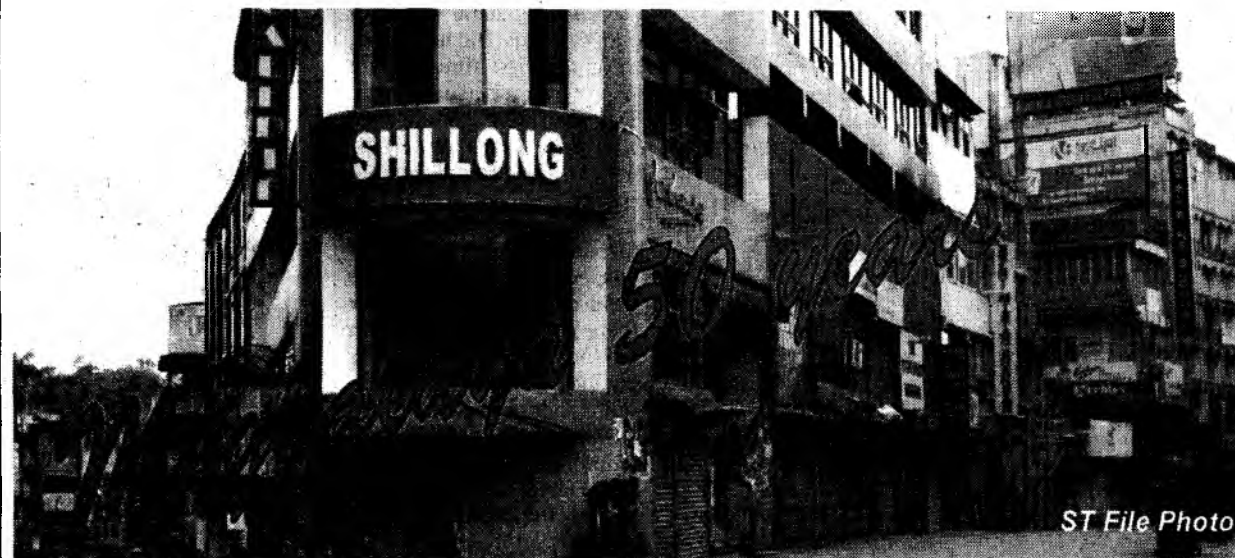
It would be demeaning to say that 50 years of Meghalaya has been an utter failure. On the other hand, it would be foolish to believe that the achievements till date reflect its true potential. In fact, the achievements in agriculture, education, arts and culture, tourism, job creation, investment friendly business environment, etc., must act as a wakeup call. The shortcomings far outweigh the achievements. To name a few, unemployment, corruption and cosmetic governance (whereby things are done only to show/deceive the people) are at the top of the pecking order. As dire are the shortcomings, the saying that 'age is just a number' makes sense. Hence, it is better to celebrate less and

ognition, it is brushing aside the issues being faced by the people every day. What about them? Are they not a part of the 50th year make-up? On the hot topic, why is there a haste to attend to the border issue with Assam, it is a complex matter and unlikely to be resolved in a month. The people must see through the fragility of the exercise being conducted currently at the border areas. The contents in the electronic media are there for all to see. In all of the visits/inspection, the state government has come up under-prepared and has been reduced to a puppet whose strings are controlled by the Assam government. In most likelihood, Meghalaya will end up losing a lot of ground as per the 'give and take policy'. It would be foolish to think that the MDA does not recognise this. Hence, it is in the fitness of things to tread wisely on the border issue.

study outside the state and as for jobs there is political nepotism all around. One of them said that his degree is useless and that he feels sorry for his parents for having spent so much on his studies. These are the issues that need attention. This writer believes that the two youth who expressed their views have spoken for the many thousands more. As a teacher, it is disheartening to converse on such issues, but we must. Unless we do we will not know the gravity of the problem. Will the present government and the successive ones take notice? Notice beyond the 50th year? If we are really interested

training/awareness is not a bad idea. It is needed so that the village communities can sustainably reap the benefits. The good thing now is that there are many students in our villages who are skilled in tourism activities. The government can think of engaging with them.

In arts and sports, there is talent aplenty. Having a weekly arts theatre where the youth can showcase their music, songs, acting, drama, films, etc can be highly motivating. All they need is a platform to take-off. Plus, every holiday/weekend morning one just needs to see the number of young boys and girls engaging themselves in sports (mostly football). There is potential in the locality/village grounds. A sports scouting



use the 50th year to be a representation of an assessment period. Give a report card to the people and let them give feedback on it. Let there be deliberations. Then only can we meaningfully decide what would be the future of Meghalaya beyond its 50th year. And no, this is not government centric. The government might change but the ethos of governance (to bring development) remains.

To start with, the government of the day is duty-bound to initiate the process of collaboration, assessment and chart a future blueprint through political consensus. But the chance of this happening is naught. This is because the MDA government is spearheading the statehood celebration as an event to earn brownie points. It is busy playing to the gallery. It wants to highlight achievements of the recent past and be in the good books of the people. Public memory is short and this is what the MDA is taking advantage of. By focussing on the inter-state border issues with Assam, Them Metor (Punjab Lane) shifting, lifting of the ban on coal mining and Khasi/Garo language rec-

vention by the government? These and many more are the issues being faced by the people every day. What about them? Are they not a part of the 50th year make-up? On the hot topic, why is there a haste to attend to the border issue with Assam, it is a complex matter and unlikely to be resolved in a month. The people must see through the fragility of the exercise being conducted currently at the border areas. The contents in the electronic media are there for all to see. In all of the visits/inspection, the state government has come up under-prepared and has been reduced to a puppet whose strings are controlled by the Assam government. In most likelihood, Meghalaya will end up losing a lot of ground as per the 'give and take policy'. It would be foolish to think that the MDA does not recognise this. Hence, it is in the fitness of things to tread wisely on the border issue.

in solutions, it lies in assessing the strengths of Meghalaya. At the top of the pecking order are agriculture, tourism, arts and sports. Agriculture and tourism are closely related to rural development. Agro-enterprises have a huge employability scope. Some can be management level and many in operations. What is needed is an agriculture-centric incubation centre. This will drive agro-enterprise start-ups. It is about capturing the entire agricultural value chain. The time has come to not just sell raw agri-produce; rather, process them locally and market them extensively. This creates employment opportunities.

Rural tourism can transform the livelihoods of the villages. We have seen many examples of this. However, it must be developed only in places where there is potential; else, it will lead to waste management issues and destruction of the attraction (read The problem with Meghalaya's tourism potential; The Shillong Times dated 21st January, 2020). Unlike agriculture, tourism services/activities are easier and quicker to train and develop. A scheme on tourism

mechanism is required that focuses on identifying talent early. Like the saying goes, 'catch them young!'

In the end, the 50th year of statehood does not belong to the government (or opposition) that they would try to highlight achievements/failures. We are seeing enough of it every day. It is only a bombardment of chaos; deception and misdirection of the thoughts of the people from the real issues. The result is that the people are disillusioned and perplexed with the current state of affairs. Many have found solace on being indifferent and going numb on the issues afflicting Meghalaya. So, will it be a joyous and momentous occasion? Again and if we really dig into it, it is better to make the 50th year a period of assessment and planning for the future. Let the shortcomings of this era not be repeated in the 75th year of statehood (whether we still are there or not). The failure to do so will mean that we will be celebrating the 75th year with the same kind of cosmetics and fanfare with no real substance and pride.

(Email: benjamin21in@yahoo.co.in; the writer teaches at NEHU)

**KCR considers Modi govt and saffron party anti-farmer**

## TRS breaks away from BJP, now a regular at opposition meets

By Sushil Kutty

Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS) Member of Parliament Keshava Rao sat to the right of Congress MP Rahul Gandhi, who had a Covid-19 mask on. As far as the TRS was concerned, all masks were off, Keshava Rao was at the Opposition MPs' meeting in Parliament with instructions from TRS chief K Chandrashekar Rao to dump the BJP and join the Opposition ranks.

One journalist called it "a twist in the tale." The tale, the story of the Congress-Trinamool rift. The twist: Telangana Rashtra Samithi is no longer inclined to support the BJP. November 30, TRS got off its perch on the fence. Even otherwise, the perch on the fence was painful!

Things had been building up between the BJP and the TRS. And 2014 had faded in the background. That said, the TRS stood by the BJP in Parliament, helping the Hindu nationalist party win scrappy floor battles. KCR and Modi were distant friends, but friends nevertheless.

Not anymore. Keshava Rao now attends strategy meetings of the floor leaders of the opposition parties. The November 30 meeting was held in Congress leader

long since the BJP trounced the TRS in the Huzurabad assembly seat, all bets were off. To add salt to the wound, BJP candidate Eatala Rajender had ditched KCR to hitch his wagon to the BJP bandwagon.

Also, the BJP won four Telangana Lok Sabha seats. The manner of the winning didn't help. The BJP challenge in the Greater Hyderabad civic polls also rankled. Now, the fog has cleared from Keshava Rao's mind. He says the TRS was always BJP's rival in Parliament. And the TRS now has an excuse: The BJP and Modi Government's "anti-farmers policies." It is not likely that the TRS will backtrack from its newfound anti-BJP allergy. Keshava Rao will keep attending opposition floor meetings.

Keshava Rao's right of Rahul Gandhi's seat at the November 30 meeting also made it quite apparent that when it's between the Congress and the Trinamool, TRS sits and stands with the Congress. More significantly, the TRS has made its 2024 intent clear: Modi and the BJP can take a walk.

The Shiv Sena has gone. Akali Dal went. Apna Dal



Mallikarjun Kharge's office. Kharge is the Leader of the Opposition in the Rajya Sabha. Of course, Rahul Gandhi being Rahul Gandhi can always attend such meetings. November 30, TRS MPs joined opposition parties to force an adjournment on the farm bills issue.

With that KCR made his intent clear. Actually, this shouldn't surprise anyone. Things haven't been gung ho between the TRS and

ditched. The YSR Congress never was with the BJP. The less said the better of the Telugu Desam Party. CBN cannot be trusted to stick to a blob of gum! The long and short of it: The BJP is hemorrhaging allies and potential allies. Narendra Modi's 2024 outing will not be like the 2019 picnic, or the 2014 tea party—Chai Pe Charcha!

With Asaduddin Owaisi on the TRS bandwagon, and

**KCR fumed. Now, the TRS is convinced BJP and the Modi Government are "anti-farmer". There is no need for Rahul Gandhi to drum resentment in KCR and TRS.**

**There are other irritants, one too many! The biggest is the perception in the TRS that the Bharatiya Janata Party wants to be the principal opposition in the state.**

BJP. The KCR regime and the Modi Government don't usually get along. Of late, ties were frozen. There is a chill. There is also some burning "paddy trouble" between the state and the Centre. KCR lost his appetite for BJP when the Centre refused to buy parboiled rice from Telangana.

KCR fumed. Now, the TRS is convinced BJP and the Modi Government are "anti-farmer". There is no need for Rahul Gandhi to drum resentment in KCR and TRS. There are other irritants, one too many! The biggest is the perception in the TRS that the Bharatiya Janata Party wants to be the principal opposition in the state.

Ironically, the BJP is getting its wish! When Keshava Rao plonked himself maskless to the right of Rahul Gandhi, the TRS revealed its face. Then again, it isn't

the Congress hitching its Maruti to KCR's Merc, 2024 wouldn't be an easy haul for the BJP. Keshava Rao is not a stranger to the Congress. He is a "once PCC chief" and is comfortable in the Opposition fold. As for BJP-TRS, historically, if the Gujarati and the Telugu ever got along, there is no evidence to show, which leaves Rahul Gandhi in the clear. It is now for Rahul Gandhi to make the best of the TRS shift. How he handles Mamata Banerjee will matter.

How Narendra Modi will strategise in the changing scenario also will matter. Opposition MPs in Parliament are gung ho with the TRS-BJP split, "pleasantly surprised", like somebody put it, adding that the TRS had "dramatically snapped ties with the Congress" in 2014. That's lost in time, 2024 Narendra Modi will be 10 years older and a decade slower, too. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

**Entrepreneurship: To encourage or discourage?**

Editor,  
The annual wine festival of Meghalaya is slated to be held on the Dec 11, 2021. Let us be perfectly clear that in Meghalaya there are a lot of wine making enthusiasts and they make fantastic wines. Wine making in our state, as far I am aware is a hobby and the vintner loves to showcase his products in such fore mentioned festivals, not for love of money but simply to see the delight with which one samples his product. These festivals also form part of our efforts to sell the State as an exciting destination for tourists. In such festivals a few odd bottles are sold to cover costs though we wish that wine making would one day become an industry that will provide employment to both the vintner as well as the farmer who produces the raw material. It has potential to become an income generating activity as well as a force multiplier for promoting tourism. Looking at the dismal performance of Meghalaya in recent Niti Aayog reports one would think that wine making as a

promising industry would get the maximum Govt support that it deserves.

It appears that anyone who wishes to become a wine making entrepreneur has to register by filling a form prescribed by the Excise Department. Going through the formalities demanded by the form one is totally foxed as to the objective of the Govt. In filling the form one has to mention the marital status of the applicant. Now frankly speaking what has wine -making got to do as to whether the applicant is single, married, divorced, has a live in partner or the sexual stamina of a Casanova? How does this data contribute to the ability of the vintner to make quality wine or not? Clearly this is one aspect of the registration process that has to be seriously reviewed, as it is clearly associated with gossip rather than promoting the quality of the product.

The registration requirements then continue to follow other intriguing queries. For instance one has to state the age and sex of the applicant. For Christ's sake one is only trying to manufacture wine and therefore the whole idea of whether one is male or female or under 18 or above 100 years is totally irrelevant. Then one has to also state one's qualifications, caste /

community together with present and past occupations of the applicant. Dear God in Heaven, we are talking about one's ability to produce good quality wine to make the state proud, not trying to enter into discredited Govt service. I have no qualms in stating the obvious that the above requirements in the form are the creative products of an arm chair babu whose sole purpose in life is to make the life of ordinary citizens as miserable as possible.

Then believe it or not a verification of antecedents from the Police is also asked for. I am in knowledge of applicants who ran from their Police stations then to the SP's office then back again to the police station for this certificate. Hey, listen we are simply registering because quality wine making is a hobby that we wish to demonstrate to the world. We have no desire nor the intention to produce guns or bombs that would require the scrutiny of the police. The question that arises is whether the Govt wishes to promote entrepreneurship or discourage it? The above example is a classical example why people view India as red-tape ridden and industrially hostile nation. To make one small bottle of wine you are made to run from pillar to

post and to top it all the data collected hardly has anything to do with adding quality to the product being produced. I'm sure the Wine Festival will be inaugurated by some VVIP or the other. In light of the above will that worthy have the courage to claim that it is Govt policy to encourage industry and entrepreneurship? Bro, hypocrisy and apathy has its limits!

Yours etc.,  
Toki Blah,  
Via email

**Merger no issue**

Editor,  
The merger of the 12 congress MLAs to the AITC or for that matter any other party is valid and has no legal infirmity.

Yours etc.,  
Fearless Warji  
Via email

**Wild charges on private education**

Editor,  
Apropos the letter, "A mixed model for higher education" by Glenn C Kharkongor (ST Dec 1, 2021), in response to Dr Saji Varghese's article the previous day, it

is unfortunate that Varghese should opine that higher education has now become a privileged commodity of the wealthy. Had he not involved the private universities, Dr Glenn Kharkongor would not have wasted time on a rejoinder. Dr Varghese has misinformed the readers about the contribution of private universities. This is also a disinformation campaign for students who are unable to afford heavy spoon-feeding by mushrooming coaching centres like the NEET; if not rebutted.

In Meghalaya we are fortunate to have MLCU by virtue of which our children could get jobs in new subjects never taught in NEHU. The advancement in other fields like Environment Science, BSc Nutrition and Dietetics etc., have helped students to get jobs. On the IITs let me tell readers that whereas the fees are reasonable but how students get admission there involves huge sums of money and in the end there's brain drain as every engineer flies away to the USA, UK etc. This was what had troubled Donald Trump a great deal before election. He had said that the US gets cheap labour from India.

There is no denying the fact that anything run by Government is never in good shape compared to private

institutions. Look at government schools from primary to higher secondary level. Look at the State-run buses and transport systems with tyres that are so eroded they are devoid of grip. The buses and maxi cabs are neither road nor passenger worthy. NEHU could not equip itself with electronics the subject that can generate employment. The one college in Shillong which teaches this subject needs to send its students to West Bengal. And when there was radiation leakage in the uranium site at Domiasiat in Meghalaya and the state needed NEHU's assistance to investigate the leak they could not come clear on the findings. That made the Minister in-charge turn to IIT Guwahati, which has for more than a year since failed to come up with findings on the plea that exams were going on.

Hence any write-up in a newspaper with a large circulation, especially with online readership should be properly thought through before putting pen to paper.

Yours etc.,  
F.L Lyngdoh  
Shillong 3

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"Politics, as a practise, whatever its professions, has always been the systematic organization of hatreds."

— Henry Adams

## The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIV No.113 SHILLONG, FRIDAY, DECEMBER 3, 2021

### Dividing the opposition

PM-post aspirant Mamata Banerjee has not shaken the western metropolis with a previously scheduled and politically loaded visit, but she has put the Grand Old Party on notice. It was not the BJP, per se, that was targeted during her public appearances there, but the Congress party and in particular Rahul Gandhi. In other words, realization is dawning on her that in order to win the gaddi in Delhi, she must first make mincemeat out of the main Opposition party and then take on the principal rival for power, the BJP. The strategy could be her own, or dictated to her by strategist, Prashant Kishor. Either way, the Congress party has experienced a jerk in a starker manner.

Her poser, "What is UPA? There is no UPA", is a signal that she's planning another Opposition alliance to be at its head. While the TMC is not with the Congress, parties like the DMK and the National Conference are with the UPA; Lalu Prasad in Bihar could again back the alliance and so would some regional parties in the North East and elsewhere as also the two Communist parties. The strength of the Congress party is its pan-India presence and appeal, village to village, city to city. NCP leader Sharad Pawar, whom she met in Mumbai, made this clear and stressed that keeping all together, mainly the Congress, is the way forward to defeat the BJP in the 2024 parliament polls. No one can "kill" the Congress. Banerjee, her mind preoccupied by the PM-ambition, chooses to ignore this aspect. This could be 'Advantage BJP', as some Congress leaders have stressed.

Banerjee and Kishor elsewhere have trained their guns on Rahul Gandhi and in a choreographed manner as part of this strategy. Banerjee's argument was that one in politics should take things seriously and cannot be on frequent foreign jaunts; and Kishor suffixed it with a statement that leadership of the Congress is not the "divine right" of an individual. More attacks on Rahul Gandhi and the Congress from the Mamata enterprise can be expected from now on. Integral to democracy is debate; and politics evolves through a process of churning. Nothing wrong about this, other than that this is now music to the BJP's ears. The 2019 parliament polls were marked by Opposition disunity. Prashant Kishor would know better as to which opposition parties can come together to put up a united opposition against the BJP in 2024. A united opposition is therefore what the TMC should be focussed on. If the Congress does not want to play ball, there is no other way for the TMC but to proceed without it.

# Importance of institutionalizing an idea

By Patricia Mukhim

The Cherry Blossom Festival was conceived by the Mukul Sangma led MUA Government. This concept among others was institutionalized by the present MDA Government and the Festival, especially the one at Ward's Lake was conducted with finesse. It brought together some of the best writers and scholars from the State and the country. Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih's magnum opus - Funeral Nights - a book that takes the readers through the rites associated with funerals and the all-pervasive sense of what this entire night vigil actually means to a Khasi. There was Shekhar Gupta of ThePrint in a tete a tete with David Laitphang which was very engaging. Shekhar has edited the Indian Express and now runs the online news platform - ThePrint. He is usually too busy to even take calls but that he spared time to come to Shillong for the event shows that he has a healthy respect for the organizer/s mainly Mary Kurkalang of the NGO- Khublei. Mary has been organizing Litfests across the country and even abroad. That a homegrown youth now based in Delhi could put together what must have been a highly challenging programme of hosting celebrities from cinema to literature is a matter of pride.

Naseeruddin Shah and Ratna Pathak Shah enjoyed their stay in Shillong and visited Sohra, Mawlynnong, Pynursla and other places besides. Naseeruddin was in conversation with our own theatre actor of acclaim, Lapding Syiem. We had a very engaging discussion on, "When words grow wings," moderated by this writer where two eminent writers of children's books, Bijal Vachharajani and Parismati Singh; a bookstore cum cafe owner, Raman Shresta of Gangtok and Badapbiang Dkhar a legal eagle cum activist whose mission is to take books to the villages and get children to develop a reading habit, all engaged in a very interesting discussion.

The panel discussion "Travelling Green" had Zorba Laloo whose labour of love over six years resulted in the book, "Meghalaya Rivers," ecologists Varun Goswami and Divya Vasudev, Naphibahun Lyngdoh a young archaeologist and Laurige Boyer a French gentleman living in Meghalaya since 2007 with Mary Kurkalang as moderator. What was stimulating about this discussion was

that tourism was linked to the environment and how to get tourists to respect the places they visit and not just tick them off their bucket list as another destination visited. Zorba Laloo and his team comprising Aaron Laloo and other like-minded colleagues have been organizing treks for school students and other interested visitors through their adventure company, Campfire Trails. This trek is meant to inculcate in young people a healthy respect for the environment.

Varun and Divya both working from Shillong said they felt young citizens should be encouraged to start movements for environment conservation and also be informed that this state is the home of the fast disappearing hoolock gibbons. Varun said escapades away from Shillong should form part of the adventure tourism perspective and those who promote tourism should actually know what they are getting into and not just entering the space blindly. To this Zorba Laloo also added that most people who promote tourism or are working in the sector have no real love or understanding of what a tourism experience is all about. "Campfire Trails is the first group to promote river canoeing because Meghalaya has the highest rainfall but no one ever spoke about rivers and their tourism potential in Meghalaya. Zorba and his team have had several foreign travelers come to Meghalaya for kayaking.

What impressed me the most was that Meghalaya also has a young archeologist in Naphibahun Lyngdoh. She said she dreamt of becoming an archeologist at the age of three and now at 28 she has achieved that dream. She organizes heritage walks to places in Meghalaya which are historically and archeologically important. Its so wonderful and inspiring to know that these national treasures exist in our midst. The State needs to nurture and promote these gems so that they add value to Meghalaya; to India and the world.

Laurige Boyer who probably understands better than any of us about the importance of homestay experiences observed that those running homestays in Meghalaya need to understand that guests want a home-like experience in that they can have free access to the

kitchen and see how local cuisine is cooked and what ingredients make up a particular dish; what local spices are used etc. Laurige pointed out that Meghalaya should reduce the use of plastic bottles; encourage people to carry their own bags and that tourists should stop polluting the silent spaces with loud music. He shared his experiences of taking French travelers to Nongnah village for survivor classes. When Mary asked him if foreign travelers are better spenders than Indian ones, Laurige said he finds that both categories spend more or less the same, depending on what there is that attracts them.

There was a little of everything at the Litfest from discussions on books to poetry reading from our young and aspirational poets to artists echoing their angst, to music and performances. Shillong could not have expected better than this. Truly the organizers and event managers deserve a standing ovation.

The Ward's Lake wore a festive look during the Litfest. Whoever did the decoration deserves applause. The gatekeepers were very strict and did not allow people to carry cigarettes or booze or plastic bottles inside. That's one reason why the Lake despite having hundreds of travelers had no brawls. What was perhaps overlooked was that the checking at the gate took a bit long and that resulted in a long queue outside. The Wards Lake had never had so many footfalls as it had this time hence the organisers need to take note of this. We should either have many more entrances or expand the present ones to allow for a smoother experience.

The sales counters inside the Ward's lake too were quite enticing. Those Garo wood sculpted figurines were to die for. So too were the other items on display. What a way to showcase our cultural and civilizational strengths. I met quite a few visitors who just waxed eloquent about how wonderful it was to visit Shillong. They included Devdutt Pattanaik the mythologist, speaker, illustrator and author, known for his fictional writing on Hindu sacred lore, legends, folklore, fables and parables. Interestingly his work focuses largely on the areas of religion, mythology, and management. There was

Kanishka Gupta the literary agent in conversation with Namita Gokhale. Our own Janice Pariat was drew out Amitav Ghosh on The Nutmeg's Curse (a pre-recorded one) which helped us get an insight into the great writer and understand Janice Pariat's own literary persuasions too. This Litfest created space for every art form, from literature to poetry, to conversations by visual artists to the environment and music and what have you.

What was a trifle sad was the brawl at Polo where the musical concert was held. That was bound to happen because the crowd was expected to swell up. After all we have been homebound for nearly two years and rock concerts are part of our DNA. If the organizers failed to gauge that human response then they need to learn from the NH7 events which were always held away from Shillong city because of their ability to anticipate the number of attendants. In any case major events should not be held within city limits because the rest of the citizenry is held captive by the serpentine traffic jams. So let's hope some lessons are learnt!

But the purpose of this article is to point at the need to institutionalize good governance practices irrespective of which government initiated it. The Cherry Blossom festival has gained momentum over the years and the Japanese Government is committed to creating tourist footprints from Japan to Meghalaya. This will see an all-round growth in tourism and the hospitality industry. Our young people studying hospitality and tourism management across the country will then find opportunities in their own state. This is important and adds value to the tourism industry because these professionals will know how to manage it more efficiently and also train others in the trade.

What Meghalaya needs right now is a Tourism Policy which should not be undermined by a Mining Policy. Meghalaya will have to choose between mining which devastates the environment and will hasten climate change and tourism which will leave the environment untouched.

Hopefully, this aspect will be debated on Meghalaya's 50th year and it is the people of Meghalaya and not just the Government which should be actively engaged on this issue.

# Narcotics law must not hinder medical use of opioids

By M.R.Rajagopal & Jagdish Rattanani

The repeal of the three farm bills is in the headlines. A little beneath the surface and reportedly all set for the winter session of Parliament are amendments to the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act. These are causing some worry among medical professionals and palliative care specialists on fears that the "principle of balance" in regulating opioids will be tilted against the interests of patients suffering from intense pain.

The "principle of balance" acknowledges the dual responsibility laid down in the United Nations Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, 1961. This is the responsibility placed on any government to achieve two ends - prevent inappropriate non-medical use of the medicine while at the same time ensuring its availability for treatment of pain. The lesson is that with reasonable controls, the medicine can be safely used and help relieve pain for patients with cancer and a host of other diseases.

Except for morphine and medicines belonging to that class (opioids), there is no other medicine that can relieve many kinds of pain, particularly about 75% of pains in cancer. It should also be obvious from decades of experience that irrational controls would impact only access to pain relief and have very little impact on non-medical use.

The need for pain relief has been known and clear to health professionals around the world, but the United States recognised this only at the turn of the century. That was when an ill-advised, industry-driven campaign without adequate control measures resulted in the growing abuse of opioids in North America. This became news. The fact that for a quarter of a century prior to that, Western European countries were using opioids effectively and safely, with just enough controls and documentation to prevent it reaching the wrong hands, was not as much reported or emphasised.

It was half a century ago that the growing burden of addiction in the USA resulted in President Nixon announcing the "war on drugs". India responded to the ensuing ripple effect across the globe, with the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act of 1985 - a draconian law which effectively paralysed the availability of morphine for pain relief, but had little impact on inappropriate and non-medical use. This law enabled mandatory and harsh punishment for what could even be a clerical error. If a pharmacist or doctor was found in possession of more than 25 grams of unaccounted morphine, the judge would have no alternative but to mete out rigorous imprisonment for a minimum of ten years. The person would not be deemed innocent until proven not guilty, with the onus of proving innocence foisted on the accused. Hospitals and pharmacies stopped stocking the medicine. State drug controllers stopped issuing necessary licenses. The national consumption of medical morphine came down from more than 600 kgs in 1985 to a meagre 17 kgs by 1998. Rather obviously, that increased the pain burden in the country in inverse proportion.

There should have been a lesson in this for us. The State of Kerala brought in rational rules in 1998, largely driven by non-government action supported by the government. Morphine and other opioids became at least 15 times more accessible than in the rest of the country, with more than 170 institutions in the State safely stocking and dispensing them for pain relief.

The fact that this has been successfully done in Kerala and demonstrated by

another low-income country, Uganda, for decades, has attracted little attention. Contrast this with the attention given to the misuse of drugs and the talk of a "drug epidemic" that we hear globally and now also from parts of India.

Concerted efforts by civil society and medical fraternity advocates eventually bore fruit. Reason prevailed, and in 2014 the Indian Parliament passed an amendment act - which, for the first time, acknowledged the responsibility of the government to provide pain relief. The implementation of the amended law has been incomplete; nevertheless, it was a major step in the right direction.

In recent times however, there have been unfortunate instances of doctors being jailed and prosecuted on misconceived grounds. This further dissuades them from prescribing controlled medicines or using them in hospitals.

It is essential for enforcement systems to distinguish between licit use and illicit use. Prosecution is warranted in cases of diversion and misuse of opioids, but if arrests happen on misconceived grounds, hospitals and doctors would naturally stop using the medicine. The pharmaceutical industry would be discouraged from manufacturing and distributing them. We will see more and more people with scars around their necks - both successful and unsuccessful attempts - and their children growing up with scars on their psyche. Their numbers will not be in the thousands; they will be in the millions.

Doctors and NGOs working in pain management and palliative care have made a representation to the government, to ensure that professionals and members of the pharmaceutical industry will face prosecution only for illicit use or diversion of controlled medicines and not on misconceived grounds.

The trouble with a campaign for pain relief is that pain and suffering are not very visible till it happens in one's own family, though there are over a million people with cancer pain in India, and millions more with other diseases. People who have not experienced or borne witness to excruciating pain from diseases like cancer cannot understand the enormity of the suffering - pain like an axe falling on one's jaw-bone every few seconds or hundreds of needles relentlessly jabbing a foot. These are the experiences that are not usually shared, and when shared, deliberately unheard. A man with cancer in his jaw once asked one of the authors, "Tell me, how can I be strong, when a nail is driven into my ear again and again, through the night and day?"

Similarly, people showing up with a rope burn scar around the neck are not rare in palliative care clinics. The National Crime Records Bureau of India reports that more than 26,000 people die by suicide every year owing to health-related suffering. Having to kill oneself is not the ultimate tragedy. Far worse is not having the strength to do it, and being abandoned to a fate that is worse than death.

India must work to build on the gains painstakingly made over the years, build further on the Kerala experiment and honour the principle of balance - and strike a compassionate balance between the government's responsibility to control drug misuse and its responsibility to mitigate unnecessary suffering caused by excruciating pain.

(Dr. M.R.Rajagopal is the Chairman of the non-profit Pallium India and Director, WHO Collaborating Centre for Training and Policy on Access to Pain Relief. Jagdish Rattanani is a journalist and a faculty member at SPJIMR) (Through The Billion Press) (e-mail: editor@thebillionpress.org)

### Letters to the Editor

#### Urgent letter to Power Minister

Editor,  
With the Leshka Power being the last addition to energy supply in our state in spite of the presence of the heavy consumers of our hydel power and with the PGIL and NTPC always demanding their dues, the domestic consumers are suffering a great deal. Last Saturday, a portion of Lum-mawrie and the market area (a locality of Laitumkhrh) suffered six to seven hours power cut from morning. As always, the line men were spontaneous in attending to their duties. But as time passed by and with no results, I rang up the Engineer who told me it was a transformer glitch. And my affected friend too added that this transformer always creates problems. With the effort of the linemen, the supply was restored; so thank you.

Mr Minister, although the transformers are routinely checked nothing can last to infinity. So if you could request the staff concerned to have a check if replacement is needed, that would be helpful to the consumers of any other locality too.

One very disturbing discovery I detected is the manufacture of local im-

mersion rods in place of the ISI branded one. The heater coil meant to be red hot is wound on a piece of stone or asbestos collected from roofs of dismantled buildings. The two wires, with no earthing are inserted into the socket. The total cost comes to Rs 35 only as against the ISI be it Remington or Bajaj of Rs 450. But the former is life threatening if accidentally touched. We ought to know that the coil of say 1.5 Kilowatts is conditioned to be red hot, and the current at red hot is around 6.5 amperes. Dipped in water this coil is of 20 ohms resistance and it consumes 220/20=11 amperes. The wattage shoots to 2.5 Kilowatts. As lay persons we only look at the time the bucket of water takes to boil. For the legal immersion rod the time taken is 25 minutes. For fake ones only 8 minutes!!

Some 20 years ago the transformer of NEHU was completely burnt down. The MSEB men inspected the students' hostels of NEHU based on some information from those with idea of Physics. All bathrooms had these fake immersion rods. That stupefied me as many students have taken Electricity as a subject in Physics so how could they practise such illegal acts. I asked the MSEB as to who bore the cost of the transformers but they just smiled and that was understood.

So, Mr Power minister, please take this detailed information I had furnished to save MeECL and the law-abiding consumers who have to suffer for no fault of theirs. And this requires of your Government to act on a war footing to search door to door if people use such devices, especially with winter already here. This becomes more urgent as KitKats in meter boxes as well as distributors would be fixed by self-styled engineers and an outbreak of fire in such buildings cannot be ruled out. Nearly all fires in winter are triggered by this culprit.

Yours etc.,  
W. Passah  
Retd HOD Electronics  
St.Edmund's College.

#### Higher education a distant dream

Editor,  
Apropos the letter, 'A Mixed Model for higher education' by Mr. Glenn C. Kharkongor, it's heartening to note the writer's angst against some of the issues relating to Higher Education expressed by Dr. Saji Varghese

Dr Kharkongor referred to the narrow mindset of Dr Varghese in using the words 'extortionate' and 'exorbitant', but it's an open secret that

higher education has become a platform which only those with money can reach for. Moreover, the recent survey conducted wherein Meghalaya is ranked very low in the poverty index subscribes to this notion that many of the "young people in our state cannot afford to pursue higher education because of poverty.

The top-ranking colleges in our state have very high fees for courses like Computers, Social Work, Mass Communication and the likes. Those who wish to pursue such courses have parents and guardians taking loans to enable their wards to take up such fields and for the many who don't have the means, they simply have to give up as a mere pipe dream.

Coming to the point of data and statistics, even though I'm not an educator or in the field of academia, simply as a parent, I can say that statistics and ground reality are poles apart. Data can always be tweaked to project a rosy picture but we have seen that even basic infrastructure in some of our government institutions are not viable at all for our students to pursue higher education wherein they have no alternative but to pay the 'exorbitant' fees to pursue what they aspire for.

In the end, I must add that it's time our state sets up educational institutions

which would cater to all and thus live up to the statement which our Chief Minister recently said, that we spend about Rs 2000 crores in the educational sector and we can finally say with pride that indeed we do.

Yours etc.,  
Angela Lyngdoh  
Shillong - 14

#### When data is unreliable

Editor,  
We cannot make accurate predictions about India's population growth based on the findings of the National Family Health Survey (NFHS). Assumptions about India's population are questionable. Claims about India's population are not entirely true. India's Total Fertility Rate (TFR) has slipped to 2.0. However, for India's population to stabilise or decline, it would have to maintain a TFR equal to or less than 2.1 for a sustained period.

In spite of this, India's current level of TFR is of enormous significance. This achievement is the result of concerted efforts of the people, successive governments and officials. That women have recognised the importance of having fewer children is a significant change. Our women are more empowered in their awareness about contracep-

tion and birth control.

The most significant aspect of the findings is the sex ratio. The population of women has exceeded that of men. There are 1,020 women for 1,000 men now. It is assumed that India's irrational preference for male child may have disappeared over time. However, it is worrisome that 57% of women of reproductive age are anaemic and the percentage of anaemic children is also on the rise.

Sensitising people about the importance of having fewer children is the most appropriate measure the government can adopt. There must be adequate investment in education and healthcare and more employment opportunities must be created. Girls' education is linked to decrease in fertility. The findings show that uneducated women tend to have more children. Health and life-skills education need to be provided at an early age. Sexual and reproductive health services must be provided along with this. Concerted efforts are needed to stabilize India's population.

Yours etc.,  
Venu GS,  
Kollam

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*"Consumer accountability drives quality and efficiency."*

— Pete Hoekstra

**The Shillong Times**

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**Attacks on Christians across India**

IT is disheartening to note that the Modi-led, NDA government has turned a blind eye to the series of atrocities on Christians across the country, including in Dwarka which is in the national capital. What are all these attacks supposed to convey? That the BJP will not allow individuals in this country to practise the faith they choose to? Is this not a violation of the Right to Freedom of Religion which is guaranteed to all Indians by the Constitution under Articles 25 to 28. Article 25 guarantees the freedom of conscience, the freedom to profess, practice, and propagate religion to all citizens. Article 26 gives freedom to manage religious affairs. This Article provides that every religious denomination has the right to manage its institutions subject to morality, health, and public order. Article 27 gives tax exemptions to proceeds which are directly used for the promotion and/or maintenance of any particular religion/religious denomination. Article 28 grants freedom to attendance at religious instruction or religious worship in certain educational institutions.

Despite the above clearly laid down freedoms in the Constitution which is the guiding light for all those governing the country, over 300 instances of violence against Christians by Hindutva groups have been reported from across 21 states, particularly North India, in nine months of this year. This was documented by a human rights fact-finding group. In Delhi's Dwarka area, a new church was allegedly vandalised by members of the Bajrang Dal. People praying inside the church were also allegedly assaulted by them. It is ironic that in October this year, Prime Minister Modi had met and invited Pope Francis to India - a country with the second largest Christian population in Asia. Two weeks earlier Mohan Bhagwat the RSS head and the ideological mentor of the BJP had warned Hindus of religious conversion and even alleged that there were demographic changes in the North Eastern states of India which have a large Christian population. Bhagwat made this speech on Dussehra, an important Hindu Festival. It is no secret that the RSS aims to make India a Hindu state. Following those speeches there have been violent attacks on Christians across different states in India.

What is intriguing is the silence of Christian groups in North East India at what is happening to their fellow-worshippers across India. If Mohan Bhagwat mentioned North East India, it may not be long before the attacks begin in these hills too. Also, none of the political parties barring the All Indian Trinamool Congress has condemned these atrocities. Are the churches and those elected to rule the states waiting to be attacked before they speak up?

**Now stiff opposition for Modi's bank privatisation**

**Two-day strike may be followed by series of agitations**

By Dr. Gyan Pathak

Modi's moves to privatise public sector banks have now met with stiff opposition by bank employees and officers. The Union government has labelled it as much-needed banking reforms, while agitators sense some foul play just to hand over the public sector banks to "crony capitalists". The same story is being replayed, as we have seen regarding farm sector reforms, labour reforms, and insurance sector reforms - agitators alleging them to be

is going to privatise at least two public sector banks during the current fiscal 2021-22 itself, as Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman had announced in her budget speech in February 2021.

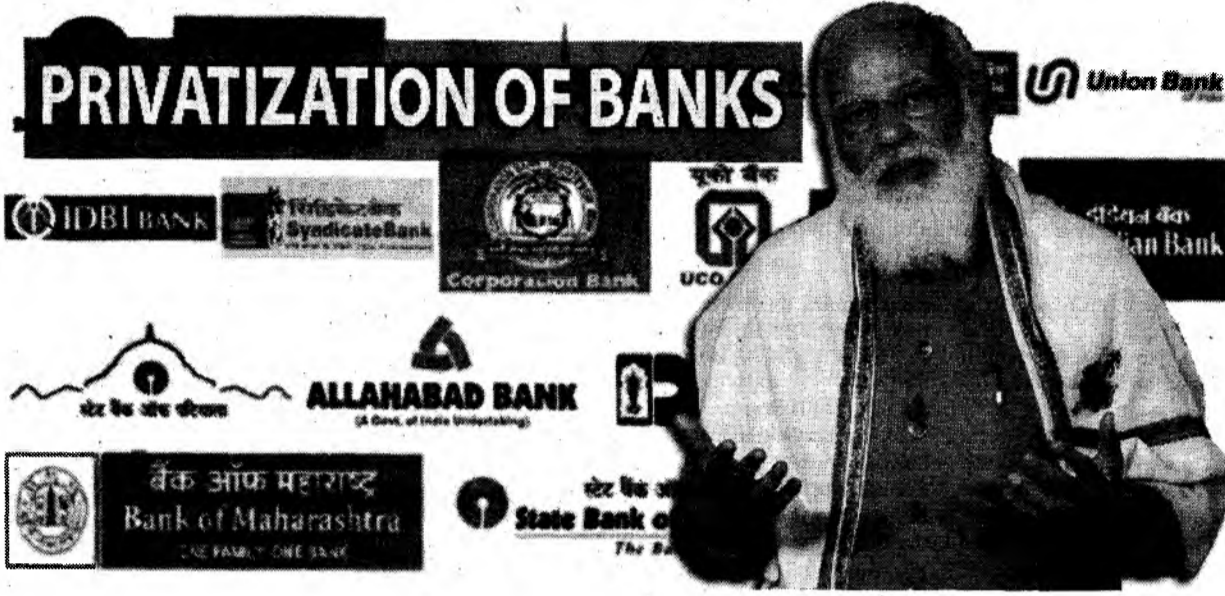
India has already been undergoing a great banking crisis with unprecedented level of non performing assets (NPAs), large number of banking frauds, and very

logic but is purely a political decision to hand over the banks to "crony capitalists". He also said that 70 per cent of the country's total deposits are with the public sector banks and handing them over to private capital will put the common man's money deposited with these banks in jeopardy.

Such allegations and fears for the economic well being

than all earlier agitations. In a developing country like India, where banks deal with huge public savings and they have to play a leading role to ensure broad-based economic development, public sector banking with social orientation is the most appropriate and imperative need, he emphasized.

The protest is against the expectation that the government would table bill for privatization of banks in the current winter session of Parliament, though the bill is



pro-corporate and demanding their rollback. With repeal of the infamous three farm laws, agitators are emboldened, and India may well expect a series of agitations if the Union government does not review its approach to privatisation of public sector banks.

The review of the Union Government's decision to privatise the public sector banks has become all the more important because several experts have found the policy to be against 'national interest' in the real sense of the term. Even former RBI governor Raghuram Rajan has said that selling PSU banks to corporates would be a 'colossal mistake', adding that it will also not be politically feasible to sell any decent-sized bank to foreign banks.

The two-day bank strike on December 16 and 17 has been called by the United Forum of Bank Unions (UFBU), an umbrella organization of bank unions. All India Bank Officers Confederation (AIBOC) has said if the Union government does not give up the idea of privatisation, they will launch a series of agitation programmes after the two-day strike. On the other hand, the Union government

poor performance of banks providing only a limited access to financial resources to MSMEs and other needy people despite the so-called financial packages of several lakh crores announced by the government after the COVID-19 crisis made them shut down their operations. At a time when the country is just recovering from the shock, the privatisation move and the agitations signal more troubles for the country.

Sanjay Das, the General Secretary of AIBOC, has said that the move to privatise

of individuals, MSMEs, and small businesses cannot be easily brushed aside because it is well known that they have always been suffering from much difficulty in accessing finance through even public sector banks on low costs. Privatisation would certainly push up the cost of getting loans, and also may suffer favouritism or bias against them due to narrow interests of the private banks. Public sector's social responsibility cannot be found in the private sector.

C H Venkatachalam, the

*The review of the Union Government's decision to privatise the public sector banks has become all the more important because several experts have found the policy to be against 'national interest' in the real sense of the term. Even former RBI governor Raghuram Rajan has said that selling PSU banks to corporates would be a 'colossal mistake'.*

PSBs would hurt the priority sectors of the economy and also credit flow to self-help groups and to the rural economy. Moreover, the proposed privatisation move is not based on sound economic

general secretary of All India Bank Employees Association (AIBEA), has said that they have served the strike notice to both the IBA and the Union government, and the two-day strike would also be stronger

yet to get official approval by the Union Cabinet.

The agitation against privatisation of banks is not new. UFBU had organized a two-day bank strike on March 15-16, 2021, just after the announcement of privatisation of banks by the Union Finance Minister in her budget speech. It was a success in terms of expanded participation of bank employees and officers.

UFBU's meeting on November 29-30 had decided to start a sit-in (dharna) on December 3 which is going on in several places across the country, and on December 4, protest demonstrations will be organized in all the state's capitals. A twitter campaign has been planned for December 10, and online petitions would be submitted to the Prime Minister Narendra Modi on December 14. On the day of introduction of the Bill for privatisation, there will be a demonstration before Parliament.

It should be noted that the Union government has already sold its majority stake in the IDBI Bank to LIC in 2019, and merged 14 public sector banks in the past four years as part of banking sector reforms. (IPA Service)

**Dalade: The promise of entrepreneurship**

By Sonata M Maiong

'Dalade, is a Khasi word meaning "by myself" which seems like a reasonable explanation as to why a local food processing entrepreneur would choose it as a brand name. It is a word most apt to capture the essence of entrepreneurship.

Food processing as a business in Meghalaya is not new, but since the pandemic the office of the Directorate of Food Processing has been bustling. Unemployed men and women, parents accompanying their children who have lost or left their jobs in other States, young students who are soon to graduate visit seeking information and support to start a business in food processing. The

kirana store in grams when she first started. She now orders in bulk because her pickle brand has quickly found favour among customers. Anumahasa Sna has named her brand Braves. It does take courage to venture into entrepreneurship. There must be an untold story there of how brave she must have been to start and carry on. Courage also reflects in the case of Wondrous Nonsiej of MFPI, whose minor granddaughter sat besides here and promptly shared images of MFPI products via a smartphone, one which Wondrous doesn't know how to use.

The stories are not all rosy. There are chapters on risk and loss. An entrepre-



Hon'ble Prime Minister's call for a self-reliant India and vocal for local has added hope to this dream.

Entrepreneurship is the new ambition. Entrepreneurship in farming and food processing, it appears, the most appealing ambition.

Justifiably so. Suddenly the world is talking about Lakadong turmeric. Trinity Saioo of Jaintia Hills was conferred the Padma Shri for her initiative in mobilising farmers for growing the Lakadong turmeric. Nanandro Sangma of Garo Hills was conferred the Padma Shri for planting 3,400 trees of black pepper. Neighborhood markets now offer locally cultivated kiwis, apples, persimmons, avocados, mushrooms, broccoli and bok choy. Local brands like Zizira established its presence online. CountrySpice launched a brick-and-mortar store in New Delhi, Bee Natural won an award at an international food event.

Hon'ble Chief Minister, Conrad Sangma coined the phrase "Meghalaya on the

neur tells of how at the start of his journey, his naivety was taken advantage of by people taking free samples of his products with empty promises to later buy. Another tells us how she has received feedback from many quarters to get her brand's label and packaging re-designed, to think "premium". She faces the criticism with a brave smile.

Only she knows that she has to ensure that her employees are given their salary, even during lockdown, that her loan EMIs are paid on time and that she has to save enough to sustain business. The pandemic can be harsh.

She has learnt that. Rosy or not, the stories are equally intriguing. Dilseng Sangma of M/S Hills Products manufactures biodegradable plates and bowls from Areca Nut and Sal leaves. He is a self-taught student of the technology used from YouTube. Neha Nialang of Jowai is just 23 years old but her Lakadong turmeric infused honey and cashew butter won the Selection Committee over Gabil's chocolate cashews are delectable, TIA's Spices



Move" to commemorate this evolution as seen in Meghalaya.

There are however, innumerable untold stories about the spirit of entrepreneurship. Stories that may never find a place on Amazon or win awards at events but ones that equally contribute to moving Meghalaya. 18 local food processing brands were recently selected by a Committee to represent the State at SIAL India 2021 to be held in New Delhi on December 9-11. Each of these 18 brands tells one such story. Junda Marak, who travelled from Garo Hills to showcase her pickles, speaks with demure pride about how she would buy spices from the local

are aromatic, Omil Farms' range of honey infused with mustard, mandarin and litchi are an innovative winner, award or not.

As these 18 brands get ready to showcase at one of India's biggest B2B food exhibitions, one knows that not all of them will garner business at the event. However, each entrepreneur goes in the hope to do so, or at least to learn how to do so. And for each brand that does achieve success, more courage will be gained by others, more entrepreneurs will be born in the State who can tell their story proudly saying we did it "dalade".

S M Maiong is a consultant currently engaged in projects with the Directorate of Food Processing

**Letters to the Editor**

**Not small on the Richter scale**

Editor, The Richter scale measures the movement of tectonic plates under the earth's surface. The Richter scale emanating from the midnight coup when 12 Congress MLAs left the Party to join the TMC is not a negligible one as just two days after that, the Tura MP, Agatha Sangma, all of a sudden betrayed the BJP to become anti-CAA. This is the height of political immaturity! Sadly, very few or none in our State questioned this sudden turnaround.

Following the coup it is also unthinkable that the Speaker of the Assembly has to go through the rule book as the erosion was 300%. That such a trivial thing should require the Speaker to be a student once again exposes lack of sheer logic that comes from common sense. It reminds me of a friend who tried to learn karate from a book in case his house was attacked by robbers. Mr Prestone Tynsong should be praised for his sound judgement on this issue though.

But the most disturbing fact is that some peoples' hatred of the Bengalis is greater than their fear of the CAA or the invasion of corporates

that would snatch away jobs of Meghalayans, recently exposed in the MeECL, smart meter worship to enhance someone's business. No one is paying attention to the new Electricity Bill which may be tabled during this winter session of Parliament and which may displace our locals from MeECL and raise the domestic bills to that of industrial ones.

Lastly, it is very disappointing indeed that all the struggles and unceasing debates in the Assembly by the so-called Bengali lovers to alleviate the suffering of farmers caused by unavailability of good seeds, disrupted transport system succumbing to unlicensed ATMs on roads, no waterproof godowns to prevent decay of broomsticks and bay leaves in the wettest place like Mawsynram has resulted in nothing. The plight of SSA teachers under this Education Minister who makes contradictory statements like, "It's not the duty of the Government to pay salaries," and in the next sentence says, 'Of course I shall release 2 months pay,' is mind boggling.

It is disappointing that people in our state don't raise their voices for teachers who are not being paid their dues or on the border issues, although they watch social media 24x7. Their love for regional parties had perma-

nently blinded them to the stark realities of these parties which no longer have the spine to unfetter the shackles that have tied them to the MDA Government.

Let me end with an old saying, "When Bengal sneezes, the whole of India catches a cold."

Yours etc., James Kharminh Shillong 1

**Congress Party rudderless**

Editor The continuous resignation of Congress office bearers and workers in a span of weeks is something that has never happened before, since it set foot in Meghalaya. Reasons are many and so are contradictions which have made the party look like a rudderless ship with very few passengers on board sailing onwards. Blame games, finger pointing are all part of every political party but the issue of a senior party member being singled out for many things gives a different picture. What would be the impact at the regional level as well as at the national level within the Party as it heads towards 2023 and 2024 cannot be said at this stage but yes as a party it has suffered severe blows. There is a school of thought that says, people are either

being politically rational or politically sentimental. Both have different meanings especially in a society like ours where issues are side-lined left and sentiments tend to overtake them.

Yours etc., Dominic Stadlin Wankhar, Shillong

**Rejoinder from DIPR**

Editor In response to letter to the editor captioned "Entrepreneurship: to encourage or discourage?" (ST December 2, 2021 by Toki Blah I would like to clarify on the points raised by the writer firstly by stating that the form in question is not a registration form but form of application for the grant of license for Homemade Wines wherein it is necessary to enclose the marriage certificate of married applicant, to address any issues arising in future of marital discord and settlement thereof in respect of the license.

Secondly, the Excise license cannot be granted to any person below the age of 21 (twenty-one) years and is personal to the licensee, hence the basic information like name, sex etc., of the applicant is sought. Thirdly, wine making is a specialized trade, which entails continuous monitoring

and recording of Potential Alcohol Content, PH level, Alcohol by volume, quality of the wine. etc. to ensure that the homemade wines are fit for human consumption, for which basic educational qualification is a must. Fourthly, the caste/community in the application form is primarily asked to see if the applicant needs to obtain and produce Trading license or not, as per extant Rules on the subject matter. Fifthly, the license shall not be granted to any person who are in arrears in respect of any Government revenues, dues or is a defaulter in respect of repayment of any Government loans, hence the present and past occupation of the applicant is sought.

Lastly, verification of the antecedents of the applicant from the Police is necessitated as Meghalaya Excise Act and Rules prohibit grant of Excise License to any person who has been convicted by criminal court for non-bailable offence. The Government had notified the Homemade Wines Policy, which is one of its kind in the country at home-scale, on September 29, 2020, keeping in mind the interest of the fruit growers and farmers of the State to provide for an enabling legal framework to facilitate such an economic activity and providing for benchmarking of quality and alcohol content of the wine

at the same time. Interested Homemade Wine producers are applying for grant of license for production and sale of Homemade Wines, allowing them to sell their products directly to the wine consumers or through Excise retail outlets or for that matter export outside the State as well, within the ambit of the Homemade Wines Policy and approval of the Government is accorded to them.

On behalf of the Excise Department, I would like to reiterate that the conditions put forth by the Government for production and sale of Homemade Wines with the sole purpose of ensuring that only good-quality wines duly certified as fit for human consumption are eligible for sale, thereby discouraging and keeping a check on the fly-by-night operators/fraudulent/non-serious wine-makers. Any points of clarification or any inputs/feedback regarding the Homemade Wine Policy may kindly be addressed to the office of the undersigned via ceshillong01@gmail.com.

Yours etc., G. Dkhar, Deputy Commissioner of Excise, Meghalaya, Shillong

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

# First War of Independence through an Indian lens

**D**rawn from the details provided by a Brahmin-turned-amateur-historian, this is a real story that follows two learned men as they traverse India during the 1857 uprising on foot, unearthing history from a new vantage point.

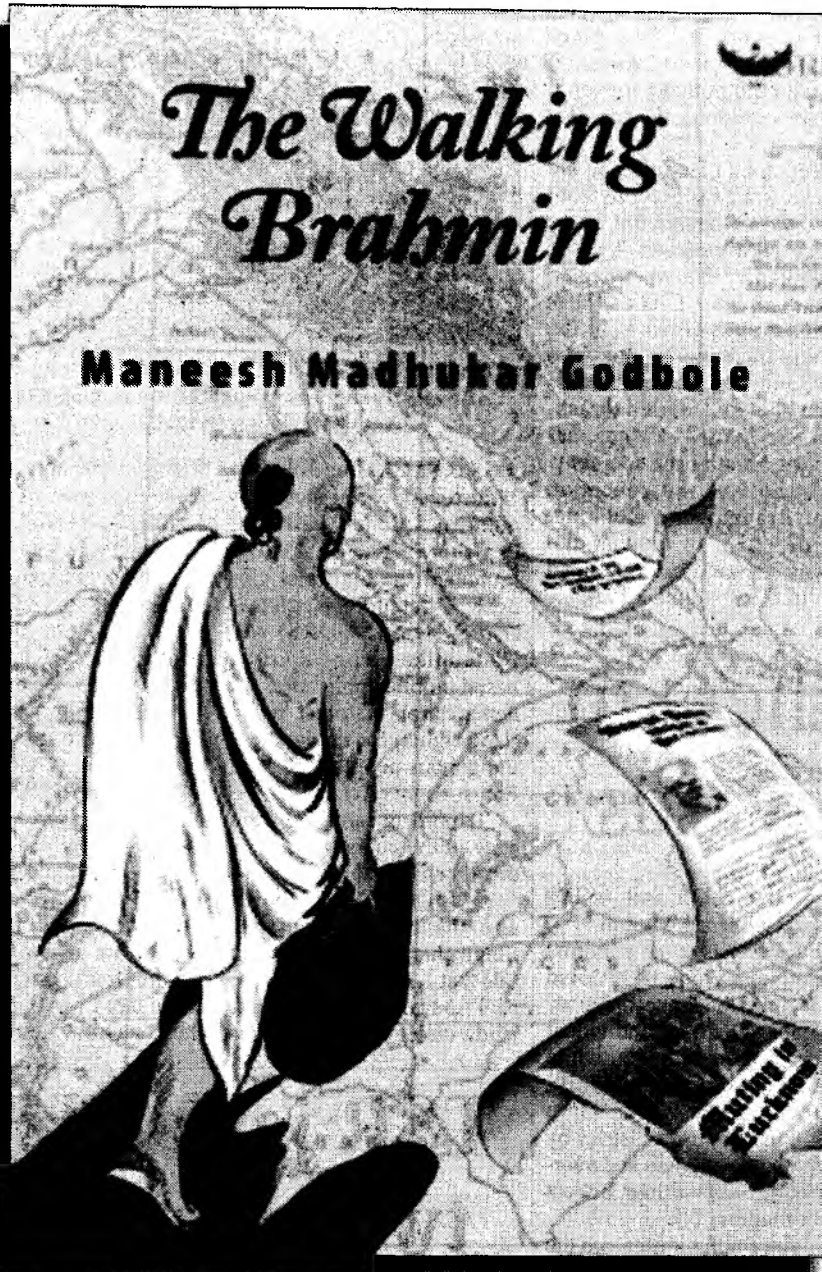
As the First War of Independence raged, a Brahmin from Maharashtra, Vishnubhat Godse, on a pilgrimage found himself caught right in the middle of the action. He, along with his uncle Rambhat, went through a series of adventures, including barely escaping hanging.

Upon his return home, Godse wrote it all down in Marathi so that his forthcoming generations could have an idea of how things were during that tumultuous period. "The Walking Brahmin" by Maneesh Madhukar Godbole retells that journey, which is a rare eyewitness account from a common Indian's point-of-view.

Published by Garuda Prakashan decades after the original manuscript, it puts all pieces of the story together with maps and photographs and offers a unique insight into what really happened during the War of 1857.

This tale starts in 1857, as the protagonist duo starts on a *teertha yatra* from Varsai, a small Maharashtra village, and walk smack in the middle of the mutinous upheaval of 1857. Having the misfortune of being at the wrong place at the wrong time, they were caught in the crossfire between the loyalist Indian troops and the British.

Narrativising historical incidents through an Indian lens, such as the fall of Jhansi, they survived the aftermath of British savagery, were robbed of all their belongings mul-



multiple times, and even managed to avoid getting hanged twice. Being on the road for over two years, they finally returned to Varsai, which was where Vishnubhat penned down his adventure for his

descendants.

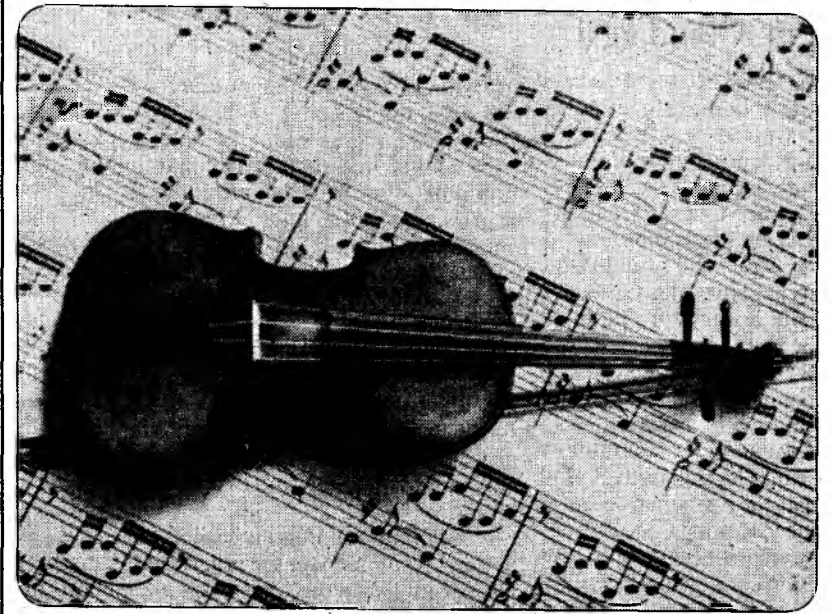
"His original manuscript, which ran into 297 pages, comprised two notebooks and twenty-two individual pages. It was eventually published as a Marathi book in 1907, a few years after Vishnubhat's death. This is probably the only known instance of a document that talks about 1857 from an Indian perspective," the Pune-based Godbole said.

"Not only does it give us the story from the perspective of the vanquished, but it is also more reliable as it is a first-hand account of experiences and not based merely on hearsay. Thus, the value of this book, in the annals of history, is quite priceless.

"Vishnubhat's book offered me a unique and authentic insight on how our ancestors lived. What they believed in, the social structure of those times, the hardships, the never-give-up attitude, their fortitude, their beliefs and their ability to even put their lives at risk to fulfill their responsibility," added Godbole, who learnt about this lesser-known story when he was busy writing blogs related to his travel to northeast India and subsequent research.

Sharing his insights on the book, Uday S Kulkarni, historian and author of "The Extraordinary Epoch of Nana Saheb Peshwa", said that it "gives us a graphic account of the cruelty perpetrated by British forces in cities such as Jhansi, where troops looted and massacred the populace in retaliation for the stiff resistance the city offered the attacking force. It's a short book, which brings alive the times, the dangers, the smell of war and of death... a first-rate historical account of those turbulent times." (LANS)

# Celebrating music and its power to unite people



**N**ever-before-seen concerts by renowned performers such as the Berklee Indian Ensemble and Women of the World, a collection of inventive artists from throughout the world, are among the highlights of The Museum of Art & Photography (MAP) Bengaluru's 'Art is Life: SoundFrames', a three-day digital festival in collaboration with Berklee College of Music.

MAP, is one of India's leading private museums dedicated to making art and culture accessible to a wide range of people. Sound of the City, a sonic public engagement in which composers and producers create music influenced by the sounds of cities across India (Mumbai, Bengaluru, Kolkata, and Delhi), is another collaboration between the two institutions.

Songwriting, music therapy, and vocals are just a few of the immersive programmes offered as part of the cooperation event between MAP and Berklee.

The festival will take place from

December 3-5, 2021, and will also provide a variety of music-related educational and immersive programmes, some of which are co-sponsored by the Indian Music Experience (IME) museum.

Art is Life: SoundFrames celebrates music and its power to bring people together as part of MAP's aim to bring art to the heart of the community and develop bridges between varied art forms and audiences. Over 25 events inspired by music will be presented over the course of three days, including concerts, performances, panel discussions, film screenings, educational workshops, and exhibitions.

More than 65 artists from India and around the world will perform at the festival, including Subramania's Ambi and Bindu Subramaniam, Grammy-winner Ricky Kej, musical talents from IndianRaga, young Hindustani maestro Pandit Sanjeev Abhyankar, and the Durbari Qawwals of Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya Dargah." (LANS/ife)

# Kerala Literature Festival from Jan 20

**T**he sixth edition of the Kerala Literature Festival (KLF 2022) will be held at the beaches of Calicut (Kozhikode) from January 20 to January 23.

Over 400 speakers including Jeffrey Archer, Ada Yonath, Abhijit Banerjee, Arundhati Roy, Remo Fernandes, Sagarika Ghose, Wendy Doniger, Shashi Tharoor, Manu S. Pillai, Devdutt Pattanaik, Chris Kraus and Sudhir Kakar among others will be part of the festival.

Organised by the DC Kizhake-muri Foundation, the event is supported by the Government of Kerala and Kerala Tourism Board. Well-known poet, critic, and writer Prof K. Satchidanandan is the festive director of KLF 2022.

Set along the shores of the Arabian Sea, the four-day festival brings artists, actors, celebrities, writers, thinkers, and activists closer to people of different backgrounds and interests. With an aggregate footfall of more than 3 lakhs, KLF is the second largest festival of its kind in Asia, combining the best of literary



and popular cultures.

The sessions at KLF aim to map literature through discussions on aspects of science & technology, art, cinema, politics, music, environment, literature, pandemic & its impacts, business & entrepreneurship, health, art & leisure, travel & tourism, gender, economy, culture genomics, history & politics, and various facets that shape human consciousness.

Speakers include major award-

winning writers, film and theatre personalities, performers and artists, designers, media personalities, sports icons, diplomats and celebrities from diverse backgrounds.

KLF 2022 will host 200 plus sessions boasting writers, experts, and performers from across India and more than 12 nations globally.

This year the organisers will introduce curated gastronomical exuberance with food trucks and ethnic cuisines. (LANS)

# A rise in pet-friendly and sustainable travel options

By Olivia Sarkar

**T**here is no doubt that the pandemic modified travel – but that's just part of the story. Hilton released a global trends report, "The 2022 Traveler: Emerging Trends and the Redefined Traveler" which dives into an important truth: in two years, peoples lives were dramatically altered, and that radically changed people.

The report examines the macro trends and changes that have emerged and will continue to thrive in 2022. Using insights from Dr Kate Cummins, a travel psychology expert, and industry leaders, the report explores four consistent themes that summarise the new, pandemic-changed traveler, which are fueling several emerging travel trends:

Amid Chaos, People Found Efficiencies, and Will Be Looking for the Same in Travel: After on-demand services, grocery deliveries, and other time-saving measures become commonplace, people expect efficiencies and convenience. Shifts like contactless payments and digital check-ins to become more popular than ever before.

The Overall Focus on Wellness Will Span Beyond the Gym: The wellness vertical has moved beyond the spa and the gym. From bringing your dog along for the trip to creating spaces with more natural light and indoor plants, mental and physical wellness is a focus that will continue to grow.



They Nurtured New and Existing Passions and Will Have More Refined Tastes and Preferences: After months of baking sourdough breads and planting victory gardens, people have new hobbies and passions, and they're expecting to pack their passions while traveling. Culinary and integrated experiences are expected to be in high demand.

Catering to this change, travellers can expect a rise in pet-friendly and sustainable travel options, unique food and beverage experiences and menu changes, and more offerings catered to guests' health and overall wellbeing – and this is just the tip of the iceberg. The report outlines changes to guest preferences across the entire hotel experience, backed by internal booking and revenue data, guest feedback, third-party research and more.

By Julian Lawrence

**T**he current Somerset House exhibition in London, Beano: The Art of Breaking the Rules, revels in the joyful impudence of the 83-year-old comic magazine's characters. A tribute to the publication's impact seems long overdue; as curator Andy Holden says: "Beano's irreverent sensibility is something that appeals to you as a child, but also, for some, never leaves you."

The Beano plays an important role in children's lives because, along with other Beano readers, you become part of a community, through the readers' letters page, fan art and fan club.

Beano's longevity can be attributed to what educator Carol Tilley calls the "participatory culture" of comics and its diversity of characters.

Of all the Beano's characters, no one better exemplifies the essence of sheer impertinence and anarchic subversiveness - as represented in the exhibition's title - than Dennis the Menace himself.

Indeed, the 70-year-old character has helped maintain the Beano as a long-running publication. Dennis debuted in a black-and-white half-page tucked inside the issue of March 17 1951. From that pivotal moment, growing demand for Dennis's adventures "led him to the colour back cover in 1954... and then to the cover replacing Biffo the Bear".

I first discovered Dennis when he was 20 years old, and I was all of eight. In December 1971, I was growing up in

# Dennis the Menace turns 70



Quebec, Canada, and my UK grandparents sent me the 1972 Beano Book as a Christmas present.

Dennis was introduced as a large red and black drawing that depicted him shaving his name into his dog Gnasher's fur. As Beano characters often do, Dennis broke the fourth wall, gazing beyond the page. I immediately identified with this cheeky chap.

Cultural impact

Journalist David Mapstone observes

that, until recently, the UK's weekly printed comics, such as Beano and Dandy (among others), were "a massive influence on the lives of children for decades... and then they were gone."

All apart from the best - the Beano - still read weekly by thousands."

Dennis the Menace's influence on culture in the past is undeniable, from raves to professional darts, to RuPaul's Drag Race.

However, today's Dennis (formerly

the Menace) appears more influenced by society rather than the other way around. For instance, he wears new trainers instead of old boots, and he's addicted to the internet rather than bent on disturbing lines of communication.

Those original themes of subversion appealed to young readers; Dennis would try to fight the law, but the law would generally win – a timeless lesson that can almost be considered a sort of delinquent rite of passage. Dennis's

charm lay in being "an anarchic figure" who expressed others' feelings of rebellion vicariously through him.

Cartoonist David Law was the artist behind the character's adventures from 1951 until 1970.

I don't think the two Dennis stories in my 1972 Beano Book were drawn by Law, but the team that took over from him when he died. Law's original Dennis the Menace, on the other hand, presented a comparatively raw, crude,

and proto-punk aesthetic: irreverence, nihilism and amateurism.

There are visual links between this chaotic Dennis the Menace and the UK's Viz comic, which began as a do-it-yourself fanzine in 1979.

In researching this article, I rang up Viz co-editor Graham Dury and we talked about the influence that Beano, and Dennis the Menace specifically, had on the comics scene in the UK, and Viz in particular.

Beano and Dandy were a major influence on the wonderfully rude and crude Viz, which even satirised some of its characters, Dury told me.

Tumbling into the 21st century

Dennis's anarchist appeal is not what it used to be; in fact, he is not even featured on the cover of a recent issue of Beano (week of November 27 2021).

He does appear in a two-page story, but he is an ally (rather than a menace) to his family, who all work together to escape to a world "unspoiled by internet and mobile phones".

Contrast this with Dennis's first adventure in 1951, where we are introduced to a very different relationship: Dennis wants to be free to play on the grass and climb trees.

Dennis's dad, meanwhile, decides to control the cheeky chap by tying a dog's leash around his neck.

The art of breaking the rules is, apparently, knowing what the limits are.

(Julian Lawrence is a Senior Lecturer in Comics and Graphic Novels, at Teesside University, London)

# HEALING THROUGH LAUGHTER

## Clownselers' journey to Meghalaya

By Ibankyntiew Mawrie

A famous line from the comedy-drama film — *Munna Bhai M.B.B.S* called "Jaadu ki Jhappi" (magical hug) and the lead actor Sanjay Dutt's attempt to spread laughter at a hospital set up might seem just like any other well-scripted scene from a movie but one cannot deny that such attempts are but a reflection of life — as it is — and I choose to believe that the foundation of this famous line is drawn from the quote — "Laughter is the best medicine."

The ability to make someone smile is an ever powerful and effective gift; whether or not you choose to believe the scene depicting the miraculous healing through laughter in the *Munna Bhai M.B.B.S* movie, I leave it up to you, the wise readers to analyse.

One such believer is Sheetal Agarwal, the founder of Clownselers Foundation — a five years old Delhi-based non-profit organisation. As a clownselers, Agarwal has been visiting hospitals, cheering up patients so that their healing process becomes faster and quicker.

Why Clownselers? As the word suggests, Clownselers are clowns plus counsellors, engaged in an intervention strategy for therapeutic treatment of patients in hospitals — internationally known as medical clowning.

About Medical Clowning: Medical clowning is an established field of medicine, internationally. It is believed to be introduced by American doctor Patch Adams in the 1970s. But in India, it is not known so much. In many countries, it is part of medical learning and in various setups, medical clowns are specifically trained.

"When we talk about health care, the focus is entirely on physical health. But as clownselers, our focus is on the complete well being of a patient — both physical and mental



"Laughter is the tonic, the relief, the surcease for pain" — Charlie Chaplin

health," Agarwal told *The Shillong Times*.

A core team of 16-17 people, Clownselers Foundation also has about 250 volunteers across the country. "We have been travelling across India, taking clowning to different hospital settings and also all kinds of spaces like old age homes, slums, orphanages, special schools," Agarwal said.

Agarwal is in Meghalaya to spread the word on the effectiveness of medical clowning. The Clownselers were invited by the Meghalaya government to introduce this form of therapy in the state.

"This is our second time to Meghalaya and we are glad that Sampath Kumar and Vijay Kumar recognise the need for clowning in medical set up. Our first visit was in April 2021,

exactly at a time when the second COVID wave hit us. But despite that, we had a session in three different hospitals including COVID wards in NEIGRIHMS. The other two hospitals were Bethany and Nazareth," Agarwal said.

Termining the experience as "wonderful", Agarwal said the sound of laughter is something that evokes emotions and provides a sense of relief.

During their second visit, the Clownselers, who reached Shillong on November 24, visited three different hospitals in Shillong, two in Tura and one in Jowai.

"We started clowning from November 26 — first at Meghalaya Institute of Mental Health and Neurological Science (MIMHANS), then Shillong Civil Hospital on Novem-

ber 27, and Ganesh Das Hospital on November 29," she informed.

Narrating her experience at Shillong Civil Hospital, Agarwal said they came across a patient with acute depression. "He hardly smiles but post clowning, we noticed that even after we left the room, he couldn't stop smiling," the elated Agarwal said.

**It's not a joke, it's therapeutic**

"When I learnt about medical clowning, I wanted to try it and only a few people were doing this in India. In fact, very few people in the medical setup knew about medical clowning. So, it got me — I realised this is a powerful therapy that revolves around the whole idea of giving purpose to a smile," the 35-year-old clownselers said.



She further added that this medical clowning is not just therapeutic for people they engage with, in different setups but it has been therapeutic for the Clownselers and volunteers as well, for ourselves too. "Medical clowning is like a win-win thing, both ways," she said.

Agarwal met Commissioner and Secretary, Government of Meghalaya, Vijay Kumar on November 29 to discuss plans of training the youth of the state in this form of therapy.

"Medical clowning can't be a one day process. It has to be a continuous affair and for that, there should be people who can continue," she said.

Since there aren't any courses in India for medical clowning, Clownselers Foundation has all kinds of people, from all kinds of

educational or professional backgrounds and age groups. "There is no particular education or profession that we are looking at but anybody can clown and anybody passionate towards spreading a smile can join us," Agarwal added.

Speaking to this scribe, Principal Secretary of Health & Family Welfare Department Sampath Kumar said this is a welcoming intervention and the need of the hour to deal with fear and anxiety during times like these — medical clowning is more like a Placebo effect.

"You see fear is the problem. We need to have a positive attitude towards life. Yes, we facilitated the Clownselers in carrying out clowning. This is a new concept in Meghalaya — even for the doctors and nurses here," Kumar said.

### 'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, DEC 5, 2021

Moon sextile Jupiter on your solar return chart and it will give fantastic results. You will get peace and happiness. You will also get full support from your life partner. An influential person will provide you timely help and take you forward in your life. The decisions of court cases that are pending will be in your favor. Works will get completed. Before making any investment in land, vehicle etc. take proper advice. You will try and obtain all the amenities in life. You will get a lot of time to spend with your companion. You will get a chance to get connected to new people. You will also get a chance to fulfill your interests. You will also enjoy the holidays fully. You can get a responsible position in your job. Money will be spent on comforts and facilities. You will be able to overcome obstacles with your good understanding.

**Aries: (March 21 - April 20)**  
There is a need to do some assessment now about the turn your life is taking. Perhaps you are too much busy with your work and have even neglected some other aspects. You need to look at your likes and interests too. And leave little time for yourself too. The elders of your family will guide you well. You will get surprising results. The benefits of which will be visible in your work too. Your interactions with people will increase. Your financial position will remain stable and strong. You will come up to the expectations of people around you. Your business too will prosper and flourish. You will enhance your name and prestige. There are chances of a promotion and increase in salary.

**Taurus: (April 21 - May 21)**  
Your responsibility towards people will increase. You will fulfill the expectations of those who are dependent on you. You will also look after your elders in the family well. You will also have monetary gains. You will plan to buy a vehicle or property. You will also invest in books, shares, gold and mutual funds. It will be a wonderful week from all points of view. Those looking for job will get good offers. A new person can enter your life all of sudden leading to a warm and fulfilling relationship. The time will be happily spent among your own people. You will also have professional gains. Your house will reverberate with the laughter of guests. You will also fulfill your dreams. You will be made to work hard. You will not mind it. You will materialize your plans at the last moment. Your health will remain perfect. And you will remain cheerful and happy.

**Gemini: (May 22 - June 21)**  
You will like to stay with your family. And spend some time with them. The year is coming to a close and you will have high hopes for the coming year. You will work and plan in that direction to make your life happy and prosperous. You need to re-focus on some of your priorities and make changes accordingly. You will pay attention to your family, work and relationship. Your friends will help and guide you. You will also feel a lot different emotionally and physically. You will understand the feelings and expectations of your close ones. You matter a lot to them. Lovebirds will have a wonderful time and bonding. You will have to go out for work. Your trip will be successful. Your bosses will be satisfied with your performance. You will pay high respect to your elders. You will also take out time to rest along with doing work.

**Cancer: (June 22 - July 22)**  
Your time will be full of gains and profit. The decisions taken in your business will prove to be right. You will also progress in your job. Your peers and superiors will be happy with your performance. Your financial position will remain stable and strong. You will also receive a pleasant news from somewhere. Your worries regarding your children's career and marriage will come to an end. You will also make best use of your communication skills. Your work will get done with ease. You will feel you are at the crossroad and you need to do something special. You will also assess yourself and others. You will take steps for your self development. You will get satisfaction at your progress.

**Leo: (July 23 - August 23)**  
It is an amazing week for you. You will make a program for going out of station on a trip with your family for fun and relaxation. You desperately need a break from your hectic work schedule. You will also make good relations with everyone. You will also meet some of your old friends and colleagues. You will earn a lot of money. There will be opportunities for sudden gains. Your efforts will fetch you good returns in your business. Increasing interaction with people will be beneficial. You will take the right decisions with regard to marriage, investments, property etc. Money wise you will get best results. You will make new friends. Your health will remain fine. The circumstances will be favorable. Your children will study hard and will follow your advice. Your popularity will increase.

**Virgo: (August 24 - September 22)**  
It will be a peaceful time for you. Your attention will be focused on family and work. You will remain devoted to your work and also make progress. You will also lead a quality life. Your business plans for expansion will get underway. Your colleagues and associates will remain fully in your support and look forward for guidance. You will remain in total control and manage the things well. Your financial position will remain stable and strong. But you will feel that family is important for stability and success.

You will pay equal attention to your family ties and discharge your responsibilities well. You will work with a cool mind and all things will turn in your favor. The graph of your prestige will go up. You will have no health issues. Travels will prove profitable. Your self confidence and determination will be high.

**Libra: (September 23 - Libra 23)**  
You will get job opportunities and you will take no time in accepting them. You will feel a lot more confident and not afraid to accept challenges. Your boss and colleagues will be happy with your work. But you will also need to take life a little easy and put too much stress on yourself. There are chances of promotion, increments etc. too. You will be handed over some important responsibilities and duties at your work. You will come up to the expectations of everyone. You will also impress your life partner with your dedication and sincerity. He/she will come closer to you. You need to take care of health of your elder family members. Also you need to curb your expenses. You will never be sort of funds.

**Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22)**  
As you need to meet work deadlines in office the work pressure will be too much. You will get very little time for yourself. But that you will have to look into and also take care of your health. Taking a short break from work and going on a trip with family will do a world of good for you. You will feel energized, fresh and peaceful. It will also help you to understand the feelings and expectations of your close one. Gradually you will feel relieved from all the troubles that have been bothering you for sometime. Your financial condition and status will also be good. You will also buy some insurance policy and also make investments in banks and shares. You will be successful in all your efforts to get money. The relations with your brothers will be better. You will receive some good news from somewhere.

**Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 23)**  
You will work on the path of success due to your intelligence and patience. Honestly, work passion and truthfulness will be on your mind constantly. This will win you lot of admirers and your bosses will be impressed by your work and performance. Disputes related to assets will be solved in the presence of an experienced person. You will also enjoy the trust and confidence of your colleagues and associates. Your brothers will also listen to you and give equal respect. Love mates will enjoy bonding and trust. They will plan to get married. You will also become free from pain and diseases. There will be a great improvement in the relationship of husband and wives. You will also take care of your children. You need not lose your patience and discipline in certain matters.

**Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20)**  
Your problems will be resolved with ease. You will be successful in job, business and investments. There are chances of continuously gaining money. You will also get lot of name and fame. You will also accomplish a certain responsibility of your workplace. You could get promoted. You will also feel full of energy and motivated and ready to accept any challenge. You will also meet an influential and inspirational person. Your financial status will be strong. Your partner will be a source of strength. Despite being busy with your work you will give time to your family. You will be successful in your love relations. A decision regarding marriage can be taken after taking your family elders into confidence. All your plans for the future and career will be successful.

**Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18)**  
The beginning, middle and end of the week will be fantastic. These are the days to execute your plans and ideas. Your good work will be appreciated. You will feel a lot more confident. Whatever you do will be done with full loyalty and dedication. There will be give and take in relations. Your family members will come close to you. You will also enjoy perfect equations with your mate. You will continue to do brilliant work. You will move forward in the right direction because of your maturity and right thinking. Love affairs will be successful. Newly wed couples can go on a trip. They will also spend the time in understanding each other. Your career will receive a boost on the aid and advice of a gentle person. Your entire attention will be on your family and house.

**Pisces: (February 19 - March 20)**  
There will be happiness and bliss in your personal life. You will plan to go on a trip with family. You will witness joy, cheer and unity in the family. Family members will love and respect each other. You will understand the needs and demands of your children and do your best. They will also listen to you. Luck will also favor you. You will also remain disciplined in your habits. You will also walk on the path of spirituality. It will make you feel peaceful and relaxed. You will also indulge in your interests and give time to gardening, walking and other leisure activities. You will face stiff competition in your business but that will not worry you much. Your government related work will get done with ease. Tax disputes will be resolved.

## In the hope of a better world for differently-abled children



By Br KJ Jose

In 1992, United Nations General Assembly took a bold decision to observe December 3 as International Day of Persons with Disabilities. Thereafter, every year December 3 is observed or celebrated to honour persons with disabilities. This year, the theme for International Day of Persons with Disabilities is "Leadership and participation of persons with disabilities toward an inclusive, accessible and sustainable post-COVID-19 world."

Leadership, participation and accessibility are important words in the life of every human being, especially for children during their schooling and growth.

Leadership and participation go hand-in-hand. We can develop or nurture leadership in children through participation. Leadership training in children with disabilities is a paramount importance to make them contributing members of the society.

To nurture leadership, it is essen-

tial that children with disabilities are given opportunities to participate in all that happens in the school.

To make it a reality, all the activities and programmes of the school have to be accessible for children with special needs. Accessibility calls for modification and accommodation.

Children with special needs can actively participate in all or most of the programmes of the school when modification and accommodation are taken seriously and implemented by all the stakeholders.

We need able leaders with disabilities to lead and guide the lives of persons and children with disabilities. To achieve the goal of having able leaders, it is important to have education for all children in an inclusive ambience. Inclusive education is meaningful when children with special needs are given opportunities for full participation and growth.

Inclusion and participation do not mean equality in all the areas but equity in every programme and project of the school and community. We make sure that

nobody is left behind or made to feel unworthy.

In the post-COVID-19 era, though we are still fighting with COVID mutations, digital learning and use of technology have become the order of the day. Blended learning has to be accepted and adapted by the teachers, school authorities and parents. During the past few months, parents have become real educators and partners in schooling and education of all children.

In the case of children with disabilities, the support of parents and community has become inevitable for their learning, leadership training and participation in the school and community programmes and activities, especially during and post pandemic period.

The day is auspicious and we shall pledge to provide opportunities and uphold the rights of all persons with disabilities toward fuller participation and enriching life in an inclusive environment.

*"Education is the ability to listen to almost anything without losing your temper or your self-confidence."*

— Robert Frost

## The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIV No. 116 SHILLONG, MONDAY, DECEMBER 6, 2021

### Indiscriminate firing

WHEN a reckless act is committed leading to scores of deaths and injuries, an apology means little and could even be an added provocation. But the government cannot remain silent after a massacre of the kind that took place in Nagaland's Mon district, bordering Myanmar. Both the Indian Army and Union Home Minister Amit Shah were quick to come up with statements expressing their grief and announcing a Court of Inquiry as also a probe by a special investigating team of the Nagaland government, respectively. Compensations would be announced but the amounts could be no more than a few lakhs to each affected family as the dead and the maimed were poor labourers who worked in coal mines and the establishment treats them lightly. Sadly, they were sitting ducks — on their journey back home in a pick-up van from the mine.

From the looks of it, the army exceeded its brief. The job of the army personnel on deployment there was to round-up and arrest insurgents following a tip-off that men of the NSCN-IM, a proscribed separatist outfit, were testing the ground there. Security forces open fire when they are challenged. The unarmed labourers were unlikely to throw a challenge. These are matters that will be investigated and action taken. Also, mob violence followed. Many of the injured taken to hospitals in Assam died too and so did a soldier. Left to the police and its investigation machinery, across states, people have less faith. For, the policing system has been rubbished increasingly by the politicians in power. There are more corrupt elements in the police force today than in the public realm. One can only hope the army with its stronger systems might do the probe in a more serious manner, fix the guilty and mete out exemplary punishment if there was wrong-doing.

The entire North-East is a special case. The process of integration with the national mainstream has been a work in progress. Over the past several years, the positive vibes are there for all to see. At the same time, the region remains highly sensitive also because of the tendency among tribes for self-assertion, a scenario complicated by long years of low-paced development. The army, the police and other security forces engaged in the region are expected to exercise maximum restraint in the discharge of their responsibilities. At the same time, only an impartial inquiry would bring out the facts as to what went wrong and if there was any justification for the firing on the part of the soldiers.

# MGNREGS: The saving grace for rural folks during Covid times

By HH Mohrmen

One of the most important legislations adopted by the Parliament in 2005, was the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, also known as Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act. The Act is a rights-based legislation which seeks to empower the poor citizens of the country. The objective of the Act is to encourage the citizens to use their basic rights as enshrined in the Constitution for their own good and for the development of the country.

MGNREG Act mandates that the government is duty bound to provide every citizen his/her work and livelihood as a Matter of right. The MGNREG scheme which is the outcome of the Act is so popular in Meghalaya that people call it by different names. Some call it one hundred days work from the main objective of the scheme which is to provide one-hundred-days work in a year to at least one member

The other unique aspect of this scheme is, all development activities through MGNREGS are implemented using a different approach. It is the community that decides and plans what and how they wish to execute the work in their village. The community makes their demands to the Office of the Block Development Officer for the work they plan to execute in their villages. Of course, more study is needed to know how much community participation is involved in the decision making to select the proposed works, yet it cannot be denied that the scheme has brought the needed development in the village and has to some extent, helped empower the rural folks.

Today the scheme is also used for creation of livelihood opportunities for people in the rural areas. Livestock rearing is one common live-

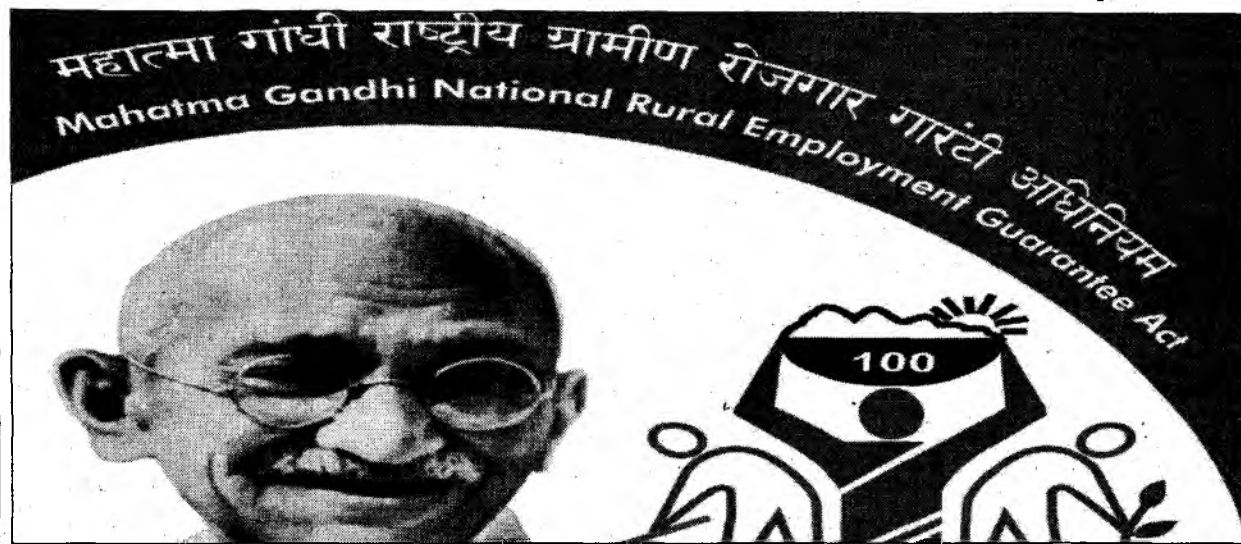
support their families.

The hardships that they had endured due to the pandemic had also compelled the central government to come to the rescue of the rural folks. Just after the first lockdown the central government announced immediate relief to help people especially those who have been directly hit by the lockdown. It may be mentioned that after the first lockdown, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced an additional amount of Rs 20 lakh crore package to help revive the country's economy from the onslaught of the pandemic.

What does this have to do with the MGNREG scheme or how does it relate to this article; one may ask. The fact is of the 20 lakh crores announced, the government has increased the allotment of Rs 40,000 crore to MGNREGS.

help create assets to develop the villages in the state. The Scheme already has a social audit system which ensures that it is properly implemented and help control the leakage of funds. The question is, how many of the household heads in the state really benefitted from the scheme during the lockdown due to the Coronavirus pandemic. How much assets have been created in the different villages of the state during the last two years?

The Government needs to do its own study to see how many rural people in the state were able to get themselves employed and how much income they have earned from the scheme during the lockdown due to the pandemic. The question is how much has the scheme benefitted the rural poor during this extraordinary time? The respective Block Development Officers play a vital role in the implementation of the scheme. In fact it is like a hub where all the important activities take place. Hence it



of every household in the rural areas; while others call it - job card scheme from the fact that every job card holder is entitled to the hundred days work in a year.

Apart from ensuring hundred days work for the bread winner of the family, the other objective of the scheme is also to create the much-needed assets in the rural areas. In fact, MGNREGS has really empowered the rural folks so that in many villages they do not need the support of the MLA or the MDC to construct footpaths, improve the village playground or other activities. Depending on the number of household in the village and how active the respective Village Employment Committee is, some villages were able to get work order worth even one crore in one financial year. This is a monumental achievement for a village and as a matter of fact, the visible development that one sees now in many villages is not because of the development activities initiated by the political leaders but because of the community's ability to successfully implement the MGNREG scheme.

hood activity of the people in the villages, hence many households were able to build pig, chicken and even cow sheds to help them rear domestic animals using the scheme.

When the Coronavirus hit the country and nationwide lockdown was imposed, the whole country came to a standstill. Even MGNREGS works were initially stopped and people were denied access to any kind of livelihood activity. Fortunately, after the first lockdown MGNREGS work resumed and job card holders in the villages started working by following government protocols like maintaining social distancing, wearing masks, etc. When everything was closed due to lockdown, MGNREGS work continued to provide jobs to the rural poor and also give them the much-needed income when all other employment avenues were closed. In spite of the lockdown due to COVID-19, MGNREGS works continued but it also depends on the VECs. In villages where the VECs are active, the scheme has been some kind of a support which helped the local people earn some income to

It may be mentioned that the government has already allotted Rs 61,500 crore to the Scheme in the Union Budgets 20-21 which is quite a substantial amount. So, with the additional amount of Rs 40,000 crore, the total sanctioned for MGNREGS during that period comes to a whopping Rs. 1,01,500 crores. The question that needs to be asked is how has the State Government fared with regards to implementing the MGNREG scheme in the state during the last financial year? Has the Government been able to make the best use of the special allocation from the Union Budget towards MGNREG scheme? Has the government been able to use the opportunity to provide employment to people in the rural areas and also help create assets for the development of the villages in the state?

This year's allocation is huge and it would have been of great help to the rural poor if the state government was able to properly utilise the funds. MGNREGS already has a mechanism in place to help provide employment for the villagers and also to

would also be interesting to know which block in the state was able to better support the rural population during their time of trouble using the MGNREG scheme? Perhaps the reason that the rural populace in the state did not complain about the hardship that they had endured during the lockdown as much as the urban poor in the cities and towns is because of the employment provided to them by the Scheme.

In spite of the challenges created by the pandemic, the District Rural Development Agency which is the nodal agency which supervises the implementation of the projects at the district level, the Block Development Officer at the block level and ultimately the Village Employment Committee at the village level were instrumental in the success of the scheme. It is hoped that this central scheme has lived up to its objective and was able to generally provide the hundred days employment to the rural poor every year. Surely the scheme has helped provide employment to people in the villages with active VECs especially during the pandemic when they need employment the most.

## Fifty years of statehood: : A soul-searching event

By Barnes Mawrie

Come 2022 and we enter the golden jubilee year of Meghalaya's statehood. Jubilees are celebrated with a sense of achievement and glory. Statehood is definitely an event to be celebrated and thanks to our Hill State fighters who struggled resolutely to achieve autonomy from Assam and carved out an autonomous state of our own on 21st January 1972. It is right that we should celebrate the memory of those valiant souls like Capt. W. A. Sangma, S D D Nichols Roy, Prof. G G Swell, B B Lyngdoh, PR Kyndiah, Prof M N Majaw, J D Pohrmen and others, who made this dream of statehood possible. However, the foundation stone for development which they have laid has never been fully built upon by their successors. Meghalaya has become a full-fledged adult by age reckoning but unfortunately it still remains an infant in terms of growth and development.

Fifty years is a long enough time for a person to grow richer, better, fatter or taller. It is a long enough period for anyone to reach the top of the social ladder, to become a hero from being a zero, to grow from rags to riches. Some individuals like Jeff Bezos, Mark Zuckerberg, Steve Jobs, Bill Gates and Jack Ma, have done it in lesser time. Can we honestly say this about our state of Meghalaya? Looking back at the past half a century of our state's existence, we note with concerns the sluggish pace of development that we witness up to now. We could enumerate a lot of examples to demonstrate this statement.

When it comes to economic equity, the state of

**The adverse consequence of this is evidently scarcity of jobs. More and more of our youth are getting educated and qualified but there are no jobs for them. No wonder thousands of educated youth are seen queuing at every employment centre.**

Meghalaya has failed miserably. The gap between the haves and the have-nots has widened scandalously. There are individuals who own thousand acres of land while there are many families who still live in rented homes because they own not even an inch of land. There are families who could spend crores of rupees giving quality education to their children while there are poor families who cannot afford even Rs. 500 of monthly school fees and as a consequence school dropout is on the rise. There are people who could spend lavishly on extravagant weddings and parties while there are many families who could hardly afford a square meal a day. There are families who could provide comfortable transport to their children going to school and colleges but there are thousands of poor children in rural areas who still walk on foot for kilometers daily in order to reach their schools. We could cite many more examples of this sort just to demonstrate how deep is the economic divide in our state. This is certainly not a sign of development or progress. We should feel ashamed of this situation in our state. A tribal community that used to be characterized by collective well-being and prosperity has transformed into a capitalist society where the rich thrive and the poor rot.

Turning our attention to public development in terms of infrastructure and opportunities, Meghalaya's performance is pathetic. The road condition in Shillong for example, has remained unchanged except for re-routing of traffic from time to time as a sort of time pass for the traffic department. In the last ten years Guwahati has seen scores of flyovers to ease traffic congestion, instead in Shillong we only dream about them. While the volume of traffic has increased tremendously, the road condition has remained the same. The absence of

adequate public infrastructure like road connectivity, rail and air connectivity etc, has repelled big investors and economic players from within or from outside the country. While other states of India have seen the entry of many big international companies, our state has remained neglected. The adverse consequence of this is evidently scarcity of jobs. More and more of our youth are getting educated and qualified but there are no jobs for them. No wonder thousands of educated youth are seen queuing at every employment centre. Many times for a single job vacancy there would be at least five hundred applicants. In desperation many of our youth have left the state in search of jobs in other parts of the country which means a brain-drain for the state.

It is a matter of shame for the state that half a century has passed and we are yet to get a state university, a state medical college or a state engineering college and so on. While Assam has a number of state universities, Meghalaya is still surviving on a single central university. If our state has a deficit of doctors, engineers and other professionals, it is precisely because we lack such professional institutes. Consequently, only children of rich families could afford to give professional education to their children outside the state while children of poor families (intelligent though they may be) are forced to terminate their education at graduation level. When it comes to rural development, our state should hang its head in shame. Our border issues are still unresolved for fifty years now and we

are witnessing the adverse consequences of that. The disparity between the urban and the rural areas in the state is so evident in terms of roads and transport, communication, educational and health infrastructures etc. No wonder, there is a constant migration of people from rural areas to the city, adding more to the woes of congestion. When it comes to sports, the youth of our state are left high and dry with no opportunities to develop their skills and talents. When will Meghalaya produce Olympians like Manipur or Assam? We have inborn talents in archery, but there is no infrastructure to provide professional training to such youth. Thus our people end up using their traditional bows and arrows at some local competitions. The preparation for the National Games which is supposed to take place in 2022, does not seem to see the light of day. The state does not have sufficient infrastructure for such mega events and the few that we have are sub-standard. Thus thousands of talents in sports and games are left untapped and wasted.

In the recent NITI Aayog survey done in 2021, Meghalaya ranks 5th in the list of poorest states of India. This is a matter of shame for the whole state and especially for our leaders and governments. Different governments have come and gone in the last fifty years and the state is only regressing and soon enough we may take the first place in the list of poorest states. There is much soul searching to be done by every political party in the state including every stakeholder in the governance of the state. We hope and pray that the present as well as the future governments will wake up from their day-dreaming and start acting responsibly to take the state forward and not backwards in development and progress. Long live Meghalaya!

### Letters to the Editor

#### Correction

The rejoinder to Mr Toki Blah's letter which was published by this newspaper on December 4, 2021 was issued by the Office of the Commissioner of Excise, Meghalaya, Shillong and not by the DIPR as published.

Yours etc.,  
Office of the DIPR,  
Shillong

#### Non-existent MPYC

Editor  
There's much washing of dirty linen in public by the Congress. As a political observer of state politics it is sad to see that none of the groups engaged in the verbal tussle over who is right or wrong have spoken on their achievement and their role as youth models in society. Those frontline members of Meghalaya Pradesh Youth Congress (MPYC) have never been heard or seen coming out to help our farmers who were badly hit by the pandemic and suffered severe economic losses. We have not seen them taking up issues affecting students especially those from marginalized families or even taking up the issue of high

school and college fee structures or even providing career counselling for the youth of the state. So what politics are they talking about except for basking in their political positions without any impact whatsoever? I had met the former General Secretary of MPYC and had questioned him of his and his team's role in helping the youth but sadly he had no answer and acknowledged the truth that MPYC existed only as a toothless tiger on paper. Well, we hope with a new party like AITMC and VPP our young people will have better guidance and mentorship. They have high hopes and expectations from these two parties.

Yours etc.,  
Dominic Stadlin  
Wankhar  
Shillong

#### Cruel fate awaits the girl-child

Editor,  
Apropos the news item, "Body of missing school girl found in SGH jungle," ST (Dec 4, 2021), I only can only express my deepest regrets as I have in the past. What can be more unfortunate than

that of a State where a minor school-going girl does not even have minimum safety to reach to her examination centre whereas the elected MLAs and MDCs are only concerned with their selfish aspirations for more lucrative positions! What is the local MLA going to do in this case as a public representative? What will the Government do? What will be its responses? Words fail me at this time!

How long will such anarchy be allowed to prevail where minor girls are not spared from the clutches of the beastly creatures?

Yours etc.,  
Uma Purkayastha,  
Shillong 4

#### Dead men tell no tales

Editor,  
The headline, 'MDA trashes AITC charge' (ST Dec 4, 2021), reveals the mindset of the MDA Government. While reacting to the All India Trinamool Congress's (AITC's) charge that the MDA allies and the Congress have been silent at the over 300 cases of atrocities against Christians across India in the past nine months, mention was made

of a letter written by VH Pala (Shillong Lok Sabha MP) and WR Kharlukhi (Rajya Sabha MP) to the Government of India when Fr Stan Swamy was incarcerated in prison until he died after being jailed for nearly one year on frivolous charges.

Fr Stan Swamy the Jesuit priest spent his entire life working with and for Dalits, Adivasis, SCs & ST in Jharkhand and elsewhere. He was booked under the draconian UAPA with no bail and not even a straw to sip water as he suffered from severe Parkinson's and could not hold his cup/glass.

That the two MPs should drag the name of Fr Stan Swamy now, instead of focussing on the atrocities against Christians which has grown by leaps and bounds, is nothing short of blasphemy. The subject involved was the atrocities unleashed on Christians in Karnataka and a BJP MLA urging the Government to pass a bill against conversion. Hence dragging the debate to Fr Stan Swamy, an issue that the Catholic faithful are trying to deal with, shows that the NPP, Congress and regional parties do not keep themselves abreast of what is happening to Christians in other parts of

the country. None indeed is as blind as those who do not want to see.

Yours etc.,  
M Khyriem  
Via e mail

#### The Modi-Putin meet

Editor,  
Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Russian President Vladimir Putin are scheduled to meet in New Delhi on 6 December for the first time since the BRICS Summit in Brasilia in 2019. Putin had stressed upon the significance of Russia-India Special and Privileged Strategic Partnership in the fast-changing global scenario. There has been a mechanism between the two countries under which India's Prime Minister and Russian President hold a summit meeting annually to review the status of ties. The two leaders will review the state and prospect of bilateral relations and discuss ways to strengthen the strategic partnership.

The summit is likely to produce specific outcomes in further expanding ties in areas of defence, trade and energy. The summit will produce opportunities to

exchange views on regional, multilateral and international issues of mutual interest. It will strengthen the India-Russia special and privileged strategic partnership. 2+2 dialogue is expected to further strengthen the strategic partnership between the two countries.

A framework for military-technical cooperation is expected to be renewed for the future. This apart, announcement of a joint commission on technology and science will be made. Furthermore, the two countries have reached the final phase of negotiation for a logistic support agreement. The agreement will facilitate the use of each other's bases for repair and replenishment of supplies. It will facilitate scaling up of overall defence cooperation as well.

Russia has always been a trustworthy partner for India. The country plays a significant role in India's foreign policy.

Yours etc.,  
Venu GS.,  
Kollam

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"The tragedy of war is that it uses man's best to do man's worst."

--- Harry Emerson Fosdick

## The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIV No. 119 SHILLONG, TUESDAY, DECEMBER 7, 2021

### Time to revoke AFSPA

INDIA'S North East and Jammu and Kashmir are not the only militancy afflicted zones. Central India has its share of disaffected people who go by the moniker of "Maoists" and who are fighting for a cause they believe in which is that development has bypassed them just because they are tribals, Dalits and Scheduled Castes. Development in this country has never been uniform. Some states by virtue of their privileged positions, better governance and better resource management have succeeded where others have failed. But while internal rebellions are dealt with by the police in the Left Wing insurgency areas, in North East India and Jammu & Kashmir the army has always been deployed to deal with militancy.

Retired Gen VK Singh currently a parliamentarian and minister stated to the media while he was in uniform that the army would never be used against, "our own people." Hence even the army which is an important wing of the state views the situation in the North East and J&K from two separate lenses. It would imply that the people in these two frontiers are not "our own people." Hence different sets of laws need to be applied against them. While there is a case for army deployment in some areas under dispute between India and Pakistan in Kashmir, where the latter uses Indian space for its anti-India offensives, there is no such activity in the North East from powers inimical to India. There cannot be two yardsticks while viewing militancy/insurgency/terrorism. India needs to come clear on these terms too instead of using them to confuse. The army refuses to operate in militancy afflicted areas unless it can make use of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) which gives it a blanket cover from ordinary laws. The army says, going into an insurgency affected area without AFSPA is like being sent to war with their hands tied.

AFSPA has turned the North East into one of the most heavily militarised zones of India. At last count there were 627 policemen for every 100,000 citizens in Manipur making it the state with the highest police to citizen ratio and yet in such turmoil. Over and above the police there are about 55,000 army and paramilitary personnel. Hence for every 35 civilians there is one security personnel but militancy and extortion continue to thrive with at least 30 odd insurgent outfits operating in that state. If militarisation of the region has not resulted in any results over three decades in Manipur and seven decades in Nagaland, isn't it time for the state to think differently? It's time for draconian laws like AFSPA to be revoked and allow citizens a breathing space.

I went through the vision 2050 of the ICAR, a well-written 46-page document, to find if any emphasis had been laid on regionally focussed research, but I couldn't find any. Not a single sentence about the NER in that document, but since it is a general vision document, one does not need to read much into it. But its overall emphasis on food grain production heavily favouring two crops - Rice & Wheat surprised me. The collective memory of the country of the days of the ship to mouth (PL-480 funds of USA) when the country waited for the next ship for its food grains has long faded. Things have changed since. We are a different and more confident country now, but it appears the ICAR cannot shake off the memory of the past. As someone said, 'cages are made of thoughts, not steel'.

ICAR may have indoctrinated itself into believing that Rice and Wheat are the only crops India needed and became a predominantly Rice and Wheat-centric research body sometime during the sixties and continues to be so, decades later. This obsession with the Rice & Wheat system can be gauged by the fact that nearly 25% of the scientists within the National Agricultural Research System (NARS) work in Rice or Wheat. Contrast this with only 40 scientists working for the Indian Institute of Millets Research, Hyderabad - the organization of the ICAR that exclusively works on the Millets. A quick retort from the ICAR would be that these two are our main food crops, so if you want food security, we have no option but to continue to work on Rice and Wheat. Right? Wrong, in the present context.

Only four crops contribute to 60% of the world's food - Rice, Wheat, Maize and Soybean. Since the 1900s, about 75% of crop diversity has been lost forever from the farmers' fields. Whatever has happened to the nutritionally dense Millets, our pre-eminent food before the green revolution? It is not always about production or productivity; it is also about nutritional security. Ignoring other food crops, especially Millets, that were our staple and nutritious diet across the country, including the NER, was a mistake. The scientists very well knew that millets were C4, and therefore, climate-friendly, water-efficient, and suitable for semi-arid and rain-fed

tracts of the country. The decline of Millets corresponds with the Green revolution - between 1966-2006, the millet area in the country came down by 44%. The area under Millets was 53.35 lakh hectares in 1955, which came down to 6.82 lakh hectares by 2013-14. Likewise, the millet production came down from 20.7 lakh tonnes to 4.29 lakh tonnes, and in the process, the food habits of the people of the country have changed drastically toward the gluten-rich C3 plants like Rice & Wheat. The rats that chase only cheese die of obesity!

Be that as it may, I am convinced that Food security is not the same as Farmer security, evidenced by the fact that about 3 lakh farmers committed suicides in one decade even as the food grain stocks at the Food Corporation of India's (FCI) are bursting at the seams. The FCI has a stock of more than 77 million tonnes of food grains, 3.6 times the mandatory stock requirement. We have become a food secure but farmer-insecure nation. There appears to be an inverse correlation between Food Security and Farmer security. The Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution meanwhile has revealed that more than 38,000 M.T.s of food grains have rotted over the last five years.

I keep thinking that the temptation to promote Rice in the NER will be far more than any other because it is a water-rich region. In a situation of such surpluses, would it not be correct for the ICAR to make some firm decision to cut down its work on Rice & Wheat and instead move toward crops with potential for value addition and exports for the NER? Of course, it will seem like a horrible thought for many and may even be opposed vehemently. But the ICAR should not be enslaved by false narratives that may be slaying us as a country and instead re-prioritize its research, localize it, do market-centred research, and make it all farmer-centric.

So here is my sense of what should be the way forward to the ICAR over the next three decades. Call it ICAR's vision for the NER, if you will. I will list five crops/trees that can change the game for the NER - (1) Chilli (2) Jackfruit (3) Turmeric (4) Ginger and (5) Buckwheat. Each of these crops deserves

### A behemoth to a dinosaur

# ICAR needs an intellectual and pragmatic makeover

By K.N.Kumar

a National Research Centre located within the NER. A land with so much biodiversity and traditionally organic for the most part deserves far more NRCs than what it currently has. It is, in fact, strange that not a single commodity centric research centre in crop sciences has not been established in the region despite the impression that they have given the country better results.

An NRC for Chillies: Although North-eastern India is rich in the genetic diversity of Capsicum species, there is hardly any worthwhile research to improve the chilli landraces of NE India. The scope for discovering more pharmacological applications and improving the capsaicin content is high. The demand for value-added chilli products like powder, colour oleoresins and pungent oleoresins is very high. So, an exclusive NRC on Chillies will help, and I think Manipur or Nagaland would be highly appropriate states for such an NRC.

An NRC for the Jackfruit: Jackfruit is the least demanding and the most neglected fruit of the region. 75% of our Jackfruit is wasted, meaning a vast economic opportunity waiting to be explored and exploited. We have a million trees in our state, that is Rs.500 crore economy. It is drought-resistant and is naturally organic because no fertilizers and pesticides are ever used. Therefore, it has the texture of meat and is increasingly being added to the vegan diet as a meat substitute, an emerging economic opportunity. Globally, a vegan revolution is sweeping; the USA has seen a 600% increase in the Vegan population in the last three years.

An NRC for Turmeric: Post the launching of the Lakadong Mission in 2018 in Meghalaya, the number of new farmers has gone up by 7000, the number of SHGs exclusively cultivating the Lakadong variety is now 129, the additional area brought under Lakadong is now 1075 hectares, and the total production has now crossed 14,000 M.T.s. We did the profiling of Lakadong Turmeric for curcumin in 38 villages and discovered a considerable variation in the curcumin content - from a low of 2.5% to a high of 12%. If the ICAR had researched to identify the factors that

contributed to enhancing the curcumin content, it would have given our farmers an extra edge. If an NRC is established exclusively for Turmeric in the West Jaintia Hills, the heart of the turmeric land, it will take us to the next level.

An NRC for Ginger: About 36% of the total Ginger of the country is produced in the Northeast. Assam is at the top, and Meghalaya is the sixth-largest producer. Since Ginger is a shade-loving plant, the possibility of expanding the area is high in the region as an inter-crop or as a pure crop in the hills. In addition, Ginger is highly amenable for value addition. However, the local market is not large enough to absorb the green Ginger so converting a part of produce into low volume, high-value products is essential to remunerate the farmers. Therefore, an NRC for Ginger in Assam, the largest producer of Ginger in the country with close to 1.5 lakh tonnes every year, will be a significant move forward.

An NRC for Buckwheat: One of the exciting things that happened to us over the last two years is our successful experimentation with Buckwheat in Meghalaya. There are two problems concerning Buckwheat (1) the absence of frost-tolerant varieties and (2) the absence of appropriate technology for milling/dehulling. I wrote a letter to the D.G. ICAR two years ago to help us by developing a small-scale buckwheat dehulling machine. I am yet to receive an acknowledgement, what to speak of the machine. I think Meghalaya will be an excellent location for establishing an NRC for Buckwheat. The Japanese have an insatiable demand for Buckwheat and our farmers will benefit immensely through exports.

In its vision 2050, the ICAR commits "to transform itself into an organization engaged fully with the farmers, industry, entrepreneurs, and consumers at large". If the ICAR does not match its words with deeds by making a specific and actionable blueprint for the NER, it will become irrelevant for the region and the cost to the nation will be irredeemable. A behemoth must guard itself against becoming a Dinosaur. Otherwise, questions about its relevance will continue getting asked.

(The writer is Chairman, Meghalaya Farmers' Empowerment Council)

### Centre has to repeal AFSPA immediately after Nagaland developments

## Army bosses have no reason now to stick to the five-decades old Act

By Sushil Kutty

The Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958's killing spree continues, begging the question for the nth time whether it isn't long overdue for its removal lock, stock and barrel? Thirteen Naga civilians cannot reply to that question. They were in coffins wrapped in colourful linen, killed in a "botched-up" army operation in a Nagaland district bordering Myanmar on December 4, 2021.

AFSPA has been in force in the north-eastern states and Jammu & Kashmir for decades. It gives armed forces exclusive powers to shoot and kill, arrest and dismantle, without much ado. There have been insistent demands for dismantling AFSPA but to no avail. Civil society and human rights advocates have been at the forefront.

Saturday December 4, 2021, witnessed one more

eerier picking up in poll-bound Uttar Pradesh and four other states, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi attacked the Modi Government. Gandhi sought a "real reply" from the Centre, asking what the home ministry was doing when "neither civilians nor security personnel are safe in our own land."

Police in Nagaland are investigating and the army—which tendered "deep regret"—ordered a court of inquiry into the killings of the civilians. The army said the operation was carried out based on credible intelligence and that the "incident" is being probed "at the highest level."

The fact remains the Centre cannot afford to take action against the army for the "botched" operation. The Centre cannot risk "demoralization" of the soldiers, especially when Naga insur-



example of why AFSPA should go. The army has expressed "deep regret", but that hasn't made any difference. The silenced voices of the 13 civilian dead spoke volumes, but, as happens every time, what follows are voices in the wilderness. The Yung Aung faction of the banned National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Khaplang) operates from within Myanmar. Home Minister Amit Shah was to make a statement in Parliament on December 6.

The paramilitary Assam Rifles, which was involved in the botch-up, operates under the control of Amit Shah's Union Home ministry. "Whether Shah pronounced a verdict on AFSPA or would he dare do an Article 370 on Nagaland because of pow-

agency refuses to end on an accommodating note. The killings have put a question mark on "peace talks."

The question is, why is the Modi Government shying away from surgical strikes into Myanmar? The Yung Aung faction of the banned National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Khaplang) operates from within Myanmar. Home Minister Amit Shah was to make a statement in Parliament on December 6.

The paramilitary Assam Rifles, which was involved in the botch-up, operates under the control of Amit Shah's Union Home ministry. "Whether Shah pronounced a verdict on AFSPA or would he dare do an Article 370 on Nagaland because of pow-

The Modi Government will not intervene in AFSPA. The "special powers" of AFSPA do not give "total immunity" to the armed forces, but human rights have been rendered null and void by these very "special powers."

ers granted under AFSPA. Nagaland was declared an area in a "disturbed and dangerous condition", ergo fit to use the armed forces in tandem with civil power.

The Union Home Ministry justified with the statement that "killings, loot and extortion" were going on in various tracts of Nagaland. Home Minister Amit Shah has been facing flak ever since. Today, after the latest civilian killings, Shah is in the eye of the Naga storm.

Christian-dominated Nagaland is seething at the sight of the coffins of the civilian dead, the crucifix on the coffins tell-tale that Hindutva doesn't count for zilch in this state where insurgency refuses to give up, as also the counter-insurgency symbolized by AFSPA.

Demands from J&K and northeast organisations to give AFSPA an early burial were never brooked. If anything, such calls only strengthened the resolve of the Centre—irrespective of which party/front is in power—to continue with AFSPA and its "sweeping powers." A framework agreement was signed on August 3, 2015 with Naga insurgent group NSCN-IM after over 80 rounds of negotiations spanning 18 years, but there was no dent on AFSPA.

Today, with the election-

### Letters to the Editor

#### Counter-insurgency Ops gone awry

Editor,  
The killing of thirteen civilians by the Army in a botched counter insurgency operation in Mon District of Nagaland and then terming it as a case of mistaken identity is tantamount to war crimes during peace times as well as homicide. With the Mon killings the AFSA is once again in the limelight. The Supreme Court in the case Naga People's Movement of Human Rights v Union of India (1998) upheld the constitutionality of the AFSPA, but gave certain cautions in the form of 'dos and don'ts' by the armed forces chief. How effective these dictums have been can be gauged from reports of the various committees constituted in the past to assess the impact of the AFSPA. The Justice Santosh Hegde Committee (2013), appointed by the Supreme Court to look into the extra-judicial killings in Manipur found that, that the Dos and Don'ts dictum of the Supreme Court hold no significance in the field and the army has not been following them. However, a case like this does call to question the moral and ethical values of the most respected organisation of the country. While operational situations may demand taking bold and aggressive decisions, at no stage should human values

be subverted during counter-insurgency.  
Yours etc  
Advocate M Haque.  
Shillong -6

#### Meghalaya and development

Editor,  
Browsing through the newspaper it's heartening to note the comments of our Education Minister Mr Rymbui on efforts to operationalize technical varieties and colleges by next year. Everyone would agree it's about time as so aptly pointed out by Barnes Mawrie in his write-up. Fifty years of statehood: A soul searching event.  
Half a century of statehood and we don't have much to show in terms of real development. As we all know most of our funds come from the central government and a lot of it is pumped into the economy of our state but somehow along the way they dissipate and don't really reach the target population. We finally have an Education Policy in our state after much efforts by educators and members of civil society including those in governance. One can only hope and pray that it takes seed and is put into execution by next year.  
As observed by Barnes Mawrie, the poor can't think of educating their children beyond the graduation level because of the high cost of

education. With our government institutions as pointed out in my earlier letter not having viable infrastructure and private institutions charging exorbitant fees, our poor are thus left behind in this march of progress towards the 50th year of statehood.

For salaried employees that wish to give our children professional or higher education, we have no option but to send them outside the state for dearth of such institutions in our state.  
Coming to the field of medicine, many of our people have to rush to our neighbouring state for treatment because some of the facilities in our government medical institutions are not available or not in working condition. Those suffering from Cancer have to travel for 2 hours, to avail radiation therapy for about half an hour and then travel back. Only those who have the means can stay overnight and pay extra apart from the treatment. Why can't those in power think about all this while formulating policies and suggest practical solutions?

As we embark into the 50th year of statehood, let us look forward to development in the real sense of the word and work together as citizens where we can proudly claim that Meghalaya is indeed on the road to progress and prosperity in all aspects and we can look forward to the Statehood day as a really happy occasion and not a ceremony of lip service.

Yours etc.,  
Angela Lyngdoh  
Shillong -14

#### Meghalaya not so lucky

Editor,  
The news report captioned, "Bigger aircrafts cannot operate from Umroi Airport : Aviation expert," (ST Dec 6, 2021) is bad news though this was known since a couple of years ago. The newly appointed aviation expert Mr Uday Rawat, according to the news report, lamented that Meghalaya was unfortunate not to have experts in the field of aviation to have sorted out the obstacles. It appears that Mr Rawat is not informed of the involvement of the DGCA in the slicing of the two hillocks and the issues that cropped up. In the final survey in which the Public Accounts Committee was also present (being strict on expenditure), the DGCA had proposed, after a careful survey to attempt to approach the Airport from over the Umiam lake for which one hillock needed to be sliced. In the second survey, they discovered that another hillock too needed to go. The slicing was completed but to their dismay they discovered that a third hill also needed to be cut.

Fortunately, or unfortunately, even after the slicing of the third hillock there was another problem. The

portion of the newly built NH6 needed to be rerouted with a portion of the church building to be removed and minor shift of the high KV transmission lines. All these were in the daily news those days. With these new developments that were not in favour of the airport expansion it was time to finally call it a day. Umroi airport was tagged as a category 3C airport. A 3C airport is one that has no instrument landing facilities and operates only during daylight hours. Thus 3C is a precise approach and landing system with no decision on height and no runway visual range limitation, which means it can land with zero visibility BUT for Boeing and Airbus, the pilot has to have thousands of hours of flying experience and with the crew monthly in a simulator, subjected to worst case scenario. There are very few 3C airports in India; perhaps just 3 or 4.

Meghalaya is unfortunate in that before the Umroi Airport was finally selected, there was a proposal to use the long range land at the southern foot of U Lumshylong (6445 feet ASL) But whether it was land requisition problem or the usual dragging of feet for reasons best known to the powers that be, is difficult to say. We notice this even in changing the route of highways which were stalled for years like the NH 6 at Umsning.

Two pertinent questions need to be asked. The Boeing 747 became operational

in 1968, around the very years that work on Umroi Airport began. Why did the planners not foresee the need for an airport suitable for 747 to land on? Instead, they were satisfied with Dakota and Fokker Friendship flights. That apart why did the DGCA fail, with all the satellite coordinates and computers by then at their disposal, to foresee that slicing the hillocks would never yield results? The slicing had cost the Government of India quite a lot. And with these hillocks of historical and cultural significance the sacrifice was not small.

If appropriate land elsewhere around Shillong within say 50 Km could be surveyed, it would be a blessing for the people of Meghalaya (fare wise). Most importantly, with aviation industries all over the world aiming, one day to be CO2 free by shifting to hydrogen or electricity (fares may shoot up), the Govt needs to settle on that airport of the future, with no more alterations needed on shifting from one airport to the other. All we need is the vision to meet the parameters to capture the mercury rise of 1.5 Celsius by 2030 - the deadline mankind is hoping for.

Yours etc.,  
W Passah,  
Via email

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

"You must not lose faith in humanity. Humanity is an ocean; if a few drops of the ocean are dirty, the ocean does not become dirty."

— Mahatma Gandhi

## The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIV No. 118 SHILLONG, WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 8, 2021

### Russia then and now

A brief visit by Russian president Vladimir Putin to New Delhi – the second time he's airborne abroad in two years – occasioned a review of India's famed ties with Russians since our Independence. The dismemberment of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in 1991 spelt the end of the Cold War Era. The impossible happened: bitter rivals, Americans and Russians, have begun being on talking terms. The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in which India and several 'neutral' nations across continents were part of collapsed like a pack of cards. India, over time, lost the high profile it enjoyed in world forums. While India's stock went down, China's stock went up by virtue of its sharply increased economic clout, military strength and resultant bargaining power at the diplomatic level due also to its permanent membership and veto power at the UN Security Council.

In all fairness, the centre-piece of the old USSR, namely Russia, too failed to retain the old clout. The strength, however, of Russia is the impactful leadership that Putin gives it through his uninterrupted leadership for two decades. He's rough, tough and minding his business with rare grit and determination. Compared to Russia, however, the advantage for China is its huge human resources, the largest for any nation, which is being put to productive use—unlike India. Russia, with strong oil reserves, makes huge money from its continued expertise in military technologies and weapons systems. India and several other nations continue to rely on Russia largely for their military needs. Our dependence on Russian-made submarines and of the missile defence systems – the supply of S-400 systems is well-documented. India has a long-standing military cooperation pact with Russia, which in a new form has been extended by 10 more years now. Notably, it was a military pact for mutual support, signed during the time of Indira Gandhi, that helped India confidently move its military to East Pakistan at the height of the Mukti Bahini movement there, leading to the formation of Bangladesh in 1971.

While diplomatic, trade, technology and other cooperation between India and Russia continued during Putin's terms as prime minister or president there since 1999, the intensity of the old warmth between the two countries was missing. India, on its part, edged closer to the US in the post-Cold War period, but there have not been substantial gains from America to this country. The US threats of sanctions in the matter of acquisition of key missile defence systems from Russia have rightly and boldly been ignored by India now.

# As shown by Father of the Indian Constitution

By Albert Thyrniang

In May 1936, Dr Ambedkar stated: "I tell you all very specifically, religion is for man and not man for religion. To get human treatment, convert yourselves." 20 years later, on October 14, 1956 the Dalit scholar along with 380,000 untouchables abandoned Hinduism and pledged fidelity to Buddhism. For the 100,000 latecomers the ceremony was repeated the next day shooting the Buddhist believers up to nearly half a million within thirty-six hours. Significantly, the 'Great Conversion' was in Nagpur, the court yard of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) whose head, Mohan Bhagwat, non-stop, raises false conversion alarms.

In mid-October on Dussehra festival, Bhagwat alleged demographic changes, particularly in the North East, due to conversion. Five days later, Bajrang Dal and Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) members on Sunday, 17 October barged into a Church in Hubli, Karnataka, squatted and sung Hindu bhajans, in protest against 'forced conversions'. Communal violence in the southern state sees no end with perpetrators, chanting "Jai Shri Ram" enjoying 'impunity'. To please the Hindutva brigades and to target Christians, the BJP government in the state is determined to bring in an anti-conversion law. The Archbishop of Bangalore has termed the alleged conversion a bogus. None is converted, let alone forcefully in the thousands of Church run educational and medical institutions. The allegations are to justify violence against Christians and other minorities.

The editorial in this paper the other day states that over 300 cases of violence against Christians have been perpetrated by Hindutva groups across 21 states in nine months of 2021 alone. The latest is the attack on a Catholic School and the disruption of a religious function in Ganjbasoda, Madhya Pradesh by Hindutva goons last December 6 on the basis of a fake news on a local Youtube channel. As per the United Christian Forum's report Uttar Pradesh (66), Chhattisgarh (47) and Karnataka (32) top the list of attacks on the Christian community and their places of worship. 1,331 women, 588 tribals, and 513 Dalits were injured in these attacks, reveals the report.

Anything forced is illegal. However, there are valid reasons for changing one's religion. The Constitution guarantees it. 'The Dharma Diksha' was traced back to the humiliating discrimination the school boy Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar endured. An untouchable he was seated on a burlap at the back of the classroom; his teacher refused to handle his books; drinking water had to be poured into his mouth and

was beaten if he accidentally touched a caste Hindu. No wonder the greatest Dalit leader turned into a critic of Hinduism. The shackles of the four-fold varna system would keep his community in chains forever. An analysis of Ambedkar's conversion also suggests his action was a political protest. Historical figures like Ashoka and the 12th century Dalit martyr of South India, Nandanar, who braved to challenge the tenets of Hinduism, deeply influenced him. His personal journey might have convinced him to embrace Buddha's teachings. Ambedkar showed that for political, social or religious reasons conversion is permitted.

The allegation of alarming demographic changes is exaggerated and unwarranted. The Pew Research Centre (PRC), an American think tank that provides

information on social and demographic issues all over the world observes that 'an overall pattern of stability in the share of religious groups is accompanied by little net gain from movement into, or out of, most religious groups. Among Hindus any conversion out of the group is matched by conversion into the group.' Only 2% of respondents say they are no more in the religion in which they were raised. A meagre 0.4% are Hindu converts to Christianity. 0.7% of respondents were raised Hindu and moved elsewhere while 0.8% were not raised in Hinduism but now have practised the religion. Why single out only conversion out of Hinduism?

Most Christian converts live in the South. Some dwell in the Eastern states. The vast majority of former Hindu adherents who became Christians are from Scheduled Castes (48%), Scheduled Tribes (14%) or Other Backward Classes (26%). Note that almost half of the Christian converts (47%) reveal that there is a lot of discrimination against Scheduled Castes in the country while 20% of the overall population admit discrimination against Scheduled Castes. The high percentage of Scheduled Castes opting to alter their religion calls for an examination. Is it not justified for them to practice another faith if they are discriminated against in the religion of their birth? It

is not reasonable to embrace a religion that gives them equal social status? Why has Hinduism not reformed to see everyone equal? Why has Hinduism not become casteless? If quality of life is better in other 'ways of life' is it not natural that a switch-over is made? Incentives and allurements are wrong. But no one can be forced to adopt another religion. At the same time, incentives are not ruled out. If I willingly follow someone who promises me a much better condition what is wrong with that? The root cause has to be addressed. If the poor are attracted to allurements to the point of changing their beliefs the fault lies elsewhere. Neither the convert nor the preachers are to be blamed. If there is discrimination and injustice, inequality and disparity the poor are fully empowered

A change of mind-set is the key. But do we take eternity to effect that change?

The MDA partners are completely mum on the unending atrocities against Christians. They have stopped being secular as the B team of the BJP. But other parties, including the Congress, 'champions' of minorities, too are unconcerned. The Archbishop of Shillong and the Khasi Jaintia Christian Leaders' Forum (KJCLF) have condemned the persecution. But the numerous centres in the predominantly Christian states are in hiding. We are unmoved by the RSS and the BJP's vision to turn this multi-religious country into a Hindu nation. It is possible that a section of the Church in the North East has been influenced by the RSS as is the case with the Kerala Church. In 'God's Own Country' the Church has fallen into the trap of right-wing propaganda of 'Love and Narcotic Jihad'. This writer met a couple of anti-Jihad 'warriors' from that state who are double certain of a well 'crafted' conspiracy. They threw up numbers of cases involving the above mentioned 'religious war'. I asked for proof of their allegations. They readily agreed. The heat of the controversy broke out in early September. Till date they have not provided any link to substantiate their claims. The oldest and most influential Church in the country has been set up by fundamentalist elements to divide the society on religious lines. There is a perception that the invitation to the Pope to visit India was done with the understanding that the BJP be accepted among Christians.

When the AITC called out the MDA allies and the grand old party for their silence on the atrocities against the soft target Christians, the bragging Meghalaya MP, WR Kharlukhi responded ridiculously saying the parachuted West Bengal party is unauthorised to speak for Christians until it has been accepted in the state, like his NPP (after 20 years). Shoot the messenger without reading the message! Also his insistence that his joint protest letter on the arrest of late Stan Swamy suffices, is pathetic.

Contentious is the conversion issue in India. Nine states have enacted laws against proselytism. But as exemplified by the Chairman of the Constitution drafting committee, the 'Rule Book' stands for religious freedom in the country. The Father of the Indian Constitution himself preached religion and conversion.

Let me end on a different note. The 'genocide' in Nagaland is beyond comprehension. The colonial and draconian Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA) has to go. The army is not deployed to fight its own citizens, especially with impunity.

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*"The atmosphere of hate and animosity is prevailing in the world and in India.*

*Love, compassion, openness, selflessness, brotherhood and common humanity are proclaimed virtues of every religion.*

*But forget the violent and atrocity offenders, ordinary people of different faiths ignore homo sapiens' shared reality."*

to decide for themselves. If there is no quality and free services either in education or health care, no nourishment and no employment opportunities why search for culprits of conversion? Why are the unprivileged 'forced' to abandon their religion for the sake of incentives? Why are the neglected 'compelled' to link spirituality to material benefits? Counsel for everyone: remove poverty before a hue and cry on conversion. India, the super power, has to end extreme poverty of 84 million or up to 400 million this year due to the COVID pandemic. Spirituality is blurred with the 'worldly' even for the haves.

The atmosphere of hate and animosity is prevailing in the world and in India. Love, compassion, openness, selflessness, brotherhood and common humanity are proclaimed virtues of every religion. But forget the violent and atrocity offenders, ordinary people of different faiths ignore homo sapiens' shared reality. The PRC sample of 22,975 Hindus, 3,336 Muslims, 1,782 Sikhs, 1,011 Christians, 719 Buddhists and 109 Jains finds that they see themselves as different from the other. Disturbing is the revelation that a substantial percentage would not accept followers of other religions as neighbours. Another important note is that caste division exists in all religions, including Christianity. Then why convert?

## India-Russia bilateral relations have a chequered history Modi - Putin must impart fresh dimension to ties after summit

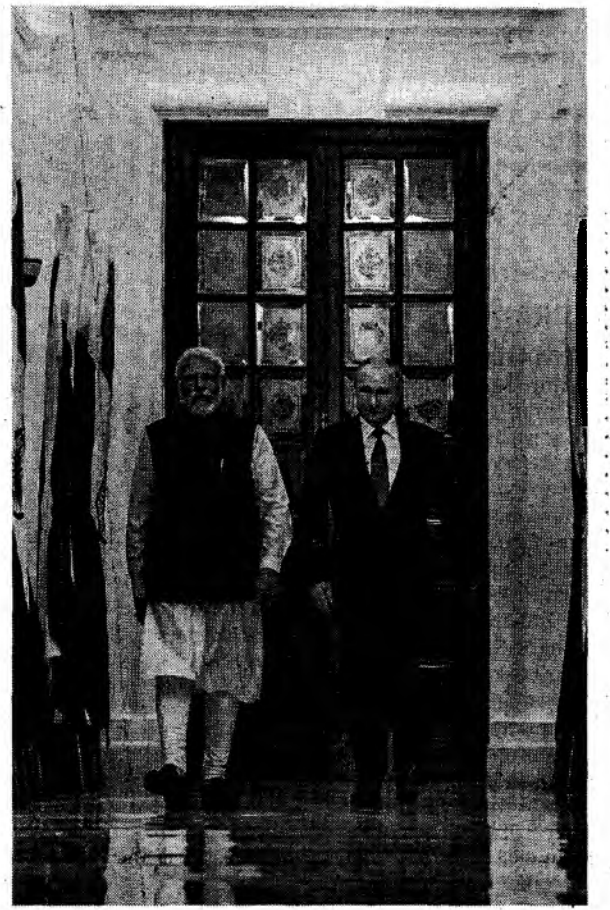
By Sushil Kutty

India-Russia ties are an extension of the Indo-Soviet bonhomie that lasted several decades, nurtured by successive leaders of both countries. The break-up of the Soviet Union and the emergence of Russia did not weaken the ties. The changes were more in India's relationship with the United States. So much so, there is debate nowadays whether India leans more towards the United States or tilts the extra bit towards Russia?

Media reports ahead of the 21st India-Russia Annual Summit spoke of the "historical significance" of the Modi-Putin meeting and why Putin made the

China. Putin's Russia hovers dark and deadly. The Americans can't place Russia with any degree of surety. China, however, believes it's got Russia's number, so to speak. But, of the three, Russia is the only one which thinks and understands "multipolar." As far as India is concerned, Russia has always played fair. It is important it stays that way.

Russia also leaves China to its devices so long as China does not step on Russia's toes. But to India's chagrin, Russia riled India by staying aloof when India and China had their tantrums—whether it was Doklam or Galwan. Of late, Russia is also ex-



India halt on his way to a meeting with US President Joe Biden. Indian so-called "geo-strategists" could not stop talking of the importance of Putin taking time to meet Modi before he met President Joe Biden.

To them, it spoke of Modi's standing in the world. But to be fair to Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin, the Russian President did not make the India stopover on his way to meet Biden because he had to hug Modi and draw strength from him to take on Biden. Putin touched down in New Delhi because there were a stack of agreements to sign—and there was the S-400 and the AK-203.

And the optics also spoke. At the end of their one-on-one, when Putin bid goodbye and drove away, Modi couldn't take his wistful eyes off the limousine. The world knows Modi values his meetings with world leaders. It would do well, however, if Modi acknowledged the contributions of successive Congress governments in cementing India-Russia ties, beginning with when there was the Soviet Union, and then Russia—beginning with Jawaharlal Nehru, then Lal Bahadur Shastri and, then, Indira Gandhi.

In the 'Great Game' played by the world's great powers, both Modi and India are late entrants, though it will a fair bet to say that India has "arrived" and part of the credit goes to Modi. Then again, Narendra Modi's ascendancy on the world stage is an adjunct to Chinese President Xi Jinping setting his eyes on taking China to the role of sole superpower. History will remember Modi as a contemporary of 'Xi the Great', not the other way round.

Which brings us to the Modi-Putin meeting. There are always positive vibes whenever India and Russia talk. The vibes go back to the Soviet era. Even when India was non-aligned, India was a friend of the Russians. The US had chosen its ally in the subcontinent, Pakistan.

Today it's a different world, with a declining United States and a rising

ciatingly pro-Pakistan. Which leaves India—the "emerging power"—angling to be counted. India is like the salmon, swimming against the flow. And China has got a head start! Then again, India is in China's neighbourhood and India is big and second only to China in population. India makes China nervous.

Doklam and Galwan—and Arunachal Pradesh, China won't leave India alone. And then when India and the US get together, China complains that the West is trying to turn "friendly Asian neighbours" into deadly foes. There is a 50:50 chance that the China-United States rivalry will drive India into the vortex of a war-like situation.

Also, with apologies to Prime Minister Narendra Modi and External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar, India is far from being an "emerging superpower." India's location on the map may give India a certain placing in the 'Great Game' being played in Afghanistan, but India cannot afford to take risks. The bottom-line: The United States cannot be trusted—and Pakistan, in the peripheral vision, will, given the chance, stab.

Only Russia, erstwhile Soviet Union—friend and ally for decades—looks trustworthy. India and Russia the other day signed a 10-year security pact. India will soon get delivery of the S-400 systems—US sanctions be damned. And joint production of AK-203 rifles will begin soon in poll-bound Uttar Pradesh.

India's ties with Russia have always been highlighted because of military hardware—fighter aircraft, naval ships, submarines, and the aircraft carrier. India and Russia have agreements on various areas of convergence—from science & technology to space exploration. It is a "special strategic relationship" and it required both Narendra Modi and Vladimir Putin to have a one-on-one. (IPA Service)

### Letters to the Editor

#### Give back our seats

Editor,  
"Give back our seats" is a common cry in Meghalaya when 12 MLAs choose to quit the Indian National Congress (INC) on whose platform he/she was elected. To hold on to the seat while crossing the floor is seen as, 'little short of a fraud on the voters.' Given the potential consequences of defection, which undermine the very foundations of our democracy and the principles which sustain it, the 10th Schedule was added to the Indian Constitution, popularly referred to as 'Anti-Defection law'. This law has succeeded to a reasonable degree in preventing defection, but not without ambiguities. Hence, there is considerable scope for judicial interpretation of the law.

Yours etc.,  
Dr Omarlin Kyndiah  
Via email

#### AFSPA has no place in modern India

Editor,  
This weekend the Assam Rifles, Special Force acting on a tip-off that insurgents were crossing over from Myanmar to Mon District, Nagaland, shot at and killed at least 15 coal mine workers in Oting. Hence a case of poor intelligence claimed the lives of innocent people. This speaks volumes of the gross miscalculation and indiscriminate use of force. That special forces of Para SF 21 an elite unit within the command of the Army with best weaponry and intelligence had misjudged the situation without verifying the authenticity of the so-called targets leaves a lot of questions on the tactical error of such an operation. The use of deadly force is legitimate during war or when the enemy is on the verge of taking over a country's territory but in this

unfortunate ambush the use of such tactics had resulted in the loss of innocent lives. The Armed Forces Special Powers Act - a colonial era law has to be trashed as it violates all forms of human dignity and human life. A democracy like India needs to become a model of tolerance not a model of aggression and intimidation or else our standing in the international scene is questionable.

Yours etc.,  
Dominic Stadlin Wankhar,  
Via email

#### Vaccination a must; so too SOPs

Editor,  
With the new variant Omicron making its entry in many countries including our own, it is even more essential that the government and individuals take the new mutant seriously in order to avoid similar or God forbid worse situations the world faced in the last two years.

We cannot afford to go back to those times of fear, pain, of being confined within our homes, of the numerous lives lost. While the government must be prepared and not go off guard, every individual citizen must strictly adhere to SOPs of wearing their masks, washing their hands and sanitizing and maintaining physical distancing. At this point in time it becomes even more needful for those who have not been vaccinated as yet to get themselves vaccinated as the vaccine is a shield that could help protect us to a certain extent. It's common knowledge that the vaccine does not claim to provide hundred percent protection and thus a person who is vaccinated may still be infected, however it must be understood that a person who has been vaccinated is far more protected than one who has not. Rather than posing risks for oneself and also for others, the most logical action would be to put on that mantle of protection. Humans are a socializing lot and when things seem to

have got better and people are allowed to go about their work and enjoy their share of fun and recreation, it must however not be forgotten that COVID 19 is still hovering around us. Let us be more wise and vigilant and fight this war together for our sake and for the sake of our loved ones and our fellow human beings.

Yours etc.,  
Jennifer Dkhar,  
Via email

#### Demand for scrapping AFSPA.

Editor,  
In the wake of that indiscriminate firing on the coal miners on Saturday, December 4, 2021 killing six people on the spot with more succumbing to injuries at the hospital on Sunday. I was able to watch a TV discussion on TV channels. Surprising is the fact, that in the past, these same incidences had been taking place, and

not only that, the human rights activists on every count did raise their voices, with prominent judges of the country behind the victims, but AFSPA still remains the Act to be time and again misused on the pretext of countering insurgency. This has culminated in what can be called the saddest day in the history of our country, in the state of Nagaland.

Those maddening phrases of "deeply regret" and 'mistaken identity' are impossible to accept, as the dead can never be brought back to life. Does the army expect people travelling in open trucks to stand with their hands up? The AFSPA has to be scrapped once and for all, so that any hope for a peaceful solution of the Naga problem does not fade away.

Yours etc.,  
FL Lyngdoh  
Via email

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"It's fine to celebrate success but it is more important to heed the lessons of failure."

-- Bill Gates

## The Shillong Times

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### Muting of voices in Parliament

ON Tuesday the lone MP from Nagaland, KG Kenye entered the well of Rajya Sabha demanding that he be heard on the killing of civilians by security personnel but did not get a chance. He was supported by the Opposition MPs, who temporarily halted their sloganeering to demand revocation of suspension of 12 MPs, but was not allowed as the discussion was ongoing.

After a few minutes, Kenye returned his seat while the Chairman, Harivansh adjourned the House, as the Opposition continued their protest. On Wednesday the Government adjourned Rajya Sabha at 3 PM because it did not want the lone Nagaland MP, K G Kenye, to speak on the horrific killings in his state. On Wednesday Kenye was allowed to speak for three minutes after which his microphone was muted. This is shocking as the Rajya Sabha is the Council of States and members represent their states. Earlier, the NPP, MP Agatha Sangma who spoke on revocation of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) in the North East following the killing of 15 civilians was also disrupted. The new trend in Parliament today is not to allow dissenting voices to speak up. The very idea of democracy is subverted. The Opposition continues to demand the revocation of suspension of 12 Rajya Sabha MPs who raised their voices on the Farmers' Bills and wanted a discussion on its revocation. The Rajya Sabha Chairman wanted them to apologise before their suspension is revoked. Opposition MPs have not allowed any discussion to happen following the suspension of their fellow members.

In the Lok Sabha, Home Minister, Amit Shah tried to defend the firing by armed forces on the civilians at Oting, Mon District on Saturday and said they were forced to open fire as they had credible intelligence about the movement of insurgents of the NSCN (K) group from across the Myanmar border and because the vehicle carrying the coal mine labourers did not stop when told to. In that case was it necessary to shoot to kill? There were other ways of bringing the vehicle to a halt by firing at the tyres. But that standard operating procedure was not followed. It is obvious that the demand for revocation of the AFSPA as demanded by the Nagaland Government and which also has the support of quite a few MPs both in the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha might not get traction if it is not sustained by civil society across the country. The demand for revocation of AFSPA must be a live issue.

# Education must be a priority in Meghalaya

By Louis Pyngrope

In Meghalaya education should be the top priority of the Government. Education should also be listed in the manifestos of all political parties in our state. This is important for the upliftment of our citizens. Such manifesto should be strictly implemented after the formation of the government. This focus on education will help address the areas we are lagging behind in. An educated electorate will also be helpful to politics and governance because they will not demand personal benefits as they are doing today but will demand responsive and transparent governance.

It is important to understand that the rise in unemployment is mainly due to the newly adopted policy of our government to reduce expenditures in salary payments to its employees. The non-payment of salaries to teachers, non-implementation of pension schemes for retired teachers and the non-availability of technical educational institutions to produce human resource and experts with technical know-how to run industries or companies required for the scientific and technical development in our state also contribute to unemployment to a large extent.

Poor standard of education is the main factor contributing to the backwardness of Meghalaya. In the recent past, an organisation published its findings on the status of education in our state. We were shocked to learn that Meghalaya fares worst in education when compared with other states of India.

Whatever has happened in our state is totally our fault as we have never bothered to check the erosion of education through sheer negligence of past governments. Hence large sections of people live in ignorance without any awareness on educational and other matters as it is not a top priority of the state. Holistic education provides all round knowledge such as on health, cleanliness, ability to make informed decisions, questioning the government amongst others. An uneducated, uninformed electorate will not demand policies in economics, agriculture, environment, education, mining etc., and nor will it push for necessary reforms. The continued neglect of education has led to backwardness in almost all spheres of activities. As of now, we are

at the bottom of the list in education as per the recent publication of NITI Aayog and henceforth we will be lagging behind even more in different spheres of development in our state.

Recently NITI Aayog's published its first Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) report which found Meghalaya to be the fifth poorest state in the region and the poorest in India. That was followed by the Swachh Bharat report which found Shillong to be the dirtiest city in India which many find highly controversial and objectionable. All of these arise from the non-inclusion of education as a priority in our state. What we must do now is to convince the political parties to start afresh and focus on the real idea of development by coming up with an education policy and educational reforms as the top priority in their election manifestos and the public must hold them on to this promise after government formation.

We have seen the dismal performance of all political parties whether national or regional parties. They have no concern for the uplift of the state. Recently, a new political party "The Voice of People Party" (VoPP) was launched by Ardent M Basaiawmoit, our ex MLA from Nongkrem Constituency with the intention of winning the next elections and forming the government in 2023. Basaiawmoit criticised the present government for its non-performance. Of course this was rebutted by the Dy. Chief Minister, Prestone Tynsong.

I respect the idea of a revolution as suggested by Ardent Basaiawmoit but from past experiences there are doubts if such an ambition can be realised without hiring a political strategist and tactician like Prashant Kishor who has proved his mettle in the West Bengal election where the Trinamool Congress won against the BJP. The same person has used his valuable strategies and tactics in Goa, Tamil Nadu etc. It is important for this newly created party to adopt the same strategy to win the elections in 2023. But the VoPP needs to find another strategist as Kishor is already working for the Trinamool Congress which is currently the opposi-

tion party in the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly.

Its high time for the VoPP to be highly professional by appointing expert political strategists like Prashant Kishor to fight the current brand of politics in our state. Hence it is important to raise funds to meet the expenditure in hiring such experts. If such appointments are made, it is more or less certain that the Education policy, Social and Economic policy, Mining Policy, Environment policy, Agriculture policy, etc. will be properly framed with provision for reforms to be introduced and when needed and put in place in our state. In this way long pending problems can be solved permanently and the citizen of Meghalaya can ultimately live in peace and harmony.

Public memory is short and politicians know this well. The large majority of our people are silent on most issues and even MLAs are not educated enough to understand the consequence of the interstate border problems. Now our elected MLAs and ministers have accepted the 'give and take' policy although they know that our state will be the loser as we have never encroached on even a tiny portion of land belonging to other states/country. The Chief Minister of Assam understands the inferior intellectual capacity of our ministers so he took this opportunity to lay down terms of reference for constituting committees from both state governments which was gracefully accepted by our Chief Minister in the interests of the people of Assam. The short term memory of our people has contributed to the daring attitude of the ministers of this government to take decisions at random without thinking of future consequences, thereby reducing the people of the state to scapegoats. But our people have become wiser now and I strongly believe they will jog their memories in the assembly elections in 2023.

There is still time to convince the voters of Meghalaya on the need for a single regional political party to rule the state. Such a party will hopefully take decisions that are favourable for Khasis, Jaintias and Garos, hence there will be no cause for disaffection among them. This will also serve as a good

lesson for all the existing regional political parties who repeatedly commit to unite before every election but without any fruitful result. This is because voters elect the wrong people who are power hungry. We strongly believe that if serious appeals are made to all the citizens, our dreams will materialise when people with intellectual capacity lead the state. Then we will have no fear of any new/existing policies being enacted which are in conflict with central government policies like ILP, CAA, etc.

It is an undeniable fact that many projects executed in our state have resulted in large scale corruption. The hydel power projects, drinking water projects, permission for setting up coke factories, etc., have all led to crisis of confidence in the government. If these are left unchecked the state will dip even lower on socio-economic indicators.

Education reforms are much needed right from the primary and upper primary levels. Students should be taught the importance of a healthy lifestyle and awareness on drug addiction and its preventive measures. Sex education should also be taught to students at the high school level. Also, it is important to teach the basics of law and the Constitution from the time they enter high school.

An example of poor legal knowledge is the non-availability of forensic evidences in the recent judicial inquiry on the August 13 alleged killing of Cherister Thangkiew by the police at Mawlai Kyn-ton Massar. All this happened because the society at large was not aware that a crime scene should be immediately sealed off for collecting evidence. But people moved freely at the crime scene. Even the policemen entered the crime scene and bore the walls of the room apparently to get out a bullet lodged in the wall. This is equivalent to destruction of forensic evidence Co which was required to be placed by the Government for the judicial inquiry.

If students en-masse are armed with some knowledge of the law, it will be difficult for anyone or any organisation to cheat or brainwash them. Hence it is critical to revamp the whole education policy of our state with provision for reforms to make our citizens ready to face new challenges.

## To every action, there's an equal but opposite reaction!

By TFL Mawlong

The recent killing by the army is yet another example of the horror of inhumanity. Regardless of the context, the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA) has been responsible for the majority of the most inhumane episodes in modern Indian history. There's a stark similarity between the inhumane activities of the Armed Forces under the AFSPA for decades now and those at the concentration camps of the Nazis in Germany. During World War II, 6 million Jews were persecuted and murdered in death factories, the most notorious of which were the Auschwitz concentration camps. Here, Jews were held captive, robbed of their dignity and lives by another group who thought themselves superior. This inhumane concentration camps incident stands as a testament to what happens when 'human beings' fail to be 'humane beings'.

Looking through the same lens, there have been numerous reports of rape, extortion, and molestation under the AFSPA in the N-E region, in addition to roughly 2000 brutal encounter killings by the Armed Forces since 1979. The regions under AFSPA are, in so far as 'inhumaneness' is a concern, the modern concentration camps, albeit with a new face, more subtle, for a new reason, new context and in a democratic country.

Despite mounting evidence of the AFSPA's dangers, our leaders and governments have failed to devise an alternative solution. The Indian government continues to operate this colonial repressive machinery first promulgated by Lord Linlithgow in response to a massive scale of violence across the country during the Quit India Movement in 1942. This is callousness and an utter lack of imagination. While such draconian laws are not found only in India in modern times, but the horrendous activities in N-E and J & K under AFSPA beats even the US Patriot Law in the USA. Whether it is World War II-era or the 21st-century world if we are giving them a license to do anything how can we check the affinity of the Armed Forces towards perpetrating evil? We can't!

History demonstrates that the most remarkable achievements of humans have occurred when humanness and humaneness combine in optimal proportion. Scientific achievements such as atom-splitting, space travel, landing on the moon, and deciphering the genetic code of life itself are desirable when they are restricted to ethical and humane use. We have physical laws that govern how electrons are transmitted through power lines and how much energy is released when a one-kilogram Uranium-235 burns. These fundamental laws bestow enormous but terrifying power on humans. The only thing that keeps humans from self destruction is the 'humaneness' factor.

This is what we need. As with everything else, AFSPA should be able to ensure humaneness, to some degree at least. The license to do anything under this repressive act, intended to be a cure for separatist tendencies and insurgencies, should no longer be overlooked. True, the government genuinely requires tools such as the AFSPA to combat insurgencies, but nothing is above humanism. We must do better, be more imaginative, and strive for humaneness as a matter of survival. If we are imaginative enough to check the killing spree of the invisible viruses, it should be easy to devise a humane

version of AFSPA if we have the political will to do so. We can start by accepting that even under exceptional acts such as AFSPA, ethical behaviour should no longer be optional.

Solving the North-East's problems requires unwavering 'political will,' as well as 'statesmanship' and pragmatism of the highest order from those in charge of the country's affairs. However, we have been unlucky in this regard. North-East politics are devoid of a consistent political ideology and data-driven strategies. We define our political leaders by their 'antics,' rather than their 'visions' and 'ideas.' And our political parties have been crippled by defections, party-splits, shifting alliances, and a lack of class. Little wonder then, that, 75 years of independence did not give birth to modern and matured politics in N-E. Rather, the N-E region has birthed its mediocre, and primordial politics. Will our political parties please redefine N-E politics!

Furthermore, far too many administrative, and law enforcement officers and businessmen in India are unconcerned about tribal dynamics, ethos, and psyche. As a result, tribal areas and tribal states are experiencing more governance failure and backwardness. The N-E region requires more local IAS and IPS, and brilliant academicians and entrepreneurs. Perhaps this necessitates the implementation of progressive reforms in our schools and colleges, beginning with the examination system, and purging the rottenness out of our classroom teachings. It's hard but where there's a will, there's a way!

A psychological divide between the people of the North-Eastern states and the rest of India should also be addressed. Generally speaking, there is a strong sense of neglect and alienation among N-E tribals. As a result, anti-national sentiment is rife throughout the region. Since the low Human Development Index (HDI) in N-E states is one of the key factors that creates a psychological divide, the key to subside this feeling of alienation lies in human-centered economic development, improving educational outcomes, and expanding economic opportunities. The central government's 'stay aloof policy,' which is largely to blame for the region's socio-economic stagnation, must end. Furthermore, the N-E states should reconsider their ill-conceived development strategy, which has failed to link resource mobilization and developmental investment policies to the region's structural specificities.

If fundamentals are not strengthened, the continued imposition of draconian legislation such as AFSPA will only aggravate the disillusionment. As the AFSPA becomes more abusive, human rights violations increase, and it may draw more young people to militant organizations. The cycle of violence persists. After all, 'to every action, there is an equal but opposite reaction' (Newton's third law of motion).

There is a strong case against the continuation of AFSPA. However, if repealing AFSPA in those regions is premature at this time, the government should be more imaginative and make necessary amendments to the act so as to prevent any excesses from occurring. After all, the legislation is not written in stone. If we want citizens to be humane and more law-abiding, the Act should at the very least ensure some level of humaneness.

Email: (tflmawlong@gmail.com)

### Letters to the Editor

#### Barbaric killing by Indian army

Editor,  
The recent killing of 14 innocent civilians by the Indian Army in Oting, Mon district, Nagaland on the 4th and 5th of December 2021 is a barbaric and cowardly act of the men in uniform under the protection of AFSPA. As per the statement of Home Minister, Amit Shah in Parliament, there were intelligence inputs that there will be movement of insurgent groups in the area and an ambush was laid by the Special Force of the Assam Rifles. When the pick-up van carrying the victims passed by, the army signalled the vehicle to stop but it didn't stop which led to the firing. Later on the forces realised that it was a case of mistaken identity. Looking at the statement by the HM with inputs from Home Ministry, the question arises as to why the army has to open fire on the persons occupying the vehicle even if there are insurgents on it. They could have shot at the tyres or done a blank firing for the vehicle to stop. Even the statement of the army officials looks fabricated where the report says they were innocent civilians with no arms or ammunitions with them while in another report it says that the victims were carrying hunting rifles.

On this matter only a serious investigation monitored by a court of law will bring out the truth. The most

horrific action by the army in operation as per reports of the Nagaland TV channels is that the vehicle in which the army personnel are travelling have dual registration of Manipur and Assam registration with one overlapping another. As per the reports of the said channel the army personnel after committing the crime tried to take the dead bodies to another location, strip the clothes of the victims and put on them camouflaged dress of insurgents to claim that they have killed the militant insurgent group and when they couldn't do so they just wrapped the bodies in tarpaulin.

Such heinous crimes are being committed by men in uniform whom we as citizens expect to be our protector. I hope that justice will be given to the families who lost their dear ones in this incident and the culprits are punished. May God grant eternal rest to all who lost their lives and console their loved ones

Yours etc.,  
J. Warjri  
Shillong -3

#### Water tanks turn architectural marvels

Editor,  
Even with the incumbent MLA returning after every election from this constituency, water scarcity is an intractable issue in the Greater Laban area of the

town. There are a number of suburbs that receive little or no water, such as Harisabha, Howell Road, ABP Road, and Sylhety Para (East Laban), to name a few. In Harisabha, a borewell was dug some years back near the community water tank off the Harisabha Temple, but this has been a non-starter from the very beginning. An additional RCC tank has been constructed adjacent to the British-era metallic tank, but it appears to be empty all year round. Additionally, there are notorious plumbbers in the area. It is no better on Howell Road, either, where residents are collecting water from leaking pipes and neighbours who have a personal borewell.

The community water tank in Sylhety Para is more or less a showpiece whereas the road becomes a river where the water is actually gushing. The local MLA goes for inspection of the numerous public welfare works that he has undertaken in the constituency frequently, as we have seen in this daily. The people in this constituency are even aware of the number of water tanks constructed in different suburbs and how many of them have water inside them to quench the thirst of households. These tanks can at best be classified as "architectural marvels". As a matter of fact, the issue of water scarcity has never been addressed in this constituency. Even though this urban constituency is seeing a lot of infrastructure development work, there has

been little in the way of adequate water supply to each homeowner. When can we expect a concrete solution in this regard?

Yours etc.  
BC Paul  
Shillong - 4

#### Fixing Intelligence

Editor  
The botched-up counter insurgency operation in Nagaland's Mon district exposed the grave failure in of intelligence gathering and dissemination. This has added a blot to the peace process which still awaits the region. Security elements in the Northeast armed with the draconian AFSPA have failed to put weight on winning the support of the populace which is the central theme for any counter-insurgency program.

Intelligence sharing to vetting is a dilemma for some forces, often ending up in a tussle between departments. From the 9/11 terror attack to 26/11 Mumbai long delays in acting on actionable intelligence have proved fatal and the lessons have still not been learnt. Taking a leaf out of the book 'Operation Dark Heart' by Anthony Shaffer, the Predator drone program was counterproductive at times creating more enemies around the Afghanistan-Pakistan region.

Keeping in mind the claw of the Chinese dragon over Northeast India counter-insurgency commanders in the Northeast should have

the same bearing such as Lt Gen. (Retd) Syed Ata Hasnain who once served in Kashmir using the 'Hearts and Minds' approach and the use of technology similar to the Blue Force tracking system allowing situational awareness in complex environments. The road ahead is steep and it is high time for officials who are watching this part of the world to read, "Understanding India's Northeast: A Reporter's Journal," by Rupa Chinnai.

Yours etc.,  
Christopher Gathphoh,  
Shillong-10

#### River pollution

Editor,  
A recent study has found that hydrogen sulphide released from the black waters of the Yamuna has a more corrosive impact on the Taj Mahal than sulphur dioxide emitted by the factories in Agra. The stink that comes from the Yamuna is caused by hydrogen sulphide. It is likely that this gas is behind the discoloration of the Taj's magnificent white marbles.

The findings assume profound significance as the measures adopted to protect the Taj from pollution are concerned with dealing with industrial and vehicular pollution. In fact, the pollution of the Yamuna has not received much attention until recently. For a long time, discussions on tackling the discoloration of the Taj have been centred around reducing sulphur dioxide

emissions on the assumption that it was the main pollutant behind the decay of the marbles. While a report of the Archaeological Survey of India had blamed Yamuna pollution for the discoloration, it viewed things in a different perspective.

The polluted Yamuna is damaging the Taj in different ways. The polluted water of the river contains hydrogen sulphide. This acidic and corrosive gas causes considerable damage to the monument. Industrial pollution causes less damage as the wind takes away the pollutants moving towards the Taj.

In the light of the findings, practical measures need to be adopted to deal with the pollution of the Yamuna. Froth in different parts of the river indicates that its pollution has reached alarming levels. The sacred river that occupies a very important role in Indian puranas must be rid of pollution. It must be cleaned and Agra's sewage and industrial waste must be allowed into the river only after treatment. Listed as one of the seven wonders of the world and standing as India's pride and architectural marvel, the Taj must be protected from harm. Both the Yamuna and the Taj are essential for the landscape.

Yours etc.,  
Venu GS,  
Kollam

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"It's fine to celebrate success but it is more important to heed the lessons of failure."

— Bill Gates

## The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIV No. 120 SHILLONG, FRIDAY, DECEMBER 10, 2021

### Adieu, general

CHIEF of Defence Staff Bipin Rawat is no more. The vacuum he leaves behind would be difficult to fill. Years of experience at the apex of the Indian Army followed by the final two years as Chief of Defence Staff, India's first, have all tuned his brain and steered his resolve to give the right kind of responses to enemy designs at the right time. It was evident in the way China came calling in Galwan Valley, Ladakh, where within hours of an unconventional attack from PLA in 2020, special commandos of the Gorkha regiment were airlifted and the Chinese made to have a "feel" of Indian force's lethality. General Rawat had taken over as CDS just months before and his advice mattered. He was army chief when the Chinese were challenged in Doklam in 2017. He had led the first surgical strike under the Modi dispensation, in 2015, when the Indian forces crossed the eastern borders and dismantled NSCN-K insurgent camps in Myanmar that posed a threat to the North-Eastern states.

Notably, Rawat was vice chief of army staff when the 2016 post-Uri surgical strikes on terror camps along LoC in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir was carried out. During the Balakot IAF bombing in 2018 he as the army chief provided the ground support in the western sector. Rawat carried with him a great sense of poise. The Kshatriya-Rajput blood in him and his family history of being part of the Indian military for generations all added to his aura of being a soldier of the first order. His utterances have at times drawn flak from various quarters, as in the threat he held out to the stone-pelters in Kashmir Valley "to dare come with weapons" and taste the might of the military. His comment about the IAF being a supporting force to the Army did not go down well with the warriors up in the air.

As Chief of Defence Staff, Rawat was busy with the task of modernizing the Indian military through training and acquisitions. He knew his job and the political establishment had reposed full confidence in him. Prima facie, the mishap in the Nilgiri Hills looked like the result of bad weather conditions. A detailed tri-service probe has been ordered, which should pin-point to what went wrong. India's brave soldiers will miss General Rawat and his demise is an irreparable loss to the nation. Renewal and reinvention are integral to life and survival. All our Homage to General Bipin, his wife Madhulika and the other deceased brave-hearts.

# Never play with the Naga Pride

By H. Srikanth

Exploring Nagaland and participating in the Hornbill Festival was on our bucket list for many years, and we were glad that we could make it this time. Apart from exploring Kohima and the surrounding villages, we spent the first three days in Kisama village where the festival was organized. Every year, the Hornbill Festival attracts thousands of Indian and foreign tourists. The festival could not happen last year because of the Covid Pandemic. Although this year the state government decided to resume the Hornbill Festival only a couple of months back, it attracted several tourists from different parts of India. All hotels were booked, most stay-homes around Kisama village were occupied; taxi drivers and shop owners were expecting good business. Although the Festival was primarily aimed at showcasing Naga history, folk culture and traditions to the outside world, we observed that all local people in Nagaland also owned the festival. Several entertainment and cultural activities were organized not only in Kohima, but also in other towns in Nagaland by different youth and civil society organizations. The local people were out in large numbers, strolling in illuminated night bazaars, selling, buying and eating street food.

As one who had seen some other such state festivals in the north-eastern states, I felt the Hornbill Festival was organized in a more systematic way by the Tourism department in collaboration with other government and civil societies. There was bonhomie all around. The Hornbill Festival has the potential to promote and strengthen peace, understanding and harmony among different ethnic groups in Nagaland, and also between the Nagas and the rest of India. Unfortunately, all that festivity ended abruptly, once news of the killing of innocent Naga civilians in Mon district spread like wildfire and the Naga tribes started disassociating from the Hornbill in protest. The gory encounter has now become a rallying point for an organized political movement of the indigenous communities in the northeast to end the AFSPA regime.

The Nagas were the first in the northeast to experience the dark side of Indian democracy. The then nascent sovereign Indian State could not accept that a numerically insignificant, economically backward community in a remote corner of the country dared to express its reser-

ations against joining the Indian Union. Indian government's reluctance to abide by the Nine Point Agreement of 1947 and Nehru's refusal to Naga National Council NNC's demand for sovereign Nagaland led to the Naga resistance movement under the leadership of A.G. Phizo. Instead of continuing the negotiations to convince the Nagas, the Indian State deployed para-military forces and enacted black acts such as Armed Forces Special Powers (Assam and Manipur) Act, in short, AFSPA to quell



the Naga resistance. But, far from suppressing the Naga insurgency, human rights' violations carried out during the counter-insurgency operations united the Naga tribes and widened the support for the movement in other Naga inhabited areas.

The movement that started in the 1950s went through several ups and downs under different militant organizations and leaders in subsequent decades. Realizing that violence alone would not yield the intended results the Indian state created the Nagaland state in 1963, assuring autonomy, through Article 371-A of the Indian Constitution, and sponsored development programs. Seven decades of Nagas' uneasy relations with the Indian Union has created a section which no longer finds any merit in the idea of sovereign Nagalim. Corruption and factional fights among the Nagas did weaken the morale of the resistance movement to some extent. All these socio-economic changes did create the conditions for the latest round of peace negotiations.

Ever since the peace negotiations started in 1997 between the Indian State and the Naga rebels, law and order situation in Nagaland has improved considerably. Most

Nagas reposed faith in the ongoing negotiations and believed that something acceptable to both the parties would emerge and establish permanent peace in the region. During this interlude, anti-Indian feelings which were rampant in the first three decades of Indian independence have considerably mellowed down. Many Nagas accept that they cannot completely sever their relations with India and seek independent Nagalim. Instead, the Nagas groups are insisting more on greater autonomy and ethnic

civil society confronted the Assam Rifles not in remote jungles, but right at the heart of the town amidst glaring eyes of the media - local and national. This Naga civil society could be blackmailed by the national digital channels which, left to themselves, would love to paint all dead Naga coal mine workers as terrorists and even Chinese agents. When confronted by the jingoist media obsessed only with national security, the Naga civil society does not blink even for a second to express their admiration for the militant leaders whom they consider as their national heroes. The Nagas may have problems with their own militant groups, but they do consider them as part of their community, and not treat them as terrorist or anti-national groups. One only has to see what is written on the memorials erected in Khonoma and Kohima to understand the respect that the Nagas have for the militant leaders who fought for the cause of the Nagas.

The present phase of peace negotiations became possible not only because the governments and the militant groups wanted it, but also because of the pressure from the Naga civil society. The civil society has emerged as a force to reckon with, alongside governments and militant groups. Any attempt to provoke and antagonise civil society would be disastrous. Even at a time when the Nagas had limited resources, they withstood the onslaught of the military and paramilitary forces and dared to challenge the Indian State. The Nagas of today are more educated and resourceful than what they were in the 1950s and 60s. They cannot be led or misled by any leader, government or media house. The emerging Naga civil society organisations are aware of the changes taking place within and outside the Naga world, and ready to listen and accommodate. But they accept nothing under duress, at the cost of the Naga pride and Naga interests.

India can win the trust of the Nagas through dialogue, reason, development, mutual trust and emotional bonding. Military operations and draconian acts like AFSPA have become redundant in the changed circumstances. It is high time the Indian Army, the central government, the ruling party and the media learnt to deal with the Nagas in mature and responsible ways. (The writer teaches Political Science in NEHU, Shillong. Email: hskant@gmail.com)

Integration. These demands are no doubt complicated as they have implications for other states and communities in the region. Nevertheless, if the negotiating parties are sincere and reasonable, it is possible to arrive at a solution acceptable to all parties. But the delay in arriving at an acceptable solution is causing tensions among the Nagas, who started doubting the sincerity of the Indian government. What happened to the innocent local coal mine workers in Mon district only rekindled their fears and suspicions about the sincerity of the Indian State in finding a lasting solution to the Naga problem.

The incident is definitely shocking to the Nagas who were in the midst of the Hornbill Festival and looking forward to peaceful Christmas celebrations. The violence that followed the untoward incident was expected. However, one can see that the Nagas' reactions this time is different. Unlike earlier times, the lead in mobilizing the people is not taken by any one leader or militant group. It is the civil society which reacted spontaneously and took the lead in channelizing public anger against the botched-up Army encounter. The Naga

the enemy is much stronger. But it was definitely not an inferior force and hence there was no question of 'Hit and Run', a tactic usually adopted in an ambush. One of the two survivors had said according to the report that the commandos had dragged the bodies out and dumped them on the road including that of his brother. All this leads one to understand that there was plenty of time and huge number of assault resources.

From the available information, it is clear that the plan was to eliminate each one to make a clean sweep. But soon it came to light that it was not a victory but a great tragedy. The victims were unarmed innocent villagers employed at Tiru coal mines. Six of them brutally killed while in the truck itself. More were injured and killed when agitated Konyak villagers attacked first those in the ambush, and then an Assam rifles post. One army trooper got killed. In fact states in north east have often witnessed violent insurrections and brutal counter-insurgency laws like the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, (AFSPA), 1958. In Manipur, immense discontent erupted against AFSPA and it was removed from the particular area for a while.

Union home minister said in Rajya Sabha that 'vehicle was signalled to stop' and was 'fired upon as it tried to flee'. One among the survivors said that they were not trying to flee, that they were just in the vehicle waiting for the firing to stop. Both were taken to hospital with serious injuries almost ten hours after the incident. According to the hospital sources, the survivors were given protection by a team

## Armed forces killing in Nagaland a cold-blooded murder Centre has to ensure that the peace negotiations are not disrupted

By Krishna Jha

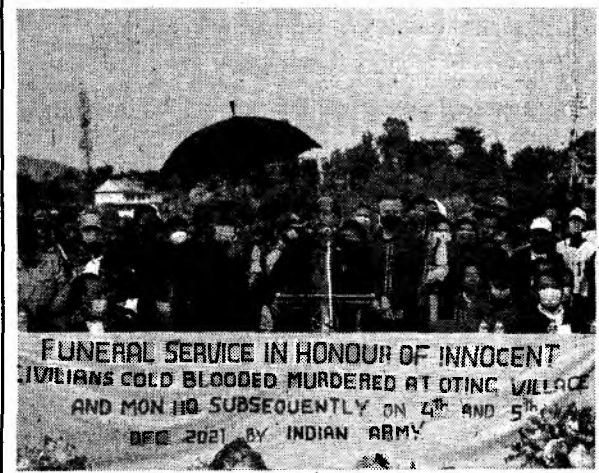
There was no last minute reprieve. The men were in the pickup truck that kept winding the narrow road climbing up slowly. Unarmed, each of them saw the guns flickering, and in one single moment the horror swept them away for ever. Soon, all of them, drenched in blood, were left dead, excepting two, still struggling for life. Miners in Tiru valley coal fields, they were residents of Oting village in Mon district of Nagaland where the Konyak Nagas live. Those who killed them were para commandos of Indian army. They were based in Jorhat, tried to ambush those said to be insurgents moving in the area. Information came from army intelligence. Yet the bloody initiative had its gaps.

Why there was no attempt to arrest them alive, and that too when they could not have escaped. The terrain itself did not allow that. If they were insurgents as the intelligence claimed, there was no provocation at all, nor any movement, especially, not within the country. The local police and the Assam Rifles were never given any clue about the action the para commandos were to undertake. Was it all planned to be a 'surgical strike'? In fact an ambush is usually taken up as action plan when

of Assam police. The district administration and police officials of Mon and Nagaland police also visited them. The hospital staff said they did not know earlier who the injured men were but when the news went viral about the killing, they decided to upload the photos of those unknown miners admitted in the hospital on social media, and succeeded to link with their village. That is how the news came out.

In fact, fake encounter killings have been in vogue. Those involved in counter-insurgency, have known through experience that such lesser known 'crimes' fetch none or almost zero legal reactions or consequences. Killing of the so called insurgents has fetched till today, only grief, anger and frustration, but no action. It is even taken as a law applied to wild, lawless territories, and therefore part of the game. It may be noted that all significant insurgent groups are in peace talks with government in Nagaland. They have also arrived at a ceasefire agreement. There are crimes like extortions, intimidations violating the ceasefire agreement, but they are only violations of ground rules, not challenges to Indian state.

It is possible that the Naga underground faction reportedly involved must



be among those yet to enter into the ceasefire agreement. Reports indicate this is the faction led by Yung Aung, the nephew of NSCN-K founder, the late S.S. Khaplang. But Yung Aung has its support base in Myanmar. Historically, it was only one group that started the agitation in Nagaland, led by Naga National Council of A.Z. Phizo. This group entered into a peace agreement with the Government of India in 1975 as the Shillong Accord.

A group calling itself the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), broke away in protest, in 1980. But the NSCN also split into two, violently, in 1988, with S.S. Khaplang, a Myanmar Naga, leading one faction and the other led by Thuingaleng Muivai and Isak Chishi Swu. Among the two, the Khaplang group faced several splits. Within the group, there were India and Myanmar Nagas who got the group divided among themselves in several factions. The faction led by the Indian Nagas are engaged in the ongoing ceasefire process. In 2017, Khaplang passed away, and Khango Konyak became the leader of the NSCN-K, an Indian Naga. Soon after, in 2018, Khango Konyak faced impeachment and Yung Aung took over. Khango Konyak came back to India and was in the ongoing ceasefire which is supposed to be in the final stages.

It is imperative for the peace process to be finalised uninterrupted, but the tragedy has its own deep impact. The resolution of the crisis depends on the Indian state especially in assuaging the hurt feelings of the Naga masses. As a last resort, the state has to say sorry, reflecting a sincere bid to share the tragedy. (IPA Service)

### Letters to the Editor

#### Meghalaya ranks lowest in cleanliness

Editor,  
I was really taken aback on reading the recent findings of the Swachh Survekshan Cleanliness Survey (SSCS) 2021 which ranks Meghalaya last among the 14 states surveyed. As a lay person I am in complete agreement with the Deputy Chief Minister of Meghalaya on his disagreement of such ranking by the reputed organisation Swachh Survekshan Cleanliness Survey 2021. This survey clearly indicates that the surveyors have not surveyed the entire state. I may be wrong in my assessment but I hope that The Shillong Times has enough circulation that it reaches the ears of the cleanliness Survey organisation and hence I would like to request the SSCS to highlight the criteria on which cleanliness is being marked so that we will not be left behind in groping about the cleanliness index of any state we visit in future.

As of now, my understanding of cleanliness is more or less same as the understanding of every tourist (national and international) that I am in touch with. Among those tourists I have met or my friends from other states who visited Megha-

laya, I have always received a favourable reply whenever I asked about the cleanliness of the tourist spots they have visited or even the urban areas they have visited or passed through. As far as cleanliness is concerned, the feedback I get from my verbal interaction with visitors is always excellent. I am really surprised and shocked therefore to learn from the mentioned survey that Meghalaya is ranked at the bottom since cleanliness is a part of our culture and is more or less mandatory in the society we live in. In fact I expect the SSCS ranking to place us at the top of the list.

Yours etc.,  
Louis Pyngrope,  
Via email

#### AFSPA: a brutal law

Editor,  
Amidst outrage over the killing of 14 civilians by armed forces in Nagaland, demands for the abolition of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA) are intensifying over the North East. The 63-year-old law needs crucial reforms if the Union Government has no intention of completely repealing it. The draconian law gives the armed forces extreme powers whereby they can enter and search

homes without warrants and arrest people on mere suspicion. The authority to fire upon anyone even if it causes death is savagely brutal. Under this law, the armed forces actually have the license to act brutally instead of responsibly because they enjoy legal immunity for their actions. Perhaps it is because of this particular provision that the soldiers raped, tortured, and killed innocent Indian citizens for decades without fear of being held accountable.

The Chief Ministers of Meghalaya and Nagaland have appealed for its withdrawal but will the Union Government accede? In 2005, the BP Jeevan Reddy Committee, as well as the Second Administrative Commission, recommended its repeal but 16 years on and despite protests and repeated calls for its nullification, this law continues to be enforced. How many more innocent lives will be lost, until the Union Government decides to act?

Yours etc.,  
Kelly Lyngdoh,  
Via email

#### World Inequality Report

Editor,  
It is ironic that despite being one of the leading

developing economies in the world, the recently released World Inequality Report has put India into the category of the poorest and the most unequal countries in the world. In fact, India's widespread poverty is not caused by shortage of resources but by the most unequal ways of distribution of wealth among people. One-third of the country's wealth is accumulated in the hands of 1% of the population. The wealthiest 10% of the population holds two-thirds (65%) of the total wealth of the nation. It is worrisome that 90% of Indians are forced to manage with just 35% of the total wealth. Worse, this percentage is showing an upward course for over two decades. In spite of tall claims by successive governments about poverty alleviation, the country's severe poverty has not been eliminated. Even more worrisome is the fact that the wealth of the bottom 50% has been in a downward slide.

We can draw reasonable inferences from this. One, there is a wide gap between wealthy and deprived sections of the population. Two, as years go by, the gap is widening. The average wealth of an Indian household is Rs 9,83,010 whereas a household in bottom 50% holds a mere Rs 66,280. As for income, half

of the Indian population is far behind earning what 1% of the population is earning. Inequalities of income would lead to even greater inequalities in accessing other benefits.

Substantial inequality that exists in Indian society calls for critical analysis by policy makers and experts. One of the distinctive features of Indian society, diversity could be one of the reasons behind this great inequality. Faulty economic model that India follows is another reason for this. Instead of focusing on an overall growth, India must focus on the welfare of individual people. It must follow the best economic models. The Report must make us analyse the situation and improve. Our leaders must recognise the reality and transform the country into an equitable one.

Yours etc.,  
Venu GS,  
Kollam

#### A catastrophic week

Editor,  
Just the other day we watched the magnificent air show which displayed the prowess of the Indian Air Force. It was a delight to watch the fighter aircraft formations in the skies and

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

"Every adversity, every failure, every heartache carries with it the seed of an equal or greater benefit."

— Napoleon Hill

## The Shillong Times

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### Smart meters: Needed a public debate

THE intent of the recently minted Power Minister to install smart meters is laudable. The MeECL cannot be expected to underwrite the bills of defaulters or those who make false declaration on the kilowatts used or who break up their bulk requirements into smaller units so that they can pay lesser. Also, there are still many who steal power by fiddling with the meters or as stated by knowledgeable sources by the use of non-standardised immersion rods so as to beat the power bills. "Smart Meters" usually involve real-time or near real-time sensors, power outage notification and power quality monitoring. These additional features are more than simple automated meter reading (AMR). They are similar in many respects to the Advanced Metering Infrastructure (AMI) meters. Interval and time-of-use meters historically have been installed to measure commercial and industrial customers, but may not have automatic reading.

An academic study based on existing trials showed that home owners' electricity consumption on average is reduced by approximately 3-5% when provided with real-time feedback. Another advantage of smart meters that benefits both customers and the utility is the monitoring capability they provide for the whole electrical system. As part of an AMI, utilities can use the real-time data from smart meters measurements related to current, voltage, and power factor to detect system disruptions more quickly, allowing immediate corrective action to minimize customer impact such as blackouts. Smart meters work by using a secure national communication network (called the DCC) to automatically and wirelessly send a consumer's actual energy usage to them. Smart meters also come with an in-home display. This display gives the consumer near real-time information about consumption and how much it's costing.

However, installing smart meters for a state like Meghalaya which has erratic internet connection is fraught with uncertainties. A smart meter needs constant power and WIFI connectivity and that's asking too much. Another problem with Meghalaya is the use of smart meters manufactured in China. The Union Government had categorically warned states not to import Chinese made goods, particularly smart meters which could be intrusive. Some of the smart meters installed in parts of Garo Hills have already stopped functioning and are simply hanging by a thread. An informed public debate on such an important power reform is needed at this juncture. The public should get into this new metering system with their eyes open and with clear guarantees that it will work smoothly and not intermittently. The public also needs to know how the smart meters applied to certain households and commercial establishments are functioning at this point.

## Use of armed forces against civilian population unconstitutional

# Modi govt must repeal atrocious AFSPA law in totality

By Prakash Karat

The killing of 14 civilians in Mon, Nagaland by a special force of the Assam Rifles has brought into sharp relief the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA), a lawless law that enables the security forces to act with impunity, which has led to atrocity after atrocity on the civilian population in the North-East. Eight young men, who were coal miners, were travelling in a van when they were ambushed by a special force, who were

search any premise without warrants.

The AFSPA was extended to Jammu & Kashmir by an Act in 1990 and it remains in force there still. The AFSPA, along with the Public Safety Act and other draconian measures have created a regime of impunity and brutal excesses on the civilian population of J&K in the past three decades.

Under AFSPA, to pros-

not establish any prima facie case against the accused.

There has been a constant demand to repeal the AFSPA. Irom Sharmila conducted a hunger strike demanding the abolition of AFSPA which stretched to sixteen long years. In 2004, the UPA government set-up a committee headed by Justice Jeevan Reddy to look into the working of the AFSPA and the committee in its re-

port of J&K, except the border region, since militancy and violence had come down to very low levels. Despite the then home minister also subscribing to this view, the government did not comply with this demand due to the open resistance of the army chief and the defence establishment.

The use of the armed forces against the civilian population goes against the basic tenets of the constitution. It is highly regrettable that the



purportedly targeting armed insurgents. The killing of six of the miners led to protests by the local people, which resulted in eight more deaths due to firing by the armed forces.

The Mon atrocity is not an isolated incident. Time and again, under the cover of the AFSPA, massacres of civilians have taken place with security forces claiming every time that they were opening fire against armed militants. The AFSPA has been in operation in the North-East since 1958 and some of the killings of civilians that took place are the 1984 Heirangoithong massacre of 14 civilians in Manipur; the RIMS incident in 1995 in which 9 civilians died; and the Malom massacre in Manipur in which 10 civilians were killed in 2000.

The AFSPA can be imposed by the centre on a state, or, a part of it after it is declared a disturbed area under section 3 of the Act. The centre can invoke the AFSPA without the consent of the state government concerned. Under the law, the armed forces are given unlimited powers to open fire and kill any person contravening the law, or carrying arms and ammunition; they have powers to arrest any person and

execute any security personnel for a crime committed by the local people, which is practically impossible as the experience of Jammu & Kashmir shows. Till July 2018, successive state governments had sent 50 cases for sanction of prosecution against armed forces personnel under the AFSPA. However, the union government denied permission to prosecute in all these cases. In the

infamous Pathribal incident, five civilians were killed in a fake encounter by some army personnel claiming they were foreign militants. Though the CBI investigated the case and charged some of the army men for the crime, eventually the case went to an army court-martial where all the accused were acquitted on the grounds that the evidence did

not establish any prima facie case against the accused. There has been a constant demand to repeal the AFSPA. Irom Sharmila conducted a hunger strike demanding the abolition of AFSPA which stretched to sixteen long years. In 2004, the UPA government set-up a committee headed by Justice Jeevan Reddy to look into the working of the AFSPA and the committee in its re-

port in 2005 recommended the repeal of the law. But all efforts to amend the law, or, withdraw it from certain states were blocked due to the opposition of the army and the defence ministry. In Manipur, after the brutal rape and murder of an alleged militant, Tangiam Manorama, by some security personnel in 2004, there was a big movement for the revocation of AFSPA. It resulted in only the Imphal municipal

higher judiciary has not struck down this law as ultra-vires of the constitution in all these years. The Modi government has been utilising the arsenal of anti-democratic, draconian laws to the fullest to build a national security State, which brutally tramples upon the fundamental rights of citizens. The Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, the National Security Act, the sedition clause in the IPC along with the AFSPA are part of the authoritarian security architecture. The recent extension of the jurisdiction of the Border Security Force from 15 kilometres to 50 kilometres inside the international border in Punjab and West Bengal has to be seen in this light. It is good that the chief minister of Nagaland, Neiphiu Rio, and the Meghalaya chief minister, Conrad Sangma have demanded the repeal of the AFSPA from their states and the North-East. In 2015, the Left Front government of Tripura had got the AFSPA revoked in the state by getting the "disturbed area" proclamation withdrawn.

However, the revocation of the AFSPA piecemeal from some states is not enough, it is time to repeal the AFSPA laws in totality as they have no place in a democratic and civilised society. (IPA Service)

*"The AFSPA has been in operation in the North-East since 1958 and some of the killings of civilians that took place are the 1984 Heirangoithong massacre of 14 civilians in Manipur; the RIMS incident in 1995 in which 9 civilians died; and the Malom massacre in Manipur in which 10 civilians were killed in 2000."*

area being removed from the jurisdiction of the Act. In Jammu & Kashmir, during the second term of the UPA government, the Omar Abdullah government, the Left parties and other democratic organisations demanded that the disturbed area proclamation and the operation of AFSPA be withdrawn from all the urban and other areas

## Modi swears by 'constitutional values' at democracy summit

# Indian PM in the company of some big authoritarian heads

By Sushil Kutty

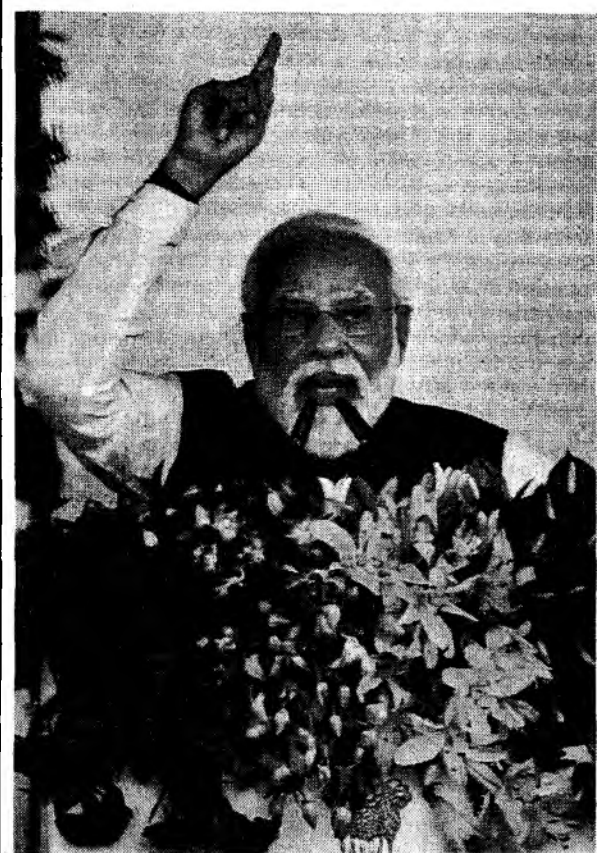
President Joe Biden is a cognitive disaster, say some of his meanest detractors. Two recent polls—one by the Wall Street Journal and the other by Monmouth University—have given Biden no more chance to retain control of the House and Senate in 2022 than Prime Minister Narendra Modi had of winning West Bengal in mid-2021. And American media now say that Covid-19 transformed America into a 'gig economy', which is not too far from the glaring truth of India, where Narendra Modi's 'pakoronomics' reduced India to an economy where people can only 'pay bills.'

Leaders of most democracies are in no better situation than POTUS Biden—whether it is Boris Johnson of the United Kingdom or the 'Pradhan Sevak' of India—the 'one and only Narendra Modi.' Johnson is gaining in unpopularity like once Modi

declining vote. Veepee Kamala Harris hasn't put the Potomac on fire, and the US intelligence community does not know Modi's democratic credentials!

Biden, on his part, opened the first 'Summit for Democracy' and Modi made an intervention—one of a dozen leaders allowed to. Biden said democracies do not happen by "accident", they have to be renewed "with each generation", and because of that, it "is a defining challenge of our time." Modi followed Biden and Modi spoke of "following the principles enshrined in the Constitution." He also spoke of the four pillars of democracy—"sensitivity, accountability, participation and reform orientation."

The Prime Minister of India called for reform of international institutions and said "principals of democracies should guide global governance." One thing is clear.



used to gain in popularity. The halcyon days of Modi have faded into the mists above Wellington, which brought a helicopter down.

And Modi has changed, not the least of which is his beard, which is now the silver of the mist! Has Modi mellowed? Modi has surely bowed down to circumstances. Chances are he may even accept the gift of a skullcap! Narendra Modi wants to leave a legacy that will be acceptable to the liberal truth—which is that you are only as good as the liberal world would want you to be.

As if to convince everybody, Modi made an intervention in Joe Biden's 'Summit of Democracy', in which the US President raised the "alarm" that democracies were "backsliding" on democratic institutions worldwide.

If he was referring to Narendra Modi's democratic India, Biden did not raise his voice enough to be heard. And guess what Modi told Biden in his intervention? Modi insisted that countries should follow their "constitutional principles" and that tech companies like that of "Google Pichai" and "Twitter Aggarwal" should help preserve open societies. If Biden did not hear the sniggers and giggles, it was because the "interventions" were made in "closed door" and limited to 12 countries only.

What Joe Biden should do is call an urgent meeting of his White House. The United States intelligence is as fragile as Biden's vice president's standing in the US Senate where she's the

Modi considers his rule "democratic" and we have to understand that, even if we run out of salt! The repeal of Article 370 may not be "democratic" for millions of Kashmiris, but for Modi it is part of "good governance". Ditto triple-talaq made "null and void", and CAA and NRC and what else? Modi is doing everything per democratic principles and nobody should and can point fingers at him.

And now that, as a 'sensitive' leader, Modi had accepted that he was wrong, there is a lesson in it for Biden and Johnson and whoever else. The people of India can be forgiven for thinking they live in another country—an India more repressed and little less democratic. But that is because there is an intractable Opposition which refuses to accept that Modi plays by the rules of democratic principles and wouldn't be the autocrat they want him to be.

In defence of his model democracy, Modi spoke of India's "civilisational" ethos which places India as the "original source of democracy." If Biden took that and moved on, then it must be because of the democratic spirit, respect for rule of law and pluralistic ethos ingrained in the Americans. Ask Rana Ayyub and Barkha Dutt and they will not laugh. The Indian government hasn't stopped "harrasing journalists", but it has stopped journalists from covering Parliament, the seat of India's democracy. So much for Modi's democratic and constitutional principles! (IPA Service)

### Letters to the Editor

## Omicron and vaccination

Editor,  
After Omicron entered India, the fear of this variant has started gripping people across the country. People are now fearing that the third wave of Coronavirus has arrived and now cases have started increasing. A total of 23 cases have been reported in the country so far, after which the states and the central government are on alert. At the same time, scientists have also started trying to gather more information about this variant. Experts are advising people to be cautious regarding the new Coronavirus variant. Now, questions are also arising as to which of the two vaccines are more effective against Covid. Is it Covishield or Covaxin that can deal with the Omicron variant?

According to experts, the Omicron variant has brought 50 new mutations in which there are 10 mutations in

the spike protein where the receptor binds to our lungs. The Omicron variant will have a lesser effect in those vaccinated with Covishield and Covaxin? Clinically, Omicron is not yet posing a burden on the healthcare system but vigil has to be maintained.

Yours etc.,  
Pinaki Nandy  
Guwahati

## Power Minister please reconsider

Editor,  
The news report Tynsong pushes for smart meter (ST Dec 9, 2021) is rather troubling. It has come after a long tumultuous time when M/s Satnam Global Infra Ltd attempted to acquire land for one company from Haryana but whether the company falls within the top three agreed upon smart meter companies by the Power ministry, am not

aware. The top 3 are the Schneider of France, Siemens of Germany (which has now backed off) and Genus of Karnataka.

Then not long ago the Power Minister had stopped the further manufacture of smart meters, an action that made the Meghalayans wonder if it was some difference with the former Power Minister or something else. Mr Prestone Tynsong also lamented at the very wrong report by MeECL of the readiness of 25,000 households, which he found untrue.

My questions are (1) Did the Power Minister read the letter by Mohit Kumar, President of DAM (Data Acquisition & Management)? It reads 'The central government first rolled out the reforms scheme with smart meters with a budget of Rs1.5 lakh crore and now that it is being made compulsory it is potentially the most serious reforms undertaken by the Government,' Kumar wrote this sometime this year.

(2) Does The Power Min-

ister know that internet link is required for smart meters. And that WIFI is a must. Then two WIFI of 2.5 giga hertz and 5 giga hertz are a must to get signals uninterrupted. And worse, these are found to be frequency and site selective. For laypersons you need to move from sitting room to kitchen to interact with the power supplier (MeECL) who will inform the consumer his excessive use of power and when to pay the bill before power is cut off. Messaging charges are to be borne by consumers.

(3) Will Govt agree to fund those with smart phones but cannot afford to connect WIFI which makes up 90% of the population of the Shillong, Jowai etc. The 250 households in Maines are complaining of smart meter interferences with the e-devices like IP (internet provider), in the process of transmitting and outsourcing 2 or more nodes. This is serious.

About the fear that smart meters could be hacked the

Power Minister said its too early to comment upon, but with cybercrime the talk of the day, anything is possible. Germany which has the most advanced technology in Europe, is not going to be smart-metered. I hope the Government knows this.

Lastly the very advice by the Power Ministry to Schneider to manufacture smart meters in line with the Indian power status raises suspicion about putting new wine in old bottles. All are aware that in Meghalaya the voltage at its peak never crosses 180 volt which normally is 220v. And smart meter by its very name cannot be outsmarted.

In view of the above, I pray to the Power Minister to lead us from the front by example and to first order all the ministers in the cabinet to have their houses smart-metered first. Then only will the masses join the chorus, for better or for worse.

Yours etc.,  
W Passah  
Retd HOD Electronics  
St Edmund's College

## Kudos to the Govt!

Editor,  
The Meghalayan Age Store was inaugurated on the 9th of this month at Connaught Place, New Delhi. Congratulations to the Government of Meghalaya for this wonderful initiative in setting up this store! Our farmers and artisans will now have a wider platform to showcase their products and increase their sales. This will definitely help in sustaining their art form over and above their livelihood! And the interior designers have done a fantastic job. Hats off to them!

Once again, a big Congratulations to the Government! Well done!

Yours etc.,  
Eugene D. Thomas  
Shillong 6

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

# Artificial Intelligence hijacking art history

By Sonia Drimmer

People tend to rejoice in the disclosure of a secret.

Or, at the very least, media outlets have come to realize that news of “mysteries solved” and “hidden treasures revealed” generate traffic and clicks.

So I’m never surprised when I see AI-assisted revelations about famous masters’ works of art go viral.

Over the past year alone, I’ve come across articles highlighting how artificial intelligence recovered a “secret” painting of a “lost lover” of Italian painter Modigliani, “brought to life” a “hidden Picasso nude”, “resurrected” Austrian painter Gustav Klimt’s destroyed works and “restored” portions of Rembrandt’s 1642 painting “The Night Watch.” The list goes on.

As an art historian, I’ve become increasingly concerned about the coverage and circulation of these projects.

They have not, in actuality, revealed one secret or solved a single mystery.

What they have done is generate feel-good stories about AI.

## Are we actually learning anything new?

Take the reports about the Modigliani and Picasso paintings.

These were projects executed by the same company, Oxia Palus, which was founded not by art historians but by doctoral students in machine learning.

In both cases, Oxia Palus relied upon traditional X-rays, X-ray fluorescence and infrared imaging that had already been carried out and published years prior – work that had revealed preliminary paintings beneath the visible layer on the artists’ canvases.

The company edited these X-rays and reconstituted them as new works of art by applying a technique called “neural style transfer.”

This is a sophisticated-sounding term for a program that breaks works of art down into extremely small units, extrapolates a style from them and then promises to recreate images of other content in that same style.

Essentially, Oxia Palus stitches new works out of what the machine can learn from the existing X-ray images and other paintings by the same artist.



But outside of flexing the prowess of AI, is there any value – artistically, historically – to what the company is doing?

These recreations don’t teach us anything we didn’t know about the artists and their methods.

Artists paint over their works all the time. It’s so common that art historians and conservators have a word for it: pentimento. None of these earlier compositions was an Easter egg deposited in the painting for later researchers to discover.

The original X-ray images were certainly valuable in that they offered insights into artists’ working methods.

But to me, what these programs are doing isn’t exactly newsworthy from the perspective of art history.

## The humanities on life support

So when I do see these reproductions attracting media attention, it strikes me as soft diplomacy for AI, showcasing a “cultured” application of the technology at a time when skepticism of its decep-

tions, biases and abuses is on the rise.

When AI gets attention for recovering lost works of art, it makes the technology sound a lot less scary than when it garners headlines for creating deep fakes that falsify politicians’ speech or for using facial recognition for authoritarian surveillance.

These studies and projects also seem to promote the idea that computer scientists are more adept at historical research than art historians.

For years, university humanities departments have been gradually squeezed of funding, with more money funneled into the sciences.

With their claims to objectivity and empirically provable results, the sciences tend to command greater respect from funding bodies and the public, which offers an incentive to scholars in the humanities to adopt computational methods.

Art historian Claire Bishop criticized this development, noting that when computer science becomes integrated in the humanities, “[t]heoretical problems

are steamrollered flat by the weight of data,” which generates deeply simplistic results.

At their core, art historians study the ways in which art can offer insights into how people once saw the world. They explore how works of art shaped the worlds in which they were made and would go on to influence future generations.

A computer algorithm cannot perform these functions.

However, some scholars and institutions have allowed themselves to be subsumed by the sciences, adopting their methods and partnering with them in sponsored projects.

Literary critic Barbara Herrnstein Smith has warned about ceding too much ground to the sciences. In her view, the sciences and the humanities are not the polar opposites they are often publicly portrayed to be.

But this portrayal has been to the benefit of the sciences, prized for their supposed clarity and utility over the humanities’ alleged obscurity and

uselessness. At the same time, she has suggested that hybrid fields of study that fuse the arts with the sciences may lead to breakthroughs that wouldn’t have been possible had each existed as a siloed discipline.

I’m skeptical. Not because I doubt the utility of expanding and diversifying our toolbox; to be sure, some scholars working in the digital humanities have taken up computational methods with subtlety and historical awareness to add nuance to or overturn entrenched narratives.

But my lingering suspicion emerges from an awareness of how public support for the sciences and disparagement of the humanities means that, in the endeavor to gain funding and acceptance, the humanities will lose what makes them vital. The field’s sensitivity to historical particularity and cultural difference makes the application of the same code to widely diverse artifacts utterly illogical.

How absurd to think that black-and-white photographs from 100 years ago

would produce colors in the same way that digital photographs do now. And yet, this is exactly what AI-assisted colorization does.

That particular example might sound like a small quail, sure. But this effort to “bring events back to life” routinely mistakes representations for reality. Adding color does not show things as they were but recreates what is already a recreation – a photograph – in our own image, now with computer science’s seal of approval.

## Art as a toy in the sandbox of scientists

Near the conclusion of a recent paper devoted to the use of AI to disentangle X-ray images of Jan and Hubert van Eyck’s “Ghent Altarpiece,” the mathematicians and engineers who authored it refer to their method as relying upon “choosing ‘the best of all possible worlds’ (borrowing Voltaire’s words) by taking the first output of two separate runs, differing only in the ordering of the inputs.”

Perhaps if they had familiarized themselves with the humanities more they would know how satirically those words were meant when Voltaire used them to mock a philosopher who believed that rampant suffering and injustice were all part of God’s plan – that the world as it was represented the best we could hope for.

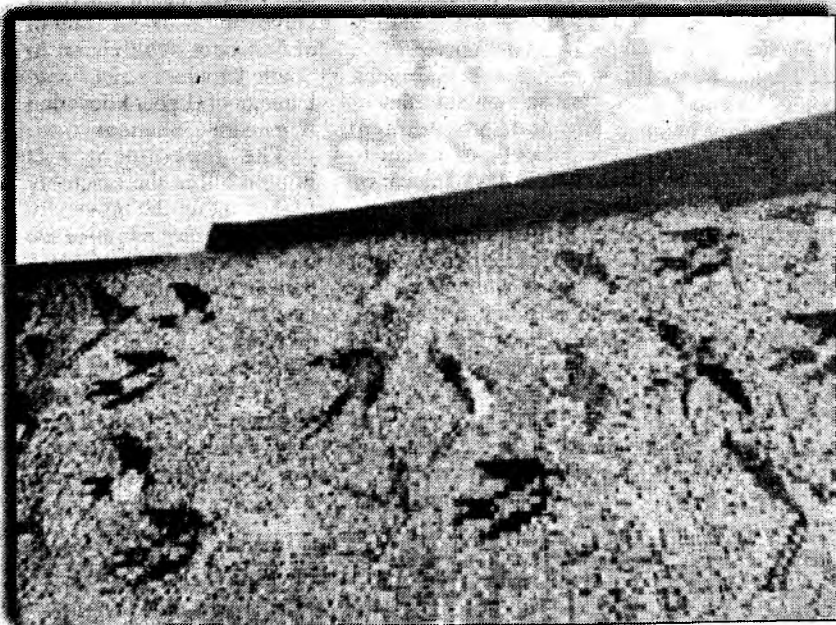
Maybe this “gotcha” is cheap. But it illustrates the problem of art and history becoming toys in the sandboxes of scientists with no training in the humanities.

If nothing else, my hope is that journalists and critics who report on these developments will cast a more skeptical eye on them and alter their framing.

In my view, rather than lionizing these studies as heroic achievements, those responsible for conveying their results to the public should see them as opportunities to question what the computational sciences are doing when they appropriate the study of art. And they should ask whether any of this is for the good of anyone or anything but AI, its most zealous proponents and those who profit from it.

(Sonia Drimmer is an Associate Professor of Medieval Art at University of Massachusetts Amherst)

## COVID art for Corona Warriors



The fight against COVID is yet far from end. However, with such strong individuals protecting us, India will undoubtedly emerge victorious at the end of this battle. People have a conduit to express their gratitude and respect for the Corona Warriors’ valiant sacrifices on behalf of the country, thanks to initiatives like ‘Together We Fly’, a massive art work by Zydus teamed with the Corona Quilt Project (CQP).

The pandemic has wreaked havoc on every industry on the planet. The status quo has been thrown into question, and we’ve had to remake it to match the post-COVID new normal.

While the government, organisations and institutions throughout the world have worked together to combat this unanticipated threat, one group of people who has pushed all boundaries and played a critical part in reducing the problem is the healthcare community, dubbed the Corona Warriors.

Zydus teamed with the CQP to

launch a unique initiative, ‘Together We Fly’, which was inaugurated by Gujarat Chief Minister Bhupendra Patel, to honour their efforts and devotion to the people of India.

‘Together We Fly’, a massive artwork made up of 15,000 distinct expressions, spans over 262 feet in width and 85 feet in height.

Individual pieces of art, poetry, calligraphy, photographs and handwritten notes are woven together as a quilt to reflect the spirit of the times from the start of the pandemic to the second wave, and bring together the thoughts, feelings and expressions of people from all over Gujarat and the country.

The installation is a unique monument to all the Corona Warriors, including physicians, researchers, nurses, paramedics, the healthcare community as a whole, and law enforcement officers, who stood strong and unified India during the pandemic by their hope and positivity. (LANSLife)

## Five of the best Lord of the Rings experiences

Can you believe it’s been 20 years since The Lord of the Rings movie adventure began? The first film in the epic trilogy, The Fellowship of the Ring, was released on December 10, 2001, at a world premiere in London, and if you’re a fan of Peter Jackson’s cinematic magic then a visit to New Zealand is an absolute must. Step foot into the perfect backdrop for the cinematic trilogy, and learn behind the scenes information as you discover Middle-earth for yourself with these five experiences.

### Hobbiton, Hamilton Waikato

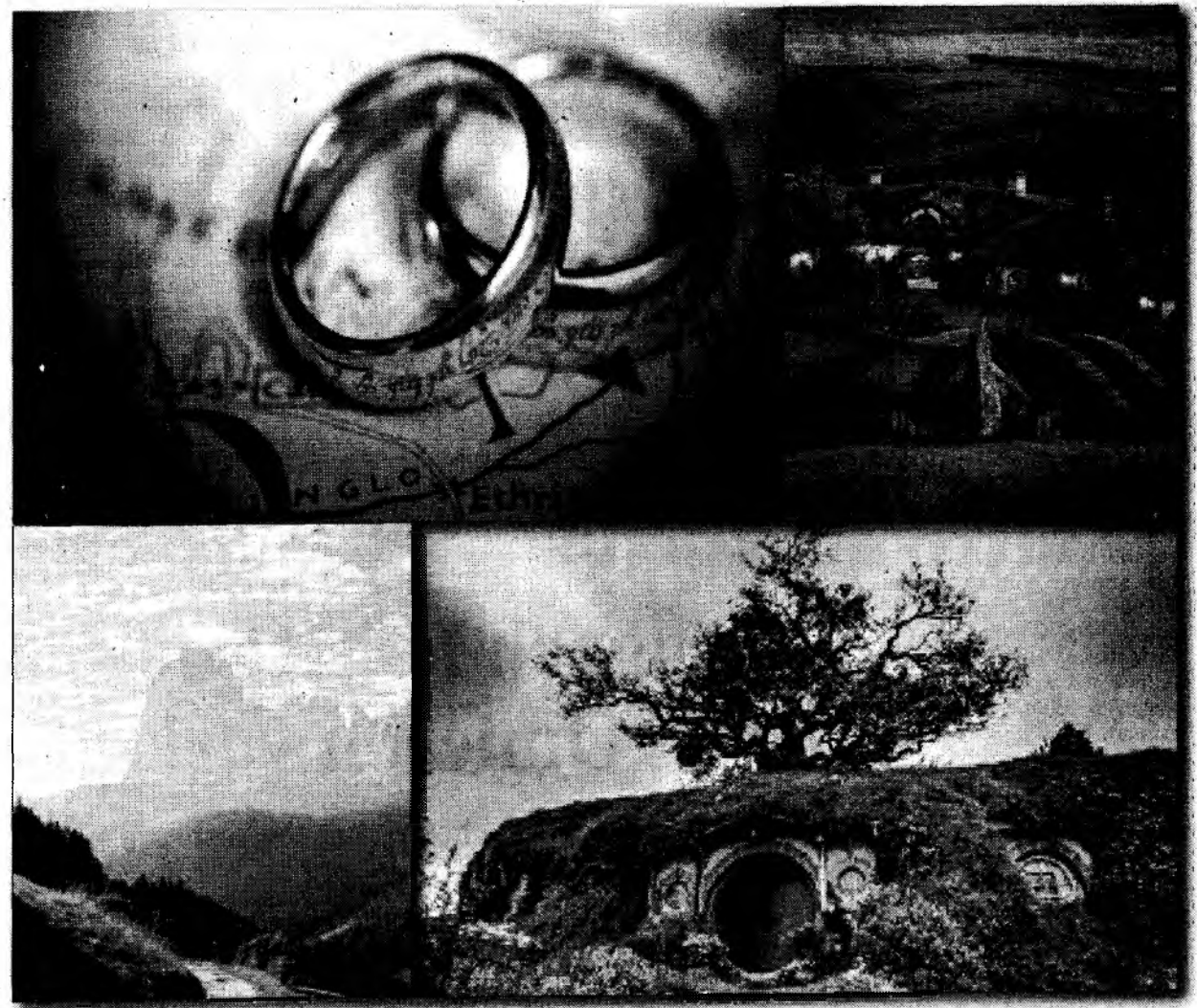
It’s impossible not to compare New Zealand to Middle-earth, and nowhere is this more true than the enchanting village of the Hobbiton movie set. The rolling green hills and lush Matamata farmland show clearly why Sir Peter Jackson chose this area to create the village of Hobbiton in 1998. Experience it for yourself as you witness the real life set up close, walk the same path as your favourite characters, grab a pint at The Green Dragon Inn, get a photo in front of a hobbit hole and dance under the party tree. Hear behind the scenes tales from the filming and feast like a hobbit on the evening banquet tour.

### Weta workshop, Wellington

Wellington’s Miramar suburb is home to the Academy award winning company that produced the special effects, costumes and creatures from The Lord of the Rings, brought to life at the hands of creative geniuses such as Sir Richard Taylor and his team. Witness up close the artistry behind filmmaking creativity and discover the people, processes and props that bring the imaginary worlds to life.

### Jens Hansen, Nelson

The makers of the world’s most famous ring. The movie’s Academy award winning Art Direction team first



approached Jens Hansen about making the infamous One Ring in March 1999. Jens submitted 15 prototypes in a variety of weights and finishes, and from this extensive collection, the final movie ring design was selected. More than 40 variations were used in the filming of The Lord of the Rings and The Hobbit trilogies. One original ring is on display and for true fans, you can take home your very own ‘precious’ replica. Elvish engraving optional!

### Glacier Southern Lakes Helicopters, Queenstown

The aerial film company for the Lord

of the Rings trilogy, with senior pilot Alfie Speight, the principal pilot for the filming. All of the pilots are familiar with the unique landscapes that appear in the films and as part of the production crew can share insider secrets from behind the scenes. Soar into the air and above the famously majestic Queenstown and Fiordland landscapes that featured in the films, over the Shotover River gorge recognisable as the Ford of Bruinen as well as Isengard, Lothlorien and Dimrill Dale. Land high on a glacier alongside the misty mountains and get a sense of what it might be like to cross

The Redhorn Pass.

### Nomad Safaris, Queenstown

Off-road adventure meets Middle-earth magic as the films come to life on location around the dramatic scenery of Queenstown. Travel into the out of this world scenery that inspired the film location scouts and had this area featuring prominently in the films. Witness the real life locations of the battle of the Wargs, Argonath (Pillars of the Kings), the Forrest of Lothlorien, and the loss of The One Ring at Gladden Fields. (LANSLife)

# SUSTAINABLE CHRISTMAS TREES

If you celebrate Christmas, chances are you are planning to decorate a tree (or have already). But how do you make an informed and environment-friendly choice? Environmental impact is a complex question for any product, and as a tree ecologist I know that Christmas trees are no exception.

Lifecycle analyses, which look at how much carbon is used in every step of a product's life, have estimated that plastic trees have a carbon footprint between ten and 20 times greater than that of a real tree. This isn't surprising since plastic is derived from fossil fuels, and takes a lot of energy to manufacture.

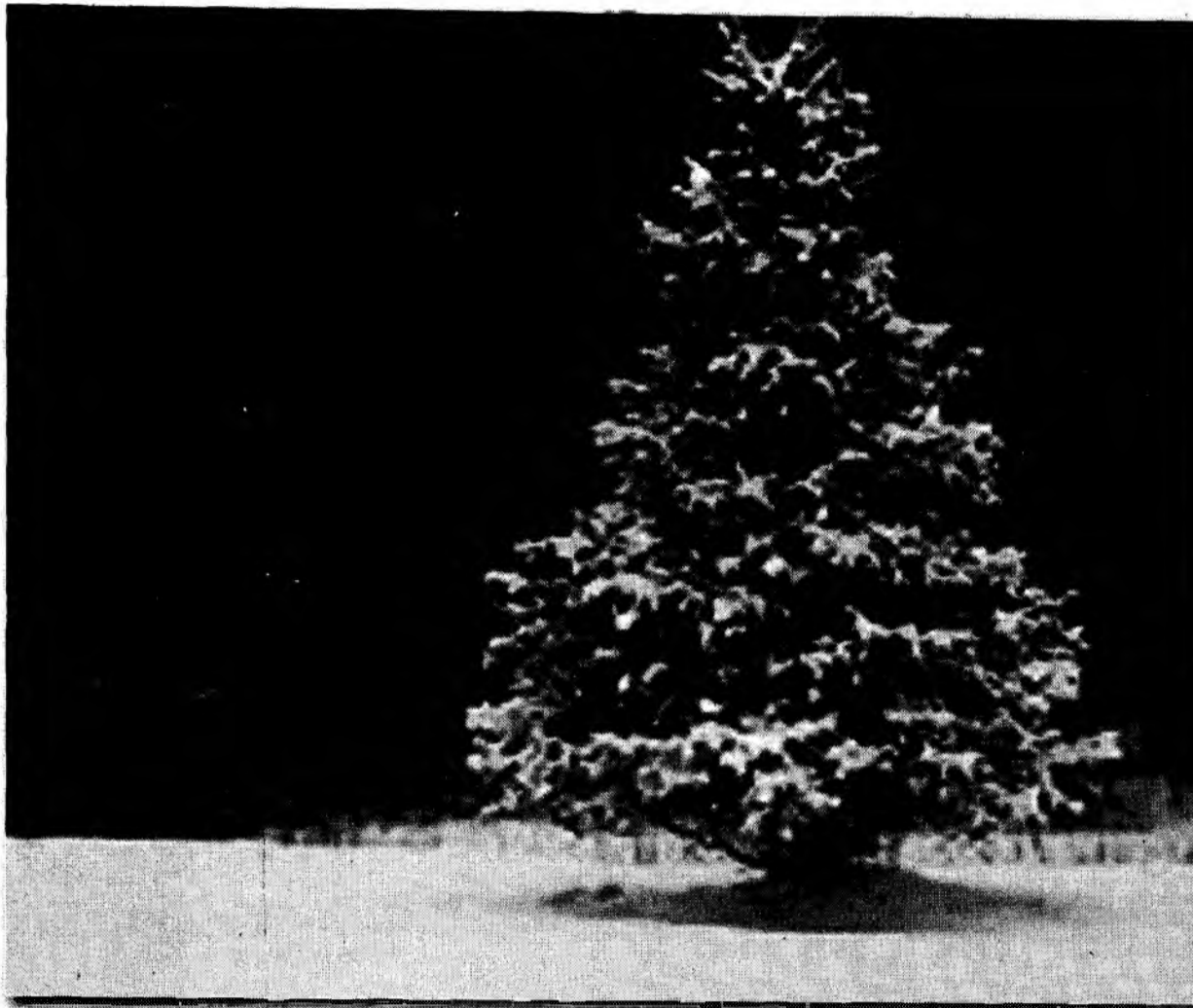
Real trees, on the other hand, take carbon out of the atmosphere to grow. But once you add in chemical fertilisers, also fossil-fuel hungry, fuel for machinery and transportation, it's clear that both types of tree will have a solid carbon footprint, albeit lower for a real tree than a plastic one. Unless you invest in a beautiful plastic tree that you or someone else reuse for at least a decade, it might be better to buy a real, grown tree. What should you consider then?

The carbon footprint will grow tremendously with transportation, so a tree grown on the other side of the world isn't at all a sustainable choice.

Similarly, we have seen that chemical fertilisers have a large carbon footprint. They are also a big source of pollution, potentially affecting rivers, lakes and whole ecosystems. Pesticides are used because Christmas tree farms are monocultures, in which a single species is grown at high density, which puts them at risk of parasitism and diseases.

Pesticides are also a problem for the environment, particularly for invertebrates. Growing trees organically can reduce that impact, although this might result in "wonky" trees that are less formatted in shape.

The type of land where a tree is grown will also play a big role in its environmental impact. Is a Christmas



tree plantation replacing something else, possibly more useful (food, for instance) or better for the environment (old growth forests or peatland)? Luckily, in countries where most consumers live, a lot of land that is used to grow Christmas trees used to be low-productivity farmland.

But this doesn't mean that growing millions of trees every year (8m in the UK, 20-30m in the US) is the best choice of land allocation. Growing Christmas trees means harvesting them after six to ten years, which means less time for wildlife and bugs to establish thriving populations. Compare them with timber production (cut every 20 to 100 years) or a nature reserve (never) and you will understand why Christmas tree planta-

tions are not considered in the EU tree planting pledge.

### Which species?

The species of tree might also matter. Christmas tree species are coniferous and include Nordmann fir, Douglas fir, Norway spruce, and more rarely Scots pine. They will likely have different rates of carbon capture, and different interactions with surrounding plants and animals, depending on their physiology and how it matches the soil and climatic environment (I did say it was complicated).

Unfortunately, I am not aware of any study comparing tree species in the context of Christmas tree plantations (monoculture, early harvest). It might

be expected that a native tree (like Scots pine in the UK) will be better at hosting local biodiversity, for instance, but that needs testing. Considering the intensive management involved, the differences between species are likely to be small.

Finally, what should you do when the tree is no longer fit for purpose? Chipping a tree to use as mulch or compost will effectively mean carbon contained in the wood is stored in the soil, which is more stable. Burning the tree releases that carbon into the atmosphere.

Dropping it in landfill is the worst as it releases both carbon and methane through slow degradation. The best option is to keep the tree alive so that it grows, captures more carbon, and dies

after several decades.

**How does all this translate in practice? Here are a few tips:**

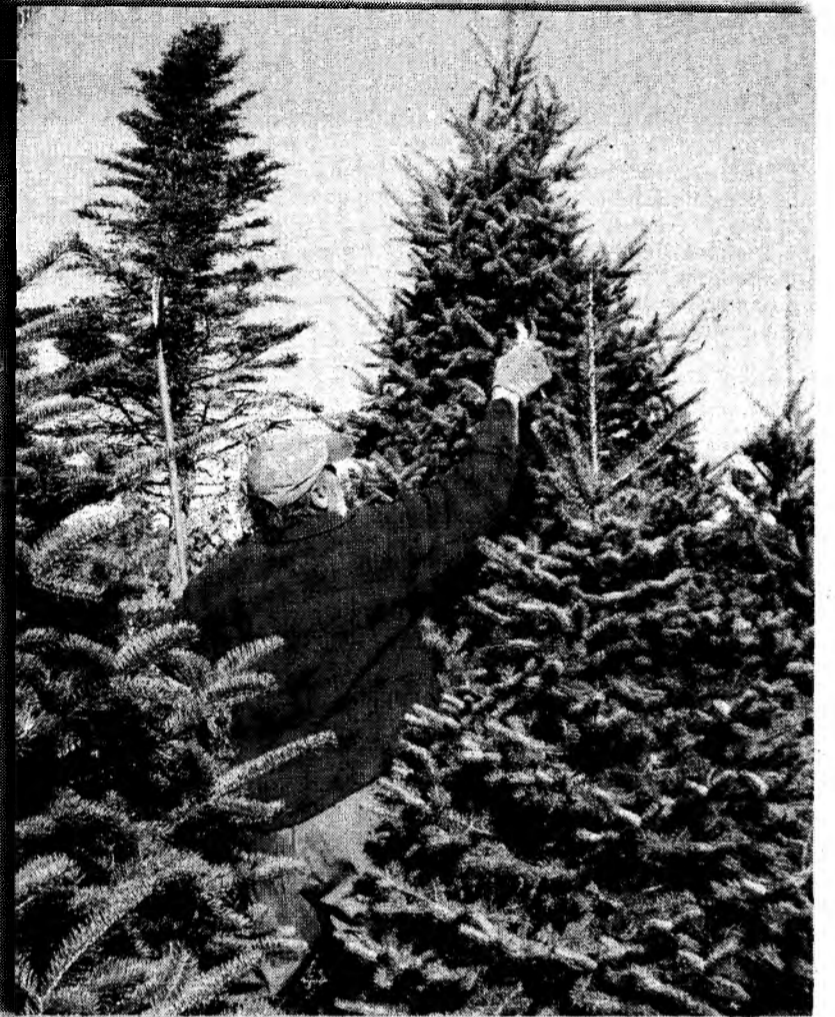
1) If you like being able to have the same tree that you can store and reuse for years, then a plastic tree might be an option. But check where and how it is produced (sustainability isn't only about the environment, it is also about people).

2) Buy locally-grown trees, with Forest Stewardship Council certification. If possible, check for additional characteristics such as whether it's organically grown, native and not grown on peatland. And don't have it wrapped in a plastic net.

3) Ask your council about recycling options. If you can do it yourself, chip the wood and use as mulch, or use the branches to build nests for native bees.

4) Consider buying pot-grown trees, which you can keep for several years. But note that this is different from potted trees, which are grown in the soil and then dug up – the root system of potted trees won't really support them.

5) If you are not too attached to the traditional look of a tree, why not consider timber-made alternatives that you buy or make yourself, or even just decorate your house plants? After all, in a world of overconsumption, the most sustainable option is to avoid getting a new tree at all. (*The Conversation*)



## 'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, DEC 12, 2021

Sun square Neptune on your solar return chart and it will give mixed results for the whole year. In your attempt to do new work, you may face some setbacks. Financial problems may linger but you will manage to keep things running. Your expenses may rise but you need to keep your budget well under control. At times it is important to take decisions using head not heart. If you trust people blindly in financial matters, you may stand to lose. Don't try to prove yourself to others. You can harm yourself in trying to win the hearts of people. Laughter may vanish from your life. You need to be practical and action-oriented. You need to take all professional decisions carefully. Your government related work will be done. If you take decisions at the right time you will get success. There will be an improvement in your health. Your behavior with children will be friendly.

Aries: (March 21 - April 20)



It will be a week full of gains. Those who are unemployed will get work proposals. Those who are working in private sector will also make good progress and will be able to fulfill their work responsibilities. It will take some time for your work to get finished but in the end you will be able to do so. Those who are in business will face tough competition but will ultimately have major gains and profits. Do not forget that tough competition brings out best in us. You will live an active social life too. You will get invited to meetings, conferences and public gathering. You also need to talk to yourself. Don't be scared and take care of your needs. You will also enjoy love and bonding in family ties. Those who are married will have good understanding with their spouse.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21)



As you will be busy with your work and family life, you will be happy and prosperous. It is time to enjoy some quality time with your loved ones. You will be active in social life. You will have a wide circle of friends who will help you in time of need. You will not be afraid of challenges. The responsibility of work and family will increase but you will shoulder it well. You will have profits in business. You will also participate in a marriage/birthday function. Love birds will come closer to each other. You will have financial gains. You will concentrate on a better life style without taking stress. Happiness will radiate from the house. Students will do well in exams/interviews. It is a period to grow in life.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21)



You will walk on the road to prosperity and growth. You will get opportunities to rise in your business/work. Property related disputes will get resolved. You will be courageous and take bold steps. You will have profits in your business. You could get promoted in your job too. Buying and selling of property will give you profits. You will feel capable of carrying out your tasks. Your reputation and prestige in your organization/family will come up. Your work will start getting completed. You will earn well too. Some health issue may crop up but that should not worry you much, everything will be alright. You will be surrounded by your well wishers. Your own people will come up to your help when needed most. You will be able to pay attention to your business, work and family.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22)



Your efforts will give you mixed results. You will have gains in your business but you may incur some losses too. Your old memories will get refreshed with some old friends. This will make you feel happy and take out the stress in you. Old tensions will come to an end. At work superiors will be happy with your work and your efforts will start paying off. You will be able to achieve your targets but will have to work hard too. You will get a big order in business from abroad or domestic buyer. You will have good relations with your colleagues and will listen to their views too. You will enjoy wonderful weather and can go out with family for a picnic or sight seeing. With the coming of guests in your family whole atmosphere will be filled with happiness and joy.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23)



It is generally a good time. You will fulfill your desires. You will also have monetary gains. Some vital decisions regarding work/business will be taken. You will also take part in some function at your in-laws house. Married couples will experience bliss and happiness in family ties. Love birds will also enjoy wonderful bonding. You will be able to think out of the box and will amaze people with your outstanding abilities. Your communication skills will be second to none. You will have the inclination and power to get everyone on your side. You will also have the power and ability to make people appreciate your work and sincerity. Unmarried people will receive marriage proposals. You will also get interested in meditation, prayers and chanting and other religious activities.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22)



You will achieve your goals and targets at any cost. You will have respect for your seniors. You will get success in exams/interviews. Those who are unemployed will get good job offers. The students will be dedicated in studying and also get good grades in exams. You will also assess your priorities in life and will think what needs to be done to get things alright. At times you may feel bored and alone but you will achieve your objectives. You will face a major test in your domestic life

but will come out with flying colours. You will remain popular amongst your family members and friends. Those who are involved in serious relations for a long time will plan to get married. You will also get your house renovated and cleaned.

Libra: (September 23 - Libra 23)



You will be taking some bold decisions. Your enemies will get trounced. You will be having no problems and you will be strong and stable. Some ticklish issue at your workplace may give you headaches but you will solve it with your cleverness and intelligence. However, avoid being overconfident. You need to take all professional decisions with great discretion. You also need to take counsel and aid of your seniors. All your plans will gradually come to its logical conclusion. You will not disturb your family members and will keep giving advice to them. It is better if you do not enter into any financial dealings with strangers. You will also spend your time well. You will read enlightening and entertaining books. You will also help the needy ones. You will have self confidence. And will pay attention to your household and office work.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22)



There will be an increase in your fame and prestige and you will also take up challenging tasks. You will keep your goals clear before yourself and will move in the right direction. You will have monetary gains. Your interactions with colleagues and seniors will prove beneficial. As a result, you will get excellent results at your workplace. But you need to keep a check on your diet. Also take adequate care of your health. You should wear proper warm clothes in the changing weather. You will also spend time with your family and enjoy lot of happiness and comfort in family ties. Your children will listen to your suggestions. You will also do prayers, chanting, meditation and exercise regularly. There will be marriage proposals for unmarried boys and girls. There will be an improvement in relations with neighbors and friends.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 23)



Things are looking up again for you this week. There are strong chances of monetary gains. You will take tough decisions in your business. You will have a tendency to learn and do something new. Your worries regarding your family will come to an end. There will be improvement in your relations with your neighbors and elders. Relations with boss and colleagues will be good. Your partner/spouse will be your biggest strength and guide you in the right direction. There will be mutual understanding between family members. You will also win praise with your good behavior. The range of your contacts will be quite big and wide spread. You will move forward with focus on your objective. The time is favorable for students, business persons and professionals.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20)



Whatever work you visualize will be completed. You will get success in exams, interviews and departmental tests. The work you had thought about will be completed. You will get success in exams, interviews and departmental tests. Financial condition will become stronger. Your hurdles in work will get removed and you will accomplish much. You will be rewarded for your efforts. You will also do your work peacefully. You will be liberal in your outlook and views. You will impress one and all with your attitude. You will come closer to your spouse/partner and will win everyone's heart with your smart work. Once you decide to do something you will not rest until you complete it. Your planetary position will inspire you to do wonderful tasks and you will reach new heights of success on the strength of your creative talent.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18)



Your marital relationship will be good. Your life partner will stand by you in the worst of circumstances. You will understand feelings of each other well. A misunderstanding between brother/sister will get removed. Your family members will have expectations from you and you will not disappoint none. You will worship your parents and get their blessings. You will have financial gains. The career, marriage and education of your children will be your top most priority. You will not expect much from your relatives. You can also enter into new love relations leading to marriage. Challenges will come in your life if you just need to concentrate on them. You will get success in the end.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20)



A dispute at your workplace will get resolved but not before putting you under lot of stress. You will earn from the experience and do the things well. Planetary positions are undergoing a change for the better. Your time will be spent on fun, frolic and entertainment with your family members. You will remain busy with your work and professional commitments. Your circle of contacts will increase. You will also maintain a balance between family and job. Wealth and property related matters will get resolved. With the intervention of a third person, your health will keep improving. Your self confidence and mental strength will be terrific. Official and government work will get done with ease and proper handling.

## Silent Night – an origin story



Joseph Hermann Mohr

Over the centuries, hundreds of Christmas carols have been composed. Many fall quickly into obscurity. *Not Silent Night.*

Translated into at least 300 languages, designated by UNESCO as a treasured item of Intangible Cultural Heritage, and arranged in dozens of different musical styles, from heavy metal to gospel, *Silent Night* has become a perennial part of the Christmas soundscape.

Its origins – in a small Alpine town in the Austrian countryside – were far humbler.

As a musicologist who studies historical traditions of song, the story of *Silent Night* and its meteoric rise to worldwide fame has always fascinated me.

### Fallout from war and famine

The song's lyrics were originally written in German just after the end of the Napoleonic Wars by a young Austrian priest named Joseph Mohr.

In the fall of 1816, Mohr's congregation in the town of Mariapfarr was reeling. Twelve years of war had decimated the country's political and social infrastructure. Meanwhile, the previous year – one historians would later dub *The Year Without a Summer* – had been catastrophically cold.

The eruption of Indonesia's Mount Tambora in 1815 had caused widespread climate change throughout Europe. Volcanic ash in the atmosphere caused almost continuous storms – even snow – in the midst of summer. Crops failed and there was widespread famine.

Mohr's congregation was poverty-stricken, hungry and traumatized. So he crafted a set of six poetic verses to convey hope that there was still a God who cared.

*Silent night*, the German version states, "today all the

power of fatherly love is poured out, and Jesus as brother embraces the peoples of the world."

### A fruitful collaboration

Mohr, a gifted violinist and guitarist, could have probably composed the music for his poem. But instead, he sought help from a friend.

In 1817, Mohr transferred to the parish of St. Nicholas in the town of Oberndorf, just south of Salzburg. There, he asked his friend Franz Xaver Gruber, a local schoolteacher and organist, to write the music for the six verses.

On Christmas Eve, 1818, the two friends sang *Silent Night* together for the first time in front of Mohr's congregation, with Mohr playing his guitar.

The song was apparently well-received by Mohr's parishioners, most of whom worked as boat-builders and shippers in the salt trade that was central to the economy of the region.

The melody and harmonization of *Silent Night* is actually based on an Italian musical style called the *siciliana* that mimics the sound of water and rolling waves: two large rhythmic beats, split into three parts each.

In this way, Gruber's music reflected the daily soundscape of Mohr's congregation, who lived and worked along the Salzach River.

### Silent Night goes global

But in order to become a worldwide phenomenon, "*Silent Night*" would need to resonate far beyond Oberndorf.

According to a document written by Gruber in 1854, the song first became popular in the nearby Zillertal valley. From there, two travelling families of folk singers, the Strassers and the Rainers, included the tune in their shows. The song then became popular across Europe, and eventually in America, where the Rainers sang it on Wall Street in 1839.

At the same time, German-speaking missionaries spread the song from Tibet to Alaska and translated it into local languages. By the mid-19th century, *Silent Night* had even made its way to subarctic Inuit communities along the Labrador coast, where it was translated into Inuktitut as *Unuak Opinak*.

The lyrics of *Silent Night* have always carried an important message for Christmas Eve observances in churches around the world. But the song's lilting melody and peaceful lyrics also reminds us of a universal sense of grace that transcends Christianity and unites people across cultures and faiths.

Perhaps at no time in the song's history was this message more important than during the Christmas Truce of 1914, when, at the height of World War I, German and British soldiers on the front lines in Flanders laid down their weapons on Christmas Eve and together sang *Silent Night*.

The song's fundamental message of peace, even in the midst of suffering, has bridged cultures and generations. Great songs do this. They speak of hope in hard times and of beauty that arises from pain; they offer comfort and solace; and they are inherently human and infinitely adaptable. (*The Conversation*)

*"A good head and a good heart are always a formidable combination."*

— Nelson Mandela

## The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIV No. 123 SHILLONG, MONDAY, DECEMBER 13, 2021

### Beti bachao derailed

THE scary and shameful manner in which the governance system is being derailed to suit the personal whims of those in power is evident also in the observation by a parliamentary panel that the Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao scheme introduced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2015 went haywire. The findings of the House panel linked to "women empowerment" that went into aspects of utilization of some Rs 850 crore in the past six years noticed that nearly 80 per cent of these funds was distributed by governments to media establishments by way of advertisements. Multiple government funds are misused and squandered this way. This is typical of the wayward styles of those who rule this country in the garb of democracy and rob the exchequer for their personal aggrandizement. The unprincipled, self-seeking crop of politicians does not buy media support by using money from their pockets. They indulge in tactics like this. There indeed are still a large number of politicians whose integrity in promoting public causes is unassailable. But, the number of the black sheep is steadily rising more because those the nation elects as its leader(s) are unmindful of arresting such trends and instead concentrate on indulgences like freebies to the poor to pocket their votes. The poor do not know they deserve more than crumbs. That their plight has only worsened in India compared to the British Raj days was well-documented in a recent global study. This, for us, is clear as sunlight. Politicians will rile at such findings because their own survival is called into question.

Notably, it is neither understandable or acceptable that 80 per cent of the central funds meant for the uplift of poor girls and their education has been squandered. The media faced serious odds during the last two years due to the Covid-linked devastation caused to the economy through reckless lockdowns for repeated terms. Helping the media in such contexts is fine, but this splurge has been going on since 2015. Normally, in olden days, the Centre used to give break-ups as to how the money for a project should be utilized and how much could be spent for public awareness or advertisements. States and even the Centre seemed to have thrown sense and caution to the winds. Likely there was no such stipulation when this fund was released in instalments. The government, rather than coming up with an explanation, is keeping quiet — a trait often exhibited by thieves. In the long term, such indulgences are bound to seriously hurt the institution of democracy itself.

# Climate Change Mitigation: Lessons from the Pandemic

By H H Mohrmen

The Corona virus induced pandemic has affected every nook and corner of the world and people continue to suffer and the consequences even today. The immediate effect of the pandemic aside, there are the long-term impacts on the life of the people and the world at large. Hopefully the pandemic will end one day and we will be able to leave behind all the troubles that we have experienced. But the most important question is how do we come out of this mess. We are not doing ourselves or the future generation a favour if we do not learn lessons from the biggest challenge that humanity has ever faced.

**Pandemic is the greatest equalizer**  
Two very important lessons we have all learned from the Pandemic is that a global problem like the pandemic does not spare anyone; it attacks the rich and the poor with the same vengeance and it also attacks the rich countries as much as the poor ones. Afluent countries that are advanced in medical science and have a "supposedly" robust Public Health System, were not spared. The healthcare system of developed countries in the western world collapsed and obviously they were as ill-prepared for the pandemic as the poor countries in the under-developed world.

The pandemic is one global problem that had hit the world like a bolt from the blue. It happened all of a sudden and it did not give us time to prepare ourselves for the eventuality, but we are also encountering another problem of a global magnitude due to climate change. The climate crisis is slowly driving us to extinction if we do not mend our ways fast. (fingers crossed), and hopefully the worst is over now and the countries are prepared for another wave of the pandemic. But the question that we need to ask ourselves is whether the pandemic has anything to teach us to help solve the biggest conundrum that the entire human race is facing? Is there any lesson we can learn that can help us mitigate climate change?

**Indigenous food systems and food security**  
On March 2020, the immediate lockdown took everyone by surprise. All of a sudden supply of farm food to the local markets (particularly vegetables) was stopped and the entire supply chain collapsed like a pack of cards. People particularly those in the rural areas went back to making the best use of their natural instincts and engaged themselves in collecting and foraging for food from the

forest. It was the local food system which came to the people's rescue especially those in the rural areas. During the lockdown due to the pandemic, the indigenous foods even reached the dining tables of the urban population. During their time of need it was the local solutions that came to the people's rescue.

The story from the pandemic is that at least in the rural areas and in some cases even in the urban areas, the indigenous food system has served us in good stead and has saved us in our time of need. The first lesson that I personally learnt from the pandemic is the need to strengthen the local food system. Our local indigenous food system has not only fed us since time immemorial, but it also contains micro-nutrients that are needed for the growth and health of any human.

**IFS are micro-nutrient-rich foods**  
In most cases we consume indigenous food just because it has been part of our tradition. We do not realize that the time-tested food system

**The first lesson that I personally learnt from the pandemic is the need to strengthen the local food system. Our local indigenous food system has not only fed us since time immemorial, but it also contains micro-nutrients that are needed for the growth and health of any human.**

that we have inherited is also good for our health. For example, we consume 'Tynghieh/Khliang syiar/kynbat maloi' (centella asiatica) but we are not aware of the nutritional composition of the plants which are in fact rich in iron and magnesium. We also consume 'Jamyrdon/tamyrdoh' (Hauttuynia cordata Thunb) but we are not aware that it contains magnesium, fiber, calcium and other nutrients. These are a few examples of the IFS which have rich nutritional value.

**IFS helps maintain the ecological balance**  
Most of our IFS are wild edibles, therefore it goes without saying that consuming indigenous foods will also help in conserving the environment. As most of the food is collected by foraging in the forest, popularising Indigenous Food System will also help protect the forest where the wild edible grows. Since time immemorial indigenous people have been consuming these wild edibles and they were able to maintain the ecological balance that is needed to

sustain both animals and plants. The lesson learned from the pandemic is that at least for indigenous people nature not only helps provide us clean air and water, but all along, we have received a stable supply of food from the forest.

**Local food can also be climate resilient**  
Indigenous foods are also endemic to the area. They have existed in the nature for ages and they have adapted to the environment of the area. Naturally they are much more resilient to climate change and they can tolerate climate change much better than the vegetables or food which were brought from outside the region. Indigenous foods are sustainable and they can sustain lives.

**Local participation**  
The other very important lesson that we've learned from the pandemic is that to a certain degree, local solutions help lessen global problems. The pandemic has taught us that when a problem of a global magnitude hits the world, the immediate reaction is for the respective nations to protect their own

people and close their borders. In fact, that was what we have seen happening the world over when the virus attack was first reported. The solutions did not come from the WHO (World Health Organisation) or the UNO, but from the individual countries. In fact, in many countries including India, it was because of the active participation of the local bodies that the governments were able to control the spread of the virus.

If we take our state as an example, we saw that it was the Dorbar Shnong which supported the government in implementing the lockdown and even quarantining the returnees and the affected in their respective towns or villages.

**Bottoms-up approach**  
If the world is to effectively mitigate climate change, it has to be a bottoms-up approach. It has to be in partnership with the people, not the government doing the people a favour. We need a paradigm shift in our approach in how the government engages with people to effectively check rising global warming. The government should stop con-

sidering the people as mere beneficiaries of the conservation efforts, but to treat them as equal stakeholder in the process. The new approach is to take the people along in the conservation efforts as people's participation will ensure community ownership of the activities too.

**Mitigating climate change at the local level**  
The other lesson for climate change mitigation from the pandemic is the fact that the local civic bodies have a vital role to play. Perhaps it can start from a simple activity like how the community is taking care of its waste and minimizing the amount of waste that goes to the landfill. For any waste management effort to succeed it needs active participation of the people hence the local governance system plays a vital role in the effort.

Planting trees is one popular activity during every World Environment Day celebration but how much of the saplings survive is another question. Again, for every sapling to survive and the tree plantation to be fruitful, community participation is very important. The biggest enemy of a tree or the forest is forest fires. Such wildfires are the major cause of destruction of the forest. Much of the forest in the hills state is destroyed by wildfire during the dry season; controlling forest fire can also be effective only with community participation. Strengthening community participation in forest conservation is inevitable and it needs to be pursued vigorously.

**One man or one woman can make a difference**  
Ultimately, like in the case of COVID-19 pandemic, some solutions to mitigate climate change also lie in the hands of the individual. Controlling the spread of the virus is in the hands of the individual and it comprises simple activities like wearing a mask, keeping physical distance from one another and of course following COVID protocols. The war to protect the world from meeting the ultimate climate crisis has no border, hence we are all frontliners in the fight against climate change. We each of us are armies in the war and our fight is against one common enemy called greed. We need to change our attitude towards using fossil fuel, using plastics and anything that contributes to global warming. The need of the hour is to avoid getting trapped into consumerism culture which generates waste and is the major cause for global warming and thereby contributes to climate change.

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## Farm Travails & WTO Right prices critical

By Shivaji Sarkar

The long night is over. The farmers call off their over year-long stir and return home as the Centre sends formal letter accepting their major demands. The farmers proved many people wrong but also gave the lesson that mere majority cannot impose even the best pro-people decisions. Farmers need the right price.

In West Bengal not long ago Marxist Left Front government had a huge majority. Yet it had to eat a humble pie when farmers in Nandigram and Singur put paid to its industrialization plans. Maybe the State government's plans were good, but it became immaterial in the face of farmers protesting acquisition. It is nearly similar now. The Government said the three farm laws were for the benefit of farmers. A section of them, however, remained unconvinced. Despite several rounds of talks, some violence, various cases slapped including of sedition, combined media onslaught, farmers remained firm. Finally, almost one year after their sit-in, they got what they wanted.

Where does the real power lie? Not in government with its elaborate security setup. Not in Parliament where laws are made. Not in the Supreme Court which can unmake laws. Real power lies only in the people. Only people are sovereign. That is what the year-long farmer's agitation suggests. The Samyukt Kisan Morcha, group of 40 protesting farm unions, announces as the Centre agreed to several demands, including MSP, they are going home.

This should make popular governments change their

**In West Bengal not long ago Marxist Left Front government had a huge majority. Yet it had to eat a humble pie when farmers in Nandigram and Singur put paid to its industrialization plans.**

tack. The NDA government took the correct decision on junking Land Acquisition Act and now on the farm bills. Those in power anywhere have to accept that howsoever they may be, taking decisions for the welfare of the people, if the beneficiaries are not satisfied, such decisions cannot be implemented.

Now former Deputy Chairman of NITI Aayog, Arvind Panagariya, says an important aspect that crops up is the World Trade Organisation (WTO) rules on subsidies. India so far escaped with a peace clause for violating its subsidy rules. He indicates that the demand for MSP, which WTO does not accept, may lead to a difficult global situation apart arguing that MSP would entail extra payment of Rs 1.5 trillion. He also stresses that the proposed massive transfers under MSP would bypass not only the urban poor but also the rural poor among the 46 per cent non-agricultural households.

Any solution? Yes, either reform WTO or rethink on MSP. Or may be listen to another former NITI Aayog Deputy Chairman Raghuram Rajan on a TV discussion on December 8. He emphasised that despite some good points in farm bills, agriculture needing reforms, India is so vast that decentralisation is essential. There could not be one solution for the entire country. India cannot be like China. He says, "India's strengths were democracy and debate. China became a manufacturing superpower following its system of authoritarian rule. "It would be difficult to emulate the Chinese path".

Rajan gives the easy prescription. Governance should not resort to adamancy and electoral numbers are never enough to roughshod the sentiments that may not look palatable to the ruling parties. The governments in the past also had to eat a humble pie. The most glaring example

was the rise of NT Rama Rao in 1980s against a despotic Indira Gandhi.

At the same time, it should not be forgotten that even rich nations give farm subsidy and WTO ignores it. In the present context, the cases went for judicial review but the court did not resolve the issue. Rightfully, the popular government has taken the required decision. The government need not be apprehensive of the WTO or international bodies. If it could keep the environmental COP26 at bay for several decades, it can do so for farm issues too.

The country should rather begin a new discussion on agriculture, crops, creating diverse food grain habits and sustaining ecology. Today's MSP issue is complex as farmer needs higher income. All the same the companies could not be allowed to have ways that bolster their profit at the cost the people's interests.

India has to ponder whether it can put income inequality as high as it was under British colonial away from public discussion. The top 10 per cent accounts for 57.1 per cent of the income now. The top 10 per cent earns 20 times — Rs 11,66,220 more than the bottom 50 per cent — Rs 53,630, according to the World Inequality report 2022 released on December 7, 2021. The women have a much lower share in labour income compared to their global peers. Again these are issues that have deep connection with agriculture.

Despite a pan-India sentiment, it should not be forgotten that Nandigram, or Singur or various long

farmers' marches in Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and other places, did not become national economic issues and need to observe whether the present MSP issue would rule the roost post-UP elections. In fact, this calls for diversification of farm products and less dependence on mono or select cropping that may have led to this difficult situation post-Green revolution.

So the debate now centres on the multi-billion dollar question of how to reintroduce the diversity in food habits. In 1881, it was a nation of 220 million people eating millet and other food grains. It has changed to eating a 1.3 billion rice-and-wheat eating behemoth riding on the Green Revolution. India has not planned its strength of varied food and agriculture depends on local ecology-led consumption.

It is not easy to restore that back. But the agriculture universities can be told to start the discussion process obviating needs for creating large dams and concomitant problems as the nation faces in the post Narmada and Tehri-dam phase, including a severe water crisis. It has caused severe ecological problems. The farmers' issues are diverse and different in each region. There cannot be one-India solution be it MSP or crop pattern.

Of late, there is too much centralisation. It is not required. This nation has to accept that it has yet to come out of the high poverty level. The Kisan Morchas should not see it beyond the corporate. Both will survive if the economics and finances are strong.

The farmers' stir now should stress on having a multi-pronged approach for ushering in a new diverse and strong farm environment. The government should help create that new farmer-dominated agriculture where no outsider needs to fix the MSP. —INFA

### Letters to the Editor

#### State Reservation Policy: An Illusionary approach

Editor,  
Reservation policy has always been framed to benefit the local residents or the tribals that belong to one of the three tribes in Meghalaya. Throughout the years the policy has been applicable in education, employment and other allied areas for all the deserving and eligible front runners in the tribe. The policy was a dream comes true though for the middle class as well as the under privileged candidates residing in the state in the previous years with limited number of districts.

However, now with the growing number of Districts numbering 12 in the state whereby the Khasi and Jaintia people account for a total of 7 (Seven) districts and Garo Hills comprising of 5 (five) district, the 40% - 40% reservation policy seems more like a discrimination and bias against some tribes. With politicians already taking control and pulling the strings of the reservation

policy especially in the areas of employment with most of the government vacancies being filled by them through their 'Political appointment mode' exploiting their political powers thereby depriving the deserving candidates belonging from middle and underprivileged class who are losing the race and their rights.

High unemployment rate in the state has surged drastically with the years. Competition in both education and employment via the reservation policy has most of the time left the candidates with nothing but hopelessness and despair. Our Garo brothers and sisters are somehow doing well with their 40% share of the reservation policy even though politics does play its part aggressively whereas Khasis and Jaintias have to compete amongst themselves for a meagre 40% which is a big stumbling block that usually leaves the much deserving youth disillusioned. Why does such injustice exist?

Even as the State is about to celebrate its 50th statehood day, do the youth of this millennia have to compete amongst each through the outdated reservation policy that gives politicians the ut-

most power to influence? Let me ask the youth of today if they think that an open competition is much fairer and more justified for everyone. I personally urge all the legislators of Khasi and Jaintia hills along with the various NGO's, students' bodies etc., to fight for the implementation of a new policy that gives equal reservation and attention to Khasi, Jaintia and Garo and to unlock the main door for an open competition amongst the youth of the three tribes so that the fittest and the brilliant minds prevail and the future of our community and the state as a whole is safeguarded.

As a concerned citizen, I personally do not wish to witness our young and talented minds ending up being unemployed and falling prey to the present failed Reservation policy. It is a matter of great concern that the Government has not come up with any alternatives to address the issues that concern the future of our younger generation. Justice has to be served, fair play has to be adapted and an Open competition is the best solution for the youth in both education and employment.

Yours etc.,  
O R Shallam  
Panaliar, Jowai

#### Harassment faced by Meghalaya Rural Bank employees

Editor,  
It is with a sense of profound distress that I write to draw the attention of the authorities to the current dissatisfaction amongst staff of the Meghalaya Rural Bank against the Management for unjustified treatment meted out to them by way of arbitrary transfer of staff especially of the lady employees. Additionally, it is alleged that such ill - advised transfer of lady staff members to remote offices in isolated areas is fraught with unforeseeable consequences apart from the fact that they are posted in such locations for an indefinite period without any verifiable dateline of being brought back to their nearest hearths and home. To make matters worse such personnel either have small kids or aged parents to look after to cater to their bare exigent needs.

Further it is also alleged that those who are in the good books of some members of the management are not subjected to transfers. Hence there is a simmering wide-

spread dissatisfaction among the rank and file of this bank. Suffice to say therefore, that an urgent overhaul of the present panel-members of the Meghalaya Rural Banks is a crying need before the work culture is compromised among the concerned staff.

Yours etc.,  
Name withheld on request,  
Via email

#### Why can't teachers be paid regularly?

Editor,  
It is difficult to understand why educators who help mould the minds of thousands of students during their tenure as teachers should have to agitate to get their just dues. This has become an ongoing problem over decades in Meghalaya. I am not sure if other states also pass through similar travails. Deficit School teachers get their salaries once in three months and have to manage to run their families amidst a lot of anxieties. How can anyone with a heavy heart and anxiety be expected to give their to their profession which requires a lot

of free interface with students. Teachers have to put up a brave face and continue to motivate students even when they are emotionally disturbed by the burden of managing their lives without salaries for months. This must be the worst form of injustice meted out by the government on educators.

This problem has to be sorted out once and for all. It is against all norms of decency when teachers have to go on strike to get their hard-earned salaries. Teaching is no easy job. It involves several skill sets to be employed while dealing with different kids coming from a range of backgrounds, each with their own strengths and the teacher has to identify those strengths to help the student reach his/her highest potential. It's a daily challenge for the teacher. Why don't those in Government understand this?

More power to teachers!  
Yours etc.,  
M Kharmalki,  
Via email

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

"Change your life today. Don't gamble on the future, act now, without delay."

— Simone de Beauvoir

## The Shillong Times

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**Social audit on MeECL imperative**  
MEGHALAYA became the first state in the country to enact the Social Audit Act. The objectives of the Act are to review delivery of public services and implementation of government schemes and programmes through a participatory social audit by government and the stakeholders. The Act is also intended to ensure timely review and concurrent course-correction in the delivery of schemes and programmes to arrive at the desired development outcomes.

Named the Meghalaya Community Participation and Public Services Social Audit Act, 2017 the Act seeks to facilitate 'Concurrent Audit' of development programmes and public services as specified under Schedule I of the Act. It seeks to monitor the effectiveness and efficiency of the implementation of the development programmes and public services in a time-bound manner and to initiate course-correction measures wherever necessary. The Act, above all, would monitor and encourage transparency in the delivery mechanisms and institutions engaged in the implementation of developmental programmes and public services. The Social Audit Act above all is expected to educate the citizens and make them aware of their rights and entitlements in order to build their confidence and secure their participation so that they become partners in governance and not mere beneficiaries. Unless citizens own up development they will continue to be outside the governance process which is the antithesis to participatory democracy. Social Audit tools are to be used for the purpose of finding the facts at the field level during programme implementation. People should be responsible for the kind of roads, footpaths, and water supply systems that are constructed in their localities.

An important aspect of social audit is to provide a platform for airing of public grievances and ensure a time-bound redress of the same. In the light of the above Act it would have been in order for the Social Audit authorities who are empowered to take up auditing of public services to audit the State Power Corporation and all the irregularities in it. After all, whether the Government is taking loans or injecting funds from different central institutions, it is all public money and the government must account for every penny. But the manner in which the MeECL is functioning makes it appear that it is a privately owned corporation with no public accountability. Now that the Government is intending to install smart meters in private residences and public institutions, the public have a right to know if the meters used have the sanction of the central government and are not manufactured by Chinese firms which could compromise data safety and security. The Social Audit Commissioner is expected to take suo-moto action on the smart meter case.

# Inducting zero energy cool chambers in Meghalaya

By K.N. Kumar

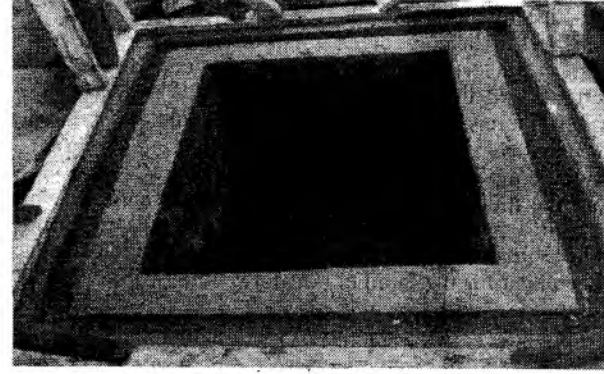
Losses due to spoilage of fresh horticultural produce between harvest and market can be as high as 30%. Post-harvest losses depend upon the season, distance to the markets, condition of the roads and the nature of the commodity. Leafy vegetables like Spinach perish faster than layered vegetables like Cabbage. A farmer from South-West Khasi Hills district may be worse off than a farmer from Mawphlang if they both desire to sell their produce at the Shillong market. So how can a farmer minimize his post-harvest losses is one question that has been an evading answer in our state for long.

Cold storage prolongs the life of fresh produce, but the available technologies being costly and energy-intensive, farmers can neither mobilize the capital nor afford the maintenance costs of such units. Uninterrupted supply of power is a sine qua non for these units, but erratic power in rural areas is usually a deterrent. Solar-based cold-storage technologies are still not sufficiently commercialized, and the private sector is hesitant to step in because the scale of the operations, and the volumes are still uncertain. Cooperatives or FPCs may, if prodded, venture into establishing cold storage units, but we are aware that they are not primed yet for such investments in Meghalaya. So, what is the way forward? Even when we are confident that cold storage units, if set up at the household level, can prevent anything between 20-30% of a farmer's loss, it has to be conceded that our search for low-cost technologies has not been successful. So far, that is!

We now have a ray of hope in the Zero Energy Cool Chambers (ZECC) about which technology I want to highlight in this article. The ZECC technology, developed by the Indian Agricultural Research Institute, New Delhi and customized by the Assam Agriculture University, Jorhat, has been in existence in the country for a while, though it has not yet reached out to our farmers for whatever reasons.

It is now clear that we should only explore low-cost and decentralized solutions that are easy to set up by the farmer himself. The technology should not be capital intensive, nor should it burn up energy but must still give a reasonable storage time. These criteria fit the ZECC model that functions on the thermodynamics principle of passive evaporative cooling without any external energy - electrical or mechanical. Evaporative cooling occurs when dry air passes across

any wet surface. The ZECC is a semi-underground chamber of brick, mortar, and sand. It is a double-layered structure about five feet long and four feet wide. The height may vary depending on the local situation, but it is usually about 2.5 feet high. The cavity between the two layers is filled with sand, and the chamber walls are soaked in



water from an overhead tank. The bricks and sand absorb water that evaporates slowly and lowers the temperature within the chamber. The ZECCs can bring down the temperature by 10-15 de-



grees C and maintain about 90% Relative Humidity. The faster the evaporation, the greater is the cooling. It is an environmentally sustainable model because it uses local construction materials. In sum, it fits the farmers' requirements in that it can store up to 200 Kgs. of the fresh farm produce at a time and can be easily set up with a cost of about Rs.10,000/-.



So, the Farmers' Commission decided to pilot this technology through the KVK, at Nongshillong, in the erstwhile Mairang sub-division, with a specific mandate to facili-

tate the construction of 100 ZECCs in the farmers' fields. The approved construction cost was Rs.10,000/- per unit, of which the farmer's contribution was limited to Rs.2,000/-. As I write this article, sixty ZECCs have already been constructed by the farmers and are being used. The balance work of forty ZECCs will be completed

by the end of January 2022. Seeing the utility of these ZECCs, the Squash farmers of the South-West Khasi Hills district have approached the Commission for one hundred more such ZECCs in their

district. Squash, as we know, is highly vulnerable to market price fluctuations, with the prices ranging from Rs.2/- per Kg. to Rs.25/- per Kg, depending upon the season. And the South -West Khasi Hills farmers are heavily dependent upon Squash cultivation, so they will stand to gain immensely if they can arrest the perishability even by three to four weeks. By the accounts of the farmers,

the quality of the vegetables, even of flowers is retained, and better price realization is taking place. So far, so good!

Since the farmer feedback is encouraging, the Commission intends to deepen its involvement with this technology. The studies indicate that Potatoes can be stored for 90 days in a ZECC while at room temperature; the shelf life of potatoes is 46 days. Likewise, tomatoes stay well-preserved in ZECC for 15 days while they spoil within seven days at room temperature. At times of distress sale, even a two-week extension in the storage time could be a lifesaver for the farmer. The ZECCs can store up to 200 Kgs. ZECC capacity can go up to one tonne or more, depending upon the quantum of the produce and the affordability of the farmer; however, the Commission wants to limit its support to 200 Kg structures for the present.

Meanwhile, just for academic curiosity, let us do a simple math - one hundred ZECCs store 20 tonnes of Squash for an extra two-week period. I am assuming that the price difference between the distress sale and average sale is about Rs.4/- per Kg. If so, just one hundred ZECCs would have helped the farmers get an additional income of Rs.80,000/- per cycle. There could be at least three such cycles during a squash season. That would mean an additional income of Rs. 2.4 lakhs. We can install at least one lakh ZECCs in the state over the next two years (very much possible), which will amount to an additional gross income of Rs.24 crore per season to one lakh farmers. If we include other perishable items like Tomato and commercial flowers, the savings could be even higher. In fact, the practical applications can be so many that the benefits are incalculable.

It is time for the Department of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare to conceptualize a scheme for inducting the ZECCs in Meghalaya. Apart from the farmer who may construct a ZECC in his backyard, a string of commercial-sized cool chambers can also be constructed in the wholesale markets. Further improvements could be made to reduce the cost and enhance the storage time. The ZECCs may also be useful for mushroom cultivation, something we will have to experiment further with. I request the scientific community of the ICAR to look at this technology afresh and find a way to enhance the storage time. I will also seek private participation in widening the reach of the technology to all the villages and farmer households of the state. It is a commercial possibility better left for young entrepreneurs of the state.

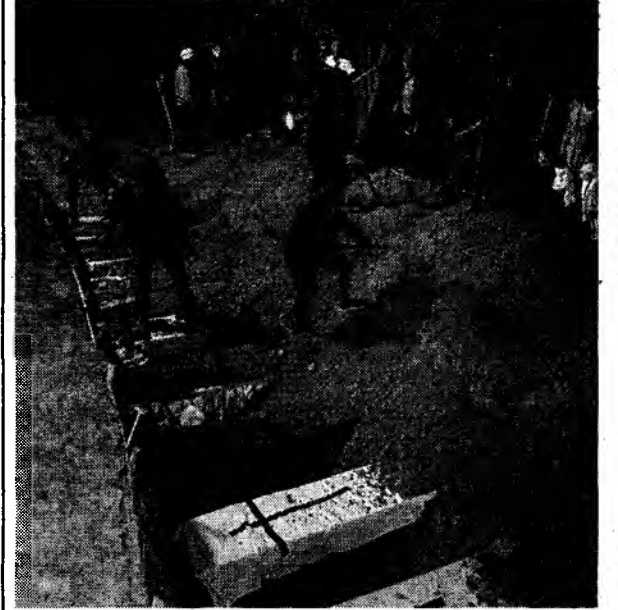
(The writer is Chairman, Meghalaya Farmers' (Empowerment) Commission)

# Are tribal lives expendable?

By Barnes Mawri

The tragic incident in the village of Oting in Mon district of Nagaland on 4th December where 14 civilians were murdered in cold blood by the Indian Army personnel, is a clear indication of the abuse of AFSPA. This draconian law empowers the armed forces to use violence or even kill persons with impunity on any mere suspicion that they are militants/insurgents. It is an uncivilized law that is seen only in the 007 James Bond movies where such "license to kill" mandate exists. We have seen too many abuses of AFSPA in the many similar incidents be it in Kashmir, Manipur, Nagaland, Meghalaya or elsewhere where this law applies. The fact that the army personnel opened fire on a group of miners merely on grounds of suspicion that they were militants, does not excuse them from being branded criminals. It would be an excusable act if those people were terrorists from Pakistan, Bangladesh or

greater criminal act that is not befitting the so called "guardians of the country." Had not the villagers discovered this evil intention and acted thereupon, perhaps the culprits would have passed off as innocent persons. The confrontation however led to seven more civilian deaths because the trigger-happy army trained their rifles on the unarmed villagers who were trying to stop the vehicle that was trying to speed away with the dead bodies of the six civilians. This incident has alarmed every tribal community in Northeast India. I, as a member of the Khasi community, first of all condemn this dastardly act and I join the Naga people in their demand to abrogate the AFSPA at the earliest. Tribal communities are peace loving and we revere life in every form. AFSPA is a law of the uncivilized because it promotes a "wild west" existence. Probably it is the imposition of this law and its abuse by the army personnel every now and then,



China. But to be aware that these people were our own citizens, there would be no reason for the army to act so brutally when the victims were not even armed. Definitely the army which is stationed there for years, is aware that there are coal mine workers in the area. So how could their intelligence be so faulty as not to be able to identify the same persons who used to go back and forth to the mines day in and day out. This proves that there are trigger-happy army personnel who are ever ready to open fire on even innocent people. They could do it without any fear of retribution because AFSPA guarantees their impunity before the law. Is this not a dangerous law that ought to be scrapped off or else murderous acts like this

that has angered many tribal youth and encouraged them to take up arms as militants. I will not be surprised if more Naga youth join the militant outfits because such unpunished criminal acts against an innocent community can only fan feelings of vengeance against the perpetrators.

It is evident that AFSPA is doing more harm than good in the country. To know that AFSPA which came into effect in 1958, operates especially in the tribal states of Northeast India, is all the more reason to condemn it as it creates more insecurity and endangers the peaceful existence of tribal communities. How many innocent tribal people have fallen victims to AFSPA without however getting any justice as the law itself denies it?

## Letters to the Editor

### Some facts on smart meters for public knowledge

Editor,  
Why does Govt continue to support Global Satnam? the headline in your newspaper (ST Dec 13, 2021) should make the public ponder why the MDA government is beholden to Satnam Global and to ask pertinent questions. The strong statement by the President of Data acquisition & Management (DAM), Mr Mohit Kumar of the Rs1.5 lakh crore rolled out scheme made compulsory and which is potentially the most serious reform by the Government I wish to explain why the new Power Minister made U turn on his sudden halt of the further manufacture of smart meters. It can be one and only one reason - a pacifist agenda amongst the secret triangle of Mr Prestone Tynsong, his predecessor James Sangma and the main player as the project is not a small one by any stretch of imagination. How could the 25,000 households falsely certified by the MeECL, that had

earlier infuriated our new Power Minister be smart meter ready at such lightning speed? One very important discovery is that Havells the most reputed electrical firm that made ISI cables and the most important circuit breaker that automatically cuts overloaded or short-circuited appliances and which saves appliances from lightning surge at 6 milli-second, needed to disassociate itself from HPL in a public write-up. This is very serious. The Govt. of India had long ago instructed all households in the country to have the main traditional Kit Kat replaced by the MCBs. The most sensitive one the B type is for domestic of 3 Kwatt (2 of them). For those with high power consumption say, 2 Kw motor; the less sensitive C type is employed to prevent unnecessary upping of the MCB switch and D the most insensitive is for heavy industries like giant saw mills, lift motors, steel fabrication etc. Had this been executed as promised, those self-styled linemen at home with little knowledge of twisting the screw drivers and fixing vehicle-used copper wires that can handle 100 amperes, many houses (especially the Assam Type)

would not have caught fire so easily in our state in winter. Instead, we barked up the wrong tree, with arguments that the smart meter would prevent tampering a crime committed not by the innocent domestic users but the big corporates especially the steel industries as detected in Byrnihat. In Meghalaya the crores of unpaid debts of MeECL as stated by Mr Tynsong relate more to government offices and government-owned buildings. The power theft at Byrnihat had reached a stage where the MeECL was compelled to install 2 meters - one for transmitting and the other for receiving memory records for the industries. With this the MeECL found that prior to the setting up of these two systems, the revenue earned was Rs 25 crores. And post the setting it jumped to Rs 40 crore. If this could be followed in the 9 cement plants (average 118 Mw hr p/m) the revenue will improve considerably. Finally let us also know whether the power supplied through internet is NOT the Kilowatt Hour as in the old meter be it electric (eddy rotating aluminium disc) or electronics the blinking LED with digital counter

to the LCD (liquid crystal displays); but in Kilovolt ampere/hour. Both are units of energy but KVA/hour includes the loss during transmission (inductive and capacitive). Physicists call it the cosine factor. For the lay person if one were boiling water with immersion rod of 1 Kw for one hour the bill in would be 1 Kw/hr = 1 unit at Rs 4. The smart meter will show Rs 4 plus 30 paise (technical loss). So for every unit one pays more. In a month we will be paying quite a sum for transmission loss. Lastly even if we are WIFI connected we are going to be blacked out without information if we happen to be in a shadow zone and the message would be conveyed at a cost to the consumer. Till date the smart meter campaign included only six households per one thousand with 251 million households as the target by 2025. Hence if our Power Minister could lead from the front the masses would slowly join the bandwagon. Then who knows Meghalaya may bag the first prize!

Yours etc.,  
W.Passah,  
Ex-HOD Electronics  
and Physics, St Edmund's  
College.

### Caution against Omicron imperative

Editor,  
Amid rise in the number of Omicron cases in India, the Centre has warned of drop in mask usage and the resulting infection dangers. Holiday season and assembly election in states may cause a spike in infection cases. In such a scenario, following Covid appropriate behaviour is of utmost importance. However, a large number of people in the country disregard the norms, throw caution to the wind and do as they wish. Stringent enforcement of masking has slackened over time. Considering the gravity of the situation, strict measures need to be adopted. Vaccination and masking are two ways of combating the disease. As masks can be bought at reasonable prices, everyone can buy them and wear them. According to the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation's projections, India's mask usage has dwindled to 59% currently. In April, it had steadily risen and throughout May it touched 80%. The surge in infection cases and

strict enforcement during the second wave prompted people to wear masks. Covid norms followed by countries such as Japan and South Korea where 92% citizens wear masks serve as model behaviour for India. In spite of high vaccination rates, infection cases have been on the rise in several countries. In India, people's indifference to masking norms has led to lack of adherence to masking rules. Given that India is an overpopulated country, a sudden surge in infections will lead to an out of control situation and it will put strain on healthcare facilities. Strictness about masking slackened as vaccination drive gained pace. Considering that there is delay in using booster dose, masking is the right path. Political leaders must ensure that those participating in election campaigns wear masks. As the pandemic has not gone away, it is the responsibility of everyone to ensure that the disease does not spread.

Yours etc.,  
Venu GS,  
Kollam

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It is evident that AFSPA is doing more harm than good in the country. To know that AFSPA which came into effect in 1958, operates especially in the tribal states of Northeast India, is all the more reason to condemn it as it creates more insecurity and endangers the peaceful existence of tribal communities. How many innocent tribal people have fallen victims to AFSPA without however getting any justice as the law itself denies it?

will be committed again and again? It is very simple for the army to say that it was a "mistaken identity" issue, but that does not bring back to life the 13 slain innocent persons. This excuse will not be able to console the bereaved families. We have heard ad nauseam this phrase from the army authorities that it has become a hypocritical statement that no one believes it anymore. The loss of human lives can never be compensated by thousands of excuses not even by any amount of material compensation.

It is unfortunate that the Home Minister and the Defense Minister have not yet expressed apologies to the victims' families in spite of the popular demand of the Naga people. As usual an investigation will be conducted which most probably will extend into years until finally the aggrieved party will have got exhausted from waiting for justice. That is the sort of ending of such cases in our country. It is time that all tribal leaders of Northeast India stand together and demand for the immediate abrogation of AFSPA. We can no longer allow this draconian law to claim more innocent lives of our tribal people. Enough is enough, away with AFSPA.

"As long as poverty, injustice and gross inequality persist in our world, none of us can truly rest."

-- Nelson Mandela

## The Shillong Times

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### Signals from Varanasi

PRIME Minister Narendra Modi's much-publicized visit to Varanasi in the last two days should be noted more for its high symbolism. In the run-up to the Uttar Pradesh Assembly polls, Modi has ably invoked religion in the land of Hindutva by visiting temples, offering prayers and stepping into the waters of Holy Ganga, cameras liberally focused on him. The idea is to send out the message that the assembly polls in the state would be fought by the BJP principally on the ground of religion. Hindu religious forces are strong in the state and their sentiments only need to be taken care of and harvested into votes for the BJP.

This could also be seen as a counter to the consolidation of Muslims against the BJP in the recent West Bengal assembly polls, which immensely helped Mamata Banerjee to floor the BJP there. Muslims formed a quarter of the population in Bengal and 20 per cent in Uttar Pradesh. In the past, Muslim votes in UP got divided between the Congress, the SP of 'Maulana Mulayam' and even the BSP of Mayawati. Akhilesh Yadav is already planning a joint state tour with Banerjee. Modi has sensed the danger ahead. A time has come when the BJP does not have much to hold aloft by way of what its governments do both at the Centre and in the states. There's some buzz in Uttar Pradesh, of late, by way of launches and inaugurations, which were only to be expected when election season approaches. Question now is, how far the BJP would go to consolidate Hindu votes. Consolidation beyond castes is the key. Targeting the Muslims is a favourite pastime for some forces. Law and order issues could arise and hope is that this will not get out of hand.

The second part of the Prime Minister's errand in Varanasi this time was to collect the chief ministers of BJP-ruled states and hold forth on Good Governance, a goal that they have collectively failed to accomplish if regional and national growths are the yardstick. The BJP-ruled states are not known for huge corrupt practices, on the face of it, which is unlike the scenes in several of the states ruled by regional satraps or the Congress. This alone will not help a party stand erect, more so as Modi could not control the spectre of growing corruption in the bureaucracy. Issues like joblessness, regional developmental imbalances and reigning poverty in eastern states have worsened. Yet, the PM knows how to endear the large folk of the nation's poor and win elections in the Hindi belt.

# School garden for combating malnutrition in Meghalaya

By Bhogtoram Mawroh,  
Gratia E Dkhar and Stefan W Lyngdoh

As we approach the 50 years of our statehood it is important to reflect on the good and bad of the journey towards this milestone. A good way of doing that is to assess the achievements or regression that has happened among some crucial indicators of development. An important concept in this regard is the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which were adopted by the United Nations in 2015 as a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure that by 2030 all people enjoy peace and prosperity. India is tracking its progress towards the 17 Goals that have been identified under this framework. The 2021 NITI Aayog Report "North Eastern Region: District SDG Index and Dashboard: Baseline Report 2021-2022" was a part of this process with the focus being on North East India. Meghalaya did very badly in the overall ranking coming second from the bottom. Among the specific targets the performance under SDG 2 - Zero Hunger was very disappointing.

SDG 2 aims to end all forms of hunger and malnutrition by 2030, making sure all people - especially children - have sufficient and nutritious food all year. The NITI Aayog report revealed that the highest ranked district from Meghalaya under this goal is South West Garo Hills which came in the 42nd rank among all the districts in the North East. The indicators in which the State has performed badly are percentage of children under 5 who are stunted (around or more than 30% in all districts), percentage of children who are underweight (from almost 20% to more than 30%), percentage of pregnant women 15-49 who are anaemic - >11.0 g/dl (from almost 30% to more than 60%), and percentage of children aged 6-59 months - >11.0 g/dl (again from almost 30% to more than 60%). To summarise, Meghalaya suffers from various forms of malnutrition, including the pandemic of 'hidden hunger' or malnutrition deficiency. Children as seen from the figures given above, are especially very vulnerable.

The problem of malnutrition was a special concern which prompted NESFAS to implement the Rural Electrification Corporation (REC) supported project "No One Shall be Left Behind Initiative: Biodiversity for Food, Nutrition and Energy Security, Meghalaya and Nagaland". Among the interventions, supplementation of MDM (Mid-Day Meal) program through establishment of School Gardens was an important initiative.

Under this School Gardens were established in more than 40 schools engaging almost 200 school children. The idea is to support the existing MDM program for improving dietary diversity, i.e., increasing the number of food groups consumed by school children. MDM is a flagship program of the Govt. which caters to the supplementary nutritional needs of school going children. Mid-Day Meal Scheme was introduced in the State of Meghalaya since 1995. From 2004-2005 onwards and as per Supreme Court Order cooked meal is provided to all Govt. and



Govt. aided Lower Primary and Upper Primary Schools for 10 academic months. Food grains is provided free of cost through Food Corporation of India (FCI) by Government of India. The transportation cost of rice calculated as per PDS (Public Distribution System) Rate of the State and is met by Government of India. For the other ingredients which includes oil, dal, condiment and other vegetables the respective school have to purchase from the funds that have been allocated for the purpose from the open market. The program is a highly commendable one but some problems were detected regarding its implementation during discussion with communities working with NESFAS.

Green leafy vegetables are absent from the diet in many schools. This deprives the children of important micronutrients, particularly iron. Potato is a common item in the diet and considered a vegetable when in fact it is a starchy staple. Rice is already available as the starchy staple and this duplication of food group is a waste of financial resources which is already inadequate (a little later on that). Also, in many schools dal is cooked and given to children along with nutrela or horse gram. All the three are pulses and a good source of plant protein. Giving just one of them would have sufficed.

The financial resources saved could then be used for buying other vegetables. But even for rice that is supplied free of cost it suffers from many problems. Irregularity in the supply of rice is a common problem. Recently during a review undertaken in one of the schools it was reported that they were supplied with plastic rice. A complaint was filed but no action was taken forcing the school to use its own funds to buy new stock of rice. The schools also shared that the amount allocated for purchase of other food items is woefully inadequate and the school has to dip into its own funds to

cover the shortfall. Many a times the schools have to buy all the ingredients from their own fund which they can get reimburse after submitting the bills. This however takes a lot of time, ranging from months to a year. The rate of honorarium to Cook-Cum-Helpers is Rs. 1000/- per month (900 Central Share + 100 State Share) for ten months is well below minimum wage. Because of these shortcomings the functioning of the Mid-Day Meal has not been satisfactory.

While NESFAS does not have the mandate to solve institutional problems like funding and salary it decided to focus on the nutritional aspect. School gardens were established to grow food plants which were missing from the diet, e.g., green leafy vegetables, vitamin A rich food plants among others. In the second half 2021 NESFAS did an assessment to find out if any improvement has taken place in the dietary pattern of the school children. For this study 32 schools from different parts of Meghalaya were selected. The variable used for assessment is DDS i.e., Dietary Diversity Score.

DDS is measured by the number of different food groups consumed over a period of 24 hours, and the score is a validated proxy indicator of dietary adequacy, i.e., micronutrient adequacy. A food group is defined as a group of food items that have

similar caloric and nutrient contents. The principle of DDS is based on the fact that different foods are sources of different macro and micronutrients, so a diverse diet best ensures nutrient adequacy. There are 10 standard food groups and a score of DDS 5 (consumption of at least 5 food groups) is considered to be the benchmark for a nutritionally adequate diet.

The assessment found that the overall average DDS from existing MDM program is 3.28, well below the benchmark. Only Little Flower, RCLP School Mawmuthoh (Mawryngkneng Block) had a score of more than DDS 5. With the establishment of the school gardens the overall average DDS rose to 6.28. The highest DDS was recorded from RCLP/RCUP School Laitsohpliah and RCLP School Nongtraw (both from Khatarshnong Laitkroh Block) with DDS 9 and DDS 8 respectively. On an average, the school gardens contributed around 3 new food groups to the diet. These were Green Leafy Vegetables (like mustard leaves, taro leaves, cabbage, lettuce along with wild edibles like khliangsyiar, jamyrdoh, jail, jaiing etc), Vitamin A Rich Food Plants (pumpkin, carrot, tree tomato etc) and Other Vegetables (bottle gourd, brinjal, turnip, radish etc). Nuts and Seeds and Other Fruits were also the food groups that were added in some schools. The establishment of school gardens has, thus, helped in tackling the problem of 'hidden hunger' among the school children who were part of the program.

The establishment of a School Garden to supplement MDM is a cost-effective method which if done properly (knowledge of the FAO 10 Food Groups) has the potential to tackle the problem of malnutrition especially 'hidden hunger' among school children in Meghalaya. This will go a long way in improving the performance of the State as regards SDG 2. With the Goals interlinked this will then have a multiplier effect which will ultimately raise the overall rank of the State. Helping our children access nutritious food and inculcate healthy food habits is, however, more important than any ranking and should be a priority.

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## Modi government caught in a dilemma over Crypto Bill

By Arun Kumar Shrivastav

The Narendra Modi government seems to be caught in a dilemma over the crypto bill that is scheduled to be introduced during the ongoing winter session of parliament. It has maintained a rigid posture throughout the current year by letting out that a ban on cryptocurrencies is actively under consideration.

As the final moments of the Cryptocurrency and Regulation of Official Digital Currency Bill, 2021, being introduced in parliament for discussion draws to a close, the government seems to be developing cold feet on its likely stance. The finance ministry has sent a note of the bill and put it before the cabinet to consider and give its nod. However, the cabinet has not been able to clear the draft bill with the same ease as 25 other bills scheduled to be taken up during the current winter session of parliament.

Cryptocurrencies have been making news globally over the past few years. But the massive gains even alternative coins (coins other than bitcoin are called alternative coins or altcoins) brought to the investors have made to top headlines and prime time TV. For quite some time now, cryptocurrencies have been seen as a better bet than gold as far as a hedge against inflation is concerned. The US is witnessing the highest inflation rate in 30 years at 6.8% in October 2021, while India's is 4.48%.

In what is seen as the definitive evidence of gold

the government thinks and wants to do on this issue. It is a question of the government's ability to balance the aspirations of different sectors and stakeholders. Here is how they are pitted against each other:

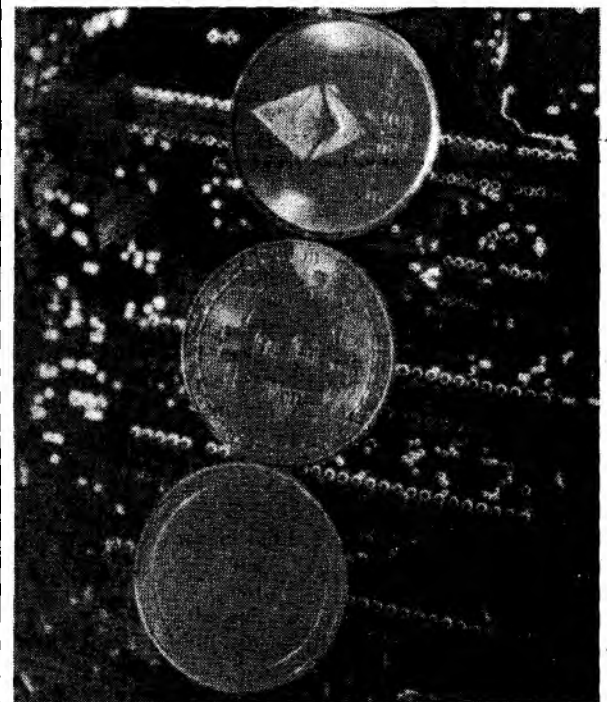
The regulators don't want to give any leeway to cryptocurrencies and insist that the digital coins should operate as per strict regulations in complete transparency - something that goes against the basic principles of cryptocurrencies.

The people want the freedom to trade in crypto and make the most of the opportunity. They also wish a fully regulated environment where their investments are safe and secure. But even the US, which is the most crypto-friendly nation, has not allowed cryptos to be traded on stock exchanges and has consistently denied bitcoin spot ETF, citing the high volatility of crypto assets.

The banking sector is excited about cryptocurrencies as they promise to transfer much of the mundane, repetitive tasks away from the banks to the customers and their devices. Banks can create and manage wealth rather than handle cash and payment systems.

Crypto startups are leveraging new technologies, and they find nothing wrong with it. They argue: if you don't adopt and use the best technology, others will.

Striking a balance between these divergent views and interests is hard for any government. The Indian



being replaced as a hedge against inflation by cryptocurrencies, the first bitcoin future ETF (BITO) in the US listed on the New York Stock Exchange on October 19 broke all previous records of the most successful ETFs. It amassed \$1.1 billion in Assets Under Management (AUM) within two days. In doing so, it knocked off the SDRF Gold Shares ETF that held the record of collecting \$1 billion in AUM in three days in 2004.

Indian investors are aware of all these developments, and the government can't look away, denying the people an opportunity to make profits from new technology and asset class.

RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das has been flagging the concerns felt by the financial sector regulators over the dangers of allowing cryptocurrencies to take root in the financial system and become popular. His concerns echo with the central banks all over the world. The government can't overlook these fears. RBI had banned cryptocurrencies by asking banks not to provide banking facilities to crypto transactions in 2018. The Supreme Court subsequently overruled it in 2020. But despite the Supreme Court ruling that the crypto exchanges and crypto trading are legal in the absence of any law that makes them illegal, Indian banks are still not providing regular banking services to the crypto sector.

So, the complexity of the upcoming Indian crypto bill is not limited to what

government is struggling to find a way that satisfies all the groups and interests. The Indian cabinet has authorized Prime Minister Narendra Modi to take the final decision.

On December 11, PM Modi's Twitter account was hacked by some unknown bitcoiners who posted a ludicrous claim through the hacked @narendramodi handle that the Indian government has accepted bitcoin as the legal tender. The incident provided fresh fodder to the opposition during the current Parliament session.

On Monday, senior Congress leader Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury raised the issue during Zero Hour in the Lok Sabha. He attacked the Modi government and said

"At a time when the government is considering a ban on cryptocurrency, the prime minister's Twitter handle is compromised, and tweets are posted about the government accepting cryptocurrency as legal tender and had purchased 500 Bitcoins for distribution among citizens. This is the biggest security issue before the nation."

Turning the political heat on the government, he demanded that the government make its stand clear on cryptocurrencies and the upcoming crypto bill. It will be worth watching what direction the Government takes in the crypto bill. Many of the other countries are also waiting for the Cryptocurrency bill since the Indian banking system is one of the most modernised in the developing world. (IPA Service)

### Letters to the Editor

#### Pay teachers their dues!

Editor,  
On behalf of the Headmasters and Assistant Teachers of the Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan Schools (RMSA), Meghalaya, we would like to bring to your notice that we have not been paid six month's salaries from June-Nov, 2021. This has caused many hardships to the teachers as we have to meet our family obligations such as buying our daily rations, pay school fees of ward(s), meet our medical requirements, transportation fare to and fro in performing our duties as teachers to impart knowledge to our students. To highlight the plight of the RMSA teachers, 90% of the teachers are from the urban areas and with the transportation fare skyrocketing we now find difficulties to meet such ends.

As per the last press conference our Honorable Education Minister stated that the fund has been received from the Central

Government. But why has it not been released till date? Where is the Corpus Fund? Why has that not been used in paying the salaries of the RMSA Teachers? Why is the Government still adamant in using the funds for other purposes? Christmas is round the corner, and it seems we will not be able to celebrate it this year. We request the Government to take immediate steps to find ways and means to pay the unpaid salaries of the teachers who had rendered their services.

Yours etc.,  
Gerandia Marbaniang  
Headmistress  
Mawmthied RMSA  
Secondary School, & over  
400 others

#### Indolent SBI staff

Editor,  
In Kench's Trace Branch of the State Bank of India, banking operations generally don't begin until the clock strikes 11 in the morning. Otherwise the timing of this branch is 10 am to 4pm.

The indolent staff of this branch start appearing on the scene after 10:30 am and full operations begin at 11 am. Nevertheless, this is the same SBI branch with an exemplary staff whose work is commended by all. But having only one staff like him does not serve the purpose of the customers since the other staff members do not appear to have learned anything from this punctual and disciplined service-oriented staff. Customers come, go back and return in the first hour of the morning without staff at the branch to cater to their queries while there are also those who queue up and crowd the branch.

The parasitic staff at this branch, who enjoy perks and other benefits derived from customer deposits, care nothing about their jobs, and should be stripped of their salaries for showing up late. The staffs are otherwise very punctual when it comes to leaving for the day. The SBI Zonal Office here needs to pull up its socks and take on the staff of this branch, who seem to run the show with a "sarkari naukri" bent

of mind. "Either perform or perish" should be the mantra and there should be a reporting time, say 9:30 am, by when the staff must report to their respective desks with branch operations starting in the next half hour. By doing so, the staff of this prestigious branch will also avoid unnecessary reprimands.

Yours etc.,  
BC Paul,  
Shillong - 4

#### Kudos VPP!

Editor,  
I would like to congratulate the VPP for their stand on teachers needing to take part in politics. They are 100% right when they argue that 'Barring teachers from politics, a regressive step' (ST Dec 14, 2021). Teachers who make classes interesting are good teachers and teachers who live by examples are our second parents. They teach us not only books but to love one's state and whole section of society. It was in the sixties that we were in high school and half of a period was used to its

great advantage by all our beloved teachers of repute who spurred us to love and respect all in our society. One of them later became the editor of our local daily that fought for statehood and the other who vowed never to join politics became the Education minister and brought great improvement in the field of education.

The only problem in this new politics is, 'How can lowly paid teachers and salaries unpaid for months and with no pension fight against the coal mine owners especially when the declaration of wealth or assets or the misuse of the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) can never be apprehended. Boleros with tea chests packed with 100 Rs notes are caught on highways but the issue is hushed up!

What is witnessed in UP right now is the use of government machinery which has beggared description. But if citizens can help to fund teachers who contest elections we could retrieve the politics in our state from the wretchedness it faces

today and for the regional parties to come under one banner then we can perhaps see rays of hope in 2023.

We are now hearing that some ministers who see no hope of being re-elected from their present constituencies are now seeking new pastures. This amounts to a father abandoning his family after the children are born. Mr Conrad Sangma should better be advised even though this mid-term the exercise has already been done.

It is said that the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world. Similarly the hand that holds the chalk and duster standing in front of the blackboard, should rule the hearts of judicious politicians. And if this is done peace and prosperity is assured for Meghalaya.

Yours etc.,  
F.L Lyngdoh  
Via email

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"There is no great genius without some touch of madness."  
— Aristotle

## The Shillong Times

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### Politics versus political partisanship

THE notification of the State Education Department in November this year that teachers wishing to contest elections or to join political parties should first resign their post appears to have been taken in a moment of pique since the National Peoples' Party (NPP) itself has many in its ranks who are teachers of different colleges. It includes the Rajya Sabha MP, WR Kharlukhi who served as President of the NPP in Meghalaya while still a teacher. Now there are teachers from different colleges who recently joined the Voice of Peoples' Party (VPP) led by Ardent Basaiawmoit. If those teachers had joined the NPP would the Government have come up with that notification? If the Government had taken that decision after giving sufficient reasons why it is doing so then perhaps the public reaction would not have been as loud as it is today.

The UGC regulations cited by VPP President Ardent Basaiawmoit which deals with the Code of Professional Ethics of Teachers, states that teachers should, "Perform the duties of citizenship, participate in community activities and shoulder responsibilities of public offices." Basaiawmoit further cited the UGC notification of May 2019 that teachers in Universities and Colleges who are elected as Members of Parliament or Members of State Legislature can continue their teaching duties while at the same time execute their functions as MPs and MLAs without the necessity of taking any kind of leave if they so desire. Even when taking leave, there should not be any break in their service. A Division Bench of the Gauhati High Court in WA. No. 14 of 2001, dated 07-12-2005 also ruled that employees in government aided educational institutions are not 'government' employees.

This is a very interesting juncture for Meghalaya. On the one hand there is need for political discussions in the classroom so that students are exposed to a range of ideas about politics, political participation, political ideologies and how politics influences governance. The question however is whether a teacher who is already aligned to a particular political ideology and political party be able to create an atmosphere for a free and fair discussion on politics and governance in the classroom especially at the college and university level where students have their own political alliances. Is it possible to create a climate where all the competing views in the classroom are allowed free rein? Studies have shown that there is such a thing as political seepage meaning that teachers aligned to a particular political ideology tend to be intolerant of other views. That invites the most divisive parts of the partisan climate into the classroom. It is this that needs a public debate.

# Rollback of farm laws

By Rajdeep Sardesai

With prime minister Narendra Modi, expect the unexpected: unpredictability is an offensive armour for a crafty leader who likes to keep his opponents constantly guessing. Which is why two weeks since he rather dramatically came on national television on Guru Nanak Jayanti to announce that he was withdrawing the contentious farm laws, no one is still quite sure yet just why the prime minister finally relented. His army of supporters have even suggested that the 'apology' was a Guruprab festive 'gift' to the farmers that reveals the prime minister's large heartedness. But those who have observed Mr Modi's politics closely over several years now will recognize that repentance has never been part of the leader's well cultivated strongman image.

seems to invigorate him each time. Even as prime minister, he has relished plunging into every electoral battle with the same zeal that he once showed when riding pillion to stick posters at night in an Ahmedabad municipal corporation election in the mid-1980s. The late New York governor Mario Cuomo once referred to 'campaigning in poetry and governing in prose', but Mr Modi is perhaps the closest you can get to a leader who blurs the lines between campaign and governance: almost every action is part of a year round campaign aimed at maximizing voter eyeballs.



Truth is, this isn't about a change of heart but a change in strategy.

For seven years as prime minister and twelve years as Gujarat chief minister, Mr Modi has never been publicly apologetic for any of his contentious actions: the idea of remorse is seen as a sign of a weakness that is anathema to his macho persona. Then be it the failure to control the 2002 Gujarat riots or the misery caused by the sudden decision to demonetize currency, Mr Modi's strength is seen as his unwillingness to bend before his critics. Which begs the question: why did Mr Modi allow a farmers agitation that was primarily limited to three states of north India to force him to publicly retreat?

The most obvious and plausible explanation lies in the fact that as an astute politician, Mr Modi recognized that the farmers protests could prove electorally detrimental ahead of a string of assembly elections, especially in the politically critical state of Uttar Pradesh. Elections are Mr Modi's oxygen cylinder, a tonic that

But while election concerns might explain the timing, they don't quite reflect

the manner in which the prime minister appears to have personally acknowledged his failure in not being able to push through the farm laws. After all, Mr Modi could easily have got any of his cabinet colleagues to step up and take the blame for misreading the mood of the agitating farmers. If Dr Harsh Vardhan was made to pay a price for the Centre's failure in anticipating the second Covid wave, agricultural minister Narendra Tomar could have been made the scapegoat for the farm law debacle. That Mr Modi chose to accept the blame himself reveals a strategic shift, however momentary, in leadership style: from imperious Supreme Leader to actually appear humble and take responsibility for failure. It's almost as if the seemingly indestructible Big Boss is trying to re-brand himself as an occasionally fallible leader if only to remove the sting from his opponents prime criticism of being an arrogant autocrat. Recall how the previous 'suit boot ki sarkar' critique might have influenced the demonetization decision in 2016 and

religious identity based on lingering fears and resentments. The epithet Hindu Hriday Samrat (Emperor of Hindu Hearts) was coined specifically for a post 2002 Gujarat electorate to polarize 'neo-middle class' Hindu voters.

But for the wider national constituency of the poor and farmers, the prime minister needs to be seen as a caring and benevolent 'vikas-purush' above all else. Ahead of the 2019 elections, the launch of the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi was seen as a conscious attempt to woo the farmer with a minimum income support scheme. But this pro-kisan image took a hit when farmers were barricaded at the Delhi borders with iron spikes and barbed wires. The government's response was to try and demonize the farmers as 'anarchists' and 'terrorists', a toxic campaign that only invited a backlash, especially amongst the farmers of Punjab. By the end, the battle was no longer about the nitty-gritty of the farm laws but about the optics of being perceived as 'kisan virodhi' or anti-farmer,

something which the prime minister could ill afford.

This is where the viral video of protesting farmers being run over in Uttar Pradesh's Lakhimpur Kheri by a speeding jeep on October 3rd, was arguably the turning point. The alleged involvement of a union minister's son in the gruesome incident was a major embarrassment, far greater than the government's media managers would care to admit. In an age where news knows no geographical boundaries, it angered farmers in areas far removed from the original conflict zone. That a Rakesh Tikait like figure was now attracting sizeable crowds even in Maharashtra showed that the Modi government could no longer afford to take the 'andolan-jeevi' farmer protestors for granted.

restored the prime minister's credentials then as an anti-corruption crusader.

This time, the 'apology' can be seen as a tactical move linked to refurbishing the prime minister's self-image as a protector of the 'gareeb-kisan.' Go through any major Modi speech on the campaign trail and he will almost always refer to his commitment to the 'gareeb-kisan' or the 'g-k' of his political vocabulary. Mr Modi could afford to antagonize India's wealthy with his demonetization gambit; he could even anger the middle classes by allowing fuel prices to climb. A large section of India's rich and middle class can after all be lured by a promised Hindutva haven that taps into a sharp

In a sense, the government, secure in its massive parliamentary majority, has paid a price for an unbridled hubris that led it not to take the farm agitation seriously enough for way too long. By the end, all the prime minister could do is cut his reputational losses. Not because there is a sudden change in heart towards the farmers but quite simply because in politics, there is always one inner voice that no leader can ignore: the sound of the election bugle.

Post-script: Just days before the farm law repeal announcement, a senior minister and an RSS leader had reportedly met the prime minister to 'persuade' him to reconsider his stand. Then, Mr Modi had allegedly brushed aside their concern by insisting that the new laws were a matter of conviction for him. What suddenly changed may seem mystifying to Modi watchers but often ideological conviction in Indian politics must cede ground to electoral expediency.

(The writer is senior journalist and author. Mail: rajdeepsardesai52@gmail.com)

## Putin's India visit: The diplomatic message

By Kanwal Sibal

President Putin's visit to India was timely. It was important for both sides to mark the importance they attach to bilateral relations and alignment of their policies on pertinent issues in view of the flux in international relations. An impression had got created of reduced warmth and understandings between Russia and India and this needed to be addressed.

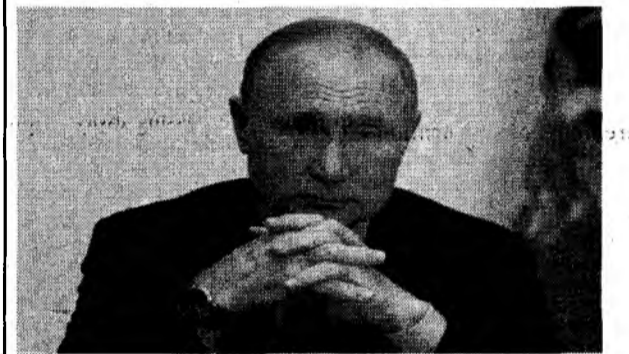
The Russian president's decision to visit India, be it for a few hours, notwithstanding pandemic concerns and the Ukraine crisis carried many diplomatic messages. With China and India locked up in a military confrontation the visit signalled Russia's intention to pursue an independent course in relations with its two strategic partners, especially as one important objective of the visit was to solidify defence ties with India. The arrival of the first deliveries of the S-400 to coincide with Putin's visit had significance.

The inaugural 2+2 dialogue between Defence and Foreign Ministers has been initiated at a time when India is feeling threatened by China and India's ties with the US have expanded. The Indian side also has signalled its determination to resist any untoward US pressure through CAATSA to reduce our defence ties with Russia. The institution of this dialogue provides a balance to our foreign policy as we have such dialogues only with Quad partners: US, Japan and Australia. The next

manufacturing, collaboration, technology transfers in the defence sector and this was the focus of the 2+2 meeting and summit level subsequent discussions, with convergence in thinking. Raksha Mantri proposed greater engagements in the Indian Ocean region where Russia's thinking is not in alignment with ours. During the visit, India and Russia have also signed a programme of cooperation in the field of Defence for the next 10 years (2021 to 2031).

The Indo-Pacific area is one in which India and Russia have different perceptions and efforts to close this gap will continue. Russia is still reluctant to use the term Indo-Pacific and prefers the term Asia-Pacific, which from India's point of view is exclusive as it does not include India and, besides, is a western term originally. India and Russia are already cooperating quite extensively in the Indo-Pacific region through the Vladivostok Chennai maritime corridor for which the Draft Project Report is nearing completion. Russia exercises with us in the Indian Ocean and in the Western Pacific. The development of the International North South Corridor will raise Russia's stakes in the Indian Ocean trade routes.

The signing of the agreement to jointly manufacture over 6 lakhs AK 203 assault rifles in India with technology transfer contributes



round of this dialogue will be held in Russia next year.

The remarks made by Putin publicly on Afghanistan have narrowed the gap that had developed between the two countries on developments there, which are a cause of concern as their fall-out for our security is real, with the Taliban now controlling the country with Pakistan's support. Russia now supports the broad line that India and others have on Afghanistan, namely, the need for an inclusive government, the Taliban honouring its agreements, especially that it will not allow Afghan soil for terrorist attacks against any country. It has been agreed that close consultation and coordination between India and Russia on Afghanistan will continue. Russia has been reaching out to Pakistan militarily, causing some concern to us. Putin's visit, by underlining the strategic importance of India-Russia ties, sets some limits to how much Pakistan can hope to drive a wedge between India and Russia, which it seeks to do. Counterterrorism is an area of common interest, with convergence on how to deal with terrorist entities such as ISIS, Al Qaeda, and LeT to which a specific reference has been made in the joint statement.

In the 2+2 dialogue, Raksha Mantri Rajnath Singh mentioned India's requirement for closer military and military-technical cooperation with Russia. He communicated quite directly our concerns about China by referring to militarisation and expansion of armament in our neighbourhood and the completely unprovoked aggression on our northern border. Emphasising the legitimacy of our defence challenges, he said meaningfully that India "seeks partners who are sensitive and responsive to India's expectations and requirements". The Russian side recognises that the priority in India was on joint

atmanirbhar in defence manufacturing, RELOS, the reciprocal logistical support agreement, could not be signed during the visit. It has been put off for the time being as some issues need to be discussed further and, according to the Foreign Secretary, it will be concluded at the earliest possible.

Minister Jaishankar rightly mentioned during the visit that PM Modi and President Putin "share a relationship of great trust and confidence". PM Modi in his own public statement referred to Putin's attachment and personal commitment to relations with India.

On the economic side, a record number of 28 agreements were concluded, covering various sectors such as trade, energy, culture, intellectual property, accountancy, cyber-attacks in the banking sector, manpower, geological exploration survey, education, etc. The energy sector holds great promise. Both sides are interested in more investment in the oil and gas sectors as well as petrochemicals. A Gas Task Force has been set up to examine investment in gas infrastructure and distribution projects, use of natural gas in transport and emerging fuels including hydrogen. Long term cooperation in the areas of inland waterways, civilian ship building, fertilizer, coking coal, steel, skilled manpower is envisaged. We have invited Russian investments in the steel sector. Cooperation in Russia's Far East holds great potential. We are interested in collaborating with Russia on the Northern Sea Route through the Arctic. It is intended to make greater efforts to achieve the trade target of USD 30 billion by 2025. All in all, a very productive visit that testifies to our increasingly effective foreign policy.

(The writer is a career diplomat & former foreign secretary)

### Letters to the Editor

#### On Transmisogyny

Editor,

A very recent incident that occurred with a friend has fuelled me to write this, mainly because I believe it genuinely needs to be discussed. A friend of mine was verbally abused for being a transgender girl, by a self-proclaimed 'feminist'. First of all, we need to understand what the term 'transgender' really means. A transgender person is someone who doesn't identify with the gender they were assigned at birth. It's basically an umbrella term under which non-binary people, genderqueer people, agender people, etc., exist.

What is transmisogyny? In simple words, transmisogyny refers to the unfair treatment subjected towards transgender women in particular, within societal dynamics and social structures. How is it different from transphobia? Transphobia refers to the prejudice against trans people, whereas transmisogyny attacks trans women in particular. Some very eminent propagators of transmisogyny are TERFs or Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists. Their main concern seems to be the 'safety' of cisgender women, whether heterosexual or queer. Of course, they aren't feminist at all.

Why is transmisogyny more inherent?

I would blame it on the

erroneous, totally preposterous representation of trans women in the mainstream media, and the unwillingness of schools/colleges and parents to educate the youth about gender diverse people. Over the years, trans women have been portrayed as cross dressing, predatory, borderline psychotic men whose only intention is sexual assault or murder, or just a 'man dressed as a woman' for a comedic effect. These people with absolutely no knowledge of the complexities of being trans, the struggles and science behind it, the social, physical and emotional gender dysphoria they go through, spew out their uninformed nonsense and people actually listen to them.

"I won't sacrifice my identity and legal rights to protect men's feelings or fantasies of womanhood," a TERF has said. This statement in itself screams 'ignorance'. Trans women always have been/always will be women. The lack of representation or presence of blatantly wrong representation harms trans women in ways more than one. Not only are they deprived of basic human rights, they also experience extreme violence and hostility. Trans kids are not only deprived of gender reaffirming healthcare, but also severely bullied by their peers. One of the ways to try and eradicate transmisogyny is by propagating intersectional feminism; by exploring the intri-

cate details of systemic issues and where they intersect each other. Transmisogyny is an intersection of two issues: transphobia and misogyny. Allies need to educate the people instead of depending upon trans people to do so, when they already have to face a lot of hateful nonsense that try to invalidate their very existence. The demand for tolerance of intolerance is always more work for the person that is being attacked or subjected to prejudice. It takes far more energy to forgive than to spout misinformed bigotry.

Yours etc.,  
Rupsa Marak,  
Tura

#### Khasi sense of cleanliness fading

Editor,

Khasi and Jaintia women are far from perfect but here's one reason why every Khasi and Jaintia man should be proud of them. So, I had this conversation with this Bengali colleague yesterday. She was telling me about how sour the pineapple she ate was and it was contrary to what the fruit vendor told her. I asked her whether she bought the cut and sliced ones and she replied in the negative. She said that she bought a whole piece and cut it herself. Explaining the reason she didn't want to buy the cut pieces she said, "Yuck

all those Khasi women vendors with a mouthful of kwai all the time, no I don't want to eat the sliced pineapples which they sell." Then I told her that the Khasis are one of the most hygienic and cleanliness conscious people. So our conversation shifted to this topic. She had to eventually admit that Khasi women are one of the most cleanliness conscious people she has ever met. She jokingly said that they might all suffer from OCD but we can definitely take that as a compliment.

In fact, a few other non-Khasi friends reluctantly admit that Khasi women are the most cleanliness conscious women they have ever met. So we should brush aside all those cleanliness rankings putting our State at the bottom, right? Arrogance aside, now is the time to wake up from our slumber. Even though we are cleanliness conscious people yet nowadays we have no qualms about dirtying our surroundings. They say cleanliness begins at home and I've seen how cleanliness conscious my mother and two of my sisters are. The important thing is that we should hold dear this cleanliness conscious nature even after stepping out of our homes. What goes around comes around, if we don't change our attitudes, the rubbish outside will eventually find a way back to our homes.

Yours etc.,  
Gary Marbaniang,  
Via email

#### SBI Kenches Trace Branch: Another view

Editor,

As a regular customer of the SBI, Kenches Trace Branch, I would like to share my experiences starting with an efficient security personnel who is not only vigilant but also does his job well. Never would he ever allow clients to crowd inside the bank, following COVID 19 protocols. Once inside the bank, one seldom finds any of the employees not stationed in their designated cubicles, attending to the clients. In all these years, I have never had to leave the bank for want of staff to attend to my needs. Granted that there may be a small crowd outside but that was because the space inside the bank is not big enough to allow all the clients inside especially when we should be adhering to physical distancing. I have also been witness to few clients who have failed to get their pass books updated in the ATM booth on the ground floor and would go up to the bank for the same and were never refused. They may have to stand in queue and wait for their turn but their work would still be done. The only time that the cubicles would be empty during working hours would

be their lunch break.

I wish to also share a recent occurrence whereby the employees of this bank went out of their way to help me. A fraudulent transaction transpired in my account that belonged to the SBI, Laitumkhrach branch that came to my notice while I was at home. In order to get immediate assistance from the bank, I rushed to the Kenches Trace branch. The staff there were prompt and directed me to their accountant, a very efficient gentleman. The first thing he did was to help me secure my account. I faced no hassle nor refusal from their end in spite of the fact that the account belonged to another branch. The quick action from the bank employees was much needed and appreciated.

I am of the belief that work is worship and agree that one needs to earn one's salary. In fact, this mantra is true of all professions and all jobs. Though we do have our respective experiences in our journey in life, sometimes bad, sometimes pleasant, one looks up to the staff of this branch to continue to showcase the best they can offer to their clients.

Yours etc.,  
Jennifer Dkhar,  
Via email

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*"Time plays a role in almost every decision. And some decisions define your attitude about time."*

— John Cale

## The Shillong Times

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### Striking at the Nation

A two-day strike by employees of public sector banks (PSBs) since Thursday has disrupted banking services across the country – and for four days at a stretch in some places/states. The impact that the national economy suffers as a result of this could be deep and painful. The protest is against the central government move to privatize some PSBs as announced by finance minister Nirmala in the Union Budget 2021. A Bill to this effect is being brought to parliament, under which two major PSBs would be privatized this fiscal as part of the government's Rs 1.75 lakh crore disinvestment initiative. The government's minimum shareholdings in these banks will thus reduce from 51 to 26 per cent. The Centre's plea to the Union Forum of Banking Unions (UFB), an umbrella body of nine entities, has gone unheeded.

The government had gone ahead with disinvestment plans in the aviation sector, and Air India went into the hands of the Tata Group two months ago. What is common with both Air India and several PSUs are that years of bureaucratic and political mismanagement had turned them red, crippled, and the exchequer was pumping huge sums to make them stand erect, fly or functional. The bad debts or NPAs of PSBs mounted to as high as Rs 10 lakh crore some years ago and the fire-fighting by the Modi government since it came to power had only limited positive impact. Though some of these bad debts were caused by business downturn, many were virtual loot. Vijay Mallya's aviation business in the form of Kingfisher Airline was a flop. At the same time, he was wallowing in wealth from the liquor business. Those like Mallya, diamond merchant Nirav Modi or Mehul Choksi with loads of wealth have all taken sanctuary in tax havens abroad. They are smarter than the establishment here or its investigation agencies. Ordinary taxpayers filling the government coffers are the ultimate losers. The sweat of ordinary Indians has turned into their ill-gotten wealth. It is also well-established that top guns in the banking sector facilitated such outright loot.

The much hailed socialistic decision by Indira Gandhi to nationalize nine private sector banks ultimately and over the years proved, in part, to be the nation's undoing. Business isn't the government's business. Banking sector employees, well-fed and well-paid, are fancying two-day strikes close to weekends, turning these into four-day "holidays" – and frequently so, for better pay and to press for other unending "demands". All these indulgences only go to reaffirm what a weak leadership we as a nation now have.

# Teaching or Politics

By TFL Mawlong

Education and good politics are noble and vital to the well-being of society. However, if you mix them, a vortex of uncertainty will form that could trap our education in its relentless pull. School, college, and university teachers enter politics for a variety of reasons: the majority join because they want power, influence, and money; others join simply because they are more inclined to politics than teaching, and a small number join because of the call. Whatever the reason, once they enter politics, they invariably create a vortex of uncertainty around education, creating that void in their educational institutions. This article is an argument supporting the government's decision to bar teachers from entering politics.

Ardent Miller Basaiawmoit, president of the VPP, is correct about the constructive role that 'some' reputable teachers have played in state politics. We cannot deny their positive roles in Meghalaya's politics and public policies. Also, as 'boots on the ground' in the education sector, teachers can act as voices in a political party to help spur educational reform. However, the context is different today.

First, unlike in the past, there are no shortage of intellectuals and sociologically literate people outside the teaching community today. Political parties in Meghalaya today have access to a large pool of non-academic intellectuals. My point is you don't always need an economics teacher from university or college to shape the party's socio-economic agenda. This is because mainstream economic models and the needs of the Meghalaya economy do not always match. A young and brilliant entrepreneur can have far more insights into our economy than any economic professor in our colleges or universities. And any intellectual and sociologically literate person outside of academia can analyze data and statistics to determine what socio-economic policy is required.

Second, it is half-knowledge to claim that we cannot improve education by prohibiting teachers from participating in politics. In this information age, empirically evaluating and analyzing the education sector from the outside has become easier. Political parties must learn to shape vast expert and crowd-knowledge into usable politics; into wonderful social technologies that can improve our society. If a political party requires serving teachers to be members

to understand the needs of the education sector, then logically, the political party should incorporate important and knowledgeable people from every sector to have knowledgeable debates and a holistic understanding of the society's problems. Is this a possibility in Meghalaya? What we need is a political party that listens to all voices, not just its members' voices.

Third, the actual issue is not what teachers can or cannot do in politics. The concern is that it will undoubtedly hurt teaching and learning. To be active in a political party, you must devote a significant amount of time and energy to the party, which comes at the expense of quality service in academics. While politics may benefit from a teacher joining politics, education will cer-

***If a teacher wishes to pursue a political career, he or she should not do so at the expense of students or the government. Resigning from his or her teaching position before entering politics is a progressive and 'noble' step. If one is an intellectual who has lost interest in teaching but is passionate about politics, by all means, please join politics. The state requires capable political leaders. But first, the teacher must resign. Leaving out academics will give the person more time and energy to deal with the complexities of modern politics.***

tainly suffer unless a teacher resigns and a new brilliant youngster takes the teaching post. There is no playbook for how to be an active member of a political party while also working wonders among students. Peer studies show that political party membership hurts a teacher's academic responsibility and quality. Also, if a teacher is affiliated with a political party, I do not think he/she will have the academic freedom for political discussion in the classroom, especially since we are not intellectually a mature society yet and we're still miles from being able to learn the value of listening.

According to Louis de Broglie (French physicist), a microscopic particle behaves as a particle at times and as a wave at others. It cannot be both a particle and a wave at the same time. This is known as the wave-particle duality principle. If one considers one's job as a teacher to be

the particle aspect of oneself, then one's political life is the wave aspect. So, if one is active in political works (act as a wave), one will not be sincere in academic works (act as a particle) at the same time. A reputed teacher with political acumen can make significant contributions to politics and educational reforms. And he can be great in teaching and learning to improve educational outcomes. However, these two phenomena cannot occur at the same time.

The 2019 UGC's decision to allow college teachers to serve as MLAs/MPs and teachers without taking leave or resigning is unfortunate and unwise. The UGC should know better. In its directive, the same UGC also says that college teachers should be on campus for

ing students? How will the teacher balance political and genuine academic endeavors? A college professor told me that he seldom realises he is an associate professor until the end of every month. It's easy to see why. Is this what the people of Meghalaya want?

The VPP president also claimed that the government's notification is unconstitutional because teachers in both unaided and aided educational institutions are not considered government employees. This is, once again, deceptive. The prohibition on teachers joining political parties has less to do with the teachers themselves and more to do with education. Education is both a public good and a state responsibility. As such, the government has the authority to direct all teachers (whether in aided or unaided institutions) in educational matters, including prohibiting them from joining political parties if it believes that allowing teachers to participate in politics will harm the state's educational outcomes.

If a teacher wishes to pursue a political career, he or she should not do so at the expense of students or the government. Resigning from his or her teaching position before entering politics is a progressive and 'noble' step. If one is an intellectual who has lost interest in teaching but is passionate about politics, by all means, please join politics. The state requires capable political leaders. But first, the teacher must resign. Leaving out academics will give the person more time and energy to deal with the complexities of modern politics. It will solve some problems in state politics; it will save our education, and it will give brilliant and passionate young people a chance to fill a teaching job vacancy. But mind that, because we have collectively failed to produce educated and scientific citizens. You would need millions to win an election to occupy public office.

However, if one is an intellectual who enjoys and excels at teaching and wants to make a difference in the state, one can either stay in the classroom or enter politics. Such a person can devote his/her life to educating, teaching, mentoring future generations, and working to produce great political leaders. Or quit teaching and pursue a fruitful political life. The choice between good academic work and politics is a binary. One can choose one or the other.

*(The writer is a teacher and an alumni of IIT Kharagpur. Views expressed here are personal. Email: [ftmawlong@gmail.com](mailto:ftmawlong@gmail.com))*

## AITC and VPP: Some reflections on the contrast

By Benjamin Lyngdoh

Today in Meghalaya, the majority of the discussions on political developments circle around All India Trinamool Congress (AITC) and Voice of the People Party (VPP). These parties have come up only recently with an eye on the upcoming MLA election, 2023. It is fair for anyone (or group) to form a party. In a democratic setup, the idea is tenable when one sees himself/herself as a change agent. However, the real test happens when faced with the need to mobilize mass support and connect with the masses with regards to the motive of the party. Today, this is what both AITC and VPP are faced with. Keeping in mind their early days in Meghalaya politics, this column focuses on the contrast between the two. It explores how they would position themselves. What image would they have amongst the voters?

**Initial thoughts –** When the news broke on 24th November (night) about the formation of AITC in Meghalaya, the first thought that struck this writer is that it is a party centred in Bengal and that the name Megha-

during its initial days. **The experience –** The main advantage of AITC Meghalaya is that they are built around twelve experienced legislators. In politics, experience is important. Come 2023, they already have legislators to contest from twelve constituencies and factoring how established AITC is in India, finding contestants for the remaining seats might not be that difficult a task. A national party always has the resources (money and people) to get things done. Mukul Sangma and his team would find it comfortable when it comes to charting a victorious strategy by eating into the vote bank of the Congress. In contrast to the AITC, if there is one parameter where VPP takes a serious hit; it is this one. Just by looking at VPP one can fairly say that they are way behind in terms of political experience. But, this is not necessarily a bad thing. Fresh blood into any activity/intervention is always good. Hence, this might play into their hands. In addition, there are many sections that are willing to give VPP a



chance. The biggest plus point is Ardent Basaiawmoit. If it were any other person, maybe the people would not have paid much attention. Since it is him and with his record of activism and good governance the party has a strong platform to build upon. **Starting on the back foot –** The reaction of many towards AITC is that it is a party of outsiders. In social media, many do rephrase it as a Bengali party. Yes, there are claims that apart from the regional parties, all other parties in Meghalaya are outsiders. However, that is not the argument here. The point is that the party will have to work very hard in order to create a connection with the masses, especially at the grassroots. It would take time for AITC to establish itself as a major force. No doubt, people are joining it today as members; but, are these members enough to create a dent in 2023? In the case of VPP, the pressure tactics by the MDA government is concerning. Why should it bar teachers from taking part in politics and public office? As highlighted by the VPP office bearers extensively, the UGC regulations do permit teachers to take part and contest for public office. So, where is the problem? The other day the state government raked up the service rules of teachers. But, how does it matter. After all, a state regulation is subsumed by a central regulation. As a result, VPP is tied up in fighting this issue democratically and legally and in the process it is losing valuable time in its efforts to present itself as an alternative and clean face of politics.

**The road ahead –** For AITC, it is about the anti-BJP card and that the present MDA government is a friend of the BJP. Nationally and regionally it is positioning itself as the only real challenger to the ills of the BJP. But how relevant are national issues as against local issues? In the past, it has not been so relevant. For VPP, it is about resource mobilization and coming out with a specific development blueprint to change the face of Meghalaya. Indications are that they are earnestly working on it. A lot of brainstorming is happening. It can be fairly said that many are keenly waiting to see/read what it really has to offer and how it plans to execute it. Watch this space! (Email: [benjamin21in@yahoo.co.in](mailto:benjamin21in@yahoo.co.in); the writer teaches at NEHU)

laya was coined by Prof. S.P. Chatterjee, a Bengali. Till that night, no one seriously thought that the AITC would immediately be able to set up shop in Meghalaya. But, with Mukul Sangma anything is possible. His personnel relations and mobilization skills, did the trick and many are still discussing about it. The only question is how many of those who joined him did so out of free will and how many by compulsion. Is AITC in itself a stable ship? In the case of VPP, the first news on its creation broke on 5th October (night) when a document was circulated widely in social media highlighting the name of Ardent Basaiawmoit as its president. The point of difference and a serious eye catcher is the presence of many teachers in its fold. The first thought that came to mind was the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) in Delhi. Their style of governance is unique and with a human touch to say the least. So, if Arvind Kejriwal can do it, can Ardent do it as well? Can this group of concerned citizens bring change? Is such a party sustainable in Meghalaya? Only time will tell.

**The drive –** It is common knowledge that the drive for Mukul Sangma joining AITC is because he wants to become the next Chief Minister of Meghalaya. This fact will gradually play out. For today, the reason being played openly is that he was being sidelined in the Congress party and things were only going to get worse for him in terms of voice and power positioning. At this opportune time the AITC offered him a lifeline and he grabbed it with both hands. It must be noted that Prashant Kishor played an important role in this development. Being a shrewd political strategist, his role will only increase as we move towards 2023. When it comes to VPP, the drive is the societal cry and the need for alternative and clean politics. This is the punch that is being thrown around now. In the Meghalaya of today, these terms are appealing to many. The people are hungry for change but there seems to be no medium for it. VPP has come as a saving grace. It must be noted that the intentions of VPP till date are humanistic with a concern for a holistic development of all. Their approach is primarily bottom-up where they do take a lot of advice and inputs from the grassroots. What they are doing now is more of what AAP was doing in Delhi

### Letters to the Editor

#### Postal Dept needs complete overhauling

Editor,  
The abysmally poor postal service in the country often takes a toll on the public in multiple ways. The non-delivery of urgent documents and parcels adversely affects not only individual citizens, but also government departments, private companies and agencies. Here is a recent case in point. One urgent parcel dispatched from Rajasthan on Nov 24, 2021 somehow reached Guwahati on December 1st. But that packet has now seemingly been left in some parcel hub in Guwahati to gather dust. This piece of information I got when I pulled up the details from the postal tracking portal two days back. I immediately contacted and intimated the GPO, Shillong. I am always thankful to a few of the staff in Shillong GPO who are quick to resolve petty issues. Yes, I further learned from the concerned employees of GPO that they are also fed up with the non-chalantly callous attitude of officers/staff concerned in Guwahati. Many reminder letters from Shillong GPO for the prompt forwarding

and the clearance of the consignments often go in vain. Unlike ordinary documents, even "speed post" letters/parcels are forwarded from the Guwahati hub only after being held up for many days or weeks. This violates the contract between the post office and the consumer who has paid for service and hence makes them liable before a consumer court. Why does the post office charge so high if the so-called "express service" is abnormally poor?

On the other hand, we now have several private players in the field which fly with zeal. They ensure excellent service. Couriers like FedEx, BlueDart, Delhivery, DTDC put their best foot forward to keep their customers satisfied by delivering documents on the third day. One wonders why the postal department is still moving at a snail's pace in this age of the digital world. Who is responsible for this poor performance of Indian Post? Aren't there higher-ups to resolve customers' grievances? Why are the public left in the lurch? The Indian Post is not doing us a favour.

From all indications it appears that government-run postal department badly needs a complete overhaul. It must use all its technologi-

cal tools to improve services with utmost urgency. This is the age of competitiveness and efficiency. Hope this letter will draw the attention of the concerned authorities.

Yours etc.,  
Salil Grewal,  
Shillong-2

#### Road widening causing traffic jams!

Editor,  
Road widening is happening in the Chandmari area of Tura, alongside the construction of an astro turf playground. This is excellent, but after knowing that the traffic density has increased manifold why can't the Company which has been awarded the contract, clear out the debris? These bottlenecks can easily be avoided. When one is stuck in a traffic jam due to the narrowing of the roads as the debris is yet to be cleared, our engines are running, but going nowhere. Fuel is expensive and it's a sheer waste of time and money due to the traffic snarls which have now become a regular occurrence in Tura. Can't the WGH administration instruct the contractor to clear the debris immediately, so that we experience a smoother ride,

save precious cash and fuel and breathe clean air?

Yours etc.,  
Tyrone D'Brass  
Tura

#### Oh! The cry of our wretched teachers

Editor,  
The letter, 'Pay teachers their dues!' by Gerandia Marbaniang, Headmistress, Mawmihthied RMSA secondary school & over 400 others is a cry in the wilderness. The cry for payment of salary is in chorus with SSA teachers. It is high time that the portfolio of education is held by one who has been a teacher so the person gets a better idea where the shoe pinches when he/she has to go without pay for 7-8 months. Teachers are head over ears in debt. In Khasi we use the words 'Ka ram haduh niuhmat' meaning, to be in debt up to the eyebrows.

As early as 1988 it was decided that cess earned from petrol would go towards primary education. An RTI activist petitioned Mr Prestoive Tynsong in the beginning of 2021 about this cess going towards payment of teachers' salaries and was assured that it would. But

in the final stages when the activist consulted the Finance Department there was nothing on record. Meanwhile the 243 pumps of Meghalaya were promised by the government to waive off the tax on petrol/diesel. The proposed waiving was supposedly done secretly.

In this confused scenario I hope the teachers have a Happy Christmas.

Yours etc.,  
James Kharmih  
Shillong

#### AFSPA an instrument of racial discrimination

Editor,  
India, called the world's largest democracy" is using the Armed Force Special Powers Act (AFSPA) in North East India, in the name of "counter insurgency." There are insurgent activities in Chattisgarh and West Bengal too where the Maoists regularly kill uniformed personnel. There was uprising of Tamil Eelam in Tamil Nadu too but the AFSPA has never been enforced there. AFSPA, an inhuman and draconian Act might have been relevant in 1958. But times have

changed and the nation is now no longer unsure of itself as it was in the early stages of the post-independence period. So why does India not think of doing away with colonial Acts in consonance with the changing times and thereby win the hearts of its countrymen? And why enforce AFSPA continuously in the North East? We have to clearly understand that the inhabitants of this region are mostly of the Tibeto-Burman race and hence using AFSPA here is nothing short of "racial discrimination."

People of the North East must jointly oppose AFSPA and take up the issue at the International fora as an issue of "racial discrimination." This will be a strong instrument for the region to fight for repeal of the AFSPA - the irony of the so-called "world's largest democracy".

Yours etc.,  
Er. Mhondamo Oving,  
Retd Chief Engineer,  
PHED, Nagaland state  
& Chairman, Lotha Hoho  
(Tribal Council)  
Wokha, Nagaland.

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

*"The whole point of collaboration is that you give and take from each other, and that's how you create things that are totally new."*

— Virgil Abloh

**The Shillong Times**

Vol No: LXIV No. 128 SHILLONG, SATURDAY, DECEMBER 18, 2021

**Traffic snarls: Who's at fault?**

TRAFFIC jams in Shillong city had reached a critical point at least a decade ago. That the matter has now reached the High Court of Meghalaya is par for the course since that's the last resort for aggrieved citizens in the absence of any redressal mechanism in the system. The irony is that the size of the roads has remained the same but the number of vehicles on the roads have reached humungous proportions. Add to that the cars parked by the roadside which reduce the space for vehicles to maneuver. An important point that the Court needs to take cognizance of is that the mandatory requirement for houses to be constructed at least 6 feet away from the road or the from a neighbour's boundary is flouted with impunity. The mandate of the Meghalaya Urban Development Authority (MUDA) which issues building permissions is restricted to Shillong Municipal limits. Even there, the MUDA building bye-laws are flagrantly violated. Houses are built as close to the road as is possible and no authority dares to demolish these structures that violate building laws.

The less said about areas beyond Shillong Municipality the better. People are allowed to build homes even on 1000 sq ft of land which also includes space for septic tanks etc. Meghalaya is the only state where the law applies in the breach across all areas, from building over encroached spaces to not leaving the mandatory space for road widening should that be required. So, who is to blame for the traffic jams if not the narrow roads which have no scope of widening, thanks to petty-minded individuals who pay their way to break every rule in the book?

There have been incessant debates about the need for flyovers but nothing concrete has emerged. Every government that has been in power in the State has had only a 5-year vision. Not one Chief Minister has institutionalized any idea that is worth pursuing to its logical end. Each government that comes to power starts from scratch as if the one before it never left any footprints to be followed or any idea worth pursuing. If every task must start from scratch then five years is too short a time to complete what was started. The MDA Government has to show sincerity of intent by constructing flyovers across the city. The MLAs and ministers should visit Kolkata and see the multi-storeyed flyovers which are a sign of a government that thinks and delivers. Meghalaya has reached an inflection point. Government cannot be held hostage to law breakers. If demolition of encroachers' properties is needed that should be done. The rule of law must prevail.

**Letters to the Editor**

**Barring teachers from active politics - A blunder**

Editor,  
The notification barring teachers from active politics to me is another blunder committed by this present MDA government. It was a shock to read on Tuesday, December 14, 2021 on the front page of this daily that this government had come up with this notification. To me it's really unfortunate and unacceptable that the Government of Meghalaya should bar its intellectuals/teachers from participating in active politics, especially when the statutory body the UGC, responsible for issuing guidelines to college and university teachers, in fact, encourages teachers to shoulder responsibilities of public office. The big question therefore is: Who then can participate in politics? This notification is a loss not only to the teaching community but for the society at large.

We have witnessed in our state that teachers do shoulder social responsibilities be it in local bodies as well in state politics. These can be considered to be affairs of common interest to all members of society. I would like to state here that the editorial of your daily dated November 6, 2021 recalled the days where the state of Meghalaya was once represented by stalwarts comprising educated leaders like university and college teachers. Here you rightly pointed out that these were "professionals not businessmen." Since intellectuals are now barred from politics then what kind of politicians will we get in the future, and in which direction is our state headed for?

I would like to point out here that our Chief Minister himself revealed in an important social gathering that he is engaging a renowned professor/teacher from one of the world's best universities, to provide advisory services to his political party the NPP, on political party management. When many of the leaders of NPP are also teachers of different

A West Asia Quad is on the anvil. This Quadrilateral partnership comprising India, USA, UAE and Israel will provide a solid window for India to the Arab world. In India's strategic backyard, it will open up enormous opportunity for India's economy, technology and human resources. At the same time, India should leverage its economy for a bigger opening in the region.

Follow the creation of the Quad in the India-Pacific consisting of India, USA, Japan and Australia, and the reactions it incurred from countries, mainly China and its new ally Russia, the grouping of India and USA, Israel and UAE are likely to draw similar attention. India teaming up with America in any part of this world will raise eyebrows of China, and in the Arab world, it would rattle Pakistan if it isn't the Arab region. Hence, New Delhi will have to tread cautiously, unless, miraculously relations with both Beijing and Islamabad normalise.

The coming together of four countries is a promising development, which some observers are leading the epithet, West Asia Quad. This group follows the Abraham Accord signed in September 2020 between Israel and Arab states -- UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco. The Abraham Accord was a historic development following two such accords in the past; Israel and Egypt in 1979, and Jordan and Israel in 1994.

According to this accord, Israel and other signatory countries could open embassies in each other's countries, and trade and investment could begin. While Israel is ushered into the Arab world through diplomatic and economic ties, Muslims; among other things, could go and pray in the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, the third highest holy site of the Islamic world.

Abraham Accord and West Asia Quad were done against the backdrop of competitive positioning of the powerful countries. One is to curb the ambitions moves by Recep Tayyip Erdogan for Turkish leadership of the Islamic World. Second factor is Iran, that is developing nuclear capabilities. Iran has been in cold war against Saudi Arabia for long? The fight is Islamic inter-denominational conflict between Sunni (Saudi Arabia) and Shia (Iran).

From New Delhi's point of view, this new grouping lands new access to advance its geo-economics interests.

colleges of our state, the question here is why has the government then come up with this notification. Or is there a hidden agenda behind the notification? And what message is the government sending to the society and whole of humanity with this kind of action?

I think it is time for all citizens of our state, especially the intellectuals and educated to think hard on this issue. Otherwise in future other groups of the educated and intellectuals may be barred from participating in politics and local authorities too.

Yours etc.,  
Samborlang Dkhar,  
Shillong

**Politics In Meghalaya**

Editor,  
When 12 MLAs left the Congress to join the All India Trinamool Congress (AITC) it gave a jolt to the MDA Government. Ms Agatha Sangma the Tura MP perhaps on instructions from her brother the national

interests in the Middle East. India receives considerable remittances from expatriates in the Middle East, mainly UAE. Of late, UAE has taken the initiative in inviting India as the observer-member of Organisation for Islamic cooperation (OIC) much to the chagrin of Pakistan. It has also snubbed Pakistan for raking up Kashmir in each meeting of the OIC. Israel has been close to



But Russia is gaining an impressive foothold with its selective alliances with countries like Syria. Beijing is eyeing the oil-rich region to acquire strategic accesses through Iran and others. It has made contacts with Israel too. That tie-up may be tricky in view of the Israel-USA umbilical cord.

At any rate, India as a part of West Asia Quad will reap big benefit. The group is

*"The coming together of four countries is a promising development, which some observers are leading the epithet, West Asia Quad. This group follows the Abraham Accord signed in September 2020 between Israel and Arab states -- UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco. The Abraham Accord was a historic development following two such accords in the past; Israel and Egypt in 1979, and Jordan and Israel in 1994."*

India. Saudi Arabia is somewhat friendly. Iran and India have maintained proximately in mutual interest, but USA's sanctions, and exit from the nuclear treaty has put strain on that relationship. China seducing Iran away is another bottleneck in maintaining the

relations. UAE has also stood for India in a few forums including the OIC. Hence, New Delhi should ramp up defence and security ties with UAE which could be India's dependable ally in the Middle East.

The United States has formidable presence in the Middle East because of its proximity with Israel, UAE, Saudi Arabia and other coun-

cooperation shared security concerns are bound to come up. There is bound to be intelligence-sharing, and coordination on the security front as economic interactions and security are closely linked, especially in West Asia.

New Delhi, however, seems be sanguine about the West Asia Quad. Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar said recently that "the Quad has moved effectively and well in the last year. It is loose, innovative and embraces new ways of working for all the four members. It is not aspirational, it is real." The new group takes a realistic view and finds practical solutions on issues like student movements, vaccines, start-ups etc.

The other economic strategy followed by West Asia Quad is to avoid risking large exposure to any country. In the wake of the pandemic, such exposure has cost heavily to the countries. The reference country is China, which is the hub for aviation, pharma, and medical equipment. These got disrupted due to COVID-19. In the

light of the COVID-19 experience, West Asia Quad will explore shorter and multiple supply chains and plural options. It will also focus on hedging and de-risking the imports.

In the future, technology will be a key determinant in economy, politics and diplomacy. New technologies, green-technology and start-ups will be the top priorities. In order to operate those, sound and quality human resource will be needed. India with her depth in skill-building, education and technical know-how can be a more effective power.

Finally, the West Asia Quad is a result of many countries de-coupling Israel and Palestine. New Delhi has done so. Two Arab countries had done it, now others are following suit. Be that as it may, Israel boycott must end, and the Palestinians should be able to live in peace and security. The West Asia Quad could serve as a balancer between the two countries in perpetual conflict.

It is certainly a feather in the cap of India to have friends and partners in the Middle-East. Pakistan could not play the Islamic card in the region as India has as many Muslims here. The domestic policy should reflect our foreign policy and vice versa. That balance is to be made by India. That is the challenge of diplomacy in the Arab world. —INFA

(The writer is Prof. International politics, JIMMC)

to sell off their homes and leave their birthplace to move to Calcutta. Those are sad memories.

Right now we appear to be inclined towards the Party that before 1992 had 40 MPs in the Lok Sabha and which by 2009 became our rulers. We also fail to perceive the religious intolerance practised today because we don't view the right channels. And also we seem to have forgotten the dreaded CAB now elevated to CAA.

As far as my conviction goes, unless VPP, AITMC and INC come together in 2023, Meghalaya and the whole country will regress and perhaps be far worse than things are at present.

Yours etc.,  
JKharmih  
Shillong - I

**Mahant a stranger in his own temple?**

Editor,  
Appropos to the public notice published in your daily dated December 9, 2021

by the Mahant of Narsingh Akhara Temple in Qualapatty, Shillong, informing the authorities that if any unlawful construction is found in the Temple complex, necessary action may be taken against the erring person as he has nothing to do with such illegalities.

It is surprising that the Mahant of the Temple should make such an irresponsible statement. How is it that illegal construction is going on in the complex and he has no knowledge of the same? If it is so he has displayed his incompetence to be the Mahant of the temple. This calls for his immediate removal from his post of Mahant by the superiors of the Narsingh Akhara Temple because the continuance of such a person is not in the interest of the Temple and the people connected to it.

Yours etc.,  
Junelson Rangdong,  
Shillong-9

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

**West Asia Quad**

**India's Arab footprints**

By Dr D.K. Giri

**Union minister Ajay Mishra a damocles sword hanging over Modi**

By Sushil Kutty

Minister of State for Home Ajay Mishra 'Teni'—India's 'Most Wanted' hiding in plain sight! They take his name and they talk of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's motives. Which other man in India gets this distinction? Why is PM Modi reluctant to sack him from the Council of Ministers? What kind of hold does 'Teni' have on Modi? It isn't that Ajay Mishra Teni is Modi's common law son-in-law—'Damaad'?

And, yeah, what sort of sinister hold on Modi, not on Amit Shah, who is Teni's senior in the Home Ministry, but Teni's junior in running Modi into the ground. Is Ajay Mishra Teni to blame for his son's alleged murderous run which claimed five deaths under the four wheels of a Thar jeep? See, they even got the killer vehicle's moniker right—Thar!

What is more, the death-dealing Thar's registration is in Ajay Mishra's name! Now, what kind of idiot kills

tion, why is Modi reluctant to throw Teni under the bus? The hell, Modi is 'Prime Minister of India', not some ornery bloke who strayed into view, like the vagabond in the buff!

There are now people—the aam aadmi, Laxman's common man—wondering if Teni knows Modi's best known dark secret and Modi is afraid that a reindeer caught in the glaring headlights of the Thar. Nobody wants to be 'road kill', not even the five who got mowed down under the Thar in Lakhimpur-Kheri.

The three others killed, who got beaten to death, their lives do not count. They were at the wrong place at the wrong time—nameless, ageless and useless to no one in particular. Even the BJP, the party they belonged to, wanted to have anything to do with them. The world's largest political party is a joke!

Modi should drop every-



with the weapon issued in his name? And then they say the Brahmin is innately intelligent, with more grey cells in the cranium than hot air in a balloon the size of Ashish Mishra's head?

The dark deed done, which son of an idiot goes into hiding and refuses to surface till the police post "Wanted"—or India's equivalent for "Bolo", the all-points bulletin—at Teni's Lakhimpur-Kheri mansion? Only the densest of the nation's dumbest will do it.

But they say even the best of criminal minds leave behind clues. In Teni's case, it is his son Ashish Mishra and his dirty dozen, all 13 of them who are in judicial custody. The 13 "conspired to kill", says the SIT, set up on the orders of the Supreme Court. But it seems like the apex court lacks the power to order "prime suspect" Ajay Mishra Teni's arrest.

The only people who get

thing—most of all the expressway binge—and serve notice to Ajay Mishra 'Teni.' Like they say, Caesar's wife should be beyond suspicion. Right now, there is a thick slab of suspicion sitting on Modi's grey head! So, what is it that keeps Modi from kicking Teni in the butt and straight out of his Council of Ministers?

Some say, it is Modi's arrogance in full flow. Others say Modi will not sack anybody on the eve of important elections. Three, the BJP and Modi do not want to give the Opposition a rant to keep haranguing the ruling party with. Let's admit not just Ajay Mishra Teni, but also Modi who is on a very sticky wicket. The day will come when Teni will be like the pup that got thrown under Modi's car—like the puppy in Modi's 2014 story.

There is talk that Ajay Mishra Teni will eventually get his comeuppance—if

*The dark deed done, which son of an idiot goes into hiding and refuses to surface till the police post "Wanted"—or India's equivalent for "Bolo", the all-points bulletin—at Teni's Lakhimpur-Kheri mansion? Only the densest of the nation's dumbest will do it. But they say even the best of criminal minds leave behind clues. In Teni's case, it is his son Ashish Mishra and his dirty dozen, all 13 of them who are in judicial custody.*

thrown under the bus are the nation's poor. The Supreme Court, if you look at it, innately discriminates and if there are folks who consider the top court incapable of being fair and square, then they aren't too far wrong. Why is Teni allowed to have a free run despite all five fingers pointing at him?

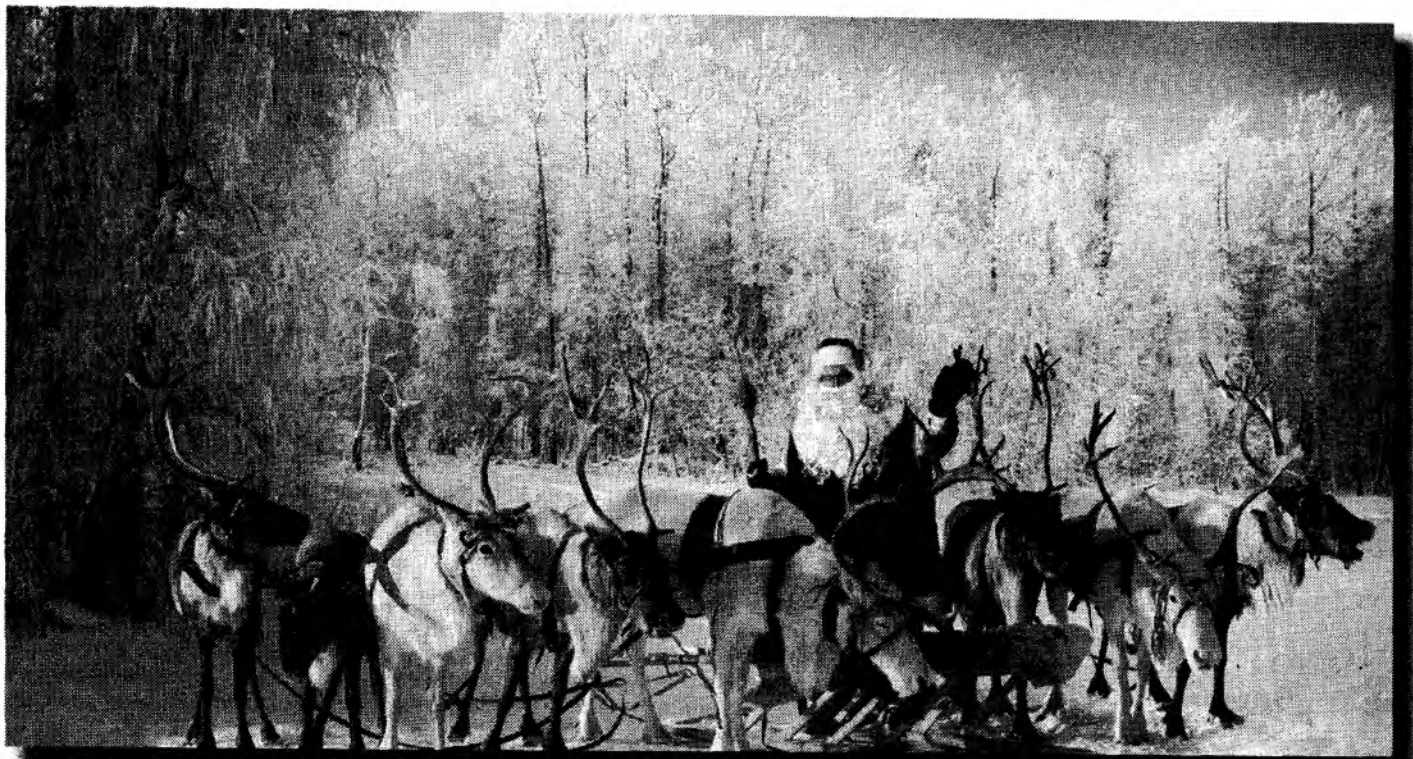
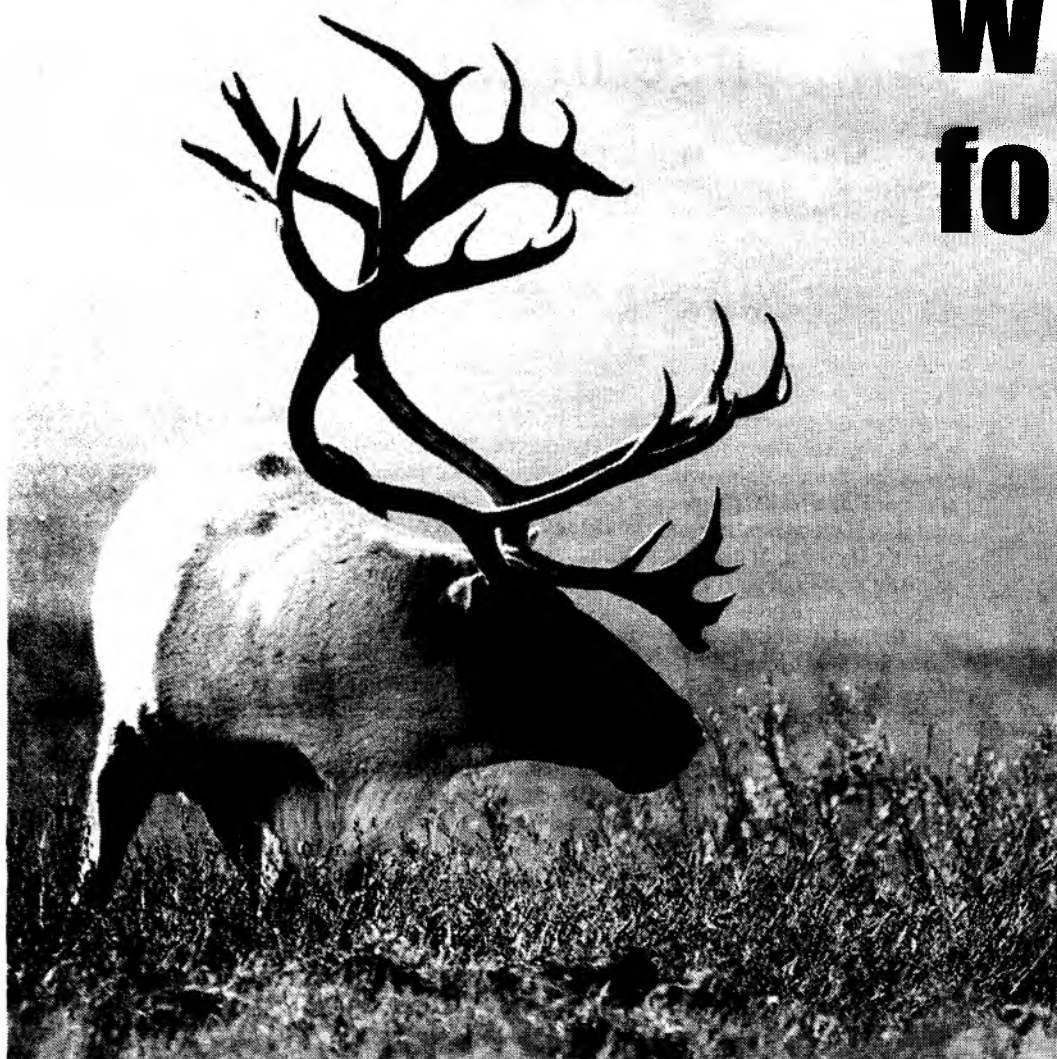
Last heard Ajay Mishra Teni, MoS Home, was to be Chief Guest at the Sashastha Seema Bal's 58th anniversary parade. Teni's VVIP status has not taken a hit despite the choicest cuss words he hurled at a journalist who asked one too many questions of 'Teni' and got pinned to the wall like a fly in the ointment.

Ajay Mishra 'Teni' is one fine fellow who when he is in the mood blurts out his murderous credentials, which then begs the ques-

not now, then whenever Modi thinks it's the right time. Modi's senseless cult-followers are blind as a bat when it comes to following Modi. They believe Modi is doing the right thing. But for Modi's restraint, they would commit mass suicide at Ganga Ghat in Varanasi if it comes to that.

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi has vowed to get the "criminal" behind bars even if it takes a decade. The farmers got outsmarted. They should have understood that at the end of the day, it was Modi's inaction against 'Teni' that mattered more after Lakhimpur-Kheri. More than even the repeal of the three farm laws. If Ajay Mishra Teni survives till after the UP elections and BJP posts a win in Uttar Pradesh, Modi would have pulled off a miracle. (IPA Service)

# Why reindeer are perfect for pulling Santa's sleigh



**W**e all know that Father Christmas would struggle to deliver presents to everyone around the world without the help of his magical reindeer. But why were they chosen to pull the sleigh rather than any other animal?










It turns out that the biology of reindeer makes them ideal for the job. Here are five reasons why.

### WARMTH

Reindeer live in the Arctic, where temperatures on long winter nights often plummet below -30°C. Unlike most mammals, which only have one layer of fur, reindeer have two: a dense underfur beneath a blanket of hollow guard hairs. Reindeer can have up to 2,000 hairs packed into a single square centimetre, making it ten times as dense as human hair. This double layer traps air and creates a cover of insulation that keeps reindeer from losing heat, and stops snow from reaching and cooling the skin. This enables reindeer to keep warm, whether living with Santa at the North Pole or travelling around the world on Christmas Eve.

In addition, when blood reaches our extremities, like our fingers and toes, it cools and our hearts must pump at a faster rate to warm the blood up again. This requires a lot of energy which we get from food, something that is often lacking in Arctic landscapes – well, unless you count feasting on candy canes and sugar plums with the elves.

But reindeer possess something called a counter-current heat exchange which essentially allows them to recycle heat so that the heart doesn't need to work as hard. The arteries and veins carrying blood to and from the heart are intertwined, allowing heat from warm arterial blood to pass to the cold venous blood. A lot of this heat exchange happens in the specialised nasal bones of the reindeer,

 <b>Dasher</b>	 <b>Dancer</b>	 <b>Comet</b>
 <b>Prancer</b>	 <b>Rudolph</b>	 <b>Donner</b>
 <b>Vixen</b>	 <b>Cupid</b>	 <b>Blitzen</b>

where plenty of cold air is inhaled through the nostrils. In fact, the highly concentrated blood vessels in their nostrils often give reindeer a red nose, just like Rudolph.

### FITNESS

Reindeer lichen – an organism that is formed from a symbiotic relationship between algae and fungi – is the main thing reindeer eat during the winter. Lichens are the crusty looking things that you often see living on tree trunks and rocks.

Lichens are plentiful in the Arctic – an ideal food source that reindeer can find wherever they go. This means reindeer don't need to store body fat and unlike many other animals, they can find enough food to power their epic sleigh journey with Santa – helped along by the carrots people leave out, of course.

Reindeer are actually the only mammals capable of digesting lichen, thanks to specialised bacteria in their gut.

### SIGHT

The Arctic has very little daylight during the winter, so reindeer have evolved to see as much as possible in the dark. Reindeer eyes change colour from gold to blue in the winter, letting in more of the small amount of light available and improving their vision.

Reindeer can even see in the ultraviolet. Although this amazing sense is common in birds and insects, reindeer are some of the only mammals to have evolved this ability. This means that objects that would blend into the background when seen through human eyes are much more visible to reindeer.

As reindeer can essentially see in the dark, it makes them perfect for guiding Santa on

his journey through the night, ensuring he is not seen by children.

### STEADINESS

To walk in snow without sinking or getting frostbite, reindeer have evolved wide, crescent-shaped hooves. These keep them stable, but they can also be used as shovels to dig down to find lichen under the snow.

The hoof pads shrink and harden over winter, allowing the reindeer to walk on the sharp edges of their hooves. As well as reducing the area of the hoof exposed to the cold ground, the hoof rims cut into the ice and snow to prevent slipping. Obviously, this is a great adaptation to keep reindeer steady when landing on snowy rooftops.

### TRANSPORT

Reindeer are the only domesticated species of deer, and people have been using them to get around since the stone age. People ride on their backs like horses, and use small herds of them to drive sleds, just like Santa.

Reindeer migrate up to 5,000km a year – further than any other land mammal – and they regularly cover 55km in a day. They are surprisingly fast too, reaching speeds of up to 80km per hour. This long distance travel is ideal to help Father Christmas visit every child in just one night. So, reindeer can stay warm, see in the dark, stay upright on slippery surfaces and find nutrition in the harshest of environments – all invaluable skills for pulling off the biggest night's work on Christmas Eve. Their domestication and long relationship with humans means they are also well accustomed to pulling sleighs.

Of course, Santa's reindeer can also fly, though they can't thank evolution for that. As we all know, their ability to fly comes from a sprinkling of magical Christmas dust.

*(The Conversation)*

## Prinseps to host first NFT auction in India



**P**rinseps auction house is set to host the Gobardhan Ash Live Auction, offering 35 rare works on paper from the family estate alongside 35 accompanying NFTs. The auction will open for live bidding on January 14, 2022 at 7 pm, representing the first time an Indian auction house enters the NFT (non-fungible token) space.

The Gobardhan Ash Auction re-creates the second exhibition of the Progressive Artists' Group and Calcutta Group, 1950, in which Gobardhan Ash presented a series of gouache works alongside F.N. Souza, M.F. Husain and S.H. Raza, among others. The bright and eclectic modern images painted by Ash for the exhibition, and now offered for auction, perfectly capture the milieu of the time presenting modernist interpretations of everyday people or animals.

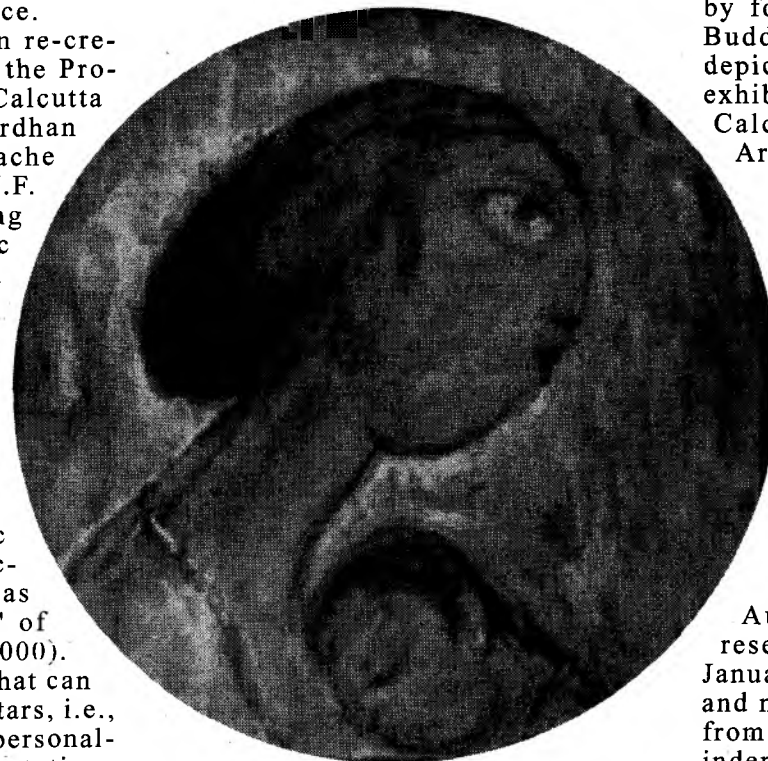
Ash's art from the 1950s showcases his individuality alongside his characteristic technique and presents impeccable character studies such as the painting 'Mother and Son' of 1948 (estimate Rs 30,000-1,50,000).

These experiments in art are what can be characterised as today's avatars, i.e., 'primitive' artworks depicting personality traits, or graphical representations of a user, making them ideal for transformation into an NFT and continuing Ash's artistic experimentation into the

21st Century.

The auction will offer each of Ash's physical works on paper, immediately followed by its accompanying digital versions offered as NFTs minted on the Ethereum blockchain.

All 35 of the works on paper carry an estimate of Rs 30,000-



1,50,000, and the NFTs are estimated at RS 1,000-25,000, offering accessible prices to newer col-

lectors exploring the NFT market for the first time.

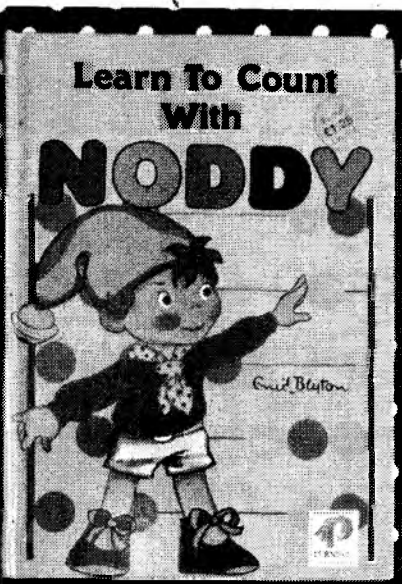
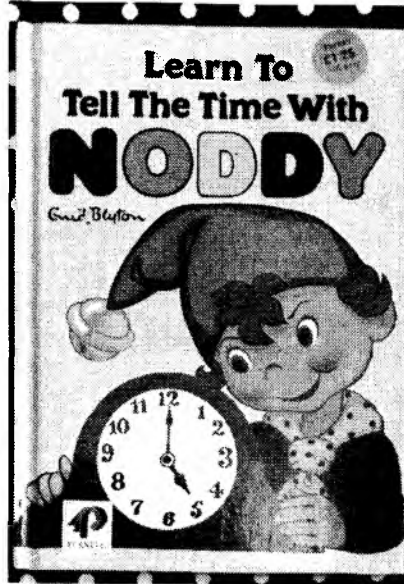
The key works include 'Tribhanga', which depicts a common stance in traditional Indian art and popular Indian dance forms such as Odissi; 'FA-HI-AN', which depicts an avatar of a Chinese Buddhist monk who travelled by foot from China to India to study Buddhist texts; and 'Mosgul', which depicts a man lost in thought and was exhibited in the joint exhibition of the Calcutta Group and the Progressive Artists' Group, 1950.

Speaking about the upcoming auction, Prinseps curator Indrajit Chatterjee said, "Ash's paintings struck me as bearing a resemblance to the crypto punks movement, but from seven decades earlier. We are delighted to be presenting what we see today as an avatar, painted in Ash's unique and primitive water-colours more than 70 years ago. These works will also represent the first NFTs offered on the market by an Indian auction house."

Following the Gobardhan Ash Auction, Prinseps will host a no reserve nationalism book auction in January, offering a collection of rare and mostly first edition books ranging from the pre-independence to the post-independence era in India, written and signed by revolutionary leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and V.K. Krishna Menon. *(IANS)*



# How Enid Blyton created the template for children's theatre



Head to London's West End and you are likely to find all sorts of plays for families, inspired by some of the most loved children stories. There is JK Rowling's Harry Potter And The Cursed Child, Neal Foster's adaptation of David Walliams' Gangsta Granny and Tim Minchin's "anarchically joyous, gleefully nasty and ingenious musical adaptation" of Roald Dahl's Matilda, as theatre critic Lyn Gardner described it.

The popularity of theatre for children and for adapting children's books for the stage begins in Britain with the works of best-selling children's writer Enid Blyton (1897-1968) in the 1950s. By this time Blyton had, as The New York Times reported, made herself "supreme above all authors" and was "a category all herself".

This was thanks to her long-running magazine Sunny Stories, adventure series such as The Famous Five and The Secret Seven, and stories set in the boarding

schools Malory Towers and St Clare's. It was not unusual for bookshops to have a designated Enid Blyton section due to her regularly publishing 30 or more books a year - 39 in 1951 and 44 in 1952.

It made sense, then, to adapt her stories for the stage and she sometimes had two shows running in London during the Christmas season: Noddy in Toyland (1954-59) and the thriller Famous Five Adventure (1955; 1956).

The importance of Blyton's literary achievements remains a contentious issue but in the 1950s she mostly seemed untouchable and conquered the West End as seamlessly as she had done the world of children's publishing.

This was especially so with Noddy in Toyland (described as a "pantomime"), which opened on December 23 1954. Along with the power of Blyton's name, Noddy's catchy tunes, dazzling special effects (including a

"real" train puffing steam on stage) and the ease with which Blyton's characters could be shoe-horned into a familiar pantomime plot (the usually timid Noddy travels to the Enchanted Wood to capture some wicked goblins) helped make it a West End fixture.

**NODDY ON STAGE**

Noddy, a little wooden nodding boy who lives in Toyland, first appeared in the stories Noddy Goes to Toyland (1949) and Hurrah for Little Noddy (1950) and came to be Blyton's most famous character. There were 24 tales in the "Noddy Library" series, ending with Noddy and the Aeroplane (1963).

The Noddy books' success was due in part to the colourful illustrations by Dutch artist Eelco Martinus ten Harmsen. Designed for pre-school children, the books' characters were partly intended to compete with those of Disney and were an enormous hit in Britain. By 1962, 26 mil-

lion copies of the books had been sold.

In 1954, When the wooden boy made his stage debut it was, unsurprisingly, a hit.

Children at performances reacted noisily and excitedly. They leaned dangerously over the balconies to get a better look and tried to grab the sweets thrown to them from the stage. It was often pandemonium but to Blyton, this did not matter: "the children took over the play at times and even held up the action", she reported proudly.

Noddy came at a time in the history of pantomime and theatre for children as it coincided with celebrity casting taking off, much to the annoyance of traditionalists. "If this is the way pantomime is going", remarked one reviewer faced with the crooner Frankie Vaughan, "it will speedily become a yearly parade of television performers going through their usual paces ... [and] there will be little point in taking the children along".

Blyton was widely credited with returning pantomime to children. Her plays had no "stars" but sold out nonetheless.

The familiarity of the characters was part of the appeal of Noddy and later the Famous Five Adventure - in much the same way that Harry Potter and Matilda draw audiences in 2021.

**CRITICAL PLAUDITS**

In 1954, people worried about declining theatre attendances (partly because of the threat posed by television) held up Noddy in Toyland as proof that the way to make children develop a long-lasting interest in theatre, and thus ensure its survival, "is to offer them real plays of their own" (The Stage, December 31 1954).

Even writer Kenneth Tynan - a fearsome enemy of things twee and formulaic - used his Observer column to compare the "pleasing" production favourably against the star-studded pantomimes elsewhere, full of

"radio comedians...condemned to fidget uneasily in doublet and hose" (26 December 1954). As Tynan noted, Noddy in Toyland kept things simple.

Simplicity was, of course, part of the charm of Blyton's work. The show was easier to follow than other pantomimes. Fairies, goblins, talking animals, humans and toys came together in a world that made sense to its young audience.

But as reviewers noted, there was a myth-like quality to it all. The show promised an exciting but easily understandable way of living beyond the every day, which even to young children who (one might suppose) had not lived long enough to become jaded, was beguiling.

Blyton's plays have been forgotten but 70 years on this is still part of the appeal of such shows. In Blyton's case, it is another instance of her legacy - a legacy that sits awkwardly in the history of popular entertainment.

(The Conversation)

## 'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi Sunday, DEC 19, 2021

Full Moon on your solar return chart will give very good results for the whole year. Things will get better in life and your desired targets will be achieved to make you happy. Unexpected events to your liking will take place. You will be full of spirits and will have gains in your professional/business. The gains in your professional life will also get reflected in your personal life. You will enjoy excellent bonding with your partner. Peace and harmony will prevail in marriage ties. Those who are unmarried will get good proposals and will plan to enter into wedlock. You will enrich your knowledge. Students will remain devoted to their studies to utilize their time properly. Your financial position will keep getting better. Mental satisfaction will see you gain supremacy in your work field. You will have a swell time. Government officials will remain happy with you.

**Aries: (March 21 - April 20)**  
It is going to be a happy and peaceful week. You will be spending quality time with your family and will also plan to go on a picnic or sight seeing trip. You will also like to spend some time being left alone and offering your prayers to God. You will get astonishing results in your work. Your bosses will be impressed with you and your never say die attitude. You will have monetary gains. A work that was left incomplete will get finished with your efforts. You will do charitable work and also help people a lot. There will be amicable relations in relationships. Chances of gains in partnership business will double. You will look after your elders well. It will be easy to get along and work with even those who oppose you.

**Taurus: (April 21 - May 21)**  
It is time to re-assess your potentials and carry out your tasks efficiently. You will get enormous success on the strength of your efforts and will be well organized. You will get happiness and the main thing is that you will be satisfied. The government works that were struck will gather momentum. A court verdict will come in your favor. You will also get to meet an influential personality. You will also get old diseases. There will be progress in your business. There will be increase in your popularity and influence. You will also have good understanding with your spouse/partner. You will be involved in social service, charity and noble deeds. You will create a good impression that will give happiness in your family.

**Gemini: (May 22 - June 21)**  
It will be auspicious week. You will get happiness and the main thing is that your work will get done with ease. All decisions taken by you will prove to be correct. You will also get back your money given to a third person. A confusion will be created at your workplace but you will solve it with intelligence. You will also try and work according to your wishes and all your work plans will be successful. Opportunities to earn money will rise. You will spend some time with your family. You will spend time in reading knowledge enhancing literature. You will make progress in your works and personal relationships. You will also pay attention to domestic works and also help to the best of your ability.

**Cancer: (June 22 - July 22)**  
You will get lot of success, name and fame this week. To match the fast pace of life you will have to double up your efforts. And in the process, you will be successful in achieving your objectives. You will get lot of mental satisfaction. The husband and wife will have good understanding. You will also remain active and take part in community activities and also share your emotions which will help you in making useful contacts. You will also meet your friends and relatives. Travels will be beneficial for you. You need to adopt yourself to the needs of the time. Change is the need of the hour. If you keep your behavior adoptable time will favor you. You will also meet your friends and relatives.

**Leo: (July 23 - August 23)**  
It is generally a good time. You will fulfill your desires. You will also have monetary gains. Some vital decisions regarding work/business will be taken. You will also take part in some function at your in-laws house. Married couples will experience bliss and happiness in family ties. Love birds will also enjoy wonderful bonding. You will be able to think out of the box and will amaze people with your outstanding abilities. Your communication skills will be second to none. You will have the inclination and power to get everyone on your side. You will also have the power and ability to make people appreciate your work and sincerity. Unmarried people will receive marriage proposals. You will also get the situation at work place will be in your favor. You will touch the heights of success. You will also prove your mental capability. You will be promoted in your job. You will also plan a major expansion in your business. You will give equal importance to your work and home. Your thoughts will be vast. You will also help your friends and other people. You will give lot of importance to your emotions. You will also have faith in your capability that will give you satisfaction.

**Virgo: (August 24 - September 22)**  
The time will be passed happily. At this time your outlook, values and behavior will undergo a change. You will rise in your profession. It will also bring about an increase in your respect, name and fame. Your prestige will grow. You will go on a business journey. The results will

be good. You will pay equal importance to your domestic and household matters. You will also do religious and charitable works. Your life partner will prove to be a great advisor and helper. You will do your work with great enthusiasm and your efficiency will increase. Materialism will attract you, but you will keep things balanced. You need not postpone your work and keep a control in your job. You will get the blessings of all. Your financial position will remain strong.

**Libra: (September 23 - Libra 23)**  
Your efforts put in the past will pay off well. You will get peace and cooperation on the domestic and work front. Your problems at work will get solved. There can be some trickery in money related matters. You will spend lavishly. But don't get entangled in other's work or you may face losses. There will be an improvement in your health. That is why you will realize that tension can harm you and your dear ones. That is why you will take out time for entertainment. You will feel mental peace. You will also get a good news from some relative. You will come closer to your spouse/partner. Your contacts and associates will help you a lot and you will receive a very big contract or order. You will do your office work with great enthusiasm and your efficiency will improve.

**Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22)**  
A success granting awaits you. The pace of time is also in your favor. You will feel yourself to be full of energy and vigour. You will be fully active too. You will be busy in your work, business, entertainment, travels, shopping etc. You are accepting what life is giving on a platter to you. You will also be able to succeed in establishing a dialogue with people. The time will be favorable for you. You will get to know about your financial and personal gains. You need to be careful in financial dealings. Don't trust anyone blindly, not even your family members. You may become a victim of disloyalty. Otherwise, time will be passed happily. At this time your outlook, values and behavior will undergo a change. It will bring about an increase in your respect and prestige.

**Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 23)**  
It will be a special week for you. You will do something new and will be full of enthusiasm and zeal. You will complete your work with cooperation from colleagues. You will have interest towards spiritualism. It will be auspicious and wealth giving days. Your prestige will increase. You will be artistic and imaginative. You will be traditional and fulfill your desires. You will also have monetary gains. You will also receive a cheque or draft, and will also sign some new contracts in your business. There will be improvement in your business. You will do every work carefully with a lot of deliberation and on someone's advice. Newly wed will understand each other properly and also take care of each other.

**Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20)**  
Your self confidence will be high. And you will not deviate from your goals. You will keep doing your work and will impress one and all. Your bosses and seniors will be happy with your performance. You will also work under the guidance of an influential person. Your social life will be active. You will look after your parents well. These are prestige enhancing days. You will be busy in preparing for some festival or function. You will be ostentatious, but people will praise you. You will be successful in competitive examination. Your time will be great. This is an auspicious time for you. There will be an increase in your income. You will work hard to bring yourself and your family back on track. You will establish a dialogue with everyone.

**Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18)**  
You will be mentally relaxed. You will also take your work seriously. Your image will also improve. At the office or at work you will work with team spirit. Your contributions will be acknowledged by your bosses. You will also give some gift to your friends as a gesture of thanks. Your efforts will bring in money. You will plan to buy a property or house. The balance between buying and selling will be static. You will also not compromise in money related matters. You will also not rest till you do something. You will have respect for your in-laws. Do not trust anyone in money matters. Works that have been pending with the government will be completed. Work related to pension, insurance, passport etc. will be completed. You will be praised for your work. Work in office will gather momentum.

**Pisces: (February 19 - March 20)**  
You will enter an excellent phase. Held up money will be realized. Your investments in some venture may give you a fabulous return to strengthen your financial position. You will have your work duty stabilized. All endeavour to earn money will be successful. Your influence may swell and you may get promotion. Your health will be okay. You may get entangled with your relatives on some case. Students will get positive results. Those in service must adopt an adjustable attitude with their seniors and colleagues to get maximum output in their work field. Family members affectionate nature will make you quite courageous. The time will be favorable but avoid having any tussle with colleagues.

## 2021 Meta year-in-review

**Meta released its annual 'Year-in-review' to share the top trending topics on Facebook and Instagram for 2021. Vaccines, Olympics, and Captain Vikram Batra were among the top trending topics.**

Every year the Year-In-Review reflects the themes that define the top keywords for the year. For 2021, Covid and health, Sports, and an assortment of Cultural moments and topics captured the minds of Indians across Facebook and Instagram. We also have a section of trending on Reels.

**COVID AND HEALTH: 'Prayer', 'Oxygen' and 'Hospital' were the top trending topics within this theme, as India grappled with the second wave of Covid and people reached out to each other for support on our platforms. This then graduated to various 'Vaccine' and vaccination-related topics, as people looked to immunize themselves from the virus. A surprising trend though was 'Flaxseed', which a lot of people shared and discussed because of its perceived benefits.**

**SPORTS: 2021 will always be marked as the year when India created history at the Olympics. With the highest ever tally of medals at the 'Tokyo Olympics' and 'Paralympics Games', the country celebrated its athletes with a 'Gold medal' becoming a key topic of discussion. Test cricket made a big comeback, especially as India made it to the finals of the inaugural 'ICC World Test Championship'. Also, 'Women's One Day International cricket' has been a trending**

topic, as cricketers like Mithali Raj, Smriti Mandhana, and Jhulan Goswami make India proud with their performances on the field.

**CULTURAL MOMENTS AND TOPICS:** Facebook and Instagram are embedded in the cultural fabric of India and the trending topics within this theme depict the diversity in interests that the country has. Among Indian festivals and celebrations, 'Garba' emerged as a top trend. With the release of the Bollywood movie 'Shershaah' around 'Independence Day', Indians remembered Param Vir Chakra Awardee 'Captain Vikram Batra' for his bravery. Lastly, 'Jewelry' and 'Cryptocurrency' emerged as topics of interest, illustrating India's traditional and modern outlook.

**TRENDING ON REELS:** Reels has been the gateway for young people to express themselves, showcase their talent and break out as the new stars of Instagram. Some of them can be seen on the 25 Under 25 Instagrammers of India list. Some of the top songs popular on Reels (in the past 90 days are): Raataan Lambiyan (from 'Shershaah'), by Tanishk Bagchi (2) love nwantiti (feat. Dj Yo! & AX'EL) [Remix], by CKay and (3) Tu Milta Hai Mujhe, by Raj Barman. Some of the top trends or challenges popular on Reels this year are (1) Bachpan Ka Pyaar, which is a lip-sync & dance trend (2) Baarish Ki Jaaye, which is trending involving Remix & an AR effect and (3) Lut Gaye (feat. Emraan Hashmi), which is a lip-sync trend. (IANSLife)

*"We may have found a cure for most evils; but we have found no remedy for the worst of them all, the apathy of human beings."*

— Helen Keller

## The Shillong Times

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### Violence, Democracy

A series of incidents across the nation in the past two days are testing the patience of civilized society. In two incidents in Punjab, linked to holy Sikh shrines, two men were lynched on suspicion that they attempted to commit sacrilege. In Kolkata, crude bombs were hurled and injuries caused to many during the voting for the civic polls. In Kerala, in a mix of religious and political passions, one leader each of a pro-Muslim and pro-BJP outfits were done to death in retaliatory strikes. All of these reveal one fact - that social divides are deepening while the political class keeps dividing the people and fishing in troubled waters.

The Punjab incidents, prima facie, have no political link. But, this cannot altogether be ruled out as assembly elections are approaching. In one incident, at the Golden Temple in Amritsar, a youth was pounced upon, taken to a room and lynched after he forced his way close to the sanctum sanctorum and attempted what looked like sacrilege. In the past, such attempts had happened and they turned out to be acts of mentally disturbed men - or, the courts ruled so. The second incident, by a 'migrant' youth elsewhere, is described by the police as a simple case of theft inside the gurdwara, while the man was lynched on suspicion of it being sacrilege. He was executed in police presence. Religious sensitivities are high in Punjab, where minority Sikhs are often restive for one or other reason. The farmer agitation was handled by the Centre with kid-gloves because it did not want to rub the Sikhs - Punjab farmers forming the vanguard of the agitation -- the wrong way. Police too have its hands tied when handling tense situations there.

The two murders in Kerala, involving suspected RSS and SDPI goons, have the potential for communally dividing the society down the middle. The first murder was pre-planned, the second a retaliation in a matter of less than 12 hours at a distance of 10km, in Alappuzha district. The first murder itself was seen as retaliation to some earlier murders suspectedly by the SDPI, a militant Muslim outfit with strong funding and political ambitions. Chances are that both sides will lose more lives in similar strikes though ban orders have been clamped on the region for two days. In Kolkata, there was large-scale violence after the assembly polls and the ruling Trinamool Congress is doing its best to stonewall BJP forays in West Bengal. The bomb-attacks in civic polls are new instances. All these are against the set democratic traditions of the nation.

# U Kiang Nangbah: A Swordsman with the stealth of the Tiger

The honour given to the Man

By H H Mohrmen

It is not easy to give an irrefutable English translation of the Khasi Pnar term 'u Khlawait' or 'u khla-kawait', which comprises two or three words as the case may be. If the two words are defined according to their respective meanings, the literary meaning of 'khla' is tiger and 'wait' here refers to wait-lam or wait-fa-pom which means a warrior's sword. It is different from a machete that the people use for cutting trees or clearing the forest or bushes. Sword was an important weapon that a warrior would wield in every battlefield. Tiger in the Khasi Pnar culture represents courage, strength, ferocity, swiftness, the quality that every warrior would like to imbibe and hence the combination of the two words 'khlawait' or 'khla-kawait' would mean 'A Swordsman with the stealth and courage of a Tiger'. It is the highest honour that any warrior can be bestowed with.

Tigers which are known to the people also have their presence in their folk narratives and traditions. 'Khla' is a prefix in the name of any big cat. For example, the leopard is known as 'u khla-krong', clouded leopard u khla-sim or 'Iabasim in Khasi, and Royal Bengal tiger is 'khla-thoh-lareh'. U khla or khli is also used in a festival celebrated by the War Jaitia people in Nongtalang in honour of the Tiger and the festival is also known as Rongkhli or tiger festival.

The fight of U Kiang Nangbah also has some connection with the Warrior Dance called 'ka Chad Pastieh' which is indeed a warrior dance and a ceremony where male members of the community dance to the tune of the 'tangburi' and the beating of the drums with a sword on one hand and a shield on the other. Warrior Dance called 'Pastieh' is performed by the War Jaitia during the Rongkhli and the Rong Kusi festival and it is also part of the different religious festivals of the eleka Raliang, Shangpung and Nartiang.

Another term used by the Pnar to describe a man like U Kiang Nangbah is 'u Dap-chynrang' or in the case of a woman 'ka Dap-kynthai'. 'Dap-chynrang' is not just being manly but a man of courage and conviction will-

ing to sacrifice oneself for the sake of others. It also means a complete or a real man or the epitome of being a man. The only woman who had earned the title of 'ka Dap-kynthai' and also the only female ruler of a kingdom in the folk narrative was Ka Syiem Latympang of Hima Mannar.

### The causes that led to the rebellion

According to local narratives there were three immediate causes which led to the Jaitia rebellion against the British government. Reason number one for the rebellion was the house tax imposed by the British Government on the hills subject of the erstwhile Jaitia Kingdom. J.H. Thornton in his memoir published in 1895 blamed the Bengal Government for the wrong advice to impose income-tax on the hills subject of the erstwhile kingdom. The tax was first introduced in India by Mr Wilson the finance minister. He is of the opinion that it was wrong to impose any tax on the highlanders who had no income in the proper sense of the term and to whom tax was a foreign idea.

(Capt BWD Morton DC Khasi and Jaitia hills in his communication to the officiating commissioner of Assam (dated Jowai, the 30th September 1862) said that in the last part of June on his arrival in Jowai he met with the Daloi of Jowai and Shilliang Myntang and enquired from them the reasons that led to the people taking to the path of rebellion. The Daloi of Shilliang Myntang feigned ignorance and the Daloi of Jowai casually stated that it could be due to the interference with the religious festival and the house tax that the government imposed on the people.

The unceremonious act of obstruction made by the British soldiers while the people of Raid Ialung were performing their traditional warrior dance chad pastieh known as pastieh Kaiksoo was one of the major causes of the rebellion. The oral stories have it that the British on learning about the Pastieh dance at Ialung went to stop the ceremony while it was still going on and confiscated all the swords and the shields used by the young men in the

festival. Local stories have it that the British mistook the event to be a preparation for war against the British government, hence they put a stop to what appeared like a rebellion in the making. Chad Pastieh is a religious festival hence it was not only an act of sheer irreverence to the local ethos to interrupt the ceremony while it was still going on, but it is also a sacrilege of the worst kind to confiscate objects used in performing the religious ceremony. This act of blasphemy has not only hurt the sentiments of the Pnar which also led to the rebellion but it was an irreversible loss to the Raid Ialung because the Chad Pastieh which was a part of tradition has never been performed since then. The incident caused permanent damage to the religious activities of the Raid Ialung and since then the Raid has stopped performing the tribal warrior dance. This is one part of the oral stories which can be substantiated with facts available because the Rajj has not been able to revive the tradition since it was stopped due to the interference of the British.

Ram Singh, Rajah of Cherra and his cousin, Hajun Manick who were engaged by the British to convince the rebels to submit to the government, on being asked in the presence of Major Langmore, Commanding the 33rd Native Infantry, and Captain Morton, Deputy Commissioner in charge of the Khasi Jaitia hills on 13th of October 1862 stated: I met the following Dalois at Lad-Tuber, namely U Myllon Daloi of Mylso, the Daloi of Rymbai, the Daloi of Raliang, Shilliang Myntang, Sutnga and the Daloi of Nongjingi. I did not recognize them all but people said that all Dalois were present. I met about 1500 rebels and asked them why they had revolted, and they assigned as their reason for doing so because the police had interfered with their worship at Ialung and had prohibited some family from performing funeral rites of the deceased member of their clan in certain area. The police had not only interfered with their Pastieh Dance but oral narratives also mentioned that they had interfered with the last

rites of one member of the Sumer clan.

It was only in the later part of the rebellion when the rebels came in contact with the Kur or the Royal Clan which came from Sylhet (who were also engaged by government to mediate with the rebels) that they openly demanded independence. BWD Morton in his letter to the Officiating Secretary to the Government of Bengal dated Jowai the 28th October 1862, said that the Jaitias had now openly demanded their independence as reported by the Raja of Cherra and his cousin Hajun Manick. In the meeting between Ram Singh Raja of Cherra and Hajun Manick his cousin with the rebels at Moobakhon/Muwakhon about 9 miles from Nartiang (probably between 18th and 23rd October), the mediators reported to the DC that while sections of the rebels expressed their wish to submit, it was the rebels from Jowai under the leadership of U Kiang Nangbah who were chiefly to blame for the resistance. He also reported that U Kiang Nangbah did also mention about the incident in which Colonel Lister and Mr Inglis confiscated guns and wealth belonging to the Jaitia Raja of Jaitiaapur.

In the statement made by Raja Ram Singh of Cherra on the 27th October 1862 to the DC, he said that in the meeting at Moobakhon he met U Kiang Nangbah of Jowai, u Khmah Langdoh, a Pator and u San Sallo (Shylla) of Ialung, a Pator of Nartiang and u Kiri Daloi of Shangpung and the Daloi of Nongjingi. It was then obvious that U Kiang had emerged as a leader and the spokesperson of the rebellion. Ram Singh also claimed that U Kiang had said that they will only submit if the Raj is restored and the hills are relinquished by the government and the rebels would make friends with them. They wish neither to see nor have anything to do with the government.

It was after the outcome of the meeting at Moobakhon was made known to the government by Ram Singh that the British decided to launch a full-scale battle against the Jaitia rebels. And this rebellion was led by none other than U Kiang Nangbah.

(Email: hhmohrmen67@gmail.com)

## Peak Inflation

# More taxes to be levied?

By Shivaji Sarkar

The highest wholesale price inflation in decades at 14.23 percent may result in high deficit leading to levying of more taxes. Government expenses are certain to rise even if it wants to keep the deficit low at least on paper around 6 per cent. It is a difficult task but necessary as per international norms. The budget would be interesting to watch as the consultations with agriculture, industry, kisans and financial institutions begin.

An interesting aspect is that all these groups want a check on inflation but all the same struggle for having better prices that contribute to an inflationary trend. The government has also started the process of domestic production of semi-conductors, and batteries for the car industry. This is the contrived solution to counter international rise in prices. But it is not sure that steps taken to acquire lithium mines or increase semi-conductor manufacturing or edible oil production would be a solution.

The price rise is heightened by muted factory output at 3.2 per cent. This has led the Asian Development Bank (ADB) to scale down India's growth estimate to 9.7 per cent, almost close to the rates of the RBI at 9.5 per cent.

It is the highest since 2005 and surpasses the recent October figures of 12.54 per cent. This is spiked by high petroleum products, gas prices at 39.81 per cent, mostly due to high component of excise and other taxes. The manufacturing prices are also high at 11.92 per cent causing a severe crisis like situation in the textile sector. Domestic edible oils have spurred at a very fast rate at over 50 per cent in the last one year. Even commonly used mustard oil shot up to Rs 214 a litre from approximately Rs 85 to 90 a litre.

The Reserve Bank of India is concerned of the impact of high toll, fee, excise and other charges for the rise in commodity prices. The rising prices are making most commodities unaffordable as there has also been loss of jobs or cut in wages. The food grain prices rise by 4.88 per cent, not low but moderated by free food grain doles through public distribution system. Else the food grain prices too could have soared to a high.

One interesting aspect is that high prices show GDP look brighter. Inflation-engineered high expenses show the growth in "positive" light though in reality it depresses purchasing power and adds to many other woes including contraction of wages a normal for many industries. Inflation naturally adds to the problem. It becomes difficult to afford high prices at low wages.

Foods inflation especially in staples like pulses and edible oil is the last thing any political party wants in the run up to a crucial election. With just weeks left for the elections in five States, including the all-important Uttar Pradesh, it is no wonder the Central government has started taking measures to control prices through various measures. The uncertainty of kharif product due to a not so well distributed monsoon has made the government jittery about uncontrolled inflation in the days to come. Sustaining the free dole for long is not practically possible but withdrawal also has political implications.

The high fuel prices are being tried to be countered with more battery-powered cars and being self-sufficient in producing lithium batteries. It aims at saving about Rs 2.5 lakh crore

in import of crude! But the new effort is capil intensive, expensive ad has high prospecting co. It plans to buy 12 lithia and cobalt mines abroa. The National Alumina Co Ltd will hold a 40 per cent stake in the joint venture called Khanij Bidei India Ltd, with Hindust Copper Ltd and Minel Exploration Corp Ltd controlling 30 per cent each. Apparently, a wise move but lithium is not widely available. Its mining ad processing costs are very high. The Khanij Bidei is two-year-old and so it could not achieve the kind of success it was expected.

Chinese companies control most such mines in Australia, Chile and Argentina. Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison had discussed Indian participation in critical metallic sectors. The progress is slow. Apart from lithium production cost being high the shipping costs makes the overall cost oppressive. It would not be easy to produce lithium and lithium-batters at affordable cost or save on foreign exchange. Ts apart, lithium reserves are not high and the prospective mines may not necessary produce as much lithiums the world demands. A caution is needed before rushing for such a venture.

Though the new battery industry is trying hard for a fillip, it seems that battery powered cars may not be an economic solution. Overall so far despite all its complexities petroleum remains the versatile fuel and along the world may not rid of it however much may like to.

Most efforts often are crisis-led solutions and ignore the problems as to implementers are competing for kudos and high profits. India should better move slowly on battery production and electric cars. So far 20 companies have shown interest in producing lithium batteries.

Lessons must be drawn from the semi-conductor crisis. There is also the problem in getting the chips which are essential for manufacturing semi-conductors. It is hit the passenger vehicle industry hard. Automobile production has reduced by 19 per cent to 12.88 lakh units from 18.88 lakh units. Scooter, motorbikes, three-wheeler productions have all been affected because of the chip scarcity. Federation of Automobile Dealers Association President / Gulati says that automobile sales remain in the negative zone.

The government's Rs 76000 crore manufacturing programme may give it a boost but again the basic issue of how to have the chip would remain. It seems that globally chips themselves are in shortage.

Similarly there is a 2-30 per cent year-on-year rise in prices of edible oil. A public distribution department note says despite a cut in import duty, a sudden spurt in prices of edible oils/oilseeds has been observed which may be due to alleged hoarding of it by the stockholder. Thus, all edible oils have seen significant increase across the country. The average retail prices Rs 12 to Rs 177 a litre.

So there can be programmes but solving the crisis in critical areas may not be easy. The impending shortages and cartelisation may result in overall price hikes. If the fuel crisis is not solved it is likely that inflation in the Indian situation would continue to be a bane. ---INFA

## Letters to the Editor

### Questions on Umroi airport

Editor,  
Big kudos to the Shillong Umroi Airport AAI (Airport Authority of India) Team for development of the airport which stands testimony to their hard work and dedication. Now there's also a big question of WHY the many issues relating to flights and airlines from Shillong Airport as a whole are still not answered.

I would like to pinpoint and also need some clarification both from the airlines operating from Shillong Umroi Airport and the Meghalaya Government as well, because the matter is compounding.

Firstly, the Kolkata sector taken by GoIndigo has seen a rise in passenger traffic and the prices for this sector are sky high and soaring, sometimes exceeding 15,000 INR per passenger per sector. Many friends and colleagues of mine have had to bear the brunt of this. If Indigo airlines can start a second Kolkata-Shillong-Kolkata flight I believe the matter would be resolved as time slots in the airport are still hugely available while inbound and outward flights are still less.

Also, requesting GoIndigo to start a Shillong-Bagdogra flight for ease of connectivity to improve tourism passenger move-

ments etc. Secondly, the Imphal -Shillong- Imphal sector should have more frequencies in a week, it should be made from three to at least five times a week as this route is also very feasible. I am speaking as a very frequent traveller from our airport not just a common man.

Thirdly, Flybig which was awarded the Shillong-Delhi route under RCS is defaulting big time. I feel that the Meghalaya Government should make new arrangements with other big aviation giants like SpiceJet or other big airlines under RCS to enable easier connectivity to the national capital. Flybig has to lease SpiceJet's aircraft every time and on contacting their customer care services it is very frustrating and often a harassment to us passengers! Their constant reply of 'no information received' has hit me hard every-time I try to contact them.

The DGCA and Ministry of Civil Aviation as well as the Transport Department of the State should have given SpiceJet for this route. I sincerely hope and wish that this would materialise sometime soon.

Last but not the least, it's funny to say that everything has been done by the AAI Shillong to provide the most comfort for air passengers. The question for landing of bigger aircraft like the Airbus 320 or Boeing 737 is a big no no. Why?

To cite an example, Paro

International Airport, Bhutan, one of the most dangerous airports in the world is surrounded by mountains on all sides of the airport yet bigger aircrafts are landing and taking off smoothly. Of course the pilots have to manoeuvre and take a sharp turn to align with the runway for landing.

If such is the case, why are bigger aircrafts not able to land at Umroi airport? Should pilots not be trained in a such way that they can easily take off and land at Umroi airport and if our runway needs more strength and robustness, that can and should be done. Where there's a will there's a way mind you!

And lastly, coming to the landing of small commuter chartered flights a friend of mine who booked a chartered flight from South India - a non-stop flight to Shillong Umroi airport actually amazed me. If such a small aircraft can fly non-stop why not implement bombardier CRJs to connect with metros like Bengaluru and Chennai for ease of students and also for medical tourism alike.

One thing that really disturbed me is the taxi fare from Umroi to Shillong which is Rs 1500. That is equivalent to the price of an air ticket from Shillong to Guwahati. In fact, the price of the Shillong-Dimapur ticket is only Rs 1300. I urge the authorities to check on this huge fare demand and put a tariff check on the same. It's a harassment

for us passengers!

All the above questions need to be answered, and as we can see today the movement of passengers from Umroi airport have been growing. Let us not forget that there was once only GoIndigo with one flight a day. But look at the airport today! It gets busier every day! Hence I urge the people sitting in big chairs to please take initiatives and try to solve our problems to ease our travel to and from our lone airport! For a better tomorrow, wishing our airport the very best in and kudos to the airport station manager and director as well.

Yours etc.,  
Dr Chanmiki Ezra Laloo,  
Via Email

### Political party members hip in Meghalaya

Editor,  
The special article "Teaching or Politics" by TFL Mawlong (ST Dec 17, 2021) is an excellent analysis on the subject. The special article is a wakeup call to those aspiring for power, influence and money. I am in sync with his thinking and statement that people "need a political party that listens to all voices, not just its members' voices". In fact, we do not know the percentage of members of a political party to the total number of the electorate as

no such study has been done so far in Meghalaya or for that matter in India. This reminds me of what the great political veteran of Meghalaya, late Mr Brington Buhai Lyngdoh, Chief Minister, Meghalaya told me at the end of the North Eastern Council Meeting at Chumukidema, Nagaland in 1998 that runs in Khasi as follows "U Paidbah um juh iasoh party tangba U shongshit election. Balei U shongshit election? Namar ba ka dei ka election" (The electorate does not join a political party but is excited about the election. Why are they excited? Because it is an election!)

Yours etc.,  
V.K.Lyngdoh,  
Via email

### Traffic snarls: Is anyone thinking of a solution?

Editor,  
Venturing out of the house to work, school, college or shopping has become a literal nightmare. The massive traffic jam and chaos has left all of us commuters baffled. Earlier one would blame the many trucks which plied through the roads of Shillong city as the cause for the traffic jams. But now that's not the case, so why is it that this massive choc a bloc situation persists?

For those people who travel from the villages to Shillong it's a real struggle as they waste a whole day's work and wages because of the traffic snarls. We've seen women with babies on their backs, school and college students, office goers having to walk their feet off literally, just to get to their destination. To add insult to injury we have our VVIP's going through with their sirens blaring while we mere mortals stew in the traffic.

Why can't they too experience what the public do so on a daily basis? After all they're the people's representatives right? Moreover, the traffic personnel are overworked and one can't really blame them for giving up in such situations.

This debate has been going on for too long. Solutions have to come about. We're already embarking on to the 50th year of our statehood. Let's just get the basics done properly. Be it infrastructure, healthcare, education and most importantly looking after the well-being of our citizens in every way is what would make this milestone worth looking forward to.

Yours etc.,  
Angela Lyngdoh,  
Shillong-3

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

"Once you've been through tough times,  
you can only become stronger."

— Alesha Dixon

## The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIV No.131 SHILLONG, TUESDAY, DECEMBER 21, 2021

### Meghalaya Congress in a tailspin

IF the exit of the 12 MLAs from the Congress and their joining the All India Trinamool Congress was a political earthquake of sorts, the action of the remaining five Congress MLAs is nothing short of bizarre. Short of joining the National Peoples' Party, their fig leaf of an "advocate" for peoples' causes virtually means they are joining hands with the MDA government which has in its fold the BJP — the Congress's prime rival. Is this the end of the Congress in Meghalaya? Time will tell. It has been observed that in Meghalaya political ideology has no legs to stand on. Political parties only provide the uniform during elections. So-called national parties especially if they are in power in Delhi are also helpful in terms of funding. Regional parties don't really have the resources to fund elections hence those contesting from regional parties, nearly always have to be financially robust candidates.

The Congress has been out of power since 2014 and it would be logical to believe that its coffers have run dry. So clinging on the Congress now is more of a baggage. First, the members have to keep defending the Congress leadership pitted as it is against the BJP — a party that is the richest today what with business persons and corporates of all hues funding the Party. And that's no surprise. Those in business will always invest in a party they can do business with. They have no loyalty to any political party. Even in Meghalaya, those in business will fund the elections of those they foresee have good chances of winning.

Nostalgia does not win elections. Nor does an amorphous future promised by any political party excite the voters. It is the promise of bringing solutions to problems and what concrete steps a political party will adopt to solve those problems is what people are more likely to vote for. Voters generally don't want to enter an uncertain future or of getting sucked in the past. At this moment the Congress represents a tragic and tired contrast to the triumphant manner it rode to power in 2009. This stasis is hurting the Party which has now become an incubator of disillusionment. No wonder the 5 MLAs want to get out while the going is good. But the question remains as to whether the newly elected Meghalaya Pradesh President and Lok Sabha MP, Vincent Pala concurs with what the 5 have decided which is basically to support the MDA Government from the outside. It will be enlightening to know if Pala is also part of the plot.

### Letters to the Editor

#### Murdering Tradition

Editor,  
Though I prefer to remain anonymous, for obvious reasons relating to the uncivilized nature of some of the characters described below, let me assure the reader that I am a Khasi who is as keen as the next Khasi to preserve our tradition and culture; our value systems and social practices and our identity as a distinct indigenous society. A video on a social media news platform — "Shillong Mail" has gone viral and raises serious doubts about the commitment of this generation of our youth to preserve and project the Jaitbynriew as a community that prides itself on the tenet of "Ka Jaitbynriew Tip Brieu Tip Blei," (a community that respects man and God). The video shows a group of masked Khasi youth cursing, bad-mouthing and name-calling the Rangbah Shnongs of Jaiaw Pyllun. Reports from eyewitnesses to this unsavory incidents on the streets of Jaiaw have identified the masked youths as members of prominent student and youth organizations.

From accounts available it seems a meeting of the Rangbah Shnongs of the area was in progress to discuss and confer on increasing cases of assault and battery,

especially of non-tribals within the Jaiaw area that had been on the rise for the last six months or so. It came to light that even innocent specialist Doctors from CMC Vellore who had come to Roberts Hospital to assist the hospital and its patients (99% of whom are locals) also fell victim to these unprovoked attacks. The law and order in the area was deteriorating and keeping within their traditional mandate to preserve peace and tranquility within their areas of jurisdiction, the Rangbah Shnongs had gathered to address the problem. It now appears that local goons of the area, most of whom belong to so called "Seng bhalang" disapproved of this meeting of their elders. They barged in uninvited, condemned the agenda under discussion and started calling their own elected elders as anti-jaitbynriew. All this has been sincerely recorded and filmed in the above mentioned video and is not a fabrication of the writer.

From available eyewitness accounts it appears that most of the perpetrators were either school dropouts or under-matric louts. They however claim themselves as patriotic members of organizations whose avowed self declaration is safeguarding and protecting the Jaitbynriew. How do you protect us by attacking the very traditional institutions (The

# Hurdles to Meghalaya's Tourism Industry

By Barnes Mawrie

Tourism is a major industry in most of the European countries like Italy, Switzerland, Germany, France and others as well as in some Asian countries like Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, China, Japan and South Korea. Rome alone got 10.32 million tourists in 2019 while Thailand recorded an astounding number of 39.92 million tourists in the same year. Although the pandemic has slowed down the flow of tourists, yet lately it has again picked up momentum. These countries are minting money through their tourism industry. Meghalaya which is gifted with so much potentials for tourism especially eco-tourism and cultural tourism, is actually letting down the drains all these golden opportunities of jobs and income generation. Our tourism industry is yet to be fully exploited in order to become an income generating enterprise.

There are many reasons why tourism as an industry and a means of the state's GDP, has not picked up. When we visit the above-mentioned countries we immediately realize that the connectivity to tourist spots is so efficient. There is air connectivity as well as rail or road connectivity. This facilitates tourists to reach the desired destinations with ease and at affordable costs. Tourists who visit our state, will definitely suffer due to poor connectivity. Our Shillong Airport has not developed for the last several decades. While the Guwahati airport has already developed into an international airport with rapid expansions taking place, our own airport wears a miserable appearance. Our state government has neither the political will nor the commitment to the progress of the state. Railway connectivity is still absent in our state due to the anti-development attitude of our local NGOs and pressure groups. Our road connectivity to most tourist spots, is dismal to say the least. Those who have visited Nongkhnun, the second biggest river island in Asia, will

have had a terrible experience of travelling through the approach road to the island. Many other beautiful tourist locations remain inaccessible due to poor roads. Take for example, the road to Sohra and the adjacent locations, it has not really improved as it should. Tourists all over the world have long past come to know of Sohra and it features in Lonely Planet as prominently as other known places, but sad to say the road condition is hardly improving. It is a matter of shame



for the citizens of our state to see such a miserable plight. Connectivity is of primary importance for the tourism industry and it should be a priority of the government.

When we visit tourist locations in other parts of the world or even in India, what we witness is the adequate infrastructure available like hotels, restaurants, shops, eateries, souvenir shops, amusement parks for children, flower gardens and sitting places for visitors as well as efficient tourist guides. These are the things that attract tourists as they provide enough fun and diversions for them. Instead, when tourists come to Sohra, Dainthlen, Mawsmi cave or Wah Lyngksiar etc, they get disappointed with the lack of facilities in these places. They come and see the spot and they have to go back as there are no other things to amuse them and to retain them in the location. In most of the places, tourists would go hungry for lack of restaurants and eateries. Adven-

ture sports could have been organized in most tourist locations and it would have brought in a lot of income as well as employment for youth.

The Umiyam Lake is a scandalous waste of touristic opportunity. Such a picturesque lake that is right on the national highway, is absolutely underutilized. Many water sports like water biking, sea parachuting, scuba diving etc., could have been organized and attractive facilities like floating

restaurants, cruising to the islands etc., could have been provided. Dinner cruises in the evening could have attracted thousands of visitors. In short, Umiyam Lake should have been throbbing with life and touristic activities of all sorts and thousands of tourists should have been seen there daily. The place should have been lit up with lights all around and what a sight it would have been in the evening. Unfortunately, whoever is in-charge of the lake has not been able to maintain even the few streetlights that are there. Presently, the Lake wears a deserted look and there are hardly any tourists there except for the passers-by who stop every now and then for a selfie or photography.

Here I would like to say that the biggest hurdle to tourism industry in our state, are the local people themselves. We are very much aware that tourist spots are managed by the village authorities. The government departments be they the Tour-

ism or Forest department, invest in developing the place with the collaboration of the villagers, but the supervision is that of the villagers themselves. These villagers in their limited capacity both in material as well as manpower, are unable to develop the tourist locations on their own. At the same time they are so close-minded and inward-looking that they prohibit outsiders to invest in those places. This is the reason why our tourist spots remain undeveloped and are as primitive as ever with only the bare minimum facilities. If they were to open their places to rich investors from outside their villages, we would have seen tremendous development of these tourist locations. Thereafter a lot of employment opportunities for the local youth would have been generated and more inflow of tourists would have taken place thereby enriching the economy of the local people themselves. Outside investors should have been encouraged to come in but of course with proper MoU and MoA so as to safeguard the interests of the local population.

A blanket prohibition of prospective investors from outside, is the reason for the woes of tourism in Meghalaya. It is a sort of "dog in the manger" policy, for the local people themselves are unable to provide development while at the same time they prevent others from doing it. As long as this policy prevails, we do not hope to see any significant development in the tourism sector in the near future. The State Tourism Department should take a pro-active step in this regard. It should sit down with the village authorities and enlighten them in this matter. At the same time, our government needs to realize that tourism can be the biggest source of income for the state and so it should go on a war footing mode to improve transport and communication infrastructure. God has given our state natural beauty beyond comparison, but we should capitalize on this or else it would be like throwing pearls to the swine.

iceberg and a quick fix somehow prevented this 'ship' from sinking to the bottom of this vast political ocean. The irony is all this while the party was screaming against the MDA after the exit of the 12 MLAs from its fold. Having seen that remaining in a minority position would be outgunned by the majority this very party has now "agreed" to advocate rather than oppose as a responsible opposition in the Assembly. Their methodology is simple "if you can't beat them, join them."

Yours etc.,  
Dominic Stadlin Wankhar  
Via email

#### Police Bazar should be pedestrianized

Editor,  
It is that time of the year again where Christians celebrate Christmas; people attend weddings and various other events. The season has already kick-started and all of us are in a festive mood. The markets and shopping complexes are thronging with buyers during this season. The mood is one of enjoyment where people shop for themselves, their families and friends.

Since Christmas is approaching, I happened to go shopping with a friend of mine at Police Bazaar which

is located at the heart of the city. As we were walking through the once pedestrianized lane (now allowed for vehicular movement) leading towards Umsohsun a number of four and two wheelers passed by, making it difficult for us to walk since there are no footpaths. We had to make way for vehicles to pass. In all this melee cars are honking and adding to the noise pollution. Firstly, the movement of vehicles disturbs the pedestrian since one has to give way for the vehicles to pass. Secondly, it distracts the vendors and people buying their requirements from them. Thirdly, it may also cause accidents due to reckless driving especially in an area that is choc-a-bloc with vehicles throughout the day.

As a concerned citizen, I request the Superintendent of Police (Traffic) to put a "No Entry" sign in this lane so that the movement of pedestrians is not disrupted and also to prevent any mishaps from occurring and so that people can do their shopping with ease especially during this festive season.

Yours etc.,  
Alvinson P Syiem  
Shillong - 3

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

## Omicron virus has become deadly in the US India should not take it lightly as assembly polls approach

By Sushil Kutty

United States President Joe Biden has warned of a "winter of death." Mad at unvaccinated Americans, Biden said many of them "will soon overwhelm" hospitals and there will be "a winter of severe illness and death." Biden's "direct message to the American people" didn't seem to have any effect on the conservatives among Americans. Greg Gutfeld, a Fox TV anchor, mocked Biden and said it was time for some Americans to "grow stones", his way of being direct with Joe Biden.

Gutfeld dismissed the whole "booster theory" to beat the latest variant Omicron, spouting ridicule at both the virus and the Biden administration. In Alaska, former Governor Sarah Palin, a Republican, said she would take the vaccine over her dead body. Palin had once been a Vice Presidential candidate.

Last heard she was still with the Trump camp. Talking about the Covid-19 vaccine, she told a crowd that they shouldn't succumb and instead remember that "we (the unvaccinated) outnumber them". Ms. Palin is a role-model to follow, which she is to the unvaccinated. And Joe Biden is an angry

ery... I want to see everyone around enjoy that. I want to see them enjoy the fact that they're able to be in school, that businesses are open and the holidays are coming."

It could be rated a rant. But it is the American in Biden speaking; perhaps the fervent wish of a benign "ruler" to see his "people" enjoy in the midst of gloom. Biden wore his facemask and next to him Fauci stood flaunting his. The seriousness and the solemnity was lost on Trump's party of resistance. Proving once again that the ruling party and opposition party everywhere behaved the same—again Mohan Bhagwat's "dna is the same" at work.

And not for nothing are Biden and Fauci's stark warnings. Covid infections are surging across the United States. Worse, the surge is being driven "by the heavily mutated Omicron variant." Nearly 3 percent of Covid cases in the US are because of Omicron—up from 0.4 percent the week before.

And Covid-19 deaths crossed the 800,000 mark the week before December 20. On average the US is seeing near about 120,000 new cases every day and 1200 deaths daily. This is data from Johns Hopkins



old POTUS. Angrier still is White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki. Biden has been losing presidential steam in recent weeks and Psaki talks as if it's her fault though she lets it out as if it is her bounden duty to protect Biden from crazy leftovers of the Trump Presidency.

But the Trump presidency would rather train guns on Antony Fauci, Biden's and before him Trump's Covid-19 advisor. Fauci stood next to Biden when the President told Americans that "it (Omicron) is here and now and it's spreading and it's going to increase."

University. The deaths and new cases are double of what they were the month before.

Here's what it could look like in the USA in another two to four weeks—cases linked to Delta and Omicron variants could peak in January 2022. And Omicron cases will see another surge in the "Spring", which won't be Spring on the subcontinent. American infectious disease specialist Celine Gounder, whose mother is French and father Tamil from Erode, said the US death toll could "shoot up dramatically in the next couple of weeks."

*Fauci stood next to Biden when the President told Americans that "it (Omicron) is here and now and it's spreading and it's going to increase." It's Fauci who is feeding such dire warnings into Joe Biden's thought stream.*

It's Fauci who is feeding such dire warnings into Joe Biden's thought stream. Biden has asked Americans to take their "booster shots" if they didn't want to see schools and businesses shutting down.

The story is Biden and Fauci are looking at Omicron's run in Europe and it is worrying them no end at the speed with which Omicron's "raging" across Europe and the United Kingdom. Even otherwise if anything happens to the English, and it's happening to the Americans. Crazy, but that is how it is. The Yanks and the Brits, the two are an "item". If one goes crazy, the other goes loony. It's got to do with Mohan Bhagwat's "dna is the same" theory.

President Biden and the US do not want the United States to return to "shut-downs". "We are gonna protect our economic recov-

No wonder Biden is fit to be tied. Any President of the US would be. What about our Prime Minister? Looks like he lost the zeal to talk Covid to the "praja" ever since the May defeat in West Bengal. The second Covid wave left him in dire straits. Now he has put in double the work in Uttar Pradesh and even then there is the fear of the outcome. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has very nervous days ahead of him. One piece of advice: DON'T call or take calls from POTUS Joe Biden till the UP elections are through. And watch out for Omicron, this variant like Delta can be vicious to the Bharatiya Janata Party. If UP is lost don't blame the electorate. Between Modi and Yogi, pick one or pick both, you will have caught the culprit. After Delta, the Omicron variant is out to try to lynch the BJP. (IPA Service)

"Adopting the right attitude can convert a negative stress into a positive one."

— Hans Selye

## The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIV No.132 SHILLONG, WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 22, 2021

### Age and marriage

AFTER having taken a step forward, the Modi government at the Centre is obviously having a pause when it comes to the cabinet decision to raise the marriageable age of girls from 18 to 21. Several opposition parties, including the Congress, have expressed their disaffection against the government move and activists too have opposed this. As a result, the decision has become controversial even though Prime Minister Narendra Modi had hinted about such a plan in one of his Independence Day addresses. So, what is intended as an amendment to the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2006 might not be introduced in the current session of Parliament, which is closing soon.

The issue has two sides. One, raising the marriage age grants girls more space for education and eventual employment. The question of maturity, again, is a contentious issue. Conventional wisdom has it that girls gain mental and physical maturity a bit earlier than boys do. That's in the nature of things. Hence the keeping of marriage age for girls at three years below that of men — 18 against 21. Also, if girls or boys attain maturity, legally delaying their marriage is unjustified. Life, anyway, is short in our conservative societies. The other side of the story is the communal angle. Muslims tend to marry off their children at an early age and procreation follows. They are generally reticent about family planning norms or limiting the number of children. Population bulge is a serious problem that India is faced with and licentiousness in this respect will make matters worse for the nation. The family planning campaign is facing odds because of the tendency among sections of the population to produce more children than the norm of two to a family.

The Uttar Pradesh Government led by Yogi Adityanath has shown the courage to introduce certain controls over couples having more than two children in future. There have been proposals to deny such families ration and the chance to contest polls etc., by way of a deterrent. The Modi government at the Centre apparently wants to exercise caution or go on a merry-go-round. Perceptions are that it is aiming to control population growth by raising the marriage age for girls. Muslim organisations have raised serious objections. However, unexpected support for the move came from veteran Congressman P Chidambaram with a rider that it be implemented a year or two later, after a period of awareness drive among the population. A national consensus beyond political considerations on this matter might do the country a lot of good.

# Christmas, Christ and the Indian situation

By Albert Thyrniang

Christmas bells are ringing. In three days we are in the 'universal festival'. Though the date of his nativity is unknown, the birth of Christ is believed to be on December 25. Estimated by historians to have been born between 6 BC and 4 BC Christ ushered in the new era called Anno Domini (AD) leaving behind the history of Before Christ (BC) epoch. According to the Bible Jesus was born during the Judean king, Herod the Great in Bethlehem at a manger of Mary and Joseph (foster father) having virginally conceived by the Holy Spirit. His birth, his name and his mission were announced by the Angel. He grew up in his home town of Nazareth and emerged as a preacher in Palestine at the age of 30.

The four Gospels of Mathew, Mark, Luke and John record the works and words of Jewish prophets who performed stunning miracles including curing lepers, making the lame walked again, restoring the sight of the blind and banishing demons from the possessed besides multiplying bread and fish on occasions to feed the hungry. His preaching of love, peace, forgiveness and brotherhood was through the storytelling and a teachable moment method. His persistence with his new understanding of Sabbath, the Jewish 'holy day' in that it should be used to do good and not simply to cease work, got into the nerves of the Pharisees who ultimately killed him with the help of the Romans on blasphemy charges. The Gospels reveal Jesus to be the 'Immanuel,' the Hebrew word for 'God with us'. Neutral thinkers give Jesus different names like a wise sage, a revolutionary and an apocalyptic prophet.

Today there are more than 2.2 billion world-wide who follow Christ. In the last two millennia persecutions as well as political patronages accompanied the growth of Christians. Christianity came to India soon after the death of its founder brought by St. Thomas the Apostle in 52 AD. The community did enjoy official blessings under the Portuguese and English but the growth is by no means phenomenal. Though there was no sanctioned persecution in the subcontinent Christians have faced hostile opposition particularly from Hindutva outfits pre and post-Independence. With the capture of power by the BJP at the centre, the hatred for Christians has increased resulting even in violence and vandalism.

Now we are seeing institutionalised oppression. The happenings in Karnataka point to the harassment of the minority under the pretext of decrying 'forced conversion'. The BJP legislator, Gulihatti Shekhar recently shed tears in the Legislative Assembly informing that his mother had been forcefully converted to Christianity only to admit later that she returned to her former religion. No one raised a question. Was she also pressurised to return to her new found faith? Shekhar also claimed that forced conversions were rampant in his constituency, Hosangur. However, later, after a survey, it was officially declared that the allegation was totally false. The Karnataka government's response was to transfer the officer who conducted the survey.

In the meantime the Hindutvawadis convinced the BJP government to introduce an anti-conversion bill in the Legislative Assembly with provisions of jail term up to 10 years for the 'guilty'. The tabling of anti-conversion bill in the southern state, the only state the BJP has ruled, came close to the meeting of Prime Minister, Narendra Modi with Pope Francis on October 30 last at the Vatican. When the images of embrace, handshake and sitting across the table of the two leaders were flashed across the media, the Church leaders in India were euphoric. The Catholic bishops joined the BJP and the RSS in welcoming the "very warm meeting." The excitement was all the more positive as Modi extended an invitation to the Pontiff to visit India. The Church leadership thought the BJP had a change of heart.

Shortly after the 20 minute 'historic' parley, emerged reports of unprovoked attacks against Christian assemblies in different parts of the country were reported. The hard-liners in the Sangh Parivar, on which the BJP thrives, are not going to be taken up by the imagery of friendship between Modi and Christian leaders. In less than one month after the Vatican meeting, the Church in Karnataka is branded as a 'forced converter.' The actual reason for befriending the Pope was in view of the election in Goa and Manipur hoping that sizeable Christian population there would be inclined to the BJP. The saffron brigade is leading the Christian leaders in Kerala into thinking that both the Congress and the Left are pro-Muslim. The Modi-Pope meeting was

done at the behest of the Church leaders, particularly the powerful Kerala based churches. The BJP think tank agreed in exchange for a Christian support base as it is crucial for the 'majoritarian' party to come to power in the most educated and secular state.

This reveals the hypocrisy of the Church leaders, BJP and Sangh Parivar. While in Kerala the BJP counts on Christians as 'partners,' in Karnataka and other states Christians are made to feel like second class citizens. In Goa, Manipur and Meghalaya BJP leaders have been quick to emphasise that the BJP is not anti-Christians and cite Modi's meeting the Pope to convince people. But in other parts of the country Christians are booked and targeted. Church leaders, who profess to oppose extremism have associated with the very fundamentalist elements. They have listened to the highly communal RSS call for unity among Hindus and Christians to deal with the threats of Islam. They are not anticipating the danger of the 'hand of friendship' from the RSS and its cohorts. The RSS has not changed, and will likely remain so, for its chief, Mohan Bhagwat has vowed for a 'ghar wapas' of 'converted' Hindus. For the Sangh all have Hindu roots. Therefore, the mission is re-conversion of all adherents of other religions. The 'Hindu common root' insistence is far off the mark. The Adivasis in Jharkhand have asserted they "were never Hindus and they never will be." The same affirmation should come loud and clear from all other tribes. Assam Chief Minister, Himanta Biswa Sarma is sure that Indians were Hindu before Babur but the Ahoms themselves, who came to Assam as conquerors in 1228, were never Hindus. The Hinduisation (through the influence of Brahmin priests) of the Ahom court from the medieval period led to Rudra Singha (1696-1714) to be the first Ahom king to embrace Hinduism. Subsequently, by the early 19th-century, the Ahom religion was replaced by Hinduism. Should history be ignored?

All religions are basically proselytic. Christianity originated in Palestine but has spread all over the world. Islam began in Saudi Arabia but it has almost become omnipresent. Buddhism's birth place is India but is prominent in South Asian countries. Hinduism went to Nepal and adjoining areas.

Hinduisation of tribes and others also took place within the countries. Today gurus and 'godmen' freely preach in the US and Europe and accept Christians into Hinduism without any legal restriction. Why is there no reciprocal treatment for Christians in this democratic and secular country?

The allegation of proselytization is against 'neo-Churches'. In Karnataka pro anti-conversion law groups have specifically clarified that induced conversion is not done by the Catholic Church. Though this is an attempt to 'divide and rule' yet there is no denying the fact that certain pastors are too enthusiastic and even aggressive. They antagonise people. They publicly utter that 'Jesus is the only way' to heaven and pronounce hell for those who refuse to accept Him as 'Saviour' and be baptised. Is this the reason that a stringent law has to be brought in?

Christmas is an occasion to learn who Jesus really is/was. He did not say 'I am the only way.' Jesus did not even baptise anyone. He used Jewish temples and remained a Jew till his death. So did his Apostles after his death. He did give the parting command to 'go to the whole world and make disciples of all nations' but should it be taken in isolation? Should we go to the extent of incentivised conversion? Jesus never condemned anyone to hell. He did not condemn even 'sinners'. He advocated a 'change of heart' and a shake-up in the status quo in the society. Those who use allurements to convert are anti-Jesus and ignorantly misuse his name. But even against them an anti-conversion law is unjustifiable. The IPC has enough teeth.

In North East we celebrate Christmas to our heart's content. But elsewhere in the country the atmosphere can be intimidating. Persecution will never succeed. In the history referred to above, Christians were beheaded, burnt at the stake, and thrown into animal dens but Christianity flourished. However, we need to be respectful. India is a unique country. Not everyone is going to become Christian. Hinduism has its own history, philosophy and theology. You could be involved in intellectual discourse. You could also focus on humanitarian works in education, health care and other engagements. Festivals are occasions to learn and appreciate one another. Christmas is one of them. We celebrate the birth of the One who was never a religious fundamentalist. Happy Christmas to everyone!

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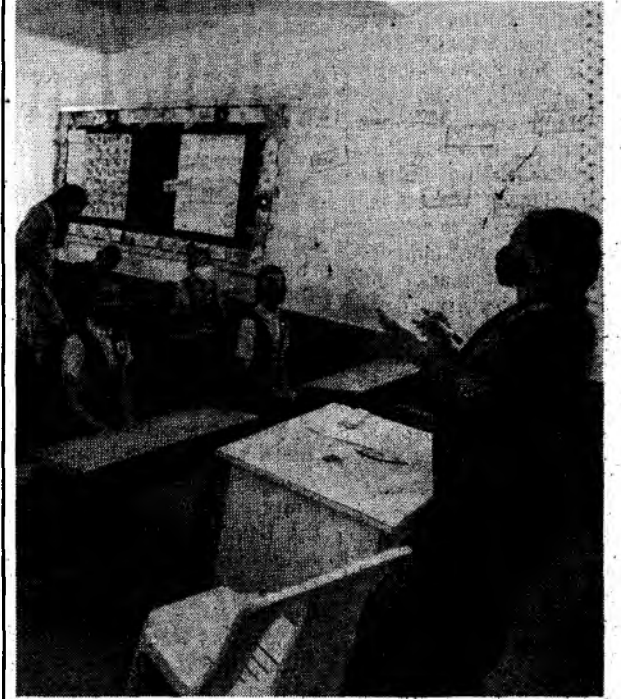
## Teachers must get a share of the 10 billion dollar economy

By Avner Pariat

The Chief Minister likes to tell stories. Like any good politician, he is an expert yarn-spinner. I have come to realise that some people are perfectly suited for politics (of a certain kind). Their abilities are forged at the dinner table or around a living room - chatting and listening in turn. These private spaces are the staging areas for testing and tempering of their reasoning and oratorical skills before their debut in public. Unfortunately, one of the drawbacks of this intimate setup is that the practitioner might start confusing his own thoughts for public sentiment. Often in the presence of an ever-encouraging retinue of friends and family they might start believing

were deemed to no longer be entitled to the full UGC payment scale but would instead be paid in part by the state DHTE. The salaries and benefits from the state as you can well imagine would not be of the same degree as those offered by the UGC. This is clearly quantitative easing and similar struggles in Panjab University and others have highlighted the same problem.

Since the problem is the same for both SSA and college teachers, it follows that the solution must be the same as well. The teachers at college and school level must demand that the government spends MORE on education not a mere Rs 2000 crore. A smart forward-thinking



their own narratives. Let us examine two of these wonderful imaginatively creative stories as told to us by our favourite bed-time storyteller, Conrad K. Sangma.

Yarn no.1 - "Meghalaya spends Rs 2000 crore per year on Education". The moral behind this story is that the MDA is spending so much money on that sector and that we - the citizens - should be grateful and not make a fuss about the sad plight of Education (and educators) in Meghalaya. This yarn we must recall was told with the ongoing SSA teachers' fight in the background. It is not a neutral statement. It is loaded with implications of a particular political position.

While Rs 2000 crore a year sounds like a lot of money, it is actually tiny when compared to the overall budgetary allocations that are made each year. If the chief minister is promising Modi (another great storyteller) a doubling of the GSDP to 10 billion dollars per annum within the next 5 years we should demand more devotion to the education budget. Today Meghalaya has a state GDP of about 5 billion dollars per annum which means that education is not even reaching a measly 10%. Southern states in comparison spend in the double digits on their education sector and it shows in the type of society they are building. Numerous publications including the 2021 Niti Aayog report have highlighted the terrible state of education in Meghalaya. This is in spite of massive injections of investment from the Asian Development Bank in the past few years. Turns out new buildings do not really lead to better education after all especially when the teachers still have to worry about their salaries.

To be fair, the overall trend at almost all levels of government (including that of Central Government bodies like the UGC) seems to be a general divestment and pull-back from spending. Recently there was a serious issue which the Meghalaya College Teachers' Association (MCTA) had taken up wherein newly-appointed (well-qualified) teachers

society will be borne out of this. The teachers must learn from the farmers of Singhu and keep applying pressure. Be creative, be seen, be heard and most of all - be POLITICAL.

Going further in on this, Yarn No. 2 has Mr Conrad spinning a fabulous narrative that teachers should not do politics. To be fair, he is not the first legislator to say this. And he will probably not be the last. Words aside, his government has issued a notification recently that strictly prohibits teachers from joining any political party or similar organisations. This is a bold move by the MDA as many of its leading advocates happen to be teachers themselves! I wonder what they will think about this decision? I hope they will not hurriedly delete the numerous social media photos they have taken with the NPP and its luminaries! This "don't do politics" yarn is like a scary anecdote told to children in order to frighten them into "good behaviour". However teachers are not children. They build the future through their efforts in the present. I applaud the teachers right now but I also urge them to be braver and bolder in their fight. This problem of delayed payment is not new and we must fight together to ensure that neither this government nor any other that comes after shall be allowed to do this again.

On a recent visit to Switzerland, I was told that teachers there are some of the best paid and best equipped professionals. It can be that way here too but we must stop listening to sob stories issued by the government. If they don't have money for the education department, they can jolly well make cuts to less important ones. Government must enhance/increase its spending in crucial sectors not back away from its responsibility.

(Avner Pariat is a writer, cultural practitioner and President of New Dawn Meghalaya, a political organisation dedicated to strengthening democracy in the state. Email - [newdawnmeghalaya@protonmail.com](mailto:newdawnmeghalaya@protonmail.com) or visit [newdawnmeghalaya.com](http://newdawnmeghalaya.com))

### Letters to the Editor

#### Much ado about teachers in politics

Editor,  
The controversy around the issue of teachers being barred from entering politics is not about to end soon. The latest to join the debate is Jemino Mawthoh, General Secretary of the United Democratic Party (UDP) and a faculty of the North Eastern Hill University who had once contested and won the election. It is right that Mawthoh should be worried about this notification from the MDA Government which does not seem to have come about after consulting the coalition partners. If the NPP has consulted the UDP and other parties would the notification have been out considering that Mawthoh is a prominent member of the UDP?

But that aside, as Mawthoh had pointed out several of our past legislators who served the state well were all college and university teachers. They include PG

Marbaniang, MN Majaw, SL Marbaniang, Dr B Pakem, Mr RS Lyngdoh, Mr Korbar Singh Phanbuh amongst others. These intellectuals made a mark for themselves in the Assembly. When they spoke it was a pleasure to listen to them. No chief minister had to stand up and answer on their behalf when they were asked questions pertaining to their department. They could hold their own with central ministers and dignitaries from across the globe. They made the state proud. It is therefore ridiculous to pass a notification barring teachers from joining politics.

It would have been much healthier for the MDA Government to ban business people from contesting elections because there is a direct conflict of interest here. How can a politician also be a contractor and do business in the very government he is part of? If that is no problem for the MDA then what's the problem with teachers joining politics or contesting elections? Is the MDA afraid of the Voice of the Peoples' Party (VPP) which has several college teachers

and some faculty of NEHU as its members? Come on MDA Government, you can do better than this!

Yours etc.,  
Roland Mawlong.  
Via email

#### Water pipe scam unpardonable!

Editor,  
Apropos to the news report "JJM: Kolkata firm supplies defective, sub-par GI pipes" (ST Dec 16, 2021) a great job has indeed been done by some members of the Khasi Students Union (KSU) by bringing to light a shady deal in Jal Jeevan Mission scheme. This bold step by student members is in fact an "eye-opener" and should be supported and praised. Needless to say, using substandard GI pipes that have been supplied by Kolkata-based company - Jindal India, will only sabotage the government plan and objective to provide safe and adequate "drinking

water" to all households in rural India. A great mission indeed. But what is the point of such "schemes" if that will not be helpful to the underprivileged poor and targeted sectors? Hope this case will also draw the immediate attention of the concerned central ministries. They should now know what really gets cooked in the pot sent from Delhi.

In the olden days people exercised their benevolence by offering "water" generously to the thirsty travelers. This was considered as one of the most virtuous acts on earth. But in modern times people do just the opposite. They deprive the voiceless poor of water in order to "quench" their thirst for money. This is unarguably a great sin and totally unpardonable. The government should immediately initiate a thorough investigation into this alleged scam to identify the real culprits. Those responsible should be punished as per the law.

Yours etc.,  
Salil Gwal, Shillong

#### Rise in political violence

Editor,  
Political violence has been raising its head in different parts of India recently. Political violence is often perpetrated with the tacit support of political leaders themselves. Two people were killed in succession in Punjab as punishment for committing sacrilege. It is ironic that political leaders who advocate secularism and religious harmony are reluctant to speak out against these killings. Many leaders have condemned the sacrilege while most of them are keeping mum about the killings. It is worrisome that instead of trying to restore peace, some leaders are trying to take advantage of the tense situation. They want to swing the Sikh votes in their favour ahead of Punjab Assembly election. As political coalitions have changed in Punjab, the issue of sacrilege will become a source of fierce contention.

The two political killings

in a span of 12 hours in Kerala are certainly a stain on the state's record of political and social harmony. In the retaliatory killings a BJP leader and an SDPI leader were murdered. Kerala is known as a state with a record of communal harmony. Any attempts to get political violence must be resisted. Political leaders must join hands to ensure that the secular fabric of the state is not damaged.

All religions teach people to live in harmony with other people. When people disregard religious principles and think only in terms of religion, intolerance develops and crimes are committed. Democracy stands for equality, justice and religious harmony. When such principles are forgotten, it leads to violence and counter violence.

Yours etc.,  
Venu GS,  
Kollam

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

"With pride, there are many curses. With humility, there come many blessings."

— Ezra Taft Benson

## The Shillong Times

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### Nonchalant about MeECL affairs

ON assuming charge of the Power Department, the present Power Minister appeared ready to steer the Department in the right direction and redeem it from the morass it is in. But the sudden turnaround has left many wondering if the MDA Government has dug in its heels too deep into the smart meter contract to be able to pull out of it. No one is privy to the agreement signed between Satnam Global and the MeECL on the smart meter project but for some reason it seems that despite the lacunae pointed out from time to time by the media about the dangers of using Chinese made smart meters there is no attempt by the MeECL to back out of the deal. This despite clear directives from the Union Power Ministry.

The so-called enquiry into the MeECL scam that once hogged the limelight is now a forgotten saga. The Opposition which is now in tatters after the split in the Congress and the emergence of the Trinamool Congress has forgotten the MeECL. The former is trying to find its feet and the latter is busy enrolling members. The murky affairs of the MeECL are no longer sexy as they will not win votes. The ordinary citizenry are exhausted just complaining about the terrible choices they make after each election cycle. Unfortunately, the citizenry never organizes itself enough to bring the change they want to see. Years and years of exhaustion has made people weary, cynical and disgusted. Exhaustion tends to induce pessimism. But this hardly works in a democracy. The catchword is organize, organize, organize.

The MeECL has, over the years bred a category of vested interests starting with those holding charge of the Power Department. Every step is about deal making. This is not the first government that has milked from the Corporation. Others before it have acted in a similar vein. At least three decades ago there were attempts to privatise the Corporation because even then it had become unviable, with transmission and distribution losses running wild. These losses continue and with no consequences on those that allow such leakages to happen. The new CMD is a no-nonsense engineer with a management background to boot. He is expected to do what needs to be done to turn the Corporation around but he would have to be given a free hand to do that. Is that even possible? A government-controlled corporation is an extension of the government and politics will always determine how it is run. That is until the MeECL hits a major iceberg and runs aground.

### Letters to the Editor

#### Smart Meter: Boon or bane for MeECL!

Editor,  
After reading the news reports on smart meters and the subsequent comments shared by many readers about the smart meter, I would like to share my views, as I have tried to learn what other power distribution utilities are doing regarding the implementation of smart meters: who the vendors are and their qualifications.

During my search, I found that the Tripura Power Distribution Company decided to implement the smart meter project on DBFOOT Model – the same model which Ministry of Power, Government of India released, in which Discoms don't have to take loan or invest money upfront and the project area was also 1 sub-division only. Similarly, Assam has already executed multiple tenders, with first order being around 15,000 households in 1 sub-division and that too as per central government guidelines. A similar pattern was seen in Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and other states. It is surprising to note that when power companies with a much higher revenue

and rating than Meghalaya Power, choose the central government model and are eligible for grants, Meghalaya on the other hand is going in the opposite direction and using public money for this work, which could have been used in other social projects such as health infrastructure and other basic needs of the people of Meghalaya.

Surprisingly, I didn't find any other state power company giving orders to these vendors who are working in Meghalaya, not even for normal meters. So who selected them and how they qualified is a big question. Another surprise factor in this project, which is a unique case in India especially in the power sector, when our country is facing cyber security threats and serious discussions are going on about grid security, Meghalaya is procuring Chinese smart meters. As per information available in the public domain, other discoms where work was started and meters were procured to the tune of several lakh rupees also cancelled the orders of smart meters from Chinese vendors. Why is this not happening in Meghalaya. Above all, why has the present Power Minister also changed his stance in few months. Also, no other political party is raking up these real issues but nit-picking on inconsequential

Here is an intriguing question: has corruption declined, increased or remained the same in the seven years of the Narendra Modi government? After all, the 'na khaoonga, na khane doonga' (neither will I take a bribe nor will I allow anyone to take a bribe) was the rousing message from prime minister Modi in his first Independence Day address to the nation after taking over in 2014. Well, tell that now to contractors in Karnataka where the state contractors association has written to the prime minister's office last month claiming that they have to cough up around 25-30 per cent of tender amounts to elected representatives before even starting any public works in Bengaluru with a further five per cent being paid to get their bills cleared. Or mention this to government employees in Goa where a BJP MLA has accused his own PWD minister of taking Rs 25-30 lakhs as a bribe for every departmental posting. Or indeed to police officers in Maharashtra where a former top cop has accused the state's now arrested home minister of seeking Rs 100 crore 'vasooli' per month from the police force.

Karnataka and Goa are BJP ruled. Maharashtra is an opposition ruled coalition. The evidence would suggest that institutionalized corruption remains the great leveler that cuts across the political divide. So where does that leave the prime minister's commitment to act tough against corruption? Recall that in the build up to the 2014 general elections, the image of being a fierce anti-corruption crusader was key to the Modi strongman persona. The 2014 poll slogan 'Baat hua Bhrasthachar, abki baar Modi sarkar' (enough of corruption, this time Modi government) was targeted at an effete Congress-led UPA 2 government that appeared to stumble along from one corruption allegation to another. But an anti-corruption slogan on the campaign trail is so much easier than actually bringing in genuinely transformative change on the ground. So what's the reality beyond the stirring soundbites?

In January this year, India slipped six places on the

# Na Khaonga Na Khane doonga : Slogan Not Reality

By Rajdeep Sardesai

Transparency International's annual corruption index to the 86th rank but it was still a marginal improvement from being ranked 94 in 2013. On a global bribery risk index as perceived by foreign investors doing business in the country, India made a big leap forward from rank 185 in 2014 to 77 in 2020. Digitisation and the use of technology in several government processes has reduced the scope for misuse of discretionary powers, be it in tax collection or public

anti-corruption watchdog, the Lokpal, has been a virtual non-starter. When there is an occasional solid media investigation in a corruption case, it rarely gets followed up into a sustained campaign.

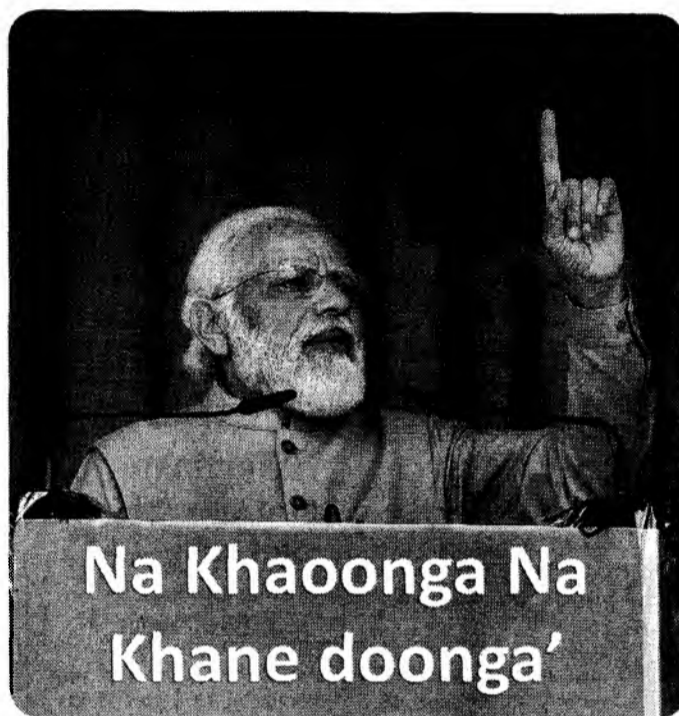
Take the classic example of the controversial electoral bonds that lie at the heart of the country's vast and mostly unregulated election funding system. The figures for a key election year of 2019-20 for example reveal that out of the Rs 3,249 crores received by

the line need their own line of poll financing from local 'syndicates'. In effect, there is a 'decentralisation' of corruption that co-exists with a centralization of power. Be it a 'rate card' for transferring or posting a government officer, haftas from dance bars, allowing illegal mining, changing land use and building regulations, granting additional management seats in an education institute, or just manipulating village road tenders, the nature of the corruption may vary but the 'deal-making' is almost in-built into a vast well-entrenched system of localized political-bureaucratic largesse. Just look at how the assets of so many elected representatives at every level register a quantum jump after just a few years in power. As the re-emergence of cash in a post demonetized world has shown, there are no quick fix deterrents to ending a near-endemic culture of bribe giving and taking.

Which is why Mr Modi's anti-corruption pledge now seems more like a well-spun election narrative that doesn't quite stand up to rigorous scrutiny. Why not at least act in BJP-ruled states like Karnataka and Goa against those who are misusing their public office? Simply blaming previous governments for their spotty record against corruption may no longer cut ice. Interestingly, Karnataka's contractors claim that while a ten per cent commission was demanded in the previous JD (S)-Congress government, that 'rate card' has now spiraled to thirty per cent. Corruption too it would seem is hostage to inflationary pressures!

Post-script: Last month, I interviewed the outspoken Meghalaya governor, Satya Pal Malik who candidly claimed that in his previous tenure as Goa governor, the BJP government in Panjim had been 'fully involved' in corruption even during Covid relief and he had written to the prime minister to complain about it. So what happened, I asked? 'Well, I was removed and sent to Shillong,' he sighed ruefully.

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services. The Modi government boasts that unlike in the UPA years, there is no major corruption scandal that has hobbled the government. Ministerial accountability which was seen to have gone missing in a weak UPA coalition government has been restored it is argued through greater ministerial scrutiny by a domineering Big Boss-like chief executive.

But exposing big ticket corruption is often a consequence of robust watchdog institutions or an independent media that investigates wrongdoing. In recent years, there are signs of institutional collapse and media co-option and compromise that make it that much easier for an all-powerful government to ensure a veil of opacity over its decision-making. Fewer Right to Information applications get answered satisfactorily, if at all. Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) reports are no longer the subject of heated public debates. After all the hullabaloo, the

political parties, the BJP got Rs 2,606 crores or more than 75 per cent of the electoral bond money, confirming the wide disparity in access to resources. Even more troubling is the non-transparent information asymmetry with only those in the ruling party having access to the source of the monies. This creates the suspicion of potentially widespread cronyism and collusion of interests with little or no oversight. That the Supreme Court has procrastinated over the electoral bonds case only exposes the manner in which the few institutions which can act as a check on any misuse of power have also failed to perform their constitutional duty.

Elections, after all, lie at the heart of the democratic set-up and money oils the election machine. Routine elections every year, from gram panchayat upwards, demand a constant flow of cash. If the major parties rely on funding from the big corporates, those down

## Real designs behind BJP's 'electoral reforms' No delinking of money power envisaged

By Dr. Gyan Pathak

Electoral reform, in the true sense of the term, in India remains a dream for poor, common, and innocent people of the country. What happened in the name of several reforms is exclusion of the poor, effected, for example, by enhancing even the security deposits that a poor person cannot dream of or afford. Delinking elections from money power is not on the cards, while it would be the real inclusive electoral reform. What the Modi led BJP government is pushing would create more problems than it would solve for the common man, federalism, and the autonomy of institutions in the country.

The most recent example was the passage of the Election Laws (Amendment) Bill 2021 in Parliament, which seeks to link electoral roll data with the Aadhaar ecosystem. Modi government got it done even amid walk-out by the opposition. The opposition wanted the bill to be referred to a standing committee for deeper deliberation on all the related issues. However, the government rejected their demand. During the brief discussion before passage of the bill in the Rajya Sabha, it was termed by the leader of the opposition Mallikarjun Kharge as a "mockery of democracy" since it was earlier passed in the Lok Sabha without any "discussion or debate".

*"The Constitution has also made a provision of State Election Commissions which are given the responsibility of conducting local body elections for urban and rural areas under Panchayati Raj System."*

The chief allegation regarding this bill is that it is in violation of the SC judgment in Puttaswamy case, and the chief fear is that it would lead to mass disenfranchisement. However, the Centre has claimed that it would solve the "major problem" of multiple enrolment of the same person at different places and help in "cleaning" the voter's list to a great extent. The fear against the passage of the bill intensifies when we read it with other steps initiated by the government, such as CAA-NRC-NPR and several other issues like availing even their legal rights and humanitarian help, we know how much trouble the citizens face in the absence of Aadhaar cards. Even if, government's claim is accepted, it cannot empower the poor and common men who have only the right to vote and in reality shrewdly excluded from contesting since it is linked to money which they cannot afford. It means only moneyed people would be rulers and all others are only to be ruled and will have no say in the legislative except through the moneyed people they have elected. It is not a true democracy if the poor cannot voice their concerns directly in the legislative, since they don't have their representative from among themselves. If the poor have no right to decide their own fate, and make provisions, they can never be uplifted which we have been seeing for a long time, since the rich decide what the poor need, and what should they be provided, based on their second hand information about poor people.

In the next step of the electoral reform, Modi government wants a single electoral roll for all the elections in the country. It is again objected by the opposition on grounds that the power of the states must be respected, and State Election Commissions must not be compelled to follow the "dictates" of the Centre. The

Centre on the other hand has adopted an approach which is called "persuading" the states, which would not be very difficult for them, since almost all states except 9 and one UT are already following the Election Commission of India's electoral rolls for their local body polls.

Among those, one is the Union Territory of Jammu & Kashmir, which is already under a Lieutenant Governor under the Centre. Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Madhya Pradesh, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh are under their rule and hence adoption of one electoral roll will not be a great problem. Only in respect of Kerala, Odisha, and Nagaland, there would be problems. Problems may occur even in election bound Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand, if the decision is delayed.

It is perhaps in this backdrop PM Modi had recently called a meeting in which the Chief Election Commissioner of India and his two other colleagues were asked to attend, which was even criticized by the opposition as an effort of "compromising the autonomy" of the Election Commission.

Presently, the electoral rolls prepared by the Election Commission of India are used for Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabha Elections, as per the responsibility given under the Constitution of India. The Constitution has also made a provision of State Election Commissions

which are given the responsibility of conducting local body elections for urban and rural areas under Panchayati Raj System. Only 10 states and UTs are making their own electoral rolls while all others are making their electoral rolls on the basis of the ECI electoral rolls.

BJP has been pushing for simultaneous election for Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabhas. It is in this context it wants a single electoral roll even for local bodies. It is clear the Centre wants to interfere and do politics in the subject that the Constitution of India has given exclusively to the states. The Centre has directly been doing politics not only in the subjects that are in concurrent list of the Constitution of India, but also in the subjects that are to be handled by the states alone.

After 1992, when through a constitutional amendment, three tier system of governance was implemented in the country, we have Panchayati Raj System, apart from the states and the Centre. We have already seen how the Centre and States do politics in the Panchayati Raj System through numerous programmes and administrative manoeuvring and undermining its very functioning. Now the Centre wants to play direct politics in the Panchayati Raj System through the so called single electoral roll.

Governance through the Union, the State, and the Panchayati Raj are the three layers the Constitution of India has provided, and the Union must not usurp the powers and functions of the states and the Panchayati Raj through innocent looking instruments that can be misused to tame opposition ruled states and the local bodies. Real electoral reform must start from delinking money power from the electoral process, and then barring criminals, communalists, casteists, and those who do politics of hate by arousing passions among voters. (IPA Service)

issues. Why are political parties avoiding this issue? Do they have anything to gain?

Recently, we heard in the news about the cyber attack on the Prime Minister's twitter account, which is considered to be very safe. If tomorrow because of Chinese meters, anyone hacks our grid and attacks the transmission network of POWER GRID and the Power station of NTPC, it will lead to blackout in India and will impact hugely on the economy. Then who will be responsible for that? This is a serious concern of national security as correctly pointed out by the previous Chief Secretary, as published in your daily.

We wait and watch to see what our Government has to say on this?

Yours etc.,  
P. Nongrum  
Power Electrical Engineer  
Shillong

#### Privacy at stake

Editor,  
The electoral reforms bill was passed by a voice vote in the Rajya Sabha amid vociferous protests by the opposition. This bill entails that the Electors Photo Identity Card (EPIC) be linked with Aadhar Card which contains

sensitive personal information like biometrics.

While the constitution ensures privacy as a fundamental right, the government at the centre, with its callous and authoritative disposition as can be seen axiomatically from the recent legislations, brought a law which impinges upon the very fundamental privacy right. Not only does it break privacy but it will also make it difficult for those without Aadhar to vote in elections, denying another very basic right. As it is a matter of Constitutional infringement will there be judicial activism in this case? Will the Supreme Court judgement in Puttaswamy Case, which protects the privacy right under certain constitutional provisions, prevail over the new electoral reform law? It is left to the moral conscience of the law makers and the wisdom of the SC judges.

Yours etc.,  
Kevin M Shangpliang  
Via email

#### A cause of serious concern

Editor,  
Apropos the letter, 'Murdering Tradition' by name withheld (ST Dec 21, 2021)

it is really painful to read of the events unfolding in Jaiaw. More painful however is that the writer dared not reveal his name, which if one reads between the lines, could well grasp the reasons. It is unfortunate to see the public apathy of that locality. I too saw the sad event on social media and was equally shocked at what our custodians of peace and harmony were doing. As of now there appears that not much can be done as it took almost a week for a voice to cry in the newspaper. Why were the judicious elders, who tried to restore the once upon a time social harmony abandoned by the remaining elders of the locality as big as Jaiaw, is a pertinent question that needs to be asked.

That our doctors from CMC Vellore who have helped cure our poor patients who due to financial constraints could not personally travel to Vellore for treatment, were harassed and only the few handful of elders worried about the sad happenings and dared to correct the rot, seems like the disease is now too deep-rooted to be cured. The perpetrators of such acts of violence had better be informed that, be they doctors or any ordinary non-Khasi in Meghalaya do not belong to the tit for tat group in their own state. If that were

so, do we ever dispassionately ponder at the fate of the thousands of our brethren in offices or schools or colleges in the different parts of this vast country?

Let us hope that this racial hatred will die a natural death if all right thinking citizens of this land once glorified as 'Ka ri tip brier tip Blei' (The land that respects humans and is God fearing) stand together and what our land was once upon a time known will once again bear that glorified name.

And one factor not to be brushed aside is the politicking practised by our politicians. Let the racial tone in electioneering, not be deployed for goodness sakes and concentrate on the manifesto that would make Meghalaya the best of the best, be it in Education (today at its lowest ebb) Agriculture (left forlorn), Social Harmony, road safety, clean water to drink and last but not least the solution to this problem of traffic snarls that had turned the clock to one century back.

Yours etc.,  
F. Lyngdoh  
Via email

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"History is a pack of lies about events that never happened told by people who weren't there."

--- George Santayana

The Shillong Times

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Polls and development

WITH the assembly elections in Uttar Pradesh and other states just a call away, there's a frenetic "developmental" push in the star state in Indian politics that has the largest population of nearly 20 crore - forming some 17 per cent of the national total. This, even after a bifurcation of former UP into two with formation of Uttarakhand in 2000. UP's largest size in Parliament, with 80 MPs in the Lok Sabha itself, obviously adds to its clout. With Prime Minister Narendra Modi having made Varanasi his political base since 2014, the importance of Uttar Pradesh has further escalated. On the debit side, Uttar Pradesh is also the most-chaotic state in terms of law and order, a credit it shares with neighbouring Bihar.

Stakes are high for the ruling BJP in Uttar Pradesh, a fact that is reinforced also by the so-called "developmental" push for the state in recent weeks, led by the Prime Minister himself. In a latest in the series of visits for foundation-laying and launches, Modi was in Varanasi on Thursday, unveiling schemes worth over Rs 2000 crore. Nothing wrong per se about developing a region or state, other than that it should not be at the cost of the others that are also craving for development. An upcoming election by itself should not be the spur for development either. After all, the question arises why such a frenzy when the state is at the end of term of the BJP rule, rather than the party showing the nerve to push development there in the past five years. In part, fooling the people could be the name of the game. The poor in India, fed on a diet of hope and their bellies left half-starved, form the bulk of the electorate; mere sitting ducks for politicians to take them on a fancy ride and rob victory often from the jaws of defeat.

In all fairness, the Yogi Adityanath government in the state was far better compared to the complacency of BJP rule in other states and even at the Centre. Reason why opinion polls one after another give it a fair chance of returning to power. But, any election scenario is unpredictable until the day the votes are cast and counting done. There are times when new issues come upfront and spoil the chances of an incumbent government. It can happen in UP as well and this must explain the present developmental over-drive by the PM in Varanasi and elsewhere in the state through a series of foundation-stone laying agenda and other programmes. Others too deserve their fair share.

# Meghalaya stepping into its 50th year

By Patricia Mukhim

Someone has rightly pointed out that Meghalaya's 50th year celebration appears to be very statist with no involvement of civil society. Apparently there is a top heavy committee of the who's who of the State including a few Padma Shri recipients who are on the Committee chaired by the State Chief Minister. As can be expected, the list of members comprise the acquiescent variety. Politicians in Meghalaya can't handle dissent which they equate with hostility. Dissent is the lifeblood of democracy. Dissent means dealing with a range of ideas. An example of where dissent matters is that we don't accept as gospel everything suggested by the state. We want a public debate especially on issues directly affecting us the public, so that in the end the best idea which is rigorously tested is accepted and implemented.

In 1927, the Nobel Prize for Chemistry for discovering a structure of cholic acid was won by Heinrich Wieland. Within a year other scientists proved him wrong. Similarly, in 1959, Severo Ochoa and Arthur Kornberg shared a Nobel Prize for the discovery of enzymes that carry out the synthesis of RNA and DNA in living organisms. It turned out that these enzymes were not the right ones and this was testified by other scientists. Academics is all about arriving at the truth through robust methods of testing by knowledgeable individuals be they scientists or people of other professions. Such corrections are possible because of informed dissent, meaning that the person who suggests an alternative does so based on rock solid evidence. Humankind would not have progressed without dissent. It would have been a boring one-way traffic of ideas as happened in Hitler's regime.

In Meghalaya, however, if you are a dissenter then you are construed to be anti-government. If you point out the government's flaws you are considered the enemy and looked at askance. Does this mean that all wisdom resides with the government and those outside it are bereft of intelligence? Look at the State Planning Board. Do we know what it is planning? Have we ever seen the State Planning Board Chairperson briefing the media on what policy briefs it has suggested to the State Government? The NCP MLA has correctly stated that if the Planning Board is unable to show action and outcomes it might as well fold up. Unfortunately, most of such institutions in Meghalaya are defunct or functioning in the breach. On Meghalaya's

50th year it would be prudent to do a SWOT (strengths, weakness, opportunities, threats) analysis of all the Institutions which have an appointed Chairperson who reports to no one - not the Assembly, not the public. They earn their pay and perks and sometimes even a ministerial rank for doing nothing. This is not acceptable and we should question the heads of these institutions because they are paid from the public exchequer.

Coming to institutions, most of them moribund, on Meghalaya's 50th year it might be a good idea to do an audit each of these institutions which are actually political largesse bestowed by the ruling party to buy the loyalties of the individuals appointed as chairpersons. Are these institutions delivering anything at all or are they just white elephants eating a way public resources? At present after the State Planning Board we have the Meghalaya Tourism Development Corporation (MTDC), Meghalaya Government Construction Company (MGCC), the Khadi Board, Meghalaya Urban Development

The other day several of those red buses funded by the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JN-NURM) were being towed to Assam perhaps. Recently those buses and maxi cabs that were never maintained and therefore have been condemned were auctioned out. With so many public transports out of commission the commuters are at the mercy of local taxis which charge a bomb these days. Is there any reason why we should be celebrating Meghalaya's 50th birthday when every aspect of human development and ease is going south?

If we have a State Grievances Committee can we ask when was the last time it sat and what were the public grievances brought before it? You may take this as an RTI. And about the Meghalaya Government Construction Corporation the questions are (a) Is the Corporation running at a profit or loss? What are the major construction works undertaken by the MGCC considering that it has a rival in the Dhar Brothers Construction Company? What about the

we have as good as lost our democratic rights.

Meghalaya is not in that cosy position of celebrating its 50th year. On the contrary the people of the state must start taking stock of all the areas that require redress to bring Meghalaya on track in critical areas of governance and administration.

And then there is one question that has bothered many of us who have analysed how the State Health Department and the Government as a whole has battled Covid. To the credit of the senior officers manning the health administration they have been candid about where they had gone wrong in the initial stages and where they were able to show innovation in Covid handling. One Institution that has stood the state in good stead is the Indian Institute of Public Health (IIPH), Shillong which was set up over a decade ago by the Public Health Foundation of India (PHFI). It is the IIPH Shillong that crunched data and provided it to the State Health Department to better understand the Covid situation in Meghalaya and therefore to tailor-make the interventions. Also, a pandemic is a public health issue and the IIPH has started several courses for local researchers in different aspects of public health. The State Government should have been giving more assistance to this much needed public health Institution but it appears that there is a subtle resistance from a section of the state medical fraternity, which like the dog in the manger are not used to collaboration or cooperation. It's a case of departmental ego playing spoilsport. The Health Minister would do well to nip this politics in the bud. The Government cannot allow petty-minded individuals to sabotage a good cause.

The preamble for setting up the IIPH Shillong clearly states that it was started "in collaboration with Government of Meghalaya." I recall that in those early years, Assam's Health Minister, Himanta Biswa Sarma was very keen to get the IIPH to Assam. He promised land and other assistance but the UPA government then was definite that it should be located at Shillong.

The IIPH has been able to attract several foreign foundations to fund and assist its research, particularly in tackling malaria. On Meghalaya's 50th birthday we should be supporting such proactive institutions instead of clipping their wings. Please leave politics out of health care. Period!



Chairman of the Meghalaya Urban Development Authority? What is its brief? Can we get a gist of the responsibilities of this Chairman and what recommendations he has made to the Government?

I would also like to pose a question to those in the Opposition too. Why are questions about these public offices never raised in the Assembly? Can Meghalaya afford to pay all for these superfluous positions from the public exchequer? Why do successive governments treat the State of Meghalaya and its resources like their personally inherited fiefdoms. But more importantly why do people of Meghalaya allow this to happen? An unquestioning populace will have a government that loots its resources from under its nose. If we can't raise questions in public platforms about issues that matter then

## Karnataka bill: attack on religious minorities Retrograde move needs to be stopped

By Prakash Karat

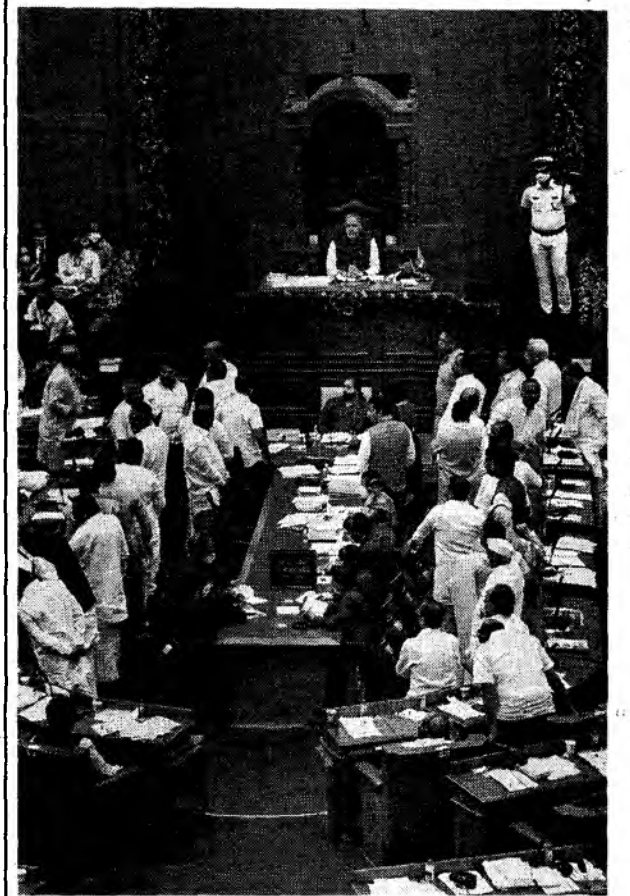
The Karnataka anti-conversion bill passed by the legislative assembly is a direct attack on the rights of religious minorities and religious freedom. Such laws have been passed in other BJP-ruled states like Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and earlier in Gujarat. Though named as 'Freedom of Religion Act', these laws do the opposite: curbing the fundamental right provided in Article 25 of the constitution to 'freely profess, practice and propagate religion'.

The Karnataka Protection of Right to Freedom of Religion Bill follows the pattern set by similar laws passed in other BJP-ruled states. The Gujarat Freedom

target and penalise normal religious activities.

The bill provides for more stringent punishment for forced conversion of SC/STs, like the legislations in other BJP-ruled states. This reflects the long-held RSS fear that the poor dalits and adivasis are easy prey to the allurements offered to convert. The RSS cannot ever accept that the conversion by dalits and adivasis to Christianity or Islam stemmed from their oppressed caste status and their quest to acquire dignity and social acceptance.

The campaign against "forced conversions" has been part of the main agenda of the RSS since its inception. In fact, the Vishwa



of Religion Act of 2003 was adopted during the Narendra Modi state government and this law has taken away the freedom to convert and prohibit interfaith marriages. The Karnataka bill provides for three to five years imprisonment for forced conversions; however, if such a forced conversion takes place with a minor, woman, or an SC/ST person, then the jail term will be from three to ten years.

The bill has come in the background of widespread attacks on Christians and their places of worship in the state. According to a report by the People's Union of Civil Liberties (PUCL), on "Hate Crimes against Christians in Karnataka", from January to November this year, there were 39 incidents of attacks on Christian

Hindu Parishad was formed to bring the converted back into the fold of Hinduism. The RSS has been conducting a systematic campaign for 'gharwapsi' (home coming) since the Modi government took office in 2014. Recently, RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat justified gharwapsi by claiming that it is "to bring back our brothers who lost their way". By the RSS logic, gharwapsi is not "conversion" but a return of a person to their ancestral religion. That is why the Uttarakhand Freedom of Religion Act (2018) legitimised gharwapsi by stating that any person "coming back to his ancestral religion" shall not be decreed as conversion under the Act.

The anti-conversion drive is now accompanied by the campaign against 'love ji-

"The Karnataka bill provides for three to five years imprisonment for forced conversions; however, if such a forced conversion takes place with a minor, woman, or an SC/ST person, then the jail term will be from three to ten years."

places of worship and congregations. All these attacks by various RSS outfits were attributed to efforts at conversion, a charge found false in all the cases. The falsity of the Sangh propaganda about conversions to Christianity is obvious when it is seen that the Christians in Karnataka constitute only 1.87 per cent of the population, according to the 2011 Census, and this too was a decline compared to the 2001 census figure of 1.9 per cent.

If the bill becomes law, then it will be a constant threat to the Christians, as along with vigilante actions against places of worship, the law can be invoked by a compliant administration to

had', which is meant to stop interfaith marriages and to demoralise Muslim youth. Already Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh have passed laws against love jihad. Even the Karnataka bill will criminalise inter-religious marriage since the definition of forced conversion includes through marriage also. The bill was hastily introduced and passed in the legislative assembly. It now needs to be approved by the legislative council, in which the BJP does not have a majority. If the Congress and the JD(S) unitedly oppose the bill in the council, it can be defeated. This retrograde bill needs to be stopped. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

### Have we really sunk this low?

Editor,  
Reading the two letters to the editor, the first "Murdering Tradition (ST 21/12/21)" name withheld and "A cause of serious concern by F. Lyngdoh (ST 23/12/21)" sent a sinking feeling in the pit of the stomach. If the video mentioned in the above two letters really does exist and if the allegations levelled at the unruly behaviour of some local youths at the Rangbah Shnongs of Jaiaw Pylun is really true, then a serious question arises. As a society where are we heading if respect, deference and regard for our elders is no longer a social value? Christmas is just round the corner and we are readying ourselves for celebrating the 50th Anniversary of our state. I know there is little or no connection between the two but at the same time is there anything to cheer or be joyful about? As Khasis we are so very conscious and proud of maintaining "Ka akor ka burom". As a matter of fact it forms the core of our identity. It is the issue on which we pride ourselves as Khasis and the very first

basic tenet of "Ka akor ka burom" is respect for your elders. Mr F. Lyngdoh has made mention of his concern that it took a week for any reaction to the incident to appear and that this is indicative of the public apathy we as Khasis attach to the deterioration of our customs and values. I fully agree with him and this has therefore prompted me to join this chorus for a revival of our Hynniewtrep value systems. We must raise our voices to save ourselves. I appeal to all right-thinking Khasis to join in this attempt to restore Ka Akor Ka Burom and not allow our combined silence over the matter to be the dirge of our culture.

Before I end and in conclusion I have one more concern and worry that needs to be clarified. I am certain that the various localities in Jaiaw have their Seng Longknie and Seng Samla. I also have reason to believe that these are strong and dynamic organisations with strong energetic elected leaders. Where is the voice of protest from these organisations over the humiliation of their own Rangbah Shnongs? I am not trying to politicise the issue nor am I interested in being a rabble rouser. How-

ever, as an elderly Khasi I am simply wondering if we have progressed so much that we are now ready to discard our own traditions and culture and dump them into the dustbin of 21st century Modernity?

Yours etc.,  
Toki Blah,  
Via email

### Controversial smart meter

Editor,  
Apropos of P Nongrum's letter, 'Smart meter: Boon or bane for MeECL' (ST dt 23-12-2021), I would like to add few more points. The meter box left unsealed as in the 60s due to too shortage of manpower to attend to it had led consumers to fix fuses. Kit kats were fixed with wire that can carry such an amount of current, that buildings can easily catch fire. To curb this the power ministry planned a few years ago to resort to MCBs (miniature circuit breakers). Havell is a renowned and reliable company. The plan was fantastic as any tampering internally won't matter anymore as the MCB controls from the source. Sadly its price is only

Rs 450 each (2 are needed for live and neutral). At Rs 900 for 2 only is too small an amount to interest the policy makers in the country. So the plan to save millions of households was sadly shelved. And many buildings became victims of this vital Havell item being too low-priced to receive the attention of corporations.

Let us study the meter in chronological order. (1) Electric meter. This was and still is the earliest form of meter. It is based on the eddy current rotating the circular aluminum disc. The unit is Kilowatt/hour which could be read on the basis of current drawn and time. Sadly, this meter is easily tampered and our power suppliers incurred a huge loss. MeECL had huge revenue loss on account of this in the steel industries in Byrnihat and in many such factories in our country as well. So MeECL resorted to the meter for transmitting (records solely kept by MeECL) and receiving meter (property of factory). This proved fantastic as prior to this, the revenue earned per month was Rs 25 crores. After this intervention it shot to Rs 40 crore. And this was detected too

late, when two steel plants packed up and left the state for reasons known to them.

The electric meter is not as smart as the electronic meter since electronics no longer have mechanical moving parts but purely electronics counters, registers and digital displays. It registers every unit of power used. This means consumers are billed accurately. This is the reason why we see complaints of excess billings by our unmindful innocent consumers. But the new Power Minister wants to tax ordinary consumers first while leaving out the steel industries, government buildings et al with uncleaned bills. Imagine Rs 1.74 crore was waived off for one steel plant.

With smart meters the bill may go up three times. Why? The power supplier charges us kilowatt per hour, plus loss in transmission. The arguments against smart meters outweigh those for it but why is it that to date only 6 out of 1,000 households are smart-metered? The target is 251 million households by 2025. So why not leave us for the time being as we are way behind the long list among the states? Germany,

the most advanced country in technology in Europe does not accept smart meters. In the UK and Canada it is not compulsory. Why not in India? According to Mr P. Nongrum weird and obscure companies are awarded the tender. The question is why in a project as huge as this, tenders are not openly floated? And electronics meters manufactured by HPL malfunction after 8 months with no prompt local after sales service is a big problem to be shouldered by the consumer as experienced by someone I know.

The Power Minister should reconsider installing smart meters, more so those made in China. The people of Meghalaya cannot be turned into guinea pigs. If at all smart meters are to be installed then let the whole process of procuring the meters be transparent and their installation fool-proof.

Yours etc.,  
W.Passah  
Ex - HOD Electronics  
St.Edmund's College

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"If you haven't got any charity in your heart, you have the worst kind of heart trouble."

--- Bob Hope

The Shillong Times

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The Christ of Christmas

CHRISTMAS like every other religious observance has over time tended to become a commercial affair with decorations galore and all kinds of LED lights lighting the paths that otherwise remain dark in ordinary times. There's nothing wrong with lighting up dark spaces except that it should not be a temporary affair because pedestrians need to feel safe. And while most government employees are paid early this month there are many unfortunate souls that will go without their salaries and for whom Christmas is a depressing affair because they see celebrations all around but don't have the wherewithal to even keep their kitchens warm.

Considering that a Bill to ban conversion to Christianity has just been passed in Karnataka a state otherwise known to be progressive and housing the IT hubs of the country with several back offices of international IT companies located there, such a regressive Bill does not bode well for that state and for the country. The anti-conversion Bill goes against the idea of freedom to choose one's religion - a Constitutional right. Today the idea of a diverse India is slowly giving way to a nationalism project that is defined by the ruling BJP and its mentor the RSS. State Governments of the North East have remained silent under the onslaught of violence against Christians across the country in the last several months. The government and civil society groups from Christian-majority states like Mizoram, Nagaland and Meghalaya ought to have passed resolutions that should go to the Prime Minister and Union Home Minister. But there has been a stunning silence on the matter. Are the states waiting to be put through the wringer before they make their voices heard?

In fact, Christmas is the perfect occasion for introspecting on the state of affairs besetting the minorities in the India of today where a section of right wing activists blatantly speak of attacking Muslims and arming themselves with weapons for this war against Islam. This certainly is the clash of civilization that Samuel Huntington spoke about. While there is no need for grandstanding on the issue of religion, to be silent is to invite a penalty which might be too heavy to pay in the long run. Late TH Rangad of the BJP was one person who regularly took up the issue of freedom of religion as an important freedom for the tribes of the North East whenever he met the top leadership of the BJP. Now none of the BJP MLAs in Meghalaya or elsewhere are questioning the party leadership on the regular attacks on Christian churches. The question to these BJP MLAs/MPs across states is "If not now then when?"

# The celebration of Christmas

By Fr (Dr) John Parankimalil, SDB

It's Christmas Time! Homes are decorated, shops are illuminated, and markets are flooded with Christmas goods. Cakes are being ordered, cards and gifts are getting wrapped, people are buying new dresses, and there are festivities all around us. But what is Christmas all about? Through a series of questions, I want to take you to the spirit of Christmas.

A reflection on the Gospel narratives related to the birth of Jesus can help us draw useful insights for strengthening ones faith, and to live ones faith against various odds, including persecutions.

1) Making Right Choices in Life: Mary's "yes" to become the mother of Jesus is an invitation to all followers of Jesus to make right choices in life. Every choice has corresponding challenges and Mary too had many challenges. But she had the courage to accept the challenges after weighing the benefits to humanity if she said "Yes" to God.

Everyday life provides the followers of Jesus with challenging situations to make their choices: choice to follow the crowd or to make a difference by setting new trends; a choice to tell lies and escape punishment or tell the truth and suffer the consequences; a choice to be original or to copy others ideas and style; a choice to be indifferent and allow injustice to flourish or to speak for justice and to pay the price in the process!

2) Life is not about Receiving but Giving: God became a human being in the person of Jesus so that people may have life and have it abundantly. Jesus taught his disciples by his life and discourses that the purpose of life is achieved by giving, giving without expecting anything in return. Mary presented herself as an excellent example of giving by going in haste to serve her cousin Elizabeth who became pregnant in her advanced age. Her response was immediate and without any request from Elisabeth.

Life provides abundance of opportunities to the followers of Jesus to bring relief, consolation and joy in lives of those who are in need by giving time, talents and financial and material resources. When millions of people are suffering due to the consequences of the pandemic, are the followers of Jesus generous to share their

resources with the needy?

3) Simplicity and Wisdom Lead to Discernment of the Divine and Manifestation of the Divine. When Jesus was born in Bethlehem People did not recognize the messiah in child Jesus. That is why Mary and Joseph did not get a place and Mary had to give birth to Jesus in a manger. But two groups of people could discern the divine in child Jesus. They are the simple shepherds who were given the news about the birth of Jesus by angels and the three wise men, magi, who came from the east guided by a star. The shepherds were simple people without prejudices and they were open to the message from God. As a result, they could perceive the messiah in child Jesus. The magi because of their eagerness to search and learn with openness could discern the messiah in the child Jesus.

In order to see God in human beings and perceive the divine plan in the phenomenal changes taking place in the world and in India, and respond to them creatively the followers of Jesus need a combination of simplicity, openness and intelligence.

4) Leaders Need to Avoid Obsession with Power and Use Power only for Fulfilling Responsibilities: Leaders in any community are entrusted with certain powers and these powers are given to them to fulfill their responsibilities. Sometimes the leaders become obsessed with their powers and forget their responsibilities and even misuse their power. When King Herod heard from the magi about the birth of "a baby born to be the king of Jews", he was very upset. He felt threatened about his power and it led to the massacre of thousands of boys in Bethlehem and its neighbourhood, who were two years old and younger.

Jesus presented himself as a sublime example of leadership. He told his disciples bluntly that authority is for service and not to lord over others. He also said that the "Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mt. 20:28). By presenting the parable of the Good Shepherd Jesus explained to his disciples the qualities needed for a leader: deep knowledge about the people, care and concern for

the people, leading from the front and readiness to protect people even by laying down one's life.

5) Be Innocent as Doves and Prudent as Serpents: When Joseph and Mary came to know about the order of King Herod to kill all male children below the age of two, they escaped to Egypt and remained there till the death of Herod. Jesus could foresee the opposition and harassment his followers would have to face in the future. That is why he advised them to be innocent as doves and prudent as serpents.

When the followers of Jesus have to face crises, they should not compromise with their integrity. At the same time, they may not go for a direct confrontation with the adversaries.

6) Become Humane - Essence of Spirituality: God became human in the person of Jesus in order to teach men and women how to live as human beings. The Gospels depict a Jesus who is endowed with all noble human qualities like selfless love, forgiveness, compassion, courage, respect for individuals etc. Only when the followers of Jesus are able to reflect these qualities in their lives, will they be able to witness Jesus. As Jesus was a man for others, the followers of Jesus also have to become altruistic.

Rituals, prayers and preaching about Jesus cannot replace following the way of Jesus. To be humane, the followers of Jesus also have to undergo a paradigm shift from religiosity of rituals to spirituality of practicing the core values of Jesus. That is why Jesus gave a new commandment to his disciples on the eve of his death. "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another" (John 13:34). The three main characteristics of love, as reflected in the teachings of Jesus, are forgiveness, compassion and non-discrimination or respecting the dignity of every individual.

Good Governance Day

In the year 2014, the Government of India declared 25th of December, every year, as Good Governance Day. It may be too hard for the majority of Indians to imagine that a child born in a manger in Bethlehem a little

over two thousand years ago could still inspire billions of people across the globe to know what good governance is all about.

Let us look at just four characteristics of good governance that the top Indian leaders can learn from the divine child of Bethlehem.

First, the Saviour comes down from heaven to the earth, leaving behind the heavenly bliss and thus taking human form; if our leaders can come down from their ivory towers and reach out to those living in ignorance, poverty, hunger, unemployment, lack of habitation, then there would be rays of good governance emerging in our land.

Second, God chose the less known town of Bethlehem to let his Son pitch his tent among humanity; he did not choose the well-fortified city of Jerusalem, but the almost unknown town, and he would live a "hidden" life for the major part of his life. It is time that our leaders leave the comforts of the city and urban living and go to the lesser-known villages and towns to see reality. For this, our leaders will have to take dusty roads.

Third, the new-born child had as his first acquaintances the simple village people and shepherds of the neighbourhood. These are the people who have been on the margins of the society, who have been shunned by the "genteel" society. Good governance can only begin when those on the periphery are first approached and any development is seen from their perspective.

Fourth, the child in the manger also reminds the floating population; we may call them refugees, or migrants or casual labourers. If the leaders care for the people, then they need to take into consideration the plight of those who are always on the move, either because of survival or because of job opportunities, and provide support systems which would assure that they are well-protected and their basic needs taken care of. That is how good governance can flourish.

May Christmas 2021 bring about 'good will' in each one of us to love, to serve, to forgive, to give, to care and to bring about Good Governance in all areas of life!

(The writer is Director, Don Bosco Institute of Management, Guwahati Email: jparankimalil@gmail.com)

# The Joy and Dubiety of Christmas

By Rev Kyrsoibor Pyrtuh

"Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. An angel of the Lord stood before them... and said to them, "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. (Luke 2:8-10)

The year 2020-21 has been bitter for everyone and one can no longer think of realizing the dream to be happy and certain in life. The Covid19 pandemic and the damage it has incurred on the lives and livelihoods of the people especially the marginalized sections is humungous. It will take decades to recover from the damage in terms of economic growth, health care, education of children and young adults and employment etc.

At the same time, our hearts cannot but be joyful on the advent of Christmas and indeed Christmas is a season of joy and once again we all long to celebrate the season with gaiety and in the spirit of piety. Christmas reminds us that the Good News and Hope has descended into earth in the life and person of Jesus Christ. It is the season that we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, the Hope of the world and we are being renewed in our belief in the possibility of hope.

The tales of Christmas are a mixology of joy, anxiety and dubiety. The Gospels inform us that the tales about the first Christmas about two thousand years ago, are

rending and sentimental. At the same time, they were the first to receive the good news via an Angel who appeared to them while they were singing through the night in an open sky. The shepherds were at the bottom of the social ladder and yet they had the opportunity to participate fully and joyfully in the hope of Christmas.

The tales of Christmas also include the decree issued by Herod, the Jewish Governor under the Roman Empire, to kill all male children in Palestine below two years of age. This decree forced many including Mary, Joseph and child Jesus to escape and leave Egypt as refugees. Further, the three sages also walked under the shadow of death as they listened to the directions given by Herod, however the Angel led them into a different path after they had visited the child Jesus.

Jesus came to the world which is uncertain and sorrowful. The world which is broken and asunder. While we are celebrating the joy of Christmas there are many around us who are in great pain due to poverty. Disparity and inequality abound in the present. There is a huge gap between the haves and the have nots. The SSA teachers are in deep pain due to untimely and irregular disbursement of their salaries. Plethora of unpaid, underpaid workers and the unemployed are bracing the cold-chilly winter and look at the bleak months ahead of them. There are many who



not only filled with joy, but there was great anxiety and doubt.

Mary and Joseph, the parents of Jesus were Palestinians whose land was under the foreign Roman Empire and were considered second class citizens with no rights. During the birth of Jesus, the Roman Government was highly exploitative and heavy taxes were levied on the subjects, especially on unorganized laborers like the fisher folks, masons and daily wage earners.

The Government Officials, including the Jews et al, in Palestine would care less about the wellbeing of the "aam admi" or common people, rather they were self-centered and only served the need and greed of the Roman Rulers in order to promote and protect their own powers, positions and interests.

It was ritualistic for every subject in Palestine, also Mary and Joseph, to visit Bethlehem annually to pay obeisance to the foreign government. Therefore, along with their fellow Jewish neighbors they would visit Bethlehem on such time of the year. In Bethlehem Mary and Joseph were homeless and they were found wanting for a shelter. They were daily wage earners who could not afford to buy a home or a piece of land in Bethlehem. They were landless in their own country but fortunately in that very year they were given shelter in a shed where Mary delivered the baby Jesus.

The Christmas tale about the shepherds on the hills in the countryside is heart-

are suffering from various diseases and cannot afford to have expensive treatment. Sadly, our state has no better and affordable health care system. Also, there are friends who lost their loved ones during this pandemic.

Jesus came into this world to proclaim the good news of hope and liberation. The hope which Jesus proclaimed is not empty. Jesus is a human for others and gave his life for the shepherds, fisher folks, daily laborers and the common people. He gave hope and healed the lepers, the blind and the lame. He stood by the Samaritan women and defended them from being stoned and chastised by the patriarchal society. He was the friend of the destitute, orphans and in Christ Jesus there is neither slave nor master, neither Greeks nor Jews, neither gay nor straight. Everyone is free to realize their dream and drink from the same cup of hope and liberation. Today, from the State and rulers we get only false and empty hope, but Jesus Christ gives us real and tangible hope. This is the meaning of Christmas and that is exactly why we celebrate the season. On Christmas we celebrate the possibility of hope.

Folks, in this dubious, dishonest and unjust world there is hope and it is possible that we can rebuild our society and fill the State with honesty, integrity and justice.

Jesus said, "I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly" (John 10:10)

Blessed Christmas and a meaningful year ahead.

Letters to the Editor

## AICTE ban on new engineering colleges

Editor, According to a news item on the front page of the Shillong Times of Dec 24, 2021, Meghalaya Engineering College will open in 2022. The need and timing of this venture is questionable. While a few new engineering institutes may still be permitted in certain regions, the advisability of an engineering college in Meghalaya needs a detailed study.

Just a week ago, on Dec 17, the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) announced the extension of an existing ban on new engineering colleges by another two years, until 2024. Across engineering colleges in India, almost half the seats are unfilled. This is after the seat capacity in the country has been reduced from 3.0 million in 2015 to 2.4 million in 2020.

In 2021 alone, 63 engineering colleges closed and another 32 applied for closure. Apart from these more than 500 engineering colleges have not applied for continuation of approval for the 2021-22 academic year. The job market demand for engineers, especially for some specializations, is very low compared to supply. I wonder if there is a study

of the need for engineers in Meghalaya.

Education minister Dharmendra Pradhan told the Lok Sabha on July 26, that over 5.62 lakh seats have been cut from engineering colleges since 2019. Of these, 4.80 lakh seats were "surrendered" by the institutions themselves. After the admission process in Maharashtra last year, nearly 50% of engineering seats remained unclaimed. In some states, seats were reportedly unfilled even after offering seats to candidates who scored zero in the common entrance test.

These decisions are based on the Reddy Report 2019, constituted by the AICTE. The 41-page report available on the AICTE website cites the poor training and low employability skills of engineering graduates. It quotes figures from the 2016 National Employability Report which shows that only 18% of engineering graduates are employable in the software industry. Even for a non-functional role, such as call centres only 41% were employable. In five states the percentage of employability was 0-25%.

In Meghalaya, the development of other training sectors should be given higher priority. Perhaps the most urgent need is for trained teachers and allied health personnel, especially public health. Priority must also be given to traditional and natural resource-based live-

lihoods. Perhaps the new building meant for the engineering college in Mawlai, could be repurposed.

Yours etc., Glenn C. Kharkongor, Via email

## The conversion conundrum

Editor, Perhaps after showing Muslims their "rightful place" through demolition of Babri Masjid by barbaric force and ensuring the "much-cherished" dream of Ram Mandir right where the mosque stood for centuries, 2002 Gujarat pogrom, Kashmir saga, NRC-CAA, murderous antics of cow vigilantes and what not; attention is now being concentrated to show another set of "aliens" named Christians their "entitled place" in "New India" off/for/by the Hindus!

On the one hand, zealous chants of "We are all Indians" would reverberate in the "nationalist" horizon; on the other fellow Indians are getting ruthlessly ostracised in their very own land for their "sin" of embracing Christianity with the Pastors and preachers faring the worst right from getting assaulted physically or thrown behind bars on fictitious cases! No wonder why the image of the India of Rabindranath Tagore-Jawaharlal Nehru-Mahatma Gandhi is being tarnished so severely in the

eyes of the international community!

The "nationalists" often stress that "only the most illiterate and poor" are found to "fall prey" to the "enticements" of the Christian missionaries in the form of food, medicine, education or livelihood! If it is true then it gets clearly proved that what the State has failed to deliver to the vulnerable souls of the country, are instead being guaranteed by the Christian missionaries! So instead of getting peeved over the issue, the "nationalist" Hindutva brigade should either remain ashamed for the failure of the State in ensuring such basic necessities to large section of Indians or ask their "very own" Government in New Delhi to provide food medicine education livelihood to those much-deprived folks; if not for the sake of humanity, at least to retain them in the fold of Hinduism! Why don't the Hindutva outfits themselves provide such basic amenities to their poor illiterate cousins if they are such "well-wishers" of the Hindu community!

Last but not the least. The "poster boys" of Hindutva brigade not only invoke Vivekananda at the drop of a hat, they also make a beeline to Belur Math to advertise their "respect" to the sage!

Now Belur Math witnesses special prayer to Mother Mary and Jesus with the Hindu monks singing Christmas Carols to celebrate the divine

occasion. Are the intolerant brigade ready to learn a lesson on mutual respect and communal brotherhood from these saffron-clad Hindu monks of the institution based on the humanitarian ideals of that all-embracing humanitarian sage!

Yours etc., Kajal Chatterjee, Via email

## End of parliamentary debates

Editor, Despite the fact that Parliament is the greatest debating forum in the country, no proper debates happen in the two Houses. The winter session was no exception. Although there were 18 sittings in 24 days, productivity was very low. Instead of participating in informed debates, both the ruling party and the Opposition blamed each other for the disruptions. The Prime Minister's presence only on the first and the last days reflects the pitiful state of parliamentary proceedings. The suspension of 12 Opposition members of the Rajya Sabha at the beginning of the session for indiscipline behaviour adversely affected the functioning of the Parliament. The adjournments created an impression that the government did not want any debate. The government wanted the Op-

position to disrupt so that it could get the Bills passed. In a democracy, this is not the way the Parliament should function.

The government's decision to revoke the three controversial farm laws was welcomed by everyone. If there had been a debate on why the government wanted to bring the farm laws and later withdrew them and why the farmers were against them, it would have revealed many facts. It must be remembered that the farm laws were first introduced as ordinances and later passed as Bills. Although 11 Bills were passed this time, there was no serious debate. The Constitutional principles require that Bills need to be discussed by both Houses. It is relieving that some Bills were referred to the parliamentary committees.

Discipline is of utmost importance for the proper functioning of Parliament. It is mandatory for legislation and proper governance. Parliament members must not purposely be absent from parliamentary proceedings. Parliamentarians must set examples and uphold the dignity and sanctity of Parliament.

Yours etc., Venu GS, Kollam

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

*"To understand the true quality of people, you must look into their minds, and examine their pursuits and aversions."*

—Marcus Aurelius

**The Shillong Times**

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**Judiciary and reforms**

CLEARLY, the Modi government is not showing the nerve to reform the judicial system in the country, the centrepiece of the nation's well-being from multiple angles. The subject is passing through weak handling for the past over seven years of the Modi government after the Supreme Court blocked a legislation to start a National Judicial Appointments Commission. The idea behind the initiative taken at the fag end of the Manmohan-led UPA-II was to strengthen the judicial system in the country with intake of bright young legal practitioners to hold posts of judicial officers. Using the Supreme Court's adverse stand as an excuse, the Modi government slept over the matter. Now, law minister Kiran Rijju has stated in parliament during the just-ended winter session that the government is "trying to arrive at a consensus" in this respect — meaning drag and further drag on an important matter like this.

True, several high courts and some state governments including from Meghalaya had opposed the formation of the national judicial appointments commission along the lines of the civil services through a centralized authority. One argument cited was that the judges thus appointed by a central authority might not know the local language. The same, however, is applicable to civil services too, but those officials appointed in different states pick up the local language in a matter of a few months' training. This solves the issue. The real resistance has more to do with other matters. A lot of alleged nepotism in appointment of judges by judges themselves, in collegium and other formats, and from high court to high court, is evident, vitiating the fair name of the judiciary in India.

Consensus will be a mirage, and more so when a government is not serious about a matter. This is an excuse to drag the matter and not bell the cat. This kind of a drag is evident in several aspects of the present governance system, other than in some matters that are pushed by the hardline Hindutva forces or the RSS keeping some national and security interests in mind. The rest of the governance system is in chaos and nothing changed for the better in recent years. It is well-acknowledged by now that the Manmohan Singh government had a better perspective about national development, an initiative that however got drowned in scams and huge corruption involving both the Congress top brass and regional satraps, who were part of the UPA arrangement. Time and tide wait for none. The government must end its vacillation. National interests demand as much.

**British efforts to get U Kiang Nangbah to surrender**

By H H Mohrmen

The British government had used all channels available within its disposal to try convince the rebels to come overground and submit to the Raj. The government used the services of the Rajah of Cherra U Ram Singh and his cousin U Hajun Manick and also that of the Syiem of Hima Khyrim U Rabon Singh to meet the rebels and convince them to submit to the government. Later, on learning from Rabon Singh that the Jaftia royal who then lived in Sylhet still has influence on their hills subject, the government ordered the kur (clan) to ascend to the hills and persuade the rebels to surrender.

BWD Morton in his journal entry from September 27-30 1862 noted that on September 28 Hajun and the kurs from Jaftiapur (the Jaftia royal family) had come up from Jaftiapur to meet Morton. The government has used Hajun Manick to convince the kur or the royal clan to convince the rebels to end their fight. Morton met with the kur and on being satisfied of their claim to heirship of the throne, promised to communicate with the government their pension claims from the government, next day. Morton also remembered that while in Sylhet he had learnt that the magistrate has spoken unfavourably of them during the Jaftia trouble of 1860. This is also interesting information because oral narratives also have mentioned about the rebellion prior to 1862 led by u Ksan Nangbah, maternal uncle of u Kiang Nangbah.

Morton also learnt that the rebels still consider them as their Rajah and expressed their desire to restore the kingdom. He suspected that the kur would still have some influence to bring the rebels to the negotiating table so he gave them Rupees 100 for their expenses and ensured that they and the Raja of Cherra who accompanied them were also properly fed. He also told the kur that if the rebels submit, then he would report favourably on their claims for the pension of Rupees 500 per mensem and the condition is that payment of the same will immediately be suspended should the Jaftia revolt again. The kur and Hajun Manick then left for Shangpung and on the way they met the Rajah of Cherra.

On September 30, Morton noted that Rabon Singh, Raja of Khyrim sent some of his minister to Lad Tuber to meet the leader of the rebellion and the chief of Jowai u Kiang Nangbah. The Rajah reported that some fifty rebels met

the myntris but they were adamant that they can do nothing until they received a sign from U Kiang. It was also noted that Prokas/Prakah Chander, a Bengali Mohurir informed BWD Morton that Hajun Manick told him that if the kurs use their influence the rebels will submit. In the course of the day Rajah Ram Singh of Cherra also sent a message to Morton that since he could not convince the chief to meet him in Nartiang, he planned to meet him in the jungles and hence requested that a tent be arranged for him. Morton said that Lieutenant Sadliers

now demanded their independence. All the mediators from Ram Singh, Rajah of Cherra, to Hajun Manick and Rabon Singh, Rajah of Khyrim, corroborated the statement made by each of these Rajahs.

Examination of Ram Singh, Rajah of Cherra and his cousin, Hajun Manick was taken by Captain Morton, Deputy Commissioner in charge of the Khasi Jaftia hills in the presence of Major Langmore, Commanding the 33rd Native Infantry, on 13 October, 1862.

Ram Singh, Rajah of Cherra in his reply to the DC's question said that the

ber of the kur syiem. He also met the Langdoh of Jowai afterwards at Shangpung and informed that two durbars were held in Shangpung. At the first durbar the rebels present were, the rebel Daloi of Jowai U Kiang Nangbah, the Daloi of Shangpung u Kiri Daloi, the Daloi of Raliang, the Daloi of Shilliang Myn-tang, the Daloi of Rymbai, a Pator of Nartiang and the rebel Daloi of Nonggingi. BWD Morton explained that the word rebel was inserted before the name of some rebels because the real Dalois have remained friendly with the government, while the rebels have elected a person from amongst themselves as Daloi in their place.

At the Dorbar u Kiang Nangbah and the rebels from Jowai were seated by themselves. When Hajun asked them the reason for their revolt, they said they desired to hold a puja at Jalong and had sent their Daloi u Manick Pakynte to seek Major Row-latt's permission. When they received the permission, they accordingly organized their Pastieh but Soorkee Darogah interfered and confiscated the swords, the shield and other item used in the Pastieh. Hajun said that if they had any complaints against the Darogah they should do so, but the rebels do not see any use of filing a complaint. In the second Dorbar at Shang-pung Hajun explained to the rebels that the act of sacrilege was not authorized by the government and it will pardon them if they submit but the rebels instead charged that the soldiers had also stolen their dhan at Mynso.

Hajun said that he was also present at the Dorbar which was held at Lad Tuber and he reported that all the rebel leaders were present except for u Kiang Nangbah who was sick. The rebels said they would be satisfied if the government gave them back their kingdoms and excused them their taxes etc. Hajun also said that six of the seven Dalois whom he had met in Shangpung earlier and had expressed their desire to submit to the government have now changed their minds. They spoke about their Raj and blamed the sepoys for stealing their dhan at Mynso as the reason which compelled them to change their mind. BWD Morton after examining the mediators, was of the opinion that the rebels were simply using delaying tactics to buy time till the rice was harvested. (BWD Morton, DC Khasi Jaintia hills letter to the Secretary Government of Bengal dated 15th October 1862).

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reported that the rebels in Nartiang expressed their willingness to submit and they were only waiting for a signal from their chief.

Morton's journal entry on October, 3 stated that Ram Singh, Rajah of Cherra sent a message to say that he hoped to meet the rebel leader u Kiang Nangbah on the same day at Lad Tuber. While Lieutenant Andrew informed that thousands of rebels have assembled at Shangpung village to speak with the kurs and to see the golden sword which is the property of the late Rajah of Jaftiapur.

Three days later on Monday October 6, Hajun Manick informed that he and the kurs had manage to meet the seven principal leaders including u Kiang Nangbah. Six of them wished to submit except u Kiang Nangbah who talked about getting aid from the Burmese etc. From 8 to 13 of October, Morton visited Shillong via Dienglieng to meet the committee members appointed by the government to settle upon the new station.

On October 13 they marched back to Jowai and found that the mediator had returned with unfavourable reports and that the rebels

Daloi he met at Lad Tuber, were u Myllon Daloi of Mynso, the Daloi of Rymbai, the Daloi of Raliang, Shilliang Myn-tang, Sutnga and the Daloi of Nonggingi. He also said that he did not recognize them all but people said that all the Dalois were present. In the durbar he met about 1500 rebels that day and they all refused to surrender.

Ram Sing also reported that he had arranged for another meeting with the rebels on Saturday at Nartiang and when he was asked the purpose of the meeting he said the rebels wished to hear what the government would do, to which the officer's reply was that the government's stand is that it will pardon the rebels if they surrender but would not entertain any demand from the rebel even if it is about taxes.

Hajun Manick in his reply to the Deputy Commissioner, stated that he first met the rebels at Dawki Bazar on the frontiers of the Khyrim state with the Jaftia hills. The rebel he met were, a Sangot of Jowai, a Langdoh of Jowai, a Langdoh of Padu, the Daloi of Darang, a Myntri of Lamin. About 300 rebels met him at the meeting in Dawki along with one mem-

**British Cultural Hegemony & U Kiang Nangbah**

By Dr. Omarlin Kyndiah

An Irish poet, dramatist, and prose writer William Butler Yeats once said, "In dreams begins responsibility". The patriot whose death anniversary we are commemorating was a perfect epitome of this. He is U Kiang Nangbah. U Kiang Nangbah, who dreamt of an independent motherland, shoulder the responsibility to lead the fight against 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 the British tyranny. The Indian freedom struggle was a long 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 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

caused suspicions in the minds of people about the real intent of the British.

However, the anti-British feelings started when the British India Government attempted to impose taxes and interfered with the customs 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 the 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 and 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 his guerrilla tactics. The British had to reinforce Regiments to conduct a full-scale military operation against U Kiang Nangbah and his men and yet the British described it as a "Little War". However, as it happened throughout history, Kiang Nangbah was arrested with the help

**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.**

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 13th January 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 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 plan 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. 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

of a traitor and was hanged after a "mock trial" on the December 30 December 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, some surrendered and 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.

Today, as we remember the supreme sacrifices that U Kiang Nangbah had contributed 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 Ranganbah, U Bang Raliang, U Kher Pator Raliang, U Woh Rieng, 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 continue to strive and not to yield. Meghalaya needs a new and young generation imbued with new ideas, new values, new hope, and new vigour in the social, economic, and political sphere to make the dreams of our leaders a reality.

(The writer is the General Secretary of Sein Raji Niamtre Shillong)

**Letters to the Editor**

**Congress speaking in forked tongues**

Editor, The statements coming out of the Congress party to extend its support on "issues" taken up with the current MDA coalition and at the same time not entertaining the BJP within its parameters is akin to winking with one eye and nodding its head. The "issues" that the Congress plans to take up were always part and parcel of what the earlier party members who have now become recognized AITC legislators in the Opposition bench were concerned about. Notwithstanding the fact that a host of "issues" are still lying unfinished on the table of the MDA, it is the AITC that will be taking these to their solution. How can people trust the Congress party when it seems to speak a language of the MDA government? In principle the NPP has told the Congress, "You are either with us or against us." No matter what the Congress says now the credibility of the Party has sunk.

Yours etc., Dominic Stadlin Wankhai Via email

**Flyover at Riblong point the need of the hour**

Editor, Every day we experience the nightmare of traffic jams in Shillong and also we read in your newspaper the reports, complaints and suggestions regarding this menace. The Traffic police have tried their best but I think they have exhausted all methods and strategies to solve the problem. Everyone knows the cause of the problem right from an ordinary man on the road to the men in power in the government. What is the cause? "With time the number of vehicles has increased while the width of the roads are decreasing". When I say the width of the road is decreasing, you may be surprised, but this is true as hawkers have taken over a quarter of the road especially in Laitumkhrah area and the road leading to Motphran.

The spill-over effect of the traffic jam in the city is seen in the choc-a-bloc traffic in the highways leading to the city, viz, at Upper Shillong, Mawlai and Nongthymmai. But the reverse effect is also happening. When there is a traffic jam at the Riblong point near Umshyrypi, it will spill over to the Anjalee point, Barik

point and also to Garikhana junction near KHADC then up to Mawlai.

The only solution to traffic problems in Shillong are flyovers. Building of flyovers involve huge cost and availability of land is another problem; but if a flyover is built at the Riblong point stretching from the Umshyrypi bridge upto the military hospital, I think it should be possible if the military establishment is ready to part with a portion of their land as they have done for the Shillong-Mylliem Four lane. And this proposed flyover if built will connect the upcoming four-lane to Shillong city thereby reducing the traffic congestion in those aforesaid choke points to a considerable extent. Let the government show that it has the will, so that this will be possible.

Dr M. Lyndem St. Edmund's College Via email

**Vaccination for younger people**

Editor, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced Covid-19 vaccination for those in the 15-18 year age group from January 3 and booster doses for healthcare and frontline workers from January 10. In his address instead of saying

"booster dose", PM Modi said "precautionary dose" because more information needs to be passed on to people in this regard.

While the Prime Minister's announcement has been welcomed with relief, it is not clear yet which vaccine will be used for the booster dose in India. PM Modi's announcement came after the Drugs Controller General of India (DCGI) granted emergency use authorisation (EUA) to indigenously developed Bharat Biotech's Covaxin for children above 12 years.

Covid-19 vaccination is effective in preventing the disease. On the other hand, it may become less effective over time. In the wake of the emergence of the highly transmissible Omicron variant, many unvaccinated, vaccinated with one dose and fully vaccinated people are susceptible to be infected.

As children below 18 have not yet been vaccinated, they are likely to be infected. As schools and other educational institutions are still working and children are not protected against the disease, it is a cause for concern. Hence, there is an urgent need to vaccinate children. The governments must undertake rigorous vaccination campaigns and build up capacity for emergency response.

As a major section of the population are at the risk of infection or reinfection, we need to keep our life-saving tools ready.

Yours etc., Venu GS, Kollam

**Omicron scare and outcome**

Editor, A pandemic does not take long to spread in this era of ease of travel when people fly for business or pleasure from one country to another or one state to another. But this has a cost and we are seeing this happening since phase one of Covid. It is travellers who bring in the virus and once it enters a state it does not take time to spread. There is no knowing if Omicron will warrant another lockdown but if that happens many small and big businesses will have to fold up. Students are promoted from one class to the next after writing an exam online often with the help of parents who want their child to excel. Already there is a sense of dystopia about whether or not there will be normal classes in the coming year. All these are creating a sense of foreboding as to the future of education in the country and the world. Perhaps those in the education

sector should come up with better strategies for online teaching that ensures attendance and also better planning that would prevent wastage of the school year. It is also time that the Government of India directs state governments to take stock of the number of students that have dropped out during the pandemic and how to bring them back to the school system with minimum damage.

The pandemic does not allow complacency of any kind. The Allahabad High Court had in fact requested the Election Commission of India to postpone the UP polls happening early next year in view of the tendency of voters to crowd at election meetings without masks and social distancing. Sadly the leaders lead their way in this. There is merit in what the Allahabad High Court is suggesting. Elections are not a matter of life and death anyway. States should now gear up since they have had enough time to prepare and there can be no excuse for any kind of unpreparedness.

Yours etc., T Kharbani, Via email

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

*"Democracy requires common ground on which all can stand, but that ground is sinking beneath our feet, and democracy may be going down the sinkhole with it."*

— Pat Buchanan

## The Shillong Times

VOL No. LXIV No. 137 SHILLONG, TUESDAY, DECEMBER 28, 2021

### Silence of the churches

THE series of violence against Christians on Christmas day and one in the neighbouring state of Assam should shake the conscience of all who believe in freedom of religion as guaranteed in the Indian Constitution. What is strange is that each time the churches are attacked the laity (congregation) look up to the church leadership. That's because the church is a hierarchical structure where the Laity is not empowered to act as members of the church. Perhaps this hierarchy is itself a defining fault-line. On Christmas day services very little mention was made of the grave danger that Christians as a minority are facing in this country. On Christmas Day the central government froze all bank accounts of Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity in India. This when the Missionaries of Charity have been in the forefront of looking after the destitute and orphans across the country including in Meghalaya. What else is in the offing, no one knows.

Christian missionaries have set up the best educational and health care institutions in every part of the world and many of those who hold positions of authority in this country today were educated in these institutions. Then why this new-found vengeance against Christians?

At this point the laity has to rise to the fore and speak up for that is what Christ's teachings were all about – to stand up against injustices of all kinds and to spread love and peace. But that also means that all Christians and not just the leadership have the onus of standing up for what they believe in. Being Christian means much more than just church attendance and the church is not a social space. But it would seem that Christians have entered a comfort zone of weekly worshipping without being trained to use their resources to also engage with the politics of the times. Perhaps Christians have over time forgotten that Christ was political in the sense that he took on the rulers of the time for which he was finally nailed on the cross. At one time the churches would call for special prayers and fasting when issues such as attacks on churches happened. These days there is only a stunning silence. But at what cost? It is time that Christian churches come together on this issue and make common cause. If Christianity is under attack, it is the idea of Christ that is under attack and that the pretext should be about forced conversion is a slur on Christianity.

# A Leadership crisis after 50 years of self rule

By Toki Blah

A friend rang up and we started to chat on nearly every topic under the sun. As is often the case nowadays, the discussion soon veered off towards politics and of political events happening in the country and in Meghalaya in particular. In the midst of all this he suddenly went off on a tangent on what I initially thought were some very funny mundane questions. He asked where I was; what was I doing and where was I going. I thought it strange but out of sheer courtesy to friendship answered all his questions as truthfully as I could. He replied with "What a relief to talk to someone who knows what he is doing and where he is going. Can't say the same for our state of Meghalaya or for the Jaitbynriew for that matter. No one seems to know where the State is headed for nor does anyone have a clue as to the future of the Jaitbynriew!" He cited examples of where we as a community have started to err and where we have begun to falter. He referred to the latest incident at Jaiaw where a group of uncouth Khasi youths openly rebuked the Rangbah Shnongs of the area and by a stupid thoughtless act of juvenile felony, turned topsy turvy the very philosophy of Khasi culture and its traditional value systems. Khasi identity and its institutions that day at Jaiaw was attacked by our own. I was rooted to the spot with the veracity of his statement. It came as a very unpleasant shock but it does happen to be the truth. We are a society with no sense of vision as to where we are headed nor are we able to even guess the consequences of our actions and the impact it could have in the future.

The conversation with that friend carried on for quite a while, especially on issues of mutual concern. I want to share with the readers some of the pertinent points discussed and beg the reader's forbearance if any of the issues mentioned below do not meet with your approval. Life however is often a mixture of the good the bad and the ugly and at times the truth can be bitter and difficult to swallow. Sometimes to ensure survival, in our case our very identity, a scan, an X-ray is called for. For the Hynniewtrep people, for the Khasis of this generation the crucial question and the debate should be, are we prepared for such introspection, however disappointing and distasteful the results might be? Are we prepared to bring back taste, fragrance, hope and meaning to our lives or have we already sunk to such depths of apathy and depression that we are prepared to tolerate the rot that has set

in? Should we as a Jaitbynriew, allow the current and ongoing social and political trends take us down the path of oblivion or should we, for the sake of our own survival; for the sake of our future generations; for the endurance of the Hynniewtrep people, say enough is enough and take a collective decisive step to rectify what has gone wrong? For those who believe that what has been stated above is hogwash and nonsense; for those who believe that we are still on course towards the promised land, my humble apologies. They are requested to ignore this column and move on to other exciting topics in the news. If however there is consensus of the need for immediate and urgent social and political reforms, then read on. We need to put our heads together to come up with satisfactory answers to our problems.

*"Fifty years ago, who we elected as our representatives were from the creamy layer of society. Academicians with impeccable qualifications and experience, barristers and lawyers – people who understood the law, presented and convinced the electorate of the value and worth of their respective manifestos. Such personalities, however penniless they might be, formed the majority of leaders elected to lead the state and its people."*

First let us dwell on the issue of politics and specially the type that is being currently practiced. The provisions of the Law through the Representation of People Act 1951, Sec 29A, sets down certain conditions for the formation of a political party and its registration thereof. For the record, our politicians have been most correct and particular in the observance of this condition. The Constitution has also by the 52nd Amendment and the Anti Defection Act, effectively cut short the repulsive habit of swapping parties. The law however has been most lax and remiss on the important manner and etiquette on how to get elected and our politicians have taken maximum advantage of this flaw. The basis on who and how we elect as our representatives is crucial for our own welfare and wellbeing. Firstly, who we elect defines and sets forth the qualification, character, personality, moral fibre, temperament and quality of leadership we get. It reflects the collective objectives of the electorate; the type of governance and services we

expect from those so elected; the goals we have set forth for ourselves and our children. Secondly, how we elect defines our own knowledge, familiarity and comprehension of representative democracy; the electorate's and voters understanding of the value and power of his vote to determine his own destiny. It's all about the most important aspect of life – choosing the right leaders to lead. Looking at Meghalaya we realise we have failed and failed miserably.

Fifty years ago, who we elected as our representatives were from the creamy layer of society. Academicians with impeccable qualifications and experience, barristers and lawyers – people who understood the law, presented and convinced the electorate of the value and worth of their respective manifestos. Such person-

alities, however penniless they might be, formed the majority of leaders elected to lead the state and its people. The debates, questions and answers that took place on the floor of the Legislative Assembly were something to be proud of. Members of the opposition always came prepared to challenge the Government and Ministers of the Government gave back for good measure, secure in their knowledge and grasp of their respective departments. Businessmen the financiers, were there to back up their stalwarts and the parties they belonged to. Service to the people and interest of the state however was always the objective of politics and the floor of the House, the arena in which oral battles over governance took place.

Fifty years down the line this canvas of politics disappeared along with the fire in 2001 that destroyed the old Legislative Assembly building at Khyndailad. Today businessmen have taken over. A business cartel is formed where Political Power is used to milk the exchequer. Elections no longer the oc-

casions to elect those most qualified to provide service to the people but has been turned into an auction where the highest bidder collects the votes to win. A ministerial berth in the cabinet a shop to bargain and sell the assets of the state. In the House, the Chief Minister speaks and answers on behalf of nearly all his cabinet colleagues who prefer to conceal their knowledge than display their ignorance. The enhancement of personal business interest has overtaken the duty to provide service to the people. Fifty years of statehood and politics has simply shown that it is there for names sake only. Its whole purpose debunked, distorted and invalidated. Most have already lost faith in its ability to deliver. Politics as it is practiced has left a vacuum in governance.

In Nature a void is never tolerated. It has to be filled up and in Meghalaya it is rapidly being filled up by organisations composed of green horn, self appointed saviours of the people. Such organisations sustain themselves by propagating social fear, real or imagined, to mobilise and rally society. With the failure of an elected administration to provide hope, vision or service, society turns to such organisations for help. The mobilisation of society has always threatened any non performing administration and as such, deals between the Govt and the groups that can mobilise, has become the order of the day. Govt contracts on supply and construction make up the bargaining chips between the two. Of governance and service to the state and its people; of vision and planning; of growth and development, a silence of conspiracy is maintained. Is it any wonder therefore that Meghalaya should always find itself at the bottom of any index report on human development? The electorate will have to find a way out of this mess it has created for itself. We have no one else to blame but ourselves. Our very survival is at stake not from outside, as we are led to believe, but from within.

A revival to rediscover ourselves; our strengths; our potentials and the way forward will have to be undertaken. Professional politicians and political parties have betrayed us. The pressure groups that profess to save us from God only knows what, are leading us astray. The time has once again arisen for persons qualified in the law; academicians and scholars; men and women of substance and experience; people with a vision for the state, to step forward and show the way forward. Otherwise we are doomed!

## Foster father of farmers

By Arun Sinha

Regardless of how the government negotiates with the farmers on the issue of legally guaranteed minimum support price for 23 crops, there seems to be no way it can abandon them. The State has been a foster father to the farmers, encouraging them to grow wheat and rice, pushing them to grow more and more of them, pumping their hearts with pride that they were feeders of the nation, glorifying them as warriors who drove the US food ships away.

The State did it for well over five decades, and suddenly one fine morning it tells the farmers, "I am no more your father. From now on a new father, the food tycoon, is going to take care of you." To the farmers it was like the shepherd asking his sheep to go live under the guardianship of a pack of wolves. They were shocked, shaken and terrified. And the resistance, as imperishable as the glitter in gold, began. They would squat on roads, in freezing cold or scalding heat, until the foster father tore up the transfer of guardianship papers.

To the advocates of free enterprise that seemed like fully grown adults insisting to stay home as suckling babes. In their view they had to be detached. They had to be forced to go out and build their own lives, like all adult children do. They had to go find their place in the marketplace.

The champions of privatization said they were not being cruel to the farmers. They just wanted them to be self-dependent, to stand on their own feet. They were imparting wisdom to them. What Prime Minister Narendra Modi said in his address to the nation announcing the repeal of the three farm laws essentially meant the same thing: "We had only the best interests of the farmers in mind. But some of them were too foolish to understand."

Were the farmers really stubborn and stolid? The answer is: they were stubborn but not stolid. The farmers are not against the private sector. How can they be? They are themselves in the private sector. Agriculture is the largest segment of the country's private sector. The same farmer in turban and country clothes who sat on the roads in protest and who was derided for seeking protection from the State as a permanent dependant is deeply engaged with the private sector. He buys his seeds, fertilisers, pesticides, equipment and spaces in warehouses and cold storages from private players. He sells most of his produce to the private sector. He is not only in the domestic marketplace but also in the world marketplace. India's agri exports have been significantly growing and are likely to reach US\$ 60 billion by 2022, which is the clinching proof of the participation of the farmers in turban and country clothes in the global market.

The question then is: Why was the farmer opposing the entry of the private sector into the agri produce market through the three laws? The answer is: It was not the solution to his problems. One of his major problems is dwindling groundwater and soil nutrients. Was the food tycoon going to make the aquifers and the soil young, muscular and vigorous again? Armed with the three laws, private players would have come and carted away all the agri produce. They would not have bothered to see how the land was deteriorating. If one land deteriorated, they would have gone to another land, telling the abandoned

farmers, "Sorry, we can't help. It's your problem. You have to fix it."

The trouble is the farmer cannot fix it himself. Only the State can do it. At the core of the farmer-State confrontation, and now of the hard negotiations between them, lies this issue: Who will fix the cracking food bowl?

The picture presented of the farmers is that they are big landowners who have amassed wealth growing rice and wheat and selling it to the government and want to go on doing it, unmindful of their folly that they were cutting the branch of the tree they were sitting on. This is a wrong picture. The farmers are aware that their land, their main resource, is under threat. They want to move out of cereals into other crops, provided they get the same or more income from them. They are desperate to start with getting out of rice, for this crop is water guzzling and has drunk off much of the aquifers.

It is only the State that can help the farmers of Punjab, Haryana and Western UP, the brown land of green revolution, transition from cereals to other profitable crops. The State can only do it by fixing a minimum support price for non-cereal crops and by raising it every year. The State has done it in pulses. If today the country is close to achieving self-sufficiency in pulses, the reason is the State alluring farmers to switch from cereals to pulses with incremental MSP.

The work of the State should not end with self-sufficiency in pulses. The green revolutionaries can be driven to grow pulses instead of cereals. There is a huge global demand for pulses. The country can claim an increasing share of global pulses exports by inducing farmers for the switch. Not only pulses, the farmers can be shepherded into oilseeds to make the country self-sufficient in cooking oils and then join the group of cooking oil exporting nations.

The farmer is no different from any of us. They want to make a good amount of money for a good life. As long as the State makes policies and implements schemes that help them earn a decent income they would be willing to grow anything. Even in the developed countries the State plays the role of a guardian to the farmers. The Indian State cannot give up that responsibility.

The State has to begin by moving rice cultivation out of the green revolution belt to other states and helping the farmers in the region diversify to pulses, oilseeds and other commercial crops. That will help solve many problems: It will help raise the groundwater table; it will end stubble burning, the additional cause of Delhi's air pollution; it will save foreign exchange by reducing imports of pulses and oilseeds; it will earn foreign exchange through their exports.

(Arun Sinha has done pioneering work in investigative journalism, beginning with the expose of Bhagalpur blindings. He has worked in senior editorial positions in the Indian Express and the Times of India. He has been editor of the Free Press Journal, Mumbai and The Navhind Times, Goa. He has authored four books, titled Against The Few: Struggles of India's Rural Poor, Goa Indica, Nitish Kumar and the Rise of Bihar and the Battle for Bihar. He has spent a year at Oxford as a Fellow of the Reuter Foundation. He currently writes commentaries for newspapers and is based in Delhi.)

### Letters to the Editor

#### TMC in Meghalaya

Editor,  
The recent backdoor entry of the Trinamool Congress (TMC) into Meghalaya on the backs of disgruntled Congress legislators seems to be little more than a desperate attempt on the part of Dr Mukul Sangma and the other leaders involved to stay relevant in the political space of our state. The fact that a political party which lacked any semblance of cadre or office bearers in Meghalaya now suddenly possesses twelve legislators, each of whom had been elected to office on a different party symbol, is nothing but a subversion of democratic principles. Such instances of overnight shifts in ideology are unfortunately not unheard of in our country, and they only serve to expose the true colours of the political leaders. Dr Mukul Sangma and the other newly stamped TMC leaders should have resigned as Congress legislators before donning the TMC jersey, had ideology truly been the cause for their jumping ship. The Congress of course

is far from a beacon of good politics, but the entry of the TMC into Meghalaya raises an especially distressing fear. The Bengal-centred political party's rise carries the potential danger of importing the culture of electoral violence that has now become a unique feature of Bengal in our country, and which has permeated every level of the electoral process in that state, be it Lok Sabha, Assembly or even panchayat and municipality elections. On the policy side, one would imagine that the TMC will try to gain influence here through the several issues on which it shares a stand with our state's politics, such as the opposition to the CAA, the hostility towards the NDA govt in Delhi, and even the anti-outsider sentiment which the TMC's firebrand leader and Bengal CM, Ms. Mamata Banerjee, has been known to invoke in her own state. It is also possible that the TMC pushes hard at the Centre for implementation of the ILP and aims to solidify a base here by helping achieve a long term aspiration of many people of our state. The entry of the TMC is certainly an intriguing wrinkle in Meghalaya politics. Whatever be the consequences on

policy, one only hopes that it does not lead to Meghalaya losing its peaceful election record and joining Bengal in its shameful electoral dance of death.

Yours etc.,  
N.K. Kehar  
Shillong-3

#### Contentious border issues

Editor,  
The news report, 'CM to take final call' on reports by Jan 15 (ST Dec 23, 2021) sounds quite authoritative. What transpired at the last meeting at the border must be seriously scrutinised as the MLA and the MDC of Ramrai were never invited to it. It was the sheer love for their constituency as Langpih is involved that they barged into the meeting and Chief Minister Conrad Sangma had to give in.

Two things are to be taken seriously (1) The Assam minister was heard to be buying time, meaning that Assam is not yet prepared for the final outcome of the meetings. In the meanwhile no one knows what will happen since Assam is a BJP ruled state and therefore has

the political heft to assert itself (2) The declaration of the Meghalaya CM to base the border issues on the public hearing smacks of a conspiracy of the highest order.

Let the CMs of both the states agree to one thing and that is to stand by the Assam Re-organisation act 1969 (when the premature state was born) and most importantly the North East Re-organisation Act, 1971. No state formation is complete without following this Act as it marks the real and proper boundaries. The public ought to know that any border settlement requires a topographical map (not one carried out by drones) and historical background with names of the villages involved. Public consensus is illegal as anything can happen. To cite an example, Langpih is the local (Maram) name for the place. 'Lang' is a contraction for Phlang (grass) and Pih is derived from Japih which is the Maram name for frogs who love to brush themselves by the grass.

There are too many acts of omission and commission by our Chief Minister on many sensitive issues like the Star Cement clearance which he

confessed to TUR of being in the dark about. The blow hot blow cold on CAA and palm oil trees plantation and the attempted de-franchising of 2 circles to RePDCL, the hush-hush transportation of illegally mined coal amongst others had made me caution against any out-of-the-rule book solution to the border problem.

Let us the Meghalayans be wise as serpents and gentle as doves.

Yours etc.,  
J Kharmih,  
Shillong 1

#### Meghalaya should push for own cadre

Editor,  
The news item, "5 IPS Officers shortlisted for DGP's post," (ST Dec 27, 2021) reeks of yet another saga of IPS officers from Assam with no idea of policing in Meghalaya coming here to serve the last part of their tenure. It is a shame repeated again and again that officers that have served in Meghalaya during its most troubled times should not automatically be made DGP

when they have qualified for the post. Meghalaya has always been a pushover state dominated by Assam in every sense of the term. The State is entering its 50th year but it does not even have its own civil service cadre. Till date Meghalaya is clubbed with Assam in terms of cadre allotment. When will this end? There is also a question of officers having served in Assam for their entire career being more loyal to that state than to Meghalaya where they are serving for the first time. This has to end but do the leaders elected to serve the interests of the state have the time to exercise their minds on such issues when they are more interested in building their own fortunes only? God help Meghalaya!

And the less said about the State Security Commission the better. One wonders how many meetings are held and why those are never made public.

Yours etc.,  
Batyllilang Lyngdoh,  
Via email

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"My share of the work may be limited, but the fact that it is work makes it precious."

— Helen Keller

## The Shillong Times

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### The Omicron Overkill

SEVERAL states including Delhi have announced major curbs on public life in view of the marginal spread of the Covid pandemic and surfacing of scores of Omicron variant cases. The national capital is put on a yellow alert with inbuilt curbs on public life, schooling and gatherings while a night curfew for around six hours is ordered for Delhi as also Maharashtra, Karnataka, UP, Kerala etc. Governments faced with a pandemic would need to act and act tough but need not go for an overkill. It is well-acknowledged that the Omicron variant is not lethal though it spreads faster. In rare cases is death linked to Omicron. The symptoms are mild and there's no cause for panic. It is quite likely that more variants of the Chinese-induced pandemic will surface in due course of time, and the world would need to battle them too. Life, anyhow, must go on with least disruptions.

It is clear by now that in March 2020, India went in for an unwarranted nationwide shutdown lasting weeks and then more region-specific lockdowns came. The national economy went into a tailspin and recovery thereafter was slow. When only some major cities and states were affected, at the start, there was little reason to have ordered a nationwide shutdown, other than for the misconception that this was the magic wand to wipe out the pandemic. Other religiously loaded gimmicks advised by the top leadership only made India a laughing stock. Yet, the damage was done. Note the fact that it was during the Covid period that the Bihar assembly polls were held. Large gatherings threw caution to the winds and observed no Covid-appropriate behaviour. But, this did not result in any massive spread of Covid-19 there. So too with West Bengal later, where massive rallies were held one after another and no Covid norm was followed even when Prime Minister Modi addressed the gatherings. There was no major spurt there as well.

Trains and buses resumed running after a long period of halt, and yet the Covid scenario has only improved, other than during the second wave when the government was in the docks. The government failed to adequately equip the hospitals with oxygen and ICU beds though medical experts had warned of the possibility of there being a crisis of both. The large-scale vaccinations are believed to have helped. Now a booster dose is advised. There are those who minted money out of human misery. Precautions are a must. People would need to be alert and caution is the byword, but let there be no overkill on this count.

# Disrupting the idea of India

By Albert Thyrniang

When this author wrote in his last piece in this column that in other parts of the country Christmas celebrations could be in an intimidating atmosphere, someone emailed, "you are exaggerating and an alarmist." Well, he has been proven wrong. On Christmas day a spurt of incidents took place where Hindutva groups vandalized, attacked and disrupted Christmas celebrations in many places across the country. Sangh parivar activists burned the effigy of Santa Claus shouting 'Santa Claus Murdabad' in Agra, UP. In Varanasi a group protested in front of Matridham Ashram, shouting slogans, 'Church Murdabad'. Right wing groups interrupted Christmas celebrations at Nirmala school, Mandya, Karnataka. Bajrang Dal activists stormed a church in Silchar, Assam, during the midnight Mass and also protested against Christian schools celebrating Christmas; Hanuman chalisa (hymns) were played by bigots in Kurukshetra on a stage set up for Christmas celebrations; the Statue of Holy Redeemer was vandalized in Ambala and Christmas celebration was disrupted in Gurugram. All these incidents occurred in BJP ruled states. The last four were in Haryana. This is certainly intimidating for the minority community.

Christians have every right under the Constitution of India to celebrate Christmas, other festivals and practice their faith. Goons have no business to harass festivities. Bizarrely, the Rashtriya Bajrang Dal in Agra even fear that Santa Claus will convert Hindus to Christianity. The chief instigator, Aju Chauhan, even threatened agitations at missionary schools if his warning was not heeded. In Mandya right-wing activists complained that Hindu festivals like Ganesha festival were not being celebrated. In Silchar too the Bajrang Dal activists accused the church goers of being selective since Tulsi Diwas was not being celebrated. For the sake of argument, even if it is true that Hindu festivals are not celebrated by Christians, that does not give anybody the justification to disrupt Christmas celebrations and storm churches. I may decide to choose and pick in celebrating festivals. How is that a problem for anyone? I too have no issue with people who celebrate festivals of their choice. A religious group may celebrate only their own feasts. How is that a concern for others? Those who do must be out of their minds. A question is thrown back right at the 'disrupters': If you are inclusive why don't you lead by example? Why don't you also celebrate Christmas? The young men in Silchar self-pitied saying they were hurt because Tulsi Diwas was ignored. Who

prevented them from organising a gala function to mark the occasion? Why enter a church instead and create a ruckus?

In the other cases thugs disturbed celebrations alleging conversion. Conversion or forced conversion has become a pet subject of right wing outfits. Anything that Christians do or say is linked to conversion and the pretext is used to attack the community. While working on this article a cartoon came via Whatsapp showing that Sikhs are about one per cent of the total population, Christians about two per cent, Muslims below 20 per cent and Hindus close to 80 per cent. Using a hand loud speaker, a person on a helicopter shouts into the ears of a tall man standing and representing the Hindu population, "You're in danger of them!" Though there is no data to prove the bogey of change of demography due to large scale conversions, yet radicals continue to persecute Christians and other minorities in the name of checking

**Christians have every right under the Constitution of India to celebrate Christmas, other festivals and practice their faith. Goons have no business to harass festivities. Bizarrely, the Rashtriya Bajrang Dal in Agra even fear that Santa Claus will convert Hindus to Christianity. The chief instigator, Aju Chauhan, even threatened agitations at missionary schools if his warning was not heeded.**

the non-existent trend.

It is not just the fringes but people like BJP MP Tejasvi Surya terrorize minorities. On Christmas day in Udipi, Karnataka, the 31 year old parliamentarian called for 'ghar wapsi' of converted Muslims and Christians during the course of India's history on a "war footing." His statement implies using force to re-convert the 'converted'. Nothing is more disgusting than this! Notorious for communal speeches the young legislator is regressing young India to a darker era instead of exhorting the gen-next to advance to an age of prosperity when only economic, social, political, cultural and educational issues and not religion figures in public discourses. Religion should remain in the private domain. The RSS swayamsevak has done 'better' than the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) who have been harassingly engaging on 'home coming' of Muslims and Christians. On December 25 last, the fanatical group even demanded that the central government make necessary amendments to the Constitution to 'exclude tribals who converted to other religions' from the list

of tribes. The VHP thinks tribals can convert only to Hinduism. They must be met with strong opposition. Adding to the present hate atmosphere is the event in Uttarakhand on December 24 when certain Hindu religious leaders called for genocide of Muslims.

The Narendra Modi government prides itself in the pleasant and catchy slogan, 'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas (Together with all, for the development of all, and with the trust of all). However, Christians and other minorities seem to be excluded from the 'all' of the BJP. The majority is all that matters. A writer reminds, "Christians' right to be Christians is no less constitutional than the rights of those following the majority religion." However, going by the current affairs the right to worship is shrinking by the day for Christians. The gush of attacks has phenomenally gone up after new anti-conversion laws have been enacted in many BJP-

the North East the Churches feel no pain when their fellow believers are endangered.

The attacks on Christians come to our phones in the form of news reports, images and video footages. They do the same in the smart gadgets of bishops, priests, pastors, nuns and other Church leaders. Most just murmur and then remain indifferent. The silence is truly stunning. We are busy celebrating Christmas in full gear. We are unperturbed by the disturbing occurrences in the above mentioned states. We are not in solidarity. A social media, "Ka mat iea dep shato... para dkh" (Let it be... it's among outsiders) is very distressing. We think that we are in a safe cocoon or a comfort zone. But are we? If a Church in Silchar can come under attack, the danger could be closer home. Groups like the RSS have an eye on the North East and the 'Christian belts'.

At the political level too the response is insufficient. All parties claim to be secular but have rarely stood up for secularity. The Silchar episode is insignificant to the NPP, the regional parties, the Congress or the newly recognised AITC that was air dropped from West Bengal one fine day. Having received the stamp of approval of the Speaker the 12 MLAs and 11 MDCs in Garo Hills are in a blissful state. As a main opposition the party will have a prominent place. But rainy days will come for sure. It is doubtful post the 2023 Assembly elections if their position will be the same. My sense is that their number will drastically reduce. Though Mamata Banerjee was once a minister in the NDA-BJP led government, hope the TMC remains committed to the minorities.

Christians, Christian churches and the idea of Christ are under attack but more worrying is that the idea of India is under a more severe attack. India's myriad castes, creed, cultures, ethnicities, languages and religion are under question. Instead of embracing all a ploy is being made to exclude some. The progress of the Indian idea is being disrupted by anti-nationals. The idea of India which is the vision of a vibrant and strong modern nation that is defined by tolerance and a broad worldview is being interrupted. The idea that gives dominant importance to economic, social, cultural and educational development and rejects hatred, parochialism and radicalism is unfortunately under threat. Should we not join hands to thwart this danger? Political groups certainly but also religious leaders need to do it all to preserve and promote the idea of India. Currently church leaders, whose community is a victim of religious intolerance, are complicit in the disruption of the idea of India.

albert.thyrniang74@gmail.com

## CEC, Commissioners attending PMO meeting dangerous

### Fears of EC coming under executive's thumb come true

By S N Sahu

During a discussion in the Constituent Assembly on June 16, 1949 on Article 289 of the draft Constitution (the corresponding Article of the Indian Constitution is Article 324) on the Election Commission, Dr B.R. Ambedkar admitted that there is nothing "to provide against nomination of an unfit person to the post of the Chief Election Commissioner or the other Election Commissioner." He was candid enough to concede that "there is no provision in the Constitution to prevent either a fool or knave or a person who is likely to be under the thumb of the Executive". He proceeded further to say that, "I do want to confess that this is a very important question and it has given me a great deal of headache and I have no doubt about it that it is going to give this House a great deal of headache."

In fact, slightly more than seventy two years after Ambedkar's articulation of these concerns in the Constituent Assembly, India indeed suffered such a headache when it was reported that the CEC, Sushil Chandra, and two ECs, Rajiv Kumar and Anup Chandra Pandey, attended an online interaction with the Prime Minister's Principal Secretary on November 16 this year on getting a letter from the Union Law Ministry that the CEC

while participating in the discussion on Article 289 of the draft Constitution, went to the extent of expressing his fear that in future, "it is quite possible that some party in power who wants to win next elections may appoint a staunch party man as Chief Commissioner." He also stated with prescience that there might not be a Prime Minister like Jawaharlal Nehru, known for independence and impartiality, and someone else with weak credentials would occupy that office and abuse his right by appointing an unworthy person as CEC, who in turn would cause havoc on the electoral process.

It is worthwhile to note that the aforementioned observations of Dr. Ambedkar that an unworthy person appointed as CEC or EC might come "under the thumb of the Executive" were made in response to these apprehensions of Saksena.

Those words, uttered in 1949, resonate in India today. The CEC and two ECs appointed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government are now attending a meeting convened by the PM's Principal Secretary and fulfilling Saksena's prophecies. The dent it has caused on the independent status of the Election Commission indicates that both Ambedkar and Saksena were right in



is expected to do so. It was a demonstration of the CEC and ECs coming under the "thumb of the executive", as had been apprehended by Dr Ambedkar in 1949.

Obviously, the conduct of CEC and two ECs came under scanner, and fingers were raised at the independence of the Election Commission from the executive. Five former CECs described the letter of the Law Ministry to the Election Commission as unacceptable, and saw it as an attack on the independence of the Commission.

At a time when India has been downgraded as a "partly free country" and described as an 'elected autocracy', the conduct of the CEC and ECs, attending a meeting under the chairmanship of PM's Principal Secretary, does not augur well for conducting free and fair elections, considered to be part of the basic structure of the Constitution.

With elections scheduled to be held in several states, including Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Goa and Himachal Pradesh in the early part of 2022, the attendance of the CEC and ECs at the meeting convened by the Prime Minister's Office is being rightfully seen with apprehension. It certainly sends a wrong message concerning the independence of the Election Commission from the Executive. A peep into the Constituent Assembly Debates educates us about the fears expressed by the framers of the Constitution that the institution of Election Commission, in spite of its constitutionally guaranteed independent status, could face threats to its impartiality and neutrality from some regimes in future which would be guided by partisan interest that would employ all kinds of techniques to make it succumb to their dictations.

On June 15, 1949 in the Constituent Assembly, Professor Shibban Lal Saksena,

their anxieties about the potential adverse impact of the influence of the government, on the Commission.

The attendance of CEC and two ECs in the PMO meeting raises questions on not only the independence of the Commission, but also its integrity.

The robust stand of the Constituent Assembly was to have an Election Commission completely independent of the government of the day. The attendance of the CEC and ECs in the meeting called by PMO has to be examined in view of this intent of the Assembly.

The independent functioning of the CEC on a sustained basis, and the conduct of CECs and ECs to uphold the Constitution since the commencement of the Election Commission earned it worldwide acclaim as a major pillar of our democracy. That was why President K.R. Narayanan, while speaking on the occasion of the golden jubilee of the Election Commission, had stated that in a public opinion poll, it was found that people rated the Election Commission very high, far ahead of the police, the bureaucracy, political parties, the union government, local self-government, and even the judiciary.

When the Commission was held with such esteem, above even the government, it is important that the conduct of the CEC and ECs should be seen to be in tune with its rich legacy of maintaining its independence from the influence of the Executive. The present CEC and ECs must be guided by the intent of the Constituent Assembly, and steadfastly adhere to the letter and spirit of Article 324 of the Constitution to protect the Election Commission from interference of the government. (IPA Service)

### Letters to the Editor

#### Double-laning of Mawroh-Mawkyroh road

Editor,  
The residents of Bunker-Mawroh, Umshing (Umjapung, Mawkyroh) are very happy and relieved that the road is now under construction to ease their various problems faced during the last two years. It is appreciated that the PWD has gone ahead with the project and thanks to the responsible M.L.A. Mr P.J. Sawkmie who has supported this many times. However, this letter is to highlight on a few key issues on the ongoing construction as a lay person.

1. It is observed that the materials used, being small stones are not of good quality in terms of hardness. This double lane road will be under heavy traffic. When it is completed, I wonder how long it will last if it is not

take the heavy traffic?  
2. Much earth or sandy earth is rolled in the layers.  
3. The existing road (black-topping) has not been peeled or eroded to make it much stronger.  
4. Site inspection by the engineers, overseers should be made more frequent to monitor the construction.

5. Drainage facility on two sides of the road has not been provided till date. Without drainage, this road will not last for long.  
6. Through this letter I request the PWD and the MLA to devote more care and attention to this VIP Road, since this is a public asset which comes once after many years. Since this work has been given to contractors there should be constant monitoring by the PWD to bring the road at par with other good roads in the country. All I want as a layman and conscious citizen, is that the 12.50 crore road project be a worthy of the cost.

Yours etc.,  
Reward Rymbai,  
Shillong-8

#### TMC Versus NDA

Editor,  
Apropos 'TMC In Meghalaya' by N K Kehar (ST Dec 28, 2021), I am amused at the comparison of the writer between TMC and NDA as far as violence is concerned. Leave violence aside. I was listening to hate speeches yesterday on TV, in which the number of hate speeches of NDA and Opposition are in the ratio of 340 to 60. Without going further the incidents on Christmas Day where the effigy of Santa Claus was burnt and slapped with slippers and in Assam where our Hindu friends as always join the faithful to celebrate Christmas but were disrupted by members of the Bajrang Dal who dragged them out of the celebrations are clear proof of violence. In West Bengal fear arose not because of violence but because people of all religions thronged the Christmas celebrations in togetherness, despite the

Omicron threat.

On CAA the double standards of the NDA was exposed in West Bengal and Assam. It was on top pitch in West Bengal but silent in Assam. Why this disparity? What went wrong? It appears that the writer has no record of the violence unleashed by different political parties. Yes he has every right to keep NDA out of the record but why did Mr Modi during his meeting with Pope Francis during the G27 summit in Rome invite him to India and why did he not say a word when the Catholics in India and their schools were recently vandalised?

Last but not least, dabbling with history is devastatingly dangerous. The assassin of our beloved Mahatma was crowned a national patriot. Any take on this when top BJP leaders are silent and silence means consent?

Yours etc.,  
C.L Lyngdoh Mawnei  
Shillong 14

#### Freedom should be foremost value

Editor,  
Libertarians (also known as classical liberals) who want to wind back excessive governmental interference and bring back more of the freedoms once enjoyed during the 19th century are sometimes derided for being caught up in their own theories to the extent that they conveniently overlook the practicalities of real life. "Freedom sounds good on paper," it is said, "but it shouldn't be the ultimate value we prize above others because often it doesn't work in practice."

People point out there are other important objectives – social justice, the collective interest, and so on. Others say it's too simplistic (despite many empirical studies lending support to the concept!) to suggest one single variable – that is, the level of freedom – largely determines the

health, wealth and happiness of the human race.

However, there is one point that libertarians argue is undeniably within the confines of the real world. And that is the simple observation that as human beings we operate within rational bounds. Those who influence policy – whether they are economists, scientists or others who know more maths than I do – cannot possibly be aware of all the unintended consequences of a particular course of action.

This insight can be applied to any controversial area. No individual or government possesses all the knowledge and foresight required to take the optimal decision in any area of life. Sometimes, the best thing for government to do is... nothing. Nothing... except ignore sensational media coverage and permit the natural state of affairs to develop.

Yours etc.,  
Sukrit Sabhlok  
New South Wales,  
Australia

"True strength lies in submission which permits one to dedicate his life, through devotion, to something beyond himself."

— Henry Miller

## The Shillong Times

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### Advisors galore for the CM

THE latest to have joined the elite circle of Advisors to the Chief Minister of Meghalaya is the former Chairman, State Planning Board, Lambor Malngiang. His place has been taken by the newly elected MLA of Rajabala, Mr Abdus Saleh. This is nothing but a game of thrones where the present incumbents on the throne want to hang on for as long as they can by wending their way around constitutional amendments. According to the 91st Amendment Act of 2003, clause (1A) makes a specific provision that the total number of ministers in the central government, including the prime minister, can in no case exceed 15 % of the total number of Lok Sabha members. This Amendment applies to the states as well.

The Amendment to the Constitution putting a cap on the number of ministers was carried out to curb the abnormally large council of ministers that were sworn in. This is a drain on the exchequer and a superfluous exercise particularly in the smaller states like Sikkim, Mizoram and Goa which have an Assembly strength of 40 members only. In these states a minimum strength of 7 ministers is proposed. Prior to the 91st Amendment Act, ministers would be sworn in installments. Normally the first swearing in would have just a few ministers. Then the cabinet would be expanded to accommodate those whose loyalties remain questionable and who are capable of shifting parties mid-stream. This was true especially prior to the passing of the Anti-Defection Act. Meghalaya is known for its coalition governments which remained inconstant. We have had several toppling games and chief ministers that could never last their full terms.

What has become dark humour now is that if an MLA cannot be accommodated as a minister in the cabinet he/she is given one of these posts created to beat the 91st Amendment Act. So, while the incumbents are not actually ministers their posts are equivalent to a ministerial berth with the same pay and perks. With so many Advisors it is astonishing that the MDA Government is still floundering in several areas of development. In normal circumstances it is the bureaucracy that advises or should be advising the Chief Minister on the ground situation and how those are to be addressed. Besides, senior bureaucrats are also seasoned administrators who can pitch in with ideas that can be taken forward. Meghalaya cannot afford these gratuitous posts which are not in public interest but for short-term political interests only.

# Of Devotion and Conversion

By Deepa Majumdar

It is with consternation that those of us who are outside India read recent news about the persecution of religious minorities in India by right-wing Hindu extremists. It is unbelievably sad that fear of conversion has led Hindu extremists to destroy statues of Christ and burn effigies of Santa Claus. It shocks us to hear these words of Aju Chauhan, regional general secretary of Bajrang Dal: "As December comes, the Christian missionaries become active in the name of Christmas, Santa Claus and New Year. They lure children by making Santa Claus distribute gifts to them and attract them towards Christianity." Or these, from one of the men, during the

was very Hindu in character, made us overlook the disdain for Hinduism among converted Christians. To this day, Vedantic chapels include symbols of all major world religions. I remember a young Hindu child entering the chapel in my Catholic school in Shillong, with a heart overflowing with a child's piety and deep devotion for Christ. I remember, as well, a burning Hindu love for Christ. Indeed, it was in the heyday of British colonialism, that Gandhiji adored Christ. Only a total bigot would take offence at and destroy a statue of Christ. Only a perfect bigot would

devotion, loyalty, and a spirit of service. All these virtues put together should open the heart to true universalism, just as the heart of prayer opens our eyes to the good in other religions. Sincere practice of the virtues Hanuman represents should cleanse the heart of paranoia, violence, vengeance, and identity politics. This, then, is the real heresy: to claim to be a follower of Hanuman and practice the opposite of the moral virtues he represents.

Likewise, the word conversion deserves scrutiny. In its heart and essence, conversion is a matter of inner spirituality. For theists, it is an act of God, who alone

dilute our own religion rather than any other. The same may be said, perhaps more forcefully, of coerced conversions. Anyone will convert for the sake of food and shelter. But this is conversion of religious identity, not a conversion of the heart.

Finally, it is imperative that Hindu extremists recognize why some Hindus voluntarily convert to more accepting religions, like Christianity, Buddhism, Sikhism, etc. Those, like Dalits, who have been hurt by the lower ideological forms of Hinduism, have every right to voluntarily convert to more egalitarian religions. All religions come with contradictions between their higher and lower aspects. But no contradiction



disruption of a Presbyterian church in Assam, on Christmas night, where Hindu protesters demanded that all Hindu's leave. Let only Christian celebrate Christmas. We are against Hindu boys and girls participating in Christmas function... it hurts our sentiments. They dress up in church and everyone sings Merry Christmas. How will our religion survive?"

I could understand non-violent concern about Christian imperialism back in my youth in the Northeast, when just after independence, India was still diffident before the white man and his religion. But we never felt this kind of acute paranoia and hostility towards the heart and essence of Christianity. A beautiful universality, which

burn an effigy of Santa Claus. This last puzzles me even more. How can anybody be offended by a jolly old man who brings goodies for children? If in a Hindu majority nation, decades after independence, Hindu extremists are still afraid of extinction because of coerced conversions to Christianity, perhaps they need to take a hard look at who they really represent and what conversion really means.

Members of the Bajrang Dal claim to represent Hanuman, who is Rama's monkey devotee in the ancient Hindu epic, Ramayana. Hanuman symbolizes virtues that go directly against what Bajrang Dal members practice today: moral strength, divine intelligence, wisdom, burning

possesses the power to convert, or transform the human heart from a state of sin to one of virtue and inner peace. Conversion in this profound sense, therefore, signifies the descent of divine grace, to enable the ascent of the human soul. But when used in its historical sense, "conversion" becomes distorted to mean a transformation of the religious identity, without necessarily any accompanying conversion of the heart. As is the quality of the conversion, so will be the result thereof. Thus mercenary conversions will lead to mercenary forms of religiosity, which cannot possibly harm other religions, but harms the religion that does the converting. By using dubious means to convert others to our religion, we pollute and

could be greater than the highest teachings of oneness in Vedantic Hinduism and the abomination of the caste system as it is practiced today. To be regarded as "untouchable" by members of one's own religion is an abominable breach of human rights that deserves the strongest protest. One way of protesting this is to convert to more accepting religions. For, rare is the soul that can ascend directly from the pain of caste-oppression, to the wondrous and awe-inspiring mysticism of the highest Hinduism.

In these tumultuous times, we can only hope that the rationale of the Indian Constitution will prevail over the insanity of religious bigotry and identity politics.

## Political Violence Abhorrent turns normal!

By Sagarneel Sinha

On December 19, the election day of Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC) the city of Kolkata saw incidents of violence with the Opposition parties alleging rigging by the ruling TMC activists. The entire day saw candidates and activists accusing TMC for forcibly not allowing polling agents of Opposition parties in several wards. Not only this, there were also scenes of protests by CPM, BJP and Congress activists in different parts of the city, and in some places they even protested jointly. But TMC supremo and Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee discounted the allegations of malpractices as mere "drama" and claimed the voting being "peaceful."

Let's now take a look at what happened on November 25, during the civic body elections in the tiny north eastern State of Tripura. The TMC levelled allegations there, similar as accused by CPM, BJP and Congress in the KMC election. Should the allegations of TMC now be seen as baseless in Tripura? Certainly not. The civic elections in Agartala and in many other urban areas were definitely not peaceful with reports of rigging and forcible stopping of polling agents of CPM and TMC by BJP activists. Just like Mamata and other TMC leaders, the State BJP leaders, including Chief Minister Biplab Deb, had then claimed elections were "peaceful" and the Opposition was doing 'drama'.

The events that took place in KMC elections and Tripura civic polls were very similar. The unfortunate reality is that such incidents of political violence are indirectly normalised by both TMC and BJP in West Bengal and Tripura respectively. BJP leaders talk about West Bengal when asked about Tripura, while TMC leaders prefer to talk about Tripura instead of their State! Worse, TMC leaders choose to say that KMC elections were less violent than the previous elections and the civic polls of Tripura. While this can endlessly be debated by either side, it can be said that while political violence under ruling-BJP in Tripura is a reality, the history and situation is worse in West Bengal.

How can one forget what happened on polling day of the 2015 Kolkata Municipal Corporation and of other urban bodies? Scenes of widespread violence rocked the State while TMC tried to portray everything was hunky dory and the rest was a conspiracy hatched by the Opposition! Or how can one ignore the brutal scenes of violence during panchayat elections of 2018 that not only rocked the entire West Bengal but even reached the doors of the Supreme Court? In that election, deaths of Opposition workers and supporters belonging to BJP, CPM, Congress were reported. Or the widespread post-poll violence resulting in killings of supporters belonging to BJP, CPM, cleric Abbas Siddiqui's Indian Secular Front (ISF) etc, this year after the return of TMC to power for the third consecutive term?

Add to this, there were allegations of rapes/gangrapes of women, who didn't vote for TMC during the 2021 Bengal Assembly elections. The alleged rape/gang rape survivors of political violence even knocked on the doors of the Supreme Court for justice. The Calcutta High Court not only came down heavily on Mamata Banerjee government but ordered a CBI inquiry, which is still going on.

To be fair and it is a given that people generally prefer the ruling party in local body polls whether in West Bengal, Tripura or in any other State and there is little doubt that the TMC would of

course win the KMC polls or that the BJP would have an edge in the civic body polls in Tripura. However, what is critical is that in a democracy, there is no place for political violence whether it is before polls, on the day of polling or after the polls. Every political party has the right to contest and every voter has the right to choose the party of his/her choice. This, sadly is not being respected in India, boasting of being the world's largest democracy.

At the same time, it is true that political violence is not a new phenomenon. West Bengal and Tripura had seen long rules of CPM-led Left Front and large-scale incidents of political violence then. How can one forget Kerala, another State where political violence has become a big issue? The power reins in this southern State have oscillated between ruling CPM-led Left Democratic Front (LDF) and the Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF) in the past 40-50 years.

Often the assumption by a section is that political violence in West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura is a legacy of the Left, particularly of CPM. However, this isn't quite true as there are acts of political violence in other parts of the country reflected in the reports compiled by NCRB: these include Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Karnataka which have performed worse, and others such as Jharkhand and Maharashtra faring badly! Political violence in Kerala was even under Congress-led UDF rule and there was a time when widespread rigging and violence were common in Bihar during elections. Or for that matter, let's not forget the history of alleged political violence by Shiv Sena with the tacit support of then ruling party Congress--both in the State and Centre -- to wipe out Communists in Mumbai and neighbouring areas?

Today, the Left, particularly CPM, cannot ignore the fact that there were incidents of political violence during their era in West Bengal, Tripura and Kerala, and continue in the southern State as it sits in power. But many commentators often ignore that political violence in West Bengal is said to be institutionalised by the Congress, particularly during the regime of Siddhartha Shankar Ray, in the name of suppressing the Naxal movement. While that was a pretext, the trend of violence per se continues unabated under the TMC.

Recall the dark period of the 1970s, when Congress ruled both in the State and the Centre, and elections were rigged in West Bengal and attacks on the Opposition, particularly CPM, were viewed as normal. Tripura too witnessed a similar dark period during 1988-1993, when Congress along with Tripura Upajati Juba Samiti ruled the State. Though a significant point often ignored is that during Manik Sarkar's era, the violence lessened and elections by and large were more peaceful.

The crucial point is when it comes to political violence almost all parties stand guilty. Political activists often indulge in such acts because they believe they would get away with murder thanks to the blessings of the political leadership. Instead of accusing each other, it is high time leadership of all parties take note of the unfortunate, unhealthy and anti-democratic events they indulge in. Strict action needs to be initiated against the perpetrators rather than mere issuing of statements of condemnation, crying hoarse or passing the buck. In the end, it's the country which becomes a victim, wherein in an era of polarisation it's witnessing normalisation of political violence! --- INFA

### Letters to the Editor

#### Perfidious politics

Editor,  
Two headline news reports on the front page of the Shillong Times 28th Dec 2021 made entertaining reading. The first is titled "HSPDP determined to seal regional bond" and the second "Party to push for Khasi Jaintia State". Lets talk about the first heading. The issue, news, information, gossip, rumor, here-say or by what ever name you call it about the Regional parties coming together under one flag, has by now become an old wife's tale. Or to put it in its correct perspective "a widely held traditional belief that has long proven to be unscientific, unrealistic and impractical". It's ethereal in nature, devoid of form and substance but usually emerges for public consumption just before elections and apparently it's no different this time.

Now hold it. Hang on a second. Perhaps I got it all wrong. The news report further adds that the call for unity among the regional parties is, quote "It is high time for the regional forces to work together in the best interests of the people of the state", unquote. Ah Ha, so the goal of regional unity is in the best interest of the people and the state. The statement however leaves the definition of "best interest of the people" unclear

and dangling in the air. An enticement for the unwary electorate and voter. OK! OK! Lets cut the suspense and let me take the bait. There is the economic interest of the state. It is mainly concerned with policies and strategies to promote livelihoods, employment, improvement of infrastructure etc. Then there is the social aspect which in our case is the concern we have about the poor prevailing state of healthcare, education and the rapid deterioration in our traditional value systems and culture. Then last but not least is the political issue. Of concern here is the fast disappearance of the political ethics and will to serve the people and which has been replaced with perverted values and principles where political power is a business platform to loot the state and to enhance business and self interest. The task for the advocates of regional unity is very simple. Just come out with a detailed plan of action on the above (its called a manifesto, if they have ever heard of the word. It spells out in clear detail the policies and strategies of the party). Then leave the rest to fools like me. We will ensure you are returned to power.

Then we come to the second headline which speaks for a push for a Khasi-Jaintia state. It's pretty confusing. One report speaks of "best interest of the people and state of Meghalaya" while the second speaks about

splitting Meghalaya into two halves so as to benefit both the Khasis and Garos. As God is my witness, even after prolonged head scratching, I fail to identify such benefits for either community. Divided or united as one, we will continue to remain land-locked; lacking and deficient in revenue we survive only through doles and the good will of New Delhi; we lack governance and whatever little there was has been thoroughly demolished by an inward thinking political mindset. We have failed our youth and if there ever was a brain-drain one only has to see the despair of our educated youth to realize the import of the word. So what benefits of the people are we talking about? How will they come about? The only benefit visible will be for mediocre politicians. Their tribe and opportunities for them will increase. There will be two CMs instead of one; two legislatures; two sets of cabinet ministers with all the pomp and glory that comes with it; two meaningless budgets instead of one. Of improved services to the people the less said the better. So please don't talk of benefits for the people when there are none. Allow me to quote George Orwell "Political language is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure hot air". I think he had Meghalaya and its politicians when he

said this.

Yours etc.,  
Toki Blah,  
Via email

#### The case of PSOs in Assam

Editor,  
The Chief Minister of Assam recently commented that he would request his party colleagues in his political party (that is BJP) for withdrawal of Personal Security Officers (PSOs) assigned to them as they need not fear anyone and that assigning PSOs is a Congress culture. Great thoughts indeed! But the question remains as to who decides to spend taxpayers money on personal security of important people? Is it political leaders themselves? Or, is it the duty of the Police, or the people given the authority? The CM seems to indicate otherwise.

Yours etc.,  
D Bhutia,  
Guwahati - 24

#### Need to be alert and ready for Omicron

Editor,  
The Central government is justified in giving extensive publicity about the new Covid variant Omicron. It is the responsibility of any government to inform people

about the health crisis the world as well as the country face. We can never forget the harrowing experiences that we underwent during the Covid-19 second wave. The healthcare crisis and deaths that occurred have alerted the government to the great perils facing the country.

True, the data from across the world on Omicron is not frightening. On the other hand, no country can afford to take the transmission of the disease lightly. Researches on the nature of the transmission of the disease, the potency of the virus and the impact of the disease are in progress. Fortunately, the virus has not resulted in high number of hospitalisations or deaths so far. Data from different parts of the world shows that the virus is milder than the delta variant. It is hoped that the impact of the transmission won't be as severe as that of the second wave. We cannot think of a situation in which thousands struggle to get hospital admission and oxygen support. True, India's healthcare infrastructure has not developed much. On the other hand, remaining on high alert and preparedness will help us combat the impending third wave. It is a relief to know that the Omicron infection rate in India is not very high. However, within a few weeks there will be a substantial rise in the number. Appropriate policy formulations and strategies would help us deal with the

lurking crisis effectively. The government has taken a wise decision to roll out booster doses and vaccination for children.

It is worrisome that a large section of the population is unvaccinated. While the government claimed that adult population will be fully vaccinated by the end of this year, that objective is difficult to accomplish. The vulnerable sections, that is, people who have not yet been vaccinated with a single dose, must be given priority. It is of utmost importance that people follow Covid-appropriate behaviour. Many state governments have imposed new restrictions in the wake of the emergence of Omicron. However, the strategies adopted must be logical. What is the logic of imposing night curfews when markets and public transport remain crowded during the day? There must not be any political biases in imposing restrictions. Covid protocols are applicable to both the ruling party and opposition parties. Instead of postponing assembly elections in some states, it must be held by following strict Covid protocols and through medical readiness.

Yours etc.,  
Venu GS,  
Kollam

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*"The ultimate tragedy is not the oppression and cruelty by the bad people but the silence over that by the good people."*

--- Martin Luther King, Jr.

**The Shillong Times**

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**Polls sans show-off**

WITH just weeks left for the string of assembly polls, the election commission hinted on Thursday that the elections will be held as per schedule. All political parties in Uttar Pradesh have expressed themselves in favour of this, while CEC Sushil Chandra said the Covid-related guidelines would have to be adhered to. This clears the air about a likely postponement of the elections. Having come this far, it would be in the fitness of things if the political parties exercise restraint and reduce the massive rallies and processions.

These are the days of virtual meetings. Television screens should suffice to reach messages to one and all, though candidates will still have to reach out to every ward and village. This should largely reduce the money spent for elections. In other words, the pandemic season is offering an opportunity to change the election campaign modes in tune with the changing times. Yet, politicians are keen on showing-off by using the campaign as another excuse for their indulgences even as this poses a health risk to the people. Gathering huge crowds is no more a requirement. Large-scale fund collections are done by parties and candidates on this count. This makes both parties and candidates obligated to money bags, contractors, businessmen and other vested interests, who would extract their pounds of flesh once a party forms the government. Parties are taking crores from ticket aspirants for "campaign". The entire political system and life itself are getting hugely vitiated by such acts and this worsens the corruption scenario. Since there is scope for politicians to pocket a substantial part of such collections, they are game with all these. It should be up to the Election Commission, an autonomous body, to call the bluff of unscrupulous, wayward politicians.

Chief Election Commissioner Sushil Chandra made it clear that, among other regulations, the EC would insist on at least one Covid dose as a requirement for people to come for voting at polling booths. Those who are hesitant about vaccination would either have to fall in line or keep out of the voting process. In UP, for instance, some 50 per cent of the population is fully vaccinated, the daily Covid positive cases were just four so far. Active cases in the state stood at less than 500. The other poll-bound states too are having such low numbers. Holding the polls as per schedule is justified while strict regulations must be in place. No mega shows must be allowed.

**When silence is collusion**

By Patricia Mukhim

One is nonplussed by the apathy of the churches here in the North East to the acts of vandalism against Christians and churches across the country by right wing fundamentalists. Some leading columnists have expressed their anxiety at this attack on Christian minorities but the church leadership, other than Archbishop Machado of the archdiocese of Bangalore, are muted. Today the churches in Meghalaya and the North East seem leaderless and the laity in a state of flux not knowing what to say and how, since the act of making public statements has always vested with the church leadership. Could it be that the church today has become so insouciant about these series of events because the leaders have lost their moral compasses or are we Christians waiting until we are neck-deep in water before raising our voices?

Much has been said in email groups about the churches and their leaders having lost their moorings and colluding with the politics of the day especially in Kerala. The BJP will do what is possible within its might to win Kerala even if it has to work with the church leadership there which it hopes will appeal to the faithful on its behalf. But if one were to analyze the church attacks, they are not led by the BJP as a political party but by fringe elements of the Sangh Parivar. The BJP hardly has a hold on these rabble rousers. They go about doing what they like and saying what they want and get away with it. The state simply refuses to take action against them. From the look of things, it appears that in BJP-ruled states these demagogues enjoy the tacit support of the state. Hence even the law enforcers look the other way but are quick to book the critics of the NDA/BJP government on sedition and contumacious charges. Such is the situation today that there are more journalists behind bars than ever before in the history of India.

The situation is not getting better. On the contrary, the Missionaries of Charity were told that their accounts governed by the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) were not in order. Now this could have been pointed out to them earlier. Why on Christmas Day? Naturally the Missionaries of Charity - the order started by Mother Teresa stopped operating the accounts out

of panic. These are subtle ways of intimidating Christian institutions despite their outreach programmes for the poor and destitute and their educational institutions which have provided a robust educational framework that has benefitted millions in this country over the years and without the burden of conversion.

Coming to the allegations of forced conversion one can-



not testify to that since one has not witnessed any such thing at least in the North Eastern States. True, the missionaries preached and evangelized for that is their mission and indeed the mission of every follower of Christ to spread his teachings. And Christ's teachings are condensed into one simple sentence, "Love your neighbour as yourself." The sentence is simple but a tough one to practice especially since we are all obsessed with self-love. Christ also paraphrased the word "neighbour" to mean those who we interact with on a daily basis and not just people living next door.

If there are over-enthusiastic preachers who wish to increase their flock for reasons best known to them and to others and are therefore threatening people with dire consequences unless they become Christians then those should be held accountable for such acts. Unfortunately, the churches are so divided by denomination that there isn't an overarching authority over "Christian churches." Catholics are governed by canon laws and papal edicts while other protestant churches have their own governing councils. Hence there is no single authority to control wayward church leaders.

Perhaps it would not be wrong to surmise that the church today has slipped into a comfort zone because Christians have not faced persecution for as long as we

can remember. Churches, especially those in Kerala are filthy rich and where mammon gets a hold over church leadership then depravity follows. Not that other religions are not guilty of the same predilections, but when Christianity asserts that it is the only way to salvation for all humankind then naturally questions arise when the Christian leadership falters.

This reminds us of the

ugly incident that beset the Mawkhar church way back in August 2019 when Rs 4.67 crore went missing from the church accounts and nothing has been heard about this issue since January this year when the police said they would file the chargesheet against the fraudster. These sort of incidents are a slur on church management and a slap on the face of the laity that regularly pay their tithes with the hope that their hard-earned money would reach the needy. After this incident, several church members have defaulted in paying their tithes since they don't want to tempt the fates and have a repeat of the same melodrama.

If I may say so, then every Christian is expected to be a model of integrity. We are supposed to live our faiths and not just attend church in our Sunday best and the rest of the week get back to doing what we do best which is to break all the commandments especially No 8 and No 10. Thou shalt not steal and Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house, wife, ox, ass man-servant, maid-servant or anything that belongs to the neighbour. What are politicians doing if not daylight robbery by pilfering from schemes meant for development and for the poor? Remember the rice scam? What has happened to that enquiry? The top honchos in the cabinet are all Christians. Then why are water pipes of

such inferior quality being brought in to supply water to poor households under the Jal Jeevam Mission? Why do roads have to be repaired every year?

Sadly, despite the visible signs of corruption the churches continue to patronize politicians in their respective churches instead of calling out their acts of omission and commission. What we see in Meghalaya is that politicians shamelessly flirt with church leaders. One doesn't know whether to blame the church leaders or the politicians. For a politician every election is a matter of metaphysical survival and a clash of existential identities. In the end their identity as politicians wins the day. To win the elections they will climb on anyone's back including that of acquiescent church leaders. Since church leaders are influencers in their own right the laity can be influenced to become force multipliers for the politician of choice.

It is this convoluted relationship between the church and partisan politics that has eroded the very foundations of Christ's teachings. Christ was a messiah who stood with the weak, the widow, the outcast. There are among Christian leaders even today who carry out Christ's mandate and care for orphans; for destitute and for those that have lost their way in life. But they are a dwindling community. We respect and honour such souls and can only hope that many more join their arduous paths. There are also those within the church who speak through their writings undaunted by what the laity will say or how they will be judged. They listen to their inner voices and call out what's wrong. May their tribe increase!

Meanwhile it's embarrassing that a state with a Christian majority simply refuses to look the problem besetting it, in the eye and to deal with it. Are church leaders waiting for politicians to wield their swords against the right wing brigade that pulled out people from a place of worship in Silchar, Assam? Such malcontents will soon develop clout here if there is no resistance to such ugly incursions into places of worship.

What's needed is for the laity to take on the mantle of leadership, for church leaders have failed to rise to the occasion when they are most needed.

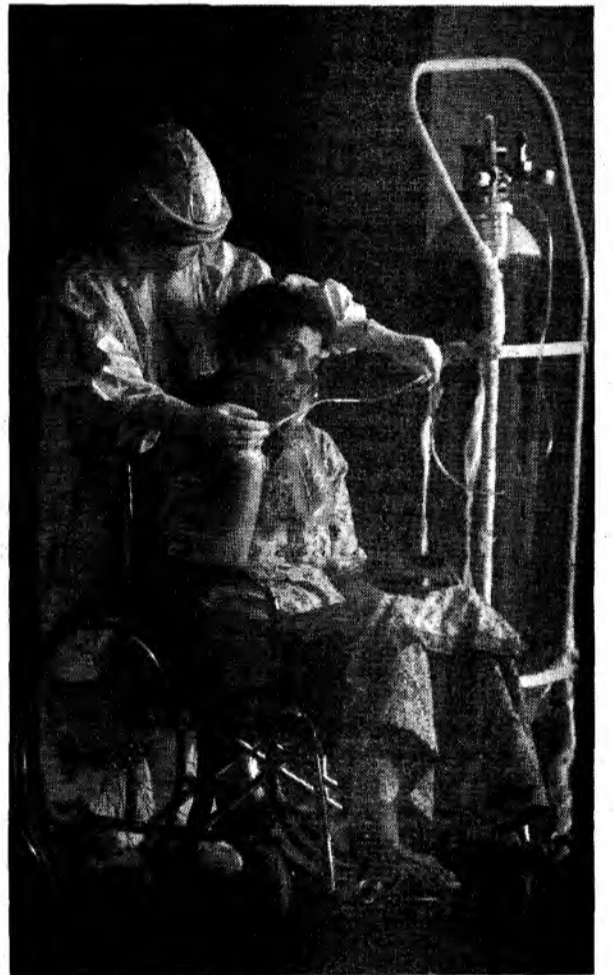
**Reflections on the pandemic and rebuilding of humanity**

By Jenniefer Dkhar

On Friday midnight we will welcome the New Year amidst a mixed baggage of happiness and sorrow, joy and pain, love and loss... after all life is a bundle of beautiful contradictions. One cannot help but reminisce the last two years that had been years of great challenge for humankind across the globe. COVID 19 walked into our lives in ways unexpected. The virus trampled and crushed us underneath its demonic feet. Humankind was and is still left wondering as to what triggered the virus? Where did it originate? Is there a cure? How safe are we? When will it end? These are questions that perhaps are still running in all our minds. The world became a battleground that we humans were trying hard to fight to survive. In this fight, some have lost their lives and some fortunate others have been cured and are learning precious lessons and the meaning of the gift of life.

If truth be told, the two years made life more mean-

ingful and valuable. Isn't it ironic that though the only sure and certain thing about life is death yet we all fear death? We fear the unknown for what lies beyond, which is far from human knowledge. In spite of the known fact that we are born only to die, we do all we can to stay alive. Why not? As humans we do not live in isolation. We are born to weave a beautiful yam of relationships. Our parents, our siblings, our grandparents, relatives, friends. These bonds and ties have been made more meaningful with the entrance of COVID 19 into our lives.



At this juncture one would like to go back to the times when humankind became one. Selflessness and fellow feeling was what was exemplified by all. What mattered was to be there for those in need. Across all sections of the society people extended a helping hand in any way they possibly could. Religion, class, caste, rich, poor mattered less and to help was at the fore. While lives were lost and livelihoods suffered what prevailed was humanity and fellow feelings. COVID 19 was indeed a leveler in all respects. It made no discrimination among humankind but devalued all that came in its way. One wondered if that was essentially needed for us humans to realize that in the eyes of God we are one. God has created us with no prejudices and to live in peace and harmony with one another. It is us humans

who create barriers and differences among us. The only difference the Creator made was in our biological construct but the roles that we are expected to play once we are born into this world are roles assigned by us humans and the society. Feelings of discrimination, inequality, partiality, unfairness, injustice, greed, lust, envy, hatred, dishonesty, etc., are all man-made. Such negative traits and characteristics are made to crawl into our hearts and minds bringing us so low to the point of ridicule and hurt. We seem to forget that the true purpose of our lives is in giving rather than snatching, plundering and looting. Aren't we doing that? Don't we at times become so over-powered by our sense of possessing and owning what we can lay our hands on that we fear no one not even the One above? The I, me, myself at times become so important that it leads us to selfishness, greed, unscrupulousness, crookedness, deceit, and many more.

Today, we are trying to get back to our normal lives hoping for a better and brighter tomorrow for our children, ourselves and the world. Can we continue to keep the spark of love and compassion burning bright? Can we not recoil to lives of degradation and immorality and continue to help make this world a better place for each one of us? We should be grateful to God Almighty for giving us a chance once more to live in this world. Can we make 2022 a fruitful year and try to be better human beings today and always? With these hopes and aspirations here's wishing each and every one, "A very happy and glorious new year!"

**Letters to the Editor**

**Booking anomalies on Indigo Airlines**

Editor,  
It has been a great relief since the operation of the Shillong-Kolkata flight and vice versa from Umroi Airport by Indigo Airlines. It has reduced the travel time considerably. However, in the last few weeks booking for the Shillong-Kolkata route has become nightmarish. If one goes to the Indigo website goindigo.in it always shows "flights on these dates are not available." But if a return flight is booked from Kolkata to Shillong and vice versa, flights are available for the return journey from Shillong to Kolkata. But if one were to book a one-way flight from Shillong to Kolkata on the same day the portal shows, "flights on these dates are not available."  
I request the authorities concerned to look into these anomalies so that a direct flight on Indigo Airlines is available for booking on goindigo.in website for Shillong-Kolkata route. Other flight booking websites show only Alliance Air

operating on the Shillong-Kolkata route, but it is not a direct flight with two to three stoppages before reaching Kolkata. This is rather inconvenient.  
Yours etc.,  
Dr Eladbor Laloo  
Shillong-14

**Treachery of the highest order**

Editor,  
Apropos the letter 'Perfidious politics' by Mr Toki Blah (ST Dec 30, 2021) the HSPDP had not only betrayed the people of Garo Hills but had shown no gratitude to Chief Minister, Conrad Sangma who had made them ministers against all odds, as the INC should have been invited to form the Government considering it had the single largest majority. What has made the HSPDP or for that matter the UDP so blind to all the acts of omission and commission of the NPP is really a mystery of mysteries. The NPP is nothing but the BJP in regional uniform. And we should know that it was courtesy the Election Commission of India (ECI) and

our prime minister that the NPP with a lone MP in a house of 540, gets the status of a national party. What has the MDA achieved since 2018? There is nothing to gloat about. In fact there are disappointments on all fronts.

And to demand a Khasi and Jaintia state out of Meghalaya goes to prove that the HSPDP is not aware of the Constitution. Even if Delhi feels for the unjustified demand, what about the total number of voters in one constituency? Hardly 10,000 and the electorate would be doomed to succumb to money power while the state is devastated. Why are we not ashamed to look at Bihar poll results? There the winner wins by a margin of 1,50,000 votes which is equal to the total votes of MP in our state. And they call themselves the representatives of the people! Worse is that people of integrity and honesty who yearn to serve and raise this badly run state to its height of glory and to ease the pain of the have-nots will never contest elections because they cannot afford to throw money around. But who is the loser in all of this? It is the state that sinks lower and lower in all departments be it education or health or

transport or agriculture or qualities of lives.

Unless the electorate reject these freebies and incentives thrown indiscriminately before polling without understanding that these politicians will take back more than what they have invested, the real democracy enjoyed at one time would become a mirage.  
Yours etc.,  
W Passah  
Nongkrem.

**Weird idea of "Acche Din"**

Editor,  
Within the first 14 years of India's independence, as many as 5 IITs had started their journey of excellence --- all under the stewardship of Jawaharlal Nehru who possessed the vision of building the "Temples of modern India." Yet today by standing right on the floor of Kanpur IIT (1959), it is being announced that the "first 25 years after India's independence have been wasted"! Is it the joke of 2021 or this millennium!  
Despite the relentless anti-Nehru/Congress campaign armed with the coinage, "Nothing happened

prior to 2014," the fact remains that right from major dams and hydro-electric projects to steel plants and other industries, extensive railway infrastructure to reputed educational and medical institutions to IT sector --- the whole infrastructure of the society have been set up by the preceding Congress Governments led by the much-maligned Nehru-Gandhi family or PV Narasimha Rao-Manmohan Singh! In contrast the regime of "Good Days," is far from coming up with a single constructive project worth mentioning. On the contrary the carefully nurtured banking system has been devastated. The BSNL, Air India and the health of Indian Railways is also now lying in tatters! Even highways are being handed over to private players! When the policies of earlier regimes centered around job generation, that of the present regime seems hell-bent on shrinking job opportunities resulting in achieving a record of joblessness around the country! And as if sprinkling salt upon the wounds of the ever-increasing unemployed lot, they are being advised to start pakora shops!  
And the last nail got in the coffin of creating jobs

through the "historic bold" demonetisation process and the flawed GST has robbed the livelihoods of millions of wage earners and disrupted small enterprises! The less said about the systematic devastation of the economy the better! Perhaps the only "contribution" of the harbingers of "New India" is to divide the nation through brute communal polarization, hate-filled cuss words and violence with the religious minorities and Dalits being the most victimized and persecuted lot, often at the expense of their lives! And, of course we should be indebted to the project of "restoring national confidence" through Kashi Vishwanath corridor, Grand Ram Temple, Gigantic Patel statue, Bullet trains and most importantly Central Vista!  
God save India from such "restoration of national confidence" if it continues for the next 25 years!  
Yours etc.,  
Kajal Chatterjee,  
Kolkata

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